

## Fine Fescue; “Greener” Grasses Made for Shade

The popularity of fine fescues has soared in recent years, as the trend toward environmentally friendly and economical “Green” landscapes has gained momentum. Fine fescues are persistent long-lived perennial grasses with an attractive, fine texture, a relatively slow rate of vertical growth, and excellent winter hardiness.

A fine fescue seed mix can be a very good solution for deep shade and low maintenance situations. While they are not suitable for lots of wear and tear, fine fescues will resist drought stress from tree root competition and grow well in deeply shaded, low pH areas under both high and low fertility and with little or no irrigation. Most new varieties are endophyte-enhanced for even better heat and drought adaptation and disease resistance.

There are many sub-types of fine fescues, but for turf purposes five main types are preferred; strong creeping red fescues, Chewings fescues, hard fescues, slender creeping red fescues, and sheep fescues.

Strong creeping red fescues like Garnet and Jasper II contribute excellent shade tolerance and turf quality plus strong spreading ability from underground rhizomes. These fine fescues are taller growing and broader-bladed than other types. They are good seed producers and are valuable components in most fine fescue blends. With 54 chromosomes they are quite distinct from other fine fescues. Garnet has excellent test scores in the recent NTEP, especially in the Northeast, and is performing particularly well under traffic stress.

MEAN TURFGRASS QUALITY RATINGS  
STRONG CREEPING RED FESCUE CULTIVARS  
GROWN AT EIGHT LOCATIONS IN THE  
NORTHEAST REGION; 2004-07 DATA

NAME	RATING*
EPIC (5001)	6.0
WENDY JEAN (C03-RCE)	5.8
GARNET (PICK CRF 1-03)	5.7
CLASS ONE (IS-FRR 29)	5.6
PATHFINDER	5.3
CELESTIAL	5.2
SPLENDOR (ASC 245)	5.1
RAZOR	5.1
AUDUBON	4.8
SHADEMASTER	4.3
ORACLE	4.1
BOREAL	3.9
LSD VALUE	0.3

\*Turfgrass quality ratings 1-9; (9 = Ideal turf)

Chewings fescues like Windward and Victory II are the highest quality turfgrasses among the fine fescues, and can form an elite turf under shade, capable of being mown at ¾ inch or even less. They are non-spreaders, but have strong drought tolerance and will persist under the deepest shade. High endophyte levels in Windward and Victory II have contributed to their outstanding performance.

Hard fescues like Spartan II possess the maximum amount of shade and drought tolerance, and will thrive under the lowest fertility levels. Newer

# Fine Fescues continued from front page

endophyte-enhanced hard fescues have the best heat tolerance among all the fine fescues, and though slightly slower to establish, they are very persistent, low growing, long lived, high quality turfgrasses. They are non-spreaders and can become “Bunchy” in appearance if planted too thinly.

***Spartan II has outstanding test scores and is the top scoring hard fescue in the latest NTEP trials.***

MEAN TURFGRASS QUALITY RATINGS OF HARD AND SHEEP FESCUE CULTIVARS GROWN UNDER TRAFFIC STRESS AT MADISON, WI 1 / 2004 – 07 DATA	
NAME	RATING*
SPARTAN II (PICK HF #2)	7.6
OXFORD	7.1
GOTHAM (IS-FL 28)	6.9
RELIANT IV (A01630REL)	6.9
BERKSHIRE	6.6
FIREFLY (SPM)	6.5
QUATRO	6.5
PREDATOR	6.1
SR 3000	5.8
SCALDIS	5.6
LSD VALUE	1.2
*Turfgrass quality ratings 1-9; (9 = Ideal turf)	

MEAN TURFGRASS QUALITY RATINGS OF HARD AND SHEEP FESCUE CULTIVARS GROWN AT SEVEN LOCATIONS IN THE NORTH CENTRAL REGION; 2004-07 DATA	
NAME	RATING*
SPARTAN II (PICK HF #2)	6.1
RELIANT IV (A01630REL)	5.9
GOTHAM (IS-FL 28)	5.9
BERKSHIRE	5.9
OXFORD	5.8
PREDATOR	5.8
FIREFLY (SPM)	5.6
SR 3000	5.3
SCALDIS	5.2
QUATRO	4.7
LSD VALUE	0.3
*Turfgrass quality ratings 1-9; (9 = Ideal turf)	

Slender creeping red fescues like Sealink have superior salt tolerance. They spread slowly and look like Chewings fescues in most turf applications. These grasses evolved in the marshy salty waters of the Rhine River estuary. They are excellent turfgrasses; attractive, winter-hardy, and persistent.

Sheep Fescues require the least maintenance of all the fine fescues. Varieties like Azay and Azay Blue are usually not used as low-cut, highly maintained turfgrasses. Generally they are used in the low- to no-maintenance situations. They are slow growing and never get too tall, even with no mowing. They are often mixed with wild flowers. Sheep fescues are non-spreaders with a strong bluish cast that can be very attractive for some uses.

**Blends and Mixtures:** Fine fescues are almost always used in turfgrass blends and mixtures. Since they mix very well with Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass, creeping red fescue and Chewings fescue are very common components in these types of seed mixes. Improved varieties like Garnet, Jasper II, Windward and Victory II should be used for the best quality and appearance.

Fine fescue blends are ideal in certain situations. For very low maintenance applications, such as shady, non-mown areas between golf fairways or steep non-maintained slopes, a blend of all fine fescue types can be recommended. For quicker establishment, consider using a “nurse” grass such as Transist 2400 transitional ryegrass. Using a blend of 10-20% seed by weight, the Transist 2400 will establish an attractive ground cover very quickly to stabilize the soil, reduce erosion and improve appearance. The transitional ryegrass will die off in about a year’s time, leaving behind a pure, well-established stand of fine fescue.

**Establishment:** Fall planting is best, as it allows for good germination, minimum weed competition, and

## Fine Fescues continued from second page

maximum establishment time- particularly under trees without leaves. In shady areas, it is important to remove tree leaves that fall on newly established turf in autumn. For spring planting, seed should be sown as soon as possible in late winter or early spring. The new turf needs to get well established before deep shade returns when the trees leaf out again in the spring.

Dormant plantings work very well with fine fescues. Plant the seed in late fall or winter before or as the soil starts to freeze (well after the germination time.) This will result in the quickest possible establishment the following spring. Use recommended seeding rates. Winter conditions will not damage the ungerminated seed.

**Seeding Rates:** Plant fine fescue blends at around 4-6 lbs per 1000 sq feet (try to use seed less than two years old to maximize endophyte levels.) Higher seeding rates help in weed control and speed of establishment. Incorporating a complete fertilizer into the soil at recommended rates prior to seeding is recommended.

It is important to get fine fescues established and growing well before subjecting them to low maintenance. Irrigate at least twice daily and keep the soil damp for the first three weeks. Germination should occur within 5-6 days from a fall seeding and within two weeks from an early spring seeding.

**Management:** Once well established, lower- or non-maintained fine fescue turf can be left alone and not mown, watered, or fertilized except as desired. Mowing once or twice a year will optimize turf appearance. After

establishment on maintained turf, mow the turf as high as possible depending on the use and appearance desired. Once well established, fine fescues will tolerate minimal, low or medium maintenance regimes and still look great.



*Dr. Jerry Pepin*