

AND THE GRASSES SHALL ABOUND

By Edwin Wollenberg, Retired Superintendent

The summer was hot and dry. Moisture was scarce to moderate, and very spotty. Forty six days of 90 degrees plus, including seven days of 100 degrees or over. We tied a record set 33 years ago, with plenty of time left on the calendar to break that record. Lawns looked dead and took on the appearance of a stubbled field of grain after harvest.

It is with selfish satisfaction that I retired a few years ago, and do not have to worry about Nature's wrath. But, I do worry, for I have a son and many other superintendent friends, who, although they know the grass will make a "comeback" and green up, do not know if the "locker room and pro shop" superintendents can wait that long, and are anxious to make a change. We, the superintendents, know that the grass will be green again and survive, but sometimes we have to be patient with temporary and lack of cooperation from Mother Nature.

The golf course superintendent must wear many hats, and that's why they gave us the pretty title of Golf Course Superintendent a few years ago, a replacement for the common tieless, blue jean and grubby moniker of Greenskeeper in the past.

But I am sure that most golf course superintendents when they think of what their most important obligation is, automatically thinks of grass, that which surrounds their responsible domain. Grass grows almost everywhere except in the deepest woodland and on the very parched deserts — and with modern technology in grass survival and growth, we are now conquering many portions of that area, once thought as wasteland. Where trees struggle or can't gain a foothold, grass flourishes and possesses the earth. Wherever there is soil, moisture and some period of warmth, grass will grow.

Man is more dependent on grass than any other species of plant life. We could do without trees, though we would suffer some for want of shade, lumber, and in early history for fuel. We could do without flowers, though we would be deprived of color, beauty, fragrance and certain items of food and fiber. But without grass we would surely starve. The cereal grains are all grasses — corn, wheat, rye, barley, oats, rice, etc. The pastures for our meat animals is grass. Grass anchors the soil against erosion. Grass cools the earth and constantly renews the oxygen in the atmosphere. Grass is necessary for life as we know it.

It has been estimated that there are 7000 species of grass, including the tall giant bamboo that was used on golf courses in yesteryears as whipping poles for dew, worm casts, and leaves or debris on the lush greens or tees. Few of the so-called ordinary grasses grow more than three feet high, and most of the grasses that blanket our plain states or midwest flatlands are even shorter. Yet it is so demanding, so vigorous in growth, so skilled in reproduction, that it out-produces all other plants. Maybe someone, or the unique computer instruments of today, have counted the number of individual grass plants in an acre of fairway, but I have never seen the figures. They must run well into the millions.

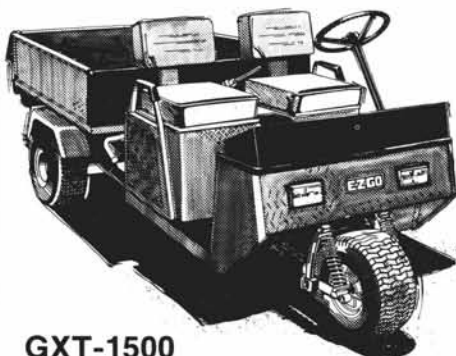
Grasses, as plants go, are really very simple. Most grasses have fibrous roots, their stems jointed, leaves long and slender, and flowers simple. The seeds carry the germ at one end, and the remainder of the seed consisting of so-called concentrated food; it is this food concentrate that makes the cereal grains so valuable to us. And because grasses have an unusual capacity for replacing the lost stems and leaves, it makes pasture grasses and forage crops so valuable to farmers and ranchers because a meadow, range or hayfield tends to replenish itself.

The fibrous roots of wild grass lace the soil so completely that they form a turf and sod. When I was a young boy in the middle 1920s, I had an uncle who went to see his uncle in Montana — still a very wild and untamed area of our nation then. He said his uncle cut sod and laid it up like bricks to build the house, barn, and even corral walls to confine the livestock. The sod of the pioneer days on the plains substituted as building material for the logs of the forest lands. He also remarked that the sod was so thick and tough that it required four horses to pull a plow turning a single furrow through it.

I'm sure we all remember from our school days and early American history, the vast pasture land that existed with grasses so plentiful that for generations it supported herds of buffalo estimated at 100 million or more. For hundreds of years those grassy lands fed those herds and the grass was never noticeably diminished. Then man came with his cattle and sheep and, though some areas were overgrazed, the grass persisted until men with plows ripped up the sod to plant wheat — another grass, by the way, but a nurtured, civilized grass without the staying power of buffalo grass and all the other wild species. Drought (like this year) hampered the wheat crops and wind blew the dust.

(continued on page 8)

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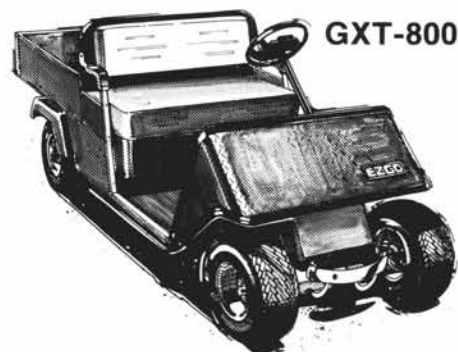
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