



Labor Savivors

BY DAVID FRABOTTA
SENIOR EDITOR

▲ Plant growth regulators have proven to be one of the most effective labor savers for turfgrass managers.

There was almost no way to foresee the extent of this year's price increases. Rising crude oil prices have impacted almost everything that makes up a superintendent's budget. Fertilizer, turfgrass seed and sod, irrigation equipment and diesel fuel costs have forced superintendents to either go over budget or make some drastic cuts.

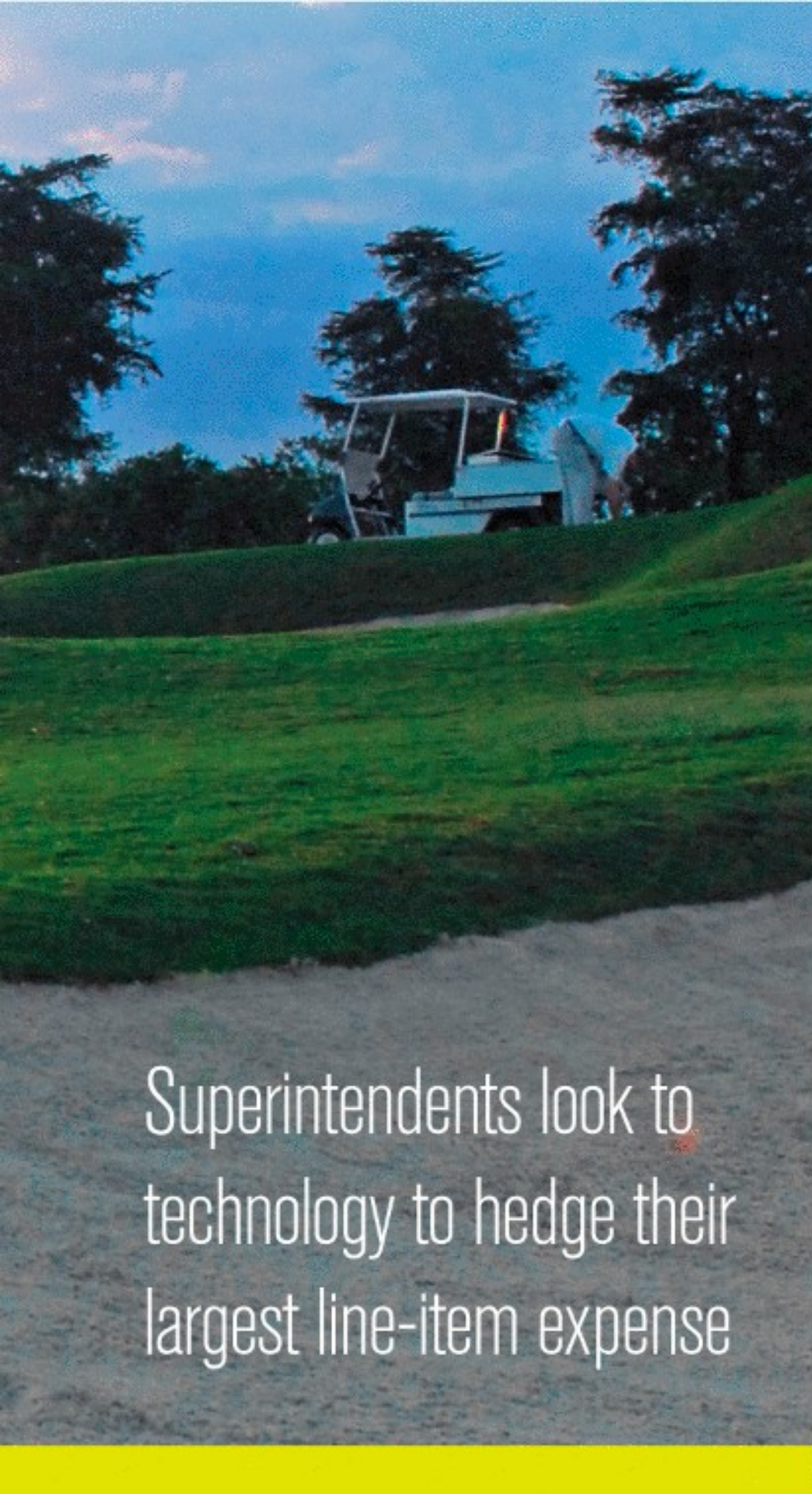
The largest line-item expense in most golf course maintenance budgets is labor, which means that many superintendents can cut overtime or scale back hours in an effort to save capital in one area in an attempt to mitigate unforeseen price increases in other areas.

Scaling back hours might sound simple, but it isn't easy. Golfers assume conditions will meet long-standing expectations. But there are a few equipment innovations and technologies that might help superintendents hedge the largest line item in their budgets. Larger mowing decks, longer-lasting chemicals, plant growth regulators and advances in irrigation technology all can help golf course crews operate more efficiently.

In an online *Golfdom* survey, readers were asked, "What equipment or technology saves you the most labor?" Out of 45 respondents, 40 percent said plant growth regulators saves them the most labor; 20 percent said irrigation technology; 13 percent said aeration core harvesters; 13 percent said longer-lasting chemicals; 9 percent said mechanical bunker rakes, and 4 percent of respondents said larger mowing decks eased their labor woes.

"One of the most important labor-saving technologies in our arsenal is (plant) growth regulators, which has decreased our fairway-mowing frequency from four days a week to two to three days," says Tim Sanchez, director of grounds of Woodmoor Pines Golf and Country Club and neighboring King's Deer Golf Club in Monument, Colo.

Sanchez estimates that he saves between eight and 16 hours each week with reduced fairway mowing, and the fuel savings of keeping a mower in the shop more often is an additional savings. Plus those man-hours can be spent elsewhere on the course to get additional work done.



Superintendents look to technology to hedge their largest line-item expense

Some courses can save even more using PGRs. Superintendent Mark A. Livingston of Ridge Creek Golf Club in Dinuba, Calif., says PGRs can save him up to 40 man hours a week, much of it on his large practice facility.

“Our practice facility is 25 acres and requires six hours to mow. PGRs reduce the down time for maintenance and increase the revenue by extending hours of operation,” Livingston says. “We also have 101 deep bunkers that require hand mowing of steep faces. Again, the mowing interval is increased allowing labor to go elsewhere.”

Of course, being able to save on labor depends on the club and the type of expectations from golfers. Even courses that use PGRs regularly on greens and fairways might not be able to cut mowing because of expectations from golfers.

At The Club at Crested Butte, superintendent Stephen Rue values how PGRs suppress *Poa annua* seedheads and helps create fuller, healthier grass plants, but he can’t skip mowing without members of the high-end club noticing. He walk-mows greens — at less

than one-tenth of an inch — and approaches every day, and fairways get cut every other day, whether they need it or are just getting cleaned up. He says the only way to really save labor at the course is to reduce bunker grooming.

The same is true at Berkeley Hall Golf Club in Bluffton, S.C. Its 770 members expect its 36 holes to continue to play like they’re in tournament-ready condition.

“We are basically spending over our budget,” says Danny Malone, superintendent of two layouts. “We’ve cut back a little on pine straw and mulch, but we’ll continue to walk mow greens and tees every day.”

Being creative

But higher-end clubs might be the exception to the rule. Even some PGA Tour venues capitalize on the labor savings of chemical technologies amid a tight budget. At East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta, certified superintendent Ralph Kepple started using PGRs heavily last year to reduce clippings and tighten the turf. It was especially helpful around the golf course’s steep bunker faces, which require walk-mowing.

Limiting the growth of the turfgrass around the bunker faces allows Kepple to mow them once a week with less cleanup instead of twice a week as he did without PGRs. He saves about 20 hours to 24 hours a week, which is a welcomed relief for the 26-member crew, especially as it prepares for the PGA Tour Championship this month.

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Even some PGA Tour venues seek technologies that can help save labor in certain areas.



Many superintendents can reduce mowing of bunker faces in half with the use of PGRs.

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Larger mowing decks can help save some time, but significant time and labor can be saved by triplexing greens, if golfers allow it.

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Many clubs are looking to improved chemical technologies to help trim labor, but it might not be enough. At Shelter Harbor Golf Club in Charlestown, R.I., Certified Superintendent Ed Walsh says he's using more PGRs this year, and likely will recommend additional usage to the board of directors when budget talks for next year roll around. But he likely will need to take more drastic measures to stay on fiscal track.

"As all of us get close to budget time for 2009, we try to be as creative as we can," Walsh says.

He's taking a close look at generic chemicals to help save money when efficacy is the same, and Walsh says he'll look to expand his contracted services when appropriate to alleviate his labor needs. In addition, he might hire more part-time workers next year instead of full-time seasonal workers. This year, the Hurdzan/Fry course has eight full-time workers, 12 full-time seasonal workers and 20 part timers.

At the St. Lucie County (Fla.) Fairwinds Golf Course, Superintendent Chris Gamble doesn't have any leeway for skyrocketing turfgrass maintenance costs, so he's running his operation a little differently these days. First, he now mows greens with a triplex mower instead of walk mowers. And he added a piece of equipment that saves him dozens of man-hours: a tractor-mounted boom mower for lake, pond and stream banks.

As you might guess, the bunker edges don't get quite the attention they used to, either. Other aesthetic parts of the

golf course get a little less attention as well, including perennial beds, mulch beds and cart-path edges.

"We concentrate on the play areas and do the detail work as we can," Gamble says.

To cut labor significantly, golf course managers need to take care of the golf course differently, such as spending fewer man-hours on bunker maintenance or limiting the mowing of out-of-play areas. Changing maintenance practices is what some courses might need to do keep labor and budgets in check.

At many golf courses, natural areas are getting bigger, especially at golf courses trying to mitigate their environmental impact. Larger natural areas cut down on mowing, and they create an opportunity to use fewer chemicals.

In many cases, better-scripted chemical-management programs could reduce or eliminate the need for edging and string trimming.

Also, using contracted labor, Walsh says, could mitigate unnecessary capital expenditures. Tree-maintenance companies and aeration services might be viable options, even when working with tight budgets.

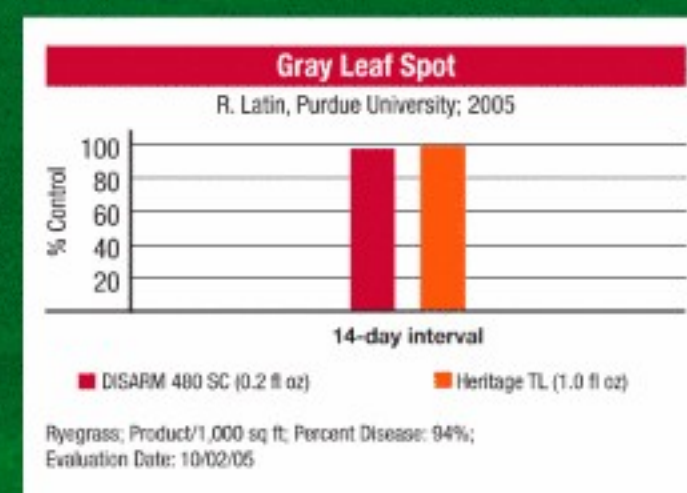
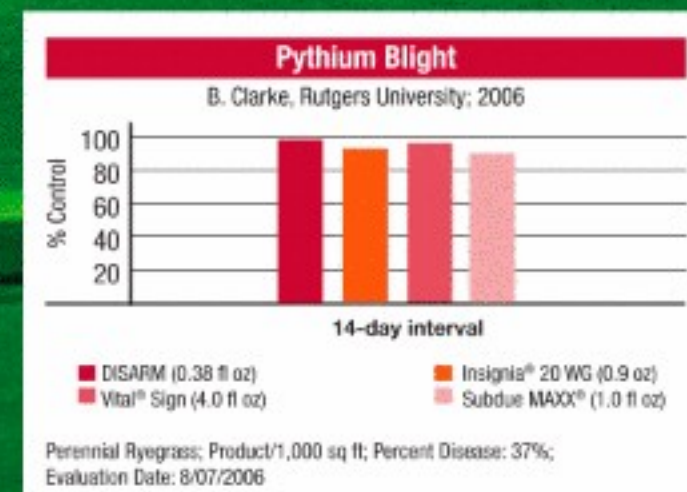
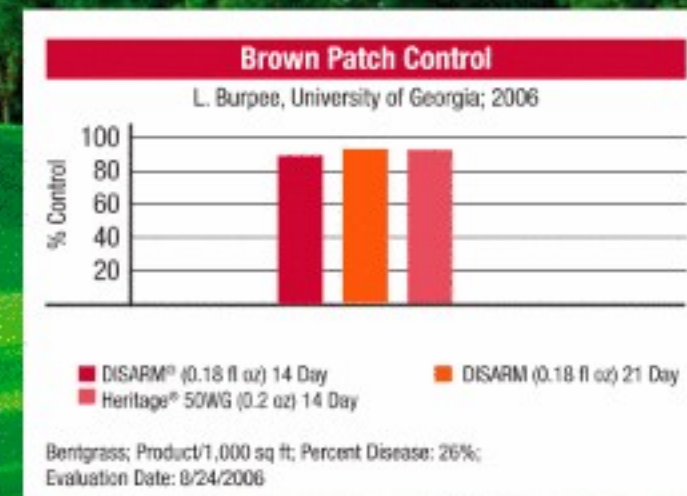
Whatever cost savers golf course managers are considering, it's clear that superintendents have unprecedented price pressures affecting their operations in addition to the environmental pressures that influence their turfgrass.

"For the most part, superintendents are a creative bunch, so we'll survive," Walsh says. "But our creativity is really going to be tested this year." ■

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