

WATER WISE: Alternatives to bluegrass turf

University of Nebraska Extension, the Nebraska Forest Service and the Cities of Gering, Scottsbluff and Terrytown, are working together to provide information on how to conserve water by using it wisely in the landscape.

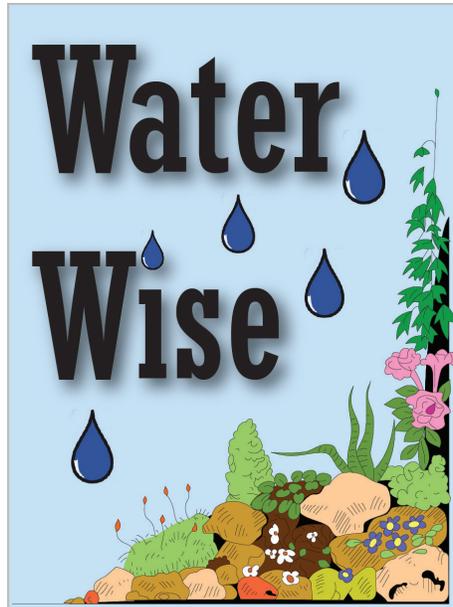
The single biggest use of water in the average western Nebraska household is irrigating the Kentucky bluegrass lawn.

But there are two alternative turfs that allow homeowners to manage water more efficiently, according to UNL Extension Educator Jim Schild of Scotts Bluff County: tall fescue, a cool-season grass, and buffalograss, a warm-season grass. Each has advantages and disadvantages, Schild pointed out.

Tall fescue can use more water than bluegrass, but its advantage is a deep, extensive root system, which can extend as deep as 2 ½ to 3 feet in western Nebraska soils. The effective rooting depth for Kentucky bluegrass is 6 to 8 inches.

“This means you have a bigger soil profile you’re able to manage, so you’re not watering as frequently as the bluegrass,” Schild said, “and you’re able to take advantage if and when we get an extended rain or rainy period.”

One of tall fescue’s drawbacks is that it looks less attractive when stressed to the point of thinning out. As a bunchgrass, it tends to become “clumpy,” Schild explained. Also,



its leaf blade tends to widen, which is undesirable to some people.

But Schild noted that some newer cultivars of tall fescue are rhizomatous – they spread by means of underground stems, similar to the way bluegrass fills in dead patches.

Buffalograss, once established, is one of the better alternatives for a low-water landscape, according to Schild. It is a soft, fine-bladed grass slightly lighter in color than Kentucky bluegrass.

“Buffalograss is another deep-rooted grass, so again, as with fescue, you’re able to manage your water a little differently and take advantage of seasonal rain to a better extent,” according to Schild.

Perhaps the most noted of buffalograss’s disadvantages is that the warm-season grass does not green up until around Memorial Day in

western Nebraska, according to Schild. At the other end of the growing season, it goes dormant after the first hard killing freeze. In addition, weed control can be challenging the first year of establishment.

But on the plus side, buffalograss doesn’t need to be watered in early spring and fall; its fertilizer requirement is half that of bluegrass or less; and mowing frequency is half or less of bluegrass, every two weeks instead of up to twice a week.

UNL Extension has two NebGuides on line related to establishing and caring for buffalograss lawns. Both can be found under lawn and garden section at ianrpubs.unl.edu:

Establishing Buffalograss Turf in Nebraska, G1946: (<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1946.pdf>) This NebGuide discusses cultivar selection, converting Kentucky bluegrass to buffalograss and establishing buffalograss.

Management of Buffalograss Turf in Nebraska, G1947 (<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1947.pdf>)

This NebGuide discusses irrigation, mowing, fertilization and weed control after the turf stand is established.