



## Sodding vs. Seeding



### Sod or Seed? The Question of the Ages

BY JOE O'DONNELL

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As part of a company that is a basic producer of both sod and seed, we have seen over the years that there is definitely more than one path to customer satisfaction.

The idea of sod battling it out with seed as to which 'rules' is right up there with some of the great feuds of our time:

- Steel vs. graphite
- Aluminum vs. vinyl
- Concrete vs. asphalt
- Hot fudge vs. caramel with pecans

However, for the purposes of this exercise, we do have a winner. The jury will not have to deadlock on this issue. The winner by knock-out is Sod!

No other product can offer the instant customer gratification and satisfaction that sod offers. At times, in a matter of minutes, a site can be transformed from a bare, plain site into a green, lush, soft, relaxing landscape. This process can happen so fast with sod that a customer is sometimes shocked at the speed of the transformation. From the standpoint of being able to provide even more than what is expected, the customer response is often, "WOW! I didn't know sod could make such a difference."

Using seed can provide satisfaction to the customer over time but the process is not anywhere as dramatic and requires much more patience and input along the way. The watering requirements for seed are much more precise and demanding than for sod. Because of the continuous nature of the germination process, the requirement that the seed be kept moist without alternate wetting and drying, seed must be watered much more frequently than sod.

With the new seed laying in the top 1/4 in. of the soil, it is only that narrow layer that can influence seed germination. Since soil dries from the top down, when that layer dries out, any moisture below it is unavailable to the seed. Infrequent, heavy watering does not satisfy this requirement as it does for mature turf.

Since even new sod comes with substantial plant material, it can use this mass to hold and store moisture which even a newly seeded area with mulch can not do.

Once sod has been laid properly it provides soil stabilization and erosion protection that is not afforded by seed. Seed, even seed that has been mulched, is much more vulnerable for an extended period of time to erosion and run-off than is sod.

From a weed control standpoint, a seeded site will fight more battles with volunteer weeds than will a sodded site. When new seeded sites are prepared and the soil is turned over, the weed seed reservoir present in the soil is stimulated and the potential for weed growth and competition is established. The seeded site, initially being open with very little in the way of desirable grasses, may have very high soil temperatures, presenting an opportunity for weed germination and antagonism.

The sodded area does not have to fight this battle, since it covers and out-competes the weeds that might have germinated. To add to the complexity of the seeded site, the turf manager has to carefully choose the proper weed control material for the specific problem weeds and insure that the material is applied properly and at the right stage of development of the desirable grasses.

All these factors (proper watering, dealing with erosion and stabilization, and weed control issues) add to the "hidden costs" of the seeding process. When the cost per unit area is compared for seed and sod, the initial lower cost of the seed is greatly mitigated by the down-the-road time and hidden costs of seeding.

My vote: Sod first, seed second, pave third.

### "Ya Gotta" Like Seeding!

BY BARRY C. TROUTMAN, PH.D.

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In this world of high speed Internet, the instant gratification of sod seems the perfect answer. There are times and places where sod is the best choice, but when the time and place are right for seeding; choosing sod is like buying a Big Mac when you can slowly char grill the perfect sirloin burger with your favorite bun while drinking a cold beer and still have some change in your pocket.

Seed is not always an option: St Augustine grass can't be seeded and I wouldn't wish bahiarass seeding on Joe O'Donnell. While seed is now available for zoysia and bermudagrass, breeders are just beginning to approach the quality and uniformity with seeded turf of these species that has been available in sod varieties for the last 30 years.

Season is also important when deciding whether to sod or seed. Cool-season grasses are best seeded in the early fall or in early spring. Tall fescue can be seeded in Atlanta from late August to early November and with limited success in early spring. As you move north to Columbus, OH, bluegrass and fescue may be seeded in fall and spring with almost equal success. Even further north, say Detroit or New England, bluegrass and fescue with good irrigation can be seeded in fall, spring and summer.

Warm-season grasses are best seeded in late spring or early summer. Generally-warm season grasses are slower to germinate and, unlike cool season grass, are somewhat slow to develop a dense hardy lawn. Late summer and fall seedlings of bermudagrass are more susceptible to winter injury.

When properly timed, seeding gives us the opportunity to plant the best-adapted species not only for your climate but also for the specific conditions of sun, shade and moisture at the site you are planting. This is achieved by using custom mixtures and blends of seed. Mixtures are combinations of different species such as mixtures of sun-loving bluegrass and shade-adapted fine fescues. As seeds in this mixture germinate and develop, the bluegrass will dominate in full sun and the fescue will dominate in the shade.

Blends are combinations of different varieties of the same species that can be used to maximize the lawn's resistant to stress and disease problems. Blending two or three varieties with different characteristics can maximize survival of any single stress or disease event. Seeding new varieties into a weak existing lawn can improve color density and health of the lawn.

NTEP has done your homework: The National Turfgrass Evaluation Program continually evaluates performance of turfgrass species and varieties at multiple locations across the country. By accessing the results of these trials ([www.ntep.org](http://www.ntep.org)) you can determine the relative strength and weakness of each variety.



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