

For Bermudagrass seed marketers: the 40-40 zone is their oyster

By MARK LESLIE

Consider the growing zone of Bermudagrass — 40 degrees north to 40 degrees south of the Equator — and it's obvious there is a mammoth market for this warm-season turf in golf. Yet, only in recent years have seed companies and universities researchers started to key on developing seeded varieties to compete with the industry's standard-bearer for the last 30 years: the vegetatively propagated Tifway 419 Bermuda.

"It's amazing we have done so much work on cool-season grasses over the years and not devoted much time to warm-season," said Ronnie Stapp, senior vice

president of seed operations for Pennington Enterprises. "But we have seen that the market can be grown, going north and further penetrating the area that Bermuda is already in ... and winning customers who would otherwise be buying sod."

Farmers Marketing Corp., International Seed Inc., Jacklin Seed Co., Medalist America, O.M. Scott, Pennington and Seed Research of Oregon are all players in the market.

"Our intention six years ago was to get into the Bermudagrass business because, as far as warm-season species go, it clearly had not been worked on, so it provided a lot of proprietary opportunity," said Craig

Edminster, director of research for International Seeds. "It doesn't have the glamor of zoysiagrass or St. Augustine. But it is low maintenance-oriented (in water, toughness, drought-tolerance, ability to live in many different climates, perform under low height of cut).

"If you're in the mid-South and want to reduce costs of maintaining your golf course but want that elite bentgrass for the high-end golfer, Bermudagrass is the choice. The problem is, it's dormant in the winter, and, depending on your situation, that may or may not be acceptable.

"You don't have to have a crystal ball to see this warm-season species has

potential," he added.

That potential goes far beyond an extensive market in the United States.

"Those folks in Southeast Asia don't have the infrastructure for the sod industry like we do, and it will be years and years before they do. So if you can provide, in a bag, a type of Bermudagrass comparable to, or a little less in performance [than vegetative varieties], you have a huge international market," Edminster said.

Pennington, whose Arizona operation reportedly handles about one-third of the 12 million pounds of Bermudagrass produced in the United States, concurred.

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NTEP begins membership

The National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) has initiated a \$30 annual membership fee. Payment of the membership fee entitles individuals to receive all NTEP reports produced in 1995. Exempt from the fee are university turfgrass faculty members and seed companies that enter grasses into NTEP tests.

NTEP was initiated in 1980 to provide unbiased information on turfgrasses to the turfgrass industry. Since 1980, several hundred grasses have been tested by NTEP with more than 600 grasses currently being tested in locations throughout the United States and Canada. Grasses tested include Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue, fine leaf fescue, bentgrass, bermudagrass, buffalograss and zoysiagrass. NTEP progress reports contain information on turfgrass quality, genetic color, leaf texture, spring green-up, density, disease and insect resistance, drought and cold tolerance, establishment rate and many other characteristics.

The NTEP is a sponsored program of the National Turfgrass Federation, Inc. and the United States Department of Agriculture. The National Turfgrass Federation, Inc. is recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization; therefore membership fees may be tax deductible. Please consult your tax adviser for details.

For information about the NTEP please contact: Kevin N. Morris, National Program Coordinator, National Turfgrass Evaluation Program, Beltsville Agricultural Research Center-West, Building 002, Room 013, Beltsville, MD USA 20705; Phone 301-504-5125; Fax 301-504-5167.

Seed vs. sod equals 'huge cost savings' for superintendents

Once seed-propagated Bermudagrass varieties on a par with vegetative types are developed, cost savings will be huge.

Seeding costs half what sprigging costs, Pennington Enterprises' Ronnie Stapp estimated. International Seeds' Craig Edminster thinks the savings are even greater. "If you sod a standard golf course wall to wall with Bermudagrass (70 to 90 acres of fairway, another 30 to 45 of roughs), that will cost you close to \$500,000," he said. "You can cover 90 acres with 8,100 pounds of Bermudagrass seed — a fraction of the sod cost."

"And if you can get it to come up within seven to 10 days, how does that compare to sprigging — with all the water, fertilizer, etc. you need for sprigs?" asked Skip Lynch of Seed Research of Oregon.

Seed is also "so much more convenient and reliable. Someone can buy seed that is certified and can keep it on the shelf," said Dr. Doug Brede, research director for Jacklin Seed.

"Once it's established, you've got a population of grass that is going to be aggressive and uniform," Klingenberg said. "Remember, when you're putting down sod, unless you stolonize it — which is probably what they'll be doing from here on out in big areas — you've got that long period of time for it to grow together. And if you put down straight carpet sod, you've got that interface between the sod and soil that can cause problems down the road..."

NTEP field day set

BELTSVILLE, Md. — On Aug. 3, from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) will conduct a turfgrass research field day here at the U.S. Drug Administration Beltsville Agricultural Research Center.

Topics will include discussion and display of NTEP tests of Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue, fineleaf fescue, bentgrass, Bermudagrass, buffalograss, zoysiagrass; establishment methods of zoysiagrass; traffic tolerance of cultivars, blends and mixtures; traffic tolerance of poa supina mixtures; endophyte-enhanced grasses; low maintenance performance of tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass and zoysiagrass; organic fertilizer use on turfgrass; management of the zoysiagrass/tall fescue mixture.

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