

# Preparing A New **LAWN**

*Lawns are NOT low maintenance. The initial effort in developing a lawn will affect its long-term quality, and its upkeep and maintenance requirements.*

## SITE PREPARATION

To minimize disease, proper preparation of the soil is critical. Prepare the soil using a mechanical tiller or by digging to about one spade depth.

A soil test will indicate the type of soil and its pH. Most grasses do well in mildly acidic soil with a pH of about 6.5. If the soil is too acidic, add dolomite lime to the top 10–15 cm (4–6 in.) at a rate of 20–40 kg/100 square metres (50–100 lb/1000 square feet) of lawn for each pH point below 7. If the pH is above 8.0 (alkaline soil), add sulphur at a rate of 10 kg/100 square metres (20 lb/1000 square feet).

A soil layer of 2–7 cm (1–3 in.) is sufficient for seeding, but between 10 and 15 cm (4 and 6 in.) is recommended.

If required, improve the soil by adding organic matter and topsoil if the soil is sandy, or organic matter and sand if the soil is compacted. Grass needs drainage, and 30–40% sand in the soil mix is desirable.

Rake to remove stones and create a finished grade. Introduce a small uniform slope, or raise the center area by 2–5 cm (1–2 in.) to allow water to run off in the desired direction(s). If an automatic sprinkler system is planned, it should be installed at this stage. Roll the entire lawn bed with a roller, then water lightly to settle the area.

## SEED OR SOD?

### Advantages of seeding

- Less expensive than sod
- A wide selection of seed is available
- The deep root systems of seeded lawns tend to be more durable.

### Disadvantages of seeding

- Requires more work than sod
- Daily watering is required for up to four weeks
- Seeding should be undertaken only in the prime growing seasons
- Pets, animals and large birds need to be kept off the seed bed.

### Advantages of sod

- Sod can be laid any time except mid-winter
- It can suppress weeds
- It can be laid on slopes without erosion
- It establishes quickly (in 2 to 3 weeks).

### Disadvantages of sod

- More expensive than seed
- Can be rolled up by animals in the first few weeks.



Front cover:  
PHOTO:  
Barry Roberts

### Choice of Seed

Grass blends are used to take advantage of the strengths and properties of each grass. For lawns that must withstand hard wear, look for seed of turf-type perennial rye grasses, tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass. Drought-tolerant grasses include turf-type tall, fine or hard fescues. For wetter areas of BC, including the Lower Mainland, ALWAYS choose a shade-tolerant mixture of fine fescue or bentgrass.

Pre-packaged blends are available at garden centers.

Buy new and good-quality seed. Cheaper mixes, old seed or seed with a high weed content ultimately will cost more.

### Seeding

The optimum seeding time is early fall. Spring seeding is possible, but will be less effective. Spring is the best time for RESEEDING.

Sow at the coverage recommended on the package, but a rule of thumb is 5 kg/400 square metres (2.5 lb/1000 square feet).

Best results are achieved using a drop spreader rather than the rotary type, but scattering by hand can also be effective. Sow in a pattern as shown in Figure 1.

Rake the seed lightly into the surface of the soil, using a bamboo or fan rake, barely brushing the seed into the soil. Roll the entire lawn surface with an EMPTY lawn roller.

Water seeds in with a fine mist. Keep soil evenly moist by lightly watering twice a day until germination. Then, water less frequently for 3 to 5 weeks. DO NOT OVERWATER, and do not use a strong spray. About 2–5 cm (1–2 in.) of water per week (rainfall plus irrigation) will be required until the lawn is well established.

With good seed, approximately 70% germination can be expected. A further seeding is recommended after 3 weeks and possibly again after another 3 weeks.

Hang up some aluminum plates, or CDs, on a string to scare away birds.

Avoid walking on the newly seeded lawn and do not mow until the grass is 7 cm (3 in.) long.

### Laying Sod

Prepare the soil in the same way as for seeding.

Buy good-quality sod. Lay it immediately after delivery, or keep it moist until it can be put in place. Lay the sod in parallel strips, staggering the ends of sod rolls to avoid gaps; do not overlap the edges. Fill any gaps with topsoil; the grass will grow to fill in the spaces.

Roll the sod with a water roller, and water thoroughly twice a day for approximately 10–15 days, depending on weather.

Do not cut the grass until it is approximately 7–10 cm (3–4 in.) high.

## WATERING

Approximately 2.5 cm (1 in.) of water per week will keep a lawn green in most of BC. This should be provided through deep watering once weekly (twice in very dry weather) to penetrate the soil 10–15 cm (4–6 in.), rather than daily sprinkling. Apply water early in the day.

## FERTILIZING

Traditionally, nitrogen-rich fertilizers were used in spring to accelerate growth and, in fall, a greater percentage of phosphorus was used to stimulate winter root growth.

Slow-release fertilizers are now recommended, regardless of time of year. This prevents over-fertilization which can lead to lawn fungus. At least one application in early spring is required, but for optimum results, lighter applications in September, November, February and April may be preferable. Check bag for application rate.

Organic fertilizers are becoming effective and are available in most garden stores. They are preferred for environmental reasons.

When spreading new seed, do NOT apply a herbicide, which will kill young grass along with the weeds.

## MOWING AND MAINTENANCE

Lawn maintenance is covered in detail in a separate Fact Sheet.

To summarize, set the mowing height at 6–7 cm (2.5–3 in.), and aim to remove only one-third of the grass length at each mowing. Leave the clippings on the lawn to provide a “nitrogen fix”. Remove dead leaves from trees and shrubs before winter, and give the lawn a final mow with a mowing height of 3–5 cm (1–2 in.).

## PESTS AND DISEASES

The Master Gardeners Association of BC recommends the use of integrated pest management: a systematic way to manage pests and diseases without the use of insecticides or herbicides. Many municipalities in BC have now placed a ban on a number of products.

Most lawn diseases can be prevented or minimized by maintaining a vigorous, healthy lawn that is mowed to the correct height, regularly aerated and not overwatered. Shade control should be practised to discourage moss growth in shady areas and scorching in areas exposed to strong sunlight.

Regular inspections will give early warning of potential problems, but it must be accepted that a few weeds or insect pests will do little harm to a healthy lawn.

Hand-weeding will normally suffice. If a particular weed is invasive and out of control (such as creeping buttercup), cover with black plastic or two layers of corrugated cardboard for 4 to 6 weeks, after which the weed should have died. Then re-seed as above.

A new turf pest, the European Chafer, a grub with few natural predators, recently started spreading in BC. Severe damage can be caused to lawns in the spring and fall by birds and small mammals pecking and pulling back the turf in search of the grubs. There is no easy control for this pest, and a healthy lawn is the best prevention. Some success has been achieved with biological controls, with nematodes being applied to the lawn during the third or fourth week of July. Professional advice is recommended.

# LOW MAINTENANCE OR ECO LAWNS

There is a considerable interest in low maintenance or 'Eco lawns' with the development of new types of seed, largely of fescue grasses. Limited quantities of seed such as Sheep's Fescue (*Festuca ovina*) are available in garden stores in British Columbia.

**Details of successful planting of this type of lawn are appearing in greater number, the claims being that:**

- it can thrive in sun, part shade and, in some cases, full shade
- it requires less mowing as the grass grows more slowly than a regular grass
- it is drought tolerant and requires significantly less watering because of its deep root system
- it requires less fertilizing, also because of the deep root system
- it is less vulnerable to bugs.

Most of the recommendations given above are valid for developing an eco lawn, but a preparation depth of up to 20–25 cm (8–10 in.) is preferable in view of the deeper root systems for this type of seed. Eco lawns are well worth exploring if development of a new lawn is being contemplated.

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# Master Gardeners Association of British Columbia

The Master Gardeners Association of British Columbia is a volunteer organization providing information about gardening and horticulture to the community and educating people about environmentally responsible gardening practices.

- Through its chapters in Vancouver, Victoria, Summerland, Vancouver Island and Prince George, the MGABC
- runs a series of clinics at garden centers and major garden events
  - presents gardening programmes in schools, hospitals and seniors' homes
  - works with community groups on various "greening" projects.

Most of the 700 Master Gardeners in BC are enthusiastic amateurs; some are experienced professionals — all of us have a passion for gardening. We share this passion with the public and promote the enjoyment of gardening through a variety of volunteer projects and activities.

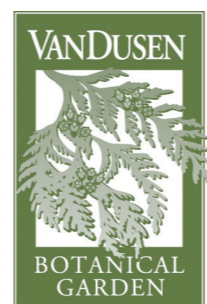
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## Do you have a Gardening Question?

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## A Master Gardener Fact Sheet