

Planting a Winter Lawn

Here's a step by step guide to an excellent winter lawn:

Scalp the Bermuda first. That means mowing it down to 1/4 inch tall or less, to allow the ryegrass seed to reach the soil. Don't de-thatch, because that will leave holes in the Bermuda next summer!

Feed with Rose Food, at a rate of 1 pound per 100 square feet. You can do this step by hand, but you'll get more even coverage with a spreader, which will also come in handy when you spread the seed.

Water heavily, for around 90 minutes to 2 hours, if you have regular pop-up sprinklers—other kinds of sprinklers may take longer. If runoff is a problem, water in stages—say for 15 minutes, then allow it to soak in for 20 minutes, then repeat 7 times. That deep watering helps set the fertilizer in the ground and wet the soil enough so it doesn't steal water from the seed.

Sow the seed moderately thickly: about one and two thirds pounds per 100 square feet. Sowing too thin can leave the lawn looking polka-dotted, since ryegrass doesn't spread. Sowing it too thickly will result in crowded, sickly, yellowish seedlings that often die out in patches. As an extra fillip, turn a leaf rake over, so the "teeth" are pointed up, and run it lightly over the seed to push it into the remains of the Bermuda.

Cover the seed with about 1/8 to 1/4 of an inch of fine organic matter, such as Turf Topper, fine compost, or composted steer manure. This helps hide the seed from the birds, and keeps it moist, so you don't have to water quite so often. Without a cover, a winter lawn could need watering twice each hour!

Water frequently (even with a cover) until a thick stand of seedlings emerges. Common watering schedules are about 3 minutes at a time, 3-4 times a day. Seedlings usually come up in 5-10 days, depending on the weather.

Gradually water less often and more at a time—once the seedlings are up—until you reach your usual watering schedule. Common weaning schedules usually run twice a day for a week, then once a day for two weeks, then once every two days for three weeks, then twice a week. During the coldest part of the winter, ryegrass may only need water once a week.

Feed again, after the grass has been up for a month, with a regular lawn food, to keep it green and thick. Most lawn foods should be applied every 4-6 weeks for best results. A month after sprouting is also a good time to deal with any weed problems, too.

Mow regularly. Perennial ryegrass doesn't need very frequent mowing, but it should be cut often enough that no more than 1/3 of the blade length is removed with each mowing. For example: if your mower is set at 1 inch high, don't let the grass grow more than one and a half inches high before you mow. Sharp mower blades leave fewer brown tips.

Don't forget to enjoy your lawn! The basics, once learned, are easy to do—and far easier than trying to fix problems later!