

AERATION WORKS!

If turf could talk, you'd hear all about the benefits of soil aeration. It's a service worth selling.

by Terry McIver, associate editor



Aeration, a standard procedure on the golf course, helps to improve the turf's overall stress resistance.

Soil aeration is the turf manager's favorite remedy for the problems of soil compaction, thatch build-up and interfacing soils.

When done correctly and on time, aeration assures that the soil will be better able to withstand a season of heavy traffic and harsh weather.

Thanks to aeration, the effectiveness of fertilizers and pesticides is improved, and overseeding into established lawns can be done without destroying existing grass. The gaseous exchange between the soil and atmosphere is clear, creating a favorable growing medium for seed and established turf.

To battle compaction, coring opens a channel between soil layers, removes part of the problem soil and permits topdressing and refilling with

more compatible material.

In the fight against thatch, aeration improves the growing medium for new seed. Excessive thatch can lead to a poorly-rooted generation of new grass.

Aerate in spring or fall

Aeration in cool-season grasses is most effective when done in the spring and fall, to coincide with increased foliar growth. This minimizes the time the lawn is damaged by the process and reduces the probability of annual weed invasion.

Aerifying too late in the fall or too early in the spring leaves a lawn open to additional winter annual weed germination from knawel, speedwell, henbit and chickweed, and summer annual weeds like knotweed.

Aerifying too early in the fall or too late in the spring provides a seedbed for summer annual weeds such as lespedeza, prostrate spurge, purslane and crabgrass.

The opportunity for maximum effect from aeration generally occurs for cool-season grasses in April, May, September and October.

Reduce your water use

According to Bob Brophy, marketing manager of lawn care products for Cushman, proper aeration can reduce water requirements up to 25 percent without harming the grass plant.

"The cost of the aeration itself will be recouped over a year's time in water savings," says Brophy.

"Because you're getting the water down to the rootzone," Brophy ex-



The old standby drum roller, which aerates quickly and never needs fueling. Drums can be detached, depending on the size of the area in question.

plains, "you're not letting it evaporate or get lost in the thatch layer."

Brophy also reminds landscapers that by opening the ground with aeration, fertilizers and other control products will reach their targets more effectively.



Cushman's Bob Brophy: aeration can show a 25 percent water savings.

"That's why a lot of lawn care companies try to sell aeration with the first fertilizer application," says Brophy. Customers are then told to water after the aeration service to wash the fertilizer down into the rootzone.

It's not a hassle

Landscapers whose customers view aeration as a hassle because of the remaining core material have to explain the benefits better.

"The aeration cores stimulate microbial activity to break down the thatch," says Brophy, "and make a better growing medium."

Experts also say it's important to coordinate aeration with overseeding: aerate first, then overseed. That way the cores can be broken up with the overseeder. This will also eliminate the problem of grass growing in clumps inside aeration holes.

Sell the benefits

John Haubrich, general manager of Thornton Landscape in Maineville, Ohio, stresses to customers aeration's positive effect on thatch, especially during dry spells. "During the drought two years ago," says Haubrich, "we strongly recommended it, there was so much compaction."

Haubrich says the company aerates about 100 acres each year, for

about 60 percent of its clients. The service is presented as part of a maintenance package.

"If it's a new account," says Haubrich, "we go in proposing everything. Hopefully, they'll buy everything, but not every client will. If there are budget constraints, aeration is one of the first things that'll go. The client may need to thrift out, and maybe will agree to it next year."

Steve Ashton, manager of the Tree Division for Molar, Inc., says company crewmen recommend aeration to customers if they see a need for it during the course of a visit. The service is sold at a minimum of \$35, and Ashton says it has been well received. "It's an old neighborhood, and lawns are so compacted," explains Ashton. "It's

Aeration can be sold as an end-of-the-year "extra" when customers have a few dollars left in their yard budgets.

never a hassle for us. It's a rainy-day job in spring and fall."

Finding the money

Charging \$10 to \$12 per 1000 square feet is reasonable, according to Ed Gallagher, landscape maintenance manager for Yardmaster of Painesville, Ohio. For harder-to-reach areas, such as throughout condominium areas, Gallagher suggests charging \$12 to \$15 per thousand.

"We try to put the service in as a way to complement the fertilizer application," says Gallagher. "If the customer is going to put dollars into fertilizer, aeration is certainly the most complementary service."

"You can fertilize and fertilize and fertilize," Gallagher explains, "but if you don't do some of the mechanical treatments, like aeration, you'll develop extreme thatch problems on top of compacted soil. Then you run into disease and stress problems."

The money for aeration is there; it's the landscaper's challenge to find it.

"Companies are going to sell a lot of 'extras' throughout the year," says Gallagher, such as annuals or other plant material. "Aeration, if sold properly, can be another one of those extras, when it comes down to September and October, and they still have a few bucks in the budget." LM