

The Value of Verticutting

Given the benefits of cleaning up your greens, the only question to ask if you're not 'pruning' them is, 'Why not?'

By Frank H. Andorka Jr.
Managing Editor

Jason DeMartino, superintendent at Audubon Country Club in Naples, Fla., gives his golfers an explanation he hopes they can relate to when they ask him why he verticuts his greens.

"I've found that if I tell them I'm pruning

the greens the way they would prune trees — to make the plant grow stronger and more healthy — they understand it immediately," DeMartino says. "It's much better than trying to overload them with the scientific explanation for it."

Verticutting, or the process of removing some of the vertical growth that occurs around a grass plant, provides several potential benefits for the turf. It can:

- force the remaining turf to stand up straight and smooth the putting surface for better ball roll;
- increase green speed;
- open the turf canopy to allow in more sunlight;
- makes topdressing easier to work into the soil; and
- allows the plant to put more energy into growing upright shoots instead of lateral shoots.

But verticutting isn't something that can be done haphazardly. Superintendents should account for weather patterns, grass varieties and region of the country when deciding how often and how aggressively to verticut. If superintendents have any doubts about what they're planning to do, experts say they should check with their peers who are experienced verticutters. This careful preparation will help them get the most benefit from the practice.

How it works

Normally, when superintendents mow greens, the blades cut the turf horizontally, taking off the top of the crown to reduce its height. Verticutting blades, which can be fitted on most triplex mowers, rotate in the opposite direction. The goal is to

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Assistant superintendent Kevin Neils verticuts a green at Audubon Country Club in Naples, Fla.



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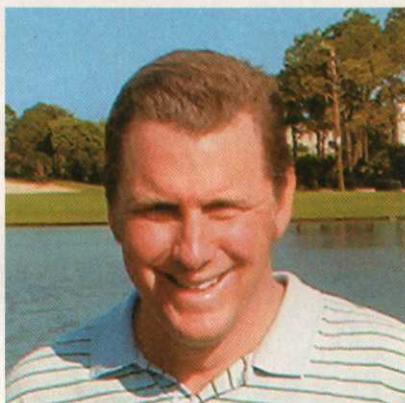
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reduce the number of stolons on leaf blades that grow laterally, says Ron Wright, certified superintendent at The Country Club of Mobile (Ala.).

"Every time a plant grows new shoots, it takes energy," Wright says. "If you cut off some of the lateral plant growth, it forces the plant to use that energy elsewhere. The plant will use the excess energy to grow upward, creating a more upright and dense stand of turf."

Tighter turf also increases green speed without lowering mowing heights, says Cory Blair, certified superintendent at Rarity Bay Golf & Country Club in Vonore, Tenn. He says it also allows the ball to roll more smoothly.

DeMartino says he combines a verticutting program with plant growth regulators to keep his greens consistent from one hole to the next. He says verticutting also increases water penetration and air movement — two essential ingredients to healthy turf.



Superintendent Jason DeMartino says his members understand the verticutting process more easily if he describes it as "pruning" the turf to promote strong growth.

Be careful

Superintendents who verticut on a regular basis warn their colleagues that an indiscriminate program can do more harm than good.

"Anytime you're mechanically damaging the plant, whether by regular mowing or verticutting, you're opening the crown of the plant," says Russ Heller, certified superintendent of Franklin Park Golf Course in Boston. "That gives diseases and other pests opportunities to harm the turf."

Heller says superintendents should also be careful to watch the weather when deciding whether to verticut or not. If the weather is too hot (in the case of Franklin Park, Heller says that's June, July and

August), verticutting can stress the turf so much it can severely damage it.

DeMartino says superintendents should wait to verticut until the dew burns off to avoid turning their greens into muddy messes. "You don't want to verticut wet turf — it will get ugly."

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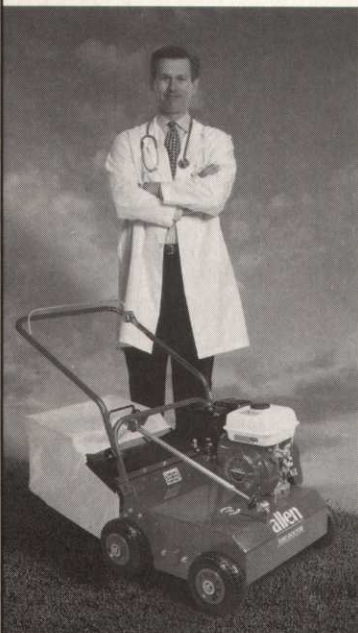
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Not only is verticutting dependent on the region, it's also dependent on the grass variety, Wright says. For example, when Wright had TifDwarf bermudagrass greens at The Country Club, he would verticut every other week (and topdress on the weeks in between) because the turf grows so aggressively. Now that he's moved to an ultradwarf bermudagrass, he doesn't verticut as often because the turf recovers more slowly from the procedure.

"If you verticut an ultradwarf, you can still see the scars three weeks later," Wright says. "That's not acceptable at most courses."

Wright says superintendents in the South, where ultradwarfs are more prevalent, are moving away from aggressive verticutting.

Blair says he also changed his verticutting practices when he switched from Crenshaw bentgrass to PennCross bentgrass. Superintendents have to verticut Crenshaw more aggressively because it's such a tight turf that topdressing can't get down into the soil profile. With PennCross, raising the green speed is more the issue, Blair says.

"Before you start verticutting, you have to understand your variety completely," Blair says. "You don't want to create a program that won't do what you want it to."

As with so many other cultural practices superintendents employ, there's no one verticutting program that will work for everyone, Blair says.

"If you're in doubt, turn to your local extension agents or other superintendents in your area to see what they're doing," Blair says. "It's such a region-dependent practice that your best guides through the process are your peers." ■

Tips and Tricks

Here is some general advice from superintendents for effective verticutting:

- Focus on periods of time when the grass is growing aggressively because verticutting when the turf isn't growing strongly could lead to the most damage.
- Set your verticutting blades to a uniform depth of cut to avoid scalping.
- Don't think that verticutting is a substitute for aerification because you'll never remove enough of the soil profile to make a difference.
- Topdress lightly afterward to smooth the greens, and brush or water the sand in afterward.
- Test your program on the practice putting green before taking it out on to the course because it will give golfers the heads up that you're trying something new.
- Alert your pro shop about what you're doing and why. Most of the complaints about the procedure are going to be lobbied there first, and you want to have the pro to have a ready explanation.

— Frank H. Andorka Jr., Managing Editor