

Fall Planting & Question on Native Grasses and Wildflowers for Tennessee

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Autumn is here but gardeners shouldn't hang up their trowels when getting out their leaf rakes. There is still gardening and landscaping that can be done.

Fall is a great time to plant perennials, spring blooming bulbs, as well as winter annuals like ornamental kale and pansies that survive temperatures colder than most other soft-stemmed (herbaceous) plants can tolerate.

Fall is the prime time (turfgrass experts say the only time) to start a lawn or sow seed to repair turf damage, if you grow cool-season (CS) type grass on the Cumberland Plateau. Cool-season lawngrass species stay green all year. The 2021 heavy invasion of fall army worms damaged lawns throughout my neighborhood. So lots of turf rehabilitation has been needed. CS turfgrass is one perennial that benefits from fertilizer at this time of year. Fall is the season maximum root growth occurs in those grass types. Tall fescue or fescue blends and KY bluegrass are CS turfgrasses many homeowners in our area choose rather than warm-season lawn grasses. A primary reason is that warm-season (WS) turf goes dormant and turns straw-colored in cold weather. Bermuda grass, centipedegrass, and zoysia grass are three WS turfgrasses cold tolerant enough to be grown in our part of Tennessee. WS grass seeds need heat to germinate. WS grass plugs or plants or seed are best installed in late spring to summer when soil temps are above 65 degrees Fahrenheit at 3 inches below the surface.

Transplant perennials in autumn. Despite dips in air temperatures above ground, below the surface soil usually stays sufficiently warm for root growth during September through December. An established root system makes fall perennial transplants stronger and better able to resist insect and disease attacks than those set in the ground during springtime when plants have high energy demands for production of roots, shoots, and flowers. Mulching after planting and watering in new transplants helps maintain soil warmth

and moisture.

Horticulture experts tell us woody perennials grown in containers can be set out whenever the ground is not frozen more than an inch below the surface. Despite such encouragement, I'm one of many home gardeners who prefer working outside on milder fall and early winter days when it isn't cold enough to freeze your ears off. If shrubs or trees will need to be added to your landscape during the chilliest months, select and prepare each site by digging the planting hole ahead of time during warm spells.

Don't fertilize when installing shrubs and trees. Wait about one year then follow guidelines for each specific plant on the best time and fertilizer formula to feed. Some fertilizers can be applied when planting flowering bulbs. Choose something like bone meal which has no or little nitrogen. Because bulbs tend to rot in a nitrogen-rich soil, even after the initial planting do not use nitrogen-rich plant food in areas where bulbous plants grow.

Reader Kurt from the Crossville area emailed to ask about *native grass and flower seeds to sow in a boundary area (approximately 1,000 sq. ft.) between his lawn and woods. Suggestions for native plant species that grow in Tennessee were requested and also where to purchase seeds.*

I have been growing wildflowers, flowering shrubs, and ornamental grasses on a strip of land between my woods and the ditch along the road at the south side of my property for over 10 years. This area slopes gently and has good sun most of the day. Flowering plants were selected to bloom all season in succession meeting butterfly and other pollinators' needs for nectar, pollen, shelter, and food for immatures (caterpillars, etc.). Some wildflowers were chosen to attract hummingbirds and others to provide seeds for different bird species. Wildflowers were started from seeds sown directly in springtime. Shrubs and ornamental grasses were purchased in pots then transplanted. Most but not all of the plants were natives.

I learned from experience- Sowing wildflower seed directly at the site by broadcasting them results in flowering plants that are too close together. The riot of colors from a mix of many flower types looks pleasing but grouping individual plant species in drifts is better. I believed wildflower seed packets claiming annual flowers will keep on coming from seed. That hasn't worked. Over the years broadleaved weeds and weedy grasses grew up crowding flowers out.

When researching this request my search: "establishing native grasses – USDA" led me to the Natural Resources Conservation Service document Establishing Native Grasses,

https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcs142p2_017880.pdf.

Check out this advice on page 4: "Only as a last resort should native grasses be seeded broadcasting onto a conventionally prepared seedbed." Another important point is that TN native warm-season grasses do not need nitrogen fertilizer. "Do not apply nitrogen at time of planting because it will only encourage growth of other grasses and broadleaved weeds."

I'm now renovating my meadow area removing weedy grasses and unwanted plants leaving only perennials using some tips from that USDA publication about not fertilizing and will reseed in springtime.

A comprehensive list of native plants for Tennessee can found online at www.tnipc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/landscaping_2016_forweb.pdf.

Good pictures, names of native grasses and their plant needs are available at the blogsite <https://nativeplantherald.prairienursery.com/2016/09/native-grasses-the-tall-and-short-of-it/>.

Keep those email questions coming.