



## Grass in the Shade

There is really no such thing as a shade loving grass. As a result, everyone trying to maintain good quality grass in shady areas is fighting an uphill battle. Most grass can be improved in shade if you understand the problems grass faces.

There are two problems grass faces in shade. The first is the lack of quantity and quality of sunlight. Remember plants create sugars from sunlight via photosynthesis. If you take away or reduce the amount of sunlight a plant receives it will effect how much food it can produce for itself. If the grass is under trees or an overhang, there is simply less light striking it. If the light is reflected or filtered, the quality of light is diminished. Grass plants respond by producing long spindly leaves. These leaves are not as hardy as leaves grown in direct sunlight, and are more easily damaged by leaf diseases. Less sunlight for the leaves also means a weaker root system that is not as able to recuperate from wear. This is doubly bad when dogs are confined in a small area under a tree. The grass soon disappears due to increased wear and decreased ability to grow.

The second problem for shade grasses is reduced air movement. At night, dew settles on the grass. If the dew stays on the grass into mid-day, this extends the length of time the leaf blades are wet. Foliar diseases need "free water" like dew to spread. Long periods of wet leaves are perfect for disease development. To minimize disease development by shortening the amount of time the leaves are wet, you should not water in the late afternoon or evening.

There are some things you can do to improve grasses' performance in shade:

1. Select grass species that do better in shade. Some grass species we normally would reject in full sun will survive better in shade. As a general rule, **Fescues** both Tall Fescue and Fine Fescue have the greatest amount of shade tolerance of any cool season grasses. Kentucky bluegrass is not a first choice in shade, but it can be a component in shady mix of grass seed. The best advice is to go to one of our depots or your local garden center and purchase their best shady mix of grass seed. Follow their advice on establishing your lawn and avoid seed mixes that have annual ryegrass. Early spring is the preferred time to seed in shady mixes.
2. Do what you can to improve airflow so the dew dries quickly. Trim some lower branches, or consider reducing the size and amount of less desirable trees and shrubs. Look at your landscape with a critical eye. Consider replacing old, damaged, and overgrown trees with new smaller ones.
3. Don't over water the grass in shade. If the shady area is watered as a sunny zone, the shady area is getting way to much water.
4. Take a moderate approach to fertilization. Don't over fertilize grass in shade or neglect it altogether. At most, consider reducing the amount of fertilizer by 50-75% and only use slow release fertilizers. If you do fertilize your shaded areas, apply fertilizer only in late fall preferably around the time when the leaves begin to drop from your trees.
5. Minimize wear traffic. Find another place for the dog if you want grass in the shade.

Sometimes, grass in the shade will last a few years and then die, requiring reseeding. That may be the best you can do. Don't underestimate the beauty of a well-mulched flowerbed underneath a beautiful tree.