



Avoiding Death By A Thousand Cuts

By Todd Lowe, agronomist, Southeast Region | March 2, 2018



Trees can be silent killers that weaken turf and eventually contribute to rapid decline when other stress factors occur.

Sometimes turf loss occurs after one deep “cut” like drought, chemical burn or mechanical damage. Other times, it results from a combination of several small “cuts” that slowly weaken the turf over time. Shade, poor drainage and reduced air circulation all keep turf in a weakened state. Weak turf is left vulnerable to additional stresses that cumulatively can lead to turf loss.

Chronic stressors can cause subtle changes in turf growth, leading to reduced turf density or shallow roots. Oftentimes, these issues are not enough to cause visible damage or turf loss on their own, especially if maintenance practices can be altered to place less stress on turf. Increasing mowing heights, utilizing hand watering instead of overhead irrigation and making timely plant protectant applications help nurture stressed areas.

The art and science of turf management may be best appreciated when consistent turf quality is maintained on troublesome putting greens despite the negative effects of chronic stress factors. However, minor issues can quickly become severe problems when additional “cuts” occur. Poor weather, low mowing heights and excessive rolling are just a few factors that can damage weakened turf. When several stressors occur at the same time, it creates a perfect storm of events that can cause turf loss.

Hopefully, chronic stress factors can be identified and addressed before a perfect storm occurs. Trees and underbrush that reduce sunlight and air circulation around putting greens may need to be selectively pruned or cleared. Putting green drainage issues can be improved with aggressive cultivation or some subtle earthwork to remove collar dams.

Having a different set of eyes look for stress factors may shed light on potential problems. An unbiased evaluation from a [USGA Agronomist](#) can help you devise an effective plan to address any silent killers before they strike.

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