

THE SECRET RECIPE OF THE PUTTING GREEN



By Joe Sell

Why do putting greens need instructions? Roll, verticut, topdress...

What are you going to do first?

Being that I'm the third generation of my family to enter into golf course maintenance, I knew from an early age that maintaining a high quality putting surface would be in my future. However, I clearly underestimated the level of experience and knowledge it would take.

We all know everyone gets into this business for the same reason... We love to drive cool stuff! However, at some point we have to stop driving the cool stuff. When you've moved past the cool stuff, you have to answer that tough question: How do you get the perfect greens that everyone wants?

When it comes to the best way of achieving that high quality putting surface, I have learned that even with all the education and work experience out there, it seems my way is still the best way. (Well, that's what we all like to think.)

So what is the secret recipe then? I do not truly have it, but some common sense sure will take you a long way. I like to think about the basics: soil, water and fertility. Technology has brought us a long way, but they were still making golf

courses playable 50 years ago.

Some people think if I keep rolling greens until all the air space is out, then they'll be fast. I have been part of those conversations. I wish I hadn't been. I also have heard you can't overroll sand-based greens. My thoughts are always, "Yeah... maybe new ones." A 5-year-old profile is still quite different than a new one. Some form of aerification is needed, unless you like dandelion putting surfaces.

When you walk into the shed and start thinking about fertilizing, remember what that walk was like and take into consideration the weather conditions. It's March 15 and 75 degrees in Wisconsin. Usually at this time there is snow on the ground. Just because the calendar says it's March 15 doesn't mean I still plan to go shovel snow. Simple, right? So similarly, why would you use the same fertilizer on the same day every year? I'm sure there are a lot of us who do. Because it works? Or because it's easy? It just doesn't make sense to me. Not to mention those using only liquid fertilizer.

If you keep only putting nutrition sources on the leaves, it might look good for a while, but what about the roots? At some point I have to believe the soil will get so stripped of the plant's basic needs that no amount of liquid fertility will help. I am no scientist, but there is a reason farmers — the largest group of plant growers — rotate their crops on fields.

Water smarter, not harder. Use a wetting agent. Be prepared to water even when it doesn't need it. But it's not practical to water 3 minutes every night, either.

Nothing can substitute for a good topdressing program. If you have to use sand mowers for more than 3 days, you put too much sand down. If you are seeing thin spots from traffic, maybe stop verticutting and aerifying that spot. The traffic will keep the organic matter down, and the little that is there will help provide a buffer to the area. It works, trust me.

Not every green is the same, even on the same golf course. Everyone is interested in finding the golden ticket or the secret recipe to the perfect putting green. Guess what? There isn't one.

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