

# Studying Low Maintenance Turf

**B**uffalograss once interested only buffalo, which grazed large expanses of the native short prairie grass from Canada to Mexico. Now, researchers at the University of Arizona are studying 22 varieties of the sod-building grass for lawn use, because of its water efficiency and low maintenance properties.

Charles Mancino, an associate professor in the Department of Plant Sciences, and Thomas Richardson, a graduate student in Plant Sciences, are field-testing the buffalograss varieties for turf potential. The results of the five year study, sponsored by the USDA-National Turf Evaluation Program (NTEP), will indicate the varieties best suited for turf uses nationwide. Plant breeders, turfgrass company professionals and extension agents will be able to use the information the trials provide.

Tests are currently underway on buffalograss varieties at 22 locations in the United States.

Local plantings were established in October, 1991 at the Desert Turfgrass Research Facility in Tucson, part of the UA College of Agriculture.

After the first year, a new variety Mancino introduced ranked third nationally. It does well even in wetter parts of the country, while also exhibiting heat and drought tolerance. Patent negotiations are currently underway for the turfgrass, known as AZ-143.

Mancino found the variety growing on campus in an old lawn, where a patch of it was competing against the bermudagrass growing around it. He noted how well the buffalograss performed.

"It was in the lawn at least 30 years," Mancino said. "We compared it with other grasses for three or four years before deciding that it might be suitable as a new variety."

The procedure for new plant introductions involves quality ratings,



Buffalograss turf plots at the Desert Turfgrass Research Facility. AZ-143 is the square at lower left.

C. Mancino

including plant height, root length, stolon length and other characteristics. In addition, it must be an improvement over existing commercially available varieties.

In general, buffalograss grows thick and short, making it suitable for

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arid and semi-arid locations in the United States. It has low water, fertilizer and mowing requirements.

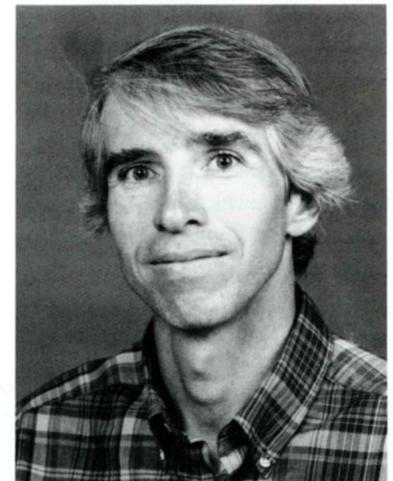
"It's a really good low maintenance turf," Richardson said. "It only gets four to six inches high if you let it go, and is very water efficient." Grass mowed less often conserves water.

Richardson is checking the nitrogen uptake of the 22 varieties to determine which varieties use nitrogen most efficiently. He will also plant the different grasses in tubes six feet long embedded in sand, to measure the rooting lengths of each variety.

Until recently, buffalograss was used only in very low maintenance

landscaping, but now even golf courses are beginning to use it in their roughs.

"Eventually, it may even be used on fairways," Mancino said, "but homeowners will probably benefit most from this low maintenance, attractive grass." ♦



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