Northern Michigan golf resort’s goal is to be 100 percent zero discharge.

by Ron Hall
Senior Editor

The golf course management team at Michigan’s Treetops Sylvan Resort turns landscape waste into valuable compost. It does it by following basic composting rules, but not with a lot of fuss.

The Treetops’ effort began in earnest when Bruce Wolfrom, CGCS, arrived as golf course manager five years ago. He came from Barton Hills, Ann Arbor, Mich., where he’d been for 20 years.

“Recycling yard waste is something I’ve always done. This material is just too valuable to throw away,” says Wolfrom.

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For instance, Treetops purchases its fertilizer in 200-pound bulk fabric containers that are returned to suppliers and refilled. The resort gets no price breaks, and it must use a forklift to handle the palletized shipments. But Wolfrom says it’s worth the effort because it drastically reduces bag disposal.

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nies to help us with their packaging. We want them to be a little more responsible about what comes into the resort and what’s going to happen to this packaging when we’re done with it,” explains Wolfrom.

The ultimate goal, he adds, is for the resort to become 100 percent zero discharge: everything that comes into the resort stays on the property.

“There are a lot of questions and answers that need to be thought out,” he admits, “but that is our goal.”

Usable end product—

One of Treetop Sylvan’s biggest successes so far has been green waste recycling. This benefits the resort by eliminating the need and expense of hauling waste away while it also produces about 300 cu. yds. of compost annually.

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around the other courses, too. This makes it easier for crew members at each course to bring debris to them.

Periodically, a crew member uses a front-end loader to turn and churn these piles. This is necessary to keep them aerobic. Only once did a pile go sour at the piles. This is necessary to keep them aerobically active.

Before golf course equipment is washed, it’s blown off with an air hose. Each course can generate over 300 lbs. of clippings a day. These are swept up and put in the piles.

Grass clippings also come from the lawns in front of the resort’s hotel and guest areas. Sometimes, for appearance’s sake, Frisbie’s crew must bag them and add them to the piles.

But the most largest ingredient, by volume anyway, is leaves. In fact, beginning in September (maples and oaks turn early this far north), teams of workers begin blowing the leaves into windrows on the golf courses. Then leaf vacuums come along and suck them up.

He does many things well, as a good superintendent must. But the best thing he does is manage people. “The hardest part of this job is dealing with people,” Sandburg notes, “and that’s something I love to do.”

He learned part of his management technique from his father, a hard-working Kansas farmer. (“This is the closest I could be to farming and still make money.”) The rest he picked up during four years at ChemLawn, where he saw both the good and the bad.

“The philosophy of Dick Duke (ChemLawn founder and CEO) was to put the customers and employees first and profits second. But by the time I left ChemLawn, he was gone and things had changed.”

Just do it—If there is a definition of "working superintendent," Sandburg is that. "I can’t sit in the office," he notes. "I just like to be one of the guys. And I don’t ask my employees to do anything I can’t or won’t do.

"If you can’t take employees out and show them how to do it yourself, you can’t teach them. You have to break them in slowly. Only our most experienced guys mow fairways. New guys rake bunkers and work up from the bottom."

He claims that his employees would jump off of a bridge, provided he asked them to, and that he jumped off with them. “They know that I do everything for a reason, and they don’t question the reason.” Continuing education is also a key to the happiness of the 26-person crew at Lakeside.

“I love to see people get better," Sandburg says. “My lead assistant, Chad Stearns, will make a good superintendent someday. And I want him to be a superintendent someplace, but I want him to be ready when he goes. Another employee is 19 years old, has one child and one on the way. He’s finishing his GED, and I’m starting him on a training program to be a licensed pesticide applicator.

The training is reciprocal. Since superintendents are supposed to be jacks of all trades, Sandburg finds himself learning the odds and ends from his employees. “Every day’s a learning process.”

Most of the crew members at Lakeside are Hispanic, some Mexicans and Salvadorans with green cards, and some second-generation U.S. citizens, but Hispanic nonetheless. That makes language another potential hurdle.