

Tall Fescue

Cool-season grasses grow well during the cool (60 to 75 °F) months of the year. They may undergo stress, become dormant or be injured during the hot months of summer and may require significantly more water than the warm-season grasses. They are adapted to the upper regions of the state and will not grow along the coast.

Tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*) is perhaps the most popular grass in the mountains and upper piedmont areas of South Carolina, which extend as far east as Columbia. Its popularity relates to its ease of establishment through seeding and its green color during the winter months when warm-season turfgrasses are dormant and brown. All of the species adapted to South Carolina can be planted by seed, the most economical method of establishing a lawn. Tall fescue is a perennial bunch-type grass that grows rapidly during spring and fall. Because of this bunch-type growth, spring preemergence herbicides are generally necessary to keep a lawn relatively free of weeds. Tall fescue is adapted to a wide range of soil conditions but grows best on fertile, well-drained soils with a soil pH between 5.5 and 6.5. It often needs irrigation to remain attractive during the summer. Established tall fescue lawns tend to thin out and become "clumpy" and may

need annual reseeding every fall, especially in areas where it's poorly adapted.

Kentucky-31 (K-31) is the old, common cultivar or variety of tall fescue. Most of the new and more attractive cultivars are referred to as "turf-type" tall fescues and have a slightly finer leaf blade, lower growth habit, darker green color and greater density and shade tolerance than K-31. Therefore, if properly managed, these new cultivars provide alternatives to K-31.

The confusion between tall fescue and fine fescue was increased by the introduction of turf-type tall fescues that are frequently promoted as fine-leaved. It is important to know the difference between tall fescue and fine fescue. The tall fescues have wider leaf blades and better tolerance to South Carolina environmental conditions than fine fescues. The fine fescues such as red fescue have extremely fine leaves, are suited to low fertility, low maintenance, and shaded situations. However, they generally do not perform as well as tall fescues in South Carolina.

See adaptations and characteristics of cool-season turfgrasses chart below.

Adaptations & Characteristics of Cool-Season Turfgrasses

	Fine Fescue ¹	Kentucky Bluegrass ¹	Tall Fescue ¹
Area Best Adapted	Mountains & Piedmont	Mountains	Mountains & Piedmont
Heat Hardiness	G	F – G	G
Cold Hardiness	VG	VG	VG
Drought Resistance	G	F – G	G
Sun Tolerance	P – G	VG	F – G
Shade Tolerance²	VG	G	G
Salt Tolerance	P	P	F
Wear Tolerance	F – G	G	G
Establishment Rate³	Fast	Medium	Fast

Rating Key: E=Excellent; VG=Very Good; G=Good; F=Fair; P=Poor; VP=Very Poor

¹ Can be seeded.

² Turfgrasses need at least four hours of direct sunlight per day.

³ Establishment rate is dictated by planning dates, seeding and planting rate, intensity of culture, and environment.

Note: Some improved cultivars are better adapted and more pleasing in appearance than the comparison rating provided for a given lawn grass.

Excerpted from the *South Carolina Master Gardener Training Manual*, EC 678.