



# Golf's Great Cover-Up

*As I sit in our shop and look outside while "Billy," my wonder boss, sits on a beach somewhere near the equator, I wonder how our turf and ornamentals will come out of winter with good color and overall plant health. So far this winter season, we have not received adequate snow cover, and our turfgrass has been exposed to extremely low temperatures. As superintendents, we have a very large tool belt to manage our golf courses. Sometimes a few of these tools fall to the bottom of this so-called tool belt, and we just forget they are there. Turf covers, erosion-control blankets and weed barriers are a few tools we can utilize to give our turfgrass and ornamentals a better environment in which to grow.*

*... you cannot just cover a surface and forget about it. You must monitor how much germination and growth you are receiving ...*

During last season, Aurora Country Club underwent a small renovation to our driving range, chipping area and second hole. As most of you know, the fall months of last season were not the best time to start a renovation. And if you don't remember, let me refresh your memory. September had to be the hottest September on record (in my opinion) with consistent days at 90° or above. So basically, in a nutshell, turfgrass would not grow. October was just a cold and wet month, and November was the beginning of winter for most of us. And yes, once again, turfgrass would not grow.

Even though we did get germination, the temperatures were falling and I didn't know what to do with our new seedlings. Since my boss Billy (John Gurke) wanted me to really get the full experience of a grow-in, he allowed me to make most of the agronomic decisions for this renovation. Not knowing what to do, I asked Billy if there was anything that I could do to protect this new turf from death. He told me to break out the Evergreen turf covers and cover all the newly seeded tees and chipping green. Since I had no previous experience with turf covers, I asked Billy if he would assist me with the installation. (See above picture.)

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The first recommendation I would make regarding turf cover installation is that you should pick a day where the wind is less than 10 miles per hour. This makes for a much easier installation. Turf covers are very large and, as I experienced for the first time, they take a great amount of manpower to install and remove. Using sod staples, and our bodies to hold down the covers from blowing away, John and I finished covering three tee surfaces in about two hours. So imagine covering 18 greens and a whole lot more tees—this would take forever. I can't neglect to mention the fact that you need to remove the covers during the fall months if temperatures fluctuate higher. No, you cannot just cover a surface and forget about it. You must monitor how much germination and growth you are receiving, or you can create a greenhouse-like effect underneath the cover and when you uncover your turf in the springtime, you may find three inches of long rough to mow on a tee box. During last season, we only had to uncover the tee surfaces twice: once because they were getting too long and required mowing, and once when we observed algae in areas where seedlings were not germinating (sure, it's green, but not the kind of green we were looking for), so we uncovered to dry out the surface, and applied some Daconil to remedy the algae.

*What did I learn from the use of turf covers in a grow-in application? I learned that they can work if you have the manpower and time to manage them.*

Last week (late January) I went out to visit the covered tees and chipping green to take some photos for this article. I tried to pull up on the sides of the covers, only to find out that the staples were frozen solid. Ripping up one corner, I was amazed at what I found underneath—beautiful green grass that looked to still be growing in subfreezing weather. What did I learn from the use of turf covers in a grow-in application? I learned that they can work if you have the manpower and time to manage them. If you are interested in using turf covers for the first time, perhaps consider covering your worst green on the course in the late fall, and see what type of results you get in the spring (keeping in mind that *Poa annua* likes it under there, too).



Another product we utilized during the renovation was Futera Blanket—an erosion-control product designed for application over newly-seeded areas to prevent soil erosion and to act as surface insulation to keep soil temperatures higher in the late fall months. It can also be a lower-cost option to sodding erosion-prone areas (i.e., green, tee and bunker perimeters). We discussed the option of using Futera Blankets on the entire renovation project—not just the areas where there could potentially be erosion. But due to the added cost, we opted not to use it on the entire renovation. Installation of Futera and other rolled erosion-control products is very simple—you just unroll it over the seedbed and attach it to the soil with either biodegradable landscape spikes or wire staples. A few weeks after seeding the roughs and fairway, we noticed the germination rates were far higher in the areas where we used Futera. I believe this product outper-

formed our expectations—we had a dense cover of weed-free turf where it was used (at about half the cost of sodding), with very sparse germination in uncovered areas. One negative aspect of Futera Blanket is the plastic mesh that holds the material together. Once you receive adequate germination and the turf is ready to mow, this plastic mesh can become caught up in the reels or blades of the mower, causing a difficult first cut. If Billy and I could change one decision regarding the renovation, it would have been to buy more Futera Blanket to apply to all seeded areas.



Weed barrier is a product that I had never used until this year. This product is a thin black fabric you apply over the top of the soil in a landscape bed to prevent weed encroachment. I tried this material out for the first time on a landscape side job over the summer. The advantages of this product include the fact that it does cut down on the amount of weeds that germinate in the bed; but I did find out that once you cover the material with mulch or even gravel, the weeds still germinate above the barrier. On another job, I tried using less mulch to cover up the fabric, but then I had problems with the material being pulled up and showing through. In theory, a barrier over the soil to deter weed germination and growth seems beneficial; but too many

problems can occur. For example, every time you wish to add another plant, or even remove plants, the barrier becomes an issue. The fabric rips and tears, almost making you want to remove all the material and start from scratch.

So here I am, peering out the window once again (while pondering visions of monsoons and hurricanes ruining Billy's vacation) and thinking of the warmer weather that will soon take residence in the Chicagoland area. Thankfully, it appears Mother Nature has finally graced us with her own version of a turf cover (SNOW), probably only temporarily given the peculiarities of this winter.



However, when snow cover is not in the hand dealt to us by Mother Nature, there are many different manufacturers of turf covers, erosion blankets and weed barriers with their own brand names and proclaimed differences to serve an equal purpose. In my own opinion, turf covers are tools we all should reconsider using to combat the type of winter weather we have received over the last few years. Erosion-control blankets are one of the best tools we have as superintendents during a grow-in situation, and should be utilized as extensively as our budgets permit. Weed barrier and other weed-inhibitor products, on the other hand, have their place in the homeowner market, but from a golf course perspective—where the resources for intensive landscape bed maintenance can be lacking—are best left on the shelf at your local home improvement store, and not in your “tool belt” at all.



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