Curbing dollar spot blight a battle of changing weapons

Left unattended, the disease can wipe out a green or fairway quickly

By PETER BLAIS

As late-summer days warm up and nights cool down, superintendents' dreams of lush, green fairways turn to nightmare visions of foliar yellow lesions that attack healthy stands of grass and turn them into round, sunken patches joining like some sickly Olympic symbol of blighted turf.

No silver medals are awarded to superintendents finishing second to dollar spot, just pink slips.

"It's a real problem up here as we get into the warm, damp days and cool nights of August and September," said Jim Diorio, superintendent at Purpoodock Club in Cape Elizabeth, Maine.

"It starts out about the size of a silver dollar. But it can wipe out an entire green or fairway pretty quickly if left untreated." 

Cool-season, bentgrass courses are more likely to treat for dollar spot, the most persistent of all fungus diseases in managed turf, according to Rhone-Poulenc Technological Development Manager Tom Vrabel.

Warm-season and transition-zone Bermudagrass courses can also suffer from the fungus, although brown patch and red thread are usually bigger problems.

Fortunately, fungicides that control brown patch also curb dollar spot. In fact, one of the saving graces about dollar spot is that most fungicides will tame it, temporarily.

"If caught in time, dollar spot is relatively easy to control," Vrabel said. "The problem is that it can become resistant to a certain fungicide fairly quickly."

"Dollar spot and pythium show the greatest tendency to become resistant to a certain class of fungicides. And once it becomes resistant it often stays that way, even if you come back with the same chemical 10 years later."

The biggest advance in dollar spot research in the past few years is the understanding that it cannot be controlled by a single product, Vrabel said. The best technique is to rotate the fungicide class by the treatment, month, or season.

Some application specialists even recommend mixing fungicides with two different modes of action in the same tank treatment, he added.

"Look for the rotation that best fits your area," Vrabel recommended. "Contact a local turfgrass specialist and find out the best program for your region. It's an evolving science."

A fungicide's effectiveness can be prolonged by using as little as possible as frequently as possible, Vrabel added. Although preventive applications to stop dollar spot are frequently made, the fact it can be effectively beaten back after symptoms appear helps limit fungicide use.

Preventive applications for diseases like pythium or brown patch must be applied continually. Once the symptoms for those diseases appear, the turf is often lost, Vrabel said.

But the superintendent walks a fine line with dollar spot. Wait too long to treat an infected area and poa annua, which germinates in late summer, can get a foothold in the diseased turf, Vrabel warned.

"Before you know it, you're well on your way to a green that's 50 percent or more annual bluegrass," he said.

Cultural controls that can help control dollar spot include deep, frequent irrigation; avoiding water in late afternoon or evening; improving air flow across turf; minimizing thatch; and maintaining adequate nitrogen and potassium levels during summer.

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