What Are Golfers Thinking?

The top ten questions frequently asked of the USGA Green Section.

BY BRIAN MALOY

Communicating with golfers is probably the most important part of a superintendent's job description. Unfortunately, when the daily responsibilities of maintaining the golf course get in the way, there is often precious little time left to effectively communicate with those who have questions regarding maintenance activities. As a former superintendent, I remember the strange looks when, one day, I was working with my crew to reopen our flood-damaged course. It was evident that the golfers did not understand why the greens were being watered after the course had just received three inches of rain. What they did not realize was that we were not watering the greens, but rather attempting to remove a layer of silt that had been deposited on them. In hindsight, I realize that taking the time to discuss my agronomic strategy with the golfers would have answered their questions and prevented their imaginations from running wild.

After visiting many courses on behalf of the USGA Green Section, I have come to the realization that many golfers have the same questions regarding course maintenance. The purpose of this article is to address ten of the most frequently asked questions we receive during Turf Advisory Service visits.

QUESTION #1

Why is it necessary to aerify the greens when they are at their best?

It is no coincidence that greens are usually in their best condition right before aerifying. The reason is that the turf needs to be in good condition to endure the physical trauma of core removal. When the date for aeration is postponed to accommodate the golfing calendar, it is likely that it will take longer for the aeration holes to fill in. For more information, refer to the article entitled "Orange Barrels and Putting Green Aerification" by Bob Brame in the January/February 1999 issue of the *Green Section Record*.

QUESTION #2

Why is it necessary to aerify greens built according to USGA specifications?

Many golfers are under the impression that USGA greens should not require routine maintenance practices, such as core aeration, for several years. Their belief is that new greens should be comparable to new cars that do not require a

Aerification is an essential agronomic practice that is necessary to help control organic matter accumulation.

tune-up until they have reached 100,000 miles. As living turfgrass plants do not perform like machinery, new greens often require the same maintenance practices as older greens.

According to research conducted at the University of Georgia, USGA green profiles constructed with 1-3% organic matter can quickly accumulate 8-10% organic matter as a result of normal turfgrass root and stolon growth. When organic matter accumulates to such a high percentage, the water infiltration rate can decline 40% or more. To sustain a high infiltration rate, core aeration is employed to harvest organic matter and introduce fresh sand into the soil profile. For more information, refer to the article entitled "Core Aeration by the Numbers" by Chris Hartwiger and Patrick O'Brien in the July/August 2001 issue of the *Green Section Record*.

QUESTION #3

Is it possible to substitute water injection aeration for core aeration if the greens are built in accordance with USGA specifications?

As previously discussed under Question #2, turfgrass plants continually add organic matter to the rootzone by virtue of their normal growth cycle. Water injection aeration cannot remove this accumulating organic matter in the process of relieving soil compaction, as it does not remove a core. As such, it cannot serve as a substitute for core aeration. For more information, refer to the article entitled "Organic Matter Dynamics in the Surface Zone of a USGA Green: Practices to Alleviate Problems" by Dr. Robert Carrow, published in the USGA's *2000 Turfgrass and Environmental Research Summary,* available on the USGA website at www.usga.org/green.

Tees of insufficient size will not recover quickly enough to support day-to-day play.

QUESTION #4

Agronomists talk so much about the importance of aeration. So, why don't they support wearing metal-spiked shoes?

Research conducted by Green Section Director Dr. Marvin Ferguson in 1958 showed that those wearing metal spikes caused severe damage to the turf, compacted the soil, and delayed turf recovery around the hole locations. Since the mid-1990s when spikeless shoes became popular, golfers have enjoyed smoother, healthier putting surfaces across the country. For more information, refer to the article entitled "The Metallic Mashers of Monocots — Golf Spikes!" by Larry Gilhuly in the September/October 1996 issue of the *Green Section Record*.

QUESTION #5

Why are the greens much faster at my friend's course, where we recently played in a member-guest tournament?

Superintendents coordinate a number of agronomic practices so that the condition of a golf course will be at its best for special events. Unfortunately, greens cannot endure the intense cultural practices that are required to provide fast green speeds for extended periods of time. Research conducted at Kansas State University confirmed that, regardless of bentgrass cultivar, turfgrass quality declined as the height of cut was lowered for extended periods. The pursuit of perpetually fast greens can result in dead turf by the end of the season and unemployment for the superintendent. For more information, refer to the article entitled "S.P.E.E.D. — Consider What's Right for Your Course" by Paul Vermeulen in the November/December 1995 issue of the *Green Section Record*.

QUESTION #6

Are there new products that can allow the turf to be cut short throughout the entire season?

Superintendents at the best-conditioned courses are always happy to report that their success is the result of hard work, the employment of basic agronomic practices, and the use of common sense. This is not to say that there are not products that promise equal results and at the same time allow the staff to punch out early. The bottom line is, if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. For more information, refer to the article entitled "It Just Has to Be Cheaper or Better" by Bob Vavrek in the September/October 2001 issue of the *Green Section Record*.

QUESTION #7

Is it possible to improve our divot-riddled tees by applying more water and fertilizer?

Unfortunately, many players falsely believe that applying more water and fertilizer will hasten divot recovery regardless of the overriding circumstances. There is a point of diminishing return, however, when too much water and fertilizer can actually erode turf quality and deteriorate playing conditions. This happens when the turf becomes too succulent and disease prone and thus is no longer tolerant of normal use. When the quality of the tees deteriorates because of concentrated divot removal, the most likely causes are heavy shade that retards the growth of the turf or a lack of space to rotate the markers. For more information, please see the article entitled "How Large Is Large Enough?" by Paul Vermeulen in the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents' January 2001 issue of *On Course*.

QUESTION #8

What is the quickest way to get damaged greens back into playable condition?

If the damaged areas of a green are too large to repair using nursery sod, then the best course of action is to restrict daily play by establishing a temporary green. If daily play is not restricted, damaged greens can further deteriorate because of golfer traffic and the inability to employ special maintenance practices, such as overseeding. Rather than delay the recovery process, temporary greens are the answer to a speedy recovery. To reduce the likelihood of turf loss in the future, it is important to analyze all the factors that impact the situation. For more information, please see the article entitled "Helping Your Greens Make the Grade" by James F. Moore in the March/April 1998 issue of the *Green Section Record*.

Once a green has suffered stress, the quickest way to encourage a speedy recovery is to restrict the traffic to a temporary green.

QUESTION #9

Is closing the golf course one day per week a cost-effective method for improving its overall condition?

Closing a golf course on a regular schedule is, in fact, a good way to improve course conditioning and help keep the maintenance budget in line. The reason is that the productivity of the staff improves dramatically when they do not have to repeatedly suspend their activities due to approaching golfers. For more information, please see the article entitled "Closing for Maintenance" by Mike Huck in the January/February 2001 issue of the *Green Section Record*.

QUESTION #10

As part of a master plan, the golf course architect has recommended removing more than 250 trees around the greens and tees. Is this kind of suggestion a normal component of a master plan?

Good turf needs good growing conditions, and tree removal is an essential part of master plans on many older courses. Oftentimes, well-intentioned individuals implement tree-planting programs that, in the long run, result in dense forestation. As trees mature, they dramatically affect the way a course plays as compared to the architect's original intention. Also, they cast long shadows over the turf and reduce air movement to the extent that greens and tees develop a poor performance record. Rather than earmarking funds for planting additional trees on the property, consider using the money to take better care of the trees that are already established. For more information, refer to the article entitled "Trees Versus Turf" by Jack Swayze in the November/December 2000 issue of the *Green Section Record*.

CONCLUSION

Since Green Committees change from year to year, one should not make the mistake of assuming that new members automatically understand the importance of routine maintenance procedures. It is the responsibility of the superintendent to explain the importance of what is being done on a daily basis and how it keeps the course in good condition. Discussing common agronomic questions with golfers will help them understand why they are important.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Articles published in the *Green Section Record* since 1997 can be viewed and downloaded from the USGA's website at www.usga.org/green. Select the *Green Section Record* tab.

BRIAN MALOY *has been an agronomist for the USGA Green Section Mid-Continent Region since 1996. He conducts Turf Advisory Service visits in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mexico, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.*

Overplanting trees on the golf course is a national epidemic. As the trees mature, they dramatically affect the way the course plays as compared to the architect's original design.