

MAKING SENSE OF

Turfgrass Nutrition

A guide to feeding
golf course turf – from
the importance of
cultural practices to
what factors determine
how often to fertilize

Less Is More

Superintendents find that applying less fertilizer more often makes the best sense for their turf-nutrition programs

By Anthony Pioppi,
Contributing Editor

Nowadays, it appears as if the golf course maintenance business is changing on an hourly basis — with new machines, pesticides, diseases, turf types and environmental rules coming from every direction.

While all this is happening, the changes in the way superintendents feed and nourish their grass in the last 15 to 20 years are relatively small. It all comes down to nitrogen and how it is applied.

At York (Maine) Golf and Tennis Club, superintendent John Laprey says he has reduced the amount of nitrogen he puts down per year since coming to the club in 1990, but his applications have increased like many superintendents' applications across the country.

At first, Laprey says he would put down 1 pound of nitrogen a month on his small Donald Ross-designed greens that received extensive play, pushing them the best he could with granular. Now he puts down one-tenth of a pound every week to 10 days in soluble form.

According to Laprey, what has changed is the attention given to the grass. Not only are superintendents eyeballing the turf (he checks his clipping yields on a daily basis), it is now

normal for regular testing of the turf to determine its health.

"There is a lot more spoon-feeding of soluble fertilizers on a more frequent basis," Laprey says.

Stan George, the longtime superintendent at Prairie Dunes Country Club in Hutchinson, Kan., agrees.

"You can target specific microclimates," he said. "It was always if you did one thing to a green, you did it to every green. (Today), microclimates are taken into consideration much more."

As an example, George points to his 14th green, which sits in the shade for virtually the entire day and stays damp longer than any of the other greens. As a result, George mows the green slightly higher. "It deals [with the shade] much better," he says.

Now George applies one-eighth to one-tenth of a pound on a foliar basis where before he was previously at one-quarter of a pound per 1,000 square feet. Sometimes he'll mix in a little nitrogen and iron with a fungicide application.

George's fairway application plan calls for 1 pound of nitrogen in the late fall, or two 1-pound applications over two months if he is able to work it in.

In his 21 years at the Honors Course in



Ooltewah, Tenn., superintendent David Stone has reduced his nitrogen application from 2 3/4 pounds per year to 1 1/4 pounds. "In the past six years I've reduced it by 25 percent," he says.

Stone came on board 21 years ago when the Honors Course was just about grown in. Back then it had bermudagrass fairways. A few years later, however, Stone convinced his owner to make the switch to zoysiagrass, one of the first courses in Tennessee to do so. Zoysia sod had to be shipped in from a farm near Cincinnati for the conversion. Stone reduced his nitrogen rate by half after the switch.

Like Laprey and George, Stone says one of his biggest changes in fertilizer application is

getting to know his turf — "just watching the grass," he says, "and knowing when it is growing well and doesn't need anything," even if his calendar calls for an application.

Changes in fertilizer applications since the early 1960s is almost staggering. In 1963, Doug Petersan was out of college and working at Pioneer Golf Course, a municipal course in Lincoln, Neb., that was getting 65,000 rounds a year. For the eight-month golf season, the superintendent applied between 7 and 9 pounds of nitrogen on greens and mowed them seven days a week.

"We had to keep the grass growing to keep it recovering," Petersan says. "If we didn't get

Continued on page 52

Given the rapid developments in other aspects of golf course maintenance, the way superintendents feed the turf have changed little.

MIKE KLEMM



At Austin (Texas) Golf Club, the L-93/Crenshaw blend requires superintendent Doug Petersan to apply only 3 pounds of nitrogen per year.

“[Golfers] want June-like conditions right through the year.”

JOHN LAPREY
SUPERINTENDENT
YORK (MAINE) GOLF
AND TENNIS CLUB

Continued from page 49

three baskets of clippings off a green, it needed fertilizer.”

In contrast, Petersan — now in his 40th season as a superintendent — grew in Austin (Texas) Golf Club that opened in 2001. With a 12-month growing season and greens that are an L-93/Crenshaw blend, his yearly application total is about 3 pounds. Petersan thinks the drop in rates coincided with the increase in green speed.

“As everybody became more acclimated to faster greens, (they) became more of a demand than a luxury,” he says. “You can’t have fast greens if you put a lot of fertilizer on them.”

In 1965, Petersan lowered the height of cut on the greens to one-quarter inch at Pioneer, causing an uproar with other superintendents in the area. “Everybody thought I was crazy, and that I was going to kill everything,” he says.

Almost coinciding with the drop in rates was the change in the means of application. David Sexton, superintendent at Meadow Club in Fairfax, Calif., says it has virtually eliminated one big problem.

For 22 years, Sexton has been superintendent at the Meadow Club, Alister MacKenzie’s first design in the United States. He remembers when an incorrect application of a granular product would leave putting surfaces

covered in green spots. Even when the Cyclone spreader came along, there were still problems trying to keep the nitrogen levels uniform throughout. “There were green strips that showed up and areas that got missed,” he says.

With the current application rates so low and the means of dispersion in liquid form, problems occur far less. “Even if you overlap, the consequences are hardly noticeable,” he says.

Maybe the most radical change in the past 10 years is the acceptance of fertigation. Petersan opted for fertigation during the growth of his zoysia-sprigged fairways at Austin. Fertigation, which is becoming more and more popular, allowed Petersan to correct pH problems with his water source when establishing his turf. But Petersan uses his fertigation system only rarely now.

“I don’t use it now for maintenance-type fertilizer applications,” he says. “[I’ll use it] maybe to put down nitrogen for an event to green things up.”

All the refinements in nitrogen application have led to one big problem — unfair expectations from golfers.

“They want June-like conditions right through the year,” Laprey says. “That might help us if golf was televised in black and white.”

Pioppi is a Golfdom contributing editor based in Middletown, Conn.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD

Professors on Plant Nutrition

Academics discuss everything from testing to frequency and formulations

By Peter Blais

Today's superintendents can select from a wide menu of plant-nutrition choices when deciding what will yield the healthiest turf. Still, course managers need to consider some basic

concepts before placing their turf-growing orders, such as:

- the major steps to follow and nutritional products needed;
- cultural practices that affect plant nutrition;
- factors determining how often to fertilize; and
- the various fertilizer formulations available for different purposes.

To sift through the major items superintendents need to digest when it comes to plant nutrition, *Golfdom* sought the opinions of four academics from across the country: Joseph Heckman, soil-fertility specialist at New Jersey's Rutgers University; Karl Danneberger, professor at The Ohio State University's Department of Horticulture and Crop Science and *Golfdom's* chief science editor; Richard

White, professor of turfgrass physiology and management at Texas A&M University; and Kent Kurtz, professor at California State Polytechnic University Pomona's Horticulture/Plant and Soil Science Department.

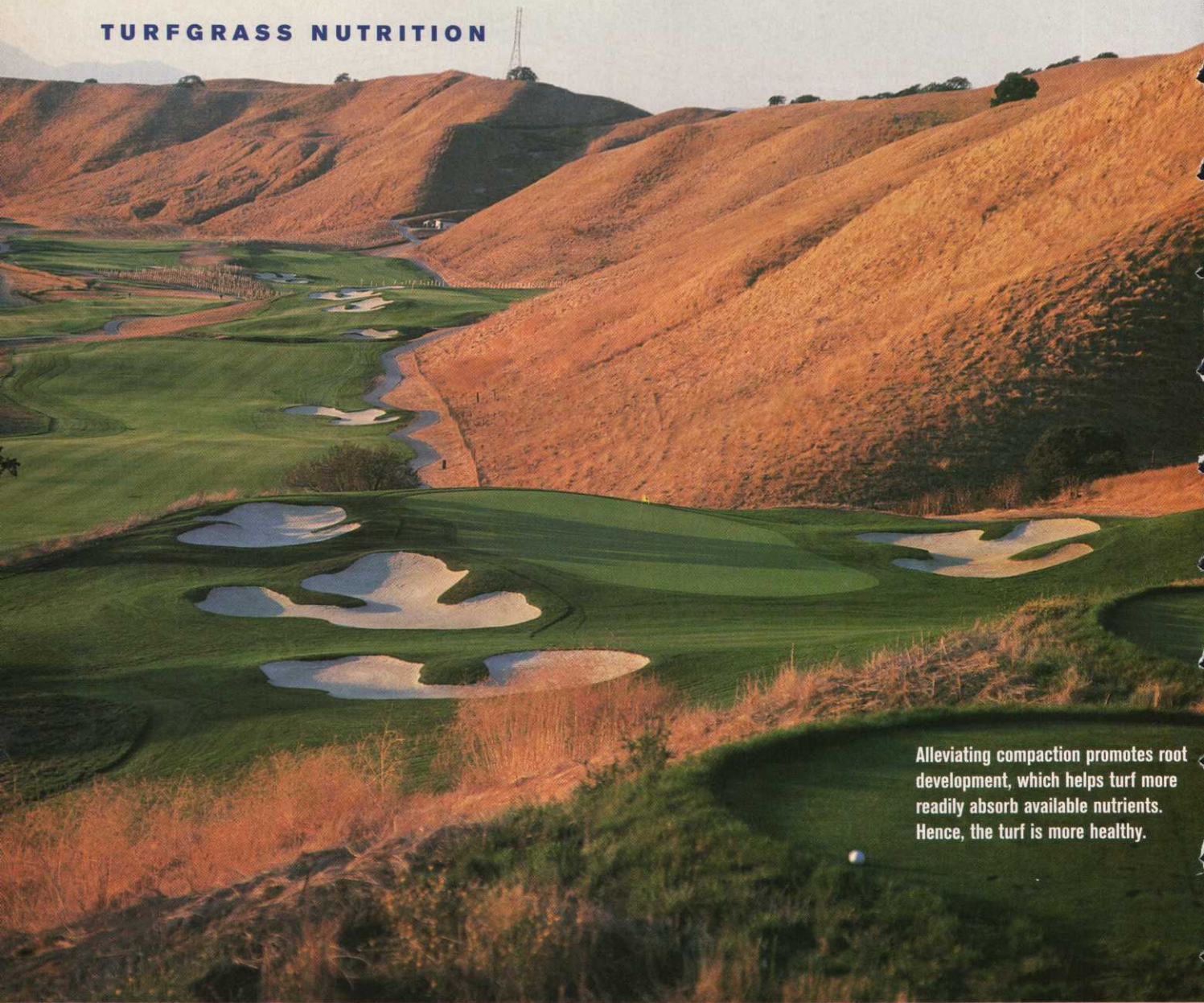
Testing

One of the first things most turf experts recommend is a soil test. These should be done routinely to provide a basis for the application of all nutrients except nitrogen. Appropriate nitrogen application levels can be determined by tissue analysis, experience or extension service recommendations, White says.

Kurtz believes soil tests in his region are best conducted in winter when things are slow but superintendents are still trying to keep turf healthy.

"Find out which nutrients are deficient," he recommends. "Don't worry about the ones in good quantity, but address the others. You don't have to test all 18 greens. If you have three or four that are typically a problem, test those and then test some of the better greens."

Continued on page 58



Alleviating compaction promotes root development, which helps turf more readily absorb available nutrients. Hence, the turf is more healthy.

Continued from page 54

Nutrients

Danneberger believes superintendents need to focus more on macronutrient levels of nutrients. These generally include nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium and sulfur.

"The major elements are called macroelements for a reason," he says. "The plant needs them. Many of the disease problems on golf courses are because of low levels of nutrients."

On high-sand greens, superintendents should also look at the major microelements that need to be chelated, things like iron and manganese. "Some of the micropackages are valuable during summer stress on high-sand content greens," Danneberger says.

New sand greens often need more fertilizer,

because many of the products are leached out with water, Kurtz agrees. Superintendents compensate by applying extra water and fertilizer.

White suggests caution regarding indiscriminate applications of one particular macronutrient — phosphorus.

"If the soil test does not call for phosphorus applications, don't apply it," he warns. "It has a greater risk of environmental impact on surface waters. In sandy soils, there is the potential for movement into ground water."

One nutrient superintendents need to use more often is potassium, Kurtz says. Several products provide potassium and nitrogen while skipping phosphorus.

"Potassium nitrate is the one that comes to mind," Kurtz continues. "Some are soluble and are hot fertilizers, so [superintendents]

Continued on page 60

Continued from page 58

have to be careful. But in the winter, it shouldn't be a problem if they put it down on dry grass and get it watered in right away."

Many fertilizers used in Southern California have micronutrient packages as part of the product. Iron, zinc and manganese are the most important ones [micronutrients], says Kurtz, who also recommends varying fertilizer types.

"It's like fighting a fungus problem," he says. "If you continually use the same fungicide, you build up a resistance. So you have to alternate things. We do the same thing with fertilizers."

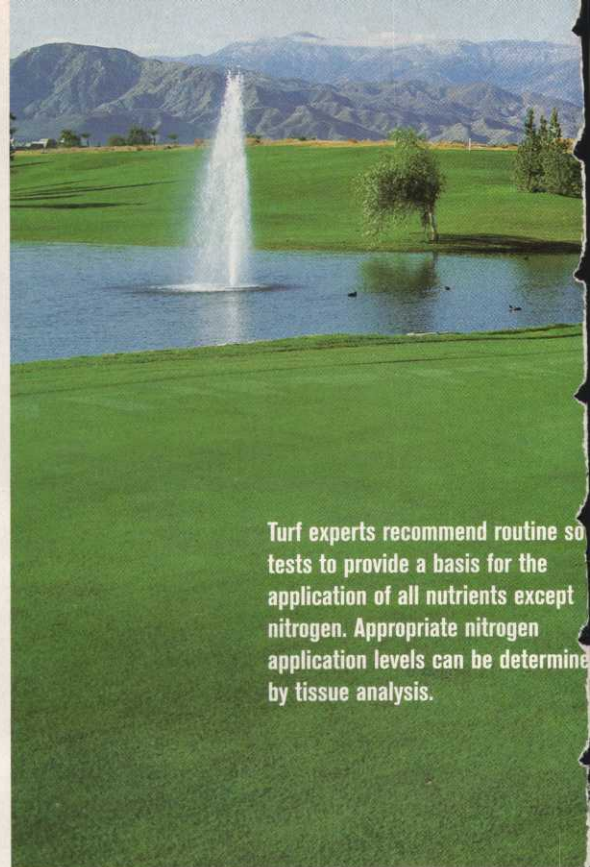
Kurtz also recommends keeping a close eye on the soil's pH. Some micronutrients are only available to plants when the pH is 6 or below. "With greens that are above 7, many times you have to use a product that is readily available, like iron. Some courses will actually use more iron applications because it keeps the turf green."

Kurtz notes that certain fertilizer products have different salt indexes. For example, ammonium nitrate and ammonium sulfate are fairly high in salt, while some organics are fairly low. Many slow-release fertilizers, like urea formaldehyde, are quite low with just a trace of salt.

"You don't want to put high-salt-index fertilizers on your greens in the summer unless you need them," he warns. "When you do the soil analysis, you should get the ECE [electrical conductivity] of the salts and the SAR [sodium absorption ratio]. If you have those results from the soil test, you ought to be able to manage those greens with materials that don't have high salts."

One of the benefits of a good soil-fertility program, Heckman says, is that it can minimize the need to use pesticides for take-all patch or summer-patch disease. "We have done a lot of work here looking at plant nutrition/disease interactions," he explains. "We can get pretty good control of summer patch by using ammonium nutrition. We can get good control of take-all disease with manganese fertilizer. Using nitrate nutrition on summer patch disease seems to exacerbate the problem."

Superintendents who use ammonium fertilizers, like ammonium sulfate, often worry about burn problems. "You can minimize the risk of burn with these fertilizers as long as you



Turf experts recommend routine soil tests to provide a basis for the application of all nutrients except nitrogen. Appropriate nitrogen application levels can be determined by tissue analysis.



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KARL DANNEBERGER,
DEPARTMENT OF
HORTICULTURE AND
CROP SCIENCE,
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

irrigate and water them in after you have applied them," Heckman says.

Ammonium nutrition also lowers pH rapidly. "If you don't follow up with a good liming program, you can have a problem with excessively low pH," Heckman notes. "Whenever you use ammonium in combination with a good liming program, you still get good control of summer patch disease. Too low pH runs the risk of aluminum toxicity and influencing the availability of other nutrients like phosphorus."

Take-all patch is controllable without the use of fungicides, the Rutgers instructor notes.

"You can get very good control using manganese fertilizer," Heckman explains. "You put on about 2 pounds per acre in April before the disease starts. It's best to use it every year if you know you have a problem with take-all patch."

Cultural practices

Certain cultural practices can help plants more readily absorb available nutrients. For example, alleviating compaction promotes root development, White says.

"Anything that can be done to improve root development will help the plant's ability to absorb nutrients," the Texas A&M professor says. "Avoiding heavy irrigation following the application of nutrients or timing nutrient application to avoid heavy rainfall will reduce the movement of those nutrients off site. That

Continued on page 62

MIKE KLEMM



"If the grass grows from the aerification holes, you will get a bumpy green."

KENT KURTZ,
CAL STATE POLYTECH
UNIVERSITY

Continued from page 60

makes them more available to the plant and improves fertilization efficiency."

Kurtz notes that increased use of reclaimed water has led to more salt problems, particularly on push-up greens. Increased salt adversely affects nutrition uptake and places grass under additional stress. On native greens, he suggests aerification through the spring and into the summer with a lot of leaching.

"If you're doing the leaching, your best grass comes out of the aerification holes," he says. "The areas between the holes tend to be a yellowish color because you didn't leach the salts there as much as where the holes are. The grass will come up green in the holes, so you need to get in there and spike or lightly verticut, and then leach the green again. Then you have to put an even distribution of fertilizer on to match everything. If the grass grows from the aerification holes, you will get a bumpy green. You have to try to stimulate the areas between the aerification holes."

Heckman has experimented with recycling

grass clippings and found that superintendents can cut fertilizer rates in half when clippings are left behind.

"You have a better color turf with half the nitrogen with Kentucky bluegrass," he says. "It also reduces the weed population. This would be helpful for any turf manager trying to go toward organics. The down side is you have to mow more frequently. But some of the mowers coming on the market today are better at recycling clippings, so you don't see as much residue. The other thing you can do to minimize clippings is use a controlled-released fertilizer."

Fertilization frequency

White recommends fertilizers be applied at least annually and every six months on new turfgrass. The heaviest applications should be in the fall.

With bentgrass greens during Texas summers, spoon-feeding small amounts of nitrogen at frequent intervals — as little as one-sixteenth of a pound per 1,000 square feet every week —

Continued on page 64



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Continued from page 62

seems the way to go. During more optimal growth periods, a half-pound per 1,000 square feet once a month seems a better strategy.

"In the summer, you don't want to be overstimulating [with too much fertilizer] because of disease," Kurtz agrees. "A good fall application or two is always helpful. Spring applications can be helpful and then cut back in the summer."

Danneberger cautions against overrelying on certain practices.

"People have taken a good practice, like foliar feeding or spoon-feeding during a stress period, and turned it into their entire program," he says. "That's not a good idea. Many have gone to spoon-feeding light rates frequently in the summer. Exactly how much of that nutrient is being taken up in those low amounts is always an interesting question. Sometimes there's a response, and sometimes there isn't."

Fertilizer formulations

Most superintendents use combinations of liquid and granular applications.

"In expansive areas, like fairways and roughs, granular applications would be more cost effective," White says. "Liquid fertilizers are usually done on greens when you're trying to spoon-feed with micronutrients."

In the fall and late spring, Danneberger recommends granular, slow-release and liquid fertilizers at high rates with adequate nitrogen levels. During summer, when superintendents are concerned about too much growth and how it affects ball speed, adding small amounts of nitrogen through spoon-feeding or foliar applications works well.

"It's tough to put granular down on a green with the right dispersion patterns to deliver extremely low rates," Danneberger concludes. "So they [superintendents] are almost tied into a liquid application. If it were up to me, I'd like to see granular applications during non-stress times and liquid/foliar/spoon-feeding during stress times." ■

Blais is a free-lance writer from North Yarmouth, Maine.

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