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MAINTENANCE: HYDROSEEDING GONE WRONG

Take measures to correct problems before they happen. Five sure signs you've hydroseeded incorrectly.



Please, don't give hydroseeding a bad name. A blemished reputation is a major concern when contractors come across a poor attempt at hydroseeding. Often they're witness to subpar seedings because they've been called in to correct another contractor's folly.

"Hydroseeding is not a problem if it is done correctly," says Chris Haddock, owner of CBH Landscape Contractor in Laconia, N.H. "A lot of what happens when a job goes bad has nothing to do with hydroseeding, rather it's because the contractor didn't prep the site properly or follow procedures correctly."

On the surface, hydroseeding seems relatively simple for a single operator to incorporate into a business, says Ken Hirzel, owner of Dogwood Hollow Landscapes in Mountain Home, Ark.. Many novice contractors simply see adding hydroseeding to their service menu as buying a machine for a few thousand dollars, loading it with seed, mulch and tackifier, spraying the seed mixture on the ground and cashing the client's check. Some contractors, though, fail to properly assess their costs and drastically underbid their competitors, Hirzel says. Incorrectly bidding a job is the first domino to fall in a chain reaction the leaves the client dissatisfied and disheartened with hydroseeding.

"They bid their hydroseeding jobs too cheap to get the work," Hirzel says. "Then they realize what they've gotten themselves into so they try to do the job while cutting back on materials, especially the mulch. And there is the start of a bad hydroseeding job."

A general lack of knowledge is one of the biggest contributors to poor hydroseeding practices, contractors say.

1. **UNEVEN GERMINATION.** Contractors looking to cut costs will often skimp on the seed mulch used during the hydroseeding process. The result is inconsistent coverage and little islands, or pockets, of soil.

A solid hydroseeding job is incumbent upon proper coverage and equipment calibration, says Pat Holubetz, vice president of North American sales at Fairfield, Ohio-based Finn Corp. "What I see a lot of guys doing is mixing a load and then spraying double the recommended area with it," Holubetz says. "Often they're not doing a proper coverage calculation and calibrating the equipment accordingly for that coverage. Really, they're just guessing, like throwing a dart at a dart board."

Inconsistent coverage can also stem from poor application practices. "Try to get application from a couple of different angles to avoid a shadowing effect," Holubetz says. This shadowing comes from uneven soil from tire tracks, footprints or even channels in the soil from a recent rainfall.

Lastly, failing to mix the slurry of material throughout the process allows the mixture to settle, Holubetz says. The results is too much materials being applied at the beginning or the end of the process, which increases the chances of uneven distribution of seed and/or mulch. "Proper agitation keeps everything in suspension and ensures even coverage," he says. "It'll keep the mixture the same at the end as it was in the beginning of the process."

2. **DARK GREEN SURFACE.** A cost-conscious homeowner may offer to handle the site preparation to reduce his costs. Part of that prep work involves breaking up compacted loam, or surface soil, to create an inviting seed bed for the germinating turf. However, if the loam remains compacted, the slurry of seed, mulch and tackifier may appear dark green, whereas it would appear as a lighter green on a properly prepared surface.

"You'll spray on the seed and you won't penetrate to the proper depth," Haddock says. "Instead, it just sits on the surface. The seed will grow, but it won't do well because it'll never properly germinate."

3. **UNDESIRED VEGETATION.** It's a major disappointment when a motley mix of native plants and grasses spring up in a client's yard instead of the lush green blanket of ryegrass and fescue they were expecting. It's important for a contractor to flush his hydroseeder's tanks in between jobs, Haddock says.

"It might not make too big of a difference going from a lawn job to an erosion control job," he says. "But the other way around and the client won't be too happy to have wild flowers coming up in his front yard."

However, Holubetz warns that while hydroseeding is an efficient way to install a lush lawn, weeds and undesired plants are an inevitable and unintended side effect of the process.

"If you examine a typical cubic foot of soil you'd find thousands of weed seeds in it," he says. "With hydroseeding, you're creating an environment – mulch, fertilizer, water – that's perfect to wake up these weed seeds and get them to

germinate.”

4. **NATIVE GRASSES FAIL** Hydroseeding is commonly employed as an erosion control method to reduce soil loss in a given area, typically sloped geography.

Erosion control seed mixes quite often include wildflowers or native grasses specific to the geographic area, says James McEntire, president of McEntire Landscaping in Redding, Calif. Evolution has ensured that these native flora will not only take to the soil in a variety of conditions, but also thrive and hold the ground in place. However, using native grass seeds at the right time of year is critical to success, he says, especially if irrigation is not available and germination is dependent upon seasonal rain cycles.

“Hydroseeding too late or too early in the season can greatly reduce the likelihood of success,” McEntire says.

Not addressing the proper slope in an erosion-control spraying could impact germination, Holubetz says. Drastic inclines require a more powerful tackifier to hold the seed in place.

5. **DEAD GRASS.** The grass may start out strong, but within a week or two the tender blades are weak, wilted or even dead.

More often than not the customer is the culprit for this dire condition. Most likely they took the process for granted and failed to water regularly or at all. Some contractors report instances where clients went on vacation and turned off their irrigation systems on their recently hydroseeded lawns, only to come home to a brownscape instead of a lush greenscape. LL