

How to get quick green-up

BY CHRIS HARRISON

It's true: sports turf managers like cars that are fast, runners that are fast, and fields that green-up fast when they need it to grow.

Whether it is getting a quick start on a field in spring or fast rebound coming out of the summer slump, there is no single answer to making grass grow. Listen to a cross-section of professional managers, however, and you'll get some good ideas. Two in particular stand out: first is a proper fertility management program. The other is judicious use of turf tarps.

Fertility

"Start out by putting down 1.0 to 1.5 pounds of N in November," advises

Ohio State University sports turf extension specialist Pamela Sherratt. Her recommendation is for fields on a latitude with Columbus. Farther north, that schedule should be stepped up. Farther south, it can be pushed back to early December.

"You want to apply a quick-release nitrogen source," Sherratt continues. The idea is to get plants to take up N quickly, but not use it for growth. The N is stored for the following season.

Darian Daily, director of stadium grounds for the Columbus (OH) Crew Stadium, recommends using urea and iron "if you're on a budget." His pro soccer stadium is a bluegrass base with ryegrass overseed.

"We use a granular 32-3-10 with 3% iron, 50% slow release," Daily says. "We apply 2 pounds per 1000 in November or December, usually after the completion of our season. We then apply the same granular product the first of March."

Once grass starts to green up, Daily lowers the mowing height from 1 3/8-



Columbus Crew Stadium

inches to 1.125 inches. "We mow the pitch and then raise the mowing height back up," he says. "I found that dropping the mowing height thins out dead and brown leave blades. When new growth happens, it gives the appearance of a greener pitch."

Another tip to reduce stress on the field is to rotate the location of team drills. Spring baseball practice and summer line-man drills hurt grass just when it needs to be its greenest.

Make it easy for the coach to change the location of the drills, even to providing striping on the field in alternative locations. Use a good

fungicide in the spring to help the program along.

In addition to the nitrogen hit, Sherratt recommends applying potassium for winter hardiness. A 3-1-2 complete fertilizer or a 2-1-2 will do the trick.

"We've seen a good 14-21 day advance on spring green-up with this program," Sherratt says.

If timing is off, the biggest downside is the loss of the N. In long grass, it leaches. In shorter grass it could burn the leaves, but the grass will rebound. With a good late fall program, there is no need to apply more N until May, Sherratt says.

Tarps

There is no doubt in Daily's mind that a grow tarp will make all the difference in the world for getting grass growing in tough conditions.

The stadium is home Major League Soccer's Columbus Crew. It is fair to say that the 22,555-seat facility is the most extravagant monument to the

progress of soccer in the U.S. It offers a combination of European atmosphere and traditional American amenities. But it is the field that counts.

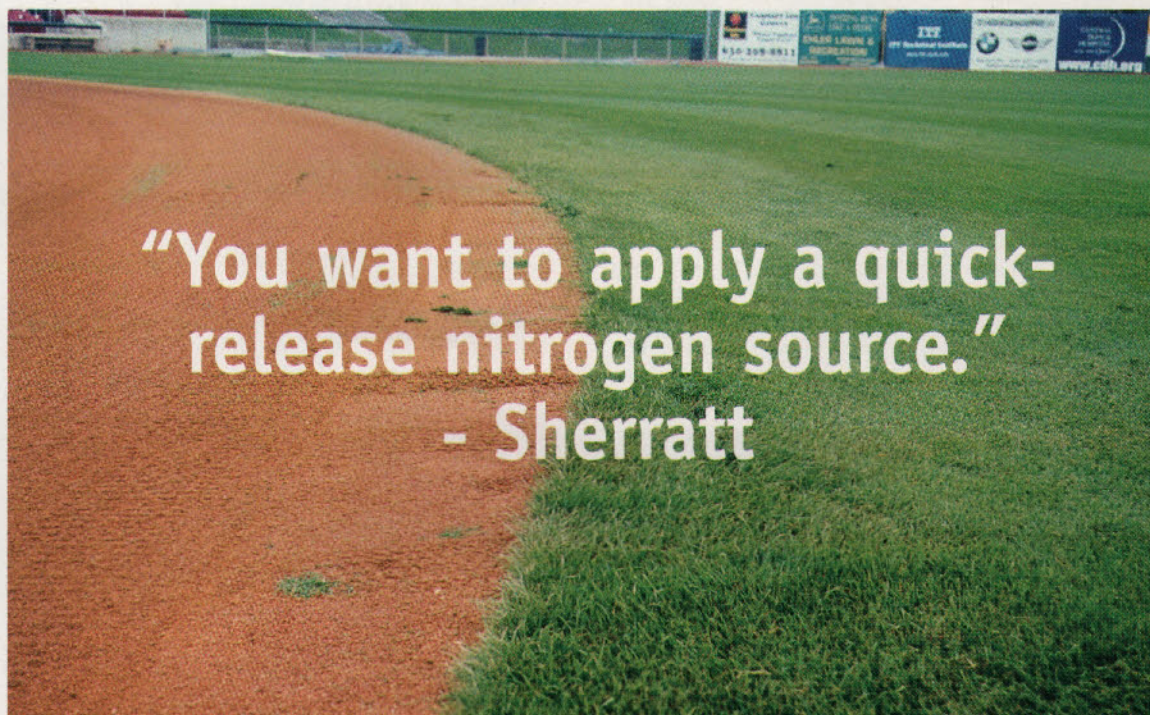
"Use a grow tarp," Daily says unequivocally. "We use Evergreen from Covermaster." The tarp is used like a greenhouse. "We have five sections that cover our entire 102,564 square feet," he continues.

Daily has a word of caution. "Watch out for frost," he says.

Boyd Montgomery, groundskeeper for Sylvania Recreation near Toledo, OH, is sold on tarps, too. He told listeners at the Ohio Turf Conference that he has a half dozen tarps which he puts together to make one good cover.

If the purpose of a grow tarp is simply to serve as a temporary greenhouse, why not put down some clear plastic and simply toss it at the end of the season? Montgomery does not see any percentage in that.

"A 60-foot by 200-foot tarp will cost you about \$1200, he says. "It's a good tool and worth the money."



Keep in mind that grow tarps are not solid sheets of plastic. They are made of a woven material that allows heat and water to pass through.

"Most grow tarps come with a 5-year warranty," Montgomery says. Divide the cost by even that minimum life expectancy and it really is less costly than plastic . . . without the disposal problem.

Daily agrees. "If things are tight, choose one area of the field that needs it most and use it there." If there is only one tarp, try it first

at midfield between the hash marks. Or, on a soccer field, put a tarp by the goal mouths.

"We did an experiment, just covering the center of the pitch and we found that we had a huge green-up under the cover," Daily says. The weather determines if he covers or not. "If we are going to get a long period of cold or frost, we will cover so that we can keep the green longer."

Of course, not all stadiums are in the north. In the Southern United States, Bermudagrass is the turf of choice. "On Bermudagrass, lightly paint with Green Graphics or Lesco Green," advises Tom Burns, grounds manager with the Texas Rangers, Arlington, TX.

The playing surface of The Ballpark is Tifway 419 Bermudagrass. The sod was grown on a farm in Granbury, TX, and was laid in 4x100 foot strips on the field in October 1996. Drainage lines are laid every 15 feet over the entire field. The playing surface is then covered by 4-5 inches of pea gravel and 14-15 inches of sand mixture as the field is expected to have the capacity to drain 9-10 inches of water per hour.

The field's irrigation system allows the entire outfield to be watered from one station, producing 750 gallons per minute or 50,000 gallons per hour, as compared to 18,000 gallons per hour in Arlington Stadium.

If money were tight, Burns says he would buy a single grow tarp and move it around, and making the infield the first place to cover.

Burns says tarps are handy for germinating seed. "A good tarp will speed germination by 50 percent or more," he says.

However, a tarp is not something a manager can roll out and forget. Once outside temperature reaches 60 degrees, the tarp should be pulled. "Remember, if it is 60 degrees air temperature, that means under the tarp it is 70 degrees," Daily says.

Burns agrees. "If you keep a tarp down more than a few days, you're going to have problems with pythium and a broad spectrum of patch diseases," he warns.

Burns offers two further bonuses to using a grow tarp on newly seeded areas. First, they keep birds away. In areas where birds are troublesome, this alone can be worth the price of the tarp.

Second, tarps minimize erosion. Tarps cut both water erosion and wind erosion.

Storage is not a big problem. "We roll them up on 4-inch drainage tubes," Daily says. "I would suggest that people use a larger diameter tube, say 18-24 inches, to roll the tarps. We use the tubes because we have a forklift to move them around the stadium. People without fork lifts can fold them up and handle them by hand," he adds. "They are not that heavy."

Final tips

Sometimes it is tough to get grass green in August, just before the start of

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off-balance, and everything to follow will be off as well.

I use my 36-inch rake as a guide. I measure 36 inches out to the sides from the front corners of the rubber, mark those points, and then measure 36 inches back from those two points. Set nails in all four points and stretch a string line. This will give you a nice level and a guide to work with. Water this area and fill in with packing clay, about an inch at a time, tamping as you go. Always keep your clay moist as you work. Never add clay dry.

Once your table is built, it's time to work on the slope. The slope should drop one inch per foot from the front of the rubber out 6 feet. So, 6 feet in front of the rubber should be 6 inches lower than the rubber. Once you figure where these points are, dig down an extra 3 inches in the landing area, the v-shaped area in front of the rubber.

Starting at the center of the rubber, measure out 6 feet. From this point, measure out 4 feet to each side, and set nails. Run a string from the front corner of the rubber down to the other two nails. This is your landing area. Dig down 3 inches, water to help form a solid bond with the soil and fill the area with packing clay or clay bricks.



Most amateur mounds lack a "table," a pitcher's work area behind and to both sides of the rubber.

If using the loose clay form, fill an inch at a time, tamping and watering as you go. Let the water soak in between layers. If using bricks, wet and blend all the seams. When you are within a 1/2-inch of grade level, fill in with your infield mix. The base clay will allow you to dress the area and protect your subsurface from cracking in direct sunlight. Most importantly, it allows players to kick out a little something without creating holes.

Finally, taper the rest of the mound from the table and work area to the sod, so it has a smooth transition and there is no hazard of tripping. Cover the mound area with a soil conditioner or drying agent,

like Soilmaster or Rapid Dry to control surface moisture.

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Bill Butler is the Field of the Year Award-winning head groundskeeper for the Lakewood Bluesclaws. This article was supplied by Oil Dri, makers of Pro's Choice.



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football. Bluegrass is pretty bad at that time of year. Don't give up on Bermudagrass just because your stadium is not in the south. Dr. Tony Koski, extension turfgrass specialist, at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, says there are seeded hybrid Bermudagrasses that work well in cold climates—not cool, but cold.

Bluegrass is at its best in the spring when Bermudagrass is struggling to get going. Ironically, Bermudagrass looks best in mid-August when bluegrass looks lousy. A northerner has little to worry about with disease and even the perennial Southern problem of mole crickets is not a factor in the north.

"Yukon and Riviera are two varieties that look very good," Koski says. Koski has Yukon growing under Colorado conditions for years. Riviera thrives at a mowing height of about three-quarters of an inch. It is a newer variety of Bermuda. As such, it will be harder to find and more costly.

Even with more typical blue or rye grass, a dormant seeding in January or February can pop new grass two weeks earlier than traditional seeding, Sherratt says. "The mortality rate (on seed) is high," she cautions, "so boost the seeding rate 30 to 50 percent."

Another tip: "Pre-germinate the seed and keep people off the seedlings," Daily says.

While not every sports turf manager has the budget of a professional stadium, there are ways to get what you need. One way is to approach several different departments or clubs and ask them to split the cost of necessary gear to get grass growing faster. All coaches really do want a safe, nice playing surface for the athletes.

Another is to take the old extension route and change a management practice in one area or on one of several fields. Perhaps change the fertility program in the end zones or put a grow tarp on a single practice field. Anyone who has spent any time on a field will notice the difference quickly. The improvement in one area of a field will sell itself for other fields.

Lastly, be sure everyone is on board with the program. "Educate your superiors and administrators on the care of fields. It will pay off in the long run," Burns says.

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Chris Harrison is a free lance writer specializing in turf and agriculture.