

Give Me Your Poor, Your Tired, Your Dead Bentgrass Greens

Golf courses are reaping the rewards with new bermudagrass varieties.

by CHRIS HARTWIGER

LIFE IN THE transition zone may have its advantages, but it is not the land of opportunity for bentgrass greens. Whether it is winter injury to warm-season turfgrass or summer heat stress to cool-season turfgrass, the transition zone is never dull. The summer of 1999 was no exception. Bentgrass greens throughout this region suffered greatly under extreme temperatures. This regional trend offers a glimpse at what golf courses in this region are doing to break this cycle of summertime disaster on bentgrass greens.

The decision of whether to plant bentgrass or bermudagrass on putting greens has never been easy in the southern portion of the transition zone. Improved cultivars, better maintenance techniques, and player demands have made bentgrass the most popular choice for the past ten years. In fact, the bentgrass/bermudagrass line was pushed farther south during this period.

Has bentgrass been a success in the South? The reviews have been mixed, but when armed with the right tools, good management, and reasonable weather, bentgrass greens have been a success at many courses. However, in extreme summer conditions such as those in 1995 and 1999, bentgrass greens struggled and even failed in some instances. The general consensus

has been that even though bentgrass may become weak in the summer, there are still more days of good putting conditions during the year with bentgrass than with bermudagrass greens.

The introduction of new ultradwarf bermudagrass varieties has given golf courses another option and may even change the conventional wisdom in the bentgrass-versus-bermudagrass debate. While there is disagreement on the exact definition of an ultradwarf, this article considers an ultradwarf to be any variety that tolerates regular mowing at $\frac{1}{8}$ " or less.

After 30 years of Tifdwarf, turf managers in the Southeast are breathing a collective sigh of relief and can be heard shouting, "Finally, a bermudagrass that can compete with bentgrass." And compete they do! In fact, many of the ultradwarfs provide faster, firmer playing conditions during the summer than bentgrass varieties.

It has not taken long for news of the success with ultradwarfs to spread. Many bentgrass courses have converted to an ultradwarf bermudagrass or are considering it. The decision has been driven by several factors:

- The high-play and high-stress periods occur at the same time.
- The ultradwarfs are superior compared to Tifdwarf.
- Maintenance costs are lower with bermudagrass.

- Golf courses are having difficulty finding skilled labor.

- Water quality is degraded or is poor in many areas. The ultradwarfs have better tolerance to marginal water quality than bentgrass in the southern climate.

Although the ultradwarfs have been successful, there are areas of potential concern with these varieties. For example, the best method to overseed or transition the overseeding in the spring is not completely understood. Best management practices are evolving through a combination of trial and error and university research. Winter hardiness and tolerance to pests still need further investigation, too.

If your golf course is interested in a conversion, ask the following questions before proceeding.

- What is the most important playing season? Bermudagrass is much more tolerant of high temperatures and humidity in the summer.

- What are the growing conditions like? Factors such as shade, water quality, rootzone quality, green size, and traffic patterns all will influence the performance of the turf and should be evaluated.

- Does your golf course have the staff and expertise to successfully manage bentgrass?

- Is your budget adequate to properly maintain bentgrass?

Is an ultradwarf variety the answer for your course? Maybe it is or maybe it is not. Remember that the transition zone is a tough area in which to grow any turfgrass. Today, we can confidently say that there are better options on the bermudagrass side of the equation. Whatever your choice is, the player is the real winner.

CHRIS HARTWIGER considers his land of opportunity to be on the golf course. When not playing, Chris can be found at home in Birmingham, Alabama, or visiting one of the courses in the Southeast or Florida Regions.



Maintaining high quality bentgrass turf during the summer temperature extremes in the Southeast can be a difficult challenge for the golf course superintendent.