Heat, humidity fry turf in Midwest and East; promote disease and crabgrass; force turfseed prices up.

NATIONAL REPORT—"It's a year of burnout," says Stan Zontek of the USGA Green Section. "It's September 13th and there's some dead grass, and trees are already dropping leaves.

"But most of the grass looks worse than it is. Turfgrass is amazingly resistant."

A worldwide shortage of grass seed, coupled with blistering heat, then a late-summer drought in the grass-rich Midwest and Eastern U.S., are forcing prices of proprietary brands up drastically.

"Demand is tremendous," Mike Robinson of Seed Research of Oregon told LM on September 11th. "Sales are up at least 20 percent, and I think that's industry-wide—and we've still got half of September and all of October to go."

A band of land from Chicago to Philadelphia was among the hardest hit. In Chicago, for instance, at least 50 golf greens had been killed, says Robinson.

"Turf is just dead everywhere," he says, "and it's not just home lawns; it's golf courses, too—even those with irrigation."

Bruce Church says the second-hottest summer in Chicago history forced D.R. Church Landscaping to send out water trucks in double shifts, night and day. Yet increased incidence of crabgrass, summer patch, leaf spot and grubs were unavoidable, meaning...

"We're doing tons of renovations," he says. "We're trying to blend in patches of new turf, but I get the feeling that the renovations we're doing now will be just a small portion of what we'll be asked to do next spring."

Even though the weather boosted the demand for turf renovations, nobody's hoping for a repeat of 1995's crabgrass and turfgrass disease problems.

"We've had a ton of crabgrass," reports Steve Van Noord of Weed & Feed Lawn Care, Byron Center, Mich. "Everybody has their theories as to why, and I'm not sure either, but it seems that every fourth or fifth year we have a bad year for crabgrass."

Several Ohio lawn care pros speculate that the near-tropical conditions—weeks of continuous high heat and humidity—proved to be too much for pre-emergents at their labeled rates. Most customers generally understood that the unusual conditions were at fault, they say.

Clark Throssel, associate professor at PSU's 'commando' turf research,
working in your area.

He provides these tips:

- When selecting a pre-emergence herbicide, stick with what works.
- If change is necessary, talk with peers and colleagues and find out what's working in your area.
- Once you chose a new product, try it on only a small portion of your accounts.
- Keep in mind the kind of equipment you use and if it is compatible with the pre-emergent.
- Be aware that some products stain sidewalks and equipment.

Turfgrass diseases clobbered many turfgrass areas, too.

Joe Rimespach, extension turfgrass pathologist with the Ohio State University, says that brown patch (rhizoctonia) and phythium were especially active in Ohio. Turf got a double whammy when soil temperatures kept rising through mid-summer. When cooler temperatures finally did arrive, so did drought in many parts of the Midwest and Mideast. All these factors combined to stress turfgrass.

"Roots were deteriorating and there was no new root growth or initiation for weeks on end," says Rimespach of the unusually hot summer weather. "Turfgrass just got weaker and weaker and weaker." The problem was most dramatic on golf courses where high traffic and low mowing heights gave turfgrass little respite. "A lot of the grass that died on golf courses was almost out of control of the superintendents," says Rimespach.

Meanwhile, seed prices are rising, partly because the international market is so tight. In other high-demand years, U.S. turfseed marketers were able to import seed from New Zealand or Europe. This year, that won't happen because of high overseas demand. An early indication was the price of tall fescue, which went up almost 15 cents a pound from mid-August through mid-September.

"We can't get the seed cleaned fast enough," Seed Research's Robinson contends. "And if the grass gets moister—as it is starting to do—and the fall stays mild, we will also see tight supplies next spring.

"We have never totally run out of seed, but that's not to say it can't happen."

-Jerry Roche, Ron Hall, James Holter