

Brown Grass, Green grass or somewhere in the middle

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While there are many different opinions about turf grass, the one consistent theme is that it uses a lot of water. There are a couple of reasons for this, one is that we tend to over water it and two is that cool season grasses, the types most commonly planted here, do not like heat and drought. Their natural tendency is to go dormant during the hot summers. When plants go dormant, they restrict energy to the leaves which causes them to turn brown. Any extra energy is then stored in the root system, which is used during the growing season. For cool season turf grass the optimal growing season is during the wet and cool part of the year. For our region that season runs from late September through May and often well into June. The following summaries on the pros and cons of turf grass may help you make a decision this year and see if taking on a different strategy is in your best interest.

Brown Grass: (upsides)

- Dormancy is not death. Dormancy will begin as soon as the daily temperatures approach a consistent 80° and the moisture in the soil begins to dry out. The grass will remain dormant until the temperature drops back down and moisture begins to reach the root system.
- You will need to water your lawn well only once or twice per month, depending upon how much summer rain we get.
- Reduces pesticide use. While the grass is dormant, some weeds may get started, these can be easily controlled by digging them up or spot treating them with an herbicide.
- Brown lawns are much less attractive to moles, and other pests.
- Dormant lawns do not need to be mowed. Once it goes to sleep, the lawn becomes low cost and low maintenance.

Brown Grass: (downsides)

- Does not do well with heavy play or foot traffic. Brown grass is hard and the crown of the plant can be damaged by continual foot traffic. If you have kids, this might not be the best option for areas that they are active in or if you have social functions.
- It is hot and does not help cool the temperatures around a home.
- Takes 3 to 5 weeks of regular watering to snap out of dormancy and begin to green up.

Green Grass: (upsides)

- Has a cooling effect that can be beneficial. In and around the walls of your home or the deck or patio, grass can cool the ambient temperature as much as 10°; making outdoor gathering areas more pleasant and helping to hold down energy costs to cool your house.
- Handles high traffic and play better. It is also much softer to land on. So for areas of your yard that are regularly used for sports, or play or social gatherings, green grass is probably a better choice.
- Acts as a filter when you wash your cars on it, helping to keep pollutants and detergents out of the storm system

Green Grass: (downsides)

- Needs a high level of water, amendments (fertilizers/herbicides) and labor to maintain it.

- Typically shallow roots (2"-3") easily stressed.
- Attracts moles and the food they eat. Moles are carnivores and their favorite foods are earthworms, grubs and beetles all of which flourish in a moist environment. A Well-watered lawn is always good hunting grounds for moles.

Somewhere in the middle: (upsides) managed stress.

- Requires less water and less maintenance (mowing). It is kept just on the edge of dormancy. Takes about 30% to 40% less water to maintain and about half the mowing days.
- Promotes deeper growing roots.
- Greens up in about 1 week if needed. Usable for play areas.
- Less attractive to moles and other underground living pests.

Somewhere in the middle: (downsides) managed stress.

- Not uniform in appearance. Shaded areas will be greener than slopes or exposed areas.
- Will provide some, but not much in the way of cooling.

The best strategy would be a combination of all three. If you have areas that are rarely if ever used, let them go brown. Keep the areas in and around your house and gathering areas green. If you have kids, select a portion of your yard for their use and keep it green, or you might want to use managed stress for all of your yard and just add water when you need it for an event or function.