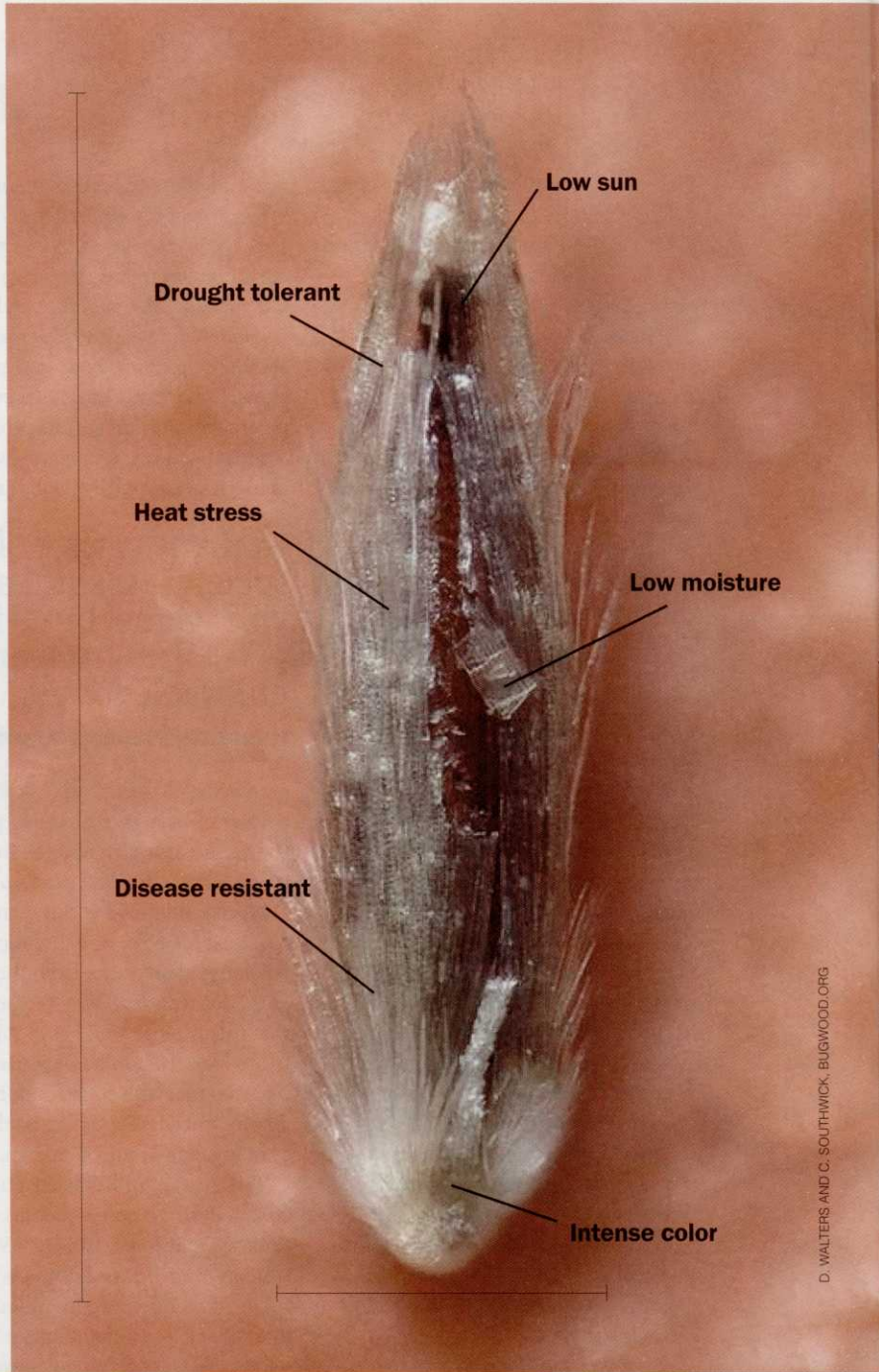


# Anatomy OF Seed Choice

With diverse distinctions between turf seed varieties, it's in your best interests to do your due diligence before making the final choice.

by Rob Thomas



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## TOP TRAITS

So what are the top traits turf managers are seeking for their

Drought tolerant // Disease resistant // Traffic resistant // Quality



George Washington was quoted as saying, "Bad seed is a robbery of the worst kind: for your pocket-book not only suffers by it, but your preparations are lost and a season passes away unimproved."

Sure, he wasn't thinking ahead to today's golf course turfgrass, but the words still ring true.

While nobody wants to lose time and money buying "bad" seed, what superintendents and builders are looking for in a seed has certainly changed over the years. With advancements being made all the time, the possibilities seem endless.

Golf course superintendents and builders are looking for seed varieties that are drought tolerant, disease resistant and exhibit stellar ability to handle traffic, says Murray Wingate of Lebanon Seed.

"Some older bentgrass varieties that do not have as good disease resistance have fallen out of favor," Wingate says.

Lewis Sharp, agronomist and golf course consultant with Tee-2-Green, echoed Wingate's sentiment on disease, drought and traffic, and added several other items on a seed wish list, including but not limited to overall seed quality, color and a tolerance to extreme heat and cold.

And Sharp has spotted a new development in seed usage. "Depending on the location, I am seeing the use of tall fescue / blue blends in the rough now," he says. "I have seen this pushing farther and farther north over the

past three years or so. With above normal heat and drought over the last couple of summers, the ability to handle the cart traffic [also] seems to be a new trend."

Earlier this year, Tee 2 Green introduced a new bentgrass – Pure Distinction – that will hit full release in the fall of 2013. According to Sharp, it has a bright green color, is disease resistant and allows for an ultra-smooth putting surface. It is high in density, upright, aggressive in growth and produces less thatch than other bentgrasses.

"Pure Distinction likes drier conditions, so it requires less water and fewer inputs than other varieties," he adds. "It will really save superintendents time and money."

Bill Rose, president of Tee 2 Green, says PennCross – which debuted in 1955 – is still the company's best seller, but they are now testing all varieties in salt baths as the potable water available to superintendents continues to diminish.

"We're getting rapid progress in salt tolerance," he says.

Sharp took a stab at what

the future may bring, but acknowledges that there are so many variables, tomorrow is a moving target.

"I wish I had a magic ball to look into from time to time," Sharp says. "With water shortage, I would say drought tolerance and salt tolerance will be a way of the future, along with even stronger disease resistance. The use of affluent water will also play a big role in grass selections."

Dr. Leah Brilman of Seed Research of Oregon notes one new trend she is observing is trying to balance varieties with a lot of drought resistance and heat tolerance, which are closely linked in many cases, as dry conditions and heat often go hand in hand.

For Seed Research of Oregon, Tye and 007 have become very popular for greens and fairways. A blend of it was used at the Olympic Club in San Francisco for the U.S. Open, while a blend of 007 and SR 1119 was used at Chicagoland's Medinah Country Club for the Ryder Cup.

She is seeing more requests for Dollar Spot resistance in Bentgrasses and says the new bents can really tolerate heat significantly better than their predecessors. And their higher density can take shorter heights of cut and fight off *Poa annua*.

What's hot at Lebanon

Seed? According to Wingate, Declaration Creeping Bentgrass has been their most popular seed variety for golf courses because it exhibits top-rated Dollar Spot resistance and excellent turf quality in National Turfgrass Evaluation Program trials.

**SUPPLY VS. DEMAND.** Revisiting our founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin once says, "You may delay, but time will not." Considering the state of turfgrass seed today, procrastinating on an order is something best put off until tomorrow.

In sales terms: Don't delay... order today.

Why the sense of urgency? In a word: Shortage. The supply is not meeting the demand.

Seed Research of Oregon's Brilman says the lack of available seed has been several years in the making. When the economy took a tumble, many companies had extra seed that was highly priced, but took a loss. They bought higher than people were willing to pay.

A year ago the market started coming back and the industry saw a lot of exports to Europe, because of the overseas drought. Last fall, the excess pile had essentially evaporated.

Now growers are dedicating their acres to food crops that are paying very well, such as corn,

golf courses? The seed pros weigh in with the following traits.

// Fast establishment // Heat and cold tolerance // Genetic color // Shade tolerance // Salt tolerance



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soy and wheat.

“It’s a difficult time,” Brilman says. “Corn influences wheat, which influences us. Companies are reluctant to follow wheat in price because they’ve been burned.”

In addition to difficulty placing acres on reliable industry standards, newer varieties are even harder to place because there is no history, so growers don’t know what to expect from a yield.

The immediate future does not look promising, either, according to Brilman.

“It’s been tough and it’s not going to get easier for one-and-a-half to two years,” she says. “Hopefully we’ll be back to a normal supply and demand after two years.”

Wingate agrees, adding the industry faces potential supply problems. “Some species and top rated varieties will be in short supply,” he says of 2013. “This is particularly bentgrass and top rated Kentucky bluegrasses.”

As for the cost, the newer top-rated varieties don’t cost a lot more than older varieties, so the investment is worth it, according to Wingate, but the determining

factor remains those rival crops. “Prices will be firm to rising for most species due to the competition from cereal grains for seed production acres,” he says.

So seed is in short demand and price is high and only going higher. Are there ways to save?

There are money-saving options – like buying lesser-quality seed or using less seed – but protecting the seedlings and being as careful as possible with what you use are better than those alternatives. With lesser quality there’s potential for weed seeds and less germination, Brilman says, adding there’s always a market for lesser quality.

Sharp warns: “Yes, there will be some cheap seed on the market, but you get what you pay for – always.”

Rose, though, took the long view and added that lower-priced seed may seem budget conscience in the short term, but over time turf-related problems can culminate in compounded costs. “Some seed prices are cheap, but more expensive in the long run if it doesn’t last,” he says.

Tee-2-Green’s Sharp warns superintendents to take

protective measures when selecting seed types – anything from consulting with cultivars to surveying their regional colleagues about their choices. Doing your due diligence can prove to be a long-term cost-saving measure, he adds.

Wingate and Brilman both suggest timing – as in sooner, rather than later – is a major factor in ensuring you have the right seed when you need it.

“They really need to plan ahead for their needs to get the best varieties,” Wingate says of superintendents’ long-term planning practices. “They may not be able to save money this way, but they should shop early to get the varieties they want before supplies run low.”

“Get lined up well in advance with your distributor. People need to think ahead – anticipate their needs,” Brilman says, noting that delaying the purchase until April 1 would be a serious mistake if seed is needed next spring.

**OUTLOOK.** New seed varieties are on the horizon that will impact golf’s turf managers.

“New, improved varieties

come on the market every year,” Wingate says. “Superintendents should choose the newest, most cutting edge varieties available.”

From a cost standpoint, though, the forecast for 2013 and beyond doesn’t look great. “More new varieties will be introduced,” Wingate adds. “And continued tightening of supplies due to the competition for production acres from cereal grains – such corn, wheat, soybeans – that are high priced now.”

Brilman pointed out that cost and quality are important from the buyer’s point of view, but something else plays a huge role in whether a seed proves to thrive in the market.

“Also [we have to] look at seed yield,” she says. “It can be the best seed in the world, but won’t stay around with bad yield.”

Unfortunately, difficulty placing crops hasn’t been the only issue. Brilman says weather conditions haven’t been favorable for growing the crops that have been planted. Many fields aren’t irrigated, instead relying on Mother Nature’s usual abundance of rain in the Pacific Northwest to naturally move along the cycle. Drought conditions this past year didn’t help.

“A cascade is what’s going on,” Brilman says. “There’s not any scenario where I don’t see prices going up.” **GCI**

*Rob Thomas is a Cleveland-based freelance writer and frequent GCI contributor.*

## TOP TIPS

Tee-2-Green agronomist and golf course consultant Lewis Sharp offers superintendents and builders some key tips to make sure they’re getting the most for their money.

- Select a cultivar that is right for the location
- Do on-site trials
- Check with superintendents in the area to see what works for them
- When trying something new choose a company with a trusted history

“If you do one or more of the above you will save time and money in the long run,” Sharp adds.