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Mediterra experiments with grass

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Scott Whorrall, Mediterra's director of golf operations, is experimenting with grass — Empire Zoysia, to be exact.

The turf is a hardy variety that requires less than half the water and a third of the fertilizer of the widely used St. Augustine grass.

"We put this in as an experiment," Whorrall said of the 26,000 square feet of turf that surrounds the Sports Club. "We're looking to see if this is an option to replace our existing St. Augustine grass. It's too early to tell how much water we'll save, but it is certainly nicer looking and more pleasant to walk on than St. Augustine grass."

With stringent water-use regulations in force throughout the region and a growing number of communities passing laws limiting the use of fertilizer to protect water quality, it's important for developments such as Mediterra to find turf and landscaping plants that require less of both, Whorrall said.

Empire Zoysia performs well on both fronts.

Riverland Nursery, owned by Mayer Berg, assisted Whorrall in selecting plants and turf that reduce the need for irrigation. Riverland and Bethel Farms in Arcadia, supplied Mediterra's Empire Zoysia, while Paraisso Landscape of Lehigh Acres installed it. All three are working with Whorrall on the trial.

"Scott is a leader in sustainable landscaping," said Berg, who is also a member of the Sustainable Landscape Council. "Mediterra was the first private 36-hole golf course to earn the Audubon International Silver Signature Sanctuary status, and this project is in keeping with that philosophy."

Discovered in Brazil, this grass possesses a deep root structure that allows it to tolerate drought. Its dark green, densely packed blades provide a lush, soft carpet of grass that requires little fertilizer to maintain. It's also shade tolerant and chinch-bug resistant.

"When there's a drought, it turns brown but comes right back when it gets water," said Mike Pope, Bethel Farms national sales manager and acting president of the Sustainable Landscape Council. "St. Augustine will fight the drought until it eventually dies. Chinch bugs like dry areas. It's a perfect recipe for catastrophe. It's a one-two punch. Drought and chinch bugs. That's where we see Empire survive on a long-term basis much better than other varieties."

Faustino Torres, owner of Paraisso Landscape, says some people are hesitant about buying it because it looks so luxurious and carpet like.

"They think it will cost more because it's a nicer grass, but it's completely the opposite," Torres says. "It saves money all the way around. At Mediterra, little maintenance is necessary and it looks great. If it's handled like golf course turf, it will be spectacular."

Once-a-week watering keeps Empire Zoysia looking green and healthy.

The minimal amount of fertilizer it requires is another big plus.

Communities such as Naples and Sanibel, as well as Lee and Sarasota counties have laws that limit the use of fertilizers containing phosphorus and nitrogen because both nutrients can wash off lawns and into waterways, causing algal blooms that kill fish and marine grasses.

Empire Zoysia needs infrequent fertilization and, during the summer rainy season when fertilizers containing nitrogen and phosphorus are banned, Zoysia continues to thrive.

"It can be greened up with iron," says Pope. "It's a healthier way of growing."

The Sports Club at Mediterra is undergoing an expansion that will increase the building's existing 7,852 square feet to more than 14,000 square feet. Bonita Bay Group, which is developing the 1,697-acre North Naples master-planned community, is adding three spa treatment rooms, including a couple's treatment room, and a multipurpose room with a catering kitchen that will function as a large classroom.

The project is expected to be completed late this year. A growing membership prompted the expansion project.



Empire Zoysia grass, turf that requires less than half the water and a third of the fertilizer of the widely used St. Augustine grass, was recently planted at The Sports Club at Mediterra. Gathered to view the grass are the individuals involved with its installation, (l. to r.) Scott Whorrall, director of golf operations at The Club at Mediterra, Faustino Torres, owner of Paraisso Landscape, National Sales Manager Mike Pope of Bethel Farms and Mayer Berg, owner of Riverland Nursery. (Special to The Bonita News-Press)

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