

Challenges of an Internet Agronomist

The Internet is great, but

BY TODD LOWE

The traditional means of becoming a golf course superintendent or turfgrass agronomist generally begins with working on a golf course and developing a desire to nurture and maintain fine turf playing conditions for golf. Next comes schooling, culminating in a degree in golf course management, horticulture, or agronomy. This is followed by several years of apprenticeship for becoming a golf course superintendent, turfgrass agronomist, or other turfgrass professional.

There is a new method of becoming a turfgrass expert that reduces years of schooling and apprenticeship (not to mention student loans) and is becoming popular on golf courses throughout the country. This new method simply requires you to be a golfer and have Internet access. With a few moments of research and the click of a mouse, you can amaze your fellow golfers with an abundance of information about growing grass. With the easy accessibility to the Internet and the fact that many golf club members are retired and have some free time, an increasing number of turfgrass "experts" are produced each year.

All kidding aside, turfgrass management is an art and a science and comes from years of working with turf, understanding seasonal changes, learning how it grows, and understanding the physiological stresses that turfgrass experiences. Just because a golf club member is a good player and can search the Web, it does not make him an expert — much like flying on commercial airplanes does not make a businessperson a pilot! It can be frus-

trating to a turfgrass manager when golfers gain *nickel knowledge* of turfgrass maintenance, especially if the information is incorrect or if it is used to undermine agronomic programs. Knowledge is gained through information exchange, then understanding, and finally wisdom. Nickel knowledge lacks wisdom and can be dangerous if some basic principles of turfgrass management are not first understood.

The Internet is one of the most important resources for information exchange. In the right hands, the Internet can be used to educate and provide insight into factors affecting management decisions. The challenge for effective Internet agronomists is to first develop a professional relationship with their superintendent and learn the peculiarities of the specific grass, soil, climate, environmental stresses, and budgetary/labor constraints particular to their course to properly use the information they gather. It is best to pass the information to the superintendent to see how it might relate to conditions at your golf course before spreading misinformation around the club.

The next step towards becoming an effective Internet agronomist is to utilize the right sources of information. Ask questions like, "Is my information source reputable? Are they non-biased? Are they specific to my region?" Be wary of companies that offer advice attached to products that can cure any ailment. Make certain the source is respected in the turf industry. Also, be cautious of advice from consultants in different regions, as different climatic

conditions and turfgrass species impact specific cultural programs.

Some resources to consider include the USGA Green Section (www.usga.org/turf/index.html), the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) (www.gcsaa.org), and the Turfgrass Information File (TGIF) (<http://tic.msu.edu>). Many of the resources on the GCSAA Web site are for members only, but the magazine archive can be searched by logging in as a non-member. The USGA Green Section Web site has numerous resources available, including helpful publications, research findings, regional updates, the *Green Section Record* archive, and an area where you can post specific questions to agronomists in your region. The largest database of turfgrass information is TGIF, and although there is a fee for the service, it is a must for any serious Internet agronomist. Another valuable resource might be your local land-grant university if it offers turfgrass management programs.

Improperly trained Internet agronomists can be quite a challenge for a golf club and its management. However, with the right training, they can be an asset to the club if they develop a professional relationship with their golf course superintendent, search reliable resources, learn the peculiarities of their onsite turf conditions, and understand how to properly utilize the information they find.

TODD LOWE is an agronomist in the Green Section's Florida Region.