

THATCH MANAGEMENT

Some Turf Troubles Never Go Away

By **BOB VAVREK**,
USGA Agronomist

Excessive thatch accumulation...it was interesting to hear how many times this age-old problem was cited at a recent disease seminar I attended as being a contributing factor for a wide variety of turf problems. Several researchers mentioned that thatchy sites are more likely to experience problems with localized dry spots, snow mold, or fairy rings compared to sites without excessive organic matter accumulation in the upper soil profile. Excessive thatch accumulation also was a concern regarding the management of new ultradwarf bermudagrass greens.

Manage your playing surfaces to strike a balance between the rate of turfgrass growth versus the rate of natural organic matter decomposition in the root zone and thatch will not be an issue. Once an undesirable layer of dense thatch develops, however, an aggressive program of core cultivation and topdressing is your best bet for addressing this problem.

Reduce excessive thatch in fairways and tees through frequent hollow-tine aeration operations. Break up the cores with a dragmat or flail mower and work the soil back into the turf. This process physically removes a small percentage of the thatch and introduces microbes responsible for organic matter decay into the thatch layer. Less disruptive operations such as solid tine aeration, water injection aeration, and spiking are great for relieving compaction, but stick with hollow tines when thatch is the primary objective.

Thatch management of a sand-based green is a more complicated process because topdressing with soil would likely clog pore spaces and ultimately limit water movement through the soil profile. Consequently, straight sand is commonly used as a topdressing material. Light, frequent applications of sand can help prevent future thatch development by constantly diluting the plant debris produced by the turf. Sand topdressing, though, only buries an existing thatch layer. Removing the cores following hollow tine aeration has traditionally been the most effective way to remove thatch from greens.

The Graden vertical mower is being used successfully as a substitute for core cultivation at some courses in southern states that manage bermudagrass greens or the ultra-dense, A and G series bentgrasses. Keep in mind that bermudagrass recovers very quickly from aggressive cultivation practices during warm weather. Cool season turf in central Wisconsin during spring or fall does not have anywhere close to the same recuperative potential as bermudagrass in

central Georgia during the summer.

In time, aggressive vertical mowing will undoubtedly find a niche in cool season turf management, but until then, be conservative and stick with the tried and true techniques. Golfers hate holes in greens and fairways as much as ever, but sometimes you have to break some eggs to make an omelet, especially a thatch omelet.

Source: rvavrek@usga.org or 262-797-8742.

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