

Establishment, maintenance and alternatives to a lawn

A- Putting in a new lawn: seed or sod?

After building a new home or following a severe infestation of grubs, you have a number of options for putting in a new lawn. Regardless of the one you choose, you should know that, to a great extent, the results will depend on your soil (its texture, organic composition, thickness). And while it may be more expensive to buy a sufficient quantity of high-quality topsoil (minimum 6-inch layer in the case of a new construction), you will come out ahead in the long run, as your annual lawn maintenance costs will be reduced.

1- Sod

Sod is a fast but expensive solution, but one that requires less maintenance than seeding. Furthermore, between early June and mid-August, temperatures do not foster the germination of grass seeds (over 25° C, dry conditions).

Putting in sod is especially practical if you have young children, as you wouldn't want them playing in dirt all summer long. Still, many people are unaware that there are disadvantages to it other than its high cost.

Firstly, since sod consists only of Kentucky blue grass, it is hardly varied. As a result, over time (after approximately 3-4 years), it becomes more vulnerable to pests, unless it has been properly maintained. It is also important to know that sod is grown on agricultural land where it is heavily subjected to pesticides. In fact, when a large quantity of sod is delivered to a neighbourhood, it is not unusual to detect a strong odour of pesticides. Consequently, you must take protective measures when handling the sod (wear long sleeves, pants and gloves). You should also wait a few days before allowing children (or pets) to play on it.

Another important consideration: sod can require a significant amount of water if put in during hot, dry weather. If possible, time its installation with the weather to avoid this scenario. The planet will be a better place for it.

If you still choose the sod option, you can enhance the contents of your lawn over time, by adding diversity every year. Simply adopt good gardening methods and overseed every fall, introducing new grass varieties to the existing one.

2- Conventional seeding

Seeding should be done between **mid-May and early June** and between **mid-August and mid-September** when temperatures foster the germination of the seeds. However, these periods can vary according to weather conditions, and every effort should be made to coordinate seeding with cool, rainy weather.

While there are a number of good seeding methods, there are important points to bear in mind at all times:

- Begin by levelling the ground well.
- Spread a layer of high-quality topsoil rich in organic matter (adding compost is suggested)
- Choose an ecological mix of lawn seeds that includes a percentage of fescue, perennial ryegrass, and Kentucky blue grass (depending on sun conditions and your tastes). Don't hesitate to ask nursery personnel for advice.
- If you opt for a mix that contains white clover, it is recommended that you seed in the spring rather than the fall, to allow it to take well.
- Spread approximately 1.5 to 2.5 kg of seed per 100 m² (if there is too much seed, the competition among the seeds will eventually be too strong, and results may fall short of your expectations).
- Cover the seeds with a thin layer of topsoil (a few millimetres).



Grass and white clover makes a good mix

3- Hydraulic seeding

There is a third, lesser-known option: hydraulic seeding. Offered by some companies, this type of seeding consists in mixing grass seeds with water and projecting it through a pump or hose. This method is more costly than conventional seeding, but is often more effective, especially in the case of sloped surfaces or large areas. It is also faster.

This can be explained in part by the fact that the seeds, which have soaked in water, will germinate more quickly, much to your satisfaction. In addition, the use of mulch (paper fibres, shredded wood, hay or straw) in the mix or applied afterwards, will keep the surface moist longer, and keep birds away from the seeds.

The seed mix can be diverse and personalized to your preferences.

B- Long-term lawn maintenance

First, you have to know that a healthy lawn (diverse and pesticide-free), with longer roots, is better able to withstand the attacks of more pests than a weakened lawn. As a result, prevention becomes your best weapon against severe infestations, regardless of the type of pest. What's more, a healthy lawn is much more capable of withstanding the full range of environmental stresses, such as drought, heat, cold, trampling...

For a lawn to grow well, the temperature must be cool and humid, and the soil must be rich and light. When establishing a lawn, it is the soil that supports the growth of the grass, which is why it must be adequate if you wish to obtain good results.

If you have adopted ecological maintenance habits in recent years, but your lawn's appearance leaves much to be desired, the problem most likely lies with the soil's composition.

In Rosemère, many lots are clayey, resulting in highly compact soil. This is bad for grass roots. To counter the problem, aerate the soil annually, then add a thin layer of topsoil (with aged compost), and overseed, ideally at the end of the summer (mid-August to mid-September), otherwise in the spring. On the other hand, newer neighbourhoods located in the eastern part of the town are on higher ground, and the soil is sandy and poor, which also presents a problem for lawns. Sandy soils should be enriched through the annual addition of topsoil (with 1 cm of aged compost), followed by overseeding.

As for other good habits, simply remember the key points relating to watering, mowing, grasscycling, and you won't have to worry about thatching!

1- Watering

You should water in depth but less often, forcing roots to grow deeper to reach the water. One or two waterings per week are sufficient. If the water penetrates well, the results should be quite good!

2- Mowing

The grass should be no shorter than 7.5 cm (3 inches), except for the first cut in the spring, when you can go a little lower. Bear in mind that the length of the roots is proportionate to the length of the grass. Also ensure that the blades of your mower are well sharpened.

3- Grasscycling

Leaving grass clippings on the ground cuts the need for fertilizer by 5% to 50%, which is hardly negligible.

Another way of reducing green waste at home is to enrich your lawn, using tree leaves as fertilizer. In the fall, simply mow over the leaves to shred them.

4-Reducing thatch

Thatch is nothing more than dead grass that has not decomposed and has accumulated on the surface of the soil and you shouldn't have any if you've adopted ecological lawn maintenance habits. Thatch is often a problem of poor decomposition related to the use of chemical fertilizers or pesticides, which kill off the best possible decomposers, earthworms. On the other hand, thatch can also accumulate in soils that are very poor in organic matter or overly compact. In the latter case, adding aged compost could improve the situation by activating decomposition by microorganisms.

Alternatives to a lawn



Original grass-free landscaping

There are instances when conditions are so difficult for grass seeds that the establishment of a healthy lawn is either virtually impossible or too expensive over the long term. This could be a sign that you should stop fighting nature and opt for vegetation that is better suited to the environment and will do well. Rosemère, for example, has many hills and slopes. Properties are seldom level, and often slope towards the ditch in front of houses. Water drains quickly on these inclines, making it particularly difficult from grass to take. However, flowerbeds and rock gardens, including landscaping arrangements for drought conditions, often yield much better results (thyme, gypsophila repens, sedum repens, Irish moss, pink coreopsis, arabis, ajuga, etc.)

On the other hand, there is sometimes so much shade under a tree that grass is unable to grow, which is hardly surprising when you consider that grass is a form of vegetation that thrives in the sun. Compounding the problem is the fact that the quantity of leaves that fall in autumn is sufficient to suffocate any grass. Putting in shade-friendly vegetation (hostas, ferns), ground covers (*vinca minor*, moss) and inert materials (flagstones, mulches, etc) are effective alternatives to grass and effectively showcase Rosemère's many magnificent trees.



Landscaping arrangement using thyme and flagstones

In areas with intermediate sun (slight shade), opt for creeping phlox, *pachysandra*, *lysimachia nummularia*, dead nettle, birdsfoot trefoil, etc.



Shady path with mulches and shade plants

Replanning your garden might also provide a welcome opportunity for you to create a cosy corner, with a swing, lanterns, and water garden where you wouldn't have any grass to mow... Be creative!

For additional information on the establishment or maintenance of a lawn, please contact the Town's eco-consultant, at 450 621-3500, ext. 3305, or see next page.

For additional information:

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Rubin, Carol, 2002. *How To Get Your Lawn Off Grass, A North American Guide to Turning Off the Water Tap and Going Native*. Harbour Publisher, 208 pages.

Rubin, Carol, 2003. *How To Get Your Lawn and Garden Off Drugs: A Basic Guide to Pesticide-free Gardening in North America*. Harbour Publisher, 144 pages.

Smeesters E., Daniel A., et Djotni A., 2005. *Solutions écologiques en horticulture*. Éditions Broquet, St-Constant, Qc. 198 pages.

Website of the Montréal Botanical Garden: *Lawn and Ground Covers* :
www2.ville.montreal.qc.ca/jardin/en/info_verte/portails_carnet/pelouse.htm

Website of the Montréal Botanical Garden:
www2.ville.montreal.qc.ca/jardin/en/info_verte/pelouse_ecologique/pelouse_ecologique.htm

Health Canada website on lawns:
www.healthylawns.net/ (bilingual)

Hydraulic seeding website:
www.hydrosemenceplus.com/residentiel.htm