

Establishing a stand of grass requires proper planning and attention to detail. Perennial grasses differ in establishment requirements compared to annual grain crops. Five keys to successful grass seeding and establishment are presented in the following narrative. Adhering to these guidelines will greatly improve your chances of a successful grass stand.

Table 1 Wisconsin Recommended Planting Dates for Conservation Cover		
Area	Cool Season Grasses	Warm Season Grasses
North	May 1—June 15 July 15—August 10	Thaw—July 15 October 8—Freeze up
Central	April 15—June 1 August 1—August 21	Thaw—June 30 October 15—Freeze up
South	April 1—May 15 August 7—August 29	Thaw—June 30 October 22—Freeze up
See Technical Standards for how snow cover, species, other intended use, and frost or dormant seeding may affect seeding date.		

Key #1—Seeding Date

Grasses should be seeded when soil moisture and temperature are optimum for germination. Grasses are designated either “cool” or “warm” season based on their growth cycle. Cool-season grasses can be planted when temperatures are cooler and day lengths shorter. Warm-season grasses need warmer temperatures and longer day



lengths to grow. Following are recommended planting dates for cool-season and warm-season grasses in Wisconsin.

Key #2—Seedbed

A proper seedbed is firm and free of competing vegetation. Correct firmness is when an adult footprint is only slightly visible on the prepared bed prior to the seeding operation. The seedbed can be firmed, if needed, by pulling a commercial or homemade packer or roller. A firm seedbed is essential for proper seeding depth. A loose, fluffy bed will place seeds too deep for proper germination. Seed requiring light for germination will be hindered by deep planting. Seed that germinates but does not have enough nutrient reserve for the shoot to reach the surface is also hindered by deep planting. Most species should be planted at a shallow depth of ¼ to ½ inch. Larger seeds can be planted up to 1 inch deep. Most seedings are too deep if you cannot see a few seeds on the soil surface.

Grasses can be successfully seeded into a tilled or no-tilled seedbed, provided weeds are controlled and residue is managed prior to planting. Weeds compete with seedlings for moisture and light. Optimum control comes with several years of weed management prior to seeding. At seeding time, there should be no actively growing weeds, and light. Unless erosion is a problem, companion crops are generally not recommended in grass seedings.

Residue affects seeding depth and seed soil contact. Tillage, fire, and mowing can be used to manage residue. Weeds can be controlled with tillage and/or herbicides applied before or just after seeding. Like weeds, companion crops can compete with the seeded species for water prior to seeding. Tolerable residue amounts are dependent on seeding equipment to be used. Residue should be harrowed to spread extra chaff and straw. Late summer and dormant seedings are best planted into standing stubble.

Table 2 Wisconsin Grass Seeding Rates				
Applicable Technical Standards				
	Conservation Cover 327	Pasture and Hayland 512	Critical Area Planting 342	Recommended Planting Depth (inches)
Recommended Seeding Rates (lb PLS/acre)				
Cool Season Grasses				
Canada bluejoint			0.1	0.25-0.5
Red fescue			2-5	0.25-0.5
Fowl manna-grass			0.1	0.25-0.5
Giant manna-grass			0.2	0.25-0.5
Kentucky blue-grass	8	7	2-8	0.25-0.5
Orchardgrass	0.5-10	2-10		0.25-0.5
Perennial rye-grass		8-25		0.25-0.5
Redtop	4		1-4	0.5
Reed canary-grass		3-6		0.25-0.5
Bromegrass	2-16	3-16	5-20	0.5-1
Tall fescue		10-25	10	0.25-0.5
Timothy	1-8	2-8	1-8	0.25-0.5
Wildrye spp.			1-1.1	0.25-0.5
Warm Season Grasses				
Big bluestem	1-10	10	1-1.6	0.25-0.5
Indiangrass	3-10	10	1-1.6	0.25-0.5
Little bluestem	1-10		1-2	0.25-0.5
Prairie cordgrass			0.1	0.25-0.5
Rice cutgrass			0.1	0.25-0.5
Sand dropseed			0.25-1	0.25-0.5
Sideoats grama		2	1-1.5	0.25-0.5
Switchgrass	1-6	6	0.5-1	0.25-0.5
Note: Seeding rate ranges under each standard are based on the proportion of each species in a given seed mixture. Refer to listed technical standards for recommended seeding mixes.				

Key #3—Seed Placement

The seeding equipment should provide proper seed depth, uniform seeding rate, and good seed to soil contact. Grass seed can be broadly categorized into three types: fluffy or chaffy, smooth small seed, and smooth large seed. Grass drills are equipped with separate boxes to properly place and meter each of the three seed types. Picker wheels and agitators in the fluffy/chaffy box and oversized feeder tubes keep rough coated seed flowing evenly. Depth bands on grass drills are essential for planting depth control. Press/packer wheels contribute to close seed/soil contact. Free flowing grass seed (e.g. bromegrass) can be successfully planted with a small grain drill if proper, shallow, and consistent seeding depth is maintained.

Drills should be calibrated to determine seeding rate. Seeding rate can be determined by counting dropped seeds after traveling a given distance on a hard surface, collecting seed from openers after traveling a given distance, or turning the drive wheel on the drill and collecting seed from openers. Contact the local NRCS office for additional information. See Table 2 for seeding rate ranges and planting depth of recommended grass species.



Picker wheel

Agitators

Press/packer

Key #4—Seed Quality

All seed must meet the requirement of the States' seed laws. The seed should be tested for purity and germination. Purity specifies any weeds and inert matter in the seed lot. Germination is an indication of the percentage of seed that will sprout and grow. Seed is usually purchased and planted on a Pure Live Seed (PLS) basis. This is calculated by multiplying purity by germination (including dormant). A high PLS usually indicates high quality seed. Seed of adapted species and recommended

cultivars within the species should be planted. Your local NRCS office can provide information on adapted species, cultivars or varieties, and seeding rates. See Table 2 for seeding rate ranges and planting depth of recommended grass species.

Seed with awns or other appendages is called "fluffy" or bearded. Debearded seed has part or all of the appendages removed and is more flowable. Flowability depends on degree of debearding.

Key #5— Fertility Management & Weed Control

Plant nutritional needs should be addressed and weeds should be controlled for a successful grass seeding. Nutritional needs should be met by applying lime and fertilizer according to a soil test recommendation.

Weeds compete for moisture and light with young seedlings. Competitive weeds can be controlled by clipping or chemically. Dense residue clippings should be removed from the seeded area. Weeds should be controlled with herbicides before they reach 4 inches tall. Carefully read and follow all instructions on pesticide labels.

The two main reasons grass seedings fail are planting too deep and lack of weed control.

For more information, contact:

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Five Keys to Successful Grass Seeding in Wisconsin

- ➔ Seeding Date
- ➔ Seedbed
- ➔ Seed Placement
- ➔ Seed Quality
- ➔ Fertility Management & Weed Control

