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One of the main disadvantages of warm-season turfgrasses (such as bermudagrass, centipedegrass, St. Augustinegrass, and zoysiagrass) is the fact that they do indeed go dormant during the winter time thus losing their lush green summertime appearance.

Most people consider this to be a disadvantage; however, I personally think that there is no way that not having to mow your grass every week can be all bad. Warm season turf grasses lose color and slow their growth in the fall and go into dormancy after the first frost and are brown until spring. Planting a cool-season grass in the fall, a process called overseeding, provides a green, growing cover during the winter. The ideal overseed will be easy to germinate, look great during the winter and die in the spring just as the base warm-season grass begins to grow. Although this ideal is almost impossible to reach, here are some tips to a great-looking overseed and a good transition back to warm-season grass in the spring.

It is important to remember that growing an overseeded grass during the winter is stressful on the underlying warm-season grass. The winter grass usually is planted well before our permanent grass goes dormant in the fall, depriving the underlying grass of the last month or so of its normal growing season by shading it out and competing with it for water, nutrients, and sunlight. Also, an overseed will require much more water and fertilizer in the fall than a lawn that is going dormant.

The major problem; however, comes in the spring, when the warm-season grass is breaking dormancy and starting to grow. If an overseed is present, it competes for light, water and nutrients with the underlying grass, and can set back the growth of the warm-season grass significantly compared to non-overseeded lawns. For this reason, it is very difficult to achieve good results year in and year out when overseeding zoysiagrass (especially Emerald zoysiagrass) or centipedegrass lawns. These grasses are relatively slow growing and do not recover from being overseeded nearly as well as bermudagrass. It is recommended that homeowners think twice before overseeding zoysiagrass or centipedegrass lawns, especially on an ongoing basis. I also tend to think that zoysiagrass has a very appealing dormant winter color. Bermudagrass, with its aggressive growth, best tolerates chronic overseeding.

The overwhelming majority of lawns are overseeded using either annual ryegrass (*Lolium multiflorum*) or perennial ryegrass (*L. perenne*). The choice of which ryegrass to use often comes down to a decision of cost versus appearance. Annual ryegrass is cheaper, but perennial ryegrass has a darker green color and a finer texture. Perennial

ryegrass also has better heat tolerance than annual ryegrass. This is actually a major disadvantage in the spring, when perennial ryegrass competes with the underlying warm-season for nutrients, light and water longer than annual ryegrass does.

Perennial ryegrasses for overseeding are typically sold as blends of several varieties, with seed companies and distributors concocting their own blends, often changing the composition from year to year. There are also several varieties of annual ryegrass from which to choose.

A newer class of ryegrass intended for overseeding is called intermediate ryegrass. Intermediate ryegrasses are the result of crosses between annual ryegrass and perennial ryegrass, and they seek to combine the looks of perennial ryegrass with the low heat tolerance of annual ryegrass. So far, results have been mixed.

Ryegrass is susceptible to seedling rots caused by fungi. Buying seed treated with a fungicide will help greatly to reduce this problem. Fungicide-treated seed is worth the investment.

The best time to plant winter ryegrass varies from north to south. In the Tennessee Valley, ryegrass is typically planted sometime in mid - September. In central Alabama, the last half of September or the first part of October usually is a good time to establish a ryegrass overseed. Along the Gulf Coast, middle to late October are typical. The exact date depends on the weather. Waiting until the daytime temperatures are consistently below 85 degrees F will improve ryegrass germination.

If you have chosen to overseed your lawn, here are a couple suggestions to help make your overseeding more successful. Mow the lawn as closely as possible without scalping. A shorter cut than usual will make it easier for the ryegrass seeds to fall down to the soil. If the lawn has a heavy amount of thatch, it is good idea to dethatch the lawn before overseeding. Be sure to rake all debris off the lawn. Plant about 8 – 10 pounds of ryegrass (either annual or perennial) seed per 1000 square feet. Use a mechanical spreader for best results. Apply half of the seed walking in one direction, then the other half walking at right angles to the first. This will help achieve a uniform distribution of the overseed.

Be sure to irrigate the newly planted seed lightly but frequently (twice per day) for the first 3-5 days, until the seeds have germinated. But be careful not to overwater! There is no need to flood the soil before the seeds germinate. Only enough water to keep the seeds moist is needed.

After the seeds germinate and begin to establish a root system, reduce the frequency of watering and increase the depth. Irrigate once per day for the first week after the seeds germinate, then reduce the frequency of watering to twice or three times per week. Remember that irrigation is a supplement to natural rainfall; you can reduce irrigation or even eliminate it altogether if there is enough rain. Rainfall sensors on an automatic irrigation system can cut off the irrigation when it rains and save the homeowner significant amounts of money.

Begin mowing the ryegrass as soon as it reaches 2 – 2 ½ inches in height. The grass should be maintained at about 2 inches during the winter. Be sure that the lawnmower is sharp, especially when mowing young ryegrass. A dull mower could rip the seedlings out of the ground. Mow often enough that you do not remove more than 1/3 of the leaf blade at any one mowing.

Fertilizer may be applied to help the ryegrass maintain color. Apply fertilizer at

the rate of ½ pound of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet after the second mowing, and then up to monthly at the same rate (½ pound N per 1000 square feet) as long as the temperature is above freezing. Discontinue fertilization in February in preparation for transition back to permanent grass.

Ryegrass will die when the weather becomes hot in late spring, but several management practices can encourage transition back to warm-season grass. Do not fertilize the ryegrass in early spring, as this promotes growth and competition with the warm-season grass. Once the underlying grass greens up in the spring, mow the ryegrass as closely as possible without scalping the underlying grass. This opens up the ryegrass canopy and allows light to reach the warm-season grass. Once the warm-season grass begins vigorous growth, resume your normal lawn care program.