

Lawn



Preparing Ground

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PREPARING THE SITE

There should be a gap of at least three months between the start of site preparation and the laying of turf or the sowing of seed. This may seem a long time but there are a number of jobs to do and the soil must be given time to settle before the final smooth surface is created. Work should start in early summer for autumn sowing or turfing.

STEP 1
SPRING
OR
EARLY
SUMMER

Get down to bare earth

If you have moved into a new house, clear away the bricks, rubble, rubbish and piles of subsoil left by the builder.

The site of a new lawn is usually an overgrown patchwork of weeds and grass. First, dig out tree stumps and roots — left in the soil they could lead to a toadstool problem later on. Next, dig out perennial weeds and then treat the area with Weedol.

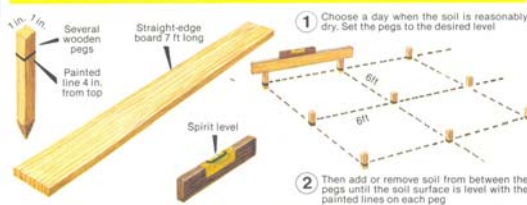
Think carefully before leaving any trees within the proposed lawn area. Trees and lawns really do not go together — see page 6.

STEP 2
EARLY
SUMMER

Grade the site (Omit this step if levelling is not required)

The purpose of grading is to change the contours of the site so that the approximate final level is obtained. Note that the lawn does not have to be perfectly horizontal — a slight slope will help drainage. However it should be level, without any bumps and hollows — gentle undulations are acceptable in a large lawn but are out of place in a small plot.

HOW TO OBTAIN A LEVEL SURFACE



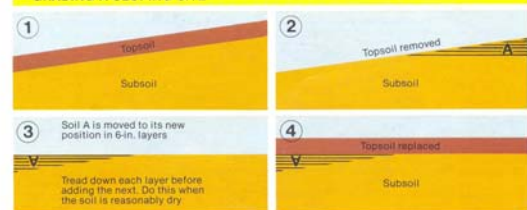
GRADING A SITE WITH MINOR BUMPS AND HOLLOWES

Do not shave off the tops of the bumps to fill the hollows unless the topsoil is deep. It is better to bring in topsoil from elsewhere in the garden or to buy a load for this purpose.

GRADING A SITE WITH MAJOR BUMPS AND HOLLOWES

Remove the topsoil and stack it at a convenient point. Make all the alterations with the subsoil. When the desired level has been obtained, replace the topsoil. On no account should subsoil be brought to the surface. If the topsoil layer is less than 6 inches thick, buy a load or two from a local supplier.

GRADING A SLOPING SITE



PREPARING THE SITE continued

STEP 3
SUMMER

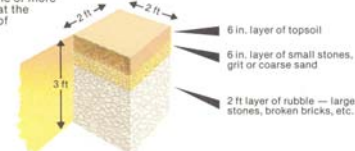
Drain the site (Omit this step if the site does not waterlog)

Good drainage is essential for a first rate lawn, and it is fortunate that thorough digging and the addition of soil improvers (see Stage 4 below) is all that is required for most soils. You may be unfortunate enough to have a site which is clayey and where water remains on the surface after heavy rain. Some form of drainage is essential here, or the lawn will rapidly deteriorate.

If levelling is undertaken, put in the drainage system when grading (Step 2). If levelling is not necessary, put in the drainage system when digging (Step 4). Simple systems are described below — tile drainage is elaborate and costly.

SIMPLE DRAINAGE SYSTEM FOR A SLOPING SITE

Construct one or more soakaways at the lowest part of the site.



SIMPLE DRAINAGE SYSTEM FOR A LEVELLED SITE

Before replacing the topsoil after grading, spread a layer of rubble on the subsoil and press it well down. Add a layer of grit or coarse sand and then replace the topsoil.



TILE DRAINAGE SYSTEM — EFFECTIVE, BUT EXPENSIVE

Very few gardens warrant the costly and elaborate system of laying drainpipes in gravel-lined tunnels, but it is undoubtedly the best method of draining a site which has a subsoil of impervious clay.

STEP 4
SUMMER

Dig the site

Digging should be done with a fork or spade to a depth of about 9 inches, or less if the topsoil is shallow. Do not bring up the subsoil — if there is less than 6 inches of topsoil, you should buy a load or two or make up the deficit. The right time to dig is controlled by the weather — the soil must be reasonably dry. Depending on the soil type, the addition of sand or peat may be necessary at this stage.

If you are not used to digging, the cultivation of an average-sized plot can be exhausting and even dangerous if you are not fit. Consider hiring a mechanical cultivator — it may not be as effective as a fork or spade but it will certainly be less tiring. Whichever method you use, large stones and the roots of perennial weeds should be removed as the work proceeds.



HEAVY SOIL

Work in at least 28 lb of lime-free sand per sq. yard when digging. If subsoil is clay, fork the bottom of the trench to the full depth of the prongs.

LIGHT SOIL

Work in about 7 lb of peat per sq. yard when digging.

STEP 5 Break down the clods

SUMMER

If the clods left after digging are not properly broken down, then settlement is bound to occur later and your lawn will be uneven. The problem of bumps and hollows in established turf is difficult to cure, but it is easy to prevent.

All you have to do at this stage is to trample the roughly dug earth with your feet. As you proceed break up hard clods with either a heavy metal rake or the back of a garden fork — remove debris, weeds and large stones at this stage.

If the site is large you can use a rotary cultivator set to work at a shallow depth. Whichever method you choose for breaking down the clods, you must pick a day when the soil is reasonably dry.

For autumn sowing or turfing this step will have to take place shortly after digging, but if the soil is heavy and you plan to sow in April, then delay breaking down the clods until spring.

STEP 6 Firm the siteABOUT
A WEEK
LATER

The next step is to consolidate the soil and produce a reasonable tilth in the top inch or two. Once again your feet are the best tool to use — walk with short overlapping steps with all your weight on your heels. Choose a day when the soil is fairly dry — on no account should the top few inches be saturated with water.

The soft spots will be revealed by deep footprints. Rake the surface level and remove stones and debris. Repeat the treading and raking process until the site is firm enough not to show deep heel-marks, yet soft enough to have a crumbly structure in the top inch or two.

A garden roller is sometimes recommended for firming the soil but this can be an unsatisfactory method. Air pockets are often left, and when they eventually settle an uneven surface is produced.

STEP 7 Fallow the siteFROM
FIRMING
UNTIL
STEP 8

The purpose of fallowing is to get rid of the dormant weed seeds which could germinate and cause a problem in the new lawn. This step is therefore necessary where seed is to be sown but is much less important prior to turfing.

The traditional method is to hoe and then rake at about monthly intervals throughout the summer, but this makes site preparation a lengthy job. The simplest plan is to hoe the site regularly if weeds appear during the period between firming and the time you plan to sow seed. Alternatively, let the weeds develop after firming and apply Weedol just before Step 8.

STEP 8 Get the site ready for sowing or turfingJUST
BEFORE
SOWING
OR
TURFING

You have now reached the final stage. Use a long straight plank to check whether the soil is level — rake gently to remove bumps and fill in hollows.

If you plan to sow seed or if the site to be turfed is distinctly bumpy, you will need a more accurate method of levelling. Attach a rope to a ladder, as illustrated, and drag this home-made screed over the surface after the top inch or two has been loosened by raking.

The site is now ready for seeding or turfing. When seed is to be sown, there should be very few lumps on the surface which are larger than a grain of wheat.

Sowing Seed

SOWING SEED

To reach the stage of the final seed bed takes a lot of hard work and patience. In contrast, seed sowing is a simple and straightforward task, but carelessness at this stage can undo all your hard work.

The most important pitfall is buying a poor seed mixture which will inevitably lead to a disappointing result. You can do this by purchasing a 'bargain' mixture, full of broad-leaved Perennial Ryegrass, or you can buy a perfectly good seed mixture . . . which just happens to be quite wrong for your particular needs and situation. Avoid the pitfall of buying the wrong seed by reading the section below *before* you go shopping.

Seed Mixtures

There is no such thing as the perfect seed mixture for every situation — the right one for you will depend on the type of lawn you have in mind (luxury or utility grade) and the type of site you have in the garden (shady, sunny, clayey or sandy).

Don't be swayed by pretty pictures, pretty names or glowing sales messages. Read the package carefully to make sure that it meets your needs. If you have decided on a luxury lawn (see page 9), then you will want a mixture of Fescues and Bents. You will not find much variation here — most of the mixtures available are similar to the formula given on the right.

Utility Grade Mixtures, on the other hand, vary enormously. Basically they consist of a mixture of fine-leaved and coarser grasses drawn from the species listed on pages 10–14. Remember that the more expensive mixtures can usually be relied upon to contain better varieties than the cheaper blends.

It has long been the practice to divide Utility Grade Mixtures into cheap blends containing Perennial Ryegrass and distinctly superior blends which contain no Perennial Ryegrass. The recent introduction of the dwarf and fine-leaved varieties of Perennial Ryegrass, such as Hunter and Manhattan, make this division less meaningful these days. A simple rule to follow if you want a top quality utility lawn is to avoid a mixture containing Perennial Ryegrass unless the package makes it quite clear that a low-growing, fine-leaved variety of this grass has been used.

If your site is either particularly clayey or very sandy, check that the mixture is suitable for such a situation or buy a tailor-made blend. There are mixtures for shady sites, but cutting higher and less frequently than normal are more important here than buying a special mixture.

Typical Blends

<p>LUXURY GRADE MIXTURE</p> <p>8 parts Chewings Fescue 2 parts Browntop</p>	<p>UTILITY GRADE MIXTURE (with Ryegrass)</p> <p>3 parts Perennial Ryegrass 1 part Timothy 2 parts Smooth-stalked Meadow grass 3 parts Chewings Fescue 1 part Browntop</p>
<p>UTILITY GRADE MIXTURE (without Ryegrass)</p> <p>4 parts Smooth-stalked Meadow grass 2 parts Creeping Red Fescue 3 parts Chewings Fescue 1 part Browntop</p>	<p>SHADY SITE MIXTURE</p> <p>5 parts Rough-stalked Meadow grass 3 parts Wood Meadow grass 2 parts Creeping Red Fescue</p> <p>Note: Many experts advise ordinary Utility Mixtures for shady sites</p>

Seed Carpets

Grass seed embedded in a fibrous or plastic mat has been available for many years, but these grass-seed carpets have never become popular. They are easy to lay, but they have to be anchored securely after laying and they are of course more expensive than ordinary seed.

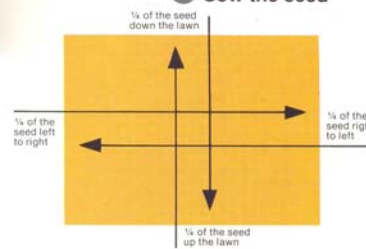
1 Feed the soil

Unless the plot has been recently fed, apply 2 oz of Growmore per sq. yard about a week before the final preparation of the seed bed (Stage 6, page 91). Lightly rake into the surface.

2 Choose the right day

The best time of the year is early or mid-September when the soil is still warm and the chance of a water-shortage problem is declining. April sowing is often successful but watering will be necessary if the summer is dry, and watering is a tricky operation on the newly-sown lawn. Choosing the right day is also important. The top of the soil should be dry with moist soil just below the surface. Delay sowing if mud is sticking to your boots. The weather should be fine and calm.

3 Sow the seed



Buy sufficient seed to allow an application rate of 1–1½ oz per sq. yard. Lower rates may mean that the lawn remains thin and sparse for an unnecessarily long time — higher rates increase the risk of damping off (see page 80).

Gently rake the surface soil in straight lines so that very shallow furrows are produced. Shake the box or bag of seed thoroughly and weigh out the amount required to cover the site — remember you will have to sow about 3 in. beyond the edge of the final size of the lawn you have planned. Next, divide the seed into four equal parts and then sow each part as evenly as possible — see the illustration. By sowing in quarters the errors of distribution and the chance of missed patches are reduced. Instead of broadcasting the seed by hand, a distributor can be used. In this case apply half the seed across and the other half up and down the site.

4 Protect the sown seed



The two immediate enemies are water shortage and birds. To help combat the first problem, lightly rake the whole area with a spring-line rake to partly cover the seeds. Do not try to bury them or germination will be patchy. Rolling the seed bed after sowing used to be recommended. Don't do it.

The second problem can be a serious one. The use of bird repellent by the seedsman will have reduced the risk of birds using the seed as a source of food, but it will not prevent birds from using the seed bed as a dust bath. The answer is to criss-cross strands of black thread 3 or 4 inches above the ground. Stand on a plank and not on the seed bed when you do this job.

5 Trim and care for the seedlings

Time of sowing	Time taken for shoots to appear
Autumn	1–2 weeks
Spring	2–3 weeks

The seedlings will appear 7–21 days after sowing. If rain has not fallen for several days at the time of germination you may have to water the plot. Take care to do this very gently — use a fine-roset watering can or a lawn sprinkler which produces a fine spray. A coarse spray may wash the seedlings out of the ground.

When the grass is 2 or 3 inches high, remove any stones and then gently sweep away worm casts and leaves on a day when the surface is dry. Follow this with a light rolling using the back roller of a cylinder mower with the cutter head held high. This treatment firms the soil lifted by the germinating grass and encourages the seedlings to produce new shoots.

After a few days the shoots will once again be erect and the time has come for the first cut. Only the top ½ inch of the grass should be removed and the mower blades must be sharp. Use a sidewheel mower, a rotary mower or a roller mower with the front roller removed. On an autumn-sown site no further cutting will be required until the spring — on a spring-sown site regular mowing will be necessary and the blades should be gradually lowered.

6 Take care of the new lawn

Although the young grass may look healthy and vigorous, the new lawn should be tended carefully and not subjected to any heavy traffic for 12 months after sowing. Water carefully when necessary, and keep a careful watch for disease right from the beginning. Weeds can be an additional problem — see pages 80–81 for the diagnosis of and cure for new lawn troubles.

Laying Turf

LAYING TURF

The disadvantages of turf compared with seed as a method of producing a new lawn are both obvious and important. Good turves are expensive and hard to find, and you can never be sure of getting just the grasses you want unless you invest in seeded turf. So the golden rule is to make sure you get value for money by examining a sample before you buy and then examining the turves at laying time.

Turves can be obtained in a number of sizes, ranging from 1 sq. foot to 1 sq. yard, with 1 ft x 3 ft as the most popular size. Turfing is heavy work, but it has an attraction which for many outweighs all of the disadvantages — the bare soil is transformed into a 'finished lawn' in the span of a few hours.

Buying turf

Cheapest of all and by far the most popular type is **Meadow turf**. Unfortunately the farmer's idea of good grass is almost completely opposed to the needs of the gardener, and there may be hardly any lawn grasses present. Good quality Meadow turf can produce a hard-wearing utility lawn, but poor quality Meadow turf merely provides a sea of weed grasses. Obtain a sample before you buy it — if this is not possible, tell the supplier that you expect lawn turf and not rough grassland.

The turf covering the South Downs is made up almost entirely of fine-leaved grasses, and **Downland turf** is much better than the ordinary Meadow variety. Best of all is **Parkland turf**, stripped from a site close to your home.

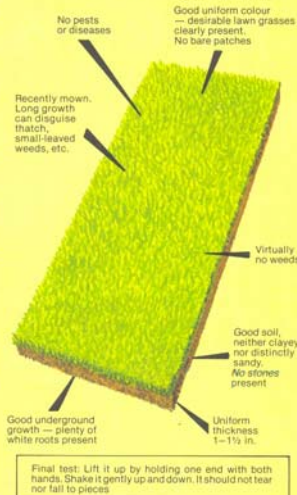
The legend of **Cumberland turf** (sea-washed turf) as the best of all types still persists. It is obtained from salt marshes and is composed of Creeping Red Fescue and Creeping Bent. Unfortunately it is difficult to maintain once it is away from its coastal habitat and nearly always deteriorates quite rapidly in the hands of the amateur gardener.

Seeded Turf

Seeded turf first appeared on the amateur market in 1960, but it has been used for a number of years in landscape gardening and the construction of sports grounds. Unlike standard turf, which is cut from meadows, salt marshes etc., this new form is obtained by sowing lawn grasses on a suitable substrate. The resulting turf is weed-free, composed entirely of desirable lawn grasses and is much lighter in weight than standard turf.

	Mature grass type	Seeding grass type
Brand available	Rolawn	Bravura
Age of grass	12–18 months	8–10 weeks
Base	Soil (1½ in. thick)	Growing medium on a plastic mesh
Size of roll	1½ ft x 6¼ ft	2½ ft x 11 ft

THE SIGNS OF GOOD TURF



1 Order the turf

Find a reputable supplier and buy the best quality you can afford — the cheapest grade is bound to produce a poor quality lawn. Order about 5 per cent more than the calculated area to allow for wastage. There may not be a choice in turf sizes, but you should remember that small turves are much easier to lay than large ones. Plan exactly where the turf is to be stacked — do this before the lorry arrives!

2 Feed the soil

Unless the plot has been recently fed, apply 2 oz of Growmore per sq. yard about a week before the final preparation of the plot (Stage 8, page 91). Lightly rake into the surface.

3 Get the plot ready

Mark out the area to be turfed, using a garden line for the straight edges. Curves are more difficult to mark — scratch out a shallow drill with a stick and fill this boundary line with sand.

4 Get the turf ready

Standard turves (1 ft x 3 ft) will be rolled up when delivered to you. Laying should take place as soon as possible after delivery — turf can deteriorate quite quickly.

If the turf is to be laid within 3 days of delivery



Store in a stack 3–4 turves high

If the turf is to be laid more than 3 days after delivery



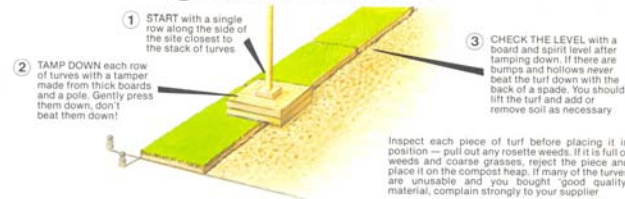
Spread out the turves in a shady spot. Water if necessary.

5 Choose the right day

The best time of the year is October or November, but turfing can continue right up to February provided that the soil is neither frozen nor waterlogged. You can turf in March or April, but this will mean regular watering when the weather is dry — failure to do so will mean shrinkage of the turves and death of the roots.

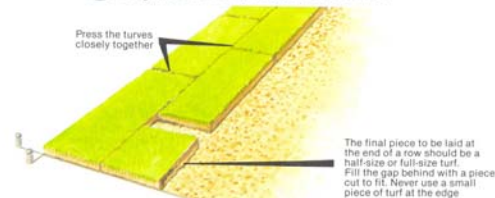
Choosing the right day is also important. Laying turf in the rain is a filthy job, so pick a fine day when the soil is reasonably dry.

6 Lay the first row of turves



Inspect each piece of turf before placing it in position — pull out any rosette weeds. If it is full of weeds and coarse grasses, reject the piece and place it on the compost heap. If many of the turves are unusable and you bought 'good quality' material, complain strongly to your supplier.

7 Lay the second row of turves

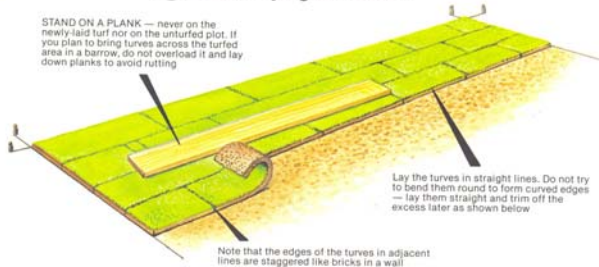


The final piece to be laid at the end of a row should be a half-size or full-size turf. Fill the gap behind with a piece cut to fit. Never use a small piece of turf at the edge.

LAYING TURF *continued*

8 Finish laying the turves

STAND ON A PLANK — never on the newly-laid turf nor on the unturfed plot. If you plan to bring turves across the turfed area in a barrow, do not overload it and lay down planks to avoid rutting.



Lay the turves in straight lines. Do not try to bend them round to form curved edges — lay them straight and trim off the excess later as shown below.

Note that the edges of the turves in adjacent lines are staggered like bricks in a wall.

9 Fill the cracks

Make up the top dressing recommended for heavy soil — see page 31. Spread this sandy soil along the cracks and work it well into the turves with a broom or the back of a rake. This will help the turves to knit together. This step is essential — an additional job, which is not essential, is a light rolling of the new turf about 7 days after laying.

10 Trim the edges



Trim the edges with a half-moon edging iron. Stand on a board — use it as your guide. If you are cutting a straight edge. For curves use a hose-pipe as your guide, as shown in the illustration.

11 Take care of the new lawn

When the grass begins to grow in spring you will have to start the new-lawn establishment programme. First of all, cut the lawn with the blades set high, so only the tips of the grass leaves are removed. As the season progresses the blades should be gradually lowered until the recommended height of cut (see page 27) is reached.

In late April or during May apply a quick-acting fertilizer such as Bio Lawn Tonic. Top dressing at this stage will help to smooth out any minor bumps and hollows, and a weedkiller can be used on autumn-laid turf. Remember that the new lawn is more susceptible than established turf to damage by drought, so water thoroughly during prolonged dry spells.

Synthetic Lawn

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THE SYNTHETIC LAWN



Synthetic playing surfaces have been used to replace natural turf in numerous areas of the sports world, and it seems that their use will increase over the years. For many gardeners, however, the idea of using plastic lawn at home is an obscenity.

Others, including the author, consider that it can have a role to play in the garden — provided that it is never used where natural grass could be cultivated and maintained. In many gardens there is an area or two which has to support foot traffic but cannot be laid down to grass. Typical examples are balconies, terraces, poolside and conservatories. The usual answer is to pave the site with stone or concrete tiles, but synthetic turf offers an attractive and lightweight alternative. Like stone it can be hosed down or brushed but unlike stone it is resilient and provides a reasonably natural-looking base for pot plants, as the photograph above clearly shows.

The modern synthetic lawn is made of polypropylene and is available in rolls which are usually 6 ft or 12 ft wide. The grass-like tufts are treated to prevent weathering and fading, and there are no problems in laying or maintenance. But there is one piece of vital advice — always obtain samples from a number of suppliers before purchasing. Some types are surprisingly life-like — others look nothing like grass. Synthetic turf is expensive, costing as much or even more than your living-room carpet, but the cheap sorts can be distinctly disappointing.

Once you have made your choice and received your roll of lawn carpet it will be necessary to prepare the site. It will have to be clean, smooth, firm and dry. Some manufacturers say that their turf can be spread out like a rug, but for satisfactory results you should stick it down with an adhesive — always use the one recommended in the instruction leaflet. The plastic turf can be cut to fit quite easily with a pair of scissors or a sharp knife.

All of this seems a far cry from the naturalness and needs of the grass lawn, but the way to regard synthetic turf is as a substitute for paving stones and gravel, and not as a substitute for natural turf.