



Turf of the Month:

CREEPING RED FESCUE

By Mike Augsdorfer

The grass referred to as creeping red fescue is actually one of three subspecies — creeping fescue (subspecies *trichophylla*), spreading fescue (subspecies *rubra*) and chewing fescue (subspecies *commutata*) — that are commonly lumped together by turf specialists as fine fescues (*Festuca rubra*). These three subspecies are fine-leaved cool-season grasses that are very shade-tolerant. Both creeping and spreading fescue spread by rhizomes, although the creeping subspecies tends to form a somewhat denser sod.

Creeping red fescue is intolerant of wet conditions, but as long as the soil is well-drained, creeping red fescue should thrive. It requires minimal fertilization: less than two pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year. Mowing height should be between 1 1/2 and 2 1/2 inches.

According to Craig Edminster, research director for International Seeds, Inc., of Halsey, OR, fine fescues such as creeping red are rarely used on athletic turf as a monoculture. “You see them as minor components in lawn mixtures, but not so much in sports turf,” he explains. Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass are among the types of grasses that can be blended with creeping red. Blends including creeping red fescue are sometimes used to establish athletic turf but are more common for home lawns or golf course roughs. “Fine fescues are not typically components in a traffic-ridden sports field,” says Edminster, “however, where you have shading and shallow soil situations, fine fescue can be a minor component, mostly in the northern temperate regions.”

International Seeds markets a number of different fine fescue varieties, including Marker Slender Creeping Red Fescue and Cindy, a strong creeping red fescue. “Fine fescues have great utility, but they wouldn’t be my first choice for a sports field,” notes Edminster.

Only a handful of sports field developers use creeping red fescue to establish new athletic fields. Mike Hebrard, president of Athletic Field Design in Portland, OR, is among them. “Red fescue is what we call our insurance,” says Hebrard. Since creeping red fescue requires minimal maintenance, it will survive if other grasses in the mixture are not maintained. “For new fields I like to go 15- to 20-percent creeping red fescue,” he admits.

Most turfgrass experts, however, contend that creeping red fescue should not be used on athletic fields for a variety of reasons. Art Wick, director of research and development for LESCO, Inc., of Rocky River, OH, does not see much use for creeping red fescue in sports-turf applications. “I’m sure that in some less-well-managed areas, it finds its way into a mixture,” he admits. “I don’t know of any agronomist who would recommend it for sports turf.” Wick says creeping red fescue is oriented to low-maintenance situations and does not recover well from mechanical damage.

Poor Wear Tolerance

Ted Mercer, general manager of Evergreen Sports Turf in Troy, OH, says poor wear tolerance is a major problem with creeping red fescue. “We really don’t recommend creeping red because it doesn’t hold up to stress well,” says Mercer. He notes that creeping red fescue simply does not hold up well to the high temperatures in southern Ohio during June, July and August. “We almost consider it a weed here,” he adds.

Skip Lynch, technical agronomist for Seed Research of Oregon in Corvallis, OR, agrees. “It’s not a particularly hardy grass for traffic,” he explains. “The problem with using creeping red fescue in sports turf occurs when you start putting wear on it. It just doesn’t recover well enough.”

Dr. Peter J. Landschoot, turfgrass extension specialist at Penn State University, has performed variety evaluations on creeping red fescue and says it tends to be a bit slippery, especially for flat-soled shoes. “It just doesn’t persist under normal use,” he explains. “We don’t feel it has the wear tolerance to handle the traffic it would get on sports fields.” Instead, Landschoot recommends a bluegrass/ryegrass mixture for most cool-season sports-turf applications.

Dave Nelson, administrator for the Oregon Fine Fescue Commission, also cites poor wear tolerance as the main reason why creeping red fescue is not used on athletic fields. “Small amounts of fine fescue are good for sports fields to tie together the turf and provide additional characteristics, such as drought resistance,” he relates.

Eric Nelson, director of turfgrass research for Medalist America of Albany, OR, says he has heard of creeping red fescue being used between the hash mark and sideline on football fields. “I think that in a mixture with blue and rye it has some potential,” he relates.

Almost Like a Weed

Jim Puhalla of Sportscape International in Boardman, OH, stays away from creeping red fescue entirely. “It creates too dense of a turf,” he says. Puhalla says creeping red fescue becomes unmanageable once a thatch layer develops. “I can’t say anything good about creeping red fescue,” he concludes. “It’s almost like a weed.”

June Boston, president of Boston Company Athletic Fields in South Berwick, ME, says that while some turf managers like to have a little fescue in their seed mix, she also prefers to avoid creeping red. “I don’t recommend it,” she admits. “It’s too clumpy.”

Roy Zehren, president of Natural Athletic Turf, Inc., in Mequon, WI, says he has used creeping red fescue for 40

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Creeping Red Fescue

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years in regular lawn mixes because it is a good low-maintenance turf. "We definitely keep all fescues out of athletic turf fields," he notes. Zehren says he can grow Kentucky bluegrass so vigorously that he simply doesn't use any of the fes-



Creeping red (left) and chewings fescue (right) both show signs of stress under drought conditions, but the creeping red fescue retains more green color. Photo courtesy: International Seeds, Inc.



Creeping red fescue is not used for most sports-turf applications but can be useful in low-traffic, low-maintenance conditions. Photo courtesy: Larry Kassell/Oregon Fine Fescue Commission.

cues in sports-turf applications. "I use it once in a while in golf roughs," he admits.

Turf specialists and facility managers both seem to agree that creeping red fescue is not an ideal athletic turf, primarily because it does not tolerate heavy traffic. However, creeping red fescue can be a useful tool for sports-turf managers if it is used carefully in selected applications. The best use for creeping

red fescue would be in shaded areas under low-traffic and low-maintenance conditions — perhaps under permanent bleacher seats or in a partially enclosed bullpen area that tends to be shaded most of the time. While creeping red fescue is a desirable turfgrass for low-maintenance situations such as home lawns, it is more of a liability than an asset in sports-turf applications. □

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