Renovating Your Lawn for Better Health and Appearance of Your Turf

Your turf is home to a lot of activity. Kids and pets romp around on the lawn. Golfers trample over your fairways. Football players run plays up and down your fields. The sun beats down on the grass, and drought can reduce the amount of water available to the root zones. No matter what takes a toll on your turf, improve the health and appearance of thin, worn down grass by applying these useful turf techniques.

Turf Renovation

If less than 50 percent of the turfgrass is damaged and there's still some existing turf to work with, a renovation will improve grass density and appearance. This process allows existing grass to thrive while filling in large areas where thin, damaged spots or bare patches have appeared. As long as the area is not completely bare, this option will revitalize the turf and can enhance the grass variety and color.

Fall is the ideal time for **lawn renovation**, but it can be done in the spring. Springtime renovation revitalizes existing cool-season grasses, like Kentucky bluegrass or tall fescue,

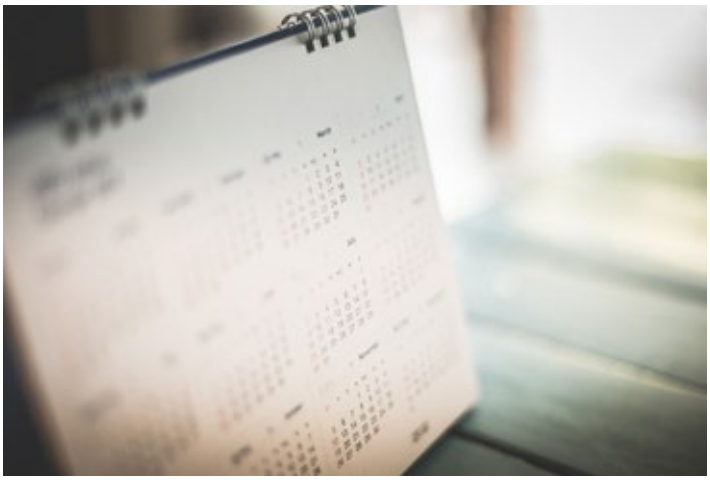
as bare spots left over from winter are filled in. However, competition from annual summer weeds and stress can make a spring renovation more challenging.

Overseed For the Winter

Maintaining a healthy turf during the winter means overseeding with a quality winter seed that provides consistent results. Higher quality seed shows near-zero percentages of non-seed material, which may include crop seed, inert matter, weed seed or noxious weeds.

A three-seed blend is ideal for consistent germination, providing other strands if one type of seed doesn't take.

While the colder weather plays the key role in deciding when to overseed, the **type of seed** is typically dependent on cost.



If you can estimate the amount of seed you'll need early enough, it's possible to purchase quality seed at a reduced price. By calculating the right amount ahead of time and placing a bulk order, it's possible to save on the price per bag.

Inspecting the irrigation system prior to overseeding will guarantee healthy germination. A system that provides uniform coverage with rotors that are in good working order will keep the landscape from looking uneven as the seed takes root.

Preparation is Key

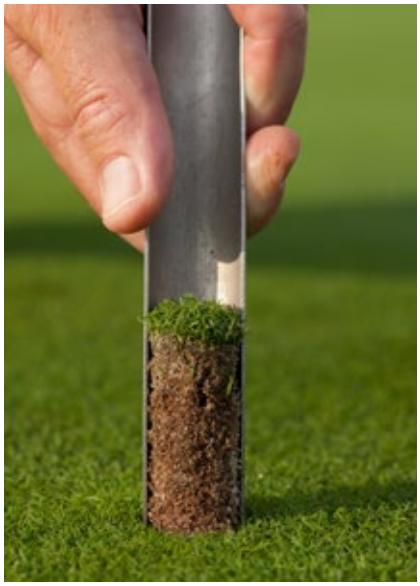
Because of the costs and time commitment associated with renovation and overseeding, **prep work** is key and may include figuring out the right time to overseed, soil testing, aerating, mowing or scalping, improving sunlight to the area through foliage maintenance, applying soil amendments and correcting any issues that may come up.

Timing is crucial to successful seed germination. Planting too early or too late will lengthen the time it takes seeds to germinate or may prevent them from germinating entirely. Exact timing varies based on several factors including grass species, geography and overall site conditions.

In cool-season markets where **renovation** is the predominant practice, seeds germinate best when the average air temperature drops below 85°. Typical cut-off dates for cool-season lawn renovations across the transition zone

are mid-October. These temperatures are good baselines, but make sure you research your specific part of the country before starting. Cut-off dates will vary by region in accordance with the first local frost dates.

When **overseeding** in the fall, a good rule of thumb is to wait until overnight temperatures consistently drop below 65°, and the existing bermudagrass growth slows and begins losing color.



In the spring, overseeding will be more effective when it takes place early enough that seedlings have time to mature before the summer heat arrives.

Healthy plants start in the soil, so having healthy soil contributes to your success. Soil tests tell you what's in the soil and also what needs to be. Soil type, pH level and nutrients in the soil each play an important part in plant health and growth. **Soil testing** removes the guesswork for applications of fertilizer, lime and other soil additives.

Soil that's too acidic or alkaline can impact nutrient solubility and the uptake of nutrients, causing the plant to get too many or too few nutrients. A pH range of about six to seven typically promotes the best availability of plant nutrients.

A soil sampler or soil probe helps gather the samples. Once you have your soil sample, a lab can test it to provide the results and recommendations for amending the soil. Ask your local supplier if they offer soil testing services through regionally-based testing laboratories. Review the results and apply their guidelines to address nutritional deficiencies to amend your soil for the healthiest turf.

When it's time to plant, apply a **high phosphorus starter fertilizer**. Phosphorus is a vital component in seed germination and ample amounts of it are critical to germination. (For a common source like 18–24–12, apply 1 lb. of phosphorus or 4 lbs. of this fertilizer formulation, during planting.)

For the best results, aim for good **seed-to-soil contact**. Aeration and verti-cutting are two strategies to achieve optimum seed-to-soil contact. If your soil is compacted, aeration provides the seeds with plenty of space to grow and guarantees the vital seed-to-soil contact necessary for successful overseeding and renovation.

For low thatch producing grasses like tall fescue, you can bypass the aeration and try **verti-cutting** (vertical mowing) the lawn prior to seeding. Verti-cutting helps to remove thatch and dead leaves and also creates a furrow in the soil for the new seed to settle.

When overseeding and renovating, existing turf can block the new seedlings from getting the proper sun they need to germinate. **Lowering the mowing height** increases the amount of light that can reach the soil floor where seeds are ready to germinate.

For **renovations**, lower the mowing height (but not below 3 inches). For **fall overseeding**, set the mower blades as low as possible, as scalping the dormant bermudagrass is not a concern. Once you've mowed, **rake** the soil with a metal thatch rake to remove clippings, thatch and debris.

Aerating, mowing and verti-cutting allow seed a better opportunity to succeed with the greatest seed-to-soil contact. If possible, increase the amount of sunlight that the seeds receive by **trimming** back trees and shrubs around the area to be seeded.

Once you've prepared the foundation, you're ready to apply **soil amendments** to get on the fast track to healthy turf. Soil amendments like AquaSmart PRO and Holganix improve the soil's physical characteristics including its ability to hold water and retain nutrients.

Selecting the Right Seed

Once you've completed the prep work, **select the right seed** for your regional climate. Look for a seed variety and species that's compatible with the existing grass but will also work with your new goals, whether that is improving the color, improving playability or just filling in thin spots.

The **seed analysis label** on the bag can provide a wealth of information about the type of seed and what to expect as the seed germinates.

Every bag of seed is legally required to feature a seed tag and must contain the following:

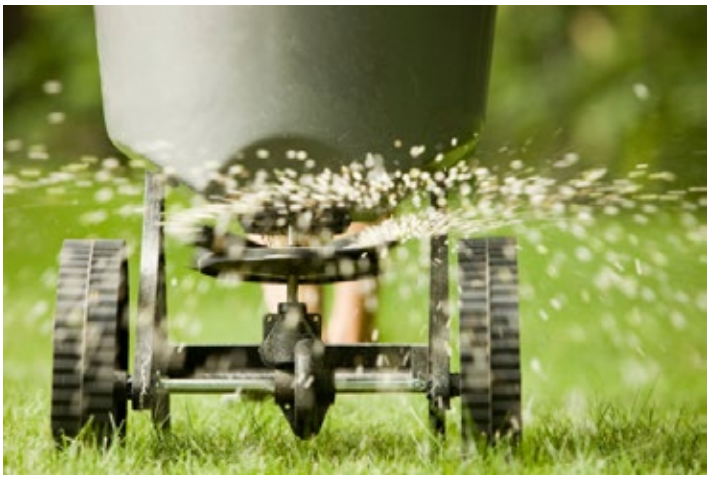
- Varieties and kinds of seed in the bag
- Pure Seed: the percentage by weight of each variety
- Germination Rate: germination percentage by seed variety for the different seed blends contained in the bag

- Other Crop Seed: other seeds that comprise 5 percent or less of the bag
- Inert Matter: non-seed materials including mulch or fertilizer
- Weed Seed: percentage of weed seed contained in the product
- Noxious Weed: number of noxious weed seeds contained per pound (regulated and may be restricted by state)
- Lot Number: production lot identification number
- Test Date: germination test date
- Sell By Date: sell by date, varies by state

The National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) evaluates all the new and premiere cultivars for three to five years across several different U.S. geographies. Selecting a seed variety that is NTEP certified ensures it contains the newest and genetically premiere varieties, which have been proven to grow in the toughest conditions.

Steps for a Successful Overseeding/Renovation

After you prep your turf area and select your seed, spreading the seed is the next step. **Apply seed** at the recommended rates by using a drop spreader or a broadcast/rotary spreader; if you're seeding a smaller area, try a handheld spreader or simply use your hand if needed.



Recommended Renovation Seeding Rates for Tall Fescue

Commercial Sites/Lawns: 5–8 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.

Recommended Overseeding Rates for Perennial Ryegrass

Commercial Sites/Lawns: 8–15 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.

Golf Course:
- Fairways: 10–20 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.
- Tees: 15–25 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.

Athletic Fields: 10–20 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.

Recommended Overseeding Rates for Kentucky Bluegrass

Commercial Sites/Lawns: 2-4 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.

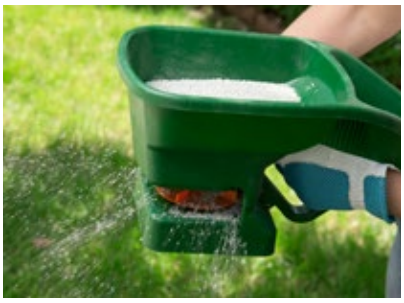
Golf Course: 3-5 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.

Athletic Fields: 3-5 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.

Next, apply the **starter fertilizer** to provide your seedlings with the essential nutrients for healthy growth. Those three primary nutrients in fertilizer, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, are critical to the effective growth of your turf. Fertilizing ensures your grass has a great start with top growth, root growth and all-around color and health.

Be sure to check with your local extension office to learn about any application requirements if you're unsure of phosphorus fertilizer restrictions in your area.

Lastly, it's possible to **topdress** your lawn with organic matter, adding it to the soil to provide protection and additional moisture support for new seed establishment. You don't need much topdressing to accomplish this: just 1/8-inch can provide adequate coverage. An application of a product like Profile's Covergrow mulch pellet provides the protection and moisture management seeds need during establishment.



Then keep a **consistent moisture level** for seven to 10 days after seeding by providing many light waterings several times a day. For example, water three times a day for 10 minutes each time. If the soil dries out too much, the seeds could germinate and die immediately. After a few weeks, increase the lengths of waterings to encourage deeper root growth. Just like regular turf maintenance, sunny, dry areas will need more water during seeding than those areas that are in the shade.

Once you see adequate coverage and growth in the area, return to a regular watering schedule. Return to a regular **mowing and maintenance schedule** once the new grass has grown to a height of 1 ½ inches.

Congratulations! Now the newly renovated or overseeded lawn is ready for the upcoming season. If there are any questions, contact your local Ewing branch for details including information specific to turf and products in your region.