



Justin Wheeler, superintendent-in-training with the U.S. Air Force, works at Wrenwoods Golf Course at Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina. He can be reached at justin@justinwheeler.com or 843-297-0063.

FROM BENT TO BERMUDA

This year, I've experienced an incredible change and learning opportunity by moving from the Midwest to Charleston, S.C., to take a superintendent-in-training position at Wrenwoods Golf Course at Charleston Air Force Base.

What a difference! I had to learn quickly about life in the South, minor seasonal changes and the needs of a turf I've never worked with before. I wondered how I was going to learn all the new information and master it quickly. So, I attended a short course at Texas A&M and learned to use resources at local universities and the USGA Green Section. I also listened carefully to local superintendents and sales reps. However, there was still a lot that would be different and interesting.

The bentgrass growth curve is high during the spring and fall and dwindles during the summer months. On the other hand, Bermudagrass ramps up in April or May and slows again in October or November, depending on evening temperatures. In the Midwest, we used to fertilize heavily in the fall and spring, as well as spoon-feed throughout the summer. When managing Bermudagrass, it feels like you're applying too much fertilizer in the middle of death weather for turfgrass. It's amazing how much fertilizer Bermudagrass can handle and how well it responds so quickly.

Up North, we were babying the turf. Although there's a need for verticutting and deep thatching, it was difficult to do because of play considerations and how well the turf might respond to the damage. I think of Bermudagrass as the sadistic sibling that enjoys the punishment. Granted, the different varieties of Bermudagrass lend themselves to different amounts of management. The newer ultradwarfs need much more maintenance but are less intrusive than the older varieties such as 328 and Tifdwarf.

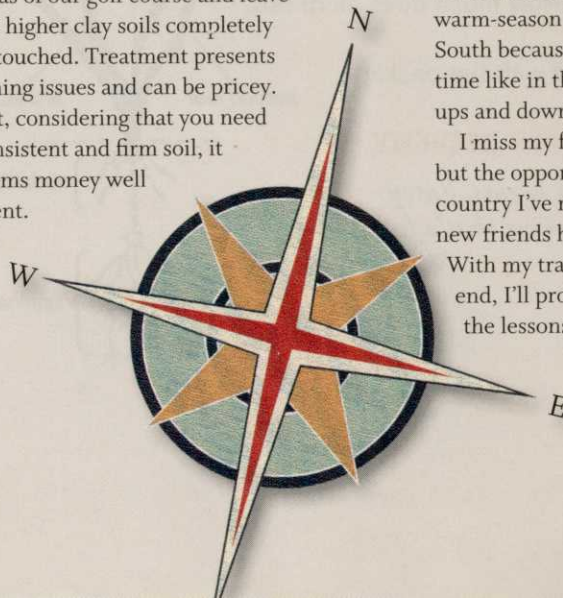
Another big difference is water management. I could count on one hand how many times I've had to drag a hose to water hot spots on a green. I was told a rule of

thumb is to wait until you think you need to water, then wait about two more days and then run the sprinklers.

Also, I can probably count on two hands how many times we've had to spray fungicides. You trade fungicides for herbicides and insecticides. With the extended growing season, every weed known to man will come up and needs to be dealt with eventually. Usually, a good fall and spring preemergent program will deal with the majority, but you might find yourself spraying about as often as if you were on a preventive fungicide program up North.

It's a good idea to know who to ask and trust with questions. Don't be afraid of not knowing all the answers.

Insects are ravenous in the South. I had heard horror stories about mole crickets up North. These little pains will live just under the soil surface and munch roots, loosening the soil and making surrounding areas soft underfoot. They seem to favor sandy soil, and I marvel at how they only attack some areas of our golf course and leave the higher clay soils completely untouched. Treatment presents timing issues and can be pricey. But, considering that you need consistent and firm soil, it seems money well spent.



And overseeding ... imagine trying to grow in an entire golf course every year, then killing the grass and trying to get your base grass to come back. Many superintendents verticut deeply and scalp their Bermudagrass to get the new seed down into the soil. After getting the new grass in and looking good for about six months, they have to spray it out or let the heat kill it. Bermudagrass doesn't like shade or competition, so this transition period is critical to summer and early fall conditions. The positive side of this is that ryegrass is relatively cheap and can be seeded again into weak or heavy traffic areas such as tee boxes.

Despite the differences, there are similarities between cool- and warm-season turfgrass, such as the need for basic nutrients and water. Like so many people have said, growing grass is just a part of the job. Still, it's a new area and set of rules. It's a good idea to know who to ask and trust with questions. Don't be afraid of not knowing all the answers. I've made many phone calls to local college professors, USGA turf agronomists, sales reps and other local superintendents asking what their opinions are and what others are doing. Getting involved immediately in a local associations might sound a bit overwhelming when you're new to the area, but the contacts and friends made surely will be a welcome helping hand.

Some who make the move I've made say they would never go back to bentgrass, while others last only a few years growing warm-season turf. It can be tough in the South because there's not really a down time like in the North. Everything has its ups and downs.

I miss my friends that I left up North, but the opportunity to see part of the country I've never seen before and make new friends has made this move enjoyable. With my training program coming to an end, I'll probably be moving again, taking the lessons I've learned here along with me. Grass is grass, you will learn how to manage it if you learn to use your resources. **GCI**