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## ART OR SCIENCE?

Has science killed the art of growing grass?

Is science taking the art out of growing quality turf grass?

I've been mulling that question as my travels have made it obvious that superintendents are relying more and more on data, research, and high-technology while losing the feel and connection to the golf course.

Being somewhat old fashioned — I came of age in the white shoe, hard-collar, plaid-pants era — I'm concerned that the next generation of superintendents doesn't know the art of greenkeeping. They are so wrapped up in the bells and whistles, so glued to their screens, that they neglect to look up (and down) and are unable to take in, touch and feel the very real world around them.

Please don't think that I'm anti-science, some sort of technophobe who wants to return to sheep as mowers and the wind as seed-spreader. There was science when I was starting out in the business. But it wasn't nearly as developed or all-encompassing, and as a result we were forced to view our golf courses from a true "grassroots" perspective. My most important tools 30 years ago were a soil probe, a knife and pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses.

Yes, there are more and better tools available today, without question. However, I strongly suggest that superintendents and others who want to succeed need to learn how to manage by touch as well as by tech, and have a real feel for the environment rather than automatically referencing a computerized graph or a smartphone app to explain where, when and how to apply water or chemicals.

Because only with this feel can you make the best use of the tools and technologies available.

One of golf's fundamental tenets

is that it's a touchy-feely business and sport: Architects and builders touch the ground, feel the dirt; superintendents have a close relationship with the turf; and golf professionals place their hands on the shoulders of students when teaching the game. Science has made many inroads the last few years, from equipment technology to apparel that wicks and warms, GPS devices and lightweight shoes.

But as always throughout history

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— not just golf history but world history — even the most dramatic breakthroughs in science only work as adjuncts to our human senses.

I asked a number of prominent people in our business their thoughts on the art vs. science debate to see if my view made sense. I received a range of responses. A noted superintendent in my age bracket echoed my sentiments when he asked, “Are these young guys looking at their golf courses and knowing what they are seeing? Are they really thinking about what is in the best interest of their golf course?”

Another looked at the landscape of our industry today and said, “Science versus art is actually a trick question because you need both. But if I had to pick one, I would take science over art because it's nice to have paint on a ripped canvas.”

I agree that we need both, and I see the logic — if not quite agreeing — with placing science first. But the

fault in that logic is that you can only put science first if you also understand and have art in your arsenal. I'm worried that art has all but disappeared. Echoing an argument often used when talking about how golf is played, I'm fine with the new equipment until it takes the golfer's skill out of the game.

When I was moving up in the industry three decades ago, the practice of agronomy varied with each super-

intendent, who practiced his trade any way he wanted. The science was new and not very widespread, so each superintendent made his course as a personal laboratory. Today, with the science blanketing the industry, we're all doing the same thing pretty much the same way, often without regard to whether it's right for our courses.

Talking early one morning to a very successful superintendent, I asked what his game plan was for the day ahead. His answer sums up my feelings exactly: “I don't know,” he said. “I need to walk around and see what my golf course needs.”

Is that your first thought every day? It should be.

Here are some thoughts from others in our business regarding art vs. science.

From a prominent turfgrass management Ph.D.: “Golf turf management has evolved over the past

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On many days, staff outnumbers players. Like some U.S. clubs, they are run by smart business executives who meet budgets at work, but overspend on their club. Chinese are known to be practical, so how long will that trend continue? As you can tell, I wish they would learn some of lessons more quickly.

This is the first time a country is undertaking new golf development based on the U.S. golf model, which has evolved from its Scottish roots over the last 120 years. Some worry that there is too much disconnect from golf's origins and roots in the U.S. model. In my opinion, golf's adaptability to different climates and cultures proves that the essence of the game remains powerful enough to thrive and endure as strongly in the next 500 years, as it has in the last 500. Overall, golf will thrive in China, and they will be good stewards of the game's many traditions, even while adapting them to their unique conditions. **GCI**

three decades from a discipline where success was often dependent on art and experience to one where new, young superintendents are better trained in the sciences and quickly embrace technological advances. As such, the discipline has moved to a much more science-based effort. Of course, golf course supers are also required now to be much more well-rounded in communications, personnel management, and business skills to be successful."

From a soil physicist: "Science and technology will never replace the real masters and artisans. Rather, we're talking art, or a natural world that just to happens to be labeled 'golf course.' It's unfortunate more golf course superintendents don't understand their role or have the passion to understand the artisan's role in these natural settings. In my mind, it's a natural palette of bio-mass that has been refined and in many cases,

a lot like a work of art."

A turf grass specialist: "For most modern-day superintendents, it is mostly science. But, when you get to the best conditions and the best superintendents, it becomes more of an art."

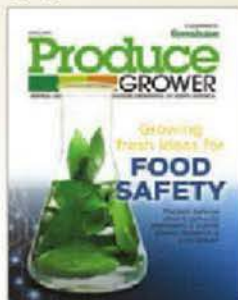
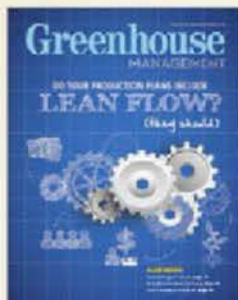
In all of those quotations, even the ones that give a nod to science, it is the ability to understand the artistic side that separates the best from the rest. Even if art is knowing how to evaluate the science and choose what's best for your course.

I've used this column for years to advocate more out-of-the-box thinking in agronomy. I fear that a science-only approach puts us back in the box, a box that is now a computer or a smartphone.

Learn the science, use the science. But never forget that at its best, agronomy is first and foremost an art because every golf course – like every other masterpiece – is unique. **GCI**

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