

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

If it seems too good to be true . . . it probably is.

by PATRICK GROSS

EVERYONE enjoys a good magic trick. A skilled magician seems to create something out of nothing with apparently little effort. Wouldn't it be nice if golf course maintenance were that easy?

With the demands placed on today's golf course superintendent to produce perfect conditions, it is very tempting to jump at any little trick or product that can give you an edge over the competition. Slick brochures and enthusiastic testimonials promise an end to all your problems with little or no effort. Salesmen point out that the guy down the street just bought the same equipment or product and his course has never looked better. They can't exactly explain how or why it works, but *something* is definitely happening. We all want to learn the various tricks of the trade and maybe develop a few of our own to make our jobs easier, but are we making things trickier than they need to be?

A wise man once told me, "Everyone is so busy learning the tricks of the trade, they forgot to learn the trade." While we all want to do things faster and better with less effort, our search for a shortcut often leads us away from the basics of good turf management. After all, the basics are boring. Mow, water, fertilize, aerate, and control pests – there must be something else. We start to second-guess our standard agronomic programs when presented with something a little more glamorous or mysterious. Thousands of dollars may be spent on the latest cutting-edge product with little or no results. Before long, thousands of dollars are wasted and then it is on to the next miracle cure.

When it comes to tricks of the trade, the most successful superintendents I know have mastered the basics – water management, mowing, fertility, cultivation, and pest control. It's not boring to them; in fact, it is at the core of what they do. Every employee is trained in the basics and then held accountable to high standards. When tempted to take shortcuts, the experienced superintendent reminds the staff that their job is to do things the right way, not the easy way.

One of the many challenges for today's golf course superintendent is staying on the cutting edge while avoiding the pitfalls of questionable products and technologies. With concerns over the rising cost of maintenance and affordable golf, superintendents need to stay abreast of products that can improve efficiency and quality without increasing expense. Here are a few suggestions for evaluating the merit of such products:

- Be skeptical about slick advertisements and testimonials. Seek out unbiased sources of information.
- Look for independent research to verify the product claims.
- Test products on a limited basis and include an untreated check area. A good guideline when starting out is to treat only as much area as you are willing to sod in case the material causes damage.
- Determine if the product or technology is necessary or appropriate for your situation.

Golf course management is a combination of art, science, and common sense. There is no need to get too tricky. It is important to keep the emphasis on basic agronomic programs rooted in good science and common sense. Dr. Robert Carrow, turfgrass research scientist at the University of Georgia, offered these comments in a recent *Green Section Record* article regarding the importance of sound basic agronomic programs: "The foundation of all excellent golf facilities is solid, basic turfgrass management. This starts with priority attention given to the basics – good fertilization, irrigation, mowing, pest control, and cultivation programs. The 'extra 5% to 10%' enhancement in quality from the incorporation of new products or technologies cannot compensate for the missing 90% from good 'basics.'" In the end, the tricks of the trade are no substitute for education, training, experience, and common sense.



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