

Letters



Please email your notes to: scott@bigga.co.uk

Letters & Notes

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before the 12th
of the month

PROVIDING SATISFACTION ON A BUDGET

Dear BIGGA

Chances are you have concerns about the current economic climate - but what's this got to do with maintaining your playing surface?

It is estimated that 40-60% of the overall cost of operating a typical golf course facility is related to turf maintenance. As a facility offering a natural playing surface, this may seem a reasonable balance and justifiable to you as Greenkeeper or Course Manager. You can't attract regular golfers without good quality greens, tees and fairways can you? In the current economic climate, that may not be your reaction if you're the owner trying to maintain revenue.

The ultimate natural playing surface is, however, the aim of every Greenkeeper. On an unlimited budget, life is certainly easier, but most Greenkeepers are working to a given budget and a surface requiring continual improvement. Recent weather conditions have stressed grass even more with heavy rainfall last summer, and rootzones stripped of vital nutrients in the autumn. Then the low winter temperatures and snow came to deplete grass carbohydrate reserves resulting in severe thinning of many fairways and greens.

Balancing the books, while maintaining a quality playing surface, has never been harder. It depends greatly on the Greenkeeper's relationship with club committees for them to understand what hurdles have to be overcome to deliver playability and visual appearance expectations. It also depends on the Greenkeepers' appreciation of budgetary restraints.

In the last 18 months just about every cost in managing a course has increased, whether they be machinery equipment and repairs, fungicides, fertilisers, seed, irrigation or increased environmental and health & safety issues that courses are required to operate under to meet regulatory compliance. Then add in the prospect of reduced cash flow down to more golfers operating on pay and play rather than the annual subscriptions and is it any wonder that turf management expenses costs are becoming an easy target for making immediate savings? On paper it looks like the sensible thing to do, but can you really afford to cut back on some of the essential inputs?

Greenkeepers and Course Managers are between a rock and a hard place trying to maintain member satisfaction in the playability of the course, whilst appeasing the secretaries by operating on a reduced budget. For sure, you'll have to make the budget go further, and look at ways to make savings. But it needn't be all doom and gloom. Somewhere there's a compromise, and some real opportunities exist for Greenkeepers and course owners to take a close look at their grounds management. So ask yourself the following questions:

"How can we become more efficient?"

"How can we produce a playing surface requiring fewer inputs, whilst maintaining quality?"

"How can we promote the environmental benefits to the local community and paying members?"

"How do we effectively communicate to members that changes in maintenance and playing surface are for the long term good of the club?"

We could start with playing the old 'sustainable' card, a buzz word in golf over the last couple of years, but does it actually mean anything? Your course is only sustainable if members don't vote with their feet. No members, no fees, no course-simple. So forget the sustainable trend. Instead you should assess your current grass regime consumables - Fungicides, Fertilisers and Seed.

Naturally as a seed company we are going to recommend regular overseeding programmes. It really is the way to introduce more efficient species and cultivars to your course. Without grass, you haven't got a course therefore the grass you maintain is the single most important material in your toolbox. Seed in real terms has not increased in price in the last 15 years so is not so much an issue. But it's the amount of the other constituents your mixture requires that consumes your budget and makes seed selection crucial. There are now cultivars that have improved wear tolerance, more disease resistance and reduced cutting frequency, all offering potential for saving money. Furthermore, those species requiring fewer nutrients lend themselves to meeting a club's environmental aims and removing the conditions that actually sustain predominantly annual meadow grass greens. Cutting frequency is also influenced greatly by the choice of cultivar. How often do we actually need to cut fairways? Daily cutting is not uncommon, but is it essential? Communication to members to reduce the expectation of close mown fairways is required however grass cultivars with high scores for slow re-growth can save up to 50% on mowing costs.

British Seed Houses have Grade 'A' mixtures especially formulated for Golf Course Greens, Fairways and Roughs - from A5, an all Perennial Ryegrass mixture, through to A27, an entirely All-Fescue one. However, Velvet bent grasses will produce the smoothest, truest, fastest putting surface a golfer will ever play. This is because velvet bent grass has the finest leaf texture and highest shoot density of all the fine turf grasses available to the UK Greenkeeper.

The plant requires very little nutrient input (as low as 25kg/ha N per annum is acceptable and anything over 100 is not necessary) which, combined with extremely high shoot density, also helps to limit *Poa annua* infestations. Velvets can also tolerate dry conditions and, on the flipside, there has also been a noticeable resilience to the wetter conditions recently experienced. Disease resistance is also an exceptional trait of the species, the highest of most commercial bents.

Most Greenkeepers work within a very tight window to complete renovation work and allow new seed to establish - they must get it right first time. Young seedlings are vulnerable and regular applications of soluble high salinity fertiliser can kill the emerging shoots, not only a waste of good seed, but costly too. In contrast, the use of a low salt BSH Floranid slow release fertiliser delivers a steady feed of the essential nutrients. Floranid can also provide a cost saving throughout the season by having to make fewer applications than soluble types. All in all they create healthy growth, less susceptible to disease, and therefore requiring less fungicide.

Simon Taylor
British Seed Houses