

# Carpentgrass: Low-Maintenance Alternative To Centipede

Carpentgrass (*Axonopus affinis*) is not for everyone. If ease of maintenance is more important to you than a high-quality lawn, then carpentgrass may have a future role on your lawn. Carpentgrass is a utility grass best grown in lawns, roadsides or low-maintenance wet areas receiving little traffic.

This warm-season grass is native to the West Indies and Central America and can be grown only in the warmest regions of eastern North Carolina (from Moore County east). Carpentgrass is relatively coarse textured with large-leaf blades and appears intermediate to St. Augustinegrass and centipede-grass in leaf texture. Carpentgrass is often included in the "green" mixes sold at seed stores and only rarely can gardeners tell the difference between carpentgrass and centipede-grass.

It has about the same shade tolerance as centipede-grass but responds to fertilizer application by producing a good dense turf and green color (but routine overfertilization will induce chronic disease problems). However the real strength of carpentgrass resides in the ability to grow in wet, acid, infertile soils where few other perennial grasses will persist.

Carpentgrass also has a down side. This warm-season grass goes dormant (turns tan-brown) soon after the first hard frost and is susceptible to winter kill at about the same frequency as St. Augustinegrass. Tall thinly-stalked forked seedheads will grace a carpentgrass lawn during the summer, but unlike the tough seedheads of bahiagrass, carpentgrass seedheads can be easily cut.

Carpentgrass will not tolerate or recover rapidly from heavy foot or equipment traffic. Another disadvantage of a carpentgrass lawn in eastern North Carolina is drought tolerance. Carpentgrass is very susceptible to drought injury because the roots tend to be very shallow. In sandy, dry soils frequent irrigation will be required to maintain a living stand of turf. In addition, carpentgrass will not tolerate saline irrigation water or close proximity to salt spray from the ocean.

**Getting Carpentgrass Started**  
No named varieties of carpentgrass are generally available, but this may change soon. Seed is the preferred method of establishment, but carpentgrass can also be sprigged. Sod is also a viable means of establishment, but carpentgrass sod is not commercially available anywhere in North Carolina.

The secret to establishing carpentgrass resides in soil preparation. In general, carpentgrass will do well under the same soil conditions as centipede-grass but will thrive on soils with a pH of 4.5 to 5.5. Excessive liming and fertilization will hinder the establishment of carpentgrass.

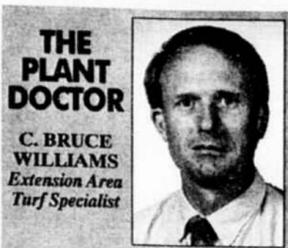
Collect 10 to 12 small plugs (4 inches deep) at random in the area to be planted and place in small paper or plastic container. Take your soil sample to your county N.C. Cooperative Extension Service office for an NCDA soil analysis.

Add the recommended amounts (on the soil test results) of lime, phosphorus or potassium to the site and thoroughly rototill the nutrients into the upper 6 inches of the soil profile. Smooth grade or level the area with a hard rake and then with a water-filled roller. Apply at least an inch of irrigation and allow the soil to settle for several days prior to planting. Prior to seeding, hard rake the area again.

Seed is the least expensive and fastest way to establish a carpentgrass lawn. Carpentgrass can be seeded in eastern North Carolina between April 15 and Sept. 15. Earlier or later seeding dates can be damaged by frost.

Carpentgrass is relatively inexpensive when compared to other warm-season grass seed. Carpentgrass is best seeded at a rate of 2 to 5 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet. In general, the higher rate of seed the faster the establishment.

If seeding very large areas or areas where soil type variability is



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in the carpentgrass mix, since centipede-grass is better adapted to droughty soils than carpentgrass.

Apply one-half the seed in one direction and the remainder at right angles to the first for better uniformity of establishment. Lightly rake the seedbed. Roll the entire area with a water-filled roller to ensure good seed-to-soil contact.

Keep the area seeded moist. Water several times a day if necessary. Carpentgrass is relatively fast-germinating (7 to 10 days) when compared to other warm-season grasses. However, do not allow the

soil to dry out the first several weeks after planting or all of your carpentgrass seedlings will die. Frequent light watering (2 to 3 times daily) is better than constant watering.

**Caring for Carpentgrass**  
Carpentgrass is a low-maintenance grass, thus minimum fertilizer use is recommended. The application of 4 to 6 pounds of 16-4-8 or 8 to 12 pounds of 8-8-8 per 1,000 square feet in April and then again in August will produce a healthy vigorous lawn. I have also seen excellent results in fertilizing carpentgrass with the same fertilizer and rate that you

fertilize centipede-grass (10 pounds of 5-5-5 or 5-0-15 per 1,000 square feet).

Carpentgrass will require mowing every 10 to 14 days during the growing season. Mow with a rotary mower to a height of 1.5 to 2.0 inches.

I have not found carpentgrass to be susceptible to ground pearl, but that may change. A few insects can be problems on carpentgrass, but in general this grass is very tolerant of pest problems. Carpentgrass has only one severe disease problem. Brown patch disease will cause severe dam-

age to carpentgrass that is overfertilized. The use of a slow-release fertilizer will help prevent brown patch severity.

Avoid the use of herbicides on carpentgrass. Carpentgrass is sensitive to many of the herbicides that centipede-grass and St. Augustinegrass tolerate, and few (if any) herbicides are labeled for use on carpentgrass. Under normal conditions, carpentgrass will crowd out most weed invaders.

Send your comments and questions to the Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia NC 28422.

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