



The Quality of cultivated Turf

by Robert Laycock

Turf is a product that can vary in quality – when it arrives on site, the purchaser has usually not seen the field from which it has been harvested and is not always sure what to expect. He knows what the turf should be like but occasionally it fails to live up to expecta-

tions and has to be sent back. This aggravates both grower and customer and could be avoided if the customer had a detailed description of the turf.

What customers really need to know, preferably in advance of purchase, is the composition of the turf, not just the seeds mixture

which was sown to produce it but also the percentages of the species of grasses which have survived in the mature turf, as well as its dimensions, strength, roll weight and whether or not it contains netting.

The Turfgrass Growers Association, formerly known as TPI (UK), which represents most of

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the producers of cultivated turf in the UK, commissioned me in 1996 to produce a quality standard for use by turf growers who needed to be able to describe their turf objectively. In other words, rather than saying something vague, they would be able to provide detailed facts about it.

I decided that an important feature of the quality standard scheme, as with a growing number of declarations these days, was that it should be self-certified – in other words the growers would assess the turf themselves. The actual measurements are all easy to perform and need a relatively short time to do. As a result, outside bodies would not be needed to measure the turf and assess its composition on a regular basis, charging large fees which would have to be passed on to customers.

Turf that had passed the tests would be sold with a signed declaration to that effect. All the techniques used to assess the turf would be set down so that they could be repeated by similarly equipped greenkeepers or outside agronomists so that if necessary a third party could confirm the details on the declaration. If it turned out that there was a problem with a consignment of turf not matching its description, a trained outsider could assess the turf using the same techniques as used on the turf farm and make a ruling as to whether the turf



Philip Young, Head Greenkeeper at The Oaks, with an optical point quadrat frame

in question had been accurately described.

In the past, the British Standard Institute's "Recommendations for turf for general purposes (1990)" has been the only objective guide to turf quality assessment in the UK. However, this document is fatally flawed in the methods it advocates. It is out of date in that it allows the use of meadow turf and it specifies dimensions of turf pieces which are not now in common use while omitting modern formats of turf such as "big rolls".

The TGA quality standard is now being advertised and used in the selling of turf by participating members of the TGA. As it stands, it is primarily intended for use by suppliers of turf for landscape purposes. The reason for this is that the area of sports turf is fraught with dangers relating to soils and their drainage characteristics, much to the delight of lawyers. Greenkeepers know the importance of matching soil types, particularly on playing surfaces. In the landscaping world,



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'The optical point quadrat frame is now used as the standard equipment for turfgrass ground cover assessment at STRI and is used around the world'

however, this is less of a problem and much excellent turf is grown on heavy soil. This would be unsuitable for use on most golf greens but from a compatibility point of view would match with the majority of natural soils in this country (which also tend to be heavy), and could be used away from sensitive areas such as new greens. However, those producers who are confident that their soil type is satisfactory for specialist areas can add a note to this effect as part of their declaration.

Eventually it may be possible to draw up a detailed standard for turf for sports turf. In the meantime, the standards are useful to greenkeepers who need to know the features of turf they are purchasing. These include dimensions (including height of sward, soil depth and thickness of thatch), the soil type and the cultivars used to produce the turf and, possibly most importantly, the percentages of grass species which are present in the turf when it is sold.

One measurement which can be of particular interest to greenkeepers, apart from the obvious one of exactly which grasses the turf contains, is thatch thickness. Turf bought for use on tees needs to be strong, with a reasonable thatch layer to withstand the golf club heads which will be trying to destroy it, possibly a matter of weeks after it has been laid. A

turf grower using the standards will be able to tell the greenkeeper the average thatch thickness of the turf he is offering.

Since last summer turf growers have been on training courses to learn to use simple techniques to objectively assess their turf. The only tools needed are a ruler, tape measure, weighing scales and an optical point quadrat frame. The optical point quadrat is used to assess the percentage ground cover of the grasses in turf and is based on the instrument I developed when working at STN in the late 1970s. All participants on these courses have been fully equipped with identical sets of this equipment to ensure that all measurements are repeatable.

The part of the tests which was new to all growers was the assessment of the botanical composition of the turf. The method set down in the British Standards "Recommendations" is to use a large square quadrat, subdivided into a hundred squares and to estimate the proportion of the grasses in them. This then provides a percentage figure for each species present in the turf. I defy anyone to do this. It is tedious, as anyone who has tried it will tell you, and the fact that estimation is involved must mean that it is not accurate.

The optical point quadrat frame is now used as the standard equipment for turfgrass ground cover assessment at STRI and is used

around the world. It gives an accurate, repeatable measure of ground cover, and can be used on turf of greens height as well as the more normal cutting heights used on turf farms. Provided the user can identify the grasses in the turf its use is very simple. Incidentally, as a tool for greenkeepers who want to monitor changes in the content of grasses in golf greens it is invaluable.

It is important to remember that although they were produced on behalf of the TGA, the TGA standards are strictly defined and are not a soft option for the grower. As an independent agronomist working with both the producers and users of turf I was able to devise measurements which are workable and useful to both. The training which participating growers have received using standardised equipment means that the results of assessments are repeatable and because the criteria for meeting the quality standards are set down in detail it is possible for the contents of a TGA member's declaration to be verified by an independent assessor.

The long term consequences of growers using these techniques are that turf quality will improve, provided customers insist on seeing these detailed descriptions of the turf they are buying. This way they will obtain the best turf for their purposes

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