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WHAT TO LIKE ABOUT AUGUSTA NATIONAL

Augusta National gets a bad rap. Not from the general public, which would give its right golf ball to play there or just walk its hallowed ground for a day, and not from most of the pros, who fall over themselves to praise the club and course for their history and tradition.

But among superintendents and others in the maintenance profession, Augusta is held up as the ultimate bad guy for its dedication to creating deep-green carpets of fairway, super-slick greens, ornately flowering surroundings, and other intentions to perfection. I've had numerous people in our industry come up to me and start bad-mouthing Augusta.

Well, I've got news for you. I'm an Augusta fan. I drink the green Kool-Aid – which isn't to say that I don't note some shortcomings. And I sympathize with my brethren who have to answer the same question from their members every spring: "Why can't we be like Augusta?" It's unrealistic for almost any other course in the world to aspire to that look, and certainly not if the members aren't willing to invest millions of dollars.

So what do I love about Augusta National and The Masters? Let me count the ways...

Among its general qualities: The tournament is held at the perfect time of year; it's an invitational that requires exceptional play (usually including a victory) to get in; the club gives a lot of money to charity; the par-3 tournament is not only fun but shows that short courses still have a purpose and that when all is said and done, there is no doubt that the tournament will have identified the best player that week.

But let's dig a little deeper, delving into the agronomic aspects of Augusta National, things that most golfers – and even many people in the industry – don't know and therefore don't appreciate.

Yes, we can all see that Augusta National is an agronomic Disneyland, with no stone left unturned in pursuit of creating the perfect playing field for golf. The staff's attention to detail is unprecedented, which not only results in the beautiful course we see but continually raises the bar for all involved.

I think the course set-up is second to none, and remains that way year after year. Can you think of another course that has been so flexible about changing to match the evolving level of players' abilities? You might not agree with all of the alterations, but how many other courses have even tried

to accommodate the new equipment and fitness standards of the world's finest golfers?

Changes aren't only made to fit the players. Also taken into consideration are the "patrons," keeping in mind that they, and the millions of viewers, want to see every inch of the course.

The club keeps reams of information on the course from year to year, assuring that hole locations are nearly identical to where they were in the past, which adds to everyone's enjoyment. They're just as meticulous about maintaining green speeds -- and by not making those speed ratings public, they perform a real service to course superintendents everywhere. Another point about Augusta's greens: The speeds are allowed to vary green to green based on surface slope and incoming shot values and other options: Nothing is cookie-cutter at Augusta.

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The course also has been something of a living laboratory for turf grass research over the years, aiding breeding efforts of Penn A & G by Dr. Joe Duich of Penn State. Augusta was also one of the first to install internal drainage and water-removal systems as well as sub-surface heating and cooling devices. Plus, the club has been at the forefront in energy savings, GPS-controlled pesticide application, turf grass internship programs and proper pesticide storage and removal practices.

Furthermore, I can't think of another club that has done as much to advance both the image and the profession of the superintendent, building a maintenance facility with all the bells and whistles of agronomics, ergonomics and environmental safety. How many maintenance buildings do you know of with a real reception area? The club understands and appreciates what its maintenance staff does. And they also support it with a healthy budget.

What I love most about Augusta is how all of these actions, when taken together, create an atmosphere of respect and proper behavior that extends to everyone: patrons, players, the media, club members and employees.

And by limiting commercials, I get to see more golf – and usually better golf – than at any other event during the year. **GCI**