

Seeding Native Grasses

Whether you were affected by the fire or just want a prairie as part of your landscape here are tips for being more successful when seeding. Installing sod doesn't work if you want a mix of native grasses and it probably isn't available anyway. Seeding can be tricky because there are a number of factors to consider:

- Soil moisture – to germinate the seed you need soil moisture and the best moisture in Albuquerque comes during the monsoons. However, you don't want to wet the soil, have the seed start to germinate, and then go through a dry spell just as the seedling starts growing. The best time to seed is when we're going to have several days in a row of moisture. **Soil moisture is the primary factor to successful seeding in the arid southwest.**
- Seed dormancy – you want some dormant seed in the mix because if we do get rain and seed germination, followed by a dry spell that kills the germinated seedlings, you don't want all of the seeds used up. Having some seed that "waits" to germinate is a good idea.
- Soil compaction – if the soil has been walked on or run over with heavy equipment, the air pockets are removed. Seed has difficulty rising through compacted soil and seeds need oxygen to grow and spaces for water to infiltrate. To reduce soil compaction, you have to break up the crust so air spaces can be returned. However, this process turns over the soil opening it up to weed seed germination.
- Seeding depth – too deep and there may be no moisture for the seed, too shallow and the seed dries out, blows away or is eaten by the birds. 1/4-1/2 inch is the preferred depth.
- Seed contact with the bare soil – must be good for a higher rate of germination. Voids around the seed can reduce capillary action of the moisture.
- Light mulch cover – using weed free native grass hay or straw helps keep the seed from blowing away, being eaten, and losing moisture to evaporation. The mulch needs to be a thin application because if light is blocked entirely from the seed, it won't germinate. For this reason we leave natural grass cuttings in the streetscape areas of High Desert.
- Weed control – if the area being seeded contains lots of weed seeds, then the grass must fight the weed seed to germinate. Dense stands of weeds need to be removed before seeding. One way to do this if they are annual weeds is to mow them low to the ground with a mulching mower and let the cuttings act as mulch (remember, light mulch). If the annual weeds have seed heads and are about to drop the seeds, don't mow them or you'll have even more weed seed to deal with.
- Cool season versus warm season grass – both High Desert mixes available from Leeco contain a mix of cool season and warm season grasses. Warm season grasses germinate between 85 and 90 degrees, cool season grasses germinate between 70 and 75 degrees. Warm season grasses should germinate if planted in August. Winter snowpack will help germinate the cool season grasses.

While you can rake the soil before seeding this may expose existing weed seed for possible germination - especially in bare spots. While you could use a pre-emergent herbicide to keep the weed seed from germinating, it may also keep your new grass seed from germinating. Both High Desert seed mixes

include wildflowers and a pre-emergent herbicide for broadleaf plants will prevent them from germinating. Anything that's a broadleaf weed killer will kill wildflower seedlings. This is why hand pulling is generally more effective for weed control where other desirable plants exist.

If you are starting a prairie from scratch, putting down a thin layer of compost before seeding and lightly mixing it into the native soil might help provide organic matter for initial germination. All other steps would be the same.

Prairies or native grass areas have several benefits:

- Provide nesting and cover for wildlife like quail
- Provide food for wildlife especially birds and bees
- Eliminate bare spots which are fertile ground for weeds. With fewer bare spots and weeds there is less maintenance required.
- Give the area seasonal interest with great winter color.
- Adds color in the other seasons with the wildflowers and subshrubs.

If you want shrubs in the area to be seeded, I recommend that you use the High Desert reclamation mix. If you want a few subshrubs like bush penstemon and winterfat and also some wildflowers, use the overseeding mix.

If the grass becomes tall, you may want to cut it annually in the spring to about 4 inches. Be sure to remove any dead plants as these encourage fire.

The primary source for this article is "Seeding Native Grasses in the Arid Southwest" from NRCS New Mexico. Dave Dreeson at the Los Lunas Plant Material Center wrote the original brochure.