

A generation devoted to turfgrass testing

Dr Andy Newell this year celebrates 25 years of unbroken work compiling independent test data for the TurfGrass Seed booklet. Jim Goodwin spoke to him

turf – which links the sea and land – possessed finer characteristics, hence the preference for using this type of turf in a non-links setting grew.”

The STRI recognised that a better range of grass species was needed for golf and sport at large. “We started to look at breeding grasses for golf, and our first success was with Dawson Slender Creeping Red Fescue, bred at Bingley and eventually sold to a manufacturer.

“We were also trying to find grasses from other sources, as well as developing some early commercial elements. Today, you couldn’t rightfully breed grasses for golf yourself and then test other manufacturers’ breeds. The commercial world back then wasn’t what it is now. Needless to say, it probably took us 25 years to produce a grass worth cultivating.”

When courses began to be built inland, course architects moved grasses inland from their links environment, which worked well in some instances. But the necessity of a scientific focus to seed testing was accelerated by companies selling grasses and heightening claims for their performance without any independent trialling to back them up.

The STRI began testing more widely and invited growers to submit their grasses for trialling alongside other manufacturers. The first competitive trial took place in 1965 and five years later, the STRI and growers came together and decided that a publication should be assembled to collate all the results. The first booklet was launched in 1978 and has grown to become the industry ‘bible’ it is today. “When I started the brochure was very much based on opinion. Part of my remit was to move the science of the industry forward. In the early days the respect for my predecessor John Sheldrick’s analysis proved sufficient for con-

sumers but as the business side of the industry moved on, it became more pertinent to have quantifiable data, numbers and rankings. The numbering system currently in place can be traced back, allowing today’s consumer to see exactly how and why a cultivar has been given the rating it has. Ultimately, our job is to help the breeder sort the champions from the also rans.”

If his 25-year association with the Institute has taught him anything, it’s that you should never advocate using a poor cultivar, in any circumstance, even if it’s just down to a cost consideration.

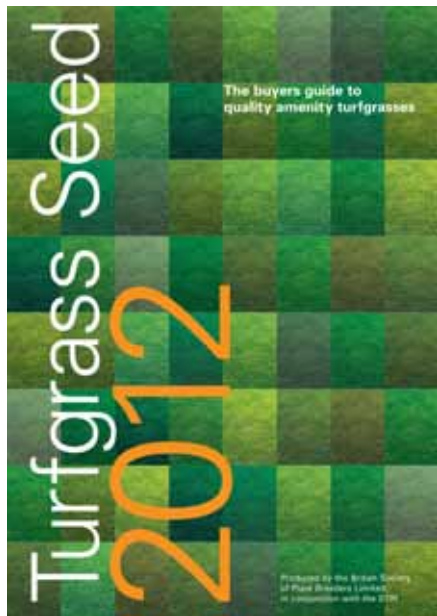
The quality of your turf has to be a long-term factor, so any differential in price should be thought of over a longer period, in which case the price difference becomes minimal.

“If you use the booklet superficially, merely going by who tops the table, you won’t get any rubbish but if you’re an educated greenkeeper you can make some far more well-informed decisions based on the specifics of the course and the environment.”

Although the turfgrass industry is constantly evolving certain grasses differ little from the 1970s, he says. The slowest evolving grass in his quarter of a century stint has been bent grasses. “Some of them on the list now have been there for over 20 years, largely unchanged. In stark contrast, the perennial species and red fescues are big business for breeders, so the turnover of new cultivars within these categories is frequent.”

The nature of this vitally important reference work has changed and evolved as much as the industry has in a quarter of a century. But what does the future hold?

“The tall fescues are where we predict the major evolution will occur. They’re at the stage where perennial ryegrasses once were and the breeding potential is vast. If we can improve the attractive-



It’s been a staple of the industry for generations, has continued to shape current trends and given us a scientific footing concentrating on impartiality and quality.

The Turfgrass Seed Booklet is at the heart of sports and amenity turf breeding and is the UK’s most trusted source for independent grass cultivar trials data.

Since the first booklet was published in 1978, one man has exerted perhaps more influence in its evolution than any other – and this year he celebrates 25 years of compiling the catalogue of turf performance data that characterises the publication.

Dr Andy Newell, Head of Turf Grass Biology at the Sports Turf Research Institute in Bingley, West Yorkshire, has been responsible for data analysis and the assembly of trial results as performance ‘league tables’ since 1988.

In that time, aspects of seed trialling have changed beyond recognition, while others have varied remarkably little.

“When the STRI was formed in the 1920s, one of the core aims of the Institute was to create a scientific base for testing and trialling turf,” he explains. “There was very little science behind the way turf was used prior to this but what they did know was that sea-washed



The patchwork of trial plots where STRI conducts tests on cultivars provided by growers.



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ness of them, there’s huge scope for commercial growth from breeders. You wouldn’t recognise a perennial ryegrass now from 20 years ago, and the same could be true for tall fescues.”

He claims the most pressing issue would be to stop talking about *Poa annua* and start doing something about its prevalence in turfgrass.

“*Poa* really needs some investment and for decent research to be done, the end game of which would be to understand the relationship between *Poa* and other grasses so users can exploit its weaknesses better,” he argues.

The whole thrust of the Turfgrass Seed booklet is a willingness to adapt and evolve, take on new practices and welcome new cultivars into the increasingly multi-faceted repertoire of greenkeeping skills.

In the UK, more senior grounds professionals have grown up with a host of chemicals at their disposal - treatments that they could fall back on to keep the ills of turf maintenance to a minimum. Or as Andy puts it: “We’ve moved from nuclear weaponry to small arms, and in the future were likely to just be using bow and arrows. We have to adapt and it’ll bring real greenkeeping skills to the fore.”

He offers an example of what modern greenkeepers have to contend with. “You might sow what you believe to be a preferred seed mix, but in reality, you can never guar-

antee that that’s what you’ll get. If you sow a mix of bents and red fescues, for example, one or more will come to prominence depending on the weather. Nature will start to select the best cultivars for the environment and that’s where the art of greenkeeping comes in to play – working to the strengths of the desirable grasses and to the weaknesses of the undesirable.”

The longevity of the booklet is

proof enough of its impact on the industry but for Andy, it’s the reward of knowing that you’ve helped produce something of worth that’s praise enough.

“We’ve prevented a free for all among breeders, and guarded against those with bigger budgets producing poor seed but enjoying the biggest consumer base.”



Richard Brown, amenity sales manager at British Seed Houses, said: “The BSPB Buyers guide is an invaluable guide to turf professionals as it records the results of independent and thorough trials which accurately reflect a cultivar’s performance. A variety that does well in these trials is taken seriously in the market place and gives greenkeepers added confidence. We have a reputation for quality and investment in developing cultivars and understand the real worth of the guide.”