

Let the Buyer Beware when Buying Sod

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I hear the complaints all too often, from both customers and sod dealers. Customers complain, "I planted sod two months ago and most of it's dead, and the sod dealer won't do anything about it." Or, "I bought centipede sod but it's twenty-five percent bahia. Can you help me prove that the bahia came in with the sod?"

And, the dealers complain, "We have a customer who wants us to replace his sod. It was fine when we put it down, but something happened since then. Can you look at it and see what happened?"

Both sides want me, as a horticultural expert, to settle the dispute. But, two months, or even two weeks later, I usually cannot determine what went wrong. You see, it's as the sod dealer says, there are too many things that can happen to that sod once it's in the homeowner's care. I wasn't there, and I don't know firsthand what kind of care the sod received or what it looked like when it was received.

So here's my advice. Once you buy sod, consider it yours. Take good care of it. But, for goodness sake, make sure you're completely happy with it before you accept it and pay for it! You won't have much recourse later. I've even seen some of these cases go to court, and the outcome isn't usually in the favor of the homeowner.

Before you go out and buy sod, do your homework. Know your site and know all about lawngrasses. For some basic information about grass selection and care, visit the University of Florida IFAS Extension publication website link at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/TOPIC_Lawns. There you will find a complete Lawn Handbook.

But, first, here are some basic facts you need to consider:

- If you have too much shade, even the right type of St. Augustine grass won't grow well. If you have any question about whether an area is too shaded, buy a tray or two of St. Augustine plugs and plug part of the shaded area first. Give the grass a month or more to see what it will do before investing lots of money in sod. **Too much shade is the number one cause of sod failures.** You can always find someone to sell you sod and tell you it seems as if you have enough sun. But, remember, it's your responsibility to pay for that sod. So you want to be sure you have enough sun. Do the plug test first.
- Plugs, such as you buy in trays at a garden center, are easier to establish than sod in shaded areas anyway. They've got a deeper root system and are more forgiving of not watering properly than is sod.
- You need to prepare the soil before planting grass. Laying sod over old grass or untilled ground is not recommended.

- If the sod doesn't look good when you receive it, then don't accept it. If it doesn't look good, it may come back, but what will you do if it doesn't? For this and other reasons, it's best not to buy sod in the winter.
- Check the sod for weeds as you're unloading it. If you see too many weeds in the top layers of sod, don't accept it. If you find weeds in sod further down in the pile as you're laying it, complain to the dealer immediately. Don't wait until weeks or months later to complain.
- In hot weather don't accept sod that you know has sat on the pallet for more than a day or two. The pieces in the center of the pallet can heat up too much and be too severely damaged to recover. If you find yourself in the position of having sod that you think sat on the pallet too long before delivery, note which sod comes out of the center of the pallet and monitor it to see how it does. If it is too damaged, it will brown within a few days. Then, not later, is the time to complain.
- Keep the sod watered carefully until the roots knit into the soil below. Then you can gradually taper off the watering. Frequency will depend on the time of the year and the amount of shade. Sod in the summer sun will need watering at least daily. However, I've seen sod in the shade, receiving daily summer rains, get too wet. You will have to use some common sense in watering. The object is to keep the root zone from drying out and to have the soil just below the roots moist so that the roots will grow into that soil.

For more local gardening information, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/>

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