

## Off The Fringe

# Embracing *Poa*

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT IT, YOU MAY AS WELL TAKE CARE OF IT

By Anthony Pioppi

**A**fter years of unsuccessfully battling *Poa annua* with an endless array of cultural practices and chemicals, more in the turf industry are seeing *Poa* as a grass to be hugged, not drugged.

When it comes to *Poa*, maybe the mantra should be, "If you can't kill it, grow it."

We're not talking about high-bred species of *Poa* in development. We're talking about the good, old common annual variety found in virtually all cool-weather locals across the country.

The fact is, the likelihood of altering the ratio of *Poa* to bentgrass on existing greens is almost nil, especially where *Poa* makes up a large majority

of the existing species. "It's a difficult dynamic to change," says Jim Skorulski, agronomist for the USGA Green Section's Northeast Region. "If your greens are 80 percent *Poa*, you had better change your management practices to benefit the *Poa* because that's what you have."

Superintendents are learning to live with annual bluegrass, which can create a rather smooth, fast putting surface thanks to *Poa*'s ability to handle a low height of cut.

Skorulski points out that attitudes toward annual bluegrass have changed in the 20 years he's been in the business.

"Superintendents are trying to find ways to make it more consistent," he

Attitudes toward annual bluegrass or *Poa annua* have changed in the past 20 years, USGA Agronomist Jim Skorulski says.

says. "They are creating nurseries with aerification cores and are not worried about keeping it (*Poa*) out. Would that have been the case 20 years or 15 years ago? Probably not."

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One problem that remains, according to Randy Kane, turf pathologist for the Chicago District Golf Association, is that superintendents can't decide whether they love or hate the stuff.

He addressed this problem at a meeting late last year with assistant superintendents from northern California. He talked about how some superintendents treat *Poa* erratically. "They try and kill it in the spring and fall, and they try to keep it alive in the summer," Kane says,

Kane's advice is for superintendents to tailor their cultural practices for the benefit of *Poa*, instead of focusing just on the bentgrass.

"If it's in a mixed stand, people manage for the bent, keeping it dry and using less fertilizer," Kane says.

Also, topdressing and grooming, which are good for bent, are harmful to *Poa* and can damage leaf tissue and lead to higher incident rates of disease, Kane notes.

"If you really stress it, there's a good chance you'll lose it," Kane says.

He does suggest small-tine aerification, hand watering and spoon-feeding of nutrients. "A lot of superintendents are paying more attention to fertilization and irrigation," Kane adds.

According to Skorulski, one key to help *Poa* is to increase the nitrogen rate, which helps the shallow rooting plant establish.

Kane says research indicates some growth regulators can markedly benefit

the plant when applied at the precise time. "There is some evidence showing that *Poa* roots better and is more tolerant if it doesn't seed or flower," Kane says.

The catch is the window for the application is small and can differ on the same course because of microclimates. "It might work for one superintendent

but not for another superintendent whose course is located five miles away," Kane says.

Skorulski concurs.

"It's all timing. When you hit it right, it does extremely well," he says.

*Pioppi is a free-lance writer from Middletown, Conn.*

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