Managing without chemicals
Is it possible and how would I cope?

When asked to consider whether it is possible to manage a golf course without chemicals, my thoughts immediately turned to European legislation and the impending likelihood, that at some stage in the future, there may be very few chemicals with which to combat turf problems. That this often talked about change in attitude has come about at all is due to a recent shift in the way in which European governments view the natural environment and how it is controlled, which is perhaps how the title of this essay came into being. Ever since the first alchemist attempted to use science to turn lead into gold, man has lived with the notion that nature can be distilled and separated into elements and that these can be used to twist and bend our environment to suit our needs. Man has seldom, if ever, accepted that the human race should live within the bounds set by mother nature, but recently there has been enough publicity about the European Community’s attitude towards chemicals to suggest that this may be changing.

The golf industry is obviously bound to be affected by any change in pesticide regulations and I, in turn, will be affected, but how will I cope?

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It must be accepted that a golf course can be cared for and excellent playing surfaces produced without the use of chemicals, but what is required to change for this to happen? I will readily admit to using any pesticides that I consider appropriate to solve a specific turf problem, but is this really necessary? The amount of resources placed at our disposal for the maintenance of a golf course are based on what is available in terms of the pesticides that can be used to save labour; but what if these are to be withdrawn? Are we producing better courses by utilising every available pesticide or are they simply different from those on which the game was first played? There are probably only a handful of problems associated with the care of a golf course that can be solved most easily by the application of chemicals, but we have become used to the amount of time that this saves. There are very few Greenkeepers who would deny that all of the most common turf problems can be controlled without the use of chemicals and it is probable that the only thing that prevents this from being the case is the golf culture of today. It is the pressure brought to bear on Greenkeepers to save time that drives the use of chemicals to control the common problems associated with the production of fine turf. I am sure that the skills and knowledge exist to manage turf problems culturally, but are golf clubs prepared to find the necessary extra resources to do this and to continue to present their courses in their current fashion. I am old enough to have experienced highly labour intensive practises on a golf course that are no longer necessary; but where has the time saved gone? Instead of spending weeks mixing, spreading and dragging twenty tons of top dressing by hand we routinely carry out this operation in one day giving us the rest of the week to cut as much grass as is humanly possible.

Without too much trouble, we can pinpoint what was different on the average golf course in Britain twenty years ago. Fairways were cut once per week with trailed gangs, large areas of rough were only cut once per year and bunkers or verges rarely saw a scythe. But golf was quick to adopt each new technological advance in grass cutting techniques and fairways are regularly cut twice per week with ride-on mowers, acres of rough are now kept in check with an array of implements and strimmers have shorn unkempt corners in every course. This attitude towards unquestioningly accepting "progress" has had a great influence on the way that chemicals are used to help create golf tracks that allow two hundred people to play around in average round times of four hours. The thought of returning to the type of course that abounded fifty years ago with rank roughs, slow fairways and unkempt margins is abhorrent to most golfers used to the manicured motorway golf of the twenty-first century. Many golf clubs have grown to a point that their course has to be set up to accommodate over one thousand members playing golf twelve months of the year, and if the time is coming when chemicals are no longer to be used on fine turf and manual labour is to be used instead, will this type of course continue to be viable? If the choice between using labour intensive cultural controls for weeds, pests and diseases and using chemical pesticides is taken away from us, what will change and who will find it more difficult to cope? I would like to argue that it would be the modern golfer, rather than the modern Greenkeeper who would find it more difficult to cope and the entire culture of golf management will be forced to make difficult decisions about the type of courses that can be produced without the use of chemicals. In order to explain this more clearly, it is neces-

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A golfer’s view of how his or her own course should be set up must also be influenced when he or she plays at a club that employs forty labourers to see golf courses that are either set up in the same manner they were forty years ago there would be far more forgiving three degree lofts, massively oversized drivers in the bags of players and more judicious use would be made of the far more forgiving three wood. Accuracy rather than distance would become the most desirable trait. Perhaps if the same courses were set up in the same manner they were forty years ago there would be far fewer eight degree lofts, massively oversized drivers in the bags of players and more judicious use would be made of the far more forgiving three wood. Accuracy rather than distance would become the most desirable trait for a golfer.

Was the way in which Carnoustie was presented for the Open in 1999 unattractive or unfair? Was the resultant media frenzy deleterious for golf? Did golfers stay away in their droves? Carnoustie was given mixed reviews by every golfer that watched the Open that year, but nobody denied that the course was set up in such a way that the removal of chemicals as a management aid and that Greenkeepers everywhere will prove once again that turf management is not simply a case of cutting grass.