

Grass Meeting - 3/14/2018
Notes from the discussion

Speaker: Dr. Grady Miller, NC State

Credentials:

<https://cals.ncsu.edu/crop-and-soil-sciences/people/grady-miller/>

The ARC Committee and KC HOA Board asked Dr. Miller to come and speak to us about the Pros and Cons of the different warm and cool weather grasses and give us a recommendation about grass types on single family home lots in Kitts Creek based on his professional expertise and experience.

- The Triangle is in a between zone - between where warm weather grasses and cooler weather grasses are optimal. This means there are advantages and issues with each.
- Neither will do well all year: cool weather grass struggles in the heat of July & August, warm weather grass experiences "winter kill" in January & February (winter kill was particularly lethal this year)
- Because this area is an in-between zone, homeowners must accept the idea that there will need to be investment and rehabilitation for their lawns of one kind or another every year regardless of the grass type that exists. (Like you're used to doing in the Fall with fescue aeration and seeding)
- Warm weather grasses: Bermuda is not at all recommended. If going with warm weather grass, choose to allow Zoysia
- Feedback on the grasses comes from NTEP trials we conduct (over 300 different varieties each year)
- All grass needs sunlight. Fescue is more shade tolerant. Zoysia will have issues in shady areas under trees, between houses, on North sides of houses
- A bit of history: after the big drought in 2007 & 2008, many towns, Cary included, offered incentives to homeowners who used more drought tolerant grasses. Many sod farmers moved to Bermuda and lots of builders followed. Bermuda became more popular with many falsely believing Bermuda does not need as much upkeep. This is false - the upkeep is just different and timed differently than fescue. In recent years, the issues with Bermuda have moved the sod farmers back to producing about 70% Fescue types. Fescue has always been the most common grass in this area, aside from the brief reaction to that drought period.

Pros and Cons:

Fescue -

- Will struggle in hot weather and go dormant. Will struggle next to hot concrete.
- Needs watering even when dormant.
- Must be aerated and seeded in the fall because of this
 - Note* - avoid using the smaller aerators that homeowners can rent. They do not produce cores that are deep enough. You need the larger ones that commercial providers use.
- Myth that it can't do well in Triangle. If it is installed right and cared for, it can be nearly as hardy as warm weather grasses. Both types need heavy watering when new or overseeded and less when established.

- Usually homeowners that struggle with Fescue do so because of not understanding it.
 - Must be cut much higher. If you cut it too short, it will die. Homeowners like to cut it short thinking they will have to cut it less often. This is untrue plus will kill their lawns. It should never be cut shorter than 3 inches -4 inches is better - usually the highest setting on a home mower. Biltmore has Fescue and they cut it to 5 inches.
 - Must be cut every 5-8 days in the cooler weather (spring & fall), 7-14 in the summer
 - Never let it get high enough that you are cutting off more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the blades.
 - Pre-emergent weed killer must be applied by around March 15th and crabgrass pre-treatment about 6 weeks later. Soil conditioning & fertilization must be done. Total treatments, aside from Fall aeration & seeding, is about 6 per year.
 - Do not fertilize in the hot weather - use the right treatment at the right time of year
 - Can be very hardy if these things are done with the right watering.
- Fescue does not spread. It will not encroach on flower/garden beds unless some seeds get in the bed and is easily weeded out.
- Susceptible to "Brown Spot" - easily treatable by homeowner if homeowner can spot it and does not think it means more water.
- Tolerates shady areas to some extent
- Can tolerate full sun very well if well established - "I grow tons of Tall Fescue in full sun"

Zoysia -

- Tolerates hot weather well with good care.
- Will suffer in any shade at all
- Needs as much water as Fescue to get established, slightly less once established but not significantly less
- Needs fertilization and weed treatments just like fescue but different timing
- Less "tricky" to learn how to care for it
- Can be cut lower - needs cutting every 7 days or so all summer when healthy
- Will spread! It will get in to adjacent beds requiring much more weeding than fescue and in to neighboring yards

Anecdote: Dr. Miller had a good friend go from Fescue to Bermuda after the drought. Bermuda had lots of weed & health issues as well so he took that out and went to Zoysia. Had winter kill issues and issues with it dying in any amount of shade plus noticed the upkeep was not significantly less than Fescue. Taking that out and returning to Fescue this year.

Dr. Miller's Advice for Kitts Creek:

- Single family homes already all Fescue for the most part and houses are close together. All yards have trees - some mature and some still maturing but will be mature. Shade will be an issue with warm weather grasses and over the long term, you will be unhappy with Zoysia with mature trees and shade
- Switching to Zoysia will be expensive - you have to remove the fescue (dig it out), prepare the soil and redo the sod then heavily water while it gets established. And you'd have to have whole sections agree to switch. Plus Zoysia is the most expensive sod to buy - and using seed will not be successful.

- It will not work to have different grass types in different yards here because they are too close together with no natural separations like woods or pine straw/mulch - and it will look messy because when one is brown the other will be green and vice versa
- In neighborhoods where this has been tried, there are many disagreements and some are quite bad unfortunately. "Neighbors have become REAL upset with each other - I've seen it."
- "Teach homeowners who need help how to care for Fescue. Teach about the height it needs, the 6 or so treatments it needs each year, brown patch and how often to mow and they can be very happy with it. Make the most of what you already have here."
- There is no lawn that is "work free" and some people want that - help them understand having a home means a yard and yard work
- Builders have put sod right on clay - not a good installation. But within a season or 2, this can be corrected through good care. That is a problem with the installation, not an issue with Fescue.

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Info from the program: www.turffiles.ncsu.edu

End of meeting notes from Dr. Miller's talk and Q&A

Summary:

Dr. Miller: "There is no perfect grass in this area. NC is traditionally a tall fescue state and it can do well here too."

There were several homeowners passionately advocating a switch to Zoysia since they believe it to be easier to care for. None advocated for Bermuda.

There were several homeowners passionately advocating not to allow neighbors to install Zoysia or any warm weather grass since they've finally sorted out their fescue and don't want it invaded.

Next steps:

HOA Board & ARC Committee getting realtor input for property value assessment and cost estimates for changing to Zoysia. Final decision will be in April.