



Will your grass seed stay the course?

When it comes to seed, always select the right variety for the task in hand. This is, however, easier said than done, reckons PAUL BILLINGS

The evaluation of amenity grass varieties is a complex issue as it embraces a wide range of features which may vary in importance with the assessor and the expected usage. For example, the wear resistance associated with some varieties may or may not be as important as the minimum cutting height or shoot density of another variety. So how does the greenkeeper select the varieties he requires and, just as importantly, how does he ensure what is being recommended is suitable for the application he has in mind? Clearly, the first thing a greenkeeper must decide are his exact requirements. Let us take some examples – golf greens, tees, fairways and roughs. Obviously, all are extremely important areas but each one has vastly different requirements and management regimes.

In the first instance let us consider greens. The fundamental

requirement must be tolerance of close mowing followed closely by compactness or shoot density. Species such as chewings fescue and browntop bents demonstrate these characteristics extremely well. If, however, a variety is chosen which is not tolerant of close mowing then over a period of time it will begin to die back and allow *poa annua* infestation. Also, if the variety has not got a dense growth habit one will get a poor uneven finish and further increase the possibility of infestation by *poa annua*.

For fairways the requirements differ markedly than those for greens and, indeed, from course to course. The overriding question a buyer must ask is how many rounds per annum am I anticipating? If the answer is a very large number – for example over 60,000 – then wear resistance is obviously going to be very important and species of perennial ryegrass which show good wear resistance

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combined with excellent compactness and fineness of leaf ratings, will be very suitable. If however there are to be fewer rounds than other attributes such as compactness, slow growth and disease resistance will become more important.

Tees are a very important and specialist area of the course. Variety choice for tees depends on both the size of the tee, the number of rounds and the length of the hole. With a par 3 municipal or pay as you play course, one would naturally expect to see a large number of rounds in all weathers with a great number of inexperienced golfers. On this basis wear tolerance and recovery for divots is obviously going to be of prime importance. For the full length 'members-only' course, some wear tolerance will be required but other aspects may need to be taken into account such as fineness of leaf, slow growth, compactness and disease resistance. Species such as smooth stalked meadowgrass, along with creeping red fescue should be looked at.

Roughs have a rather unique

set of requirements. Management time devoted to these areas is very limited, or even non-existent, so the area must be sown with low maintenance varieties selected for their slow growth, a low final height and demanding minimal fertiliser inputs. Species which slot into this category include hard fescue and chewing fescue.

So, once you have defined your exact requirements the next step (and it is a major one!) is to make a firm decision regarding individual varieties. There are several sources of information available to the greenkeeper. These include amenity grass seed salesmen (who will have a certain degree of bias), independent testing stations such as the Sports Turf Research Institute (STRI) and trade organisations like the Amenity Grass

Marketing Association (AGMA).

Also, do not overlook the sound advice that can be gleaned from specialist wholesale seed houses who can usually be found at the key UK exhibitions such as the BIGGA exhibition at Harrogate and the IOG at Peterborough. The more professional of these companies will not only have highly trained amenity specialists on their pay-roll but will also have the additional support of their own comprehensive trial and evaluation facilities.

At the end of the day your usual supplier will be able to guide you towards a mixture formulation that best suits your requirements. This may be from an own-brand range or, alternatively, your supplier may well be offering a mixture from one of the established ranges marketed by one of the

specialists mentioned earlier.

A key point to note with any mixture is that you should be wary if you are offered cheap 'bargain basement' blends. The old adage that 'you get what you pay for' certainly applies to amenity grass seed. If you sow an inherently low grade mixture, containing inferior varieties, then no amount of follow-up management, however good, will help you to achieve top class results. The moral is quite clear - always select the right variety for the specific task in hand.

For information on individual varieties it is well worthwhile obtaining both the STRI's Turf-grass Seed booklet (available for a small charge from the STRI, Bingley, West Yorkshire, BD16 1AU) and AGMA's Merit List which is available free of charge either from your local AGMA member or write direct to The Amenity Grass Marketing Association, c/o The Secretary, 158 The Causeway, Wyberton, Boston PE21 7AR.

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