

## An Update on Tall Fescue

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“Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who’s the prettiest of them all.”

Yes it is that time of year when we start trying to select “THE BEST” tall fescue cultivar, and the increase of cultivar types continues to grow. In order to help answer this question, The University of Georgia participates with The National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) in cultivar evaluations. In the last completed trial which started in 1996 and ended in 2000, there were 132 entries. By entries we mean different named cultivars of fescue that may be sold to you at a seed dealer. The current trial, planted in the fall of 2001 has 162 entries. Turfgrass breeders across the country are continuing to work hard to improve turf type tall fescue for **disease resistance**, **drought tolerance**, and **overall turf quality**.

Before exploring which of the dozens of cultivar selections you have to choose from to have your beautiful lawn; pause. Let’s take time to review some other important keys to successfully growing a tall fescue lawn. Whether you use a fancy name branded fescue seed or just plain ole Kentucky 31 the following will make sure you have success, we guarantee it.

Soil test. It is so important. This is commonly the most overlooked part of a successful lawn. It’s easy, just go around to 10 to 15 places in the lawn area and get some dirt 2 to 5 inches in the ground. Mix these 15 samples up well and bring us a cup of this mixed up soil. We will charge you 8 dollars and send it to our lab at UGA and tell you exactly how much lime and fertilizer your lawn needs for success. Please don’t guess.

Timing is important to lawn success. Fall planting is the best for fescue. Planting between September 15<sup>th</sup> until November 1<sup>st</sup> is always successful. After November 1<sup>st</sup>, the risk for failure becomes greater due to freezing temperatures and the heaving of the soil that goes along with it. This heaving tears the roots from the plant. Spring planting can begin on March 1<sup>st</sup> through the end of April. We have found that this is always a harder time to start a lawn due to the heat that is just around the corner and know that crabgrass will compete with your newly planted fescue. If you can’t go by one of these optimum times due to construction, meteor strike, or other acts of God, do as follows and be prepared to aerate and over seed in the next fall.

Good, deep tillage prior to planting a new lawn provides significant short and long term dividends for turfgrass survival. The hard, compact high clay subsoil’s in north Georgia, make rooting tough on plants. The looser the soil the more water from irrigation or rainfall penetrates into the soil. Plant nutrients such as lime, phosphorus and potassium can be tilled into the soils at this time putting them where the roots are. It is always amazing to see a hard one-inch rain and then see the soil only wet down to one to two inches. So even when we get normal rainfall, much of that simply runs off and never enters hard, compact soils.

The use of an aerator when renovating a lawn is invaluable. The aerators that remove a plug of soil from your lawn are the best. Spike aerators just don’t do the job of loosening the soil. I think it actually hardens the soil as it works. Aeration should be done before applying lime, fertilizer, or seed. The aeration holes will make a good home for your seed. Don’t be shy; aerate the fool out of your lawn when you do this. I’m always amazed to see new grass only in the aeration holes a few weeks after planting.

Of course we also see the lawn growers that water improperly. Usually the problem is too often and too little, which helps increase shallow rooting and disease problems. But most tall fescue problems tend to be associated with too little water, not

too much. When possible, one inch of rain or irrigation every ten days will make a big difference. Use a tuna can to measure the amount of water you put on a lawn with your sprinkler so you will know how much you have applied or has fallen from the sky.

The common problem I see is too high of a seeding rate. What I mean in simple terms is you put way more seed on the lawn than is necessary. All tall fescue research done through NTEP has used a seeding rate of **five pounds**, that's right, five pounds of seed per 1000 square feet of bare soil. Yes this seeding rate means a bit slower establishment time and a stand of grass that has wider leaf blades. However, it also means that when stress does occur, there are larger, more vigorous plants that are less prone to drought and disease problems. So take note, if you want that perennial ryegrass look of fine, dense turf from tall fescue, you will also get more drought stress, disease problems and then you will be reseeding again.

Obviously then, is the reseeding rate on lawns that already have some grass. If a stand has been thinned out 50% at the end of the summer and it should be reseeded at two to three pounds per thousand square feet I know that that is not much seed but it is what success has shown us to work. Of course for initial establishment or reseeding the conditions must be considered. If you don't follow our soil preparation guideline and irrigation is poor, there will probably be more seedling loss.

The point is, if you have been having great looking tall fescue lawns in the spring, and plenty of disease and stand loss in the summer, maybe your stand is too dense. Try our seeding rate and other recommendations as a challenge.

Once the grass is up, what is the fertilizer program? Well most of our evaluation work has been with two to four pounds of Nitrogen per thousand square feet **per year**. This means if you are using 10-10-10 you **should put out** 20 to 40 lbs. of fertilizer in an entire year. This should be applied in four equal doses. The first application should be in the fall at planting, then in Feb., April and in lastly in June if it is a wet year. If you need help understanding a fertilizer bag or are confused about the many different types of bags give us a call. The **natural, dark green** color of the newer grasses allow for less Nitrogen to maintain good color. However, too many fertilizer programs are set as though lighter green Kentucky 31 was the grass being used. Consider that lower Nitrogen rates often mean lower water needs and less mowing. Just like the higher seeding rates, high Nitrogen rates also have a significant down side during stress. I feel they increase the incidence of disease in home lawns.

That leads to the next point, which is weed control. With the available choices of preemergence herbicides, there is little reason not to have reasonable weed control. Like everything else, timing is important. Apply these in the spring after planting to control crabgrass. We have an excellent bulletin on weed control in lawns. We'll be glad to send it to you.

If you get a nice stand of grass, what's going to be the mowing height? Again, most evaluation work is done at heights of **two** to **four** inches. All of the tall fescues all perform better at this height. And, always keep in mind that as drought stress becomes an issue, higher mowed turf grasses are able to develop deeper rooting systems, hence better survival.

Now to the cultivars you will find that most of the bags sold are mixes of 2 or 3 cultivars. Do your best to get at least one of the 3 cultivars in the top groups in your mix. The other 1/3 is usually one of the lower rated Fescues. The seed sellers want you to be successful so for the most part they are trying to give you the best seed they have access to.

There is a great sheet that has all of the grasses that were tested at our Griffin experiment station and rates them from best to poorest quality. Guess which one was the worst..... Kentucky 31. The table is too long to put here so here is the link you can put into the address bar on the computer and print it off and take it with you to the store. If you don't have computer access call us and we will print you one.

\* Note: The Cultivar "Southeast" was not included in this test. I have observed it and it would fall in the last category or lower. It has poor color for home lawns.

If you would like more information on NTEP and turf grass testing, go to [www.NTEP.org](http://www.NTEP.org). You'll learn lots about this evaluation process and their five year process of turf evaluation.

The University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences has an outstanding turf grass program in Georgia! We have a turf grass field day every other year where all of our turf grass research and educational displays are showcased. It's held in Griffin at our experiment station. The next one will be held in 2011.

If you have any questions about your lawn or fertilizer, please give your extension office a call at 706-253-8840. Additional information on growing and maintaining all types of grasses are on our website at [www.georgiaturf.com](http://www.georgiaturf.com) and follow the turf grass link to your grass type.

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