Irrelevant ideas, total heresies - JIM ARTHUR on mistakes which continue to be made

When will they learn?

Recently, I was discussing the trends of today's greenkeeping with a friend of many years standing and observed that in my opinion greenkeeping was at a cross-roads and that the crisis seemed largely unrecognised, especially by those decision-making. This despite the start made on The Way Forward. But you have been saying that at intervals for the past forty years was his riposte.

This I admit was certainly correct, but on reflection so were the reasons for such pessimism. Greenkeeping seems to suffer from cyclic disasters, all too often repeating the errors of previous decades. So-called new ideas - many not even new but recycled - are pushed by commercial interests, without adequate trials and in many cases all the rules of basic greenkeeping. Words fail me to describe the predictable disasters they are quietly dropped. The victims may not repeat that mistake but often fall for the next ploy. So few learn from the expensively experienced error of others.

Such gimmicks range from 'new' fertilisers, magic cures ('apply this to everything and you'll get results') to the long hoped-for 'miracle build up' of new methods of construction or even 'new' machines. I was amazed to see such new aerating machine recently which was a carbon copy of a similar one which failed more than a decade ago. Why? because it took a week to aerate one green and the work can be done much better today by Vertidrain.

There is little to listen to experienced head greenkeepers let alone advisers. Too many seminars are choke full of irrelevant ideas and total heresies. Now we even have moves to train golf professionals to be course managers. Hopefully as the recommendations of The Way Forward are implemented we may see some improvements.

In the sixties it was gross over-use of complex NPK fertilisers. Several companies fought me - often unfairly - and where are they now? More to the point, nearly every fertiliser firm advises and supplies nitrogen only or 'no phosphate' fertilisers for greens. Yet we still see soil analyses being pushed as a useful guide as to do no apply. Why does not it matter if the phosphate levels are shown as very low if the grass is the right grass? If there are problems, the odds are it is not due to manural deficiencies.

In the seventies, with increased numbers of courses installing automatic irrigation (pop-ups), but with no one realising it was fatal easy to over-water by merely turning a dial, the problem was over-watering. The British Turf Irrigation Association was set up and as instigator and founder member I tried to get better education and better equipment. Again, some unrepentant firms refused to listen - one even went so far as to say he had decided to assassinate my character to force me out of business - as I would not support their views. The top man who made that rash statement is no longer with the company!

Today most course managers, greenkeepers and chairmen of green pay at least lip service to the principle that 'overwatering is the cardinal sin of greenkeeping', made by that doyen of American greenkeeping, Al Radco.

In the eighties, the main problems were the use of wrong grasses in a feverish pursuit of colour, at the expense of 'traditional' playing surfaces. Penncross, introduced in the States to replace Bermuda grass in hot arid States, was blazoned as the grass to end all grass. Where is it now? It cannot legally be sold, though its successors can, but they are just as problem ridden. All have severe winter dormancy, all pluck up badly with traffic, all produce thatch second to none and all suffer more from disease (from Fusarium to Botrytis) than they do with the Penncross. Words fail me to see on a recently televised English tournament. Yet they still have defenders - usually those from the other side of the Atlantic - whose experience of Northern European greenkeeping conditions is even less than mine of American.

I hear now that one much publicised venture is to kill off its Penncross fairways and resow with ryegrass - ryegrass, ye Gods! Do they not realise (and there are plenty of notoriously bad courses to prove it) that ryegrass - even the so-called dwarf varieties - never forms a close knit turf and with lush leafy lies control on the ball is impossible. The end result is top spin, players moaning they cannot stop the ball on the green, and then on goes the water. 'Oh, but it stays green in drought', say the advisers. I wonder if they have never learned that so few of those pushing bad ideas have the slightest idea of the results of following their advice.

Please do remember that there is very little new in greenkeeping - only better or quicker ways of doing it - and it has all been seen before. So check and avoid repeating the often very expensive mistakes of others.