

The great coverup

Course cover sales rise in wake of killer frosts

BY PETER BLAIS

Turf cover manufacturers are expecting sales to increase this fall, especially at transition zone courses where last winter's record cold temperatures caused extensive turf damage.

Turf covers have grown in popularity over the past five to 10 years as a way to protect cool-season grasses, like bentgrass, on windswept Northern and Central courses from desiccation (drying out, often resulting in death of the plant).

But increasingly, superintendents in the transition zone between cold and tropical climates are discovering covers can also protect warm-season turf, like Bermudagrass, especially on those rare occasions when the mercury drops well below the freezing mark and the wind howls.

"We've already seen a substantial sales increase in the South because of the fears of another cold winter," said Emory Hunter, sales manager with Washington-based Davenport Seed Corp., the manufacturer of Warren's Terra Shield turf cover. "The Terra Shield was very successful in protecting greens throughout the South."

"I don't know of a single course that lost a (Bermudagrass) green last winter that was covered with our Typar Style 3301 cover," added Gary Anderson, market development account executive with Reemay, Inc. of Old Hickory, Tenn. "We're expecting good sales this year because of the terrible freeze last winter."

Ironically, while Typar 3301 helps insulate turf from wind and cold, the black cover is primarily designed to block sunlight.

This prevents grass from warming on an unseasonably warm winter day, temporarily emerging from dormancy, and sapping the plant of strength and nutrients it needs to green up in spring, Anderson explained.

The desiccation protection was an additional benefit during last winter's frigid conditions.

"The black cover helps insulate the grass from the wind and cold, but also keeps it from getting too warm," Anderson said.

Reemay also manufactures the more traditional white (the company prefers the term 'natural') Typar Style 3201 cover. This type of lightweight (1.9 ounces per square yard compared to three ounces for black) cover, designed primarily to protect cold-season grasses from desiccation, remains the big seller for turf cover companies.

"Most of our business is still in lightweight covers for Northern and Central courses," said Anderson. "Covers aren't generally used on courses below the transition zone, except maybe to help grow in a newly sodded area."

Greens on elevated, windswept hilltops benefit most from turf covers, according to John Roberts, a University of New Hampshire associate professor of plant biology, who has researched turf covers the past seven years.



Course covers are being tested at the University of New Hampshire, where researchers have found their main benefit is protection from the wind. Covers have relatively poor heat retention, says UNH Professor John Roberts.

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— Professor John Roberts

"The main protection is from the wind," the UNH professor said. "Covers have relatively poor heat retention. They only keep the turf between one and three degrees warmer overnight, although that can increase to 10 to 15 degrees in the afternoon."

"So they have little effect on direct low-temperature kill. But if the wind is blowing, they can help a lot."

Ken Flisek, superintendent at The Woodlands in Falmouth, Maine, agrees. "They're good to protect greens from desiccation. But I don't think it helps with the ice (direct low temperature kill) problem."

Still, the extra few degrees of warmth provided by Terra Shield "made the difference" at some Southern and transition zone courses last year, said Hunter.

"They're especially helpful in the spring, when you go through the thaw-freeze-thaw cycles," he added. "When the grass begins coming out of dormancy, water gets in the tissue, freezes and ruptures the cell tissue. The cover reduces the possibility of freezing."

Covers are generally placed over greens in the late fall and removed about three weeks after the snow melts. They must be securely fastened to the ground to prevent wind from getting underneath "or you can end up with something that looks like a huge kite in the nearest tree," said Anderson.

To hold down the cover, Reemay recom-

mends a 3/8-inch concrete bar laid around the exterior of the fabric. Cover and bars are secured to the turf with U-shaped metal staples passing through fabric and turf every two to three feet.

"That system has effectively held covers down in winds over 45 miles per hour," Anderson said.

If securely fastened to the ground, today's synthetic covers shield greens from the drying effects of wind and cold while allowing beneficial sunlight, water and air to penetrate.

"If a superintendent fertilizes properly, the cover allows for quicker release of nitrogen and quicker green-up in the spring," Roberts said.

According to Anderson, the additional warmth provided by covers on Northern courses gets grass growing between one and three weeks earlier than on uncovered greens in the spring. They also allow seeds to germinate later into the fall and early winter, improving their absorption of systemic chemicals against diseases like snow mold.

Roberts said four or five covers on the market are very similar in performance. However, there are no laws requiring a cover to meet certain criteria, as with pesticides.

"Not all of them are good," Roberts said. "But those that have been around three to five years and have proven effective are very reliable."

It costs about \$300 for a (white) cover the size of the average 6,000-square-foot green (\$500 for the black cover), said Anderson. Terra Shield also costs about \$500 for the typical green, added Hunter.

Covers can last from three to five years if stored properly out of the sun.

"Covers are not a panacea," said Roberts. "They're additional weapons in a superintendent's arsenal. They are beneficial in certain situations."

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England duplicates student turf program

Top turf students from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands recently completed the European Turf Care Seminar in Manchester, England.

Sponsored by Jacobsen Division of Textron, and organized by the U.K.'s Institute of Groundsmanship, the program brought together 25 students for three days of intensive, hands-on education.

As with its U.S. counterpart, Jacobsen's

College Student Seminar, the European program allows students to learn from experts in the students' field of study. This year's program included lecturers from the United Kingdom's golf and sports turf industries as well as field trips to horse racing's Haydock Park Race Course and Manchester United's soccer stadium.

Students were given an overview of the U.S. golf industry by John Peirsol of Lake City

(Fla.) Community College.

The European Turf Care Seminar was the second one jointly conducted by Jacobsen and the IoG, and the first to include students from outside the United Kingdom.

Jacobsen's College Student Seminar, which served as the model for the European seminar, has been held for the past 23 years at the company's headquarters in Racine, Wis.

Summit

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president of Wilson, Miller, Barton & Peek; Henry J. Fishkind, president of Fishkind & Assoc.; Jack Mathis, president of Golf Plan Group; Richard Orman, vice president of Public Golf Corp.; Donald E. Rhodes, vice president of golf finance with Textron Financial Group; Doug Winter, president of Doug Winter & Cos.

W. Clifton Smallridge, superintendent at Royal Poinciana Country Club; Joseph Towry and John Parnell of the St. Petersburg Public Utilities Department.

Also, Henry Dean, executive director of

St. Johns River Water Management District; Raymond Miller, chief executive officer of Wilson, Miller, Barton & Peek; Larry Hawkins of GEO Science.

Also, Rick Jacobson of Jack Nicklaus Golf Services; Mike Dasher of Arthur Hills & Assoc.; Bob Cupp of Cupp Design Inc.; Ron Andres of Grand Harbour; Richard Norton, general manager of NGF Consulting Inc.; and Howard Searcy, president of Howard L. Searcy Engineers.

The summit gets underway Thursday at 10 a.m. with the Florida Golf Council board of directors meeting, followed by a golf

tournament, conference registration and a cocktail reception at the Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress.

Speakers, educational sessions and panel discussions dominate Friday's schedule, which begins at 8:30 a.m. and continues until 4:45 p.m.

The event concludes Saturday with a final speaker at 8:30 a.m., a roundtable discussion on the future of golf in Florida and a wrap-up session.

The conference fee is \$425. To register or obtain more information call 407-688-0800.