

STOP THE SILLINESS!

GREENKEEPING problems seem to crop up on a regular pattern, some seasonal and some topical, judging by my telephone calls. The commonest chronic worry from now on until spring is the concern, to put it mildly, about moss on greens. This always seems to be raised by the keen lawn owner – and if there is one man I dread (much more than farmers who can be educated), it is the lawn owner who extols lush green turf and wants the greens on his course to look like his lawn. It is pointless telling him that his lawn would soon look a sorry mess if it had to withstand the amount of traffic to which the normal green is subjected.

By Jim Arthur

Concern that moss will kill the grass is baseless. There is an old greenkeeping adage to the effect that if greens do not show a little moss in winter, then they will inevitably be too lush and soft all summer. Naturally, as soil 'fertility' drops off in winter with the cessation of micro-organism activity in the soil as temperatures drop, that critical level which suits the finer grasses, but is too low for the unsuitable ones to survive, may drop temporarily to a level only just enough for the better grasses and moss can then invade.

Needless to say, such invasion is worst where there is least traffic, e.g. on the backs of greens and the areas furthest from the next tee, and also on ridges that are penalised by closer mowing, etc. One dodge to get rid of moss in the old days was to cut the hole in the middle of a mossy area – it very soon disappeared!

As 'fertility' rises naturally in the spring, the moss will go equally naturally, though it can be speeded on its way by the application of a light ammonia and iron dressing in March. Try and kill it off with (expensive) moss killers in the autumn and inevitably we are left with bare areas that can only recolonise with more moss.

In the growing season, savage attacks against moss all too often merely result in the scars recolonising with annual meadow grass. Moss will never kill grass in the accepted sense of the term. It is easily controlled by creating conditions that suit the finer grasses and less so the moss, but great care is needed not to overdo the 'improvement' which would replace moss with annual meadow grass.

A great deal of unnecessary worry could be avoided if a little moss were accepted as normal and a good sign that soil conditions are about right. It also needs stating that very little moss is caused by bad drainage or by compaction – as these have to be so marked that other problems loom first and demand correction. Nothing exasperates me more than the worried committee man who goes on and on about the moss, but admits that the greens are putting perfectly. Yet they never see annual

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Jim Arthur — Continued...

meadow grass and far more serious problems remain a complete mystery to them!

The other hardy annual concerns hollow-tine forking. I must have missed some article or talk that extolled the virtues of this type of aeration, since my telephone has been red-hot on the subject. Hollow-tining has been repeatedly proven by engineering research to be less effective than deep chisel-tining or slitting as a method of achieving maximum sub-surface cultivation with minimal surface disturbance. This has made it far less popular, especially with the accent in recent decades on much more intensive all-year-round slitting and, of course, in the last seven years with Verti-draining. Frankly, the only function of hollow-tining is to aid the introduction of soil ameliorants into the soil profile and, in any case, this is much more easily achieved after Verti-draining.

I am horrified to see a resurgence of the totally disproven practice of intensive hollow-tining and heavy sanding - disproven in every case and by the latest US research, except on pure sand greens - and, be it noted, this does not mean sandy construction to USGA Green Section specification. Again, history repeats itself and 40 years ago hollow-tining was condemned by many old Scottish links greenkeepers on the grounds that it let in annual meadow grass in pure links greens. I cannot see any point in hollow-tining and leaving the holes open. Yet, if you hollow-tine late to avoid upsetting

the autumn meetings, then it is difficult to top-dress afterwards without risking a massive attack of disease.

If regular deep-slitting is carried out, with perhaps chisel-tining in summer to avoid disturbing putting surfaces and if Verti-draining is carried out when and where needed to deal with sub-surface pan formation, I can see absolutely no point in hollow-tining, and especially if this is part of a heavy sanding programme. Very little of the sand goes down normal hollow-tine holes and it merely sits on the top and causes, eventually, a severe root break. It used to be said of some greenkeepers that they earned undeserved good reputations for good greens by feeding and watering and heavy sanding, but they had to move every five years to avoid being sacked in the face of impending disaster.

Engineering research

I must stress that engineering research shows that slit-tining is the ideal method of sub-surface aeration and hollow-tining, which used to be a useful method, not more often than once a year, has largely been superseded by better methods. We must beware of resurrecting old ideas that have no relevance to today's problems - and those advocating it must remember that 25 years ago you could do what you liked to the greens between October and Easter and hardly a member would ever see what was going on. Today, we play golf all the year round and, hopefully, on good putting surfaces. If we have to upset members at any time, let it be for good, valid and unavoidable reasons and not unnecessarily.

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