

CHEMICALS

or

COMPOST

by

John Stobbs

Quite a few pointers have been showing up in greenkeeping articles in various American publications which rather suggest that they are realising anew, over there, that there are ways in which slicker methods of treating turf, for immediate results, may have considerable long-term disadvantages.

This is a point of view which has always held its ground over here, of course: the more so since members of the British greenkeeping profession have a certain traditional suspicion against "too much science"—especially when combined with high-pressure salesmanship (as all new products, good or bad, inevitably are in America). It's still interesting, though, to see an old cry of British Greenkeepers and Turf Advisers taken up with something of the air of a new and interesting rediscovery over there.

Ice Coating!

Maybe it was triggered off by the vast damage suffered by many Northern American courses in the winter of '61 and '62, when big snowfalls thawed slightly, then froze solid: to cover many greens with a solid coating of ice (much the same problem which we had ourselves here).

There was a great deal of to-ing and fro-ing and comparing of notes, apparently, amongst "Course Superintendents" in areas most seriously affected. All manner of theories were put forward to account for why some courses had

suffered so much more catastrophically than others. On some courses, whole greens emerged from the ice-sheet, rotting and stinking, or emerged green, only to die off soon afterwards; whereas in others, where conditions had been much the same, the turf suffered little permanent damage.

Theory plus Facts

In the end, it seems, the theory which most closely seemed to fit the facts (including the examination of plugs from different greens) was the one many a Briton might have suggested in the first place! Where the soil-structure of greens had least successfully been looked after, so that aeration was poor, and there was compaction of the soil (often at more than one level), the effects of the ice-sheet were disastrous. Where the turf had best been kept aerated and healthy in structure, damage seemed to be least. "If compacted turf is overlaid by a thick sheet of ice, life-giving oxygen can't penetrate to the roots Air drainage is a must" just about summed it all up, as the magazine *Golfdom* put it.

Autumn Dressing

Since then, there's been quite a bit of attention paid, too, to the functions of autumn dressing of greens: with the idea that above all it mustn't aim to stimulate growth above ground, but rather to strengthen the turf reserves for winter, and to help it to store up food for itself during the cold season. No one, they reckon, yet knows exactly how turf stores food reserves. But it does, and it must be helped to do so.

With the focus on long-term health of greens, not entirely surprisingly, there seems to have been something of a re-emphasis on composts, as against fertilisers. *Golfdom*, which usually has its nose very close to the ground indeed, came out with a short but dogmatic article (admittedly by a Vice-President of an Organic Compost Company, a Frank T. Sprogell), with a heading reading like one of our old clichés of tradition in this country: "Organic Material Helps to Rebuild Depleted Soil!"

He's worth quoting at some length, for the gist of his message to the modern American Greenkeeper:—

"Some of us who, for many years, have been responsible for golf course maintenance have wondered how we once managed to keep greens in such excellent condition despite the somewhat primitive stage of turf management technology compared with today's advanced methods, materials and machinery."

The troubles they used to have then, he remarks, don't seem to have been any worse than the troubles they now get "in this modern, highly scientific turf management era".

Use Compost?

Why? Because, he suggests, "the old fashioned value of soil building in compost" has gone rather out of fashion. "A good living organic compost is much more than just a fertiliser . . . It is a means of continuing life". And this old well-tried idea, he thinks, more and more American greenkeepers are reverting to.

"Many experienced superintendents realise that life (soil bacteria) is being depleted in the soil. This is caused by the constant use of sterile materials and the necessary application of various chemicals needed to correct weed and turf diseases. Detergents and chlorine in city water used on many courses also deplete soil life. Seldom are materials, containing living soil organisms, added to turf programmes to help remedy the deficiency. Lack of active, living organics in the soil creates a condition difficult to cope with. Unhealthy turf, shorter roots and compaction result. The soil becomes less friable, preventing adequate water and air circulation.

"To correct this condition Superintendents are beginning to revert to the old custom of using substantial amounts of live and active organics. Humus is a necessary and active organic portion of the soil. It creates a loamy textured structure by producing granulation, thereby improving aeration and drainage. It also improves the soil's exchange capacity, which is the soil's ability to retain plant nutrients and moisture. Active organic matter is needed by soil

micro-organisms as a source of food . . . Sufficient living organic matter in the root zone assures the full and complete productive value of all types of inorganic or sterile fertilisers."

Repetitive

It's all been said before, of course (and is continually being explained to Club Committees here in Europe by most of the well-known turf advisers). It is arresting, though, to observe the Americans—well-launched for decades on all the ambitious short-cuts of green-keeping—rediscovering the fundamental importance of the traditional British base for the whole perennial operation!

A Course Superintendent (Paul Voykin, Briarwood, Illinois), writing elsewhere on another subject in the same issue of *Golfdom*, perhaps sums up, incidentally, what it is all about:

"In the 12 years I have been in the turf business, the most successful superintendents I have run across are those who not only have wide technical knowledge and practical sense, but understand how to work with nature and its elements. They never fight nature or try to rush it. They learn to live with it and that, I think, is the secret of their success."

CORRESPONDENCE

Hon. Secretary,
British Greenkeepers' Association.

Dear Mr. Secretary,

1. The Spangdahlem Air Base is in the process of building a nine-hole golf course. The activity is presently suspended, of course, due to the inclement winter weather. I am sure that you are aware of the fact that there are very few golf courses located in Germany, and our problem is a competent qualified greenkeeper. We are wondering if you have someone available that would be qualified and interested in the position, and since this is a new activity to us perhaps you could offer some ideas as to the salary that would be expected.

2. The technicians that are building the golf course feel that it is most important that the greenkeeper be involved in the initial ground contouring and general layout. If you feel there would be any advantage in our doing so, I or a member of my staff can make arrangements to visit you at your convenience for further discussion.

Very truly Yours,
HARRY B. DAVIS,
Chief Civilian Personnel Officer.