crowns, stems, roots and even the foliage to be attacked. The moisture, humidity, nutrition, and temperature of the thatch layer make conditions more favorable for the growth of certain organisms, but not ideal for the growth of turfgrass. Therefore, disease and insect problems may occur more readily on thatch stressed plants.

Pest (or Pathogen)

The third factor involved in a disease or insect problem would be the presence of a disease causing organism or insect that is capable of inciting a problem. The thatch layer may provide an ideal place for the growth and reproduction of the pest, allowing pest population to increase to a damaging level.

The thatch layer offers protection for the pest. This is especially true when considering chemical control because thatch forms a barrier to penetration of certain pesticides used to control disease or insect problems. The pesticide is either unable to penetrate the thatch layer, or it is absorbed by the organic matter of the thatch, making control of diseases or pests futile.

It is a generally accepted assumption that as thatch increases, disease and insect problems also increase, but research documentation is sparse. Perhaps the reason for this is the difficulty of working with thatch in trying to establish a cause and effect relationship. Let's look at a few examples in the literature dealing with thatch and disease and insect problems.

Disease

It is believed that many of the facultative parasitic fungi that cause disease on turfgrass are favored by a thatch accumulation. Apparently these fungi are capable of living on dead or decaying organic matter (thatch) as well as upon live turfgrass. Therefore, thatch is an ideal growth media for the establishment of this type of pathogen. Within this group are such fungal pathogens as *Fusarium*, *Rhizoctonia*, *Helminthosporium* and *Pythium* species. An increase in the incidence of the diseases caused by these pathogens has been noted with an increase in thatch accumulation.

Pythium Blight: Many turf specialists have associated *Pythium* blight with thatch accumulation. Research by Hall, Larsen and Schmitthenner (3) indicated that populations of *Pythium* species in the thatch increased approximately ten times over that of soil, indicating that there is a potential for increased *Pythium* blight with thatch accumulation.

Helminthosporium Leaf Spot: Several researchers have shown a relationship between thatch and leaf spot. Healy (4) has shown that *Helminthosporium* species can produce large quantities of spores (inoculum) while growing on thatch. Thatch accumulation favored greater incidences of *Helminthosporium* leaf spot in studies conducted by Murray and Juska (5). Work by Colbaugh and Endo (1) indicated that thatch accumulations may favor or inhibit the incidence of *Helminthosporium* leaf spot, depending on the moisture condition of the thatch.

Fusarium Blight: *Fusarium* blight is another disease that is often associated with thatch accumulation. There seems to be some correlation, as it occurs primarily on aged turfgrass (3 or 4 years old). The causal organism is also a fungus that can live off organic matter such as thatch. This disease has been shown to be more severe on turfgrass under a drought stress (2). Therefore, a greater potential exists for Fusarium blight to occur in turfgrass with a thatch accumulation. Recent research by Smiley (8) may indicate a somewhat different correlation between this disease and thatch. In this case, the thatch decomposition itself may be more important than the amount of thatch accumulation.

Control of Diseases: Disease control would depend on the pathogen and the chemical used. Some of the chemicals are held in the thatch layer, while others may leach through the thatch. The materials bound to the thatch may give better control to those organisms in the thatch, but, if the pathogen occurs on the foliage or within the soil, then these materials would not be as effective. So there could be differing effects depending on the specific disease and the type materials used. This is a relatively uninvestigated area which may explain some of the erratic fungicide responses.

Insect Problems

As with disease causing organisms, an increase in insect problems depends on the type of insect and how thatch may influence its activity. Thatch layers seem to make little difference on population of soil inhabiting insects. However, with surface inhabiting insects, thatch may have significant influence on their activity. Again, as with diseases, the turfgrass is better able to tolerate a population of insects when in a healthy condition. Therefore, if thatch is severe and causing stress, then the turf is more prone to insect damage.

Soil Inhabiting Insects: Thatch does not seem to affect the activity of soil inhabiting insects. These insects (grubs) cause problems on thatched turfgrass as well as thatch-free turf. Since these insects live in the soil, thatch does not affect their development.

Surface Inhabiting Insects: This group of insects includes the sod webworm, chinch bugs, adult billbugs, and army worms. Thatch provides an ideal habitat for the overwintering of these insects, as it gives protection from the low temperatures, which appears to be the only direct influence that thatch may have on these insects, with the exception of the sod webworm. Sod webworms survive best in the cover of thatch and are seldom a problem on thatch-free turfgrass. Sod webworms have real difficulty in surviving in bare soil, so thatch is very important to continued populations of these insects. Thatch does not appear to be as important with the other insects within this group.

Control: Control measures are affected by the thatch, as it inhibits the penetration of insecticides, not allowing the chemical to reach the soil below. Control of the soil inhabiting insects would definitely be less effective with a thick thatch cover (6). However, thatch may improve the effectiveness of control of insects that remain on the surface or within the thatch. Many of the insecticides are absorbed by the thatch, making them more likely to come in direct contact with the surface feeding insects (7).

Continues on page 54

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Changes in Management Needed Due to Thatch Accumulation

Jack D. Butler, Department of Horticulture, Colorado State University, Ft. Collins, Colo.

The influences of thatch on turfgrass management are many. The effects of a layer of undecomposed organic matter no more than ¼ to ½ inch deep on irrigation practices and water availability can be noticeable. Also, serious disease and insect problems may be directly associated with thatch accumulation. Mowing, aerification and fertilization practices may be affected by thatch.

Thatch problems seem to become more evident when management is directed toward production of an excellent turf. In some instances thatch problems can be associated with low growing, dense, heavy organic matter producing cultivars. In other instances heavy thatch may be related closely to stoloniferous grasses or to those of a strong fiberous nature.

Heavy fertilization programs were thought to cause serious thatch problems. However, field observations do not necessarily bear this out. One fertility trial area that received up to 20 pounds of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. per year for several years developed no noticeable thatch. Thus, it became more and more evident that heavy thatch accumulation on many turf areas, even where management levels were high, was not "natural". Rather it resulted because of specific environmental conditions or management practices.

Turfs growing on soils that are wet and cold, very acid, sandy or heavy clay may have noticeable thatch accumulations. Whether such site conditions exist naturally or are caused by man - acid soils from use of acid-forming fertilizers, or use of "pure" sand medias for athletic fields — they may contribute to thatch build-up. It is apparent that where these factors exist to cause thatch build-up, management, topdressing, aerification, dethatching or treating with a wetting agent to counter the problem will be needed.

For many years pesticides were widely used in the turfgrass industry with almost total attention given to the control of specific pests. Ultimately, field observations began to suggest that thatch problems were sometimes severe where pesticides had been used. Such observations indicated that it was time to begin long-term field investigations of some commonly used pesticides to determine if they contributed significantly to thatch problems.

The role of microorganisms, especially bacteria and fungi, in organic matter breakdown indicate that the routine use of fungicides might greatly influence thatch build-up. This has been substantiated in a recent report (5) that indicates that long-term fungicide programs can materially influence thatch accumulation. This investigation reports that the physical depth of noncompressed thatch was significantly greater following application of certain fungicides, but not others.

Another factor, earthworms, should be considered as it influences thatch accumulation. Some early work (3) that influenced pesticide use and thinking was summarized as follows.

Continues on page 56

Joyner *from page 51*

Another important aspect of thatch and control relates to the various organisms that live in the thatch. The thatch layer is an ideal environment for organisms that may reduce insect populations. There are many predacious insects, mites, and other animals in the thatch that feed on insects.

Certain fungi living within the thatch may also be involved in reducing insect populations, therefore, the thatch may in some cases, be helping the turfgrass manager.

Conclusion

It is apparent that thatch and its affects on disease and insect problems is complicated. It is not simply an increase in thatch and an increase in problems relationship. There are other factors involved making this area very difficult to study. However, it can be said that there is often a relationship between disease and insect problems and thatch accumulation. It can be further stated, that if thatch is causing turfgrass stress then the turf is more prone to disease and insect problems.

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Butler *from page 54*

"Use of certain pesticides over a 3-year period caused a marked build-up of plant debris (thatch) of 'Kentucky' bluegrass (Poa pratensis L.) turf above the soil surface. Applications of the chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides, dieldrin and chlordane, resulted in a thatch layer of 20 mm or more. The use of the carbamate insecticide, carbaryl, caused an average thatch thickness of 1.3 mm. The plots that received no insecticides or the mercuric fungicide, phenyl mercuric acetate (PMA), had no measurable thatch. The thatch depths were closely associated with plant debris weight.

In this study as the number of earthworm burrows increased, the amount of thatch decreased. Where earthworms were present to any extent, thatch was virtually non-existent. This research reitereated that earthworms are important agents in organic litter decomposition. Earthworms can influence decomposition in several ways. Among these are organic debris breakdown, giving greater surface area for increased microbal activity; they also mix organic litter with the soil.

It should be noted "that where earthworms flourish the amount of organic matter they consume is limited by the availability of supply rather than their capacity to ingest it" (4). Thus, it seems that increased organic matter production — through the use of more fertilizer and faster growing cultivars, may be offset by earthworms to the point that thatch build-up would be little, if any. Also, other benefits from earthworms such as their burrowing, which considerably improves soil aeration and drainage, should be noted.

In the early 1970's pesticide influence on earthworm populations and associated thatch problems began to be considered more often by turf professionals. Earthworm control recommendations were deleted from many published turf pesticide recommendation lists. A critical evaluation of whether or not earthworm control was necessary or desirable began to receive more attention. Earthworms on golf greens are often considered undesirable. However, many different kinds of earthworms and macrofauna occur in the soil, and many of these could be desirable, even on golf greens. Generally, a rough soil surface caused by earthworms ("night crawlers") is most common in areas of low soil fertility and shade. Proper fertilization, use of better cultivars and shade reduction are possible means of developing a better cover over the casts to reduce or elminate the rough surface problem.

Since research (3) had indicated that certain turf insecticides might induce thatch, it seemed possible that other type pesticides might also cause a thatch. A few turf pesticides, especially of the 1960's and early 1970's had dual use. For example, an insecticide might be used at a very heavy rate for crabgrass control. Also, long term pesticide use, often at high rates, might be expected to reduce earthworm populations and cause thatch accumulation. Consequently, investigations (6) were undertaken to study the influence of six preemergence herbicides (bensulide, calcium arsenate, DCPA, bandane, siduron and benefin: on thatch accumulation. This work revealed that in the fall following 2 successive spring applications, thatch had accumulated to a depth of 1.4 cm (.6 in) where calcium arsenate had been used, and to 2.1 cm (.8 in) where bandane had been used. No thatch had accumulated from the use of the other four herbicides. Also of interest in this study is the fact that "essentially no thatch accumulation was observed following the first series of herbicide treatments". This observation could help explain the lack of close association of pesticide use with thatch development.

In another report (7) it was noted that four annual applications of the six preemergence herbicides mentioned above had thatch accumulations only in bandane and calcium arsenate treated plots. Samples taken from the plots treated with bandane and calcium arsenate revealed no earthworms; whereas, there was no great difference in earthworm counts made in plots treated with the other materials or in areas not receiving treatment.

It has been reported (2) that "annual applications of insecticides to bluegrass turf over a three-year period did not create a thatch build-up. Diazinon, Gardona, trichlorfon (Dylox), fenthion (Baytex), and carbaryl (Sevin), were investigated in this study. It was also noted that when dieldrin and chlordane were applied 3 times a year over a 5 year period insecticide levels in the thatch layer were very high as compared to that in the soil.

It appears that adequate research has been done to demonstrate that certain pesticides may induce thatch. Also, thatch has been observed to accumulate rapidly where earthworms were not present. However, it has been noted (5) in a report that "thatch accumulation was not considered to be due to inhibitory effects of fungicides toward earthworms".

With these aspects in mind, it appears that thatch problems could sometimes be reduced or perhaps eliminated by using pesticides that have not demonstrated a significant influence on thatch development. More testing to determine the influence of existing and experimental turf pesticides on thatch development could provide useful management information for professional turfmen.

Some of the pesticides used in the past appear to cause long-term turf problems by influencing thatch accumulation. One area, where pesticides were applied some 20 years earlier, had distinct thatch accumulation; whereas, adjoining untreated areas had none. In this area, thatch was associated with a serious winter drought or desiccation problem.

Activated charcoal has been useful in inactivating certain pesticides, and certainly more research is needed on "turning-off" pesticides. Removal of thatch and working the soil might remove or dilute pesticides to the point where earthworms might reinfest, or be introduced into the soil. More work is needed on this possible means of thatch control. However, some work in this general area has already been done. It was reported (1) that where earthworms had been introduced the surface mat as a discrete layer disappeared.

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Continues on page 58

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Integration of Control Methods Necessary to Prevent Thatch Buildup

R. N. Carrow, Assistant Professor, Horticulture Department, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kan.

Excessive thatch accumulation results in degradation of turf and increases maintenance. Turfgrass cultural problems associated with thatch are: (a) greater susceptibility to heat, cold, and drought stress, (b) localized dry spots, (c) increased insect and disease incidence, (d) scalping, (e) reduced effectiveness and penetration of fertilizers and pesticides, (f) more wilt, (g) greater iron chlorosis, and (h) increased time, labor and money to maintain an acceptable turf.

Thatch control is not a once a year project. Instead it requires an integrated approach involving prevention, biological control, and mechanical removal. Each of these aspects requires a basic understanding of how thatch forms and how it is decomposed.

Prevention

Thatch develops in turfs because shoot growth results in organic matter accumulation at a faster rate than decomposition occurs. One approach to thatch control is to reduce accumulation by restricting excessive shoot growth. Factors which contribute to unnecessary shoot growth are discussed below.

Vigorous turfgrass cultivars: Turfgrass species and cultivars utilized for recreational turf are often vigorous. While this characteristic is important for persistence and recuperation from use, it also promotes rapid tissue production. Where feasible, the turf manager should use cultivars less prone to thatch development.

Excessive nitrogen fertilization: Thatch consists of an intertwined layer of living and dead stems, rhizomes, stolons, leaves and roots of grasses. Adequate nitrogen is required for acceptable turf quality and recuperative potential; however, excessive nitrogen increases shoot production which contributes to thatch accumulation.

Excessive irrigation: Applying excessive irrigation enhances shoot production and therefore results in thatch buildup.

Mowing and collection of clippings: Thatch accumulation can be reduced in bermuda and zoysia turfs by mowing closely. This retards total shoot production. For cool season turf, clipping removal has little influence on thatch accumulation since the leaf tissues easily degrade. Clippings contribute more to thatch buildup in bermuda and zoysia. Removal will aid in preventing thatch in these turfs; however, clippings only contribute 15-25% to the thatch.

Biological Control

The decomposition process for thatch normally involves digestion and mixing with soil by earthworm and insect activity. At the same time fungi, bacteria, actinomycetes and other microorganisms are active in decomposing various constituents within the thatch. Any factor which interfers with this natural decomposition pathway will enhance accumulation.

Promoting microorganism activity: Degradation will occur at a rapid rate if microenvironmental conditions within the thatch are suitable for a large, balanced microorganism population. The primary environmental variables influencing microorganisms are moisture, aeration, temperature, pH, organic matter, and inorganic nutrient supply. When a turf manager topdresses with a well-composted topdressing mix, he is adding microorganisms to the soil. However, more importantly he is changing the microenvironment to favor sustained microorganism activity. With topdressing soil well intermixed with thatch, moisture retention is improved. Also, due to a denser and moister environment temperature, variations are decreased. Thus, improved moisture and temperature conditions aid in maintaining an active microorganism population within the thatch.

Thatch and its decomposition products consist of a wide variety of organic compounds. To adequately degrade such a diverse assortment of compounds requires a very diverse microbial population including fungi and bacteria. Thatch tends to become acidic even if the underlying soil is alkaline. Exception to this would be if irrigation water is alkaline. When the thatch pH reaches 6.0 or less many bacteria involved in decomposing resistant components of thatch are no longer active. Thus, a light application of lime to keep the thatch

Butler *from page 56*

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Mechanical dethatching brings thatch to the surface for removal.

Damage to turf and shrubs caused by burning thatch as a method of removal.

pH at 6.0-7.0 will aid in maximum thatch breakdown. Generally, 5-10 lbs. CaCo,/1000 sq. ft. once a year on heavily irrigated turf is sufficient. Also, maintaining a soil pH of 6.0-7.0 will help insure a good natural microorganism population.

Cultivation practices, such as coring and grooving, improve moisture and temperature relations by mixing soil into the thatch. Improved soil aeration from cultivation — coring, grooving, slicing, spiking — will aid in the maintenance of an active microorganism population. Adequate irrigation also favors microbial activity.

Promoting earthworm activity: On golf greens earthworm casts are objectionable, they do not interfere to a great extent on higher cut turf. A good earthworm population is often the cheapest and most efficient control for thatch. Earthworms digest thatch, integrate soil into the thatch, and carry some of the organic matter down into the soil. Promoting earthworm activity is best achieved by avoiding pesticides detrimental to earthworms and maintaining a favorable pH range of 6.0-7.0. Cultivation on compacted soils will aid in creating a loose, friable physical condition for earthworms.

Biological dethatching materials: Several biological dethatching agents are commercially available which consist of a dry or liquid media inoculated with specific microorganisms. These are applied to the turf and when exposed to a favorable environment the microorganisms are activated and reportedly decompose thatch. Research studies conducted at several universities (Georgia, Hawaii, California, at Riverside, Nebraska, Michigan State) have not shown any beneficial affects from these materials. Innoculation with a specific microorganism population will have little affect if the microenvironment is unfavorable for sustaining the population. Natural, as well as added, microorganisms require correct moisture, aeration, pH, etc. conditions, if they are to persist at a high enough level to influence thatch decomposition.

Mechanical Removal

Vertical mowing is the most common method used to remove thatch. On golf greens or close cut turf, vertical mower attachments are available for riding greens mowers. This allows frequent, light vertical mowing without disruption of the playing surface. However, on higher cut turf vertical mowing is normally done once or twice a year, if thatch accumulation requires it. These can be severe and result in at least some disturbance of the turf surface.

When a severe vertical mowing is necessary, at least 3-4 weeks of good growing weather should follow in order for turf to recover. For example, with a cool season grass early fall would be a good time to verticut, while mid-spring would be acceptable for a warm season turf. Care should be taken not to severely verticut just prior to annual grass germination. If it is necessary to vertical mow at that time, a good preemergence herbicide for annual grasses should be applied to prevent severe weed encroachment. Do not verticut after applying a preemergence herbicide for annual grasses or the herbicide zone will be destroyed. Maintain good nutritional, moisture, and other growing condition after vertical mowing to insure rapid turf recovery.

Sometimes when a turf with rhizomes or stolons has developed a thick thatch, the turf can be stripped and allowed to recover from rhizomes or stolons that remain. Turning the sod under is generally not desirable since mixing it into the soil is difficult. This method is unsightly and requires several weeks for recovery.

Burning is sometimes used to remove thatch, particularly on bermuda. This method can reduce thatch but it is not without problems. If a thick thatch exists, the plant crowns may be elevated into the thatch. Burning can then result in high temperature kill of the crown, even on dormant turf. If burning is used it must be rapid and preferable with a moist soil. Burning should not be attempted around houses or where evergreen trees and shrubs are present.

Thatch is not a desirable turfgrass growing media. The turf manager should not consider mechanical removal as a routine maintenance practice. Instead he should give careful attention to preventing excessive shoot growth and promoting maximum decomposition. Mechanical removal is expensive and time consuming and should be used only as a last resort.

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