

Carol Dutton meets up with new Master Greenkeeper Phillip Helmn who has a novel way of testing new products

The Masterplan



Master Greenkeepers don't grow on trees. With just 31 qualified individuals worldwide - despite the fact that it is now 13 years since BIGGA devised the scheme - it is logical to assume that successful candidates possess more than the experience, education and practical greenkeeping and management skills demanded by the award.

Phillip Helmn, one of this year's new Masters is a case in point. He has come up with one of those simple ideas which is so obvious you wonder why nobody thought of it before.

As Course Manager at Overstone Park in Northamptonshire he is often approached by trade representatives, extolling the virtues of the latest products their companies have to offer.

"I wasn't happy about

putting anything new on my greens without testing it first," he says. "I know the companies conduct their own rigorous trials, but no two golf courses are the same, and the chances of soil conditions at the testing grounds exactly matching those here, were slim."

Encouraged by David Barraclough, Group Managing Director at Overstone, who has backed Phillip throughout his Master Greenkeeper studies, Phillip decided that what he needed was his own trial green, built as closely as possible to match the 18 on the course. Vitax put their support where their representative's mouth was, giving practical help and technical advice, which has resulted in the construction of a new testing area. At 16 by 10 metres, it is situated directly in front of Phillip's office window.

"Although the rootzone has not been constructed strictly to a USGA specification, in all other aspects, conditions, including fully automatic

irrigation, are identical to those on my greens.

The area is subject to the same maintenance regime, and is effectively our 19th green.

One aspect in which the trial green differs is the amount of poa resident within the sward.

Having decided to build his own testing green to assess new products, Phillip realised that he now had an opportunity to safely investigate methods of combating poa annua.

"In the fight against poa invasion there is no real substitute for good, traditional greenkeeping techniques, but outside pressures can reduce the effectiveness of an Integrated Disease Management Plan, and I was keen to experiment."

For this reason, the trial plot was deliberately sown with a large percentage of poa.

"We can even put paraquat on it if we want to. The whole area has been sectioned into grids, and we are keeping detailed records of every application administered," he says.

The first step was to establish the percentage of poa in each grid by using a point quadrant frame which is simply a piece of softwood 60cm long with two rows of 10 pins five centimetres apart.

Where the pins landed the grass species was recorded, and although results varied, on average poa coverage was found to be 60%.

"One area has been left untreated as a control and other grids subjected to treatments ranging from high to low doses of Glyphosate total weed killer. We have also applied excessive rates of chemical and biological fungicides to some areas, to see if this has a detrimental effect on the poa. Already some interesting things have started to happen," said Phillip.

Although he will offer the results of research carried out at Overstone to fellow greenkeeping professionals, given the space, time and resources, the only way to assess the effects of applied products with total accuracy may be to try them on your own soil.

