

Embracing the Environment



CHARLIE PASSIOS

"It's a great job. There's more here than most superintendents will experience in their careers."

Continued from page 23

— but that they need help with the plans," he notes.

Stone says water management is another area where superintendents, especially in Florida, need assistance. He says Florida is running short on water, and golf courses there will soon have to cut back their usage. He says he can help them determine watering priorities and water-quality management planning.

Davis has also found time to consult, as well as write articles and narrate videos on golf and the environment. "Environmentalism is a selling tool," he says in reference to securing the extra work.

But superintendents had better be well-informed in the subject if they're trying to market themselves as environmental authorities to move up in their careers. Passios warns that superintendents who are winging it will get burned in the end. He says some superintendents who claim they are environmental authorities often end up misrepresenting and embarrassing themselves.

"They leave themselves exposed and it backfires on them," he says.

Nancy Sadlon, executive director of the Alliance for Environmental Concerns, says superintendents need to keep abreast of regional environmental issues if they want to be authorities. "Different regions have different hot spots," she adds.

Environmental consulting is the rage, but Carlson is not worried that the field will become crowded with pretenders. "If you have a passion about what you do and you work hard and do a good job, you'll find plenty of work."

While they are recognized for their environmental convictions, Carlson and the others are realists. Their slogan is not "organic or bust."

"I'm not on a kick to eliminate pesticides," Davis says, stressing that a superintendent's No. 1 duty is "growing great grass" to appease a course's customers. "Pesticides are safe and effective when applied according to label directions."

Passios is irked at environmentally fervent superintendents who declare that all-organic is the only approach to turfgrass management, yet their golf courses

Doing the Right Thing

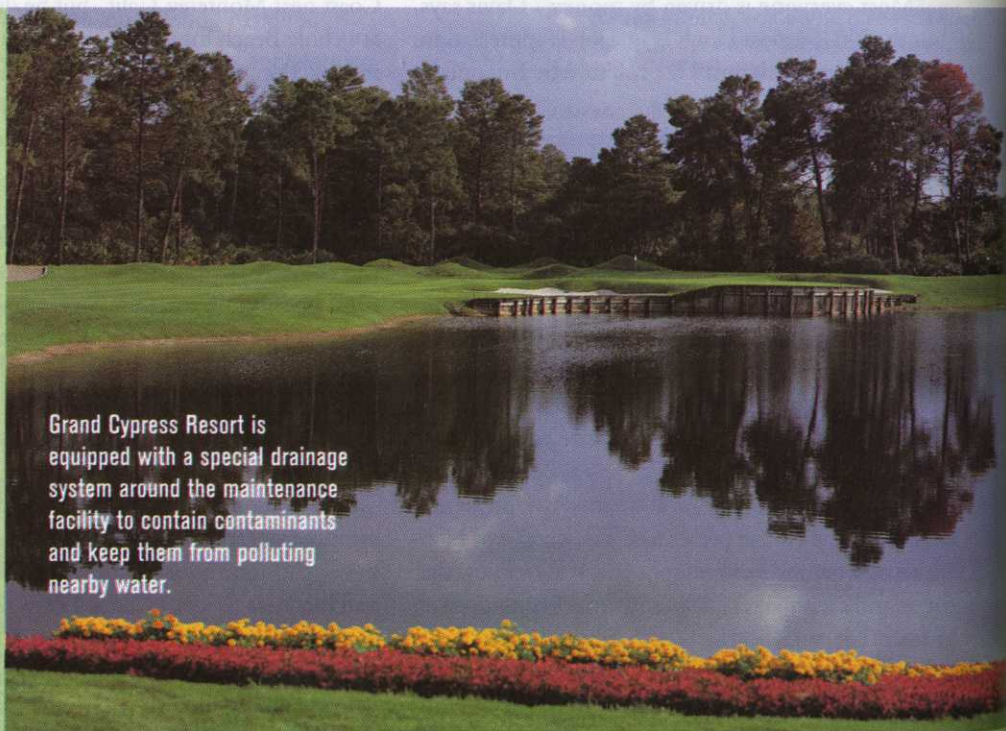
By Larry Aylward

They say that Tom Alex runs a model maintenance facility when it comes to environmental awareness. Alex appreciates the plaudit, but the director of golf course maintenance at Orlando's Grand Cypress Resort didn't become an environmentalist to earn praise from his peers.

"It's the right thing to do," Alex says humbly when asked about his tidy reputation. "I have two children, I live on a lake, and I'm an outdoorsman. I'm genuinely concerned about the environment."

Alex says he has always been on nature's side, but a few incidents that happened several years ago spurred him to take golf course environmentalism to a level that might even make Rachel Carson proud.

In 1988, a representative from Florida's Department of Agricultural Services stopped by Grand Cypress for an inspection and discovered fungicide residue in soil that was off limits to chem-



Grand Cypress Resort is equipped with a special drainage system around the maintenance facility to contain contaminants and keep them from polluting nearby water.

icals. Alex was angry. He knew a strong rain could have washed the residue into a nearby creek.

"The residue shouldn't have been there," Alex maintains, explaining that a worker had mistakenly discarded the fungicide from a sprayer.

The other incident occurred in 1991 when Grand Cypress spent nearly \$100,000 to repair

underground storage tanks that were leaking diesel fuel. "We took out about 2,000 tons of contaminated material," Alex says.

Both mishaps were accidents, but that didn't stop Alex from stepping up his environmental approach through education and action. As part of the process, Alex constructed a drainage system

resemble unkempt city parks. "That's selling the wrong picture," he adds.

Onward, upward

Carlson, 50, eventually wants to leverage his experience and environmental knowledge into owning a golf course similar to Widow's Walk, regarded as the nation's first environmental demonstration project.

Carlson attempted to purchase Widow's Walk earlier this year but was underbid by a local management company. "It was disappointing, but such things happen for a reason. I've kept busy with the consulting, and I've worked on some good projects," he says.

Forty-one-year-old Passios, 42-year-old Stone and 55-year-old Horton say they are content in their current positions. But that doesn't mean they're not thinking about the future.

"Do you have a crystal ball?" Passios asks.

Quimbey's goal is to keep quality superintendents who are environmentally informed from leaving for other jobs. The key is to show them your appreciation,

says Quimbey, adding that the average stay of superintendents at ClubCorp courses has been about 17 years since the company began 42 years ago.

"If I received recognition and credit for my contributions, I wouldn't want to leave," Quimbey says.

Davis knows that feeling, but he still believes he owes it to himself to re-evaluate his career goals. The 32-year-old has been at Olde Florida for seven years in his first stint as a superintendent and is regarded as one of golf's top young superintendents.

And because he's passionate and knowing about the environment, he's as marketable as Star Wars movie merchandise.

"If you're up to date on the environment, you become a more desirable employee," Davis says. ■

It ain't easy being green but it's worth the pain, says columnist Joel Jackson. See page 40.

Golf has experienced an improbable green conversion, says publisher/editor Pat Jones. See page 46



TED HORTON

"I'm absolutely enthralled with the properties we're maintaining."

to negate the possible contamination of nearby streams and wetlands with fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals. The objective of the drainage system is to contain and collect, Alex says.

A closed loop

It's a sunny, cool Florida morning and Alex is conducting a tour of the maintenance facility. He points to a drain located at a pesticide tank filling station and explains that any chemicals spilled during loading will drain into a sump and can be pumped back out and into the tank.

Standing inside the repair shop, he points to another drain bordering the building's open front. He explains that all solvents and oil that drip from repaired equipment are washed into the drain and circulated to an oil-water separator.

A drain in the lapping pad area performs the same function. So does the drain at the cleaning station, where nearly 60 workers wash and wax mowers and other equipment at the end of a working day. The waste water flows through three screens to capture grass clippings and other debris before being pumped.

Alex adds chemicals to the separator to dissolve oil. The water from the separator flows to a sewage treatment plant about a mile away, and is later used to irrigate the course.

"It's all underground piping, and it's a closed

loop," Alex says of the drainage system that he installed with the help of employees skilled in concrete, metal and electrical work. Because he didn't have to hire outside help, construction expenses didn't break the maintenance department's budget, Alex says.

Recycling of tires, batteries, oil filters and chemical drums is also part of Alex's environmental program. "A lot of it is common sense," Alex says. "You don't chuck batteries and oil filters. You don't dump waste oil."

But a lot is based on sound management. For instance, there's the daily mower check when mechanics inspect bed knives and reels. If they can't cut paper, the bed knives must be faced before the mowers are allowed back out on the course. Also, all fast-moving mower parts are replaced every five years. The bottom line: Well-maintained equipment is easy on the environment, Alex believes.

Finding a way

Education, perhaps, is the key to Alex's environmental program. Alex, who has worked in the industry for more than 20 years, recalls the 1970s when heavy-metal pesticides were to golf courses as disco was to dance bars. "We used a lot of it," Alex says of the hazardous chemical. "It wasn't cool, but we didn't know that then."

Most superintendents weren't thinking about

the impact that such chemicals might have on golf courses in 20 years. But today, the future is top of the mind for Alex. "We're looking at the long haul. And if you do that, the environmental side of golf management is a natural fit"

Alex is content with his maintenance facility, even proud. He has given tours to his peers who are interested in adopting similar programs. But he understands that many golf courses don't have the money to overhaul their maintenance facilities. His advice to them is to do like he did: move slowly and implement one corrective step at a time.

Which brings Alex to his last incomplete environmental task. Flies buzz his head when he nears a reeking dumpster packed with decaying grass clippings. He can bear the stink, but he's bothered when nitrates drain out of the dumpster with water after a hard rain.

Alex says it would take four full-time employees and new equipment to implement a grass clipping recycling program. While he's an environmentalist, Alex admits he sometimes has to take off that hat and look at the big picture.

"It's still a lot less expensive to put the grass clippings in a dumpster and have them hauled away," he says, thinking like a businessman.

But he vows to rectify the situation. "It's the last thing I've got to clean up," he says.

He knows it would be the right thing to do. ■