



## THE HALLMARK

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# To the ends of the earth

*"I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars."* — WALT WHITMAN

It had to have been a strange sight for herdsmen in Inner Mongolia to see this imposingly large foreigner, with a round, sun-reddened face, climb from a Jeep, get down on his knees on the grassy meadow and probe the soil with his pocketknife.

"What on earth is he up to?" they surely puzzled as the big man extracted a clump of grass — in this case a hunk of bluegrass — from the earth. Holding it in his hands, he scrutinized it and passed it to his companions to examine.

The man, Dr. William "Bill" Meyer, is one of the world's leading turfgrass breeders. Since taking the post of director of turfgrass breeding for Cook College, Rutgers University in 1996, he's become somewhat of a world traveler. He and other turfgrass experts at Rutgers have launched a global search for new turfgrass germplasm. Well, actually it's new only in the sense that this "foreign" germplasm has yet to be incorporated into the turfgrasses we in North America are familiar with and appreciate. In reality, these specimens represent ancient germplasm; they've survived for millennia in their respective environments.

On this particular dusty, bone-jarring jaunt across the stark, wind-swept Asian steppes, which writer Allan Hoffman chronicled in the article "Sod Sleuths" in the Spring 2010 *Rutgers* magazine, Meyer, Dr. James White and a Chinese assistant seek survivors. They're searching for grasses with traits that have allowed them to remain vigorous under Mongolia's harsh conditions. They're

seeking turf that, since time forgotten, has battled droughts, periods of intense heat or cold, diseases, insects and grazers such as sheep, goats and the stout, pony-sized Mongolian horses that, like the grasses themselves, have remained unchanged since the rampages of Genghis Khan.

The specimens they dig from the rolling grazing lands and put in their cooler — the grasses that their experienced eyes tell them hold potential for making our lawn grasses more environment-friendly — will become candidates for further study, but merely candidates. Eventually, they — or some of the unique genetics of these same selections — may end up as a new cultivar, on a lawn that requires less water, fewer chemical inputs or can tolerate more traffic and still maintain its attractiveness.

Developing new improved cultivars is a lengthy and, to the layman, tedious process that takes a minimum of five years, with many dead ends and frustrations. Even so, Meyer and his Rutgers team of experts, working cooperatively with more than 20 private seed companies, continue to make incremental improvements to the cool-season grasses — the bluegrasses, ryegrasses and fescues — that the first European settlers brought with them and that we now use on our lawns, parks, sports fields and commercial properties.

Meyer and his colleagues are expanding upon the groundbreaking research initiated by Dr. C. Reed Funk almost a half-century ago. Funk's findings resulted in a series of remarkable achievements in turfgrass development, from the release of perennial ryegrass Manhattan in 1967 and the continuing improvement of the species, to the development of techniques for hybridizing bluegrass, to pioneering the development of turf-type tall fescue.

From the 1960s until today, the Rutgers program has led the world in developing cool-season grasses on lawns, parks, sports fields and golf courses. Now, its research team is traveling to the far ends of the world to keep the innovations coming.