

Better Grasses Make For Better Fairways

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The golf industry is being pressured on multiple fronts, including heightened scrutiny over the use of water, pesticides, and other resources. A sluggish economy and stagnant growth in play have created a challenging business environment. The uphill road just got a little steeper with recent droughts and widely fluctuating weather conditions adding even more stress and challenge to golf course maintenance operations.

Turf managers are expected to produce quality course conditioning to satisfy golfer expectations in this changing environment and, to their credit, most do. However, continuing to do so only becomes more difficult and costly as pressures intensify. Therefore, isn't it critical that our industry take every available measure to enable continued success? I certainly think so.

But where does one begin? Arguably the first step is for golf facilities to maintain course infrastructure and implement programs and maintenance practices that provide the best opportunity for success. Because this gets to the very core of practically every aspect of golf course operations, perhaps there is no better place to start than to utilize the best turfgrasses available; hence the focus of this article.

Even the best management practices and growing conditions will not compensate for inherently inferior turfgrass plants. Unfortunately, utilizing new, improved turfgrasses requires that the current stand be eliminated. Regrassing programs continue to be the best way to establish a new stand of turf. The concept has been widely accepted for putting greens, but it makes even more sense for fairways.

Under the right circumstances, regrassing provides a fresh start, a clean palette.



Older golf facilities frequently contend with a mixture of cool-season species, including creeping bentgrass, perennial ryegrass, and annual bluegrass. Fairway regrassing is the most effective means to eradicate unwanted turfgrasses and establish a new species or cultivar that will provide a more uniform playing surface that can be managed with less water and pesticides.



Glyphosate, a nonselective herbicide, provides control of existing vegetation, allowing new turfgrasses to establish without weed competition.

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Old technology is frequently replaced with new, and the same goes for turfgrasses as newer, improved varieties become available. This includes turfgrasses that boast greater resistance to disease and are selected for their ability to better tolerate traffic, shade, drought stress, and temperature extremes, qualities that will make it possible to manage the turf with less water and fewer pesticides while producing firm and uniform playing surfaces. A fairway regrassing project is indeed ambitious, but the reward is such that it deserves greater consideration by more golf facilities.

WE HAVE THE TURFGRASSES!

The USGA Turfgrass and Environmental Research Program has invested in turfgrass breeding to produce turfgrasses that are vastly improved over those that were available even 10 to 15 years ago. New cultivars provide excellent playing quality and can be managed with less water, provide higher levels of disease resistance, and exhibit greater tolerance to environmental stress.



A fairway recently treated with glyphosate is overseeded with creeping bentgrass as part of the renovation process

A cartoon golf ball character with arms and legs is pointing with a white stick to a chalkboard. The chalkboard has the following text: "What Makes A Good Greensmix?", "HOMOGENEOUS BLEND - consistent mix for consistent performance", and "MEETS USGA SPECS - all components & finished mix tested to ensure adherence to USGA specifications". To the right of the golf ball is a red circular stamp that says "ALL PRODUCTS LAB TESTED GOLF COURSE APPROVED". At the bottom right is a logo for "SAND & SOLUTIONS WAUPACA" featuring a stylized grass icon.

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Again, we have the turfgrasses. We just need golf facilities to utilize them. While inter-seeding or spot-seeding programs may improve surface quality to a very limited extent, complete regrassing is necessary to realize the full potential of improved turfgrasses.

Fairway grassing options are extensive. Creeping bentgrass, colonial bentgrass, bentgrass/fine fescue mixtures, and Kentucky bluegrass are the most common selections for fairways in northern climates. It takes some effort to identify the species and cultivars best suited for your site and growing conditions. The opportunity to regrass surfaces is usually a one-time deal, so the selection process is critical, as is being willing to invest in the best seed or sod that is available. Your regional Green Section agronomist can assist in selecting the best turfgrass option for your facility.

WHERE THERE IS A WILL, THERE IS A WAY

Fairway regrassing is not for the faint of heart. Mere mention of killing grass on purpose and closing the course is sure to attract a firestorm of criticism. A convincing case must be made to gain approval. The anticipated benefits resulting from regrassing must be significant, clear, and deemed critical to the success of the facility. Proposals should emphasize the potential to significantly reduce water and pesticide use, improve playability, and create more reliable and aesthetically pleasing fairways. The age-old adage "there is nothing like rapid and complete failure to promote action" may be accurate in regard to regrassing programs at some facilities.

Hopefully, fairway regrassing programs are not predicated on turf failure alone. A more effective approach is to take action before problems occur. This allows the project to be planned effectively at reduced cost and with fewer disruptions and surprises. Ultimately, planning will lead to a better finished product.

Most fairway regrassing projects at northern golf facilities are initiated in late July or August, when a nonselective herbicide is applied to control the existing turf stand. Shortly thereafter the fairways are seeded or sodded with new turf. At that point the fairways are closed to traffic for about six weeks or until the new turf has fully established and matured.



Fairways are closed to play during regrassing projects so new seedlings can establish and mature into a uniform and durable playing surface. In most northern locations, seeding is performed in late summer and fairways are opened to play the following spring or early summer.

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Disruption to play is perhaps the greatest downside of a regrassing project, and it is probably the reason why the program has not become more popular. Some disruption to play is inevitable, but it can be minimized through proper planning and some creativity. Completing the project in multiple phases may be one option to appease golfers, but there are other techniques that have been used successfully as well. The use of sod for fairway regrassing, though less common, is certainly an option available in northern climates where a very short golf season makes it less practical to renovate with seed. Again, where there is a will, there will be a way.

BEGIN WITH A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

Not yet fully convinced of the merits of the project? Then consider introducing the concept using a smaller regrassing demonstration project. Demonstration plots can be initiated over a sizable fairway area where several different establishment techniques and turfgrasses can be used. The demonstration project is an inexpensive and less disruptive way to introduce golfers to the regrassing concept and the playing surfaces that are attainable. It can also be helpful to test specific cultivars, varietal blends, species mixtures, and renovation techniques before taking on a larger project.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that more golf facilities will begin to initiate regrassing programs to upgrade fairway surfaces that may currently be underperforming or are more costly to maintain due to inferior turfgrasses. Fairway regrassing offers the only real opportunity to eradicate outdated turfgrasses and replace them with newer, improved options that will better survive weather extremes and can be maintained using less water and pesticides. New turfgrass options play a major role in the solution to provide quality playing conditions long into the future. The turfgrasses are already here, and the road to successful surface renovation is easier than you think. The choice is yours. 



Finished product! A new stand of creeping bentgrass using varieties with genetics superior to older bentgrass options provides quality playing conditions and a surface more resistant to disease and cold temperature stress in northern climates.



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