

# CHALKBOARD

## TIPS FROM THE PROS

### ADVANCES IN TURF VARIETIES EVIDENT AT OREGON FIELD DAY

Ten years ago selecting the best turf seed for a particular site was relatively simple. The local seed supplier would have a choice of perhaps four Kentucky bluegrasses, two perennial ryegrasses, one annual ryegrass, one creeping red fescue, one chewing fescue, either K-31 or Alta tall fescue and Penn-cross or Highland bentgrass. Landscape architects rarely attempted to specify certain varieties of turfgrasses believing there wasn't significant difference between them. So, basically you went by the price and the supplier's recommendation.

Few turf managers realized the potential for improving turfgrass performance ten years ago, nor were they aware of breeding work underway by a handful of seed companies to develop and market the seed of better turfgrasses. The management of these seed companies had begun to realize the value of research data being produced at universities such as Rutgers and Pennsylvania State University. They started to hire graduate turf breeders from these universities to identify turfgrass varieties that outperformed the others and which produced seed in the Oregon fields most profusely. It was beginning to pay turf companies to improve turfgrasses and to expand the number of choices turf managers had when choosing seed for a site.

Today, it's hard for a seed supplier to pick a reasonable number of seed varieties to offer his customers because there are so many. There is a limit to the inventory a supplier can carry. About the only way a sports turf manager can see for himself what all the different varieties look like is to attend the summer field days held at state universities and seed companies during the summer. Chances are, once you see how your old variety stacks up against the newer ones, you'll want to switch.

One of the largest of these field days is held by Turf Seed Inc. in Hubbard, OR, every June. In five years, the company's Bill Meyer has planted thousands of different varieties of turfgrass on 66 acres of Willamette Valley farmland and maintained them to industry standards. Meyer keeps in touch with fellow breeders across the country to learn of regional variances in turf performance. He shares all this information with nearly 500 turf managers who venture from across the country to his research farm.

Meyer and other breeders have had a great deal of success in developing improved perennial ryegrasses and turf-type tall fescues. The number of new, significantly-improved varieties is rising at a rate con-



Bill Meyer explains crossing of selected turf varieties to achieve improved varieties.

siderably faster than in the past making production and marketing of individual varieties difficult. To solve this problem, seed growers are offering blends of three improved varieties to give them flexibility. The individual varieties in these blends can vary based on the availability of seed. This way the company can market the seed by the name of the blend and can avoid promoting individual components. The three varieties also provide the customer with three chances at disease resistance and wear resistance instead of one.

Nothing can beat the single-week germination period of perennial ryegrasses. By improving the color, disease resistance, mowability and wear tolerance of perennial ryegrasses, breeders are giving Kentucky bluegrass a run for its money in the northern U.S. Winter overseeding of dormant warm-season turfgrasses with perennial ryegrass continues to expand as soccer and other winter sports take their toll on dormant turf. Overseeding has become much more than a factor of appearance during the winter.

New turf-type tall fescues are quickly replacing K-31 and Alta on sports fields, parks and roughs. The finer blades and darker green color of these fescues, combined with surprising shade and wear tolerance, make renovating older tall fescue sites with the new varieties wise. Dwarf turf-type tall fescues will enter the market soon to give the turf the additional benefit of reduced mowing frequency. Some breeders, however, question the wisdom of using dwarf tall fescues on heavily-used sports fields, but they praise it for low-maintenance utility turf areas.

Ryegrasses and tall fescues, despite all their strengths, are bunch grasses. Only Kentucky bluegrass and most warm-season grasses spread to repair damaged turf without overseeding. Unfortunately, bluegrass' 28-day germination period makes it too slow for overseeding thin sports turf. However, breeders still recommend a heavy percentage of Kentucky bluegrass mixed with perennial ryegrass for establishing cool-season sports turf.

Research on low-maintenance grasses and wildflowers has increased greatly. Hard fescues, sheeps fescues, chewing fescues and creeping fescues are being developed which require barely any fertilizer at all. Wildflowers are a colorful option for low-maintenance areas of parks, schools and golf courses.

Insect resistance is another new feature of perennial ryegrasses, turf-type tall fescues and fine fescues made possible by a fungus contained in new varieties. This endophytic fungus repulses attacking aphids, bill bugs, sod webworms and chinchbugs. Growers have been able to produce seed containing the fungus. It's an extra benefit to look for when selecting a seed variety.

Turf field days are valuable events for sports turf managers today. Ask your seed supplier about field days in your area. You can see for yourself how the newer varieties can help you do a better job. Also ask him about the national turfgrass trials taking place at more than 30 different locations around the country. The type of turf seed you buy does make a difference. With the number of improved varieties on the market, field days and new information from suppliers is important.