

'Very dwarf' bermuda looks good for greens



As a golf course superintendent at an up-scale daily fee golf course or country club, you want to give your customers the best possible putting surface.

by BILL KNOOP, PH.D.



Brad Fluitt's ready to go for a tournament, and likes the color of the Champion dwarf bermuda.

You know that the density of the putting surface has a great deal to do with putting quality. It's a well known fact that, so far, the bentgrasses have proven to be able to produce the highest plant density under the close mowing associated with putting green management.

The kicker is...you're in the south.

The text books say the best temperature growing range for a cool-season turfgrass—and, of course, all the bentgrasses are classified as cool-season turfgrass—is from 60 to 75 degrees F. In the south, the night time temperatures usually don't get that low for months during the summer. This means that any cool-season turfgrass may be under a prolonged period of high temperature stress, which could result in the increased possibility of a disease and also a general loss of plant vigor and density. This is exactly what you don't want or need during the busiest time of the year.

We want the high putting green quality from bentgrass, but no one wants all those summer time headaches that may be associated with growing a bentgrass putting green in the south. Most will agree that we haven't had a bermudagrass that could pro-

In many parts of the south, it may be possible to keep this turfgrass from going dormant by using greens covers. Shown are Champion Dwarf Bermudagrass and Tifgreen 328.

duce as high a quality of putting surface as bentgrass, but that's no longer true.

We are at the beginning of what may be a significant movement in the south: back to bermuda!

The driving force is the coming availability of new, very dwarf bermudagrasses, such as Champion dwarf bermudagrass that produces a putting surface that rivals the density of any bentgrass putting green. Golf course superintendents like Dale Miller at Barton Creek Country Club, Austin, Texas, and Larry Clanton at Indian Ridge Country Club in Palm Desert, Calif. have both had it with bentgrass and have chosen Champion Dwarf Bermudagrass for their greens.

Brad Fluitt, golf course superintendent at Bentwood Country Club in San Angelo, Texas, chose to replace his Tifgreen 328 with the dwarf bermudagrass.

"Bentgrass just isn't doing well at all during the heat (over 115 degrees F.) of July and August," says Clanton.

"Bermudagrass is more native to the Texas climate," adds Miller, who doesn't get the summer heat like Palm Desert, but does get weather warm enough to put the bentgrass under continual heat stress for months at a time.

Miller feels that with less summer stress, the

need to use pesticides will be significantly reduced.

Fluitt wanted a bermudagrass that would produce as dense a putting surface as possible at very low mowing heights.

Going native

One item high on the list of ways to implement an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program, is the use of plant material that is native or as close to native as possible to the intended use area.

As with other hybrid bermudagrasses used for putting greens, Champion Dwarf Bermudagrass has to be sprigged. Research found that while the grass did not have high vertical growth rates, it has superior lateral growth rates. Clanton was able to re-open his greens in 62 days, but Dale Miller had full coverage in seven weeks, as did Brad Fluitt.

Barton Creek in Austin is an up-scale golfing facility and is known for its dedication to protection the environment. Miller

says the change to the new grass is "the best thing Barton Creek has done with its course to date."

Clanton has heard golfers describe ball roll as "incredible." Stimpmeter reading has been over 11.5.

Cutting height, topdressing

Clanton's problem has to do with mowing heights. He says he can only lower the greens mowers to 0.085 of an inch and get an even cut, and would like mower manufacturers to design in "ultra-low" mowing heights on greens mowers.

Because of the extremely high density that the dwarf bermudagrass produces, says Clanton, even at the 0.085 inch mowing height, only the finest topdressing particles work their way down to the "soil" surface. This makes "quality control" of topdressing even more important.

Low temperature damage is a concern with bermudagrass putting greens, especially in the upper south.

Fluitt overseeded his first-year Champion greens with a mixture of poa trivialis and bentgrass. His greens stayed under 32 degrees F. for five days in a row with lows around 6 degrees F. With green covers, soil temperatures were 10 to 15 degrees warmer on the coldest days than the uncovered greens.

"We're probably in better shape than we've ever been for March 13," says Fluitt, who hosts the YMCA Pro-Am Tournament in mid-March.

In many parts of the south, it may be possible to keep this turfgrass from going dormant by using greens covers, which could make overseeding unnecessary.

Is there a "back to bermuda" movement in the works? These three superintendents think so, and think that just maybe, they can take a summer vacation. □

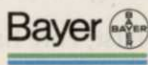
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