Starting a New Lawn
by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

The finishing touch on a new home is usually the installation of the landscape. Often this is completed as part of the deal with the builder. As with other decisions you make when purchasing a new home, you should be part of the selection and installation process of the landscaping that comes with your new home. Mistakes made now will often have to be "lived with" because of the cost involved with "fixing" them. It may be better to really understand what you want and wait a little, rather than to rush into having something thrown down to cover bare dirt and rocks.

Before you have that fill dirt brought in, walk around your property and ensure that all the construction leftovers have been removed. Twenty years from now the reason that tree or bush just won't grow right may be because of what is buried under it. Concrete, grout and paint cleanup leftovers spilled on the ground should be removed along with bricks, insulation, wood pieces, metal banding materials, large rocks, dead tree branches or roots and, any other trash left lying around.

There are several things you need to do before putting that grass down. We live in an area with poor soil that is usually thin, alkaline, and heavy sticky clay. Grass prefers sandy loam. This problem is corrected with the dumping of fill dirt onto the lot. Add one inch of organic matter (such as compost) to the top of three to four inches of dirt and mix thoroughly with a garden tiller or a similar tool pulled behind a garden type tractor. Now is the time to grade and smooth out the surface. Be sure to take care that drainage is considered. The surface should fall away from the house so that water will not collect around the foundation. There should be no pockets or depressions anywhere in the lawn area. To ensure this you may have to wet it thoroughly several times and re-grade the area to make sure there are no low spots. Dirt should be one inch below the level of driveways and sidewalks if installing sod.

Hopefully any trees remaining on the lot had their root zone protected during construction. Whenever possible root zones should not be driven over or exposed to the air. When installing a lawn, do not add more than two to three inches of dirt over tree roots. Grade the fill away from the trunk of the tree. If more than three inches of fill must be added, build a retaining wall 4 to 6 feet out from the trunk of the tree to keep the dirt off the root system inside the retaining wall. The bigger the tree the further back the wall should be. The last step before adding grass is fertilizer.

A soil analysis is best to determine exactly what should be put down. Without a soil analysis to give you exact fertilizer recommendations, use a 1-2-1 (such as 10-20-10) or 1-1-1 (such as an 8-8-8) fertilizer to put down the equivalent of 1 pound of Nitrogen per 1000 square feet of area. Go to aggie-turf.tamu.edu, website and find the fertilizer calculator to determine how many pounds of fertilizer to buy. Be sure to spread it evenly over the soil. Rake everything smooth and break up any large clods of dirt. Remove any weeds that may have popped up. Now you are ready for grass.

First you must choose the best type of grass for your needs. Several factors need to be considered in making this decision. The five warm season grasses that do well in this area are Bermuda, Hybrid Bermuda, St. Augustine, Buffalo, and Zoysia grasses. There are pros and cons to each, none of them may be a perfect fit, but you should choose the one closest to your needs. Each type of grass has many varieties some of which are disease or bug resistant, qualities that you should take into consideration.

First you must know how much the lawn will be used. Some grass selections take foot traffic better than others. Bermuda is much tougher and recovers faster than St. Augustine grass. Large dogs will quickly wear trails down to the dirt of a St. Augustine lawn. Zoysia also tolerates traffic while Buffalo can handle a moderate amount of traffic. Another major consideration is the amount of shade the grass will have. St. Augustine can take up to fifty percent shade while Bermuda can handle almost none and Buffalo very little. Some turf sellers claim to have varieties of Zoysia that can take almost as much shade as St. Augustine. Other factors you should consider are cost, not just of the turf but also of maintenance. How much fertilizer and water does it need? Of the choices available St. Augustine takes the most water, Buffalo the least. Bermuda is also drought tolerant while Zoysias are in the middle of the water use scale. Other factors to consider are things such as how aggressive the grass grows. If you are a gardener you
may not choose Bermuda because it is almost impossible to keep it out of your flower beds. If you have salty well water, select Bermuda because it has the highest tolerance to salt of all the grasses. I don’t want to make this too difficult for you but the best choice is the informed choice. A major mistake may cost you more money very quickly.

Finally you need to decide how to install your lawn. You can seed it, sprig it, install plugs or a full sod cover. Which one you choose may be dependent on the type of grass you choose. Bermuda and Buffalo are the only types that can be seeded. Lawns should be started after the temperature stays around 70 degrees at night in the spring. Two to four inch plugs of St. Augustine set two feet apart will fill in the area after 3 months while sprigs of Bermuda set out in the proper density may take only 2 months to fill in. These methods are cheaper than installing a full cover of sod but they also leave open areas of dirt where weeds can easily invade, another choice you must make. Be sure to check your sod as it is being delivered for weeds, a few are understandable but a lot will mean weed control headaches in the future. Reject sod with an obvious weed problem. It may cost a little more to buy a quality sod to start but it will save you money in the long run with maintenance costs. Be sure to keep your newly installed lawn moist at all times with frequent light watering. Be especially vigilant during dry and windy conditions to keep both the sod and the dirt just under it moist but not soggy. After it grows to 1 ½ to 2 inches mow it using a sharp bladed mower. Continue mowing and watering until your lawn is well established. For further information see the website mentioned above.