

IN PRAISE OF ZOYSIA

By FRED V. GRAU

Zoysiagrass was little more than a botanical curiosity fifty years ago. Twenty years later it was featured in the August 1953 National Geographic magazine and in LIFE magazine. Public interest was phenomenal. It offered the homeowner a natural easy way to fight crabgrass in sunny lawns in the "crabgrass belt" which divides North from South turf systems.

The "perfect grass" either does not exist or has not yet been found or developed. Quite likely it will never be found. In the meantime zoysiagrass comes close to the ideal for many people and for many situations. From the nation's capital to St. Louis and Kansas City the popular Meyer (Z-52) zoysia is increasingly in use on home lawns and golf course fairways. Its ability to tolerate close mowing is in evidence at the Naval Ordnance Lab on New Hampshire Ave. (suburban Maryland) where the original putting greens that were planted to Meyer zoysia in 1950 are still in play. At one-quarter inch height of cut they provide satisfactory putting surfaces all year. In the winter the golfers putt on "browns." There are similar putting surfaces in play in the Philadelphia area. When I was asked to recommend the grass for the putting surfaces at N.O.L. in 1949 I asked, "What are your criteria?" "Low-cost maintenance, minimum water, minimum labor requirements, minimum fertilizer and growth," was the answer. When I specified zoysia many of my contemporaries scoffed. "Bent is the only grass," they railed. As a result we now have had 30 years of low-cost maintenance on satisfactory putting greens/browns. They might not pass a stimpmeter test for a major championship but people like them. They meet current specs for economy in labor, water use, pesticides and weed control. Color changes with the seasons.

Zoysia lawns in Washington, St. Louis, Kansas City and other "transition-zone cities" are conspicuous in winter. The golden brown hue is refreshing. In summer these lawns are at their best when heat and humidity take their toll and diseases and stresses render bluegrass and fescue limp and weed-infested. Zoysia is not the perfect lawngrass but it is way ahead of whatever is in second place.

Many of my golf course superintendent friends are quietly proud of their success with Meyer zoysia that provide almost perfect fairway turf for their members. The first full fairway to be planted to zoysia was done in 1950 by the Mid-Atlantic superintendents and our crew from The Green Section. Fairfax C.C. was the site. Planting methods ran the gamut from sprigs to plugs to seedlings to sod strips. It was a pioneer learning effort. Much has been learned since then. Mel Anderson at Laurence, Kansas, is pleased because he can mow it closely without fear of injury. It requires hardly any irrigation and very little fertilizer. Weeds are minimal. Golfers love it. The color changes with the seasons and turf quality is at its best when the most golf is played. The grass meets current specs for ECONOMY.

There will be other zoysia cultivars, most better in some respects than Meyer. Like Merion Ky. bluegrass, Meyer is a

pioneer. Merion is being supplanted by better bluegrass cultivars but its place in turfgrass history is secure. Thus it is with Meyer only it will take longer.

There will be zoysia turf established from seed. We grew zoysia seed at Beltsville and sent it all over the U.S. Seedlings also were shared with golf clubs and with experiment stations. Mechanical and chemical treatment will help zoysia seed produce turf faster.

Zoysia is a grass with infinite variability and tremendous potential. Japan has used zoysia for years on lawns and golf courses. We've been slow to accept it because it changes color with the seasons. As "BROWN" becomes more acceptable so will zoysia gain in acceptance. Don't sell this grass short. It has a bright future even though it isn't for everyone and every situation. It does meet ECONOMY guidelines.

The name Meyer was given to the Z-52 selection to honor Frank H. Meyer, U.S.D.A. plant explorer, who searched for grasses in the Orient and sent zoysia seeds to the U.S. His body was found in a canoe floating down the Yellow River in China. ■



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