

Real-Life Solutions

PICKING THE RIGHT TURFGRASS

Sure About Seashore

Florida course is the first U.S. track to combine use of the SeaIsle 1 and SeaDwarf varieties of the turf. So far, so good

BY SHANE SHARP

Is seashore paspalum the next “New Coke” or the answer to the Southeast’s potable water shortage? That’s the question the Crown Colony Golf and CC in Fort Meyers, Fla., seeks to answer. In the years to come, the course will be a living experiment for the new turf that can be irrigated with effluent, brackish and even salt water.

Seashore paspalum has raised the eyebrows of golf course owners and superintendents in South Carolina, Georgia and Florida ever since University of Georgia turf scientists Ronny Duncan and Robert Carrow



Aesthetically, seashore paspalum holds its own, as Crown Colony displays.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CROWN COLONY GOLF & CC

penned *Seashore Paspalum: The Environmental Turfgrass* in 2000, and world-famous course designer Pete Dye used it on his Caso de Campo golf course in the Dominican Republic five years ago. Dye proclaimed paspalum to be the savior of golf in the Caribbean.

Picking paspalum

What’s good enough for the islands could turn out to be good enough for the mainland. Seashore paspalum is already in use at a select number of courses in the Southeastern United States, including the Old Collier GC in Naples, Fla. But Crown Colony is the first course in the country to combine use of the SeaIsle 1 and SeaDwarf varieties of seashore paspalum. It’s also the first facility to use

seashore paspalum by choice instead of necessity.

When Crown Colony was being built last year, the water available to former Crown Colony superintendent Steve Spaugh for irrigating the course contained 1,800 parts per million of salt. A hearty stand of bermudagrass would tolerate this salinity, but Spaugh considered using seashore paspalum, even though the turf is so new and untested in the industry.

“I lost sleep over the decision,” Spaugh says. “They had to use [seashore paspalum] at Old Collier. We had a decision to make here, but I had enough input and support from our owners to go for it.”

When he decided to use seashore paspalum after exhaustive research, Spaugh used it everywhere — on

tees, fairways and greens. Spaugh also discovered seashore paspalum was superior to bermudagrass aesthetically, and could easily be mistaken for the stunning bluegrasses and ryegrasses of the North and Midwest. He found the turf was slightly thatchier than bermuda, but needed significantly less fertilizer to survive.

“The problem wasn’t that we didn’t have a choice,” Spaugh says. “The problem is the risks associated with using a turfgrass variety that doesn’t have a long track record. We’re not sure how it will fare in the long run.”

Lakeland, Fla.-based architect Ron Garl, who designed Crown Colony, says the future of golf in warm climates with potable water issues lies with seashore paspalum. “Some courses

What to Do?

Steve Spaugh lost sleep over his decision to use two varieties of seashore paspalum at the Crown Colony Golf & CC in Fort Meyers, Fla.

The Right Call

Spaugh says the turfgrass has performed wonderfully. He wonders why more Florida courses haven’t turned to the hearty turf.

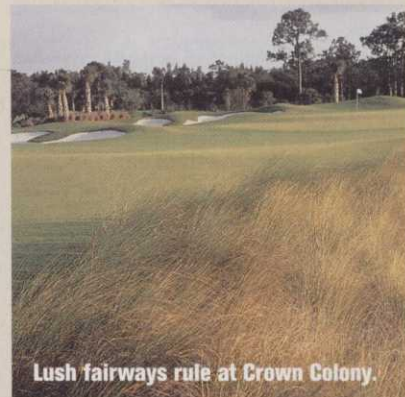
have to take the lead when it comes to new technology," he adds.

They like it

Spaugh elected to try SeaIsle 1 on the fairways and tee boxes, and Sea Dwarf on the greens. Club agronomist Tim Daniels says the course requires 30 percent to 50 percent less fertilizer, and has proven to be drought-tolerant. SeaIsle 1 has also suppressed weed growth.

The maintenance staff currently irrigates the turf with effluent and brackish water. The crew also flushes the course periodically with fresh water to prevent salt and mineral buildup.

Crown Colony held its official grand opening last February. Spaugh is no longer superintendent at Crown Colony — his business card now reads vice president — so he must have done something right when he chose seashore paspalum for the course. Also, player response to the grass has also been over-



Lush fairways rule at Crown Colony.

whelmingly positive, as the grass looks better than bermuda and actually provides better lies from the rough.

"It reminds me of grass you might see up North, and the ball sits up in the rough because it's so thick," says Joe Bruno, a Florida-based golf writer.

As a semiprivate facility, Crown Colony will host thousands more rounds than its exclusively private neighbor Old Collier. But with fairways as lush as you'll find in South-west Florida, as well as nearly flawless

greens cut to one-eighth inch, Spaugh is hardly worried.

"My question, after the grass came in, was: Why doesn't everyone use it?" Spaugh says. "The answer is: The industry is slow to change.

"Most people would say, 'Bermudagrass isn't broken, so why fix

it?' Admittedly, there's an added initial cost because [seashore paspalum] is a new technology, but we may recoup the costs in a year because of the savings in maintenance." ■

Sharp is a free-lance writer from Charlotte, N.C.

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