TO SOD, OR NOT TO SOD, THAT IS THE QUESTION!

SCS-2020-14

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“Can I lay sod during the dormant season?”

“How can I control soil erosion during the dormant season?”

“What will happen if I dormant sod?”

These are all common questions that are asked by homeowners and professionals within the turfgrass industry during the fall/winter time period when warm-season grasses have ceased active growth and entered a period called Winter Dormancy.

Laying Sod in the Winter. Photo Cred: Supersod

Dormant sodding is the act of laying sod when turfgrass is not actively growing. Preventing soil erosion during the winter dormancy period can be tricky. Options for prevention are generally dormant sod or establishing a cool-season grass like annual ryegrass. Dormant sodding is a risk due to the potential for winter desiccation to occur. In general, root activity in warm-season grasses can be retained until approximately 50°F in the soil, which means root growth is still possible in the Fall in many parts of Texas. However, when root growth slows and temperatures drop, turfgrass is more susceptible to freeze damage. Of the primary warm-season grasses grown in Texas, St. Augustinegrass and centipedegrass are often considered the most susceptible to winter injury, followed by bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, and buffalograss. This is cultivar-dependent as genetics play a large role in freeze/cold tolerance. While end-users may have their reasons for laying dormant sod, it is important to be aware of the potential risks and consequences prior to investment of resources. If you are ready to try your hand at dormant sodding, be sure to follow these basic guidelines to give your sod the best chance of surviving.

The first step is to be sure sod is just dormant and not dead.

Fertilizer Use

In general, fertilizer use is not recommended when dormant sodding. The grass is not actively growing and root health is poor. Therefore, any unused fertilizer will likely end up in the environment or the groundwater. Excessive nutrients can promote disease and dormant turfgrass can be especially vulnerable.

Nitrogen is not recommended at this time due to encouraging shoot growth over root growth. Encouraging shoot growth at this time can be detrimental to the grass if soil temperatures are below 60-65 degrees. Dormant roots may be incapable of taking nitrogen up at cooler temperatures which will lead to loss of nitrogen that could result in contamination.

Pesticide Use

Do not apply any herbicide that may interfere with root establishment. Common preemergence herbicides (prodiamine, pendimethalin, dithiopyr, etc.) may inhibit rooting and should not be applied at time of sodding. Herbicides are intended for use in well-established, healthy lawns.

Water Management

The root system of dormant sod may not be very active or developed, depending on temperatures. Therefore, the upper 1-2 inches of soil must be kept moist, but not saturated, to avoid drying out or desiccation. Ideal conditions for desiccation are temperatures in the upper 60s or low 70s, little humidity, sunny skies, and gentle breezes. If left unattended, dormant turfgrass can easily dry out in as little as a day. Irrigation is supplemental to rainfall. Often, Texas receives ample amounts of rain in the winter season, which may lead to oversaturation of dormant sod due to an undeveloped root system.

Should grass die during winter dormancy, due to desiccation or drying out, it potentially will not be noticed until spring green-up. Topdressing dormant sod may help conserve moisture, retain heat, and fill in depressions/seams from initial sod installation.

Quick Tips

1. When laying sod, stagger edges, keep seams tight, and always lay perpendicular to any slope.
2. For the best chance of survival, roll sod at planting and keep roots moist.
3. Do not water grass in freezing temperatures. Water will not be taken up by roots. Be sure to prepare your irrigation system for freezing temperatures to avoid any damage to the system.
4. Follow all labels for any pesticide you are considering applying. Many pesticides have restrictions for newly planted lawns and guidelines must be followed for a successful establishment.

If you need more information, please contact your County Extension Agent or visit aggieturf.tamu.edu!