

About Turf Grass

For those of you with kids or pets turf grass is probably part of your landscape. Turf grass comes in two seasons/multiple varieties: cool season like Kentucky blue grass and fine fescue and warm season like buffalo grass and Bermuda grass. The reason you need to know if it's cool season or warm season is because knowing when the grass grows (the season) tells you the right times to irrigate and fertilize and knowing the variety tells what the correct height is for mowing. All turf grasses are not created equal. The world of irrigation, fertilization, and lawn mowers is geared to Kentucky blue grass, for other grass varieties you may need to do things differently.

Selection

If you have a lot of traffic think kids, pets, and athletic events, then blue grass is the most traffic tolerant of the turf grasses. If you have shade, then fine fescue is the best choice but isn't as traffic tolerant. If you want turf but don't want to water a lot, choose buffalo or Bermuda. If you want a truly drought tolerant turf, choose Bermuda. However, selecting Bermuda is a onetime decision – it's almost impossible to remove once it's installed. Many people consider Bermuda grass to be an invasive weed. Warm season grasses go dormant (turn brown) starting late September until early May and aesthetically you may not like that. Although there are new greener varieties of buffalo grass, many people prefer the deeper green of blue grass or the blue of fescue.

Irrigation

Don't irrigate turf until it starts growing as it's a waste of money: for cool season that's usually early March, for warm season that's usually late April/early May. Irrigate earlier and you'll be watering the weeds not the turf. If you see bare spots, don't automatically dial up the water. You may end up with fungal problems instead of bare spots.

With turf irrigation it's important to have good spray head to spray head coverage. To determine if you have good coverage you have to turn on the system and see if spray from one head slightly overlaps the surrounding heads. You can perform a coverage test using tuna cans. Put tuna cans in a grid pattern with no can closer than 3 feet to a head. Run the system for 10 minutes, measure the amount of water in each can, and compare amounts. Bare spots are often found in areas with poor coverage. The ideal is to have the same amount of water in each can.

You may have to adjust the spray if you don't have equal amounts of water in each can. You may also need to replace broken heads or ones that shoot geysers of water into the air. Also, if you're watering the sidewalk and streets, you may need to adjust the spray at the head or change the frequency or run time. Note that irrigation is not standardized so you can't interchange the heads from different brands of irrigation equipment.

Next you have to determine how long to run the irrigation and how often. Grass doesn't need irrigation to be run very long because it doesn't grow very deep, but you do need to water at least 2 inches deep (3 inches for buffalo). Test the depth by poking a long screwdriver into the soil an hour after watering and measure the result. Water more or less based on the results. Water next when the grass begins to wilt, **and** it shows your footprints. Water in the morning for best results: it's cooler, the grass has time

to dry so less chance for fungal disease, and the wind is typically less. Water turf when you can visually watch the system watering. Lots of problems go unaddressed because the sprinklers run when you're still asleep or away from the house.

If water begins to run off and you haven't reached the 2" mark, run the irrigation until it begins to run off, wait until the water soaks in (say 1 hour) and restart the cycle.

Reduce irrigation frequency when the temperatures are cooler, increase frequency when it's warmer (over 85 degrees). Turn the system off if we get ½ inch or more of rain. Turn it back on when the grass gets wilted with footprints or use the screwdriver test again. Turn off the system completely in the winter when we begin getting consistent freezes. Grass doesn't need to be watered when it's dormant.

Fungal diseases flourish in moist humid conditions. If you have a fungal disease, reduce your watering frequency or run time. Fungal diseases are spread by walking on an infected area, then on an unaffected area. Sometimes the mower can spread them.

Fertilization

Fertilization needs to be done when the grass is growing. Cool season grass should be fertilized in early March and again in September. If you want three fertilizations, fertilize again in November. Warm season grasses should be fertilized in early May and late August. Organic fertilizers are better for the soil. When you fertilize you're really adding nutrients to the soil. All plants (turf in this case) need water soluble nutrients and they take up nutrients through their roots from the soil not the fertilizer directly. So be sure to water in the fertilizer after applying. Use a slow release fertilizer to get better, longer lasting results. That's one of the reasons to use organic fertilizers – slower release, longer lasting, and they don't kill helpful soil microbes.

Be sure to follow the directions for the fertilizer and apply evenly (one row down, one row across with a slight overlap on each row).

Mowing

Mowing height is dependent on the specific variety grass you selected. Lawn mowers are set for blue grass (mow to 2"). Cut 1/3 of the blade no more. For fescue and Bermuda mow to 1 ½". You'll need to raise the height if you have buffalo grass (mow to 3"). Also, as summer arrives, raise the height of the mower in half inch increments when we don't have rain then mow less frequently. Mowing too low, called scalping, kills the crown of the grass and creates dead spots. Mowing frequently (fertilizing also) encourages more growth. Don't encourage growth when the grass doesn't want to grow e.g. blue grass in mid-summer.

Mulching mowers which cut the grass blades into smaller pieces reduce thatch, return nutrients to the soil, and are easier on the person doing the mowing too! Over-fertilization increases thatch. Unless the soil under your turf is compacted, you shouldn't need to aerate it.

Pet Urine

Pet urine is one of the toughest issues for grass. One suggestion is to dilute it quickly so following the dog with a hose and spraying water on the area may be your first line of defense.

Weeds

The best solution to weeds is to improve your stand of grass, the healthier the turf, the fewer the weeds. Some weeds give you hints about the problem. Weeds that like water like purslane and spurge say you're overwatering, weeds like cheat grass may indicate underwatering. Before you start treating the symptom look for the underlying problem. It's often related to the type of cultural care you're providing, or it might be that the irrigation coverage isn't even.

[Down to Earth, latest edition \(5\)](#)

A new edition of the book on local gardening published by Master Gardeners is now available from the Garden Center shop, local bookstores, nurseries, and at Garden Center events. It gets better every edition and the information is for Albuquerque not for areas with more rain, humidity and acid soil.