

# Wisconsin Turfgrass Disease Diagnostic Lab: *The Next Step*



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The dirty little secret among turfgrass professionals is that PLANT DISEASE DOES HAPPEN, no matter how hard we try to prevent it. Consequently, Plant Disease Management that is effective, timely, and as economical as possible is critical. The first step in appropriate turfgrass disease management must be the correct diagnosis of the problem, so the Wisconsin Turfgrass Disease Diagnostic Lab (TDDL) was created last year to provide commercial turfgrass professionals and homeowners with rapid, unbiased evaluations of turfgrass diseases and to then make appropriate management recommendations.

Our staff gets this information out as quickly as possible by phone, FAX, and mail, but is actively pursuing the newer electronic communication methods, such as E-mail and the WWW (World Wide Web), for up-to-the-minute information dissemination. Also, new molecular DNA technologies are to be developed for the more rapid identification of some elusive pathogens.

In the summer of 1995, the TDDL was under the supervision of Dr. Douglas P. Maxwell, a long-time member of the Plant Pathology Department, and Mr. Steve M. Millett, who has an M. Sc. Degree in turfgrass pathology from Clemson University and who is a Ph. D. graduate student with Dr. Maxwell. Mr. Millett was the fellow who provided the diagnoses and recommendations for the 200 plus samples submitted last summer. The 1995 season must rank as one of the most difficult summers in decades for golf course superintendents. The TDDL saw its share of unusual turfgrass problems, and "Poa decline" became an everyday topic of discussion.

In the March/April issue of THE GRASS ROOTS, Mr. Robert Erdahl, a member of the WTA Board of Directors,

outlined the partnership between the WTA and the TDDL for 1996 and the near future. This involves an initial sharing of expenses, with the University of Wisconsin and funds generated by the WTA each providing half the salary of a Research Specialist. Additional operating costs will come from increased fees (\$20 for homeowners and \$60 for commercial samples) and funds generated by the WTA. To achieve this arrangement, the TDDL offered \$1,000 contracts for services for the 1996 summer season. For each contract the staff of the TDDL will process 10 samples and make one site visit, and all contract holders will be invited to attend a plant disease management educational day. The needed funds were raised by the time of Expo-96. What an enthusiastic demonstration of support for the TDDL!

Personnel are the key to the success of any operation, and this was of little concern since Ms. Catherine Smejkal, who had been associated with Dr. Worf's and Dr. Meyer's turfgrass program for many years, was to be the diagnostician. Unfortunately, this was not to be, and her untimely and tragic death due to cancer in March 1996 has left a major void. A position description was approved by the

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Departmental Chair of Plant Pathology in March and applicants will be interviewed until a suitable candidate has been found.

What does the future hold? In short, not what was originally planned in the fall of 1995, but contingency plans are in place. The TDDL will move from Russell Labs on the main campus to the O. J. Noer Turfgrass Research & Education Facility in April. Personnel will include Mr. Gary Gaard, a long-time research and administrative employee of the Department of Plant Pathology, Steve Millett, and Doug Maxwell, as well as an undergraduate, Andi Guerin, who worked in the TDDL in August/September of 1995. The team of Gaard, Millett, and Maxwell will review all data collected during the diagnosis of each sample and jointly come to a diagnosis and plant disease management recommendation. Mr. Millett has by far the most experience with turfgrass diseases, and he will be involved in the final decision on each sample. When a new diagnostician has been hired, he/she will become part of this TDDL team.

The TDDL staff are not isolated. We have electronic mail connections to Dr. Randy Kane, the Turfgrass Disease Management Expert in the Chicago area, Dr. Hank Wilkinson, the Turfgrass Pathologist at the University of Illinois, and Dr. Phil Larsen, the Turfgrass Pathologist at the University of Minnesota, colleagues who have all indicated that they are willing to discuss any particular problem to give us a helping hand, if needed.

**On a personal note:** Mr. Bob Erdahl hit the nail on the head in his recent article about my expertise—(Doug Maxwell is) "long on plant pathology (32 yrs) and short on experience with turfgrass diseases." What are we (I say we because it is not just me.) doing about this? Getting involved!! This started with a wonderful experience when the WTA invited me to attend the International GCSAA meeting in Orlando in February. After a two-day workshop on Golf Course Design by Geoffrey Cornish and Robert Graves, I'll never look at a golf course in the same way. The workshop was excellent and I enjoyed it immensely. (It was my lucky day that all the disease management seminars were filled, because I'm certain that I would never have selected a seminar on golf course design—not in a hundred years.) Without this introduction, I would not have appreciated the article by Monroe S. Miller on the Tillinghast-designed Cobble Valley Country Club; now I can hardly wait

to see this course with its par 4 18th hole which has a dog-leg right, as it goes around the old spring house.

Orlando was the beginning for me; now it is spring. With the help of the WTA, we have at least three superintendent mentors: Monroe Miller of Blackhawk Country Club, Jeff Parks of University Ridge, and Joe Kessenich of Pleasant View Golf Club. These superintendents have agreed to spend some time with our staff each month discussing golf course and turfgrass management schemes. Again I feel so lucky to be part of this group! Also, the TDDL staff will visit at least 20 golf courses this summer. As we gain experience, we will be better able to serve the turfgrass industry. Maybe I'll even find time to hit my first golf ball, who knows? But whatever happens, it will be a growing season filled with excitement and wonder. (I wonder...where that ball went, what that white fuzz is, why it's still raining,...)

If you think that you have a disease management situation that needs attention, I hope that you'll give us a call. We are anxious to serve and to learn. ♣

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