BENT ON BETTER FAIRWAYS

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The bentgrass fairways of this Pennsylvania course (top) become most inviting to area golfers. Note the well-groomed appearance and overall beauty. Bent fairways can be kept in top shape with modern irrigation (center). The fairway at the bottom is on an Illinois course. Many champion golfers prefer bentgrass because it improves shotmaking and reduces the chance for divots.
NOTHING contributes more to the overall beauty of a golf course than healthy, well-groomed fairways. The feelings of exhilaration and mental relaxation that result from the sport of golf when played on acres of green grass are difficult to describe, but are well understood by all lovers of the game.

Unfortunately, fairways are usually at the mercy of the economic situation prevailing at each course. Greens and tees must be maintained to certain minimum standards no matter what the budget is. Thus when a budget is tight, fairways will suffer relatively more than will tees and greens.

However, the increased popularity of golf and the greatly expanded inter-club and tournament schedules means more attention must be paid to fairways. The "greener grass" of other courses can be embarrassing as well as costly (in lost memberships).

In recent years there has been increasing interest in creeping bentgrass as fairway turf. The increased interest has been mainly caused by a greater use of fairway irrigation; improvement in equipment; a trend toward lower cutting heights for fairways; and the development of varieties bred especially for golf courses such as Emerald and Pennfine. With the well known ability of creeping bentgrasses to tolerate low cutting heights and to rapidly heal divots and other injuries, even with heavy play, the bents can make excellent fairways.

In addition to looking first class, bent fairways improve shotmaking and reduce divots by holding the ball up better.

If a "perfect fairway grass existed, it would probably have the following characteristics: The leaves would be rather broad and stiff to hold the ball up firmly. It would tolerate a cutting height down to at least one half inch and also possess rapid healing characteristics. It should also be seed propagated, wear resistant, and not so vigorous as to require excessive management due to thatch or "puffyness."

At this time such a "perfect" grass does not exist. The two species most nearly fitting the bill are bluegrass and bentgrasses. The better bluegrasses possess the stiff leaves and aren't difficult to manage, but only the very best varieties under almost ideal conditions can persist for any length of time under a one half inch cutting height. At this height wear tolerance is low and healing is very slow.

On the other hand the creeping bents will persists nicely at one half inch or less. They will retain good wear resistance and heal rapidly. However, their leaves are not stiff and upright and excessive vigor leading to thatch and puffyness can be a problem, particularly with improper management.

Seventy-one percent of the complaints against bentgrass in a recent survey were (1) it requires too much chemicals and (2) it produces too much thatch. The use of less aggressive species such as Emerald and proper management can do much to eliminate the latter problem.

The other cool season species offer little hope of ever being bred to produce a good fairway variety. The colonial bents have all the problems of creeping bents and few of the advantages.

Colonial bent usually competes poorly with Poa annua, will not heal rapidly, and is more disease susceptible than creeping bent.

The red fescues, particularly the newer varieties such as Highlight and Jamestown, can form excellent fairway turf in the shade. However, they don't compete well in the sun and heal injuries very slowly.

The new turf-type perennial ryegrasses, such as Manhattan and Pennfine, are excellent for seeding injuries and bare spots on fairways and tees. However, they also spread very slowly and aren't completely winter hardy in the northern areas.

**THE COST OF MAINTENANCE**

What are the economic aspects of creeping bent fairways? Is their average maintenance cost significantly greater than that of a mixed bluegrass, fescue, Poa annua type fairway? Although generalizations are difficult and vary with the local area, the maintenance cost of a creeping bent fairway will usually average slightly higher than other types. However, ten percent of the golf course superintendents recently surveyed indicated bent fairways would be cheaper in the long run, despite higher initial cost and high chemical cost.

Fairway irrigation is essential with bent fairways, but the total water volume used should not significantly exceed that of any other type fairway cut at the same height. The fertilizer bills should also be comparable. Bent fairways should be fed only enough to keep the turf healthy and maintain good color. It is not true that bents must be fertilized much more heavily than other grasses. Over fertilizer can-
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