

Clubhouse Edition

Shade vs. turf: can they coexist?

Why turf needs light: Plants use light the same way that animals use food -- to fuel the chemical reactions that keep them alive. But different plants need different levels of light. Shade loving houseplants or mosses that grow on the forest floor require very little light and will actually die if exposed to direct sun. In contrast, plants such as turfgrass require many hours per day of high intensity sunlight, and will die if forced to grow in the shade.



What happens in the shade?

When turf plants receive less light than is optimal, they begin to change almost immediately. The plants stretch out, with thinner stems and taller plants. Root growth is decreased, and leaves become darker, fewer in number, narrower and more succulent.

The damage cascades: Eventually, the turf plant becomes weakened. The succulent leaves are more susceptible to damage from foot and equipment traffic, as well as to disease. The depleted root system makes it difficult for the plant to recover from injury, and weeds become more common, because the turf is unable to compete with them. Overseeding places more stress on turf in shady areas, and can sometimes be the death knell for warm season turf.

As the shaded turf succumbs to these pressures, thinning and bare spots become more common. And because shaded turf requires less water, these areas are frequently wet and muddy.

Some damage can be avoided: The practices below can help decrease the problems associated with shade, but only tree pruning or removal can completely stop shade-related damage.

- Raise mowing heights to increase plant health.
- Minimize traffic and avoid overseeding in shady areas
- Consider replacing turf with shade tolerant plants, ground covers, or mulches

Bottom line:

There's no way around it -- shade and turf health are not compatible. When turf doesn't receive enough light, a host of problems develop, including low quality turf, increases in pests, bare spots, wet spots and reduced playability.

Tree pruning or removal are frequently the only solutions. If these are not options at your golf course, then some turf damage is inevitable.

