

It Needn't Be Greener In Someone Else's Yard

By KATE MURPHY

IN the spring, does your fancy turn to thoughts of grass? Of fine-bladed, emerald green, fluffy soft grass that puts your neighbor's lawn to shame?

For many Americans, a lush lawn is a matter of pride, if not a competitive sport. And this is the time of year to reseed or perhaps lay down fresh sod to replace grass that may have died over the winter. New types of turf offer better color, texture and disease resistance, not to mention longer growing seasons, than the grasses of years past. These latest varieties can be harder to find and more expensive, but they are also your best bet for cultivating a gorgeous green.

"What you're seeing now is the payoff from 20 years of breeding efforts," said Karl Guillard, who teaches turf-grass management at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. Grass isn't genetically modified, so improvements occur by painstakingly screening out plants with undesirable traits over countless seasons to create a better crop. "The grasses that have come on the market in the last few years are far superior than the older varieties that are growing in most people's yards," Mr. Guillard said.

Joseph Mesarvey, who describes himself as a "yard fanatic," planted a mixture of new, premium bluegrasses last spring in the barren yard of the home he had just bought in Coldwater, Ohio. "The grass is greener, thicker and has fewer weeds than what I had at my old place," he said, adding that a lawn service seeded a neighbor's yard at the same time and that "there is just no comparison."

Turf experts say that it is not in landscapers' interest to use new and improved grasses because they cost about 20 percent more than older types and are often slower-growing or grow more horizontally, which reduces the need for their mowing services. Depending on the variety, the new grasses cost \$25 to \$50 for a five-pound bag, which covers 400 to 1,000 square feet. Sod may cost 30 cents to \$1 a square foot.

The new types are also harder to come by, because home and garden supply chains tend to carry only a limited number of seed blends that are generally mixes of new and old grasses. "It's not the kind of thing you find at Home Depot," said Mr. Mesarvey, a director of materials management for a hospital who ordered his grass seed online directly from a producer, Turf-Seed Inc., of Hubbard, Ore. "It was more of a hassle, but I made up my mind that I wanted the best," he said.

The latest grass — seed or sod — usually isn't available at mass merchandisers or even local nurseries because of the expense. "Most homeowners want what's cheapest and has a pretty picture on the bag," said Drew Sullivan, general manager of Dickens Turf and Landscape Supply in Nashville, which supplies new grass seed and sod varieties to university and professional sports teams, including the Tennessee Titans.

And retailers could not possibly stock all the new grasses, many of which are bred for specific climatic, soil and shade conditions. Mary Palmer Dargan, an Atlanta landscape architect, said, "When I started in this business 35 years ago, there wasn't much to choose from, but now it seems like there are new grasses coming out every day." She attributes the proliferation to the golf course industry, which she says is always pushing for "better, more attractive and lower-maintenance types of grass."

Finding the grass that's right for your yard starts with a soil analysis. Knowing your soil's characteristics will help you determine which kinds of grasses will grow best in your yard.

"I always tell my clients to take a soil sample to the county extension to find out what they're dealing with," Ms. Dargan said. Agents at that office can provide information about your soil's texture and composition. The service is usually free. Where you live is also a factor, because there are cool-season grasses, which generally do better in Northern states, and warm-season grasses, which are more likely to survive in the South.

But A. J. Powell, an agricultural extension professor at the University of Kentucky at Lexington, said that this line was blurring because of the development of "new temperature-tolerant varieties that will grow in a wider region." Warm-season grasses generally include St. Augustine, zoysia, buffalo



Drew Sullivan of Dickens Turf and Landscape Supply, which sells new varieties of grasses. He examined a yard in Smyrna, Tenn.

and Bermuda, while cool-season types are perennial rye, fescue and bluegrass.

New grasses are typically permutations of these species. Mr. Mesarvey, for example, ordered a custom blend of several new bluegrasses with names like Midnight, Moonlight and Brilliant. Using a blend is a good idea in case one variety fails.

Rick Phelps of Snohomish, Wash., prefers grass with a finer blade, so he went with a blend of new rye grasses. He researched the kinds he wanted on the Web site of the nonprofit National Turfgrass Evaluation Program, www.ntep.org, which posts the results of its nationwide trials of newly introduced grasses. You'll find standardized assessments of color, density, resistance to disease and insects and tolerance of heat, cold, drought and traffic. "It's all there for you to figure out what you want," said Mr. Phelps, including the names and phone numbers of seed companies responsible for each variety.

Be sure that any seed you buy has a 95 percent or better germination rate and less than 0.1 percent weeds in the mix. This information should be certified by the agricul-

ture department of the seed company's home state.

But turf experts say that even a state seal of approval is no guarantee of purity. Milt Engelke, a professor of turf-grass breeding at Texas A&M University in Dallas, said contamination, whether accidental or intentional, was common. Sod is safer, he said, because "what you see is what you get" and, once it's in place, "you've got an instant lawn." He added, however, that you can pay up to 20 times as much for sod as seed to cover the same area. For example, a premium blend of fescue and bluegrass seeds may cost \$350 for enough to cover an acre, versus \$7,280 for an acre of sod.

TURF experts say that it is easier for new grass types to take hold if you get rid of all existing varieties in your yard. But you can "overseed" — sprinkle new seed — over the grass you already have. After several years of overseeding, the new variety will predominate, and you should have a uniform lawn fit for croquet or badminton. Or, like Mr. Mesarvey, you can mow it in crisscross patterns so it looks like a Major League Baseball field.

"Then," he said, "you just sit on the patio, drink a beer and look on it with pride." □

New grasses can add luster to a lawn (for a price).