SODDING DORMANT GRASS
RISKY, BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE

Dormant sodding of warm season grasses is a common practice even though it is a risky endeavor. Roots in sod originate at the soil surface when the temperature closely mimics the air temperatures. If the air temperature is at or below freezing, roots of newly laid sod may freeze.

Some types of grass (zoysiagrass and centipedegrass) are more sensitive to freezing than others (bermudagrass). However, if warm season grasses like bermudagrass, centipedegrass, St. Augustinegrass, and zoysiagrass, are going to be established while dormant there are management practices that can improve the chances of success.

Prepare for Success

Recommendations for sodding during ideal periods also apply to off-season sodding.

- Soil preparation is critical for success. Take a soil sample to determine lime and fertilizer needs before preparing the soil and planting the sod. Add lime, phosphorus, potassium and sulfur (if needed to lower pH) and till it into the soil before sodding.
- Apply nitrogen to the turf in the spring once soil temperatures at the 4 inch depth are consistently 65°F or higher. The dormant grass's root system is incapable of taking up nitrogen at lower temperatures and the nitrogen may be leached into the environment.
- Loosening the soil and incorporating lime and fertilizer by tilling to a minimum depth of 3 to 4 inches is typically adequate for turfgrass establishment. If possible, tilling deeper is always better. After thorough tilling and mixing, the soil should be leveled, smoothed and moistened. Large rocks, stones, weeds, and other debris should be removed prior to planting. Also prior to laying sod, the soil should be lightly watered but not saturated. Ruts from foot traffic or equipment can occur when soils are excessively wet and are more difficult to repair after the sod is laid.

Plant Quickly

To prevent drying, potential cold injury, and death of roots, sod should be installed within 24 to 48 hours after harvest.

Turfgrass sod does not have a long shelf-life in the best of conditions. If freezing temperatures are predicted while sod is still on the pallet, the exposed roots could freeze and die.

Another reason to get the grass off the pallet as quickly as possible is to take advantage of the soil's radiant heat. Higher soil temperatures may offer some protection from cold injury when compared to temperatures experienced by turfgrass on the pallet.

Sod should be laid tight and rolled to ensure sod-to-soil contact.

Watch the Water

Water management is critical when laying dormant sod. Although the root system of dormant grass is not highly active or developed, water is needed to keep the turf from drying out. Water demands of dormant sod are lower than actively growing grass so less water is needed for dormant sod. Dormant sod will need enough water to keep the upper 1 to 2 inches of soil moist.

During the winter months rainfall may suffice, but 0.75 to 1.0 inch of water may be necessary every two weeks. After sodding, frequently check the soil moisture by gently pulling up sod edges to make sure the soil is moist.

Temperature Matters

The survival of off-season transplanted sod is dependent upon avoiding desiccation or drying. Those lovely winter days, with temperatures in the low 70's, little humidity, sunny skies and gentle breezes that we cherish, are ideal conditions for plant desiccation. In as little as a day, turfgrass that has an undeveloped root system can dry out.

Low temperature injury can be a problem because crowns, stolons and shallow rhizomes of the turf may be frozen and killed. Newly sodded turfgrass lacks deep rhizomes and the large root system necessary to recover from these winter stresses. The result is grass that dies while dormant and is unnoticed until after spring transition.

Desiccation and cold injury may be reduced by topdressing the dormant sod. Furthermore, topdressing can smooth shallow depressions and fill seams, conserve moisture, and potentially retain heat near the soil surface.

Take a Close Look

Successful transplanting is dependent on a healthy sod. It is difficult to determine whether the sod is dormant or overseeded. Examine the sod closely when buying to insure the sod is not dead. To check sod, place one sod piece in a warm location and keep it moist. It should begin to green up within a few days to a week. If it does not the sod may be dead instead of merely dormant.

Resist Overseeding

Overseeding sod with ryegrass may reduce turfgrass vigor and quality. While overseeded turfgrass may look appealing during the winter months, during the spring the ryegrasses can out-compete the warm-season grass for space, water, nutrients and light. The result can be a poor spring transition, delayed green-up of warm-season species, and potentially turfgrass death. The worst case scenario is when a poor transitioning grass, like centipedegrass, is overseeded with ryegrass and sodded during dormancy. This is a situation when spring survival is dependent on good root zone preparation and proper water management.

Control the Weeds

Winter annual weeds are common for dormant sodded grasses and there is a need to apply preemergence herbicides for control of summer annual grass species, like crabgrass. Always read and follow the label recommendations before applying any pesticide to newly planted grass.

In summary, successful sod transplanting depends on proper soil preparation, good soil-to-sod contact, avoiding low temperature injury, and most importantly, proper water management to prevent drying.

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