Ohio show hits hot buttons

President stresses green 'marriage'

BY MARK LESLIE

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Calling the relationship of the state's golf course superintendents, sports turf managers and lawn-care operators "a beautiful marriage," new Ohio Turfgrass Foundation (OTF) President Joe Duncan said the different groups are learning more and more from each other as time passes.

"That relationship has existed for a long, long time, but we depend on each other more than ever before," said Duncan, owner of Evergreen Lawn Care Inc. in Troy, who succeeded Hank Chafin at the OTF Conference and Show here, Dec. 8-11. "We're learning that everything we do is an integral part of each other's work. Things that happen on sports turf and on golf courses, and the research they are fostering, affect us all."

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Tackling unreasonable expectations

BY RON DODSON

It's interesting how jobs seem to define who we are. For instance, when we ask, "What is a golf course superintendent?" we're really asking what job does he or she do, and, believe me, everyone's got an answer about what they're supposed to do.

First of all, everyone seems to agree that a superintendent's primary job is to manage the golf course (meaning turfgrass). And it follows that every golfer has an opinion about how a golf course should be managed. They've played a lot of golf, they have a lawn, they have a lot of money, and they know how their greens ought to look and play. That makes them experts on how turfgrass ought to be managed. Right?

Sometimes that's how it sounds when I talk with golfers about superintendents. Well, I'm here to tell you that good golf course superintendents do a whole lot more than manage turfgrass. In addition to all of the work and expertise it takes to manage turf, they manage water, and from an environmental perspective they also manage wildlife, wetlands, lakes, streams, forests, landscape ecology, insects, the weather, the media, the government, their staff, and the biggest challenge of all: the unreasonable expectations of golfers.

What do I mean by unreasonable? From an economic and environmental perspective, think about wall-to-wall manicured turfgrass, both in terms of man and machine hours as well as in loss of habitat. Think about fertilized turf right down to the edge of water bodies, both in terms of cost of fertilizers, man hours to spread it, and the potential damage to water quality.
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Duncan: Mutual help in green industry

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What we're doing in gathering research, Meier said, is the research and technology of products and services. "We feel we are the education arm of all the other groups — the golf course superintendent associations, Ohio Lawncare Association and Professional Grounds Management Association. We feel they better serve their constituents in the administration and business aspects. What we're doing in gathering and disseminating information and research is the beauty about the marriage. It's what makes the green industry in Ohio so successful. Both groups are very viable and important to all the people involved."

Duncan, who has been in the lawncare industry since 1975 and started Evergreen Lawn Care in 1985, said extraordinary advances have been made in technology and the use of computers.

"These things will come more naturally to the next generation," he said. "Some of us in this industry are dinosaurs. Look where we've come in the last 20 years, in the way we managed turf then and now. It is the difference between night and day. I can't imagine where we're going to be 20 years from today."

"It's exciting because what we're doing now is so much better for the environment, for our clients, and for the turf."

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Boehm: Much to learn in bio-ecology

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sound chemistry — whether it’s synthetic or from a natural origin — and to better understand and increase the use of biologicals.”

Composts add nutrients and micro-organisms to soil that have been shown to control or counter pathogens, he said. The focus of research at OSU and other universities is understanding how and why diseases are suppressed.

“We know that if you increase the nitrogen level on turf you can suppress dollar spot nearly 60 percent,” Boehm said. “But there are still lots of issues. Is the nitrogen in the form we are applying it directly toxic to the pathogen? Or is the nitrogen giving the plant the ability to outgrow the pathogen? Or is the nitrogen somehow changing the physiology of the host, thereby making it less susceptible?”

“Those are all very valid questions that we’d like to address.” From a plant pathologist’s perspective, he said, mechanisms of biocontrol are:

• competition between the biological control agent, or the organism that is suppressing the pathogen for space or nutrients;
• antibiotic production, since the biological control agent produces antibiotics that are toxic to the pathogen;
• hyperparasitism, wherein the biocontrol agent uses the pathogen as a food base or energy source; and
• induced resistance — “an area,” Boehm said, “we don’t understand very well, but the presence of these beneficial organisms affects the physiology, or biochemical change in the plant that renders the plant resistant.” He likened this to spraying Crenshaw bentgrass, which is prone to dollar spot, with a chemical and finding it is resistant to dollar spot.

Boehm released some findings from a compost study that is in its second year.

Asking what a single application of compost does to the turf, he said it gives the turf “a huge swell in growth and clipping yield. Depending on what kind of compost you use, that lasts anywhere from six to 10 weeks. If an epidemic occurs during that period of enhanced nitrogen fertility, we see a significant decrease in the amount of dollar spot. If, however, like last summer, we make our compost application in May — even though we get nice fertility and green up effect on the turf ... we did not see any appreciable effect on disease management.”

The OSU professor hopes to discover the effect of continued use of compost top dressing incorporated in spring and fall, along with spring and fall aeration, over a four-year period.

He mentioned studies at Cornell University by Dr. Eric Nelson, in which compost top dressing has suppressed pythium root diseases in sand putting greens.

In one his own projects, Boehm has established bentgrass greens to compare compost and peat in the root-zone mixes.

“It’s a pretty striking difference when you look below the ground,” he said, adding that, while using take-all patch as a test pathogen, he found that compost was good, peat was not.

Speaking of the U.S. Golf Association Green Section’s greens construction specifications, Boehm said he would like to see, over the next several years, a section incorporated on the pros and cons of altering the organic matter in the root-zone mix from a biological and microbial standpoint.

“It might take another 20 years before we’re ready to do that,” he admitted, adding, “We are isolating lots of organisms, adding organisms, challenging the systems in the field and in the greenhouse, and trying to get a better handle on microbial populations that affect disease suppression.”

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