

The power of restoration

Try this practical plan for getting your customers' lawns healthy again

BY JOHN C. FECH

When turf dies, it's your job to do something about it. You can offer diagnostic services, restoration services, or both. The good news is that the process can be profitable, both short-term and long-term. If you turn the lawn around, you make your client happy and earn the right to market additional services.

In order to do a job you can be proud of, understand the scope and extent of the turf restoration process. In most cases, it's not simply a change of species or replacement of grass plants that have died. The old adages of "garbage in, garbage out" and "you get what you pay for" apply here in terms of making a significant effort to improve a lawn's growing conditions.

Don't decline to diagnose

Diagnosis is the most important consideration here. Ironically, it's the one most turf managers skip. Why? Because it takes time and expertise. You may have to call a technical representative from one of your suppliers, or a university agronomist/horticulturist.

If the turf failed once, and you don't know why, it's likely to fail again. If your



What's the problem? Dogs? Traffic? Neglect? Diagnose the problem before offering a solution.

client pays you for restoration, and the new turf succumbs to the same ailment as before, you'll probably be looking for a new client. So make it cost effective and consider time for diagnosis in addition to your costs for materials, labor, insurance, equipment and fuel when bidding for the job.

Start the diagnosis by obtaining a map of the site. If the client can't provide one, check with the city or county planning department. Use the map to inventory and analyze the site.

A turfgrass stand may decline for many reasons. Resist the temptation to jump to an

early conclusion about the cause. As you walk the property, consider these factors:

- shade
- thatch thickness
- soil type
- infiltration rate
- adverse environmental conditions
- insects
- diseases
- compaction
- mistakes that you or another lawn services may have made
- the client's lifestyle.

If the client throws parties every week-

end, compaction is likely to be a problem. Spilled drinks, salt from ice cream freezers and other party items can also cause problems. Pets can cause urine injury, traffic injury and compaction. Note these conditions on the property map with phrases like "heavy shade;" "lots of knotweed and bare soil here;" or "severe slope and powdery mildew galore." A thick thatch layer is responsible for many turf failures, so use a pocket knife or bulb planter to check it.

Finish the diagnosis with a soil sample, which can offer you lots of information about the site (see sidebar).

Make a workable plan

Once the problem has been identified, you can start the turf restoration process. If there are too many trees on the property competing for water and nutrients, ask the client to remove one or more of them, or replace a sun-loving grass such as bermuda or Kentucky blue-

grass with centipede, St. Augustine or one of the fescues. If the soil test indicates that the organic matter content is 45%, incorporate compost or Canadian peat moss to increase the soil's tilth.

In some cases, there is nothing wrong with the soil or sod. Rather, the site is the limiting factor. The landscape design may have narrow strips of turf that channel lots of traffic into a small area, or there may not be enough sidewalks, paths or walkways on the property to handle the volume of footprints it gets. If so, ask a certified landscape designer to suggest some simple modifications.

Prep the site

Because of the decline, there will probably be many weeds and undesirable grasses in the lawn. Eliminate them by applying a nonselective herbicide such as Roundup, Finale or Reward. If the lawn is only thinned, or if only a few areas

Soil samples made easy

Soil sampling is easy and it gives you and the property owner additional information before you start to renovate. Here's how you start:

1. Take eight to 10 samples from an area of turf that you observe to be homogenous, where all the turf is affected in the same apparent way.

2. Sample at the 2-in. to 4-in. depth, taking a handful or two of soil with each sub-sample.

3. Mix them together in a non-metallic bucket, then package and ship them to a lab for a soil test. This test will determine the soil's type, organic matter content, pH, relative amounts of various nutrients and presence of soluble salts.

Use this information to plan out the necessary steps for improving the lawn. Share the soil test information with the client to help him or her understand the reason for each of the steps you're about to take.

are affected, lessen the competition between the existing grasses and the seed to be installed by scalping the turf—mow it at about one-half the recommended height of cut. This will open the turf canopy and stress the existing plants somewhat, creating a more favorable establishment environment. Consider using a plant growth regulator (Embark Lite, Primo) to provide extra suppression of the existing grasses.

After scalping, cultivate. The key concept in re-grassing is to create a suitable seedbed.

Match the type and extent of the cultivation with the severity of the decline. Power-raking is appropriate for severely injured turf, while slit seeding or aerating/overseeding is best for thinned lawns.

In all cases, seed-to-soil contact is essential.

Check reseeding rates

Calculate the areas to be reseeded and adjust the seeding rate/establishment rate (see Table 1) according to the severity of the decline and thickness of the existing stand. Worn out sites will need more seed or plugs.

Choose disease resistant seed/sod/plugs whenever possible. One of the best control methods for summer patch, leaf spot and dollar spot is the use of genetically resistant cultivars. Contact your local cooperative extension office for detailed lists of resistant grasses for your area, or the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP), which provides exten-

Table 1.

LOW TO HIGH RANGES OF SEEDING /ESTABLISHMENT RATES

Grass type	Rate
Kentucky bluegrass	1.5 to 3.0 lbs/1,000 sq. ft.
Perennial ryegrass	2 to 4 lbs./1,000 sq. ft.
Fine fescue	2 to 4 lbs./1,000 sq. ft.
Tall fescue	9 to 10 lbs./1,000 sq. ft.
Bermudagrass	1 bushel of springs/1,000 sq. ft. or 2-in. plugs on 6-in. spacings
Zoysiagrass	2-in. plugs on 6-in. spacings in rows 6 in. apart

SOURCE: JOHN FECH, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

sive information on turfgrass cultivars (www.ntep.org).

Follow-up care

In most situations, follow-up care may be out of your hands once the seed, plugs or sod is installed. In residential settings, the baton is passed to homeowners. Increase their chance for success by instructing them to water frequently and lightly for the first few weeks. Homeowners should gradually reduce the frequency and increase the duration of the watering to create a healthy root system.

Consider using a "door hanger" to remind homeowners about their responsibility in this



Sometimes the best option is to start all over with new turfgrass.

venture. This kind of printed literature projects a professional image of your company and increases the likelihood that the customer will be satisfied.

If you're responsible for follow-up care in a commercial or residential landscape, you can control the follow-up care.

Apply starter fertilizer two to three weeks after the initial seeding to encourage rapid establishment of new seedlings. If applied at seeding time, the starter fertilizer will encourage growth of the existing grasses, which may become vigorous enough to shade out the new

seedlings and reduce your renovation's success.

Young crabgrass plants compete with the desirable grasses in the establishment phase. Consider the use of pre- and post-emergence herbicides such as Tupersan and Drive to control them. At the present, cost is a major limitation to their use. John Kaiser, owner of Legendary Lawns in Omaha, NE, makes this treatment an option for his clients. "We let them know what their cost would be with and without the chemicals," he says. "Most customers opt to leave them out of the bid, even if it means pulling crabgrass by hand."

Mowing can give some level of weed control. Start mowing as soon as the grass plants reach the recommended height, or sooner if a large number of broadleaf weeds germinate along with the desirable grasses.

Ongoing maintenance

Try to avoid making the same management or pest control mistakes that caused the initial turf decline by scheduling regular aeration and vertical mowing procedures for your clients. This will reduce problems with compaction and thatch. If improper mowing and watering techniques were the culprit, teach the property owner routine maintenance practices for the lawn. Remind the client that good lawn care is a partnership. You can avoid many future problems by making it clear which duties are yours and which are the responsibility of the client. **LM**

— John Fech is with the University of Nebraska.

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