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Turf Grass Species Facts and Problems

by Mark G. Grundman
Medalist America

More and more golf courses are following the trend toward lower fairway mowing heights or returning to higher BLUEGRASS contents in fairways.

With lower mowing heights, you reduce the choices for grasses, that will survive in any given turf situation. For instance, at lower mowing heights, BENTGRASS should be the desired species because of its capability to survive at ½" or less. Which BENT to use will depend on the amount of traffic and maintenance programs.

RYEGRASS can be another grass of consideration for not only lower mowed fairway situations, but as a intermediate grass mixed with BLUEGRASS for a multitude of potential problems. These problems could include lower to higher mowing heights, heavy wear, drought tolerance, rapid establishment, and overall disease resistance. The major problem with this concept is the variation in color, texture and growth habits at different times of the year.

BLUEGRASS, on the other hand, can give you the optimum in a turf situation. Newer varieties are available that can be mowed as low as 5/8" for tournament play. With their overall disease resistance, insect resistance, quicker establishment rates, finer texture, better winter hardiness than any other turf species, and dark green color. However, they do have their problems with thatch development, some insect problems, limited disease susceptibility and limits to height of cut.

A concerted effort should be made by overseeding to even out turf areas with the proper grass species, and improve I.P.M. programs.

The concept of overseeding turf is nothing new, but with the advent of newer equipment and newer varieties, which are more aggressive, have better overall disease resistance, better uniformity, and better mowing qualities, the days of damaged or modeled turf are over for the most part. The way to approach this is through overseeding every fall or do split applications by seeding once in fall and possibly seeding again in spring (if needed). Many superintendents realize better turf and reduced maintenance budgets through incorporation of a set amount of dollars per year into their budgets for overseeding. This concept has proven itself time and time again in the fight against POA ANNUA. For instance POA ANNUA needs soil temperatures of 70 degrees for germination while most BLUES and RYES will germinate at 50 degrees or above. As a norm under iced situations, POA ANNUA will only survive for 30 days while most cool season grasses will survive for at least 90 days. During the summer months 104 degree leaf temperatures can create problems with POA ANNUA DECLINE. Recent studies suggest that POA ANNUA DECLINE, LEAF SPOT, and ANTHRACNOSE all seem to work together to weaken turf.

In many cases, the initiation of an annual overseeding program will seek to affect a distorted equilibrium that has developed over the years and favors ANNUAL BLUEGRASS

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(Turf Grass Species cont'd.)

ENCROACHMENT. It will take time to shift this equilibrium but a shift will result from dedicated and vigorous annual overseedings.

One last problem facing every superintendent, is that of every day management of rough areas. With shrinking or stagnated budgets, more and more superintendents are looking for ways to reduce rough maintenance costs, yet make their roughs look like they are a viable part of the normal maintenance program.

How is this accomplished, you may ask? With the proper use of low management, slow growing BLUEGRASSES and or blends of FINE FESCUES a Scottish links affect can be accomplished for deep, unmown rough areas. To add a touch of color to these areas a sod cutter can be used to open strategic beds for wild flower introduction. Which WILDFLOWERS should I use? This will depend on one simple questions: CAN YOU BURN IN YOUR AREA?

With most long term prairie grasses and forbs burn management is a very real tool. This tool is used to manage annual weed encroachment, dead matted material, insects and diseases that will soon turn your beautiful wild flower area into a large weed patch.

If burning these areas is not a realistic program then maybe short term wild flowers should be looked at with mowing and overseeding with light rates of short term flowers every fall. Solid beds of flowers can also be used to accent many different parts of the golf course or prairie grasses can be used to screen tees from greens or any other area. Which grasses should I use? This will depend on soils, and growing height requirements.

The end result of proper overseeding is a golf course that has more uniform turf with reduced maintenance problems and reduced overall costs threw proper Integrated Pest Management.

And a pinch of baking soda

Ready for a really handy fungicide? Dr. Kenneth Horst and his colleagues at Cornell University are seeing startling results using sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) to control powdery mildew and other fungal diseases. The compound, mixed with various spreader/sticker agents, not only prevents the growth of several fungal diseases, it cleans up plants already stricken.

Horst's work is primarily with ornamentals, but colleagues have had good results with grains, cucurbits, small fruit, and turf. Horst is unsure why a common compound such as baking soda works against diseases, but he says it controls mildews better than any other product he has seen, including those chemicals specifically marketed for mildew control.

Working with Church and Dwight, makers of Arm and Hammer baking soda, Horst recently met with EPA representatives in Washington. The goal: to get pesticide registration waivers or exemptions so that this product, can be used in the ag market. The meetings, says Horst, were "very productive", and he expects to have sodium bicarbonate registered for use on ornamentals within 8 to 12 months. Registration for food crops would follow quickly, he believes.

Credit: Pesticides Coordinator Report



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