

Establish, Maintain A Healthy Lawn In The Southeast

Dear Plant Doctor: Please send me info on establishing and maintaining a "healthy" lawn. I just recently purchased a new home and want my yard to be well kept.

—Fayetteville
Dear Plant Doctor: I am a new homeowner with a problem. My front and back yard are bare and I do not know where to even start in establishing a lawn. I read your articles on establishing a "perfect lawn" but can you send me information about establishing and maintaining a "healthy" lawn?

—Fayetteville
Establishing And Maintaining A Healthy Lawn

Southeastern North Carolina is in a climactic transition zone for northern and southern plants—a kind of "gardener's purgatory."

Summer heat, humidity and sandy soils make the culture of cool season lawn grasses (e.g. tall fescue, Kentucky Bluegrass, red fescue, bentgrass, and others) extremely difficult. Periodic winter freezes and the occasional arctic blast will kill or severely injure many of the warm season grasses (eg. bermudagrass, centipede, St. Augustinegrass, carpetgrass, and bahiagrass).

In order to grow a "healthy" lawn, you need to know where our lawn-grasses are coming from, so you will know where you are going.

None of the lawn-grasses commonly grown east of the Mississippi are native to North America. Most originate from the great grasslands (ie. steppes, veldt, or pampas) of Europe, Asia, Africa or South America.

In their native habitat, grasses do not grow in a pure stand. A square yard of native grassland may contain several dozen species of plants which may include two or three species of grass and 10-to-25-plus species of broadleaf plants, mosses and fungi.

The temperate or tropical grasslands do not produce large forested areas on the 15 to 25 inches of annual rainfall (i.e. trees and grass do naturally occupy the same niche). Many of the warm-season grasses were thought to have evolved under heavy grazing pressure from animals and natural burning (from wild fires).

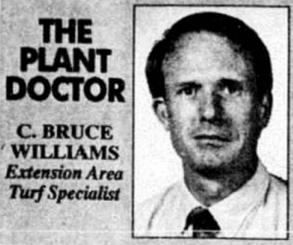
In a modern world, monoculture is the normal method to grow vegetable, fruit and fiber crops. Monoculture is the production system of choice for most cultivated plants to maximize uniformity, management and labor efficiency, and harvest.

Lawn-grass monoculture has become the "norm" for home lawns due to a variety of agronomic and sociological reasons. Most people consider a "perfect" lawn to be absolutely uniform in color (green), texture (fine), and density (thick). Most perfect lawns are probably healthy, but a healthy lawn is not necessarily perfect.

The establishment of a healthy lawn will depend on how well you do your homework.

The 10 Steps To Establishing A "Healthy" Lawn

1. Develop a healthy soil. Contact your N.C. Cooperative Extension Service for information on soil testing. This is free service in North Carolina. Without modifying the soil, you will have bare ground, native plants, weeds, or a combination



THE PLANT DOCTOR
C. BRUCE WILLIAMS
Extension Area Turf Specialist

ture adapted to your location. Warm season grasses adapted for southeastern North Carolina include centipede, carpetgrass, bermudagrass, St. Augustinegrass, zoysiagrass, and bahiagrass.

4. Choose a lawn management scheme consistent with your lifestyle. If you have the time and money to culture a fine lawn, then choose a grass that will perform up to your expectations (hybrid bermudagrass or zoysiagrass). If you like other leisure-time activities, choose a grass that requires less maintenance (St. Augustinegrass,

centipede, carpetgrass, bahiagrass, or common bermudagrass).

5. Plan a fertilization and mowing program based upon N.C. Cooperative Extension recommendations—and stick to it. Request a copy of "Carolina Lawns - AG69" from your local N.C. Cooperative Extension agent.

6. Use slow-release forms of nitrogen fertilizer. Use other fertilizer nutrients only in the proportions needed for grass growth. Most warm season grasses do best with a 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 nitrogen-phosphorus-potassium fertilizer ratio. Fertilizers like

16-4-8, 15-5-10, or 12-4-8 are ideal for all warm-season grasses except centipede (where a 5-5-15 or 5-0-15 is appropriate).

7. Use IPM, or Integrated Pest Management, strategies and practice grass-cycling. Controlling insects or diseases often requires that you learn the proper time and method for treating pests. This will require some effort and tolerance on your part. Grass-cycle—leave grass clippings on your lawn or compost them.

8. Do not try to grow lawn-grass where lawn-grasses do not grow.

Most lawn-grasses do poorly in heavy shade, water-inundated soils, very acid soils, heavy foot-traffic, or on the beach. Choose appropriate groundcovers, ornamental grasses, or landscape materials for difficult-to-maintain areas.

9. Provide adequate water.
10. Learn everything you can about all the plants in your yard, including your lawn-grass.

You will become a better gardener and develop a healthier landscape. Send your gardening questions and comments to the Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia NC 28422.

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