Native Grass Transition
Greenwood Cemetery

Start Date—June 2024

A gradual transition from poor condition cool-season grass to a more drought-resistant native grass stand using:

- Little bluestem
- Blue grama
- Blue Mesa sheep fescue
- Buffalograss

Assuming conditions typical of central Nebraska, irrigation using a moveable sprinkler system and typical rainfall. (estimated at approximately 50% of normal irrigation compared to a conventional lawn)

The selected seed mix creates a hybrid prairie-lawn approach that combines:

- Low-growing turf characteristics from buffalograss and blue grama
- Seasonal color retention from Blue Mesa sheep fescue
- Deep-rooted drought resilience from little bluestem

This combination provides a more natural-looking lawn with significantly improved drought performance compared to cool-season turf.

Goals

1. Reduce irrigation demand
2. Improve drought tolerance
3. Lower fertilizer and maintenance requirements
4. Maintain an acceptable lawn appearance during transition
5. Establish a durable native warm-season grass stand

Recommended Grass Mix

Buffalograss

- Primary turf-forming grass
- Extremely heat and drought tolerant
- Low-growing with reduced mowing needs
- Provides the foundation for the lawn system

Blue Mesa Sheep Fescue

- Cool-season bunch grass for early green color
- Fine texture and ornamental appearance
- Helps maintain some spring and fall color
- Lower water demand than traditional turf fescues

Bad River Blue Grama

- Warm-season native grass with excellent drought tolerance
- Strong performer in Nebraska heat
- Adds density and summer durability
- Blends well with buffalograss

Little Bluestem

- Structural native prairie grass
- Deep-rooted and highly drought tolerant
- Provides seasonal texture and strong summer performance
- Adds winter interest and resilience

General Strategy

The transition relies on gradually weakening existing cool-season turf while helping native grasses establish.

Key concepts:

- Water deeply but less frequently
- Allow cool-season turf to experience summer stress
- Encourage warm-season native grasses during hot weather
- Expect a patchy appearance in early to mid-years
- Native grasses prioritize root development before top growth
- Sheep fescue will establish faster than the warm-season species and may visually dominate during the first several seasons

Irrigation Strategy

Aim for approximately:

- 0.5–0.75 inches total moisture per week, including rainfall.
- This is significantly less than a conventional lawn.

Use moveable sprinklers to:

- Deeply soak seeded areas
- Rotate watering zones
- Prioritize newly establishing sections
- Avoid keeping the entire lawn uniformly green

The goal is native grass survival and establishment, not appearance perfection. The existing cool-season lawn should gradually thin during hot weather.

YEARS 1–3 — Initial Establishment and Turf Suppression
June 2024 Through Fall 2026

Early Season Objectives

- Begin gradually weakening existing turf
- Prepare seedbed without fully removing lawn cover
- Introduce native seed slowly over multiple seasons
- Preserve enough lawn density to prevent erosion and mud during dry periods

Early Season Actions

1. Mow existing lawn very short (1.5–2 inches)
2. Aggressively dethatch or power rake
3. Core aerate if soil is compacted
4. Lightly expose soil surface
5. Reduce irrigation frequency immediately
6. Seed native grass mix
7. Roll or lightly press seed into soil

Early Season Watering

- Light watering immediately after seeding
- Transition quickly to deeper watering
- Water 1–2 times per week depending on rainfall

Early Season Expected Appearance

- Existing lawn remains mostly dominant
- Sheep fescue visible first
- Sparse warm-season native germination
- Patchy establishment throughout seeded zones
- Lawn still generally recognizable as conventional turf

Mid-Season Objectives

- Keep seedlings alive
- Stress cool-season turf
- Control weeds

Mid-Season Actions

1. Mow high (4–5 inches)
2. Do not fertilize heavily
3. Spot-control aggressive weeds if necessary
4. Continue reduced irrigation schedule

Mid-Season Notes

- Native grasses grow slowly during establishment
- Little bluestem may appear sparse the first season
- Heat favors warm-season natives

Mid-Season Expected Appearance

- Patchy lawn
- Brown cool-season grass during heat
- Scattered native clumps emerging

Late Season Objectives

- Encourage root development
- Evaluate establishment

Late Season Actions

1. Continue reduced watering
2. Overseed thin areas if needed
3. Remove heavy leaf buildup
4. Avoid aggressive fertilization

Late Season Expected Results

- Some native grasses visible
- Cool-season lawn thinner than spring
- Root systems beginning to establish
- Optional Dormant Seeding

YEARS 4-5 — Early Transition Phase
Spring 2027 Through Fall 2028

Early Season Objectives

- Continue suppressing cool-season turf
- Expand native coverage

Early Season Actions

1. Scalp isolated heavy cool-season patches if desired
2. Maintain limited irrigation
3. Spot overseed bare areas
4. Avoid excessive nitrogen fertilizer

Early Season Expected Appearance

- Lawn may green unevenly
- Native grasses emerge later than conventional turf

Mid-Season Actions

1. Continue deep, infrequent watering
2. Mow selectively
3. Allow natives to mature during summer heat
4. Reduce mowing frequency if possible

Mid-Season Expected Results

- Native grasses become visibly stronger
- Cool-season lawn weakens during heat
- Water demand noticeably reduced

Mid-Season Appearance

- Mixed prairie-lawn look
- Better summer performance than traditional turf
- More texture and seasonal color variation

Late Season Objectives

- Improve stand density
- Evaluate successful species

Late Season Actions

1. Overseed sparse zones if necessary
2. Continue reduced irrigation
3. Begin accepting more natural lawn appearance

Late Season Expected Results

- Gradual increase of buffalograss and blue grama in sunny areas
- Sheep fescue continuing to occupy cooler and partially shaded zones
- Little bluestem slowly forming visible clumps
- Existing cool-season lawn beginning to noticeably thin during hot summers
- Approximately 30–50% native presence in successfully seeded areas
- Improved drought resistance

YEARS 6-7 — Mid Transition to Functional Native Lawn
2029–2030 Growing Seasons

Objectives

- Allow natives to dominate
- Further reduce irrigation

Actions

1. Water only during extended drought periods
2. Mow less frequently
3. Spot treat invasive weeds
4. Avoid high-input lawn practices

Expected Results

- Strong mixed native grass stand developing
- Buffalograss and blue grama increasingly functioning as the primary lawn surface
- Little bluestem established in clumps and accent areas
- Conventional turf reduced substantially in sunny areas
- Reduced irrigation needs become noticeable

- Significantly lower irrigation demand
- Improved summer appearance compared to conventional turf
- Deep root systems established

Appearance
- Prairie-style lawn texture
- Seasonal color changes
- Tan/copper winter appearance

YEARS 8 and beyond— Mature Native Stand
2031–forward

Long-Term Maintenance

Watering
- Emergency watering only during severe drought
- Many areas may survive on rainfall alone

Mowing
- Flexible depending on desired appearance

Fertility
- Minimal fertilizer needed

Weed Control
- Occasional spot treatment only

Expected Outcome
- Mature drought-resistant lawn system
- Increased resilience during Nebraska summer heat

Long-Term Transition Strategy:

Rather than attempting a full conversion immediately, this plan relies on:
- repeated overseeding cycles
- gradual suppression of cool-season grasses
- taking advantage of naturally dry summers
- allowing native species to slowly occupy open space

This is slower than aggressive turf removal methods, but often produces:
- fewer weed problems
- lower establishment risk
- better drought resilience during transition
- improved appearance during dry years

During unusually dry years:

- prioritize survival over rapid conversion
- protect young seedlings with occasional deep watering
- allow cool-season turf to enter dormancy naturally
- postpone aggressive turf suppression if necessary
- continue dormant seeding during fall and winter

Native prairie species are naturally adapted to slow establishment under variable moisture conditions.

Important Expectations During Transition

- Uneven appearance
- Temporary browning
- Weed pressure
- Slower spring green-up
- More natural texture

Long-Term Benefits

- Much lower irrigation demand
- Better heat tolerance
- Reduced fertilizer needs
- Improved drought resilience

Management Philosophy

The most successful native lawn transitions usually occur when expectations involve:

- gradual change rather than instant results
- seasonal color variation
- a more prairie-like aesthetic
- occasional dormancy during dry periods

The reward is a far more sustainable lawn system that performs well during Nebraska heat and water stress.