

# Top Dressing

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One of the essential tasks in the Autumn programme of Golf Greenkeepers is the application of top dressing to the greens and tees; whatever time has been spent on early-autumn renovation work, the time given to the final operation of applying the dressing is of the utmost importance.

The main purpose of applying top dressing to turf is to improve the physical condition in which the root structure can expand in the coming autumn and winter months, and to provide a resilient, even surface for future play.

What does the average top dressing consist of? Quite often this depends on where the course is sited – is it near the coast, is it an established course, is it one of the many new courses – with its multitude of problems (usually caused by modern construction methods) – passed on to the greenkeeper? Some courses have greens which vary considerably in their make-up, especially on some heathland. All these problems will have completely differing requirements, and any young greenkeeper with such complex problems should seek advice from local courses, where experienced greenkeepers are usually only too pleased to offer sensible advice, if approached in the right manner.

On the seaside links the greenkeeper will use the local dune sand and old turf from repairs; close contact with local building contractors (who themselves are perhaps keen golfers) usually means a supply of local soil. Farmyard manure, if available, is also

incorporated, along with grass clippings from the course. The inland links, of course, only need change to local pit sand, and some courses have a source of supply on their own links. Many pit sands, along with the dunes sand, have a slight lime content, some more than others. When this is so, and the quantity of calcium is known, some adjustment for this should be made in the fertiliser programme; many inland courses will not find soil easy to acquire, and care should be taken that the pit sand and the soil used have a very low clay content. Anyone within reasonable distance of a sugar-beet factory would be well advised to inquire as to the availability of soil from the washing plant.

The make-up of most top dressing suitable for greens and tees is usually 50 per cent Dune or Sharp sand, 40 per cent light loam with a low clay content, 10 per cent fine peat. Some greenkeepers apply 1 cwt. of pinhead charcoal to each ton of screened compost; all compost must pass through 3/16 in. or 1/4 in. riddle mesh, and screening is best done in a dry shed or barn, when the staff can be occupied on rainy days. But wherever one is sited, it is important when making the compost heap to prepare it in layers some 6 in. to 9 in. thick. On some courses the heaps must be nearly 30-ton capacity. It is a must – to assist in the breakdown of the materials – to turn the heaps at intervals of 9 and 16 months. It is usual to take two years to really break them down into well-rotted humus-forming material. In the old days the turning of the heaps was no easy and pleasant task, but with the modern tractor with its front-mounted bucket, it is relatively easy.

Many very experienced greenkeepers incorporate light dressings of lime and sulphate of ammonia between layers, to assist the breakdown of the organic matter; others do not agree, being firmly convinced that the nitrogen released with the top dressing en-

courages soft growth and brings on fungal diseases such as Corticium and Fusarium during a mild autumn. Others contend that the excess lime alters the P.H. and encourages clover and worms. Certainly this period after top dressing does cause troubles with fungal diseases for some greenkeepers, but more often the cause of the trouble is one of the following: the top dressing was applied too thickly and not worked in; it was done under wet conditions; soil with a high clay content can smother fine grasses; fine sand which forms a layer and is not easy to work into the surface. I personally think the main cause of top dressing troubles is lack of scarification and aeration; it is an essential part of autumn work to do both scarification and aeration correctly, essential to allow oxygen to the plant root structure, and top dressing should never be applied to turf if it has a growth of grass exceeding 3/16 in.

Many greenkeepers simplify the making of dressing by purchasing a ready-made product; many of these are a boon to the greenkeeper with no resources to stack into heaps, or with a limited staff unable to spare the time to gather material. Some of these ready-made dressings vary considerably from one brand to another; some have a very high regard of fine peat, another a large proportion of sand; whichever type is chosen, if found to be satisfactory – stay with it – don't chop and change, as long as the product remains constant.

I do think a lot of serious green trouble is caused by applications of straight dressing, such as one year sand, one year peat, and I am convinced that all dressings must be thoroughly mixed together; to apply straight dressing will cause a build-up of layers of these materials under the sward; this will eventually lead to hard-capped greens of uneven pace, and on this surface players will have great difficulty making the ball stop, and unless regular seration is prac-

tised it is nigh impossible to get water into the green. If peat is the dominant factor, just the opposite can happen, soft spongy greens; thatch starts to build up unless regular scarification is carried out. Both methods lead to major troubles; root action is restricted, the sward becomes stunted and sparse and benefits very little from fertiliser when applied, and soon one is faced with desperate measures – should one re-lay the greens or will a combined scarification and hollow tining programme be sufficient – result, the green is out of play for a considerable time. The decision to undertake either method on some heavily used courses would almost require an act of Parliament! Look for layering when changing holes, and plan accordingly.

Some greenkeepers mix into the top dressings autumn fertiliser and apply to the green. I have reservations on this method, and fail to see how time is saved or how one can apply the fertiliser equally. I am sure a dressing of it can be applied more easily and quickly to a green by modern methods, or by hand if no spreader is available, than by mixing so many cwts. to so many tons of compost. I would recommend that fungicide be applied to the green before any top dressing be used, that all dressing be in a fairly dry state, and it is essential that dry conditions prevail during the operation to assist in working the dressing into the base of the sward. What method you adopt to put on the dressing is your choice; some use wooden lutes, others Trulutes, and to still see the experienced man casting with a shovel, working against the wind with a flick of the wrist as he casts, is something the machine age cannot compete with. As each green is covered I would recommend it be finished off with a steel drag mat pulling both ways across the green; it is most essential to work the dressing in thoroughly.

Usually, 3 to 4 lb. per sq. yd. is a

sufficient dressing to apply at any one time; a green of around 500 sq. yd. would take about 18 cwt. of compost, but should the green have been hollow tined this operation done by hand can remove some 10 to 12 cwt. of cores, and allowance should be made for two dressings to restore a true surface; allow some four to six weeks between dressings, always drag mat after spreading; I prefer a steel mat to a brush, the mat following the contours of the green much better. It is necessary to sterilise top dressing, often an expensive task and labour can be very involved; it does ensure weed-free compost, how essential that is on strong healthy sward is not easy to judge, but on poor thin swards some weeds could be worked in and be troublesome the following summer.

## News

Cambridge Soil Services combine expert technical knowledge with very extensive practical experience. This, together with the research and development constantly carried out in their own laboratory, workshops and trial grounds at Cambridge, enables them to provide the best possible answers to questions of sportsfields drainage, soil conditions and grass growth.

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The Parker 1973 exhibit at Motspur Park will be of particular interest to Golf Greenkeepers. The company report a continued increase in their range of Verdant Grass Seeds and Fertilisers. In addition, the company are London and Southern counties distributors for the Hommersteeg Seed Co. and responsible for the selling and distribution of Pedigree Grass Seed to Clubs within the area.

The latest machines from Sisis will be on show including the Sisis Autocrat, an attractively priced self-propelled Aerating machine ideally suited for golf greens. The well-known Parkamatic Self-Travelling Sprinkler will be on show and finally the Ransomes 67 in. Ransomes-Hahn Tournament Triplex. This machine has been supplied by Parkers to some of the leading Clubs in the South of England including Walton Heath who possess two.

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