

Q&A Rutgers' Dr. Bill Meyer: Singing the blues — the Kentucky blues

Dr. William Meyer took over as the primary director of turfgrass breeding at Rutgers University last June. Meyer and Bill Rose founded Pure Seed Testing, a Hubbard, Ore.-based seed production firm 21 years ago. Meyer has bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in ornamental horticulture and plant pathology from the University of Illinois. He has developed or co-developed more than 60 turfgrass varieties in the past 20 years.



Dr. Bill Meyer

Golf Course News: What makes Kentucky bluegrass a good golf course turf?

Bill Meyer: It has good general disease resistance. It doesn't shear when mowed with dull blades, recuperates well, has a wonderful color and is fairly heat and disease resistant.

But when mowed short, like the 3/4-inch fairways common today, annual bluegrass (*poa annua*) invades and Kentucky bluegrass has trouble competing.

Other grasses do better in most fairway situations. Ryegrass does well at the lower cutting heights, but dies off in the

cold when ice sheets occur or when subjected to diseases like gray leaf spot. Bentgrass has become popular in fairways because it can withstand fairway mowing heights of 3/8-inch and the cold temperatures.

But I'm hopeful we'll see a Kentucky bluegrass that can stand the lower fairway mowing heights within the next five years. Until then, it does best in roughs in the Northeast and Midwest and some fairways in the Rocky Mountain states.

GCN: What research is Rutgers doing on Kentucky bluegrasses?

BM: We're doing an immense amount of breeding work, crossing some experimental bluegrasses that are heat and drought tolerant with traditional turf types like Unique, America and Midnight. The experimentals look great in summer, but are disease-prone in spring. Some of the traditional bluegrasses are just the opposite, greening up quickly in the spring but having problems in summer. This year we experimented with 175,000 individual seedlings, of which we're testing about 10,000 in the field. We ran a similar program last year, experimenting with 125,000 seedlings, testing 7,000 in the field and ending up with 700 to 800 that look promising.

GCN: Are you experimenting for other characteristics with Kentucky bluegrasses?

BM: We're testing other crosses in the hopes of getting better seed production and improved turf quality. Those grasses that have good seed production tend to have more disease problems. Shamrock is a grass that was developed here [Rutgers] that shows good seed production and fewer disease problems.

GCN: Where else have you searched for better Kentucky bluegrasses?

BM: We did a big grass collection in Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, last year. We collected the grass there, grew it in Holland and should have the seed here next year. We found samples in parks, along roadsides and in pastures that have been growing for 100 years. We have another team going over this summer.

GCN: What are you looking for in an ideal golf course Kentucky bluegrass turf?

BM: We want a more aggressive turf that can compete with annual bluegrass at fairway mowing heights of 3/4-inch or less. We don't have that yet and I wouldn't recommend that anyone in the Northeast or Midwest consider switching to Kentucky bluegrass fairways. My brother has had some success with a 30-

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Overseeding with bluegrass a 'tricky' process, says Dr. Brede

By MARK LESLIE

POST FALLS, Idaho — Superintendents considering overseeding with bluegrass should be prepared for a tougher job than usual, according to one turfgrass expert.

"Overseeding is tricky with bluegrass because it's a small seeded grass," said Dr. Doug

Brede, research director at Jacklin Seed Co. here.

Superintendents must get the timing right, he said, overseeding the bluegrass in the fall when temperatures are conducive. Also crucial to success is seeding so as to open up the stand to sunlight.

"The best thing is to make sure when you cut it in — whether by

aerification holes or vertical mower — that you take more than one pass," Brede said. "I've seen people take four or five passes when they're doing a bang-up job of overseeding. It's done to get sunlight into the stand."

Any type of renovation, he said, will encompass overseeding every fall for three to five years be-

fore the bluegrass takes over the turf stand.

The entire process relies on the first two weeks after overseeding. But once the bluegrass is up and growing "it's pretty tough and will hold itself very well against rye," Brede said.

The process can be done without interfering with golf play, he

said. Sweeping after each pass makes the fairway look simply like a cross pattern and doesn't affect the ball roll.

Don't expect, however, to overseed bluegrass entirely on tees, however, Brede warned.

"On tees it's nice to have a base of this grass to form a little bit of thatch, whereas ryegrass tees won't do that," he said. "But with tees you're always going to be coming in and overseeding with ryegrass, or a ryegrass-bluegrass blend periodically just to establish something green. They [bluegrasses] will fit the tee market, but moreso when planting new tees or renovating a tee, rather than periodically filling in bare spots. Rye is still the seed to use in that case."

Q&A: Meyer

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percent rye, 70-percent Kentucky bluegrass mix at his course, Hughes Creek Golf Course near Chicago. It looks good, but, to me, it still seems risky to try to compete with *Poa annua* with the bluegrasses we presently have available. We're hoping that in the next five years we'll develop a high-end Kentucky bluegrass for fairway use that will also have good seed yields.

The golf industry also wants bluegrasses to be tested for traffic tolerance. Traffic simulation is one of the hardest tests to run. We've developed a traffic simulator that uses rotating rubber paddles. Unlike the traditional rollers you have to use four times a week, you can make a single pass with the paddles and get reliable results. It looks interesting.

GCN: What are the biggest differences between working in private industry and working in an academic environment like Rutgers?

BM: In private industry you won't find a team of researchers from different companies who are willing to work together. But the collaborative support among university researchers here has been tremendous. Dr. Funk has been particularly helpful, sharing the knowledge he's gained during his 41 years of turfgrass research.

Some things do move more slowly in a university setting. To buy something here, you have to go through a bid process that can take up to six months. In private industry, if we wanted to buy a truck, for instance, we just went out and bought the truck.

I certainly don't have any regrets about the switch, though. Most people go the other way, from academia to the private sector. My path was just the opposite. Rutgers is the only university I would have considered.



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