

And the Grasses Shall Abound

Editor's Note: This article appeared in the November 1988 issue of Bull Sheet. The eloquent words of Edwin Wollenberg are especially meaningful in light of this summer's hot, dry, stressful weather.

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 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 think 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 are 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 7,000 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 Plains 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

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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 the buffalo grass and all the other wild species. Drought (like this year) hampered the wheat crops and wind blew the dust.

I remember the dust storms of the 1930s, indirectly, and many farmers in the Dust Bowl area moved from the land, leaving behind everything except what they could pack in a car or truck. But after the dust storms had somewhat abated, the grass crept back into the plowland, as it always does.

Man can destroy the grass, but if he turns his back for a few years, nature urges the grass back where it belongs. Grass is persistent. Grass seems to have a fond kinship for the land. Grass can and will, if given half a chance, repair the damage man does to the green around him.

In my almost 40 years as a golf course superintendent, I have seen many ideas evolve to take the extreme drudgery out of playing the game;

from caddies to pull carts, to the money-making destructive motorized monsters of today. These new, modern and progressive vehicles ruin much turf and grass, but when ropes and barriers are constructed to prevent this abuse, it isn't too long before the grass will take over again in these areas when left to its own urgencies.

The tamed grasses feed us and our livestock, and some of them provide shelter and recreational sites for us. We could not live without them in any degree of comfort. But it is the wild grasses that have done most to shape this world. Occasionally man cooperated, and helps produce a better species of turf plant, but for the most part the grasses need little help.

Nearly all plants have strong capacity for self-renewal, and grass is outstanding in this respect. Break off or cut one stem, and another stem will soon rise to take its place. Mow a golf green today, and tomorrow there will be new growth to be cut again. The obnoxious and cursed annuals, such as crabgrass, knotweed or *Poa annua*, will persist in growing and coming to seed regardless of abuse or adversities. And the perennial wild

grass, such as the quackgrass in edges of sand traps and flower beds, when cut down to the roots repeatedly through the season, will still send up a few seed stalks and survivors.

It is this persistence of life and growth that has enabled the grasses to take and hold such large areas of the earth. Their simplicity of flowering, their toughness of seed, these essentially simple ways or parts, are all remarkable and a vital element in their persistence. It is this courage and urge to live, this insistence on growing and seeding and multiplying, that really impresses me. If one can say that any form of visible plant life possesses the earth, that plant is the grasses.

Thank God that it abounds in abundance to feed and nurture us. Gives us a carpet to enjoy the many recreational sports played on it. And a much-needed and pleasant and inviting oasis to view and live with. And for its compatibility with the superintendents and greenkeepers who pamper it, and its acceptance of the homeowners who take it for granted. Yes, that ubiquitous plant called, Grass.





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