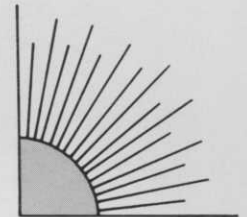


South Florida Sunshine



By BRAD G. KOCHER
Inverrary Country Club

THE ART OF TOPDRESSING

Topdressing serves a great variety of useful purposes. It stimulates growth in turf areas that are weak and need increased turf coverage. It smooths rough and similarly "thin" areas on putting greens and tees. As a soil amendment, a special mix can help to improve poor soil drainage. It can be said - if you are having trouble growing grass in any particular area - topdress it.

There are as many types of mixes available as only your imagination will let you conceive. Sterilized, unsterilized, 50/50, 70/30, 70/30 Medium, coarse, fine, 90/10 - the list goes on forever. One thing that is generally accepted is that the first number in the slash series is the sand and the remainder is Florida muck. However, there are some inconsistencies that exist even using these standards.

One supplier may call his 70/30 mix what another calls straight "muck". Briefly explained, all muck contains a certain percentage of sand. It is usually very fine sand or what we call sugar sand. If muck is placed in a jar of water and allowed to settle, it is readily seen that usually 50-70% of the composition is this fine sand. Conversely, another supplier of topdressing will use muck in its regular form as the other ingredient to be combined with sand. Simply put, if I would order a 70/30 mix, the supplier would take 7 parts sand (fine, medium or coarse) and mix it with 3 parts muck. This second option, as you can see, does not consider the very fine particles of sand that exist in his muck. Most mixes used by South Florida superintendents use this latter method of measuring sand to muck ratios, but it would seem there is a definite need for some form of standardization within the industry.

Differing types of sand also play a big part in topdressing mixes. Trap sand and D.O.T. sand are considered some of the coarse grades of sand and mason sand is probably the finest grade. A combination of the two sands should give you a medium grade mix. This mix, from personal experience, seems to work into the soil extremely well and can be applied at very light rates. Additionally, because the mix works into the existing turf, it is somewhat less abrasive to mowers making for a more contented mechanic.

The infiltration rate of different mixes also greatly varies. A mix using strictly fine sand may have a very poor water infiltration rate, whereas a straight trap sand mix may have excessive infiltration and little nutrient holding capacity. In either case, there are different purposes for different mixes. The coarser mix could be used to improve poorly drained soil especially during aeration, and the medium grade for general topdressing on well constructed greens having a similar soil profile. The fine mix, although one may question its percolation characteristics, can be used to "polish off" putting surfaces or to use

after establishment of overseeding. The finer mix is generally less abrasive and would be less harmful to sensitive overseeding leaf surfaces. It should be noted that any combination of the different sands is feasible and most topdressing suppliers are most receptive to custom mixing to your specific needs.

Probably the greatest benefit derived from topdressing is the results achieved to improve a putting surface. Light frequent topdressings are that extra plus that separates an average putting surface from a superior one. It would not be excessive to consider light (3/4 to 1 cu. yd. per 5,000 sq. ft.) topdressing every 3 to 4 weeks. The topdressing smooths the roll of ball as well as increases putting green speed. One of the prime tools a superintendent has to improve quality, in addition to low mowing height and minimum fertility levels, is topdressing.

Topdressing decreases the severity of low mowing heights. This is especially true when a decision has been made to lower mowing height. Probably the best time to lower mowing height is the day after a light topdressing. It decreases the shock to the plant. I have seen what happens when a green is mowed at 7/32" and the decision to gradually lower to 5/32" is made. It puts undo stress on leaf blades and will often result in browning or yellowing of the turf. However, if over a 2-3 week period the height is lowered in 1/64" increments just following a light topdressing, little discoloration, if any, will result.

One of the ways so many of the courses who consistently maintain Bentgrass or Tifdwarf at 1/8", or 328 at 5/32" is through the use of topdressing. A northern course I am familiar with has the reputation of applying a very light layer of topdressing once a week. We all hear of how so many of the "tournament" courses mow at 5/64" or 3/32" for sustained periods during major tournaments. It is entirely feasible and with light topdressings it can be done with little loss of that desirable green color. I think most superintendents desire a "pool table" putting effect. I am sure at least the smoothness is desired, maybe not always the speed. Topdressing is the answer!

Topdressing is also a small price to pay to improve the most important area on the golf course. Twenty yards of topdressing at \$20-\$25 per yard plus 30-40 hours labor to topdress, drag and mow is a small monthly investment to give golfers a smooth, consistent surface. It does not seem like much when compared to \$300-\$350 thousand to maintain an 18-hole golf course.

I believe most superintendents would, if they had their choice, topdress more frequently. It really seems to solve a great many problems. It is the great cure-all. ■