

Bermuda Grass

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If you've been watching the news, you may have noticed that several media outlets recently announced that hybrid bermudagrass has been legalized for sale, purchase, and growth in Utah. Unfortunately, an unintended negative consequence of these announcements has been that the public is, in many cases, confused. The grass is not yet widely available for purchase from retailers in the state, and the common form is still considered a noxious (regulated) weed in Utah. However, understanding more about the grass will hopefully clear up some of the confusion.

Common bermudagrass is a noxious weed because it spreads aggressively from above- and below-ground runners and by seed. If left unchecked, it can overtake a lawn or other landscaped area, out-competing grasses like Kentucky bluegrass in just a few years. It is also fairly widespread in the state, especially in older neighborhoods and historically farmed areas where pastures were present. For example, it is pervasive in western parts of Farmington, Kaysville, Layton, Syracuse, West Point, Clinton, and Hooper and growing in most other parts of the state.

Interestingly, the common form of bermudagrass can form a good lawn when adequately maintained. However, its adaptability is a double-edged sword, not only because it can quickly overtake other grasses but also because it can be notoriously difficult to eradicate. It is also worth noting that the bermudagrasses are warm-season grasses, actively growing along the Wasatch Front from late May to late September and remaining green for slightly shorter periods in colder areas like Heber and Logan. Conversely, other lawn grasses, such as Kentucky bluegrass, remain green from April to early November, which you should be aware of when considering lawn options.

In fact, bermudagrass is used for high-quality lawns in many parts of the world and certainly across the southern U.S. Because of this, continual breeding work is conducted to develop improved cultivars for various uses. Many hybrid bermudagrasses, produced by crossing with other closely related varieties, do not grow as aggressively, have finer, softer blades, stay green somewhat longer, and produce sterile seeds. Because these hybrids are somewhat "tame" and produce sterile seed, they are grown extensively in other states like Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma, and the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food (UDAF) recently legalized planting them across Utah.

Many residents are excited about this because bermudagrass uses as little as 1/3 of the water required by Kentucky bluegrass. Utah State University Extension offices and garden centers have received many calls about where to purchase it. Unfortunately, it will not be widely available in the state until at least 2025 or later due to a lack of inventory, and it was legalized late in the growing season.

Utah State University Crop Improvement Association inspectors must inspect all hybrid Bermuda grass sold by distributors before it is sold to the public. This includes sod, plugs, and sprigs.

Because seeded types of bermudagrass are still illegal in Utah, cultivars that can be grown in the state must be planted using sprigs, plugs, or sod. Along the Wasatch Front, sprigs and/or plugs should be planted from mid-June through mid-July in a grid pattern to fill in planted areas (plant 1-foot on center).

Sprigs and plugs can be planted through early August but the areas will not fill in completely until the following year. Sprigs and plugs should not be planted later than this because they may not be established well enough to overwinter. Bermudagrass sod can be laid from mid-June to mid-August. One other thing to note is that both sod and sprigs/plugs will--at least initially--be more expensive than other options. I recently purchased 140 plugs for a dollar each. This was enough for 140 square feet.