

STAYING GREEN

TifTuf™ Bermudagrass aids in Rivermont Golf Club's ongoing conservation efforts.

On any given fall day golfers can enjoy the sight of tall grass swaying in the wind as they play the 18 holes at Rivermont. Of course, this isn't the turfgrass on which golfers are playing. This plant is native to Georgia and part of the unique atmosphere of the Rivermont course. The native broomsedge and other seasonally colorful plants, carefully cultivated by superintendent Mark Hoban, add a natural flair to the course, giving each hole a bit more personality and a distinctive Georgia feel. The bunkers even have a dark brown river-like sand as opposed to the white sands of most courses.

Organic Course Care

However, the natural atmosphere at Rivermont is more than an aesthetic obsession. Hoban has been utilizing organic course care methods for 10 years. He uses a combination of worm compost and thermal compost — purchased in truckloads or produced onsite — to make compost tea and compost extract for turf management.

"My favorite part is pioneering in the steep learning curve of going this route," Hoban said. "I'm seeing some success and it drives me to reduce inputs even more as I go along."

Hoban and other organic turf care enthusiasts even hosted a field day during summer 2016 to showcase what their research has revealed in recent years.

He added, "I'm more convinced of the organic methods every year and want to continue to do [organic care] to collect more finite research details."

TifTuf Water Conservation

At Rivermont, conservation efforts reach beyond the lack of chemicals and into the careful selection of turfgrasses. In 2015, Hoban set out to remodel the chipping area. As a new turfgrass variety, TifTuf™, provided an option for water conservation.

Developed at the University of Georgia's Tifton campus, TifTuf underwent multiple tests before its market introduction in 2015. UGA research found that TifTuf uses 38 percent less water than standard Tifway Bermuda. As one of the first golf courses to use TifTuf, Rivermont had the opportunity to test TifTuf's real-world application in the chipping area and later in roughs and target areas in the driving range.

After changing their watering practices for TifTuf, Rivermont staff discovered that reduced irrigation is a good growth regulator to control mowing frequency without affecting turf quality.

Rivermont's chipping area is home to the course's first TifTuf Bermuda installation.

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"It is remarkable in how much less water it uses than [Tifway] 419. We had a drought fall and the color on the TifTuf rough height is better, whereas 419 is going dormant," Hoban said. "It's almost a night and day contrast between the TifTuf and 419."

Hoban also said they have placed TifTuf in areas with limited water access, particularly slopes. He has observed that once TifTuf is established it requires no extra water care, a remarkable difference compared to the Tifway, Tifgreen and TifEagle Bermudas at Rivermont.

"It might go off color in extended drought, but it bounces right back," Hoban said. "In comparison to other Bermudas, you really can't do that."

Other TifTuf Advantages

Hoban added that he has seen advantages beyond water tolerance, including that of recovery rate and late fall dormancy.

UGA research indicated that TifTuf's traffic tolerance is superior to that of Tifway and Celebration Bermuda. A quick recovery rate contributes to traffic tolerance.

"It's holding up so well with the picking areas compared to 419 and in the chipping area that gets a lot of wedge shots in it," Hoban said. "It recovers quite well, so I'm very happy we selected it for that."

National Turfgrass Evaluation Program trials showed that TifTuf goes dormant later in the fall than other

Bermudagrasses. Hoban has seen the results of this new turfgrass for himself.

"We have had some very low temps in the 22 degree [Fahrenheit] range at least twice, and we still have color in the short game area," Hoban observed on Dec. 19, 2016. "All other Bermudagrass is dormant. Granted, it's not summer lush, but very impressive."

Saving Water and Pollinators

In addition to organic care and TifTuf improvements, Hoban also takes pride in Rivermont's participation in the Operation Pollinator program. OP is an international biodiversity program to boost the number of pollinating insects on commercial farms by providing golf course managers with targeted seed mixtures and innovative pesticide practices designed to benefit pollinators.

"There are a lot of people outside the turf industry who are naysayers about the golf industry," Hoban said. "They think we are toxic and only the grass and golfers survive. We give tours to show people [we aren't toxic] rather than tell them. They see for themselves."

Whether its limiting water use, pollinator decline or chemical spread on golf courses, Rivermont welcomes members and guests to the championship course with the effort to "go green." There are certainly exciting years ahead to see how these efforts pay off.

Rivermont Golf Club is located at 3130 Rivermont Parkway, Johns Creek, Georgia. More information at RivermontGolfClub.com.



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Top left clockwise: Mark Hoban and his dog enjoy a game of catch on TifTuf. The lush TifTuf repairs itself quickly in the chipping area. A close-up look at TifTuf by the Rivermont pond.

