

# IS SEASHORE PASPALUM MANAGEMENT IN YOUR FUTURE???

By Michael J. Healy, Ph.D.

Eight years ago I met a New Orleans area golf course superintendent and asked the question “Have you ever considered trying Paspalum?” There was an immediate look of disbelief, with a verbal response of that “#@&\*## weed?! What I would soon learn was that the word “Paspalum” was considered very much a four letter word by most turf managers in the greater NOLA area. Given a sample of NOLA Paspalum to take back to Alabama, I soon learned that this Paspalum (*Paspalum distichum*), sometimes called Knotgrass, was a whole different plant than the Paspalum (*Paspalum vaginatum*), commonly called Seashore Paspalum, that I was talking about.

So how far has Seashore Paspalum made it into the hearts and minds of your membership? Is it still getting a “bad rap”, or has it been redeemed? I do know that Oak Harbor GC made the pre-Katrina conversion to SeaSle 2000 greens, which were mostly submerged in brackish water for nearly one month post-Katrina.

So where did the Seashore Paspalums originate? Best guess seems to be along the coast of either Argentina or South Africa. In the beginning Seashore Paspalum most likely had to survive a very harsh environment- shifting sands, low fertility, and often inundated with saltwater. Beyond living in a low fertility environment, it had to survive alternating drought-like and aquatic environments.

Its spread to other lands was most likely the end result of its use as bedding in slave ships. When a ship reached its destination port, the soiled hay was discarded on land. Bermudagrass biotype spread has been chronicled to have happened in much the same way.

In the 1970s Seashore Paspalum formally invaded the U.S. as an import from Australia. The variety Adalayd established beachheads of user interest in California, Texas, and Florida. Eventually those beachheads failed to gain wider acceptance, and the name Seashore Paspalum slid into obscurity. Predating the Adalayd invasion was Seashore Paspalum biotype selection used to grass a course on Sea Island, Georgia in the early 1920's. Nearly two decades after Adalayd, Dr. Ronnie Duncan at the U.of Georgia became the pioneer behind a new generation of Seashore Paspalum selections for use in sports turf applications. In the last decade, the Seashore Paspalums have made steady progress in their recognition and acceptance as golf course turf on a tee through green basis.

So why consider making the break from bermudagrass to the Seashore Paspalums? If you have poor irrigation water quality now, or believe its quality will be decreasing in the future, then the Seashore Paspalums merit your utmost attention. Whether you are talking

about India, the Mediterranean, or our hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast area, the love of living on or along a coast line is bringing ever increasing demand for dwindling supplies of fresh water. As fresh water supplies dwindle, pressure will be placed upon all sports turf facilities to rely upon poorer water quality. For coastal areas this means the use of effluent and effluent/brackish water mixes.

## **HABIT OF GROWTH**

Both the turf varieties of bermudagrass and Seashore Paspalum produce lateral growth by means of both stolons and rhizomes. Although the leaf structure of the Seashore Paspalums is more coarse than the ultradwarf bermudagrasses, its ability to be mowed and sustained at a low mowing height (.120" down to .10") should make any concern for putting speed not an issue. Unlike the bermudagrasses, Seashore Paspalum does not produce grain. It also stripes nicely. Golfers have commented that their golf balls seem to set up more on the surface of Seashore Paspalum than Tifway 419 when maintained at fairway mowing height. And perhaps most significant is the depth of rhizome and root growth. I've often seen a 4X difference between Seashore Paspalum and an ultradwarf bermudagrass when maintained as a greens turf. When the bulk of roots and rhizomes of an ultradwarf hover in the 1" deep range, a Seashore Paspalum growing in the same environment with the same management practices has a root/rhizome depth of 4+ ". The rhizomes of Seashore Paspalum are extremely stout and sturdy-looking, in comparison to competing bermudagrass varieties.

Along the Gulf Coast, Seashore Paspalum will normally go dormant three weeks later in the fall and come out of dormancy three weeks earlier in the spring. In some winters, Seashore Paspalum never goes completely dormant. Rate of growth during the hottest part of the year appears to be slightly greater than bermudagrass varieties used for the same purpose (green/tee/fairway/rough). As Seashore Paspalum both tolerates and responds well to the plant growth regulant Primo®, mowing practices do not need to be drastically altered.

## **WEED, INSECT, AND DISEASE PROBLEMS**

Seashore Paspalum does differ substantially from bermudagrass in its sensitivity to various herbicides. Golf course superintendents already growing Seashore Paspalum have found a wide enough range of Seashore Paspalum compatible herbicides to achieve suitable weed control. While removal of bermudagrass from Seashore Paspalum still remains problematic, there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel for this control need. Insect infestations seem to be similar for Seashore Paspalum and Bermudagrass. The one exception I have observed is where Seashore Paspalum is surrounded by bermudagrass and resulting late season mole cricket activity. I believe this has more to do with the difference in dormancy onset between these two turfgrasses than insect preference. Seashore Paspalum does get several leaf diseases, and is more susceptible to Dollar Spot than bermudagrass. In 2004 I began seeing what I now call False\$spot on

Page 3

Seashore Paspalum. This is a midsummer disease often producing visible white tufts of mycelium on grass blades. While it looks like standard Dollar Spot, microscopic examination places the causal agent in the Fairy Ring fungus family. Both Dollar Spot, False\$spot, and the various leaf diseases can be controlled by a variety of fungicides.

## **FERTILITY**

Early on there was the belief that use of Seashore Paspalum might save you as much as 50% of your fertilizer bill when compared to bermudagrass maintenance. I now believe the reality is that any savings in your fertilizer bill by converting to Seashore Paspalum will be quite modest. I do believe that by virtue of the rhizome/root depth differential, Seashore Paspalum is far more efficient in utilizing nutrients stored in your soil profile.

## **BERMUDAGRASS TO SEASHORE PASPALUM CONVERSION**

For a number of reasons I recommend you consider a tee through green variety of Paspalum for your conversion, even if you initially plan to only convert your greens. Suitable varieties include Salam™ (Southern Turf Nurseries), SeaDwarf™ (Environmental Turf), and SeaIsle Supreme (U. of Georgia release, various licensed growers). Some courses also are considering using SeaIsle 2000 (another U. Georgia release), on a tee through green basis even though initially it was developed as a greens type only variety.

When you decide that Seashore Paspalum merits a closer look, then seeing (and playing) a Seashore Paspalum course and visiting with its superintendent is a logical first step. Earlier in this article I mentioned Oak Harbor GC in Slidell. My understanding is that Brian Boudreaux hopes to open 9 holes soon. If you can journey to the very western edge of Florida, two Pensacola courses located several miles from each other should be on your list. Perdido Bay GC (Bill Herring, GCS, cell: 850 291 0500) and Lost Key GC (James Ritchie, GCS cell: 850 712 1205) would be happy to give you a tour. Also at Perdido Bay is Ron Althaus, who was GCS at Corel Creek, an all Seashore Paspalum course in Hawaii.

## **A FINAL CONSIDERATION**

I see the demand growing for superintendents having Seashore Paspalum maintenance experience, particularly as an overseas assignment. Having Seashore Paspalum experience will be a real plus (with all that implies) on your resume. Is it time to begin thinking about adding that grass to your list of accomplishments?

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