



Planting a Lawn You Can Love

It is estimated that the average American spends 40 hours a year mowing his or her lawn. The typical suburban lawn, even here in Maine, is primarily composed of Kentucky bluegrass. Most varieties of Kentucky bluegrass demand considerable TLC, forcing an attentive homeowner to mow weekly, water regularly, and ward off weeds, insects, and disease with frequent applications of fertilizers and pesticides. Water quality testing by Friends of Casco Bay has documented that these fertilizers and pesticides make their way into stormwater runoff that flows into the bay.

A two-year study of residential landscapes in southern Ontario, Canada, compared the maintenance of conventional lawns vs. low-maintenance lawns. Those with low-maintenance lawns spent 50% less time, 85% less money, and used 50% less fuel, 85% less fertilizer, 100% less water, and 100% less pesticides per year than residents with conventional lawns.

One of the impediments to creating a low-maintenance yard here has been the fact that there is no lawn grass seed native to Maine. The good news is that Maine horticulturists have recently tested grass seed mixes that thrive in our trying climate. They require little fertilizer or water, and some only need to be mowed two or three times a year. Lawn expert, Gary Fish, of the Maine Board of Pesticides Control and Maine YardScaping Partnership, planted a number of grass seed blends he calls YardScaper mixes. The mixes grew very well in test plots at the University of Maine, the Pine Tree State Arboretum, and Southern Maine Community College.

Getting Started

Now is the time to plant these grasses for a stress-free spring. Because the soil is at its warmest and most receptive at this time of year, overseeding an existing lawn or planting a new one is best done in late summer and early fall. (When you plant a new lawn in the spring, crabgrass often gets a head start, crowding out the slower germinating grass seeds.)

Before planting a new lawn, think about how you use your yard, where you may want grass, and high traffic areas that may be better suited to paths or gravel. Identify areas that are relatively flat, are well drained, and receive at least six hours of sunlight a day. They are best suited for growing turf. Consider planting native ground cover like sweet fern or bearberry on steep slopes and wintergreen or bunchberry in shady areas.

For an existing lawn, core aerate or heavily rake it to expose whatever bare soil you can. Then, if needed, add compost and overseed with a low-maintenance mix, like those described below. You may need to overseed for as long as three years in order to achieve a thick lawn.

Maine-loving, Low Maintenance Grass Seed Mixes

You may order these mixes from the grass seed suppliers listed below or ask your nursery or garden center to make them up. These blends are more costly than ready-made seed mixes, but they should save time, effort, and money in the long run.

YardScaping/BayScaping Mix: 40% Creeping Red Fescue, 30% Charger II Perennial Ryegrass, 20% KenBlue Kentucky Bluegrass, 10% Tiffany Chewings Fescue

This mixture requires lower fertilizer and pesticide inputs but also has a refined appearance, better wear tolerance, and is adaptable to different soil conditions. Allen, Sterling & Lothrop



in Falmouth (207-781-4142, www.allensterlingandlothrop.com), Maine's oldest seed company, is currently the only source for it, but they are a wholesale distributor of grass seed to almost all the hardware and garden center stores in Maine, so if there is enough demand, it should soon be available statewide.

No Mow Mix: 25% SR5100 Chewings Fescue, 25% Azay Sheeps Fescue, 12% SR3100 Hard Fescue, 12% Scaldis Hard Fescue, 12% Creeping Red Fescue, 2% Dawson Red Fescue

This mix is good for rough areas in the yard where there is not a lot of foot traffic. It requires very little maintenance and only needs to be mowed two or three times a year. It is available from Prairie Nursery in Wisconsin (800-476-9453, www.prairienursery.com).

Tuffturf Mixture: 25% Masterpiece Tall Fescue, 25% Rembrandt Tall Fescue, 20% Kittyhawk SST Tall Fescue, 20% Exacta Perennial Ryegrass, 10% Bordeaux Kentucky Bluegrass

This tall fescue blend is a great mix for very dry sites or even on top of a septic leach field. It resists drought, disease, and insects. It tolerates higher soil pH and needs little nitrogen fertilizer, while still holding great color and texture. It is also available at Allen, Sterling & Lothrop (207-781-4142, www.allensterlingandlothrop.com).

With questions or for more information about low-impact lawn care alternatives, contact Gary Fish at gary.fish@maine.gov, or check out **YardScaping for a Healthy Maine: www.yardscaping.org** (look for the free Maine YardScaping lawn sign!).

YardScaping hopes to inspire Maine people to create and maintain healthy landscapes through ecologically based practices that minimize reliance on water, fertilizer, and pesticides. The Maine YardScaping Partnership was formed out of the rising concern among statewide organizations and agencies over the possible pollution caused by yard care chemicals washing away into water bodies, as well as the risks of pesticide exposure to people, pets, and wildlife.