

Unless you simply live with your head in a deep bunker, you must embrace the fact that pesticides and turfgrass aren't looking at a long future as soul mates.

It really isn't like there is some kind of war going on out there, but we now have a brewing debate over two opposing viewpoints. The Organic Crowd says, "Sure, man, we can be all things wonderful if we get off the bad stuff and get on the good stuff." The Chemical Crowd says, "You gotta have chemicals to have high-quality turf."

It's interesting that history is repeating itself here. The opposing viewpoints usually come from someone who is trying to sell you a product. If you're selling compost, you certainly don't align yourself with the petro-chem crowd. You throw rocks at their glass houses — and it's the same on the other side. I'm beginning to tune them all out because the objectivity of the debate has been lost.

Golf course management at the highest level is about *stewardship*. There's another buzzword that's been kicked around too much for my taste. In some cases, there will be situations where some form of limited chemical use may be required or even desired. So the notion of stewardship is really individual effort doing great things. I'm all for that.

The question comes up all the time, as I believe it has through the whole history of managing fine turfgrass: Is it possible to have an organic golf course? The division between organic vs. inorganic isn't as black and white as partisans on both sides would have you think. After all, it's nearly impossible to put a limiting definition on the word "organic."

To some, it means pesticide-free. To others, it means pesticide- and synthetic-chemical free. To yet another crowd, it means you're buying a new product that tells you in the sales literature that "you are being organic."

I can't hold on to any one definition. I've eaten plenty of organic produce and plenty from conventional farming, and the fact is that you can get bad-tasting food from either camp. It's the same for turfgrass. Organic programs and synthetic programs can both yield dead grass. For the transitional course that's

Debate Rages Over Organic Golf

BY DAVE WILBER



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moving toward more sustainable management, however, one little hiccup in appearance causes the voices from the other side to chant about not being able to grow grass without the chemicals.

Stories circulate about facilities here or there that have been organic. Some of them are so labeled because governments insist on it. Some of them earn the label because some superintendent decided to be a rebel. Some get the label from necessity because their budgets don't give them the purchasing power for much more than basics, which are often organic.

I'm lucky enough to get to see all kinds of operations and, label or no label, some courses are doing some really cool stuff. They don't give a hoot about being dragged into some Black Spy vs. White Spy debate about whether they're organic or not.

I keep getting the same phone call and the same e-mail from different people: Can we have pesticide-free golf courses? Of course we can. But will the customer — the all-knowing golfer who follows golf on the Internet, watches it on TV, quotes about Stimp readings and gabs about "who looks better than who" — accept some degree of blemished turfgrass because the superintendent decided not to use a plant-protection chemical? For there to be pesticide-free golf, players will have to allow for some different, more natural smells now and then.

I don't think golfers are ever going to ask for less from us Turfheads. Is it really possible to return to "Amish Turf Management" when so much pressure is on everyone to be perfect? Maybe, but waiting for the USGA to mandate a return to hickory shafts might be in the same line of thinking.

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