

# A no-fuss compost plan that pays off

## Northern Michigan golf resort's goal is to be 100 percent zero discharge.

by Ron Hall  
Senior Editor

■ The golf course management team at Michigan's Treetops Sylvan Resort turns landscape waste into valuable compost. It does it by following basic composting rules, but not with a lot of fuss.

The Treetops' effort began in earnest when Bruce Wolfrom, CGCS, arrived as golf course manager five years ago. He came from Barton Hills, Ann Arbor, Mich., where he'd been for 20 years.

"Recycling yard waste is something I've always done. This material is just too valuable to throw away," says Wolfrom.



**Golf course manager Bruce Wolfrom, CGCS, loves northern Michigan and works to preserve its beauty.**

The resort and its golf courses generate tons of landscape waste annually, mostly grass clippings, leaves, chipped limbs, spent flowers and discarded sod. But Wolfrom's management team has a plan to take care of it, and a plan for source reduction, too.

For instance, Treetops purchases its fertilizer in 200-pound bulk fabric containers that are returned to suppliers and refilled. The resort gets no price breaks, and it must use a forklift to handle the palletized shipments. But Wolfrom says it's worth the effort because it drastically reduces bag disposal.

"We have pushed manufacturers, chemical companies and fertilizer compa-

nies to help us with their packaging. We want them to be a little more responsible about what comes into the resort and what's going to happen to this packaging when we're done with it," explains Wolfrom.

The ultimate goal, he adds, is for the resort to become 100 percent zero discharge: everything that comes into the resort stays on the property.

"There are a lot of questions and answers that need to be thought out," he admits, "but that is our goal."

### Usable end product—

One of Treetop Sylvan's biggest successes so far has been green waste recycling. This benefits the resort by eliminating the need and expense of hauling waste away while it also produces about 300 cu. yds. of compost annually.



**Treetops' landscape manager Don Frisbie says the use of compost gives flowers like these astilbes and impatiens extra vigor.**

That's slightly more than the resort can use, so there's always a slight surplus on hand.

Don Frisbie, the resort's landscape manager, uses much of this compost on 8,000 sq. ft. of flower beds each spring.

"When you first put the compost down, it makes the bed richer and brings out the color of the flowers," says Frisbie. "But we don't use compost for this rea-



**Karen O'Dell, superintendent of the Robert Trent Jones, Jr., Masterpiece course at Treetops Sylvan Resort, says several smaller compost piles around her course encourage employees to use them.**

son." He feels double-processed hardwood bark mulch gives beds a more finished look.

Frisbie estimates the compost saves his department about \$2,000 a year in product costs.

"We found by trial and error that the compost gives us the desired results in our beds," he says. "Occasionally we give them a foliar feeding to give them a boost, but we don't use any granular fertilizer at all."

Also, Frisbie says the beds stand up to diseases and insect pests better since the resort began using compost. The annual beds haven't needed any pesticides in two years, he says.

**On the course—**Karen O'Dell, superintendent of the Masterpiece course, says she often uses compost to

improve or repair roughs.

"If I've got a weak spot on the course where it's been worn out by the carts, and it's sandy and I can't keep nutrients in, I have the compost mixed in," she says. "It helps out tremendously. It's a good soil additive."

Three compost sites are located around O'Dell's course, along with multiple sites

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around the other courses, too. This makes it easier for crew members at each course to bring debris to them.

Periodically, a crew member uses a front-end loader to turn and churn these piles. This is necessary to keep them aerobic. Only once did a pile go sour at the resort, recalls O'Dell. "It began stinking, so we spread it out and let it dry some. Then it was fine."

O'Dell says it takes about a season for the green wastes to turn into compost. Before it's used, it's run through a screener to remove any rocks and soda cans.

One of the prime ingredients in the resort's compost piles is grass clippings.

Before golf course equipment is washed, it's blown off with an air hose. Each course can generate over 300 lbs. of clippings a day. These are swept up and put in the piles.

Grass clippings also come from the lawns in front of the resort's hotel and guest areas. Sometimes, for appearance's sake, Frisbie's crew must bag them and add them to the piles.

But the most largest ingredient, by volume anyway, is leaves. In fact, beginning in September (maples and oaks turn early this far north), teams of workers begin blowing the leaves into windrows on the golf courses. Then leaf vacuums come along and suck them up.

These leaves, along with wood chips, are fed into the compost piles almost like ingredients measured into a cake mix. Sometimes sand and soil are also added to control moisture.

"If you have the right combination of wastes, then the compost piles seem to take care of themselves," says O'Dell. "Maybe we've been lucky, but it just hasn't been that difficult for us to compost."

Golf manager Wolfrom thinks more golf courses will be both trying to reduce the source of waste, and recycling what waste they do produce.

"I think our industry is primed for this. Being responsible for our waste is not a bad idea," he says.

## Keeping workers productive, the Sandburg/Lakeside way

**'Good clean fun' is the way to go, says this superintendent of a course where summer days run to sub-tropical weather.**

by Jerry Roche  
Editor-in-Chief

■ Sitting in the air-conditioned Houston office of Lakeside Country Club superintendent Mike Sandburg, at around 3 p.m., you can hear the muffled sounds of workers who've survived another day of 95 degree temperatures and 85 percent humidity. They're clowning around in the equipment area, winding the day down.

"Hear that?" Sandburg asks. "You wouldn't hear that at a lot of golf courses." He avoids the tired cliché of the crew that's one big happy family, but you know it's true here.

"I try to pass on the message to be happy with yourself or to find someplace where you can be happy," Sandburg asserts. And that is the key to successful personnel management at Lakeside, inarguably one of the spiffiest courses in east Texas.

"We're a good family—my wife Kelli, my son Matthew—and that includes the guys who work for me," says Sandburg.

He does many things well, as a good superintendent must. But the best thing he does is manage people. "The hardest part of this job is dealing with people," Sandburg notes, "and that's something I love to do."

He learned part of his management technique from his father, a hard-working Kansas farmer. ("This is the closest I could be to farming and still make money.") The rest he picked up during four years at ChemLawn, where he saw both the good



and the bad.

"The philosophy of Dick Duke (ChemLawn founder and CEO) was to put the customers and employees first and profits second. But by the time I left ChemLawn, he was gone and things had changed."

**Just do it!**—If there is a definition of

"working superintendent," Sandburg is that. "I can't sit in the office," he notes. "I just like to be one of the guys. And I don't ask my employees to do anything I can't or won't do.

"If you can't take employees out and show them how to do it yourself, you can't teach them. You have to break them in slowly. Only our most experienced guys mow fairways. New guys rake bunkers and work up from the bottom."

He claims that his employees would jump "a bridge, provided he asked them to, and that he jumped off with them. "They know that I do everything for a reason, and they don't question the reason." Continuing education is also a key to the happiness of the 26-person crew at Lakeside.

"I love to see people get better," Sandburg says. "My lead assistant, Chad Stearns, will make a good superintendent someday. And I want him to be a superintendent someplace, but I want him to be ready when he goes. Another employee is 19 years old, has one child and one on the way. He's finishing his GED, and I'm starting him on a training program to be a licensed pesticide applicator."

The training is reciprocal. Since superintendents are supposed to be jacks of all trades, Sandburg finds himself learning the odds and ends from his employees. "Every day's a learning process."

Most of the crew members at Lakeside are Hispanic, some Mexicans and Salvadorans with green cards, and some second-generation U.S. citizens, but Hispanic nonetheless. That makes language another potential

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