
Cool and Warm Season Grasses

Cool-season grasses resume actively growing in April and continue that growth while cool temperatures and rains prevail. Cool season grasses do not go dormant in the winter months. Rather, they go into a suspended state of growth and form complex sugars which act as antifreeze. Common cool season grasses include brome grass, orchard grass, and western wheatgrass in pastures. Cool season lawn grasses include Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue's of several types, creeping red fescue and Chewings fescue used in shade mixes and rye grasses which are annual cool season grasses in our area. Cool season grasses go dormant during hot and dryer summer months if they are not watered. If they are watered, they will slow their growth rate considerably to cope with the heat. Cool season grasses then begin growth again in cool, fall months if moisture is available.

Kentucky bluegrass has an 18 inch deep root system. In warmer weather it will be dormant when it does not rain for two and one-half weeks. Tall fescue will stay out of dormancy for three to four weeks because of its deeper root system. When choosing the best management plan for your lawn, it is best to water on a continually steady basis or not water at all. Treating the lawn like a queen with regular water and fertilizer, then going on vacation for two weeks can actually kill your lawn while the neighbor who just mows at three inches all year with no water or fertilizer looks great after the September rains.

Cool season pastures retain forage quality better than warm season grasses but they can be hurt and thinned when over grazed in their dormant season. It is best to have cool and warm season areas of the pasture fenced separately so the forage can be utilized in its season of growth.

Warm-season grasses break winter dormancy and begin their growth in May and grow actively until mid September. Warm season grasses dry up and go dormant in the winter months. They thrive in the summer months with high temps and reduced rainfall. Warm season grasses are very efficient users of water and nutrients. They have an extensive root system that keeps them green and growing in periods of drought.

Warm-season prairie grasses focus most of their energy on establishing a root system the seeding year. They emerge as thin, needle-like shoots and produce very little top growth at first. By the end of summer, they will have produced a small clump of grass and possibly a small seed head. It is not until the second and third years that they produce large amounts of top growth.

Inexperienced growers many times become frustrated and feel they have failed the first year. However, it is likely they actually have a good stand. Check the stand in the fall for small clumps with a red or yellow cast. Patience must be a part of the native seed sower's arsenal!

Warm season pasture grasses include switchgrass, sideoats grama, little bluestem, big bluestem, blue grama, and indiagrass. They are very adaptable to our prairie and will thrive unless abused by poor grazing practices.

Warm season lawn grasses include buffalograss and zoysiagrass. They can be very good turf choices, but management practices need to be adapted for them. The landowner needs to enjoy a brown lawn for seven months of the year.

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