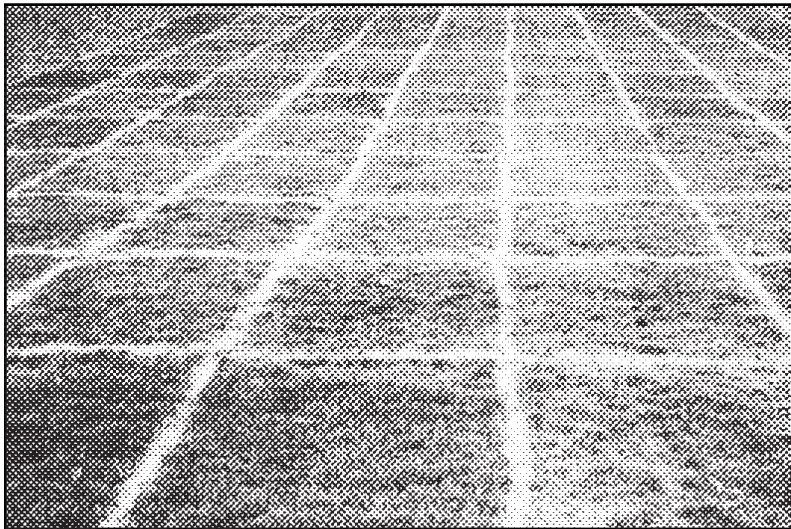


Are Kentucky Bluegrasses Getting A Bad Rap?

Law makers on Long Island were considering outlawing Kentucky bluegrass as a lawn grass. Water district managers in the Delaware River basin bashed lawns, especially those planted to Kentucky bluegrass, at a conference a few months ago. We often hear that Kentucky bluegrass is a water-guzzling, fertilizer-loving lawngrass. Is Kentucky bluegrass getting a bad rap by some ill-informed people? I sure think so, and I would like to explain why.

Kentucky bluegrass has long been the lawn grass of choice in the Northeast. Lawns planted with a mix of Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescue 20, 30, or 40 years ago have persisted with little care.



New low maintenance bluegrass trials were established at Cornell in 1990.

The misconception that Kentucky bluegrass is a fertilizer-loving grass probably originated with the release of Merion Kentucky bluegrass in 1947. A beautiful grass when well fed, Merion became the “Cadillac of bluegrasses” and was widely planted from seed and sod until the 1970’s. Merion Kentucky bluegrass, however, has a high nitrogen requirement and had to be fertilized heavily to maintain that luxurious look. Efforts by plant breeders in recent years have yielded bluegrass cultivars that look good with far less nitrogen than Merion.

Kentucky bluegrass also tolerates drought as well as most cool season grasses. Bluegrasses that perform well in drought conditions include Touch-

down, Adelphi, Nassau, Victa, Ram I, Cheri, and others. Most other bluegrasses have the ability to survive extreme drought periods, but may do so by going dormant; conditions that are rare in the Northeast.

We have established a new trial this fall at Cornell to evaluate over 100 bluegrass cultivars under extreme low maintenance. With variety names like Crest and Cobalt, who knows what the future holds in low maintenance bluegrasses. Work recently reported from trials at Iowa State, however, found several cultivars of bluegrass that had superior performance in non-irrigated, low fertility experiments. Included in the list were several old common types, as well as several improved

cultivars, such as Vantage, Argyle, Plush, Vanessa, Fylking, Victa, Monopoly, Mosa, Ram I, Harmony, and Kimona.

What are the alternatives? Fine leaf fescues have low water use rates, but go into summer dormancy much sooner than bluegrass. Tall fescue, being touted as a water conserving grass, actually uses more water than any other cool-season grass. Admittedly, tall fescue has a deep root system that helps it avoid drought better than

bluegrass, but it cannot be called a water conserving grass.

Likewise, perennial ryegrass has a high water use rate, and is also quite responsive to increasing nitrogen rates.

No one can deny that bluegrasses will respond to inputs of water and fertilizer by looking more attractive. Kentucky bluegrass’s label as a high maintenance grass, however, is unfounded. Kentucky bluegrass has, and should continue to be the lawn grass of choice in New York State.

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