



Gardens & Greens

Getting To The Root of Turf Problems

Summer in the Coachella Valley has become a challenging time for landscape turf managers. As more people are living here year round, expectations of summer turf quality have increased significantly.

Historically (15-20 years ago) the month of May was a period of transition for turf. It was very similar to the fall renovation everyone is familiar with. The water would be shut off and the mowing heights would be reduced. The winter ryegrass was quickly killed off leaving mostly brown turf. The water was then turned back on, fertilizer applied and by June usually the turf had fully transitioned to summer Bermuda. This gave the Bermuda four months to develop a strong root system and store food for the winter dormant period.

In the past 15 years, as more full time residents have moved into the valley this quick transition became unacceptable. The expectation was that the grass would remain green continuously.

This presents some challenges to those landscape professionals who are managing this transition. Ryegrass suppresses Bermuda growth by shade competition and chemical means. By allowing the rye to remain in the turf the Bermuda does not fill consistently. The rye will continue until extreme hot temperatures are experienced, sometimes in late July. When the rye dies off this late in the year the Bermuda may not be fully established until mid August leaving only a month until the fall renovation process begins.

There is not enough time to develop strong enough root systems to go through winter dormancy and re-establish in the spring. Resulting in a continuing cycle of poor transition that gets worse as time goes on. This transition problem along with Bermudas poor growth in shade areas contributes to poor quality turf in many areas.

Another problem that is often experienced during summer months is excessive growth of Bermuda. This usually happens in July or August during periods of high heat and humidity. During these periods three inches per week of growth is possible. Mowing equipment is designed to remove one inch or less growth. Turf experts warn never remove more than 30-40% of leaf blade when mowing. When more than two inches of growth is cut in a single week, this contributes to the appearance of poorly mowed turf.

What are some solutions? Golf courses mow greens daily and fairways three times per week. Homeowners can consider twice per week mowing, but landscape budgets limit mowing to once a week. Another option is to put back into practice the May renovation. We are investigating with experts other chemical and/or mechanical solutions.