



— Soil Fertility Note 10 — Fescue Lawn Care

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NCDA&CS Agronomic Division

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Fescue is a cool-season grass suitable for lawns in North Carolina. Management of a fescue lawn requires attention to mowing, fertilization, watering, and pest management.

Mowing

Everyone agrees that an evenly mowed lawn looks well kept. However, few people know how important it is to cut grass at the right height. Mowing directly affects the depth of the root system.

Fescue and other cool-season grasses grow best when cut to a height of 2.5 to 3.5 inches. The shorter height is better during cool weather. Raising the mower deck to 3.5 inches is appropriate from July through September.

If the grass has grown tall, however, it is best to shorten it gradually. For example, if the grass is taller than 5 inches, cut off about an inch when you first mow. Then, mow again a few days later, cutting the grass to a final height of 3.5 inches. Whenever you mow, never remove more than one-third of the grass height.

Fertilization

As far as fertilization, timing is critical. Fescue is a cool-season grass and grows most actively during the cooler periods of the year. That is when it needs fertilizer the most. Therefore, apply fertilizer in early spring (late February to early March), early September when the weather starts to cool, and/or

November before the weather turns severely cold. Fescue cannot use fertilizer during warm weather, but disease organisms can and will.

Having soil tested is the best way to determine the rate and grade of fertilizer to apply. The standard nitrogen recommendation for fescue is 1 lb/1000 ft², but most fertilizers also contain phosphorus and potassium. Only an accurate soil analysis can indicate how much phosphorus and potassium a particular lawn needs. For fescue to benefit fully from any applied nitrogen, its need for phosphorus and potassium must be met.

Once you know which nutrients are needed, selecting a fertilizer grade and calculating how much to apply are easy. A 16-4-8 grade of fertilizer contains 16% nitrogen (N), 4% phosphate (P₂O₅), and 8% potash (K₂O). The percentage of nitrogen in the fertilizer (16) divided into 100 gives 6.25 lb, which is the amount of fertilizer you should apply per 1000 ft² to provide 1 lb of nitrogen. When you apply 6.25 lb of 16-4-8 per 1000 ft², you are also providing 0.25 lb of phosphate (6.25 × 0.04) and 0.5 lb of potash (6.25 × 0.08).

Watering

When irrigating a lawn, pay attention to timing and amount, just as when fertilizing. If you begin watering fescue in the spring, be prepared to water all season long. The grass can become dependent on irrigation and experience drought stress if watering stops during midsummer.

In the summer, fescue needs about 1.0 inch of water per week. This amount can come from either rainfall or irrigation. If temperatures are extremely high, the grass may need 1.5 inches per week.

When irrigating fescue, it is best to provide enough water to wet the soil to a depth of four to six inches at each application. Following this advice is easy if the soil doesn't contain much clay. However, if the soil has a high clay content or is compacted, runoff may occur before sufficient water is applied. In this case, stop watering and begin again about 30 minutes later.

Common mistakes when irrigating fescue include applying water in the evening or in small amounts at frequent intervals. Always water your lawn so the grass is dry by nightfall. If you water your lawn four or more times a week and wet only the grass or the soil surface, you are creating favorable conditions for diseases such as brown patch.

Pest Management

Occasionally, pests—such as weeds, insects and diseases—may be a problem in fescue lawns. Turf diseases rarely appear before late June. When they do, it is usually because recommended practices for fertilization and irrigation have not been followed. When pest problems arise that do require treatment, the *N.C. Agricultural Chemicals Manual* contains an extensive list of herbicide, insecticide and fungicide recommendations for turf.

Preemergence herbicides can control annual grasses, such as crabgrass. These materials must be applied *before* crabgrass emerges. The general rule in North Carolina is to apply these herbicides to fescue before dogwood and forsythia bloom.

Some weed control products contain both a fertilizer and a preemergence herbicide. Before choosing such a product, consider whether it is suitable for your situation. When such formulations are applied early enough to meet fertilization recommendations (before March 15), the herbicide has no effectiveness by late summer. Depending on the extent of the weed problem, you may want to apply fertilizer and herbicides separately.

Insects rarely cause enough damage to justify treatment. A heavy infestation of white grubs, however, can attract moles. If pulling back the sod reveals three or more grubs per square foot, you may want to put out a granular insecticide. April and October are the best months to treat for grubs.

Following recommended practices and doing so in a timely fashion is the secret to a successful fescue lawn in North Carolina. Lawn care information and soil sampling supplies are available from the NCDA&CS Agronomic Division [(919) 733-2655], local Cooperative Extension offices and other agricultural advisors.

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Questions or comments should be directed to the Soil Testing Section of the NCDA&CS Agronomic Division. Information on soil testing, nematode assay, and plant/waste/solution/media analyses is also available from the Division.

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