

## Maintaining Annual Bluegrass

by  
J.M. Vargas Jr.  
Associate Professor  
Michigan State University

The problem of learning how to successfully grow annual blue grass (*Poa annua*) is one of educating or re-training. It has been considered an undesirable weed for so many years that it is hard for people to accept it as a desirable turfgrass. It is not a weed and if managed properly provides a satisfactory turf in the many areas of the cool season grass belt. Many golf course superintendents either refuse to admit they have an annual bluegrass or else deliberately under-estimate how much they have. Part of the reason for not admitting to having annual bluegrass is because of the stigma attached to it being a weed, therefore, if it is a weed I must be a poor superintendent if I can't control it. The reason for the stigma attached to annual bluegrass came from educators in the universities who were convinced it really was a weedy annual grass that died from high temperature during summer heat

stress period. Because of this attitude, little research has been done on cultural aspects, disease problems or insect problems on annual bluegrass for fear of being burned at the stake as a heretic or put away in a padded cell. Research was done instead on Kentucky bluegrass and creeping bentgrass which very few people actually had on their golf courses and the results transposed to annual bluegrass which more often than not didn't work.

On golf courses 10 or older in the northern region of the cool season grass belt annual bluegrass is the largest single component.

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Although most people wouldn't admit having it, it has been successfully grown on golf course greens for years, mainly because pest control programs have been practiced on the greens, just as such programs have been neglected on the fairways.

Many a golf course superintendent has spent a great deal of time, money, and effort trying to control annual bluegrass with the arsenical rather than trying to learn how to live with it. Most lost their fairway, many lost their jobs. The smart ones either got off arsenical programs or else never got on one.

### Fairways vs. Greens

In spite of the fact that good pest control practices are carried out on annual bluegrass greens very poor pest control practices are carried out on annual bluegrass fairways. It is difficult to understand the logic behind this. If one knows they have to treat annual bluegrass greens for diseases and insect problems in order to maintain healthy turf, why should you not have to apply

the same treatments on the fairway in order to keep them healthy? But there is a logical explanation, and it deals with the long accepted belief that the annual bluegrass is dying from high temperature stress alone. As long as one is convinced high temperature is the primary reason for the grass dying, the method of preventing this will be through irrigation instead of pest control. However, it was clearly demonstrated high temperature alone was not the reason for annual bluegrass dying, but what was causing it was a fungus disease called anthracnose which destroyed the annual bluegrass during the hot weather. In addition, an insect problem caused by the Ataenius beetle grub has been shown to be responsible for the loss of annual bluegrass fairways during heat stress periods. Blaming the loss of annual bluegrass on high temperature alone prior to 1975 is understandable since the facts concerning annual bluegrass survival were not known but the information is available now and yet annual bluegrass fairways are still dying and the blame is still being placed on "that lousy annual bluegrass" dying in the hot weather.

If we further examine the history of the fairway watering we find that initially only golf course greens were watered. The green fairways of spring were allowed to go dormant in the summertime and they would green up again with the return of fall rains. These fairways were primarily common Kentucky bluegrass, colonial bentgrass and fine leaf fescue. Then

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someone got the brilliant idea that all that is necessary to have green fairways all summer long is to water them. So fairways are irrigated and mowed closer and the Kentucky bluegrass, colonial bentgrass and fine leaf fescue fairways soon became soft lush annual bluegrass fairways. What was overlooked was the pest control programs that were carried out on golf course greens in order to keep them healthy. Soon golf course superintendents observed common diseases like dollar spot or brown patch on their fairways and sprayed them when they became severe. The two problems that weren't recognized were anthracnose and the Ataenius beetle grub. These fell into the category of high temperature killing of annual bluegrass.

### It is Expensive to Treat Fairways for Diseases and Insects!

What has happened in the past is understandable,

and if dollar spot and brown patch were the only major diseases on annual bluegrass fairways, the statement that it is too expensive to spray is understandable, even if I don't agree. What is meant is that dollar spot and brown patch are unsightly but occur slowly enough that they can be treated on a curative basis, but we are no longer talking about dollar spot and brown patch, we are talking about large dead areas of the fairway caused by anthracnose and the Ataenius beetle grub that must be treated if you expect "to have green grass on the fairways." With that in mind here is the part I don't understand.

From 50,000 to 500,000 dollars are spent to install an irrigation system "to have green grass in the fairways." In addition, thousands of dollars are spent each year on water "to have green grass on the fairways." Thousands of dollars are also spent on

miscellaneous equipment and supplies such as aerifiers, spikers, vertical mowers "to have green grass on the fairways." From a few thousand up to 15,000 or so thousand dollars are spent for the finest mowing equipment "to have well-manicured green grass on the fairways." Between three to fifteen thousand dollars is spent to fertilize the fairways, "to have green grass." But you can't spend between 5-10 thousand dollars a year to treat the fairways for disease and insect problems, because "it is too expensive" to treat on a preventive basis. You have over a half a million dollar investment for the purpose of "having green grass on the fairways," and you can't spend five to ten thousand dollars a year to protect it. But you wouldn't think of not watering on a hot day because it was too expensive. Why? Your answer would be something like "because the grass would die." And yet it is too expensive to treat with pesticides to prevent the grass from dying. What difference does it make

if the grass dies from drought or disease, or if the money is spent on water of fungicide in order "to have green grass on the fairways." The answer is "none" and you know it.

### Put It in Your Budget

Put the cost of the fungicides and insecticides in your budget. Present a strong case for them. Ask them whether or not they want "to have green grass on the fairways" all summer long. If they turn you down, fine, shame on them but if you don't fit it in the budget because you think it is too expensive, then shame on you.



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