Common Grasses in the Charlottesville Area

Tall Fescue

- Cool season
- Able to have excellent color and quality fall through spring
- Deep root system
- Start with seed or sod
- Average shade tolerance
- Best adapted cool-season variety for Virginia
- Needs a *sharp* mower blade for healthiest maintenance
- A 90/10 combination of Tall Fescue / Kentucky Bluegrass tends to both look good and resist disease (this is the most common composition of sod)
- Spread seed at 6-8 lbs / 1,000 sqft (a 90/10 combination would be 3-4 lbs / 1,000 sqft)
- Water Soluble Nitrogen: 1lb / 1,000 sqft in September and again in October or Slow Release Nitrogen: 1.5 lbs / 1,000 sqft in August and October
- Standard mowing height: 2-3"

Fine-Leaf Fescues

- Cool Season
- Excellent shade tolerance
- Minimal maintenance
- Not available as sod, only limited seed availability
- Mixed with Kentucky Bluegrass and Perennial Ryegrass for sun/shade
- Spread seed at 3-5 lbs / sqft
- Standard mowing height: 1.5-2.5"

Kentucky Bluegrass

- Cool season
- Considered high maintenance
- Good lateral growth (spreads readily)
- Poor shade tolerance
- Mixed with perennial ryegrass and fine fescues for a sun /shade lawn
- Spread seed at 1-2 lbs / 1,000 sqft
- Water Soluble Nitrogen: 1lb / 1,000 sqft in September, October and early November, with an additional .5 lbs / 1,000 sqft in May; Slow Release Nitrogen: 1.5 lbs / 1,000 sqft in August and October

- Standard mowing height: 1.5-2.5"

Perennial Ryegrass

- Cool season
- Considered high maintenance
- Average shade tolerance
- Mixed with Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescues for a sun /shade lawn
- Water Soluble Nitrogen: 1 lb / 1,000 sqft in September and October or Slow Release Nitrogen: 1.5 lbs / 1,000 sqft in August and October
- Standard mowing height: 1-2"

Zoysia Grass

- Warm season
- Slow to start and to spread
- Expensive whether seeding or using plugs or sprigs
- Resistant to weeds and pests
- Long dormancy period (4 months in colder weather) means long time with no color but also a long time with no mowing
- Average shade tolerance
- Provides thick lawn
- Very good water efficiency
- Spread seed at 2-3 lbs/sqft
- Water Soluble Nitrogen: 1lb / 1,000 sqft in May or Slow Release Nitrogen: 1.5 lbs / 1,000 sqft in April
- Standard mowing height: 1-2"

Bermuda Grass (Wire Grass)

- Warm Season
- Long dormancy period (4 months in colder weather) means long time with no color but also a long time with no mowing
- Frequent mowing required in summer
- Poor shade tolerance
- May not withstand harsh winters-cold tolerant varieties can help
- Aggressive lateral growth (good for turf grass but could make it a problem weed)
- Withstands pests very well and good water efficiency
- Spread seed at .5-1 lbs / sqft
- Readily Available Nitrogen: 1lb / 1,000 sqft in May and again in July or August. Or, Slow Release Nitrogen: 1.5-2 lbs / 1,000 sqft in April and again in June
- Standard mowing height: 1-2"

Substantial information for these tables used from: Vickers, Amy. Handbook of Water Use and Conservation. Amherst, MA. Waterplow Press (2001): 173.

I have no idea what species of grass is in my yard. How do I find out?

First things first - does your grass turn brown in the summer or the winter? The answer to that will determine its seasonality. To get a handle on the details, contact the Extension Office (http://offices.ext.vt.edu/albemarle/) here in Charlottesville. They can help you with identifying the species present. You can also refer to the "Common Grasses in the Charlottesville Area" on the website.

Which Grass Should I Choose?

Virginia is a transition zone for grass - too warm to be ideal for cool season varieties and too cold for warm seasons. This means there are pros and cons to each type and you should choose based on what is most important to you. The cool season grasses are hardy through winter, and make a beautiful and showy lawn in spring and fall. They're the types that get that distinctive "striping" pattern after mowing. However, they will go brown and dormant in a typical summer and are more susceptible to dying in extremely hot and dry weather.

Warm season grasses are just the opposite, and are unlikely to be significantly damaged by extreme summers (even if a summer like 2010 may cause some browning). Their biggest drawback is that they will be completely without color for four months of the year (first frost until mid-spring). They can be killed off in harsh winters, though winter hardy varieties are available.

If water efficiency is a primary concern, and hopefully it is, tall fescues, Bermuda and zoysia have the best water efficiency and ability to get the deepest root system. The experts at the Extension Office are very supportive of cold hardy varieties of zoysia grass. Its excellent water efficiency, resistance to disease and pests and lower nutrient requirements make it very low maintenance here. It is not native to the Mid-Atlantic region, but it did evolve in Asian countries that are transition zones for grass, just as Virginia is.