

## Week 5 – *Establishing a new lawn – proper planting practices*

Welcome back to my fifth weekly blog of the 2011 season. We hope that everyone enjoyed a wonderful Easter weekend and are raring to get back into our yards and gardens.

In between the rain drops, I have managed to cut my front yard for a second time this season.....it looks like a lush green carpet right now. My Magnolia and Serviceberry are about to show colour this week and of course the Forsythia are a little more advanced but not quite fully open.....great time of year. For many of you, we addressed the turf maintenance side of things in my week 2 blog. We also discussed planting and perennial planting in week 4. We would like to discuss the establishment of a new lawn and proper planting practices for other landscape plants this week. Let us get started.

### **Establishing a new lawn**

Homeowners have a decision to make on which means they should go with, regarding the establishment of a new lawn. The two main means of establishment of course is seed or sod. Both have pros and cons, listed some of the key factors.

#### ***Seeded lawns:***

- a) Lower cost than sod produced lawns
- b) Provide more variety in terms of selection of cultivars/varieties of seed
- c) Provide more options for customizing a mixture or blend
- d) Is less labour intensive versus sod produced lawns
- e) Process can be completed in a more timely fashion, versus sod, due to no delays in delivery

#### ***Sod generated lawns:***

- a) Provide instant gratification in terms of finished product
- b) Provide fewer weed problems in the near term versus seeded lawns
- c) Provide an extended season in which you can establish a lawn area successfully (provided you have irrigation or good watering practices during the summer)

For specialty turf areas like putting greens and similar surfaces, a few less common means of turf establishment include plugs, sprigs and stolons. All of these methods are vegetative establishment methods (like sod) where small sections of turf are cut into circular “plugs” or strips of sod are actually shredded and spread on the surface. Regardless of whether you use one of these less common methods or seed/sod, the preparation should be similar. Let us look at what is involved.

### **Site preparation**

If you are dealing with a new home construction, it is very important to have an appropriate depth of topsoil over the whole turfgrass area as well as sufficient slope. The grading should be carried out to provide sufficient slope away from the home to your property lines and curb areas. A minimum of 1-3% slope is advisable (1-3” drop over 100” length) so that water does not puddle near your home and cause

drainage issues. Skilled landscape contractors like Bellaire Landscape Inc. can assist you with proper rough/finished grade and turf establishment.

In an earlier blog, it was suggested how important aeration of the root zone was for maintaining good turf. It is therefore of great importance to attempt to establish the most favourable root zone depth as one can afford. If you are left with a rough grade of sub soil (clay based soil), it is advisable to attempt to rough up or carry out a quick cultivation of this lower soil before adding your topsoil. This will allow any/all topsoil to integrate with the sub soil and provide a uniform transition zone for your root system. I would also recommend that if you can afford several centimetres of topsoil now, it will pay dividends down the road. The addition of 7.5 cm (3") of topsoil is good, 10 cm (4") is better while 15 cm (6") is better yet.....affordability will be the issue. Be sure to check with municipal building codes for your finished grade level so as to allow the maximum amount of topsoil that you can afford. Bellaire Landscape Inc. and Essex Landscape Supply will be glad to calculate and supply your topsoil needs for your lawn/garden project.

Once the topsoil layer is at finished grade, the incorporation of a good quality starter fertilizer is recommended. Products high in phosphorous (to promote good root development) are recommended at this time. If these products cannot be incorporated into the topsoil/root zone area prior to finished grade, surface application is second best. Be sure to follow package directions on the bag so that appropriate amounts are applied.

### **Turf installation**

As noted in Blog 2, choose the best mixture or blend of fresh turf grass lawn seed that is suited to your site conditions. If the area is relatively sunny then selections of Kentucky bluegrass are the industry standard. They are best mixed with selections of Perennial ryegrass (which will germinate quickly and act as a nurse grass to the slower germinating bluegrass) and in some cases with Fescues. The Fescue selections are more suitable for drier conditions and shade situations. Talk to the experts at Essex Landscape Supply to determine what is best for your situation.

The seed can be either broadcast over the lawn area with a calibrated fertilizer applicator/hand seeder or drop seeded with a similar type drop fertilizer spreader. After applying the seed uniformly over the area, lightly fan rake the whole area and begin the watering practice. If the area is too large to manually seed, consider hiring a contractor that will precision drill the seed into the lawn area.

If sodding your lawn, be sure to allow sufficient time for preparation prior to the delivery of your sod. The sod is largely based on a blend of Kentucky bluegrass selections that are produced for sunny and partial shade situations. When laying your sod, start from a straight edge (house, driveway, etc.) and lay out staggered rows across the face of the slope. This will aid in preventing any wash outs and erosion after heavy rains or excess irrigation. Be sure to tuck strips of sod tightly together so no visible seams are apparent. Utilize a sharp garden spade or knife to cut cleanly around curved beds and other objects. A light hand pulled roller is also recommended to compress the fresh sod surface into close contact with the topsoil below.

## **After care**

Watering practices are most critical in the establishment of both seed and sod. Newly seeded lawns require light and frequent watering until emergence of the majority of seed. The amount and duration of water is then gradually increased to promote a deep rooting and full establishment. New sod requires heavy or thorough watering initially and continually to prevent drying out and quick root system establishment. Monitoring the watering/irrigation for both seed and sod is critical for a successful lawn. Once fully established, lawns require about 3.75 cm (1.5") of rainfall equivalent per week to sustain green, active growth.

Mowing can be carried out with a light push mower after your seeded lawn has grown to the 5-7.5 cm (2-3") height. Avoid larger/heavier equipment initially or be sure that water has not been excessive to prevent rutting and damage. Sod can also be cut once top growth has emerged above your standard cutting height.

Your initial starter fertilizer will have aided in root development and provided an initial top growth type of feed. You are relatively safe to fertilize a newly seeded lawn after your first few cuts or approximately 4 weeks after seeding. A newly sodded lawn can also be fertilized approximately 1 month after establishment. In both cases, use a good quality, slow release type product that is properly calibrated and spread over the entire turf surface. It is a good idea to apply this feed immediately before a rainfall or water in immediately after feeding. Most lawns are designed to favour three feedings per year however this can increase based on desire and species. Consult with your experts on what is best suited for your site.

Weed controls on newly seeded lawns should be avoided until after the first cuts. Turfgrass is more sensitive to products in the tender youthful stage. \* Avoid corn gluten based fertilizer products for weed control on newly seeded lawns due to their ability to prevent seed germination of weeds as well as turf seed.

## **Planting Practices**

When considering some facts for success in planting trees and shrubs, I was told by one of my former colleagues many years ago "it is best to dig a \$5.00 hole for a 50 cent plant" .....this is great advice. Professional associations like Landscape Ontario (which Bellaire Landscape Inc. is a member) develop planting specifications for the industry that employ this same train of thought. Just think about how much easier it would be for the new fine hair roots of a newly planted Maple tree to grow into a large, well prepared planting pit versus one that was restrictive and carved exactly to size.....there is no comparison. A well prepared planting pocket that is at least two times the diameter of the existing root system of the nursery plant is a good starting point. Landscape Ontario specifications call for planting pits to be 30 cm. larger than existing root systems. Extra prepared/conditioned soil volume around a newly planted nursery plant will aid the plant in maximizing root growth and ultimately transplant success. I have mentioned to my students many times, we want the plants to not only exist after planting, we prefer that they thrive.

A good planting pit should have all debris removed from the parent soil. I generally recommend to add up to 1/3 of the volume removed with conditioned topsoil and/or organic matter such as peat moss, compost, cattle or sheep manure, etc. In addition, add your starter charge of fertilizer and blend this mixture together (parent soil, fertilizer and organic matter) before back filling around the root zone of newly planted selection.

Now that we have our backfill and planting pit ready, be sure to understand the type of nursery plant you have. If the nursery plant is grown in a plastic container, this pot should be removed prior to planting. Generally the root system is quite full and the plant benefits from a light teasing of the outer root tips with your fingers. As with all of these methods, center the plant in the planting pocket, no deeper than it is found in the container (or slightly higher in heavier soils) and carefully backfill with conditioned mixture. While backfilling, firm in the soil around the root ball and thoroughly water in the plant.

A paper type container (generally brown in colour) provides you a choice of removing the top only of the pot (top lip) or carefully removing the whole container. These plants usually have a heavier soil base planting media in the pot and can easily fall apart if container is fully removed. If unsure, remove only the top lip area and allow the remainder of the pot to biodegrade. If root system is wrapped in burlap, center plant in planting pit, cut all strings and ties supporting the root ball and fold back top half (approximately) of burlap and cut away or fold down into planting pit.

Large plants grown with wire baskets should ideally have the basket removed at planting time. This is best accomplished once plant is centered in the hole, generally planted at approximately 7.5 cm (3") higher than the surrounding grade (Landscape Ontario specification) to allow for settling and drainage. Carefully remove any top strings attached around tree trunk and wire basket, fold back wire basket and determine how solid root ball is. If the root ball appears to be very loose than use bolt cutters to remove upper portion of basket only and plant tree with remaining basket in planting pit. If root ball is relatively solid, I always make an attempt to carefully cut and remove the basket from the tree and then continue with the planting practice.

For larger trees and specimen plants, it is recommended that the trees be supported/staked for up to one year after planting. Staking specifications vary pending size/type of plant. Talk to your experts at Essex Landscape Supply for recommendations on proper staking practices on your new tree.

With watering practices, I have always suggested that a homeowner is better off to water more thoroughly and less often than light, frequent and daily watering. In order for plants to generate new roots, it must have soil, water and also air in the root zone region (topic of forthcoming blog). We sometimes overlook this recipe for success and hence often over water many of our plantings. We are not saying that you let them dry out totally, we just want them uniformly moistened, aired out and repeated every 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> day depending on water volume applied. Monitor leaves and foliage on plants and look for signs of slight flagging, leaf discolouration or dark/light colour of soil conditions at root zone area. All monitoring will aid you in determining best water practices for your newly planted selections.

Whether it is establishing a new lawn or shade tree, now is a great time to plant. Be sure to stop by the garden center and check out the wonderful selections of fresh nursery stock arriving daily. The friendly staff will be glad to point out what is new for 2011 and give you some great advice on what would be best suited for that garden space you wish to fill this spring.

As a reminder, if you have any gardening/landscaping related questions about your yard, feel free to contact me through the [Bellairelandscape.com](http://Bellairelandscape.com) site. We will attempt to respond as quickly as we can. Until next week.....happy gardening!

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