Build A House Out Of Bricks, Not Straw

By Steven Kammerer, regional director, Southeast Region | September 15, 2017

Most warm-season putting greens are established with sprigs. Treating the source field before harvesting springs can improve their establishment.

Sprigs are similar to seeds in that a clean and homogenous start is desired, especially when establishing putting greens. Dwarf and ultradwarf bermudagrass as well as seashore paspalum varieties used for golf course putting greens are primarily asexually propagated, so seed is not an option. Sprigs are preferred over sod for a number of reasons such as limiting the introduction of soil, organic matter and soil-borne pests.

Young plants, whether they emerge from seeds or sprigs, are tender and especially susceptible to pests. Fortunately, a number of products are labeled for treating seeds before planting. Treating seeds with various products can protect young seedlings from pests following germination. However, when planting treated seeds, do not exceed maximum seeding rates because doing so can result in the over application of active ingredient.

Comparing turfgrass to cotton may seem silly, but both cotton and turfgrass are most vulnerable to pests during their seedling stage. Most cotton farmers use treated seeds to protect their investment – now golf course superintendents have the ability to do the same. Unfortunately, there are no known active ingredients specifically labeled for treating sprigs.

So, does your sprig supplier treat for pests such as nematodes or diseases before harvesting? Endoparasitic nematodes like root-knot nematode can be present in sprigs even when washed of all soil. Fungal pathogens are even smaller than nematodes, and maintaining wet conditions to promote sprig establishment allows fungi to proliferate. It would be ideal to have sprigs that are treated like seeds to protect against these pests, but producers lack specifically labeled products and the specialty equipment required to treat sprigs after harvesting. Fortunately, there is an alternative.

One golf course in the South requested their sprig supplier treat the source field of bermudagrass with a broad-spectrum fungicide before harvesting sprigs. As a test, the sprig producer also supplied sprigs from a nearby, untreated field. The sprigs were planted side-by-side on a putting green for evaluation. The sprigs from the field treated with fungicide before harvest established almost three to four weeks ahead of the sprigs that came from the untreated field. The springs from the treated field also delayed the need for fungicide applications during establishment.

Saprophytic and opportunistic fungi can accelerate the senescence of harvested sprigs, delaying the establishment of young turfgrass plants. During your next project, be the smart pig and use clean, healthy sprigs. Even if golfers don't thank you for it, you may sleep better for years to come knowing your putting greens started as a house made out of bricks, not straw.

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