

HONEY I SHRUNK THE GRASS!

One of the new “tools” which the modern day Course Manager has at his or her disposal is the growth suppressant. Slowing down the natural rate of growth is great for cutting down on mowing, but are we messing with nature and is there a downside?

Greenkeeper International spoke with six top greenkeepers with differing but equally interesting views on the subject.

Duncan Kelso, Kings Hill GC



I started to use growth suppressants after reading some research from the USA which made me aware of them and their potential benefits.

Economically, it means doing things less often which makes more time available to do other things. This means fuel savings and the ability to direct manpower in other directions. Then there was the turf side of the equation and a number of things to do with the plant including its ability to recover from drought

I began using them in powder form, which was difficult to administer, but since the latest liquid versions have been launched it is a lot easier to amend rates

I always worry about the consequences of doing something new but that's why we

did trials first and we do constantly monitor it. People are always a bit sceptical but we haven't really found any problems yet.

I've only seen positives and have been using them mixed with other things. We've tended to go with, and it sounds bizarre, liquid fertiliser with them. The rates of fertiliser are very small, sulphate of ammonia and sulphate of iron, and we've been doing that on certain fairways to retain density.

In terms of saved time we lose one mow a week. If tees were cut three times a week you'd be cutting two times a week and with fairways, if you were cutting every week you might cut twice every three weeks.

Cost savings are not really the issue. It just frees up people to get other things done. You can never do enough, there is always something else to do free up some labour which might make a difference elsewhere – attention to detail stuff.

They have got to be in the top three in terms of greenkeeping tools, probably behind the vertidrain.

They work for us and we'll continue to use them from an economic point of view and from the turf point of view. We're predominately fescue here and we've been using it on fescues for a long time and not seen them diminish.

Paul Lowe – Rhuddlan GC



My greenkeeping philosophy is all about competition and using stress to favour the finer grasses. If you use growth suppressants they do help with deeper roots and a denser sward which is actually less stressful for the grass which on the one hand is great, but I need that stress to win the battle.

That's where I feel it an old theory that a good drought gets rid of a load of rubbish and growth suppressants will help you overcome certain things. Annual meadow grass is shallow rooting so I need to promote my deeper rooting grasses to win the battle.

They do have their uses, it's just that they just don't sit in with my strategies. I'd say they were an excellent tool if you were managing annual meadow grass as they overcome some of

the weaknesses of poa.

Most greenkeepers are either going through the change from annual meadow grass to fescue or they are thinking about going through it.

I believe if we mess about with nature we'll lose, as she's got a bigger budget than we have. I don't believe any chemical or growth suppressant is a good thing. Some would argue that they are not doing damage but, I'll admit, I'm not convinced by that.

Clubs want us to be as environmentally friendly as we can and we don't want anything to be done just for the sake of it.

If you look at cutting down maintenance and using less fuel, this is where I swing to the other side. If you have a site with difficult to manage areas - banks or very fast growing areas which are predominately rye or meadow grass growth - suppressants have their place. It is more environmental to use less fuel diesel, fewer man hours and we can concentrate on getting good grasses on greens. They can be used as a tool to overcome problems.

Brian Turner – Worplesdon GC



I've been using growth suppressants for a few years now.

Suppressants help you with mowing and you can cut that down to a minimum. I used them on my greens seven times last year. It did the trick giving us an even covering of grass, more bents and they seemed to be more aggressive. The energy seemed to go into the root system so we could keep our fertiliser down. At the moment I'm a great believer in them.

My view on new products is that they've got to make a difference and the new suppressants do make a difference. A lot of products you see are very much of a muchness, But with these, I've been converted.

Things can go wrong if you don't get your timing right or you can overdose it

by silly amounts but I can't see a problem myself and, talking to the experts, a lot of it is common sense.

Obviously no-one can tell what's going to happen in the long term. We don't know that, no-one knows that, but at the moment it is beneficial.

Most greenkeepers would cut their greens every day during the growing season. Modern growth suppressants mean that you have a bit of leeway and can leave them once or twice during the week if you wanted to.

Not everyone has the amount of staff they want and the ability to attend to the attention to detail isn't always possible and this does give you a little bit of leeway. It has certainly helped us. It has made such a difference that I'll be using them on fairways tees and greens this year! That's how much I think of them.

As I said when a new product comes along it must make a difference and while the early growth suppressants were good the new versions are even better. I'll be using it for a few years or until experts say you want to be a bit careful with it.

When people start to use it see benefits they will find room in their budgets for it.

Andy Campbell, The Duke's Course, St Andrews



I started using them when I was at Carden Park on the fairways because they were fairly wet. We needed to fertilise them in spring so we got the resultant massive rush of growth and if the weather turned wet again we'd have the problem of getting the grass off. We started experimenting with suppressants and got a response straight away with the grass being held back, while we also got density and colour. With creeping bent grass greens we were also getting peaks and troughs and we were trying to find a way to even that out. Using growth suppressants worked very well for us.

I didn't really think about using them for poa suppression in those days but when we

put it on at the higher rate, like everyone else, we noticed some scorching. Then we had the idea that we would use them when we were overseeding to give the new seed a chance to out compete the grasses which were already there

Aside from the poa suppression there is the usage of water and holding its colour longer. Significantly we reduced the amount of feed - just little bit of iron or nitrogen mixed in with suppressant at a quarter rate - we were doing it every 21 to 30 days, depending on weather, and we have probably used less fertiliser than has been ever used in the past. And that's on a golf course that had a reputation, in the early days, of being managed along traditional lines. But we don't get any loss of colour, we get good root extension and a healthier plant. If we are not chopping the head of the plant all the time it must be better for it.

I don't think there are any long term issues. I've spoken to people in the States who have been using them for years and there is no evidence of any problems. Equally, there is no real evidence that on its own they significantly reduce poa. They certainly control your poa, in conjunction with other measures but whether you want it or not is debatable

If you were to stop using them the sward would revert to what it always was. They are not a miracle cure for changing grass species.

If you take the very purist view on it. It is a chemical of sorts and should we be applying chemicals at all? Well, some people would say that, but if we didn't we'd end up with no grass at all. With the rates we are applying it is impossible to get into a water source, you don't see any degeneration or pollution of the rootzone. Indeed there is no factual evidence that they do any harm at all.

At the end of the day, tip it on its head. If you are using growth regulation you are cutting down on fertiliser; the amount of water used and the amount of fuel needed to mow the grass. Is that better than throwing three or four different kinds of resource at it?

They have the potential, when people get use to them and get more experience of using them, to be as effective to greenkeepers as an irrigation system. Purist might say that's not proper greenkeeping well go back to using the scythe.



Ian Stephens – Carholm GC

I'm been in greenkeeping since I left school, but I look at the growth suppressant debate from the point of view of my volunteer work for the National Trust which I've been doing for 18 years. It just seems to be a bad thing to be putting down chemical to suppress elements of flora because grass, weeds and flowers all grow for a reason.

I know the companies who promote growth suppressants are into making working life easier for the greenkeeper but I don't like the idea of spraying something on that affects the natural make up of the plant.

I can see that they do have their uses dangerous banks places that are difficult to get to but I know a lot of people who are using them on greens. I'd much rather try to promote good green growth even if it means more work for the team.

I'm also on a low budget golf course as well so I can't really afford to use it. Often you find that when you've sprayed one product you've got to combat it by spraying another to balance it up and you end up putting on all sorts of stuff. I'm trying to use as little chemical as possible.

I'm an advocate of traditional greenkeeping methods, that would be the idea scenario for me but I'm at an 18 hole course and we've got four full time and one part time person. I'd like to do a lot traditional methods but with manpower an issue you've got to find a compromise.

However if it worked for the good old boys in the old days they must have been doing something right.

I'm doing a college course at the moment and I we had to try a particular product. I went with a blinker approach, thinking it was complete rubbish - it was a product for black layer control - but to be fair it actually worked during the three

month trial and now I'm going to be using that where I am now if I get issues with blacklayer.

So I'm not so stuck in one camp and not open minded enough not to try new things. I've been greenkeeping about 19 years now and I know I haven't learned all there is to learn and I suspect when I retire that I still won't have.

The club lets me get on with what I think best but we have an unusual situation as we're on common land, a private club which leases the land of the council, we are dictated to about what we can and can't do. We have horses grazing on the land and we have to be careful to ensure we are not using fertiliser with too many nitrates so it doesn't interfere with the horses. I'm actually investigating a more organic mix. If I do use a different product I'll mention it to the Chairman of Green.

Different if a neighbouring club started using a product and the course looked great. Can get pressurised into doing all that but that is all part of the open minded policy go along there pop along to greenkeeper and have a chat. They are the best people to go to rather than reps as they will tell you exactly how good it is, a fellow greenkeeper will give you the negative as well as the positive feedback.

I certainly wouldn't rule out using growth suppressants in the future but I'd think carefully about it and initially use them on trial areas.



Alex McCombie - Ledreborg Palace GC, Denmark

I have 142 bunkers on the course which is a huge task for me and I have to try and look at it from a management perspective. Growth suppressants are another tool and I have to assess the cost of using them against my staffing costs - having to flymo bunkers every week, against having to do it once a month. Growth suppressants could be very useful to me and I'm seriously considering it for the first time ever.

Having been though the college system and you have believes instilled in you by not just college system but also the Course Managers you've work under.

So it is very much a conscious thing you wonder if you are doing the right thing but you have to look at it from a management perspective – is it going to make my life easier. Environmentally, it does make you think about the reduced use of fuel and reduced pollution, which enters your thought processes.

It was a conscious thing for me to begin with but you've got to look beyond that on something like this because I have to manage my golf course and the reasons I'm here is to manage it to a level of high perfection. If you can use something like growth suppressants, which will allow me to do my job more effectively and have a lesser effect on the environment, then I have to consider it. It's my job.

When I was still the Deputy at Parkstone I would have come to a different conclusion. When I was a Deputy I was fairly vocal in what I believed in, but when you get into the world where you are actually making decision which are really counting and having an impact, 52 weeks a year, on your golf course you have to move away from the fuzzy world where you can say what you like but it doesn't have that much of an impact.

When you are in the hot seat it is so different. I've having to look at things and deal with things so differently now. I think it's good as it gives you a whole different perspective on the greenkeeping world and sports turf management.

I still a have my ideas and beliefs but I'm not so vociferous particularly, with things I've disagreed with in the past because I understand we all have difficult jobs, we all have golf courses to manage and we all have to do that within the constraints that we have.

I now believe that you must be constructive and balanced and accept that people might do things differently and good luck to them.

With growth suppressants I'm sure in the past I would have said, "Don't be stupid. I don't agree it with them and I'm never going to use them". Now I have to consider them, as I have to consider all options. That's my job as a Course Manager.

In Denmark chemical usage depends very much on whether it is on private or publicly owned land and it's something I'm investigating at the moment but the believe I will be allowed to use it because we are on private land. Denmark is very restrictive on chemicals and golf has a bad image. We are seen as bad managers of the land and people who use lots of chemicals and lots of