Ronnie Bunting describes the work he has done at Kilmacolm Golf Club and gives some thoughts on environmental management

Over the span of 33 years in golf greenkeeping, 26 as Head Greenkeeper and Course Manager I have always attempted to be positively pro-active within the industry. The following topics are intended to kick start some constructive discussions. Like anyone who sticks his or her head over the parapet, that person becomes a target for praise or ridicule. Through such discussions, the outcome I believe can only be constructive. The following is meant to be food for thought, and not, do as I do!

Like most Greenkeepers I have an active interest in environmental matters. To this end I have here at Kilmacolm been very successful in bringing attention to members and the general public that the term golf course does not always refer to an area of barren grassland, with wall-to-wall cutting and grass that looks like a Celtic football strip. It can be an area of outstanding beauty not only for quality turf on which to play golf and the scenery but the wildlife that dwells in the out-of-play areas. These we can also manage for the social union of nature and mankind not only by protecting the existing habitat but also by creating new areas of mutual interest with great benefit for all.

There are some golfers who do not appreciate the wonders of nature, as they are blind to all but their game. Only once this loveliness is pointed out to them do they appreciate the importance of their surroundings. I have found this among many of my members.

In my Environmental portfolio I have addressed a number of topics intended to reduce the amount of toxic chemicals I apply and would like to share some of my thoughts with you. Are we being fair to assume that applications of cure-all’s are the correct way to go about our business? What will be the effect in the decades and centuries to come? Remember the after effects of the chemicals used to defoliate the jungles in Vietnam. An extreme example but it did happen and the results we see today are the evidence to justify that we consider alternatives!

I ask the question. Do we need to use the amount of fertiliser and chemicals we budget for annually? Should we apply preventative sprayings? Do we need to apply nitrogen in such amounts that by doing so creates a flush of growth that disposing of the cuttings creates environmental problems, or applying copulas amounts of nitrate at a rate the plant cannot expect to use and in doing so we contaminate our waterways.

Then comes the after effects, Thatch, Fusarium, Poa Annua, and the biggest threat of all peoples acceptance of the poorer playing standards we ourselves have created. I believe that by using top dressing as a source of nutrition coupled with a little nitrogen and plenty of aeration should be a healthy and robust sward and produce a much easier kept playing surface.

Fusarium
We have all experienced this turf disease at some time on our greens, and if you received the same training as I did - blanket treatment must be done as soon as humanly possible. Or spray every six to eight weeks as a preventative. Both veins of thought very much the norm at some golf courses and both very expensive not only in financial terms and man-hours but also in terms of lasting damage to the useful micro organisms and beneficial fungi in the soil. Is there an alternative? I believe there is. If the outbreak is only in certain areas of greens there may be good reasoning to spot treat. If the outbreak is serious during the end of the season going into autumn and justifies blanket treatment so be it. Or it may be that in leaving it alone it will recover without anything being done at all. A strong healthy infertile bent dominated turf has great resolve. One other operation I feel helps when conditions are such that disease threatens is to scarify tees and greens aprons and verticutting greens, opening the base of the sward allowing air in and therefore keeping it drier I feel helps considerably. How often does it seem that attacks of Fusarium on the greens starts in the surrounds? I have never sprayed fungicide on tees or aprons.
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Leather Jackets
My opinions on the damage done by these grubs may be probably singular but it is based on my observations over many years. Fact, I have never seen turf stress caused by this insect. The only damage I have seen is caused by birds in search of them. This I believe is a bit like the angler finding a beautiful loch and knowing there should be fish in it but only after six or eight hours of fruitless fishing asks the question I wonder if there are any trout in here!

On the greens I don’t see the bird damage as a major problem as greens are either cut or rolled or switched every day, dispensing any debris. A similar approach I adopt to tees and surrounds and fairways. The semi rough tends to show some lasting damage but it is caused again by the birds searching for the grubs and not by the larvae. Even this damage recovers very soon when the soil tem- perature allows some growth. To back up the above statements, during the spring of 1999 I noticed there was more bird activity than usual.

At the spring outing of the Scottish West Section I started a discussion based on the above scenario with some of my colleagues and was left in no doubt they felt I should have sprayed with insecticide on a preven-tative basis as they had done.

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Soaking this part of my 13th green and covering it overnight with hessian sacking has highlighted the infestation of leatherjackets during the last week in March 2000. The amount visible would generally demand an application of pesticide. Fact! No insecticide was used and at no time during the season were any of my greens to show any effects of turf stress.

Weeds and worms
If you have cast forming worms you will almost inevitably have weeds; the worm cast is the ideal seedbed and chemical warfare unjustly on, leather jackets, soil organ- isms, other innocent insects, birds and their young, golfers, the general public, course staff, etc?

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