

# Don't Play With People's Lives

## Guest Editorial



Monica Elliott, PhD  
Plant Pathologist  
UF-IFAS

I have desperately tried to understand the golfer and golf course owner point of view in regards to golf course maintenance. However, to

borrow from Hollywood, I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore. Now, you're probably thinking the person writing this is a golf course superintendent. No, I am an associate professor of turfgrass pathology with the University of Florida at the Fort Lauderdale Research and Education Center. I work very closely with the golf course superintendents trying to make sure golfers have the best possible conditions for playing

golf. What happens to them affects me also, personally and professionally.

So what has me all fired up? I can no longer tolerate the way superintendents are treated when the weather takes a turn for the worse. Superintendents all over southern Florida have either lost their jobs or are afraid they will in the next few weeks. Why? Because we have had abnormally high rainfall. Naples has had over 42 inches since August 1. Many communities in Palm Beach County are flooded today, thanks to 12 inches of rainfall in 24 hours. Superintendents in Illinois and Indiana have been under the same pressure. Why? Too much rain in the spring followed by a drought and excessive heat during the summer. And then the golfer or owner has the nerve to ask why the greens don't look perfect. How would you feel if someone kept beating you up all the time?

Growing plants is a risky business. Ask any farmer! Farmers in Illinois are harvesting poor crops of corn and soybeans this year due to the bad weather. My father has farmed in that area all his life. Even with all his experience, he could not change the crop yield because he could not alter the weather. He doesn't like it, but he accepts it. The citrus crop in Florida failed a number of years in the 1980s because of severe freezes. Again, the farmers live with that because they could not change the weather. Why do golfers and owners think that superintendents

can change the weather? Superintendents are great managers, but even *they* can't control Mother Nature. Why can't golfers understand this? The only explanation I have is they must all have green thumbs with beautiful gardens that are perfect. Right — and I still believe in the Tooth Fairy!

Golf course superintendents are professionals who know what to do if the golfer will allow them to use their knowledge and skills. Golfers complain if the greens are slow because the superintendent has raised the height of cut. The height of cut is increased because that is the very first thing that professionals like myself recommend. We have the proof to demonstrate that this is the most effective method for preventing serious long-term damage to the green. There is no such thing as perfect greens 365 days a year. It simply cannot be done, no matter how much money you have. You can't change the physiology of the plant.

Let me use southern Florida as an example. Southern Florida is in a subtropical climate. This means we have extensive rainfall in the summer and fall (corresponding with the hurricane season). During the rainy season, we not only have extensive periods of rainfall but also many days without adequate sunshine for bermudagrass growth. Bermudagrass is not a shade-loving plant. In fact, under low light intensity, bermudagrass actually changes the way it grows in that it puts most of its energy into its leaves and stolons and little into its root system. Plants don't survive very well without an extensive root system. So as the summer and fall progress, the root system becomes more and more shallow. The only thing keeping the plant alive are the green leaves. If those leaves are continually cut too short, then you further reduce the plant's ability to survive.

What is the appropriate height for bermudagrass? Let me answer this question from a historical perspective. The bermudagrass cultivars used today on putting greens are Tifgreen and Tifdwarf. They were developed 30 years ago. At the time they were selected, 1/4 inch was considered a very low height of cut. We have proven year after year here at the research center that Tifgreen cannot be

maintained during summer and early fall at less than 1/4 inch, and we don't even have the everyday stress of golfers! Tifdwarf is tolerant of a 3/16-inch cut. However, if it is cut much below this height for any length of time in bad weather, it will look as bad as Tifgreen. Golf courses still use Tifdwarf because no other grass selection has proven to be any better.

Furthermore, golfers and owners have no basis for judgment of a good or bad superintendent if they keep changing the superintendent every couple of years. As with any professional pursuit, you learn from experience. I have never seen two golf courses react the same. For that matter, I have never seen two greens on a golf course react to weather and stresses exactly the same. It will take a minimum of a year for a new

superintendent to become familiar with a golf course as he needs to see how it responds to various weather patterns and maintenance practices. It is obvious to me that changing superintendents does not solve a golf course's problems. Each new superintendent at a course eventually calls me with the same problem that the prior superintendent had. There are a number of courses in southern Florida that I know better than the membership or owner. I am not complaining. I am happy to help, but it is a waste of resources (i.e., taxpayers' money) for me to go to the same course each year to view the same problem because the membership or owner will not allow the superintendent to implement my suggestions or the suggestions of other professionals.

Superintendents should be applauded for their management. Instead they are dismissed. How do they explain their dismissal to their children? How would you, the golfer, explain this to his or her family? "Well, kids, I like fast greens and your father or mother couldn't keep them fast enough for me when we had rain every day. Now, don't blame it on me. Blame Mother Nature." Get real, folks! Growing grass that is constantly under stress is an achievement that should be applauded. If I had my choice, a golfer would not be allowed to play until he or she spent a month in the superintendent's shoes listening to complaints from fellow golfers.

*Editor's Note: Dr. Elliott originally sent this unsolicited letter to Golf Digest.*

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