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Editorial Index

Company	Page No.	GCSAA	10,80
Advan LLC	38,80	Germantown C.C.	8
Advanced Aeration Systems	74	Golf Club at Cuscowilla (The)	20
Albuquerque C.C.	16	Goose Creek G.C.	76
Andersons (The)	72	Gowan Co.	40
Arysta LifeScience	44	Irrigation Association	80
Aquatrols Corp.	16,80	Jacobsen Hardy G.C.	80
Audubon International	50	John Deere	70,74
Augusta National	8,26	Kahkwa Club	18
Aurora C.C.	78	Kemper Sports Management	80
Automotive Aftermarket Suppliers Assoc.	14	Lastec Inc.	80
Barton Creek Resort and Spa	80	Links of Novi	10
BASF	44,70	Links of Pinewood	10
Bayer Environmental Science	42,72,80	Marriott Golf	80
Bell Laboratories	42,74	Mitchell Creek	10
Bethpage State Park	35	Mohawk G.C.	80
Blackstone C.C.	80	Monsanto Co.	38
Bobcat Co.	74	Motor Equipment Manufacturers Assoc.	14
Bogie Lake G.C.	10	National Alliance for Accessible Golf	32
Broken Sound G.C.	76	National Amputee Golf Association	30
Candlewood C.C.	22	National Center Accessibility	32
C.C. of Darien	80	National Golf Foundation	14
Chemtura Crop Protection	42	Newport C.C.	18
Clarkston G.C.	10	New York State Turfgrass Association	80
Cleary Chemical	44,72	NGCOA	14,32
Club Car	54	North Ridge C.C.	49
Coyote G.C.	10	Nufarm Americas	80
David D. Davis and Assoc.	78	Old Sandwich G.C.	16
Desert Willow	52	Otterbine Barebo Inc.	80
Dow AgroSciences	42,72	Partridge Creek G.C.	10
DuPont Professional Products	42	PBI/Gordon	40
Eagle One Golf Products	72	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals	48
Eldorado G.C.	10	PGA National Resort and Club	
Farmlinks G.C.	55	Phoenix Environmental Care	72
FMC	40	Pinehills G.C.	20
Forest Crossing G.C.	34	Pontiac C.C.	10
GCBAA	14	Prairie Dunes G.C.	16

Precision Laboratories	72	Standard Golf Co.	72
Pro-Mark	70	Syngenta Professional Products	44,54,72,80
Pursell Technologies Inc.	54	Terre Co.	80
Rain Bird Golf	74	Toro Co. (The)	54,72,80
Responsible Industry Sound Environment	80	Turfco	74
Ritz-Carlton Members G.C.	80	Turfgrass Council of North Carolina	80
Riviera C.C.	18	Turf Merchants	74
Saddle Creek Resort	80	Ty-Crop	72
Salem C.C.	18	USGA	18,32
Shady Canyon G.C.	8	Valley Club of Montecito	16
SISIS	74	Veronica Valley	10
Society Prevention of Cruelty to Animals	39	Widow's Walk	52
Spencer Municipal G.C.	8	Wildhorse Resort and Casino	80

Ad Index

Circle No.	Page No.	Novozymes Biologicals Inc	21
Andersons The	39,71	Nu-Gro Technologies, Inc.	87
Aquascape Designs	47	Oxford Garden	40
Arvesta Corp	CV2-1	Parkway Research Corp	69
B A S F Corp	7,22-23,31	P B I Gordon	33
Bell Labs Inc	6,9	Rain Bird Sales Inc	37
Bernhard and Co LTD	20	Scotts Co	(reg) 81
Champion Turf Farms	(reg) 79	Seed Research of Oregon	43
Cleary Chemical Corp	5, CV4	Sisis	4
Covermaster Inc	82	SoloRider Mgmt, LLC	4
Dow Agrosciences	15,17	Standard Golf	18,19
Dupont Co	(reg) 77	Syngenta	12-13
Eagle Golf	82	Target (reg)	48a-48b
Eagle One Golf	45	Tech Sales	83
FarmSaver	CV3	The Toro Co	11
From Tee to TGreen	83	Tru Turf Equip	35
Grigg Brothers	41	Tee to Green	30
Gro Power Inc	6	Turf Merchants	25
Howard Fertilizer	(Reg) 87	Turfco Mfg Inc	75
IVI-Sandtrapper	59	Turfmaster	83
Jeg Inc	82	Z Screen	27
Klingstone Inc	(reg) 79	TURFGRASS TRENDS	
Lawngrrips	82	Bayer Environmental Scienc	(reg) 63
Lesco Inc	51	Floratine	61
Magna Matic Corp	83	John Deere and Co	59
Markers Inc	82	Pursell Tech Inc	65
MKB LLC	83	This index is provided as an additional service. The publisher does not assume any liability for errors or omissions.	
New England Reg'l Turfgrass	(reg) 85		

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ironing

Back in high school, a wrinkly shirted friend laughingly deemed that ironing was “a fad.” I, being of full manliness, declared the same, and throughout my 20’s and 30’s wound up routinely bedecked in crumpled raiments that earned me countless insults on my domestic skills. The worst incident — the one that finally changed me — was from a colleague in front of a group of 50 teenagers. She asked simply, “Do you even own an iron?”

Cackling ensued, and while red-faced and ego-bruised and with pants, well, quite wrinkled, I made a vow to never be so unsmooth again.

As I dove into this new land of pressing knowledge, I quickly discovered how much of my source information was thoroughly incorrect. The Chinese came up with the notion as early as the first century B.C., tucking hot charcoal into pans to flatten garments. The Scandinavians were down with smoothing stones and smoothing boards — both heat-free ways in which to roll out even the toughest of rumples. Then came the wave of the future — propelled by those fancy high collars — with a series of goffering irons, flutter irons and sad irons. I learned of Mrs. Mary Florence Potts, who invented the cold-handle sad iron, allowing quick changing of iron bases; Mr. Henry Seely, who patented an electric flatiron in 1882. Further, I gained ironing inspira-

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BY MARK LUCE

tion from two completely different sources: Suresh Joachim of Ontario, Canada; and my own musical tastes.

First, Mr. Joachim. On Sept. 22, 2005, Suresh Joachim started ironing in a mall in Canada; 55 hours 5 minutes later, he stopped, setting another of his 20 world records. Mr. Joachim performs these feats to raise money to combat childhood poverty. So if he can manage to iron for more than two days, I can surely find 20 minutes to compress a couple of pairs of pants and a few Oxfords — especially if the cause was my own fashion sense.

I have always understood the basics — an iron gets hot, it makes wrinkles go away. I had never thought of my cotton shirts such as Louis Bloomfield, University Virginia Professor and author of



“How Things Work: The Physics of Everyday Life,” had put on one his final exams: “Cotton fibers are essentially pure cellulose, a glassy, crystalline polymer formed from sugar molecules. One reason for spraying water on a cotton shirt just before you iron that shirt is

that the water acts as a plasticizer, lubricating the polymer molecules so that they can rearrange easily during ironing.” In other words: heat plus weight equals straight clothes.

With that in mind, I dusted off the electric steam iron, filled it with distilled water, hit the switch and scanned the memory banks for the basics — start at the collar, work your way down, sleeves before front. To keep me focused on the task, a mix CD seemed appropriate and the name “Zen Ironing” seemed to work on the metaphorical level of evening out one’s laundry and in turn, one’s life.

So now, with the strains of old blues, melancholy odes and dreams of being king, I have finally found myself in clothes that not only fit but keep their creases, too.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he remains convinced that “wrinkle-free” means nothing of the sort.

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