

Managing Bermudagrass during the winter

During the winter in many parts of the country, turfgrass is dormant and there's not much to manage. This winter started off is a little different because many regions of the country were experiencing balmy weather. Golfing in January in places like Connecticut, Ohio and New York? Surprisingly, yes.

During the fall, golf course superintendents in the North spend time preparing turf for dormancy during the cold of winter. But in the transition zone and South, the goals of fall maintenance are a bit different. According to

Chris Hartwiger, a USGA Green Section senior agronomist in the Southeast region, there should be three main goals:

1. Put the grass to bed healthy;
2. Manage growth to avoid excessive winter green speeds; and
3. Provide golfers with the best putting conditions of the year.

Mowing height management is one aspect of maintaining healthy turf. Cool temperatures during the fall and winter months are a natural growth regulator. Green speeds can increase with no change in mowing height when the turf falls out

of optimum growing conditions, Hartwiger says. Speeds on greens cut at 0.125 of an inch in the summer will be different than greens cut at 0.125 of an inch in the fall. Superintendents should gradually raise the mowing height in September to prepare for the winter, but they might have to roll greens to maintain green speeds.

At the Carolinas GCSA Conference and Show in November, Hartwiger presented a few items to consider about mowing height management:

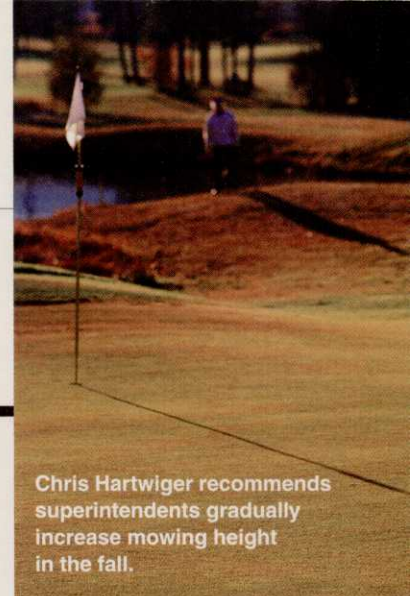
- You have to raise mowing

Chris Hartwiger recommends superintendents gradually increase mowing height in the fall.

height, and September is time to do that;

- You should increase height incrementally;
- How high you raise the height depends on the climate; and
- Mowing heights should be decreased incrementally during the spring.

Aside from mowing heights,





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green covers are another management practice that can aid turf during the winter. They're more prevalent in the North, but they can be used effectively in the transition zone and South as well. Green covers help prevent winter injury, which is the Achilles' heel of Bermudagrass putting greens, Hartwiger says.

Covers can prevent winterkill, but they don't guarantee you'll never have winterkill. Many superintendents face the decision to cover or not cover their greens. Varieties of ultradwarf Bermudagrass are found as far north as Memphis, Tenn., and as far south as Key West, Fla. Hartwiger says those with Bermudagrass north of central

Georgia should have them, and those below might want to have them if temperatures dip below 25 degrees for a significant length of time.

Hartwiger says covers aren't popular and many superintendents have a negative perception of them, however, it's the USGA's view that they're an insurance policy for greens. Research suggests the cover type isn't critical, but using one that's easy to use is.

The average weight of a cover is between 150 to 180 pounds, and a simple system is needed to secure one. One goal is to cover or uncover a green in 10 to 12 minutes with three guys. However, some superintendents say it takes an average of six guys

to cover or uncover a green and it takes longer than 15 minutes because if wind is present, the cover acts like a sail and it's hard to control. Ideally, when covering greens, the maintenance staff should follow the last foursome of the day.

Covers can keep greens green and growing during the winter if greens are covered when the temperatures stay consistently below 45 degrees, Hartwiger says.

The average cost of a cover is \$1,000 for one green, Hartwiger says.

Green covers also can protect Bermudagrass greens from a late spring frost. During spring transition, Bermudagrass greens

green up in late February or early March, then they can get hit in late March with a frost, which knocks their growth back a bit.

Also in the spring, light, frequent topdressing can be used to dilute organic matter. Disease can be an issue in the spring, too, but not as much as during summer because the grass is growing so vigorously.

Asked which ultradwarf Bermudagrass was the best, Hartwiger ranked Champion – which he says grows in better than Miniverde – first, TifEagle second and Miniverde third.

"There have been instances in which people were golfing six weeks after Champion was planted," he says. — John Walsh

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