



# What a Difference a Year Makes!

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As this season winds down, superintendents and golfers at many courses in the north-central tier of states are wondering if the season ever really arrived. At this time last year, pythium, brown patch, summer patch, wet wilt, and numerous other problems had already damaged or killed more than their share of turf at numerous courses during the "endless summer" of 1995. The "endless spring" of 1996 has, according to some golf course superintendents, resulted in one of the more comfortable, laid back seasons in many years. Brown patch and pythium were all too common sights during July and August last season. In contrast, a major outbreak of disease activity might be a localized area of dollar spot or a little yellow tuft this summer.

The superintendent's perspective and opinion regarding stress this season, however, changes dramatically if any appreciable amount of winterkill occurred. Areas damaged by crown hydration and snow mold have been extremely slow to recover this year. Cool weather (especially cool nights) and hard, late frosts have significantly slowed the growth and development of turf. Sodding, plugging, and patching of the thin or bare spots in low lying, poorly drained areas of fairways and greens has been an all too common sight on Turf Advisory Service visits well into August. It appears that much of the winterkill was closely associated with the summer stress last year — many of the dead areas that appeared this spring were areas that never completely recovered from last year's disease activity or heat stress and entered the winter in a weakened condition.

## Timing Is Everything

Regardless of whether or not the season has been easy or frustrating, many superintendents thoughts are now turning to late season special projects, for instance the construction

of forward tees or the renovation of fairways, surrounds, or bunkers. One of the most frequently asked questions by golfers at Turf Advisory Service visits is: "How late can we seed an area this fall and still have a playable surface by Memorial Day?" In fact, the question should be: "How early should we complete construction and seed to ensure a playable surface by Memorial Day?" Both questions appear similar but they are significantly different. The chances for establishing healthy turf before the overseeded area is opened for play are slim to none at a course where the first questions is asked.

All golfers and a few superintendents have heard of the course where an old green was taken out of play on Thanksgiving, then a new green (probably a "modified" USGA green) was built and dormant seeded on Christmas and it was ready for play and stimping ten feet by Easter. I have not seen this course, but it must exist because I hear this tale and similar tales of incredible successes with late season turf establishment time and time again.

After sifting through a number of successful and unsuccessful efforts at establishing turf during fall, my opinion regarding the cutoff date for a good chance of playing a new green, tee, or fairway by mid-June has not

changed. In northern states, if the seed is in the ground by August 15, then there is a very good chance that the turf can safely accommodate golfers around Memorial Day the following season. Soil temperatures are about as high as they will get in August and there will be ample time for the seedlings to develop, to become accustomed to mowing, and then harden off before winter. As a general rule of thumb, it will take an additional two weeks of turf growth and development the following spring to make up for every week of growth that is lost by a late seeding the previous fall.

If the golfers refuse to believe you or me, perhaps they will believe the commentary of one of the most famous golf course architects, Donald Ross. His statement was made many years ago, but as true now as it was then. The following excerpt from the popular book, *Golf Has Never Failed Me*, by Donald Ross is reproduced with the permission of the publisher, Sleeping Bear Press. "The very best season of the year to sow grass seed is the fall, but not much later than September 10th. Of course, seeding is determined by locality and temperature. When it comes to the extreme northern states, I have made it a point to seed no later than August 15th."

Pressure from golfers to keep the course open for play as long as possible is the most common reason why renovation projects are seeded late - and why so many attempts at renovation fail, or at best, provide a weak, thin playing surface the entire next season. Give yourself a fighting chance of success and lobby hard for a mid-August seeding date — timing is everything! 🍷

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