**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**Which Lawn Grass Is Best**

It is not easy to grow a great lawn in the San Antonio area. A low water use landscape dominated by mulch, hardscape, perennials, groundcovers, shrubs, and trees is more natural. A well planned low-water-use landscape can have 12 months of color, be lush, or even look manicured (see watersaver landscapes at the Botanical Gardens) with less maintenance and water than a lawn. If you prefer a lawn, however, consider these cultural practices and grass characteristics when making your choice.

Limit the lawn area to a small area. The lawn should not be the default landscape plant. Justify a small piece of turf for a place for the kids and pets to run and play. Pieces of lawn also contribute to or open up a view of other features in the landscape.

Whatever lawn grass you select, it needs six inches of soil to serve as an adequate reservoir for roots and moisture. The money you invest in a high quality landscape soil mix will be paid back in one summer of lawn watering. Water is reasonably priced in San Antonio but even here the payback for adequate soil is very quick.

Buffalo grass is a native grass and the most drought tolerant turf choice, but it is not well adapted for use as a lawn grass. It does not make a tight sod. Grow it on a level piece of good soil and it will be infested by weeds (quite often Bermuda grass) within several years. Buffalo grass does best west of San Antonio in low rainfall areas.

Buffalo grass can work if you are skillful with pre-emergent herbicides and/or you grow it as a groundcover. Mow it six inches tall on a southern or western slope with heavy soil. Grow buffalo grass in full sun.

Bermuda grass is almost as drought tolerant as buffalo grass and it is much easier to manage as a manicured sod. Bermuda grass is the usual grass used for golf course fairways and greens. Mow it frequently at low heights (one and a half inches or less) for a golf course look. Bermuda grass has good traffic tolerance and has the capability to go dormant in droughts. When the rains resume, the grass quickly greens-up without permanent damage. Also grow Bermuda grass in full sun. It can be planted by seed or sod.

Bermuda grass is the easiest grass to manage because of its drought tolerance, traffic tolerance, ability to spread and because herbicides are formulated for use in Bermuda grass.

Bermuda grass seed is “common Bermuda” but there are selections such as Cheyenne and Sahara that are improved varieties selected for superior color and finer blades. They are three to four times more expensive than regular seed.

“Common Bermuda” sod is available but most sod is a hybrid Bermuda grass. The hybrids are generally finer bladed and less aggressive.

Zoysia grass has many of the good characteristics of Bermuda grass plus it has some shade tolerance. Zoysia grass has almost as much traffic tolerance as Bermuda grass and can also go dormant in a drought. In addition to shade tolerance, zoysia makes a tighter sod than Bermuda or buffalo grass so is better at resisting weeds. Most people also think zoysia is more attractive than Bermuda grass. It has less blue in its green and grows more upright. On the negative side, zoysia is the hardest grass variety to mow. It grows slowly and is very tough, so you must use a reel mower or very sharp rotary mower for good results.

There are many zoysia varieties from which to select. My favorite wide bladed zoysias are El Toro and Jamur. Emerald is a fine bladed selection that is very attractive.

St. Augustine grass is the most popular lawn grass because it has the most shade tolerance, grows fast, has an attractive wide blade, and is easy to mow. Unfortunately, St. Augustine is the least well adapted grass to our alkaline soils and requires the most water. St. Augustine is the grass most likely to die from drought, have a disease, show iron chlorosis, and be attacked by insects.

There is one selection of St. Augustine, however, that is much less likely to fall prey to typical St. Augustine problems. Floratam St. Augustine actually out-performed zoysia grass in drought tests in San Antonio. It also is resistant to brown patch fungus and chinch bugs, two common St. Augustine aliments.

Floratam was the St. Augustine grass that stayed green the longest and greened-up the fastest in tests conducted by SAWS, Texas Turfgrass Producers, and Texas A&M.

St. Augustine has the most shade tolerance of the grass varieties, but even St. Augustine does better in full sun if there is adequate soil and water. More than 50 percent shade will result in a poor St. Augustine lawn.

Be careful when using herbicides with St. Augustine grass. Some of the herbicides that kill weeds in Bermuda, buffalo, and zoysia grasses without harming the grass, will kill St. Augustine. This is another good reason to read, understand and follow herbicide labels if you are going to use them.