

Roland Taylor looks at the development of the turf industry and how quality turf virtually can now be bought "off the shelf"

What a sod

Turf is at the centre of most readers' every waking hour and for many, one suspects, part of their sleep. After all, it is the core of what greenkeeping is all about - trying to achieve the ultimate playing surface. A lot rides on what one is given to work with. As the saying goes "you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." The quality of turf is vital, especially where it is being renewed. This is a time when there is an opportunity to put down exactly what is needed and, like the artist, start with a new canvas. By beginning with quality, the chances of success are greatly increased.

One suspects that, in the early days of greenkeeping, some well-known courses decided to set up their own turf nurseries - they needed to have a ready supply of turf with the cultivars they wanted, grown under their conditions. This would have seemed a logical step three decades ago when a supply of top quality turf was not always readily available and orders for small batches were not entertained. Times have changed and today turf containing the latest pre-blended mixtures can be virtually bought off the shelf, in any quantity. A whole industry has grown up to serve this market and to find out more we visited Europe's biggest turf growers - Rolawn.

Their policy regarding seed mixtures is different because they buy in the best cultivars from individual seed houses. In short, they choose the

best each seed house has and then blend their own mixture. This takes more time and adds cost, however the company believes this provides better turf quality than buying mixtures off the shelf.

The company was originally started on the Aberdeenshire estate of Lord Forbes, primarily to supply turf to golf courses. While the original locality initially served its purpose, a new site was sought. The Vale of York proved to be ideal - flat, light sandy soil with deep bore holes for irrigation. In addition there are good road links - an important factor when time is of the essence in getting freshly lifted turf on site, fast.

Over 2000 acres are under cultivation and this is being increased annually by about ten per cent.

Growing turf commercially is not the same as managing it on a golf course. Whilst related they are separate skills. Between 8 to 12 weeks are required to bring freshly laid turf into play. The company has considered supplying ready-to-play turf, but decided against it feeling that the market is unlikely to pay the extra price and that in any case, bringing turf in to play is a skill best left to the individual greenkeeper in his own course environment.

The sandy soil on which the mixtures are grown is compatible with most other soil types but there are some greenkeepers who would prefer soil-free turf. To accommodate them, the company has recently installed a



new turf washing plant. This latest equipment deals with big rolls, as well as the standard one square metre roll and small quantities can be supplied any time throughout the year. In its washed condition the turf is a mat of living plants with little support, so it is highly perishable and needs laying as fast as possible. It will also require plenty of irrigation once down.



Rolawn is a commercial operation and therefore very conscious of market trends and requirements. The final product has to be what is wanted and for this reason they work very closely with the top seed breeders and the STRI. A field of turf takes between eight and twelve months to be ready for harvesting, so decisions on which cultivars to include in the

mix are important. Get it wrong and very few, if any, want the product. The company blends its selected seeds and the process of producing top quality turf begins. Once sown and established, the young turf is mown regularly throughout the year at a height, which has been found to be an ideal length for producing sufficient roots

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to support a strong healthy sward. The very fine clippings are generally not collected as these return nutrients to the growing plants. There are occasions when it is necessary to collect the cut grass and this is carried out using a vacuum type collector. Weeds and disease are eliminated by spraying as and when required and the establishment of strong healthy grass plants are encouraged by a number of other management techniques.

To ensure that buyers can be confident in what is in the actual turf mixture being grown, the STRI is asked to carry out testing of a large part of the crop. Rolawn then make the STRI's findings available to anyone who asks for a copy of their report.

The day of harvesting finally arrives and, depending on the area to be lifted and weather conditions, work can start as early as 4 o'clock in the morning. Dealing with a perishable product means it needs to be cut and transported to its destination as quickly as possible. It can be a big

operation. On the day we were there, 23 articulated lorries were loaded and sent on their way.

Immediately after the turf has been removed, the plough moves in and the growing process begins again.

There are two other methods of obtaining turf. Setting up your own nursery or by seeding appropriate areas. While both have their merits, time in establishing them and time taken in managing them have to be given careful consideration.

A nursery site will have to be of sufficient size to meet the estimated requirements for a two-year period plus contingencies. Irrigation needs to be readily available. How the soil is prepared is important, as it needs to be well drained and of a depth that allows strong root development. Some bought-in turf can be included, but the main objective is to grow mixtures to match the existing areas on the course. A first class maintenance programme similar to the one used on existing playing areas is necessary to ensure good quality

replacement turf is available at short notice.

The other alternative is seeding worn or damaged areas - and again there are pluses and minuses with time being one of the major considerations. This is illustrated in the difference between an autumn seeded green and a turfed one. The former would not be playable for over 20 months while the latter could be open in about seven. Another factor to take into account is the limited period during which seed can be sown, whilst turf can be laid virtually all-year-round. Seed is initially less costly and the precise mixture of cultivars is available.

However, pre-blended mixtures are generally only available in pre-determined form. With seed there is also the risk of "washout" owing to heavy rains.

Most readers are under considerable pressure to meet the increasing demands of players. Playing surfaces have to be more resilient plus disease and wear resistant and seed breeders



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are continually seeking new cultivars. Turf suppliers are well aware of this and as a result are continually looking at the product range they offer. In addition, they take into account developing patterns. Fewer golf courses are at present being constructed, so less turf is required. Because of the increased wear and tear on courses more renovation work has to be carried out. To meet this situation, Rolawn has a no minimum order policy.

A great deal relies on getting it right so the top turf companies work closely with the STRI. They also offer advice and arrange visits for greenkeepers to inspect the turf on site before purchase.

Turf management is a science which, when done well, looks 'easy' to the layman. We live in a television age when the public has come to expect turf to be visually perfect and players want to tee off on something as good as Carnoustie or Augusta. Under this sort of pressure, the turf growing and seed industry is more

than happy to work closely with greenkeepers in order to meet their requirements. In a country that is regarded as the University of the World on turf, the UK has all the

expertise and facilities to grow and manage playing surfaces that are second to none.

Shows like BTME, SALTEx and Scotsturf provide the chance to see

and discuss the latest developments, arrange a visit to a turf farm; or obtain some samples. Opportunities not to be missed!



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