



DOUGLAS COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

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Grass Seeding

An established stand of grass in this Colorado climate is defined as 2 to 3 plants in a square foot area.

How To Plant.

Grasses must be planted in a firm, weed-free seedbed, primarily because success depends upon good soil-to-seed contact. If you are broadcasting seed, it must be raked into the soil. Native grass seed is planted only 1/4 to 1/2 inches deep. Loose soil dries out quickly at the surface compared to firm soil.

Most grasses should be planted with a grass drill, but broadcasting can also be used. A double disc drill with an agitator is recommended for seeding. If using a grass drill, the amount of seed needed will be cut in half since the method of planting is more efficient.

In most cases, a grass seedling needs no fertilizer during establishment. However, on disturbed sites, such as areas around a new house, water lines, trenching, etc., soil amendments may be required to maintain the vigor of the grasses.

Key #1 – Seeding Date (When to Plant)

Recommended seeding dates for Colorado are November 1 to May 1, when the soil is not frozen. Grasses should be seeded when soil moisture and temperature are optimum for germination. Grasses are designated either “cool” or “warm” season based on their growth cycle. Cool-season grasses can be planted when temperatures are cooler and day lengths are short. Warm-season grasses need warmer temperatures and longer day lengths to grow.

Key #2 Seedbed

A proper seedbed is firm and free of competing vegetation. Correct firmness is when an adult footprint is only slightly visible on the prepared bed prior to the seeding operation. The seedbed can be firmed, if needed, by pulling a commercial or homemade packer or roller. A firm seedbed is essential for proper seeding depth. A loose, fluffy bed will place seeds too deep for proper germination.

Cover Crop Seeding

Seeding native grasses in a suitable cover crop is recommended. A suitable cover crop decreases evaporation to retain soil moisture, and keeps soil temperatures lower because of shading. It protects young grass seedlings from strong winds, collects snow during winter, and minimizes the weed problem. The cover crop should be planted in the spring May 15 through July 15 but preferably before June 15. Grass is seeded directly into the standing stubble in the fall. If you are haying the cover crop, leave 18 inches on sandy soil and 12 inches on loamy or heavier soils. Recommended cover crops are sterile forage sorghum, long-season milo, millet, oats, sudan grass, etc.

What to Expect the First Year

Most growers of native grasses are convinced they have a failure the first year. Most of the time they actually have a good stand. Native grasses grow down, not up, during the establishment year. The top growth normally amounts to a narrow, straight leaf until late summer. These seedlings can be hard to see, even for the experienced grower. Be patient! Do not graze for at least 2 to 3 growing seasons and after the grass is established.

Weed Control

Weeds are the greatest cause of poor grass stands because they challenge the small seedlings in two ways:

- they take away necessary water and nutrients
- they shade and smother the young plants

Weeds need to be controlled, chemically or with tillage, prior to seeding due to the competition. They will take the moisture needed for the grass to germinate. Mowing weeds the first year is important to prevent the seedlings from being choked or smothered. All mowing needs to be done before weeds go to seed.

After the grass plants are established (at the 4 or 5 leaf size) spot spraying with a broadleaf herbicide to control *noxious weeds can be done at this time. When applying chemicals, read the directions or contact the chemical representative.

*A list of Colorado Noxious weeds can be found at <http://www.cwma.org/nxwdid.html>

Grazing Management

All desired grasses decrease in numbers with continuous grazing, overgrazing, or abuse. Undesirable plants will invade immediately.

Each grass plant has its growth and grazing characteristics. Proper management practices should be used to maximize the use of each grass. Most range plants provide quality forage and are eaten by some class of livestock during the year.

Proper grazing use allows the land to be grazed at an intensity that maintains enough cover to protect the soil, while maintaining or improving the quantity and quality of the desired vegetation.

A rule of thumb for proper grazing use is to "take half and leave half" of the available forage during the *growing season. Livestock can graze a plant down to half its weight, which is generally about two-thirds of the mature height, without detrimental effects to the plant. The percentage of leaf volume grazed at 50% (half of the plant) results in a 2 to 4 % root growth stoppage. The percentage of leaf volume grazed at 60% results in a 50% root growth stoppage. It is very important to use proper grazing methods to insure plant vigor. *A growing season is defined as April 1 to October 15.