Will Warm Winter = Mad March??

Weather

What a stark contrast this past winter was to the previous! In 2011, we had near record snowfall (48” + in some areas) and were well below normal. As you can see by the above graphic, we are in exactly the opposite situation this year. Missouri had its 3rd warmest winter since 1895, and the nation as a whole recorded its 4th warmest winter. Eighteen total states ended up with 2012 winter in their top 5 warmest ever. Craziness, no igloos for the Washington politicians this year...

Our warming trend actually started in late 2011, and we are currently in a 5 month span of temperatures ranging 2 to nearly 6 degrees above the 30 yr normals. Our 10-day forecast reveals an even more aggressive warm-up with midweek low temperatures (near 60°F) rivaling our normal daily high temperatures. Several turf managers have or are contemplating crabgrass pre-emerge applications for next week already in mid Missouri. Soil temperatures need to be 55°F for five consecutive days for crabgrass germination. According to our Horizon Point reports, we have not reached that level yet in the state except for the Bootheel which has been tickling that mark for the last week. I would warn that by going this early, a split application strategy may not get control into August, and three applications may be necessary.
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Like crabgrass, several questions have been raised about the potential for earlier and more severe outbreaks of other pests this season. With the historical nature of this winter’s warmth, I don’t have much experience to rely upon to answer the concerns. From a biological perspective, several tree species are already budding and warm season grasses are breaking dormancy (see below). This should also mean fungi and other pests are following suit and have their metabolism firing too. In addition, there was not a harsh overwintering pressure on our pest populations this year which could yield larger epidemics. Because it’s so early compared to our normal last spring frost date (see below), it’s not time to start fungicide programs quite yet (even during next week’s warmth). However, it may be a few days or even weeks earlier than last year if the current trend doesn’t break. On the plus side, we don’t have snow molds to worry about this year.

Quick Hits:

After getting back from GIS, I scouted the farm intensively for disease this past week. No disease symptoms have awakened yet, but henbit, Poa, and other cool season weed species are running rampant. Below is a list of turf diseases I was looking for, and the first ones out of the chute we should be aware of.
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- Creeping bentgrass: cool season brown patch (yellow patch), Microdochium patch, early season fairy ring ?? *
- Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue, perennial ryegrass: red thread
- Zoysiagrass: large patch
- Bermudagrass: spring dead spot

* I’ve heard Twitter and Facebook rumblings from our neighbors to the north of Type II (green) fairy ring symptoms already on putting greens. Anyone in MO seeing the same?

Spring Green-Up

While futilely scouting for disease, I did a spot check on green-up of bermudagrass and zoysiagrass at the turf farm. From 5’6” away it appears that the turf is still dormant in Columbia, but when you brush back the upper surface of the turf canopy there are numerous green stolons and some green leaf shoots visible in both species. I would expect that those in the Bootheel and even in St. Louis may be seeing some zoysiagrass with a green tinge. Many, if not most, are mowing off the browns on creeping bentgrass greens by now.

If history serves, there should be at least a few more spring frosts in 2012 in Missouri, which should slow down green up of warm season species. The respective average dates of last frost are Bootheel (April 5- April 10), mid-Missouri, KC & STL (April 10-15), Springfield (April 15-20), and north Missouri (April 20). One thing to keep in mind is that these average dates were calculated from the span of 1971-
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2000, and may not be viable in our current climate of global change (phrase purposely rearranged).

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