



The condition of the putting greens at Chesapeake Hills is one of the highlights of playing golf there, but that wasn't always the case.

NEW PUTTING GREEN TURF IMPROVES PLAYING CONDITIONS

The Dunes Golf And Beach Club | Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Steve Hamilton, Superintendent

Patrick O'Brien, USGA Agronomist

Converting putting greens to a newer grass gives golf facilities an opportunity to improve playing conditions, conserve resources and become more sustainable. Unfortunately, even with new and improved grasses available, it can be difficult to make a change. Concerns about temporarily closing the putting greens, lost revenue and the unknowns of a new playing surface can prevent golf facilities from converting to a different grass.

The Dunes Golf and Beach Club in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, was one of many golf facilities in the Southeast that was accustomed to having bentgrass putting greens, even though bentgrass struggled during the hot, humid summers. Superintendent Steve Hamilton knew that courses in the region were

converting their putting greens from bentgrass to ultradwarf bermudagrass because the ultradwarfs were better adapted to the heat, but he also knew it would take some convincing to get golfers on board with such a big change.

“There was no question that bentgrass was not an ideal choice in our area,” said Hamilton. “During the summers, we had to take a very defensive approach to maintaining the putting greens. As a result, we would have soft, inconsistent playing conditions and undesirable green speeds. Not to mention, there would occasionally be years where the weather was bad enough to cause serious turf damage.”

From April to mid-September two or three staff members would spend the better part of each day monitoring soil moisture and hand watering putting greens. Plant protectant applications were necessary on a frequent basis, and more than half the putting greens required consistent use of turf fans throughout summer.

“Patrick O’Brien, the USGA Agronomist we work with, was a big advocate for the benefits of switching from bentgrass to the ultradwarfs, so in 2011 we decided to convert the green on our 19th hole as a test.”

Hamilton established two different ultradwarf bermudagrasses on the extra putting green, which allowed golfers to experience the playing conditions and compare them with the bentgrass putting greens. O’Brien always made a special point of taking golfers past the demonstration green during his Course Consulting Service visits to discuss how the putting surface was performing and highlight the benefits. Eventually, there was a consensus that ultradwarf bermudagrass was the way to go.

To prepare for the conversion, O’Brien studied all the putting green sites with an app on his phone that allowed him to determine shade patterns at various times of the year. He was able to identify trees and even individual limbs that could hinder the growth of the new ultradwarf bermudagrass. Hamilton uses the app to this day to monitor for shade issues.

Once the new putting greens were established, Hamilton began implementing the maintenance program he and O’Brien had developed. Managing aggressive summer growth required frequent light vertical mowing, sand topdressing and growth regulators. During the winters, monitoring soil moisture and temperatures was critical to avoid winter injury.

“Patrick emphasized from the very beginning that if we were going to convert to an ultradwarf, we needed to invest in winter turf covers. A lot of courses in our area don’t typically cover their greens, but I agreed that it was a modest investment that could help us avoid a huge problem. This past year, that turned out to be the case. We had our putting greens covered for eight days during an extreme and unusual cold spell and experienced no winter injury. Other courses that didn’t cover lost entire greens, some facilities even had to close temporarily because the winter damage was so extensive.”

Since making the conversion, Hamilton has noticed a tremendous improvement in playing conditions. “The bermudagrass allows us to deliver consistent green speeds and firmness throughout the year without negatively impacting turf health, unlike the bentgrass. That’s important for us because we never really close down here in Myrtle Beach.”

Rather than struggling to keep putting greens alive during summer, the staff can focus on surface quality and playability. They no longer need to hand water all afternoon, the turf fans have been removed and the plant protectant budget is significantly lower.

“I don’t think I’ve heard anyone ever say they wish we could go back to bentgrass, and to me that’s proof that we made the right decision,” said Hamilton.

“It was really a huge shift in thinking,” said O’Brien. “For the first 20 years that I worked in the Southeast, struggling to maintain bentgrass greens was a necessary evil. The development of the ultradwarfs changed all that. I’m glad to have been part of a change that helped courses improve their bottom line and helped golfers enjoy better greens. That’s what this job is all about.”