Necessity is the mother of invention

First met superintendent John Farley in 1998, when he was working at Fairways and Bluewater Resort and Golf Club on the island of Boracay in the Philippines. Being on an island in a developing country made certain resources scarce (including water), so Farley had to use his creativity to make things work. He recycled anything that would decompose to make his own compost, carved notches into the wooden tee markers so they would double as cigar holders and made trash cans out of sections of PVC with poured concrete bottoms that were wrapped in seamless wicker. He also showed me a prototype of his hand-held spot herbicide applicator he called “Clappy the Weed Killer.”

Farley, who now works at Teal Bend Golf Club in Sacramento, Calif. (see story page 9), was just the first of many innovative superintendents I would meet.

In the month’s issue of Golf Course News showcases several superintendents who have used their inventive smarts to stay ahead of the game.

Frank Dobie, superintendent at The Sharam Center in Sharon Center, Ohio, uses the latest in plumbing technology to take a look underground and find blocked drain tiles in his greens. While you can rent a “See Snake” from your local plumber, Dobie plunked down eight large and bought one for his club. He said the unit has saved the club time and money and has improved the quality of its greens—which he added also leads to increased job security (see story page 9).

Job security was one of the things superintendent Paul White’s mind when he took over the superintendent’s position at Olde Mill Golf Club in Portage, Michigan. After looking at the fungicide budget and noticing no improvement in the quality of the greens, White decided that he needed to discover something that would help strengthen his turfgrass. “The place was going downhill,” White recalled (see story page 9).

White decided to see what biostimulants could do to improve turf quality. He set up 45 different 1,000-square-foot test plots in a field to test various products. While the tests are still ongoing, he now uses an enzyme-based product called Vital Reactions on all of his greens and has experienced better turf conditions while also using fewer chemicals. Former superintendent David Mihailides has taken his devotion to his invention one step further. Mihailides, who invented his underground hose reel in 1999 while a superintendent at Boulder Hills Golf and Country Club in Rhode Island, now works for Reelcraft Industries.

Audubon program is losing its appeal

No one can debate that Audubon International’s establishment of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP) for golf courses in 1991 was a great idea. However, the program hasn’t exploded like some thought it would. Over the past few years, the program has started to lose the appeal it once enjoyed.

With approximately 17,000 golf courses in the United States, a mere 13 percent (about 2,000) have joined the program to some degree. These are certainly not very big numbers for a 12-year period. As far as ACSP certified golf courses, slightly less than two percent (about 300) of the total golf courses in the United States have reached that status. Yet Audubon International has a goal of signing up 50 percent of the courses in the U.S. within the next five years. I certainly wish them luck, but how do they expect to add another 6,500 courses over the next five years?

Why is the ACSP for golf courses losing its appeal? In today’s depressed economy the $150 annual membership fee—which, as one superintendent stated, is easily covered by recycling bottles and cans on your course. Likewise, while some members elect to invest money in ACSP projects, the return on this initial investment can dovetail seamlessly with many of the day-to-day activities of golf courses.

The golf industry is going through an environmental adolescence of sorts. Like many industries, golf has accomplished much when it comes to protecting the environment, but many opportunities for improvement remain. While a growing number of superintendents are embracing their role as environmental stewards, the percentage of those making this commitment remains small. More than 2,000 golf courses have committed to environmental leadership through either the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP) or the Signature Program. Yet, this represents only 13 percent of all the golf courses in the United States.

Part of the problem may stem from a misperception that the ACSP takes too much money, time, or labor. This is simply not true. In fact, it can save you all three.

The ACSP has a $130 per year membership fee—which, as one superintendent stated, is easily covered by recycling bottles and cans on your course. Likewise, while some members elect to invest money in ACSP projects, the return on this initial investment can be significant.

For instance, Village Links of Glen Elyn in Illinois watched an initial investment of $5,000 toward ACSP projects yield $30,000 in savings. For most members, however, it takes very little money to accomplish the goals of the program and earn certification, yet the return on investment remains. Finally, the program is designed to dovetail seamlessly with many of the day-to-day activities of golf courses.