

# JOE VARGAS

Green Section Award — February 2007



There have been very few turfgrass experts who have made the world their laboratory, and Dr. Joseph M. Vargas is one of them. Starting his journey in Fall River, Massachusetts, as a worker on the maintenance staff at the Fall River C.C., and taking undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Rhode Island, Oklahoma State, and the University of Minnesota, Dr. Joe was just beginning a career that would take him around the world many times.

Vargas joined the faculty at Michigan State University in 1968 and for nearly 40 years has excelled as a turfgrass extension specialist, teacher, and researcher, touching the lives and careers of his students, golf course superintendents, and other turfgrass practitioners, and colleagues in academia. But it was his *accomplishments* that brought Dr. Joe the recognition he richly deserves and the invitations he receives to speak to audiences in every corner of the world. For the record, he has published three books, written more than 300 articles on turfgrass diseases, and has given more than 1,000 presentations in his career thus far. He has traveled to every corner of the globe, including Australia, Argentina, China, Europe, England, Mexico, New Zealand, Japan, South Africa, and other countries. In fact, Joe has been instrumental in establishing a joint turf educational program between Michigan State University and four universities in China.

Always searching for an overlooked path that can lead to a successful conclusion, Vargas has resolved problems that have stumped many other experts. In the mid-1970s, for example, he recognized that the decline of *Poa annua* fairways during the summer was caused not by heat stress, but rather by various disease organisms and other factors. This concept was greeted with skepticism from many academics and practitioners until Dr. Joe demonstrated that the regular use of fungicides could allow *Poa annua* fairways to

survive the dog days of summer in good condition. Proper management of *Poa annua* has been a theme of his throughout his career.

Another coup of Dr. Joe's was his discovery of the first known bacterial disease that at the time in the late 1970s was causing a severe decline in Toronto creeping bentgrass on many golf courses in the Midwest. Because of the difficulty and cost in controlling this disease with antibiotics, Toronto creeping bentgrass was ultimately replaced with other cultivars.

In the late 1970s, many courses across the country experienced what was referred to as *black layer* in their greens, a situation that could cause the turf to thin out or die. It was caused in part by poor drainage or overwatering, but why the profile turned black was not at all understood. Dr. Vargas investigated this phenomenon and discovered that high levels of sulfur caused the black color and exacerbated the decline in the turf. As it turned out, many courses were applying sulfur to their greens turf in hopes of

suppressing *Poa annua* and encouraging bentgrass. When golf course superintendents reduced or eliminated sulfur from their maintenance programs, the black layer gradually disappeared.

In addition to his many accomplishments, Dr. Joe is a great speaker. With his deep voice, self-confident nature, and persuasive tell-it-like-it-is presentation, it's no wonder that audiences call him back many times over to speak. In fact, he has been known to perform as Elvis at turf conferences and meetings. It endeared him to his audiences, who clearly gave special attention to "The King." Other speakers on the program indeed had a very tough act to follow!

Over a period of four decades, Joe Vargas has distinguished himself as teacher, researcher, and advisor to the turfgrass industry, and you might think he's contemplating a well-deserved retirement. But not Joe! "Why would I ever retire? This is what I enjoy doing, and there's so much more to do. We have to find better ways of managing grasses!"



Steve Smyers, a member of the USGA Executive Committee and current chairman of the USGA Green Section Award Committee and the Turfgrass Environmental Research Committee, was on hand to present the 2007 Green Section Award to Dr. Joe Vargas.