

# Bermudagrass dance



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## Questions?

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*I was watching a Philadelphia Eagles home game and I was shocked to hear the announcer say they had bermudagrass on the field, especially since it looked so good. I thought it was a southern grass. Can I use it at my high school field here in Ft. Wayne, IN?*

The Philadelphia Eagles do in fact have “Patriot” bermudagrass growing on their stadium field and head sports turf manager Tony Leonard is one of those creative agronomists that started pushing the use of bermudagrass beyond the upper limit of the transition zone that runs just to the north of Interstate 70. It’s important to remember that Tony along with some of the other professional and college teams have many resources, like a subsurface heating system, at their disposal to successfully grow bermudagrass beyond its normal limit. They also have the backing to replace the field with sod if the bermudagrass does not perform as expected.

There are also a few examples of bermudagrass used in the north on native soils without any modified heating system. In Ames, IA at latitude 42° N we first started seeding bermudagrass in 1998 on difficult practice fields in the summer to produce at least some vegetation for the start of the playing season in August and September. Bare soil, irrigation, nitrogen feeding, and a hot sunny summer were critical for successful and rapid growth. Back then we were using varieties like “Yukon” and “Princess” while “Riviera” is a more popular type now. We did not expect the varieties to overwinter and mostly they disappeared from winter kill.

In the past 5 years however we have been seeing patches of bermudagrass, which must have come from these seeded types, popping up all over our turfgrass research farm in Ames. In fact, we are

starting to get samples of bermudagrass coming to us from lawn care companies throughout Iowa.

If you are considering bermudagrass I suggest sprigging or sodding a vegetative type to insure better coverage and improved turf quality. Seeded bermudagrass will only establish where the soil is completely bare; it will not establish when seeded into an existing stand of cool season grass.

At the STMA Field Day in 2009 Steve Bush sprigged 5000 sq. ft. of Tim VanLoo’s Iowa State University practice football field with “Patriot” bermudagrass and it has survived at 42° N with no winter kill and no

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covering or supplemental heating. At the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, (42° N) John Donehoe has successfully grown bermudagrass for several years without supplemental heating. Based on this it would seem possible that you could grow bermudagrass successfully in Ft. Wayne, IN at 41° N. In fact, I would like to find the most northern location where bermudagrass has been successfully grown and even where it has been attempted and not been successful.

These few examples lead me to give you a big “maybe” recommendation and certainly I would not use bermudagrass on my main competition field until I had successfully grown it on a practice or demonstration area. Here are a few other considerations when contemplating bermudagrass use in northern climates: Start with a test plot at your facility of at least 1000 sq. ft.; better yet try it on two or three locations around your facility. If it fails you don’t want it to be on your main competition field.

Turfgrass breeders and growers in the heart of the transition zone are constantly aware of winter kill and they select and manage for improved winter hardiness. Winter kill can occur directly from lethal low temperatures after the bermudagrass has gone dormant or it can occur from brief cold snaps before the grass hardens off or just as it is waking up in the spring. The chance for this to occur in northern climates is much greater than in the transition zone. As you go north the growing season for bermudagrass shortens and it is more difficult to have it recover from traffic. Fall nitrogen fertilizer is commonly practiced on cool-season grasses but it will greatly increase the chance of winter kill on bermudagrass. I would not recommend it if you plan on playing fall football and spring soccer. That is just too much pressure on the grass surface when it is dormant and not growing. It has been most successfully used on college and pro practice fields during late summer and early fall from August through September. The team can then move to another cool-season field once the bermuda goes dormant. So my recommendation with bermudagrass in the north is, she can be a real sweetheart but take her to your high school prom and learn to dance before you say I do. ■