

We heard a lot about sustainability and sustainable initiatives at the Golf Industry Show in February. Certainly, in this day and age of environmental awareness, we should be thinking about how golf and turfgrass management fit into our ever-changing world.

Those of us close to golf and turf management know how much our knowledge, maintenance methods and product technology have changed for the better. But to the general public, local politicians, regulators and media, we're just another industry that uses "way too much water, chemicals and fertilizer, which is bad for the environment." That mantra has been repeated so many times that many people now consider it fact. But forget the public misconceptions. How much golfer education on these issues is taking place at our courses?

Today, all issues are polarized. You're either with me or against me. You're either for or against the environment, which is why local politicians tend to vote for bans and restrictions. The truth is, we're doing better, but sustainability has been politicized to the point of ideology. It has become green vs. brown, maintained vs. native, right plant vs. xeri-scaping and turf vs. mulch. Do golfers care?

What do golfers really think? Have we done a good job of surveying them on environmental issues? We tell them how important it is to have a good superintendent on the Golf Channel. But do we ever talk to them about the pros and cons of sustainability and what it might mean to their golf course's appearance — a factor often essential for golf course superintendents to remain employed?

The word sustainable means enduring, thus sustainable golf means the golf facility must endure. But a facility must remain profitable to be sustainable. It must meet golfer/customer expectations. But what is being done to modify golfer expectations in this time of extreme activist and regulatory pressure to help superintendents champion environmental steward goals?

Is Sustainable Maintainable?

BY JOEL JACKSON



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Any programs that urge superintendents and golf facilities to change practices to become "greener" and more sustainable should have a strong education component aimed at owners, members and golfers. Focusing on the superintendent's role is not the answer. Superintendents are employees of owners, members and golfers. To keep their jobs, superintendents tend to do what their bosses want.

A growing number of superintendents are getting clubs enrolled in stewardship programs and are making headway to minimize inputs, conserve resources and reduce costs. Still, many superintendents and course officials feel change implies more time and expense to achieve some idealistic notion called environmental sustainability.

The bottom line is this: Is sustainable maintainable? Can the golf industry gurus unite and convince golfers of the merits of stewardship and to accept less-maintained turf acreage, yellowish and brownish roughs during dry periods, fewer fertilizer and chemical applications, fuzzier cart path edges, perennial plants instead of annuals, tree removal and pruning to let the sun shine on a green, and a lot of other things that don't really affect playing the game, but conserve resources and reduce inputs?

It's not enough just to showcase golf's positive environmental and economic facts to the government and the media. When golfers themselves are convinced that supporting sustainability is in the best interest of the game, we will have taken the biggest step toward building grassroots support for achieving sustainable golf.

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