# Summertime Blues?

## USGA agronomists warn what turf diseases to watch out for and where

**BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR**

USGA agronomist Jim Skorulski can't consider summer turf disease without pondering New England's wicked winter earlier this year. "[Disease] this summer is predicated on winter injury," says Skorulski, who oversees the Northeast Region.

Mother Nature spared no mercy on New England last winter. The Northeast received significant snow and ice, especially in the Boston area, where many golf courses were damaged. But what hurt turf most were freeze-and-thaw cycles, Skorulski says.

"There were a few periods last winter when it got warm, the snow on the ground melted and it rained," Skorulski says. "Then there were severe temperature drops and the water froze."

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**Brown patch affects all turgrass. The disease often occurs during extended periods of wet weather.**

Golf course greens and turf suffered crown hydration, the rupturing of plant cells caused by ice crystals, Skorulski says. Many Northeast superintendents had to reseed damaged areas. Hence, their courses contain young and tender turf with underdeveloped roots, making it more susceptible to summer disease such as pythium root rot.

"Superintendents need to be vigilant with their disease management because they're starting from scratch with a lot of young plants," Skorulski says. "It's going to be a tough summer if it gets hot. On the positive side, there's more bentgrass growing on the greens, which means more disease tolerance."

Skorulski advises superintendents in his region to be patient and conservative in their cultural practices this summer because of the young turf. "We're in a stage of recovery," he says.

While gray leaf spot is not the threat it was a few years ago because many superintendents replaced ryegrass fairways with bentgrass, Skorulski warns that dollar spot could be a problem. "It was an issue beginning in early June (last summer) and pressure remained high throughout the remainder of the season," he says.

To combat dollar spot, Skorulski notes that superintendents are modifying their cultural practices by applying higher rates of nitrogen. They are also re-evaluating fungicide rotations, and application rates and water volumes with applications, he adds.

*Golfdom* spoke with USGA agronomists from throughout the country to get their takes on summer disease. Here's what they report:

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**Mid-Atlantic Region** — Agronomist Keith Happ says the extreme wet and dry cycles the region experienced in the spring makes it difficult to predict summer disease. In late May, Happ reported that golf courses were still dealing with pink snow mold. But superintendents are misdiagnosing pink snow mold as pythium blight, Happ says.

Last summer, dollar spot was a problem in a few areas, says Happ, who's based in Pittsburgh. But superintendents made adjustments to their fertility and cultural programs to combat it this summer. "Rather than just spray, superintendents made adjustments so the environment is better for healthy turf, which is the first line of defense against any pest, especially dollar spot," Happ says.

Happ expects to see gray leaf spot on golf courses in late August. He says superintendents should be careful not to misdiagnose it.

"Sometimes people throw water on it because they think it's drought stress," Happ says. "Then the problem is exasperated tenfold."

Last summer, Happ says he saw "devastating damage" from gray leaf spot at courses around Pittsburgh. "[Superintendents] didn't know they had it, and they didn't know how to treat it," Happ says. "It's new to this area."

But the superintendents who've had gray leaf spot are converting their fairways from ryegrass to bentgrass and bluegrass to avoid the disease, Happ adds.

Happ warns that superintendents who shaved their greens in the spring to make them fast and rid them of *Poa annua* seedheads also weakened them in the process. They had better watch closely for summer disease. "You're going to pay the piper in July and August," he says.

**North-Central Region** – Agronomist Bob Vavrek Jr. reports that dollar spot was the biggest and most persistent problem for superintendents in his region last year because of unusual weather patterns. But Vavrek, based in Elm Grove, Wis., says he's uncertain if dollar spot will return this year. "[To be safe], a few more courses will be budgeting for fairway fungicide applications," he adds.

**Mid-Continent Region** — Agronomist Brian Maloy, based in Carrollton, Texas, says he didn't see a lot of disease last summer, and he doesn't expect to see much this summer.

"It's hard for folks down here to get excited about disease when you have low humidity and dry conditions," Maloy says. "[The environment] is not conducive to disease."

Still, Maloy notes that golf courses located in or near Dallas, Tulsa, Okla., and Shreveport, La. — in places where humidity is a factor — are at more risk for summer disease.

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**Dollar spot attacks turf low in nitrogen during warm, humid weather.**

Maloy stresses that proper greens construction is vital to combat summer disease. "If you have good internal and subsurface drainage, the greens are less likely to suffer disease outbreaks," he says, noting that push-up greens with tight soil rootzone mixes are more susceptible to summer disease.

**Rocky Mountain Region** – Agronomist Matt Nelson isn't expecting any major summer disease problems. But Nelson warns that snow mold, which was prevalent in the region even in late May, could lead to anthracnose in the summer. "Anthracnose is more likely on turf that has already been weakened," says Nelson, who's based in Twin Falls, Idaho.

If snow mold-damaged areas return as *Poa annua*, there's a good chance the turf will suffer again this summer because *Poa* is less resistant to summer disease. Hopefully, superintendents re-established damaged turf with bentgrass in the spring, Nelson says.

**Southeast Region** – Agronomist Chris Hartwiger doesn't expect anything unusual in regard to summer disease on bentgrass greens. "Spring temperatures have been cool for bermudagrass, but ideal for bentgrass," says Hartwiger, based in Birmingham, Ala.

Hartwiger says superintendents have made great strides to improve growing conditions in the spring, which has resulted in healthier and stronger turf in the summer. "Fans, shade reduction and summer cultivation tools have been instrumental in improving the quality of bentgrass in the summer," Hartwiger says, noting that Syngenta's Heritage has "greatly reduced" summer disease problems since it was introduced in 1997.

**Southwest Region** – Agronomist Mike Huck also isn't expecting anything unusual.

"Typically, we get bouts with anthracnose and summer patch on *Poa annua*," says Huck, based in Santa Ana, Calif. "If we get a spell of humidity, some brown patch or pythium can occur."

**Florida Region** – Todd Lowe says many summer diseases are caused by poor maintenance practices. Lowe, based in Rotunda West, Fla., warns superintendents not to cut bermudagrass greens too low, even if members demand the greens stimp faster.

"That can bring on secondary pathogens, such as helminthosporium," Lowe says. "You're setting yourself up for problems if TifEagle is mowed consistently below one-tenth of an inch."

Dollar spot is an occasional summer disease in Florida, but can be overcome by nitrogen, Lowe says. However, too much nitrogen combined with overcast weather could lead to brown patch, he stresses. ■