Spring Could Bring Agronomic Issues

BY KARL DANNEBERGER

Through much of the Midwest and Northeast, temperatures this past fall and early winter were mild enough that golf courses had considerable play. The mild weather provided revenue streams that benefited club finances and delighted many golfers.

The agronomic downside is that golf courses continued to mow late into January, considered additional snow mold applications, and will face *Poa annua* and wear issues come spring.

In most cases, mowing was done on greens that were a mix of creeping bentgrass and *Poa annua* for the purpose of providing a smooth surface. The *Poa annua* was green and growing for part of the winter (until a cold and snowy February set in) while the bentgrass was semidormant.

Even *Poa annua* seedheads were observed in areas, including the Mid-Atlantic, in early January. The result of the differential growth between *Poa annua* and creeping bentgrass was bumpy greens that required mowing. In some cases, plant growth regulators were used to slow *Poa annua* growth.

The combination of mild weather and wear from play favors *Poa annua* spread on greens. Germination the previous fall and rapid development occurred thanks to the mild conditions early in the winter. Additionally, the wear caused from golfers on greens caused open areas or gaps and a thinner turf, which favors *Poa annua* establishment and spread.

It's also highly probable that many golf course superintendents who have predominantly creeping bentgrass greens will see considerable *Poa annua* invasion this spring. If there is any good news, the *Poa annua* that has appeared and was not apparent in the fall will be mostly annual in nature and should disappear with the arrival of summertime temperatures.

From a disease perspective, the late-arriving snow caused many superintendents who applied snow mold fungicides, especially contacts, to contemplate reapplications. If conditions remain cool and wet this spring, microdochium patch is expected to be prevalent, especially in areas not retreated.

THE EARLY MILD WINTER WAS GREAT FOR ROUNDS AND REVENUE, BUT NOT FOR BENTGRASS GREENS

Wear and soil compaction issues are major concerns that come with any winter play. So a few maintenance suggestions are warranted on greens that are predominantly creeping bentgrass. Shoot growth on creeping bentgrass is normally slow in the spring, especially compared to *Poa annua*. So in early to midspring, avoid the temptation to push your greens with fertilizer to "jump start" them. Allow creeping bentgrass shoot growth to occur in its own natural time. Fertilizing will only promote the *Poa annua*, and might be detrimental to root growth if the fertility levels are too high.

Caution should also be taken with early spring coring of creeping bentgrass greens. The natural tendency is to core cultivate early in the spring to relieve compaction from winter play. Coring bentgrass when soil temperatures are still cold will only favor *Poa annua* spread. Additionally, nighttime temperatures are still cold in the early spring. This cold air will settle into coring holes and keep the soil temperatures depressed longer.

The key to creeping bentgrass greens management in the spring is not to be in a big hurry. Let the plant get started on its on own schedule — not yours — and then do the necessary practices.

If you are managing predominantly *Poa annua* greens, you do have some advantages. With both root growth and shoot growth starting earlier in spring compared to creeping bentgrass, corrective management practices can be initiated earlier.

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