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Buffalo grass lawnsAnthony Koski¹**Quick Facts**

Buffalo grass lawns need less water, fertilizer and mowing than Kentucky bluegrass lawns.

Buffalo grass turf goes dormant and turns brown with extended drought and cool fall weather.

Lawns of buffalo grass, although usually started with seed, may be vegetatively planted.

Good soil and close attention to new seedlings can help get a good stand started quickly.

Proper care will help keep buffalo grass lawns attractive through the year.

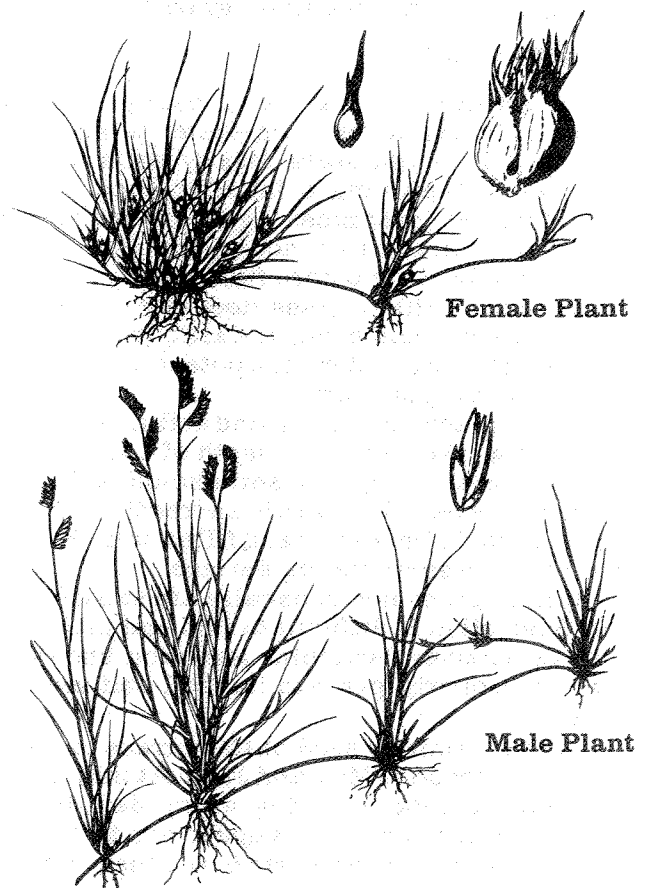
Buffalo grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*) is a permanent, native, low growing, warm season grayish-green grass. It is an important range and lawn grass in eastern Colorado. In the High Plains, this grass often is found growing as a companion with another native, blue grama.

Advantages

There are several advantages of using buffalo grass for lawns. It has good drought tolerance and stands up to wear well. Irrigation, if carefully done, can help establish stands and keep an attractive and serviceable turf. Improper watering can cause buffalo grass to be overrun by other grasses and broadleaf weeds. This low growing grass requires little mowing to give it a uniform appearance. Buffalo grass has a low fertility requirement and often maintains good density without supplemental fertilization.

Disadvantages

Buffalo grass is a warm-season grass that turns brown with fall's first freezing weather. It

**Figure 1: Buffalo grass.**

greens up with the return of warm weather in the spring. Consequently, it can be brown and unattractive when Kentucky bluegrass and other cool-season lawn grasses look best.

Buffalo grass, without supplemental water, will go brown and become dormant during extended summer drought periods. This grass has poor

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shade tolerance, and it does do well above 6,000 to 6,500 feet elevations. Because of aggressive runner, buffalo grass can require edging along walks, driveways, shrubs and flower beds.

This grass has male plants with 5- to 20-inch flowers and female plants with burs containing two to four seeds near the soil (Figure 1). Variability in turf may result from differences in appearance of the male and female plants, growth height, color and density from one plant to another. Those who are accustomed to Kentucky bluegrass turf may object to walking (particularly barefoot), playing and sitting on buffalo grass turf.

Starting a Lawn

Buffalo grass will grow on heavy and compacted soils. However, it is easier to start and keep on good loam soils. Heavy soils may be improved by applying a layer of good quality organic matter (peat moss, aged manure or compost) to a depth of 1 to 2 inches over the surface. This should be done before final tilling and seed preparation. Buffalo grass does not have good salt tolerance. If salt problems are common in the area, a soil test can determine potential success of a buffalo grass planting.

Before planting, the soil and soil amendments should be worked well to a depth of 4 to 6 inches. After the final tilling, the soil should be leveled and firmed. Areas that have been trenched for utility lines should be soaked and filled until they are level with the surrounding surface.

Buffalo grass lawns usually are started from seed. Seed often is difficult to find and usually is quite expensive. Particular attention should be given to properly prepare the soil and seed the grass.

The best time to seed buffalo grass lawns in eastern Colorado is May and June. At that time of year, with a good watering every day, buffalo grass seedlings begin to appear six to 10 days after planting. During warmer weather, runners develop and spread is rapid. Seedlings made in August or later germinate slowly, and grow little before cold weather.

Suggested seeding rates differ greatly. They range from 1 pound to 10 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Five pounds of a good quality, treated seed is adequate for broadcast seeding for most situations. Buffalo grass seed is treated to improve germination, not to protect the seed against disease. The more seed used the more rapid the ground is covered.

Broadcast seeding followed by raking in the seed is a common practice. But, the burs tend to stay on the surface. A more practical approach, using less seed, is to plant the seed in shallow furrows, spaced 6 to 8 inches apart and covered with 1/2 to 2/3 inch of soil. A starter fertilization usually will show little benefit on a good topsoil. On poor soils, an application of 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet of diammonium phosphate (18-46-0) or a commercial lawn starter fertilizer used at the rate recommended on the bag can be beneficial.

For best results, a new seeding should be watered to keep the soil moist. Two weeks after seed germination, lengthen watering intervals to every two to three days. Without supplemental watering of buffalo grass, it often takes from five to 10 years to get a good ground cover.

Buffalo grass may be started by transplanting a 4-inch or larger sod piece. These plugs should be taken to a depth of 2 to 3 inches. Plugs that are transplanted in the early spring from 12 to 24 inches apart—with watering and weed control—can sometimes cover the ground in one season. Buffalo grass sod is seldom laid as a solid cover. The scarcity of sod for home lawn use and the need to cut the sod at least 2 inches deep are problems. Buffalo grass that is vegetatively transplanted needs to be well watered for several weeks.

Since buffalo grass normally is planted in the spring, newstand weed competition can be serious. Hand-weeding and frequent mowing at 1½ to 2 inches can help to keep the weeds controlled, and encourage faster buffalo grass coverage.

Maintenance

Once established, buffalo grass usually will persist without irrigation in eastern Colorado. To keep a better looking turf, and one that will provide a better surface for general use, deep watering every two weeks during summer dry spells can be helpful. Soak the soil 6 to 8 inches deep. In especially dry springs, a good watering about the time the buffalo grass is beginning to green can help get the grass off to a good start.

Low growing buffalo grass needs only infrequent mowing. Left unmowed it will get to a height of 4 to 5 inches. But, to keep the male flowers down and to get a uniform appearance, mow with a sharp blade at a height of about 1 inch. Buffalo grass should be mowed to reduce the height by no more than 1/3 to 1/2 of total height. That is, when the turf gets to 1½ to 2 inches it should be cut back to 1 inch. In late spring, mowing may need to be done every two weeks. Later in the season mowing every three to four weeks probably will be adequate.

Broadleaf weeds, such as bindweed and dandelions, can be quite objectionable in low growing buffalo grass, especially in dormant, brown buffalo grass turf. Used according to recommendations on the label, 2,4-d can effectively control most of the weed problems.

Cool season grasses, such as bluegrass, tall fescue and quackgrass, can give an objectionable blotchy appearance, especially in dormant buffalo grass turf. A uniform-appearing dormant buffalo grass lawn may not be objectionable; whereas, one pockmarked with green may be. A green turf colorant can be used to offset this color difference. Chemicals such as glyphosate (Round-up and Kleen-up) may be used to spot kill objectionable grasses. Remember that herbicides used to kill grass can kill the desirable buffalo grass as well. Always read and follow directions on pesticide labels.