

Bermudagrass Greens Dilemma: To Paint, or Not to Paint?

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Golf is a business, and we have to try to provide what the customer wants. But getting very good putting surfaces for as many months as possible must be managed within the available turf budget.

Until the early 2000s, most bermudagrass greens were overseeded with a cool season grass — mainly perennial ryegrass. It grew well and was very persistent. It provided green color, and more grass during the winter and early spring. While it resulted in very good turf, it didn't produce fast putting speeds. Overseeding with *Poa trivialis*, or bentgrass, has been used on some courses in recent years for a smooth, fast putting surface. These grasses compete with the bermudagrass as it begins growing in the spring, but are not as competitive as perennial ryegrass.

More recently, new ultradwarf bermudagrass varieties, such as Champion, MiniVerde, and Tifeagle, have replaced the older Tifton 328 and Tifdwarf varieties on many greens — and on some courses that had bentgrass greens. The good news: These grasses have very fine leaves and can be mowed very low (1/8 inch) to provide fast putting speeds. The bad news: There are problems obtaining a uniform stand. Additionally, once a good stand is achieved, it is very competitive with the new bermudagrasses in the spring, resulting in poor turf quality into the summer.

That's why a method of not overseeding greens and having "brown dormant" bermudagrass in the winter — or painting the

greens — has become common practice.

Special paints are now available that are not toxic to the grass and have more natural colors. It looks good in winter, providing a contrast to the surrounding brown dormant bermudagrass. Paint is less expensive than overseeding — you don't have to pay for seeds or some fungicides, and there's less mowing. It costs about \$800 to paint 18 greens; some courses paint three times during the winter. Several courses I have visited are also using a lower-cost dye, probably a water-insoluble pigment, instead of paint.

Aside from lower costs, painting greens causes earlier growth of bermudagrass, since it doesn't have competition from overseeded grass. The paint's darker color also holds heat, which allows the bermudagrass to begin growing in March, and it usually has very good quality in April.

Cool-season overseeded grasses grow very well during the spring, with excellent quality during March, April, May, and early June. However, that means the bermudagrass cannot begin growing until early summer.

Superintendents usually remove the overseeded grass with an herbicide in May, to allow the bermudagrass to begin growing well by early June, but the bermudagrass usually

has poor quality for a few weeks.

My conclusion is that it is best for the health of the bermudagrass not to overseed greens. But there are some negatives associated with painting greens.

The bermudagrass usually becomes thin in late winter/early spring, and putting speeds become very fast. Greens with steep slopes have limited hole placements, and balls often roll off the putting surface. Courses with these types of greens have to overseed to achieve slower putting speeds. Courses considering converting to a new ultradwarf bermudagrass might have to reduce the contours on some greens if they want reasonable putting conditions without overseeding.

Another negative with painting is the reaction from northern golfers. Some courses found that tourist golfers did not like the very fast putting speeds of a painted green. They were calling to see if courses overseeded or painted, and many indicated that they did not want to play on painted greens. Therefore, a number of courses have chosen to overseed the greens — even with the negatives to the bermudagrass.

Once again, it's a balancing act between what the customer wants and what the course chooses.

› CGA staff agronomist [Leon Lucas](#) is available to help CGA member clubs with their turfgrass dilemmas. Contact him at (919) 779-3241 or llucas@carolinagolf.org.