

UC Cooperative Extension Turfgrass Expert Ali Harivandi Retires After 33 Years



Ali Harivandi vividly remembers the day in 1979 that he interviewed to become a UC Cooperative Extension advisor for Alameda, Contra Costa and Santa Clara Counties. Dressing for the interview, he pulled on one sock while watching the TV news and as he reached for his other sock, the news anchor announced that the U.S. embassy in Iran had been taken over.

"I'm not going to get the job," Harivandi thought.

As he retires on June 27 after 33 years of providing turfgrass advice to Northern California golf course superintendents, managers of parks, sports fields and cemeteries and homeowners, Harivandi, who was born in Iran, is grateful to the University of California for having given him the opportunity to pursue work he enjoys.

"If I had written the job description myself, I couldn't have made it more perfectly match my qualifications," he said.

The UC Cooperative Extension advisor job required expertise in turfgrass, soils, salinity, irrigation and recycled water irrigation—the same subjects he had studied, first at Shiraz University in Iran, and then at Colorado State University where he earned his master's and doctoral degrees in turfgrass science.

Over the course of his career, Harivandi expanded his research to include weeds, turf diseases, insect management, erosion control and water quality. He began to promote sustainability before sustainability became a popular topic, and is best known for his research and educational efforts in water conservation and the use of recycled water for irrigation.

When Harivandi came to California, water-loving grass varieties such as Kentucky bluegrass were commonly planted for lawns. He introduced tall and fineleaf fescue species that use less water as low-maintenance, environmentally friendly alternatives. More than 90 percent of Northern California residential lawns are now planted to tall fescue. No-mow, a type of fescue that rarely needs trimming, is now planted on slopes and rough areas of golf courses, road medians, cemeteries, and small areas that are hard to mow. Besides making maintenance of these areas much simpler, No-mow reduces labor costs and air pollution associated with mowing.

To help people avoid overwatering, he published a map that shows evapotranspiration estimates for regions of the Central Coast. Homeowners and landscape managers use the map as a guide for programming their sprinkler systems.

Harivandi is recognized nationally and internationally as an expert on recycled water use on golf courses and other landscape sites. In the Southwest, 35 percent of golf courses are irrigated with recycled water; nationally, the number is closer to 15 percent.

"I have consulted with Ali on recycled water use at three of the courses where I have worked, including Shoreline Golf

Links, San Jose Municipal Golf Course and Sunnyvale Golf Course," said Gary Carls, golf operations supervisor for the City of Sunnyvale.

"I first met Ali when we were building a new golf course in Mountain View, Shoreline Golf Links," said Carls, who has worked with Harivandi since 1981. "Ali helped us with several issues we were facing, including methane gas concerns, salinity issues and recycled water concerns. Over the years, I know he has worked with hundreds of superintendents facing similar issues."

"Without a doubt in my mind, his greatest contribution to the golf industry has been helping to create strong educational programs for golf course superintendents both nationally and locally," Carls said. "Ali was an instructor at the GCSAA's (Golf Course Superintendents Association of America) national conference for most of his career."

In the 1990s, the state Integrated Waste Management Board launched a campaign to reduce solid waste disposal in order to extend the useful life of landfills. Harivandi's research showed that leaving grass clippings on the lawn did no harm—in fact, the decomposing grass naturally fertilized the lawn. He began to encourage homeowners and landscape maintenance professionals to practice "grasscycling" instead of bagging up lawn clippings to send to landfills. Grasscycling is now standard practice.

On weekends, Harivandi referees soccer games at high school and collegiate levels to stay fit and to serve his community. "I get to see a lot of sports fields," he added. While refereeing soccer games, he noticed that the turf didn't recover well from the damage inflicted by people playing on wet fields, so he began to recommend that sports fields be closed following rain. It has become a common practice.

Aside from his wife Sue, Harivandi credits much of his career success to UC Cooperative Extension. "It probably wouldn't have worked as well for me at any other university. The ambience, the environment, the culture allow a person to do as much as you want to do," he explained. "People help you to get things done."

Harivandi has served as a member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's Technical/Resource Advisory Committee and currently serves on the International Sustainability Council and U.S. Golf Association Turfgrass and Environmental Research Advisory Committee. UC has granted Harivandi emeritus status so he plans to continue his research and to accept speaking engagements with interested groups, including UC Master Gardeners. He also looks forward to "a lot" of traveling with his wife Sue.

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