

More play equals more pressure to top-dress

BY PETER BLAIS

The growth of golf has meant more play, more pressure on greens and thus the need for more frequent top dressing.

There are many benefits to top dressing, a technique employed since the 1800s, but used more frequently in the past 10 years as the game's popularity has grown, according to Jim Connolly, Northeast region agronomist with the United States Golf Association Green Section. They include:

- Providing a smoother putting surface. Golfer traffic causes many imperfections over the course of the season. The average 5,000-square-foot green requires one-third of a yard regular application of top dressing. Laying that down every two to three weeks during the growing season can yield a more uniform putting surface.

- Filling up aerification holes. Left unfilled, air spaces can develop as the holes fill in naturally and dimples form on the green. Top dressing fills the holes and levels the putting surface.

- Improving soil quality. A clay soil that compacts easily can be improved by light, frequent top dressings of a sandier material. Over two years, one to two inches of improved top soil can be laid down over the natural clay, rebuilding the soil from the top down.

- Protecting grass from winter kill. A late-season top dressing can protect the crown area during the winter months.

With so many different reasons to top-dress, there must be many different types of machines to do the job. There are.

Top dresser manufacturers responding to this month's *Golf Course News* survey reported units that can be mounted on trucks, be pulled behind another vehicle or be pushed by a person.

They can hold from three to 30 cubic feet of material with hopper widths varying from 20 to 120 inches.

"We're fortunate that our maintenance building is centrally located," said Bruce Denning, head superintendent of Trumbull Country Club in Warren, Ohio. "Capacity is much more important if your facilities are way out and you have to keep running back for more sand."

Top dressers have swaths ranging from two to 52 feet with feeding systems that include belts, brushes, spouts, drums, pendulums, discs and many others.

"The swath is important because I want to get off a green quickly, without having to go over it many times," said Denning.

Drive mechanisms range from PTOs, to hydraulic, to ground to roller chains.

And price? Start at \$200 and continue up to almost \$13,000.

"There are no bad machines out there," said Connolly. "They all serve a purpose."

The major difference is the amount of material various machines lay down. Regular top dress-

ing applications require five to six cubic yards of material over 18 average-sized greens, explained Connolly. Eighteen aerified greens will require closer to 20 yards.

Ideally, Connolly said, a course should have at least two top dressers — one that will lay down a light layer in a minimal number of passes as part of a regular top dressing program, and a second that will distribute heavier amounts after aerification.

The trouble is, not all courses can afford it. Connolly estimates half the courses in the Northeast have at least two machines. That means the other half don't.

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— Jim Connolly
USGA Green Section

"There's no excuse not to top-dress at least three to four times a year, unless you can't afford the machinery or just have one or two people working on the golf course," said the USGA representative.

"Unfortunately, the more expensive machines are what the less wealthy clubs need. The big machines replace labor. It's the nine-

hole courses with no money that should have the most expensive equipment."

Waterville (Maine) Country Club superintendent Kyle Evans' situation is more the norm. Evans has a Viccon spreader he uses primarily for light applications and a Cushman unit for heavier ones.

Said Evans, "Sometimes we'll have both going at the same time," indicating he has a membership well educated in the importance of top dressing.

"Greens committees and golfers must realize superintendents need time to top dress," said Connolly. "It can become a real battle.

Of all the functions a superintendent does, this is the one that ties up the golf course. It can be a real deterrent, unless the superintendent is given that window of time to perform the job. Golfers must realize they're cutting their own throats without it."

With top dressers getting more and more use, they will likely have to be replaced more often.

"We upgrade or supplement our machines every three to five years," said Mary "Patty" Knaggs, head superintendent at Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y. "We ask them to do twice as much now as we used to."

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