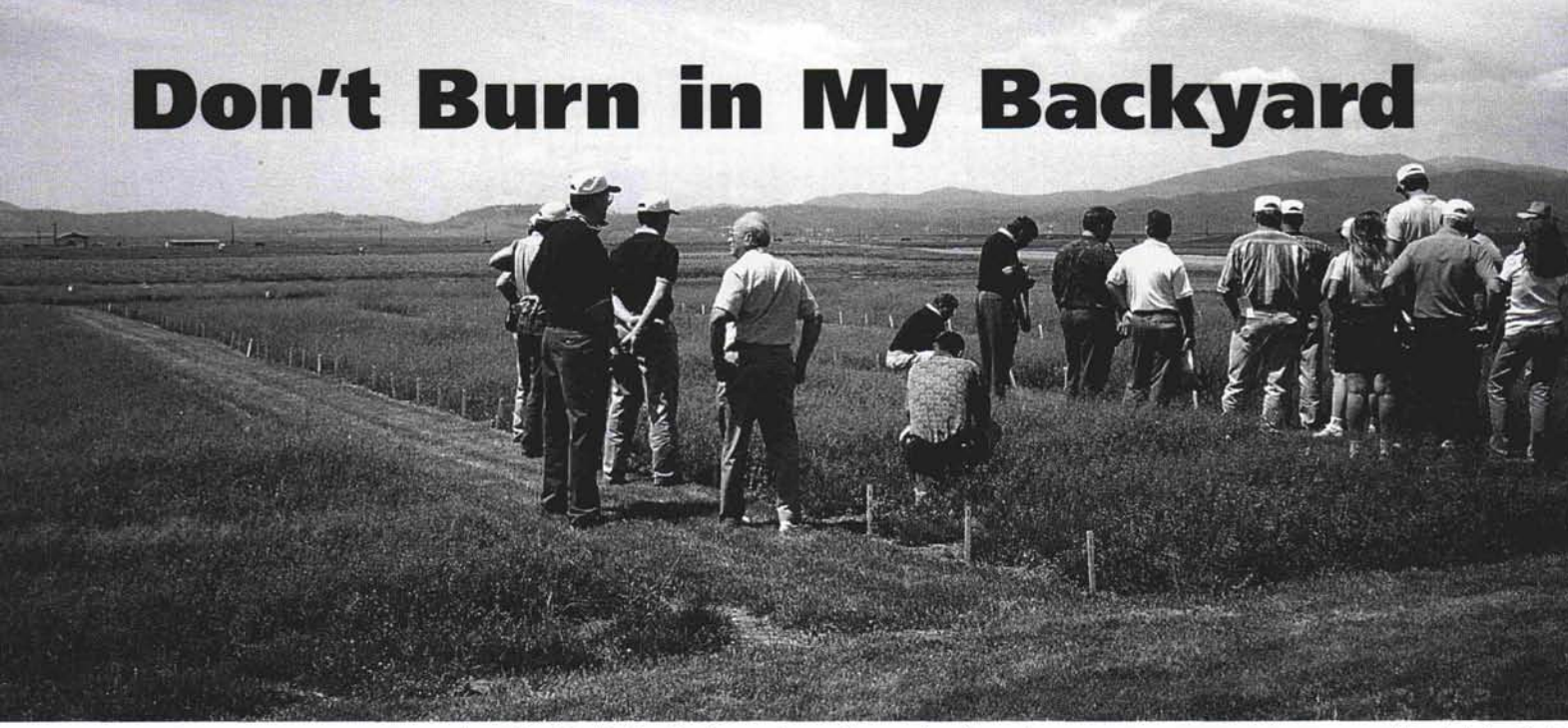
Don't Burn in My Backyard



Breeder blocks to check number of pounds of seed per acre.

Photos by LeAnn Scott

Fred Opperman
Editor

In mid June, I toured the Rathdrum Prairie area in northern Idaho. This area is located just west of Spokane, Washington, and presently supports more than 25 seed companies on 15,000 acres. About 10,000 of these acres are being used to grow proprietary bluegrasses.

So, where does "Don't Burn in My Backyard" come in? Well, it seems everytime that California shakes, rattles and rolls, there is an exodus that sends the population looking for safer ground. Many of these people leaving California are buying property in the seed-producing areas of the country, mainly Washington, Oregon and Idaho. The new neighbors, when looking for property, love the looks of the green fields with the grass blowing in the breezes. Property like this doesn't have the dust and pollution of where they just left! It sure doesn't—until field burning time. Then the new neighbors start howling and complaining of the smoke and air pollution in their newly purchased homes.

All of this complaining has brought about laws in the major three seed-producing states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho concerning the burning of seed fields. Washington and Oregon already have laws enacted on field burning, and Idaho will have some form of law in 1998.

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Seed growers have been burning their fields since the beginning. It has always been a standard practice to cleanse the field after harvest by burning. This kills off many weed seeds and the chafe left behind. The field then can grow another crop of the same variety the next year from the rhizomes and roots left in the ground unaffected by the burning. The yields are greater when the fields have been burned off.

What does this mean to you the end user? Without burning the fields, the farmers will have to plow them to control the grassy weeds. Seed yields will not be as great if the fields have to be plowed, and the purity will go down. Farmers will have to plant a crop other than grass in that field for a few years. That will drive up the price of the seed for the first year or so. With the prices up, more farmers will then want to plant grass seed; and with the added acreage in seed production, there will be more yield, and the price will go down in a year or two. Thus, we will have a cyclical market even more so than we presently have today.

Going back to the "Don't Burn in My Backyard," it has been proven that plowing and exposing the bare ground over the winter or spring creates 20 times more

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dust in the air, plus many more days of dust, than the few days involved in the burning of the fields. However, it is hard for people to understand that fact, and they insist on the no burning.

You may ask how long does it take a new variety to get to the marketplace? Well, it may take from eight to fifteen years to make it to your golf course. There are a number of ways to find a new variety; one would be to find a good-looking prospect growing someplace where it has had no maintenance and yet is doing quite well. The old Merion bluegrass was found on the Merion Country Club in Pennsylvania. Old cemeteries are a favorite place for researchers to look, for they are not maintained; and for a grass to survive, it has to be good. Another way is through hybridization of different good-looking varieties.

A grower may have up to 200,000 varieties in their research greenhouse. Out of that number, maybe only five to thirty may make it into production some "x" years down the road.

Once the plant survives the research greenhouse screening, it is transplanted out into the fields, where it is spaced three to four feet from the other varieties. Once again, it will come under a selection process where 99 percent are weeded out. At this point, it may be selected to go back into the greenhouse to be hybred with some other good-looking plants that have a characteristic that they are looking for. This procedure may be repeated for a couple of years to keep hybridizing the better qualities into the grass plant. Then from the field where they have been growing in clumps, seed will be hand harvested, and that seed will be planted in another plot

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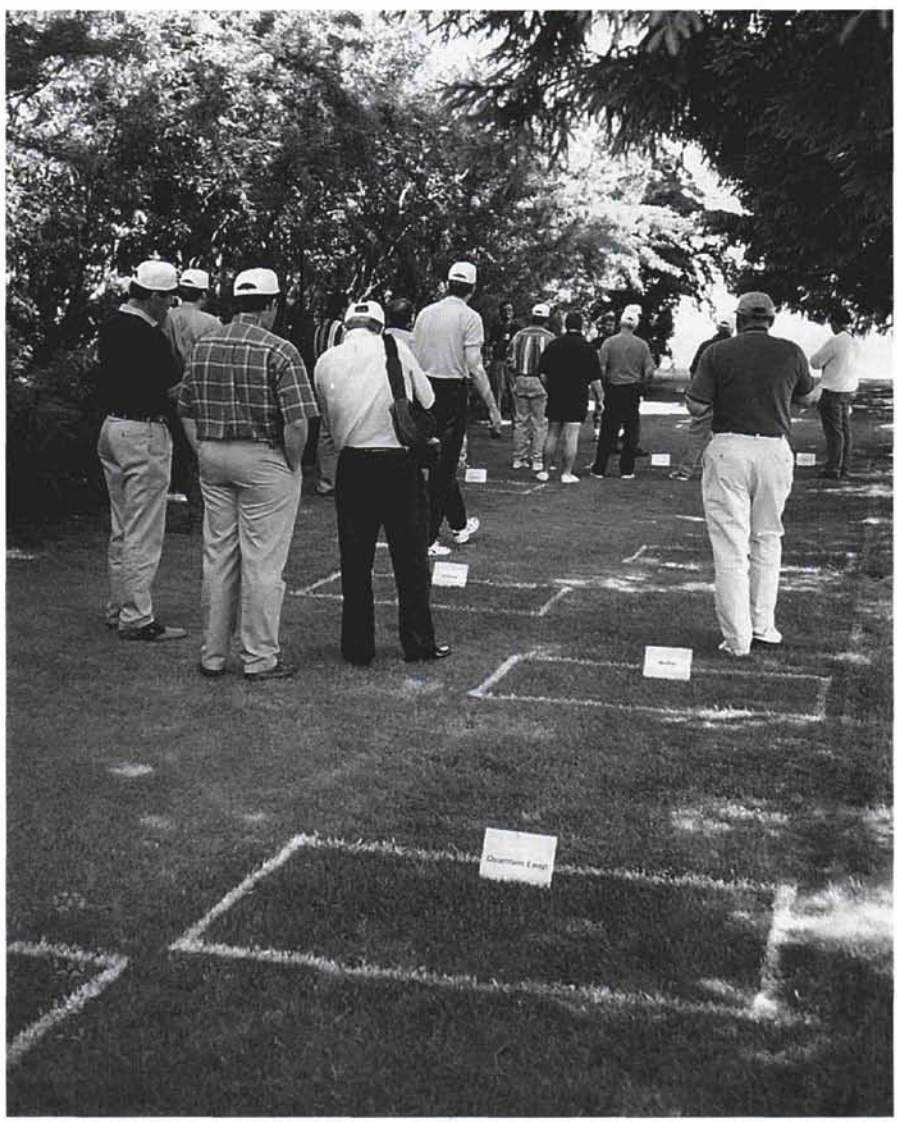
Greenhouse test plots



Shaded plots

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in a 2- by 15-foot row to increase seed production. If the plant survives this stage and looks like it will produce enough seed to meet the requirements (bluegrasses with the newer varieties need to produce 1,000 to 1,500 pounds of seed per acre for the growers to consider growing them), they again are hand harvested. From here the seed is planted into research plots that measure 3 by 5 feet. The seed is also distributed across the country to other testing sites in various climatic conditions.

As an example, with bluegrasses, there may be 8,000, 3- by 5-foot plots all with different varieties. Out of all of those plots, the growers will be lucky to get three to five new varieties into production. But from those varieties that look very good to the grower, they have to pass the NTEP trial sites and be highly rated before the grower will start production.

How long does it take?

1. Find a good looking variety.
2. First year, grow in the greenhouse.
3. Second year, plant in clumps in the field.
4. Third year through "x" number of years, the plant may be taken back into the greenhouse and then back into the fields.
5. Maybe in the fifth year through the eighth year, it will be planted in 3- by 5-foot plots.
6. After the survival of the 3- by 5-foot plots, it may be entered into the NTEP trial sites.
7. Somewhere around the eighth to fifteenth year, the seed will be grown for production and possibly have seed for that fall.

The bluegrass seed producers are looking for grasses which have a dark green color, are low growing, have narrow blade widths, are disease resistant, will take a 1/2-inch cut and can produce 1,000 to 1,500 pounds of seed per acre.

In the past, some of the newer varieties would only produce 300 to 800 pounds of seed per acre. That meant growers had to have a lot of acreage planted to get a decent harvest, and the price of the seed was higher due to the short supply and higher demand. Growing seed that produces more seed per acre in the production fields means a larger supply and a lower price per pound—a good situation for all concerned.

Some of the newer varieties I saw in the plots were truly outstanding. When compared to the present ones we have now, there is a dramatic improvement. The seed industry has made great strides in the last few years. In the next couple of years, we will also have endophyte-enhanced bluegrasses. We now have many endophyte-enhanced fescues and ryes to choose from, and we should all make an effort to purchase these newer grasses. Buying an endophyte-enhanced grass variety is the basic IPM approach. ■