Install Sod Like the Pro That You Are

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A practical step-by-step primer for a successful turfgrass sod job

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Member companies of Landscape Ontario Horticultural Trades Association and the Nursery Sod Growers Association donated their time, materials and expertise to sod Toronto's St. James Park.
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For landscapers who install turfgrass sod on a regular basis it might seem relatively easy, but for the inexperienced, what they don't know can have consequences down the road. To avoid the unexpected and make your job easier, a few easy-to-follow steps recommended by The Lawn Institute will provide results that will please both you and your customer.

Site preparation

Make an effort to clear the installation site of any debris or building materials such as wood, cement, bricks, rocks, stones or other debris. Rough grade the entire area to eliminate any drainage problems on the property. This would include sloping the grade away from building foundations, eliminating or reducing severe slopes and filling low-lying areas. A tractor-mounted blade and/or box are most often used for rough grading, but if the area is small, it can be done with hand rake. The rough grading will probably uncover more debris that should be removed.

Till to a depth of at least 2 inches (5 cm) before adding any topsoil or soil amendments. This will control most annual weeds, alleviate subsoil compaction, permit a bonding of the topsoil to the subsoil and improve root penetration as well as air exchange and water movement.

Add topsoil to achieve a total topsoil depth of 4 to 6 inches (10 to 15 cm) after firming. The topsoil should be a loamy sand, sandy loam, clay loam, loam, silt loam, sandy clay loam or other soil suitable for the area.

Finish grade the entire site, maintaining the rough grading contours and slopes, with a tractor-mounted box blade for large areas or a heavy-duty rake for smaller sites.

Roll the area with a lawn roller one-third full of water to firm and settle the surface. Low spots should be filled to match the surrounding grade surface. If time permits, allow the area to settle further with rainfall or by applying irrigation.

Select the appropriate turfgrass

Selecting the right turfgrass sod requires more knowledge than merely asking for a warm-season grass, a cool-season grass or a grass that falls into the transition zone. There are any number of turfgrasses from which to choose, knowing which one to select from among the numerous grass species and varieties available can be a challenge and needs to be determined based on the region of the country and the location of the installation.

Is winter color desirable? Is a drought-tolerant species preferred? Are there shaded areas on the property where it’s being installed? They have to be taken into consideration, too. Planting the most appropriate turfgrass for the site and for the how it will be used will maximize your success and provide your customer with years of satisfaction.

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Warm-season turfgrasses are suited for warm arid and humid climates that typically thrive in the southern United States. A warm-season turfgrass has its optimum growth at temperatures between 80 degrees Fahrenheit and 95 degrees Fahrenheit (27 degrees Celsius to 32 degrees Celsius). Warm-season grasses include bahiagrass, bermudagrass, carpetgrass, centipedegrass, St. Augustinegrass and zoysiagrass.

Cool-season turfgrasses offer optimum growth at temperatures between 60 degrees Fahrenheit and 75 degrees Fahrenheit (15.5 degrees Celsius to 23.8 degrees Celsius). Cool-season grass varieties include creeping bentgrass, fine fescue, tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, annual ryegrass and perennial ryegrass.

There are some warm- and cool-season turfgrasses species that do well in the middle of the country known as the “transition zone”. These include fescue, ryegrass, bluegrass, bermuda and zoysia, among others.

Contact a turfgrass producer in your area to confirm what turfgrass variety will best work in your geographical location. A listing of turfgrass producers in your area is available by visiting the website of Turfgrass Producers International (*www.turfgrasssod.org*).

If you provide a sod producer in your area with basic information they can recommend a turfgrass that best meets your specific requirements and answer your questions.

Turfgrass sod installation

Prior to installing the sod moisten the soil and try to complete installation as soon as possible after it has been delivered. In hot weather, protect uninstalled turfgrass by placing stacks or rolls in the shade. If possible, cover with a moist cloth, or lightly water the unprotected turf.

Begin installing turf along the longest straight line, such as a driveway, sidewalk or patio. Butt and push edges and ends against each other tightly, without stretching. Avoid gaps or overlaps. Stagger joints in each row in a brick-like fashion and use a large sharp knife to trim corners, edges, etc. Avoid leaving small strips at outer edges, as they will not retain moisture. On slopes, place the turf pieces so they run across the slope rather than up and down the slope. This will minimize water runoff and help retain moisture.

To prevent indentations or air pockets avoid repeated walking or kneeling on the turf while it is being installed or just after watering. After installing the turfgrass, roll the entire area to improve turfgrass/soil contact and remove air pockets.

Watering and nurturing

Within a half-hour of installation it is recommended that you provide the lawn with at least 1 inch (2 to 3 cm) of water. Advise your customer to water the lawn daily to keep the turfgrass moist until it is firmly rooted (about two weeks). They can water less frequently and provide deeper watering after this initial period. Weather conditions will dictate the amount and frequency of watering. Also advise your customer that the new lawn must have enough moisture to survive hot, dry or windy periods. Also advise them to water areas near buildings more often where reflected heat dries turfgrass.

Most of the unforeseen problems months after the installation of sod have nothing to do with the quality of the turfgrass, or how it was installed, but rather the neglect on the part of the owner to sufficiently water the new turfgrass sod after installation. Watering new sod daily and for several weeks after installation cannot be over-stated.

Customers should also be advised to avoid heavy or concentrated use of their new lawn for the first few weeks. This gives the roots an opportunity to grow into the soil and ensures the turf will remain smooth.

Additional considerations

Test the soil where the sod will be installed for pH and nutrients to determine if any pH correcting materials or nutrients are required. For acidic soils a pH of less than 6 can be improved by adding lime. The type (or source) and amount applied will be determined by the level of acidity will dictate the type (source) and amount of lime that’s needed. It’s best to get the advice of a professional first.

For alkaline soils a pH of 8 and higher can be improved with sulfur. As with acidic soil correcting materials, base your decision on the type and amount of materials by the level of alkalinity. It’s best to get the opinion of an professional before adding either lime or sulfur.

Finally, apply fertilizer to correct any deficiencies following the product’s recommended rate. To avoid root injury to new turfgrass rake the fertilizer into the top 3 to 4 inches (7 to 10 cm) of the soil.

Jim Novak is public relations manager at Turfgrass Producers International and a longtime communications consultant.