

PGR\$ Prized at All Costs

It doesn't hurt that the turf-regulating chemicals can help reduce mowing-related expenses, but that's not what has superintendents raving

BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ

Superintendents have at least nine good reasons to use plant growth regulators (PGRs), says a leading PGR researcher. Some of the incentives are turf-specific, says Dr. Dennis Shepard of Syngenta Professional Products. Others benefit the bottom line.

More often than not, though, it's the improved quality of turf, superintendents say, that fuels their appetite for PGRs. Balancing the budget is important, they add, especially with gas prices continually rising, but the product's ability to reduce mowing-related costs is secondary to the course looking like a million bucks.

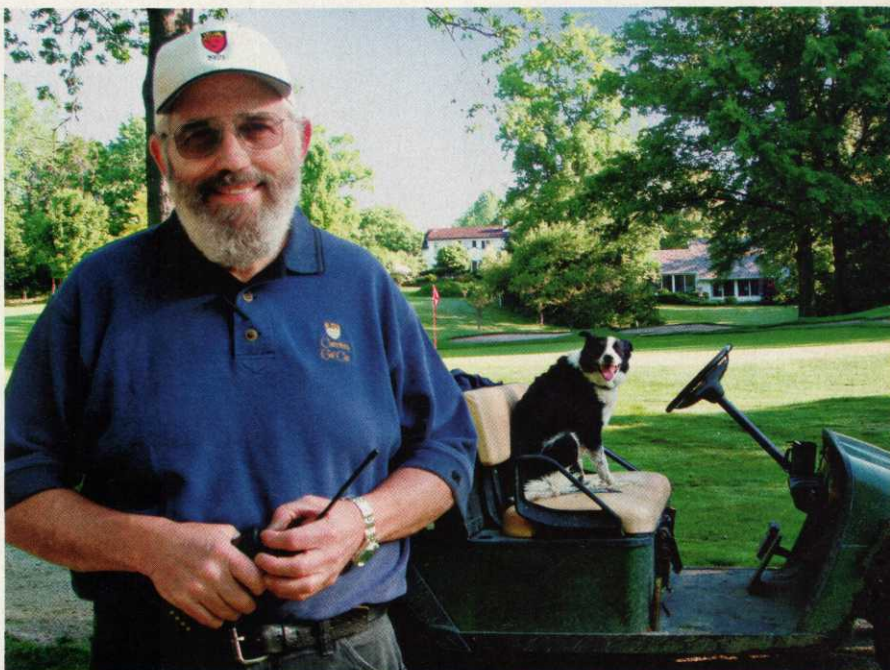
"Certainly with fuel and labor reduced, PGRs help to justify cost, but really the bottom line is the overall healthier plant and qual-

ity of cut," says Jerry Coldiron, the certified superintendent of Boone Links/Lassing Pointe in Florence, Ky. "That equals a happy customer or member, which is our No. 1 priority. ... Fuel savings, truthfully, are most likely an intangible."

Terry Bonar, the certified superintendent of Canterbury Golf Club in Beachwood, Ohio, considers PGRs one of the top three innovations during the last decade, along with soft spikes and aeration equipment. His crew uses the product virtually everywhere — greens, fairways, roughs — to limit turf growth. But as is the case with many Northern courses that collect clippings, the objective isn't to reduce gas consumption through less mowing.

"We still mow every day," Bonar says. "But you can do it faster because there's not as many clippings. When you cut a whole fairway and you dump once, you're not getting many clippings."

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Terry Bonar, certified superintendent of Canterbury Golf Club, says plant growth regulators are one of the top innovations of the last decade. "If I had to cut my budget, (PGRs) would not be one of the things I would cut," he says.



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PGRs

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Better yet, the result is a double-cut look in half the amount of time and effort.

"We used to double-cut fairways (during tournaments), and I'm telling you those were the smoothest fairways I had ever seen," Bonar says. "I said, 'Man, if I could do this for the members, it would be great.' But there was no way you can stripe fairways when there's play."

Bonar's wish came true when PGRs arrived in the mid-1990s. The product stunts the vertical growth of the blade but allows the plant to become thicker hor-

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LAYLAH VANBIBBER

MARKETING MANAGER
PBI/GORDON

izontally because of boosted root growth.

"It was really a monumental shift when this product came out," says Shepard, a field technical representative for Syngenta. "Suddenly we could manage the way grass grows instead of it managing us."

As for managing the budget, Bonar doesn't worry about saving money with PGR use. In fact, he has become increasingly liberal in using the costly product. This isn't atypical, he says, noting that some superintendents have graduated from using the recommended rate of 0.25 per thousand square feet per month to using the same rate per week.

"We're not up to that high yet, but we're getting there. And I don't care," Bonar says. "(PGRs) are worth every penny."

Bonar, who lists PGRs as an herbicide in his budget ("even though they're not," he notes), pays more than \$11,000 per year for at least 30 gallons.

"If I had to cut my budget, (PGRs) would not be one of the things I would cut," Bonar says. "I would probably pay whatever they cost. I would complain about it, but I would still probably do it."

Ross O'Fee, the superintendent at The Country Club in Salt Lake City, and Eric

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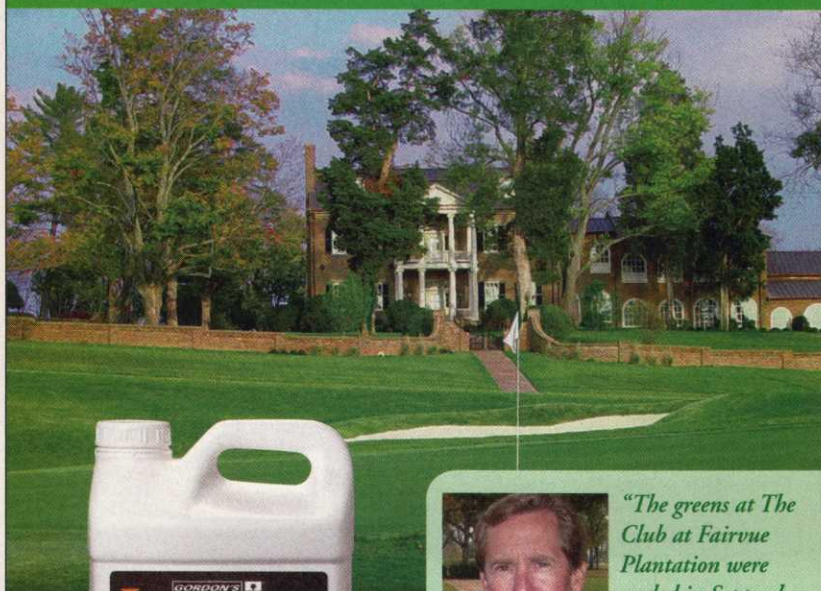
Reiter, the superintendent at Duran Golf Club in Viera, Fla., pay about \$350 and \$380 per gallon, respectively, and each documents PGRs as a chemical cost.

Because he's located in the South, where it's almost senseless to mow during the unoccupied summer months, Reiter can better appreciate the fuel-saving capabilities of PGRs.

"If you can skip one mowing per week with three fairway mowers, that has the potential to save 30 gallons of diesel for the week at nearly \$3 a gallon," Reiter says. "That's nearly \$400 per month. I can't say that we have increased our use of Primo in direct relationship to saving fuel, but the benefit of it certainly is nice."

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Why Use PGRs? Count the Ways

Dr. Denis Shepard, a field technical adviser for Syngenta Professional Products, the maker of Primo Maxx and Trimmit plant growth regulators, lists his top reasons a superintendent should use PGRs:

Fewer clippings — The quantity of clippings can be cut by 50 percent; in turn, mowing time can be reduced by the same percentage.

Improved turf quality and playability — As the turf becomes denser, the ball's lie improves.

Fuel savings — If the average annual cost for an 18-hole course is \$20,000, with \$15,000 of that dedicated to fairways, a 30 percent reduction in mowing could save \$4,500.

Equipment conservation — Less mowing means less wear and tear on reels, bed knives and other equipment.

Minimized scalping — Slowed turf growth helps prevent the scalping of extended periods of growth.

Worker safety — Dangerous mowing areas need be mowed less often.

Healthier greens — Fewer mowings relieve the stress on greens. The root system is also strengthened.

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PGRs

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Manufacturers of PGRs, for various reasons, have not yet noticed a correlation between PGR sales and rising fuel costs.

"It's probably a little early to tell," says Laylah VanBibber, the marketing manager for PBI/Gordon. "Certainly PGRs can help hold the fuel costs for mowing, but the real benefit is from labor savings. Less mowing frees staff up to do other tasks."

Among the various PGRs used by superintendents, two are often utilized to reduce total clippings: Primo Maxx (Syngenta Professional Products) and Cutless (SePRO). The latter product is often tank-mixed with Primo to provide longer residual, less rebound effect, less scalping and less bronzing, according to Roger Storey, the vice president of SePRO's turf and ornamental business.

"We haven't tracked or noticed a direct correlation between increased Cutless use and gasoline price increases in the golf market," Storey says. "However, Cutless will reduce the amount of clippings and frequency of mowing; therefore it can reduce both labor and fuel costs."

Other PGRs — such as Proxy (Bayer Environmental Science), Embark (PBI/Gordon), and Trimmit (Syngenta) — are primarily used to suppress *Poa annua* seedheads and promote conversion to bentgrass.

"PGRs fit nicely into our program," Coldiron says. "I couldn't see managing quality turfgrass today without them." ■



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ROGER STOREY

VICE PRESIDENT
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PHOTO COURTESY: SEPRO

Minnesota, early spring

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