

Wise up for winter

Prevention, they say, is always better than cure. It is certainly cheaper! Never is this adage better confirmed than in early autumn when preparing a course for winter. My comments are based on the knowledge gleaned over more than four decades from practical men, who in turn probably learned their skills not just in the hard world of experience but from their elders, so that some of this lore may well go back in direct line to the early years of this century.

Early in my advisory career I was taught much of my practical greenkeeping by a quiet and immensely wise Aberdonian greenkeeper, Frank Smith, who in the early thirties left Cruden Bay, then almost rivalling Turnberry as a holiday and railway hotel course for rich Glaswegians, to take charge of the plots at the newly established Research Station at St. Ives, Bingley. He it was who, with immense patience, corrected not just my enthusiasms and follies but in later years those of my fellow advisers – if they would listen – passing on his unique knowledge of seaside grasses and links management. Never was he more needed than today!

Recording such comments is meant in no way as trying to teach experienced men how to suck eggs, but it may be useful, both to guide those starting and also to remind others of facts which may have been forgotten. If it proves anything, it is firstly that nothing basically changes in sound greenkeeping, since the grasses and their needs do not change, and furthermore that there are no instant cures, but plenty of instant problems.

It was Frank Smith who impressed on me that 'you don't apply fertilisers after the end of July'. Remember that the temptation to try and speed up recovery from war time neglect and abandonment of golf courses in the autumn of 1945 was enormous. The wiser heads stressed mechanical aids; fools rushed in with fertilisers; and some today are still rushing, though perhaps even they have learned not to use nitro chalk – or have they?

This ban applied equally to all fertilisers, even those containing little nitrogen. To start with, there is virtually no need for phosphates on any fine turf at any time – the demand is minimal and the existing supply in the soil more than sufficient, in most cases, for the next century let alone this. Soluble potash merely goes to the drains in autumn and nitrogen stimulates lush growth, which promptly goes down with *Fusarium* patch disease at the least provocation.

This does not mean that it is anything other than sensible to use sulphate of iron in the autumn. Apart from it being a mild fungicide and discouraging annual meadow grass, it has the great advantage of greening up turf – for the benefit of those who confuse colour with quality – without making it lush. The old greenkeeping term was that 'it hardens the turf'. In passing, a moment's reflection will prove that what impresses the non-expert viewer of turf, be it a lawn or a putting green, is uniformity – and iron does produce a uniform colour!

A vitally important facet of disease control is the 'management' (ie. removal) of shading vegetation. Shaded greens suffer not only from never seeing the sun in winter, but in staying frost-bound longer, and from lack of air from thorough ventilation. As soon as the leaves fall, get in with scrub clearance and removal of shading trees around greens and tees. Blame the clearing on

the equinoctial storms if you like, or christen your chain saws 'Thunder' and 'Lightning', as does Patrick O'Brien of the USGA Green Section, but do it! Remember, there is no way of putting it back, but you need the support of allies.

Remember also that such scrub clearance is good conservation – akin to coppicing – which resulted in former years in carpets of wild flowers, which would otherwise be smothered under bramble and scrub. Get some air flowing through the greens and you will get much less disease; much healthier turf; drier, firmer putting surfaces and happier golfers. After a week, very few will be able to remember what it was like before the clearance.



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Another precaution that can be very effective is also linked with keeping surface humidity low, and that is to avoid smothering the turf. Sometimes smothering is inevitable – as with snow – but some can be prevented, notably in avoiding top dressing – especially heavily – when there is no growth for the turf to absorb it. In my early advisory work it was common practice, as soon as winter came – and that meant the cessation of almost all play save for a handful of expatriate Scotsmen – to go onto winter greens and literally smother the main greens with one heavy application of 'compost', burying the grass so completely that it took a week or so for it to show through. The inevitable result – especially when allied to the ubiquitous autumn fertiliser – was all too often a crop of 'snow mould' that defied treatment and left scarred surfaces until growth resumed in the spring.

Today, not least because winter play is almost as heavy as in summer, we adopt a 'little and often' procedure, in the growing season so that the fine screened top dressing is absorbed, almost within hours rather than days, by the growing grass.

Something else can be done to help greens stand up to a sustained winter assault and that is to leave plenty of grass on them! The vogue for shaving to produce faster greens (which has already ruined the greens on some of our famous courses) seems to be waning, but if you are unlucky enough to have one of these shaving fanatics in charge, you are going to have a battle. I personally would never mow greens closer than 3/16th, (though I might allow a dispensation for very special events if closer mowing were not prolonged for more than 10 days), because we can speed up greens in other, less damaging, ways and in any case it is the grass species which has

the greatest influence on speed. Certainly we should never cut closer than 3/16ths in September or October and raise the height, as well as lengthen the interval between cuts to help the grass put something back into the roots while soil temperatures are still high enough.

Severe scarification used to be a routine autumn task, but again this has always been condemned by experienced men, on the grounds that one should never tear the hell out of turf unless it was growing actively and could quickly recover. The advent of power scarifiers made it that much easier to remove huge quantities of surface growth or thatch, often encouraged twenty years ago by mismanagement (over watering and over feeding) which thankfully now seems less common. Far better of course to correct the thatch problems by deep routine aeration and other preventative treatment.

Talking of prevention, it is worth observing that routine spraying with systemic fungicides is an expensive non-solution to chronic disease problems. Such fungicides must be absorbed by the growing plant and have to be applied in anticipation of an attack and so can often be wasted if the attack does not materialise. Far better to cure the basic cause, when there will be no disease anyway. If a series of unplanned events does cause an attack, better to deal with it by contact fungicides before it gets a hold.

If your course suffers from poor drainage of greens – perhaps they were built without under-drainage or on heavy clay soils – then early autumn is the time to deal with the problem – for example by Vertidrainage early when the subsoil is still relatively dry and friable – and the greens firm enough not to wheel mark. This sounds fine – but the golfing calendar extends so late into the autumn today that operations, which must be done in early autumn to be effective, are postponed until so late in the year that damage and poor results are inevitable. Thus one preventative measure should be taken months earlier – education of the management and the members into accepting some slight inconveniences and disturbance, so that essential work can be done when it should be done and not left until the competition season is over.

Another preventative measure which must be planned ahead – especially regarding the 'education' of members – is to stop all irrigation after the end of August, no matter what the weather is like in September. The basis of sound irrigation is to start late and stop early. The idea is to go into winter with dry greens. Since none of us is blessed with the power of infallible weather forecasting (though some are better at guessing than others), the chances are that the gambler who acts on his belief that the autumn will stay dry will get caught in monsoon conditions, and nothing winters worse than sodden turf. But all this needs explaining to golfers – who are apt to assume that 'if it isn't green it's dead' and base their standards on the course being in perfect order on the day they want to play, never mind any other times.

There are of course many management tips on minimising winter damage, and especially the effects of concentrated wear, such as banning trolleys or at least requesting members to demonstrate their virility by carrying their clubs – or seven of them, but that is another story for another day.