

Having been at the forefront of amenity grass seed for many years Mommersteeg has decided the time is right to strengthened relations with greenkeepers by becoming a Golden Key Sponsor.

At times when relations with some of our continental cousins are, to put it mildly, frosty, it is refreshing to discover one country with which we are on the same wave length and where successful integration and co-operation is the norm.

Holland and the United Kingdom seem to get on rather well together and we can apparently work in close harmony to our mutual benefit.

Bergkamp, Gullit, van Hooijdonk have all made impressive impressions on the UK football fields – although the imminent arrival of the European Soccer Championships will split the loyalties of Arsenal, Chelsea and Celtic fans for a couple of weeks at least. Van Gogh is another from the flatlands to make a big impression in the UK, on canvas rather than turf, spending his early years working in England.

In fact those who have crossed the North Sea and failed to make an impact are about as numerous as British Wimbledon Seeds – there, I knew I could bring this introduction around to seeds eventually. It's not just BBC 2 continuity announcers who can contrive a link.

"The MM range was the first real national branded range of seed mixtures for greenkeepers and other sports turf managers," explained John Akers, Commercial Manager for the Mommersteeg Seed Company in the UK, which has become a BIGGA Golden Key sponsor this year.

The family firm was founded by Henry Mommersteeg in 1923 with its raison d'être grass breeding and multiplication of grass varieties for agricultural and amenity use.

The first Mommersteeg trading in the UK occurred in 1968 when a base was set up at Finedon in Northamptonshire. The commercial arm of the company is now based at Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, where the local MP is a certain John Major.

"We have a team of 11 people who cover both amenity and agriculture," explained John. "That's backed up by the group production facility in Sleaford, Lincolnshire, which services the three seed companies and is owned by Mommersteeg's parent company, the Royal Van Der Have Group, which employs nearly 1000 people around the world."



Taking a closer look: Examining a trial base at Mommersteeg's headquarters in Holland

From little seeds great grasses grow



The original reason why Holland became such an excellent breeding ground for seed companies is open to debate but what is known is that in the modern age the Netherlands is ideally suited to the role.

"It is very flat and has excellent farmland which is good for its seed production capabilities. Also in terms of distribution Europort

Sleaford."

Mommersteeg's Head Office is in Vlijmen in the east central part of Holland not too far from the Second World War landmark of Arnhem, of a Bridge too Far fame it the way to the German border.

The Royal Van Der Have Group's Headquarters are at Kapelle in the south west of the country and they have operating

Smooth-Stalked Meadow Grass is sold as Kentucky Blue Grass in the States – so we have connections with many of the main turf business in America," said John.

The MM range has been a market leader for the last 20 to 25 years and Mommersteeg's position will be strengthened by some new variety coming through the breeding programmes which are highly rated by the STRI. "These are now being incorporated in our mixtures and we are aiming to regain the number one position in the market place for amenity mixtures," said John.

"Our business has always been very strong with golf clubs because we deal with amenity distributors whose main market is in golf. Companies like Stewart's, Gem Professional, Stabrite Supplies and John Lindsay in Northern Ireland."

In addition Mommersteeg has a team of four people who cover

Mommersteeg

in Rotterdam is an ideal location for the distribution of seed throughout the world also the receipt of imports for other product areas such as Canada, America, New Zealand, and South America," said John.

"For the UK market much of our amenity grass is grown in Holland and Denmark but it is then assembled, mixed and dispatched from our base at


bases throughout Europe in France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland and the Czech Republic and are currently expanding into the Russia and Ukraine.

"We've a fairly big operation in North America and the companies within the Royal Van Der Have Group use Mommersteeg-bred amenity grass varieties in their mixtures. So you would find that, for example, Cynthia

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the UK in a technical support role to these distributors. They do some direct selling in certain sectors of the market and are available to give direct advice to distributors and customers.

The Golden Key Sponsorship will provide more opportunities for Mommersteeg to tap into the sort of feedback greenkeepers can offer on how grasses have performed to refine future mixtures.

"One area which is of particular interest to us at the moment is whether greenkeepers should oversow with an all bent mixture or with a traditional chewings fescue and bent mixture.

"There are two schools of thought on that and to canvas opinion from current greenkeepers on what they are doing and what success they are getting from each of the two approaches would be extremely useful," explained John.

"We've also got information we can impart to the greenkeepers on the technical developments our breeders are looking at on mixture formulation and new varieties which are coming forward. If the greenkeepers tell us what they are looking for and what responses the mixtures are having in a practical situation. If we need to we can realign our thinking to take on board information we get."

Another example where co-operation between Mommersteeg and the greenkeeping fraternity could reap benefits is in the use of fungicidal seed treatments in certain situations for oversowing of greens and tees where there is a threat from fungal attack.

"We use a seed treatment called Apron T not as standard but as a special application and there is quite a bit of work which can be done between ourselves and greenkeepers to help develop its use."

The advances made in seed development in the last 20 years, a relatively short period in seed breeding, have been quite extraordinary.

"You only have to look at the STRI Amenity Booklet and there are over 50-60 perennial rye grasses listed, 30-40 chewings fescues, 20 slender creeping reds and 20-25 smooth stalked

meadow grasses.

"It complicates the situation for the customer with so many to choose from. Choice is good as long as you make the correct choice," said John.

"What the STRI has done is very important as a guide for using the correct grasses for each situation. At Mommersteeg we have always provided a product which is genuine and true to itself and been open about what has been put into the mixtures. We specify individual cultivars rather than groups of cultivars so the greenkeeper knows exactly what he is getting.

"We're a founder member of AGMA - Amenity Grass Marketing Association - and the two main ideals of the Association are that the customer gets the right product for the right job and that he's sure that when he buys a bag of seed he is getting what he asks for and that it is of consistent quality."

John is keen that Mommersteeg forges good relationships with the bodies within the golf industry like BIGGA.

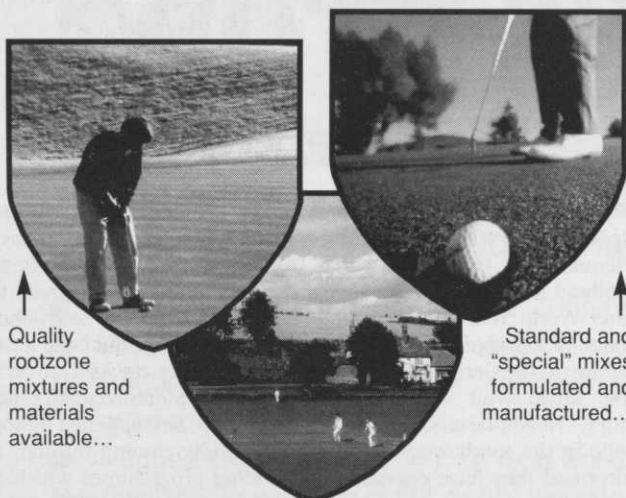
"It is important that we do play an active role in grass seed usage in the golf industry and that is the main reason we want to support the education programme within BIGGA.

"We believe that through things like the Turf Grass Workshops we have been running that we have some practical things to offer as well as a lot of expertise within the company and that a closer relationship between Mommersteeg will help to develop better greenkeeper understanding of grass seed mixtures and individual grass seed cultivars."

Mommersteeg, with its Dutch headquarters has also already been of practical support to greenkeeping acting as host to the inaugural meeting of the European Golf Greenkeepers Association..

"We were delighted to be invited by Neil Thomas and Dean Cleaver to host the first meeting in Holland and it gave us an opportunity to show off our trial and production facilities to Europe's greenkeeping bodies. We hope that it becomes a successful Association," said John.

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