

Introducing an Improved Native: '609' Buffalograss

by **BARBARA BAUER**
Crenshaw & Doguet Turfgrass,
Austin, Texas

BEN CRENSHAW, professional golfer and avid supporter of the USGA Green Section research program, and David Doguet, a 20-year veteran turfgrass producer and current member of the American Sod Producers Association board of directors, have joined forces to propagate and market a new grass from one of the USGA breeding projects — '609' buffalograss. While planning one of his golf course projects, Crenshaw discussed with Doguet the potential use of buffalograss (*Buchloe dactyloides*) to give the appearance of a Scottish links style golf course. These discussions led to the formation of Crenshaw & Doguet Turfgrass, Inc., in early 1990.

The buffalograss research program is one of several USGA breeding projects initially funded in the mid-1980s. The overall objective of these projects was a 50-percent reduction in water use and maintenance costs associated with golf course turf. As environmental consciousness has increased in the 1990s, these objectives have proven to be prophetic. The first product of Crenshaw & Doguet Turfgrass was 'Prairie' buffalograss, developed by Drs. Milton Engelke and Virginia Lehman of Texas A&M University. The newest product, '609' buffalograss, was developed by Dr. Terry Riordan and the Turfgrass Science Team at the University of Nebraska, and became available to the marketplace in September 1991.

'609' buffalograss is one of the first turf-type buffalograsses developed for golf and lawn use. Prior to the release of 'Prairie' and '609,' all buffalograsses in use were common types from the native prairie or types developed for forage to feed livestock. '609' buffalograss has a fine texture, excellent



One method used to plant buffalograss nurseries is a sod plugging. Buffalograss sod is broken in 3- to 4-inch pieces and pressed into the sod with a roller.

genetic color, a low growth habit, and the ability to stay green later into the fall than most other warm-season grasses. It is very drought tolerant and is resistant to most insects and diseases in its area of adaptation. '609' has met the objectives of the USGA project by reducing water and chemical inputs by at least 50 percent, and up to 75 percent compared to other turf species. Its low growth habit requires less mowing in the rough than the bermudagrasses or Kentucky bluegrass currently used. This new variety is a vegetative, female plant with no pollen production.

Buffalograss is native throughout the central portion of the United States, from Mexico into Canada. Improved cultivars are doing well across the central and southern United States, including some coastal regions. California, with its well-publicized drought, could be a prime target for '609.' The pleasant green color keeps up with Californians' expectations for grass, but without the high maintenance and water consumption required by other turfgrasses. Its usefulness in the more humid, higher rainfall areas of the country is unclear, and will require further study.

In test plots at Lincoln, Nebraska, '609' does not go dormant until mid-October, approximately one month after other warm-season grasses. At the Crenshaw & Doguet Turfgrass farm near Austin, Texas, '609' held its color late in the fall (mid-December) and was completely green by mid-February, well before bermudagrass. Certain parts of the country may find '609' will not go dormant at all. In the transition zone, the rapid spreading characteristics of '609' could make it a desirable alternative to slower growing zoysiagrass. Southern states with good soil condi-

tions and adequate moisture should find that plugs of '609' planted on 12" to 18" centers establish completely within three to six months.

In the past, common buffalograsses were used on fairways and roughs of low-maintenance golf courses in the Great Plains. The new turf-type buffalograsses will be used on roughs, slopes, and bunker faces. The blue-green color provides an effective contrast to other grasses presently used on golf courses.

There is a definite penalty when hitting a golf ball from a buffalograss rough, but it is less than that experienced with a similar lie in common or '419' bermudagrass. In many parts of the country the primary use for '609' on golf courses will be in the rough. However, it is being evaluated at a $\frac{3}{8}$ " mowing height for fairways, especially in areas where water availability is critical.

'609' will be commercially available throughout the South in the spring of 1992. In addition to approximately 100 acres in Texas, it is being produced in Arizona, California, Oklahoma, and Florida. As dictated by the license agreement, royalty payments will be returned to the USGA and the University of Nebraska to fund further research in buffalograss improvement.

'609' is a new and exciting option for golf course architects and superintendents. Lower water consumption, reduced chemical needs, and generally low maintenance requirements make '609' an alternative to the more traditional golf course grasses. A more detailed background of the USGA buffalograss project can be found in the January/February 1991 issue of the USGA GREEN SECTION RECORD.