



Hybrid Grass Seed 'Always' Greener

BY CHRIS LEE

Lawns is a captivating amenity for apartment community exteriors.

The grass may not always be greener on the other side in the apartment industry, but there are certainly plenty of options for creating the ultimate lawn experience (a growing lifestyle practice also known as lawns) for residents. Developments in hybrid grasses over the years almost always offer the right kind of grass for the right setting.

Apartment communities have almost as many choices in grass varieties as they do types of countertops and flooring. The key is working with local county extension agents and landscape and lawns professionals to determine what is best for the area and type of use.

For those who absolutely want to be different, working with a turf company to develop a specific type of grass is an option.

In 2010, for example, a Georgia turfgrass company developed Tifgrand, a new type of golf course turf that was the result of more than 28,000 hybrid crosses and a decade of trials and evaluations. The hybrid Bermuda grass was genetically engineered to thrive in full or partial shade, as well as sunlight, and marketed to golf courses with a lot of trees.

Tifgrand joins the thousands of grasses developed for a specific use and specific regions. Raleigh St. Augustine is one that was developed in 1980 by North Carolina State University to resist certain fungus strains that attacked conventional St. Augustine grass, which thrives in warmer climates like its native Florida.

Raleigh St. Augustine has the look of its Florida sister but stands up better in cooler weather and is less likely to develop fungi resulting from cool, moist conditions.

Buffalograss is a common turfgrass species found in climates and terrain similar to Utah. Utah State University published a guide on basic turfgrass care that emphasizes mowing, fertilization, irrigation and seeding, and includes a schedule for optimum maintenance.

Grasses for All Seasons

In all reality, apartment communities aren't likely to go to the drawing board with a grass guru to develop a custom lawn. There are enough varieties out there that work well in different climates and conditions. Just understand that each serves its own purpose.

In the United States, grasses are basically divided into warm- and cool-season turfs. Bermuda, St. Augustine and Zoysia Grass are among the most popular grasses found in warm, southern climates. Kentucky Bluegrass, Fescue and Perennial Ryegrass are favorites farther north where temperatures get colder.

In some instances, cool-season grasses can be found in southern zones. Fescues and ryes are common winter grasses

that are seeded over Bermuda during winter. Rarely, however, will a warm-season grass do well in the north because of persistence of freezing weather.

Climate compatibility, drought tolerance and the region should be taken into consideration when choosing a grass for the landscape. But be careful not to assume that just because a grass, by definition, is right for a certain area that it's the best choice. Climates within a zone may vary enough that a warm-season grass, for example, may thrive better in one area than another.

Such is the case with St. Augustine, which in Texas thrives in hot, humid Gulf Coast areas like Houston, Galveston and Corpus Christi. A few hours north to Dallas and Fort Worth, St. Augustine is widely seen in lawns but is living a harder life. Drought and temperature extremes add stress to grass and increase the likelihood of disease.

Like with shrubs or any other plant material, a grass in an unsuitable environment becomes more vulnerable and can eventually die.

One grass that is becoming more and more popular in the south is Zoysia, which originates in Asia. The grass, introduced in the U.S. in 1906, has been mostly used in coastal areas, although it can do well in other areas around the country.

Because it is more resistant to drought than Bermuda and St. Augustine and stands up to cooler weather and shade, Zoysia is becoming a preferred choice farther inland. The grass comes in varieties of fine (Emerald Green) and wide (Palisades) blades, grows low to the ground, and is soft. It's a creeping grass, so it can be installed either as sod or in plugs.

Also, like other southern grasses, Zoysia goes through a dormant stage in the winter months. It does, however, take longer to exit dormancy.

Texas A&M and Clemson University are among the leaders for studying and developing new varieties of grass. These schools are constantly researching new strains and hybrids to serve very specific needs that could bode well for large residential properties or smaller high-density communities.

For example, new, hardier varieties of Bluegrass are being developed so that the grass better stands up to shade and drought tolerance, as well as foot traffic.

Turf development opens many opportunities for apartment communities in the future as the global climate and population landscape changes. But like many amenities, turf has an evolving shelf life. What worked 20 years ago in a certain area may not be the right choice for today or in the future. ■

Chris Lee is a contributing editor to the blog PropertyManagementInsider.com, where this first appeared.