Zoysia Grass Maintenance

There is no magic lawn grass variety that answers everybody’s ideal, all have strengths and weaknesses, for example most fast growing competitive grasses are very high maintenance, most slow growing grasses are usually invaded by more competitive weeds. Zoysia species can be the most environmentally sustainable turf grasses once you understand them.

Their strengths include: slow growing, out compete weeds, and low nutrient requirement. Zoysia is intermediate for water consumption, and is a low maintenance grass if managed properly. Recognising what is happening in your lawn is the key.

If watered and fertilised heavily, Zoysia will respond with colour and vigour, and become a high maintenance lawn, become thatchy and need frequent mowing.

The correct management is to fertilise sparingly, use mainly a nitrogen fertiliser unless there are nutrient deficiencies in your soil base. Water deeply once/week in the cooler months, then twice/week as evaporation increases in the summer months.

Replace at least 80% of the weekly evaporation. If the daily evaporation rate is 8mm, the lawn is losing 56mm/week, water every third or fourth day with at least 20mm each time to keep a deep, drought resistant root system. Water is more important than fertiliser in keeping your Zoysia looking good and performing sustainably.

THE DO NOT’S

Far and away the biggest mistake made by people is not to recognise that the lawn is actually growing and needs mowing. IT is very common to see lawns that have been left for several months, the owner assumes that it is a slow growing grass, and hasn’t grown at all.

IF they had a couch or a buffalo lawn, they would have mowed it several times already. To their surprise, the Zoysia, while not tall or unruly, has grown and thickened and can be difficult to mow. In general, Zoysia needs mowing only about half as often as couch, buffalo or carpetgrass. The same rule of mowing applies: take one third of the green leaf area each time, the clipping yield will be only about 15% of the amount removed from other species. This will keep the lawn neat and even, and keep weed invasion to an absolute minimum.

Do not assume that being a slow, fine grass, that it is delicate, in any way. Zoysia will grow on very poor, bony soils, will recover quickly from drying out, is extremely herbicide tolerant, and some species are very shade and salt tolerant. IN fact, of all the lawn grasses grown in Australia, there are only three native species, these being Zoysia matrella, Zoysia macrantha, and paspalum vaginatum.
All three occur naturally along muddy foreshores/beaches/rocky headlands, some of the harshest of growing environments. The most common problems seen in Zoysia are where through improper management, or sometimes just the passage of time that the lawn has become thick and thatchy, or the opposite — sparse, weak and often very dry.

Thatch is the material between the soil and the green leaf area, it can allow disease and insect build up, and make the lawn difficult to mow.

Any means of removal is usually acceptable, like heavy raking or low mowing, usually using a vertical mowing machine called a de-thatcher is most efficient, and can be hired from hire shops like Kennards or Coates Hire. Fertilise lightly and water well for good recovery.

Thin dry lawns need a high nitrogen fertiliser and regular watering to bring them back to life.

IF there are weed issues, none of the lawn herbicides will damage Zoysia when used as per label directions. Because Zoysia lawns are often not fertilised, legumes seem to be the main issue, as they are taking their Nitrogen from the air. Spray with a clover type weed killer, and lightly fertilise on a regular basis, maybe two or three times/year.

Diseases are not common, but dollar spot on a fine leaf grass with low nitrogen levels can be seen from time to time. Sometimes, fertilising with Urea will allow the grass to grow out of the disease, but spraying with propaconozole will be the second part of the fix.

Zoysias have a broader range of use than other turf species, for instance in heavy shade, down to three hours sun/day, or in high salt areas where others will not survive. Grown on steep banks for erosion control is another common use, where there is no intention of mowing, the Zoysias only grow to about 150mm and stay neat and out compete weeds while holding the soil from eroding. Some species like Z japonica/pacifica are used in landscaping for their ‘lumpy” effect and never mown.

For the right Zoysia for your application, check turf producers websites for numbers of choices, and talk to them about what performs best in your situation.

Fertilising: Zoysia grasses have generally low nutrient requirements, and do not need much Phosphorus unless there is a severe deficiency of that element. Nitrogen is the main requirement, and in only small amounts, excessive N will create a thatch problem. Using Potassium will help the grass resist wear, nitrogen will speed recovery. Too much N will make the grass soft and easily damaged, so there is a balance that needs to be maintained.
Compaction: Heavy traffic areas are prone to severely limiting root restrictions generally in the top 25 to 50mm. Any mechanical means of allowing more air into the soil is good, providing the roots are not severely disturbed. Leaving a moderate thatch layer by mowing at least 25-30mm high will also provide some cushioning.

Zoysia species vary in their vigour, Nara is a fairly vigorous variety of Zoysia macrantha, and will be faster to recover from damage. Shadetuff is naturally slower, and under shade will take a lot longer to recover, so it should be managed carefully as above.