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WHEN GOOD LAWNS GO BAD

Summary: Banish brown with newer, tougher turf

Summer has done its dirty work.

Many once-verdant lawns have been brought to their knees, patchy and brown, dormant if not dead. But rain and cooler weather are near. Those combine to make it prime time for lawn rehab—both reseeding or starting from scratch—between now and mid-October.

But don't grab just any old grass seed.

Today there are tougher grasses that demand less fertilizer, less mowing, less water - less work - than the wimpy water hogs of the past. Hybridizers have bred grasses tailored to specific conditions. So before planting a new lawn or overseeding a tired one, evaluate your situation: Know what you like aesthetically (thin or thick blades); how hard you'll use a lawn (kids and dogs or not); how much time—and desire—you have to maintain it; site conditions - sunny, shady, wet, dry or a combination. Then match seed to your needs. If you do, you can save time and money by stepping off the fertilize/water/mow treadmill. When shopping for grass seed, the key is to study the label.

And realize that even lower-maintenance lawns need periodic care: watering, fertilizing, mowing, dethatching and aerating.

"People who want green lawns that don't grow and never need water," says Tom Cook of Oregon State University Extension Service, "I generally encourage them to buy a condominium." His brochure, "Practical Lawn Establishment and Renovation" (see SOURCE list) includes more than 80 cultivars for the Northwest. Three kinds in particular deserve a look.

Festuca arundinacea

A drought-tolerant turf that holds up to trompings by kids and pets. The species itself grows coarse and rank, but hybridizers took fescue's long roots, which reach 4 feet deep, to create rugged, medium-textured cultivars that remain green one to two weeks longer than most turf under the same conditions. Tall fescue even tolerates some shade, though it thrives in hot, sunny locations. It is best to plant fescue by itself, not mixed with other grass seed.

Agrostis spp.

No matter what turf gets planted, native bent grass dominates most lawns here within 10 years. Cook recommends going with it, but use a variety that's been tamed for lawns. Colonial bent grass cultivars, for example, suit the average homeowner, though the fine blades don't mix with kids who play football on it every day. It gives golf courses a tidy look where it is mown short, just what it likes best. The dense turf grows well even with low fertility and flourishes fall

through spring west of the Cascades, but it goes dormant without summer irrigation until autumn rains return.

Choice cultivars: Bardot, Sefton, SR 7100, Tiger, Tiger II

Poa trivialis

If you have wet, cool shade, you want this variety of bluegrass, which can tolerate up to 80 percent of its life in shade. From rough bluegrass, hybridizers have spun a fine-textured, light green ground cover that likes shade and needs lots of water. Be reasonable, though. No grass handles dense shade, and dry shade stresses almost any ground cover, especially grass. For those sites, you might pass on grass and try pine bark and needles, crushed stone or wood chips instead.

Choice cultivars: Sabre, Laser, Cypress, Sabre II and Colt

Freelance writer Sally Ruth Bourrie: sbourrie@prodigy.net