

Terry Ryan, Sales and Marketing Director of Rolawn (Turf Growers) Ltd, charts a course to the top ten questions every turf grower must answer. Straight in at number ten...

The hit parade



British greenkeepers and Course Managers have always been an inventive and adaptable group. These days their broad based skills are being enhanced with improved training. This has led to the development of the professional greenkeeper/manager who is capable of tackling an increasing number of projects on the course.

It is now customary for Head Greenkeepers and Course Managers to have responsibility for controlling budgets which represent large amounts of expenditure for their individual clubs. Whether it's Wentworth or Worksop the principle is the same and the pressure is on to deliver value for money and a golf course that can take year round play in its stride.



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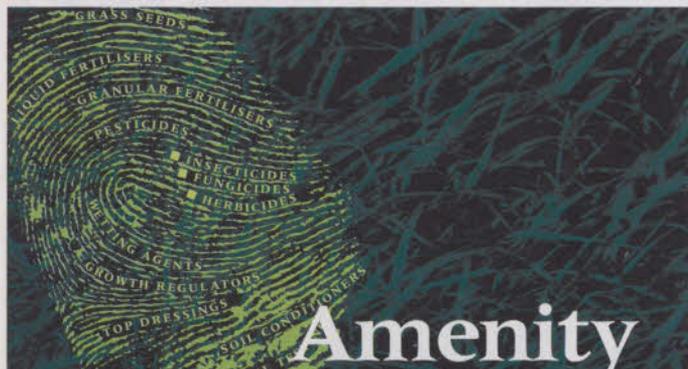


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The hit parade

If you choose turf make sure of value for money and a result that will get you noticed by the greens committee and club members for all the right reasons

To convey my idea of what constitutes value for money I invite you to invest five minutes and play a little game. You might learn something that will stand you in good stead for the rest of your career. Jot down on a piece of paper the names of ten famous companies. They can be from any industry from retailing to airlines. You decide. My only condition is that they must be famous and highly respected. Who is on your list? I put down Marks and Spencer, Virgin, BMW, Kentucky Fried Chicken (well I do spend a lot of time on the road), Tetleys (surprise, surprise), Shell, Ford, Sainsburys, Kodak and Sony.

Now ask yourself this... what stands out about these companies, what is it that they all have in common? Despite their very different backgrounds and industries, they have a common distinguishing feature. Of course they are all instantly recognisable, respected by their customers and they are profitable. So it's more than fame and fortune that links them.

If you are stumped the answer appears at the end of this article.

I have regularly been asked by greenkeepers what is the best way to identify good quality turf for use on greens and trees. Like most greenkeeping professionals the questioners usually have a copy of the current STRI turfgrass seed guide close at hand. This is because they recognise that it is an invaluable aid that makes an excellent starting point.

Sometimes even the obvious needs stating, so my first trip is to read the section on page two headed "using turfgrass seed 1998". This section states "cultivars at the top of each list may not be the best cultivars for every use". Bear in mind also that, whilst they do test individual cultivars extensively, even the STRI don't test mixtures made up of different seed types and that the turf you buy will usually contain at least two cultivars in the case of greens' turf, and usually at least four in the case of tees turf.

Having made these points it would be an unwise greenkeeper who did not actively seek out turf with seed types which are highly rated by the STRI. My point is that if you decide to use turf you will not be buying seed alone.

Whether to use seed or turf on a golf course depends on many variables such as application, the time available, the budget, and the best way to achieve your objective. As we all know top quality turf at the right price will get your green or tee back into play far sooner than seed. However poor quality turf that fails to perform is a highly visible and costly mistake. So you should certainly be price conscious but don't ever buy turf on price alone.

At first it may seem that there is no contest between seed and turf when it comes to price. In our industry no two situations are the same but you won't be surprised to learn that I strongly believe that cultivated turf has a strong case when it comes to cost. Getting a tee or green into play months (perhaps a year) sooner is a genuine and demonstrable benefit to any club competing for golfers green fees and especially to one where competitions and society days are a regular source of income. This may be obvious to you and me, but how often is this point actually discussed in committee?

As well as needing many months less time to come into play, turf also needs less water to get established than seed. Immediately after installation the water requirements of both options are much the same. However, in most cases (other than drought) turf only needs light watering for the subsequent three weeks or so. This is because grass blades shade bare soil from the sun thereby minimising evaporation which is considerable in warm (let alone hot) weather. This shading effect leaves much more of the water for its intended use. Cultivated turf can also win whatever the time of year because it offers the option of year round

THE TOP TEN

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installation, even on frozen ground (however) this is not recommended when the ground is frozen to a depth of 50 millimetres or more).

It's also worth bearing in mind that cultivated turf is capable of accepting heavy rain without erosion or damage. This could be very important to those golf courses with a large number of raised tees. With up to 90% of the weight of a grass plant in its roots, turf is an efficient erosion prevention material. It seems odd to spend money on expensive root zone material and incur labour costs then take the risk of it being washed away by heavy rain. Especially when there are members waiting to play and societies wanting to part with cash.

Uniformity in the finished sward is also important. Turf has a head start here because you can visit the turf farm and see for yourself what the finished seed mixtures will look like. Most cultivated turf producers should be able to provide you with turf that has 99 to 100% uniformity. If you are considering spending hundreds, even thousands of pounds on turf, make it a golden rule to visit the turf farm, this is because just like wine makers turf growers are subject to the forces of nature and not every year is a vintage year. Samples are fine as a general indicator but there is no substitute for walking on a full field or two to evaluate what it is that you will actually be buying and living with for very many years.

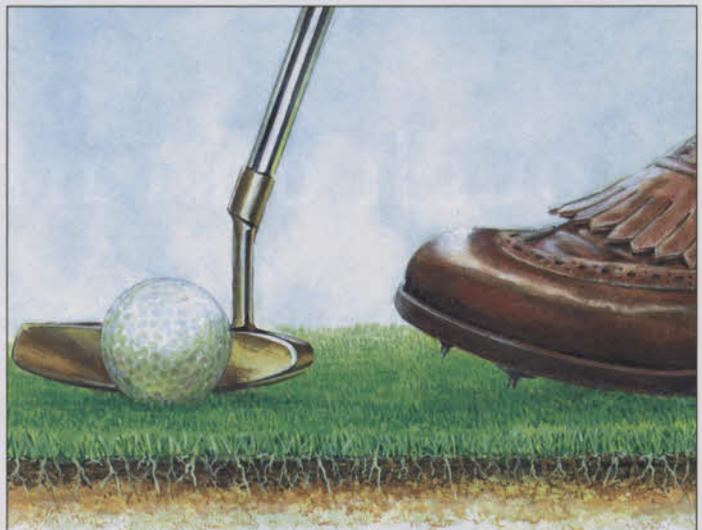
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The answer to the famous names game? The one thing they all have in common is that none of them is renowned for being the cheapest company of their kind. Just one of the best.

So here they are, the ten key questions every turf grower must answer.

If they can't answer these think about spending that precious budget elsewhere.

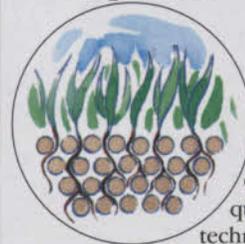
1. How old is the turf you are offering me? (the correct answer is 12 to 18 months - old turf is bad turf)
2. How can you prove to me what the age of your turf is?
3. Can you give me a certificate from an independent source to prove that the seeds you use have been tested for purity?
4. What are the names of the cultivars that you have sown in your turf and in what proportions have they been sown?
5. What is your estimate of the proportions of each grown species in the finished turf, how does this relate to what you have sown and how can you verify this?
6. What is the soil type that the turf has been grown on and what is its pH?
7. Can I have an independent analysis of both the soil type and the pH?
8. Can I visit your production fields at short notice? (The easy answer is "yes", if it is say "fine I will see you in the morning then").
9. When you arrive at the turf farm and walk on to the turf... ask on what date the turf was last fed and what with - important this - if you want to anticipate the turfs immediate requirements in its new location.
10. Can you take me through your quality control procedures? (Here you are looking for things like product traceability, detailed records of maintenance and feeding etc. and some form of independent testing).



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