



Winter Worries

By John Daniels, agronomist, Central Region | February 2, 2018



Covering bermudagrass putting greens is a must during periods of cold weather to prevent long-lasting damage.

A sustained blast of arctic air gets the attention of golf course superintendents whether they manage *Poa* in Petoskey or ‘Tifdwarf’ in Texarkana. The recent frigid weather affecting the lower 48 states has many turf managers wondering what the impact will be on turf health and what can be done to protect putting greens. Complicating matters are temperature swings from extremely cold to relatively mild.

In northern states, deep snow cover is a welcomed sight as it protects turf from low-temperature stress and desiccation. In an ideal world, the snow would arrive before subzero temperatures and remain until spring. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case and turfgrass is often subjected to wide temperature swings that result in numerous freeze and thaw cycles. Concern about damage from ice formation is certainly justifiable, but whether or not a golf course should take steps to remove snow or try to break up any ice requires careful consideration.

Some have found success removing snow anytime the forecast calls for above-freezing temperatures in an effort to limit ice formation. However, this requires a significant amount of manpower and equipment to accomplish and may not be feasible for facilities with limited resources. Depending on the turfgrass species and the anticipated duration of ice cover, doing nothing may be the best course of action—especially considering the

possibility of unintentional damage caused by shoveling or blowing snow off a putting green.

Just because other neighboring golf courses have decided to clean off their greens doesn't necessarily mean you should too. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to winter management, so don't be afraid to follow a unique plan for your property. Experience with a given site should guide decisions instead of simply following what everyone else is doing.

The same philosophy is true for golf facilities in the upper transition zone that rely upon covers to help retain soil warmth and protect bermudagrass putting greens from cold temperature winter injury. Deciding when to cover and uncover can vary by facility. Most turf managers establish a temperature threshold to determine when to cover. Covering bermudagrass putting greens when the forecast predicts a low of 25 degrees Fahrenheit has been the standard; but recent research has shown that, under certain scenarios, bermudagrass putting greens can survive even when covering is delayed until temperatures drop as low as 15 degrees Fahrenheit.

Although a lower temperature threshold can significantly reduce the number of covering events required and the total amount of time putting greens must be closed to play over the course of a winter, it may not be appropriate for many locations. North-facing slopes, areas exposed to wind and heavily shaded sites will require a much more cautious approach. As we get closer to spring, turfgrass cold tolerance begins to diminish, so using a lower temperature threshold now becomes even more risky. All it takes is one cold night to cause severe damage.

For more information on managing putting greens during winter please review the following USGA Green Section publications

[Snow Way](#)

[Putting Greens: Dealing with Snow and Ice Accumulations](#)

[When to Cover Bermudagrass Greens for the Winter](#)

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