

Putting your turf to bed for winter

OFTEN TIMES it seems that immediately after the fall season begins, we begin bracing for winter. This actually has some merit as far as a turf manager is concerned. While you are quite likely still devoted to managing fields week after week for football or soccer practice, it's not too early to start thinking ahead to steps that you can take to put your field to bed for the winter.

It is a bad assumption to think that turf management ends the minute the final whistle of the season is blown. In fact, some of the most important work is done in November and December, especially if you will have traffic on the field in early March. The following are some tips that you should consider before turning out the lights on what has hopefully been an enjoyable season:

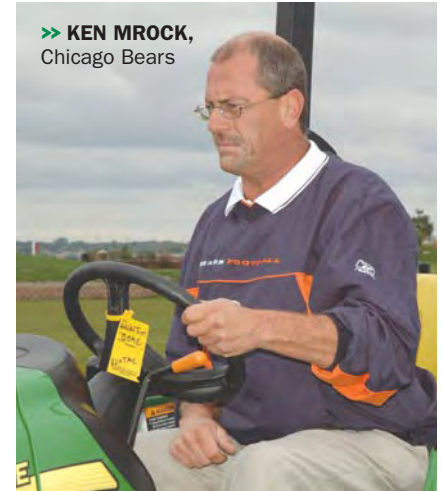
AERIFY THE TURF AFTER THE END OF THE SEASON

Chances are good that your turf has become compacted during the course of the football or soccer season, given the amount of heavy traffic a field can get, especially if teams have games and practices on the surface. Help open up space for air and water to move in the root zone with a postseason aeration. No matter how late your season extends you can aerify and topdress as long as the field has not frozen solid.

If you haven't yet incorporated conditioner into the field, now is a good time to do so. I use Field & Fairway at a rate of 750 lbs./1000 ft² across the entire area. Use a chain link drag, broom, or mat drag to break up soil cores and to move your conditioner into the aeration holes. Selecting a calcined clay conditioner will help bring air and water porosity to the rootzone for a long time.

REPAIR WORN OR DAMAGED AREAS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

By taking the time to patch the field at the end of the fall season, you give your turf a significantly better chance of coming on strong by the time spring practice comes around. A field that has been badly beaten up will likely require some resodding. If turf



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damage is light to moderate, you may be able to get by with seeding to help reestablish a strong stand of turf.

Plan ahead, considering what kind of use your field will have in the spring. A multi-use field that needs to be ready for lacrosse and other spring events needs to go into the winter in much better shape than a field that is reserved for a single sport like football.

CONSIDER SEEDING OPTIONS BASED ON CLIMATE

If you are in a climate where soil temperatures drop significantly by the end of the season, dormant seeding is an option for you. Dormant seeding can have benefits because the freeze/thaw cycle of your soil will relieve compaction and provide space for seed to work its way into the soil crevices over the winter. Seed will remain protected over the winter months and germinate in a hospitable environment in the early spring. In milder climates, a good option is to pre-germinate seed by submerging your seed bag into a 55-gallon drum of water. Change the water every 8 to 12 hours over several days until the seed swells and pops, putting out the beginning of the root. Drain the seed and mix with sand or conditioner to prevent clumping and allow spreading. The exposed seed will take up root nicely in the winter months and provide good plant growth early in the spring.

An advertisement for Natural Sand Company. It features a photograph of a young boy in a black baseball cap with the company logo and a black and white baseball glove. The text is overlaid on the image and includes the slogan 'Passion for the game Passion for the dirt', a testimonial about Grant's Engineered Soil Technology, a list of products (DuraEdge, FieldSaver, DuraPitch), the tagline 'Not all dirt is created equal.', and the company logo and contact information.

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THINK AHEAD TO SPRING CRABGRASS TREATMENT

It is common to implement some kind of crabgrass treatment program in the spring season. What is often overlooked is the impact that this can have on seeding. If your plan is to apply herbicides in the spring, it is even more important that you schedule post-season fall seeding accordingly.

TURN ON THE HEAT

Turf blankets can extend your window of warm soil temperatures by several weeks, lengthening the amount of growing time before winter, and promoting earlier green-up at the end of winter. The blankets keep soil temperatures warm enough to promote seed germination, and allow existing turf to grow instead of going dormant. This results in thicker and stronger turf when blankets come off later in the winter. Blankets are best put down in November or December in cool climates—too early and the soil will overheat—and should be removed two to three weeks before traffic returns to the field. After removing the blankets, mow the turf several times to harden it prior to field usage.

In all winter conditions and especially if you are laying turf blankets consider a fungicide application to help avoid snow molds since air movement will be restricted to the turf. This will help prevent unwanted and damaging disease from forming over the winter.

ADJUST MOWING HEIGHTS

Mowing should be infrequent, if at all, following the end of play for the season. Be sure to avoid mowing when there is any frost on the turf, as this can cause damage. Adjust the mowing height to 2 to 3 inches following the end of season, and be sure that blades have not become dull over the course of the season.

WINTERIZE IRRIGATION SYSTEM AND EQUIPMENT

Water will have remained in the lines, even when the system is turned off. Take an air compressor to blow the water out of the lines to prevent freezing and expansion, which will rupture pipes.

Also, after going through the rigors of the fall season, there may be equipment issues that have come to light. Winter months can pro-

vide the necessary time for proper repairs or rebuilds in place of short-term fixes that got you through the season. Take the time to clean out maintenance equipment, sharpen blades, wipe down machines, tighten fuel caps and cover anything that might be left exposed to the winter weather. All small engines should be drained of fuel and winterized them also running the gas tank empty.

ADJUST FERTILIZATION TO TIMING OF THE SEASON, CLIMATE

In cool climates, a late-season fertilizer application will promote rooting and carbohydrate storage. In warm climates, reduce or restrict the amount of nitrogen so that turf can be put to bed. In all cases, wait until the spring flush before starting next year's fertility program.

Remember, just because play concludes for the season doesn't mean your job is complete. Take advantage of every available hour when it comes to turf management. ■

Ken Mrock is Head Groundskeeper of the Chicago Bears.



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