"Winter Greens" Seeding Methods

By O. J. NOER

LAST fall was a bad one for seedings of winter greens in the far South. More or less trouble was universal. In aggravated cases several re-seedings were necessary. Instead of blaming prevailing weather during the germination and young seedling stage, some greenkeepers questioned and blamed seeding methods.

When weather is unseasonably warm and accompanied by copious rainfall at seeding time, more or less trouble is inevitable. Difficulties multiply on poorly drained low-lying courses, and are usually less on the high-lying better drained ones. While some trouble is inevitable during adverse seasons, damage can be minimized and disaster avoided by emphasizing practices which produce stiffer stems and leaves.

In the far South the seedling stage is the critical one. That is the period when all grasses are prone to be soft and tender. Rye grass is one of the worst offenders in this respect. Succulent seedlings fall easy prey to "damping-off" and related diseases. They strike with devastating effect when moisture is plentiful and weather is warm.

Many greenkeepers in south Florida sow rye grass at 20 to 40 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft. the first time and plan to seed again after the initial seeding is well started. This is sound practice for them. The lighter initial seeding minimizes loss from smothering and lessens the "damping-off" hazard. As the season advances into winter, temperatures moderate so there is less likelihood of trouble with the succeeding seeding. Nitrogen supply is another important factor there, and will be discussed under the general topic of pre-seeding fertilization.

Seed Heavy First Time

Farther north the problem is quite different. A satisfactory turf must be obtained while soil and air temperatures are moderate. Later on soil becomes too cold to permit germination. Hence a thin initial stand stays sparse until warmer weather in late winter and early spring. So general practice is to seed heavily the first time. Some use 75 lbs. rye grass seed per 1,000 sq. ft. Very little trouble is experienced because equitable weather prevails at seeding time. Once rye grass becomes well established, it stays green and survives relatively cold weather. That is why it is the safest grass to use along the northern fringe of the Bermuda belt.

Good Base Is Necessary

The necessity for a good Bermuda base is generally conceded. Without its support winter grass cannot withstand the wear of continuous play. Before seeding, the Bermuda should be mowed close and thinned-out, if need be. Even drastic renovation is in order if Bermuda is stemmy and heavily matted. That involves alternate cross-raking and mowing until surplus is removed. Seed germinates, but cannot strike root in a thick mass of dead stems and leaves. Unless surplus is removed, seedlings appear and then die in spots of varying size. Some blame fungus diseases, instead of the actual cause.

After close cutting or renovation, it is customary to topdress greens quite heavily, then fertilize and seed. A common mistake is to use a topdressing of high organic matter content. Such soil traps water. In the far South this trapped water favors "damping-off" and other related troubles. Farther north it accentuates heaving damage from frost, locally referred to as "honeycombing." An infertile medium sandy loam of low organic matter content is the best topdressing material for pre-seeding use.

Although opinions differ regarding best fertilizer practice, the principal difference relates to nitrogen usage. Agreement regarding need for phosphoric acid and potash is universal. The phosphoric acid to speed root formation and development; and potash to stiffen leaves and stems. From 10 to 15 lbs. 20% grade superphosphate and 5 to 7 lbs. 50 or 60% grade muriate of potash per 1,000 sq. ft. are not too much. They should be applied several days before seeding, if possible.

Nitrogen is needed to promote vegetative growth. But when used in excess it tends to produce thin cell walls and thereby make tissues soft and succulent, so they are more susceptible to "damping-off" and other diseases. Consequently, in the far South it may be wise to withhold

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nitrogen until after the seedling is well established. Rye grass seed is comparatively large so it possesses enough stored nitrogen to carry the plant through the seedling stage. Since quick growth right at the start is important farther north, nitrogen is needed before seeding. Soluble materials should be used sparingly to prevent injury to seedlings, but organics can be used more generously. They will yield nitrogen as needed to establish the plant. After that, during cooler weather soluble sources can be used when grass shows need for more.

Plentiful moisture is the other principal cause of succulence in plants. That means careful watering during the germination and seedling stage. The important thing is to avoid over-watering, but to keep the shallow surface layer damp. On hot or windy days that may mean light watering by hand three or four times.

Some greenkeepers prefer a mixture of Kentucky blue and rye grass. A stand of both cannot be obtained by seeding a mixture of the two. The rye grass germinates quickly and smothers the bluegrass before it can start. In order to obtain a satisfactory stand of both, the bluegrass should be seeded first, and the rye grass after it is up.

There is no apparent good reason why Seaside or Astoria bent should not make good greens for winter play. Since 3 to 5 lbs. seed per 1,000 sq. ft. is enough, they compare favorably from the standpoint of cost. Disappointment in the past may have been caused by imbedding seed too deep, and failure to furnish enough phosphate. In future trials, greens should be rolled after topdressing to make a firm surface. Then fertilize, rough surface with a fine rake, seed, and roll again. These bents will not equal rye grass in the cooler parts of the South. Rye grass continues growth at temperatures which are too low for bent.

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