TURF MANAGEMENT ENERGY USE IS REEVALUATED IN FLORIDA

As energy becomes more precious, many uses of it will be scrutinized. Energy consumed in the management of turf is high, higher than agricultural production. Philip Busey and Evert Burt of the University of Florida Agricultural Research Center have studied energy use for turf and have drawn some conclusions.

1. Turf energy use is high.
2. Considerable savings in energy use can be obtained through better management and better grasses.
3. The energy use question is inseparable from other aspects of turf culture. In many ways the energy question translates into a vehicle for studying better management, and getting that point across to turf managers.

Beside the reevaluation of turf maintenance practices and turfgrass selection, Busey and Burt analyze individual turf systems. "It appeared to me that in order to do an energy budget, or to have any meaningful way of looking at possible savings, it would be necessary to do an analysis of existing practices and/or design efficient turf systems ahead of time," Busey says. He designed a Turfgrass Management Audit/Maintenance Plan. "For larger areas, a similar analysis could be done with greater emphasis on detailing existing vegetation, soils and seasonal variations."

Busey and Burt have revealed basic energy use relationships which can be applied to other areas. Their findings were reported in the Proceedings of the Florida State Horticultural Society. Excerpts from this publication follow.

Turfgrass maintenance costs were 27.5 trillion BTU in Florida in 1974. This value was equal to approximately 1.5% of Florida's fuel expenditures, and 28% of the total energy used in agricultural production in Florida, in 1974. Turf energy costs were calculated based on all expenditures in the maintenance of established plantings, primarily fuel, equipment, fertilizer, water, labor, and pesticides, in that order. Benefits to Florida from turf include a landscape surface compatible with high density activity, erosion control, groundwater replenishment, and possibly reduced heat load in and around buildings. These benefits can be achieved through the use of lower maintenance species, proper management, and the tailoring of new varieties that are better adapted. Extension of present and future turfgrass technology can contribute to the savings in energy and other environmental costs.

Utility Analysis and the Choice of Species

Grasses vary in both the costs of upkeep and in the level of use that they can withstand. Current Florida fertilizer recommendations range from a low of 15g N/m²/year (3 lb/1000 ft²/year) for centipedegrass, *Eremochloa ophiuroides* (12) to a high of 60g N/m²/year (12 lb/1000 ft²/year) for hybrid bermudagrass, *Cynodon X magenissii* (13). Rates of mowing and irrigation also vary and it has been customary to ascribe a generalized cultural intensity to various species (1). Cultural intensity differences among species, which can also be equated with energy costs, are closely related to different relative growth rates among species (Table 1).

Bermudagrass, which grows rapidly and has a high maintenance cost, is the only species capable of withstanding both very heavy traffic from sports activities, and very close mowing. These features, combined with a rich green color and fine texture, make bermudagrass the most attractive turf to many. In contrast, bahiagrass grows slowly and also has relatively low requirements for fertilizer, mowing, and water. At the same time bahiagrass is generally regarded as the least attractive species. Its tall, open habit of growth, and its slow recovery from damage, makes it relatively unsuited for use in high traffic areas. The biological characteristics of grasses are closely related to their maintenance requirements and their usefulness.

Thus, it is possible to simultaneously evaluate the maintenance costs and the usefulness of different species in the landscape, and thereby analyze which kind of grass is best suited for particular use requirements. Based on estimated costs, we would not recommend

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Table 1. Management costs for various turf species, arranged from the most intensive in cultural requirements (bermudagrass) to the least intensive (centipedegrass). Fertilizer, mowing, and water requirements have been modified from Florida recommendations, according to the authors' preferences for southern Florida, in order to achieve dependable high utility. Some rates can be reduced substantially.

Species	Fertilization	Mowing	Irrigation	Estimated cost[z]	Growth rate[y]
	g N/m²/yr	times/yr	cm/yr	$/1000 sq ft/yr	%/day
Hybrid bermudagrass, *Cynodon X magenissii*	60	50-300	200	70	7.9
Zoysiagrass, *Zoysia japonica*	30	30	130	35	5.0
St. Augustinegrass, *Stenotaphrum secundatum*	30	35	130	35	4.8
Bahiagrass, *Paspalum notatum*	15	12[x]	60	15[w]	2.1
Centipedegrass, *Eremochloa ophiuroides*	10[v]	20	60	15	1.8

[z]Maintenance costs have been estimated on the basis of all expenditures, including labor, for medium-sized turf areas (100-10,000 m²). These figures are minimal costs, and can be increased by two to four times to include costs of edging, cleanup, routine spraying whether required or not, and managerial costs of supervision.

[y]Adapted from Busey and Myers (4). Growth rate is the relative fresh weight gain of a grass under ideal conditions. Values should be directly related to clippings produced, fertilizer and water requirements for replenishment of leaf tissue, and attendant energy costs.

[x]For most home lawns and especially in south Florida, the number of mowings may increase to about 25 per year.

[w]Maintenance costs of bahiagrass vary from less than $2 per thousand square feet per year (along Florida highways) to as high as the cost of maintaining St. Augustinegrass. Excessive costs for maintaining bahiagrass may result from failure to correct mole cricket infestation, excessive irrigation and fertilization, and close mowing.

[v]A fertilization rate is proposed here which is less than current Florida recommendations (12).

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that a manager with a budget of only $15 per year per one thousand square feet grow hybrid bermudagrass. Conversely, a turf manager with as much as $30/1000 ft^2/year should not exclude the possibility of growing bahiagrass; perhaps a lower traffic tolerance would be adequate and the maintenance budget could be reduced by using a species such as bahiagrass.

For purposes of this analysis, we consider "utility" to be the usefulness of a turf in terms of traffic tolerance, coverage of the soil, and beauty (specifically, intensity of color and closeness of cut). We have applied rather arbitrary utility values to show examples of relationships of the usefulness of various turf species maintained at various levels of cultural intensity. The concept of "utility function" has been presented in management books (11)—the "utility function" is the relationship between costs and returns. When the utility function is presented graphically for a variety of circumstances (Fig. 1), a decision aid is thereby created for choosing the right grass and the right management strategy. This graph has been drawn as a series of curves, to represent a widespread economic observation of decreasing marginal returns at higher and higher levels of input (fertilizer, mowing, irrigation). Beyond a certain point, most species even do worse, and are beset by a number of pest problems. The real challenge coming to turf research is not the need to show that one management strategy provides greener grass than another, but to show how much an extra shade of green will cost the consumer and how much an extra pound of chemicals will affect the environment. A flexible concept such as the utility function should permit sound decisions in the reduction of energy and other turf costs, while at the same time provide an economical return in beauty and useability.

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Management Strategy

Turf maintenance primarily consists of mowing, fertilization and irrigation in order to keep the grass actively growing and continually replenished with new leaf tissue. Proper timing of these practices to satisfy plant requirements along with attention to pest problems is necessary in order to achieve a maximum possible utility at a given expenditure. In practice, the use of strict recommendations (Table 1) may not provide maximum return in quality on expenditures. When the average expected maintenance needs are programmed rigidly over a budgeting period, noticeable problems arise. For example, large amounts of water and fertilizer can be lost due to improper irrigation, as when programmed irrigation timers are used. A study of water application on urban landscapes showed that about 40% more water was used than the estimated requirement (5). Even with the adjustment of irrigation to correspond more closely with evapotranspiration, substantial N can be wasted through leaching. In studies performed on a sand soil in Fort Lauderdale, from 35% to 55% of the N from a water soluble source was lost due to leaching under conditions of high rainfall and/or excessive irrigation (14). The use of fertigation (frequent fertilizing of low rates through an irrigation system) was shown to provide a more uniform availability of N, and thereby to reduce losses due to leaching.

Considerable energy is spent to mow turf, and at first consideration this might appear to be a good opportunity to conserve energy. This kind of savings can be achieved provided that other conditions for the grass are in balance. However, regular mowing of turf is at least as important to insure freedom from weeds, as it is for short-term aesthetic reasons. Recommended frequency of mowing should not be reduced in instances where weed encroachment is active. Too low mowing and long delayed mowing can not only damage and weaken turf, but can cause a later waste of energy in the form of extra fertilizer to assist in reestablishment of bare areas.

The greatest savings of energy can be obtained through a management strategy including routine evaluation of past and present conditions. When problems arise, diagnosis of the cause for unhealthy turf is the first step, and should be followed by an analysis of available options. In the case of turf that is unsightly because of weed infestation, herbicides should not be used without considering the underlying problems (nematodes, improper irrigation, low fertility). If grass cannot be grown properly, it may be that the weeds achieve some utility in covering the soil, whereas drastic eradication of weeds without correcting the underlying conditions will only leave the manager with bare soil.

Finally, pesticides should in many cases be used primarily for curative treatments and spot treatments. A few chronic problems can be expected that virtually always require pesticide treatment—sod webworms in bermudagrass, for example. Even in these instances the pests are erratic in their behavior, and widespread use of pesticide can be replaced by prompt diagnosis and spot eradication. Few pest problems can be managed best through the use of preventive sprays. Although reliance on regularly timed preventive sprays cuts down the number of decisions required by the manager, it also cuts down on the opportunities for experimentation and greater familiarization with the turf ecosystem by the turf manager.

Low-Energy Grasses: Strategies for the Future

A breeding strategy has been presented that "places priority on genotypes requiring smaller inputs of energy, pesticides, water and fertilizer, in order to maintain an attractive and durable cover for urban areas" (2). Different adaptations among turfgrass species were related to different use characteristics. By extension of this concept to comparisons within turf species, one can conclude that there is no one "supergrass." Different turfgrass varieties are needed for different situations (3). How then can the development of new varieties be geared to reduce use of energy, pesticides, water, and fertilizer in Florida?

The goals of a breeding program might differ for each turfgrass species. An adequate consideration of various breeding strategies should consider not only the economic value of a particular genetic improvement, but also the rapidity and certainty of its progress under selection. Some selection goals may have to be sacrificed, provided that an even greater success can be made towards other goals. As an example, one breeding strategy might be to make a high maintenance species cheaper to grow (and yet provide the same economic value) while another breeding strategy might be to make a low maintenance species more attractive to consumers at the same management cost. Both concepts are equally valid and probably both should be pursued as goals of a turfgrass breeding program.

> Although rapid growth and early establishment of turfgrasses indicate good adaptation, longer term studies might also reveal that these characteristics are related to future thatch problems.

Although economic models for directing the goals of turfgrass breeding can be based on generalized functions (Fig. 1), there are discontinuities that may make such an approach difficult without specific attention to specific problems. For a particular species there may be erratic but devastating problems—chinchbugs in St. Augustinegrass, for example—that require special screening. Although rapid growth and early establishment indicate good adaptation, longer term studies might also reveal that these characteristics are related to future thatch problems. The need for long-term studies is not unusual in a perennial crop, but evaluation of the ornamental value of turf is difficult. The large number of selection criteria for new turf varieties require simplification.

The approach suggested to achieve low-energy grasses (2) was "establishment of minimal management plots for long-term adaptation studies." To date, this approach has been effective in identifying significant differences among energy-related traits (Table 2), but considerable additional experimentation is required. To substantiate the proposed energy savings it will be necessary to evaluate larger turf plantings than have been used in preliminary field trials. More representative evaluation can also be obtained by broadening the geographic range of testing environments. This, in turn, requires not only an expansion of activities in a breeding program, but a more careful assignment of priorities in order to breed and select the best plant materials in the fastest time possible.

The most thorough studies of variety research and development have been performed in field crops, and a number of statistical approaches have been suggested. LeClerg (10) suggested that "Since varieties usually interact with locations and seasons, the early phase of the selection program can be more efficient by sowing materials in one replicate per location and in as many locations as resources will permit." This is presently being considered in the Florida turfgrass breeding program. It is expected that although genotype comparisons over broad regions of Florida will appear to provide lower heritabilities and larger error variances, the net result will be a more useful prediction of energy costs and utility in the landscape.

There is at present no one option in breeding low-energy grasses, but a restricted number of goals for various species. Bahiagrass has an excellent potential for development and release of a variety with rapid coverage ability and high competition to weeds. Such a variety should have shorter stature and lower seedhead numbers than presently available types. It should also have improved density and darker green color, making it more acceptable to consumers wishing a lower energy landscape than obtainable from St. Augustinegrass. Priority should be placed on developing a lower maintenance St. Augustinegrass, similar to 'Floratam,' but with better color and finer texture and a better root system in order to withstand drought. At the same time, a St. Augustinegrass variety with improved appearance and rapid growth rate, but at an equal or higher maintenance cost, might serve as an alternative to bermudagrass for some sports areas. In the case of bermudagrass, lower maintenance types are already available that could probably be grown on fairways with lower inputs of fertilizer and pesticides. For zoysiagrass there is a strong potential for developing strains that would fill the place of higher maintenance bermudagrasses and for extension to high quality miniature landscapes. Finally, as for centipedegrass, there is a great need for more genetic diversity (2) before significant improvements can be made through

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Table 2. Low-energy traits recognized in warm season turfgrasses, ARC-Fort Lauderdale, 1976-79.

Species	Trait	Rationale	Experimental basis
Bahiagrass	Fewer seedheads	Permits less frequent mowing	Replicated field trials
	Faster coverage	Prevents weed encroachment	Replicated field trials
	Shorter stature	Improves utility at a comparable energy input	Replicated field trials
St. Augustinegrass	Improved color and density	Improves acceptability to homeowners	Contemplated for evaluation
	Faster coverage	Prevents weed encroachment	Replicated field trials
	Tolerance to fertility stress	Permits less frequent fertilization	Hydroponic greenhouse expt.
	Gray leafspot resistance	Improves utility at the same energy input	Field and greenhouse comparisons
Bermudagrass	Survival under low maintenance	Permits less frequent mowing, fertilization and pesticide use	Replicated field trials
Zoysiagrass	Faster coverage	Cuts energy costs in production	Replicated field trials

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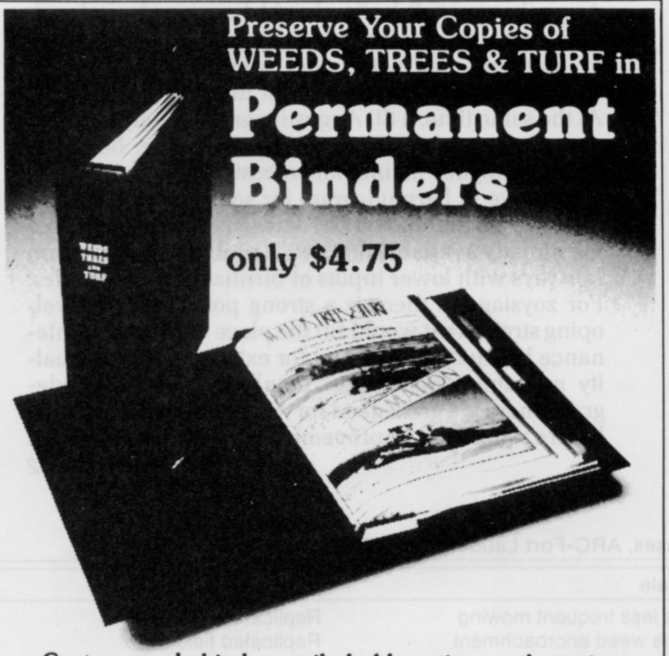
breeding. In this species, a much greater need exists to develop sound management information, especially about the role of soil pH in susceptibility to disease and long term persistence.

Conclusions

Turf is likely to remain a dominant part of the Florida landscape, and to be a continuing drain in energy expenditures. Sizeable savings of energy may be obtained through the recommendation of lower maintenance species and the extension of available irrigation technology to turf managers. Examples of savings in energy through irrigation include the use of fertigation to provide more evenly available nitrogen, and moisture sensing devices to control water application according to plant requirements. Additional consideration should be given to making better economic use of turf, for example, the use of turfgrass clippings as a protein source for animal feeds (15), and the use of turf areas as a place to recycle urban wastes. Similarly, good turf provides erosion control, groundwater replenishment, and possibly reduced heat load in and around buildings. Improvements in the utility of grasses can be made through breeding, and preliminary field trials suggest that lower energy grasses can be developed. For example, in the case of bahiagrass mowing expenses should be reduced through genetically controlling seedhead production. In addition, improvements in the visual attractiveness of bahiagrass could be of great benefit, by permitting the extension of this low maintenance species to more areas of the urban landscape. Maintenance of established landscapes, although producing no exchangeable economic product (no "cashgate" value) is valued highly in Florida for aesthetic and recreational purposes. Adjusting the 1974 turf maintenance costs (7) for inflation would yield a 1979 expenditure in Florida in excess of $600 million. A wise management of turf is, in our opinion, critical in the proper use and conservation of water, energy, and other precious resources. **WTT**



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