

The lowdown on fake golf grass

Artificial golf greens greet a growing number of golfers both on the course and in backyards. The secret to good results is proper installation.

By JAMIE PETERS

Artificial turf has long been in use in the football, baseball and soccer industries; but golfers have strongly rejected the use of synthetic turf as a replacement for real grass. Skeptics claim that fake grass can't possibly equal the subtle contours of real turf the game demands. Lately, however, the demand for synthetic

golf turf installation has increased because of technological improvements, skilled installation procedures and a general rise of interest in golf.

At the moment, artificial greens have found their niche among homeowners and small business owners, who see them as a viable option in place of spending the money required to maintain natural greens. The synthetic grass is most popular as putting greens in residential areas, and as chipping turf at driving ranges.

SynTenniCo's artificial greens feature a resiliency like that of real grass, offering a similar bounce and spin, says Allan Lemay, senior account executive of Fieldturf, a division of SynTenniCo, Inc. in Georgia.

"It duplicates and mimics the properties of grass a lot closer," Lemay says of the

turf, which is used for putting, target and chipping greens.

Grass Tex, Inc. designs synthetic grasses to fit an environment's climate and a customer's needs, says Lee Thomason, golf products manager of Georgia-based company.

"We can make a slow putting green, or we can make a fast putting green, depending on what the customer wants," says Thomason.

While technological improvements have made many of the turf types more resistant to heat, chemicals and water; the installer still remains the crucial part of the turf's quality.

"The magicians are the people in the installation business," says Jay Cohen, President of Golfscapers. The company, with offices in California and Pennsylvania, represents SynTenniCo's golf division.

The quality of the golf area is dependent on the installer's skill, says Cohen, who recently installed a six-hole, three-par golf course in New Jersey with artificial greens.

"It's built with different layers of stone as opposed to a real golf green, where they put in a drainage base, and then they use a USGA soil mix," he says. "We do the same thing. We put in a drainage layer of stone, and a drainage system in, like a real golf green. And then after that we build the rest of the green with layers of different rocks depending on where the climate is



Woodhull: likes the no-maintenance feature.



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and the drainage of the property. And then we apply the turf once that's done."

The drainage system is similar to a real golf green's, says Cohen.

"In a synthetic green, the way it's done is you put the drainage base in, and you use the pea-gravel type of rock so water doesn't sit around in the bottom; basically you're almost building a concrete box in the gravel. It's not really that, but it's a simulation of that. So what you do is you take a drainage system, and you build it around the perimeter of the green right up at the surface using a French drainage system and even some surface drains to drain into that. The water that hits the turf will roll off of it, into the system, and so there won't be any mildew and anything created around the green itself. The dirt doesn't get fungus in it. The grass doesn't thin out, and that's how you keep it healthy looking."

Much of artificial turf's appeal lies in the minimal maintenance required, which saves the owner time, labor and money.

"You don't have to mow it; you don't have to fertilize it; and there's no maintenance," says Thomason.

George Woodhull, owner of Woodhull Landscaping in Riverhead, New York, started installing residential putting greens in March as an add-on business. Woodhull, who has a contract with Old Pro Putting Greens in Georgia, installs the greens for \$7.50 a square foot.

"I'm trying to focus on maintenance-free landscapes," he says. "The putting green is something I've always wanted to do, but I could never justify the costs of the fungicides and pesticides involved with a putting green in someone's back

yard. But now with this synthetic turf from Old Pro, I can do that. It's not cheap. But you look at the maintenance-free aspect of it, and it's worth it."

Woodhull, who uses a four-man crew to install a 12 ft. by 30 ft. putting green, edges out the area's grass and places the green below the grass' grade, to create the appearance of a fairway that leads to the green.

Although there is a growing acceptance of artificial turf in the golf world, many golfers still view the artificial greens as impure and low-quality.



The Green Industry is always looking for a new niche to fill. Synthetic golf greens could soon do just that.

"It's still a relatively skeptical business to golfers," says Cohen. "The golfers are skeptical because they don't believe in their minds that anything artificial could be good."

Golfers were wary of the artificial course in New Jersey, at first, says Mat Buonomo, property management director of Village Green Apartments, where the turf was installed.

"In the beginning, it was new; so when people heard about it, they were like, 'Well, that's not going to be the same,'" he says. "But we have more people out there now than we have had in many, many, many years. So it's usable now, and that's

what we're looking at."

The consensus among the installers is that artificial turf will never replace real grass, but there are markets for both.

"Grass is grass, but it's hard to maintain," says Lemay.

A growing interest in golf is also conducive to the market.

"There's really a golf craze going on, so hopefully I can jump on the bandwagon here," says Woodhull.

In the future, it's likely that golf courses installed with artificial greens will be a com-

mon sight. Thomason says his company is considering installing synthetic turf at a nine-hole, three-par golf course in Michigan.

"The sport is growing so fast that there is no telling where it will go," says Thomason.

For more information about artificial golf turf:

Golfscapers, 701 Knox Road, Villanova, PA 19805. (800) 560-7888.

Woodhull Landscaping Inc., 307 Riverside Drive, Riverhead, NY 11901. (516) 369-5960.

Grass Tex, Inc., Dalton, GA 30720. (800) 544-0439. □