

# MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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**HORTICULTURE EDUCATION**  
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**Improve an Existing Lawn by Renovating It**  
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When would a lawn benefit from the renovation process? A lawn would benefit from renovating when more than 50% of the lawn contains weeds; soil is excessively compacted; wanting to decrease tough to control weeds such as Bermudagrass; or the turf is damaged by heavy traffic or drought.

The practice of renovating a lawn involves replanting without tilling the soil and possibly without destroying the existing grass. In some situations, only a few patches need restoring. The best time to renovate a cool-season lawn is mid-August through September.

During the renovation process, manage visible weeds first. In the lawn area, apply a non-selective herbicide containing glyphosate. Check the active ingredient listed on the label to make sure the only active ingredient listed is glyphosate, so that the number of days to wait after application to plant grass seed is before the end of September. Remember that glyphosate kills or injures plants that it touches. It works best when weeds are actively growing. Use the product according to label directions.

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Depending on the type of weeds needed to control, the herbicide may need to be applied again before planting seed. For example, to control Bermudagrass, 2 to 3 applications at 2 to 3 weeks apart with glyphosate are needed. Remember, the lawn will have to be reestablished in the herbicide-treated area. If you have questions about using an herbicide, please ask before using it. After the final herbicide spraying, wait for the number of days listed on the label before planting seed.

Next, test the soil, before seeding the lawn, to determine if lime, phosphate, and potash are needed. Testing for nitrogen is not included because science shows nitrogen is always required by growing plants.

Nitrogen should be applied soon after seed germination. Applying before seeding in the renovation process encourages weed growth. Apply about 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. Farm-type fertilizers, like urea, need to be applied when the lawn is dry and the weather is cool to prevent burning the grass leaves. Otherwise, the fertilizer needs to be watered in right after application. Specialty organic turf fertilizers do not need to be watered in but may cost more.

After collecting a soil sample for testing from the area where renovation will occur, mow the lawn as close as possible. Then, prepare the seedbed. Seed will not germinate and grow properly if it is just broadcasted on the soil surface. The seed needs good contact with the soil. Using a slit seeder would work too as long the seed is sown in two directions.

If the thatch layer, a layer of tightly intermingled living and dead shoots, stems, and

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roots, is a half-inch or thicker, remove the thatch with a dethatching machine that has knives or blades. Machines with spring tines or mower attachment tines for dethatching are not effective for turf renovation. Remove the thatch from the area before seeding the lawn. If the thatch is not over a half-inch thick, the dethatching machine would still be handy over large areas to remove dead grass and disturb the soil for good seed contact.

After preparing the soil, evenly broadcast, a turf-type tall fescue. This is the best cool season grass type for our area. Rake the seeds into the seed bed if you have a small area to renovate or cross the area again with the dethatching machine. Apply 6 pounds per 1000 square feet of a turf-type tall fescue variety on the lawn killed with herbicide.

Keep the newly-seeded area watered. In hot, windy weather, two or three light irrigations per day may be needed until germination is complete. Then water deeply and less frequently to encourage a deep root system. If the thatch is not completely removed, even more frequent watering is needed because the thatch tends to wick water from the seed and almost eliminates germination.

To thicken a thin stand of tall fescue turfgrass with no weed problems, prepare the seed bed with a coring machine that removes 2- to 3-inch long cores of soil from the top and redeposits them on the surface. After making several coring machine passes over the area, seed the lawn. Then drag a section of chain link fence or rake over the area to obtain good seed to soil contact.

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As new seedlings develop, continue mowing at the height intended for the entire area. It is important to mow the renovated lawn as frequently as needed to keep the old existing grass from shading the new seedlings.

Very small bare spots in lawns can be renovated without destroying existing grass. Prepare the seedbed by broadcasting the seed on the soil surface, then cover the seed with about one-quarter inch of topsoil or sand. Also, use a shovel to remove clumps of grass, dead turf, and the soil to a depth of one-half inch and repair the area with sod.

Do not sow the grass seed too thick because it can encourage an environment more favorable for disease development. For more information, see <https://publications.ca.uky.edu/files/agr51.pdf> or contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or at [annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu](mailto:annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu).

## **Annette's Tips:**

The active ingredients in pesticides have changed over the years. Try cultural practices first to manage a pest. If a pesticide is needed, whether synthetically or organically derived, read the label before purchasing. Find the active ingredients which usually appear on the front of the label. Look for personal protective wear needed during pesticide application. The label is the law and must be followed.

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