The Penn Pals: Right on Course

Oscar Miles, CGCS, overlooks the 6th hole at the Merit Club, Libertyville, Illinois.

Superintendent Oscar Miles, with Club President Ed Oldfield's affirmation, specified all the grassing of this Robert M. Lohmann designed club. With a clean canvas and open palette, Oscar began with PennLinks greens, Penneagle fairways and Penncross tees, framing them with bluegrass/fine fescue/wildflower and prairiegrass roughs. You couldn't paint a more attractive picture.

Oscar chose PennLinks greens for its rapid establishment, marvelous root system, a crown and stolons that take topdressing, upright, grainless qualities and good, consistent color ... the best putting surface available.

He selected Penncross for tees because they recover from divot scars more quickly.

And the Penneagle fairways? Oscar chose Penneagle for its upright growth, reduced thatch development, low nitrogen requirement and good drought and dollar spot resistance. He seeded at 80 lbs. per acre for immediate turf development and erosion control. The fairways were playable in 8 weeks. Oscar's crew usually mows fairways in the evening and leaves the clippings; recycling nutrients while reducing removal and fertilizer costs.

Oscar articulates it best: "The unique coloring of the 'Penn Pals' contrasts beautifully with the grassing around them, defining the target areas. And with the dew on the bents early in the morning, they're a marvelous work of art."


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Confused? You're not alone.
Even some within the seed industry think the great number of varieties makes it hard for the buyer to choose.

Sandra Winton of Zajac Performance Seeds wrote LM following publication of our annual Seed Pocket Guide in July.

"The proliferation of turfgrass varieties, and the multitude of data collected on those varieties has made the job of turf professionals progressively more difficult and confusing," she wrote. "Many varieties that were statistically indistinguishable from the No. 1 rated were never [even] mentioned in the guide."

In addition, Tom Stanley, director of marketing for Turf-Seed, reports some astronomical figures for brand promotion costs.

"Also, varieties have a short life span," says Stanley. "Too many varieties are causing confusion in the marketplace, and not many are significantly different.

"We all want to be listed on the first page of the turf trial reports," admits Stanley. "but what about the varieties on the second and third page? Are they significantly different? Most probably are not."

According to Stanley, Turf-Seed has decided to counter some of the confusion by promoting brands. "By promoting brands," says Stanley, "we can take the disadvantages of promoting varieties and turn them into advantages." He also believes brands are "easily upgraded by using new breeding material that's coming through our research program, and it's easy to maintain exclusivity."

The University of Illinois' Dr. Hank Wilkinson, speaking at the Jacklin Discovery Tour, explained that more and more seed companies are expanding their research to accelerate seed development, and to fill the growing void left by shrinking university research programs.

But research is costly and in some cases a hit-and-miss proposition, even for the most established company.

"You can do a lot of research and get nowhere," admits Wilkinson. "For me to generate one piece of new information can cost between $30,000 and $40,000," says Wilkinson. He described a figure as seemingly high as $1 million as "a drop in the bucket" when considering the total capital needed to finance research. And even then, most investments don't see solid results for 10 to 20 years, even longer for disease research.

"Industry's going to have to pick up more of this role and cooperate with universities," said Wilkinson, "and you're going to see more people hired in at the private level to do this work."

If it doesn't necessarily develop new varieties, seed research can still, as Stanley suggests, improve within a brand itself. "Better quality, better traits, resistance, hardiness, green-up—if it won't produce good quality consistently, it's not of much value," admitted Wilkinson.

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT would like to continue being on the cutting edge of providing our readers with significant information about the seed industry. If you have any comments or suggestions as to how we can better serve you, please let us know.
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