

FERTILIZER

BY JOHN WALSH

## The need to justify

Illinois superintendent chooses a more cost-effective fertilizer

All golf course superintendents can relate to Ron McCarthy. He has to justify what he spends maintaining the 18-hole golf course at the private Edgewood County Club in La Grange, Ill., where he's the golf course superintendent.

As a result, he changed the main fertilizer for his fertility program because he couldn't justify the cost to members. Even though McCarthy has a \$1.2 million budget, he still feels pressure to spend money prudently. As part of the overall budget, McCarthy's line item for fertilizer, which includes some specialty calcium products but doesn't include any pesticides, is between \$75,000 and \$80,000. His annual budget starts in November,

For the first time, Ron McCarthy will use the same time-release fertilizer he uses on the rough, fairways and tees on his greens, too. Photo: Edgewood Country Club





McCarthy dissolves granular time-release fertilizer in water before applying it on the golf course.  
Photo: Edgewood Country Club

which means he puts together his budget for the year at the end of the summer.

Overall, McCarthy believes he receives a decent price for fertilizers. Usually, he sends his query out to bid. As it happened the past two years, he has purchased the majority of his fertilizer from the same distributor because it carries the product he was looking for: UMaxx, a time-release fertilizer he dissolves in water before applying to the turf. McCarthy purchases fertilizers three times a year: in the spring, summer and fall. Edgewood doesn't have the capacity to store a large amount of unused fertilizer, so each time he purchases fertilizer, he already has used what he bought the last time.

Fertilizer is one of many products tied to the price of gas, but McCarthy says he has avoided any significant price hikes last year because of the timing of his purchases. During the past few years, fertilizer prices have increased about five percent year to year, he says. However, since he has been using UMaxx, he has used 20 percent less fertilizer. Before UMaxx, McCarthy was using IBDU fertilizer.

"I haven't changed my habits because of cost, I'm just using a more economical product," he says.

McCarthy has changed his fertility program somewhat, though. He was using the granular IBDU product on the fairways, banks, tees and rough. Then he tried sulfur-coated urea that was dissolved in water but didn't like that. Finally, he tried UMaxx. He first tried it on the clubhouse lawn as a trial for eventual use in the rough area. Then he tried it on fairways and liked it.



"Now we use UMaxx on fairways, roughs and tees, and will try it on the greens this year," he says. "We'll use it on the entire property. UMaxx is the cheapest thing I can find that gives me the color I got when I used IBDU; but I couldn't justify the cost of the IBDU."

McCarthy has been treating the greens differently because he wants total control and didn't want to use a controlled-release fertilizer on them. He's been using an ammonium sulfur product called Nutraculture. He spoon-feeds the greens in the spring and fall right before they're aerified.

"If I can control the release time and get the color I like, I will continue to use UMaxx on the greens," he says.

As for McCarthy's fertility program, he uses granular UMaxx that's dissolved in water. He still gets a control release but not as much as if the fertilizer were applied in granular form. He used to get seven to 10 days with the dissolved urea, but now he gets 14 to 20 days with the dissolved UMaxx, even though he doesn't get the "high kick flush" he used to with IBDU.

In the primary roughs, which encompass 120 acres, McCarthy uses three-quarters of a pound per 1,000 square feet three times a year

at the end of April or beginning of May, the beginning of June and then in mid-August. For fairways and tees, which are on a spray program, he uses one-quarter to one-third of a pound per thousand square feet every two weeks when he starts mowing. And for greens, he uses one-half to one-third of a pound per 1,000 square feet when aerifying in the spring and fall, and one-tenth to one-fifth of a pound every two weeks through June – but not in the heat of summer – and picks it up again in mid-August.

That program – the amounts and the timing – haven't changed in eight years; just the products have changed.

"The changes were primarily because of cost," McCarthy says. "The members want proof they're getting 100 percent of their money's worth. There's a lot of pressure to justify what I do. If things keep going, they might put pressure on us not to fertilize as much."

Yet members understand brown turf doesn't necessarily mean poor playing conditions, McCarthy says.

"They want the best of both worlds: lush green turf and fast and firm turf," he says.

Sound familiar? **GCI**