

# Back Yard Putting Greens: Dreams or Nightmares?

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**E**VERY GOLFER who takes the game seriously has dreamed of winning the United States Open Championship. Dreams of success are an integral part of any game. One of the dreams I have had since I first picked up a golf club is having my own putting green in my back yard. Visions of a dropping handicap and 24 putts per round danced in my head, along with thoughts of the money I would save from not having to buy a new putter every other round.

With the purchase of a home and the installation of an automatic irrigation system, the thought of that putting green became stronger. And why not? With formal training in agronomy and plant pathology, I thought maintaining a putting green would be a cinch. With what I hope will be only a minimal loss of credibility, I will describe how my dream came true.

It was early September and I was ready to go to work. The first step was to find a walking greensmower. The idea of buying a new greensmower quickly vanished when I found they cost \$3,000. Luckily, though, I found an old, discarded greensmower. It needed some minor adjustments, like a new basket, a tune-up, and blade sharpening, so I took it to a distributor. Some luck. After getting the bill I made a quick trip to the bank to get a loan.

Picking the spot on my lawn where I wanted to place my green, I stripped the sod in a kidney-shaped pattern. My wife told me it looked more like Pac-Man from the upstairs window. The world will never be short on critics.

The neighbors, as an ominous sign of things to come, were curious about what I was doing. Fearing failure, I refused to tell them, which led to wild rumors of a swimming pool (dug with a hand shovel?), flower garden, and a family burial ground. Neighbors can be pretty nasty when they don't know what's going on.

Once the sod was stripped, I built the green in a modified USGA manner. (In

simpler terms, "modified" meant to build it as cheaply as I could.) The modifications include no sand, no peat, and no surface or subsurface drainage. Basically, I seeded creeping bentgrass into the topsoil. There is an old saying that you get what you pay for; I was in the process of learning its true meaning.

Seedlings appeared seven days after I had sown the seed under ideal temperatures and nursed it with timely irrigation. I mowed it for the first time three weeks after seeding. Things went downhill after that. Rain fell through the whole month of November, and water stagnated on the green. My back yard had the slope of a flood plain, which only exaggerated the drainage problem. Once the temperatures dropped, ice formed. My putting green had become the neighborhood ice rink.

Spring brought flowers, budding trees, and an intensive overseeding program. Two months later I was cutting my first set of cups. I couldn't wait to get out and start improving my putting. No luck; mother nature was going to show me how difficult this was going to be.

One morning, after an evening rain, I gazed out the kitchen window expecting to see the wet bentgrass shimmering in the sunlight. Instead, I found 1,500 blackbirds pecking away. The ground was loaded with cutworms.

A week later, standing on the green in terror, I watched as a grayish mass of mycelium crept across my green, devouring anything in its path that looked green. Pythium!

Later, after an intense thunderstorm, I realized that with my drainage problem, any rain exceeding one inch would flood the green so badly I'd need a sump pump to remove it. Once the water was removed and I had changed the cups, I noticed this swamp-like odor coming from a dark-colored layer. Black layer!

My summer evenings on the putting green consisted of watering, spraying, fertilizing, and mowing. After these

chores, exhaustion usually set in. Battling nature had tested my resolve, but I had come away thinking I had things under control. Wrong again. My biggest challenge still lay ahead.

Neighbors I had allowed to use the green anytime they wished were initially very impressed and excited. As the season progressed, however, they began to complain the green was too slow, grainy, bumpy, too soft, too hard, too much break, not enough break, and lacked consistency. I told them they were watching too much golf on TV.

To let my neighbors know what I could do, I decided to peak my green for the neighborhood block party. Beginning 10 days before the party, I began a maintenance program of vigorous brushing, rolling, and double-cutting. Combining this with a program of lower mowing height, topdressing, and no watering, my green would have put the U.S. Open greens to shame.

On the day of the party, the green looked and putted like glass. As I watched with a twinkle in my eye, a neighbor stroked a three-footer eight feet past the hole. The remaining neighbors headed home to get their water hoses.

That one day of redemption and the promise of no more comments was very satisfying. However, the price was high, and it took the next two months for the grass to recover. As with a sports team, putting greens cannot be peaked for an indefinite period of time without paying a price.

You may have noticed that I have not mentioned my own putting, the reason behind this mad adventure. It hasn't improved, because I haven't had time to practice.

Frankly, by the end of the summer I considered subjecting the putting green to a sod cutter. Now that it's winter and I'm looking back on the year, it was not all that bad. I wonder if this story sounds familiar to anyone?



*The Dream.*



*The Nightmare.*