

## PRODUCING SOD FOR SHADED AREAS

Wallace Huggett  
Huggett Turf Farm, Marlette

Starting around ten years ago, at the farm we started to receive numerous inquiries from our customers asking "Don't you have anything but Merion"? At the time we grew nothing but Merion. Since our business operates on the same principle as yours, whether yours is a golf course, a cemetery, a municipal grounds department or an associate in the sod business, we are all in the SERVICE business. Our future and prosperity depends on "giving people what they want".

Upon trying to face this challenge, the first task was one of understanding the problem. Merion as we all know, performs very well in the sod nursery. Those who are unhappy with it decry it's poor performance in shaded areas and it's high maintenance demands. Therefore, I had the problem of trying to grow and sell the customer a grass that would do better in the shade than Merion, require less fertilizer, water and dethatching than Merion, BUT of course, still look as good as his neighbor's Merion.

The first alternate I tried in 1962 was Delta Kentucky Bluegrass. Delta was supposed to be more shade and drought tolerant, have a lower maintenance requirement, and still be quick to form a tight turf. My field experience did show Delta to be more shade tolerant than Merion, but so is just about any other grass. It's drought tolerance is more accurately described as drought recovery. It would burn out during the heat and water stress period of summer but would recover quite well during the fall. Delta did form sod a little quicker than Merion. Excellent sod was sold from this crop the first season and I was encouraged. However, during the following spring, Leaf Spot became so heavy that the sod degenerated in strength and appearance. I tried next to introduce leafspot resistance by blending Merion with the Delta. This produced an excellent turf but Merion being more aggressive, became the dominant species and I lost my shade tolerance qualities and therefore my sales pitch.

Next I tried seeding some of my loam soil to pure Pennlawn fescue. It did well and given enough time, produced good sod and fair appearance. I was lucky on my first two crops of fescue. The seasons were just right. The turf looked good and no transplanting problems on the job site were reported. On the third crop however, the fescue hardened into dormancy due to the hot dry weather and refused to root down on the job site. We still grow and market a limited supply of Wintergreen fescue but limit sales to April - June and September till freeze up.

Years were slipping by and I still didn't have the shade grass I wanted. The idea of mixtures came into vogue. So like many farms, I went with the shotgun approach. The shotgun mix contained almost everything; Delta, Fylking, Fescues, Merion, Newport, and Park. There was no particular reasons for choosing any of the above. What ever the customer wanted, you would just happen to have it. It all sounded fine but the mix lacked uniformity of texture with Merions wide leaves contrasting like a weed grass next to the fine fescues. The performance was poor in the shade as well. I therefore decided to drop Merion from any future shade mixes.

What was it then that I was looking for in a premium shade mix? First, in any shade grass mix you need a good fescue. I had been using Pennlawn fescue and later Wintergreen fescue. Both are good, especially Wintergreen, however, they still don't have any marked resistance to leafspot. Secondly, in the interests of texture uniformity you should have a fine leafed, shade tolerant bluegrass and if allowed two more magic wishes, a sod farmer would wish for a heavy root system and a resilient, dark green grass.

It was during this period what I found that I was looking for, while attending a Michigan State Turf field day. It was the summer following the winter desiccation and severe winter kill (1967-68) and followed by a spring of heavy leafspot infestation. The fescue trial plots were all badly thinned except for one called C-26. This was what I had been looking for. C-26 is not the ultimate but a big step in the right direction. To complete the perfect day, I was attracted to a new bluegrass variety from Alaska, called Nugget. It was very fine in texture, cushiony, and dark green in color. It was reported to have had excellent disease resistance. Through the excellent co-operation of two seed companies, Michigan State Seed and O.M. Scott I was able to obtain these new and superior seeds for that falls planting. I mixed C-26 fescue, Nugget and Fylking to obtain our Premium Shade mix. After growing and harvesting two crops with excellent result and comments we feel we have a real winner.

From the sod farmer point of view, the production aspect of growing six or seven varieties, blends or mixes at one time, does have a negative side. While it is true that a need to the customer is being filled, the maintenance, production and rotational problems are multiplied too. Maintaining five cutting fields during the irrigation season is no small feat. Rotational problems do cut down the turn-over efficiency on the larger operations. Unproductive man and machine hours are spent moving back and forth from one field to another while harvesting, and must be reflected in the price the customer is charged.

In a world of changing demands, I suspect that this Premium shade mix will be "giving the customer what he wants" for no more than two or three years without major changes.

Remember - Change is a challenge, but also an opportunity and a tool for profit.