



Season 1 Episode 11—Turfgrass for Home Lawns: Part 2

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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

I'm Shane Harris and joining me again for this *Southern Ground* podcast is Dr. Chip East. And we're continuing our conversation here with Dr. Dave Han, who serves as our Extension turfgrass specialist here with Auburn University and Alabama Cooperative Extension System. So welcome, Chip. Welcome, Dave. And we were talking about at the end of the podcast prior to this one was selecting turfgrass. And we ended this previous conversation on managing the lawn, looking at the overall maintenance characteristics. So, we want to pick up now and talk about these different turfgrass selections that are out there and give you the pros and cons of each one.

Dave Han

Yeah. And I think what I'll do is start with the species that I think requires the most in terms of fiddling with it, money and time. And that would be bermudagrass. So, bermudagrass and whether we're talking about the common bermudagrass is that you can start from seed or the hybrid bermudagrass is that you need to do vegetatively.

Usually that's by sod. Sometimes sprigs or plugs. Those grasses require the most fertilizer. When we talk about the fertilizer requirements at turf grasses, usually we express that in terms of how much nitrogen do they need? Per thousand square feet of grass. Okay. We don't usually use acres when we're talking about home lawns, just because of the size of most people's lawns.

And so, with bermudagrasses, they need, around 4 to 5 pounds of actual nitrogen per thousand square feet during the growing season to, to really be growing well and looking, looking good. Now, if you want grass that's growing super fast, you can certainly give it more nitrogen. Okay. If we're talking about a football field or a fairway on a golf course someplace where they're getting, you know, divots taken out of it all the time, and you need to grow really fast.

Those applications. Yeah, they're going to use a lot more nitrogen than that. But for a home lawn, 4 to 5 pounds, maybe six in, let's say, Florida or the Gulf Coast, you know, regions where the growing season is a little bit longer than, you know, farther inland in the south, especially at high elevations. But that's in contrast to, say, some other grasses which require less nitrogen.

So that's one thing, of course, because it grows so fast, it requires more nitrogen, but also because it grows so fast. It's going to require mowing. And we talked about this last time on the podcast. Right. Most bermudagrass lawns are going to look a lot better if you can mow them twice a week in the middle of the summertime, at least for about June, July, August 1st part of September.

Okay. That's probably the only of the southern turf grasses that I would recommend mowing twice a week if you can. Now, bermudagrasses also have some advantages to the fast growth, which is they do tend choke, tend to choke out weeds better than certain other grasses, especially if you're fertilizing them a lot. Right. So, there's that advantage.

They have a few pest problems, but nothing that really stands out as, oh man, if you have a bermuda, you got to watch out for this particular pest, right? So, with bermudagrass it's mostly fertilizer and mowing irrigation on it. One of the really nice things about bermudagrass is that if you don't water it, it will stop growing.

It will go dormant just like it does in the wintertime when it's cold. And sometimes people don't like that because who likes to look at, you know, brown grass in the summertime, but it's not dead, it's just dormant. And bermudagrass can survive dormant through droughts that last months. I mean, in bermuda, grass is native environment. It's, it's from a tropical, Africa and Asia in areas where they have the distinct wet and dry seasons.

So, it's used to go in 5 or 6 months without hardly any rain at all. And it can come back from that if you don't necessarily need it to be green in the summer and can stand having a dormant lawn, it's a great choice for just requiring zero water in the summertime if we have drought conditions.

Chip East

Dr. Han, if you were going to water it, when is the best times to water and how many inches or how much should we water each week?

Dave Han

For almost all of the turf grasses you're going to want to water. Well, let me put it this way. The grass is going to want to receive and use about an inch or an inch and a half of water every week. That doesn't necessarily mean you need to water it that much, because if it rains, well, that's just free water falling out of the sky that the grass can use.

But you know, if we get into a period where maybe it's only raining about a half inch or three quarters inch, in any given week, you can definitely use your irrigation to supply the grass with the other, you know, three quarters of an inch of water that it might need, to keep it growing really actively. And that's true, like I said, for pretty much any species of grass.

But the timing early in the morning is usually my go to time to water grass. Any time from after dew has already formed on the grass, naturally, till about maybe 9 or 10:00 in the morning when the sun starts to really beat down on the grass. And that's just to reduce the amount of water that you lose to evaporation while you're irrigating.

I mean, if you irrigate it by 5:00 in the afternoon in the middle of July on a bright, sunny day, or even a hazy, sunny day, you can lose up to 20 to 30% of the water that comes out of your hose or your irrigation head to evaporation before it even soaks into the ground. And if it never soaks into the soil and the plants roots can't get it, it's it might as well not have even been there at all. The only people who benefit is the water company. At that point.

Chip East

We're paying for that water, right?

Dave Han

And so, watering first thing in the morning when it's cooler, when the sun is not beating down on it, definitely saves you some water. And if you wait until these already formed on that grass naturally, which is usually it starts happening. What about 2 or 3 in the morning? You know, depends on the weather, but then you're not extending the amount of time that those leaves are wet every day.

And so, you're not, you know, making the habitat more suitable for, a fungus or an insect that likes, likes a wet canopy.

Shane Harris

The next one on the list is zoysia grass. So, tell us a little bit about the pros and cons of that. That's a very popular grass. And as you mentioned earlier, there's a lot of different selections and varieties that are out there to choose from. Sometimes that can even be somewhat confusing about which one's the best one to get.

Dave Han

Oh, you're not kidding about that. Zoysia is, are great. They have a lot of advantages. One is especially the newer. So, it's just like we talked about on the last podcast are pretty shade tolerant for grass. They have a great

color, nice density and another quality of newer zoysia is, again, things that have come out since about 2010 or so.

Are the fact that they grow pretty quickly compared to older zoysia grasses. So, one of the most prevalent zoysia grasses of the 20th century, was one called mire. Okay. And this grass has been around since the 50s. Okay. 1950s, it was very good looking, but not all that fast growing. If that's your benchmark for the growth rate, is always your grass, then some of the newer zoysia is are going to surprise you because they grow a lot faster.

So, they require more mowing. They don't require very much more nitrogen though. So, the nice thing about zoysia is almost all the soil just will look really nice with like 2 pounds of nitrogen, for 1000 square feet. Okay. Remember with bermuda we were up in the like 4-to-5-pound range, right. So, about half as much nitrogen as bermuda needs.

Again, if you need it growing faster you can give it a little bit more. But unlike bermudagrass so what you guys does kind of hit a cap as, as to how fast it grows with less nitrogen input. Okay. It's also more cold tolerant than bermudagrass is generally speaking. So, bermudagrass is fairly cold tolerant and I mean, you can grow bermudagrass well into the upper South.

Okay. You know, I've seen it been successful in, in Louisville, Kentucky and along the Ohio River in general. But, if it does get really cold in the wintertime, especially an extended period of time of cold weather with no snow cover to help insulate the grass, you can get winter kill on it. And zoysia tend to be much more tolerant of freezing weather than bermudagrasses are.

So that's a that's an advantage to one of the disadvantages is just the price. Zoysia grasses the vast majority of them have to be planted vegetatively. So, you're talking getting sod or maybe plugs you know or sprigs. And that's generally a more expensive way to establish grass and seed just in general. And zoysia sod is more expensive than bermudagrass sod is.

So the upfront cost of buying a zoysia grass lawn are going to be more than the bermudagrass lawn, but, it does require less nitrogen and it, requires a similar amount of irrigation to be, you know, again, growing and active, like bermudagrass or zoysia grasses are also really good at handling drought just by going dormant.

But if you want them to stay green, you're probably going to have to give them more solutions. A little bit more water than most bermuda is to keep them green when it comes to something like centipedegrass. That's the one I think we mentioned last time that requires the least amount of nitrogen, grows very slowly compared to zoysia and, to bermuda and to St. Augustine grass.

And so again, that's both a plus and a minus. Right? The plus of slow growth is you don't have to mow it as much. The minus is if something does happen, it doesn't fix itself as quickly because it just can't grow back in as fast.

Shane Harris

That's what I described as being a little bit finicky or moody, especially in environmental conditions. It seems it isn't like a lot of maintenance. Chip mentioned about tender loving care earlier. For some of the grasses. It just sort of just leave me alone type grass it is.

Dave Han

It's kind of like the feral kid of turf grasses, you know, the one that, like, it seems to thrive the best, the least you do to it more people, I think, get themselves into trouble with a centipedegrass lawn by doing too much to it, then by ignoring it. If you want to grass that you can just ignore and just mow it every so often.

I would choose centipedegrass. The only caveat to that would be of course is that centipede does not have great cold tolerance. So, if you live in a colder part of the South, it's not going to be the best choice for you. But if you want something that you can just kind of put it there and it'll it'll survive. It may not look as pretty. You know, it won't if you don't do anything to it but mow it. It won't look as pretty, maybe as, well maintained zoysia, St. Augustine grass or, or bermudagrass, lawn would. But it'll survive that a lot better.

Shane Harris

Seems like watering is the number one factor to keep it happy, especially during the late summer.

Dave Han

That's right. It's not as drought tolerant as the other grasses now. It is a warm season grass, so it still can go dormant and come back after, you know, a month or two. But it, centipede, it doesn't grow very fast. And so, it takes it a lot longer to fill back in when it comes out of dormancy in the spring or when it comes out of dormancy after a drought.

And so, what sometimes happens is, especially in the fall, like you said late in the year, if you let it go dormant because of drought, and in a lot of the southeastern United States, the fall is our driest time of the year, right? So, if it goes dormant because of drought in the fall, it probably won't have time to really do much growth.

If it does start to rain, say late fall before it's cool enough that it's not growing because of the temperature. And so, you can get into these cycles where the centipedegrass is just like dormant for, you know, 4 or 5 months in a row. And when it's dormant, it's not out competing weeds. And so that's, I think, another reason why it gets its reputation of being finicky.

It's just it's so slow growing. There's something happens to it. It doesn't recover very fast.

Chip East

I've had people I've recommended centipede before and I do like it. And someone said, oh no, we can't plant that. It'll get in the pasture because this right beside their house start in the pasture. And I'm like, well, if you fertilize, if you maintain the pasture like you're supposed to fertility wise, we won't have to worry about centipede. It'll grow to the fence and stop.

Dave Han

That's right. The only time I've seen centipedegrass take over, from bermudagrass or bahiagrass. Which is another. It was just another grass you can have in a pasture is when you just don't fertilize it. Right. That is the type of environment that you find centipedegrass out in the wild in. It was first found in southern China.

And they have soils there that are really similar to the southeast United States, where they're high clay content, acidic, low fertility. Okay. You know, if you ever tried to garden in the South, you know this, right? And, that that's just where it's from. And if you give it those conditions, it'll like it. But if you give it a condition where you're fertilizing a lot, you know, other things will outcompete it very easily.

And then St. Augustine grass. Right. So, St. Augustine grass, the reason I know why I'm mentioning it last is because I think it has kind of the most restricted geographical area in the southeast, where we're where we'll find it really does. Well, that's just because of its really bad cold tolerance. Right. But if you're on the Gulf Coast or right on the, Atlantic coast from about maybe, I don't know, South Carolina down and definitely in Florida, you will be able to grow St. Augustine grass.

Really well, now that's a grass, which I don't think we've mentioned this before, but it has, a very striking appearance compared to most other turfgrass. It's very wide leaf blade, very waxy, almost looks like it's artificial, like plastic or something the first time you see it. Okay, so classic example. This is like the northerners who go down to Disney.

And there's St. Augustine grass all over Orlando. Right. And they're just like, what is this grass? It doesn't even look like grass. Heck, I've even had people, you know, some former students of ours at Auburn, from Alabama, from the Birmingham area used to looking at zoysia grass and bermudagrass, take jobs in Florida. And they're like this St. Augustine grass, man, it just doesn't even really look like grass to me.

Shane Harris

Either you like it or hate it.

Dave Han

It's very polarizing. Yeah, it sure is. But appearance aside, it also is notorious for getting, an insect pest called the Chinch bug. And that is one thing which you always have to kind of be on your, on the lookout for when you have St. Augustine, especially if you're in Florida or South Texas, because there's huge chinch bug populations there and every new variety of St. Augustine grass that's been released in the past, I don't know, 30, 40, 50 years or so has come out with chinch bug resistance, and then the chinch bugs have eventually overcome that resistance and, you know, adapted.

And now we're able to feed on those varieties. So, it's a never-ending tug of war like it is with a lot of, crops in general. Right? Resistant variety comes out, pest overcome resistance. You know.

Shane Harris

I want to ask you a question on the coarseness of the St. Augustine grass that you see in on the Deep South, especially in Florida. How does that affect the lawnmower when they're trying to mow that heavy grass? We talk

about zoysia being thick and it'll bog down a lawn mower. But is there a special technique to mow St. Augustine grass?

Dave Han

I don't think there's a special technique to mowing it. You just have to make sure you're really sharp. St. Augustine grasses a lot of the varieties of St. Augustine grass like to be cut a little bit higher than other warm season grasses, and I don't there's a good chance to mention this. You know, bermudagrasses and zoysia grasses do really well in a home lawn situation of, a mowing height of about two inches, an inch and a half.

Bermuda is you can even get lower than that. Depends on how much you like to mow grass. Okay. If you want to keep your bermudagrass lawn it an inch tall, it will survive that. But then you're talking about moving it like three times a week in order to just not be overwhelmed with clippings, but St. Augustine grasses.

A lot of those varieties are about they'll do best at about 3 or 4in high. Part of that is because of how dense it is and how wide the leaf blade is. But there are some varieties of St. Augustine that you can cut shorter, about two inches. So, it just depends on the specific variety of St. Augustine grass that you have.

But the most important thing with it is just in any really dense grass is just to make sure that your blade is sharp. I don't know if most people sharpen their mower blades quite as often as we recommend. You know, mostly it's like when you really notice a problem with the grass.

Chip East

I was going to ask that, especially back on the zoysia grass. A lot of times we recommend a real mower, which most people have a rotary mower, and I understand that, but would you really want to sharpen those blades more often? It's hard to get a clean cut. Well really own any of it. Drive slower, sharpen blades.

Dave Han

I think rotary mowers can do a fine job, on a zoysia grass lawn. But yes, you have to have a sharp blade.

Shane Harris

And this is a good point to bring up, because if you're establishing the turf grass and then you've got to buy know their lawn mower to cut this particular grass, that needs to be discussed.

Dave Han

For most vast majority of homeowners, a rotary mower is going to be just fine. I don't think you need to get into a real for a run now. Some people like it. You know, the only thing about a real mower is yes, they're finicky to adjust, and really, you can't sharpen them yourself. You really need to take those in to have those real blades ground properly.

I don't necessarily say never, ever use a real mower on your lawn, but I do try to steer people away from that as much as possible. Rotary is going to be fine as long as it's in good shape. Make sure that the blade sharp.

Slowing down does help. You know, obviously it takes longer to mow your lawn if you slow down a little bit, but you will scalp less if you slow down, than if you, you know, go full throttle the whole time. That is for, for sure.

Chip East

And the more level our ground is, has a lot to do with it. When people ask about mowing heights, I'm thinking, what in your yard we might want to do a little higher, but it depends.

Dave Han

Yeah, there's no doubt about that. You know. And one of the issues also is if you're if you're mowing with just a regular old homeowner grade rotary mower, whether it's a walk behind mower or a riding mower, a lot of times the mowing height is not the knob you twist or the thing you adjust it. It just has numbers on it, right?

Or just a couple of notches on it. And you don't really know. You know, like my lawn mower is a walk behind mower because I don't have a very big lawn. And it says on it, oh, we can adjust the mowing from an inch and a half to three inches. But then when you go to adjust, it's just a series of notches there.

Right. So, in theory, that lowest notch probably is around an inch and a half, but I have I actually measured the grass after I've gone out to mow it. Well actually I have, but that's just because I'm a nerd. And it is about an inch and a half. But, but you know, the way that you really would check that is you'd have to go out and stick a ruler in the grass and see how tall it is. Yeah.

Chip East

What about collecting your clippings? Would you collect zoysia grass clippings? It depends on how tall it is when you go cut.

Dave Han

Yeah.

Shane Harris

And this is highly debatable because some people like to take their clippings off the entire year from a cosmetic standpoint.

Dave Han

That's right. You know, from a, an agronomic standpoint, if the clippings are not just lying there on the surface after you mow, if they're falling, falling back into the canopy, they're just free fertilizer, basically, and you don't really need to bag them. Now, if you're mowing often enough, then that can happen. If you are delayed in your mowing, you know, say it's been raining all every weekend for a month or something like this.

You know, and you go out there and you're whacking the grass back down to, you know, two inches tall from like 4 or 5in tall, probably. That's not going to happen. Right? Again, so many clippings are clump up on the

surface. They're going to block air and light from getting to the grass. And then you do need to bag them another time.

And I put the bag on the mower in my personal case. But I think a lot of people have this happening to I got pine trees in my yard, and when they're dropping needles, I pick those up because even with my mower, even if I have a mulching blade on it, those needles, if I don't put a bag on it in the fall, are enough to where they're blocking light from getting to the to the grass.

Plus they just it just doesn't look good, right? So sometimes even maybe most of the time when I personally put a bag on my mower where it's not because the grass is because of something else.

Chip East

One more question I'll end with is we talked earlier about the fertilizing and when would you start fertilizing? You talked about you know, it's May and it's starting to grow because that bermuda's warming up. I have a lot of people ask me about fertilizing in March because I went out there and in mowed their weeds and they're like, well, I need to be fertilize. I don't want the weeds to grow. When would you start the fertilizing? You talked about how much to put in a season, when would you start and end those applications.

Dave Han

Well, here's, here's the main thing to remember, especially with the warm-season grasses bermuda, zoysia centipede, St. Augustine they like it hot. Okay. And just because your weed you're growing in March, usually your grass is not really growing that much.

Chip East

Usually, it's a cool season. Weed that's growing.

Dave Han

Exactly. And if you fertilize in that time of the year, you're actually fertilizing the weeds and not the grass because it's, it's the right temperature for those cool season weeds to grow and not for your warm season grass. And even though we touch 90 degrees in March this year, right, we also touched 25 degrees, you know, and we really need to have consistent hot weather.

I like to tell people for the deep South again, you know, Atlantic coastal playing off coastal plain mid April to early May should be really when you put out your first. And really it ought to be early May for the upper South. And that's a long time to wait after that first bout of 80 or whatever, 85-degree weather in March and everything gets green, but it's really not growing.

And if you really want to get fancy about it and you have a soil thermometer, wait until you get soil temperatures in the 70s for, you know, consistently. And that's when the, warm-season grass is actually growing enough to, to make good use of that nitrogen because you really want to put it out there when the grass can use it.

Now, the only exception to that would be if you're using a 100% slow-release fertilizer. So, say, you know, you're made of money and you decide I'm going to use only a slow-release fertilizer on my lawn this year. Okay. Well, that you can go ahead and put out early because the slow-release fertilizers, most of them don't release very much nitrogen when it's cold.

And they'll release more when it warms up. And, the grass is, is going to be able to use it. But if you're using just a regular old, you know, mostly soluble fertilizer source, then yeah, I wouldn't put it out too early.

Chip East

Think about when it's the grass is actively growing. And that that certainly may not be in March.

Dave Han

That's right. And especially if you're worried about weeds, don't give the weeds food when it's too cold for the grass to use it, because then they're going to use it. The weeds are. Yeah.

Shane Harris

Well, we're going to wrap this podcast up. This is a part one, part two podcast, as we talked about selecting turfgrass for the home lawn. Chip, we've gone to almost an hour in this podcast.

Chip East

This is some good information, a lot of time and money spent on the turf. So, we need to be doing it right. We certainly appreciate Dr. Han for talking with us today. This has been excellent.

Dave Han

Oh, it's been a lot of fun. Thanks.

Shane Harris

And it's always educational when we have guest specials like yourself, we always learn from the trainings and the workshops that we do together. Every time we get together, we're always learning and picking up a few more tips after. Even after doing this for several, several years, Chip. So, thank you, Dr. Han, for being with us. Thank you, Chip, again for, for partner with this podcast.

If you're interested in more information about selecting turfgrass, maintaining the lawn, or any kind of questions, you might have a go to your land grant university. This in your state or here in Alabama is the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. And go to www.aces.edu and for more information including a lot of these topics that we will in detail on the we have publications on select and turfgrass for the home lawn. Go check it out. Do your research, do your homework before your establishing that lawn because we want you to be successful. Chip.

Chip East

Dr. Han wrote a lot of those publications that's on our website.

Dave Han

I helped out with most of them.

Shane Harris

You guys, thank you for being with us here. As we talked about turfgrass and selecting the right home lawn, we hope you'll join us for our next podcast as we dig deeper into other topics that you may have questions. I'll thank you for listening to this episode of *Southern Ground*.

Announcer

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