

Don't abandon me!

Each of the last few summers we have been able to close some of our fields from mid-June until early August. Before we did this the bermudagrass fields were never in good shape come fall. Since the fields are not used, we just mow at 3 to 4 inches every couple of weeks—often enough that they don't get too overgrown and look ragged. We put on one application of fertilizer (based on soil test) in mid-spring and then again at end of summer when we open them up for play. We don't do much else to them while they are closed because this allows us to save money on labor and fertilizer. This seemed to improve the fields until this year. The worn areas have not grown over very well after a month. Can you give us some advice? Is this a good practice?

North Carolina

Previously, I have called this management style, the semi-abandonment method and I have written about it previously in "Q&A." To some degree, it has been used by schools for many years with mixed success. To understand the history of this method, consider the situation that developed it.

You have a field on school property. From mid-August when school starts until the last day of classes on the spring, the school has one activity after another on their field(s). It is often a 9-month employee that is responsible for the upkeep of the field unless the school contracts with an outside maintenance group. So, when that 9-month employee leaves work in the spring, so does the maintenance on the fields. Perhaps someone will come in and mow the field occasionally but otherwise it is left on its own. When the coach comes in to start planning fall practices they look out across the field and then get a little worried that the shorter freshman athletes may need a GPS device to find their way through the tall weeds. The semi-abandoned field now gets renewed attention.

Think this never happens? I can assure you it does. The problem is not that you give your field a break in use. The problem is taking a break with the maintenance. I think it is great if a field can be closed for use part of the year. But the summer is no time to abandon a bermudagrass field. This is prime season to improve the field.

You asked why leaving the field alone has worked in the past but not this year. The bare areas are most likely due to heavy use. Heavy use not only causes above ground turf wear, but also can result in excessive soil compaction. In some cases the compaction can be so heavy that growth of turf may be stunted and those stolons that do grow across the compacted ground may not be able to "peg down" into the hard soil. This is why you need to aerify a field and

open up the soil for air exchange allowing roots to grow down deeper into the soil.

If there are large bare areas, the downtime can be used for sodding (following proper soil prep) to speed along the field's recovery. This is also a good time to go ahead and make those field improvements that have been on the backburner all year. Things like adding drainage, upgrading the irrigation system, or grading problem areas that holds water are great summer projects. With the field not being used there is time for turf to grow over trenches or if sod is laid, for it to knit down and be ready for fall play.

So if labor will be limited in summer, what are the essential cultural practices? Number one has to be mowing. Hire someone to mow the turf at least once a week. During the summer, bermudagrass should really be mowed 2-4 times per week, but if that is not practical, at least mow it once per week at a reasonable mowing height using a rotary mower. For infrequent mowing, mow down to 2-3 inches. This will help maintain density and also aid in weed control. If you cannot afford the required labor, have a school club, team, or civic organization adopt the field for the summer. Provide them some specific instructions (on-site and written) before you turn them loose for the summer.

Fertilizing is recommended to maintain density and to promote recovery of damaged turf. Summer is when bermudagrass is most efficient at using applied fertilizer. Try to get at least one or two applications of nitrogen fertilizer down during this period of time. From one-half to one pound of nitrogen per one thousand square feet per application will be helpful in maintaining turf density and health. Use a soil test for determining the need for other nutrients or for pH adjustment and then adjust in fall when regular maintenance resumes.

Weed control requires a balance between tolerance and need. Some fields are naturally weedy and will require either a preemergence or postemergence program to sustain a good turf surface. Other fields may be sustainable over summer with little to no weed control. On-site experience will dictate the best approach for weed control.

And what if none of this is done? Well, being able to abandon a field for a couple of months and then whip it back into shape in a few weeks is a testament to the toughness and resiliency of bermudagrass. It responds very quickly to inputs such as water and fertilizer. It is also very tolerant to a wide range of pesticides, allowing a manager to aggressively control most weeds without fear of killing the bermudagrass. It can be done, but certainly do not expect to win any Field of the Year awards. ■

Q&A



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