

# WATERING SOD FROM INSTALLATION THROUGH ESTABLISHMENT

(Clay Hatcher, Owner, Premier Turf Farms)

Watering is the most crucial aspect of new sod establishment. Sod is highly perishable, so without proper watering your new yard may brown or worse completely die. Certain times of the year it is much easier, particularly during cooler seasons when long sleeves or coats are necessary to be outside. This is not to say you can't have a great lawn in the summer, but it will require more effort and due diligence.

How do you know when you have watered the sod enough? Roll the sod back and look underneath. You will first notice random areas on the bottom of the sod where water is starting to come through. You are close to halfway to watering in your sod when you see the wet area greater than the dry area on the bottom of the sod. When the ground is completely saturated under the sod, you have thoroughly watered the sod.

The question asked most by owners of a new lawn is "How long do I need to water my new grass?" There is no clear cut answer since everyone's area, sprinkler, soil, and water pressure is different. My advice usually is to start when the sod is first installed. Once you have an area installed large enough to start running a sprinkler, then start watering. Once you start, keep track of the time it takes to water the sod thoroughly. This time is important as it will be a reference point for watering the sod from here on.

Can you water your new sod too much? Yes, but unlikely. The two main issues from over watering are ponding water and excess runoff. If the yard is properly graded, it shouldn't be ponding but it can under extreme circumstances. If you are watering it and the soil won't absorb any more water and what you put down is just running off, you're just wasting money. After the first week, if it's squishy or boggy, you can probably skip a day, depending on the weather.

The best time of day to water is when the dew is naturally falling, usually between midnight and 6am. Setting up a sprinkler with a timer or your irrigation schedule for this time can also help be less intrusive to your household needs. If you don't have a timer, Virginia Extension Service recommends 5am-10am.

In general, you must be mindful about watering tall turf type fescue for 2 weeks. During this period it is trying to grow roots into the soil underneath from which to get moisture. It also only has the thin layer of soil it was shipped with to survive while it is going through this process. Once it does root, you are on the downhill side. Based on the season, I offer the following advice:

**Fall** -- The opposite of Spring, it starts like summer and ends like winter. This is probably the best time of year to install sod. The reason being is that the sod has the most time to grow and establish before the stress of summer comes. It also is a time when water demand for new sod is reduced with cooler temps. Sometimes one watering is enough, but if you are out in short sleeves, you may need to water everyday. The normal watering is every other day, but that, again, depends on temps and whether you are closer to summer or winter.

**Winter** -- This is one of the easiest times to lay sod. Most of my landscapers and contractors don't water sod this time of year. I still recommend that you water the sod, but usually only one time will suffice. Water freezing on the grass will not hurt it, so don't let this be a deterrent. The main weather that dries out sod during the winter is wind.

**Spring** -- Spring starts off with winter conditions and ends with summer conditions. If temps get up to the 60's, you will need to pay more attention to the watering. If you are wearing your winter coats, watering is not as critical. If you are in t-shirts, you may need to water everyday.

**Summer** -- This is the most critical time for watering sod. Sod in extreme summer heat can start to turn brown and start to die in an hour. For this reason, you must water your new sod immediately. I usually start watering as soon as we have an area large enough to place a full size sprinkler. We also have a small area sprinkler that we sometimes keep right behind the installers. Below are some pictures of sod that was unrolled every hour starting at 11am one morning. None of the sod was watered until 5pm in the afternoon. The pictures show the effect of waiting to water your sod. Sod that was not watered within 2 hours of installation showed signs of damage. Sod that went 4 hours had permanent damage. Even if your sod turns brown, most sod will still come back if less than 4 hours before watering. At first it will look like it is completely dead, but check for root growth in a week to see if it is, in fact, dead. Sod that goes through this stress is mimicking summer dormancy to a certain degree. Once it is watered it can take several weeks for it to grow back and show full green again. The leaves that turn brown are lost but new growth from the crown of the plant will sprout. These small leaves don't show very well for several weeks as they must outgrow the brown dead leaves.

**SOD DEMONSTRATION:** Here is a little demonstration we did on our farm one 100° day to show the importance of watering sod as soon as possible after installation. The 2 pieces of sod on the far left were rolled out at 11am. The next 2 rolls were rolled out an hour later. We kept doing this until 5pm, when we finally watered all the sod. After 2 days we took these pictures to show the effects of waiting to water your sod. As you can see, there was damage starting in just a few hours. The damage to the first sod unrolled that wasn't watered for 6 hours is all but irreversible. With a lot of tender care and effort from someone with experience, I have seen sod come back from this sort of damage.



Here is a picture to show a closeup of some damaged sod that is still going to be OK. As you can see, the sod is very brown, similar to the pictures of the brown sod in the above demonstration. However, if you look close, you can see green blades spread throughout. This damage is similar to grass that has gone through a drought situation and is now in recovery. This grass is relying on the food stored in its roots to regrow which shows the importance of a strong and healthy root system.

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via email at [orders@pftsod.com](mailto:orders@pftsod.com) if you have further questions.**

## MOWING TIPS

Additionally, here are a few mowing tips. Generally, we advise customers to start mowing between 2-3 weeks after installation. The most important thing is not to mow it too short. This kind of grass prefers to be mowed about 3 to 3.5 inches long. Especially the first few times you mow, it's better to set your mower's height up high. Mow it less frequently during hot temperatures.

Your aim is to cut off no more than one-third of the grass in a mowing. Leave the clippings as they drop from your mulching mower. The clippings recycle nutrients so you don't need to fertilize as much. The exception is if you waited too long to mow and have cut off more than one-third of the growth. Clumps of clippings can smother the grass. The best way to prevent this is to mow when the grass is dry. The fescue clippings do not build up a thatch like other grasses can, so dethatching is not necessary.

Many homeowners mow too short (1 to 2 inches). That stresses the grass and it creates the ideal situation for airborne weed seeds to grow. If the grass is too short, those tiny seeds hit the blades of grass and fall to the ground where they have the ideal conditions to germinate. If the grass is kept at 3 to 3.5 inches long, those seeds never make it to the ground, never germinate.

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