

Let Mother Fix It!

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TURF TIPS come in a lot of different sizes and shapes, and this one is a bit unique, not because it is so new or so revolutionary, but because it is a practical management philosophy that is being implemented at opposite ends of the country — and it is working. If you are looking for a quick fix, this tip may not be for you, but if you are looking for long-term success, give it a try.

Mike Huck, Golf Course Superintendent at Mission Viejo Country Club, in Mission Viejo, California, and Pat Lewis, at the Portland Country Club, in Falmouth, Maine, have adopted a turf management style that places more emphasis on sound cultural programs and relies less heavily on the latest chemical technology. The results have been overwhelmingly positive. On the road to success, Mike and Pat set the following basic goals:

Goal #1 — Good Playability: Defined as medium fast to fast putting green speed for everyday play; faster speeds for selected special events.

Goal #2 — Good Reliability: Defined as developing a turf that will handle the stress of a long summer or survive the ravages of a long winter. To do either, a reliable perennial putting green turf is a necessity.

Each superintendent took over *Poa annua*-infested, problem-plagued courses, and it has taken three to four years for their programs to pay off. The programs are as simple as can be, and they have allowed the desirable species (creeping bentgrass) to increase in population and become competitive with the *Poa annua*. The following points are the keys to their success and thus the heart of this turf tip:

- Close attention to water management
- Reduction in fungicide applications
- Reasonable cutting height — no lower than $\frac{5}{32}$ "
- Frequent bentgrass overseeding



Overseeding can be carried out during routine renovation work.

Both superintendents were forced into unhealthy irrigation practices and frequent fungicide applications in 1989 because of the presence of a high percentage of *Poa annua*. Since then, both have gradually reduced daytime syringing as well as pesticide usage, and they have produced drier, firmer playing surfaces. They have allowed minor disease problems to go untreated, since the weaker species (*Poa annua*) is often more drastically affected. For instance, Mike has allowed summer patch and anthracnose to go untreated, since neither disease has caused any damage to his bentgrasses. Pat has become increasingly slow to treat pink snowmold, which is one of his major disease problems. When pesticide applications are required, only the affected areas are being treated.

It is critical to keep the cutting heights high enough on a regular basis (not below $\frac{5}{32}$ ") to keep the bentgrass competitive with *Poa annua*. Both superintendents have allowed water, or the lack of it, to become an aid in improving putting green speeds and in promoting increases in permanent turf. In turn, this has reduced the need to employ lower cutting heights to achieve reasonable putting green speeds. For selected events where additional speed is required, both superintendents rely on additional grooming and double-cutting to increase speed. Rolling is another good option.

Bentgrass overseeding is not a new idea, and I would call your attention to two GREEN SECTION RECORD articles by William H. Bengueyfield (July 1967) and

Brian Silva (September 1982) regarding the merits of bentgrass overseeding on putting greens. It is difficult to increase bentgrass populations significantly without a regular overseeding program since a single seeding rarely yields enough of a gain to be noticeable. However, multiple seedings per year will definitely increase the odds for success.

If you think this is a pie-in-the-sky turf tip, or if you would argue that what works in Maine or in Southern California won't work in Tennessee or Texas, think again. This is a program that will work anywhere *to a certain degree!* Granted, it may be difficult to reduce fungicide use by the same amount, but any reduction is good for the environment and the pocketbook. A pure stand of creeping bentgrass may not be an attainable or realistic goal with this program, but any increases gained will be worthwhile.

It is rare that just one factor is the sole cause of a turf problem, and it is also true that many factors are involved in a successful program. The various components of this program have a synergistic effect, and leaving out any portion will greatly diminish the total return. This is a program you can slip into gradually as your comfort level increases, but your golfers may need some time to adjust to a new management style. It also will require effort to educate them as to its benefits. Even if your golfers are agreeable, grass needs time to adjust to a new management regime, too, so don't try to switch from one extreme to the other in just one season.

Plan on a few sleepless nights, because making a conscious effort to reduce water and pesticide use does require some intestinal fortitude. We have been trained for years to treat preventively and to avoid stress, and this program means the opposite. A no-frills, back-to-basics program like this may not satisfy your desire for pure science and technology, but the grass will love it and playability will not suffer. Put Mother Nature to work on your golf course.