

Shopping for a new grass?

We are beginning to plan for field renovations, what grass should we use on this field?

From the audience during a Warm-Season Forum at the STMA meeting in San Jose.

The panel members for this session, Ron Hostick, Chris Calcaterra, Beth Guertal, and I, provided the audience comments related to selecting a grass. Our responses were largely a reflection of our research and practical experiences with various grasses. What follows here is a reflection of my thoughts on the decision-making process of “shopping for a new grass.”

As I considered the answer to this question, I was struck by how the process of making this decision has similarities to other big purchase decisions we make in our lives. Recently, my wife and I considered replacing our family car. The car was almost 10 years old and the wear and tear that goes with high mileage was leading to increased maintenance costs. We had planned on replacing it in a year or two, but with dealers struggling to sell their inventories, we figured we may get a better deal if we replaced it sooner rather than later. So being a savvy consumer, I began my research. I visited car dealerships, picked up car specifications on various models, and started making comparisons. Metaphorically, this is the same as a field manager evaluating research data from state universities and the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (www.NTEP.org).

I quickly found that some cars have clear advantages over others—greater horsepower, more trunk capacity, better sound systems, longer warranties, more color choices, etc. Comparisons of specifications one at a time were simple, but once they were all considered together it became very confusing as to what was “the best.”

Likewise, research data indicates that some grasses have greater cold tolerance, more shade tolerance, faster recovery from injury, more resistant to disease, darker color, etc when compared to others. Like selecting a car, these traits all sound great. And if they were all attributed to one grass, then the selection process would be quick and easy. Research data is very helpful to isolate grasses with necessary traits, but may not always result in one grass being the clear favorite.

I narrowed down the choice to three or four models and then thought I make a final selection by reading some online reviews. I found about a dozen websites that review cars; each with opinions from consumers and a few with comments from “experts.” I read about other people’s experiences as I reviewed pages of testimonials and road tests. This is similar to your asking other field

managers about their experiences managing specific grasses. You want to hear the good and not so good comments about the grasses from people that you consider peers. It is also helpful to get as much information as possible from your region. Local experience is helpful because you get an idea how the grass may respond under similar environmental conditions.

Now my list for potential cars was down to just a few, so it was time to visit showrooms and kick some tires. Since I wanted a good deal, I only looked at 2008 models. One model of interest was already sold out, narrowing my selection further. Some dealers offered to ship a car into the area, but they were less willing to cut the price of the car. Grass selection and availability may also work the same way. One has to check what is available at nearby sod farms; otherwise the grass may have to be shipped in from a more distant location. Some sod farms may give you a break with shipping, but with higher fuel cost, that expense may be passed on to the consumer.

Well, in the end I purchased a new car. Driving home from the dealership, I could not help but to chuckle at the decision. I was driving a car that was 9 years younger than the old car, but it was the exact same model and color as the previous one I owned. The brand familiarity, previous positive experiences, and personal preferences led us (someone else always shares in making the big decisions) back to the same model and color.

Should you purchase the same grass? Many people have done so. Tifway (419) bermudagrass was released in 1960. Almost 50 years later it is still an often-selected grass for use on athletic fields. Sure there are grasses on the market with better cold tolerance, salt tolerance, wear tolerance, darker green color, etc. Your specific situation may lead you to select a grass with a significant single characteristic advantage over Tifway. In addition, your past experiences with your current grass may suggest that you need a change. Certainly if my experience with my older car was bad, I would not even have considered replacing it with the same model. You will have to weigh the options when deciding on your next grass purchase.

I apologize for not giving you a specific answer, but I think this issue is important for you to research. The selection process is very important. Ask the extension specialist in your state for data, speak with other sports turf managers, and reflect on your own experiences. Visit fields and sod farms to look at old and new grass bermudagrass cultivars. And you may want to consider grasses other than bermudagrass. Cultivars of seashore paspalum and zoysiagrass have also been successfully used for athletic fields. Make your selection carefully because grass is not for a lifetime, but it is awfully hard to trade in. ■

Q&A



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Questions?

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