

Is it time to recognise the importance of ryegrass on your course?

Pressure on golf clubs to deliver courses which can meet the often-conflicting demands placed on them is leading some course managers to use ultrafine-leaf ryegrasses. Luke Hunt, product manager for Barenbrug, the UK's leading grass seed breeder and grower, explains why.

Golfers want to spend more time on course and continue playing throughout the year, footfall is increasing, and expectations are rising. These and other factors are putting pressure on those who manage the 2,000+ courses across the UK and Ireland to deliver high quality courses.

At the same time, our changing climate is bringing more extremes of weather, leading to different practical and disease challenges. The combination of generally cooler springs followed by heatwaves and drought is leading to changes in the type of grass species being selected.

To deal with these challenges, Barenbrug have been breeding, researching and trailing high quality, fine-leaf ryegrass varieties for golf courses for many years.

State of the art breeding

Breeding and technology are the life blood of the business. Barenbrug UK is part of the International Royal Barenbrug Group, which has specialised in grass breeding since 1904. The worldwide research and plant genetics network includes dedicated UK trials of amenity varieties and mixtures, providing a solid testing ground while drawing on knowledge and expertise from across the globe.

Barenbrug specialise in developing innovative grass seed solutions, and their R&D team focuses on meeting customers' requirements across a range of metrics, from establishment and wear tolerance to disease resistance and visual merit. Developing new amenity grass varieties is a long-term evolutionary process which

can take up to 18 years, with only the very best cultivars making it through the exacting R&D and trials processes to commercial sale.

The latest ultrafine ryegrass varieties represent a milestone for the golf industry. This is a significant development, not least because ryegrass was once a shunned species. In his 1997 book *Practical Greenkeeping*, legendary agronomist Jim Arthur said: "it has no place on any golf course". But times are changing and with developments in breeding fine ryegrass it can fulfil almost every golf course application.

Why fine Ryegrass

Since 2015, the amount of Barenbrug golf mixtures containing perennial ryegrass has steadily increased and there

are two key reasons for this. Firstly, Barenbrug is seeing a demand increase for products which build on the inherent strengths of perennial ryegrass. This is because greenkeepers have seen the benefits the species can bring to tees, fairways, and high traffic areas, as well as the advantages of rapid germination at low soil temperatures.

The cooler springs which we now appear to experience year on year present significant challenges when it comes to repairing the inevitable damage left behind after the winter. With fescue requiring 11°C and browntop bent needing 15°C for decent germination, achieving strong establishment may not be possible in March or even April. However, because ryegrass germinates readily at 7°C it gives the opportunity to restore grass cover in the spring.

Secondly, the latest ryegrass varieties offer previously unseen levels of fineness, shoot density and aesthetics, even when close-mown. While a perennial ryegrass dominant sward will not produce a surface that meets the expectations of golfers in terms of putting quality, there are scenarios where using ryegrass on a green is a viable option and can provide a solution.

For greens that may struggle with shade or higher moisture levels, some thinning of the sward is not uncommon, particularly on the clean-up lap or walk on/off areas. Overseeding such areas with ryegrass will increase the overall wear tolerance, protect the existing grasses, and help to reduce thinning of the sward. In these parts of the course, it must surely be better to achieve some grass cover from ryegrass than to tolerate reduced cover or even no grass. In this way,

ryegrass can be used as a short term fix whilst underlying problems are addressed.

Barenbrug varieties score highly in the 2022 BSPB Turfgrass tables. Highly respected, these rankings are the result of intensive trials by the STRI, formerly the Sports Turf Research Institute, at Bingley, West Yorkshire.

To learn more about how ultrafine ryegrass can be used to enhance your golf course, please contact your local Barenbrug Regional Manager; www.barenbrug.co.uk/our-people

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