A generation devoted to turfgrass testing

Dr Andy Newell this year celebrates 25 years of unbroken work compiling independent test data for the TurfGrass Seed booklet. Jim Goodwin spoke to him

“It’s been a staple of the industry for generations, has continued to shape current trends and given us a scientific footing concentrating on impartiality and quality.

The TurfGrass Seed Booklet is at the heart of sports and amenity turf breeding and is the UK’s most trusted source for independent grass cultivar trial data. Since the first booklet was published in 1978, one man has exerted perhaps more influence in its evolution than any other – this year he celebrates 25 years of the publication.

He offers an example of what he calls a ‘scientific reference work’ to those familiar with a website that users can exploit its weaknesses. “You might sow what you play – working to the strengths of the desirable grasses and to the weaknesses of the undesirable.”

“Tall fescues are where we have genetic potential for commercial growth from breeders. You wouldn’t recognise a perennial ryegrass now from 20 years ago, and the same could be true for tall fescues.”

He claims the most pressing issue would be to stop talking about Poa annua and start doing something about its prevalence in turfgrass. “If you sow a mix of bents and red fescues, for example, one or more tall fescues will certainly be present, the quality of your turf has to be a long-term factor, so any differential in price should be thought of over a longer period, in which case the price difference becomes minimal.”

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When I started the brochure this year, it was very much based on opinion. Part of my remit was to move the science of the industry forward. In the early days the respect for my predecessor John Shieldrick’s analysis proved sufficient for consumers but as the business side of the industry moved on, it became more pertinent to have quantifiable data, numbers and rankings. The numbering system currently in place can be traced back, allotting today’s consumer to see exactly bow and why a cultivar has been given the rating it has. Ultimately, our job is to help the breeder sort the champions from the also runs.”

This 25-year association with the Institute has taught him anything it’s that you should never advocate using a poor cultivar, in any circumstance, even if it’s just down to a cost consideration.

The whole thrust of the Turfgrass Seed booklet is a willingness to adapt and evolve, take on new practices and welcome new cultivars into the increasingly multi-faceted repertoire of greenkeeping skills. In the UK, more senior grounds professionals have grown up with a host of chemicals at their disposal. The whole thrust of the Turfgrass Seed booklet is a willingness to adapt and evolve, take on new practices and welcome new cultivars into the increasingly multi-faceted repertoire of greenkeeping skills. In the UK, more senior grounds professionals have grown up with a host of chemicals at their disposal. The whole thrust of the Turfgrass Seed booklet is a willingness to adapt and evolve, take on new practices and welcome new cultivars into the increasingly multi-faceted repertoire of greenkeeping skills. In the UK, more senior grounds professionals have grown up with a host of chemicals at their disposal.

Richard Brown, amenity sales manager at British Seed Houses, said: “The BHP0 Buyers guide is an invaluable guide to turf professionals as it records the results of independent and through trials which accurately reflect a cultivar’s performance. A variety that does well in these trials is taken seriously in the market place and gives greenkeepers added confidence. We have a reputation for quality and investment in developing cultivars and understand the real worth of the guide.”

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The nature of this vastly important reference work has changed and evolved as much as the industry has in a quarter of a century. But what does the future hold?”

“The tall fescues are where we predict the major evolution will occur. They’re at the stage where perennial ryegrasses once were and the breeding potential is vast. If we can improve the attractive-
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The Turfgrass Seed Booklet is at the heart of sports and amenity turf breeding and is the UK's most trusted source for independent grass cultivar trial data.

Since the first booklet was published in 1978, one man has exerted perhaps more influence in its evolution than any other - and this year he celebrates 25 years in compiling the catalogue of turf performance data that characterises the publication.

Dr Andy Newell, Head of Turfgrass Biology at the Sports Turf Research Institute in Bingley, West Yorkshire, has been responsible for data analysis and the assembly of trial results as performance 'league tables' since 1988.

In that time, aspects of seed trialling have changed beyond recognition, while others have varied remarkably little.

"When the SRTI was formed in the 1930s, one of the core aims of the Institute was to create a scientific base for testing and trialling turf," he explains. "There was very little science behind the way turf was used prior to this but what they did know was that sea-washed turf - which links the sea and land - possessed finer characteristics, hence the preference for using this type of turf in a non-links setting." The SRTI recognised that a better range of grass species was needed for golf and sport at large. "We started to look at breeding grasses for golf, and our first success was with Dawson Slender Creeping Red Fescue, bred at Bingley and eventually added to a manufacturer's range." We were also trying to find grasses from other sources, as well as developing some early commercial elements. Today, you couldn't rightfully breed grasses for golf yourself and then test other manufacturers' breeds. The commercial world back then wasn't what it is now. Needless to say, it probably took us 25 years to produce a grass worth cultivating.

When courses began to be built inland, course architects moved grasses inland from their links environment, which worked well in certain circumstances. But the necessity of a scientific focus to seed testing was accelerated by companies selling grasses and heightening claims for their performance without any independent trialling to back them up.

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"If you use the booklet superfluously, merely going by what tops the table, you won't get any rubbish but if you're an educated greenkeeper you can make some far more well-informed decisions based on the specifics of the course and the environment."

Although the turfgrass industry is constantly evolving, certain grasses differ little from the 1970s, he says. The slowest evolving genus in his quarter of a century stint has been bent grasses. "Some of them on the list now have been for over 20 years, largely unchanged. In stark contrast, the perennial ryegrass now from 20 years ago, for example, one or more will come to prominence depending on the weather. Nature will start to select the best cultivars for the environment and that's where the art of greenkeeping comes in - working to the strengths of the available grasses and to the weaknesses of the undesirable."

The longevity of the booklet is a key issue for those in the industry but for Andy, it's the reward of knowing that you've helped produce something of worth that's praise enough.

"We've prevented a free for all among breeders, and guarded against those with bigger budgets producing poor seed but enjoying the biggest consumer base."