

Movin' up I-95

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This month rather than answer a specific question, I want to address a turf situation I am experiencing that many of you have also experienced. A recent job change finds me relocated from one part of the country to another, and I'm about to be introduced to a whole new "turf world." How many of you have moved to a totally new situation—new stadium, new grass, new equipment, new everything? I use the word new loosely; different may be a better adjective.

Having spent more than 11 years in Florida, I have grown pretty accustomed to year-round maintenance of bermudagrass athletic fields. Of course in most of Florida, a manager can overseed if they want the look of a cool-season grass field, but that was generally not necessary for the function of the field. In most years the fields would stay green except for a few weeks of semi-dormancy. I have mowed bermudagrass the first week of a New Year in shorts more often than I have shoveled snow. Actually, I have never seen snow in Florida, so maybe that is not a good analogy.

I have begun to survey the athletic fields around my new home in North Carolina and I'm finding that there are some bermudagrass fields, but it seems that tall fescue is also popular. In fact, one of my colleagues tells me that tall fescue is the number one grass sold in North Carolina. A quick scan of the sod farm ads in the yellow pages seems to confirm that statement.

Walking down the aisle of a local "big box" home improvement store also introduced me to Kentucky bluegrass seed and mixtures of Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue seed. At these same stores, bermudagrass seed is available in one cultivar and occupies the top shelves in small, 1-pound bags. There are at least a dozen tall fescue cultivars available in bags, boxes, and buckets of all sizes. I did some studies in graduate school with a few tall fescue cultivars, but I could only find one of those grasses on the shelves. I made a mental note to begin learning more tall fescue cultivars and their characteristics. Obviously, tall fescue cultivars do not have the staying power of Tifway bermudagrass.

Ever used the term "native soil"? It is a common term used to describe the most common soil type of a region. I have to recalibrate my terminology to fit this new region. In Florida, native soil meant sand. In the Piedmont region of North Carolina it is more like clay mixed with small to medium sized rocks. It is why there are so few

brick houses in Florida and so many in North Carolina. These heavy soils do not drain very fast but I have realized some advantages. I noticed that after a morning rain the turf does not begin to wilt in the afternoon from drought stress, as it seemed to do on some of those Florida sugar sands. Also, these soils retain nutrients much better with their higher cation exchange capacity (CEC). I suppose a turf manager in this area may spend his extra money on replacing core aeration tines rather than irrigation supplies and fertilizer.

Another significant difference that I noted in the first few weeks is the climate. Everyone says this area has all four seasons. Florida also had four seasons—fall, early summer, mid-summer, and late summer. Most people in Gainesville feel there are only three seasons, basketball season, summer, and football season. Actually basketball season was a new experience in 2006, greatly increasing the city's enjoyment during March Madness. Gainesville residents hope it returns in 2007 so that the summer climate is more bearable while waiting for football season.

I have poked fun at a few obvious differences but in reality with my change in work and research environments, almost everything has changed. Colleagues, staff, and industry expectations are all different to some degree. It is human nature to compare familiarity from the past to new encounters in the present because using experiences is how we build our knowledge base. I feel that changing jobs provides a new perspective that can help energize us not only in our work environment but also our life environment. Change always brings about new opportunities.

I experienced this just last weekend. I was standing at a gas pump putting gas in a can for my lawn mower. A gentleman about fifteen feet away was putting diesel fuel in a large can when he looked over at me and said, "You ever built a baseball field?" At first I thought I must have a turf-grass shirt on or something. That is just not a normal question to ask a total stranger. But I do not think my bike company shirt gave me away. This guy was just making conversation as he was getting ready to fire up a rented bulldozer to build a baseball field in his back yard. He was so excited he just wanted to mention what he was doing to anyone that would listen. His innocent remark resulted in an engaging thirty-minute conversation on slope, clay, grass, and chalk. One never knows when or where the next opportunity to learn or to teach will come from.

I used to get a lot of questions from Florida that I would use in this column. And while I hope to still get a lot of location-specific questions from managers working in the Deep South, I look forward to getting more transition zone questions. Either way thanks for sending the e-mails. ■

