

Selecting Turfgrasses for Home Lawns

Home lawns are an integral part of the landscape—perfect for lounging, ball games, and cookouts—a real asset to any home. A beautiful lawn enhances any landscape not only by improving the aesthetic and economic value of the home but by providing many environmental benefits as well. Healthy turfgrass prevents soil erosion, reduces glare from the sun, helps cool temperatures on hot days, produces oxygen, and filters out contaminants in air and water. Perhaps the most important factor in establishing and maintaining an attractive and trouble-free home lawn is selecting the proper turfgrass. Because a home lawn is intended to be a long-term investment, the proper selection of a turfgrass is the most important step. This decision should be made carefully, based on many different criteria. Some basic questions need to be answered before making a final decision on a specific turfgrass for your home lawn. Answering the basic questions below will make it easier for you to determine the most appropriate turfgrass for your home lawn.

Are there any physical or environmental limitations to the site? Shade is the biggest environmental limitation to turfgrass selection. How many hours of direct sun will the lawn receive? Can the area be easily mowed on a frequent basis? Is irrigation available? What is the soil type? Is drainage going to be a problem?

What type of lawn is desired or expected? Everyone would like to have a perfect, dark green, lush lawn that does not need to be mowed, fertilized, or irrigated, but that turfgrass does not exist. For practical purposes, decide if the lawn is to be a “lawn of the month,” an average lawn, or just a cover to lessen soil erosion and provide soil stability around the home.

What level of maintenance will the lawn be given? Most turfgrasses will respond to a range of maintenance levels; however, each turfgrass has a preferred maintenance level for optimum results. Levels of maintenance are closely related to how much time and how much money one wants to spend on the lawn. Obviously, a higher level of maintenance costs more.

With answers to these basic questions in mind, use the following information to select the proper turfgrass for your home lawn. Your county Extension office can help recommend turfgrasses and turfgrass varieties that are best suited for your specific location.

The following factors should be considered before making a final decision about which turfgrass will provide the most beautiful and enjoyable lawn.

Region of Adaptation

Environmental and soil conditions vary greatly throughout the state of Alabama, and certain turfgrasses grow better under



Zoysiagrass

some of these conditions and locations than others. There are many turfgrass species and cultivars from which to choose. Some turfgrasses can be planted anywhere in the state; others perform best in a certain region of the state.

Turfgrasses can be divided into two basic categories based on their adaptation: cool-season turfgrasses and warm-season turfgrasses. Cool-season turfgrasses, such as tall fescue and the heat-tolerant hybrid bluegrasses, are best adapted to cooler climates and exhibit optimum growth during the cooler months of fall, winter, and early spring. Tall fescue and heat-tolerant hybrid bluegrasses are the only cool-season turfgrass that is recommended for home lawns in Alabama; the less heat-tolerant Kentucky bluegrass is not well suited for our environment. Warm-season turfgrasses, such as bahiagrass, bermudagrass, centipedegrass, St. Augustinegrass, and zoysiagrass, on the other hand, grow best during hot summer months. Most lawns across the state are warm-season turfgrasses.

Table 1. Characteristics of Turfgrasses Recommended for Use on Home Lawns in Alabama

Turfgrasses						
Condition	Heat-Tolerant Bluegrass	Bermudagrass	Centipedegrass	St. Augustine	Tall Fescue	Zoysiagrass
Adaptation ¹	N	N,C,S	C,S	C,S	N	N,C,S
Drought Tolerance	Fair	Excellent	Good	Good	Fair	Excellent
Sunlight ²	Full to Partial	Full	Full to Partial	Full to Shade	Full to Shade	Full to Partial
Salt Tolerance	Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good
Wear Tolerance	Fair	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Fair	Excellent
Soil pH	5.5 to 7.0	5.5 to 7.0	5.5 to 7.0	5.5 to 7.0	5.5 to 7.0	5.5 to 7.0
Establishment Methods	Seed, Sod	Sprigs, Plugs, Sod, Seed ⁴	Sprigs, Plugs, Sod, Seed	Sprigs, Plugs, Sod	Seed, Sod	Sprigs, Plugs Sod, Seed
Leaf Color	Dark	Medium to Dark	Light	Medium to Dark	Medium	Medium to Dark
Leaf Texture	Medium	Medium to Fine	Coarse to Medium	Coarse	Coarse to Medium	Coarse to Fine
Maintenance Level ³	High	Medium to High	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
Mowing Height	2 ½ to 3 inches	1 to 1 ½ inches	1 to 1 ½ inches	2 ½ to 4 inches	2 to 3 inches	1 to 2 inches

¹Adaptation: N = north; C = central; S = south

²Sunlight: Full = at least 8 hours of sunlight; Partial = at least 6 hours of sunlight; Shade = at least 4 hours of sunlight

³Maintenance Level: Low = fewer than 2 fertilizations per year; Medium = 2 to 4 fertilizations per year; High = more than 4 fertilizations per year

⁴Common bermudagrass types only

Even though Alabama is in the South, temperatures vary enough from the northern to southern parts of the state that some turfgrasses are best suited in certain regions of the state. For example, winter temperature extremes in the northern part of Alabama are too severe for the survival of St. Augustinegrass, and the summer heat in the central and southern parts of the state is too severe for the survival of tall fescue. The simplest method to determine which turfgrass is best adapted to your area is to check the lawns in your neighborhood or surrounding neighborhoods to see which turfgrass survives and looks the best. Refer to table 1 to help you determine the best turfgrass for your region of the state.

Stress Tolerance

Turfgrasses vary in their ability to withstand various stresses such as drought, heat, and traffic or wear. Drought tolerance is a measure of how well the turfgrass will survive extended periods of dry weather without supplemental irrigation or rainfall. Improper amounts of sunlight or shade are common stresses on home lawns. Turfgrasses can also be subjected to other stresses, such as salt in coastal areas around the gulf coast. Traffic or wear tolerance is a measure of how well a turfgrass continues to grow after being walked or played upon. Refer to table 1 for relative stress tolerance levels of the recommended turfgrasses for use on home lawns in Alabama.

Soil Conditions

All the turfgrasses recommended for use in Alabama can be grown in a wide range of soil conditions. Soil pH is a measure of the acidity or alkalinity of a soil. It is measured on a scale that ranges from 0 to 14, with a pH of 7.0 being neutral. Any soil pH that is below 7.0 is considered acidic, and a pH above 7.0 is considered alkaline. Turfgrasses differ in their ability to grow and survive at various soil pH levels. A soil test should be conducted to determine the soil pH. If the soil pH is greater than 7.0, it can be reduced by using acidifying fertilizers such as ammonium sulfate or ammonium nitrate. If the soil pH is too low, it can be increased by adding lime. It is best to make these adjustments to the soil pH before establishing

turfgrass. Refer to table 1 to determine the soil pH range for the various turfgrasses that are recommended for use on home lawns in Alabama.

Another soil component that is very important in turfgrass selection is soil moisture. Some soils dry out faster than other soils; therefore, it is recommended to monitor soil moisture conditions of the lawn area over time during and after rainfall. In contrast, some soils do not dry out and remain wet due to poor drainage. Turfgrasses will probably perform poorly on these types of soils unless the drainage is improved.

Sunlight

Most turfgrasses require plenty of sunlight to become well established and grow into a dense, healthy, lush lawn. Shade from surrounding buildings or trees may cause turfgrasses to become thin and, subsequently, to be invaded by weeds or other pests. Shrubs, ground covers, or mulches are the best alternatives to turfgrass in these severely shaded areas. Consider the amount of shade in the lawn area when selecting a turfgrass. If there are fewer than 8 hours of direct sunlight per day, or only filtered sunlight for most of the day, you should not select a full-sun turfgrass like bermudagrass. Even the more shade-tolerant turfgrasses generally require at least 4 hours of direct sunlight per day or at least 50 percent sunlight under shade conditions. Refer to table 1 for the sunlight requirements for the various turfgrasses recommended for use on home lawns in Alabama.

Establishment

Some turfgrasses must be established by seed; others must be established by vegetative plantings; and some can be

established by either means. Turfgrasses that must be established by vegetative propagation can be planted by using sprigs, plugs, or sod. Refer to table 1 to determine the appropriate establishment method for the turfgrasses recommended for use on home lawns in Alabama.

Turfgrass Color

Turfgrasses also vary in their “natural” green color. The nitrogen fertilization rate will affect the depth of color in a turfgrass. A heavily fertilized lawn will be a darker green color than an underfertilized lawn, which will be pale green or even yellow in color. Refer to table 1 for the relative color ratings of the various turfgrasses that are recommended for use on home lawns in Alabama.

Turfgrass Texture

Turfgrass texture varies with the different turfgrasses. Like color, the choice of turfgrass texture is merely a visual or personal preference. The categories of turfgrass texture are coarse, medium, and fine. This is a relative measure of the leaf blade width. Some people prefer fine-textured turfgrasses that have thin leaves, while others may opt for a coarse-textured turfgrass that has wide leaves.

Turfgrass Density

The number of leaves or shoots per a given area is a measure of turfgrass density. Turfgrasses with high density and fine leaf texture generally produce higher-quality lawns. Turfgrasses with lower density and coarser leaf texture often require a higher mowing height to produce an acceptable quality lawn. Bermudagrass and zoysiagrass have higher density leaf texture than other

turfgrasses grown in Alabama. However, dense turfgrasses tend to produce thatch faster than open ones and usually require more maintenance.

Maintenance Level

Various turfgrasses grow at different rates and have optimum levels of fertility, mowing, and irrigation needed to produce a quality lawn. Generally, as the amount of fertilizer and water applied to the lawn are increased, so is the level of maintenance required. Turfgrasses maintained at a low level of intensity are fertilized no more than once per year, mowed as needed, and watered seldom. Lawns maintained at a moderate level are fertilized about four times per year, mowed on a weekly basis, and watered as needed. High-maintenance lawns require monthly fertilization during the growing months, mowing more than once per week, and frequent irrigation during the growing months. Refer to table 1 for the recommended maintenance levels required for the turfgrasses used on home lawns in Alabama.



Mowing Height

The growth habit of each turfgrass determines the optimum mowing height for the highest-quality lawn. Mowing a turfgrass higher or lower than the recommended height will result in reduced quality and may weaken the turfgrass, leading to other problems such as invasion by diseases, insects, or weeds.

The rotary mower is the most commonly used lawn mower, but it cannot be adjusted to mow turfgrasses below 1 inch in height without scalping the lawn. A reel mower should be used if the turfgrass is to be maintained at a mowing height of 1 inch or less. Refer to table 1 for the optimum mowing heights for the recommended turfgrasses for use on home lawns in Alabama.

Mowing Frequency

The turfgrass species and the level of management determine how often a lawn needs to be mowed. The quality of a lawn will be higher the more frequently it is mowed. The frequency of mowing can be reduced to a degree by moderating the amount of fertilizer and water applied to the lawn. Recycling turfgrass clippings can also reduce the amount of fertilizer needed.

Pest Problems

Every turfgrass has some major pest problem that could limit its use in certain areas or locations. There are several different types of pest problems on turfgrasses in Alabama, including diseases, insects, nematodes, and weeds. Proper turfgrass management practices will keep most pest problems to a minimum.

Turfgrasses Recommended for Use in Alabama

After you have recognized the potential limitations of the particular site or lawn and the maintenance requirements of the turfgrasses you have to select from, the ultimate consideration is simply this: Which turfgrass do you consider to be the most appealing, beautiful, and enjoyable? Some may prefer the fine texture; some may want the one with the dark green color!

Cool-Season Grasses

Cool-season grasses grow best during the fall and spring, when air temperatures are about 60 to 75 degrees F. Because of this, the time to establish and fertilize these grasses is fall. However, most cool-season grasses survive Alabama summers poorly and are often damaged enough to need reseeding the next fall. A few can be used in northern Alabama. The most popular for a year-round home lawn is tall fescue. Ryegrass is sometimes used as a winter overseed to provide green color in dormant bermudagrass lawns. Heat-tolerant bluegrass varieties are relative newcomers on the market and provide yet another cool-season grass option, though they require more maintenance than tall fescue.



Tall Fescue

Tall Fescue (*Festuca aurundinacea*)

There are many different varieties available, with new ones coming out every year. Tall fescue is especially well adapted to the transition-zone climate—the area where it is too cold in the winter for many warm-season grasses, but too hot in the summer for many cool-season grasses. The Tennessee Valley region of Alabama is the southern limit of the transition zone, and this is where the majority of tall fescue in the state is found. It tolerates heavy clay soils well.

Tall fescue tolerates shade well but will grow in the full sun provided that the climate is not too hot or droughty. Tall fescue is a bunch-type grass. It does not produce above-ground runners (stolons) or below-ground runners (rhizomes), so tall fescue lawns in Alabama become clumpy as the grass thins out under heat stress. Most tall fescue lawns require periodic reseeding to restore an even distribution of grass. Tall fescue does not have drought tolerance comparable to warm-season grasses, so irrigation will often be needed to keep it from wilting and turning brown in the summer.

Some of the newer tall fescue varieties successful in the Southeast are Dynasty, Gala, the Rebel series, Falcon III and IV, Southeast, and Padre. These improved varieties have a finer texture, darker color, and lower growth compared to the original variety. Note that tall fescue seed is often sold at retail stores in blends of several varieties. Kentucky 31 is the ‘old standby’ of tall fescue varieties. Compared to newer varieties, Kentucky 31 has a much coarser texture and is less dense, but it is very hardy.

Perennial Ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*) and Annual Ryegrass (*L. multiflorum*)

Perennial ryegrass is not really a perennial in the Southeast. It is adapted to cool, moist climates. Ryegrass cannot take the heat and humidity of an Alabama summer, and it usually must be reseeded every year. It is a dark green, fine leafed grass with excellent winter color. Perennial ryegrass is often overseeded to provide green color on bermudagrass athletic fields and golf greens, but this is not recommended for lawns because of the competition the ryegrass provides for warm-season grasses in the spring.

Both perennial ryegrass and annual ryegrass are also used as temporary groundcovers. They are particularly well suited for this job because they germinate in only 3 to 5 days. When ground needs to be stabilized during the winter, they are often the best choice. The ryegrass is then killed during the next spring and replaced with a permanent turf.

Kentucky Bluegrass **(*Poa pratensis*)**

Kentucky bluegrass is the most popular cool-season turfgrass in the United States because of its fine texture, dark blue-green color, and good wear tolerance. However, it is not well adapted to the Alabama environment and is not recommended for use anywhere except the very northernmost parts of the state. There are no Kentucky bluegrass varieties currently available that consistently perform well in central and southern Alabama. Many homeowners who move to Alabama from the northern or transition zones are unhappy with the poor performance of Kentucky bluegrass here. The only solution is to plant another grass that is better suited to our environment.

Hybrid Bluegrass **(*P. pratensis* x *P. arachnifera*)**

Current turfgrass breeding aimed at producing bluegrasses that can be grown in the Southeast is focusing on hybrids between Kentucky bluegrass and Texas bluegrass (*Poa arachnifera*). These bluegrasses seek to combine the heat tolerance of Texas bluegrass with the appealing color of Kentucky bluegrass. Evaluations from Texas have looked promising, but in the Southeast, our humid conditions mean these grasses are prone to disease problems. Further

research will tell whether these bluegrasses will be suitable for Alabama lawns.

These hybrid bluegrasses are commonly sold under the label "Heat-Tolerant Bluegrass." It is important to remember that although they look like regular Kentucky bluegrass, only the improved hybrids with Texas bluegrass have the heat tolerance to survive long term in Alabama.

Warm-Season Grasses

Warm-season grasses grow best when temperatures are between 85 and 100 degrees F during the spring, summer, and early fall. They become dormant and turn brown during the winter. Some species may be damaged by the winter temperatures in northern Alabama, but most are adapted for growth throughout the state.

Bahiagrass **(*Paspalum notatum*)**

Bahiagrass is a coarse-to-medium textured turfgrass with a medium density and light green color. It is more commonly used as a utility turf to stabilize slopes and control dust on roadsides and around airports, but it can be used for a home lawn also. It is extremely drought tolerant and does not require heavy fertilization. Bahiagrass can tolerate wet soils well and sometimes is used around lakes and ponds. Its major disadvantage is that it produces many tall, unsightly seedheads. These are 2 to 3 feet tall and very dense in the summer. They are tough and difficult to mow with a regular rotary lawn mower. It is seedhead production more than anything else that limits bahiagrass use to areas where appearance is not a priority. Argentine and Pensacola are two popular varieties of bahiagrass often used for utility turf and lawns.

Bermudagrass **(*Cynodon spp.*)**

There are two major classes of bermudagrasses used for home lawns in Alabama. Hybrid bermudagrasses are established vegetatively and are generally finer in texture and denser than seeded bermudagrasses, though new seeded varieties are released every year with very good density, leaf texture, and color. Either seeded or hybrid bermudagrasses can make excellent quality lawns.

The advantages of both types of bermudagrass are a fast growth rate, excellent drought tolerance, and good wear tolerance. Aesthetically, many homeowners like the medium green color and fine texture. Its fast growth rate allows bermudagrass to establish more quickly than other grasses. It also recovers from damage faster than other grass species.

Rapid growth is both an advantage and disadvantage. Bermudagrass lawns need mowing and edging much more frequently than other lawns. Since bermudagrass produces both above-ground runners (stolons) and below-ground runners (rhizomes), it can grow underneath and over shallow barriers. Bermudagrass is also extremely sensitive to shade and should not be used except in full sun. This turf also has high fertility requirements.

Seeded Bermudagrass **(*Cynodon dactylon*)**

The seeded, or common, bermudagrasses are easy to establish because seed is available and they are easy to maintain. Seeds range in price from a few dollars per pound for older varieties such as Sahara and Arizona Common to \$20 or more per pound for the best-looking new varieties such as Princess-77 and Riviera. There

are also many blends available which include typically 3 to 5 varieties of bermudagrass in one bag; the composition of these blends can change from year to year. Like all bermudagrasses, seeded varieties are very drought tolerant and fast growing. They cannot tolerate shade but will grow under a wide variety of soil pH conditions and are well adapted to the entire state.

Hybrid Bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon* x *Cynodon transvaalensis*)

The varieties known as hybrid bermudagrasses are the result of a cross between common bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon*) and African bermudagrass (*Cynodon transvaalensis*). Varieties of common bermudagrass are a popular choice for lawns (see



Bermudagrass

above), but African bermudagrass is rarely used for lawns in the United States. However, the hybrids between African and common bermudagrass are exceptionally high-quality grasses. These hybrids have a much finer texture than common bermudagrass and are extremely dense. They also have good color and generally do not produce as many seedheads. They do not produce viable seeds and must be planted by vegetative means.

Tifway (Tifton 419). This variety was first released in 1961 for use on golf course fairways. It has become the most popular bermudagrass in Alabama. It is widely used in home lawns throughout the state. Tifway II is a derivative of Tifway that has very similar appearance and growth characteristics. In some cases, Tifway and Tifway II are used interchangeably. The main drawback to Tifway is a tendency to produce “off types,” or small patches of turf which are different in color or texture to the rest of the turf. To minimize this problem, purchase certified sod and install an entire yard with sod purchased from a single sod farm.

Tifgreen (Tifton 328). This grass is a low-growing variety that has a very dense texture and fine leaves. It is used for putting greens but also for lawns and sports fields. It requires more frequent mowing and fertilization than Tifway to keep it looking its best. It also looks best when mowed at a shorter height (under 1 inch).

TifSport. TifSport was released in the mid 1990s as a mutant of Midiron, a variety with good cold tolerance but a coarse texture. Although it was originally marketed for use on sports fields, it is also used for lawns. TifSport is similar to Tifway in density and texture.

Other popular hybrid bermudagrass varieties include Celebration, Patriot, and MS-Choice.

Zoysiagrass (*Zoysia spp.*)

Zoysiagrass is adapted to the entire state of Alabama and creates excellent turf when properly established and managed. Zoysiagrasses used in

Alabama comes from all over the world, from South America to Asia and the Pacific. Zoysiagrass is usually established vegetatively, via plugs, sprigs or sod.

Advantages: The wide range of native climates makes this turf highly adaptable. Zoysiagrass has the best cold tolerance of any warm-season grass used in Alabama. Like all grasses, full sun is best. It can tolerate moderate shade, but will thin out in areas that receive less than 60 percent sunlight. Turf texture varies by zoysiagrass type, but all have a medium green color and very dense growth with excellent wear resistance.

Disadvantages: Zoysiagrass is slow growing, so it is difficult to establish a new lawn. Many of the most popular varieties of zoysiagrass can only be sodded or sprigged, as they do not make viable or true-to-type seed. For the few varieties that can be seeded, think patience. It can take more than one growing season for the lawn to become fully established. Because zoysiagrass is so dense, thatch can be a problem. Be careful of thatch build-up in this turf. Some zoysiagrasses, such as ‘Meyer,’ have tough leaf blades that can be difficult to mow. Be sure to keep your lawn mower sharp.

Common zoysiagrass (*Zoysia japonica*)

Common zoysiagrass can be established from seed. It is often called Chinese, Japanese, or Korean common. Common zoysias are coarser, less dense, and generally less attractive than improved *Zoysia japonica* varieties.

Meyer zoysiagrass (*Zoysia japonica*)

Also called Z-52 and Amazoy, this is an improved selection of common zoysiagrass. It is one of the most common varieties grown

in Alabama. It has a medium texture, dark green color, and is very dense. Meyer is available only as sod, sprigs, or plugs. It has excellent cold tolerance. Cold damage is rarely a problem with Meyer in Alabama. It has a slower growth rate than bermudagrass but grows faster than fine-bladed zoysiagrasses, such as Emerald.

El Toro zoysiagrass. El Toro is another selection of *Zoysia japonica* that has slightly wider leaves than Meyer and a slightly faster growth rate.

It is similar to Meyer in other respects, including color and cold hardiness. Like Meyer, it must be vegetatively propagated. Other zoysiagrass varieties similar in appearance are Jamur and Palisades. They all provide an excellent quality turf.

Empire zoysiagrass. This is another selection of *Zoysia japonica*. Like Meyer and El Toro, it cannot be established from seed. Empire has wide leaves and a fast growth rate. It has good cold and drought tolerance.

Zenith zoysiagrass. This is yet another improved *Zoysia japonica*, but this variety can be established from seed. Zenith is comparable to Meyer in color and blade texture. If established early in the summer, and properly managed, a Zenith lawn can become fully established in a year, but if it is neglected, it could take 2 years before the lawn fills in completely.

Emerald zoysiagrass (*Zoysia japonica* x *Z. tenuifolia*)

Emerald zoysiagrass is a hybrid of two species of zoysiagrass. It is popular for its very fine texture and high density, which give it a carpet-like appearance. Since it is so dense, it tends to produce much thatch—the layer

of dead and partially decayed stems between the green leaves and the soil that can block water movement into the soil and harbor diseases and insects. Emerald grows more slowly than Meyer or other wider-leaved zoysiagrasses but has better shade tolerance. It also is not as tolerant of cold as Meyer and other varieties of *Zoysia japonica*. Emerald must be established vegetatively.

Matrella zoysiagrass (*Zoysia matrella*)

Also known as Manilagrass, Matrella is a fine-leaved, slow-growing grass similar in appearance to Emerald. It offers better shade tolerance than the *Z. japonica* varieties and can also produce excessive thatch if fertilized heavily. Matrella can be sold simply as Matrella or under variety names such as Zorro, Diamond, Royal, or Cavalier.

Centipedegrass (*Eremochloa ophiuroides*)

Centipedegrass is a coarse-textured, slow-growing grass with a light green color. It is noticeably more yellow-green than the other major turfgrass species grown in Alabama.

Advantages: Centipedegrass is adapted to low fertility soils and may even die if it is fertilized too much. However, it will out-compete other grasses in a lawn that is never fertilized. Do not fertilize centipedegrass with more than 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet per year. Too much phosphorous can also hurt centipedegrass. Do not add phosphorous to centipedegrass unless a soil test specifically calls for it. Centipedegrass will tolerate a lower soil pH than other grasses, but it can also grow at near-neutral pH. Since it is slow growing and does not produce below-ground runners, it is easier

to control around flower beds, driveways, and sidewalks than other grasses. Centipedegrass may be established by seeding or sod.



Centipedegrass

Disadvantages: Since it is slow-growing, plant centipedegrass seed early in the season giving it plenty of establishment time. Seed is expensive for this turfgrass. Centipedegrass is also susceptible to cold injury in the northern part of the state, particularly when too much thatch accumulates. The best mowing height for centipedegrass is 1 to 1 ½ inches. Be sure to mow often enough.

The rule of thumb for mowing is to mow often enough that you remove no more than one third of the leaf at a time. For example, if you are mowing the grass at 1 inch, mow before the grass gets above 1 ½ inches tall. Centipedegrass is not extremely drought tolerant.

Centipedegrass is also sensitive to many of the most popular postemergent herbicides used on home lawns, particularly those used to control grassy weeds. Before spraying any herbicide on centipedegrass, read the label carefully and make sure it is safe for use on centipedegrass.

Centipedegrass Decline

One of the biggest problems with centipedegrass is a phenomenon known as centipedegrass decline. Although the exact causes of centipedegrass decline are complex and still being studied, it is linked to applying

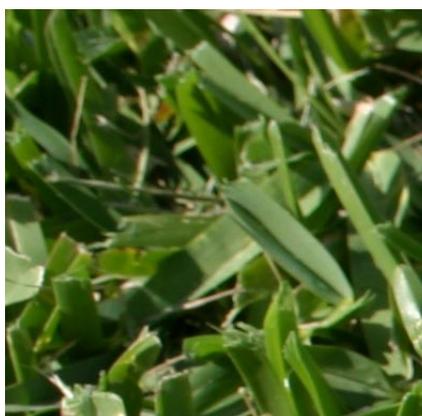
too much nitrogen and too much phosphorous and letting too much thatch develop. To help avoid centipedegrass decline, keep nitrogen and phosphorous inputs to a minimum, mow regularly and at the proper height, and control thatch through regular aerification and, if needed, mechanical dethatching. Stress from fungi, nematodes, or drought may be other contributing factors.

TifBlair centipedegrass is a newer variety with much better cold tolerance than common centipedegrass. It is a good choice for the northern half of Alabama.

St. Augustinegrass (*Stenotaphrum secundatum*)

St. Augustinegrass has large, flat stems and broad, coarse, dark green leaves. It is generally adapted to warmer climates and is used more in the southern third of the state, although some St. Augustinegrass lawns have adapted themselves to the climate in Birmingham and northward.

Advantages: St. Augustinegrass is a very dense turfgrass and is fast-growing. Like centipedegrass, St. Augustinegrass spreads by above-ground runners only. It is the most shade tolerant of the commonly available warm-season grasses. This turf tolerates alkaline soils somewhat better than other turfgrasses.



St. Augustinegrass

Disadvantages: Also like centipedegrass, St. Augustinegrass is not tolerant of many common herbicides. As with centipedegrass lawns, be sure to check the labels on any herbicide you intend to use on St. Augustinegrass to be sure it is safe. Low wear tolerance is a major consideration, especially in shadier locations. It is also very susceptible to damage from chinch bugs and from certain diseases such as brown patch and take-all patch. Floratam is a popular variety in Florida because it is resistant to chinch bugs; however, chinch bugs have recently overcome much of this resistance. Raleigh is a variety noted for its cold tolerance, as is Palmetto. Palmetto is also a dwarf-type St. Augustinegrass and can be mowed lower than most other varieties. In addition, some individual sod producers sell proprietary-named varieties of St. Augustinegrass, in most cases selections from their own sod farms.

Buffalograss (*Buchloe dactyloide*)

You may have heard of buffalograss. It is native to North America and is widely used in the Great Plains and the Southwest because of its excellent drought tolerance. It is an excellent choice for lawns there because it uses so little water—a precious resource, especially in the West.

Some people think that because it uses so little water, it would be an excellent choice for a low-maintenance lawn in Alabama, too. Unfortunately, that is not true. Buffalograss is native to a semi-arid environment, and that is where it grows best. It actually rains too much for buffalograss in Alabama. It is not able to compete with weeds in a humid environment, and it takes quite a bit of management to keep it alive here. Once again, it is important to understand the types of environments different grasses are adapted to and to choose one that will thrive where you want to grow it. Buffalograss is excellent for New Mexico, Texas, or Oklahoma—but not for Alabama.



Your Experts for Life

ANR-92

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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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