

How YOU Can Botch the Start of a Sodded Lawn!

By Dr. Hank Wilkinson

Having been professionally involved with turfgrass and sod for more years than I'd care to count, I'm still amazed at how something as simple as sodding a new lawn can get so botched.

Both professional landscapers and everyday homeowners can create a nightmare rather than a lawn, but most often it's the homeowner who fails to grasp some basic fundamentals. Relatively simple steps can make the difference between a healthy, practical lawn that's easy to care for and a total mess that will cause maintenance problems for years to come. It's such a shame, because sod should practically ensure a total success each and every time.

Here are my top 10 ways to ruin a sodded lawn installation. Avoid these, and you will avoid having a disappointing lawn project!

#1. Don't be ready to receive the sod delivery. To guarantee that you get the freshest sod possible, it's usually cut-to-order late in the afternoon prior to delivery or very early that same morning. In addition to the turf and soil that you can see, every piece of sod also contains millions of microorganisms. These "critters" respire, and thereby generate heat and carbon dioxide. But when sod is harvested and stacked on a pallet, the heat cannot escape. Within 24 to 48 hours sod can reach a temperature of over 130° F, which can be fatal to the grass plants. So it is imperative that the sod doesn't sit, stacked on the pallet, for any length of time.

Another related problem is that the delivery person probably won't wait until you have your site ready, so the pallets of sod will be unloaded for the convenience of the driver, and not where you want them. As a consequence, you'll have to handle the sod a lot more as you move piece after piece from the front yard to the back or wherever you actually want it placed. The extra carrying will add up to a lot more work by the end of the day, and probably a less-than-careful installation job.

#2. Don't properly prepare the soil. When you lay good sod on poor soil, the sod won't root, the density of the turf declines, and the grass dries out in the summer. To give sod the porous, moist, and cool conditions that promote the best rooting, till the soil, remove any debris and rocks, and make sure your soil has plenty of organic matter. Use a soil test to determine the amount and type of amendments the soil needs to maximize your results. Keep in mind, the best time to improve the soil of your new lawn is before you plant it!

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#3. Under-estimate the amount of sod you'll need. Not being able to finish the job because you're a few pieces of sod short is very frustrating! Determining the amount of grass you'll need requires some careful measurements and calculations. The turf farm can assist you in sketching out a diagram of your lawn and calculating the amount of sod you'll need. A small amount of excess is probably preferable to any shortage, unless the sod farm or outlet is convenient and you don't mind stopping everything while someone makes a trip for what's needed.

#4. Buy poor quality sod. The small amount of money you save buying cheap sod will pale in comparison to your frustrations and added maintenance expenses that come free with the cheap sod. Sod that is infested with weeds, disease or insects brings problems to your yard. So, too, will old or thatchy sod. Another frustrating problem can be immature sod that falls apart when you are trying to install it; which could mean more patching and piles of unwanted scrap. Select sod that was started from the highest possible quality of seed (sod quality seed) or stolons and grown to maturity on good quality soil.

#5. Don't add water to cool the soil. On a bright, sunny day, bare soil can easily reach 130⁰ F. Sod that has just had about 80% of its roots cut off can't absorb water efficiently, and the remaining roots are exposed. This spells disaster, known as "root stinging" or heat stress. The grass may turn an off-color green or brown as it goes dormant, and it won't produce any significant new root growth. To avoid this possibility, thoroughly wet the prepared soil to about three inches deep, 24 to 48 hours prior to sod installation. When you start to install the sod, the soil surface will be dry enough to work on, and the moisture in the soil will migrate up to meet the newly installed sod. What's more, you won't have to apply as much water after installation, and the sod won't go dormant.

#6. Do a sloppy installation. Gaps between seams, over-lapped pieces of sod, and a lot of little patches each create their own problems. Gaps won't get smaller, and they will allow weed seeds to sprout. Over-lapped pieces will never properly root, and they'll cause bumps in your lawn. Small patches tend to dry out and often die. Take your time in putting down the pieces of sod, and pay attention to details. Stay off the soil as much as possible before you install the sod. Once the sod is rolled out, work on it only when necessary to fit and trim it, then stay off! As soon as possible, soak the newly installed sod so that the soil beneath it is sopping wet.

#7. Don't learn how to water the new sod. Because new sod has very short and inefficient roots, frequent and short watering cycles will only result in short-rooted, poorly established grass. In properly prepared soil that is watered deep, sod will quickly take root and push down deeper and deeper roots.

#8. Ignore proper mowing, fertilizing and watering. The first few weeks after installing sod are critical to proper establishment. Each species of grass has its own "care and feeding" requirements. Failing to know when and how to mow, fertilize and

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water your new lawn can negate all of your hard work. If you didn't receive this information at the time you purchased your sod, here are a couple of great websites with more detailed information: www.TurfGrassSod.org and www.MidwestSodCouncil.com.

#9. Don't give the sod enough time to establish itself before it's heavily used. Putting down sod on Saturday and playing football on Sunday is something you don't want to do (although I've seen this from time to time)! While the grass is not that fragile after it's properly installed, some caution is necessary. Walking across a soggy, new lawn can compress the soil, but most often it leaves a series of depressions in the lawn that may never fully recover. Also, any lateral movement or shearing (running around on the sod by humans or dogs!) should be avoided for the first four to six weeks.

#10. Don't check up on your sod's progress. Even a new in-ground irrigation system can be less than perfect, and hose-end sprinklers are even more notorious for their lack of uniform distribution. Dry spots may take several days to appear, and if you aren't looking for these problems you could have dead grass in a matter of days

“Green side up” is the only instruction most homeowners ever get before they install a sodded lawn. While this is an absolutely appropriate rule, it's just a bit more complicated. But after all of my years in this industry, I've yet to find my first homeowner who was satisfied with anything less than perfection. Avoid these 10 problems and you'll get the lawn of your dreams, one that is environmentally friendly, requires very little in the way of long-term maintenance, and adds value and beauty to your property.

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Note to Editors:

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