

Fine fescues: Another choice as grass of the future

Combining environmental friendliness with great playability

By MARK LESLIE

You're a superintendent in the Northern latitudes looking for a turfgrass that is environmentally sound, thrives on low maintenance and poor growing conditions, and gives great contrast to your bentgrass greens and tees? Look no further than the fineleaf fescues, some say.

"The fescues are the grasses of the future in the Northern area,"

said golf course architect Mike Hurdzan of Columbus, Ohio, citing a variety of reasons to use the five types of fine fescues — hard, chewings, creeping red, slender creeping and sheep. (Tall fescues are a different cultivar and suited more for the transition and Southern zones.)

"They're very important grasses," said Leah Brilman, research director for Seed Research of Oregon. "A lot of courses have

them because you want to manage them low-maintenance. Chewings will take a little more management. But hards, sheeps and blue fescues (closely related to sheep) will die if intensely maintained."

"Fine fescues serve more of a specialty role," said Tom Peters of the seed sales department for Barenbrug USA in Tangent, Ore. "They do superbly in very shaded or very low-maintenance areas — low sun, low moisture, poor soil conditions. You can go out and buy a Chevrolet to run you back and forth. But when you have dug a hole, you'd better go out and buy a backhoe.

"Fine fescues provide that special service."

"Awesome," is Hurdzan's operative adjective for fine fescues.

"First, it's environmentally sound. It needs less water, less fertilizer, less mowing. It isn't thatch-forming. From the environmental side ... in the Northern latitudes, there's no question fescues are the best adapted turf to low maintenance.



Joe Kosoglov, left, superintendent of Wolf Run Golf Club in Zionsville, Ind., discusses fine fescue roughs along Eagle Creek which flows along the 7th hole.

Photo by Larry Kassel/Oregon Fine Fescue Commission

"Second, the playing quality is awesome. You get a tight lie and a good player can put tremendous action on the ball. For a poorer player, on the other hand, it's a little tougher to play from because the lie is tight. If there is a grass that gives a player an advantage to play a Magnum ball, it's fescue. It moves the center of gravity of

the ball up just a little into the clubface.

"Golfers love fescue because the ball runs such a long distance." So, why are fescues not used more often in the North?

"Many people," Hurdzan said, "lack the courage to be innovative. There's a certain reluctance to

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Check particulars of test site before selecting grass

By MARK LESLIE

Experts say the newly released 1992 progress report on the National Fineleaf Fescue Test is important, but superintendents should be careful how they interpret the findings.

"They have to look at individual [test] locations and compare them to where they are," said Leah Brilman, research director for Seed Research of Oregon. "I don't care about overall mean average. I care about what's best for you at the maintenance level you're going to have."

"What happens once the seed leaves Oregon is determined by climate, soil, daylight hours, a million factors," said Tom Peters of Barenbrug USA. "So we can't say in a blanket fashion that this or that variety will work in your area. The people who care for the sites are the experts, not us. They know what will work in their area."

The National Turfgrass Evaluation Program findings on fine fescues and various other turfgrasses are available from National Director Kevin Morris at the Agricultural Research Service, Beltsville Agricultural Research Center, Beltsville, Md. 20705. They include data from nationwide test sites on such aspects as disease resistance, drought and cold tolerance, green-up, and month-by-month evaluation.

Brilman suggested looking at the raw data for all factors. "I think

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— Tom Peters
Barenbrug USA

people should go out on the sites a couple times a year. The person rating that trial might have different priorities than you do. I consider density and freedom from disease two of the more important characteristics. Another person might rate higher on color," she said.

Noting the vast improvement in ratings of many cultivars from the 1991 results to 1992, Morris said four fewer test locations reported this year and Brilman added that climatic conditions played a major role.

"The 1992 results were higher," she said, "because on the East Coast they had a very mild summer last year, while in 1991 they had a hard summer. All the grasses looked pretty good last year while in 1991 they looked crummy. This year, I think they'll go down again."

Morris cited "significant progress in some cultivars" and predicted more in the next set of test grasses, which will be planted this fall.

Five types of fine fescue all have strengths

There are two major types of fescue grasses — fine and tall — and five varieties of fine fescues.

The fine fescues are:

- strong creeping fescue, which spreads and fills in well;
- slender creeping fescue, which creeps but not nearly as much as strong creeping;
- chewings fescue, which has more bunch-type growth;
- hard fescue, also with a bunch-type growth habit;
- sheeps fescue, which is bluish-green.

Hard and sheep fescues are more tolerant to heat, so they perform better in the transition zone.

Fine fescues are finer textured than tall fescue. They also tend to live long in heavy shade and have a more natural look.

Tall fescues are quite different. Less attractive, they nevertheless work best in transition areas and the South, performing well in the shade. Their main attribute is tolerance of heat and summer stress.

On the down side, tall fescue tends to have more top growth and thus needs to be mowed.



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