Bob Sowers (right) and Rhone-Poulenc turf products sales specialist Chuck McGilloway discuss disease control on one of Sunnybrook's immaculate greens.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Sunnybrook super Bob Sowers makes the most out of a modest operating budget, keeping the course maintained to tournament standards. Though difficult, it's not an impossible task.

Many superintendents of private, limited-membership golf courses have at least two things in common, a membership that demands first-class playing conditions and a modest operating budget. Sunnybrook Golf Club in Plymouth Meeting, Pa., with a membership that holds steadily year after year at about 280, is no exception.

Bob Sowers, superintendent at Sunnybrook since 1970, has learned by necessity to prudently manage his budget and his course without compromising the quality of play at the Club.

Designed by William Gordon and constructed in 1954, the 6,800-yard par 72 course gets a meager 12,000 rounds of play per year. However, Sunnybrook annually hosts the U.S. Women's Amateur and U.S. Senior Amateur tournaments. So despite the relatively light daily play, Sowers, his assistant Fred Ammon and a fulltime crew of two men must keep Sunnybrook maintained to tournament standards.

When it was built, Sunnybrook was surrounded by farms and woods. During the past 15 years, the rolling hills of Montgomery County, which adjoins Philadelphia, have been sprouting homes instead of crops. Sunnybrook was carved out of the heavy clay soils characteristic of southeastern Pennsylvania. Unlike most soils in the Northeast which are in the acid range, the soil at Sunnybrook is slightly alkaline because the course abuts a limestone quarry.

"On windy days you can see limestone dust blowing across the

course from the quarry," says Sowers. "To bring the pH down to 6.0 I apply about 65 pounds per acre of sulfur each year."

Water, fertility

The clay soil at Sunnybrook drains poorly, so water management is one of Sowers' biggest concerns. "The worst possible situation is to have our members play through water," he says. Fortunately, the course's drainage system does a fairly good job. On the other hand, summer dry spells are not uncommon; throughout the season Sowers frequently uses a soil probe to keep track of soil moisture levels.

Sowers believes that most courses are overwatered. By irrigating only when it's necessary, Sowers controls his equipment operating and maintenance expenses, and reduces the turf problems associated with too much soil moisture.

"I keep water and fertility levels to the minimum required to maintain healthy turf so that thatch doesn't get out of control," he explains.

The tees and greens at Sunnybrook receive two 2 pounds per 1,000 square feet applications of nitrogen annually, and the fairways get one pound per 1,000 square feet of nitrogen twice each year. In addition, Sowers fertilizes the turf once late in the season to build up carbohydrate reserves and to get a quick green-up in the spring.

Bob Sowers believes that the key to thatch control is keeping water and fertilizer to the minimum required.

Thatch control

Thatch control is an important concern for Sowers. Not only does heavy thatch affect golf play, but it ties up vital nutrients and harbors disease organisms.

To control thatch, Sowers verticle mows the fairways once per week during the growing season and aerifies twice per year. He generally keeps the fairways cut to ½-inch, tees to ⅜-inch and greens to 5/32-inch, but during the mid-summer he'll raise the cutting height slightly if the weather remains hot and dry for any length of time.

Sowers, a Penn State graduate with a degree in agronomy, prefers the perennial grasses because they require less maintenance and water than annual bluegrass. Sunnybrook is about 85 percent bentgrass. Sowers has a constant battle with poa annua and clover, which tend to spread if the bentgrass is stressed for any reason.

Spreading it out

The annual budget at Sunnybrook permits Sowers only a limited amount of money for construction, so major projects such as the renovation of Sunnybrook's bunkers are spread over several years. The most recent major project was the construction of a new equipment building in 1981. Sowers is pleased with the spacious new building which houses his office and provides plenty of space for equipment maintenance and storage.

During the past couple of years, Sowers has had to deal with two problems affecting Sunnybrook's trees that superintendents in other parts of the country don't commonly encounter: gypsy moths and Diplodia tip blight.

Controlling a heavy infestation of leaf-munching gypsy moth caterpillers in 1982 was fairly straightforward. Sowers hired a local aerial applicator who used a helicopter to make one application of carbaryl. He doesn't expect that

The view of the 16th hole fairway at Sunnybrook shows well-groomed predominantly bentgrass turf that Sowers works hard to maintain.

he'll need to repeat the application, but he plans to carefully monitor caterpiller populations this spring.

The second problem was not so easy to diagnose or control. With the help of Penn State Extension Service, Sowers discovered that Diplodia tip blight was responsible for the death of 24 Austrian and red pines, and the decline of 122 other conifers on the heavily wooded course. This spring, Sowers plans to follow Penn State's recommendation to make three applications of benomyl to halt the disease.

Disease control

In addition to carefully managed fertility and water management programs, Sowers feels that a regular turf disease prevention and treatment program is essential to maintaining the turf quality at Sunnybrook.

"Bentgrass is more prone to diseases than most species," Sowers says, "so a good fungicide is a necessity. Dollar spot is my biggest disease problem, and it was particularly bad this past July because of the high temperatures.

"Our board of directors approved the purchase of Chipco 26019, based on a photograph I had taken of one fairway where I had tried the product," he says. "One of my crew accidently missed a strip down the middle of a fairway while he was spraying. The contrast between the untreated area infested with dollar spot and the lush treated grass down the sides convinced the board."

In 1985, Sowers' first fungicide application was on June 10. He treated greens and tees every 14 to 21 days and fairways every 21 to 28 for the remainder of the season.

"With the cost factors, such as labor and equipment that you face today, you can't afford to apply a fungicide every seven days," says Sowers.

Sowers believes that getting out on the course and playing golf, as he does regularly, has helped him learn to manage his course better. "Many superintendents look at the course from a maintenance point of view rather than from the player's point of view," he explains. Bob Sowers has managed to combine the best of both worlds at Sunnybrook. **WT&T**