
Turfgrass Portraits VI:

Zoysia

By DR. ROBERT W. SCHERY

Director, The Lawn Institute
Marysville, Ohio

This is the sixth in a series of nine articles on the basic traits and maintenance procedures for common turfgrasses. Next month author Schery discusses bahiagrass.

ZOYSIA, glamour name among turfgrasses second only to bluegrass, is native to eastern Asia and its outlying islands. Zoysia, named for Karl von Zois, an Austrian botanist of the 18th century, is conserved over Osterdamia. Species boundaries within the genus are obscure. Forbes lumped all turfgrass types as *Z. matrella*. Yet most literature still calls forms wider leaved than matrella *Z. japonica*, very fine ones *Z. tenuifolia*. The japonica group is commonly known as Korean or Japanese lawngrass, reflecting collections from that portion of the globe by USDA plant explorer Frank N. Meyer in 1906. The matrellas are designated manilagrass, because of Piper's introduction of this type from the Philippines in 1911. Tenuifolias are called mascarene, Korean velvet, patio or flagstone grass.

Forbes, at the Tifton (Georgia) Experiment Station, has hybridized different forms, and the well-known "Emerald" is a selection from crossing japonica with tenuifolia. Unfortunately, Emerald sometimes grows

"puffy" like tenuifolia, and then mows poorly. The Meyer variety is a dense, hardy selection from japonica seedlings at Beltsville, Maryland, named for the explorer. Flawn was an early matrella selection, hardy along the East Coast nearly to New England, and also much planted in the Southwest. Recently Purdue has released Midwestern zoysia, and yet unnamed selections are today under test far and wide.

Thus zoysias, like most prominent turfgrasses, occur in tremendous variety, from very fine-leaved and low-growing tenuifolia sorts (ground covers of the deep South, so low as to scarcely need mowing), to coarser japonicas in many "sizes and shapes." Seed, mainly imported from the Far East, but occasionally harvested on sod farms in this country, exhibits genetic reassortment typical of sexual crossing, and must be considered "japonica." All named varieties are propagated vegetatively, to assure trueness to type. Through the years there have been many local selections across the South, chiefly matrellas, as good as any for their areas.

Adaptation and Preferences

Zoysia is not particular about soil, but seems to do somewhat better on heavier soils than on sands. Acid soils are best limed to bring them more nearly neutral.

Zoysias are warm-season grasses, even though selections such as Meyer are quite hardy even into Canada. But like bermuda and annual weeds, zoysia is discolored by cold weather, remains brown the winter through. In middle latitudes it is typically dormant from October until April, not much of a recommendation for climates where cool-season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, fine fescues and bentgrasses give ten months of greenness. As such, zoysia remains primarily a southern beauty, even though its growing season may be a little more prolonged than other southern grasses.

Zoysia has received heady ac-

colades, alternating with spells of disappointment because it did not always live up to extravagant claims made for it. In the early 1950's zoysia was to become the lawn savior in the crabgrass belt, in combination with the then new Merion Kentucky bluegrass. Apparently it didn't worry authorities urging this upon the American homeowner that brown zoysia was just as ugly as brown crabgrass in the winter lawn! Nor that two grasses of such divergent habits are seldom compatible, do not intersperse one within the other evenly and easily. As a matter of fact, I have still to see a permanently successful interplanting of these grasses,—the combination that was to conquer American lawns!

Nor has everything been completely rosy in the South. The enthusiasm of the 1950's for starting zoysia sod nurseries didn't reckon with the facts of life as that the vaunted Meyer strain discolored more readily in the South than local matrellas; that zoysia in time develops thatch (and consequent problems) which can cause debilitation; that diseases and insects eventually would find zoysia attractive (billbug has recently about finished off the zoysia sod business in Florida); that the very characteristics which make zoysia so wear-resistant underfoot, also make necessary an expensive heavy-duty mower to attend it.

In short, zoysia cannot be all things to all people in all locations. But among zoysias are the finest lawngrasses available for the South, aristocrats the equal of the better bermudas. Zoysia won't establish so readily as bermuda, but it will wear better. It can stand shade. It requires only modest fertilization. Seedheads are not abundant, little bother. It is not a rampaging pest at borders as is bermuda, and it is reasonably resistant to salt spray, so useful near the coast. But it is not a turf to endure neglect ungrudgingly, as so often implied. Nor is it adapted to wet places.

Zoysia's capabilities are better understood now, and there is a revival of interest in it for areas

where it was something of a flop earlier. For example, it may help golf fairways planted to U-3 bermuda in bluegrass country, which have suffered so much recently from winterkill (on north slopes especially) and from spring dead spot disease.

Growth

Zoysia spreads by above-ground runners (stolons), and underground stems (rhizomes). Rate varies greatly, and among the selections now under test are many potential releases that spread much more rapidly than is generally expected of zoysia. One of the drawbacks to zoysia has always been the lengthy period needed to fully establish it as a sod—a full growing year even in southern Florida, usually three years in northerly areas. During this interval weeds must be controlled, lest the zoysia be further slowed or even lost. A zoysia lawn has been expensive, and only for the patient man.

But once established, slow growth becomes a virtue. Mowing need not be so frequent as with bermuda, although the turf should be "evened up" regularly, at least each ten days. No grass makes a thicker, more resilient carpet than does zoysia. But here too, there are side effects. Such durability and tightness builds thatch in time, in some lawns so tight that water runs from the surface as from a shingled roof. The turf may then dry brown even though watered. And lawn mowers sufficiently powered to mow zoysia are not the inexpensive sorts. A heavy-duty machine with an extra reel blade is almost needed. Likewise, thinning heavily accumulated zoysia thatch requires special machines or skilled burning, just too much for the average homeowner-with-a-rake. And because of slow recovery, mistakes show for quite a while.

Zoysia has no terribly serious diseases; dollar spot and brown patch are sometimes found, but respond to fungicidal prevention. Until billbugs came along, siliceous zoysia was not greatly bothered by insects. Billbug larvae work deep in the grass, and unless organic phosphates

thoroughly douse the sod, control is difficult. Nematodes also attack zoysia, often seriously in Florida.

Not being the rampant grower that is bermuda, fertility needs are not so great with zoysia. "Average" fertilization for the soil and region is suggested, generally about 6 lbs. nitrogen/M/year. Resistance to drought is pretty good, though occasional irrigation is needed to keep a lawn continuously attractive. Mowing varies with use and variety, ranging from about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch to as high as 2 inches in more northerly locations. The tight growth of zoysia is quite a help in preventing weeds. Where weeds do pock the lawn, the 2,4-D family of herbicides takes out most broadleaf sorts without injury to zoysia. Nor will the usual preemergence and arsonate checks against annual grasses damage the grass.

Planting

Zoysia is best started in spring or early summer, to give the maximum period of warm weather for establishment. Seed is available only for unselected *Z. japonica*, usually sowed about 2 lb./M. Zoysia seed fits nicely

seeding mixtures for everyday lawns, where the special characteristics of varietal selections are not important.

Named varieties, of course, must be planted from living starts, sprigs (stems about three nodes in length, one extremity to be buried, the other exposed), or by plugs (biscuits of sod). New plantings generally show little activity for 2-3 weeks. Tests indicate slightly more rapid spread from sprigs than from plugs, but the planting is more of a chore and keeping the new planting sufficiently moist more of a problem. Likewise, larger plugs have proven more enduring than smaller ones, especially if interplanted into existing turf. Spacing between starts should not be more than six inches, lest filling to a complete sod take unduly long.

Quickest fill results from planting into a cultivated and well-fertilized seedbed. If the soil cannot be sterilized, weeds may be checked somewhat with herbicides and hand pulling. In Florida Simazine and Atrazine have checked weeds without setback to zoysia, when sprayed over a new planting the same as recommended for St. Augustine.



Cross section of *Zoysia matrella* sod with soil washed away. (Photo courtesy Asgrow Seed Company).