

Cooling down bent in the hot South

David Lowe and Dave Smith keep grass alive and neighbors happy

BY PETER BLAIS

There were enough complaints about the noise for The Plantation at Ponte Vedra Golf Club superintendent David Lowe to be concerned.

A handful of nearby residents said the 3- by 3-foot square fans blowing across the club's bentgrass greens were loud and unsightly.

But if you're going to keep bentgrass alive in northern Florida, you need something to keep the air circulating when summer temperatures and relative humidity both approach 100.

What to do?

Following a tip, Lowe and general manager Wayne Sloan visited Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas, where the superintendent had rigged up a smaller, air conditioner-type blower next to his bentgrass greens.

"It was much quieter. But it didn't work too well. I think they were too small and too high off the ground," remembered Lowe.

But Lowe was intrigued and took the idea to Plantation head mechanic Dave Smith. Together, they devised a way to lower a similar 30- by 24-inch blower within 14 inches of the ground. Smith attached the blower to a pole that was in turn linked to a 110-volt motor allowing the 6,500 cfm (cubic feet per minute) blower to oscillate in a 180-degree arc.

"It cut down the noise to almost nothing compared to the large, chicken-coop type fans we had been using. And it covered about 2,000 square feet" Lowe said.



Head mechanic Dave Smith shows off one of the greens-cooling fans at Ponte Vedra Golf Club. Smith rigged up the blower to oscillate in order to keep the bentgrass cool growing in the northern Florida heat.

Lowe bought 14 additional blowers, at \$550 apiece, and had Smith rig them up to oscillating motors. Lowe then placed the units within 30 inches of several greens in early June and let them run 24 hours a day through late September.

"They've been tremendous," Lowe said. "The grass is much healthier and vibrant. And it's helped root development. Overall, the greens where we used the blowers are in superb health."

Plantation was one of just six Florida courses maintaining bentgrass greens as recently as last spring, said John Foy, director of the United States Golf Association Green Section's Florida Region office.

The extra labor, inconvenience and expense of maintaining bentgrass compared to Bermudagrass — Lowe pegged the added cost at \$44,000 annually at Plantation — prompted Admiral's Cove Country Club in Jupiter to convert from bentgrass to Bermudagrass last summer, Foy said.

Golden Eagle Golf Course in Tallahassee will follow suit this summer, he added. That will leave Florida with just four bentgrass green facilities — Loxahatchee Club in Jupiter, Reserve Golf & Country Club in Ft. Pierce, Isleworth Golf & Country Club in Windermere and Plantation.

"It's becoming more difficult and more expensive to maintain bentgrass

ON THE GREEN

in Florida. There are things like fans. It takes a lot more hand irrigation labor. Your fungicide costs are increased. It's hard," Foy said.

With the trend away from bentgrass, Foy said he was pleased with Plantation's efforts to maintain the cool-season turf.

"Bentgrass courses have been using the bigger fans the last four or five years," Foy said. "They might be interested in this new, quieter blower."

Since fans and blowers were both used last summer, Lowe is unsure whether the blowers will result in a savings on the \$5,000 annual electric cost attributable to the fans.

Lowe said he plans to replace all the large fans with blowers next summer. While recognizing that some residents will never be happy with anything but grass and sand around the greens, Lowe said, "they definitely prefer the blowers to the fans."

As for the golfers, many prefer bentgrass to Bermuda, despite the added costs.

"A lot of the members grew up playing on bentgrass up North. That's what they want down here, too," Lowe said.

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