

# Turfgrass selections changing for overseeding

Dr. Coleman Ward says bent, poa trivialis challenging rye as grass of choice

By PETER BLAIS  
ANAHEIM, Calif. —

Bentgrass and poa trivialis are fast overtaking perennial ryegrass as the seeds of choice for overseeding golf courses, according to Auburn University researcher Dr. Coleman Ward.

Ten years ago, 90 percent of overseedings were done with perennial rye, Ward said. Today, blends containing bentgrass or poa trivialis make up 80 percent of overseeding stock at the better courses, he added.

Ward has studied overseeding techniques for 30 years. The Alabama professor discussed other recent innovations in overseeding during January's Golf Course Superintendents Association of America Annual Conference and Show in Anaheim, Calif.

They included the use of lower and higher mowing heights, fungicide-treated seed, lower seeding rates and strip-seeding within 10 feet of rough areas rather than entire fairways.

But most intriguing, Ward said,

*Perennial ryegrass' inability to survive sustained low cutting heights is its major flaw.*

— Dr. Coleman Ward

were the use of cool-season grasses, like bentgrass and poa trivialis in Southern climates. Superintendents are forsaking perennial rye in favor of the other

two because of the superior putting surfaces they provide an increasingly demanding clientele.

Perennial rye has long been the favorite of course managers, and for good reason, Ward said. It grows quickly, possesses great wear and frost tolerance, has high seed yields, and stripes beautifully, Ward said.

"But like anything, it has drawbacks," the university researcher said.

Perennial rye's inability to survive sustained low cutting heights

is its major flaw, Ward said.

"Its minimum cutting height is 3/16-inch for any [long] period of time. Below 5/32-inch it suffers severe physiological distress. The resulting slow putting speeds are its major disadvantage," he said.

On the other hand, bentgrass and poa trivialis can be cut consistently at 1/8-inch, yielding the 11 and 12 Stimpmeter speeds golfers prefer.

Bentgrass is ideal because it survives into late spring and early summer, Ward said. Unfortunately that can put it in competition with Bermudagrass as the warm-season grass emerges from dormancy.

Compared to perennial rye, bentgrass is less tolerant to foot traffic, has slow seed growth and is more susceptible to poa annua.

"But it [bentgrass] is unexcelled as a putting surface," Ward said.

Poa trivialis follows closely on the heels of bentgrass in putting quality, Ward explained. In addition to tolerating lower cutting heights than perennial rye, it requires less seed bed preparation, tolerates low pH levels and stands up well to shade and excessive moisture.

On the down side, its small seeds make it more difficult to overseed than rye. Compared to rye, poa trivialis is also more disease prone and takes more time (about 70 days) to develop a quality turf, he added.

Mainly because of their smaller seed size, seeding rates are much lower for bentgrass and poa trivialis than perennial rye, Ward said.

Bentgrass is applied at 3 to 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet, poa trivialis at 10 pounds and perennial rye at 30 pounds, Ward said.

Overseeding dates are tied to the first frost and vary widely from region to region, he added. For example, the mean date for first frost in Tennessee is Oct. 1. In Southern Florida it is Dec. 1.

Once every 50 years first frost comes 30 days before the mean first-frost date. The first frost also comes 30 days after the mean date once every half-century. That leaves a 60-day window, meaning no ideal date exists.

"The best date to overseed is after poa annua germinates," Ward advised. "You want to be able to control any poa annua infestation."

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