

Invasive Alien Plant Species of Virginia

Tall Fescue (*Festuca elatior* L.)

Description

Tall fescue is a coarse perennial grass. It grows in dense clumps with short creeping rootstocks which form thick mats. The flowering stems may reach five feet in height. The leaf blades grow basally or low on the stem and are four to twenty-four inches in length. Leaf surfaces are smooth on the underside and rough on the upper side. The inflorescence is two to twelve inches long, erect and contracted. Plant taxonomists have renamed this plant *Festuca pratensis*, which goes by the common name "meadow fescue." Grass species are often difficult to distinguish. For accurate identification, consult an agricultural extension agent or a natural resource specialist.

Habitat

Tall fescue can be found in disturbed areas including pastures, abandoned fields, roadsides, and railroad embankments. Tolerant of a wide range of moisture conditions, it has been planted for erosion control along levees and stream banks. It grows well under a variety of soil conditions, including nutrient-poor, acid soils.

Distribution

Introduced from Europe in the late 1800s, tall fescue is found through-

out the United States and southern Canada. It is often grown for pasture or hay, and is spread further through the manure of grazing animals. Marketed as Kentucky 31, it is included in many lawn seed mixtures because it is easily established and drought resistant. It is found throughout Virginia.

Threats

As the density of tall fescue increases at a site, the diversity of native species declines. This is partly due to a natural toxin tall fescue produces to inhibit the growth of competing species. In natural areas tall fescue crowds out other species by forming dense clumps with a thick mat of roots.

Control

Mechanical methods are virtually useless in controlling tall fescue because of the thick root system and vegetative resprouting. The most effective method for severe infestations is burning early in the growing season, followed by spot application late in the growing season of a glyphosate herbicide to plants missed by the fire. Light infestations may be controlled by spot application of a glyphosate herbicide. These methods are ineffective if the plant is in a dormant phase. Glyphosate herbicides are recommended be-



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cause they are biodegradable. However, glyphosate is a nonselective, systemic herbicide that affects all green vegetation. To be safe and effective, herbicide use requires careful knowledge of the chemicals, appropriate concentrations, and the effective method and timing of their application. Consult an agricultural extension agent or a natural resource expert for more information.

Alternatives to Tall Fescue

Since the discovery of an endophyte fungus toxic to livestock which is associated with this species, many native species of warm season

For more information, contact the Department of Conservation and Recreation or the Virginia Native Plant Society.



Virginia Native Plant Society
P.O. Box 844, Annandale, VA 22030



Department of Conservation & Recreation
CONSERVING VIRGINIA'S NATURAL AND RECREATIONAL RESOURCES
203 Governor Street, Richmond, VA 23219
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grasses have become popular and highly beneficial agricultural alternatives. These species are better able to tolerate drought as well as being more productive than fescue. Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), and Eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*) have all been successfully used where fescue once was the

favorite forage. More information on native warm season grasses can be obtained from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, P.O. Box 11104, Richmond, VA, 23230-11041.

There are several fine-bladed fescues superior to Kentucky 31 for use in lawns. One is Chewning's fescue, four varieties of which are Jamestown 2, Longfellow, Shadow E, and SR 500. Another is creeping red fescue, two varieties of which

are Flyer and Shademaster. For more information contact the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service in your area.

For more information on this and other invasive plant species, contact the Virginia Native Plant Society or the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation at the addresses below.

Illustration from *Manual of the Grasses of the United States*, by A. S. Hitchcock, Dover Publication. Used with permission.

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