Off The Fringe

Less May Be More in This Case

GRAIN COMMODITY PRICES PUSH GROWERS TO DEDICATE FEWER ACRES TO TURFGRASS SEED. BUT THOSE ACRES SHOULD YIELD BETTER PRODUCTS

By David Frabotta

Just about 30 miles from downtown Portland, Ore., wide expanses of crops and grazing cattle welcome the morning amid rooster crows and the familiar rumble of commercial tractors. Those wide expanses include turfgrass seed plants as far as the eye can see.

But unfortunately for superintendents and their respective budgets, there's a lot less turfgrass being grown today, largely because farmers are opting for heavily subsidized and more lucrative corn and soy, much of which is used for ethanol production. Wheat is in high demand as well, and canola and soy continue to quench the thirst for a healthy and reasonably priced fryer oil as more fast-food chains free themselves of trans fats. This summer's flooding in the Midwest has been a significant accelerator for food prices, too.

As farmers plant more grains to cash in on higher food prices, turfgrass acreage falls. Total bluegrass acres planted are about half of what they were five years ago, says Kevin Turner, director of seed research and production for The Scotts Co., and fine fescue acres are a tad lower than normal.

"The price of grass seed is going to change," Turner told growers in late June at the company's field day in Gervais, Ore. "We're looking at probably strong price increases in bluegrass and fine fescues, and smaller increases on ryegrasses and tall fescues."

That's the bad news. The good news is that the varieties being planted have characteristics selected for what superintendents need, like the ability to tolerate low mowing heights and drought. At nearby turfgrass research facilities owned by Pure Seed Testing (Hubbard, Ore.) and The Scotts Co., cultural practices and chemical regimens are monitored closely to create turfgrass varieties that perform in line with those emerging needs. Tee-2-Green also hosted a field day for growers at the Pure Seed facility.

Among the field trials at the testing and research facilities are wear-tolerant and drought-tolerant fescues, ryegrasses that need less water, bluegrass blends that grow in almost full shade or thrive despite low-mowing, and fine fescues that have been traditionally bred for glyphosate resistance.

Developed by Scotts through selective breeding, its glyphosate-tolerant fine fescue helps primarily with *Poa annua* control because it tolerates about 8 ounces of active ingredient per 1,000 acres, which isn't strong enough to kill many broadleaves but is strong enough to kill annual bluegrass. While Roundup-Ready creeping bentgrass — a transgenic turfgrass engineered by Scotts — continues to be tested by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, its fine fescue is making its way onto American golf courses.

Unlike its transgenic counterpart held up in the USDA approval process, fears that the fescue's ability to tolerate glyphosate will jump into weed populations are very low because the turfgrass is naturally selected, not genetically altered.

"The opportunity for glyphosate resistance on the weeds we are trying to control are extremely low compared to many of the other products that we are using today," says Eric Nelson, Ph.D., a seed researcher for The Scotts Co.

Many of the new varieties being researched and grown for next year's seed could help superintendents tread easier on the environment, a theme commonly alluded to amid trials for drought tolerance and fewer fertility requirements. ■

Scotts agronomist Jim Frelich explains the parameters of a partial-shade study. He says shaded turf has a better chance to thrive if it is mowed as high as possible.

PHOTO BY: DAVID FRABOTTA

Quotable

"Hey, I know I suck. But I got nice equipment."

— Former NBA great Charles Barkley on his not-so-great golf game. Barkley was hitting three and was not yet to the women's tee when he said this. (ESPN)