

A PRACTICAL LOOK AT PARK FERTILIZATION AND MOWING

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To fertilize or not to fertilize? When to fertilize? Where to fertilize? What to fertilize with? Why fertilize at all? There are a few of the questions that confront the turf maintenance man. How often have we kicked ourselves or been kicked for poor judgement in turf fertilization. You have no doubt learned more from those mistakes than from anything that I would possibly say. Fertilization is a scientific venture, but it is also very much a personal judgement operation. We may be wrong sometimes, but we had better be right most of the time and we better have trained people who are able to carry out the actual operation as we would if we were doing it ourselves.

I do not have a very scientific mind nor do I pretend to have. I will not talk about chemical analysis, soil properties, or mathematical equations because I am sure you have heard this over and over again. I will talk a little about the way we handle the practical side of fertilization and mowing in the city of Midland. Midland is the city of beautiful churches, the home of the Dow Chemical Company, and the site of a proposed nuclear power plant. Its a beautiful city to visit, live in and work in. It is becoming a green city with the development of a park system containing 2,700 acres of park land including 93 acres of major developed parks, 50 neighborhood play areas ranging in size from 10 acres to 4 acres, approximately 40 islands, parking lots and boulevards, and 650 acres of this total yet to be developed. We also have 436 acres of golf course property containing 36 holes and 2 clubhouses (the maintenance of which is under the supervision of our greenskeeper), and several public buildings which are on our maintenance schedule.

I have seen it recommended that if we have but one yearly opportunity to fertilize our turf, the best time would be early fall or late summer. This may be so; however, I'd bet that if I were to ask that question to each of you, as an individual, there would be quite a difference of opinions. Some would say, "in the spring we don't need it because we have a natural greening anyway". Others would say, "in the summer we need it because the grass is losing its greenness". Still others would say, "three (3) times a year - April 1st, late May, and again in early September". All of you would be right - in a sense. The scientific side of the maintenance man would say, "we will fertilize when and with what is best for the turf". The practical side would say, "we will fertilize when it is the easiest, the safest, and when we can achieve the greenest grass at the time and places that the people, whom we try to please, want to see it. So, since our primary responsibility is pleasing the people whom we work for whether they be municipal taxpayers, paying customers, estate owners, or board trustees, the practical side of fertilization often overshadows our scientific reasons.

We, in Midland, fertilize the majority of our areas around mid-March while there is still frozen ground and even a little snow. We use a large PTO tractor-operated cyclone spreader. This seems to give us much more uniform distribution than the old drop spreader we used a few years ago. It seemed that with the old drop spreader we were always leaving a strip here and there. This is seldom a problem with a cyclone spreader. We find that this is the best time and, sometimes the only time, to do our spring fertilizing. This solves the problem of getting on soggy turf, and also the possibility of burning the grass if we are forced to wait until the ground dries up and the grass starts to grow. We find this works well for us except in flooded areas. It just so happens that our maintenance headquarters and largest day use park is located in the flood plains of the Tittabawassee River. This presents a special turf problem. During the fall, touch football teams chew up the grass. In winter, we see ice rinks covering the area and then perhaps a flood. As the water goes down, the ball field and picnic areas emerge and people are wanting to use the area. We get on the area as soon as we can with our roller blade (a great piece of equipment) full of fertilizer and seed. We shake our heads at the competition between softball cleats and sprouting grass. But soon it greens up nicely and looks good from a distance. However, as you look closer you discover in some areas the cleats have won out and there are weeds - not grass - just weeds! A well fertilized green weed cover is not what you would want in most places, but here they are green and we are happy to have them and leave them alone.

If we've fertilized well, everything greens up and grows like crazy. We have our mowers (2 seven-gang Jacobsens, 1 Flail mower, 1 hustler and a dozen small hand mowers) ready to go. It rains and rains, the grass grows and grows, and then we complain because we fertilized so heavily. However, we all like green grass, not long green grass, but nicely trimmed carpet-like green grass, not one spear longer than the rest, not a piece sticking up around a tree or a post; this is what we all want in Midland, as everywhere else. We try to achieve it but, alas, the fertilizer wins out and the only thing that saves us is a minor drought in the summer. Even then it seems we're not satisfied. We have to water where we can and put on some more fertilizer, here and there. Then the grass begins to grow again and we get criticized because it either needs watering and fertilization where we didn't apply it or mowing where we did.

Well, criticism we need and should appreciate for it tells us where we failed and improvement is needed. We are expected to produce green and flawless turf and this we should aim for. We may achieve it always, sometimes, or never; but it should be our goal.

Mowing programs and schedules are easy to set up but they should be of a semi-fluid nature for the grass is an unpredictable as the weather; growing twice as fast this week as it did last week. Here again, our mowing program is only as good as the men who are doing the actual cutting. If you work with alot of temporary men, as we do, you will know what I mean. They have a habit of missing the most looked at islands in town, cutting one piece of paper into a hundred pieces, picking up a stone in the rotary and

slinging it a hundred feet through a 10 x 10 plate glass window, sitting under a tree looking asleep during their authorized break, or leaving their job half done. But with a little luck, a number of training sessions, and a little yelling you may have them thinking and working as you would like them to by the end of the season. Maybe some of them will come back next year and do a really good job! We have so many neighborhood parks that are like extensions to several back yards, with every homeowner trying to tie their grass into the park's grass. They would all like the park cut to match their own yard. So on and on it goes, and let's hope it always does, for I say again, that our job as municipal park people or whatever our position, is to try to please our employers first and foremost.

In this age of adverse opinion towards public employees, and the sometimes less than perfect jobs that they do, let us aim for a better understanding of what is expected of us. Perhaps the one truly visible way that we can show we really care is to have the greenest, healthiest, turf around. Let the scientific side of the maintenance man show through and check with the turf specialist when you have problems that you can't solve. Remember to aim for the best and have people that really care for associates and employees, but be satisfied with green weeds sometimes.