

Plant a Low Maintenance Lawn



Turf Alternatives Series

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What is a Low Maintenance Lawn?

A low maintenance lawn functions as a typical lawn but is made up of species that require less water and fewer inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, and mowing than Kentucky bluegrass. Most low maintenance lawns are a mix of fine and/or tall fescues, both hardy cool season grasses. The benefits of fescues include:

- **Drought tolerant.** They need less water to stay healthy and green.
- **Less fertilizer.** They prefer 0.5lb /1000 ft², (instead of 3 lb/1000 ft² for Kentucky bluegrass).
- **Slow growing; less mowing.** Mowing is typically done once in mid-summer to remove seed heads and once in late fall for a healthy spring lawn (shorter grass overwinters better).
- **Adaptable.** Many species, such as creeping red fescue, do well both in shade and full sun.
- **Weed-suppressing.** Some fescues are bunch forming while others are creeping. Either way, they interlock to form a dense sod and prevent weeds from establishing, so pesticides aren't needed. Some, such as tall fescue, are even allelopathic, meaning they produce natural herbicides to suppress the growth of other plants. Built in weed control!

Where to use Low Maintenance Lawn?

Areas with moderate foot traffic. Home lawns (especially hard-to-mow areas), golf course roughs, street boulevards, and city parks.

Where to NOT use Low Maintenance Lawn?

Areas with high foot traffic, such as athletic fields, and areas with deep shade. Creeping red fescue has the best shade tolerance, or try sedges or path rush.

What species to look for

Often the fescues used in low maintenance lawns are referred to as “low mow” or “no mow” grasses. Proprietary seed mixes usually include fine fescues like hard fescue, sheep fescue, chewings fescue, and creeping red fescue.

How do I create a Low Maintenance Lawn?

Overseed a traditional lawn with low maintenance species.

STEP 1: Mow your lawn very short—1" or less. Rake or remove grass clippings to expose as much soil as possible.

STEP 2: Aerating the lawn is recommended, but not required. It can be done with a shovel or machine and helps improve seed to soil contact and create good conditions for seed germination and healthy growth.

STEP 3: Spread fescue seed at a rate of 3 lbs / 1000 ft². For best results, apply a very thin layer of compost (40 lbs / 200 ft²) along with or over seed to improve seed to soil contact, and/or a thin layer of straw to limit erosion.

STEP 4: Keep well-watered for 2 weeks until seeds sprout and begin to establish. Then, refrain from watering except in lengthy periods of hot and dry weather, and do not fertilize. The fine fescues will over time out-compete the existing turf.



Build from the bottom up

STEP 1: To start from a blank slate you must remove existing grass. A large area of bare soil is easily eroded by runoff, and provides fertile ground for weeds to easily grow. Herbicides are not recommended because of impacts to water quality. All methods have pros and cons. Below are alternatives to chemical removal:

- Sheet mulching uses cardboard or newspaper to smother grass. A quick google search can tell you all you need to know.
- Sod cutter use is hard work, but non-chemical. You can lose a lot of organic matter though.
- Solarization is a method that covers the area with plastic and using the sun and lack of water to kill grass. This uses a lot of plastic, takes time, plastic degrades and may release toxins and is not practical on a large scale.
- 20% acetic acid or Phydura is an ecologically responsible alternative to glyphosate. It kills all vegetation but leaves roots for stabilization and reseeds easily.

STEP 2: Optional. Aerate the area with a shovel or machine. This helps air, water and nutrients get to where they're needed most.

STEP 3: Reseed with mix of fine fescue at a rate of 6lbs / 1000 ft².

STEP 4: Water daily for 10-15 minutes to maintain moisture for a week, then every other day for a week to promote healthy germination and establishment. Water deeply weekly, as roots establish, then ensure your yard receives at least 1" water a month from rain or irrigation to maintain green.

STEP 5: Pull any weeds as they become apparent. Watch out for broadleaf weeds as well as crab grass.

Maintaining a Low Maintenance Lawn

If you mow, leave the lawn at least 3" tall. Taller lawns shade the ground, prevent too much moisture from evaporating and discourage weeds. When seeding from scratch, there will be weeds, so you will need to weed and re-seed bare spots during establishment. To maintain green through growing season, the lawn should receive 1" of water per month (compared to 1" water per week for Kentucky bluegrass).

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