



August Regional Roundtable

By Chris Hartwiger, director, USGA Course Consulting Service and
Todd Lowe, agronomist, Southeast Region

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Recently, Todd Lowe and Chris Hartwiger had a chance to reflect on several weeks of travel in the Southeast Region and share their observations.

Todd Lowe - Summer Time Is Cultivation Time

Many golf courses in the Southeast Region are busy cultivating playing surfaces. Ideal growing conditions for warm-season turfgrasses – i.e., increased heat, humidity and nitrogen fertilization – can increase the production of thatch, disrupting turf health and playability. Some thatch is beneficial on greens, but excessive thatch can cause soft playing conditions and increased mower scalping.

Putting green cultivation practices like verticutting, core aeration and sand topdressing help remove and dilute thatch and organic matter. However, turf requires ideal growing conditions to recover from aggressive putting green cultivation practices. Therefore, the majority of putting green cultivation in the Southeast Region occurs during summer when conditions promote the growth of warm-season turfgrasses.

A growing trend at a number of facilities is double aeration – i.e., aerating putting greens twice at one time to allow for more organic matter dilution within



Mower scalping is more problematic on thatchy greens.

the upper rootzone. Note that in some cases double aeration can require extra time for the putting greens to heal and firm up. However, many facilities are also cultivating the remainder of the golf course or performing other improvement projects, improving staff efficiency and reducing golfer inconvenience.

Chris Hartwiger - Labor: The Engine that Drives On-Course Work

A golf course superintendent can have the best golf course management plan on paper, but if the staff and equipment are not in place to get the job done, the plan is no better than the paper it is written on. By far, the biggest challenge reported this year by golf course superintendents during USGA Course Consulting Service visits is difficulty finding seasonal staff. Superintendents cite a low response to employment ads despite higher hourly wages and difficulty getting new employees to stay. As a result, several facilities are operating with a smaller staff than allowed for in their budget.

The difficulty finding seasonal golf course maintenance staff is real and will necessitate a future change in employment strategy. Below is a list of ideas superintendents are considering:

- A shift towards year-round, full-time, hourly employees – During the recession of 2007-2008, many facilities reduced the number of year-round, full-time employees and hired more seasonal employees. Often the change in workforce occurred through natural attrition. Some golf facilities now are reversing the trend and plan to add more year-round staff members. Benefits, opportunity for advancement and year-round employment are a few employee advantages.
- Overtime – Before the recession, overtime was standard operating procedure at many golf courses during their busiest months. However, overtime was largely eliminated during the recession. Superintendents are relying on more overtime when open positions remain unfilled.
- Contract Work – Although contract work can be more expensive, it does guarantee that certain tasks will be done. Pond management, tree work and even bunker maintenance are areas where superintendents are exploring the use of contractors.

- Nontraditional hours – Some superintendents are accommodating the use of labor that is available for a limited amount of hours every week. For example, some staff members may be able to work 10-15 hours per week, but their schedules are variable. Although employing staff members with nontraditional hours places a burden on superintendents because staff members come and go throughout the day, more work is able to be accomplished.

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