Real-Life Solutions

Who says you can't grow in bermudagrass greens in December?

BY LARRY AYLWARD

Editor

Most golf courses wouldn't sprig bermudagrass greens in December," Danny Malone insists.

But Malone, certified superintendent of the Squire Creek CC, a new Tom Fazio design in Choudrant, La., decided to challenge that norm and sprig his course's putting and chipping greens last December.

The problem
Squire Creek CC, which opens this month, didn't receive much cooperation during its building phase last year. It rained and rained and rained, Malone says.

"We were so far behind in construction that the putting and chipping greens weren't ready for sprigging until December," Malone says.

So Malone had to decide whether to chance it and sprig the greens shortly before Santa came to town or wait until the early spring. He knew the greens might not grow in if he sprigged them two weeks before the start of winter.

The solution
Malone decided to sprig the greens on Dec. 10 — after he was convinced that Xton's turf covers would take the risk out of the process.

Malone heard about Xton's turf covers through research conducted by Mississippi State University. MSU turf professor Mike Goatley and MSU golf superintendent Pat Sneed are conducting a three-year study entitled, Evaluating Temporary Covers for Winter Protection of Bermudagrass Putting Greens.

The two men are evaluating 12 different materials and combinations of materials as temporary covers on the practice putting green at MSU's golf course. The covers are applied in the winter each time the daily minimum temperature is projected to fall below 25 degrees F for at least two consecutive days and are removed when temperatures moderated. Data loggers record temperatures under the covers at the soil surface and at a 4-inch depth at 15-minute intervals.

Xton turf covers have performed well in the study, and Malone opted to try them.

John Locker, president of Xton, has been producing large-scale covers for years at his company in Florence, Ala. Two years ago, a golf course opened next to his company. Locker was not impressed with the spun-bonded, heavy-when-wet polypropylene material the course used to cover its greens in the winter. Locker said he thought his company could make something better.

Today, Locker says his company has and is now a supplier of turf covers to the golf course industry. He says his durable, lightweight golf covers are constructed of woven polypropylene, which doesn't hold water and allows the covers to be easily placed on and removed from greens.

Locker says he told Malone he would be able to successfully sprig his two TifEagle bermudagrass greens if he used Xton's white turf covers on them.

"I told him the greens would be ready to play in the spring," Locker says.

Locker says the white covers create a greenhouse effect so turf can grow under them. The covers allow air in and out so moisture evaporates, which inhibits turf disease.

"We covered the two greens every night it got into the 30s," Malone says. "We stopped using the covers in early April, and the greens were 60 percent grown in. They were completely grown-in in May, five weeks earlier than they would have grown in if we would have waited until the middle of last April to sprig them."

In the winter, the soil temperature of the two greens at 2 inches deep was 19 degrees
to 22 degrees warmer than
the air temperature in the
morning, Malone says.
Malone also prefers the
covers because they’re easy
to use. “Four people can put
them on in five to 10 min-
utes,” he says. “They also
don’t retain water, where
others can get so heavy you
can’t move them.”

Locker says a 72-foot by
100-foot turf cover weigh-
ing about 150 pounds can
be installed or removed by
two people in less than
10 minutes.

Xton also offers black
covers for frost and freeze
protection. “The black cov-
ers are used mainly for win-
ter protection, particularly
for bermudagrass in the
Southeast,” Locker says.

While the white covers
can be left on greens for sev-
eral months, the black cov-
ers shouldn’t be left on for
more than a week.

Xton also recently intro-
duced a green and white
cover manufactured from
knitted polypropylene to
help Southeastern golf
courses protect their bent-
grass greens. “We’ve found
we can lower the tempera-
ture of bentgrass greens in
the Southeast by 10 degrees
to 20 degrees,” Locker says,
noting the covers are still
being tested at MSU.

Locker doesn’t recom-
mend ordering form-fitting
covers for greens, although
his company won’t turn
down such orders. Square
and rectangular covers are less
expensive than form-fitting
covers and are easier to use.
The cost of standard covers is
15 cents per square foot.

Outlook
Another positive attribute of
the turf covers is they can
help superintendents avoid
overseeding bermudagrass
greens, Locker says. If it’s 40
degrees or below, the greens
should be covered. If it’s
above 40 degrees, the covers
should be removed. If super-
intendents and their crews
follow this daily procedure
during the cold months,
they might not have to over-
seed, Locker says.

Malone says he’ll use
Xton’s white covers on all of
the course’s greens this win-
ter mainly to protect the turf
from winterkill. But he’s also
happy to know the turf will
hold its color long enough so
he doesn’t have to overseed.

“If we cover them on
nights that there’s a poten-
tial for frost, we can extend
their color into January,”
says Malone, adding that
overseeding new bermudas
like TifEagle is difficult be-
cause the transition is tough
on the turf. “Then one
painting we’ll get us to
March, when the greens
will green back up.”

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