

## **Lawn Seeding/Renovation Guide**

### **First Things First—**

#### **Where've You Been and Where Are You Going?**

Before jumping into the specific steps involved in establishing/renovating your lawn, it's very important to answer the following questions;

#### **Why Does Your Existing Lawn Look So Bad?**

There are many subtle conditions that contribute to the decline of existing lawns. The most likely, however, include:

- Too much shade from large trees or buildings,
- Poor soil conditions (compacted clay or dry sand),
- Soils that are too hot, dry, wet, etc.
- Too much traffic (kids, dogs, etc.) when soils are wet or very dry,
- Original seed mix was not well-adapted to the conditions of the site,
- Original seeding was done incorrectly,
- Improper maintenance (mowing too low, fertilizing at wrong time of year, watering too much, etc.)
- Damage from deicing salt, snowplows, etc.

Unless the reasons for the decline of your existing lawn are identified and addressed, all the time, money and effort you put into overseeding/renovating it will likely be wasted.

Meanwhile, if you're establishing a new lawn, you need consider these same questions.

For example, it makes little sense to establish a new lawn on a steep slope because it will always be dry. This will result in the desirable lawn grasses thinning out over time, leaving open spots where weed seed can germinate. Also, slopes are simply very difficult—and often unsafe—to mow correctly!

#### **How Perfect Do You Want Your New Lawn to Look?**

This is a ***BIG*** question!

If you want a highly manicured lawn that's emerald green from the minute the snow melts in the spring to the first snow of the following winter, you're going to need to develop very specific answers to this, and the following questions.

You'll also need to understand that it's going to take a significant investment of time and money to have a "perfect"

lawn. Even then, you need to be prepared for the fact that a lawn is made up of live plants that, even under the very best of circumstances, go through periods of decline—and sometimes die, no matter how many resources you commit!

If, on the other hand, you don't mind if your lawn occasionally looks like a hay pasture, simply changing some of your existing management practices (e.g., mowing higher and more frequently, fertilizing at the right time once or twice a year, etc.) can improve the appearance of your lawn without the expense and effort involved in the renovation/overseeding of your lawn.

#### **How Do You Feel About the Use of Pesticides and Fertilizers?**

As expectations for the appearance of your lawn increases, the amount of pesticides and fertilizer required will increase.

Therefore, if you have significant concerns regarding these materials, you're likely going to need to lower the expectations for the appearance of your lawn—at least a little. In particular, there are no effective "organic" options for controlling a broad range of broadleaf weeds such as groundivy, creeping Veronica, wild violet, etc.

While proper establishment with a well-adapted lawn seed mix in combination with proper mowing practices can result in a relatively attractive lawn, some level of weed infestation and occasional insect damage will be unavoidable.

#### **How Much Time, Money and Energy Do You Want to Commit to Your New Lawn?**

A really "nice" lawn takes all of the above.

As soon as the seed goes down, you need to be prepared to keep your lawn constantly moist—but not wet—for about four weeks (the time it takes for all the seed to germinate and resulting seedlings to become established). Turning on the water (and just as important, turning it off), moving sprinklers, dragging hoses, etc., takes time. And, spending the weekend at the lake right after the lawn is seeded can't happen as letting your newly seeded lawn go dry even once can kill half the tender seedlings!

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*Meeting The Needs of Today With A Vision For The Future*

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Once your new lawn is established, it's still going to take a lot of time—especially if it's large, because you'll have to mow every three or four days when grass is growing fast.

It also takes money.

Fertilizer isn't going to get less expensive. And, you'll need to pay someone to mow your lawn every three or four days if you don't have the time. This won't be cheap if the mowing service is using good equipment and knows what they're doing!

It takes a lot of resilience—and patience, too.

As I mentioned on the preceding page, no matter how much time and money you commit to your lawn, there are going to be times when things go wrong. When this happens—and it will—you need to be prepared to work through the problem and maybe

## Let's Get Started— The Best and Worst Time of Year to Sow Grass Seed

The best time of year to sow grass seed in Central New York is between roughly August 15th and September 10th (at the very latest).

In August, the soil will be very warm (which speeds seed germination). Then, in September, temperatures will fall into the ideal range (55°F-75°F) for maximum growth of cool season lawn grasses, we tend to receive reliable rain fall (September, on average, is the wettest month of the year in Central New York), and relatively few weeds are germinating (which results in less competition for tender grass seedlings).

Even under these ideal conditions, it takes the better part of three weeks (the middle to end of September depending upon date of sowing) for all of the Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescue in a seed mix to germinate.

Conversely, spring and summer are the very worst times of year to sow seed.

## Site/Soil Preparation— Good “Seed to Soil” Contact is Important

As I've mentioned above, once grass seed has been sown, it's absolutely critical that it remains evenly moist at all times. To insure this constant supply of moisture the seed should be in direct contact with soil particles, around which there should be a very thin film of water at all times. To accomplish this, keep the following in mind.

### New Lawns

Because you're going to be seeding bare soil, it's very important that the lawn areas be as gently sloped as possible, other-wise, you could very easily end up having large areas of the new seeding wash away during a heavy downpour. This also goes to the previous point of not maintaining a lawn on a steep slope

even be willing to live with a less-than-perfect lawn for awhile until the right time of year arrives to repair the damage correctly!

If this sounds daunting, I mean it to be just that in an attempt to prevent you from possibly throwing good money after bad!

Fortunately, if the commitment of time, money and effort is going to be hard to keep, it doesn't necessarily mean that you can't have a nice lawn.

Rather, consider having a really nice lawn in only small part of your property—next to your patio, front walk, etc. You can cover the steep slopes or deep shade under the big maple tree with groundcovers, plant snowplow-tolerant shrubs and perennials along your driveway, and turn the lawn behind your garage that you never see—other than when you're mowing it (or paying someone to look at it for you while they're mowing it) into a meadow!

In the spring, soils are very cold and often very wet. This slows seed germination to the point that all of the seed in a mix sown in April may not completely germinate until almost the end of May. At the same time, temperatures are rising above the ideal range for seedling growth (again, between 55°F-75°F). It's also common for very little rain to fall during these months, putting a lot of pressure on you to keep newly sown seed moist at all times. And, all sorts of weed seed germinate and grow like, well, weeds in the spring and early summer, often overwhelming slow growing grass seedlings.

Because the advantages of late summer lawn seeding is so well researched, the only time of year I allow my “*Terry's Best*” line of lawn seed mixes to be sold is between July 15th and September 10th!

After all, if you want the nicest lawn in the neighborhood, the easiest way to get there is to start on the right foot!

as it will tend to be dry and difficult/unsafe to mow correctly.

Next, lawn grasses do not tolerate being under water for any length of time. Therefore, you want to make sure there are no low spots where water will settle during spring snow melt, or after several days of heavy rain during the warm summer months. So, you're going to want to either fill low spots, install a catch basin or French drain to gather water and move it away underground, or create a landscape bed filled with plants tolerant of wet soils.

To prepare the seedbed, spread four pounds of LESCO 18-24-12 Professional Starter Fertilizer\* per 1,000 square feet of lawn area to be seeded. Next, rototill as deeply as possible, or have a landscape contractor “power rake” or “Harley rake” the

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area. These skidloader-mounted or tractor-drawn machines break up compacted soils, making it easier to prepare a final seedbed.

Finally, grass seed is very small. Therefore, it's important that after rough grading, the final seedbed be raked as free of rocks, stones, large clods of dirt and other debris as possible so that the soil surface consists primarily of small particles that are easily mixed with the grass seed.

## Existing Lawns

Before getting ahead of yourself, make sure that you've answered the questions posed on the first pages of this guide. There's a reason why your lawn isn't doing as well as you'd like. Unless you figure out why that is, you may be wasting time, money and effort by overseeding/renovating?

## Overseeding

If your lawn is pretty much weed-free and you simply want to increase its density now that the kids are spending less time playing in the backyard, or you no longer have a dog wearing a path through the yard, overseeding is a relatively straightforward process beginning the second or third week in August.

Start by mowing your lawn down to a height of 1½ inches. This will allow more sunlight to reach the soil surface and reduce competition between the existing grass in your lawn and the young grass seedlings.

Then, to create a seedbed, spread four pounds of LESCO 18-24-12 Professional Starter Fertilizer\* per 1,000 square feet of

## Sowing High Quality Seed— Key to An Attractive, Manageable Lawn

For many property owners, improving a lawn involves running out to a big box store, picking up a bag of seed appropriate for the perceived lawn type (e.g., sunny, shady, high traffic, etc.), spreading the seed by hand, watering occasionally—then repeating the process every couple of years when it doesn't work.

From the steps covered on the first pages of this guide, it's obvious that there's more to creating an attractive lawn than the strategy outlined above.

So, assuming that you've analyzed and prepared the site correctly, it's finally time to sow seed!

I've spent a lot of time researching the best combinations of Kentucky bluegrass, fine fescue and perennial ryegrass varieties for Central New York conditions. The results of this effort are "Terry's Best" sunny and shady lawn seed mixes.

Sow "Terry's Best" Sunny Lawn Seed Mix if the majority of your lawn receives at least four hours of direct sun each day. If, on the other hand, most of your lawn receives less than four hours of direct sun each day, you're going to want to use "Terry's Best" Shady Lawn Seed Mix.

lawn to be overseeded, then run a core aerator over the area five or six times. Your lawn is going to look terrible after this process, but it will recover quickly as the new grass seedlings emerge.

## Renovation

If your lawn is in really bad shape with more weeds than grass, large dead spots, etc., it's best to do a complete renovation.

The first step is to kill the entire lawn area to be renovated with a non-selective herbicide containing glyphosate as the active ingredient (products such as Roundup, Kleenup, etc.).

As per the label directions of these products, they're effective only when applied to actively growing plants. It may be necessary, therefore, to thoroughly water your lawn a couple of weeks prior to applying the herbicide if it's gone dormant because of very dry weather. These herbicides are also most effective when grass blades are at least three inches long, so don't mow for at least a week prior to making the application.

Five days after applying the herbicide, mow your lawn as short as possible, rake the clippings and add them to your compost pile. (This is the only time I ever recommend removing clippings from a lawn)

Next, spread four pounds of LESCO 18-24-12 Professional Starter Fertilizer\* per 1,000 square feet of lawn to be renovated and run a core aerator over the area a dozen times or more to really chew up the dead grass and thatch, and mix it with the fertilizer and soil plugs pulled from the ground. At this time you can also correct drainage problems—though, again, I encourage you to consider alternatives to lawn in problem areas.

The seeding rates for this mixes are as follows:

### New Lawns or Lawn Renovation

"Terry's Best" Shady Lawn Seed Mix

3.0 pounds per thousand square feet

"Terry's Best" Sunny Lawn Seed Mix

2.0 pounds per thousand square feet

### Lawn Overseeding

"Terry's Best" Shady Lawn Seed Mix

2.0 pounds per thousand square feet

"Terry's Best" Sunny Lawn Seed Mix

1.5 pounds per thousand square feet

To sow these mixes, set your spreader so that it applies only a small amount of seed, then go over your lawn in different directions (front to back, side to side, and diagonally) as many times as necessary to empty the spreader. It's always better to get a little extra exercise rather than run out of seed before you've finished seeding the whole yard! Plus, sowing in several different directions will reduce the chance of missing spots completely.

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Once the seed is on the ground, use a leaf rake to lightly mix the seed into the top quarter inch or so of the soil surface (on large lawns you can drag a piece of chain-link fence or other material behind your lawn tractor). Then, roll the seeded area lightly to firm the soil around the seed (this is the only time I ever recommend rolling a lawn).

Where seed has been sown on bare soil, you'll need some kind of mulch to reduce the chance of the seed being washed away by a heavy rain. Traditionally, oat straw has served this purpose. However, it's not very convenient to transport, it's often dusty, and sometimes filled with seeds of weeds you certainly don't want popping up in your new lawn.

So, I recommend is LESCO's "Seed-Starter 3."\* This mulch

## Water, Water, Water— Often, But Lightly

As I mentioned previously, once the lawn seed goes down, the water must come on.

Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescue seed takes up water and germinates slowly over the course of about three weeks. Therefore, it's **CRITICAL** that the soil be kept moist—but not wet—all the time. This holds true after the seed germinates, because seedlings are very small, shallow-rooted and slow to established.

So, my recommendation is that you turn the sprinklers on for about ten minutes as close to sunrise as possible, again around noon, and a third time around 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. Of course, if it rains, you can take the day(s) off!

## The Home Stretch— Mowing, Weed Control, Fertilization and . . . . *Patience!*

If you simply overseeded your lawn to improve its density, keep your lawn mowed at a height of one and one-half inches for four weeks after the seed is sown. Then, at every subsequent mowing raise the cutting height by one-half inch, until you're back to the recommended three inch cutting height.

If you're renovating your lawn or starting a new lawn, mow the new seedlings back to a height of one and one-half inches the first time they reach two inches in height. Repeat this shorter mowing two additional times, then raise the cutting height by one-half inch until reaching the recommended three inch cutting height by late October.

Besides grass seedlings, don't be too surprised if there are also a lot of weeds growing in your new lawn—especially if you brought in a lot of topsoil. The good news is that many of them

product is made of compressed, recycled paper fiber and looks like rabbit food pellets. It's weed and dust-free, holds four times its weight in water and breaks down completely over the course of a month or so. Spread it with your fertilizer spreader at the rate of 40 pounds of mulch per 1,000 square feet of lawn.

Meanwhile, on lawns that are renovated or overseeded and there's little or no bare soil, additional mulch becomes less critical. The existing vegetation (dead or alive) can effectively serve as a mulch, instead.

Alright, now that the seed has been sown and mulch has been spread, we're almost done, right?

Not exactly. Now, the most time-consuming part of the entire process begins . . . . .

Three weeks after sowing, most of the seed should have germinated. At this point, which should be roughly around the middle of September, the days should be getting cooler and we should be getting pretty good rain every week or so. If not, then you'll want to turn the sprinklers on for about half an hour first thing in the morning twice a week.

I know you're thinking I'm crazy as you read this as there's no way you can follow this schedule with work, running the kids around, etc., right? This is precisely why I suggested maintaining a really nice lawn on only a small part of your property on the second page of this guide. If the back forty has a few weeds and is a little less than pristine, I won't tell, if you don't!

won't survive regular mowing, and rest can be controlled with one application of herbicide in mid-October.

To support vigorous root development, you'll also want to make one last application of winterizer fertilizer after the grass blades stop growing, generally about the second week or so of November.

Finally, be patient! Even under the very best of conditions, it takes twelve to eighteen months before a seeded lawn is fully mature.

If you've considered the questions at the beginning of this guide carefully and follow the month-by-month instructions in my "*Central New York Lawn Care Guide*," you should ultimately have the most attractive lawn in your neighborhood!

\* LESCO 18-24-12 Professional Starter Fertilizer and "Seed-Starter 3" mulch can be purchased at the LESCO, Inc. Service Center - 6030 Drott Drive, East Syracuse, NY 13057-2943, phone: 315-437-3423