

Turfgrass Spring Blog #1: 2020 Edition
Turf Agronomics During the COVID-19 Outbreak
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On a personal note, I hope everyone in the green industry is safe and I encourage you to do your part by following the Centers for Disease Control guidelines (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html) as our society navigates our way through this pandemic. The landscape, golf course, sports field, and sod production industries are well suited to maintain business operations while practicing “social distancing”. Business owners and managers have to make conscious decisions to protect yourself, employees, coworkers, clients, and the general public.

As a University of Georgia Cooperative Extension turfgrass specialist, I have received numerous calls and emails over the past week inquiring into grass selection and planting. This is likely a result of two things – recent warm, dry weather which typically activates people to begin working in their landscape, and the increased number of people “sheltering in place”. It is encouraging to see people taking interest in their landscape.

I am aware that Georgia sod producers have remained open and are employing innovative ways to provide grass to landscapers, as well as, the DIYer, while maintaining “social distancing”. Much of the business has been shifting to electronic commerce, this pandemic will accelerate that shift. Ordering, payment and certified grass certificates can all be done online or through an app, minimizing human interaction. Similarly, pickup or delivery of sod requires little to no contact among people. You may see the delivery driver from a distance. Just allow them to do their job and all the paperwork will come to you via email. As you leave their retail site or they leave your job site, hopefully you get a “thank you”, a smile, and a wave.

Warm-season grasses are beginning to transition into active growth. All the rainfall this winter has resulted in wet soils which are generally slower to warm as water is a buffer of heat. In Griffin, the UGA Weather Network (www.GeorgiaWeather.net) has recorded nearly 27 inches of rainfall from January to date. That is 4.5 inches more rain than was recorded January through May last year and over 10 inches more rain for the same time period in 2017 and 2018. In the last two weeks, air and 4-inch soil temperatures have increased and are consistent with March temperatures for the past three years. If the 7-day forecast holds, warm-season grasses will green-up further and begin to need maintenance.

The other questions I have received have revolved around turfgrass agronomics as landscape companies, golf courses, sports fields, and sod producers reduce crew sizes or alter work schedules to accommodate social distancing and childcare needs. In general, turfgrass is a resilient plant capable of tolerating numerous stresses and abuse (e.g. wear, traffic, divoting, heat, cold, drought, mismanagement, disease, insects, etc.) with tremendous recuperative potential. During this time of uncertainty, turf’s resiliency can be a benefit to the plant and the

turfgrass manager. A few things to consider with limited resources include fertility, mowing, plant growth regulators (PGRs), irrigation, and pest management. Some managers may be unable to address all these practices and prioritizing may be an individual or case-by-case decision.

Amid the pressures of the COVID-19 outbreak, it would be prudent to withhold nitrogen fertilization, especially if the lawn was under a lawn care program in 2019. There are likely residual nutrients in the soil that can sustain the turfgrass plant until landscape, golf course, sports field, or sod maintenance crews can resume normal activities. If you can fertilize your turf, consider using half of what you typically would apply this time of year. When labor is limited there is little need to stimulate growth and additional management (e.g. mowing, pest management, etc.). It is still early spring and warm-season species really do not need much fertility. For most of the state, waiting to fertilize until mid- to late April will be fine.

The exception would be cool-season grasses like tall fescue and bentgrass. Now is the time to fertilize them and grow as many roots as possible to precondition the grass from the upcoming summer heat stress. More emphasis to maintaining recommended fertility programs should be given to cool-season lawns and putting greens.

Mowing is a routine practice to turfgrass maintenance. For most of the state, there is minimal need for mowing right now. That will change in the coming weeks. If you are working with a skeletal crew, consider raising the mowing height to the upper end of the recommend range for the turfgrass species you are maintaining. Lawncare calendars that include species mowing height ranges specific to Georgia can be found at www.GeorgiaTurf.com by following the link to the turfgrass species and in the “2020 Turfgrass Pest Control Recommendations”.

The use of PGRs to reduce the frequency of mowing is a common question. Right now, this may be an option for cool-season grasses. For warm-season species, it is too early to apply PGRs. These grasses need to be actively growing before applying a PGR. It may be mid-May before the timing is correct for applying PGRs to warm-season grasses. Read and follow label directions.

Currently irrigation of turf should not be a concern. This can change over the next few weeks as temperatures rise and grass begins to grow. Desiccation can be factor to turfgrass loss during spring transition. If rainfall patterns continue it is unlikely this will be a problem, but if soil does begin to dry through the spring, then irrigation should be applied. With reduced crews to maintain lawns, golf course, and sports fields, use as little irrigation as possible. Consider using half as much as usual (e.g. 0.5-inch water / week). This may not provide all the moisture the grass needs but it should be enough to get it through green-up and the COVID-19 outbreak.

Pest management is the last big issue professionals and DIYers are asking about. First, spring green-up is when warm-season grasses are most susceptible to herbicide injury. The mower can serve as a weed control option. If possible, mow regularly – I am aware this seems contradictory to the idea of minimal crews under the COVID-19 outbreak but it involves one maintenance practice and not two (i.e. pesticide application). Many of the weeds currently in lawns are winter

annuals and will be dying as temperatures rise, mowing and Mother Nature are suitable options under these circumstances.

Initiating a preventative disease control program however is something that should be considered. Spring is a time when environmental conditions are favorable for disease infection and when the grass is least capable of resisting. There are several turfgrass fungicides that have a 28-day residual. Visit www.GeorgiaTurf.com and follow the link to the “2020 Turfgrass Pest Control Recommendations” for fungicide options. A single fungicide application can protect the grass and minimize the need to return to a property for four weeks. It is still early spring and a second fungicide application will likely be warranted but it would be nice to think full crews are returning to work by the time it should be applied.

The green industry is essential and a significant economic contributor to the state’s economy. Please work within health safety recommendations and be willing to make some concessions, like lower quality lawns, golf courses, and sports fields. Do your part and provide some community goodwill. Hopefully it will be repaid with new clients once the COVID-19 outbreak has passed.