

FALL CLEAN UP

Supers battle debris, weather and labor shortages to prep for winter

By MEGHAN FOLEY

For superintendents from Maine to the Northwest, fall cleanup to prepare for winter is always an important process. After all, what is done in the fall triggers the way a course greens up in the spring. Autumnal applications of snow-mold fungicides, fertilizers and topdressing, and

overall course aerification, must occur in a short span of time before the weather changes.

For Jim Hodge, at Val Halla Golf Course in Cumberland, Maine, cleaning up in the autumn requires a great deal of attention. The scattered leaves, branches and pine needles of a typical New England fall keep

him busy down to the very last week in November.

"We use everything from a small sweeper and a backpack blower to a walk-behind push blower and a big riding blower to clear the pine needles and leaves off the course," said Hodge. "For the entire month of September, we mow the fairways

and the greens nonstop."

Michael Foster, superintendent at Province Lake in South Effingham, N.H., would agree. "In the fall, we have so much hand-raking and picking that needs to be done," he said. "We have to clear pine needles and leaves on a daily basis because we have a lot of both evergreen

and maple oak trees on the course. Here, we rely heavily on manpower."

Foster focuses largely on aerification of the whole course throughout the New Hampshire autumn, altering his usual maintenance routine. "In the fall, we begin to change our fertilizer schedule so that we can do a thorough job of aerification," he said. "We try to go 2:1 of potassium to nitrogen. We also apply a light topdressing."

In Post Falls, Idaho, where Lonnie Aller is superintendent of Highlands Golf and Country Club, preparations for a mild fall begin in the third week of September. Blowing leaves and needles off the course occupies much of Aller's time, but for him, the most important thing is mowing the grasses until they are dormant to make sure that they are not shaggy going into the winter.

"We have a small blower that we use to consolidate the pine needles around the tees and greens, which is a good deal of

'Our lack of labor when the fall comes around plays a big factor in the daily maintenance of the golf course.'

— Jim Hodge

the cleaning that we do," Aller said. "Then we use a vacuum to sweep the fairways and the roughs. We continue mowing right until the very end of November so the grass isn't the least bit shaggy for the winter. Aerification of fairways and greens is also important in the fall."

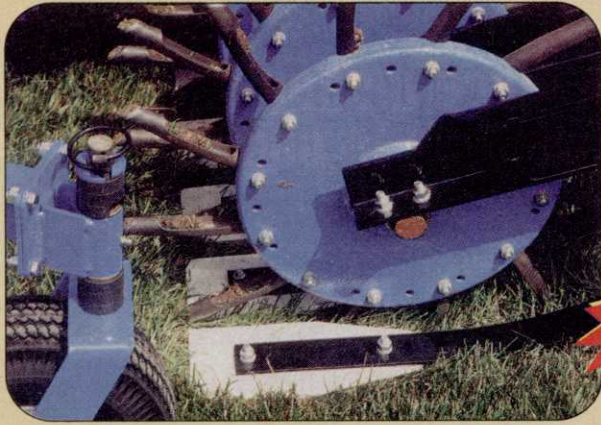
THE SNOW-MOLD BELT

In the Rockies, superintendents have different methods for making sure that their courses are properly cleared in the fall. For Jim Myers at Vail Golf Club, in Vail, Colo., keeping the course clear doesn't involve quite so much. "We don't have a whole lot on the course except for aspen trees, so we do a relatively small amount of leaf blowing — not like those guys in New England," he explained.

Myers is mostly concerned with the coming snow. "I always pay close attention to aerification and snow-mold control," he said. "Once the grass goes dormant, everything has to be mowed at the proper height so that a better root system can exist in the winter. With a stronger root system, plants have the chance to store more carbohydrates, which in turn allows them to survive a brutal winter."

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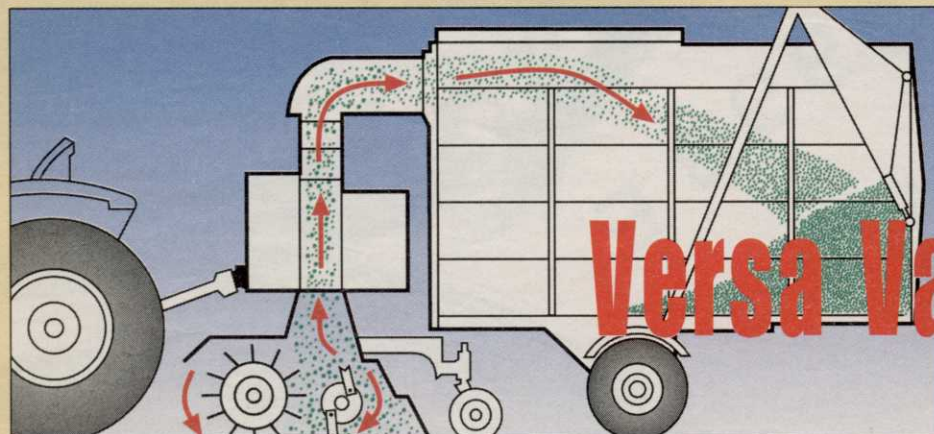
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FALL CLEAN UP



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Leaves, labor

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According to Myers, timing is key. In Vail the snow flies at the end of October. "We do the fall application of fungicides to the greens right after Labor Day, and then we do our full application to the entire course at the beginning of October."

At the Buffalo Hills Golf Course in Kalispell, Mont., near Glacier National Park, superintendent Patrick Meeker is also more concerned with the snow than the leaves. "Since we are up north here, we have to winterize the pump stations and fountains early," said Meeker. "We do all of our chemical applications for snow molds."

LABOR SHORTAGE CHALLENGES

From regulating snow mold to blowing out irrigation systems, there is always plenty to be done when the leaves are changing. With school starting up at the same time, however, all those high school and college kids who helped out during the summer are gone. Indeed, for many superintendents, the biggest obstacle in the fall lies in the decline of manual labor. The maintenance crew at Val Halla GC in Maine, for example, usually falls from 12 to six in the fall, doubling the load for those who remain.

"Our lack of labor when the fall comes around plays a big factor in the daily maintenance of the golf course," said Hodge. "So we have to try to get as much done as we can early on. I do all of the maintenance projects at the end of the summer while I have all my help, and up until Sept. 21 we mow the grasses like crazy. Once the grass stops growing, we start doing any projects on drainage, tee construction, bunker construction, and so forth."

Depending on location, season and individual layout, every superintendent adheres to different tips and techniques that ensure the visual and physical success of their golf course. Hodge faithfully abides by one such tip that he claims has been passed along from other superintendents and works wonders for his course.

"No matter what, I have to get all the debris cleaned up in the fall so that I'll have a better course in the spring," he explained. ■



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