

Science of Seeds



Keys to a successful fall planting

By Matt Duncan

Fall is the ideal time to get your grass seed planted. Weed competition is lower in the Fall vs Spring and Summer, the warm days with cooler nights are ideal for germination and establishment, and generally, precipitation starts to return more regularly helping prevent the young seedlings from drying out. Aug. 15 - Sept. 30 is a great window to get your seed planted.

You can certainly seed later as timing allows for your situation; however, the further away from Labor Day that you go, those cooler nights with frost can impact the success that you will have.

You will need to consider the first frost depending on what species you are using to overseed with. Perennial ryegrass will establish within a week and gives you a lot more flexibility with late planting. Tall Fescue will germinate next within 1 to 2 weeks followed by Kentucky Bluegrass at 2-3 weeks. In ideal conditions you may see faster germination. These are important to know especially the later in Fall it gets as I mentioned earlier. Using one or a combination of all 3 species can provide a great stand of turf for you.

Once you've chosen the species and the timing that works for you, it is time to prepare the surface and get the seed in the ground. The first thing you want to do is mow the grass shorter and remove any clippings or debris. This will help open the canopy, allowing the seed to work its way down to the soil. If seeding a small area, you can loosen the soil with a hand tool to reduce compaction and open the ground. If you are seeding a large area, this may need to be done with an aerator. If you need to level the area to match the grade around it, you can then use a screened topsoil or compost to bring it back to grade. Next, you will want to spread your grass seed evenly over the area. This can be done with either a drop spreader, or a rotary spreader to evenly distribute the seed, or if you are doing a large area, you may be able to use a seed box on your aerator to save you a step. The optimal seeding depth is $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch.

At this point you will want to apply a fertilizer to help the seed along. Generally, when seeding, you will use one that contains Phosphorous, which not only helps the young seedlings establish, but also helps the roots of the existing grass coming out of the Summer. If you are in an area with Phosphorous restrictions, you may need to show a soil test. You will also want to use a fertilizer with faster release Nitrogen so the young seedlings can utilize the nutrients quickly.

Once you've done all of that, start putting water to the seed and watch the young seedlings grow! It is important to keep the soil and young seedlings moist as they are coming in. Once the surface is firm enough and the seedlings have reached 2 to 3 inches, it is a good idea to start mowing to encourage tillering and better establishment.

Like any other project, it is best to write down your goals and have a plan. Fall is here, so you don't want to miss out on the best time of year!

Happy Planting!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt Duncan".



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