

Tall Fescue Lawns

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Tall fescue is the most popular turfgrass in our area because it greens up early in the spring and with adequate water will stay green until late fall. It is the most adapted cool-season turfgrass which does most of its growing in the cool temperatures of spring and fall. Full sun is best for growth but it is also the most shade and heat tolerant of the grasses for shade locations. It grows in wet or dry soils and has a wide tolerance of soil pH from 4.7 to 8.5. Tall fescue makes an attractive lawn when seeded at the correct rate, and mowed, watered and fertilized according to K-State Research and Extension recommendations.

Recommended Tall Fescues

Using the right plant for the location is a big factor for success. Not all fescues are the same. Other species of fescue (i.e. creeping red, chewing, sheep, and hard fescue) have poor heat tolerance and do not hold up well during Kansas summers. K-31, which is a pasture-type tall fescue, is commonly known and used cultivar for low to medium quality lawns. The turf-type tall fescues have a darker color, better density, and a finer texture than K-31. Recommended cultivars have been evaluated under Kansas conditions.

K-State Recommended Turf-Type Tall Fescues

Rebounder, Reflection, Thor, Michelangelo, GTO, Traverse 2, Paramount, Temple, Valkyrie LS, Technique, Maestro, Firebird 2, 4th Millennium SRP, Rockwell, Regenerate, Black Tail, Avenger II, Falcon V, Terrano, Rowdy, Leonardo, Bloodhound, Hot Rod, Titanium 2LS, Grande 3. (Often a blend of these is suggested for planting) Recommended plants [website](#).

Planting

Tall fescue lawns are usually planted from seed, although sod is another option. September is the best time for planting. Under good conditions, seed germinates in four to seven days in September. Planting too early risks heat and disease prob-

lems, while late plantings may winterkill. Spring seeding should be done in March or April so the grass can become well established before hot weather. Seed germination will be slower in the spring because the soil is cold. Weed competition is also greater in the spring.

Siduron (Tupersan) is the only preemergence crabgrass preventer that can be used at the time of seeding if needed. Use only the lowest label rate. Even then, a 10-percent reduction in seed establishment can be expected. Do not use any other crabgrass preventer until after grass has been mowed several times. Broadleaf weed killers should not be used until the grass has been mowed three times. Quinclorac could be used as soon as 7 days after emergence of tall fescue if it is labeled that way. It is often found in combination of herbicides and must be used according to the product labeling. The best way to avoid weeds during establishment is to plant in mid-September.

The recommended rate for seeding is 6 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet, assuming the use of good-quality seed and proper soil preparation and planting procedures. Use a lower seeding rate for partial shade planting sites. Seeding too lightly or poor seeding techniques will result in a thin, clumpy and weedy stand of grass. Heavy seeding results in turf dying due to overcrowding and poor rooting. A common mistake is seeding tall fescue too thick in an attempt to achieve the fine texture of bluegrass. This results in a weak turf and offsets the advantages of planting tall fescue.

Purchase seed with less than 0.5% other crop on the seed label. A blend of turf-type tall fescue is suggested. One can mix a 10% by weight of bluegrass seed of a recommended cultivar to a tall fescue blend. A mix of rye-grass, fescues other than tall and most bluegrasses is not suggested.

Tall Fescue Seeding Schedule (for new lawns)

July	Test soil for pH, phosphorus, potash by taking sample to Extension office. Water and fertilize Bermudagrass or other perennial grassy weeds to get them actively growing and then treat with a herbicide containing glyphosate.
August	Grade and till soil. Incorporate phosphorus, potassium, lime or sulfur according to soil test.
September	Just before seeding, mix 1 lb. N/1,000sq. ft. into the surface, 1 or 2 inches. Smooth surface and seed lawn. Keep seedbed constantly moist until seedlings appear. Gradually space waterings, but soak soil deeper as roots grow
October	Fertilize with half rate of nitrogen one month after planting. Water once a week if weather is dry.
November	Fertilize with 1 lb. soluble nitrogen. Last mowing should be at 2–2½ inches. Soak soil thoroughly before winter.

See publication [Planting Your Lawn](#), MF-608.

Overseeding an Established Lawn

- Mow the lawn to 1½ inch height.
- Core aerate if the soil is compacted.
- Sow seed uniformly. Use 6 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet for completely bare spots. Use half-rate if trying to thicken a thin turf lawn or shady location.
- Fertilize with 1 pound nitrogen per 1,000 square feet.
- Water in the fertilizer and seed.
- Do not use crabgrass preventers, except for siduron (Tupersan) if needed, until the new grass seedlings are well established.
- Do not use broadleaf weed killers for one month before seeding, or until the new grass has been mowed three times.

Watch over-seeding [video](#).

Mowing

Mowing too low or too infrequently are common mistakes. Tall fescue grows rapidly and requires frequent mowing. Spring mowing can be greatly reduced by following a fall fertilization program and not fertilizing in early spring. Tall fescue should be mowed frequently enough so that no more than one-third of the height is removed at one time. [Clippings](#) return nitrogen and

other nutrients to the soil and do not cause thatch. Put clippings on the turf, even those that may fall in the street or other hard surfaces.

Turf-type cultivars of tall fescue can be mowed slightly lower than K-31, but stay within the recommended range. Mow at the higher end of the range during the summer to promote deeper rooting and better drought resistance. Keep the blade sharp at all times, or the resulting brown leaf tips will detract from the appearance of the turf. As a guide, sharpen [blade](#) after every 10 hours of use. See publication [Mowing Your Lawn](#), MF-1155

When to Mow (to remove one-third)

<u>If your mowing height is</u>	<u>Mow when grass gets this tall</u>
2 inches	3 inches
2½ inches	3¾ inches
3 inches	4½ inches
3 ½ inches	5¼ inches

Watering

Tall fescue is relatively drought-tolerant. Avoid spring [watering](#) unless the lawn begins to wilt. Unnecessary spring watering reduces summer drought resistance and contributes to excessive growth, disease and weeds. During dry weather, the grass would have to be [watered](#) once or twice a week with a total of 1 to 1½ inches of water applied per week to keep it from going dormant. Morning watering is desired with less wind and evaporation. During the hot and dry weather of summer, tall fescue will go dormant and rest until the weather is conducive for growth. In the fall, water every other week if the weather is dry. A good soaking before winter is also helpful. Apply the water at a rate that can be absorbed by the soil.

[Sprinklers](#) vary in how fast they apply water; they can be checked by placing several flat-bottomed, straight-sided containers on the lawn and then turning on the water for an hour. The average height, in inches, of water collected in the containers is the rate at which the sprinklers apply water in inches per hour. By performing this test, it can always be determined how long to run a sprinkler to apply a given amount of water.

Avoid watering every day, or even every other day, except for a [newly seeded lawn](#). Besides wasting water, frequent watering causes shallow roots, disease and weed invasion.

See publication [Watering Your Lawn](#), MF-2059

Fertilizing

Nitrogen is the most important fertilizer element, and it is needed on a regular basis. Phosphorous, potassium, lime or sulfur should be applied only according to [soil test results](#). These elements can be applied in September or May if they are needed during core aerification.

The most important time to [fertilize](#) tall fescue lawns with a high nitrogen fertilizer is in the fall, specifically September and November. Early spring fertilizing (March or early April) causes excessive growth, which requires frequent mowing, and promotes disease and weeds. Therefore, an optional spring fertilization should be delayed until May, after most of the spring flush of top growth is over. A slow-release nitrogen source should be used for the May application, so that as the hot weather approaches the grass doesn't grow too fast. Too much top growth can prevent the healthy root growth needed to resist summer stresses. If the lawn is fertilized only once a year, it should be done during September. September applications thicken up the lawn and promote good root development. November is an important time to fertilize to keep the lawn green longer in the fall and for earlier green-up in the spring.

Compost or other natural organic fertilizers may be used to topdress the lawn. It is safe to apply up to ¼ inch of material over the crown of the tall fescue. It would be beneficial to apply these materials in conjunction with core aerification. See publication [Lawn Fertilizing Guide](#), MF-2916.

Fertilizing Schedule

	Nitrogen carrier	Amount
September	Soluble or mixed	1-1½ lb.
November	Soluble	1-1½ lb.
May (optional)	Slow release	1 lb.

lb. actual nitrogen (not product) per 1,000 sq. ft.

Core Aerating

Clay soils and soils compacted from heavy use, benefit from aerating. Core aerating machines remove small plugs of soil, leaving small holes in the ground. This aids in water, air and root penetration. Aerate in the spring or fall, or both, depending on soil compaction or clay content of the soil. Spring aerating should be done before applying crabgrass preventers. Fall aerating should be done before overseeding. Aerator holes should be 3 inches deep and a maximum of 3 inches apart.

Aerating machines may be rented from a local nursery or rental agency, or a professional can be hired.

The cores of soil brought to the surface during aeration should be left on the lawn. As they disintegrate and fall back into the holes, the resulting mixture of soil and organic matter hastens decomposition of any thatch.

See publication [Aerating Your Lawn](#), MF-2130

Thatch

Thatch is usually not a problem in properly managed tall fescue lawns. Thatch is an accumulation of dead roots and stem tissue at the soil surface. Fall fertilizing, regular mowing, and proper watering will help control thatch buildup. Clippings decompose readily and do not contribute significantly to thatch.

If thatch is more than a half-inch thick, it should be core-aerated in September, just before fertilizing or overseeding. Late fall dethatching may result in winter injury. Spring dethatching may result in weed invasion.

Weed Control

Good tall fescue lawns are fairly resistant to weed infestation. Fall fertilizing, proper watering (especially avoiding over-watering in the spring), and proper mowing will help reduce weed infestations. Good cultural practices are much cheaper than excessive use of herbicides.

[Crabgrass](#) and other annual grassy weeds can be prevented by applying preemergence herbicides before the redbud trees reach full bloom or the redbud leaves begin to emerge. Good cultural practices also are effective in reducing crabgrass and annual grassy weeds. Do not depend on herbicides alone for weed control. Many preemergent herbicides for turf are labeled for tall fescue. Corn gluten products and prodiamine (Barricade) are slower to activate so follow label directions.

The herbicide quinclorac may be used to manage germinated crabgrass in newly planted grass and established stands.

Dandelions, chickweed and henbit should be controlled in September and October. Spring applications are less effective and don't give lasting results. Do not use broadleaf weed killers for one month before seeding, or on new grass until it has been mowed three times. Watch [clover](#) management video. [Yellow nutsedge](#) is a weed that may require the use of halosulfuron or sulfentrazone to control. See publication [Weed Control In Home Lawns](#), MF-2385

Disease

Brown patch is the most common disease problem and appears as brown patches in the lawn during hot and humid weather. The best prevention method is to follow the cultural practices outlined in this publication and select recommended cultivars. Fungicides are expensive and usually are not needed. Planting too thick, early spring fertilizing, and shallow, frequent watering predispose tall fescue lawns to disease. Potential fungicides are myclobutanil, propiconazole, or triadimefon with many additional possibilities.

Insects

Small populations of insects, both beneficial types and harmful types, are normal in the lawn. Indiscriminate use of insecticides can destroy beneficial insects and allow harmful species to predominate. A healthy, vigorously growing tall fescue lawn can usually tolerate moderate levels of harmful insect activity. Occasionally, populations of harmful insects will reach levels that cause visible damage. If so, homeowners may want to apply an insecticide to their lawn.

Grubs are common insect pests of tall fescue lawns. The two main types of grubs that may damage tall fescue are the southern masked chafer (annual grub) and the May/June beetle (three-year grub). The southern masked chafer is the most common.

Dylox/Proxol, Arena, Aloft, or Sevin are used at first signs of infestation. Merit, Acelepryn, Meridian and Mach 2 are insecticides that have longer residuals than other products. They should be applied in early to mid-July for southern masked chafer. If three-year grubs are also a concern, apply a long residual product in late May or June. One application should give season-long control for both types of grubs.

See publication [Annual White Grubs in Turf](#), MF-2635

Always read and follow label directions carefully when using pesticides. Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned.

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www.ksre.ksu.edu

Management Summary for Established Lawn

Mowing	Turf-types: 2–3 inches. K-31: 2½–3½ inches. Raise height to the upper end of range during the summer or year round.
Fertilizing	Sept., Nov., May is optional.
Watering	Spring: minimal. Summer: 1 to 1½ inches per week. Fall: only as needed to prevent wilting.
Dandelion Crabgrass	Herbicides are effective in the fall. Preemergence herbicide before red-bud trees reach full bloom and/or spot spray crabgrass with a product containing quinclorac.
Grubs	Treat during July–August when grubs are present (annual grubs).
Aerating	Early spring or fall, as needed.

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Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

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