

When the Going Gets Tough, Go Back to Basics

Basic turfgrass management costs less.

BY STANLEY J. ZONTEK

In today's uncertain economic times, ask yourself this question: "What are the basic needs of my golf course?" Don't be swayed by emotion or by a small group of golfers. What are the basic needs of the grass, and how can you save money while not compromising either the needs of the grass or how the golf course is presented?

What will sustain you and your course through these tough economic times? When all is said and done, it probably will be . . . a good golf course. A well-conditioned golf course. A golf course with good grass. The golf course may not be perfect, but the challenge is to do more, or at least the same, *with less*. How can this be done?

In my opinion, go back to *basics*. For one thing, basics cost less and probably will, in the end, help you grow better grass for the golfers to enjoy. What are the most important basics, in my estimation?

Sunlight: No matter who you are, where your golf course is located, and what type of grass you are growing, without enough sunlight your turf will not be healthy. Huge amounts of money can be spent and all sorts of different products, programs, and techniques can be tried, *but there is no substitute for sunlight*. If sunlight is limited, you have a problem. The solution is obvious. Tree removal, limb pruning, and underbrush clearing also improve air circulation, which is good for the grass as well.

Water: In simple terms, too much water kills grass faster than too little water, and playing conditions suffer. Water is a precious commodity. Water and the electricity needed to pump it are expensive. Study your water management program. Are your best people managing your water, and do they really know how important water management is? Always remember, if you have a choice, stay on the dry side. You can always add more.

Nitrogen: What fertilizer nutrient really is the most important? Where should you spend your fertilizer dollars? The answer is very simple. While the grass plant needs a long list of nutrients, absolutely the most important is nitrogen. Our industry seems to be focused on, if not consumed with, maintaining all nutrient levels and how they are balanced in the soil. Does this make the grass plant any healthier? Not necessarily. Nitrogen is the nutrient the grass plant needs the most. Nitrogen is the nutrient that allows the turf to recover from ball marks, divots, and traffic. Nitrogen is the nutrient that makes grass turn green and grow. It is the ultimate biostimulant. Golf courses in the British Isles have been fertilizing with nitrogen *only* for decades. The grass is just fine.

Also, buy fertilizer on the basis of the cost per pound of nitrogen. Be a good consumer.

pH: Grass grows best in soils with the proper pH. It's just that simple.

Add lime if your soil is too acid. Lime is cheap. Equally, if your pH levels are high, acidifying fertilizers like ammonium sulfate are relatively inexpensive. Huge amounts of money can be spent on bulking up soil with macro- and micronutrients, but if the pH is off, money can be wasted and the grass won't benefit. We were all taught pH basics; they remain the same: high 5s to low 7s, with slightly acid preferred. Get your pH right. It allows the soil to take care of itself.

Set Priorities: Each and every turf manager, course official, golf professional, and club manager at every golf course needs to sit down, think clearly, put emotions aside and *set priorities*. What is necessary for your golf course to survive? Remember, the beauty of the game of golf is that every golf course is different. It is imperative to determine what is important for *your facility* and the golfers who play there. In these tough economic times, there are no more important decisions to be made than to achieve the goal of a well-conditioned golf course. This is what golfers want.

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