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A Thumbnail Sketch of the Bentgrasses

by John H. Dunn

UMC Dept. of Horticulture

The bentgrasses are what we call "specialty grasses." You will not often find them on a home lawn by choice of the owner. These grasses are susceptible to a large number of diseases and other stresses that require an adept manager, usually, a golf course superintendent and they need constant manicuring for best quality.

Colonial bentgrass (*Agrostis tenius* Sibth.), a species probably introduced from Europe, was once a recommended component of lawn seed mixtures. But the tendency of older colonial bentgrass varieties to segregate into patches soon discouraged their use in this role. If colonial bentgrass is found in the home lawn today it is usually as a plant out of place. Best use of colonial bentgrasses is on golf course fairways, although competing *Poa annua* is often a problem. But current breeding of more aggressive, rhizomatous colonial bentgrasses at Penn State and other universities may someday renew interest in the species for golf course fairways.

The finest turfgrass surfaces are reserved for creeping bentgrasses (*Agrostis palustris* Huds). It's the most important of several bentgrass species and was brought to America from central Europe including Austria some time during the 1800's. They were initially referred to as German bents. Early attempts by the United States Golf Assn. at improving bentgrass for putting greens focused, beginning in 1917, on selection of promising, vegetatively spreading types from stands of the variable, seeded German bents. These selections would eventually replace the German bentgrass and mixtures of colonial bentgrass and chewing fescue on putting greens. A letter and number system was attached to these vegetative selections that preceded assignment of variety names. Some superintendents still refer to the varieties by the experimental numbers rather than names. Certain qualities of each variety led to their selection for use in different regions of the country. For example, C-7 ('Cohansey' - original selection in 1935 by Supt. Eb Steiniger, at Pine Valley C.C., N.J.), has good heat tolerance and was a logical choice for putting greens for tough midwest summers. Some older golf course putting greens are still mostly Cohansey which was a proven track record for long term persistence. Another variety, 'Toronto' (C-15) was grown successfully in the Great Lakes region of the Midwest until much of it was decimated by a bacterial disease. But it often fared poorly in the more intense heat and humidity of Missouri summers. These and other, similar bentgrass selections must be established vegetatively, by planting sod, plugs or sprigs, all slow and expensive procedures.

An early goal of plant breeders was to provide the golf course industry with seeded creeping bentgrass that would facilitate the establishment procedure. 'Seaside' creeping bentgrass that would facilitate the establishment procedure. 'Seaside' creeping bentgrass, a mixture of seed that originated from bentgrass types found near the Oregon coast, met this need. However, quality of the ensuing turf was not usually equal to that of the best vegetatively established bentgrasses. The goal of improving turfgrass quality of seeded creeping bentgrass was pursued

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(cont'd. page 6)

(Bentgrasses cont'd.)

by Drs. Burton Musser and Joseph Duich (dew-itch) at Penn State University. Their efforts reached fruition in 1956, with the commercial availability of 'Penncross' creeping bentgrass (a special greenhouse problem - my introduction to research - assigned to me in 1957 as one of Dr. Duich's first undergraduate turf majors, was to test effects of 2,4-D on established Penncross growing in small pots; as we know today, the 2,4-D and Penncross were not always compatible). Penncross is a polycross of three parent types. Turf established from Penncross seed is of high quality, much more uniform compared with Seaside bentgrass turf. Its natural area of adaptation has been extended from the north to the southwest, with ample irrigation, and even to "deep" south states like Florida. Modern turf management tools, including more effective fungicides, have made its culture possible but difficult in these southern areas. Two seeded bentgrasses developed at Penn State, 'Penneagle' and 'Pennlinks', have joined Penncross in the bentgrass market since 1975. Successful use of these new varieties on golf course greens and/or fairways may gradually lead to broader acceptance by golf course superintendents. And breeding efforts continue to produce promising new bentgrass material. In the meantime, Penncross, at age 33, remains the dominant bentgrass turf.

Notes on some seeded bentgrass varieties:

Penncross — commercially released in 1956, is quick to establish and recuperates well following injury. Wear tolerance is considered very good to excellent. Vigorous growth is an advantage but also contributes to rapid thatch accumulation, especially, if Penncross is overfertilized with nitrogen.

Penneagle — was released in 1975; it's aggressive shoot growth and upright growth habit of shoots are characteristics desired in an improved putting green turf. We remember Penneagle as a very good experimental selection (PBCB) in our South Farm Turf plots about 1970. But vigor and recovery from wear may not be equal to that of Penncross, especially, at low to moderate levels of N. Penneagle may be a better choice for bentgrass fairways than putting greens.

Pennlinks — released in 1987; this upright growing, finer textured cultivar was tested on more than 100 golf courses under the code name PSU-126. Years of successful testing give it high marks but observations based upon use "in the field" are limited because of it's recent release.

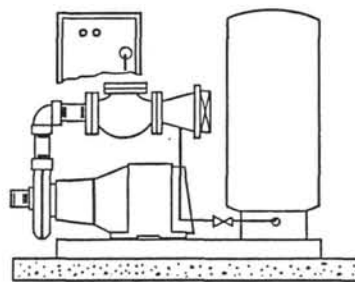
Emerald — was developed from a single progeny of 'Congressional' (C-19) bentgrass. It is characterized by high shoot density and good low temperature tolerance. However, wear tolerance is poor and Emerald is prone to dollarspot.

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