



## Spring Turfgrass Management

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Spring in the northwoods always seems to bring with it many of the same occurrences. The bald eagles return to their nesting areas and search open waters for the catch of the day. Black bears, hungry from hibernation, scavenge for food in trash cans and dumpsters until buds and berries become abundant. Grouse drumming can be heard in the distance in preparation of their mating season. The deer, moving out of winter herding grounds, become more visible every day. These natural beauties are a prelude to what may be a northern golf course superintendent's greatest frustration and challenge—dealing with winter turf damage and spring renovation.

On average in the Woodruff area this time of year, we are coming out of a winter that has dumped 90 inches of snowfall on the golf course over 140 days. This is accompanied by some freezing rains anytime during our snow cover period. With this type of winter conditions, *Poa annua* populations seldom reach spring without snowmold or ice damage.

Dean Musbach stated in his last article that golfers do not hold superintendents accountable for winter damage. We are more frequently being evaluated by owners and green committees on how fast we can bring these damaged areas back to a quality playing condition. This is due to the increased demand by vacationing golfers for better playing conditions. No longer is there that thinking, "don't worry, it will grow back by July". That was my owner's thinking when I moved to the northwoods four years ago.

This change in thinking has many northern superintendents asking and arguing hard in board meetings for the tools we need to renovate turf in the spring. The tools are seed, fertilizer, equipment and labor.

Seed selection for different areas on our golf courses is becoming very important. The new improved varieties of bluegrasses, ryegrasses and fine fes-

cues need to be evaluated and then chosen for our specific situations. Soil type, fertility requirements, disease resistance, wear tolerance and the most important of all—winter hardiness—are factors which are considered when formulating blends.

The improved varieties of fine fescues are becoming more popular in seed blends for fairways and roughs in the north. They seem to be better suited to our needs because of their low fertility requirements, good winter hardiness, ability to withstand lower mowing heights and tolerance of fairly acid, infertile, dry soils. The percentage of ryegrass in a mixture is now being lowered to make room for the fescues. Many fairways are being maintained on sandy loam soils and do not receive more than two and one-half lbs. N/M during the year. Lime and gypsum applications are also being incorporated into maintenance programs. Soil tests on fairways have often shown low levels of calcium and magnesium in these soils. pH values could be found as low as 3.8 in extreme cases only a few years ago.

The decision on what to seed into tees differs among northern superintendents. Some are staying with bluegrass and ryegrass blends trying to successfully compete the *Poa annua* that was lost over winter. Others are trying to convert their tee areas over to bentgrass using aerification, slit seeding and growth regulators. These superintendents would prefer total reconstruction of the tees to bentgrass. This is costly, time consuming and inconvenient to golfers.

Topdressers, overseeders, green covers and better aerification equipment are being found in more maintenance facilities in the northwoods. Use of the light polyethylene green cover is becoming an important tool in late April and early May for warming soil temperatures. Cool night air temperatures lasting into June often do not allow soil temperatures to be warm enough for overseeding until the fourth week of

May on uncovered areas. Soil temperatures have been recorded 10 to 12 degrees warmer at the beginning of May on covered areas. This allows golf course superintendents to overseed greens and tees three to four weeks earlier than without the use of covers.

The most important renovation work in the spring takes place on the putting greens. Specific work has varied among superintendents depending upon the extent of damage. It is not uncommon to hear reports of turf losses on greens in the 50% to 80% range. In these cases, extensive work must be done and we must be prepared. One important factor is clear. Everyone using covers feels their degree of success when overseeding was higher on covered versus uncovered areas. They stress care must be taken in the management of the covers. The microclimate created under the covers is good for seedling development but it is also ideal for disease development. Earlier fungicide applications need to be made, especially for damping off.

Owners and board members are giving many superintendents these tools to work with for renovation. But the most important tool we need from them is additional labor. Our growing season for turfgrass in the northwoods does not begin until the second half of May. Prior to the incorporation of spring renovation, college students were an excellent source for grounds crew labor. Spring renovation and the use of greens covers to start the growing season earlier creates a need for longer term labor. Board members are often reluctant to increase labor expenses, which are already the highest expense in our operational budget. Factors affecting tourism in the northwoods (the economy and fishing bag limits, for example) make revenue projection difficult for public courses.

Winter turf damage in the northwoods has us all concerned. We know it will happen. We know at this time golfers will understand. But the pressure is growing for quicker recovery of damaged areas. Cold soil temperatures in the spring and an early summer are our greatest obstacle to overcome for renovation. Our best defense against pressure for early quality turf is to continue to find ways to lessen the severity and frequency of winter damage. Many times I feel spring renovation is only putting my finger in the dike.