

GOLF & ATHLETIC TURF

Sodding vs. seeding: the pros and cons

Seeding and sodding are both viable alternatives to repair damaged turf and establish new turf. Here's how to choose.

■ To choose whether to seed or sod new or replacement turf areas, weigh the pros and cons of each within the framework of existing seasonal conditions, site considerations, use demands, and labor and budget constraints.

Paul Zwaska, head groundskeeper for the Baltimore Orioles, usually leans toward seeding.

"Seeding entails low labor and low material costs," he notes. "Variety selection is broad. Seeds sprout directly into the soil, developing their entire root mass in the existing 'virgin' soil. There's no initial thatch layer. Seed can be used to thicken and strengthen existing turf.

"Timing affects seeding success. Early spring seeding on bare ground may expose young plants to summer's heat before they mature enough to handle that stress. Overseeding in the spring may be more successful because existing turf helps protect tender seedlings. Fall bare-ground seeding benefits from more moderate temperatures and humidity levels.

"Because seeded turf is embedded in the soil, it can adapt its growth rate to conditions, unless young seedlings are one-half inch or smaller, or have just broken germination.



Though seeding is less expensive, you have a larger installation window if you choose sod.



"Weed competition is greatest with bare-ground seeding. A few scattered weeds can be pulled by hand. Control product applications for severe weed infestations must be postponed until after the seedlings have matured.

"Patience is needed to establish turf from seed. The period from seeding to usability will depend on the type of seed, the degree of cooperation from weather conditions, and the level and frequency of turf use.

"Site conditions may limit choices. Seeding isn't the best option for slopes, though seeding is possible by using stabilizing products."

If 40 to 50 percent of the existing turf is still in good shape and time is sufficient, Zwaska prefers seeding to sodding. He feels the grass plants are stronger due to superior root development into the on-site soil.

"Sodding provides instant gratification, and the installation window is longer," Zwaska says. "Initial material costs are higher with sod, and sod installation is

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more labor-intensive. Sod, with a larger top mass, may have a higher evapotranspiration than roots can handle. Diligent watering will be needed until turf roots leave the 'comfort zone' of the sod's soil and extend into the soil below."

If you're sodding, the soil of the sod needs to match the soil profile of the site, Zwaska continues. "An interface layer can form between two different soil types, restricting root growth and water infiltration.

"(But) sod may be the only viable option for certain conditions such as a sports field with heavy wear or exposed soil surfaces. In these cases, existing vegetation should be stripped and sod installed."

The other side of the coin—John Huber, president of Huber Ranch Sod Nursery in Schneider, Ind., naturally leans toward sodding.

"Sod can be installed any time of year as long as the sod grower can harvest it," Huber says. "With seeding, germination is limited to the grass growth cycle.

"Sod offers uniformity of coverage and fast usability. Low traffic sodded turf sites may be usable after two or three weeks. High-use areas with bare ground seeding may take up to a year for sufficient turf establishment."

Huber's alternatives to standard sod:

"For high-use situations, such as sports turf, washed sod provides faster rooting into the soil profile and thus faster usability. Washed sod also keeps the soil type 'pure,' avoiding interface formation.

"Where erosion is a special concern, washed sod also will root in more quickly. On a steep slope, both standard and washed sod should be staked to ensure stabilization during the rooting process.

"Big roll sod—42 inches wide and up to 129 feet long—can reduce labor installation costs. Three-person crews using a three-point hitch attachment or walk-behind installation equipment can install big roll sod at the same rate as a 10-person crew with standard rolls. Obviously, there are fewer seams with big roll sod, produc-

THE PROS:**SEEDING**

- less installation labor
- broad variety selection
- low material (seed) costs
- adapts easily to conditions
- no interface soil layer formation

SODDING

- uniform coverage
- instant fix
- good for slopes
- larger installation window
- less weed competition



For high-use areas, washed sod provides faster rooting into the soil profile.

ing a 'finished' appearance faster."

Turf variety selection needn't be limited with sod, according to Huber. "Sod producers," he points out, "may be willing to grow on contract, producing specific cultivars of certain varieties grown on a precisely-developed soil profile and following a precise maintenance program. Costs for this service will be higher and payment generally is made 'up front' to ensure a home for the finished product."

Both Zwaska and Huber agree that

selecting seed or sod depends on a project's priorities. If use requirements are slower, seeding is a viable alternative. If costs are a major factor, seeding is a viable option. The more immediate the demand, the more likely sod should be used.

"Whether seeding or sodding," Huber concludes, "turf provides multiple benefits. It removes pollutants from the air, cleans the rain water to keep impurities from the groundwater, limits run-off and adds to the beauty of any site." **LM**

The SquAyers alternative:

■ "Thick cut sod offers greater stability when quick use is needed in high-traffic areas," notes John Huber.

"A new alternative is SquAyers. These are four-by-four-foot squares of mature turf, rooted into a four-inch-deep sand rootzone reinforced with Netlon mesh elements.

"They provide the fully-turfed surface of sod with immediate surface

stability and load-bearing qualities and instant usability. The blocks of turf can be used to replace damaged or worn areas on high-use locations. A lift-and-place 'grab' system allows quick and easy installation."