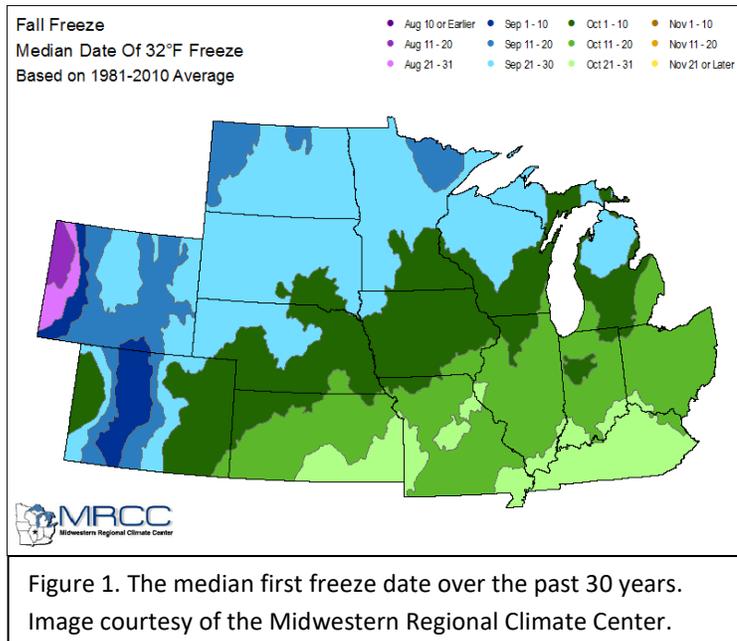


Fall Seeding Tips September 13, 2018

Fall is time to seed cool-season turfgrasses. It's ideal because the air temperature and humidity are lower than summer, the soils are still warm to favor quick germination, and weed pressure is less in the fall than spring. While the fall seeding window will close soon, it is still open for much of Nebraska. The Climate Prediction Center forecasts (www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov) support this assertion with better odds for warmer than average temperatures during the next few months. Here are some quick tips for establishing new turf this fall:

- Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue are the recommended cool-season lawn grasses for Nebraska. Tall fescue is preferred in Eastern Nebraska while Kentucky bluegrass is preferred in Western Nebraska and areas that don't have irrigation and sandy soils. Kentucky bluegrass is slower to germinate (10-21 days), so it's commonly mixed with perennial ryegrass. It serves as a nurse crop during establishment. Tall fescue is traditionally seeded by itself because it also germinates quickly.



- It is advised for new seedlings to be mowed a few times before the first freeze of the season (Fig. 1). That means we are in the tail end of the seeding season on most years. They may be extended with the prediction of a warmer fall in 2018.
- Be sure to use a drop spreader instead of a rotary spreader when seeding. Kentucky bluegrass should be seeded at 1-3 lbs of seed per 1000 ft² and tall fescue between 5-8 lbs. Ensure good seed-to-soil contact with a power-seeder, seed after aeration, or power rake *after* seeding. This won't damage the seed and improves establishment (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Seed-to-soil contact is essential when seeding. A TriWave power seeder (left) was effective, but so was aerating (middle) prior to seeding, and even a power rake (right) *after* it was seeded with a drop spreader. Photos courtesy Matt Sousek.

- Apply a starter fertilizer at seeding and a month after the first mowing or in mid-October (whichever happens first). A starter fertilizer has a high middle number on the bag (i.e. 18-24-12).
- Water to the roots. As the plants grow, cut irrigation from 2-3 times a day to once a day and finally once every other day leading into the first mowing.
- Be carefully when using mulches. While these products can help secure seed and aid in water retention, some can contain weed seed. Ask where the mulch material came from. Most mulch is from barley straw which can result in barley germination. This isn't an issue because it will die with normal mowing, but sometimes other weed seeds can get into that straw and cause problems. New research at UNL found perennial weeds like downy brome and quackgrass (Fig 3).



Figure 3. Straw mulches can aid establishment, but some mulches contained troublesome weeds like quackgrass. These straw mixes were placed on sterilized soil and watered. The weeds began to germinate over the next week. Manufactured mulch materials like Penn Mulch were clean of weeds after several weeks. Only cover 50% of the soil surface with all these mulches during establishment.

- Start mowing once the grass starts to exceed the desired end mowing height. Don't wait for the seedlings to get six inches high before mowing for the first time. Mowing actually helps the seedlings mature and increases leaf density. Cut back irrigation before the first mowing.
- The grass may not look perfect by winter. The goal is to have grass everywhere with few to no areas completely void of seedlings. Some winter annual weeds may be present, but they will die next spring/summer and aren't a big concern for most lawn weeds. Annual bluegrass and rough bluegrass can be an issue in golf and sports turf because they are mowed lower than lawns. In that case, a preemergence herbicide may be warranted. Make sure these PREs are safe on new seeding.
- If it is too late to seed, then consider sodding. Sod can be laid well into fall. It's important to keep it watered immediately after it is laid, but irrigation can very quickly be limited to a few days to weeks after application. If you cannot pull up the corners, then less than daily irrigation is recommended.
- Dormant seeding is also an option but it can be tricky if winter is extreme or if there is risk of soil erosion. The seed is applied in late fall (Nov-Dec) and covered with mulch for protection. This helps prime seed for quick germination in spring. Dormant seeding can also be very effective for seeding buffalograss – a warm-season species that needs to be seeded in the spring.
- In the spring, application of a starter fertilizer can help build density leading into summer. Most of the winter annual weeds like henbit will die as the temperatures warm and mowing begins.

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