

# Planting Grass This Fall? Select Lawn Grasses That Use Less Water and Can Tolerate Drought

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Whether you are establishing a new lawn or renovating an existing one, your choice of grass species determines how much you will have to water. Traditional grass species for Minnesota include Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, fine fescue, and tall fescue. Want something that handles hot, dry times in the summer? Choose a fescue--fine fescues simply use less water, and tall fescue has a deep root system able to access more moisture.



*Kentucky bluegrass lawn*

**Kentucky bluegrass** is not considered a sustainable lawn choice. Common types of bluegrass are more prone to disease and generally do not perform as well and are susceptible to invasive weeds. Even though improved or elite Kentucky bluegrass varieties have been developed in the last 50 to 60 years, they still need ample water and fertilizer thanks to its shallow roots. Many have limited use in low-maintenance landscapes.

However, Kentucky bluegrass does have a number of desirable characteristics. Its roots are *rhizomatous*, which means the plants spread and connect underground. This allows the grass to quickly establish in an area and repair itself from damage. Kentucky bluegrass forms a relatively dense lawn of good green color that mows cleanly. Kentucky bluegrass adapts to a wide range of environmental conditions but does best in full sun to very light shade and in soils of moderate to high fertility with a *soil pH* of 6 to 8. When mowed at 2 to 3 inches, Kentucky bluegrass is very competitive against invasive weeds.

Older, "common" types of Kentucky bluegrass have the ability to survive extended drought periods by going into *dormancy*. During extended periods of drought and hot weather, some watering may be necessary to prevent permanent injury to the crowns and rhizomes.



*Fine-leaved fescue lawn*

**Fine-leaved fescues** have a fine to very fine texture and a medium to dark green color. They include three similar species commonly used in lawn seed mixes. There are creeping red fescue (*Festuca rubra* subsp. *rubra*), chewings fescue (*Festuca rubra* var. *commutata*) and hard fescue (*Festuca longifolia*). Creeping red fescue does spread by rhizomes but is not nearly as aggressive as Kentucky bluegrass. Chewings fescue and hard fescue are considered *bunch-type grasses*. Fine fescue species and their respective cultivars are well adapted to our northern climate, and can be grown successfully in our area. They are also good to include in a lawn seed mixture when introducing low-maintenance varieties into an existing lawn or establishing a new lower maintenance lawn. Fine fescues are not normally sold or grown as *sod*.



*Kentucky bluegrass and turf-type tall fescue texture comparison*

**Tall fescues** are very tolerant of wear and traffic and are used in athletic fields, home lawns and park areas. With their much deeper rooting; these grasses are very good at surviving the often hot dry conditions of our Midwestern summers. Tall fescue performs better and maintains good lawn density when mowed at heights greater than 2.5 inches. While it's able to get by on lower nutrient requirements, at

least one to two pounds of N applied annually over the course of the season is still considered beneficial for the average home lawn. In the past, tall fescues were generally not recommended for Minnesota's climate. While today's cultivars are definitely hardier, a solid ice cover on top of the grass along curbs, driveways or sidewalks will still cause extensive dieback especially during the late winter and early spring freeze/thaw periods. Since newly planted, tall fescue grass doesn't overwinter well, plant seeds in the spring rather than the fall.



*Perennial ryegrass maintained at a mowing height of 2"-2 ½"*

**Perennial ryegrass** is a medium-textured, wear tolerant, bunch-type grass. The underside of the perennial ryegrass leaf is quite shiny and smooth. This characteristic gives perennial ryegrass an almost shiny, glistening appearance compared to Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescue. It is a medium to high-maintenance grass well adapted to areas receiving lots of foot traffic such as athletic fields or intensively used backyards.

Perennial ryegrass is known for germinating rapidly and is used for quick repair and establishment when a turf cover is needed. However, this also means it can quickly shade and overpower slower germinating grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescue seeded at the same time.

One of the biggest drawbacks of perennial ryegrass in some parts of the northern plains region is its poor cold tolerance. It is considered the least hardy of our cool season lawn grasses and can thin out significantly or be completely killed during cold, open winters.

Learn more at the [University of Minnesota Turfgrass Science Program website](#). To view cultivar trial results, click on Research, then Cultivar Evaluation, then the trial you would like to view.

Read the full article by clicking [here](#).

Table 1. Levels of Home Lawn Care

Lawn Care Level	Amount of Watering	Range of Mowing Heights	# of Fertilizer Applications	Timing of Fertilizer Applications
<p><b>Very Low Maintenance:</b> (see grass types under low maintenance)</p>	none	3+	0	-----
<p><b>Low Maintenance:</b> Suitable grasses are common Kentucky bluegrass varieties &amp; fine-leaved fescues (e.g., creeping red, chewings and hard fescue)</p>	little to none	2 1/2"-3"	1	September
<p><b>Medium Maintenance:</b> Suitable grasses are most Kentucky bluegrasses &amp; fine-leaved fescues</p>	some	2"-3"	2	Mid- to late August early September, mid-October
<p><b>High Maintenance:</b> Suitable grasses are the improved bluegrass varieties &amp; turf-type perennial ryegrasses</p>	regularly	1"-3"	3 or 4	Mid-May to mid-June, mid-August, mid-September, and mid-October