

FEATURE I

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Going Brown, a Poor Message

Just when the world is appreciating the concept of “green,” our industry seems to want to go brown! When it comes to golf, the newly coined phrase, “brown is beautiful,” concerns me. The idea is being sold based on the assumption that “brown” turf requires fewer inputs, saves money, is better for the environment, and plays better. A few key issues will drive this topic for some time to come. The industry is trying to break itself from the “Augusta effect,” where all plants are growing beautifully, and the look of perfection is seen in all elements within the landscape. “Over grooming is over spending,” is the phrase often associated with Augusta-like conditions. Some golfers enjoy the beautified landscape enhanced with flowers and shrubs. Others feel it detracts from the purity of the game. The fact is most budgets can’t afford the intensity of care golf-scapes like Augusta’s require. In many areas around the country, the drive to “go brown” is about water conservation and restrictions. In other areas the concern is water quality and the application of inputs, such as Nitrogen and Phosphorous. Many scientific studies have concluded that inputs, when used properly, pose extremely low risks on turf. However, governing bodies often overlook these studies and propose broad bans. The expense in over-seeding dormant turf is another driving force behind the idea that brown is good. Lastly, many of the better golfers enjoy the dry, firm and fast surface that thinning turf offers, because it is similar to the courses where the game originated. Regardless of the reasons driving this new trend, I feel it threatens long-term revenues, playability, the health of the facility, and the environment.

The challenge with “brown is beautiful” or “brown is the new green” is that it can work in certain areas and be devastating in others. Yes, one can argue that over-seeding dormant turf in order to maintain the green look is spending money poorly. The game can be played on dormant turf, and the grass will grow again when conditions are favorable. There are grasses that can survive when pushed into dormancy, like the Bluegrass common in Midwest lawns and prevalent in our inner roughs. During hot, dry summers, un-irrigated rough often turns brown and gets very thin. Unless the stressful growing conditions become extreme, the turf can still be playable. However, these are the areas where we actively fight weeds and have to make turf repairs. The problem is, not all



grasses tolerate dormancy; some, like *Poa annua*, simply die. Bentgrass tolerates some brief level of dormancy, but typically dies under the added stress of putting green conditions. The variability in tolerance to stress and seasonal hardiness within turf species is confusing to the non-professional. Much of what a turf professional learns is directly related to preventing brown, stressed turf during the growing season. It has been documented that healthy, growing turf is the best defense against many pests, diseases, weeds, and wear. Typically, the grasses used in our climate on greens, tees, and fairways are *Poa annua* (considered a weed by many because it lacks winter and summer hardiness and invades the turf with its prolific seed production) and bentgrass.

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We try to favor bentgrass because it is a hardier species that tolerates weather extremes better than Poa, but Poa eventually becomes part of the turfgrass stand. These grasses, when starved for both water and nutrients, become stressed and vulnerable to some potentially devastating diseases. We are reminded of this from time to time during stressful growing conditions. Rumors quickly circulate when turf dies in key playing areas at a course. Turf loss can compromise membership retention, playability, rounds played, revenues, and the course's overall reputation.

Sustainability is another buzz word used a lot today. In our climate, with the grasses that we use, turf that continues to grow and function offers sustainable playing conditions. Stressed "brown turf" will not be capable of tolerating wear from play over time. The stand of turf will thin, allowing the surface to turn into barren soil. The potential short-term savings in going brown will be offset when additional resources are required to bring these areas back to healthy, playable turf.

Healthy, actively growing turf, which is defined by the plants' ability to photosynthesize and characterized by green color, offers far more environmental benefit than "brown" turf. The plants ability to cool the surface, filter the water and air, and anchor the soil is greatest when the turf is healthy and active.

The current economy is straining maintenance budgets. As the industry responds and budgets are reduced, golf-scapes will change at many courses. In the big picture, some feel the change will be better for the game because it will lower the cost and make golf affordable for more people. I have seen standards change during my career. We now have sophisticated irrigation systems that almost mimic rain rather than the old, manual quick-coupler systems. Mowing heights on greens, tees, and fairways are less than half of what they were just three decades ago. This has been driven by the quest for fast, firm playing conditions. Managing these ultra-low mowing heights requires a fleet of equipment, an arsenal of inputs, and an army of staff to monitor the turf's life support systems, which mimic an intensive care unit. Bunkers, once considered hazards, now receive a level of attention that rivals what we give to finely managed turf. Some insist that golfer demand drove these changes. Others think it was superintendents demonstrating their skills. Regardless of what instigated the changes, these high standards are challenging our budgets today.

The key is balance. We must balance the turf's health, playability, economics, and environmental concerns to meet reasonable expectations and function. In short, this is what Superintendents are trained to do. The millions of dollars spent in research to better understand and manage turf's ecology and improve its playability are wasted when plant health is ignored. The training, tools, and resources that allow practitioners to grow healthy turf have little value when plant function is allowed to fail. "Going brown" in our climate is misunderstood. I feel it is a poor message that could lead to unattractive consequences for the golf course. **-OC**

