

Editor's note: *Christopher S. Gray Sr., superintendent and general manager of Marvel Golf Club in Benton, Ky., is the author of this new column that will appear in *Golfdom* magazine and *The Insider* e-newsletter. Gray is the only two-time overall winner of the "Environmental Leaders in Golf Awards" and the 2008 winner of Rain Bird's "Intelligent Use of Water" Award.*

I love mowing rough. Over the years, I think it's done more to preserve what's left of my sanity than anything else. It actually provides me an opportunity to evaluate the golf course and see what's working and, more importantly, what's not working.

My favorite areas to look at are the environmental programs I'm trying to implement on the course. From running through the process of making homemade biodiesel to trying to expand my use of corn-gluten meal for pre-emergent crabgrass control, I really get into these mad scientist-type solutions.

Admittedly, not every environmental program I've participated in has been a rousing success. Believe me when I tell you I have had some serious failures along my path of trying to find new, innovative ways to environmentally manage my golf course. In hindsight, some of them were, well ... to put it simply, pretty dumb.

One golf course where I was an assistant was extremely dedicated to the idea of maintaining the exact root zone mix that was originally placed in the greens during construction. The only problem with that was the original mix was an 80/20 mix. So every two weeks, right before topdressing, we blended in 20 percent organic peat moss to the topdressing mix so it would be the exact same materials as in the original mix. As you might imagine, things were fine for the first couple of months. Then, in June and July, we began developing severe algae problems on the greens.

The peat moss content of the topdressing material, while being dragged smoothly and evenly around the entire green, ended up holding enough water on the putting surface to promote the single, nastiest green algae

Lessons Learned Along the Way

BY CHRISTOPHER S. GRAY SR.



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infestation I've ever seen. Multiple applications of Terracyte later, we all had learned a valuable lesson.

Another time, I had the "brilliant" idea of buying some agriculture-grade, organic fertilizer for a fertilizer application in my course's roughs. The price was unbelievable and the seemingly only catch was that it had to be delivered in bulk — 15 tons of bulk — and all of it unbagged. So I cleverly pulled out several old greens covers from the construction days and was ready to cover the pile of fertilizer heading my way. Now, if you've never seen 30,000 pounds of fertilizer being piled up from the back of a dump truck, it's quite the vision. When the truck pulled away, I knew I was in trouble. The greens covers protected about half the pile. And when the rain moved in, an hour later, my pile of fertilizer melted like the Wicked Witch of the West at the end of "The Wizard of Oz." Lesson learned.

I've lived, learned and gotten smarter, sort of. These little setbacks obviously haven't stopped my quest for new ideas and practices in managing a golf course more efficiently. And they shouldn't.

The bottom line is that we, as an industry, can't afford to be afraid to try something new, however odd it may sound, to improve on what we already know. We are an industry full of innovators who want to improve our golf courses, our industry and our planet and leave them better than we found them.

Taking calculated risks is a key component of that drive. If you're not prepared to look silly, nothing great is ever going to happen.

So, next time you get a wacky, off-the-wall idea, don't be afraid to take a moment and examine it a little more carefully. You may just have the next big idea for our industry.