The future of grass breeding

William Eichler reports from a grass seed facility in France to see how the particular needs of local authorities are being met.


Grass seed shade trial

Grass is not something most of us give much thought to. We walk, picnic, and allow our dogs to do their business on it, but we don't tend to think about where it comes from. Or the fact that years - decades even - may have gone into cultivating it.

A recent trip to the Angers region of France, however, opened my eyes. There I was treated by the seed agents Rigby Taylor to a tour of a grass seed facility run by the specialist breeders Top Green. And the amount of effort that goes into the green stuff that surrounds us is quite astonishing.

In the summer heat, I was taken step-by-step through the intricate process of selective breeding that produces turfgrass. The first point the breeders must consider is: what does the market require? Local authorities, for example, might want a grass that is low maintenance and produces less clippings, while a golf club might be more concerned about visual appearance.

However, this is easier said than done. To create a variety of grass can take between 10 to 12 years of crossbreeding and selection and so the market research must consider what the customer will want over a decade into the future. And this is what Top Green and Rigby Taylor try to do.

'By going out into the field meeting professional users we have been able to establish the precise difficulties they are experiencing,' explains Jayne Leyland, RT's seeds & line marking product manager. 'Their requirements have then been dovetailed into our grass seed breeding programme leading to the development of these site specific mixtures.'

Once they have listened to their customer base, the breeders are then able to selectively breed grasses roughly according to certain specifications. And this is done through entirely natural methods, as one of the breeders at the Angers facility assured us. 'We're still using the same traditional methods in terms of breeding,' he explains. 'That is to say, crossing plants and letting pollen and nature do its work.'


Grass seed parent trial


Grassseed–selectingthenestnewcultivars

One of the areas grass breeders are becoming more conscious about is the potential of turfgrass for carbon sequestration, the process by which carbon dioxide is removed from the atmosphere and stored. As the breeders explained, their customers are keen to reduce their carbon footprint and large, grassy areas have potential to become carbon sinks. Top Green are researching this; however, their scientists emphasised it was still early days.

Rigby Taylor are also keen to promote their Euroflor flower mixes. These are low-maintenance flower selections that are ideal for sprucing up town centres. They are 'designed' to conserve biodiversity and are recommended under the RHS 'Perfect for Pollinators' scheme.

Councils can make savings with the mixes too. Monmouthshire County Council saved over £46,000 through not having to repeatedly purchase bulbs and through lower maintenance costs. Nigel Leaworthy, Monmouthshire's operations manager for landscape and grounds maintenance, says: 'The displays of Euroflor urban flower seed mixes ticked so many boxes in relation to the Pollinator Policy, i.e. no plants grown within green houses, no travelling to the individual sites once planted to weed every two weeks, no watering etc.'