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COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: Be careful when planting new grass in cold weather. Here are some tips.

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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Since the hurricane, I have been asked about what do now that the ground is bare.

A quick fix for muddy and eroding areas is spreading winter rye at a rate of 8-10 pounds per 1,000 square feet. That is going to be a good temporary fix, but as cold as it has been, the germination will be low until temperatures get back to normal.

Many are asking if they can plant sod in the middle of the winter. The answer is yes and no, depending on the type of grass and the weather conditions. It is ideal to plant sod from mid-spring to early fall, but sometimes that can't happen. If you need a certificate of occupancy for a building or issues with erosion control, sodding may need to happen right then.

When discussing sod in our area, we want to talk about the commercially available warm season grasses like differing varieties of Zoysia (wide or thin blade), Bermuda, Centipede and St. Augustine turf grasses.

Our warm season grasses go dormant in the fall and start growing again in the spring.

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At a sod farm, the grass is harvested by a machine that has an oscillating blade that cuts the grass about an inch or so below the base of the grass. This cut allows some soil to remain and keeps the bulk of the roots intact as well as keep some moisture in the plant system.

Cutting sod, just like transplanting shrubs, stresses a plant. St. Augustine and Centipede grasses grow by sending runners across the top of the ground, so they have a shallow roots system. Since root systems are less active during the cold season, and the sod might not have

ample root growth to reestablish, there is a chance that with extreme cold the grass may freeze.

If you want to plant St. Augustine or Centipede, it is best to plant it after late April and before Sept. 1.

Zoysia and Bermuda grasses send their roots called rhizomes directly into the ground and spread their roots by creeping underground. They are essentially better insulated than St. Augustine and Centipede. Unless there is a long-term super freeze, planting Zoysia and Bermuda year-round I think is ok.

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Do not sod if you have put out a pre-emergence for weed control. Most pre-emergences mode of action is to prohibit root growth, which is exactly the opposite of what we are trying to do with new sod.

Dormant grass is tannish in color and green winter weeds will really stand out. That can mean from December to green up in May you deal with the weeds.

Treating the new grass with post emergence herbicides is also not allowed. Rule of thumb is the grass gets to be mowed five times during active growth before any herbicide treatments are allowed.

Make sure you have good drainage. Pooling water and constantly wet grass cause rot especially in the winter when the moisture is not being drawn in by the plant or excess evaporated with warmer temperatures. Ground saturation is also more prevalent in cooler seasons.

Preparation is key. Do yourself a big favor and take a soil sample first. Knowing what nutrients are available and if the pH of the soil is the best way to get the grass the proper boost it needs to get going once it hits the ground.

Unlike trees and shrubs, our warm season grasses require a more neutral pH. About 6.0-7 is ideal, except Centipede, which prefers a pH slightly lower than 6.0.

Locate the area where you want to sod and get accurate square footage of the proposed lawn. Bermuda and Centipede pallets of sod are about 500 square feet per pallet. Zoysia and St Augustine are usually about 450 square feet per pallet. If you are getting the sod delivered,

make sure that you can get a large wide forklift to the area. Sod ain't light, so the closer you get it to the intended area, the less labor it is to get it attached to the ground.

Spray the area with glyphosate to kill any grasses or weeds that may be growing where you want to plant. Do this according to the label (above 60 degrees and well hydrated). Wait 5-7 days. Some folks like to till, but the less you disturb the land the less weeds there will be.

Try and remove as much debris as possible. Roots, straw, bark, mulch, shaving, etc., need to be cleared. Use a tractor with a box blade to level the area if possible. A smooth level area now is a lot easier than dealing with humps and valleys for the remainder of your lawn's life. Aesthetically, smooth is better, but mowing the lawn in the future is the big reason for a level yard.

All turf grass needs sun, and most lawns appreciate lots of it. You can have some lawn in shady areas but to have a good full thick yard, plan for your grass to get at least 5-6 hours of direct sun at an absolute minimum. St. Augustine and some varieties of Zoysia will handle more shade than Centipede. Bermuda grass doesn't tolerate shade at all (except TifTuf which handles a little shade).

A quick note is that on Feb. 1 there will be a camellia sale at the Church of the Good Shepard, 2230 Walton Way, from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Lots of pretty camellias to give you some great fall, winter and early spring color to your landscapes.