

An unprecedented level of interest in velvet bents (*Agrostis canina*) at this year's BTME took even amenity specialists British Seed Houses by surprise. Now that the variety Avalon has proven itself on UK greens for the first time, Danny Thorogood of IGER looks at the species' suitability to a market so dominated by browntop bents (*Agrostis capillaris*).

Argostis *capillaris*

Velvet Bent – a Turfgrass species re-examined?

Velvet bent is a common grass, widely distributed, and ideally suited to climatic conditions in the UK, often becoming dominant in damp or

wet places. This makes it an ideal candidate for greenkeepers who should consider exploiting its well-documented attributes.



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Argostis capillaris

The tremendous shoot density shown by Velvets comes from a combination of stoloniferous growth and rapid tillering. The stolons are very slender, producing tufts of fine leafy shoots that knit together in a close turf. It is easily distinguished from creeping bent (*Agrostis stolonifera* L.) by its prominent long pointed ligule at the junction of the leaf sheath and blade.

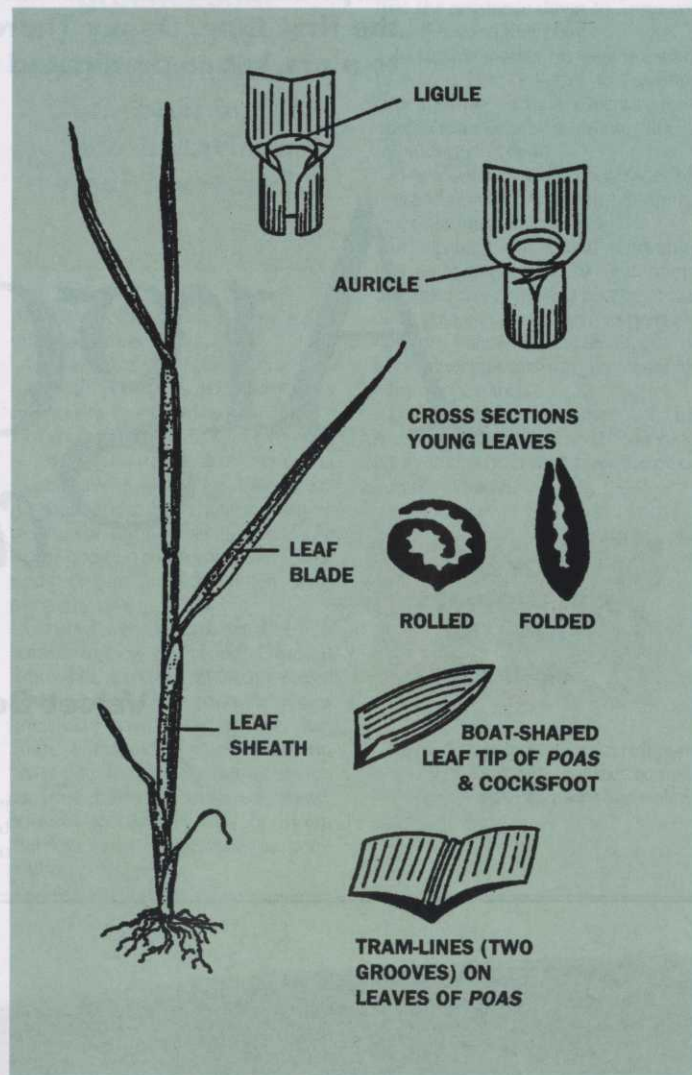
The velvet bent is stronger-growing than creeping bent, so it might need feeding little and often, although overall nutrient levels are probably the same, or lower. It produces the highest quality turf of any species under close, frequent mowing and has better low temperature, shade and drought tolerance than other bents.

So velvet varieties could provide the boost in grass quality greenkeepers need. Their shoot density and adaptability to environmental stresses mean that quality greens, playable over an extended season, can be produced.

Poorly managed velvet bents will produce thatch - a build up of undegraded lignified tissues at the soil-grass interface. Up to 5mm of thatch will cushion ball bounce and increase wear tolerance. It also insulates the soil against temperature extremes.

To maintain a high turf quality, groundsmen should cultivate conditions that favour aerobic microbes. Frequent top-dressing with a loam-based material increases the microbial population and ensures good contact between plant and soil. Liming may also help by raising pH, and coring and spiking will help by producing a free-draining, well-aerated soil.

If thatch has been allowed to develop, it can be rectified by thorough scarification in late summer



when there is active grass regrowth and less chance of weeds moving in. If necessary, top dressing, cultivations, and liming should then be practised to avoid a recurrence.

Velvet bents are not new to the industry and their ability to produce a stunningly attractive surface was known in the early 1900s. Yet none have been marketed since

Kingstown in 1963. The breeders and developers of Avalon clearly see its potential as an alternative to browntop/fescue mixes on greens.

Overall, velvet bent seems to meet the market demand for exceptional swards on loam-based golf greens. Greenkeepers who tried it last year have seen its resilience in heavy use situations.

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