

Is tall fescue a good grass for the Capital District? Tall Fescue Plots - First Year Report

Introduction

Is tall fescue a good grass to grow for lawns, sports fields and golf course roughs in the Capital District? Many people think of tall fescue as a pasture grass, or even a weed. Turf type tall fescue varieties have been developed, however, and are slowly making their way into use in New York.

For many years, Cornell Cooperative Extension recommended that tall fescue be used only in southeastern New York, since there were questions about cold hardiness. Because many people have not seen plantings of tall fescue, there are many questions about aesthetics. Has this coarse textured grass been bred into something worthy of a lawn or sports field? When thinking about planting a football field or other large area, it is easier to choose a tried and true bluegrass/ryegrass mix rather than take a gamble on something newer, like tall fescue.

In response to these questions, we established some small plots of tall fescue cultivars at two Capital District locations. At Becker's Farm, in East Greenbush, the plots were planted in a compacted, clay loam soil. In Schenectady's Central Park, adjacent to the greenhouse, the plots were planted in a sandy loam. Plots measure 5 ft. by 5 ft. and are in full sun. Irrigation was provided during the establishment phase only. A high phosphorous starter fertilizer was incorporated into the soil before planting. The plots will receive only 1 lb. of nitrogen fertilizer per year, applied in September. For comparison, we included two other commercially available seed mixtures of perennial ryegrass, Kentucky bluegrass, and fine fescues. Our mixtures are listed below.

Species and Variety Name(s)	Seed Producer
Jaguar 3 tall fescue	Zajac Performance Seeds
Pride tall fescue	International Seeds, Inc.
Houndog 5 tall fescue	International Seeds, Inc.
Falcon II tall fescue	Burlingham Seeds
Marksman tall fescue	Burlingham Seeds
Rebel Jr. tall fescue	Lofts Seeds, Inc.
Tomahawk tall fescue	Pure Seed Testing, Inc.
Kentucky 31 tall fescue	Midwestern States Fescue Association

Family mixture (29.41% Abbey Kentucky bluegrass, 24.78% Boreal creeping red fescue, 24.52% Pennant II perennial ryegrass, 19.48% PS8990 perennial ryegrass)	The Scotts Company
Fall mixture (63.05% creeping red fescue, 25.50% Kentucky bluegrass, 4.75% perennial ryegrass)	Lofts Seed, Inc

Some background information about tall fescue

Tall fescue is gaining wider use across the country in areas where cool-season turfgrasses are grown. Although it will thrive in fertile soil, it also performs well under droughty conditions and in soils with lower fertility and poor structure. Tall fescue is sometimes not winter hardy on poorly drained soils. However, newer cultivars have been bred for hardiness and have much better winter survival characteristics. A true bunch-type grass, tall fescue does not have rhizomes or stolons, and therefore will not repair itself if the planting is damaged. This limitation is offset by other favorable characteristics, however, such as fairly quick germination and growth when a new planting is started from seed, and good wear resistance to foot traffic once established. Tall fescue is often used alone or as the predominant species in a mix, since it does not always combine well visually with other turfgrass species. Although drought tolerant, tall fescue uses a good deal of water, and has an extensive root system.

A tall fescue lawn will require a low to moderate level of maintenance. No more than two pounds of nitrogen fertilizer per one thousand square feet of lawn are required per year. Thatch is not usually a problem with tall fescue, and the chore of de-thatching the lawn will therefore be minimized. Tall fescue also has a low potential for disease, and while fungal pathogens are always a possibility, their threat is minimal. Once established, tall fescue has excellent drought tolerance, enabling the homeowner with a tall fescue lawn to reduce irrigation to a minimum and still keep the lawn alive when natural rainfall ceases. This grass will also survive the ravages of road salt and sea salt better than many other cool season species, making it a consideration for use near roads and coastal areas. Tall fescue should be mowed at a height of 2 to 3 inches.

First Year Observations

Only casual observations have been made on our plots since they were planted in August, 1998. In the future, we may undertake more intensive observations. Therefore, only general impressions are reported here.

'Kentucky 31' tall fescue, a widely used older cultivar, stands out from the other tall fescues in the trial. It has a medium light green color, coarse leaf blades, and a somewhat open growth habit. These characteristics make it an acceptable grass for utility areas, but not desirable for a home lawn or other high viability area. People who may have seen old plantings of tall fescue probably observed 'Kentucky 31,' and therefore may not have a good impression of tall fescue. The other seven tall fescue cultivars exhibit dense growth habits, dark green color, and medium leaf texture. They undoubtedly could make a highly attractive lawn or sports field. No die back during the winter of 1998-99 was noted. While the winter was generally regarded as mild in the Capital District, die back was possible at Becker's Farm, where the soil is somewhat slowly draining. The plots at Becker's have routinely been cut quite high (2.5 to 3 inches) and have filled in to become quite dense. A few broadleaf weeds are present, but no more than would be expected on a one-year old seeded area. The 1999 drought did not severely effect these plots, and when precipitation increased in August, the plots re-greened and produced dense growth. The other seed mixtures ('Family' and 'Fall Mixture') have also performed well. While the improved tall

fescues are still coarser textured than the 'Family' mix, the differences may not be that apparent to the casual observer. Overall, the improved cultivars of tall fescue at Becker's are very impressive after one year of growth.

The Central Park plots, which have been routinely mowed to well below 2 inches in height, have not filled in well, and remain thin. Weed pressure since planting has also been high at this site. These plots will be overseeded or reseeded in the fall of 1999 to increase density. Park staff will be urged to increase mowing height. The differences in the quality of the plots at the two sites emphasize the need to mow tall fescue higher than is the custom for some other turfgrasses.

Visiting the tall fescue plots

There are no signs at the plots, but visitors are welcome. Please observe the operating hours of Becker's Farm and Central Park when visiting. The following diagrams can be used to find the plots and decipher the identities of the grasses.

Tall fescue Plots: Beckers Farms, Columbia Turnpike (Routes 9 & 20), East Greenbush, NY

Grassy field

Pride tall fescue	Jaguar 3 tall fescue	Family mixture	Marksman tall fescue	Rebel Jr. tall fescue
Houndog 5 tall fescue	Fall mixture	Falcon II tall fescue	Kentucky 31 tall fescue	Tomahawk tall fescue

Daylilies

<-- To Columbia Turnpike

Driveway

Greenhouses -->

Tall fescue plots: Central Park (near the greenhouse), Schenectady, NY

Greenhouse

Pride tall fescue	Houndog 5 tall fescue	Jaguar 3 tall fescue	Family mixture	Tomahawk tall fescue
Marksman tall fescue	Kentucky 31 tall fescue	Fall mixture	Rebel Jr. tall fescue	Falcon II tall fescue

<-- Park road

Tennis courts -->

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