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TALL FESCUE AND BUNCH GRASS CONTROL

by W. H. Daniel, Extension Agronomist

Perhaps your lawn, like many others in the Midwest, has a few clumps of unwanted bunch type grasses. They may reduce the uniformity and density in an attractive lawn. To selectively correct this situation, first, be sure you have identified the grass correctly. Then, select the best control measure for your needs.

Identification

Tall fescue is a clumpy, dark-green, coarse-leaved, fast-growing perennial. It is most obvious in early spring and late fall. Also, under drought conditions it remains greener than bluegrass. It usually starts from some seed included in a mixture (more often sold in economy brands). Individual plants that survive become obvious as clumps after 2 to 3 years.

The turf research office at Purdue University gets more samples of tall fescue to identify than any other plant. To identify, check base of clumps for large, reddish-brown stems. The new leaves are rolled in bud, the old leaves are coarse, and each leaf surface looks like miniature corrugated roofing. It tries to seed in early summer and sometimes in the fall by sending up hard-to-mow branched seedheads. Some people may think it is crabgrass, but crabgrass starts from seed each spring and is killed by frost.

It's not all bad

Because of its drought tolerance, rapid and all-season and perennial character, tall fescue is widely used for pasture, erosion control, sod waterways, and pond embankments. In turf it is often used on athletic fields, parking lots, rough roadsides, or other large areas where high mowing is done by rotary mowers.

In about 1953 the price of tall fescue dropped; thus, it was added to many turf mixtures. Since 1960 it is being used only in the cheap, rough seed mixtures. Even in these, bluegrass should always be included so it can fill in around the fescue clumps. Where wanted, two selections of tall fescue, Alta and Kentucky 31, are available.

General seeding recommendations as pounds per acre are:

	Tall fescue	Bluegrass
Airports and roadsides	60-80	10-20
Heavy wear and athletic fields	80-200	10-30

Wherever used, tall fescue should be more than 50 per cent of seed mix; otherwise, avoid small percentages and even a few seeds, as other crop, in seed mixtures.

Dig, kill or ignore it?

There are alternatives in dealing with fescue. Look over these choices and meet your own needs.

A. Just tolerate or enjoy it

If the clumps are numerous and funds are limited—maybe it's a back lawn—maybe it's not all bad—it's green. Each fall consider overseeding thin or worn areas again with tall fescue.

B. Remove it

1. If it is just a few clumps—maybe in the front lawn, or near the picture window—rake or comb each clump towards its center to determine size and reduce digging. Then, use a shovel, sod cutter, etc., to undercut clump. Go 1 to 2 inches deep to get below the crown where thick stems start.

- Shake soil off the loosened clumps when it is partially dry to save soil. Then reseed and smooth area. Keep moist.
- A preferred way is to fill the holes with small pieces of sod; then firm each into place and water. This is best done in early spring, or mid-fall.

2. Consider removing all the infested turf, undercut 1 inch deep, discard and resod area with purchased sod. It may cost less than you think. Check with landscape and sod services.

3. Pour boiling water over each clump to kill plant tissue (must average 150 degrees F inside tissue; 1/2 gallon per square foot poured slowly is suggested. Improve results by covering immediately; remove in a few minutes. Reseed the same day.



4. Roundup™, glyphosate, is a non-selective killer of green vegetation. It can be used in dilute form to spray individual plants and cause a complete but slow kill. Reseeding can be done any time. Suggested procedure: delay for 2-3 days, then spread seed and hack thin; loosen the turf so that seed is in best possible soil contact.

C. Weaken it

To just reduce the problem, try vertical thinning, or close cutting, plus heavy fertilization. Also, let competition weaken the tall fescue clumps.

1. By hand—By simply chopping into each clump the long leaves, seedheads and old stems may be greatly reduced. Use a knife or a shovel—any way to get criss-cross slicing. Repeat monthly until killed—a manicure!

2. By machine—Ask at landscape, rental or major equipment supply sources for motorized vertical mowers. At least a dozen brands are available. The vertical blades or tines on these either cut, pull, or comb out old thatch, long leaves

and creeping grasses. Best time for use is mid-fall, but repeated monthly use on tall fescue clumps will reduce vigor and weaken clumps.

D. Close mowing, plus repeated heavy nitrogen

This treatment stresses bunchgrasses, reduces carbohydrate reserves and favors winter kill. This principle often kills tall fescue in athletic fields. Fertilize in September and October. Combine with C-1 treatment also.

E. Avoid new infestation

When overseeding, avoid cheap or economy seed mixtures which may contain some tall fescue as Kentucky 31 or Alta.

Of these ideas, maybe one can help you to improve and enjoy your lawn. Continued research is needed on tall fescue control. The difficulty is indicated by the limited suggestions above. Clumps of bromegrass, timothy, orchardgrass, redtop—any bunchgrass—offer similar control problems.