



Timing *is* Everything

Transitional ryegrass finds its place in the overseeding market

BY PETER BLAIS

Okeehelie GC in West Palm Beach, Fla., traditionally had problems with its bermudagrass fairways thinning every winter because of high traffic, dry weather and other environmental factors.

Paul Hickman, vice president of One Source Landscape and Golf Services, whose firm maintains the course, feared that if the fairways were overseeded with perennial ryegrass — which many Southern courses use to overseed fairways, tees and roughs — its inbred resistance to heat would cause it to survive longer into the spring and early summer than he wanted. “That means a bad transition, with thin turf or no turf in the areas where the ryegrass has gotten so strong that bermudagrass is shaded out,” Hickman explains.

But last fall Hickman overseeded with a transitional ryegrass from Pickseed West called Transist 2200. “The biggest advantage of using it was its quick establishment, and that it didn’t

tolerate the heat as well as perennial ryegrasses,” Hickman says. “It did just what we wanted it to. It colored the fairways, gave us some density and died out at the right time of the year.”

Transitional ryegrass, also called intermediate ryegrass, is a cross between perennial and annual ryegrass, according to Pickseed West General Manager Jerry Pepin, whose company is selling “millions of pounds” of intermediate ryegrass annually. Its darker-green color and finer-leaf texture (compared to annual ryegrass) approaches that of perennial ryegrass. But it has an annual ryegrass growth habit, germinating quickly in the fall and dying off earlier in the spring when warmer weather arrives, allowing the awakening bermudagrass to take over. Just how early it dies off depends on weather and management practices.

Pickseed West has undertaken significant research and recently obtained patents on its breeding process and transitional ryegrass varieties, Pepin says. It is marketing three brands: Transist, Transist 2200 and Transeze. To soften the springtime transition from ryegrass

Continued on page 30

Transitional ryegrass colors up fairways fast in the winter. But it will die out quickly when warm weather arrives, allowing bermudagrass to take over.

PICKSEED WEST

Transitional Ryegrass



PICKSEED WEST

Transitional ryegrass establishes quickly. One superintendent said his overseeded course had germination in five days, and he and his crew were mowing 14 days after germination.

Continued from page 29

grass to bermudagrass, these improved intermediates can be blended with some perennial ryegrass to keep the turf green until the bermudagrass resumes active growth.

Other intermediates include Pennington Seed's Professional Select QT (Quicker Transition) and Turf Merchants' Froghair. Seed Research of Oregon (SRO) is experimenting with its own transitional varieties and plans to market Pickseed's products as well, according to SRO Research Director Leah Brillman.

Certified superintendent Patrick Burgess, project manager for recreation centers at Sun City West's seven courses outside Phoenix, says he first heard about Pickseed's transitional ryegrasses four years ago.

"The reason to change over was mainly because more of our residents are living here year round," he says. "They can't tolerate hard transitions in the summer. This is a tool I'm using to try to alleviate some of those summer problems."

Burgess overseeds the transitional ryes on the tees, fairways and roughs.

"We do our normal bermudagrass preparation in the fall to make sure the seed gets down into the soil by verticutting and lowering mowing heights," he says. "We start overseeding Sept. 23 for the first four courses and then reopen them Oct. 14. Then we close the last three and overseed them. So we're overseeding for six weeks here. We always have to have some courses open."

John Hoffman, superintendent of golf course and common grounds at Heritage Springs Golf and CC in New Port Richey, Fla., says he first used Pickseed West's Transist on his 18-hole course in 2000.

"We overseed in early November," he adds. "We used 325 pounds per acre on fairways and roughs last year. We had germination in five days and mowed 14 days after germination."

Pepin says superintendents can use any traditional seeding method from drop spreaders to air seeders. The water, mowing and fertilization requirements are the same as with perennial ryegrass.

Once established, transitional ryegrass management practices are the same as for perennials, according to Russ Nicholson, national sales manager for Pennington Seed. "The original transitional grasses [which were first developed in the early 1980s] had to be mowed more, but the new ones don't need to be," he says.

In addition to their main attribute of giving way quickly to the underlying warm-season grass in the spring, transitional ryegrasses also germinate exceptionally fast in the fall. With warm soil and adequate moisture, they germinate in five to seven days, notes Pepin, and at temperatures ranging from as low as 22 degrees F to as high as 90 degrees F, adds Heritage Springs' Hoffman. They are durable, standing up to the wear and tear of an average 220 rounds a day at 6,100-yard Heritage Springs.

But, when choosing whether to overseed with transitional or perennial ryegrass, there are those who question whether intermediate ryegrass's major attribute — a quicker spring-time transition — is worth what most agree is, at least, a slightly inferior color and texture than the best perennial ryegrasses.

"With the intermediates, you are giving up color and texture for a week to 10 days of earlier transition," says Steve Tubbs, president of Turf Merchants, who believes the attention being paid to transitional ryegrasses represents a fad rather than a trend. "You also have to

mow them more often. The last few years, perennial ryegrass has been so inexpensive, why would you give up a whole winter of beautiful, dense dark-green fairways to get a week's earlier transition? Most superintendents know how to get perennial ryegrass to transition out [more quickly]. So you're giving up a lot of aesthetics for a little bit of transitional time."

Burgess says he'll test transitional ryegrasses for a couple more years before deciding whether to stay with them or go back to perennials at Sun City West.

"In the spring, when it starts to warm again, they [transitionals] tend to get a flush of growth, especially if you have been applying a lot of nitrogen throughout the winter," he says. "That's the type of thing I learned last year that we'll manage a little differently this year.

"There's a learning curve," Burgess adds. "You can't treat it like perennial. It's definitely a different type of management."

While viewed mainly as a Southern overseeding grass, transitional ryes also have a potential Northern application as a nurse grass.

"You might mix bluegrass and fine fescue with one of these transitional ryegrasses," Pepin says. "You get a quick, early stand of transitional ryegrass. When it dies off, you get the bluegrass and fine fescue remaining, which is what you probably wanted anyway. Bluegrass takes three weeks to get any kind of ground cover at all. People don't want to wait that long, so it is traditionally mixed with perennial ryegrass.

"But then growers may be stuck with the perennial ryegrass forever. The transitional ryegrasses give you a quick stand, provide erosion control, but die off within a year, leaving you with the bluegrass and fine fescue you wanted."

Having a secondary Northern market should help transitional ryegrasses maintain their place in the seed supply arena, according to SRO's Brillman. "If one market doesn't take all the seed, it's good to have another place you can put it," she says. ■

Blais is a free-lance writer from North Yarmouth, Maine.

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