WSU EXTENSION
Spokane County

C065

ESTABLISHING A NEW LAWN

Establishing a new lawn can be a very frustrating experience if you have never done it before. It is a process that needs a clear understanding of the process so that you make the right decisions. Knowing soil conditions, water availability, and method of installation must be considered.

In addition, lawn may not be the best alternative in dry eastern Washington. Jurisdictions such as the city of Spokane encourage the replacement of lawns with drought tolerant or native plant landscaping, so consider turf alternatives when planning.

There are three methods of establishing lawns in the Inland Northwest: seeding, sodding, and hydroseeding.

SEEDING

Advantages	Concerns
• More grass species and varieties are available. • It is less expensive than hydroseeding or sodding. • Stronger initial root system development. • It is easier to select a more drought tolerant variety such as specialized mixes that will reduce water usage while still maintaining green color.	• Initial establishment takes longer. It could take up to a full season to achieve a mature and durable lawn. • Time of seeding is limited mainly to late summer and early fall or mid spring after soil temperatures reach 50ºF. In Eastern Washington, soil moisture and climate conditions are more favorable in the spring. • It is necessary to supply consistent moisture to young seedlings.

SODDING

Advantages	Concerns
• Rapid establishment of a lawn. • Good for slopes or areas prone to erosion. • Relatively weed free. • Can be installed any time during the growing season.	• Expensive to install. • Reduced selection of grass species installed. • Labor intensive

Got Questions? Give us a call at (509) 477-2181 Email: MGardener@SpokaneCounty.org
Website: https://extension.wsu.edu/spokane/mg/resources/
Revised 2026

HYDROSEEDING

Advantages	Concerns
• Less labor intensive than hand seeding or sod. • Covers large areas quickly, • An effective method for applying seed on hills prone to erosion and windy sites where seed can be blown away. It also works well on flat protected areas. • The seed is mixed with water and the mulch holds the moisture, so hydroseeded lawns come up quickly. • Some companies will custom mix your seed selection.	• Initial establishment takes longer. • Time of seeding is limited mainly to late summer and early fall or mid spring after soil temperatures reach 50ºF. • Still necessary to supply consistent moisture to young seedlings, but less often than hand seeding. • **Typically not DIY.**

SOIL PREPARATION

Whether seeding, hydroseeding or sodding, proper preparation of the soil before planting will simplify maintenance and ensure a healthier turf in the future.

If building a new home, ask to have the existing topsoil pushed aside. This can later be spread evenly back over the surface once the rough grading around the house is done. Trees, shrubs and lawns never develop to their full potential in poor grade subsoil. If saving existing soil is not possible, some effort should be put into amending poor quality soil. It is always a good idea to get the soil tested before you start.

The best type of soil for growing turf is sandy loam (mostly sand with some silt and clay). Native Inland Northwest soils vary greatly. There are regional differences as well as variations within one property. Because we have low rainfall and few native deciduous trees to add humus to the soil, the organic matter is low. Generally, the pH falls between 6.8 and 7.2. It is possible to grow a good lawn within this pH range.

ESTABLISHING A LAWN BY SEEDING

Seed Selection

If seeding by hand, select a waterwise seed mix. Certified, deep-rooted options such as tall fescue, or other specialized Turfgrass Water Conservation Alliance blends will reduce the need to water as often. This is not an option with hydroseeding and sod installation as they use a pre-selected blend.

Prepare seedbed

Rototill or spade the site to be seeded and remove rock and debris from the ground surface. Go over the site to the depth of 6 to 8 inches, breaking up the soil into smaller pieces so that it can be graded. Do not pulverize the soil until it looks like powder. This destroys the soil structure and

leaves the soil susceptible to compaction and poor water infiltration. Do not work the seed bed when the soil is wet as clods will form.

Add soil amendments

Adding organic matter to clay soils before seeding will improve drainage and aeration. The same organic amendments added to sandy soil will help hold water and nutrients in the soil. Apply a 2–4 inch layer of organic matter such as peat moss, compost, bagged steer manure, or any well-decayed compost from a nursery or soil yard. Till these materials into the top 4-6 inches of soil. If purchasing organic matter from a nursery, be sure to ask if it is certified weed free; many are not.

Using a hand rake, level the high and low spots. To provide drainage, slope the surface away from the house, allowing at least a 2 inch drop every 100 feet. Apply top soil as needed. Grade the edges flush with sidewalks and driveways. The soil will settle slightly once it is irrigated.

> **Important note:** After rototilling, buried weed seeds will be brought to the surface and will germinate. Water as you would for a new lawn for three to four weeks. When newly emerged weeds are growing vigorously; apply a non-selective herbicide to kill weeds. An alternative to pesticide application is to hoe the area and then rake up the weeds

Add starter fertilizer

After seven to ten days using a fertilizer spreader, make a uniform application at label rates for new lawns and work it into the top four to six inches of soil.

Perform the finish grading

Rake the area to the finish grade before seeding. Use a water roller one-quarter filled with water to lightly firm the soil. Rollers can be rented at most hardware or rental companies. The soil should be firm but not packed. This will result in smoother ground, and better looking turf.

Apply seed

Divide the amount of seed to be sown into two. Using a small handheld fertilizer/seeder, calibrate the seeder to deliver half the amount of seed in one pass over the area. Spread the second half of seed at right angles to the first seeding.

Rake or drag to cover seed lightly

Rake to cover seed with 1/8 to 1/4 inch of soil. Roll lightly to make contact between seed and soil.

Mulch

A light covering of peat moss, fine compost, or purchased mulching material will reduce moisture loss from wind and heat. When mulch is added, roll again lightly at right angles to the first rolling.

Water

Newly seeded lawns require special irrigation. A newly seeded lawn requires daily watering and may need as many as four light watering a day if conditions are dry and windy. Keep the soil bed moist (but not saturated) to a depth of 1-2 inches until germination occurs. Not all seeds will germinate at the same time; germination requires patience. Continue to water two to four times a day. As seedlings reach 2 inches, gradually reduce the watering frequency and water more deeply. It may take 4-6 weeks for a new lawn to establish. After the new lawn has been mowed two or three times, begin deep and infrequent watering.

Mowing

Mow the new lawn just as soon as there is enough grass to cut. This is approximately three weeks after planting. Mow at the height appropriate to your turf grass. Refer to mowing heights chart in Work Saving Tips for Lawns. Until the lawn is well established, let the soil surface dry out for a day or two before mowing. This allows the ground to firm up and will prevent ruts in the lawn.

Controlling weeds

Do not use herbicides on your new lawn unless there is a serious weed problem. Frequent mowing and proper starter fertilizer may be the only weed management needed.

ESTABLISHING A LAWN BY HYDROSEEDING

Be sure that proper soil preparation is part of the contract with the hydroseeding company. If it isn't, follow soil preparation instructions in this handout.

ESTABLISHING A LAWN BY SODDING

Sod is commercially grown turf and is traditionally laid by professional landscapers. It usually comes in 3-foot sections, 18 inches wide, with less than ½ inch of soil attached. Choose high quality sod that is actively growing. Sod should not remain on the pallet for more than a few hours after delivery. The presence of mildew and yellowing blades indicate that sod may have been stacked too long.

Be sure that proper soil preparation is part of the contract with the sod laying company. If it isn't, or if you are installing the sod yourself, follow soil preparation instructions in this handout.

Start with a straight edge such as a driveway or sidewalk. Unroll sod pieces tightly against each other but do not overlap. Stagger end seams so they are offset. Using a sharp knife, cut sod pieces to fit curves or small areas. After the sod has been installed, roll it to ensure good contact with the soil.

The first irrigation requires about one inch of water to achieve complete wetting of the sod and at least one inch of soil. After watering, lift edges of sod at several locations to be sure water has penetrated the sod and soil below.

Continue watering one or two times a day to prevent sod from wilting and keep the soil moist. As sod becomes established, gradually reduce the frequency of watering changing to deeper waterings. Do not saturate the sod and soil to the point of standing water. New roots could begin to rot under these conditions. After sod has been mown two or three times, begin to water deeply and infrequently depending on the weather and soil conditions.

After 14 days, perform a 'tug test' by gently tugging the sod in a few areas to make sure it has firmly rooted into the soil. If it has resistance, it is rooted and can be treated as an established lawn.

Additional resources:

Establishing a Lawn in Eastern Washington – EB1153
Home Lawns – WSU EB0482E
Weed Control in Lawns – WSU EB0607
Soil Testing – Spokane Master Gardeners C222