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## **Made In The Shade - - What Grass Is Best?**

Growing grass in shaded areas, especially under trees, can be a challenge. But according to the Turf Resource Center homeowners do have a few options.

To improve growing conditions for turfgrass in shaded areas, such as under trees, it is recommended that you prune the branches and limbs in the crown of the tree to allow more light to reach the grass which will also improve the quality of the turf.

Selecting the right turfgrass species is also important and it can help increase the odds of achieving high quality turf in shaded areas. The turfgrass species you select will be dependent on your geographical location but as a general rule Fine fescue is the cool-season species with the best shade tolerance. If you happen to be in a warm location the warm season species that offers the best shade tolerance is St. Augustine grass. Zoysiagrass also performs well under shaded conditions.

*The Home & Garden Information Center* of Clemson University offers this helpful insight and advice:

“If an area gets less than 4 hours of sunlight per day, it is too shady for lawn grass to grow well. The lack of sufficient light reaching the grass causes a reduction in photosynthesis, which is the process that produces energy for growth. As a result, the plant has lower tolerance to heat, cold, disease, drought and wear stress.

Competition with trees and shrubs for limited nutrients and water also reduces vigor, as many shrubs and trees will have root growth in the same area as the turf roots. Disease problems are often more severe in shade due to higher humidity, reduced air circulation and prolonged periods of dew on turf. As a result of all the factors mentioned, turf grown in the shade often shows a steady decline in density over a period of years.

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Some measures can be taken to reduce the problems associated with shade. These include plant selection, management of ornamentals and modifications of normal turf management practices.

Certain lawn grasses perform better in shade than others. Of the cool-season lawn grasses, fine fescues are more tolerant of shade than tall fescues. St. Augustine exhibits the best tolerance to shade of all the warm-season lawn grasses. Zoysia is more tolerant to light or moderate shade than centipede, but neither will survive heavy shade. Zoysia cultivars that have good tolerance to shade include El Toro, Diamond, Belaire and Cavalier. Meyer and Emerald have fair tolerance. Bermuda exhibits extremely poor tolerance to any amount of shade. It is important to remember that all lawn grasses prefer sunny locations.

When establishing cool-season lawn grasses, it is best to seed or sod early enough in the fall so there is sufficient time for the turf to mature before leaves cover the ground. During the fall remove leaves by raking, blowing or bagging when mowing to prevent smothering of the turf. Lawn grass will grow long after deciduous trees have dropped their leaves. If lawn grass cannot be seeded by mid-September it would be preferable to wait until spring to avoid the leaf problem.

Ideally the mowing height should be one-half to 1 inch higher than normal. Turf growing in shade needs a large leaf surface to take advantage of what light does filter through the leaves.

Mow on a regular schedule, never removing more than one-third of the leaf area at one time. Although people are encouraged to leave grass clippings because of the nutrients they offer this is not the rule in shaded areas as clippings may further reduce light reaching the turf.

Lawn grasses growing in heavily shaded areas require only one-half to two-thirds as much nitrogen as lawn grasses growing in full sun. Reducing the amount of nitrogen to grasses growing in the shade reduces the incidence of disease. Fertilize shady locations at the same time as turf grown in the sun. For maximum tolerance to disease and environmental stress, maintain the soil pH, potassium and phosphorus levels as recommended by soil tests.

The frequency and quantity of water needed for shady areas is less than that required for sunny areas. Water infrequently but deeply, and only when absolutely necessary. Light, infrequent watering encourages shallow roots, and increases disease problems associated with turf growth in shade.

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Most of the same disease problems exist in both shady and sunny areas. Those diseases associated with high moisture and/or high humidity may be more serious in shady areas because air movement is reduced and surface moisture remains longer. Good cultivar selection and good management practices should reduce the severity of these diseases.

Ornamentals that have dense canopies and shallow roots normally result in failure of turfgrass stands even if proper management practices are used. When possible, select trees and shrubs that are deep-rooted and have relatively open canopies. Some species that generally cause fewer problems include sycamores, many oaks and most elms. Undesirable species include ash, willow, poplar and some species of maples.

Some measures can be taken to aid turf survival, whether desirable or undesirable ornamentals are present. Selectively prune branches, particularly low branches, to aid in air movement and light penetration. Ideally, the lowest branches of trees should be over 6 feet above the soil surface. Remove any unnecessary trees and shrubs. Use recommended species and sufficient spacing between plants when placing new plants.”

If you would like more information on this topic visit the (<http://hgic.clemson.edu/>). If you would like additional information on turfgrass sod visit [www:TurfResourceCenter.org](http://www.TurfResourceCenter.org)

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