

SENSIBLE CHOICES

Making better choices of new bentgrass varieties.

by PAUL VERMEULEN

UNTIL THE EARLY 1990s, "Penncross" was the leading choice for seeding new greens in all but the bermudagrass regions. The choice was an easy one in those days, because there were no other varieties of equal quality. Today, there are 28 bentgrass varieties under review in the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP), and the list grows longer each year.

How can someone evaluate his own circumstances and make a sensible choice when there are so many new varieties to choose from? Complicating matters further is the burgeoning desire to improve long-term stand performance by blending two or more varieties. This practice is based on the survival-of-the-fittest premise and is well established in the Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass markets.

Some people rely on testimonials from fellow turf managers or information published in popular trade journals to make varietal choices. Others remain loyal to their favorite breeder and plant only varieties developed by that individual. Although these selection methods can be used successfully in some cases, their reliance on subjective information is a cause for concern.

Let's evaluate the reliability of testimonials from fellow turf managers. This approach to selecting a variety simply tells you that someone else is satisfied with the choice they have made. But because a fellow turf manager is satisfied with a particular variety does not mean it is the best choice for your course.

Likewise, shopping for a creeping bentgrass variety from a single breeder can have serious drawbacks. The performance of a variety at a breeder's home base may or may not have a bearing on how well it will perform in another location under different climatic conditions or management practices. If a breeder uses germplasm without genetic tolerance to a specific pathogen or environmental extreme that is common in your region, their varieties may not perform as well as others that are available.

When selecting two or more varieties for a blend, it is important to consider several factors. Simply choosing something old, something new, something heat tolerant and something disease resistant based only on the survival-of-the-fittest premise is somewhat ludicrous. The best candidates for blending are those with similar NTEP rankings for overall quality, color, texture, spring greenup, and spring, summer, and fall

density. If the components of a blend are not physically similar, their separation over time will erode the visual quality of a putting green. If compatible, blends should also include varieties that have disease resistance or stress tolerances that are pertinent to the course's location and environmental circumstances.

The most sensible method of choosing between varieties or blends is one that few courses employ because of either cost or inconvenience. Given the luxury of time, the performance characteristics for each variety/blend should be reviewed in on-site evaluation plots maintained using standard maintenance practices. An ideal location for the plots, albeit a possible inconvenience to a few players, is on the practice putting green. In this location the plots can be cared for using maintenance practices similar to those employed on the course, and the plots can be subjected to the wear and tear of pedestrian traffic. Also, to ensure that the evaluation is not tainted by the effects of traffic patterns, partial shading, inconsistent soil type, etc., the plots should be replicated and spaced randomly throughout the putting surface. The USGA, GCSAA, and NTEP will be establishing bentgrass trials on golf course practice greens at 15 locations throughout the country in 1997.

Choosing the best variety or blend for greens located in all corners of the globe requires sorting through the growing list of choices using sensible selection criteria and methods. If your course has time to plan ahead, there is no excuse for not evaluating potential varieties/blends using the establishment of evaluation plots located on the practice green or nursery.

One information source to ease the daunting task of selecting a variety for a new putting green can be found at on-site evaluation plots maintained with standard maintenance practices.



PAUL VERMEULEN is an agronomist in the USGA Green Section's Mid-Continent Region. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the USGA Green Section.