

## What is the best way to get my healthy lawn growing?

If you're starting from scratch: no problem! The key is **4-6" of quality topsoil** (sorry, Virginia clay is not quality topsoil). This is the essential building block of a healthy and water wise lawn. It cannot be emphasized enough. If you simply toss some seed on clay, your yard will perpetually be vulnerable to pests, disease and drought, no matter the species of grass you choose.

If you have an existing lawn that was planted over clay, it will take longer to get healthy, but it's certainly possible. Consider your lawn a long term project that will become healthier every season. Take a look under [Soil Health](#) to learn how compost and aeration will build up your base of healthy soil.

The following steps are important whether you're starting a lawn from scratch, repairing bare spots or filling thin growth in your existing lawn:

### What's So Great About Topsoil?

- Able to absorb and store much more water than clay
- Creates better drainage
- Processes nutrients so they are usable for plants

### How Do I Know If It's Quality Topsoil?

- relatively dark in color
- contains plant nutrients, organic matter and active microorganisms
- pH between 5.5 and 7.5

Read detailed instructions on creating and nourishing good topsoil [here](http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-711/426-711.html) ( or <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-711/426-711.html>) .

1. Test your soil for pH, as well as potassium and phosphorous. A pH value of 6.2 is ideal for lawns. The tests are not expensive and you can contact the local [Extension Office](#) for more information on getting one done.
2. If you decide to use a starter fertilizer, understand that excess fertilizer does not benefit your lawn - it does *not* lead to more or better grass. If you do use fertilizer, it is best to till 2/3 of the total amount into the top 4-6" of soil, then lightly rake the remaining onto the soil surface before spreading seed.
3. If your soil test determines that lime is required, incorporate it into the topsoil before seeding, tilling to a depth of 4-6".
4. Pick a quality seed. A good place to start is the [recommended seed list](#) (<http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/category/lawns.html>) put out by the Extension Office.
5. Disturb the soil before putting down seed (rake or till). This creates better contact between the two. Fill any low spots with additional soil.
6. Do not bury the seed.
7. Spread at the rate specified for the given species (or follow package directions if using a combination of species).
8. Spread the seed uniformly and in multiple directions to avoid bare spots.
9. Improve moisture retention by mulching with WEED FREE straw at 1 bale / 1,000 sqft or cover with compost or commercially available seed germination fabric.
10. When it comes to supplemental irrigation (e.g. your hose or sprinkler), do not start using it if there is a chance we may go into drought restrictions. Starting irrigation and then stopping will be detrimental to the seed. Leave the seed mulched until nature comes around and can provide the necessary moisture (and of course, if we are already in drought restriction, watering the lawn is prohibited).
11. Every year, during the optimal growth times for your type of lawn, add seed to bare spots and areas of sparse growth. Exposed soil does not hold water well and is susceptible to weed invasion.

## A Nod to Sod

Advantages of sod:

- immediate coverage and erosion control
- thick turf means minimal weed pressure
- aesthetic appeal of dense turf

The same preparation tips used for seeding apply to sod.

Late fall is the ideal time to install cool season varieties of sod, but warm season sod can also do very well. That time of year is often very moist in our area, so there is less need for supplemental irrigation and less stress from heat. Warm season sod will go dormant, and it may be hard to tell if it needs more water. Simply insert a knife into the sod and verify the soil base is still moist.

New sod only needs to be kept moist until rooted.

