

## Off The Fringe

# At Any Cost

PERENNIAL RYEGRASS, DESPITE A POSSIBLE PRICE INCREASE, IS STILL WORTH ITS WEIGHT IN GOLD



*Editor's note: Golfdom asked Turf Merchants Owner and President Steve Tubbs to provide his take on the status of turf-type perennial ryegrass in the industry. In the future, we'll provide other supplier-written articles on various topics*

By Steve Tubbs

**W**ith the passage of the Plant Variety Protection Act (PVP) in 1970, private breeders began to improve turfgrasses in earnest. One of the easiest species to improve was turf-type perennial ryegrass because advances could be made each year through open pollination.

Turf characteristics, such as color and texture, were improved with each generation. The first major turf types to be improved were Manhattan (which evolved from a native clone discovered in New York's Central Park by Rutgers turf professor Reed Funk) and Penn-fine ryegrass.

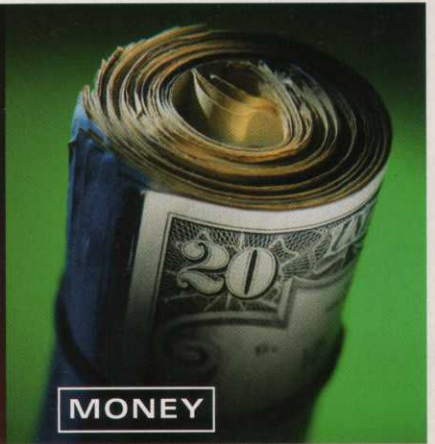
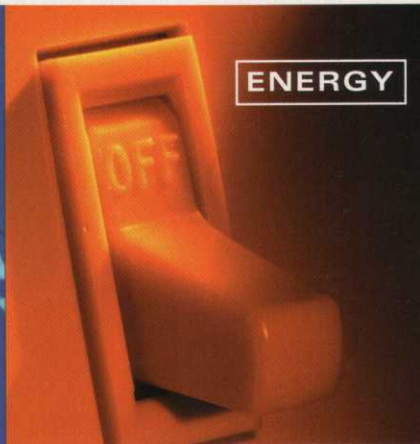
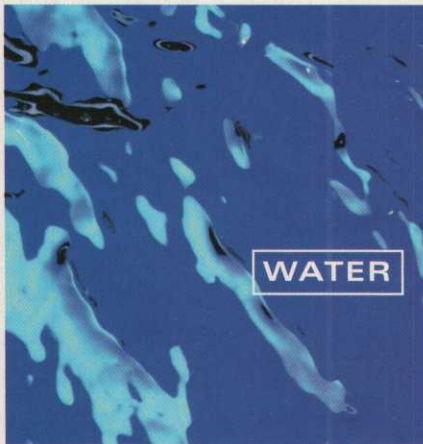
The increase of these finer, darker varieties literally gave birth to the overseeding market. Since most of the resort golf meccas were in warm-season areas, fine-leaf perennial became the winter cover of choice on top of the dormant bermuda. Closeness of cut, ball roll and ease of transition led to

the growth of the fine leaf — from several million pounds in the early 1970s to several hundred million pounds in the 1990s.

Breeders not only improved color and texture. They also improved yields by selecting clones that developed the most seed florets. For instance, the Manhattan 4 perennial ryegrass that's marketed today yields twice as much as the original Manhattan did in 1970.

So even though a farmer is being paid the same price per pound for perennial ryegrass that he was paid in 1970, the only thing that's saving him

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now is this doubling in yield. Likewise, superintendents and other turf users are buying fine-leaf perennial at prices lower than what they paid in 1970. Could any superintendent name a single item that he or she buys for the course that was the same price 30 years ago?

Sadly, the advent of the new millennium brought overproduction of turf-type perennials and the supply was exaggerated by the AgriBioTech bankruptcy. Even though the company is gone, the acreage of grass production it planted was still in the ground and mostly without a home.

Now it appears that turf-type perennial ryegrass production has turned a corner. The 2001 crop, with 162,000 acres harvested, was the lowest the industry had seen since 1994. Projections for this year are smaller yet, with about 130,000 acres of production. This will

bring us the smallest total crop in a decade and could lead to higher prices by as early as spring 2003.

With reduced carryover and average yields, supply could equal demand for the first time in many years. Should anything happen to the crop before harvest, we could even see a shortage of perennial since total supply would be less than normal demand. Last year's harvest produced a crop that was well below average and shortened the crop by at least 30 million pounds.

Additionally, many of the peripheral acres of production in southern Washington, eastern Oregon and off-shore (New Zealand, Australia) have been severely reduced or disappeared entirely. Europe is importing large quantities of Oregon-grown perennial ryegrass for the first time in many years. At current levels, perennial ryegrass prices are well below a grower's cost of production, and tens of thousands of acres

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have been plowed since 1999.

Yes, fine-leaf perennial ryegrass has been a tremendous boon for the golf industry over the years. Could you imagine what the Masters would be like every year if not for Oregon ryegrass?

At any price, turf-type perennial ryegrass beautifies any course that it graces. More importantly, it brings in the golfers who otherwise would be playing on brown, dormant bermuda.

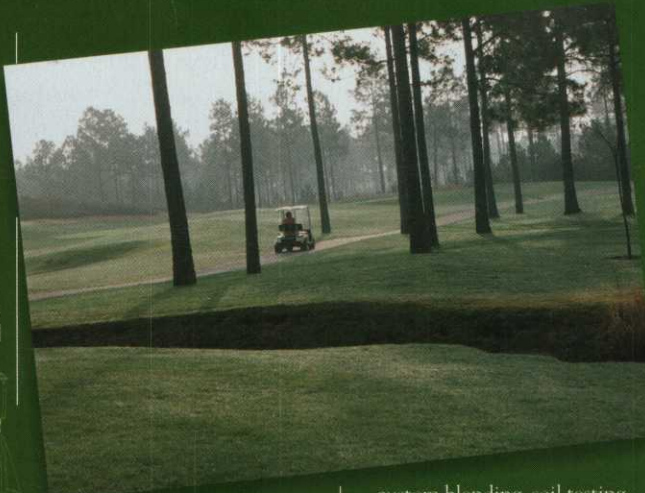


*Turf Merchants' Tubbs  
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