

WHY NOT BENTGRASS BLENDS?

Including fine fescue and bluegrass in seedings can contribute seasonally to the turf's beauty, and is economical.

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There is no more economical way to establish turf than from seed. There is no more luxurious a turf than select bentgrass. There is no more skilled management for taking care of bentgrass than the golf course superintendent, especially in this era of the irrigated fairway. So why not put greater emphasis on seeding fairways with economical mixtures built around Highland colonial bentgrass (*Agrostis tenuis*)? This would seem to make sense for courses from Tennessee northward.

As recently as World War II almost every lawn seed mixture was compounded not only of top-flight Kentucky bluegrasses and fine fescues, but also a small percentage of bentgrass "to provide body." Often unpedigreed bents, containing variants ranging from velvet bent to redtop, were included. Where humidity was favorable, such as near the Great Lakes, some biotypes naturalized, and have since gotten out of hand. Some researchers, of recent vintage, viewing lawn seed mixtures by today's more critical standards, have concluded that it is usually best to plant bentgrass alone (and manage it for bentgrass), or Kentucky bluegrass-fine fescue alone (without bentgrass inclusions).

You can accept this reasoning or not. But in any event, as we shall see, I believe the logic of the argument applies more to the lawn than the fairway. Even for the lawn, it's questionable. So far, in our tests on the Lawn Institute grounds, we have failed to see any of the select varieties of bentgrass, particularly the work-horse Highland variety, become a pest in bluegrass turf. As a matter of fact, bluegrass has tended more to invade Highland bentgrass than vice versa.

One of the reasons bentgrass mixed with bluegrass-fine fescue has sometimes been frowned upon, is that the ultimate turf is viewed solely as a bluegrass-fescue population. Bentgrass is the ill-represented minority. If an off-type gets started, or volunteer creeping sorts become naturalized, making colonies or patches of contrasting color and texture in the turf, these are understandably viewed as discordant in a bluegrass matrix. In our plantings with Highland, I haven't seen this happen to any great degree, but nonetheless you can see how it might where bentgrass has naturalized widely. But on the modern fairway, where the pros demand half-inch mowing, you're looking at exactly the reverse side of this coin. Bentgrass becomes the base population.

The question, then, is: Are the bluegrasses and fine fescues making discordant patches in bentgrass turf? Happily, it's just not the nature of Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescues to be so ungentlemanly, especially at half-inch mowing, and under irrigation!

Our premise is that today's fairway is essentially bentgrass environment. The close mowing precludes reliably dense and weed-free bluegrass-fescue. But that does not mean bluegrass-fescue has no place. Rather than avoiding mixtures that combine these stalwarts, why not view fairway seeding as a bentgrass planting that is supported by bluegrass and fescue? The lawnman's approach is bluegrass-fine fescue into which bentgrass is introduced. There is a great deal of difference. In the former, management is oriented to bentgrass needs; in the latter, of course, to the bluegrass-fescue. Although lawn advisories may overlook this distinction, today's superintendent cannot, for modern demands make the fairway essentially a bentgrass environment. Slight adjustments in the mowing, feeding and weeding schedule are all that is needed to accommodate a colonial bentgrass on an irrigated fairway.

What can fine fescue and bluegrass contribute to a seeding of colonial bent? Naturally, the performance of any combination of grasses varies according to local conditions. But surely the fine fescue, with its comparatively large seed, helps establish cover quickly, while bentgrass goes through its slow early phase of growth. If a little bluegrass is there too, additional density should result.

In our tests at the Lawn Institute, seedings which have combined modest percentages of bluegrass, or fine fescue with Highland bentgrass, show dwarfed plants of these species continuing to stay alive. They contribute seasonally to the attractiveness of the turf. This in spite of maintenance adjusted entirely to favor the bentgrass, that is, frequent close mowing at a half-inch or less, regular watering, and generous fertilization—practices that in theory give bentgrass every advantage. I won't say that our experience applies everywhere. But I think it's worth considering whether a modest percentage of fine fescue, say in a colonial seeding, doesn't have merit.

The fescue (and bluegrass) contribution may be solely in the initial year, these grasses disappearing subsequently; but even so, isn't this worth the additional assurance of a good initial stand? Seedings made by professionals in the heart of "bentgrass country," such as the western slopes in Washington, frequently are of equal parts (by weight) of a fine fescue and a colonial bentgrass. By seed count this means 10 times as many bentgrass seeds as fine fescues, since bentgrass runs in the neighborhood of seven million per pound, fescues considerably less than a million.

The economy of seeding as contrasted to vegetative planting hardly needs comment in this age of high-priced and difficult-to-find labor. The cost of the seed is inconsequential compared to investment in time and facility required to get a golf course on stream on schedule. So there's really no good substitute for seeding of fairways over the northern two-thirds of the nation. Soil cultivation with tractor equipment, followed by fertilization and leveling with other machinery is all that is needed. With the trend strongly towards underground irrigation facilities on the fairway, achieving good germination is now less a problem, even without mulch (although a mulch, such as clean straw, or one of the newer slurries, that can be blown or sprayed over acres with the modern hydroseeders, are added insurance). A slightly rough or pebbled soil surface provides good lodg-

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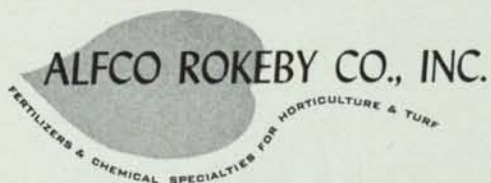
Even after the course is in operation, threadbare turf can be strengthened by bolster seeding without soil cultivation. Bolster seeding is usually suggested for autumn. But winter or early spring seedings find the seed working down nicely into frost pits as the soil freezes and thaws. The implanted seed is ready to sprout when warm weather comes. Seed is relatively so inexpensive compared to other demands for maintaining a golf course, that bolster seeding insurance makes sense. Might as well have candidate grass seeds in the soil; otherwise weeds will almost surely fill the voids! If the equipment is good enough to achieve so light a seeding, 20 pounds to the acre of a Highland bentgrass blend provide a good seed reserve.

Vertical mowing and thatch removal are being increasingly practiced on the well-kept golf course. Bolster seeding in conjunction with such practices makes good sense, too. Vertical mowing and aerification scratch the soil surface, letting seed reach soil rather than remain perched atop the thatch where it cannot sprout. One might even regard bolster seeding as a taken-for-granted complement to seasonal fairway de-thatching.

There are no better grass experts in the country than golf course superintendents, for whom success with grass spells livelihood. I'm not suggesting that successful practices be abandoned. But it does seem time for someone to say a kind word in behalf of bentgrass blends for the fairway, in case some of the lawn advisories have been misinterpreted.

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