

# The Perfect Grass

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*Native grasses used in the rough, such as common broomsedge, reduce the need for pesticides and fertilizers.*

**T**HE STANDARD CLUB in Duluth, Georgia, is a golf course so heavenly it would have intimidated me except for one thing: common broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*). If there is anything that is familiar and comfortable to the golfers in the South, it's the tawny spikelets of the plant that old-timers say God put here to hold the earth together where nothing else grows.

Common broomsedge is the most visible of our many native grasses. It appears quickly in areas that are unmowed, unfertilized, and uncultivated, environmental factors that favor its establishment and cultivation. Mark Hoban, the certified golf course superintendent who established the broomsedge in many areas of the primary rough, said, "Broomsedge is my favorite plant. It relieves the monotony of the bermudagrass fairways and rough with its attractive seedheads."

Broomsedge is a perennial warm-season bunchgrass that occurs widely throughout the United States. The three-foot-tall flowering stalks are the dominant feature, changing color during the season. Flowering stalks are a light tan color in spring, gray in the summer, orange in the fall, with a tan winter

wheat look in the winter. With increasing restrictions being placed on fertilizer and water usage for recreational turf, the need to use native grasses that require lower maintenance has become of interest to the entire turf industry.

Mark's intent with the common broomsedge was to enhance the course design and replace the tall fescue that had become sites where golfers believed the *original mulligan* was invented. The tall fescue areas got so tall that nobody found stray golf balls. So Mark cut the fescue down, plowed and prepared the areas, and planted common broomsedge in late February. Before seeding, Mark stopped all mowing, fertilization, and pesticide applications to these sites. Broomsedge won't tolerate an alkaline soil, so he also made sure the soil was very acidic. Broomsedge is a perfect grass in that the less you do, the more perfect it will become. An annual July mowing helps to improve grass density and eliminates any undesirable woody growth.

Since the availability of broomsedge seed is limited and expensive, Mark harvested his seeds from the rights-of-ways of highways.

He also obtained seed from an abandoned pasture that was full of broomsedge. The fluffy seed sheaths were removed with gas-powered hedge clippers, and the cuttings were stored in old seed sacks. Planting was easy, as the seed was shaken by hand from the spikelets over the former tall fescue areas. Mark just let the seed blow over the prepared site.

Mark also was just as successful in hydro-seeding a few sites. Vegetative plantings will also work anytime of the year. If seeding, do it before the broomsedge greens up in the spring.

"You can find your golf ball in the broomsedge and play it," a happy Hoban says. Mark now has approximately five acres established and plans more in the future.

It may take a couple of years before the broomsedge comes into its own, and as Mark pointed out, "Like most young things, it has awkward stages. It takes between one and three years to get the broomsedge started from seed." Mark promises that these stages will pass and urges patience. The result will be "lovely, educational, and totally Georgian."