New bentgrasses stir superlatives from breeders

By MARK LESLIE

are the new bentgrasses coming to market this year almost too good to be true? Plant breeders who have discovered the germplasm, developed it, and nurtured it through the development process, believe so. Yet, they think even greater heights can be reached.

"I'm very excited," said Lofts Seed Director of Research Dr. Rich Hurley, whose new L-93 along with Crenshaw and Southshore bentgrass varieties all placed in the top 10 in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) results, released in June.

"We've taken a cool-season grass and moved its areas of use from 100 to 150 miles south of where it was 20 years ago," said Hurley. "If you could comfortably grow bent in the mid-potential of the transition zone, now you can grow them in the southern part of the transition zone and maybe a little farther south. But you still can't grow them in Florida. That [summer] season is so long. Certainly, there are better bets for central Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Texas."

Engelke even points to success just north of Houston, where a golf course still reports "gorgeous" bentgrass greens four years after opening. "The bent is doing fantastically well and that is a very humid environment," Engelke said.

So what happens to the Penn series of grasses that have dominated the golf industry for years?

"If somebody saw Penncross with any of the new material, I think they would be shocked," Hurley said. "There is no reason to use Penncross for putting greens. It makes no sense at all. People say they like Penncross for its aggressiveness. But all the top eight or so are more aggressive than Penncross. Penncross is prone to spike marks, it's open and coarse, it's grainy. It doesn't have as good heat tolerance as other varieties. But yet a lot of people would dispute me and challenge me."

Added Lynch: "As the newer varieties come out and show better disease resistance, why plant something you know in advance is going to cause a headache?"

"We won't be putting Penncross on greens anymore," Engelke said flatly. "You have much better choices to work with."

Dr. Joe Duich himself is excited by the improvements in the new grasses, while putting turfgrass maintenance in perspective. "Some of the best greens I've ever seen are Penncross. And some of the worst are Penncross. A lot depends on soil conditions and management."

While Duich's PSU A-4, A-1, G-6 and G-2 advances in turfgrasses, they are increasingly apt to take the plunge and buy them, according to experts in the seed world. That may not be as true with golf course architects as it is with superintendents.

While people are usually most reluctant to buy new bentgrasses, especially on putting greens, according to Dr. Joe Duich, characteristically conservative superintendents are reportedly acting as pioneers for newly unveiled grasses.

"Absolutely," responded Turf Merchants Inc. Vice President Steve Tubbs when asked if people are ready to take the leap.

The idea of superintendents holding back from purchasing new grasses is "changing and changing radically," agreed Skip Lynch, technical agronomist with Seed Research of Oregon. "[Reluctance] is not nearly as predominant as it was, say, three years ago. I see guys running out to buy new varieties they have never seen before, simply because they want to see something new."

"Sometimes you find yourself on the other side of the argument, asking, 'Where has it been used?' I encourage new grasses, but don't make that huge leap of faith without having at least seen the material first."

Concerning course architects, Dr. Rich Hurley of Lofts Seed said:

"Many are reluctant to use newer varieties. They don't want to be the guinea pig, they say. But they're not. The parent material [for new varieties] came off golf courses."

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