

More homeowners switching lawns to warm-season grasses

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Hot summers and rising water rates are pushing more Charlotte-area homeowners to lawn grasses that thrive in warm weather.

Warm-season grasses like zoysia or Bermuda are less likely to be fazed by the hot, humid summers that take a toll on the cool-season standby, fescue. Because they stay green, homeowners are less likely to pour water on them all summer.

The tradeoff is a different-looking lawn: brown through the winter, when warm-season grass goes dormant. Fescue grows best in spring and fall.

“It’s definitely because of the water need requirement,” said David Blackley of Renfrow Hardware in Matthews, which has seen an uptick in sales of zoysia and centipede grass seed. “We can’t keep taking water out of the Catawba and purifying and piping it for miles and spraying it on the dirt. That doesn’t make sense.”

Blackley, like other dealers, say the vast majority of his grass-seed sales are still for fescue. But the warm-season grasses, which he said take about three years to become established, are steadily winning converts.

“We have a saying: the first year it sleeps, the second year it creeps and the third year it leaps,” he said.

September is often lawn-repair month for fescue, with homeowners busily aerating, fertilizing, overseeding and filling in bare spots.

“It’s like a treadmill you never get off,” said Gary Sorensen, owner of Seed Planters Supply in Huntersville. “Our seed sales have gone down over the years, and it’s getting harder and harder in my opinion to maintain these fescue lawns.”

Charlotte suffered through its third-hottest July since 1895 this year. Summer high temperatures in the southern Piedmont averaged more than 2 degrees warmer in the decade of the 2000s than in the 1970s, according to state data.

A federal plant-hardiness map, updated in January, placed Mecklenburg County’s typical minimum temperatures one-half growing zone, or 5 degrees, warmer than the 1990 version.

“We’ve had at least one or two neighborhoods in common areas switch from fescue to warm-season grass, and some individual homeowners have switched over,” said Sam Hicks of Charlotte’s Hawthorne Management Co., which manages homeowner associations.

Grady Miller, a N.C. State University turf scientist, traces the growing popularity of warm-season grasses to the 2007-2008 drought that scorched the Carolinas.

Zoysia and similar grasses can make do with less water and recover better than fescue. Warm-weather grasses spread underground with horizontal stems called rhizomes and on the surface with runners called stolons. Fescue grows an individual plant from each seed.

Neither is native to the Piedmont, Miller said, and in Charlotte both are near the extent of their ranges, making the region a transitional zone.

Rising water bills

The amount of water used to irrigate lawn grasses can drive utility bills skyward.

Water is a “huge driver” of sales for warm-season grasses, which now account for about half the sales for Super-Sod in Pineville, which once were heavily fescue, said area manager Preston Cavanaugh.

Warm-season grasses go dormant around the first frost and revive in April. But Cavanaugh said the stigma of brown lawns during cold weather is fading as the look becomes more common.

“You’ve kind of got to pick your poison in this area,” he said. “Fescue is the only grass that will retain some green in the winter. But you have to get it through the summer and it gets pretty beat up.”

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities restricted lawn watering during the 2007-2008 drought. Rates have steadily risen in recent years, using a structure that rewards conservation. In July the utility rolled out new incentives for customers to install water-efficient irrigation systems.

Conservation manager Maeneen Klein’s own 10-year-old zoysia lawn has survived deep drought and a shorter dry spell. She loves its heat tolerance and low water and fertilizer needs.

“I’ve never had an ounce of trouble with it,” she said.

Klein, who’s also a master gardener and a CMU customer service manager, says a lawn’s intended use and location need to be factored into deciding what type of grass to grow. The look homeowners want is usually the deciding factor, she said.

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