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Article Published April 28, 2016

Want Less Lawn Work? Start with the Seeds

Kathy Connolly

Q. What will most single family homeowners do 25 to 30 times this summer?

Possible answers:

A. Relax on the porch or patio

B. Have backyard parties

C. Mow and care for the lawn

The most reliable answer is “C,” they will care for the lawn. If the lawn is one-quarter acre, they’ll likely to devote between 30 to 40 hours to the job (or have a service do it for them) before November ends the growing season.

If you are a lawn owner, perhaps you’ve wondered if there’s a way reduce the commitment and still have healthy grass. According to some in the turf industry, there is—and it starts with the seeds.

We’re not talking here about a conventional lawn gone feral, nor the patchy grass that some call “freedom lawns” or “organic by neglect.” These seed mixes bear labels such as “low-mow,” “low-work-and-water,” or “drought-tolerant.” What do we need to know in order to shop wisely for these low-input lawn seeds?

It’s important to understand that mixes contain “cultivars” (cultivated varieties) of grass species that have been bred by universities or commercial seed breeders for low water use, low fertilizer needs, and slow growth. The species in the package are often described not simply as fescue, but with names such as Predator hard fescue, or Oasis Kentucky bluegrass.

Seed companies voluntarily submit their cultivars to a variety of trials, such as those conducted by the National Turf Evaluation Program (<http://ntep.org>) or by the Turfgrass Water Conservation Alliance (TWCA).

TWCA’s program administrator Jack Karlin describes a three-year trial process in which cultivars of a single grass type—such as tall fescue—are planted in as many as 10 locations throughout the U.S. and measured for water use and other characteristics.

“The breeders in this program use genetic stock they believe will push the envelope of drought tolerance,” he says.

They compare the trial grasses to established standards for the species. Karlin says these drought-tolerant varieties also take less fertilizer and less mowing.

“The trial plants grow under controlled conditions in ‘rain-out’ shelters and are evaluated for their

response to acute drought conditions with weekly measurements as well as digital image analysis,” says Karlin.

After three years, the plants that exceed existing species standards are eligible for TWCA certification. View the certified cultivars at www.tgwca.org/qualified-products.

My research shows that low-input mixes have some other characteristics in common that may help you determine if a product is right for you.

Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic is that fescue grasses dominate mixes for our area, in some cases 100 percent.

The product literature may describe the deep-rootedness of the species in the mix, which improves drought tolerance. It may also suggest that the species can live in a wide range of soil pH, from about 5.0 to 7.

The seeds are coated, which helps during the germination and establishment phases. Seeds may also be treated with mycorrhizal fungi, which help develop good soil biology. They may also be treated with endophytes, which improve both disease and insect resistance.

A number of low-input lawn mixes are available to the retail and professional markets. You may find major brands on the market with labels such as “Aqua Wise” from Turf Merchants, “GreenGuard H2O” from ProSeeds, or “Water Star” from Pennington’s.

Examples from niche providers include Eco-Lawn from Wildflower Farm, No Mow Lawn Seed Mix from Prairie Nursery, Low Work and Water Dwarf Fescue from American Meadows, Bluestem Nursery’s Enviro-Turf, and Pearl’s Premium.

Locally, Hart Seed in Wethersfield sells a 100-percent fescue mix called “(S)Low Grow.”

Colonial Seed in Windsor sells an all-fescue mix called Natural Perfection. Colonial’s “Harmony” mix also contains the regionally native wavy hair grass, and it is currently getting attention for its success in the extremely sandy conditions found on Cape Cod.

Some products are labeled “low-mow,” while others are labeled “drought tolerant.” In practice, this often amounts to the same result. So which would an expert choose?

Roger McNelly of East Haddam Horticultural Services has installed and maintains all- organic lawns for a number of years. He chooses very drought tolerant seed mixes and also mows high, a good technique to reduce thirstiness in turfgrass.

“We mow at 3 ½ inches minimum. That also helps control our local weeds,” says McNelly.

Kathy Connolly is a landscape designer, writer and speaker from Old Saybrook. She will give a talk on meadow development and site preparation on Tuesday, May 21 in Middlefield. See www.SpeakingofLandscapes.com for details.