

Fine Fescue Low Maintenance Grass



The use of lower maintenance turfgrasses is increasing in the United States. The reasons for this trend are numerous. Restrictions on water use, environmental concerns, regulations on pesticide usage and shrinking maintenance budgets for non-showcase turfgrass areas are a few reasons to consider using low maintenance grasses.

In the past, low intensity grasses did not provide the quality needed for use in areas that also contained intensively managed high quality turf. However, with the advent of improved low maintenance varieties of fine fescues it is now much easier to integrate low maintenance grasses into high quality turfgrass areas. SR 3100, SR 3150 and Scaldis II hard fescue; SR 5210 and SR 5250 strong creeping red fescue; Dawson, Shoreline slender creeping red fescue and SR 3210 blue fescue are excellent examples of grasses that can be used in low maintenance planting that are part of showcase turfgrass areas. Areas such as golf course roughs, slopes and bunker edges as well as parks, roadsides and reclamation areas are just some examples of where the improved fine fescues can be used to provide low maintenance quality turf. The presence of an endophytic fungus has been shown to improve the performance of many turf species, and fine fescues are no exception. High levels of endophyte will provide natural resistance to many damaging turfgrass insects such as chinch bug, billbugs, sod webworms and armyworms. In addition, grasses that contain viable endophytes appear to have greater vigor, quicker recovery from summer stress and greater persistence during environmental stress periods. The persistence of endophytic grasses will reduce weed invasion by maintaining a dense ground cover. SR 3100, SR 3150 and Scaldis II hard fescue; SR 5210 and SR 5250 strong creeping red fescue; Dawson, Shoreline slender creeping red fescue and SR 3210 blue fescue were developed with high endophyte levels to take advantage of these characteristics.

Improved Turf Quality

The improved fine fescues are excellent choices for low maintenance turf plantings, not just in shade. Fine fescues typically persist in turf sites that are droughty, acid and infertile. The term fine fescue refers to at least five types of fescue which have fine, tough, bristly leaves. These include: Chewings strong creeping red, sheep or blue and hard fescues; each with specific strengths, weaknesses and preferred uses. Chewings, sheep, blue and hard fescues all have a bunch-type growth habit while strong and slender creeping reds are rhizomatous. They all have good drought tolerance but the improved hard and sheep fescues have excellent heat and drought tolerance due to their leaf texture, deep rooting capabilities and high root to shoot ratio. These factors provide the hard fescues with one of the highest water use efficiency rates of any cool-season turfgrass species. All of the fine fescues have very good cold tolerance. Typically found in, and recommended for shade, the newer fine fescues such as SR 3100, SR 3150 and Scaldis II hard fescue; SR 5210 and SR 5250 strong creeping red fescue; Dawson, Shoreline slender creeping red fescue and SR 3210 blue fescue have recently been improved by breeding in stronger resistance to powdery mildew. These breeding programs have also improved resistance to a number of other diseases including Net Blotch, Red Thread and Anthracnose. The improved fine fescues are recommended for mixtures with other turfgrass species such as Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass as well as with each other, with the best mixture dependent on the site.

Maintenance

From a maintenance standpoint the fine fescues are low in cultural intensity. The low growth rate will significantly reduce the amount of mowing needed throughout the growing season. Nitrogen application rates range from 0.1 to 0.3 lb./1000sq. ft./month for hard fescues. In addition to their low growth rates, all of the fine fescues except strong creeping red fescue will tolerate mowing heights of one half inch. Wear tolerance is good for all the improved fine fescues. Only new hard fescues with improved Summer Patch resistance are good for compacted sites. Seeding rates of 4 to 5 lbs./1000 sq. ft. are recommended.