



Season 1 Episode 10—Turfgrass for Home Lawns: Part 1

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Announcer

Welcome to the *Southern Ground* podcast provided by Alabama Extension through Auburn University. Extension educators Shane Harris and Dr. Chip East discuss seasonal lawn and garden topics, address common questions, and provide the practical solutions you want to know. Let's dig in to our southern ground.

Shane Harris

Hello everyone, and welcome to another episode of *Southern Ground*. I'm Shane Harris and joining me is Dr. Chip East. Good morning, Chip.

Chip East

Morning, Shane.

Shane Harris

And we have a very special guest. We have Dr. Dave Han, who is with Auburn University, and he's, with our Alabama Cooperative Extension system, and he serves as our extension specialist for turfgrass. And we call him all the time when we have issues with home lawns, problems in the grass, or even how to establish the grass. So welcome, Dr. Han.

Dave Han

Oh. Thanks, Shane. Thanks, Chip. I'm really happy to be here this morning.

Shane Harris

Well, this is definitely your line of work and your specialty. So, Chip and I, as we looked at these topics for the spring and early summer. Now that it's warm here in the Deep South, everybody is getting that lawn ready. Ready for that grass to grow and turn perfectly green, looking for that perfect lawn. And one hot topic is always how to establish the grass, establish a lawn, or sometimes even to a point of doing some maintenance and renovating a lawn. So, today's topic is actually selecting turfgrass for the home lawn.

Dave Han

All right. Let's get started.

Shane Harris

So, I guess Chip my thoughts is how do we approach looking at a grass if we have a brand new home? Maybe something is being built or if you do want to do a renovation. Dr. Han and Chip. Where do we start when it comes to deciding what would be the perfect turf grass for my situation?

Chip East

I always ask people what they're wanting to get out of the turf, and it's if you got a lot of young kids, it's going to be playing in it. That's one thing if you never walk on it. I know people that never go outside in their yard, so I don't I don't know what it matters. There are certain grass that might recover better than another.

And then what you want to look like in the wintertime, summertime, how good you want it to look. And I think it's important to look at that before you plant. A lot of times people already have. They already got something and they really wanted something else. And I'm like, well, you, you chose to do this.

Shane Harris

And that's a good point because that's in choosing any kind of plant around the home. What's the what's the grass going to be used for? Both of y'all do a lot with athletic turf, and that's when we start looking at the right grass for those athletic fields. That's tough and can tolerate all that foot traffic. But a lot of people just want a green grass.

They just want a green yard. They just want it to look pretty, a lot of times. They want it to look like a beautiful golf course. It's manicured and well maintained.

Chip East

My favorite one, Dr. Dave for the athletic turf is may not be my favorite one for the home lawn. So tell us about some of the warm season turfgrasses that are commonly grown in in Alabama. What's the most common?

Dave Han

Well, first of all, I have to say that if you have the chance to pick what kind of grass you have in your lawn, you are already way ahead of the game. Most people, if they buy a house, it comes with a landscape, and usually that includes the lawn. And so, when you go to renovate a lawn, or if you are building a new house and are involved in the process early enough that you can have some input into the grass, that's great.

That's way ahead of where most people are choosing a grass that's going to work. The major thing besides how are you going to use the lawn is just what is the environment like? And that, encompasses two major things. Number one is just where are you located in terms of what's the climate? How hot does it get in the summer?

How cold does it get in the wintertime? You know, the South actually has a wide variety of different climates, and we have six or seven maybe. We'll probably talk about four or five of them today, but six or seven different species of grass that would work in a lawn, depending on exactly where in the south you are. But the other major thing is shade, and this is something which I think creeps up on people quite literally, you know, as trees grow, as shrubs get bigger grasses, as a group of plants, they don't do well in the shade.

And this is just how they are. When you go out walking in the woods, you never really see a nice, lush stand of grass out there in the forest. Understory. Right? Forest floor is plants like ferns and, other things. Those are what I would call truly shade tolerant plants and grass, just isn't it? But we like to have trees for shade.

I don't know about you, but I ain't cutting down the trees in my front yard. That shade my house in the summertime. Because I already pay way too high an electric bill in the summer. And I don't need that getting any higher. But I know that grass right underneath the tree is, is not going to do well.

And you can't really do much except remove shade, but that, you know, has the other consequences.

Shane Harris

The telltale question is always how many hours does this particular grass need? And from your publications and from things that we have been taught over the years, four hours, six hours, eight hours, all day sun. Is there a magic number? And I guess it would literally depend on the top of turfgrass that we talk about where it would fall in that range.

Dave Han

That's right. So, the, the floor, I think the absolute minimum below which you really can't expect any grass to do well as four hours of sun. Okay. So for example, St. Augustinegrass and some of the newer varieties of zoysiagrass, they'll be okay with four hours of direct sun a day most of the time, all everything else being equal.

But if you want Bermuda grass to look good, then you really need at least six and preferably seven or eight hours of sun a day on it. Centipedegrass, which is another commonly used warm season grass in the southeast, can do well with maybe four or five hours of sun a day. Some of the cool season grasses, the one that we use most in the southeast would be tall.

Fescue also will be okay with four hours of sun a day, but if you get below that, it doesn't matter what species of grass you have, it's going to thin out. And so, what I often see, what I often tell people to expect is that the lawn

will probably shrink as the landscape matures. You know, if you're buying a new home in a fresh subdivision, well, you can grow any grass you want there.

For the first five or ten years after that house is built, because all the trees are small. When they go in all the other landscape plants are small, but they grow. And so it's not uncommon at all to have to convert some areas that used to be grass into some other kind of a ground cover, maybe, or into a flower bed, or even just an area with pine straw or, you know, crushed rock or something else to keep the ground from washing away.

And that's fine. It doesn't mean that you have failed as a grass grower. It's just recognizing, you know, how those grasses are.

Chip East

You might have succeeded as a tree grower.

Dave Han

You probably have. Yes, that's right.

Shane Harris

And that's a lot of calls coming. What's wrong with my grass. And they they've had this house for twenty years and and hey look, the trees have gotten bigger and that's just a natural response that you just had to accept. And then they want to know, well, what can I do about it? And typically does not mean cutting the trees down.

My favorite turf grass is pine straw because sometimes that is the best alternative. When you have too much shade, then grass is not going to be the option. Then you do need to turn into to a natural area. Going back to what you said a minute ago about the top of light does morning light versus afternoon direct sunlight matter to these turf grass?

Dave Han

It can it's funny because when you look at, some of the studies that have been done, it's a mixed bag. Sometimes it seems that morning light produces a higher quality of turf. Sometimes it seems that, afternoon sunlight does. Okay. I think that, and you have some of the confounding factors as well, because, areas that have morning light, they tend to face east and south and areas that have afternoon light tend mostly to face west and southwest.

Right. And so depending on what the wind patterns are like, prevailing winds where you are, especially in the winter time, that will affect how the grass does, especially a warm season grass in a cooler area of the southeast where we have to worry about winter kill, in the in the winter time, if you're on a north or northwest facing slope, those areas tend to be much more prone to winter kill off just from the cold, dry winds that we tend to get out of those directions in the in the winter time.

However, having said all of that, I think most the time it seems like, morning sun is slightly preferable to afternoon sun.

Shane Harris

Some of that's got to do with heat.

Dave Han

It has to do with heat. And then it also has to do with how, how, long it takes the dew to dry off in the morning time. So, areas with morning sun, they tend to dry off sooner, which leads to less, fungus problems in the turf. But, on the other hand, it can also mean more drought problems in dry weather too. So, there is a tradeoff there. And I'm not I don't think it's a deal breaker either way. Whether the light comes in the morning or in the afternoon, it just has to have that light.

Chip East

Dr. Han, thinking about the turf grass, the shading on it. If you are measuring the the length of time, I tell people, would you put a flag out there in different parts of the yard and keep it with the hours it hits that flag? For instance, when you look at it there and say, well, yeah, it's eight hours, nine hours of sun right there.

Well, the left side or the right side, the east side, the west side, it might the middle of it might have got more hours of sun, but the sides did not. And of course that's what's thin. And a lot of people don't understand. Well, you're lacking in light here. And there's nothing we can do for this particular grass that you have.

It's going to be thin in those spots because it was only three hours of light, which sounds like a lot if you're standing there in it and it's a hot day, but you're in the shade a lot of that day.

Dave Han

That's right. There are some, ways that you can put numbers to how much light you have. As a matter of fact, what I like to do is use a light meter. You know, they're designed for use either in a greenhouse or, you know, just out in a yard, and you can put these things in the lawn and just, let them sit there for 24 hours and they'll record how much light fell on them.

And then you can push a button and a couple of LEDs will light up, and it'll give you a range. How much light fell on that location in that in that past 24 hours? Okay. And so the way that that's measured, it's a unit called the Daily Light Integral. And I don't know if we really want to get into how that's calculated.

But the numbers that you're looking for is, you know, a DLI of about eleven to twelve for the most shade tolerant grasses should be okay. But for something that is more like, so that would be for something like a St. Augustinegrass, or again, some of the zoysiagrasses. If you're in that twelve to maybe eleven range, you should be okay.

For Bermudagrasses is you're going to be want wanting a DLI of more like eighteen or twenty plus those. You know, you can just look them up online, you know, and, you know, just cheap, light meters work really well. And that lets you get some numbers that you can, you know, refer to and not just have to eyeball it.

Right. Of course, the other thing you can do is use one of these sun tracker apps that, are available for smartphones and other, you know, devices where you can stand any place and it'll predict where the sun will be at any given time of day. Right. And so you can use that to see, okay, well, where is when is the sun going to be behind a tree, right.

Or behind a building, you know, on any given day of the year. So and these things again, they're not too expensive. The sun tracker apps, I use them on my phone a lot because again, shade is so important when you're looking at turfgrasses. And, so that and again, that's a way that you can visualize it. You can say, all right, well December 21st, right.

Shortest day of the year. Where is the sun going to be versus, you know, June 20th, you know, and any other any day in between. And so that'll let you stand in a place at the yard and get an idea of whether or not you can really expect to have enough light there.

Chip East

Well, it's so expensive to establish turf grass to me that that is a big deal to think about before you have these issues. We could know that upfront.

Dave Han

That's right. But then also be aware if, if it's a tree causing your shade issue, it will increase over time because those trees will keep growing. Sometimes you can trim limbs. I mean, we have to prune trees to keep them healthy. And you know, there's ways to maybe target that, to open them up, open up the canopy enough to, to maintain some stuff growing underneath them.

But bottom line is, you know, the shade is only going to get worse over time from most people's home landscapes.

Chip East

Dr. Han, let's start with, since we're talking about shade, let's talk about some of the most shade tolerant grasses, turfgrasses. And where would you start if you had heavier shade and how we.

Dave Han

Well, like I said before, the species of, of turfgrasses that are the most shade tolerant, I think are St. Augustinegrass, tall fescue and, certain zoysiagrasses. Of those, St. Augustinegrass and zoysiagrass are both, members of the group we call warm season grasses. They all do very well in hot weather. But they'll go dormant in the wintertime.

So as soon as we get a frost, those grasses stop growing. They turn brown, and they go to bed for the winter. Or at least until it warms up again. Tall fescue is a cool-season grass, so it does not go dormant, won't turn brown in the wintertime, but it does not handle hot weather anywhere near as well as the warm season grasses do.

So, it depends on where you are in the southeast. You know, if you are in the deep South, on the coastal plain, South Georgia, south Alabama, low country of the Carolinas, places like that. Florida. Okay, that's pretty solid warm season, grass country. You don't really want to be trying to grow tall fescue in those areas, but if you're up in the mountains.

Okay. Tall fescue is very popular in, in that part of the southeast. That's because it's cooler up there. Right? And it's downright cold in the wintertime. And it's too cold sometimes for the warm season grasses to survive the winter. So, there's this belt that runs across to the upper South from maybe, you know, Kentucky, Tennessee, western North Carolina, North Georgia mountains, higher elevations of Alabama, Tennessee Valley, we call it the transition zone.

And a lot of my colleagues who work in turf in that part of the world like to say it's where you can grow all of the grasses, but equally badly, because in the in the summertime, if it's in especially hot and drought the summer, you're going to lose the cool season grasses. If it's especially cold winter, you're going to lose some warm season grasses.

But if you're farther north than that, or farther south than that, you know, if you were in a shady area in, in the Deep South, I would say go for either St. Augustinegrass or zoysiagrass. And in particular, I'm thinking of the fine bladed zoysia. So, there's two distinct groups of zoysiagrass. The ones have really fine blades, and then the ones that have a more of a medium texture.

So, the Latin name for the medium texture one is *Zoysia japonica*. And there's all different kinds of varieties of those. Most of the fine textured ones are in the species. zoysia Mattarella okay. And those tend to have better shade tolerance. One of the really important things that, people who've been bringing out new zoysiagrasses in particular, have been looking for over the past twenty years or so, has been better shade tolerance.

So if it's been released since about 2020 ten, it's going to have a lot improved shade tolerance over zoysia as they came out back in the 20th century.

Shane Harris

Moving on to the next one would be centipede. We see that a lot in the South. I personally have grown centipede and it's done fairly well. It's thinned over the years definitely thinned in places where more shade. Some people say four hours, sometimes six hours. Sometimes it needs eight hours. I guess, clarify a little bit on centipede because it does has a lot of variability when it comes to the shade and sunlight.

Dave Han

Yeah, I would say centipede falls somewhere in the middle between your St. Augustine and your Bermudagrass. It's similar to the older varieties of zoysiagrass. So, I'd say five, maybe six hours. Six hours. You probably okay. Five. You might be okay if it's a very warm location. So, centipede is also not very cold tolerant. So, you don't see centipede much north of about, the Piedmont region of the southeast.

Okay. So, you get up into the mountains. You. It's rare to see centipedegrass. You see it a lot in south Georgia, south Alabama, the Florida panhandle. That's kind of the stronghold of centipedegrass and then west into into

Texas. So, you know, you go into, you know, places like Houston and even maybe as far north as, Dallas, you'll find a little bit of centipede, but it tends to stick fairly close to the coast.

Interestingly enough, if you go farther south in Florida, you see less centipede. It's almost all St. Augustinegrass from about Disney, South or Orlando, South in Florida.

Chip East

Centipede to me doesn't have the best fall color or even summer color. Compared to the others, it doesn't require the nitrogen that some of the others do, but it's one of my favorites just because of the, I'll say, slower growth rate as compared to some other things. For instance, Bermuda to me needs to be mowed pretty often to stay looking good.

That's why I like the centipede. It to me it doesn't look as good. I've seen some pretty stands of it, don't misunderstand, but as far as the green color, if you want that deep green, you probably don't want the centipede. But because of the slower growth rate, I don't have to mow it as often. It's one of my favorites for that reason.

Dave Han

Yeah, centipede grass is a funny thing because it out of all of the turfgrasses we grow on lawns, pretty much worldwide, it probably needs the least amount of fertilizer it can tolerate some of the least fertile, most acidic, just horrible soils that you wouldn't recommend people try to grow things on. And so that's a big advantage, right.

But it also, the flip side of that is that it doesn't actually do very well when you pour fertilizer on it. And it does have naturally kind of a light green color does not look like most people's mental image of the best, deepest dark, almost bluish green lawn. Right. And so when you put that right up next to like a St. Augustinegrass lawn or a, zoysiagrass lawn, you know, in your centipede in the middle, people are going to be able to tell that it's a different kind of grass if you're managing it properly, because if you pour fertilizer on it, you can get it to be darker green for a year or two, but then it starts to die. And so this is definitely a case of too much of a good thing turns into a bad thing when you're fertilizing centipedegrass, let it be centipede. You know, take advantage of the fact that it doesn't need very much nitrogen, so you don't have to fertilize it as much as other grasses.

It won't grow as fast. It won't be as dark green. So, if your priority is to have something to be that color, then yeah, centipede is probably not the grass for you. But, if your priority is just to have something that you can keep the ground covered with, with minimal effort and it's not too cold in the wintertime, then it's a really good choice, actually.

Shane Harris

So, the next one on the list is for full sun. The tolerates the most, light does well, and full sun is the Bermudagrass.

Dave Han

That's right Bermudagrass. And I really should say Bermudagrasses is because like with zoysia we have two major divisions of Bermudagrass. We have, ones you can buy seed for. And sometimes we just call those seeded Bermudagrasses, sometimes we call common Bermudagrass. And then we have ones that you can't get any seed for.

And you have to buy sod or maybe plugs or sprigs and plant them vegetatively. Right. And so oftentimes we'll call those vegetative Bermuda or sometimes we'll call them hybrid Bermuda is because the majority of those are actually a hybrid between 2 to 2 different, Bermudagrass species. And whether you've got a hybrid or a common Bermudagrass seeded or vegetative, they all really require full sun to be their happiest.

But if you give them full sun and a lot of fertilizer, they will grow fast. Very fast, to the point where you have to mow them more than once a week in the summertime when it's hot, for them to really be healthy and looking good. And that's not easy to keep up with it. It sounds easy. I have Bermuda grass in the front yard of my house, and I start off every year as soon as it gets hot.

Now I'm not mowing it twice a week yet this year because we're recording this in early May and it's not in the 90's every day yet. And, you know, low temperatures are still getting back down into the 50's. But as soon as we get into the 90 degree ish range, or a high every day and upper 60's to low 70's for a low, that stuff is just going to grow super fast and normally in a typical summer for me, I'll be able to keep up mowing it twice a week, maybe through about July.

August rolls around and the kids start going back to school, and the semester at Auburn starts up, and I usually cannot keep up with mowing it twice a week. And so, by that time I'm just mowing it once a week. And so my lawn never looks as good on September 1st as it does on July 1st or August 1st.

Chip East

Dr. Han, you've talked a lot about the shade requirements and things on the the selecting this, how they grow. If you are ranking these turf grasses and the amount of maintenance required for each one, how would you what order would that go in.

Dave Han

From the most maintenance required to the least, I would say, Bermudagrass requires the most maintenance. I would follow that by St. Augustinegrass. Then the zoysiagrasses, both, both types of zoysia, and then centipede grass. So that's the warm season. Grass is ranked by most maintenance Bermudagrass down to the least maintenance required, which would be centipede.

If you want to throw in the cool season grass tall fescue into that, I think it requires, a level of maintenance. It would fall kind of in the middle right there. So about akin to zoysia grasses.

Shane Harris

And that maintenance as we define that maintenance that's mowing, watering, insect control, disease control, just that general things that you have to you have to maintain to keep the yard looking great.

Dave Han

Correct. I mean, when I talk about just overall maintenance requirements for different, you know, types of grasses, I'm talking about everything.

Shane Harris

You're also talking about time and money.

Dave Han

Yes, exactly. And it's a tradeoff sometimes. Sometimes you want to spend more time. Sometimes you want to spend more money. But just in general you're going to be spending more of one or the other or both. If you have Bermudagrass as opposed to, say, Centipedegrass, for sure.

Chip East

We get that question. A lot of I want the grass that stays green all the time and looks good, and I want low maintenance.

Dave Han

Again, tradeoffs that you have to make, you know, grasses are living organisms and like any other plant, you can't really expect it to not require any light, not require any water, not require any fertilizer. That's just that's just not the way plants work.

Chip East

The ones that are the greenest, and to me, that look the greatest require more time and money. So you just have to evaluate that in your mind when you decide which turfgrass we want to plant.

Shane Harris

The centipede I chose centipede because it is sort of the there's always been called the lazy man's grass. I call it moody because it does have a lot of issues that, it's not drought tolerant, does not like cold is tends to thin out in places where not enough light does not light traffic, doesn't like a lot of fertilization, as you said.

But, so it has its issues for the for the zoysiagrass. There's a lot of beautiful varieties of that out there that do well in the shade and do well for sun and people that creates that carpet looked at people like and that seems to be sort of in the, in the middle. But then you mentioned the Bermudagrass.

It requires the mowing, requires the fertility, requires insect control on a regular basis just to keep it going and looking good.

Dave Han

Yeah. That's right.

Chip East

We may even wear a lawn mower out more often by having the Bermuda cut, or we're using it twice as often as centipede. Just think about the money in your lifetime you're going to spend on lawn mowers and mowing that grass. But I think that's one of the prettiest grasses I look at. But it does require time.

Shane Harris

Dr. Han, thank you for being here with us on this episode of *Southern Ground*. We've dug deep into this particular topic on establishing turfgrass, selecting turfgrass, and then hitting the highlights of the different characteristics of turfgrass for the Deep South. For more information on selecting the right turfgrass for your home lawn, be sure to visit our website at the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

That address is www.aces.edu or refer to your local county Extension office that's associated with a land grant university in your state. We're going to continue this conversation as we get deeper into more the maintenance and the management of these individual grasses. And so, I want you to stay tuned for our next podcast as we'll continue this conversation with Dr. Han with Chip and myself. Thank you for listening to this episode of *Southern Ground*.

Announcer

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