

The Gator Growls

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Preparing for winter on Southwest Florida golf courses is carried out in many different ways. In fact, as many different ways as there are superintendents. The difference is not as much in the superintendent, or in the technology that is available to him, but rather it is in the property which they manage.

Within a 20 square mile radius around Naples there are approximately 30 golf courses and each has its own maintenance programs designed to solve its own particular problems. Many of these maintenance differences are created by Mother Nature herself. I will not try to list every one, but here are a few:

- 1) Location in respect to the Gulf of Mexico
- 2) Elevation
- 3) Predominate winds and weather patterns

Another set of obstacles that make maintenance practices vary from course to course are physical in nature, a few of them are:

- 1) The kind of soil used during construction
- 2) Adequate or inadequate drainage
- 3) A well maintained and efficient irrigation system
- 4) The type of grass being maintained.

Budgets are a very important factor. A superintendent must work within the financial limitations placed on him.

Within the three major groups that are listed, some sub-grouping does occur, and they deserve a closer look. Location: Here on the Gulf coast night-time temperatures vary as much as 10°, and in this sub-tropical climate 10° can make a world of difference. These differences can occur within the same 20 square mile area mentioned earlier. Example: 32° = freezing and frost, where 42° = no frost. When a superintendent is fortunate to have a course within a mile or so of the beach, his night-time temperatures are more moderate and ocean breezes help keep frost from forming. More inland courses can vary in night temperature also, but for a different reason. Elevation plays an important role as colder air tends to settle in lower swamplands, while the Pine and Palmetto ridges stay a few degrees warmer. Natural vegetation can contribute to cold pockets as trees tend to create a windbreak and let cooler air settle around green, tee and fairways carved out of heavy wooded areas.

Techniques used during construction and types of soil used account for difference in maintenance practices also. Two courses within this 20 sq. mi. area were built on solid rock,

using the small amount of sand and soil found on-site to cover huge amounts of rock blasted out of lakes and canal systems needed for water storage. Courses built on and out of rock have a different set of problems to solve than their neighbor maybe just a mile or two away. Other courses constructed in a Cypress swamp or on Pine and Palmetto ridges have a different set of problems. Financial budgets account for major differences between maintenance programs and a superintendent should realize that a budget reflects the desires of the membership or managing entity involved. All too often good members with good budgets and a capable superintendent are saddled with bad property in a poor location, with inadequate irrigation, little or no drainage, and are expected to make a first class A#1 silk purse out of 18 or 36 sows ears.

Many courses differ in their winter programs because of the type of Bermuda grass now on the greens. Example: One older club in the Naples area still has Everglades #1 Bermuda for putting surface, while three of the newer clubs have used dwarf grass. However, most clubs elect to use 328 Bermuda. Each one of these varieties react differently to cold weather.

Here at Royal Poinciana we do not overseed for winter greens but we do make a lot of preparations for cold weather.

We start early in the fall taking soil samples for nematodes, PH and fertility levels. Based on these reports we make sure the stress factor is as low as possible going into cold weather by correcting any problem the samples might reveal.

We aerify at least twice using the Ryan greenair with 5/8 inch tines. We topdress heavy each time the greens are aerified, using sharp sand, and working the sand into the extra large holes. These sand filled holes punched through the thatch layer into the native soil encourage roots to grow into the warmer depth of the soil.

We order in wetting agents to be sprayed on greens and tees to prevent dew from forming when temperatures dip down to 40° or below. We spray greens with liquid fertilizer and mirco nutrients formulated to be absorbed through the plant leaves.

We change our fertilizer ratio to allow more potassium to stimulate root and stem growth. When everything has been done that can be done to lower the stress factor and make the turf as healthy as possible — we pray!!! ■