

# Establishing A Lawn In Southeast Alaska

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With a little planning and lots of elbow grease you can have a Southeast Alaska lawn that everyone will enjoy. A good lawn incidentally, can add considerable value to your home.

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## SOILS

The better the quality of topsoil, the better the lawn. A lawn with six inches of topsoil is ideal. Topsoil should have 30 to 40 per cent sand, 30 to 40 per cent silt, and no more than 20 per cent clay. It should be free of debris and any rocks of more than 1 to 2 inches in diameter. Debris left during soil preparation can create depressions which lead to future problems. The scarcity of quality topsoil and its cost may make it prohibitive; but don't let this discourage you. Many good lawns are planted on sandy or rocky soils.

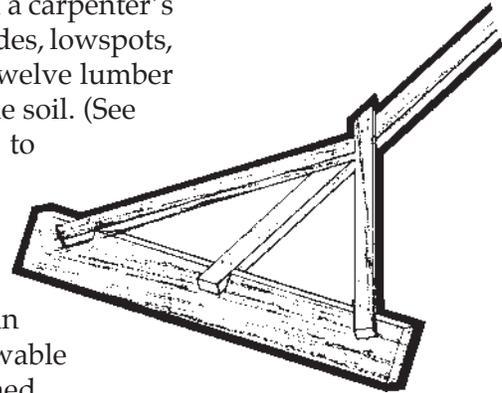
When ordering topsoil make sure it is free of rocks and is in fact topsoil. To determine how much topsoil is needed, decide how deep you want the topsoil to be. Use the following formula to determine the amount:

$$\left( \begin{array}{l} \text{Topsoil needed} \\ \text{in cubic yards} \end{array} \right) = \left( \begin{array}{l} \text{Square feet of lawn to be covered} \times \\ \text{depth of topsoil to be added in inches} \end{array} \right) \div 324$$

In most cases, topsoil should be 4 to 6 inches deep. This will provide the drainage needed for a healthy lawn. If your soil is sandy, mix in 2 to 3 inches of topsoil, peat moss or other organic material to help hold nutrients and water. Sandy soil dries quickly; it must have something added to hold the water. Local peat can be added but should be used at no more than 20 per cent of the mixture. Peat has a low pH and does not hold water as well as does peat moss. Add additional lime if you use peat or peat moss. Silt also can be hauled in and mixed with sand on an equal basis to form a good lawn base.

The lawn should slope away from the house at least 1 or 2 per cent. That will be a fall of 6 to 12 inches in 50 lineal feet. A simple way to determine slope is to use a 10-foot length of two-by-four lumber and a carpenter's level. You can also purchase a string level to determine grades, lowspots, and high spots in your lawn. A 4-foot length of two-by-twelve lumber with a 45 degree handle can smooth the lawn and firm the soil. (See illustration) A lawn rake also works. Smooth all grades to avoid water collecting in low spots. Keep the surface grade one inch below sidewalks and roadways. The type and amount of slope depends on your planned use of the lawn. A gentle slope results in a more usable area and facilitates mowing. A slope should not be dropped more than 3 to 4 feet in 50 lineal feet. A steep slope may not be mowable and is susceptible to erosion until grass is firmly established.

## SLOPES



As you work the soil, get rid of all wood, rocks, and other unwanted materials. Work in the lime and fertilizer required to grow a healthy lawn. It is important to work the lime in to the top 4 inches of soil with a tiller. Lime does not move or leach within the soil to any great degree; therefore, if it is not thoroughly mixed in at first, it will be difficult to add the necessary amounts later on. A soil test through the Cooperative Extension Service will provide you with recommended fertilizer and lime needs. If you do not have the results of a soil test, use the following approximations: Work into the soil: 100 lbs of lime and 15 lbs of 8-32-16 fertilizer per 1,000 square feet. Over time you will need to add additional lime as the soil pH decreases, and additional fertilizer to maintain adequate plant nutrition. Periodic soil testing will alert you to fertilizer and lime requirements.

## THE SEEDBED

Once you have worked in the fertilizer and lime, the seedbed needs to be firmed and leveled. This can be accomplished with the two-by-twelve drag, the two-by-four, and the carpenters level. The soil should be raked in several directions with a stiff garden rake. All rocks larger than a marble, as well as any wood or other debris should be removed. A 30-gallon barrel partially filled with water can be rolled to firm the soil. You may be able to rent a roller. A good seed bed should depress less than 1/4-inch when walked on. A light raking just before seeding will help level the surface and kill weed seedlings. Raking also makes furrows that the seeds can fall into.

## WHEN TO SEED

June is the best time for seeding. Soil temperatures are warm enough at this time of year to get fast germination. The lawn should be well established by fall. Seeding after August 15 can result in a lawn unable to withstand the rigors of winter.

If for some reason you have to seed prior to June 1 or after August 15, cover the seedbed with clear plastic sheets. This will increase the soil temperature and hasten germination. Once you can see that the grass has germinated or is  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch high, remove the plastic.

## GRASS SEED

Bluegrass and red fescue are two of the best grasses for Southeast Alaska. A combination of the two grasses will provide the best chance for a successful planting. Bluegrasses do well in sunny areas while red fescues do well in shade.

Nugget bluegrass, developed from native Alaska bluegrasses, is hardy. Merion, Fylking and Sydsport are also adapted bluegrass varieties. Arctared and Boreal are good varieties of creeping red fescue. Highlight is one of the better Chewings red fescues. Mixing your own seed is difficult, so buy mixtures that contain some recommended varieties. Recently, stores have been carrying both Nugget and Arctared varieties. Mixtures cost more, but are well worth the expense.

Perennial and annual ryegrasses have a place in establishing a fast growing lawn. In cold areas, however, they may not prove to be winter-hardy. Ryegrasses do not have as fine a blade as do the bluegrasses or fescues; but if a rapidly established green lawn is important, the ryegrasses are useful.

The use of clover is discouraged. If you want to use it, add no more than 5 per cent to the seed mixture. Clover in Southeast Alaska tends to germinate much faster than the grass seeds, thus creating unwanted competition. Other disadvantages are: (1) the tendency to winter kill which causes spotty lawns; (2) it leaves stains on children's clothes; and (3) it can completely dominate a lawn if applied too heavily. Clover does have the advantage of adding nitrogen to the lawn. Considering the small amount of fertilizer the typical homeowner uses, this advantage is slight.

## SEEDING

Bluegrass and fescue should each be seeded at a rate of 3 to 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Clover, if added at all, should be seeded at a few ounces per 1,000 square feet. Perennial ryegrass should be seeded at 4 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet if used alone. For a fast green-up you may want to add 10-15% annual ryegrass to your seed mix. The total quantity of seed should be divided into two equal portions and mixed with about 50 per cent fine sand to help get even distribution. Broadcast half of the seed over the area in one direction, with a centrifugal spreader-seeder or by hand. Sow the remainder at right angles to the first.

After applying the seed, rake the soil lightly with a leaf rake or roll it as described earlier. Avoid making piles or windrows with the raked material. You can scatter peatmoss or sawdust over the seed to keep it moist and help prevent the seed from being washed away.

## LAWN MANAGEMENT

The soil surface should be kept moist through germination and until the grass is at least 1 inch tall. Use a light mist to prevent seed movement. Keep children and pets off the new lawn for the entire summer if possible. If you attract an undue number of birds, you can try using fish net strung a few inches off the lawn to discourage them. Do not mow until the grass is at least 2½ inches high. Do not mow closer than 1½ inches.

Weeds may be a problem. (Avoid getting any weed seeds in your lawn mixture if possible.) Mowing or pulling weeds the first year is best because some herbicides can damage young grass seedlings. Use a herbicide the second year if necessary.

Subsequent fertilization with five pounds of a high nitrogen fertilizer (22 to 28 per cent N) per 1,000 square feet in mid to late July will provide additional required nitrogen. A soil test with subsequent recommendations should be used to determine the analysis and amount to use for successful lawn overwintering.

*The use of trade names in this publication does not imply endorsement by the Cooperative Extension Service.*

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