

Impeding *Poa*

Velvet and other bentgrass varieties can stop the irksome annual bluegrass from invading greens

BY ANTHONY PIOPPI

Over the past year, Monsanto and The Scotts Co. have received substantial attention for their efforts to produce the herbicide-resistant Roundup Ready creeping bentgrass that they say will allow superintendents to virtually eliminate *Poa annua*.

As Roundup Ready and other herbicide-resistant grasses are being touted as the wave of the future, researchers at Rutgers University are looking at a long-ignored variety as a way to prevent the incursion of *Poa*.

Beginning in the fall of 1998, Rutgers researcher James Murphy began a study to see which of the common turf types used on putting greens best resist the invasion of *Poa*.

As expected, the ongoing study found dense varieties such as A-4, G-2 and Century performed well, but the top grade went to an unexpected winner. "By far the best was velvet," Murphy says.

For long-time fans and proponents of velvet, considered possibly the finest putting surface in the world, the results come as no surprise. Its density and thickness make it perfect to thwart the advances of *Poa*.

One person who is not shocked by the finding is Skip Lynch, technical agronomist and bentgrass products manager for Seed Research of Oregon, which markets SR 7200, a popular velvet. When SR 7200 was introduced in the early 1990s, it was the first new seeded variety of bent to hit

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the market in more than 30 years.

"It's really no secret. The healthier and denser you can create a stand of grass, the easier it is to keep out weeds from either above or below," Lynch says.

For the trials, Murphy grew test plots and subjected them to four conditions: no wear or compaction; mechanical wear; mechanical compaction; and mechanical wear and mechanical compaction. "What we're seeing is that wear is the biggest issue," he says.

But even with the wear, so little *Poa* made its way into the velvet stand that it could be removed by hand, Murphy says. He estimates the ratio was 90:10 in favor of velvet. What makes that fact even more interesting is that Murphy managed the plots in accordance with what creeping bent favors more than what a velvet management program favors.

While bent needs its food and water, velvet is best left alone. This practice of "benign neglect," as Lynch refers to it, is helpful to velvet and at the same time detrimental to the health of *Poa*.

"Basically, if you leave it alone, it does pretty well," Murphy says of velvet. "That rule of thumb is true. It prefers to be left alone."

There were also two minor surprises. Murphy said that while most of the newer and denser grasses fared well in the trial, L-93 finished in the middle of the pack. One of the older creeping bents, Putter, exceeded expectations, also finishing in the middle. Those two examples, Murphy says, show that there is not a 100-percent correlation between density and the ability to hold off *Poa*.

While Seed Research has been beating the drum about the attributes of velvets for 30 years, other companies are now trying to take advantage of the growing fan base. A handful of companies added velvet to their product line in the last few years.

Lynch estimates sales of velvet at Seed Research have grown from 12,000 pounds to 25,000 pounds in five years with much of that being exported to Europe, where superintendents have become proponents of the variety.

There is also a growing fan base in the United States. Lynch knows of at least two



Velvet

architects who have courses under construction and will seed with SR 7200.

One of those architects is Michael Hurdzan, of the Columbus, Ohio-based Hurdzan/Fry firm, whose Shelter Harbor CC in Westerly, R. I., will have velvet greens. The club is expected to open in 2004. It's fitting, since it was Richard Skogley, a professor at nearby University of Rhode Island, who collaborated with Seed Research in developing SR 7200.

Hurdzan says he's been looking to use velvet for a number of years, but could not convince course owners to go with it. "We never found anyone who honestly had the courage to try the stuff," he says.

Shelter Harbor, located about a mile from the ocean, should be a perfect fit, says Hurdzan, who is not convinced velvet is the right choice for every region, but grows very well in certain areas. He said the microclimate of the Rhode Island coast should be the perfect growing environment. The upscale national membership of Shelter Harbor, which Hurdzan says is used to playing on the best courses in the world, will appreciate velvet's attributes on the greens.

Making for smooth ball roll is not velvet's only outstanding attribute. Because the variety requires less fertilization and water, it's now the first recommendation of the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, because of its low environmental impact, Hurdzan says.

According to Lynch, the key to velvet gaining more acceptance among superintendents and architects is academia touting its attributes. "It's got to start at the university level that this is a good thing," he says. ■

So little *Poa annua* made its way into the velvet stand that it could be removed by hand, says Rutgers researcher James Murphy.

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