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THE SCIENTISTS TELL ME ... TURFGRASSES ADD TO THE QUALITY OF LIFE

The quality of life is improved from the beauty of turfgrasses, particularly when grown in combination with flowers, shrubs, and tree plantings in a total landscape concept.

According to Dr. James B. Beard, turf and crop physiologist with the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, a more favorable, harmonious environment and improved mental health are important benefits of turfs, particularly to people living in high density urban areas.

Beard suggests seven distinct areas in which turfs make significant functional contributions to the quality of life.

Grass is by far the most effective and least costly method available to stabilize soil against loss by water erosion, whether it be on a roadside, park, lawn, ditch bank, institutional ground, or ski slope.

Dust stabilization value of an established lawn is well known to those who have lived in a newly-constructed house. Wind-blown dust can permeate a house or other building decreasing comfort and increasing cleaning problems.

Heat dissipation is a valuable byproduct of green, actively-growing grasses which release water to the atmosphere by transpiration. This conversion of water from liquid to vapor requires energy and, in effect, cools the leaf surface. This process dissipates heat, and is particularly valuable in urban areas where there are high concentrations of hard surfaces that absorb and radiate heat.

Noise abatement is helped by turfs, plus surrounding tree and shrub vegetation. Properly placed, vegetation can decrease the noise level by 15 to 45 percent at a distance of 30 to 70 feet along intensely-trafficked urban freeways.

Turfgrasses have a low-level, diffuse reflection that causes nominal glare and associated eye discomfort in contrast to relatively smooth surfaces such as snow, sand, and many types of hard surfaces on buildings, streets and sidewalks.

Safety is enhanced by the higher-cut turfs along roadsides which aid in safer emergency stoppage of vehicles. Similarly, turfs on recreational sport fields provide a cushion which reduces the shock and potential injury to players.

Perennial grasses maintained under turf conditions provide low-cost, attractive surfaces for numerous outdoor leisure, recreational, and competitive sport activities such as baseball, croquet, field hockey, football, golf, lawn bowling, lacrosse, rugby, skiing and soccer.

Home lawns represent the major form of turfgrass usage, but the increasing usage throughout the State is also associated with allied human activities on the grounds of businesses, industrial complexes, parks, public institutions, recreational areas, highways, schools, churches, cemeteries, golf courses, and military installations.

"Improved turfgrasses and cultural practices are a 'must' for the future," says Beard. "Continued concentrations of people in urban areas with less mobility to outlying locations and increased time result in greater use of the limited recreational and green-belt areas in and near urban centers.

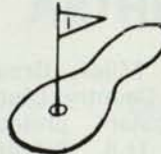
"Researchers at the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station are involved in developing improved turfgrass and cultural practices that will require minimal maintenance in terms of costs, water requirements, and energy demands, but at the same time will retain the valuable functional, recreational, and ornamental benefits.

"St. Augustinegrass is widely utilized on lawn turfs throughout Texas while bermudagrasses are more extensively used for sport and recreational turfs. A collection of St. Augustinegrass selections is being made from throughout the world to find genetic materials that are superior in resistance to diseases and insects, have low nitrogen and water requirements, and improved tolerance to environmental stresses such as drouth, heat, and cold.

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"One step in this direction was the development and release of Floratam, a St. Augustinegrass with resistance to St. Augustinegrass decline virus (SADV). However, Floratam lacks adequate low temperature hardiness for the northern two-thirds of the state and is not adapted to shaded environments.

"Approximately 25 percent of the turfs in Texas are grown under some degree of partial shade. Thus, emphasis is now being placed on identifying germ plasm having superior low temperature hardiness, shade adaptation, and resistance to such major insect pests as chinch bug and white grub and to the three major disease problems—brown patch, gray leaf spot and SADV."

Dr. Robert Toler, TAES virologist, is handling research on these disease problems. Dr. Michael Gaylor, TAES urban entomologist, is researching problems associated with insect pests.

"Other research is aimed at identifying specific characteristics that are reliable predictors of tolerance to environmental stress such as low temperature kill, drought and turfgrass wear. Cultural requirements of individual grass selections in terms of nitrogen fertility level, water use rate, and mowing frequency also are being studied.

"This step-by-step research moves us closer to the goals of effective turf at minimal cost for satisfying the functional, recreational and aesthetic needs of Texans."

Editor's Note - Any questions regarding this column should be addressed to Science Writer, Dept. of Agricultural Communications, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843.

By Robert L. Haney
TAES Science Writer

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