A Poa annua nursery: Who'd have thunk it?

By JOHN GASPER

The importance of a putting green nursery to a golf course maintenance operation can not be underestimated — acting to maintain the integrity of the greens. A quality turf nursery can be beneficial in many ways. It can be used to enlarge green surfaces or repair damage from vandalism, sabotage and oil leaks. It can also allow the superintendent to plug or sod turf areas that have been lost due to disease, insects, or winter damage.

The challenge confronting superintendents is how to produce a putting green turf nursery that will acclimate to the course’s many microclimates. At The Ridgewood Country Club, we faced an additional dilemma. Built in 1927 in the chestnut and oak forests of northern New Jersey, the course is characterized by its natural terrain and tree-lined fairways. The down side is that the many trees have allowed encroachment of annual bluegrass. In fact, Poa annua is the predominant grass species on the course.

The lack of sunlight and air circulation have allowed encroachment of annual bluegrass. The challenge was how to create a dense annual bluegrass stand from the plugs. After much experimentation, we found our answer.

First, prepare the site through rototilling and leveling. It is important to control any weed infestations, especially those that cannot be selectively removed once the turf is established.

Second, apply aerification plugs to the nursery site. The key here is to apply enough material so that an adequate root zone is present. We have found that 4 to 6 inches is optimum. This also allows for uniformity in soil type after the sod is cut. Also important is not to allow plugs to sit for an extended period of time. The sooner the plugs are spread out, the better. A conventional top dresser is employed for this application.

Next, seed bentgrass over the plugs at 1/4 to 1/3 pound per thousand square feet. This helps fill the voids between the annual bluegrass plugs. Finally, roll and top dress the nursery. Top dressing is only applied so that the bentgrass seedlings are covered. Too heavy an application of top dressing will reduce the survival rate of the annual bluegrass.

Once established, it is critical that the nursery be kept on the same maintenance program as the putting greens. Any deviation will result in a longer acclimation period once used. With this method, a 75:25 percent Poa/bentgrass blend will be produced that will adapt to any microclimate on the golf course.

Another suggestion is to aerify during seed-head production and mow without baskets during the seed-head period. This will help increase annual bluegrass seed-bank population. Also, using ammoniated sulfate fertilizers will reduce the incidence of summer patch. The idea of producing an annual bluegrass nursery for use on a golf course sounds bizarre. But with the intense tree competition and low mowing heights, it is impossible to substantially increase our bentgrass populations. Many greens at Ridgewood are not conducive to bentgrass survival.

Why not just remove some trees from the golf course? The trees at Ridgewood are like no others. That would be similar to removing the “church pews” from Oakmont or the “road hole” from St. Andrews. Not on my watch.

In the meantime, we have found an excellent method of creating a putting green nursery. In fact, other superintendents in the area have used it and have had good results. Our next step is to only cultivate the “most fit” annual bluegrass biotypes as to environmental stresses. The results will be upcoming.

John J. Gasper, superintendent at The Ridgewood Country Club in Paramus, N.J.

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