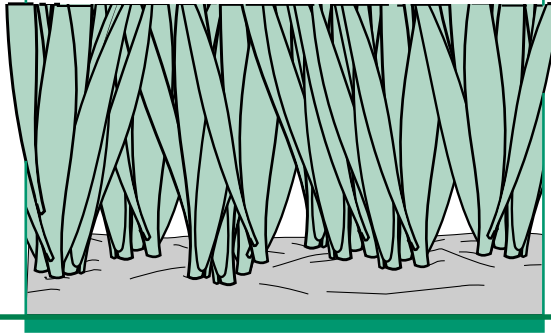


# TALL FESCUE LAWNS

Turfgrass



Tall fescue is the most popular and most adapted turfgrass for Kansas lawns. It is a cool-season grass that greens up early in the spring and stays green late into the fall. Tall fescue grows under a wide variety of conditions—sunny or semi-shady, and wet or dry. When managed properly, it has good resistance to heat, drought, wear and disease. Tall fescue makes an attractive lawn when seeded at the correct rate, and mowed, watered and fertilized according to recommendations. Other species of fescue (i.e. creeping red, chewings and hard fescue) have poor heat tolerance and do not hold up well during Kansas summers.

## Recommended Cultivars

Before 1980, the tall fescue cultivars used for lawns were the same as those used for forage grasses in pastures. K-31, which is a pasture-type, is still the most commonly known and used cultivar of tall fescue, but it is rapidly being replaced by the newer, turf-type tall fescues. The turf-type tall fescues have a darker color, better density, and a finer texture than K-31, but they are not as fine-textured as bluegrass. Recommended cultivars have been evaluated under Kansas conditions for turf quality and disease resistance. Blends of these varieties are now commercially available and are recommended to reduce the susceptibility of tall fescue to disease and summer stress.

**Recommended Turf-Type Tall Fescues\*:** Apache II, Coyote, Duster, Falcon II, Jaguar 3, Aztec II, Tar Heel, Shenandoah II, Rembrandt, Masterpiece, Millennium, Wolfpack, Olympic Gold, Crossfire II, Plantation, Bonsai 2000, Watchdog, Rebel 2000 and Arid 3.

\*This list will change as new cultivars are introduced. Check with your local K-State Research and Extension office for the most recent recommendations.

## Care and Management Summary for Established Lawns

Mowing	Turf-types: 2–3 inches. K-31: 2½–3½ inches. Raise height to the upper end of range during the summer.
Fertilizing	September, November, May.
Watering	Spring: minimal. Summer: 1 to 1½ inches per week. Fall: only as needed to prevent wilting.
Planting	September or March–April, 6–8 lb. seed per 1,000 sq. ft.
Dandelions	Herbicides are most effective in the fall.
Crabgrass	Preemergence herbicide before redbud trees reach full bloom.
Grubs	Treat during July–August when grubs are present (annual grubs).
Aerating	Early spring or fall, as needed.

## Planting

Tall fescue lawns are usually planted from seed, although sod is another option. September is the best time for planting. Under good conditions, seed germinates in four to seven days. Planting too early risks heat stress and disease problems, while late plantings may winterkill. Spring seeding should be done in March or April so the grass can become well established before hot weather. Seed germination will be slower in the spring because the soil is cold. Weed competition is also greater in the spring.

Siduron (Tupersan) is the only preemergence crabgrass preventer that can be used at the time of seeding. Use only the lowest label rate. Even then, a 10-percent reduction in seed establishment can be expected. Do not use any other crabgrass preventer until after the

grass has been mowed several times. Broadleaf weed killers should not be used until the grass has been mowed three times. The best way to avoid weeds during establishment is to plant in mid-September.

The recommended rate for seeding home lawns is 6 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet, assuming the use of good-quality seed and proper soil preparation and planting procedures. Seeding too lightly or poor seeding techniques will result in a thin, clumpy and weedy stand of grass. Heavy seeding results in turf dying due to overcrowding, poor rooting and disease problems. A common mistake is seeding tall fescue too thick in an attempt to achieve the fine texture of bluegrass. This results in a weak turf and offsets the advantages of planting tall fescue.

#### Tall Fescue Seeding Schedule (for new lawns)

July	Test soil for pH, phosphorus, potash. Begin spraying bermudagrass or other perennial grassy weeds with Roundup or Finale.
August	Grade and till soil. Incorporate phosphorus, potassium, lime or sulfur according to soil test.
September	Just before seeding, mix 1 lb. N/1,000 sq. ft. into the surface, 1 or 2 inches. Smooth surface and seed lawn. Keep seedbed constantly moist until seedlings appear. Gradually space waterings, but soak soil deeper as roots grow.
October	Fertilize with half rate of nitrogen one month after planting. Water once a week if weather is dry.
November	Fertilize with 1 lb. soluble nitrogen. Last mowing should be at 2–2½ inches. Soak soil thoroughly before winter.

For more detailed information, consult *Planting Your Lawn*, MF-608.

#### Overseeding

- Mow the lawn to 1½ inch height.
- Core aerate if the soil is compacted.
- Power rake, using spring tines or thin blades.
- Remove debris with hand rake or lawnmower and catcher.
- Sow seed uniformly. Use 6 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet if repairing large, killed-out areas. Use half-rate (3 to 5 pounds) if trying to thicken a thin lawn.
- Fertilize with 1 pound nitrogen per 1,000 square feet.
- Water in the seed and fertilizer.
- Do not use crabgrass preventers, except for siduron (Tupersan), until the new grass seedlings are well established.
- Do not use broadleaf weed killers for one month before seeding, or until the new grass has been mowed three times.

For more information, consult, *Overseeding Your Lawn*, MF-534.

#### Mowing

Mowing too low or too infrequently are common causes of problems in tall fescue lawns. Tall fescue grows rapidly and requires frequent mowing. Spring mowing can be greatly reduced by following a fall fertilization program and not fertilizing in early spring. Tall fescue should be mowed frequently enough so that no more than one-third of the height is removed at one time. If the lawn is mowed often, it is not necessary to catch clippings. Clippings return nitrogen and other nutrients to the soil and do not cause thatch.

#### When to Mow (to remove one-third)

If your mowing height is:	Mow when grass gets this tall:
2 inches	3 inches
2½ inches	3¾ inches
3 inches	4½ inches
3½ inches	5¼ inches

Turf-type cultivars of tall fescue can be mowed slightly lower than K-31, but stay within the recommended range. Mow at the higher end of the range during the summer to promote deeper rooting and better drought resistance. Keep the blade sharp at all times, or the resulting brown leaf tips will detract from the appearance of the turf.

#### Mowing Heights

Turf-type cultivars	2–3 inches
K-31	2½–3½ inches

#### Watering

Fescue is relatively drought-tolerant, but needs to be watered during the summer to keep it green. Avoid spring watering unless the lawn begins to wilt. Unnecessary spring watering reduces summer drought resistance and contributes to excessive growth, disease and weeds. During dry summer weather, grass will have to be watered once or twice a week with a total of 1 to 1½ inches of water applied per week. Morning watering is best.

In the fall, water every other week if the weather is dry. A good soaking before winter is also helpful. Apply the water at a rate that can be absorbed by the soil. Sprinklers vary in how fast they apply water; they can be checked by placing several flat-bottomed, straight-sided containers on the lawn and then turning on the water for an hour. The average height, in inches, of water collected in the containers is the rate at which the sprinklers apply water in inches per hour. By perform-

ing this test, it can always be determined how long to run a sprinkler to apply a given amount of water.

Avoid watering every day, or even every other day, except for a newly seeded lawn. Besides wasting water, frequent watering causes shallow roots, disease and weed invasion.

### Fertilizing

The most important time to fertilize tall fescue lawns is in the fall, specifically September and November. Early spring fertilizing (March or early April) causes excessive growth, which requires frequent mowing, and promotes disease and weeds. Therefore, spring fertilization should be delayed until May, after most of the spring flush of topgrowth is over. A slow-release nitrogen source should be used for the May application, so that as the hot weather approaches the grass doesn't grow too fast. Too much topgrowth can prevent the healthy root growth needed to resist summer stresses. If the lawn is fertilized only once a year, it should be done during September. September applications thicken up the lawn and promote good root development. November is an important time to fertilize to keep the lawn green longer in the fall and for earlier green-up in the spring.

### Fertilizing Schedule

	Nitrogen carrier	Amount*
September	Soluble or Mixed	1-1½ lb.
November	Soluble	1-1½ lb.
May	Slow release	1 lb.

\*lb. actual nitrogen (not product) per 1,000 sq. ft.

Nitrogen is the most important fertilizer element, and it is needed on a regular basis. Phosphorous, potassium, lime and sulfur should be applied only according to soil test results. Phosphorus and potassium can be applied in September or May if they are needed.

For further information, consult *Fertilizing Kansas Lawns*, MF-2324.

### Thatch

Thatch is usually not a problem in properly managed tall fescue lawns. Thatch is an accumulation of dead roots and stem tissue at the soil surface. Fall fertilizing, regular mowing, and proper watering will help control thatch buildup. Clippings decompose readily and do not contribute significantly to thatch.

If thatch is more than a half-inch thick in an old, spring-fertilized lawn, it should be power-raked in September, just before fertilizing or overseeding. It is best to use a machine with spring tines to avoid unnecessary injury. Late fall dethatching may result in winter injury. Spring dethatching may result in weed invasion.

### Core Aerating

Clay soils and soils compacted from heavy use, benefit from aerating. Core aerating machines remove small plugs of soil, leaving small holes in the ground. This aids in water, air and root penetration. Aerate in the spring or fall, or both, depending on soil compaction or clay content of the soil. Spring aerating should be done before applying crabgrass preventers. Fall aerating should be done before overseeding. Aerating machines may be rented from a local nursery or rental agency, or a professional can be hired.

The cores of soil brought to the surface during aeration should be left on the lawn. As they disintegrate and fall back into the holes, the resulting mixture of soil and thatch hastens decomposition of the thatch.

### Weed Control

Good tall fescue lawns are fairly resistant to weed infestation. Fall fertilizing, proper watering (especially avoiding over-watering in the spring), and proper mowing will help reduce weed infestations. Good cultural practices are much cheaper than excessive use of herbicides.

Crabgrass and other annual grassy weeds can be prevented by applying preemergence herbicides before the redbud trees reach full bloom or the redbud leaves begin to emerge. Good cultural practices also are effective in reducing crabgrass and annual grassy weeds. Do not depend on herbicides alone for weed control.

Dandelions, chickweed and henbit should be controlled in September and October. Spring applications are less effective and don't give lasting results. Do not use broadleaf weed killers for one month before seeding, or on new grass until it has been mowed three times.

Bermudagrass is sometimes a concern in tall fescue lawns. If control is necessary, spray with Roundup or Finale between June and August. (The fescue will be killed also.) More than one application is usually necessary. Replant to tall fescue in September. There is no way to kill bermudagrass without also killing the tall fescue.

### Disease

Tall fescue is relatively free of diseases. Brown patch is the most common disease problem. The best prevention method is to follow the cultural practices outlined in this publication and select recommended cultivars. Fungicides are expensive and usually are not needed, except for extremely severe outbreaks. Planting too thick, early spring fertilizing, and shallow, frequent watering predispose tall fescue lawns to disease.

### Insects

Small populations of insects, both beneficial types and harmful types, are normal in the lawn. Indiscriminate use of insecticides can destroy beneficial insects

and allow harmful species to predominate. A healthy, vigorously growing tall fescue lawn can usually tolerate moderate levels of harmful insect activity. Occasionally, populations of harmful insects will reach levels that cause visible damage. If so, homeowners may want to apply an insecticide to their lawn.

Grubs are common insect pests of tall fescue lawns. The two main types of grubs that may damage tall fescue are the southern masked chafer (annual grub) and the May/June beetle (three-year grub). The southern masked chafer is the most common, and may be controlled with a preventative insecticide application in late July or early August. Oftanol, Dylox/Proxol, Sevin or Diazinon can be used. Insecticides applied after mid-August for the southern masked chafer grub will not be as effective.

Merit and Mach 2 are new insecticides that have longer residuals than other products. They should be applied in early to mid-July for southern masked chafer, rather than late July or early August. If three-year grubs are also a concern, apply Merit in late May or June. One application should give season-long control for both types of grubs. Mach 2 is not as long-lasting as Merit and should not be applied before late-June if control of annual grubs is desired.

Sod webworms, cutworms and some other pests may also cause damage to tall fescue lawns, but they are not as common as grubs. Treat for them only if they are actually damaging the lawn. Always read and follow label directions carefully when using pesticides.

### Tall Fescue Lawn Calendar

September	October	November
Most important time for fertilizing. Plant new lawns, overseed thin lawns. Spray dandelions if not planting or overseeding. Water only as needed to prevent wilt. Dethatch if needed. Aerate soil if needed.	Spray dandelions, chickweed and henbit in established lawns. Fertilize newly seeded lawns at half rate.	Fertilize established lawns a second time. Mow 2 to 2½ inches at last mowing. Soak soil before winter. Keep tree leaves raked.
March	April	May
Avoid early spring fertilizing. Spray broadleaf weeds if not planting or overseeding. Water only if weather is dry and lawn shows signs of wilt. Aerate clay and compacted soils.	First mowing can be at 1½ inches to remove dead grass. Regular mowing at recommended height. Mow frequently. Keep blade sharp. Apply crabgrass preventers by redbud bloom.	Third application of fertilizer; use slow-release nitrogen source. Avoid frequent watering to reduce weed germination and disease.
June	July	August
Watch for sod webworms. Check for summer broadleaf weeds, treat if necessary. Raise mowing height to upper end of range to promote drought resistance.	Apply grub control if needed. Water once or twice a week during hot, dry weather. Kill bermudagrass if it is a problem. Replant to tall fescue in September.	Apply grub control if needed. Test soil before fall planting. Prepare soil for fall planting. Water once or twice a week, depending on weather.

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