
# On the Soapbox

**Stuart Yarwood MG, Course Manager at Lymm Golf Club in Cheshire, with the first of a two-part Soapbox...**

**Greenkeeping is a tough job! It's not like shark wrestling or being a vegetarian butcher, but it has its tough moments.**

We all know it's tough at the moment. The rain has disappeared and gone on holiday, along with all the money, and were left wondering when they're coming back! And not so much as a postcard.

It's not just grim up north anymore!

But we greenkeepers are made of stout stuff, we'll get through it! Of course we will - Stiff upper lip and all that!

But has anyone told the grasses that we play on or the soils that we work with?

These are the bread and butter aspects of any greenkeepers day, along with the myriad of skills we need to possess, from public relations, to public conveniences (and the unblocking of!)

We get through it with hard work, determination, training, our experience and feel, a bit of good favour and fortune and teamwork. And teamwork doesn't stop at helping out our colleagues. It extends right down from the Chair of the Board right down to the soils beneath our feet. After all this is the foundation of what our greenkeeping 'shop window' is based upon.

How we look after our soils is going to have a direct impact on the grasses we promote and the playing surfaces we provide. If we don't get the correct balance of air, water, nutrient and organic matter right within our soils then this directly affects how our soils perform… and ultimately how our playing surfaces perform.

But how do our soils perform? How do we help our soils to help us deliver? Again this is down to teamwork, and good soil biology is a very important player.

Our soils can potentially contain an incredible diversity of micro-organisms ranging from the tiniest single celled bacteria, algae, fungi and protozoa to the more complex nematodes and micro-arthropods to the visible earthworms, insects, small vertebrates and plants. They all have a role in life.

As these organisms eat, grow, reproduce, and move through the soil, they have an important job to do. They help clean up the soil, aerate the soil, recycle nutrients, and decompose organic matter.

Others, such as mycorrhizae, act as personal assistants to grass roots making nutrient available to the plants, and make it possible to have clean water, clean air, healthy plants, and drainage.

It's like a city under our feet and there is always a war raging! There're predators and there's dinner. Some things eat, and somethings get eaten, fungi prey on pathogens, limiting disease attacks, good nematodes predate on grass damaging root feeders and if the soil food web is bang on, then its healthy soil, healthy turf, and making our life easier as greenkeepers.

So why do we as greenkeepers employ practices that upset this balance? It just doesn't make sense.

We need to look after them and give them something to do. They need to breathe, eat, breed, grow and be entertained.

Some of us limit our aeration to the winter months when it's least effective and more convenient. Our soils need oxygen all year, so it is important to maintain aeration year round, all the time considering the golfer, the playing surface and ultimately our soils.

We need to aerate at the right times, right frequency and right depths, otherwise it becomes difficult to breathe down there, turns into a bad neighbourhood and folks move out. Not great.

It also may not be convenient for the golfer or the committee when we present our aeration schedules.

The club may not want ANY disruption in these strict economic times, and we are all desperate for perfect putting surfaces to get the new members coming through the door or just to retain the ever increasing nomadic golfer.

So we don't do the disruptive aeration and the flak goes away?

Possibly? Or, we just look at boosting our soil ecosystems with compost teas and expect this applied life to thrive.

The idea being, while the old biology dies off clutching their throats, turning blue and drowning, we send in a fresh batch of lambs to the slaughter! Perfect

And while we try to keep those alive, with sugary carbohydrate supplements, all the time we use salt based, inorganic fertilisers. Salt was used back in the Roman times to sterilise enemies soils so they're crops would die and starve them out, it's exactly what we are doing to our soil ecology.

If we are trying to encourage good soil ecology, and I fully agree with the benefits of all a compost tea contains, I don't believe one can force it into a soil, if that soil isn't supporting it already. The biology needs a healthy environment and we need to create it as greenkeepers, for it to flourish.

If we continue to use inorganic fertilisers, then we only serve to grow the plant, adding nothing to the soil. Surely we create an Easter egg scenario, where we have undermined the goodness from within the soil, keeping the top looking great, but hollow on the inside. If not managed correctly, it collapses, (through mechanical or environmental stresses) leaving a nitrate and bacterial rich environment only fit for the very grass we as good greenkeepers are trying to discourage, Poa Annua.

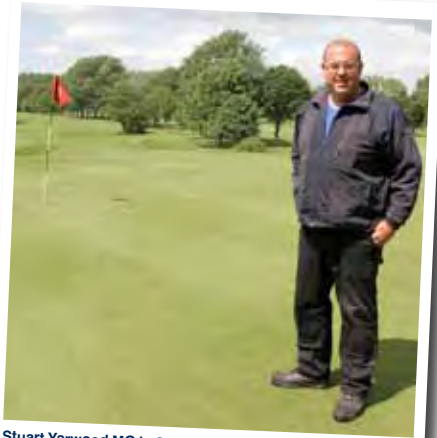
So the result of this poa dominant bacterial rich environment? The plant continues to grow, giving nothing back to the soil, resulting in more yield, slower greens so we mow tighter, apply a Programmed Growth Regulator, mixed with more urea based fertilisers, and a fungicide here and there to offset any disease attacks.

All good, but all chemicals all the same.

And do we really know their effects below the surface as well as we know these chemicals affect our balance sheets?

Tight times and we are in a profession that survives from within a bottle. Expensive, but it can save a lot of hard work and is convenient. But for how long and at what price?

## Convenience – but who are we kidding?



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