

Establishing Seeded Bermuda in the Low Desert

Cultivate your soil to a depth of 6 inches, incorporating any organic soil amendments and preplant fertilizers as needed or based on soil tests. You may need to wet the soil and let it drain prior to cultivating if soil is compacted. Prepare a medium-fine, firm seedbed – using a light roller on the finished seedbed is beneficial to level and firm the area.

Plant Bermuda grass seed from Mid May through Sept. 15 in this area to get good results. Use 2–3 pounds of hulled seed, or 3–5 pounds of unhulled seed, or 3 pounds of coated seed per 1000 square feet of lawn. Sow half of the seed in one direction, and the other half at right angles to the first half. Rake the seed in lightly, covering no more than 1/8 inch with pulverized manure, compost, peat moss or another fine soil material and then firm the seedbed. Apply water evenly and with a fine spray in order not to disturb the newly planted seed.

Take care not to bury Bermuda seeds too deeply under your layer of mulch. This is a very common mistake with seeds that are this tiny. If so, they are not dead, just waiting until something brings them closer to the soil surface. Bermudagrass seed actually needs sunlight on the seeds to germinate – a very fine line between covering them with enough mulch to help hold moisture, and covering the seeds too deep so they don't sprout right away. The seeds should have no more than 1/4 in of mulch on top, and a thinner layer is actually better if possible.

It is extremely important to apply enough irrigation during the hot, dry, windy summer here. A usual sign of this is good germination results in the lower or shaded areas where moisture collects or lasts longer – and poor germination in the areas that dry out faster. Do you see more Bermuda seedlings in the low or sunken spots? Do you have an irrigation system with timers? If you were not watering frequently enough, the seedlings may start to sprout and run out of moisture and dry up/die. During bermudagrass establishment, you should be watering 3 to 5 times each day, for about 5-10 minutes each time - just enough to keep the very top surface moist - this schedule is maintained for about the first 4-5 weeks, until you have well established seedlings that are just starting to creep and spread. Then you would start water less often, but for longer each time, as the Bermuda roots establish until you are on a regular recommended bermudagrass watering schedule.

Bermudagrass seedlings are very different looking than ryegrass seedlings, much smaller, darker and for the first month, it is much less obvious that they have actually sprouted. For the first 3 weeks you have to get down on your hands and knees and look closely for bermudagrass seedlings. Check especially in lower or shaded spots where more moisture is usually available and the Bermuda seeds germinate faster.

Only fertilize the young lawn if the early growth is weak or yellow. Approximately four weeks after seeding, apply a complete, balanced fertilizer to the newly established turf area. For faster coverage during the establishment year, a rate of 1-1/2 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet is recommended every month during the growing season. Bermudagrass responds well to regular applications of nitrogen.

Be sure your seed is not old. The germination rate drops off on older seed of any type. Look at your packaging and check the label for TEST DATE – it should be within the last 9-12 months to be sold in Arizona. You can contact your supplier to check further on this as they will have a copy of the laboratory germination test that the label is based on. Or, if you still have some of the seeds, plant some on the surface of a cup of soil and keep it inside the house, and keep moist – you should see sprouts within 7-10 days if the seed is kept moist and warm, and if it is still viable.

DO NOT apply any ryegrass winter lawn this first year - never recommended on newly established bermudagrass as it does too much harm for next year's re-emergence. New bermuda lawns will usually stay green well into late November or early December, depending on the year. They green up in a normal spring in late February or early March in the low desert so the brown dormant period is very short.