

Using A Turf Consultant ... Wisely

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Growing grass is not easy. If it were, the golf industry wouldn't need to hire the trained, educated, dedicated professionals it currently employs. Instead, we would use lawn maintenance services (or even livestock) to groom fairways and roughs. For greens, we could simply set the rotary mower setting a little lower, and cut out a putting surface.

The fact is, of course, that grass is not easy to grow. The quality demands of the members at today's public and private courses make the job of golf course superintendent demanding indeed. The better courses are required to look top-notch all the time, regardless of weather, heavy play, mechanical problems, or inadequate course construction. Superintendents occasionally need outside help, and the turf consulting industry is there to provide the service.

Perhaps the first obstacle to overcome when hiring a consultant is to convince the membership committee or owners that outside help is justified. Why should a trained turf professional need assistance? Doctors get second opinions, lawyers consult with their associates, and businessmen bring in outside experts. Another pair of eyes, a different perspective, or some specialized expertise can be a great help in any complex, technical field. The best minds in every discipline utilize consultants, and paid advisors for hire exist in every industry. Using other peoples' brains and experience in order to do a better job is admirable and productive, not demeaning or defeatist.

Superintendents most often use consultants in a trouble shooting capacity. Serious turf problems can come up at anytime, and a rapid, accurate diagnosis of the problem is critical. Consultants can usually provide such help. Often help is brought in after initial efforts to treat the disorder have failed. Usually other superintendents are then called, and finally the paid expert. If the consultant can diagnose and advise correct treatment, he is usually worth his fee and then some. If not, he can be just another blind alley.

Other superintendents prefer to bring in outside advice every so often to monitor the course and help guide its progress. Often the expert is called simply to inform the superintendent of new ideas, products, or techniques. Such timely information can be valuable in tangible as well as intangible ways.

Other times, consultants are seen on a frequent, regular basis to oversee and advise on many aspects of golf course

management, including personnel, budgeting, design and landscaping, as well as turf maintenance. The relationship is very complex and personal, with the two working as a team to design, implement, and evaluate programs. Some consultants work strictly with the turf, while others may offer assistance in many areas of golf course management. Other types of agriculture also use these services, including farms, nurseries, and groves, often to a greater extent than the turf industry.

The consultant-client relationship is a little different in each case, and the consultant's job varies somewhat with each client. In order to get what you want from consulting services, be up front with them. Tell the consultant what it is you want to achieve, and in what areas you would like technical assistance. That way, each knows what to expect from the other, and what the objectives are. At the same time, the consultant should inform the superintendent of the available ways in which he can help.

Turf consultants usually work for or in conjunction with a laboratory. Some problems with soil structure, chemistry, or disease just can't be diagnosed with the naked eye. The lab can usually figure out the problem and monitor the progress of recovery. Most consultants regularly use laboratory services, helping the client select what tests should be run, and assisting in interpreting the results.

Probably the best way to check out a potential consultant's qualifications is to ask other superintendents. Some consultants advertise, but most business is gained by word-of-mouth reputation. Find out just how the consultant has helped your colleagues, and how productive the relationship was. Then contact the consultant and ask about his background, what lab he uses, and the type of services he offers. At this point the structuring of fees can be discussed. Contracts are sometimes used, but we have found them to be generally unnecessary. They can protect both parties at times, but they can also be a hindrance.

A good, inexpensive way to try a consultant out is to call him in to trouble-shoot a problem you are having. From this, you can evaluate his knowledge, approach and effectiveness. If he solves or at least figures out the problem, then he can probably do the same for many of your other problems. This way, you can see just how it would go having an advisor around, and just how productive the arrangement might be. ■