

No reason to turn back now

The genie is out of the bottle and if we use her wisely we'll discover that she'll do wonderful things for us. Her name is biotechnology and she's tantalized us with small proofs that she can help feed the hungry and cure many of our illnesses.

This has led us to investigate what else she can do for us, including developing grasses to better control erosion along our highways, beautify our lawns and reduce the amount of chemicals and water needed to keep the turf on our golf courses green and healthy.

Most of us are willing to give biotechnology a chance to work its magic, but only after we're sure that we can direct it.

Some people, however, don't think that it's possible to control this genie. They fear that engineering the genetic material of living organisms is inviting catastrophe. Others maintain that this technology isn't needed. Some of these people, acting upon these beliefs, commit foolish, destructive acts.

A senseless act

On the evening of June 4, a group calling itself the Anarchist Golfing Association (AGA) traveled a dark, back-country road to the Pure-Seed Testing turfgrass research facility near the farming community of Canby, OR. These people — it's not known how many — entered two greenhouses there and destroyed research on genetically modified creeping bentgrass along with collections of traditionally bred grasses. They also stomped and pulled turfgrasses from research plots outside of the greenhouses. These selections were being evaluated for their resistance to disease or their ability to grow using saline irrigation.

The AGA left other reminders of their attack, including slogans on the walls of the green houses and golf balls with symbols drawn upon them. The vandalism to the turfgrass plants caused the most distress to Pure-Seed Research though. The process of developing improved varieties requires incredible effort.

The raid's irony

What the AGA didn't know (or didn't want to know) when it trashed the seed company was that the research that it damaged was directed at developing turf varieties that require fewer pesticides, less water and grasses that can prosper on saline and waste water.

While the company was, in fact, working on genetically modified bentgrasses, that research was reportedly assessing the suitability and safeguards needed to grow these modified grasses in eastern Oregon. Pure-Seed Research uses traditional selection and breeding methods to develop its varieties.

What effect will the midnight raid have on the grass seed industry? Probably not a lot.

Plant breeders will continue to develop improved grasses through traditional means *and* through genetic manipulation.

The genie of biotechnology has awesome powers to serve us. We just have to make sure we know how to guide her.

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That genie of biotechnology is out of the bottle, and we can't put her back in. But we can guide her and make her work for us.

