

When the motor car buyer purchases a Lada, can he expect Lamborghini performance and quality? Of course not, it's a foolish question: the difference is chalk and cheese!

It is surprising then, that many would-be purchasers of top dressing for use of fine turf playing surfaces approach the whole subject with a Lada mentality. Perhaps the comparison is unkind, for the Lada does at least have merit within its defined marketplace and there are thousands of satisfied users. What is beyond argument, however, is that those who beat a path to the door of the cheapest source of top dressing are stepping into a minefield.

To answer the sort of questions that ought to be asked but are often overlooked or ignored, I spoke to Tim Banks, managing director of Fen Turf Dressings Ltd., long time manufacturers and suppliers of Fendress™, used on many championship courses.

Let us first look at what we mean by top dressing. In essence we are referring to the application of a bulky medium prepared specifically for the purpose of improving the playing surface, which will (or should) have the ability to deliver the following benefits to surfaces that have been subjected to golfers, maintenance procedures, weather extremes, diseases and insect attacks. Frequent top dressing applications will ensure :-

- The levelling off of the playing surface to ensure smoother, faster, firmer and more accurate putting conditions for a rolling golf ball.

# TOP DRESSING

## What it is ● What it does

- The building up of an excellent growing medium for the future.
- The ability to assist in improving poorly drained areas.
- The ability to improve drought resistance (depending upon the make-up of the compost).
- The application of a product which contains small amounts of plant food value which reduces the need for artificial feeding.

Having established the need for top dressing (and there surely can be none who doubt its efficacy?), the recommendation is one of little and often during the season of growth rather than one heavy application which smothers grass cover.

Next must come a further decision, to buy in or prepare one's own? It will not surprise the reader to learn that as a manufacturer Tim Banks is biased in favour of the latter, but as he points out, the facts speak for themselves.

"The Club thinking of preparing its own top dressing", he says, "must consider that it is an expensive and

essentially long-term business unless they are already geared up specifically for the purpose - this includes the purchase and installation of costly machinery and a storage area that is suitable for both preparation and storage of the finished product. Furthermore, unless considerable quantities are required, say for a huge complex, the capital outlay makes in-house preparation hard to justify. This, coupled with the need to establish an impeccable and continuous supply of suitable base material to produce a good compost, makes it a doubtful proposition. There is also the convenience factor, for personnel employed on such work must be properly costed into the overall expense: no-one works for nothing!"

In talking essential quality, and making the valid point of an often in-built resistance to accept quality before considering price, the question asked most often at Tim's company (and I'm sure his company is no isolated exception) is invariably

'how much?' - only rarely is the question posed 'what does your top dressing contain?'.

I find this puzzling and must fall into agreement with Tim when he declares "Quality putting surfaces deserve a quality top dressing. Surely the most important question should therefore be 'what are the constituents; tell me the ratios of materials and the analysis of particle size; what is the pH; how low is the clay and silt content?'".

So what makes a good top dressing? Tim's opinion is that it should be - indeed must be - a free-draining material from a constant source (very, very important) which contains minimal clay and silt particles. Heavy loams containing large proportions of clay must be avoided at all costs, for such clay content will increase compaction, reduce drainage potential and increase rather than stem ball bounce. To this free-draining substance must be added a lime-free, washed silica sand of the right shape (rounded to sub-angular) and with the correct particle range. Sand quarried from the Leighton Buzzard area in Bedfordshire is particularly famed for containing these desirable properties. It is considered unwise to use soft, local sands, especially those which have a content containing lime, for this will increase alkalinity, a negative factor. The finished product should be neutral to slightly acidic, for this will encourage desirable finer grasses such as Festuca and Agrostis. Any mixture which is alkaline will produce in abundance the one thing that greenkeepers

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## TOP DRESSING

abhor – the weed grass *Poa annua*.  
If all this isn't enough, the greenkeeper should heed another note of caution: use of materials which are too fine will almost certainly produce layering of the surface which will encourage, at best, hydrophobic conditions and at worst a total capping of the growing medium.

The exact proportion of each ingredient in top dressing can be determined by ground conditions and that degree of excellence which the greenkeeper seeks to achieve. In Britain, sandy dressings are considered preferable in assisting drainage and for their ability to rapidly integrate into the soil. Remembering this, the greenkeeper should establish (by soil testing, if necessary) his existing soil texture and seek a top-dressing which has similar characteristics. The problem of 'layering' will decrease if the top dressing mix is consistently close to the particle size of the existing texture.

Finally, one other important function of top dressing is the biological control of thatch. In time, thatch is decomposed by microbes living in the soil and the action of top dressing, especially when filling core holes, brings soil into contact with the thatch and speeds up the decomposing process.

Popular mixes today, according to Tim, are 70%/30% and 80%/20%, the higher percentages being sand, the lower Fensoil. These allow light and regular top dressing to be

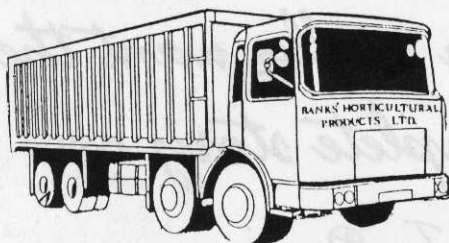
applied throughout the playing season to achieve maximum effect.

The golf market in top dressing is competitive, often to the point of foolishness, of companies working for peanuts. I don't profess to understand the motives behind such business transactions but appreciate that which has been said before – nobody works for nothing. What I do understand is that for many, price is an important consideration and this blinkered mentality results in an awful lot of highly suspect junk being foisted upon the unwary. Should price alone be the prime consideration or indeed the overriding factor? Let us look at a way of comparing like with like. The cost of a visitor green fee at a popular Club – my own Club – is now over £25. Eight years ago the cost was under a tenner. The cost of high quality top dressing material eight years ago was around £20 a ton, today it is around £25 a ton. As an inflation buster and measured against the cost-of-living index, it can be seen in real terms that cost has actually decreased! Put into perspective, nothing is worse for the long-term effectiveness of your greens than the application of an inferior product.

If there is a message here it is one of caution: you only get what you pay for. For once the computer world has the perfect one-liner to sum up that philosophy. Heed it well: RUBBISH IN – RUBBISH OUT.

• David White was talking to Tim Banks.

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