Timely Turf Care (published 2025-09-27)
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Tall fescue care when transitioning from summer to fall...
Many cool-season lawns in Tennessee may be showing visible stress at this point in the season, especially given the challenging weather this year. The good news is that fall is the best opportunity for tall fescue recovery. With warm soils and cooler air temperatures, conditions favor strong root growth and seedling establishment. Planting dates can shift from year to year and are often later than many expect. Across most of Tennessee, the ideal seeding window for cool-season turfgrasses falls between late September and mid-October—with earlier planting in cooler regions (Plateau, Mountains) and later planting in warmer areas (West Tennessee and metropolitan centers).

Be patient and prepare to support stand recovery with these practices:

Soil Test – Now is a great time to do this for cool-season turfgrass lawns. Check pH, phosphorus, and potassium; apply lime or nutrients based on results.

Aerification & Interseeding – Many tall fescue lawns thin out over the summer due to heat and disease stress. Core aeration relieves compaction and opens the canopy, creating ideal conditions for interseeding. Overseed at 3–4 lb per 1,000 ft² to recover stand density and improve turf quality heading into fall.

New Establishment – In new tall fescue lawns or lawns undergoing a complete renovation, use 5–8 lb per 1,000 ft² for new establishment. Select high-quality seed (≥ 85% germination, ≥ 95% purity).

Seed Blends –Select blends rather than a single cultivar. For tall fescue lawns, this may mean choosing mixes that contain multiple turf-type tall fescue varieties to improve resilience. In shaded or more challenging sites, blends incorporating other cool-season grasses such as perennial ryegrass or Kentucky bluegrass may provide better performance.

Fertilization – Fall is the most important time to fertilize cool-season lawns. Wait until ambient temperatures consistently range from 60–75 °F before beginning applications. Over the fall season, apply a total of about 2 lb nitrogen (N) per 1,000 ft². An additional 1–2 lb N per 1,000 ft² may be applied in spring if needed.

Mulching – In new sites, applying a light cover of clean straw (80–100 lb/1,000 ft²) can be helpful to protect seed and retain moisture.

Watering – Irrigate lightly and frequently until seedlings establish, then shift to deeper, less frequent watering. Be sure to adjust based on rainfall.

Additional Resources for Choosing Turfgrass

If you'd like to explore turfgrass varieties in more detail, these national programs can help you compare options and find grasses suited to your climate and maintenance goals:

• National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) –
Tests turfgrass varieties across the U.S. for traits like color, disease resistance, drought tolerance, and wear tolerance. Their online database allows you to filter results by location and conditions to see how varieties perform in climates similar to yours. Website: www.ntep.org

• Alliance for Low Input Sustainable Turf (A-LIST) –
Identifies and certifies turfgrass varieties that perform well with less water, fertilizer, and pesticides. A-LIST grasses are a great option if you want a lower-maintenance lawn without sacrificing quality. Website: www.a-listturf.org

• Turfgrass Water Conservation Alliance (TWCA) –
Focuses on grasses that maintain quality under reduced irrigation. If you want a lawn that can handle dry periods with less watering TWCA-approved varieties are worth considering. Website: www.tgwca.org

Sourcing Turfgrass Material

Where you buy your turfgrass seed or sod can make a big difference in quality and long-term performance.

- Buy from reputable suppliers – Look for local landscape/garden centers, sod farms, or seed companies that can tell you exactly what species and varieties you're getting.
- Check labels carefully – Seed labels should list the species, variety names, germination rate, and weed seed content.
- Choose seed with high germination (85% or better) and minimal weed seed (less than 0.5%).
- Ask about blends or mixtures – Using multiple varieties of the same species (a varietal blend) can improve disease resistance and performance. Mixtures containing multiple species can also be beneficial, particularly for balancing strengths like drought tolerance, shade adaptation, and wear recovery.

Weed Management – Eliminate existing weeds before seeding. For detailed recommendations, see UT Extension Publication W238 at: https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/W238.pdf.

Avoid using fall preemergence herbicides in areas where new seed will be planted.

Mowing – Begin once seedlings reach mowing height; maintain tall fescue at ~3 to 5 inches and avoid scalping.

Remember: Turf can be stressed by weather extremes, poor drainage, pests, or simple mismanagement. Problems like insect feeding, scalping, or improper fertilization all weaken stands and open the door for weeds and disease. Be consistent. Using balanced management

through the year is just as important as fall renovation in keeping tall fescue lawns healthy long-term.

How do I ask a question?
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