

Cardinal Rules Just Shouldn't Be Broken!

Layering problems occur too often in putting greens, and good planning and thorough research can help you avoid this common pitfall.

by DAVID OATIS

SOIL LAYERING caused by frequent or ill-advised changes in topdressing materials is the root cause of many problems on putting greens. Undesirable layering can translate into any number of other problems, but ultimately results in reduced drainage, increased disease, and softer, bumpier putting surfaces. This is not a revolutionary new discovery, and even though the detrimental effects of layering are generally understood in the industry, layering problems are still disturbingly common. Some soil profiles look like rings on a tree. Layering problems have been documented thousands of times over the years, yet they continue to occur.

Virtually all of the consequences of layering are detrimental to the health of the turf and bad for the game of golf. Keep the following tips in mind when you are considering a change in topdressing material, and don't rush into a bad decision. "Look before you leap!"

- Among the goals of all putting green soil management programs are to

a) **avoid creating undesirable layering**, and b) **reduce the effects of any existing layers**.

- Did you just take over as superintendent of a new golf course? Superintendent changes are common, and one of the new superintendent's first tasks is to develop a putting green soil management program. Among other things, there isn't always time to do the necessary testing, and rash and potentially harmful decisions are sometimes made. Even though you may have been successful at one golf course with a given program and a specific topdressing material, there is no guarantee that these will be appropriate at another course, which may have different conditions. In many cases, it is actually better to continue using the current topdressing material a little longer, even though its properties may be suspect. Only make the switch to a new material after thoroughly researching the options.

- If a change is being considered, testing is the first thing to do. Take

intact soil cores from several greens and have the physical characteristics of the different strata analyzed by a certified soil testing laboratory. These would include the upper few inches (modified zone) and any other layers beneath. The current topdressing material also should be analyzed along with any prospective materials that are being considered. The laboratory will provide the information necessary to make an informed decision as to which material is best suited to your site and situation. However, it also is wise to discuss the soil test results with your local Green Section agronomist to get another opinion.

- A good rule of thumb is, "Never switch to a topdressing material that holds more moisture than the material it is being placed on." Choosing a topdressing material that holds more moisture than what it is being placed on will result in more moisture being held at the surface of the green. This can spell disaster.

- You say you have been using the same topdressing material for years? That may well be true, but it doesn't mean the material has been **consistent over the years**. It is a good idea to test your topdressing material every year or two to ensure that it is still of suitable quality and is consistent from load to load.

Managing good golf turf can be extraordinarily difficult and, at times, even impossible. There are many variables affecting the turf that superintendents can neither predict nor control. However, the choice of topdressing material is not one of them. Spend the time and do the research to ensure that you are making the right decision for the long-term health and playability of your putting greens.

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