

The Problem with Straw Erosion Netting

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Photos by Phill Bouk

Traditional ways of starting a lawn include grass seed mixed with organic matter, spreading straw that contains seed, or applying sod to bare ground. The soil should be tested for pH and nutrients before appropriately amending only as needed, preferably using organic methods. Over the decades, these methods are proven effective for good grass growth.

Recent years saw a new product introduced: straw erosion netting. It goes by different names depending on the manufacturer, but the principle is the same. Straw is mixed in a plastic (often polypropylene) netting. The unrolled sheets are positioned on the ground and secured, usually with long, metal staples. The advertised benefits are that the netting holds the soil while grass takes root. When photo-degrading netting is used, sunlight is supposed to break the plastic down within a year. This method is favored by budget contractors, utility companies, and municipal agencies such as VDOT.

The problem with straw erosion netting lies in its unnecessary plastic usage. The netting can get dislodged by any combination of pushing up plant growth, lawn equipment, foot traffic, and flood waters, to name a few. Figure A shows a lawn with detaching plastic net and B is a close-up image. Once up, the netting can become trip hazards, get chopped by mowers, or a big enough piece could wrap around and bend a mower's blade shaft. Wildlife has been found dead after being entangled in the webbing. Wind blows the netting chunks into other areas where they contribute to plastic pollution. Photo-degrading plastics often endure longer than advertised. If or when plastics break down, they just become smaller and smaller—eventually becoming microplastics, which are increasing health concerns:

- [Potential Health Impact of Microplastics: A Review of Environmental Distribution, Human Exposure, and Toxic Effects - PMC](#)
- [Health Effects of Microplastic Exposures: Current Issues and Perspectives in South Korea - PMC](#)

Any old, buried netting is a nuisance when encountered while doing yardwork.

The best remedy for plastic netting is to pull it up once grass seedlings start growing. At that stage, much of the young grass remains in the ground while the plastic litter goes into the trash. Removing the netting is difficult amongst large, mature grass blades or Bermuda grass's wiry stolons. If a landscaping project requires erosion control while plant roots develop, biodegradable meshes such as coir netting (made from coconut fibers) are excellent alternatives. Wooden stakes holding the coir weave will safely degrade over time. Continue using the previously mentioned traditional means of starting a lawn, but when using sod, make sure it has no plastic mesh reinforcement.

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