

PLANNING & PROTECTING YOUR AERATION PLAN



The aeration is the easy part. Getting golfers and the pro shop to



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AERATION... there are few words that strike greater fear and provoke more misunderstanding in our industry. Superintendents are experts in the many agronomic aspects of aeration. They're well versed in the research of Dr. Joe Duich, Dr. Bob Carrow and others pointing to the many positive results of properly timed aeration, such as relieving compaction and the management of organic matter in the primary root zone of putting greens.

A talented superintendent can also demonstrate the multitasking skills of an orchestra conductor during aeration, as all of the elements move in proper sequence from aerator, core harvesting, amendment application, top dressing and rolling. A perfectly planned and executed aeration is a thing of beauty to a superintendent.


However, the tough economic times have

added a new element to the aeration process: protecting the aeration plan. Well meaning property managers have begun causing disruptions in the scheduling and execution of aeration programs. Now the superintendent must not only master the art of aeration, but also know how to protect the aeration plan.

Let's take a look at a few key tactics to defending the aeration plan: scheduling, communication/education, and execution.

Aeration scheduling

The scheduling of aeration is simple from an agronomic point of view: You would normally plan your aeration during the early part of the active growth season of the turf to minimize recovery time and maximize the positive effects to root and overall plant health. This could mean that transition zone courses that have bentgrass greens and



ultradwarf Bermudagrass greens at a multi-course property may be aerating their bent greens in April but not aerating the Bermuda greens until June. If multiple aerations were required during the season you would logically space them far enough apart to keep the grass from experiencing too much stress between aerations.

But this practice has helped give rise to the illusion that we aerate greens when they are at their best and as soon as they are fully recovered (in the eyes of the novice) we aerate them again. The true goal is to schedule aeration to keep the turf in an optimum growing condition.

The complexity to scheduling aeration in today's golf world is the drive to recapture the lost or reduced revenue days that are caused by aeration. Make no mistake, aeration scheduling is all about balancing the business' need for short-term revenue and your responsibility to provide for the long-term health of the agronomic assets (the turf).

These are in conflict now more than



buy into your plan? That's where the *real work* begins.

ever and you are charged with negotiating an amicable solution. Here are five tips to accomplish this:

Tip # 1: Involve the entire management team in the aeration scheduling process. Be willing to compromise but be honest about consequences and have everyone sign off on the final schedule.

Tip # 2: Post aeration dates at least 18 months in advance and try to make it a rare occasion to change dates and strategies (tine size/type, spacing, etc.) Yes, let the pro shop know your aeration dates this far out. In this new age of tee sheets expanding ever further into the future, you don't want your director of golf trying to argue that a charity tournament was on the schedule first. Your aeration schedule should always be on their first to give you an advantage in the negotiations

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Plan & Protect



Most superintendents excel at training, but are challenged by communicating to a variety of groups.

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that will surely come up.

Tip # 3: Be sure the aeration schedule is posted everywhere in your communication network such as tee sheets, newsletters, web-sites and social media sites.

Tip # 4: Keep accurate records from year to

year to use as a planning tool in future years, tracking both the effectiveness of the aeration and the financial impact.

Tip #5: Develop a comprehensive education program to help every stakeholder understand the positive results of your aeration program.

At the end of the day an aeration schedule is only as strong as the individuals who buy into its importance, so make sure this critical area is covered with the complete buy-in of the entire operation.

Spreading the message

Education and communication are critical to the success of your aeration plan. This concept goes far beyond the training of your maintenance staff to actually perform the task of aeration. Most superintendents excel in training, but it is the concept of educating and communicating with a variety of groups that can be challenging.

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AERATION 101

Aeration is the process of turf cultivation that uses either **coring** (tines that are either hollow or drill units and aerate to a depth of 3 to 4 inches or 8 to 10 inches respectively) or **punching** (solid tines that penetrate the soil ranging from 3 inches to 18 inches) to relieve soil compaction. Coring allows for the reduction of organic matter content (critical in the management of sand-based putting greens) by removing the cores that are produced either by hand or mechanically. **Blowing** (with backpack or other mechanical blowers) is useful for the removal of smaller particles. Tines are the replaceable metal parts that attach to the aerator and come in a variety of metals and sizes. Hollow tines that are used in coring are measured in either Outer Diameter (OD) or Inner Diameter (ID) and can be either top eject or side eject. A 0.5-inch ID tine will make a larger aeration hole than a 0.5-inch OD tine and a side-eject tine ejects core material faster than a top-eject tine to prevent clogging. Aeration is often accompanied by **topdressing**, which is the application of sand or other material to the treated area. Topdressing fills the aeration holes and helps smooth the surface and is one of the best biological controls for **thatch**, a layer of dead and living organic tissue. **Rolling** is a mechanical process that smoothes the turf surface. These processes will help us keep our turf healthy and provide quality playing surfaces throughout the golf season.

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To give an aeration program the best chance of success during these tough economic times, a superintendent must communicate in a common language and spread that message throughout the operation. The purpose is to teach the importance of aeration and the specifics of your aeration plan to all the stakeholders ranging from staff to members/golfers.

Developing a small card with a few key comments about aeration can be helpful, especially for staff members. Include the date and type of aeration (coring with hollow tines or punching with solid tines), tine size and any other agronomic activities planned (fertilizer or topdressing) and an estimated time of recovery (usually 10 to 20 days but it is always better to err on the high side). Include a few key power phrases like, "keeping our greens at their best" or "it's the best way to erase the effects of 100,000 golf shoe prints."

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Remember that these people will have very little actual knowledge of the terms and processes associated with aeration, so making it the most basic review is important. See “**Aeration 101**” as an example of the content that should be covered.

This may seem like a lot of information for, say, the bartender. But if you can get your bartender to at least make an effort to digest some of this information, you’ll have a hidden ally at the course who can help make your life easier by communicating some part of that message to the golfers.

Consider this scenario: A group of golfers are sitting at the bar talking about the fact that the greens have been aerated. The bartender can chime in one of two ways. He can come off as an enemy of the maintenance team and damage the entire system by saying something like, “Yeah, can you believe they aerated the greens again?” Or he can do the exact opposite and help out your aeration plan by saying simply, “You know they’ve been aerating greens like that at the course for 20 years, and this system is the reason we get to enjoy perfect greens late into the season...”

I have also had a lot of success inviting any interested party to come out and watch a “demonstration aeration” where we would aerate the practice

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green and take the time to answer questions and show the processes step by step. This gives us a chance to check out equipment and engage a variety of stakeholders. We normally schedule this the afternoon prior to the full aeration date. If you have a web page or a Facebook page you can take a few pictures of the process and post comments.

Here are a few tips for education and communication of your aeration plan:

Tip #1: Train your staff but educate the entire operation and all stakeholders (golfers, members, food and beverage staff, etc.)

Tip #2: Utilize all the modern communication devices that you can such as websites, newsletters and social network pages and do not forget the smartphone with the high-resolution camera.

Tip #3: Create cards and other training aides to promote a common language that will be consistent throughout your operation. When anyone answers a question about your scheduled aeration the consistency will be a huge advantage.

Tip #4: Conduct an “aeration demonstration” to allow interested parties to see the entire process and learn the importance of each scheduled task.

Tip #5: Attend local or regional trade shows to gather the latest information about products and Best Management Practices (BMPs) as they relate to aeration and the local golf business.

Executing the plan

Finally, let's talk about the execution of the aeration plan. This is where superintendents excel, getting the work done.

Many superintendents use other turfgrass cultivation activities such as verticutting, spik-



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ing, spooning and slicing in conjunction with an appropriate aeration program. Sometimes superintendents might even substitute these less aggressive processes instead of aerating.

My advice is to remember that when choosing your aeration plan and its goals/components, consider the amount of organic matter to be removed, other stresses on the turf, construction methods/soil types and as always ultimately the effect on financial needs of the operation. Here are the top things to consider when executing your aeration plan:

- Small diameter solid-tine aeration tends to be effective for about three weeks while hollow-tine aeration with larger tines can be effective for about eight weeks. Plan accordingly and local knowledge trumps most other sources.

- If you can no longer afford to buy aerators due to capital budget limitations, consider hiring an outside contractor to punch your holes. You save the money on equip-

ment costs and pick up a few extra crew members on aeration day.

- Share equipment. Core harvesters or other specialty equipment can be borrowed or bartered. Be sure that the equipment is properly cleaned before and after use.

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When selecting tine size and type, local knowledge trumps most other sources.

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It is more important than ever for a superintendent to plan the work and protect the plan.

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■ Take a close look at the cost of your tines and the square footage you get out of each set. You may be able to increase your results and

save a few dollars at the same time by changing the type of tines you use.

■ Flex schedule your staff on aeration day, bringing in each group in relation to their primary task to keep everyone busy and minimize the hurry up and wait factor.

Aeration is a complex and critical part of any successful superintendent's skill set. The ability to schedule, educate/communicate and execute a detailed aeration plan is one of many evolving skills that superintendents need to thrive in difficult economic times. It is more important than ever for a superintendent to plan the work and protect the plan. ■

Anthony Williams, CGCS, CGM, is the director of grounds at the 36-hole Stone Mountain (Ga.) Golf Club. He is the first two-time winner of the GCSAA/Golf Digest Environmental Leaders in Golf Awards, as well as one of Golf Inc.'s "20 most admired golf operators." This is his first article for Golfdom.

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