

USGA tips: Curbing, compost and recruiting

By MARK LESLIE

NEW ORLEANS — Preventing turf wear from straying golf carts, using rotary mowers in the rough, applying composts to improve poor soils, recruiting interns — the U.S. Golf Association Green Section's "Turf Tips" ran the gamut at the recent International Golf Course Conference and Show here.

The Green Section's annual auditorium-packing session offered help to take home, including:

CURB THOSE CURBS

Every golf course with carts struggles with areas of dead turf on the edges of paths, said Bob Vavrek Jr. of the North-Central Region.

"Curbing works, but it sometimes causes drainage problems. And you can't use it in the middle of the fairway because it can impede a ball and is not practical," he said.

Vavrek's suggestion was an adaptation to a landscape wall: cobblestone curbing.

Installation, he said, is similar to excavating a wall. "Lay a base of crushed limestone or sand and lay a pattern of cobblestones," he said.

Options include making it formal-looking, with such things as flagstone, or rural-looking, with stones.

"It is a little hard work," Vavrek said, "but at courses where aesthetics are just as important as playability, this can be a neat complement to a cart path. It's effective, it deters a wandering cart, and it blends in well with the landscaping."

BURNING THE CANDLE AT BOTH ENDS

USGA Research Director Dr. Michael Kenna reported on surprising research by Dr. Bingru Huang at Kansas State University, showing that root respiration for the amount of energy consumed by the plant increases as soil temperatures increase.

This is an important piece of the Summer Bentgrass Decline puzzle.

"High soil temperatures and low cutting heights can lead to a dead end," Kenna said. "Temperatures affect bentgrass growth. Photosynthesis is a measure of the amount of energy, or food that the bentgrass plant produces from sunlight. In low temperatures, the bentgrass plant is capable of producing an extra amount of energy or food. However, as temperatures increase, photosynthesis decreases and the amount of energy available to vital life functions continues to decrease."

Huang's research regarding root respiration leads to the dilemma of burning the candle at both ends, Kenna said, adding, "Ultimately, this leads to the total breakdown of the biological process in the bentgrass plant."

As the temperatures rise, he explained, photosynthesis decreases and as the soil temperature rises, root respiration increases to a level that is much higher than photosynthesis.

The bentgrass is using more energy than it can produce. Factor in the low cutting height of the putting green and the result is turf susceptible to stress.

Kenna cited two studies, in 1997 and 1998, that found healthier turf cut at 5/32 inch than that cut at 1/8 inch.

"I strongly believe," he said, "you should be monitoring your soil temperatures... Start looking in the late spring or early summer. You should sit down and talk with your golfers early in the season and suggest raising cutting heights when soil temperatures rise to 80 or 85 degrees."

ROTARIES IN THE ROUGH

There is a growing trend on hybrid Bermudagrass to use rotary mowers in the roughs, said John Foy, director of the Green Section's Florida Region.

No rotaries were used on golf courses for a long time because of the quality of cut, he said. But, especially with more Bermudagrass roughs being overseeded, the trend now is toward pull-behind and out-front rotaries because of improvements in blade speeds, multiple blades, collection decks, better ability to mow heavy turf, and because the mowing promotes more upright growth in the grass.

"You must sharpen blades more often," Foy said. "But it's quick and easy and inexpensive."



Plain, inexpensive stone curbing serves the purpose of saving pathside turf.



This fairway demonstrates the results of using compost (notice rich green turf) and not using it.

RECRUITING WARS

Saying that a maintenance staff directly impacts getting players, and that commitment, desire and experience make a good staff, Bob Brame suggested that superintendents actively recruit interns.

"Student interns," he said, "are committed to the industry, motivated and have some experience."

He pointed to superintendent Matt Shaffer of The County Club in Cleveland, Ohio, whose recruiting techniques have proven especially effective. Shaffer distributes video tapes to university professors, along with brochures that "sell" the golf course to prospective employees.

The combination covers information on the course; the intern job description; the club's commitment to interns' education and growth; testimonials from former interns; benefits, pay and housing; and an invitation to join the team.

CARDIO CRISIS ON THE COURSE

When caddie Garland Dempsey collapsed during the Motorola Western Open, paramedics were on hand to save his life with CPR. But what if a golfer collapsed with a heart attack during an ordinary day on a golf course, asked Brian Maloy, the Green Section agronomist of the Mid-Central Region. "If 10 minutes pass [without medical attention], the prognosis for survival is grim: 1 to 2 percent survival," he said.

Superintendent Ken Small's Brook Hollow Golf Course in Dallas has proactively faced that possibility, Maloy said, buying two solar-powered call stations and three defibrillators.

At the call stations, simply pushing a button contacts emergency services. The 10-pound defibrillators are lightweight and easy to use, even for the inexperienced, Maloy said.

COMPOSTS IMPROVE POOR SOILS

"The search for the perfect golf course," said Mid-Atlantic Region Director Stan Zontek, "involves having a good stand of grass literally on every area of the golf course. Increasingly this includes the roughs."

But since soils vary around a course, and some soils are poor, it is difficult to achieve perfection.

"What is the superintendent to do?" Zontek asked. "You can punch holes in the soil, trying to reduce compaction and loosen up the soil. You can top dress it. You can put down extra fertilizer."

"Increasingly, superintendents in my region are using composts ... to improve poor soils. Composts are a good way of improving the content of the soil. Think of it as accelerating the maturing processes in the aging process of the soil. Organic matter holds water and fertility and, generally, improves the overall enrichment of the soil."

How much do you apply?

"Generally, don't skimp," Zontek said. "Use about 1/4-inch thick."

"It may help you achieve your goal of having that near-perfect golf course, while doing something good for the environment," he added.

'ULTRADWARFING' TIRED AND DEAD BENTGRASS GREENS

"Ultradwarf Bermudagrasses have arrived!" Chris Hartwiger declared.

"The line is changing," said the Green Section's Southeast Region agronomist. "There have been successful conversions from bentgrass to ultradwarfs."

Ultradwarfs, he said, tolerate lower mowing; survive better because they consist of four or five varieties; and perform well under high play and stress.

Superintendents considering converting to ultradwarfs should take into account their budgets, number of employees, location and growing conditions, Hartwiger warned because ultradwarfs need intensive maintenance, and there are questions regarding overseeding and transition.

"But we've seen spectacular results to date," he said. "There are no perfect grasses for the Southeast. But there are better and more choices than ever before."

SPIKELESS GOLF SHOES — AVOIDING A SLIP-UP

Southwest Region Director Pat Gross' turf tip was a collection of ideas dealing with spikeless golf shoes.

"Spikeless golf shoes are probably the biggest single trend of the 1990s and have had a positive impact on golf greens for many reasons," he said. "First, there is less wear and tear on greens. Golfer comfort is greatly improved... Greens are smoother and, in general, there is less slipping on concrete cart paths, which was a real problem with steel spikes."

"But like any new idea, it takes awhile to get ahold of any weaknesses in products."

While discrediting the original criticism that golfers couldn't get proper traction with spikeless shoes, Gross said there are concerns about the product:

- Grass accumulation on the bottom of the shoe that can contribute to some slipping.
- The slipping seems to be worse on wood surfaces.
- Wet slopes, typical in the mornings, can cause problems.

"There is no golf shoe company willing to give a 100-percent guarantee that their shoe will not slip," he said, adding, "Anticipate some of these concerns."

His suggestions:

√ Place brushes on ball washer stands or next to tee markers.

√ Use compressed-air cleaning stations, mostly around clubhouses or around entrances to locker rooms.

√ Install alternative paving materials. "This is the single most important area superintendents have to be aware of," Gross said. "Look at putting a rubber surface on those areas of your course that may have wood surfaces." Sources might include a manufacturing plant's old conveyor belt material; or composite rubber

√ Do not neglect concrete surfaces. Groove steep areas.

√ Install paths of decomposed granite, or slag and pack it in with a stabilizing agent.

Gross' parting advice: "Be aware of potential problems on your golf course and act to prevent them." ▶