Innovations make more color

BY MARK LESLIE

To flower or not to flower: the question is controversial if nothing else for golf course superintendents. And now, two innovations have added a new, cost-effective method of adding dynamic color to large areas of rough for some regions of the country.

In Arizona, Phil Joines, a USGA Green Section agronomist in the Mid-Atlantic Region, said, "It's hard to say, there are so many variables," he adds. "But then you are going to do it again the next year...Hopefully you'll get good enough germination with the wildflowers that they will be more apparent than the grass..."

Wick of the Ohio-based Lesco said interest in wildflowers among golf course superintendents peaked two to three years ago. But Marie Pompei of the New Jersey-headquartered Lofts Seed Inc. said, "Yes, interest peaked out West and in the Midwest awhile ago, but in the East they're hot."

Most people in the seed industry produce answers for particular problems, and the variety of those answers suggests golf course superintendents should closely scrutinize their options.

Drill seeding possible

Sharlotta Krupala, horticulture and forestry supervisor for the Arlington, Texas, Parks and Recreation Department, said, "I'm not sure I want to put up a machine that..."

Most wildseed's... native varieties must go to seed to get a crop the next year "and they look pretty scruffy when they go to seed."

His machine is unique, Thomas said, because it will plant wildflowers through the existing turf. "Now they would run about $350 per acre. Add more varieties and the cost goes up, such as $100 per acre for the African daisy."

The J-Thom 42 can be bought for $3,990 or Wildseed can contract to do the planting.

Wick told me he had never seen such a large planting and would have to reserve judgment on the procedure.

The wildflowers, if they're tall enough to grow quicker than the grass (when the warm weather arrives), they're going to make a splash of color for the first year," Oat said. "But then you are going to have to do it again the next year..."

Wick said the Trux, Tyte and Befco drill seeders can also be modified with different calibration boxes to plant wildflowers.

Thomas said that if a superintendant wants color for a longer time, they can plant wildflowers.

Applewood Seed Co. in Arvada, Colo., whose company is producing a new carpet loaded with wildflowers, says, "There's a lot of good interest in wildflowers from golf course superintendents, but mostly for special, small areas. Yet there are warnings.

Lesco, Inc, Vice President for Research and Development Art Wick says, "Wildflowers are not for everyone. They are not for the guy who lays his money down and says, 'I want results tomorrow.'"

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Of course, there is a catch. The machine is unique, Thomas said, because it will plant wildflowers through the existing turf. "Now they would run about $350 per acre. Add more varieties and the cost goes up, such as $100 per acre for the African daisy."

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Thomas gave as an example of the cost: If you decide on using corn poppy (650 to seed an acre) and coreopsis (600 to seed an acre), and you contracted with Thomas to seed, would run about $350 per acre. Add more varieties and the cost goes up to $1,00 per acre for the African daisy.

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"It's hard to say, there are so many variables," he adds. Pompei said the South, where the J-Thom 42 has been used, does not have the problems of the East where " surrender grows so fast it's hard to keep the weeds down and keep the area in wildflowers."

In the East, Pompei recommends eliminating the cover on the area and preparing the site just as you would a new grass seeding, minus the fertilizing or liming.
achievable for golf courses

Even if successful on the large scale, the J-Thom 42 — or the Truax drill seeder — is not for those areas superintendent who has traditionally beamed with flowers. Wildflowers, Pompei said, have "caught a lot of interest from superintendents who are looking to get a lot of color for low-maintenance areas, out-of-play areas, hard-to-maintain slopes, maintenance areas, and in the roughs." Dr. Dave Brauer, director of the National Wildflower Research Center in Austin, Texas, advised, "Be aware that wherever you are there are natural open areas, and in the roughs," he said. Without shipping, to buy it on pallets in 250-foot increments costs $1.25 per square foot, which translates to $48.96 per acre. Thus its forecasted use in high-traffic, high-visibility areas is suggested. "We foresee it being used in high-traffic, high-visibility areas where people want to get immediate results and are happy with it and add to their plantings each season. It's something that takes a heck of a lot more planning and ground preparation than many people think. You have to prepare a seed bed just like you were seeding a lawn," Wick said.

Dr. Northington said most wildflower seed companies are putting varieties that have a chance of making it anywhere, but the natives... "There's all kinds of combinations of species that are supposed to work in certain situations," he said. They will often also mix in other varieties that have a chance of making it anywhere, but the natives... "We can't forget it's out there to be a golf course. And most golfers are going to think of a golf course in terms of memorability and playability," says architect Brauer. "Most golfers count up the number of balls they lose at the end of a round, too, and you can't steal their balls," he said.

Appalachian Seed Co.'s wildflower carpet arrives with flowers 2 to 3 inches high. Experience "the interest has leveled off because many of the people who tried it either didn't do it correctly in their planting procedures or didn't understand they were going to have weed competition. They expected more than what they got and many people have backed away from the use. Likewise," he added, "there are many who have good results and are happy with it and add to their plantings each season. It's something that takes a heck of a

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- "If you are in a lower-rainfall area I'd say your chances are pretty good to prepare a good seed bed, water it and moderately fertilize it to get it established. If you're east of that (rainfall) line I'd say, Are you willing to kill the existing vegetation and the possible spot-weed volunteer stuff that comes up after you've seeded in that dead vegetation?"

- "Be prepared to reseed in year number two if your catch in the first year isn't to the degree of density you want. Many super say that's too much of a hassle."

- "Get a sample kit of what the seed company has available and plant simple straight rows 15 feet long of the individual varieties. Then observe what varieties do well and what ones don't."

- "From that information the company can prepare a custom blend for you. Dr. Northington said most wildflower seed companies are putting together specialty mixes — from concentrating on native areas to mixes of cut flowers, mall perennials, annuals, shade, and full sun."

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