

A Second Chance



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Is zoysia making a comeback?



A zoysia lawn in Arlington, Va.
PHOTO BY LYDIA CUTTER.

Zoysia is a warm-season grass native to China, Japan and Southeast Asia. It's highly adaptable and can be grown in all types of soils from clay to sand, as well as in either acidic or alkaline soils. It requires little moisture and stays green during even the hottest days of summer. Mark White, a Washington, D.C.-based landscape architect and member of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), describes zoysia as a "wonderful grass – beautiful, thick and lush." He grew up sliding on zoysia-covered hills in his parents' yard and remembers it being dense and lush, an ideal lawn to play on. All this makes zoysia sound like the grass of choice for everyone to have around their home, but in reality, it isn't a popular choice in most areas of the country. So, what's the story on zoysiagrass?

A little background

First introduced to America in 1911, a USDA botanist named C.V. Piper brought it to the United States thinking it would be an ideal lawn grass in warmer areas of the country since it grew abundantly in Southeast Asia (Korea, Japan, Pacific Islands). He was right, and because of its ability to withstand hot sun and limited moisture, the grass originally proved to be a popular choice in these areas. As time went on, the positive attributes of zoysia were recognized in areas farther north, and use of zoysia migrated northward as far as Washington, D.C., and Maryland during the 1980s. In theory, zoysiagrass has been adapted to grow along the Atlantic Coast from Florida to Connecticut and along the Gulf Coast all the way to Texas. However, in reality, if you live in Zone 5 or lower you probably have never seen zoysiagrass growing in your area, and even in warmer areas of the

country zoysia isn't very common.

The skinny on zoysiagrass

As shown by its early popularity, zoysia's characteristics make it an ideal lawn grass in warmer areas of the U.S. Following are some of its attributes:

- Once established, zoysia produces a thick, cushy turfgrass that can withstand moderate wear, making it a great choice for lawns and parks (or even golf course fairways) since it maintains a beautiful green color even in extreme heat.
- Zoysia stands up quite well to drought or dry conditions, prospers in most soil types, can easily withstand low fertility conditions and requires significantly less water than other turfgrasses. Also, its thick growth prevents incursions of crabgrass and summer weeds, so you end up with a lawn with no unsightly weeds.
- Zoysia grows slowly, so it only needs to be mowed every two weeks or so, and it can stand low mowing, ensuring a low-cost, low-maintenance, easy-to-care-for lawn.
- Unfortunately, even with all these positive attributes, zoysia's "not-so-good" attributes work against its popularity.
- Zoysia is difficult to get started. Since zoysia grows slowly from seed, propagation was originally only possible with plugs or springs, and a new lawn could take up to two years to become established. As a result, anyone who wanted to enjoy zoysia's positive attributes had to wait at least a year or more, and rather than having a lush, green lawn, they would have a patchy, unkempt looking lawn for the first years of its life.
- Once established, it is invasive and will expand continuously, eventually taking over adjoining landscaping or a neighbor's lawn, making for poor community relations. Controlling zoysia's spread requires installation of plastic or metal borders, which adds to the cost of installation.
- Zoysia is prone to thatching, and even though thatch creation can be controlled somewhat by using a vertical mower, a zoysia lawn needs to be dethatched at least every two years, adding to maintenance costs.
- However, by far the largest drawback to zoysia's popularity is the fact that zoysia simply can't stand cold and turns brown at the first sign of frost. In fact, it's virtually impossible to grow zoysia anywhere north of Washington, D.C., and Maryland on the Atlantic Coast or in the Midwest. Even though zoysia does green up quickly in the spring, a lawn that looks like a hayfield from October to March is a difficult sell.

In the right climatic regions, zoysia's popularity appears to be improving. Tom Tavella, LEED-AP (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Accredited Professionals), a director of design at Fuss & O'Neill in Manchester, Conn., and a past vice president of communications with the American Society of Landscape Architects, has been noticing newfound consumer interest in zoysiagrass. He feels zoysia's natural hardiness and low maintenance requirements are in line with evolving consumer expectations about environmental friendliness and their own climatic footprint. While

everyone still wants a green lawn for the better part of the year, a number of consumers are starting to feel that if the price of having a green lawn is a lot of water, chemical fertilizers and herbicides; the price is too high and, for them, it's acceptable to have a brown lawn part of the year.

Consumers with this mindset are more willing to consider installing zoysia because its characteristics match what they want from their lawns while others are increasingly concerned with the environment and the economy. Zoysia's ability to withstand high heat and minimal moisture requirement make it a better choice than traditional lawn grasses, particularly in the summer. Plus, its ability to grow (and prosper) in less than perfect soil conditions means less fertilizer is needed, and the fact that it chokes out other forms of plant growth adds incentive since fewer herbicides are needed to keep weed growth down. In addition, the fact that zoysia grows slowly and only needs to be cut every second week all contribute to lower maintenance costs, as well as reduced exhaust pollution.

Eli Pintilie from Green Future Construction, a full-service construction, architectural landscape and tree service company based in Silver Spring, Md., doesn't discount the environmental concerns of consumers, but he also provides a purely economic rationale for homeowners to consider zoysia for their lawns. As he says, installing zoysia definitely demands an investment up front, since modern methods of installing zoysia usually require sodding instead of seeding. Plus, since zoysia isn't as popular as other grasses and zoysia sod costs more than traditional grasses, initial acquisition and installation costs will be higher. However, the economic payback for a homeowner who plans on living in their home and paying for lawn services, comes as a result of the lower ongoing costs: less mowing, less water, less fertilizers and herbicides.

What does it all mean?

Zoysia is definitely not going to take over the world of lawn grasses, even in warmer climates. While its positive characteristics make it attractive to a group of consumers that are environmentally conscious and/or concerned with saving money over a period of years, its negative characteristics, primarily its unattractive color for a significant part of the year, means most homeowners will simply not be willing to put up with zoysia's growing pains. Most consumers aren't ready to give up on the idea that a lawn should be green in color, not just in its environmental impact.

The author has been a freelance writer for more than six years and has had over 800 articles published both in print and online, with many focusing on lawns and gardens.