

Usually while trying to solve a problem, it is helpful to look up the appropriate information, or call upon knowledge one already has. But what about times when that information is difficult to find, or the turf problem is unique and hasn't previously presented itself? To help stop a lack of know-how and inaccessible information from preventing quick solutions to turfgrass management issues, a survey was conducted last year to determine common turfgrass management practices and problems among survey recipients, as well as preferred methods for learning about and receiving information on turfgrass and lawn care. The results of this study will be used in the future to provide the most useful information in effective and easily accessible ways.

How the survey was conducted

The survey was conducted by sending out online questionnaires designed in Qualtrics to those who agreed to participate, and 1,234 people returned completed surveys. The survey was available over the period of January 1st to March 31st, 2013. Most respondents were homeowners (80%), while the remainder cared for turf in some other facet, such as in their professional life. To be honest,

this survey was initially written with homeowners in mind, with the main goal of disseminating low-input lawn care information in the way that they prefer to receive it. With the overwhelming response from golf course managers, this information will can be used to help drive our educational programs for you.

MGCSA member results

Of the people who completed surveys, 160 (this means you!) stated that they took care of golf course turf. When it came to how golf course managers like to get their information, 'listening to an expert lecture' was ranked in the top five choices most often, followed by 'browsing a website', 'reading', 'watching a demonstration', and 'watching a 3-5 minute video' (Figure 1). In regard to ways one would stay up to date on future turf information, websites were the most popular choice, followed by newsletters. Upon considering the information presented in a website, the source of information was most often chosen as the most important aspect of the site, followed by the presence of informative text. An additional question asked if there were any practices not previously listed in the survey that the respondent

Preferred Information Source

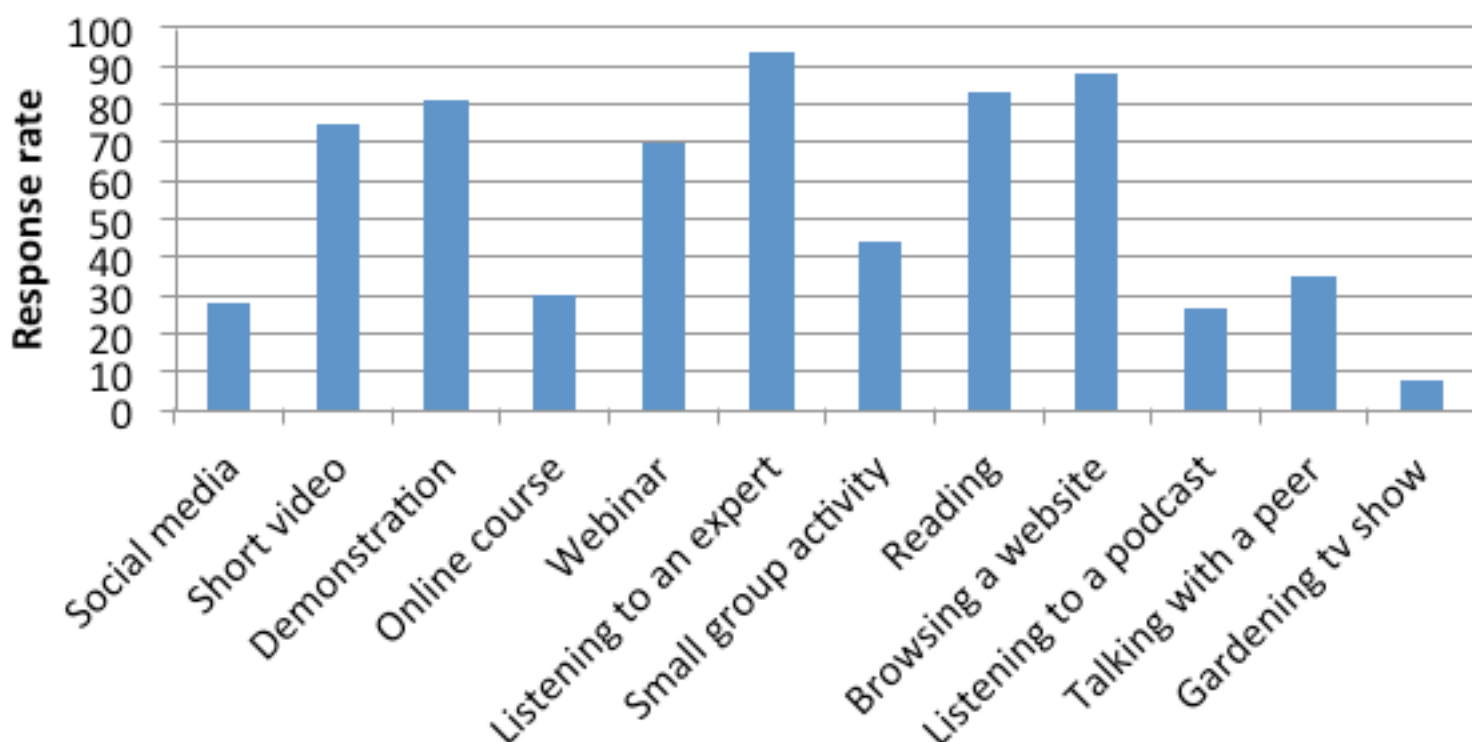


Figure 1. Golf course managers preferred information source to learn more about turfgrass management.

would like to learn more about. Golf superintendents wanted to learn more about specific topics, such as drainage issues, growing degrees days, and environmentally friendly practices, like organic products and low-input maintenance.

Further on in the survey, respondents were asked about lawn care products that are widely available at home improvement stores and garden centers. Of the questions on this topic, the answers to one question stood out when compared to the rest. When presented with the statement

‘Advertisements for the products available accurately represent the results I have experienced’, the average of the answers fell somewhere between ‘slightly disagree’ and ‘slightly agree’. This indicates that many golf course superintendents think the products available to homeowners do not always do precisely what they are advertised to do. In particular, when looking through the explanations as to why respondents answered the way they did, there was a general consensus that the products available for homeowner

use are of lower quality and not as effective as the products available to golf course managers, despite that many of these widely available products advertise themselves as being able to, in the words of one respondent, "...make your home lawn look like a golf course".

Ninety-five percent of golf course managers that responded had in the past attended a lawn care or turfgrass event. Most people had found out about the said event from a newsletter or from an individualized option, such as the MGCSA. In regard to future events, every respondent was interested in attending one, and most saw value in longer rather than shorter events (Figure 2). About a third would

prefer to attend an event that was half a day, and another third an event that was a full day. Of the remainder, 22% were in favor of an event lasting from 1-3 hours, 14% an event longer than a full day, and only 4% wished to attend an event that was less than an hour long.

Travel time choices were spread out as well, with 38% willing to travel 30-60 minutes, 28% between one and two hours, 20% more than two hours, and 14% less than a half hour (Figure 3). Not surprisingly, most respondents indicated that they would prefer to attend an event that was held in the morning or afternoon on a weekday during one of the winter months. January and February were the highest

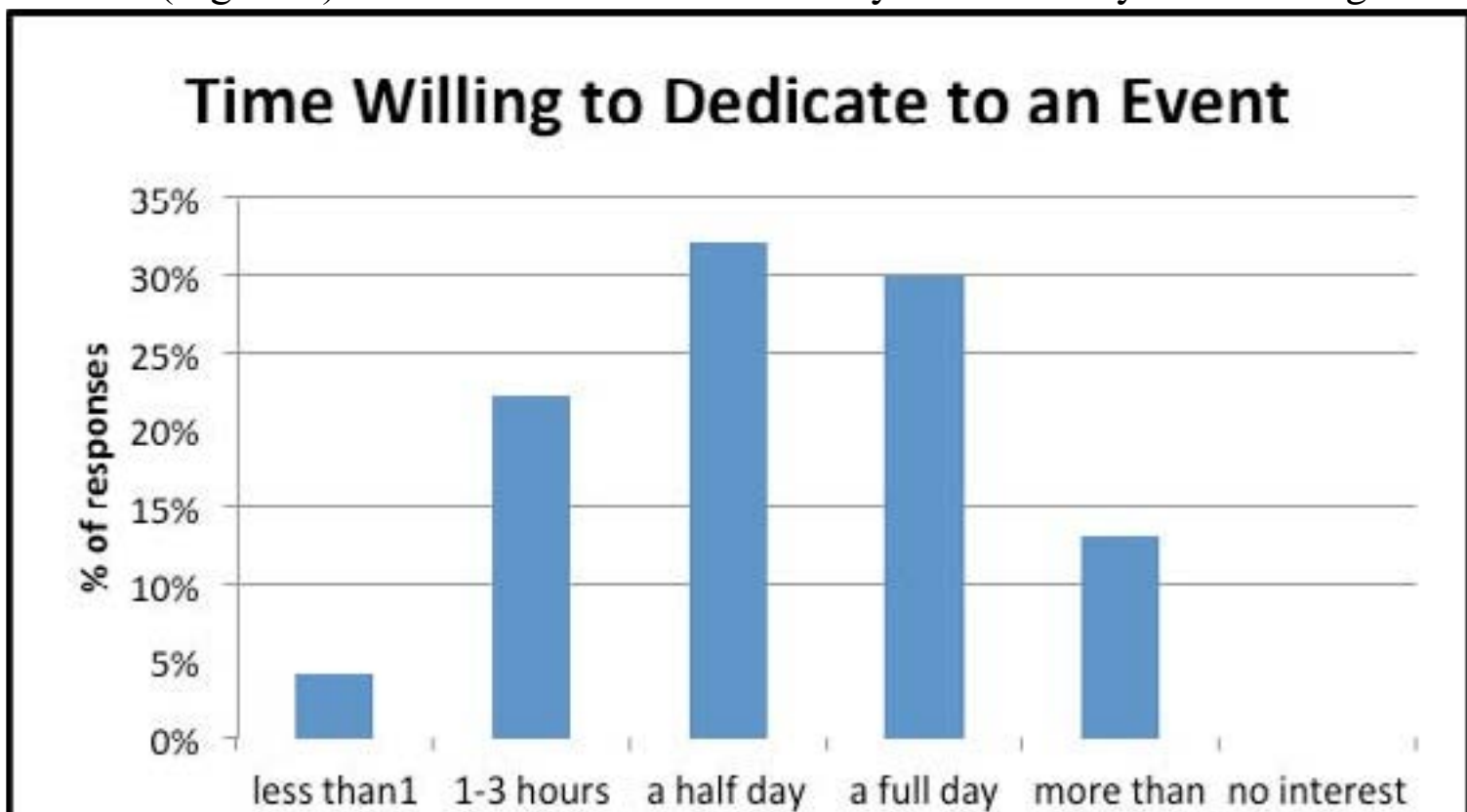


Figure 2. The amount of time that golf course managers are willing to dedicate to an educational event.

ranking months for an event. Finally, in regard to payment options, about half of the golf superintendents felt that somewhere between \$20 and \$50 was a fair price to pay to attend a turfgrass event. 32% were willing to pay somewhere between \$51 and \$100, while 12% would pay over \$100. The remainder (totaling 8%) would either not pay at all for an event or only pay an amount that was less than \$20.

A comparison of all results

The largest group of folks who responded to the survey were people who took care of home lawns. When comparing that group to golf course managers, there were some differences that stood out. When both groups were asked about how they wanted to stay up to date on turfgrass or lawn care issues, homeowners answered ‘newsletters’, ‘websites’, and ‘social media’ at a lower rate and ‘garden centers and ‘general media’ at a higher rate than golf superintendents. This is certainly no surprise. The remainder of the questions that asked about

Time Willing to Travel to an Event

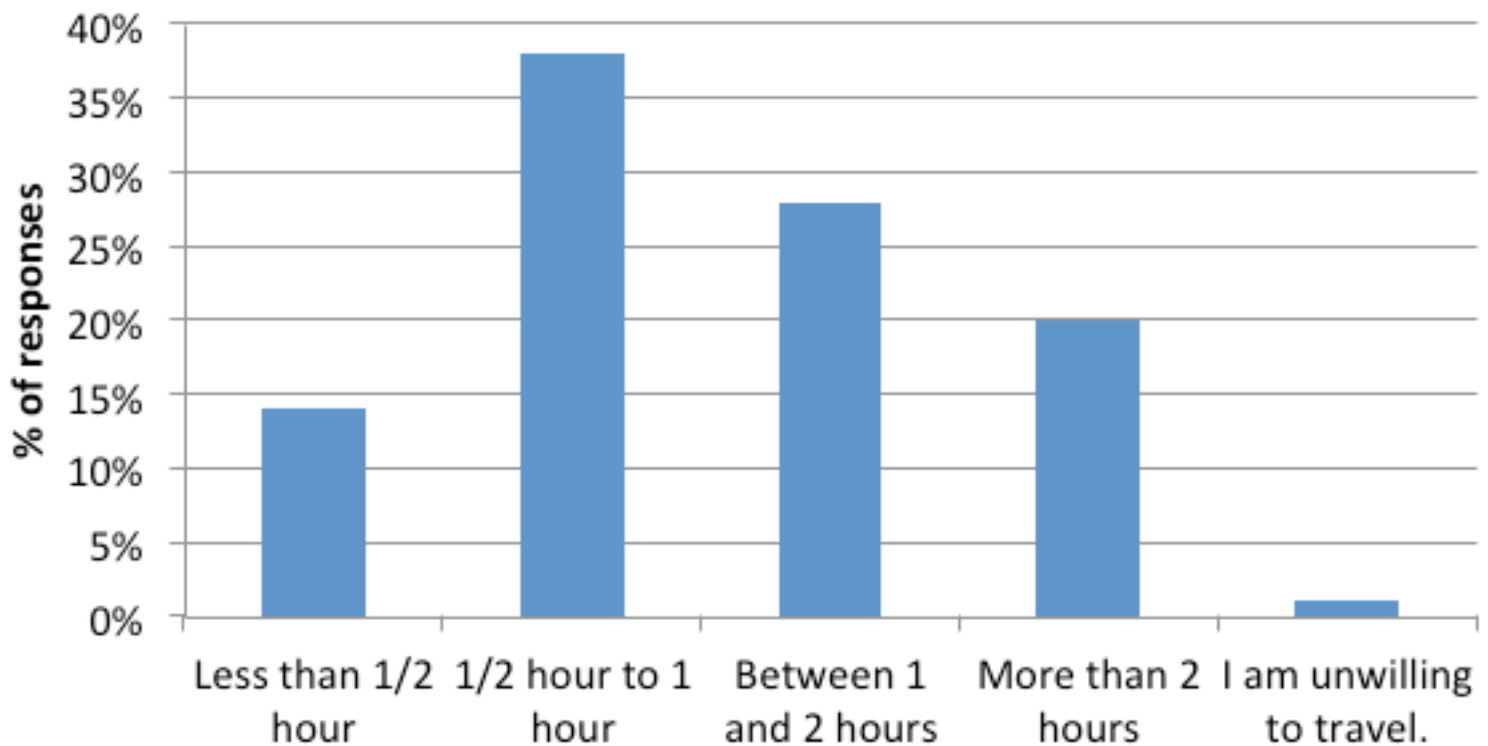


Figure 3. The amount of time that golf course managers are willing to travel to an educational event.

information reception resulted in answers from both groups that were very similar.

The turf management practices used by each group were different as well. Whereas most professionals conducted all of the common practices, homeowners were more divided. In particular, homeowners tended to not use insect or disease control, which they indicated was because they did not believe there was a need, they had environmental concerns about the practices, or lacked the knowledge to use those controls.

Additionally, homeowners were evenly split between whether they aerated their lawns or not, and when they did not aerate, it was because of a perceived lack of need, time, or knowledge. When asked the question about lawn care topics they would like to learn more about, homeowners were interested in a wider range of topics than golf superintendents, especially about subjects turf professionals may consider basic knowledge.

Homeowners most frequently wanted more information about issues with bare patches or thinning turf, low-input lawn care and organic products, pest issues caused by moles, voles, and Japanese beetles, choosing the correct turfgrass for certain situations, weed and disease control

options, and best cultural practices.

Regarding turfgrass or lawn management events, 44 % of homeowners had heard of a recent event they had attended through the University of Minnesota Extension, but 37 % had never attended an event of this nature. This is very different from golf course superintendents, almost all of whom had attended a turfgrass event, and had heard about it from a few different sources.

Over half of homeowners wanted such events to be one to three hours long, 18% preferred half day events, and 12% would attend events that were less than an hour. Golf course superintendents had a different, more even distribution that leaned towards longer events. Homeowners also preferred to travel shorter amounts of time to lawn care events, with 49% willing to travel 30 to 60 minutes, and 39% would travel no more than 30 minutes. This group also would rather attend these events in the morning and afternoon on weekends, or the evening on weekdays, mainly during the months of March and April, and February and May to a lesser extent.

The discrepancy between these groups in terms of event timing can likely be explained by work activities, as most superintendents would be attending events during their work

hours as part of their professional development, whereas homeowners would likely need to attend events outside of their normal work hours. In terms of payment, homeowners were willing to pay less money for turfgrass events, with 50% only willing to pay up to \$20, 29% wanted to pay between \$20 and \$50, and 15% not willing to pay for an event at all. This makes sense, as golf superintendents would be more likely to be using funds provided by their employer to pay for events and thus willing to pay more money. Additionally, turf management problems may be a less pressing issue to homeowners, as their jobs do not depend on them solving problems in their home lawn.

How we will use this information

It makes sense that there are different groups of people in our community that need and use information about turfgrass and lawn care. Before this survey was conducted it wasn't clear if there were differences in the type of information various groups of people use and how they like to receive it. The results from the survey indicate similarities and differences between the two groups, and this information can be used to give different groups of people the

information they want through the best channels and at the correct time of the year.

Golf superintendents need access to turfgrass information year round, but during the growing season will likely want to access information quickly, perhaps in an online format or through regular newsletters. During the winter, when they have more time, this group clearly wants to receive in-depth information on specialized topics during events such as multi-hour workshops. Given this information we will continue to refine a variety of information in multiple easy-to-access formats during the busier season, and structure the more time-consuming in-person events so they are predominantly scheduled during the winter months for the appropriate price and travel commitment.

Homeowners are interested in basic information about a wide variety of turf-related topics, and like golf superintendents would also be able to use this information year round in an easy-to-access manner. A well designed website can provide relevant turf management information to both groups of people and longer events could be held for homeowners in the early spring, on subjects they were interested in learning more about.

Final thoughts

Thank you again to all the MGCSA members who completed this survey. Without your help, we would never have been able to glean the insight we have about the best ways to deliver the correct information about turfgrass to the different groups of people who need it. With this new knowledge, we will be able to modify and sometimes substantially change our current practices to better meet your future needs and ultimately create more successful and valuable extension programs for you.

Current University of Minnesota Extension Turfgrass Management Resources:

Turfgrass Science Program Website and Blog: www.turf.umn.edu

Extension Turfgrass Management Publications and Interactive Tools: www.extension.umn.edu/turfgrass

Sustainable Urban Landscape Information Series: www.sustland.umn.edu

Yard and Garden News Blog: www.blog.lib.umn.edu/efans/ygnews

Soil Testing Laboratory: www.soiltest.cfans.umn.edu

Plant Disease Clinic: www.pdc.umn.edu

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Within the Leather

by David Kazmierczak, CGCS

By now everybody reading this column is deep within the frozen confines of the

off season in the upper Midwest. Mother Nature let us hang-on through Thanksgiving this year and then slapped us on the behind with the cold reminder that she is in charge and there will be no messing around. Winter is here for good.

When winter comes, two things happen for me: the reflection upon the previous season and the planning for the new. We are blessed (or cursed depending on how you view it), that we have this period of reflection. It's a period our brethren to the south are not afforded. It allows us plenty of time, the further north you go, to identify successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses and develop strategies to alter both for the next season. The further along I go in my career, the more important I feel this time has become for any number of reasons, but mostly because time in everyday life is becoming the most precious commodity any one person possesses. For a manager, the value is exponential.

As golf course superintendents we are

asked to do about a half a million things, wear a thousand different hats and be at least somewhat skilled at all of them. The further north you go, you are asked to do them all and accomplish everything in a much shorter period of time. The reward is that the off season is supposed to allow for a mental and physical break from the busy season and afford the turf manager time to make him or herself more efficient when the new season arrives. This is sound in theory, but are you actually able to accomplish that goal? More so than ever, it is critical that you do.

The old adage that time equals money has never rang truer. I know I don't have to beat anybody over the head about shrinking budgets, shrinking salaries and rising expectations. There is a finite threshold in all that we do. To produce the conditions at golf course X it takes X number of dollars. I can't imagine that there is a turf manager that hasn't streamlined his or her operation streamlined and got the most out of what they spend in 2013. If they didn't-shame on them. The only area in which to further streamline an operation is in the area of time management, and I don't care what your operation or budget there probably is someplace that time can be saved with a new procedure or product. The trick is finding that procedure or product.

Technology is one good place