

FACT SHEET: Warm-Season Grasses for Stormwater Management

Many stormwater management facilities are planted with warm-season grasses and perennials to reduce soil erosion and sedimentation, improve water quality, and provide wildlife habitat. These grasses are deep-rooted, long-lived perennials with a high tolerance to low pH, low fertility, and drought. They are typically planted in stormwater management facilities such as rain gardens, bioswales, and detention basins to trap sediment and uptake nutrients carried by stormwater runoff. Common warm-season grasses include switchgrass, sedges, bluestem, and indiagrass.

You are probably more familiar with cool-season grasses, such as Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and fescues, which are great for lawns. These grasses grow well in the cooler temperatures of fall and spring, but can handle the stress of cold winters and hot summers. They readily adapt to regular mowing and provide a soft cushion for running barefoot through the yard.

WHY USE WARM-SEASON GRASSES FOR STORMWATER SYSTEMS?

The deeper root systems of warm-season grasses create a sponge-like soil layer that promotes stormwater infiltration and reduces stormwater runoff. These grasses also require less nutrients and water than cool-season grasses. They can range in height from 18 to 60 inches; the height filters sediment and stores excess nutrients. However, because they have different growth characteristics than cool-season grasses, warm-season grasses require a much different maintenance approach than you may be used to.

HOW TO ESTABLISH WARM-SEASON GRASSES

In the first two years after seeding, warm-season grasses focus much of their energy on establishing their deep root systems. During this time, weeds can take over. Common weeds are mare's tail, ragweed, dandelion, foxtail, crabgrass, thistle, and cattails. Below are some tips on how to establish warm-season grasses.

- ▶ **Planting Year** - Mow at a minimum height of 8 inches to control weeds. Do not let weeds get taller than 18 inches. Discontinue mowing after early August to allow warm-season grasses to grow through August and September.
- ▶ **Second and Third Year After Planting** - Before April 15, mow as low as 2 inches, as warm-season grasses will not start growing until the temperatures increase. Once the weather warms up, weeds can be controlled with controlled herbicide spraying or mowing to a height no less than 8 inches.
- ▶ **Long-Term Maintenance** - Mow twice per year – in the early spring before April 1 to a height of 2 inches and again after October 15 to a height no less than 8 inches. Remove all cut debris. Do NOT mow between April 15 and August 15.



A variety of perennials and warm-season grasses

WE CAN HELP!

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Without proper maintenance, weeds will take over stormwater management basins as shown above.