



# Saving time with TURF

Seed or sod? DAVID WHITE speaks to leading turf growers who point out the pluses of staying with the sward

Wherever two or three greenkeepers are gathered together the topic of discussion will eventually come around to the age old saw of seed versus sod, which is best?

At the BTME I was able to ask several turf producers for their considered opinions. To begin, Stuart Mail of Lawn-Tech admitted to being a relatively new entrant into this industry and further confessed to having a fairly analytical standpoint which suggested that both seed and turf have an important and commercially viable place in golf applications. He began by saying, "The first thing I was told when I became involved in the turf business was that 'people who buy turf don't buy grass - they buy time!' Claims of seeded areas being playable in a few months, or even weeks, are often heard; but in reality seeding takes a minimum of *nine months* longer to reach an equivalent level of density, maturity, and durability compared with good quality cultivated turf." This was further endorsed by Stephen Fell of Lindum,

who pointed to the pressures under which new courses are often placed by seeking to open for play as soon as possible - often even before the timing is right - when greens and tees are early pressure points. Turf in this situation would give the new owner a head start of at least six months over seeding, or even more depending on the time of year. Stephen was quick to point to the close liaison that turf growers enjoyed with seed producers, of the great advances made in breeding new varieties, and of using top STRI listed varieties and picking the best crop free lots of those varieties - clearly indicating that turf producers are good bed fellows with their seed breeding counterparts.

Turning to Rolawn's Rachel Semlyen, I learned of visits to Rolawn's production fields, where greenkeepers were able to see if what they produced was what was wanted. She told of listening and responding to their suggestions and how this resulted in mowing the greens turf shorter, of boxing



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the clippings and scarifying and verticutting where necessary, and of mowing up to four times a week in order to satisfy their most exacting requirements. The result is claimed to save as much as a year of preparation for play, with greens being ready to play in as little as nine weeks from laying.

All were firm in their conviction that turf was financially a better bet, Stuart Mail summarising by reference to a faster return on capital through memberships, fees and so on; reduced interest charges on finance; and less tangibly, the reduction in potential loss of members or frequent users through inconvenience or delay. He made a further pointed reference to harassed greenkeepers by suggesting that valium was not tax deductible!

On to production, Derek Edwards of the Inturf Group said that ten years ago some 90% of the turf market consisted of 'improved' pasture or meadow turf, much of which was grown on soil with a high silt or clay content and virtually unsuitable for any sporting purposes. The dramatic swing away from meadow turf, and to some extent that of seeding, being influenced by heavy investment in large scale purpose-grown production of turf on selected sites. These sites are situated mainly down the eastern side of the country (because of topography and generally lighter soils), but are aimed at supplying markets nationwide. Several thousand acres of production are used by the major suppliers, with smaller, more regionally based growers following suit and between them they have now all but seen off the old style



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106



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REF  
38



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meadow turf market, which really only satisfied low cost housing and landscaping and maintained the huge demand for seeding of specialist areas, including virtually all sporting applications.

Raising the question of soils, Derek Edwards was forthright in pointing to the potential problems that can arise by applying soil-grown cultivated turf onto prepared areas of a different soil type – a problem that, of course, does not exist when seeding. The most obvious is by transplanting a loamy or heavy soil based turf onto a sandy turf bed. However good the quality of grasses contained in that turf, drainage will be impeded and a weak interface caused which would result in poor sod adhesion (ie. a root break zone could exist) and subsequent loss of grass under heavy usage. This risk can be minimised by specifying soil type as well as grass type when ordering and he insists that by placing an order with one of the leading producers, they will not only understand your requirements but almost certainly guarantee a good result.

In counting costs, Rachel Semlyen made the valid point that multiple applications of herbicides are often necessary on seeded areas whereas turf should not require any for some years. Stuart Mail and Stephen Fell were both agreed that seeding can undoubtedly produce an equally good final result, but as Stuart pointed out, when buying turf the producer has taken the seeding and establishment risks of failed germination, erosion, pests, disease and weed invasion on your behalf. Both Rachel and Stephen agreed, "where greenkeepers for perfectly good reasons choose to seed it is in their best interests to study closely the top varieties currently trialled by the STRI and to realise that with amenity grass, as indeed with turf, you get what you pay for."

There was, inevitably, talk of laying applications, the point

being made that the big disadvantage of turfing was always the heavy, back-breaking laying of the sod. The advent of the 'Big Roll' turfing system, introduced into the UK by Lawn Technology and now seen in several different and modified forms, has laid this particular ghost, with Lawn Technology proudly claiming to have laid no less than three quarters of a million square metres with their clever system since its introduction in late 1990!

Unanimous in their enthusiasm for sod, producers echoed the sentiments of Tim Fell of Tillers Turf Co., who opined that when looking for turf it is important to ask for a mechanical analysis of the soil that the turf is grown on. Tim continued: "Those turf growers with a concern for the needs of their customers will be able to supply one. A high specification rootzone material will have less than 25% of particles smaller than 0.25 mm.

"In addition, the material will contain no less than 5% silt and less than 3% clay. The infiltration rate of compacted laboratory samples should be at least 150mm per hour. However, it is very rare that naturally recurring soils meet these specs and so one has to accept a compromise. As long as turf is grown on soils that have no more than 20% of particles smaller than 0.125mm and less than 10% of silt and clay, the chances of success are greatly increased. One fundamental rule is to buy turf that is grown on soil that resembles as closely as possible the rootzone material."

Finally, let Stuart Mail have the last word by suggesting that a visit to farms or obtaining samples will give the opportunity to choose from a wide range of turf to suit your application, in the sure knowledge that 'what you see is what you get'.

"If it is not," he says emphatically, "you can – and should – send it back!"

● The editor acknowledges the assistance freely given by Lawn Technology, Tillers Turf, The Inturf Group, Rolawn Turf Growers Ltd, and Lindum Seeded Turf in the preparation of this feature.



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