

Lawn Management After Drought

Phil Blevins

Extension Agent, Agriculture

Washington County, Virginia

Consider the following from Dr. Mike Goatley, turf specialist at VA Tech. Following an extended period of hot dry weather, rains provide a very quick distinction between living and dead cool-season turf. Turfgrasses will quickly resume the expansion and emergence of previously formed leaves that were shut down by the drought and will also initiate new leaf growth that will contribute to an overall greening of the turf within a day or so of a significant rainfall event. If the turf does not show signs of recovery, then make preparations for renovating the turf in the fall, the best season to establish cool-season grasses.

If the entire lawn has failed, then complete renovation involving an application of a non-selective herbicide such as glyphosate to control all the existing vegetation is often appropriate. At this time, you have the opportunity to consider if perhaps another cool-season turf might be better suited to your needs and climate. Tall fescue works well across much of the state and research at the Hampton Roads research station is showing that a mix of tall fescue and hybrid bluegrass has desirable qualities. Complete renovation is costly, very labor-intensive and often is not required. Most lawns will likely have problem spots measuring anywhere from 50 to 150 sq feet and these spots will be surrounded by healthy, great looking grass, so it makes sense to concentrate only on the small areas.

No matter the level of renovation, be sure to conduct a soil test if one has not been made within the past 3 years. When choosing the grass for spot renovations, try to select grasses with similar appearance and growth habit as to the current lawn in order to maintain turf uniformity. The final pre-plant step is to properly prepare the soil for planting. Some degree of soil preparation is essential for successful turfgrass establishment.

What about how much seed to plant? Let's consider what NOT to do in order to handle spot renovations correctly: visibly seeing 1 seed every sq inch is NOT enough, but at the same time, seed stacked upon seed so thick that you can not see the soil is even worse! It is not an absolute number by any means because seed size among species is highly variable, but for most grasses somewhere between 10-15 seed per square inch corresponds fairly well with recommended planting rates for new establishments. The area should be mulched with straw. Call your Extension office for specific seeding rates and recommendations.