

# Dressing to Thrill

Mike Brear explores the important process when it comes to top dressing.

## WHAT IS IT?

Top dressing is a blend of hydraulically classified silica sand and organic matter, which is normally in the form of a sandy loam soil and sometimes peat, which has been heat treated and to all intents and purposes sterilised.

## WHY USE IT?

In order to affect the playing characteristics, as well as turf grass quality, frequent applications of an appropriate top dressing will assist the greenkeeper in the aim of providing a top quality surface by the following.

1. Helping to preserve a true and level playing surface.
2. Assisting in thatch control.
3. Enhancing the underlying rooting medium.
4. Improving drought tolerance.
5. Alleviating poor surface drainage.

The choice of which top dressing to apply really depends on the construction type of your greens. Do you have a modern green based on a sand and soil/peat rootzone or an older soil based green? A compatible material has to be the most important factor to consider when deciding what to use.

You must ensure that you choose a compatible top dressing for the greens. Take time to have samples taken from the greens for laboratory analysis, as this is the only way of choosing the most suitable top dressing. Reputable suppliers can offer this service free of charge.

By doing this it will, without doubt, help in your decision making and even more importantly prevent the build up of disruptive layering which would sequentially impede water movement through the profile and cause rootbreak. This is something that would not be apparent immediately. It would be a problem in the coming years.

## COMPOSITION AND CONSISTENCY

The type of sand used in top dressing is the most important factor with the soil type following close behind. The dominant particle size range for the sand should be a medium grade that is between 0.25mm to 0.5mm in size.

Soils throughout the UK do vary in quality and not all soils are good for use in top dressing. Out of 10 different soils tested, probably only one is suitable for use as an organic fraction of a top dressing or a rootzone. The poor quality soils may appear and feel good but they have a tendency to become cohesive when wet and this causes the soil to attach to the sand particles and consequently block up air and pore spaces, which adversely affects the hydraulic conductivity of the material.

A copy of a laboratory analysis should be sought to confirm the performance of your chosen top dressing with particular emphasis on the hydraulic conductivity result. If the particle size distribution is acceptable, then the hydraulic conductivity should be well above 125m per hour, assuming the chosen blend is a 70/30 sand/soil mix or above. If not it would indicate that a 'poor quality soil' has been used and should be refused.



The importance of using a reputable supplier cannot be over estimated. In terms of a consistent top dressing the manufacturer must have a quality control system in place for checking specifications. Be aware of the quality system - ISO 9001. Any company manufacturing under this quality system can offer assurances of both quality and consistency, giving peace of mind to the end user. A lack of this kind of quality control system may be a reason for that unusually cheap price.

## WHEN SHOULD I USE IT?

Spring and autumn applications are the normal times when you would apply top dressings, but as maintenance techniques develop other factors influence when you can and do apply further dressings.

The matter of 'surface hygiene' is a key issue on any green and can be managed effectively by the modern day greenkeeper. Scarification and verticutting should be carried out throughout the growing season to combat any excessive build up of organic matter, which could lead to a major thatch problem, and in turn encourage tillering of the plant.

This procedure should be followed by an application of top dressing that will help in the battle to keep the surface of the green free of any organic build up. This would mean light and frequent applications throughout the summer on top of your usual spring and autumn applications.

#### APPLICATION RATES

A normal spring or autumn top dressing application would be around 3-6 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. This would equate to around one and a half to three tonnes for a golf green of around 500m<sup>2</sup> and three and a half to seven tonnes for a bowling green of around 1200m<sup>2</sup>.

Lighter applications throughout the summer or growing season would tend to be around 1-2kg/m<sup>2</sup> equating to approximately half to one tonne for a golf green and one to two tonnes for a bowling green. In golf this lighter dressing could be applied as much as four times throughout the summer.

#### DELIVERIES

More often than not, golf clubs will take the deliveries of their top dressing in the form of bulk tippers ranging from 10, 20 and even 29 tonne loads. That is not always the case at bowling clubs. Access is usually poor and therefore the larger tipper vehicles would not be able to gain access in order to tip.



The most popular format for bowling green deliveries is in 25kg or one tonne bags. These are both covered and hence protected from the elements which is important when considering that in most cases not all the top dressing would be applied on the day of delivery if the greenkeeper were working alone.

The size of vehicles can still be a problem for bagged deliveries if the access is poor. To combat this problem check if your supplier's bagged deliveries come with an off load facility, such as a 'moffett mounty' - an onboard fork lift truck. This can deliver virtually anywhere and can save you

the problem of having to carry 200 or more 25kg bags of top dressing to the green.

An effective hassle free delivery service, the merits of which cannot be overstated, combined with a quality product. What more can a greenkeeper ask for?

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