Spring Time In Florida

By John Foy, regional director, Southeast Region

March 9, 2011

The opening of Major League Baseball preseason training camps and the PGA Tour coming to Florida are two more signs that spring has arrived. The return of warm temperatures and sunny, dry days has been favorable for the resumption of turf growth and recovery from typical winter-season course wear and damage. Yet, course management concerns, such as nematodes, mole crickets, bermudagrass stunt mites and a lack of rainfall are being encountered on recent Turf Advisory Service (TAS) visits.

Overwinter mole crickets have become active over the past couple of weeks, and typical tunneling damage is found on courses around South Florida.

The winter and spring months are typically the Florida dry season. However, below-average rainfall in 2010 resulted in state-wide deficits ranging from five to 20 inches for the past 12 months. This raises concerns about progressive salt level build-ups in putting green rootzones, even when good quality irrigation water sources are utilized. Periodically, conduct a flushing irrigation cycle to move salt accumulations out of the rootzone area so that this is not a growth-limiting factor. Venting with small-diameter, solid tines or a water-injection cultivation a day or two prior to a scheduled flushing irrigation cycle is recommended. While these operations cause minimal or no surface disruption, being able to work them into the schedule is a challenge at many courses during peak seasonal play.

In response to new root initiation, there is also a surge in plant parasitic nematode populations and activity in the late winter to spring. Plant parasitic nematodes have become much more of a concern throughout the state, and this

is especially the case with shallow-rooted ultradwarf bermudagrass putting greens. Based on product evaluation trials over the past year, the new product, Nortica, which is a strain of bacteria that protects roots from nematode damage, helps in the management of this soil- borne pest. Proper application timing is critical and should coincide with new root initiation. If you are considering using Nortica in your management program, treatments should be made as soon as possible in South Florida.

Another concern showing up in South Florida over the past couple of weeks that will progressively move north through the state, is our old friend the mole cricket. The tunneling activity of over-wintering mole crickets can be disruptive and damaging, and course damage is further increased by the foraging activity of armadillos, raccoons, and other animals. Adult mole crickets are difficult to control, but making labeled insecticide treatments in the late afternoon to early evening when they are close to the soil surface improves results. With each female that is controlled now, there will be 25 to 60 fewer eggs laid later in the spring.

Bermudagrass stunt mites cause a very distinctive "witches broom" damage pattern, and can also cause loss of turf. Fortunately, it is possible for the turf to outgrow stunt mite damage with an ongoing, sound turf management plan.

While far less common compared to nematodes and mole crickets, bermudagrass stunt mite damage recently has been found on a few golf courses and polo fields. Due to their extremely small size, it is difficult to find stunt mites in turf, but this is the only pest known to cause a distinctive damage pattern called witches brooming. Often, but not always, areas infested with stunt mites also exhibit a chlorotic bright yellow color followed by the development of the witches broom damage. Stunt mites live well protected within the leaf sheaths of the bermudagrass plant, and there are only a few insecticides labeled for control of the pest. Fortunately, a healthy and actively growing turf can tolerate and outgrow an infestation. Adhering to an ongoing, sound basic turf management program is key to successful pest management programs.

Annual TAS invoices have been mailed to all Florida golf courses that have taken a visit in the past five years. If you did not receive the invoice, or are interested in learning more about the TAS, please call our office, (772) 546-2620, or email jfoy@usga.org or tlowe@usga.org. Take advantage of a $600 savings discount by prepaying for the TAS visit prior to May 15th.

Southeast Region Agronomists:

John H. Foy, regional director – jfoy@usga.org

Patrick M O'Brien, agronomist – patobrien@usga.org

Todd Lowe, agronomist – tlowe@usga.org

Information on the USGA's Course Consulting Service

Contact the Green Section Staff