

Short will be the days of the man who doesn't know which way the wind blows. Successful golf course owners/operators know this and realize listening to customers is the way to give them the product they want.

It might come as a surprise to the average golfer, but what he thinks directly influences golf course owners, who know customers vote with their feet, especially at public venues, and pay the bills.

Owners have developed formal and informal ways of listening to their customers. Surveys, focus groups and suggestion cards are dovetailed with simply talking to golfers and employees and appreciating what they say.

ClubCorp has several devices to listen to golfers. Of the company's 160 properties, 95 are golf and country clubs, and the majority of them are private. It's much easier to hear what private club members are saying, says executive vice president of membership Frank Gore.

"Our members are more forthcoming about what they think because they feel ownership," Gore says. "It's part of our strategy to get the members to feel that way."

ClubCorp conducts an electronic member survey asking questions about the facilities and programming at each of the clubs. The survey provides an open response spot that allows members to write whatever they want. Gore says the company receives a high return from the survey.

Each private club ClubCorp operates has a board of governors that consists of members representing different categories – men, women and ethnic groups. They meet as often as once a month but no less than once a quarter. ClubCorp receives a lot of feedback from these groups. Each club also has a minimum of a membership and social committee, from which more ideas are generated.

"They give us the majority of the feedback on programming and amenities," Gore says.

When considering making physical changes to a property, ClubCorp puts together focus groups for ideas. The top request from members is for expanded athletic facilities.

"Thirty years ago, no one asked for that," Gore says. "Back then, the top request was for a men's-only area. Now we get very few requests for that."

The second most popular request is for a

larger, family-oriented casual dining space.

"The grill is too small, and the formal dining room is too big," Gore says. "Thirty years ago it was the opposite."

These member wishes have caused ClubCorp to systematically install athletic components and casual dining at many of its properties during the past four years. The third most requested item is a men's and women's adult area.

"We've been doing a wine bar and some dining," Gore says. "It's a casual space that's separate from the kids."

But not every request can be met quickly.

"Some of this must be done by evolution not revolution," Gore says. "The older members and younger members want different things, so you have to take care of both sides of the equation."

ClubCorp also is beefing up its activity offerings. Aside from golf, tennis and swimming lessons, people want cooking classes and other things they can do as a family because their time is precious, Gore says.

WHAT THEY WANT

At its eight public courses, ClubCorp collects e-mail addresses from customers and contacts a small sampling, asking about the experience and how can it improve.

"Daily fee is pay for play, so if your product isn't right, you find that out pretty quickly," Gore says. "You hope you have employees that are sensitive to the customer. You hear what people like and don't like. Observation is probably the best way to find out what's going on."

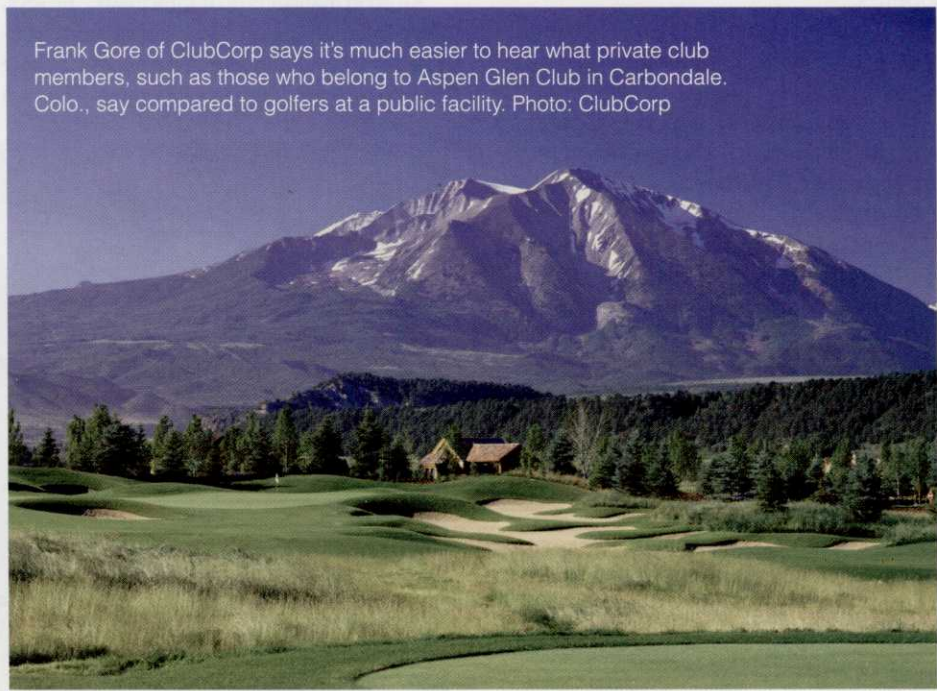
Dick Schulz knows exactly what Gore is talking about. The owner of The Oaks Course, a semiprivate facility in Covington, Ga., Schulz has had his ear to the ground since he bought the property in 1989.

"I listen to customers regularly," he says. "Our staff constantly listens. The food-and-beverage manager, the head pro and the superintendent meet with me once a week to talk about what we heard that week, positive or negative. It doesn't matter what situation you're in – public, semiprivate or private – the man who turns a deaf ear to a customer has lost his mind. Leisure time is dissipating, and people are choosy about how they spend it."

Schulz renovated nine holes and added nine new ones at the request of customers. He installed all new greens in 2005, and now his customers want more putting speed.

"They see it on TV," he says. "Some of them are probably sad they asked."

Schulz has changed mowing patterns and converted a par-4 hole into a par-5 because that's



Frank Gore of ClubCorp says it's much easier to hear what private club members, such as those who belong to Aspen Glen Club in Carbondale, Colo., say compared to golfers at a public facility. Photo: ClubCorp



what his customers wanted.

"We surveyed the membership, and the No. 1 thing they wanted was to change that hole," he says.

Schulz started having members-only dinners on Tuesday nights, and he's considering spreading out his tee times to 12 minutes instead of 10 because of overcrowding complaints on Saturday mornings.

"That has an impact on the number of golfers we get out, but it improves the experience," he says.

Other amenities, such as complimentary towels for members and a bottle of water on the cart when they start, improve the experience as well.

"It's just listening, day in and day out," Schulz says. "Some of it's hard to listen to, some of it's easy."

LISTEN CAREFULLY

An owner or operator must listen to customers, says Jim Hinckley, c.e.o. of Century Golf Partners/Arnold Palmer Golf Management in Addison, Texas. The company has 23 private facilities and 25 public ones.

Owner Gary Wilkins believes it's easier to implement change at a public course compared to a private one. Photo: Eagle Creek Golf Club

"It's different for public and private facilities," he says. "With private facilities, you have a regular customer base, and it's much easier. We have active committees along with the board of governors. The members give us great input."

Many people in the industry track customer input at public golf courses differently, Hinckley says.

"All good managers do it informally," he says. "They listen to employees. We'll survey a sampling of our customers, check the e-mail database and find the issues important to them. Then we

Jan Holt of Atlantic Golf says it was risky to add forecaddies at a course in Queenstown Harbor, Md., but in a saturated market, a course needs to separate from the crowd. Photo: The Brick Cos.

do a forced ranking of top-10 factors that have meaning to the customers."

By polling customers, Hinckley can ascertain the factors that motivate customers to play again.

"We're able to arrange our programming around that," he says.

But not everyone agrees it's easier to obtain customer feedback at private clubs. At Eagle Creek Golf Club in Norwalk, Ohio, co-owner Gary Wilkins works at the daily-fee course every day. Wilkins asks his customers to fill out surveys and gleans ideas from them.

"It definitely affects what we do," he says.

Wilkins believes it's easier to implement change at a public course compared to a private one.

"I just decide it, and we do it," he says. "We don't have meetings with the green committee. There aren't the layers of red tape that come with a private golf course."

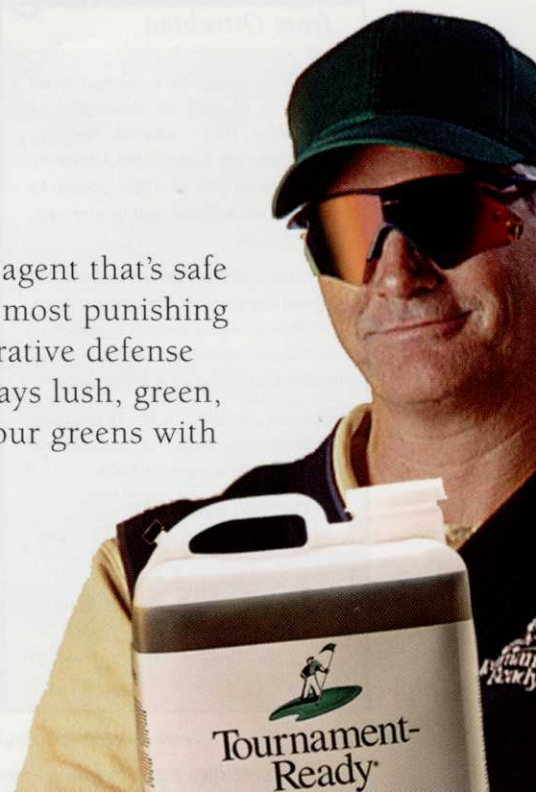
To indicate hole locations on greens, Wilkins used to have yellow flags for the front, white for the middle and yellow-black for the back.

"Some people couldn't see them and asked for red, white and blue, so we changed to those colors," he says. "Unfortunately, you can't see the





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blue flags, so we'll need to tinker with that."

But while Wilkins listens carefully to his customers, not every request can be honored. "Sometimes they make a suggestion, and they don't understand what's going on," he says. "It doesn't make sense for the course. If we think it's going to be good for the majority, we'll definitely consider it, though."

RECURRING COMMENTS

The Canadian Golf & Country Club in Ashton, Ontario, hosts a bunch of corporate outings and regular public play. But owner and general manager Mark Seabrook doesn't poll the club's 175 annual members or players formally. A couple of years ago, the club ran a few focus groups.

"It was effective but very costly because we did it by third party," Seabrook says. "We received good comments but almost the same comments we've gotten on our own."

When Seabrook or his staff hear the same

comment from more than one golfer, it's put on his task bar.

"As they gain momentum with more people talking about these items, we take a handful of items and show them to our regular members and others and see what they think," he says. "If there's a topic that gets thrown out, say a fairway widened in a certain spot, the reality is there are quite a few groups you can focus on quickly. People like tournament organizers, league golfers, regular members – it doesn't take long to get a cross section of individuals."

For instance, Seabrook has received requests for faster greens, so next year, one of his budget items will be devoted to greens rollers.

Seabrook believes a key to worthwhile customer feedback is in the way questions are asked.

"We try to phrase questions so we don't lead them to a certain answer," he says. "We would say, 'If there were any widening to do, where would you do it?'"

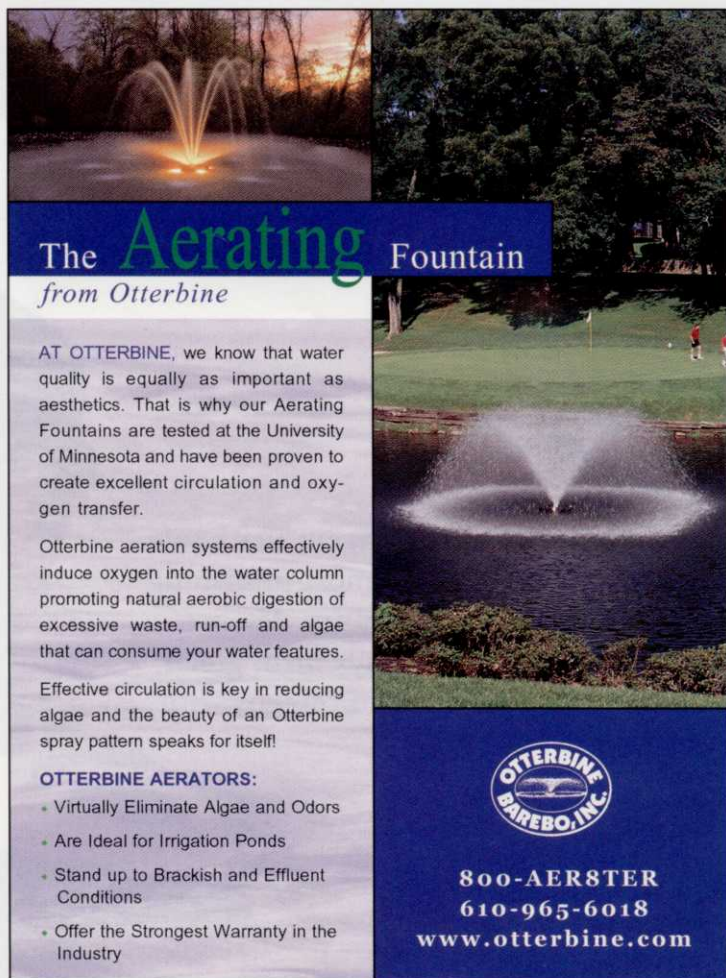
Seabrook also relies heavily on feedback from his staff.

"It's a clientele that you really didn't think about," he says. "But if they're happy, that's good. After a few weeks of hard work, I find it's good to buy a few drinks for a staff member and ask them what they'd change. You get some really good comments quickly. And when those start to copy what we're hearing from the golfers, then that's when something starts to happen."

CUSTOMER-DRIVEN DECISIONS

It's not so easy for all owners to obtain customer or member feedback. Those with more than one course will usually find it easier to cut through red tape. It goes hand in hand with the structure of a corporation. For instance, Edgewater, Md.-based The Brick Companies has a golf division, Atlantic Golf, which is finely layered. It owns and operates three different properties.

"Our owners are directly involved," says Jan



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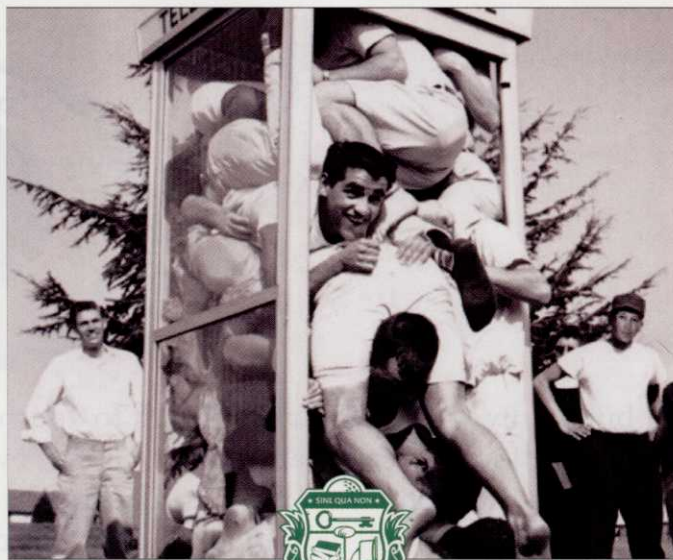
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Holt, chief marketing officer. "We have a leadership team, and we all do everything together in the same building and meet biweekly. We talk about these things. Then we make a decision."

Holt depends on general managers and superintendents as part of the information gathering process.

"I run it past all of them," she says. "If they aren't on board, it's not going to work."

The company constantly is defining market demands.

"We feel strongly to give people what they want, not what we want," Holt says. "They wanted Nike apparel, we got Nike apparel. We added forecaddies at our course in Queenstown, Md. It was a risk, but in a saturated market, you have to separate yourself."

Atlantic Golf surveys golfers daily as they leave the course. If there's a problem, the general manager should handle it on the spot. It also conducts an annual survey of customers who are Players

Card (a loyalty program) holders and receives about 1,500 responses.

"We try to capture every bit of information we can," Holt says.

Players asked for better practice facilities, so Atlantic Golf built them. Customers wanted the golf course maintenance practices to be more green, so they use chicken scat as fertilizer. Atlantic Golf also recycles and uses rain barrels and testing wells.

"Environmentally, we started before the green movement came, and now everyone's on board," Holt says. "We listen. Our Web site has a million places for customers to give their suggestions. We collect them. They don't get dumped."

THE REAL BOSS

Ralph Stading, owner of the Lewis River Golf Course in Woodland, Wash., has a fine ear for customers' ideas, too.

"After you've been around the business for

a substantial time, you realize golfers are your real boss," says Stading, a second-generation golf course owner. "Some poll their customers as a fine art, and others listen to the cash register. We try not to wait until someone decided to leave before we change what's happening."

Simply talking to customers is Stading's best chance to learn, he says, and he knows a trick of the trade.

"I ask if they heard of someone with a problem," he says. "They'll respond to that in a more neutral way than if you ask them directly if they have the problem."

Like many other owners, Stading knows which way the wind blows.

"The customers pay the bills, ultimately," he says. **GCI**

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BY STEVE AND SUZ TRUSTY

WATER WORLD

BUDGETS,
LABOR AND
ENVIRONMENTAL
ISSUES SHAPE
AQUATIC HERBICIDE
MANAGEMENT
PROGRAMS

Managed well, ponds add to the aesthetic quality of a golf course, provide drainage basins and support irrigation. Water features often add sound and movement, cool the surroundings and provide a haven for wildlife. Last but not least, ponds might come into play, adding another challenging dimension for golfers.

On the other hand, ponds invaded by weeds and algae detract from the golfing experience and affect golfers' perceptions of course quality. Yet the nature of water features adds to the likelihood of weed encroachment. Ponds are usually small and shallow, allowing sunlight to penetrate, creating warm water that encourages weed growth.

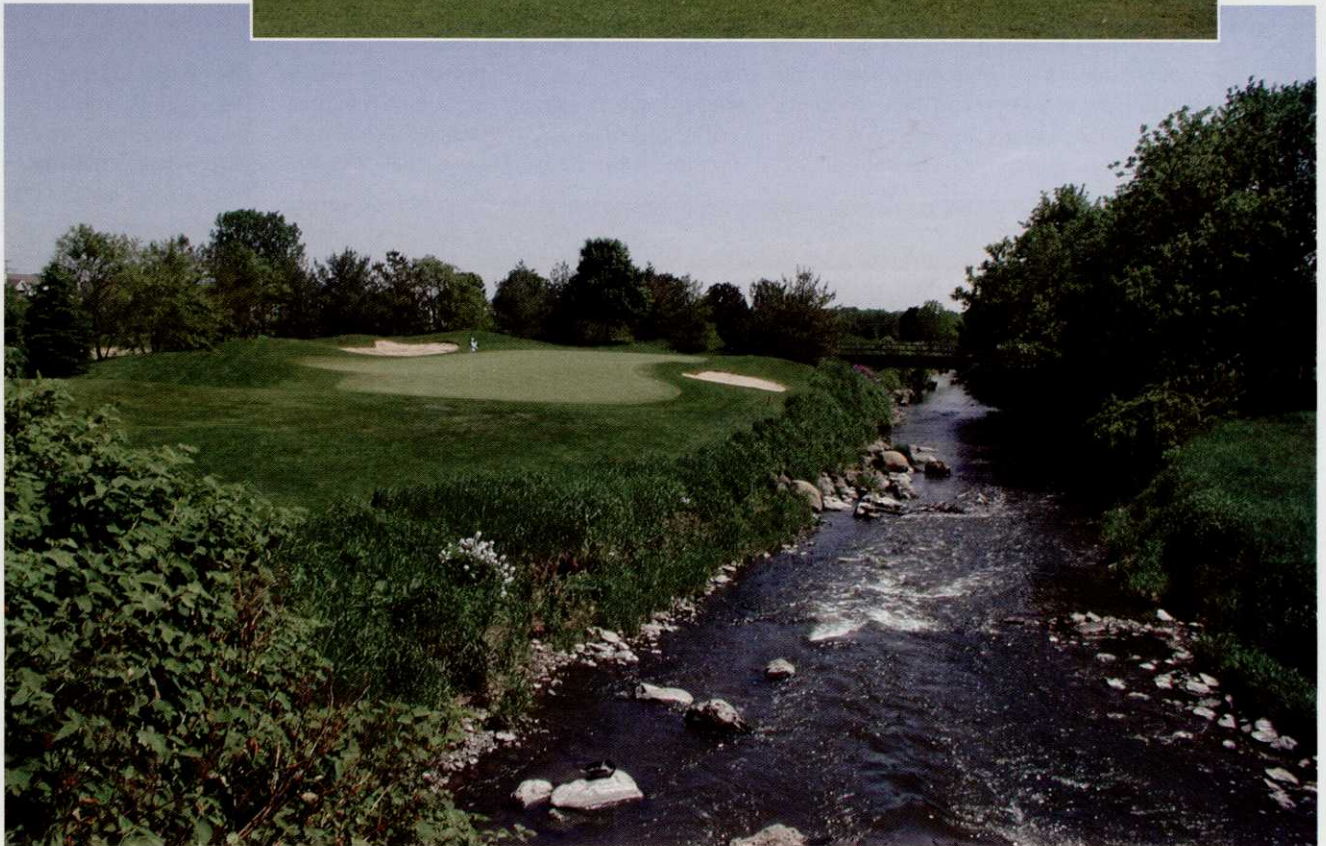
The basics of pond management could be covered in a 101-level class (see info box on page 58). Yet each pond is essentially its own complex environment. Savvy superintendents combine the basics of pond management with observation, planning and implementation to fit the unique needs of their courses. A management program needs to be effective for the type of aquatic weeds and algae and be workable within the limitations of budget and labor availability. It also must be in compliance with governmental regulations from the local to national level.

DUCKWEED AND FILAMENTOUS ALGAE

At Milburn Golf and Country Club, an 18-hole championship course in Overland Park, Kan., there are two ponds – one is an acre, the other an acre and a half – that Bill Maynard, CGCS, and assistant superintendent Danny Huntsinger manage. Each pond is equipped with a two-horsepower pump and fountain for continuous water movement, which is one of the preventive components of their weed and algae management. Another is the buffer zone of turf-type tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrasses that surrounds both ponds. The width of the buffer zone varies but averages about 14 feet. For the area of the buffer zone that's in play, the crew uses string trimmers to maintain the height at 3.5 to 4 inches.

Duckweed and filamentous algae have been recurring problems with pond maintenance at Mulburn Golf and Country Club (right). Each requires a different product to manage. Photo: Milburn Golf and Country Club

At Seven Bridges Golf Club (below), the only problem with pond maintenance is surface algae along the shoreline when rainfall is inadequate. It's treated with copper sulfate. Photo: Seven Bridges Golf Club



“The aesthetics at that height fit the park-like look of our course,” Huntsinger says.

Maynard and Huntsinger also have a border collie to help rid the course of geese.

“Keeping that population away reduces the nitrogen levels in the ponds,” Maynard says. “We can tell through scouting when the ponds will start to act up based on temperature levels and the degree of sunlight each receives.

“Duckweed and filamentous algae have been recurring problems,” he adds. “We use a liquid aquatic herbicide (Reward) for the duckweed and pelletized copper sulfate for the algae. We plan the timing of applications primarily for prevention, making the first application just as active growth becomes visible in July and the second in August.”

Though Maynard and Huntsinger hold all pertinent pesticide application licenses, there are no special aquatic licenses required in Kansas, and the control products they use aren't restricted-use pesticides. Still, one of the two makes or supervises the applications, which are made from the banks of the ponds using a handheld sprayer. Both ponds can be treated in about 45 minutes – five minutes travel time and 20 minutes at each pond. The product costs about \$1,500 for a year's supply.

Additionally, Maynard and Huntsinger are planning to add a black dye application to their preventive program.

“Area superintendents are reporting good results with Black Oynx and LochNess,” Maynard says. “The darker water reduces the photosynthesis, thus limiting vegetative growth. Though black dye doesn't sound too pleasing aesthetically, it actually produces an almost mirror-like effect, reflecting the sky.”

ALGAE AND SHORELINE WEEDS

The 18-hole Leavenworth Country Club in Lansing, Kan., has two ponds – one is bigger than four acres, the other is about one acre – and neither is used for irrigation. Buffer zones consisting of a turf-type tall fescue base overseeded with wildflowers surround the ponds and range from 5-feet to 150-feet wide. The narrower sections of the buffer zones are cut to an 8- to 10-inch height with string trimmers, making it a playable rough. The wider areas are out of play.

“We allowed the widest section to naturalize as part of a budget cut, converting it to a no-mow zone to reduce operating costs,” says superintendent Mike Boaz. “We spot spray any noxious weeds, such as thistle, within the buffer areas but do little else maintenance-wise. It's become

a haven for wildlife. It also serves as a filter because water flows from the course through the buffer zone, is channeled into the main pond first, then into the smaller one.”

Triploid grass carp serve as a biological control agent for the submerged aquatic weeds. There were some carp in the ponds when Boaz started working at the course eight years ago. Since then, he's introduced between two and three dozen small grass carp each year.

“Despite those preventive measures, we've had an ongoing problem with algae that we've needed to control aggressively. We've also had to control shoreline weeds.”

Boaz, a certified pesticide applicator, treats the algae and weeds with Cutrine and Reward mixed together for surface applications using a 25-gallon electric sprayer. He uses a small, hand-paddled rowboat to work across the ponds, then travels around the shoreline to treat the weeds. Two individuals are needed in the boat, one to row and one to operate the sprayer. Boaz supervises those making the applications, each of which takes three hours from start to finish.

Previously, Boaz allowed some of the shoreline weeds to remain in the shallowest areas to lessen a more pressing problem – algae.

“In years past, we needed to treat every three to five weeks, depending on the water flow in the ponds,” he says. “This year, we began our attack earlier, making the first application in the spring just as pond temperatures warmed to the point of triggering growth. We followed with a second application about three weeks later. Despite erratic rainfall, we haven't had to treat again. It appears we've knocked the algae down enough so there's no incubation population sufficient to reestablish.”

The savings are significant, Boaz says. The aquatic products had been equaling about 25 percent of his total chemical budget – between \$7,000 to \$9,000 a year. This year, it's about \$2,000.

MITIGATED WETLANDS

The 18-hole Seven Bridges Golf Club in Woodridge, Ill., borders the Green Valley Forest Preserve and the east branch of the DuPage River. The club's course features a tributary creek, a lake and three ponds. The entire water surface is equivalent to 32 acres. The course serves as a storm water management system for the village, releasing controlled amounts of water into the

Resources for aquatic herbicide management

- Internet resources can provide information about everything from the basics of balancing the pond environment to the identification of specific aquatic plants and algae to the details specific herbicides.

- The USDA National Invasive Species Information Center includes an Aquatic Species section: www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/aquatics/main.shtml.

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Aquatic Plant Information site provides aquatic-plant specific information: <http://el.erdc.usace.army.mil/aqua/apis/apishelp.htm>.

- Invasive Plant Management in Florida Waters contains a section about aquatic herbicide control: <http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/guide/herbcons.html>.

- Washington State Department of Ecology's Aquatic Plants, Algae & Lakes covers aquatic plant identification and management:

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/links/plants.html>.

- AquaPlant from the Texas Cooperative Extension Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences at Texas A & M University offers aquatic plant and algae identification by common name and a visual identification: <http://aquaplant.tamu.edu/database/index.htm>.

Editor's note: Part of an aquatic herbicide management program must include a review of the current regulations issued by governing agencies at the national, regional, state and local levels. Don't assume all Internet postings are up-to-date.



Some of the ponds at Thunder Hill Golf Club are deep enough and have enough slope on the edges to reduce aquatic weed encroachment. Photo: Thunder Hill Golf Club

river downstream.

“Our ponds are mitigated wetlands,” says Don Ferreri, superintendent and manager of the course. “We worked closely with the Army Corps of Engineers from the design concept through construction. We embellished a couple of the ponds, relocating the fish temporarily and then reintroducing them.”

The buffer zones surrounding the ponds included in the original design meet Clean Water Act regulations. The zones are a combination of tall fescues and wildflowers. More wildflowers have been reintroduced periodically to keep variety in color and texture. The buffer zones add a challenge for golfers and beautify the setting.

“It certainly enhances our wildlife, attracting land and aquatic creatures,” Ferreri says. “We’ve had an Audubon connection from the beginning and have completed four of the six steps for certification.”

The original design was planned to keep the ponds in balance, and it’s working, Ferreri says.

“We have very low maintenance in the aquatic area,” he says. “The only problem we’ve had is some surface algae along the shoreline when rainfall has been inadequate. We’ve treated that

with copper sulfate in a granular form broadcast from the shoreline.”

Ferreri is a licensed pesticide applicator. Any applications are made under his supervision.

A FISH HATCHERY

One golf facility that has more ponds on its course than most is the 18-hole Thunder Hill Golf Club in Madison, Ohio. It has 67 ponds, partly because the property was used as a fish hatchery before it opened as a golf course in 1976. More than half of the ponds still are being used as a fish hatchery. The course stretches across 200 acres, including about 50 acres of ponds. About 20 of the ponds are tied together to feed the course’s irrigation system.

“Some of our watershed flows into the Grand River Basin, but we haven’t had any issues with regulations or restrictions because of the attention paid to maintaining balance within the aquatic environment,” says Todd Bishop, CGCS, PGA, who serves as the general manager and director of golf operations.

The fish hatchery ponds are leased to Jeff McKinney, who manages them and works closely with golf course superintendent James Rensel on the overall management program to

ensure nothing jeopardizes the water quality or fish population.

The ponds are deep enough and have enough slope on the edges to reduce aquatic weed encroachment. Several of the ponds also have white amur (grass carp) that feed on submerged vegetation. Buffer zones around the ponds vary in width from 10 to 40 feet. The buffer zones started with a fescue base that has become naturalized gradually.

The only herbicide needed to date has been Reward. It’s applied only as needed as a spot application using a hand sprayer or a wicking tool. An application is made in late spring as temperatures warm. A second spot treatment might be needed in late summer.

“Our two licensed pesticide applicators are trained in aquatics and know which weeds to target,” Bishop says. “Because of the number of ponds, the process is time consuming, requiring around 40 hours for each application. The product cost is about \$500 per application.” **GCI**

Steve and Suz Trusty are freelance writers based in Council Bluffs, Iowa. They can be reached at suz@trusty.bz.

BUILDING ISSUES

GCBAA members discuss the impact of poor water quality and appropriate budgeting on construction

Editor's note: During the annual summer meeting of the Golf Course Builders Association of America, which was in Monterey, Calif., this year, Golf Course Industry hosted a roundtable with six GCBAA members to discuss the golf course development industry. Participants were Glenn Caverly, president of Golf Course Construction in Howell, Mich.; Bob Bryant, president of Bryant Taylor Gordon Golf in Costa Mesa, Calif.;

Oscar Rodriguez, vice president of Weitz Golf International in Temecula, Calif.; Klaus Ahlers, golf sales manager with Colton, Calif.-based Leemco; Wayne Massey, president of Medalist Golf in Cumming, Ga.; and Willie Slingerland, sales manager for Dallas-based Flowtronex. The following is an excerpt from the discussion.

GCI: Describe your main challenge in the current environment and what you're doing to overcome that.

CAVERLY: Our biggest hurdles today are environmental permits and getting paid for projects.

GCI: Is there anything you can control about either of those?

CAVERLY: No. I wish we could. Bureaucrats are becoming tougher about regulations. We've been on jobs that take as long as five years to receive permits. We've conducted studies in the past, and maybe we need to redistribute those to the environmentalists to let them know how