

Michael Bird delves into the world of top dressing machinery – and finds it can be quite a minefield.

TOP DRESSERS

Don't be rushed into buying a new top dresser by a highly attractive "never to be repeated" price or special "once only" trade-in offer. Take your time, examine all the options and always test the short-listed machines with the most commonly applied materials on your course.

Wise words of advice from Steve Isaac of the Sports Turf Research Institute, who admits that selecting the most suitable top dresser for a full range of possible golf course applications "has become a bit of a minefield".

"Most modern machines are able to handle most standard top dressings without problem," he commented. "However, uneven flow and erratic application can occur when applying bulky or very fine materials and when texture and moisture content are of variable consistency, particularly when on the damper side.

"Machine weight, its capacity and the method of drive need careful consideration to best satisfy the top dressing requirements of different turf surfaces," said Mr Isaac. "A machine suitable for dressing a green can be totally inappropriate for work on a fairway, and vice versa. It is no easy job selecting the best machine to carry out the widest range of tasks."

Mr Isaac pointed out that there are few top dressers on the market able to consistently and evenly apply wet materials. "In any case, if dressings are too wet it will be difficult to work them in to the turf," he said. "Too dry, and blowing can reduce evenness of spread. The aim should be a material of an even consistency, both in particle size and moisture content."

Important points to consider when considering different top



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dressers include capacity, weight, working width and the power unit to be used. The above factors will determine workrate, the range of surfaces across which the machine can be used safely and the back-up resources needed to keep the top dresser supplied and filled with fresh material.

"At the end of the day, the aim must be to apply dressings evenly, accurately and at the best possible workrate," stressed Mr Isaac. "However, all this must be achieved without damaging the playing surface."

With all these points in mind, one machine type which has shown considerable expansion in recent years is the self-propelled, pedestrian-controlled top dresser.

The machine's compact dimensions make for convenient operation and loading while its size and single wheel steering give greater manoeuvrability and lower weight than a trailed, a tractor-mounted or a truck-mounted combination. This makes it ideal for work on difficult access or awkward shaped greens and soft or tender turf, especially following verti-draining or hollow coring.

Because the machine's dimensions limit the amount of material it can carry, the self-propelled machine is considered best suited for use on smaller areas

such as nine hole, par three or pitch and putt courses where resources or assistance may be limited.

However, where back-up is

available by way of supply trailers and help with reloading, the pedestrian machine is able to maintain a reasonable workrate on larger areas without undue

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This machine can apply up to 500 tonnes per day of sand and top dressing material from 5mm to 100mm in depth.



SPECIFICATIONS

Capacity 6 tonnes	Unladen weight 1300kg
Spreading width 2m 30cm	Max. gross weight 7500kg
Transport width 2m 50cm	P.T.O. 15 h.p.
Height 1m 70cm	Tyres 12.5/80 x 15.3 14 ply
Length 3m	Minimum tractor requirement 45 h.p.

4 tonne and 2 tonne versions are also available for use with the smaller compact tractors.

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Above: Turfco Mete-R-Matic self propelled top dresser from Turf Machinery Ltd has a patented chevron belt conveyor for precise application of dry and damp materials at varying rates. Top: Able to carry up to 500kg of material, the Ultra Plant UP30 top dresser has a serrated roller and brush feed mechanism.

fears over turf damage, especially on newly laid or freshly aerated greens and tees.

Furthermore, its ability to be moved easily by trailer from site to site makes it ideal for contract teams needing to top dress quickly a number of fine turf surfaces of limited area without the extra weight or cost of an additional power unit.

For these reasons, the self-propelled machine is also appearing within a growing number of hire fleets.

Until quite recently, the number of purpose-built self-propelled machines available was limited to just one make, the Turfco Mete-R-Matic from North America, distributed in the UK by Woking-based firm, Turf Machinery Ltd.

Featuring endless belt and brush delivery, a new model – the F15B – has been introduced for 1994 fitted with forward and reverse gears and the chevron patterned belt used on the company's current trailed and truck-mounted models.

Said to ensure very fine application even with moist materials, the zig-zag pattern belt moves dressings positively from the 11.5 cu ft (325 litre) tapered hopper through an adjustable metering gate onto a high speed rear rotating brush. Here, material is picked up and propelled downwards into the turf.

All-mechanical drive to the F15B's wheels and 32in (81cm) wide spreading mechanism is provided by a 5.5hp Honda petrol engine with all controls now mounted on the machine's steering handle. Reverse drive is fitted as are brakes for safer operation on slopes.

Weighing 520lb (236kg), the Turfco F15B runs on five wide turf tyres (four driven, one steered) and costs a little over £4,800, including a three year warranty. It is available also through Turf Machinery's extensive hire fleet and contract maintenance services.



Turfmech Machinery's SAB 125A uses a patented rotating cage distributor at the rear to ensure even application without lumps

Over the past two years, the number of self-propelled top dressers on the market has mushroomed with the introduction of four new machines from Turfmech Machinery, Sisis, Blec and Ultra Plant.

All feature powered downward discharge of top dressings, essential to ensure that material reaches the base of the turf. However, the method of material delivery and distribution differs on all four machines.

The Sisis Autospred has a vibrating plate at the base of its 9 cu ft (255 litre) hopper from where top dressings are shaken, via an adjustable gate, to the rear delivery brush.

Drive to the machine's two wheels is hydrostatic, powered by belt from a 5hp petrol engine and providing infinitely variable forward and reverse travel up to 4mph. Mechanical drive, controlled by levers on the steering handle, is used for the vibrating plate and rotating brush.

Weighing 588lb (254kg), the Sisis Autospred has a spread width of 33in (83cm) enabling it to treat a 500sq yd (418sq metre) green in about 15 minutes. Price is £2,975.

A self-propelled top dresser with a difference is marketed by Blec. Power is provided by a standard two-wheel 5.5hp tractor (Honda F660 tiller or similar) which tows the top dresser assembly over the turf at speeds of up to

6mph. Slewing clutches are used for steering at low speeds and when working in confined areas.

The PTD42 top dresser has a spread width of 42in (1.07m), a belt and brush delivery system and both the spreader and its towing power unit run on four flotation tyres. These are said to have sufficient tread to provide traction, but not damage the turf on tight turns.

A folding rear foot plate at the rear of the top dresser enables the operator to ride on or walk behind as required. Drive to the machine's ribbed conveyor belt at the base of the 6.5 cu ft (184 litre) hopper is via twin vee belts from the top dresser's wheels. This has the effect of altering feed rate in line with forward speed.

The nylon delivery brush is direct driven by meshed gears from either the front or rear shaft of the conveyor belt. Blec says it can build the machine to provide front or rear discharge according to user preference.

Weighing 492lb (223kg) empty, the Blec PTD42 top dresser can be equipped with extension hopper sides adding an extra 2 cu ft (56 litres capacity). Price of the machine complete with Honda F660 tractor power unit, extension sides and rear drag brush is £4,035.

Turfmech Machinery's SAB 125A self-propelled top dresser uses a patented rotating cage roller instead of a brush for even

and controlled feed of materials from the endless conveyor belt to the turf.

The open cage roller is said to be better able to handle damp and sticky top dressings while also breaking down any lumps. An important feature is the machine's low spread height of just 12in (30cm) above the ground, minimising risk of wind interference.

Drive to the wheels and spreading mechanism is all-mechanical, powered by a 5.5hp Honda engine. A five forward, single reverse speed gearbox provides a good range of working and transport speeds while enabling the machine to be reversed into corners and areas where banking around greens prevents straight-forward access.

Mounted on three flotation tyres (two driven, one steered), the Turfmech SAB 125A weighs 770lb (350kg) and has a capacity of 11.3 cu ft (320 litres). All controls are handlebar mounted. Price of the machine is £5,647.

Manufactured by Ultra Plant in Co Tyrone, Northern Ireland, the UP 30 pedestrian top dresser has a serrated drum and brush delivery and distribution system at the base of its tapered 9 cu ft (255 litre) hopper. Rubber seals are fitted to prevent leakage of finer top dressings.

Claimed to be simpler, easier to maintain and better able to handle a wider range of materials than a conveyor belt, the rotating drum feeds dressings via an adjustable gate onto the nylon brush. Both the drum and brush are chain driven while the wheels are powered by belt and gearbox from a 5.5hp Honda engine.

Although forward drive only can be selected, the makers say that the machine's swivelling steering wheel produces a 6ft (1.8m) turning circle for access to awkward corners. Maximum working speed is around 3.5mph and spread width is 36in (91cm). Price of the Ultra Plant UP30 is £3,700.

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