

Sow them late and reap the benefits early

Maine superintendent finds that dormant-seeded bentgrass sprouts earlier and stronger

By Peter Blais

He thought it was ridiculous. But the bank insisted. Seed the last four holes before winter or no more construction money.

Falmouth (Maine) Country Club superintendent Kevin Ross had lived in the Pine Tree State a good portion of his life and knew temperatures in early November were too cold for bentgrass seeds to germinate. He had never tried dormant seeding (seeding when soil temperatures are too cold for germination) and didn't know if the seeds would survive the Southern Maine winter.

But the bank was calling the shots and the new course needed the cash if it wanted to stay on schedule. Grudgingly, Ross planted the remaining holes.

The results were dramatic. The dormant-seeded holes germinated very early in the spring of 1988 and a fine stand of turf resulted. Soon they were in better shape than the holes seeded early enough for fall germination. In fact, much of the seed that germinated the previous fall didn't survive the winter.

"I was against the original dormant seeding," recalled Ross, pointing at a plug of dormant-seeded turf with inch-long roots on a recent late-April morning. "I was amazed when we had grass coming up in early April. You usually can't



Falmouth Country Club superintendent Kevin Ross (left) displays a section of the club's driving range that was dormant-seeded with bentgrass. A close-up view of the healthy turf in a tee area is highlighted (right). Ross believes dormant-seeded turf areas come up earlier and healthier than areas planted in early autumn.



get grass to germinate around here until the middle of May."

Ross was so taken with the results he tried it elsewhere. That fall his crew aerified and dormant-seeded some weaker fairways. They also dormant-seeded divots on tees and a driving range target green. The results were the same.

"While some fellow superintendents were re-seeding winter-damaged greens with bentgrass and getting poor germination results, I was noticing excellent germination in our

experimental areas. These results were noticed from early- to mid-April, with soil temperatures of only 40 to 45 degrees," Ross wrote for Seed Research of Oregon for which he is an advisory committee member.

Bentgrass generally germinates when temperatures reach about 55 degrees, "or at least that's what they teach you in turf school," he added.

In the fall of 1989, Ross' crew groove seeded a practice range tee in two directions. Germination occurred in soil temperatures between 38 and 43 degrees.

"The dormant-seeded areas were mowable before before I had germination from spring seeding on some winter-damaged greens," he wrote.

Ross now routinely dormant seeds greens, tee divots and trouble spots on fairways as an

insurance policy against winter damage. To help the process, he fertilizes the areas with a slow-release fertilizer. He minimizes erosion of newly seeded areas with mulch, turf covers or erosion blankets. Turf covers are moved from greens to other dormant-seeded areas as soon as possible in the spring. Time permitting, he treats the areas with a quick-release fertilizer in early spring.

The \$5,000 annual price tag for seed, materials and labor is a small price to pay for healthy turf that comes up four to six weeks early, particularly in an area with a short growing season, Ross said.

Dormant seeding could also prove useful on courses converting from *Poa annua* to bentgrass, Ross said. This could be accomplished in two ways.

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Dormant seeding

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Poa with bentgrass in late summer (when Poa is at its strongest stage) to achieve a greater bentgrass population, Ross suggests waiting until late fall and dormant seeding. The dormant-seeded bentgrass should germinate in early spring when Poa is at its weakest stage.

Second, using Round Up before the Poa goes dormant, followed by dormant seeding of bentgrass, can help the bentgrass population.

"I'd try experimenting with a conversion program on a few par-3 fairways first to see how it works," Ross advised. "Bentgrass can get the best of Poa in the spring when Poa is basically just lying there."

The best time to dormant seed varies with the region, Ross said. In Southern Maine, Nov. 8-12 works best. Later seeding resulted in later germination come spring.

Ross isn't certain why dormant seeding works. He theorizes that the first two steps in the germination process — water absorption by the seed followed by the swelling that initiates biochemical and morphological events — are accomplished in the fall and early winter. The primed seed then freezes with the enzyme and carbohydrate processes that occur during actual germination going dormant. Come spring, the partially germinated seed has a three- to five-week jump on spring-planted seeds.