

FESCUE UPDATE

K. T. Payne
Department of Crop and Soil Sciences
Michigan State University

We have been telling you for several years now of the virtues of the fescues. Why? Because we sincerely believe that they are the turfgrasses that are standing in the wings--like the actress who is second to the star in a Broadway play--not quite as good as the current lead--but with a great potential. When the star falters or succumbs to an illness, she will be ready and able to come on stage.

We have many stars among the Kentucky bluegrasses now. We take no credit away from them. But all of current stars--while beautiful--must be wined and dined--and seem to be pretty temperamental and subject to illnesses.

"Gina" Nugget was superb for a while. Now she's showing signs of poor winter color, dollar spot, and Fusarium roseum.

"Zsa Zsa" Merion was a grand old gal--put the show where it is today in fact.

But now she has so many miseries that Dr. Vargas is talking of Death, Taxes, Merion and stripe smut--all in the same sentence. Don't miss that show!

We hope to keep these stars going a bit longer by huddling them together in blends and mixtures to reduce chances of exposure--.

But, we haven't yet found a way for them to survive without high levels of food and drink.

Enter the fescues-----

Here's a lean and hungry group.

Tough as cowboys--and able to survive on jerky and dew--

But, as yet, when exposed to the common cold, like Eskimos--very vulnerable to one disease--Helminthosporium leaf spot.

Once we find a good one that resists this disease--a new star will be born.

P. J. Boatwright last Saturday at G.A.M.'s meeting in Detroit was telling of complainers at Winged Foot's last year's Open who said,

"What are you trying to do, humiliate the outstanding players?"

To which a wise old gray head replied,

"No, we're trying to identify them."

This is what Joe Vargas and I are doing with the red fescues.

We know there are some good guys in all that great cast out there.

It appears now--after six years of effort--that this star won't burst on stage as Merion did--it's exactly the same problem--but we're getting closer--and we have 27 fledgling actors that have survived strong punishment by leaf spot inoculations.

These will have a fun time intercrossing next June and we'll be ready to see whether the resistance of these parents can be passed on to the offspring.

In fact, we are ready to test in a small preliminary way in the greenhouse in a week or two. If we can unlock this secret for you, we will have a grass that provides elegant turf with the requirement of less than one-third the nitrogen or water that improved bluegrass cultivars need.

The fescues are a gang with great variation and a huge potential.

In view of the needs soon to be upon us in terms of energy, fertilizer and especially nitrogen--we're beginning to look at the sheep fescues--Festuca ovina, which need only 10% of the nitrogen and water of Merion and still provide a beautiful, tight sward.

We know that fine fescue turfs exist in northern latitudes--they are excellent in moderate shade, and make superb fairways, as well as being economical to maintain.

Another cousin of these two is meadow fescue. Some of you have tried this winter hardy turf type that we've found does well here.

Soon we'll be ready to increase this, and we hope to be able to offer a grass for you that will do many of the things we expect of tall fescue, but can't realize because none are sufficiently winter hardy. We hope you will get some trial seed from us, and will appreciate observations from those of you who have had it.