

Seed industry makes noise as buyouts, science merge



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The turfgrass seed industry has carved a new profile for itself as it embarks in directions that would have been considered impossible 20 years ago.

Those developments are taking place in the business and scientific aspects of seed, and they will change the way turfgrass is bred, grown, maintained and marketed.

Here's a look at some of what we heard during our visit to seed country in mid-June.

The giant that is Agri Bio Tech keeps on growing. But once it buys all the companies it can,

what's next? ABT was not represented during the Oregon field days, which is unfortunate; but suffice it to say, the company is going to be closely watched by other industry players who have said "no" to ABT's offer to buy, and those who would love to become part of the ABT family.

ABT's goal: acquire the rights to as many of the best varieties as possible, then get licensing for gene enhancement from Monsanto or Scotts. Can the company begin to make a return on its considerable investment? At least two major seed company reps say it's impossible; others say they have time to play with before showing big returns. CEO Johnny Thomas reports that the company's "platform is exceptionally strong and it appears we will achieve all the goals we had set for December 31, 2000 by December 31, 1998 - two years ahead of schedule."

ABT wants to build a base of biotechnology patents and then apply those gene characteristics to its acquired turf seed varieties.

Other scientific advancements continue, such as endophyte enhancement in turfgrass, and the ability to make turfgrass herbicide resistant. Jacklin's Sui Chang Sun is doing lots of endophyte work, and Turf-Seed, Inc./Pure Seed Testing, and

O.M. Scotts, have made great strides in developing herbicide-resistant turfgrass.

The big question to ask with this kind of genetic manipulation, however, is: will the enhancement be passed on to the progeny of the improved variety?

Fine Lawn Research is excited about the prospects for *Poa supina*, a shade- and wear-tolerant species that's good for athletic turf and tee boxes, with a lightning fast, four- to five-day germination time. Some researchers have ignored this species, due to its lighter color and aggressive growth habit, but *Poa supina* has held up nicely in tests at Michigan State University, where it's survived on 5 percent sunlight, say Dennis Combs and David Lundell of Fine Lawn. And if Trey Rogers at MSU likes it, that says a lot.

(And, how often have you heard a golfer complain about the color of the tee box?)

At press time, Fine Lawn was on the way to becoming an ABT acquisition. Fine Lawn is also doing more research into seeded zoysiagrass as an alternative to ryegrass in hot, humid climates. It's also more cold tolerant.

The seed harvest generally looks good, say people we spoke with, maybe too good. With help from lower wheat prices and fewer renovations due to a mild winter, this year has the largest amount of perennial ryegrass acreage in the history of the industry, which causes some to cast doubt on the industry's ability to continue to withstand overproduction from one year to the next. There's also lots of low quality offshore seed coming in to the US at much lower prices from New Zealand and Australia, and the ban on open field burning is expected to soon catch up with the quality of seed and the yields per acre.

See our report on page 26 for more. **LM**

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