

Rough bluegrass

Rough bluegrass is best known for its ability to survive in cool, wet, shady areas but it often invades full sun areas. It often is used in areas that are too shady for Kentucky bluegrass and are too wet for fine fescue. Rough bluegrass does not handle traffic well but the stolons allow this species to quickly repair damaged areas. Rough bluegrass is susceptible to drought and heat and may turn brown under stressful conditions.

Rough bluegrass requires moderate maintenance. Growth is most rapid during spring, early summer, and fall. Soil needs to be kept moist, especially during warmer temperatures. Rough bluegrass tolerates low mowing but heights of 1 to 2 inches are recommended for home lawns. The nitrogen fertility requirement ranges from 1 to 1.5 pounds per 1000 square feet in the spring followed by 2 to 3 pounds per 1000 square feet during the fall.

Annual ryegrass

Annual ryegrass often is used to stabilize slopes because it germinates quickly and has a rapid growth rate. However, as its name implies, annual ryegrass is an annual plant and will live for only one growing season. It is a bunch grass (lacking any stolons or rhizomes) and is slow to repair damaged areas. When mowed, the leaves of annual ryegrass appear shredded. It has poor tolerance of drought, shade, and cold temperatures.

Annual ryegrass is not recommended for use in home lawns because of its annual life cycle. Because it is inexpensive, however, it often is found in lawn seed mixtures sold at garden centers and co-ops. It is advisable to purchase higher quality seed mixes that do not contain annual ryegrass in order to avoid the need for re-seeding the following growing season. If soil stabilization is important, perennial ryegrass or turf-type tall fescue are good alternatives and will provide a more sustainable lawn.

For more information

If you want to learn more about horticulture through training and volunteer work, ask your local Iowa State University Extension office for information about the ISU Extension Master Gardener program. For more information on plant selection, cultural practices, and environmental quality, contact your local Iowa State University Extension office or visit these Web sites:

ISU Extension publications
www.extension.iastate.edu/store

ISU Horticulture
www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu

Reiman Gardens
www.reimangardens.iastate.edu

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Grasses for Special Uses

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

University Extension

Although Kentucky bluegrass generally is considered the best grass for most Iowa lawns, no one type of grass is perfectly suited for all situations. Several less common, alternative grasses may fit a niche for low maintenance needs and other special sites. For example, buffalograss, zoysiagrass, creeping bentgrass, rough bluegrass, and annual ryegrass may be beneficial in specific situations even though these species generally are not recommended for home lawn use in Iowa.

Buffalograss

Buffalograss is a fine-textured grass that requires very little water, fertilizer, and mowing. It can handle extreme hot and cold temperatures and high pH soils but grows poorly in shade. Buffalograss can tolerate moderate traffic and the spreading stolons allow this species to quickly fill damaged areas. Historically, buffalograss has been an important rangeland grass for grazing animals and often appears in low-maintenance landscape areas along roadsides and city streets. However, with the recent development of turf-type species, buffalograss now is being considered for use as a low maintenance species for some lawn situations.

Buffalograss may be established vegetatively by sodding, stolonizing, or plugging. Past seeding attempts have been hampered by poor germination related to dormancy. However, seeds that are chemically treated to break dormancy now are available and result in higher germination rates. The best time to establish buffalograss in Iowa is around June 1.

Buffalograss is a warm-season species and growth is most rapid during the hot summer months. It begins to lose its green color after the first frost and is slow to green up in the spring.

Buffalograss can provide acceptable turf quality conditions with minimal mowing. It may be mowed once a month or once a year depending on the desired aesthetics. Mowing heights between 2 to 4 inches are recommended. It may be mowed shorter when receiving irrigation but more frequent mowing may be required. Minimal fertilization may be used with no more than 2 pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square foot applied per year.

Zoysiagrass

Zoysiagrass is a medium textured grass that forms a dense, high-quality turf with excellent heat and drought tolerance. It has few insect or disease problems and can tolerate partial shade or full sun. Zoysiagrass is a warm-season species and prefers air temperatures between 80-95° F. Zoysiagrass is very tolerant of cold temperatures and is used occasionally in Iowa although it has a short growing season and will go dormant after the first frost and lose its green color. If year-round color is not a high priority, zoysiagrass can be used as an alternative, low-maintenance grass for home lawns.

Zoysiagrass has traditionally been established by sodding, stolonizing, or plugging. Seeded varieties are now available although establishment is slow and can take at least one full growing season. Once established however, zoysiagrass is difficult to kill and usually requires the application of a non-selective herbicide.

Zoysiagrass requires low to medium maintenance. It has a slow growth rate and handles traffic well when actively growing during the hot summer months. The stolons and rhizomes allow zoysiagrass to self-repair damaged areas. Zoysiagrass is very tolerant of drought; irrigation is only necessary to prevent zoysiagrass from going dormant.

Sharp mower blades are necessary when mowing zoysiagrass because of the stiff leaf blades. Mowing heights between 1 and 2 inches are recommended. The nitrogen fertility requirement ranges from 0.5 to 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet each month the grass is growing. Zoysiagrass requires periodic thinning or dethatching for the best appearance.

Creeping bentgrass

Creeping bentgrass is best known for its tolerance of low mowing heights and is often mowed at 0.125 inches or less. It produces a dense, high-quality surface when maintained properly and is often used in high-maintenance sporting surfaces. The spreading stolons allow creeping bentgrass to quickly repair damaged areas and it can tolerate extremely cold temperatures.

Unfortunately, creeping bentgrass requires large amounts of fertilizer and water, and is at risk for many disease and insect problems. Creeping bentgrass also produces large amounts of thatch and requires frequent aeration.

Creeping bentgrass is not recommended for general home lawn use but can be used in special areas, such as for a golf green, tennis court, or croquet space. Constant management with specialized equipment and large amounts of water, fertilizer, and pesticides are needed to maintain quality creeping bentgrass. Kentucky bluegrass used alone or with perennial ryegrass is much easier to maintain while still providing an aesthetically pleasing, high-quality turf area.

Comparison of alternative grass species					
	Buffalograss	Zoysiagrass	Creeping bentgrass	Rough bluegrass	Annual ryegrass
Areas of best use	Low input, low maintenance	Low input, low maintenance	High input, high maintenance	Shaded areas too wet for fine fescue	Areas in need of quick stabilization
Leaf color	Gray green	Light green	Light green	Dark green	Medium to dark green
Leaf texture	Fine	Fine to medium	Fine	Medium	Medium
Maintenance level	Low	Low	High	Moderate	Moderate
Mowing height	2 to 4 inches	1 to 2 inches	0.125-0.5 inches	1.5-3.0 inches	2 to 3 inches