

Why Growers Take on New Varieties

Abstract

There are turf producers from everywhere looking at new varieties for their farms as market competition and environmental issues force them to find better products to energize their businesses.

ROCH GAUSSOIN, PH.D.

Extension Turfgrass Specialist
University of Nebraska at Lincoln

Dr. Gaussoin serves in the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) and helps growers in the Plains States to decide which, if any, varieties they should add to their farms.



In his local area, Dr. Gaussoin said, "each growing season we probably see a portion of our grasses that are new." He added, "On a new variety, if it's not in a certified field, they'll often overseed with the newer variety, especially one that's gotten a lot of push in the marketing because there will be a lot of people asking about it. I would say it's probably more frequently that they use a new and improved variety than they do an older variety."

Dr. Gaussoin said that he sees the introduction of new varieties as positive for the industry as a whole. "For the turfgrass industry it's tremendous," he said, "especially if the right varieties are put in the right locations because these are grasses that generally have been through extensive testing for improved stress tolerance, or improved disease tolerance. So obviously if we put a grass into the home lawn, or the sports field, or the golf course that uses lower pesticide inputs, that maybe is better at utilizing nitrogen, has a darker green color or has better wear tolerance, all of these things are positive attributes that the companies or universities breeding these grasses are trying to incorporate into them, based on client demand. By putting in a new or improved variety, ultimately the benefactor is the end user. It's nothing but positive."

GENE MAPLES

Executive Director
Turfgrass Council of North Carolina &
North Carolina Sod Producers Association

Gene Maples said that NCSPA is continually helping his members to evaluate new turfgrasses for possible incorporation into their fields and markets.

"We routinely initiate and help fund research projects at NC State that do a comprehensive range of performance evaluations on both the



warm-season grasses and the cool-season grasses," Maples said. "The studies focus on how these new grasses perform in North Carolina specifically, providing growers with localized research."

"Right now we're primarily concentrating on the new bermudagrasses and we have a research project at one of the university research stations that's several years old. Essentially we're funding the university research project right here to find out exactly what the performance differences are among some of these bermudagrasses. And we always have performance evaluations on tall fescues and the Kentucky bluegrasses. Then every year, we help disseminate the information to the members because it gives them another tool they can use in their decision-making process."

When asked why this is important, Maples said, "The decision-making process for considering new grasses is more complex than it once was. With the proliferation of proprietary grasses in the last few years, we have tried to help our growers think in a logical manner with regard to which varieties to select, because that's a very significant business decision they have to make that involves licensing fees and such."

Maples pointed out that the ability to market the grass to the consumer is also another factor in the decision-making process for growers. "What we're really dealing with here is the increased sophistication of the American consumer, their preferences for well-known, name brand products," he said. "Consumers are in a position now where they're going to be looking more favorably on what they perceive as a high quality name brand grass for their use, whether it's their home lawn, their high school football field or their golf course. That has injected a new element of marketing and consumer perception into the mix that did not used to be there."

"So the end result of that in the marketplace which the producer has to look at is, 'Am I just going to be content to grow the ordinary types of grasses that are rapidly becoming a commodity? Or am I going to try to meet consumer preference head-on and be able to offer some of the designer grasses that are presumably superior brand name grasses instead?'"

Maples pointed out that the potential success of these new grasses is what gives growers the incentive to continue looking closely at new varieties. "Everybody's trying to hit a home run," he said, "and if somebody does happen to hit a home run, you've got to be up to speed and have that grass in

Stacie Zinn
International
Marketing Director
Environmental Turf, Inc.
P.O. Box 12369
Fort Pierce, FL 34981-2369
Tel: 772/460-5575
www.environmentalturf.com
Stacie@environmentalturf.com

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your field. If all at once the golf course world or the entire sports world starts demanding TifSport bermudagrass, you better have it for that market. Or you'd better have the research-based facts on the grass you do have in order to remain competitive in that market. The trick is to pick the right grass. The real paradox is that the producer has to figure out—well in advance of consumer demand—which one is going to be that home run because it takes a while to wade through the licensing, prep your fields and have them inspected, plant them and produce a harvestable crop, all to coincide with the perceived or hoped for consumer demand."

In making the selection, there is an element of uncertainty. How does a grower decide? "There's an intangible there and the answer to that is going to vary by producer, depending upon his tolerance for risk," Maples said. "The basic answer is that the producer would have to determine the validity of all the input sources, the different grass performances including disease resistance, wear tolerance, cold tolerance; in otherwords, all of the standard performance evaluations must be considered.

"And then, at the same time they would have to determine what the marketing potential was going to be for that grass. You can have in your field the greatest grass known to man but if it isn't advertised and promoted so that the consumer knows what it is, what to ask for, and how great it is, you aren't going to sell nearly as much of it as would otherwise be the case. You've got to have the performance elements and the marketing campaign in place to let people know."

J.R. & FLOYD WIRTHLIN

American Sod Farms
Escondido, CA

In Southern California, J.R. Wirthlin and his father Floyd operate four sod farms under the company name of American Sod Farms, otherwise known as Am-Sod, Inc.

Recently, the Wirthlin's decided to take on a new turfgrass variety called SeaDwarf Seashore Paspalum, to compliment the tall fescues and bermudagrasses that have, for more than two decades, been the company's main turfgrass varieties.

J.R. Wirthlin said the decision to add SeaDwarf Seashore Paspalum as a new variety was based on market demand for more water-conservative grasses. "I know our region has got to come up with something new. We've actually had the water agencies say, 'Why can't you find a grass that uses less water?' Well, they're all comparable unless you want to use bermuda, and people don't want anything that goes dormant," he said.

Wirthlin began to investigate other options. According to Todd Lowe of the USGA Green Section and Stewart Bennett, who tracked irrigation amounts of Seashore Paspalum at his 18-hole golf course in Bokeelia, FL over a nine-year period, Seashore Paspalum used up to 50 percent less water than Bermudagrass, if managed correctly in combination with local climatic conditions. There were good indications that it generally won't go dormant in the Southern California climate.

"So I flew out to Florida to take a look at it, and brought half a roll home. I plugged some right in the middle of my TifGreen lawn, and my dad plugged some right in the middle of his bentgrass lawn. We kind of just let it rest there. I didn't commit," Wirthlin said. "And after we went through the winter, my wife was saying,

'That's what we want.' The TifGreen didn't go dormant, but it went yellow. And the SeaDwarf, we had this big round green spot right in the middle of the lawn."

Wirthlin continued, "That's when I realized that, yeah, we were onto something different. Not improved. Not upgraded. We truly have a variety that in my opinion is a revolution, not an evolution."

Wirthlin said he will have about 50 total acres of SeaDwarf Seashore Paspalum planted on two of his four farms by spring. And he expects to continue expanding with the new variety.

Growers like Wirthlin feel that the elements of uncertainty and the potential outlay before real market demand kicks in, are worth the possible rewards. In his area of the U.S., he questions whether his business could survive without bringing on new environmentally-friendly grasses. He said, "For me personally, how much risk is involved if I don't find a variety that uses less water? I have a 13-year-old son. Am I going to have the sod farm for him?" Wirthlin said. "We can't keep going on cool season grasses. So, I see it as being a greater risk not to take the risk."



Floyd (left) and J.R. Wirthlin are shown here on their Am-Sod Inc. farm in Escondido, CA

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