



SELECTING

Robert Laycock takes a look at the development of turf and gives some advice as to what to look for when purchasing turf

Turf has been used to create new grassed areas on the golf course for as long as there have been golf courses and it has been sold in rolls for centuries.

For many years seed was seen as being a more reliable way of making a new turf surface. Late in the 20th century plant breeders began to develop new strains of grasses created specially for turf, which could be truly called turfgrasses. This advance helped in the development of the turf industry as the new cultivated or seeded turf grown from mixtures con-

taining these was demonstrably better than that composed of agricultural or wild grasses, which is all that had been available before.

For many years it was difficult to find turf of reliable quality, but gradually, about 25 years ago, a cultivated turf industry began to develop in the UK. The use of specialist harvesting machinery, developed in North America, made harvesting easier. Later, big rolls made a further improvement to the laying of turf on larger areas. Other specialist forms of turf later became available for sports turf and other landscaping uses.

The problem has always been how to pick the best turf. Every turf company claims to grow excellent turf, so adverts are not very helpful in choosing the best. Objective tests of quality were needed and the Turfgrass Growers Association (TGA) commissioned the production of a quality

assessment scheme to make selection easier for customers. The TGA standards provided these tests, with participating growers using the same techniques to assess their turf. This is not to criticise other growers outside the scheme, who often do produce good quality material. However, direct comparisons are difficult if different assessment techniques are being used.

All participating TGA members have exactly the same equipment for assessing their product and all have been trained in its use. In the event that there is a complaint about the quality of turf supplied under the scheme, it is possible for a properly equipped and trained independent person to repeat all the tests and verify whether or not they have been measured correctly.

The TGA standards have brought a discipline to the monitoring of qual-



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ity that was not there before. It is now possible for a grower to compare his records of assessments on this year's crop with those from previous years, and see whether or not his turf has improved. Similarly, by using these parameters, customers can compare the products of different suppliers.

Just because a turf company has supplied good turf one year, it does not follow that it will be identical the next. Turf quality varies from grower to grower but all turfgrowers accept that it also varies from year to year.

There are many reasons for this variation but it is mainly due to the effects of weather conditions during the crop's production and the management it receives while it is growing. Cultivar choice is also very important and the best ones for the grower's conditions should always be used.

The best quality modern turf is

grown from top quality turfgrass cultivars and thus should produce a turf area of equivalent quality to one grown from seed. One of the great advantages of turf is that you can inspect its quality and see the grasses it contains, whereas inspecting a bag of seed may tell you which grasses should be in the turf produced from it but not their proportions and not whether weed grasses will be present in the finished sward.

The TGA standards were originally aimed at turf supplied to landscapers, the turf suppliers' largest market, rather than for sports turf users. Nevertheless many of its contents are also relevant to the latter. I find that greenkeepers are not very familiar with the scheme and what it covers so I have provided a brief list of items that greenkeepers should be looking for when buying turf, whether or not it is covered by the TGA scheme.

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Robert Laycock (right)



Assessments

Any assessments of turf suitability should include the following:

Dimensions

Some sizes and shapes of turf are easier to handle.

Health

Shows the turf is free from pests and diseases.

Soil type

Some soil types are unsuitable for some situations (usually sports turf).

Grasses

It is good to know that good quality seed using top cultivars has been used to sow the turf. Also it is important to know the proportions of the different species of grass that are present in the turf when it leaves the field.

Cutting height

Relatively short turf looks tidier and is easier to bring under control after laying.

Thatch thickness

If this is too thick it has a detrimental effect on turf performance and can slow down establishment time.

Soil thickness

Thickly cut turf tends to be heavier, more difficult to handle and slower to establish after laying.

Netting

The customer can decide whether they want to have netting in their turf.

Strength

Reassures the customer that the turf is strong enough for its purpose.

Weight

The customer can decide whether turf will be easily handled, what type of vehicle will be needed for transport.

The TGA Quality Assessments cover all the above, with objective measurements made of each criterion, but they are not the only way of assessing turf quality. All growers have their own methods, which are more or less formalised within the company. The advantage to the customer of the TGA scheme is that it

provides up to date and easily comparable information on the actual turf being offered for sale.

The standards also show details of the field and the farm where the turf was grown so that any problems that may arise can be traced back to source. A certificate is produced which identifies the staff member who assessed the turf and the date on which it was done.

The important things are that the tests are done on the turf the customer actually receives and that they are done shortly before or soon after harvest.

If turf in a particular field does not meet the standards it will not be certificated. Because of this, there are times when growers may not be able to supply turf meeting the TGA standards. Growers who do not tell the truth on their declaration of quality will be disciplined by the TGA. So far, to my knowledge, there have been no instances of sub-standard turf being supplied under the scheme, which is a credit to the TGA members and their staff.

Using turf on the golf course

Additional information needs to be supplied by the grower for turf to be used on the critical playing surfaces, especially golf greens, but including any created on a USGA or similar high specification rootzone, because most natural soils are incompatible with new constructions. If a different soil layer is introduced into the profile of the green with the turf, it will take much work to remove it, a process that may take years.

For new greens of this type, the best turf to use is either washed free of soil or grown on a soil or rootzone compatible with that the greenkeeper is going to lay it on. Only a limited number of growers produce turf in these ways and because of the extra

work and materials involved it tends to be more expensive than conventional turf.

The grasses the turf contains are also important, especially for use on greens. In an ideal world all the greens on the course would be identical, and this is possible with a new course, at least for a while. However, most old golf greens contain a high annual meadow grass content and turf of this type is not available commercially, so a mismatch is inevitable when new greens are built. Shopping around will provide the type of turf least dissimilar to that on the existing greens. Get samples of turf from different suppliers and make a choice on the grounds of soil and grass content. Make sure any samples you obtain are from the field your turf is going to come from.

Elsewhere on the golf course, away from areas created on rootzone, it is less important that natural soil is avoided, and many believe that better results are obtained if the soil the turf has been grown on and the soil it is laid on are similar.

This means that using local turf-growers can often provide material grown on a soil type more compatible with the soil on the course. Many of the best local and national growers are members of the TGA, which has members growing turf on all types of soil from clay loam through sandy soils to peaty soil.

**The website address of the TGA is www.turfgrass.co.uk
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Robert is a founder member of the Register of Independent Professional Turfgrass Agronomists (RIPTA)