



## THREE NEW READS

By Monroe S. Miller

Although they aren't on the *New York Times* best seller list, the three books I am going to tell you about likely would interest most golf course superintendents, on the surface anyway. "Interest" may be charitable in two of these books; "irritate" might be the better word.

The books are:

1. *The Lawn* by Virginia Scott Jenkins (Smithsonian Institution Press)
2. *Management of Turfgrass Diseases* by J. M. Vargas, Jr. (Lewis Publishers)
3. *Redesigning The American Lawn* by F. Herbert Bormann, Diana Balmori and Gordon T. Geballe (Yale University Press)

Joe Vargas is almost as well known to Wisconsin golf course superintendents as he is among our Michigan colleagues. He is always on the Reinners Conference program, has spoken at our monthly meetings, has addressed the Symposium, and frequently is a speaker at the GCSAA annual conference. If you attend conferences in other states, you likely have heard him there, too. He has made over 1,000 educational presentations in his quarter century as a Michigan State University faculty. Clearly, he is an excellent speaker.

While you are reading his new book, you get the feeling that he is talking with you about grass diseases and turf management. Unlike many other academic authors, Dr. Vargas spikes his book with strong recommendations, personal opinions and observations made in years of experience. He is quick to debunk theories he doesn't believe. I absolutely love this book, and those might be the primary reasons why.

Vargas doesn't pull any punches, and he offers up some brutally frank assessments of problems we all have faced. Witness his comments on pp. 193-194 about *Poa annua*: "I realize that treating annual bluegrass as a desirable turfgrass species is going to be met with amazement in some quarters, because some people still con-

sider it to be strictly a weed. But treating annual bluegrass strictly as a weed is the equivalent to living in the Dark Ages and thinking the world is flat." Strong words, but true! No wonder I like this book!

Here's another example of blunt albeit humorous comment regarding the practice of collecting clippings to prevent thatch: "This theory should rank with such fairy tales as Peter Pan, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and Cinderella."

Table 6.8 will be useful to you. It is a fungicide efficacy chart, based on Dr. Vargas' own experience and not on product labels. Real world stuff.

The bold type headings that identify subject matter make frequent use of two words—criteria and strategy. He offers us big time help in developing a plan of attack for disease control. If you see either of those two words, read carefully. There's lots there to learn.

*Management of Turfgrass Diseases* is well organized, well written in a comfortable style and chocked full of information you can use. As with other good books, when you pick this one up and start reading it, you will find it tough to put down. And it is a text book!

If you buy only one book for your office library this year, let this be the one.

*Redesigning The American Lawn* (A Search for Environmental Harmony) was given to me by a good friend. The title caused a twitch in my eyebrow. I was immediately suspicious. I quickly looked up the background of the authors—all from the Ivy League's Yale University. Strike one—not much agriculture taught at Yale U. Hardly one of the major midwestern research universities. The authors were all affiliated with the Forestry Department at Yale U. Strike two—not much turf management taught in the forestry disciplines.

Then I read the book.

The best way I can describe the historical review of lawns and the subsequent recommendations found in this book is "same old, same old." Somehow, these authors think they've

stumbled onto something new. Sorry, they haven't. Any one of us in the grass industry who is fairly well read could have written this slender volume. No PhD required. A couple of days in the Steenbock Library, an outline and a couple of days writing and—bingo—a book on the new American lawn.

Frankly, I wonder where all the lawns using the resources the authors claim are located. Not too many here in Middleton or even Madison. I've got a decent lawn and here's what I do: One to one and a half pounds of nitrogen per year, mowing once every seven to ten days, spot treat broadleaf weeds with a squirt bottle. I collect clippings once in a while to mulch my garden (I loathe pulling weeds or hoeing). My 22 year old Lawnboy rotary mower uses about 2.5 gallons of gas/oil mix a year (condemn me to hell for ALL that pollution). Once I used a pre-emergent herbicide because of the excellent crabgrass crop my neighbor's lawn produced for about three years running. As I think about it, I may be doing about what the authors want everybody to do!

As I said, nothing new in this book. Don't buy it; if you are curious, you may borrow my copy.

Finally, the book *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* caught my eye because of some good work by the graphic designer of the cover. It is done in a 1950s turquoise and dusty rose color combination, dressed up with a flamingo and a picture of Sam Sneed behind a 1951 Toro reel mower!

I was optimistic about reading an honest, unbiased history of grass lawns in our country. After all, the book was copyrighted by the Smithsonian; it had to be pure and right and true.

The word OBSESSION in the title appears in all caps and bold type—red flag to me. Also, the author was a "cultural historian"—PhD?—teaching in the history department at Catholic University—red flag number 2. I mean, where is Catholic U. and what are the author's credentials in the turfgrass sciences?

Can you imagine a professor of Dairy Science at the UW-Madison writing a book about papal history? Some would laugh at that prospect, and maybe we should laugh at *The Lawn*, too, even before reading it.

But I am more open minded than that, so I read the book. The whole

thing. This is not a highly entertaining book, but it is as readable as a lot of "historical" records are. Ms. Jenkins used a lot of references in putting this volume together—nearly 50 pages worth of literature review.

This book is no "expose", as one reviewer claimed in the cover notes, of how Americans have been duped by the USGA (can you believe that one?), the Garden Clubs of America (honest) and the U.S Department of Agriculture (I always was suspicious that USDA bureaucrats were sneaky)!

I have come to realize that it really kills some in this country that there are millions of Americans who have pride in their homes and property and really enjoy having a beautiful lawn around their home. Jealousy? Envy? Who knows.

Ms. Jenkins makes this startling and brilliant announcement on p. 184: "Lawns represent time, money and labor."

So doesn't everything else in our lives? Here's my analysis: I use 2.5 gallons of fuel to cut my yard for a year, at a cost of about \$3.50. A spot weeder spray bottle sells for about \$3.95. That 1.5 pounds of nitrogen fertilizer I put on each year costs around \$20, for an annual grand total (including all taxes) of \$28.65. The time probably amounts to about 30 hours a season.

Compare that to a trip to hear the Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of AIDA by Guiseppe Verdi. Tickets for two come to \$120. Most likely, from Madison, a car will consume a dozen gallons of fuel getting to Chicago, to the tune of about \$14. Tolls, meals, a room for the night and a program will add another \$100. One performance—\$250. Good grief! Let's ban the opera and save the world. It repre-

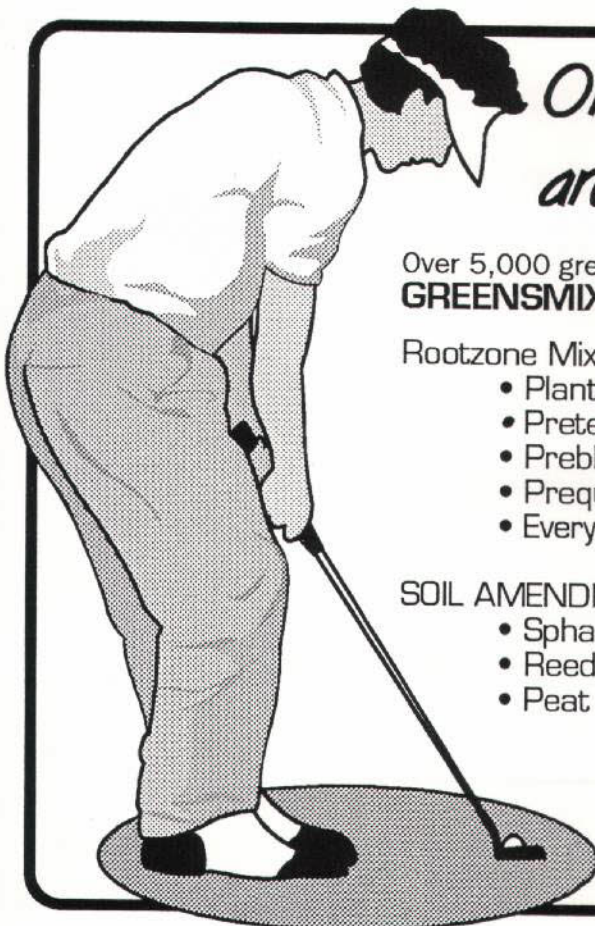
sents time, money and labor. Heaven forbid. Fact is, it makes my lawn look like a clean, safe bargain.

You can make the same case with a trip to a Packers game, the Rose Bowl or a weekend at the State Fair in West Allis.

My point is that *The Lawn* is hardly the unbiased, prejudice-free read I had hoped for. Don't buy it; you can borrow mine. 🍷

## WGCSA Meeting Locations For 1994

DATE	LOCATION	SPEAKER/TOPIC
August 8 (Monday)	JANESVILLE C.C. - Janesville, WI Brad Wagner, G.C. Superintendent	—
August 16 (Tuesday)	<b>WTA Field Day</b> O.J. Noer Center, Madison, WI	—
September 12 (Monday)	LAWSONIA G.C. - Green Lake, WI Mike Berwick, G.C. Superintendent	Bob Vavrek (Dinner) "Year in Review - 1994"
September 19 (Monday)	<b>WTA Golf Outing</b> Beloit C.C. - Beloit, WI Don Ferger, G.C. Superintendent	—
October 3 (Monday)	PINE HILLS C.C. - Sheboygan, WI Rod Johnson, G.C. Superintendent	Dr. Frank Rossi (Lunch) "To Be Announced"
October 7-8 (Friday/Saturday)	<b>WGCSA Dinner Dance</b> Cold Water Canyon G.C. - Wisconsin Dells, WI	—
December 5-6 (Monday/Tuesday)	<b>WGCSA / GCSAA Regional Seminar</b> Ramada Inn - Fond du Lac, WI	"Preconstruction and Construction Management"



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