

Growing Turf in Heavy Shade is Difficult at Best

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Growing turfgrass under shade trees is challenging at best. Sometimes it's just plain futile!

While there are varieties that grow well in shade (creeping fescues) they still need some sunlight in order to thrive.

Kentucky bluegrass, turf type tall fescue and perennial ryegrass grow best in full sun and take the heat of the day for the most part.

Turf type tall fescues are more tolerable to hot dry weather. They won't go dormant as quickly as bluegrass and ryegrass.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these species and if you are planning on installing a new lawn, I would suggest that you research each of them and determine which is best suited for your lawn.

Let's get back to the issue of growing in the shade.

The idea for this column came to me the other day while I was walking my grandson in a Beavercreek neighborhood.

I came across the perfect example of what can be done in heavy shade in place of trying to grow grass.

The homeowner had a row of very large Norway spruce trees that had been limbed (lower limbs removed) up to about 12' from the ground.

They created a really nice flower bed with about three species of perennials that tolerate heavy shade in the open area under the trees. They entire bed was mulched.

Many gardeners try growing grass seed in this area only to have it fail time after time. The competition for sunlight and water under these trees is too much for turfgrass but not for many of our great shade-loving perennials.

Perennials that do well in this situation (shade and competing for water) include Hosta, Lamium, Ajuga, coral bells, maidenhair and Japanese painted ferns, Liriope, Solomon's seal, Pulmonaria, native ginger, sweet woodruff, and snow on the mountain.

You will have to water more in the beginning in order to get them established and perhaps again if we go through a really dry spell in the summer.

In addition, you may want to fertilize in the early years of establishment to encourage growth; after established, once per season is sufficient.

Be careful planting under trees, you don't want to damage a significant portion of the root system. In addition, you don't want to bring in a bunch of topsoil and cover the roots as this prevents oxygen from getting to the roots.

Planting has to be done by hand with a hand trowel or small shovel so you disturb as few roots as possible. It's ok to bring in a little organic matter to add to the planting holes and it's ok to mulch (no more than 2").

If you really insist on trying to grow turf, prune and thin the trees to allow some sun to penetrate and reach the turf.

Some trees are more difficult to grow turf under than others because of the dense canopy and shallow roots.



A nice mix of perennials for shade including hosta, fern, bleeding heart and brunnera.