

Center Valley's Ron Garrison aggressive in IPM battle plan

CENTER VALLEY, Pa. — Superintendent Ron Garrison has a mission: To set the standard for public golf courses in the northern Philadelphia suburbs.

Outwardly, the bentgrass greens, tees and fairways, impeccable grooming and creative waterscaping give The Center Valley Club the feel of a private course. Behind the scenes lies an aggressive Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program that would make many elite clubs green with envy.

"Most other public and resort courses have a bluegrass/ryegrass fairway turfgrass mixture, while all the private clubs in the area have bentgrass fairways," Garrison noted. "We don't see private clubs as direct competitors. We're just trying to be the best public course we can be."

The Geoffrey Cornish-designed Center Valley Club first opened for play in 1992. Two separate design features characterize the course: a links-type front nine and a contemporary inland back nine. Nearly 10 acres of restored natural wetlands come into play on 14 of the 18 holes.

In three years, play has grown to an average of more than 30,000 rounds per season. Though Garrison welcomes the early success of the course, it did not come without problems.

"The increased activity adds a lot of stress to our young greens," Garrison explained. "Stress on the turf opens you up to any number of disease, weed and other turf quality problems."

In addition to stress from heavy play, humidity tends to be high because of the wetlands around the course. To control these problems, Garrison uses an aggressive IPM program that



The lush bentgrass greens, tees and fairways, impeccable grooming and creative waterscaping give The Center Valley Club in Pennsylvania the feel of an upscale private course. Superintendent Ron Garrison (right) says, "We're just trying to be the best public course we can be."



focuses first on the soil, then on the plant using a combination of all-natural fertilizers, biostimulants, synthetic pesticides and cultural practices.

"The soil feeds the plant. If the soil is healthy, it helps the plant be healthy, too," he said. "Primarily, I use a fertilizer from Earthworks with a couple of their other solubles, including a product called Kick, distributed by Earthworks. Then there's a nitrogen stabilizer, N-hance. I use another organic insoluble by Potent-Sea, which is sea kelp extracts."

"I feel strongly that once you improve the quality of your soil, you increase the natural vigor and quality of the turf. Not only will this save you money on fungicides and fertilizers, but water applications and mowing schedules can

be modified to save time and expense."

Garrison began incorporating organics into his program to improve turf quality and lower expenses. After just one season of using organic fertilizers, he said he's seen improvements.

Garrison runs soil tests every month. He and his crew sample three greens and two fairways, using the results to guide fertilization and pest management decisions.

Garrison, a Penn State graduate, primarily uses organic fertilizers, hitting the greens heavier in the spring and fall with a 3-1-2 ratio of all-natural



fertilizer. He "spoon feeds" greens through the most stressful times, applying one-tenth to two-tenths of a pound of nitrogen per week.

"With these organics, combined with my other practices, I feel we'll eventually be able to apply less fertilizer," he explained.

However, he continues to use synthetic chemicals as part of his turf management program. Two registered technicians help him oversee and perform chemical applications.

"We use very little insecticide. To this point, we've been very fortunate by letting Mother Nature take care of the problem unless severe infestations occur," Garrison said.

To control weeds, such as clover and dandelion, the superintendent relies on spot treatments of post emergence contact herbicides. Though insects, weeds and diseases all can be problems, disease management consumes more than half of Garrison's time from mid-May through mid-September.

His largest headaches come from dollar spot and brown patch, though pythium can also be a problem.

Garrison uses a preventive fungicide program for dollar spot and brown patch over the entire course — and for pythium on his greens. He spot sprays a contact fungicide for pythium outbreaks on tees and fairways only when needed. To control resistance, he always uses a three-way tank mix. To add an "element of surprise," he occasionally changes fungicides in the mix.

Garrison takes risk. He didn't think twice, for example, when his distributor rep approached him to test an experimental fungicide. Last summer, he evaluated Eagle[®] fungicide from Rohm and Haas.

"We tested Eagle on our 12th fairway for dollar spot control," Garrison said. "We had a little over 20,000 square feet of test area that stayed clean throughout the whole season."

Garrison wanted to put the product to the ultimate test, so he used Eagle alone on this fairway the entire summer.

"We have nearly 40 acres of bentgrass fairways. It takes a good eight hours and two of my employees to spray them, so it is important to me that products work on at least a 21-day schedule," he emphasized. "Eagle worked for a good month after the initial application."

At The Center Valley Club, they use a Buckner Cops-4 irrigation system, an automatic, double-row, below-ground. In the past, Garrison preferred light but frequent waterings. He now feels he wasn't getting water where he actually needed it.

This season, Garrison plans to switch to less frequent, deep waterings, supplemented by hand watering throughout the course. "It will mean sacrificing the hours of labor, but I think we'll be better off," he said.

Also under consideration: adding fans to improve air movement in problem areas where diseases are the biggest concern.

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