

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION IN ALAMEDA COUNTY

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

HARD FESCUE FOR MINIMUM MAINTENANCE

In recent months, we have been receiving increasingly more calls requesting information on low-maintenance turfgrasses. Although the term "low-maintenance" is only relative among cool season grasses conventionally used for turf purposes, hard fescue is one with great potential to be considered a "low-maintenance" turfgrass.

Hard fescue (*Festuca longifolia*) a native of Europe, is a medium tall, semi-erect, long-lived, densely tufted, noncreeping bunch type grass. Leaf texture is defined as very fine to fine. It is a heavy root producer and has a high root to shoot ratio (it is estimated that in average, under optimum conditions, it produces only 1,375 pounds of shoots comparing to 19,020 pounds of roots per acre). Root system penetrates quite deeply and enables the plant to draw water from deeper soil profile; this contributes considerably to its high tolerance. Heavy root system, plus abundant dense leaves and low crown makes hard fescue an excellent grass for erosion control purposes.

It is adapted to mowing; however, it is not recommended for mowed turf in areas with hot summers. Nonmowed hard fescue is an attractive ground cover with a natural meadowy appearance.

Hard fescue is adapted to a wide range of soil conditions. However, performance is best on well-drained soil with a pH range of 5-6. It does not tolerate "water-logged" conditions and saline or alkali soils. It does well on low-fertility soils and shaded areas.

The recent increase in demand for low-maintenance turf and landscape plants, however, makes hard fescue a prime candidate for minimum maintenance, low quality, and nonused turf. Median strips, golf course roughs, park's nonused areas and cemeteries are among many prime sites for growing this grass.

A hard fescue plot, growing for the past four years, at U.C. Deciduous Fruit Field Station in San Jose, proved positive as a low-maintenance turf for California's north central coastal regions. This plot, half of which was mowed to 1 1/2 inches and the other half nonmowed, received not more than 2 lbs. of nitrogen per 1,000 ft² per year. The mowed section thinned out considerably and is infested heavily with weeds. The nonmowed half, however, consistently rated high for color and quality. With drooping leaves grown not more than 12 inches in length and thinned seed heads, it appeared natural and attractive. Since leaves stay green all year round, it should not be a fire hazard.

No disease or insect activity was noticed and no weed was established on the nonmowed section.

All things considered, hard fescue is obviously a low-maintenance turf, given the fact that it could be left nonmowed, and does not need more than 2 lbs N/1,000 ft²/year. Although, grown for range and erosion control purposes, hard fescue does not need supplemental irrigation in areas where annual rainfall exceeds 12 inches. Summer irrigation is essential, however, if grown as turf and green color is desired.

Commonly used hard fescue cultivars are 'Scaldis', 'Tournament' and 'Spartan'.

M. Ali Harivandi
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