

## OUT ON A LIMB

‘Which turf grass?’

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If you had a choice, which turf grass would you choose? All of our most popular permanent warm season grasses for the south are of the creeping type. It's either, Bermuda, Zoysia, St. Augustine (Charleston) or Centipede.

BERMUDA grasses must be sprigged, plugged or sodded with the exception of Common Bermuda which can be seeded. Compared to the other Bermuda grasses, Common does not make a fine lawn because of its open turf type and unsightly seed heads but is suitable for very large acreages which are not close to the house where vegetative propagation is cost prohibitive. Some new hybrids have been introduced such as Princess 77 which are dense and fine textured however the seed cost is quite expensive. Bermuda is best suited in sunny locations and is able to recover from pedestrian damage. There are a number of different hybrid Bermuda grasses available. The most popular for home use is Tifway or Tif-419. There is a new one on the market called ‘TufTurf’. It greens up earlier, stays green longer in the Fall, more traffic tolerant and is more drought tolerant.

ZOYSIA as the name sounds is a native of the Orient and was introduced in the United States in the early 1900's. They grow slowly, close to the ground and have reasonably good shade tolerance. The most common hybrids are Emerald, Meyer and Zenith. Zenith and Meyer are medium in texture, have good color and cold tolerance. They can be sprigged or plugged but because they are so slow growing, they should be sodded. Only Zenith can be propagated by seed but because of its slow growth it should be sodded as well. When you seed, it looks like you planted weeds and the work to get them under control is just not worth the effort. In my opinion, Emerald Zoysia is the Cadillac of lawn grasses. It has an extremely dense fine texture with a true emerald green color and is so thick, invading weeds don't seem to be much of a problem. For Emerald to look its best, it must be mowed with a reel mower and will be the envy of the neighborhood.

ST. AUGUSTINE or Charleston is the most shade tolerant of our southern grasses, has a coarse texture, does well in wet soils and will also do well in full sun. Few seeds are commercially available, hence, St. Augustine must be propagated vegetatively. Due to fungus and chinch bug damage, I wouldn't use St. Augustine unless the area is too shady for the other turf grasses. Even then the maintenance isn't worth it.

CENTPEDE, from an appearance standpoint, is my least favorite of all of the other grasses. It grows well in full sun or moderated shade and is medium in texture with a pale medium green color however Centipede can be greened up by the application of iron. A Centipede lawn next to a hybrid Bermuda or Zoysia lawn just doesn't measure up. When introduced it was known as the ‘poor man's grass’ due to its low fertility requirements and low maintenance. It can be sprigged, plugged, sodded or seeded but is the least attractive of the other turf grasses.

Our winter grasses are ryegrass or fescue. Perennial rye is the best choice although it's not perennial, but is persistent into the summer. It can be seeded, has a dark green color and is a clump grower rather than a runner. The good thing about that is although you will have to mow all winter, you won't have to edge. Fescue is persistent in the northern part of the state.

Assuming the seed bed was well prepared topsoil and the turf was installed properly, I believe good soil chemistry is one of the most important things required for healthy turf. Obtain soil samples and take them to your County Extension Office for soil testing. They will check the pH (soil acidity) of the soil and make recommendations as to the fertility requirements. The soil test is good for three years. Adjust the soil acidity and strictly adhere to the suggested fertility adjustments. Don't just go to the big box stores and arbitrarily buy a generic grass fertilizer. If the pH (soil acidity) is out of balance you might well be wasting your fertilizer application due to the soil's inability to absorb the nutrients. I find that many people have never limed their yards.

Proper water management is very important. Lawns should only be watered in the early morning hours and watered deeply. You should try to apply one inch of water per week, accounting for rain. Just because Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday are your watering days does not mean you must water those days. I have been called to homes where grass is drowning in the midst of a drought. Some of the worst managed lawns have irrigation systems. Many irrigation systems are poorly designed and either waste water or are incapable of evenly delivering water throughout the zones. Every irrigation system needs a rain/freeze sensor not allowing the system to come on when watering is not needed. I hate to see irrigation systems running during or after a rain and how about when sidewalks are iced over because the system ran the night before. In weather the system should be shut down completely for the winter.

In closing, there is no perfect grass. There is something wrong with them all, either susceptible to cinch bugs, spittle bugs, bill bugs, army and sod webworms, mole crickets, voles, moles, diseases and fungus. However, good management can minimize these problems. But, don't let that scare you.

Take your shoes off and walk on the grass.