

Alternatives to overseeding

Budget cuts and increased labor costs have made more superintendents wonder whether overseeding is the right choice.

By David McPherson

Overseeding has side effects that become evident when transitioning back to Bermudagrasses. Weak areas may take a few weeks to a couple months to recover.

Traditionally, in the fall, golf courses in warmer climates have overseeded their Bermudagrass (which goes dormant in the winter) with ryegrass. This keeps the course green during the colder winter months. This maintenance practice has its advantages and disadvantages. The obvious benefit is the aesthetics of mowing patterns that appeal to many golfers or club members. Another benefit is playability, as ryegrass provides fluffy turf for additional golf ball support. Unfortunately, these benefits have side effects that become evident the following summer when transitioning back to Bermudagrasses. Depending on weather patterns, weak areas may take a few weeks to a couple of months to properly recover. Overseeding annually also provides plenty of food for nematode survival during the cooler months.

Budget cuts, and the increased labor costs associated with overseeding, have made more and more superintendents wonder whether overseeding is the right choice. When you choose to overseed, you commit to more of everything such as water, fertilizer, labor, hours on the mowers and chemicals.

“Each course is different, but it comes down to the question: can you make an overseed budget that can show a profit?” explains Anthony Williams, director of golf course



and resort grounds at Stone Mountain Golf Club in Stone Mountain, Ga., just outside Atlanta.

“There is no doubt that overseeding looks good during that wet/transition period in March and April, but while golfers may be more complimentary of the aesthetics of the course it does not necessarily translate to more revenue,” Williams says.

Williams, who has worked in the Atlanta golf market for 24 years, overseeded consistently throughout the 1990s. Then, one year he chose not to overseed, so the course could complete an irrigation project; the results changed his maintenance practices.

“We saw rounds remain consistent, so we began experimenting with some other strategies,” says Williams, who won the 2010 President’s Award for Environmental Stewardship by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. “The results were simple. We could no longer justify overseeding.”

Dr. Leah Brilman, director of research and technical services at the Seed Research of Oregon, says in resort areas such as where Williams works, or in places where there are a lot of snowbirds, the aesthetics of an overseeded golf course and the expectations of the golfers is the critical factor to deciding whether or not to overseed.

“Individual courses have reduced the area

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overseeded with some success, but others find that the expectation, when competing for the winter golf dollar, is to play on green grass,” she says. “If you don’t have green grass and the guy down the road has green grass, you may lose golf dollars. It’s all about revenue.”

Greenkeepers need to also weigh what time of year their courses see the most rounds. “Often, agronomists state, you will have a stronger Bermudagrass strand in the summer without winter overseeding, but if only a fraction of your play is during the summer should summer turf strength be the deciding factor?” Brilman says.

Further south, along Florida’s Gulf Coast, Allen Brissenden, CGCS, is one superintendent, who like Williams, has seen great results from not overseeding. At Dunedin Golf Club where he is the superintendent, he hasn’t overseeded for the past two years.

“The Bermudagrass has got stronger and the ease of weed control definitely shows,” he says. “According to my GM, we have not seen any loss in revenue. We have been able

to fill the golf course as long as the weather is good. This past winter was unusually cold, and although grass slowed to a standstill, we were only straw brown for about two weeks.”

Before an extreme cold snap, Brissenden paints his greens lightly with Green Lawngr, which he says lasts about two weeks. He also fertilizes more frequently on his tees and fairways to moderate the plant temperatures and stimulate growth.

“Not overseeding does not necessarily reduce your budget,” he adds. “In fact, depending on weather patterns, it may end up costing more. But, agronomically, it has been a sound decision and most of my members agree. Temperatures rarely stay cold for long, so the grasses never go into full dormancy.”

To counter the effects of not overseeding, Brissenden increases his fertilization rates and uses wetting agents to maintain turf color and acceptable playing conditions.

What if you still plan to overseed? Are there alternatives you can try that may be better for the environment and cost less? Brilman and



her team at the Seed Research of Oregon are always looking into new seed varieties and studying the past to understand what still might work today. They've been looking at using other seed species in an overseeding mix such as chewing fescue.

"I looked back at old literature by Dr. James Beard, the guru in turf, who found in its seedling state that bentgrass didn't get its

roots deep enough into the thatch, which made it easier to transition than a ryegrass," Brillman says. "We have a grad student looking at water requirements when you are first seeding grass species. A lot of the ones we know are more drought tolerant when they are seedlings. People need to look at these options. We assume certain things that we have not verified through research, but we



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can't just ignore what was done 20 to 30 years ago because sometimes you get some new clues from it."

Brilman adds greenkeepers shouldn't take an all-or-nothing approach. There are alternatives if you get creative. If you are cutting back, change the seeding rate or maybe just overseed the landing zones. "This gives you the best of both worlds," she says. "Try turning your course into a target golf experience by overseeding and greening it up only where golfers typically land. I know other superintendents who have overseeded just the rough and not the fairways."

Out on the west coast, Jim Alwine, superintendent at Stockton Golf & Country Club in California – the home to PGA Tour player and former U.S. Amateur champion Ricky Barnes – says they didn't overseed last year. The biggest reason was cost. He figures they saved \$35,000 by not overseeding – which included the cost of seed, the reduced need of fertilization and the associated labor costs.

Stockton G&CC also booked more tournaments during a time when the course was normally closed for overseeding – bringing in extra revenue. The other big reason Alwine chose not to overseed was members were upset over the course being closed during the fall – a prime playing time. And, with an older membership, having six weeks of cart path-only golf would restrict them from playing even when the course was open. When Alwine arrived at Stockton, he thought they needed to overseed just to have something to play on since most of their course is below sea level, with levies surrounding it.

"I proposed we didn't overseed for the health of the golf course," he says. "Bermudagrass is stronger and we don't get much play

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in the winter, so we are going to get softer whether there is ryegrass out there or not. So, I said, 'Why take away the best time of the year to golf for the time that sees the least play?' Financially, it made."

Alwine also let the *Poa* come into his fairways, so there was still turf to play on in the winter months, rather than making members play on mud. When the heat comes around in the spring the *Poa* fades quicker than the ryegrass traditionally did. "It worked out well," he says. "It was spotty in areas, but all in all, members told me they couldn't tell that I didn't overseed."

Leaving the last word to Williams, he says these days it's all about the bottom line. "I remember a time when overseeding was considered the cost of doing business. Those days are over. We evaluate this issue each year and balance the return on investment with the golfers' true expectation." **GCI**

David McPherson is a freelance writer based in Toronto.

The argument for and against NOT overseeding

Advantages of not overseeding:

- Savings on cost of seed/labor/energy
- No spring transition – can sustain a stronger strand of warm season grasses
- Water conservation (i.e. less water is used to establish and maintain ryegrass)
- Uninterrupted fall play – play can continue as normal
- Ease of weed control – better control of all types of weeds
- Nematode control – environmental factors that control nematodes are temperatures and food; overseeding produces lots of roots for nematodes to feed on
- No continuous mowing – crew members can work on aesthetics or projects
- No unsightly tracking of ryegrass

Advantages of overseeding:

- Aesthetics – No lush green color or mowing patterns
- Wear – Some areas will get thin from cart traffic, reducing playability
- Marketability – Players prefer green

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