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What About Tall Fescues for New York State?

The very aggressive marketing of tall fescue by seed companies appears to be having an impact in New York State. More than ever I am seeing tall fescue and mixes containing tall fescue being written into construction specifications. Touted as a wear tolerant, low maintenance grass, tall fescue is being used in many situations where Kentucky bluegrass or perennial ryegrass have been used in the past. What about tall fescue? Is it all that it is cracked up to be? More important, is it a superior replacement to other grasses typically used in New York? ■

Tall fescue use seems to be making its biggest gains on sports fields and school grounds. It is a grass that is undeniably one of the toughest, most wear tolerant grasses. It is a relatively easy grass to establish, provided that soil temperatures are warm. Thus, like ryegrass, it is well suited for the frequent overseeding requirements of multi-use fields. The newer cultivars are very attractive, often looking like Kentucky bluegrass when seeded at heavy rates.

Low Maintenance

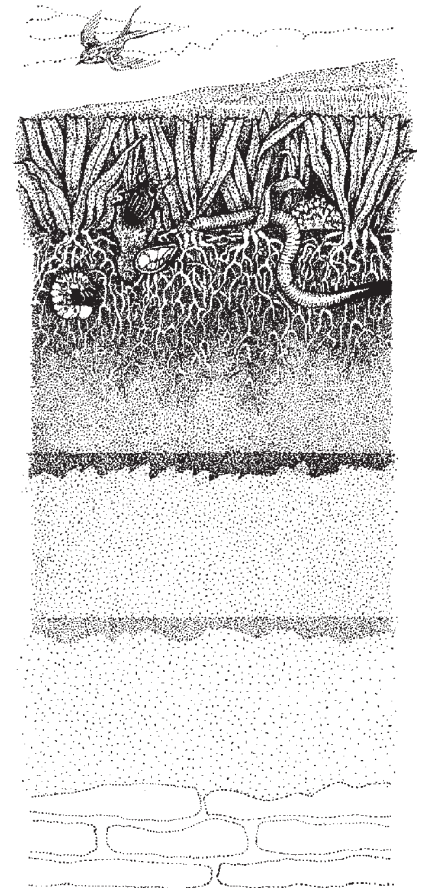
Tall fescue is an extremely drought tolerant grass and is able to maintain its color and vigor without irrigation much further into a drought period than other cool season grasses. Tall fescue is able to avoid drought because it has a very deep, extensive root system. Therefore, it captures moisture at depths in the soil profile that other grasses can not.

While tall fescue has very good drought avoiding qualities, it cannot be called a water conserving

grass. Studies have consistently shown that the water use rates of tall fescue exceed other cool season grasses.

Tall fescue will do well with little fertilizer. One or two fertilizer applications annually at 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet are all that is normally needed to have a quality stand of turf. Also, with the exception of an occasional outbreak of brown patch, tall fescue has few pest problems.

The largest input required in maintaining turfgrass is mowing. Tall fescue has a very fast vertical growth rate, requiring more frequent mowing. The newer dwarf types may have slower growth rates than other tall fescue cultivars, but they still grow much faster than other cool season grasses. A demonstration recently conducted in Rochester by cooperative extension agent Jim Willmott found that the clippings removed off a dwarf tall fescue plot were more than triple that of adjacent fine fescue plots. This very rapid growth rate will not



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Tall Fescues

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Tall fescues are undeniably one of the toughest, most wear tolerant grasses.

only influence the frequency of mowing, but also the cost of clipping disposal where clippings are removed.

Overseeding Programs

Continuous overseeding is necessary to maintain thick stands of tall fescue on athletic fields, as is the case with other bunch type grasses. Maintaining turf density in tall fescue stands appears to be especially important. Failure to do so will cause the grass to develop clumps of very coarse texture.

Tall fescue is not very compatible with other cool season grasses. Mixtures of 90% tall fescue and 10% bluegrass can be used successfully if the

especially well suited for overseeding, and much better than tall fescue for this purpose. Perennial ryegrass germinates very quickly, even in cool soils, has good wear tolerance, excellent close mowing tolerance, and is very attractive.

In summary, Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and the fine leaf fescues have for years performed well in New York State in most turfgrass situations. While there will be some applications for tall fescue in New York, it is certainly not the wonder grass some have touted it to be. Be careful in deciding where tall fescue fits into your establishment plans or maintenance program.

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Table 1. Comparison of Maintenance Requirements of Cool Season Grasses.

Grass Species	Irrigation Needs	Fertility Needs	Mowing Frequency	Pest Problems	Adaptation to New York
Tall fescue	low	low	high	few	fair
K. Bluegrass	med	low-med	med	some	excellent
Per. Ryegrass	med	med	high	some	very good
Fine fescue	low	low	low	some	excellent

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lawn area is maintained to favor the tall fescue; that is, low fertility and no irrigation. Overseeding tall fescue into existing fields of other grasses can have undesirable results. I have seen several school grounds that were sold on a tall fescue overseeding program that for some reason was discontinued. Evidence of the programs' failure exists as unsightly and difficult-to-control grassy weed problems across the entire properties.

A Superior Alternative?

Is tall fescue a superior alternative to Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, or fine fescues? On Long Island and the extreme southeast corner of New York State, tall fescues are a viable option for non-irrigated turf areas. There may be other applications for tall fescue in upstate New York, but landscape architects, contractors, and turfgrass managers should be very selective of the application.

Table 1 lists some of the characteristics of cool season grasses commonly used in New York State. For general lawn areas, Kentucky bluegrass, or mixtures of bluegrass with fine leaf fescues will provide a quality lawn, and will do well in low maintenance situations. Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass are the preferred species for athletic fields. Perennial ryegrass is

Rest

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The new specifications are more flexible than the 1989 version in areas I thought there could, and should be more flexibility. The changes should allow perfectly acceptable materials to be used; materials that would not have met the overly restrictive specifications of the past. At the same time, the specifications' limits are very clearly defined. In other words, there will be no doubt if a material does or does not meet specification.

After I made my recommendations for changes to the USGA, the proposed specs went through the most rigorous and comprehensive review ever. Scientists, architects, and others from around the world were invited to review the specs. Where appropriate, their suggestions were incorporated into the specifications giving them a strong foundation as well as international credibility.

A complete review of the literature was written that provides the scientific rationale for the pending specifications. These will be published by the USGA Green Section early in 1993.

My year "off" was a great experience for me in that it gave me the time to do a thorough job on a sorely needed project. It was an opportunity to meet many new people in a segment of the industry that most of us don't normally have contact with. I had a chance to travel extensively, and to visit some very fine golf courses. It was a pleasure to work with the USGA Green Section staff; a very dedicated and experienced group of individuals. Finally, it was very gratifying to feel that my efforts have contributed to the turfgrass industry in some way, and not solely within the borders of New York State. It was a great year indeed!

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