



LET THE CULTIVATIONS BEGIN

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Warm season turfgrasses on golf courses require vigorous thatch removal to maintain a healthy playing surface. Photo by Bill Davidson.

Mower scalping followed by aggressive verticutting is an excellent cultivation practice for bermudagrass fairways. Over the past week or so, golf facilities throughout southern Florida have begun cultivating and “working” the turf through a series of maintenance practices.

Bermudagrass and seashore paspalum produce an abundance of above-ground and below-ground stems that can accumulate to produce thatch. Cultivation practices are necessary to reduce this stem layer, dilute thatch and improve overall turf quality and playability.

In Florida, cultivation practices generally take place from late spring through late summer, as warmer temperatures improve turf recovery. Each practice provides a slightly different benefit and several of them may take place at the same time to produce the desired effect.

Circle cutting – Mowing turf in a circular pattern reduces grain that can develop from mowing repeatedly in the same direction. This practice usually takes place on tees and fairways in the spring. Circle cutting is the least aggressive cultivation practice discussed in this update because it only addresses the surface canopy and does not dilute thatch.

Scalping – Scalping includes aggressively lowering mowing heights to remove much of the turf canopy and it generally takes place on golf course roughs. Bermudagrass roughs are often maintained at 1.25 to 1.5 inches but are scalped to less than

an inch for several weeks to improve turf uniformity. Scalping exposes the underlying stems and makes the turf appear yellow to tan for a week or two until new leaves are produced.

Verticutting – Verticutting, or vertical mowing, uses a series of vertically-oriented blades that thin the turf canopy and underlying thatch. Shallow penetration depths provide a light surface grooming effect, while deeper penetration dethatches putting greens, tees and fairways and requires a longer healing period.

Core aeration – Core aeration removes small plugs of thatch and soil. In addition to dethatching, core aeration reduces compaction and improves soil physical properties on each playing surface. This practice is quite aggressive and can require a week or more for recovery, depending upon tine size and spacing.

Sand topdressing – Sand topdressing is not necessarily considered a cultivation practice and sand is applied throughout the year on Florida golf courses. However, increased topdressing is applied throughout the summer months to dilute thatch and to backfill aeration holes. Budget constraints often limit its use to putting greens and tees, but sand topdressing dilutes thatch and improves surface firmness on fairways and approaches as well.

These practices are a bit messy and can temporarily produce unsightly playing surfaces, depending upon the intensity of each practice. Short-term inconvenience is certainly worth the long-term benefits that these practices provide.

