Preparing for the Winter: Turf Blankets for Cold Weather Protection

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Last winter was the coldest in the southeast in the last twenty years. Despite these frigid conditions, ultradwarf bermudagrass putting greens didn’t miss a beat when turf covers were used appropriately. As another winter approaches, we have included a few questions and answers on turf covers for your consideration.

1. **Who needs to cover?** – If your golf course is in an area where temperatures fall below 25 degrees regularly, it is not only necessary but mandatory to use turf covers. Typically, this includes areas north of the line between Jackson, MS to Montgomery, AL to Macon, GA to Aiken SC to Myrtle Beach, SC.

2. **When should we cover putting greens?** – The general recommendation from years of research at Mississippi State by Dr. Michael Goatley is to cover anytime temperatures will be at 25 degrees or below. Over the years, golf courses that have followed this guideline have fared well.

3. **What types of covers work the best?** – An interesting aspect of Dr. Goatley’s research was that the type of covering material is not critical for winter protection. Covers of all types of materials were successful. As a result, superintendents have favored turf covers that are light in weight and durable. Lightweight covers are the easiest to install and take off, keeping labor as low as possible.

4. **Do we need double covers during extreme cold weather?** – When temperatures fall to mid-single digit or negative readings, some amount of winter injury is possible under a single cover. While a second cover is effective, other options are available. The most popular is pine straw. A two to four inch layer of pine straw placed directly over the turfgrass prior to covering helps to maintain higher soil temperatures during extreme cold weather. Pine straw is available for purchase and sometimes it is readily available from wooded areas on the golf course.

5. **How much do turf covers cost?** – Generally, the cost of light weight turf covers varies from 13 to 18 cents per square foot.
Turf covers are a valuable tool to protect ultradwarf bermudagrass putting greens from winter injury when conditions warrant.

The use of turfgrass covers should be viewed as an insurance policy and not an annoyance. If there is ever any doubt on whether or not to cover, go ahead and cover. Keeping your grass alive during a cold winter is the most important prerequisite to excellent playing quality in the spring. For additional information on winter management of ultradwarf putting greens in the SE Region, please read the article by Chris Hartwiger and Patrick O’Brien titled “Ultradwarfs in the Off Season - A Winter Wonderland.”

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Contact the Green Section Staff