

ON THE Verticutting Edge

You could say that more golf course superintendents are taking the vertical leap — that is, they've turned to vertical mowing to help tend turf.

Make no mistake, though. This jump is no leap of faith. Verticutting, the thinning of turfgrass by blades or wire tines that cut perpendicular to the soil, is a proven maintenance technique used to achieve healthy turf.

There are two types of verticutting — a shallow cut and a deep cut. Both promote lateral and vertical growth by slicing stolons and rhizomes. A deeper verticut, however, removes more material, which allows for sand to fill in spaces previously taken up by organic material.

Brad Aldridge, a product manager with John Deere & Co.'s golf group, says verticutting is getting more popular across the board — from municipal to public to private courses. A big reason is the demand from golfers for improved playing conditions. That means superintendents must strive to provide tournament-like conditions, even when there are no tournaments. And they've realized that verticutting can help them do that to satisfy golfers' expectations, not to mention keep up with the competition.

There are myriad benefits to verticutting, which has also fueled its popularity.

More superintendents add vertical mowing to their maintenance programs to improve golf course conditions

By Larry Aylward EDITOR IN CHIEF

Jeff Buchko, a product manager for Jacobsen, says more university researchers have concluded that verticutting is a cultural practice that's critical to turf care. Turf that is verticut can withstand the threat of disease and harsh weather better. Simply put, verticutting stimulates growth.

Not only does verticutting remove thatch, which is a breeding ground for turf disease, but it also provides channels to allow moisture and oxygen to get into the rootzone, says Tony Ferguson, the senior marketing manager of Reelmaster products for The Toro Co.

Another reason for verticutting's increased popularity is that turf recovers quickly from the process, so

golf course play isn't disrupted.

"You're cutting slits in the turf, and those slits will fill in the first time you mow the turf with a greens mowers," Aldridge says. "A lot of times you can verticut and mow, and golfers won't know you've been there."

Verticutting is not just a greens thing anymore, Ferguson points out. Like many turf maintenance procedures, such as topdressing and aeration, verticutting is also performed on fairways. "That will continue to some degree as budgets and manpower allow," Ferguson adds.

Jacobsen introduced its Verticut 214 a few years ago with fairways in mind. Its

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84-inch cutting path and 4-mph cutting speed covers more than 3 acres an hour for high productivity, the company says. It also features three cutting heads that penetrate soil up to 3 inches to quickly remove thatch and debris.

Aldridge has noticed a trend where more superintendents are getting more aggressive with their verticutting practices on newer turf varieties (which form thatch quicker) by combining them with aerification. They do this during the prime growing season when recovery is faster. They will aerify to maximum depth and then verticut immediately after to remove even more material.

Aldridge says John Deere is capitalizing on the trend and recently released a new attachment that enables both processes to be performed at the same time. Deere's Aercore 800 is equipped with the attachment. "You'll be able to finish the prac-

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tice much quicker, and it will also save on labor to complete it," Aldridge says.

As verticutting gets more popular with superintendents, Ferguson says more suppliers are entering the verticutting arena with new products.

"It's all part of a system of turf care management that allows superintendents to maintain their turf to a higher level," he adds, noting that verticutting is also

getting more popular in sports turf care and is even gaining a presence in the lawn care industry.

While verticutting is a simple procedure, there are a few tricks of the trade that operators should keep in mind. While it may sound elementary, Buchko says it's important to keep a constant eye on the equipment and its many moving parts while it's in operation to ensure it's functioning correctly and safely.

Both the verticutter attachment and greens mower verticutters should spin in the opposite direction that a reel would, helping to bring up more material and yield a more aggressive and consistent verticut, Aldridge says.

Ferguson advises superintendents to perform verticutting on a routine basis. Don't do it when you have a problem, such as turf disease caused by too much thatch; do it preventively to avoid such problems. ■

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