

# Zoysiagrass: Patience Reaps Big Rewards

by Janet Barbee, Fairfax Master Gardener

What is that golden-brown, honey-colored, dense, carpet-like turfgrass framing the house on the hill? In winter, this is the color of Zoysiagrass in its dormant state. Some might also call it a warm fawn or a light bourbon color, but Zoysiagrass owners never call it plain brown.

Zoysiagrass is a warm-season turfgrass named after the Austrian botanist Karl von Zois. It is a high-quality turfgrass that thrives in full sun and has excellent heat and drought tolerance. The ideal growing zones for Zoysiagrass are Zones 8 through 10, with Zones 6 and 7 considered marginal and transition zones. These zones predict which perennial plants will survive winter conditions. Each numbered zone ranges from 1 (coldest) to 13 (warmest). Northern Virginia is in Zone 7, leaning toward Zone 8. With increasing heat and drought, Zoysiagrass is a good option for our area.



Zoysiagrass

photo: Joey Williamson, Clemson Extension

In my 10-plus years working with the Fairfax County Master Gardeners' Turf Team, I have visited only two Zoysiagrass lawns, one of which was my own. My husband and I "inherited" our Zoysiagrass turfgrass when we moved into our house in 1992. Our property covered 2 and one-third acres, with the front lawn in Zoysiagrass and the back lawn areas a mix of other grasses. The Zoysiagrass was beautiful and dense. Over the 33 years we lived there, it spread to the back areas. Neighbors often asked why our lawn thrived while they had a variety of difficulties with theirs. They did not seem to mind that our Zoysiagrass crept into their lawns. We did very little fertilizing, left the watering to nature and enjoyed the benefits of Zoysiagrass. In many ways, it took care of itself.



Zoysiagrass early spring

photo: Rutgers Extension

We discovered that Zoysiagrass has many advantages. The first is its heat and drought tolerance. In the summer, Northern Virginia often experiences droughts. Because our property relies on well water and has no irrigation system, this was important. Zoysiagrass requires less water than cool-season grasses and stays green even during droughts.

It has a dense, carpet-like quality and tolerates heavy foot traffic, making it great for family activities. It can handle cold weather and stays green a little longer as winter approaches.

Once established, Zoysiagrass requires less maintenance than cool-season grasses. With proper care, it needs less water, fewer pesticides and less mowing, to name a few.

Zoysiagrass also has a couple of disadvantages, depending on how one perceives it. It can be somewhat expensive if starting from scratch using plugs or seeds. It takes patience, since it spreads slowly through above-ground stolons and underground rhizomes. Stolons grow horizontally across the soil surface and produce new plants at nodes as they creep along. Rhizomes spread beneath the soil and send up shoots. Although Zoysiagrass spreads slowly, the combination of these two systems helps store energy for recovery and survival after stress (winter or drought).

It goes dormant for four to five months from late fall to early spring, turning golden-brown. The disadvantage is that some owners only want green.



*Zoysiagrass stolon*

photo: North Carolina State  
Extension

To encourage Zoysiagrass, begin with a soil test. This will determine the soil's pH, evaluate its nutrient potential and determine the most beneficial application rates of fertilizer and lime for optimum plant growth. Water deeply and less often to help conserve our natural resource of water. In other words, Zoysia benefits from a balanced nutrient approach.

In summary, Zoysiagrass thrives in heat, making it perfect for our Northern Virginia climate. Patience is key to its success and resilience. It delivers the rewards of a beautiful lawn that reduces weed invasion, is cost-effective in the long run and helps support a dynamic environment. In the future, with increasing heat and drought, Zoysiagrass could become the turfgrass of choice in the Mid-Atlantic area.

#### References

- [Zoysiagrass](#), North Carolina State Extension
- [Zoysiagrass: A warm-season grass in a cool-season world](#), Michigan State University Extension
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