

Regrassing: Coming to a Golf Course Near You

Regrassing provides the quickest path to higher quality greens and more sustainable management options.

BY JIM SKORULSKI

The concept of regrassing putting greens continues to move northward into more temperate regions where annual bluegrass, i.e., *Poa annua*, is still king. A series of harsh winters, hot summers, continued struggles with annual bluegrass weevil, parasitic nematodes, anthracnose, seedhead production combined with other maladies have forced northern turf managers and golfers to rethink the annual bluegrass management paradigm. Even the most experienced and daring turf managers with almost unlimited resources find it more difficult and expensive to provide fast and firm playing surfaces consistently with annual bluegrass compared to creeping bentgrass.

Now before we go any further, I want to be clear that I am discussing regrassing putting surfaces and not rebuilding greens. There is a major distinction between the two. Regrassing involves working with the existing green complexes but changing the turfgrass species. It may involve some design modification, amendments to the soil, or drainage installations. However, the basic foundation of the greens and their designs are generally undisturbed. I admit the concept is a bold one and not for all golf courses, but there comes a time when we have to ask ourselves when enough is enough. How much longer can we continue to manage an inferior grass when there are better options available?

There are many strong arguments for regrassing playing surfaces. The opportunity to provide smoother, firmer, and faster surfaces more consistently should convince golfers of the project's merits. The new creeping bentgrass cultivars with their natural dense and low growing characteristics and more

vigorous rooting can be pushed harder than annual bluegrass and sustain equal or superior quality across a wider range of weather conditions throughout the growing season. Perhaps a more effective selling point for northern golf courses is the superior cold tolerance creeping bentgrass has versus annual bluegrass. That ability allows it not only to survive colder temperatures, but also to better tolerate ice encasement and wildly fluctuating winter temperatures. Just imagine, no more hassles with elaborate and expensive winter covering systems, fewer sleepless nights, and no temporary greens in spring. The more deeply rooted creeping bentgrass can be maintained with less frequent irrigation. A strong case can also be made that the bentgrass surfaces will require fewer inputs of plant protectants, which benefits the budget as well as the environment.

A regrassing project also provides an opportunity to do work that will provide long-term benefits but might otherwise be considered too disruptive or unpopular with golfers. That includes removing trees, adding drainage, grading out low depressions that hold water, or completing more extensive soil modification. The actual regrassing is the frosting on the cake. In reality, the long-term success of the project is dependent on optimal growing conditions for creeping bentgrass to thrive. Your golf course is not ready for regrassing if those factors cannot first be addressed.

Closed greens do not bring in revenue, nor do they make golfers happy. Fortunately, the growing availability of quality commercial putting green sod offers a means to complete the project in a much shorter time frame, with work often initiated in early September when play traditionally

slows at many golf courses in the Northeast. Most turf managers would still prefer establishing new putting surfaces from seed, but that too is changing as the quality of commercial putting green sod improves and managers become more experienced with its establishment requirements. Golfer concerns can be reduced further by providing playing privileges at other golf courses while the project is underway. The sacrifices resulting from temporarily closing the putting greens will quickly be forgotten once the new and improved surfaces are opened for the play the following spring.

Regrassing greens is a big venture! It requires an objective assessment of the putting green complexes and a well-thought-out plan of action. There will be challenges throughout the process and annual bluegrass will continue to be a persistent but manageable threat. Soil fumigation will slow the annual bluegrass encroachment into the greens and collars. Plant growth regulators and several newer selective herbicides are also showing promise for suppressing smaller populations of annual bluegrass in bentgrass surfaces. Even with these challenges, I cannot think another option other than complete reconstruction that can so quickly and thoroughly improve playability and reliability of the putting surfaces while offering the potential to lower maintenance costs. Regrassing is coming to a golf course near you Should you be next?

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