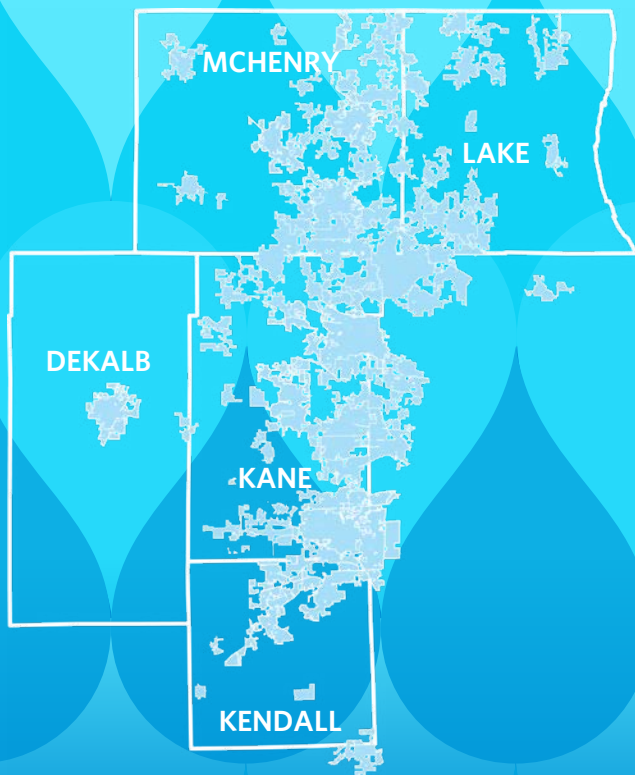


Lawn watering and other outdoor water uses can account for 30 percent of homeowner water usage throughout the summer. Reducing outdoor water usage saves you money and protects our limited water resources, especially during times of drought.



# Beyond bluegrass: a guide to selecting low input turfgrass in northeastern Illinois

## Regional Water Supply Concerns

In northeastern Illinois, regional water supply concerns and water conservation is increasingly important as rapid population growth continues. This growth is putting pressure on our rivers and depleting aquifers—layers of underground sand, gravel, and rock that contain groundwater—faster than they can recharge. In response to these pressures, the Northwest Water Planning Alliance, a consortium of five northeastern Illinois counties, was formed in 2010 to ensure a sustainable water supply.

*By understanding where our water comes from, and by using our water efficiently, our work together can create a sustainable water supply for future generations.*

### Northwest Water Planning Alliance

The Northwest Water Planning Alliance (NWP), formed by intergovernmental agreements, seeks to collaboratively plan for and steward our shared river and groundwater resources to ensure a sustainable water supply for the people, economy, environment, and future generations. This group connects roughly 80 communities in northwestern Cook, DeKalb, Kane, Kendall, Lake, and McHenry Counties. NWP communities use shared water resources of groundwater, river or lake water, or a combination of water sources.

For more information, visit [www.nwpa.us](http://www.nwpa.us)



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## Background

Homeowners have likely heard of the most common type of grass in the northeastern Illinois region, Kentucky bluegrass. The concern with Kentucky bluegrass is that it requires higher amounts of water and fertilizer to remain viable compared to other types of grass. Removing some, or all, of the Kentucky bluegrass from your landscape and installing an alternative grass species can save water and protect water quality. Additionally, consider shrinking your lawn by edging with native plants.



Photo used with permission from Jack Pizzo.

A buffalograss lawn, edged with native plants, in July in northern Illinois.

## Do you know the lingo?

Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue, and buffalograss are the common names of different grass **species**. When two or more grass species are combined, i.e. Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue, it's called a **mixture**.

Within each grass species there are sub-varieties called **cultivars**, which are bred to exhibit specific characteristics like disease resistance or finer texture. When two or more cultivars of a species are combined, it's called a **blend**.

## How to select grass type

### Steps for making your selection

Thinking through key considerations of turfgrass selection, as well as having an understanding of different grass varieties, will help you attain a lawn that meets your needs.

- 1. Get to know your property.** Factors to note include sun exposure (full sun, partial shade, or full shade), soil condition (nutrients, pH, texture, drainage), and any known lawn pests and diseases. Choosing the type of grass best adapted to your environment will help avoid lawn problems.
- 2. Consider your needs and expectations.** Think about how you plan to use your outdoor space, how much time and money you are willing to commit to maintaining your lawn, and any local landscaping and watering ordinances.
- 3. Availability.** Both cool and warm season grasses can be established from seed, sod, or plugs. Sod selection may be limited by local availability, and local ordinances may prohibit establishment from seed/plugs.

### Warm vs cool season grasses

Based on growing habits, turfgrasses are separated into two categories: warm and cool grasses. Cool grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue, and fine fescue have a longer green period in the region, actively growing in the spring and fall. Warm grasses like buffalograss, bermudagrass, and zoysiagrass grow only in the summer and appear brown in the cooler weather.

For more information, visit the University of Illinois Extension Lawn Talk website: [extension.illinois.edu/lawntalk](https://extension.illinois.edu/lawntalk)

## Lawn water requirements

Different types of grass have different lawn watering requirements. Compared to Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue requires 30% less irrigation and buffalograss requires 75% less water.<sup>1</sup>

### Cool season species

The recommended cool season alternative to Kentucky bluegrass is tall fescue, which requires less water and fertilizer. Perennial ryegrass, which germinates fast, is often mixed with Kentucky bluegrass. But ryegrass also has high watering requirements and is neither cold nor heat tolerant.



Photo from Missouri Botanical Garden.

Grass plots in early November: From left warm season grasses (zoysia and buffalograss) then cool season grasses (tall fescues).

### Warm season species

Use of warm season grasses in northern Illinois lawns has been limited, due to concern over aesthetics (a shorter green period and brown appearance in cool weather) and less cold tolerance, which means the grass can succumb to winterkill and may need to be re-established. Due to the colder climate in northern Illinois, buffalograss is likely the best warm season species for the northern Illinois region, followed by zoysiagrass and lastly bermudagrass.

<sup>1</sup> University of Missouri Extension, "Home Lawn Watering Guide," 2014, <https://extension2.missouri.edu/g6720>