

Bahiagrass Turf

Bahiagrass (*Paspalum notatum*) is a warm climate perennial grass, native to the Caribbean islands and the coasts of South America. Traditionally planted in coastal areas around the world as a very coarse, low maintenance turf such as highway roadsides and airport runway medians. The extensive root system provides excellent erosion control and wear tolerance. This grass species is moderately aggressive, spreading slowly through large stolons and short underground rhizomes to form a coarse textured, open lawn or grass surface. Bahiagrass is most suitable for sandy soils, especially with a slightly acidic pH. Tall, fast growing seed stalks require frequent mowing to keep the lawn appearance attractive. Bahiagrass is considered a weed when growing in other finer textured turfgrass species, such as bermudagrass or tall fescue and should not be mixed with other grasses. Tolerant of many diseases and pests, bahiagrass may show damage from dollar spot and mole crickets. Well adapted to infertile soils and with fair to good shade tolerance, bahiagrass is often used on parks, cemeteries, home lawns and playgrounds with older trees, or where a high maintenance, higher quality turf species cannot be grown. Bahiagrass has good drought tolerance, but does better with steady irrigation or evenly distributed rainfall over the growing season. Fertilizer needs are minimal for this light green turf, once established and the grass should be maintained between 2 and 3 inches in height for best turf results. In frost-free areas, healthy bahiagrass turf may stay green all winter. Perennial ryegrass, at light seeding rates, can be overseeded in the fall on dormant bahiagrass to provide green winter color.

Tifton-9: This improved variety of Pensacola Bahiagrass has excellent seedling vigor to ensure fast establishment. Generally considered a forage variety, Tifton-9 is a vigorous, upright grass with light green, longer, fine textured leaves that can be used as a low maintenance, economy turfgrass. Tifton-9 Bahiagrass will stay green later into fall and green up earlier in the spring. Certified seed available.

Argentine: This variety is traditionally used for pastures and lawns in adapted areas. Argentine Bahiagrass has a better green color, more dense growth habit and better disease resistance than other common varieties. Good seed availability.

Paraguay: Used mostly in central and southern Florida, this variety has a medium texture, with shorter, narrower leaves and good turf density. Paraguay Bahiagrass can withstand light frosts and remain green, and is more tolerant of the occasional hard freeze. Limited seed availability.



Pensacola: Medium textured and blue-green in color, Pensacola Bahiagrass will produce an upright, open turf that can maintain good color during winter months in frost-free areas. Pensacola Bahiagrass will respond well to regular fertilizer applications. Generally good seed availability.

The Establishment & Maintenance of Bahiagrass Turf from Seed

Seed: Bahiagrass seed varies greatly in quality, depending on the variety, seed origin and conditions during production and harvest. It is strongly recommended that turfgrass managers purchase only high quality seed for their projects – the lower grade seed is generally used for erosion control and roadside projects or for forage production. Good quality bahiagrass seed is usually scarified during processing in order to improve germination results, however it may still take up to 3-4 months to completely germinate.

Soil Preparation: Check your soil pH and nutrients with a soil test, through your local extension office or turf supply dealer. Bahiagrass prefers a sandy soil with slightly acidic pH (6.0 - 7.5), but is very tolerant of a wide range of soil conditions. For new plantings, cultivate your soil to a depth of 6 inches, incorporating any amendments and fertilizers.

Prepare a medium-fine textured seedbed, that is level and firm. A pre-plant application of adequate phosphorous and potassium should be worked into the seedbed to ensure better results – phosphorous is especially critical. Nitrogen fertilizer should not be applied pre-plant as it will stimulate the growth of any weeds that are present.

Seeding & Irrigation: Bahiagrass seed should be planted in spring or early summer for best results – midsummer plantings can produce very poor results if rainfall is low and there is no irrigation available on the site. For turf projects, plant 8 to 10 pounds of high quality seed per 1,000 square feet and be sure that the seed is covered lightly (up to 1/2 inch deep) with topsoil when finished (forage and erosion control projects will use a lower planting rate). The seedbed should be well firmed and packed after the seeds are planted, to preserve soil moisture and assure the best results. Depending on available rainfall and soil type, the new turf area should be irrigated lightly several times a day for the first 3 to 5 weeks, until a good stand of seedlings is established. After this period, the irrigation should be reduced to deeper soakings, less frequent, but to promote development of a healthy root system. Established bahiagrass is fairly droughttolerant and can generally survive on rainfall, as long as moisture levels are adequate and spread out over the growing season. Bahiagrass is well known to be a slow germinating, slow establishing crop, whether used for turf, erosion control or forage. Be patient – once well established, this crop will perform quite well.

Fertilization: The newer bahiagrass varieties will exhibit better color and turf quality under low fertility conditions than the older varieties. All bahia varieties are tolerant of low fertility soils, but will perform better with adequate nutrients, after the stand is well established. Bahiagrass turf maintained on an average sandy soil, will grow well with 2 to 4 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per growing season. Be sure to check your soil test results, and discuss with your local fertilizer supplier.

Mowing Maintenance: Mowing should begin as soon as most of the bahiagrass seedlings reach a 3 inch height. Early mowing can be critical in reducing weed competition in new bahiagrass stands. Maintain established bahiagrass turf between 2 to 2 1/2 inches for the best results. Older, faster growing varieties may require mowing as often as 2 times per week, depending on soil moisture and fertility levels. A rotary mower works best, and should be kept very sharp to cleanly mow this tough, coarse textured grass.

Pest & Weed Control: Bahiagrass seedlings are weak and do not compete well with weeds and weedy grasses, therefore weed control is very important until good bahia sod becomes established. During establishment, the bahiagrass seedlings germinate and grow very slowly so weeds often become a problem – regular mowing of the turf area will generally keep the weeds under control until the bahia seedlings are better established. Check with your local extension office or turf chemical dealer for products safely labeled for use



on bahiagrass turf. New bahiagrass seedlings are sensitive to many herbicides, and can be damaged by residual chemicals in the soil, as well as by new herbicide applications. Mole crickets are occasionally a problem and several diseases such as dollar spot and brown patch may occur during hot, wet months. Once established, a well maintained bahia turf will have a dense canopy that resists weed invasion.

Winter Overseeding: If bahiagrass in your area goes dormant in winter due to frost or low temperature, you may choose to overseed with perennial ryegrass for temporary green winter color. This turf species is generally used in lower maintenance turf areas, so only a light winter overseeding is recommended. Do not excessively damage the bahiagrass sod during the overseeding preparations or it will recover very slowly the following spring and summer. Only lightly de-thatch the dormant turf and apply a lower rate of cool season seed, than you would on bermudagrass. Perennial Ryegrass products such as Champion or Magnum will do well for winter overseeding. Due to the thick density of mature bahia sod, be sure to rake the ryegrass seeds in well for good soil contact.