

Self-Inflicted Problems Can Be Hard To Swallow

The superintendent's job is hard enough, so do not hurt yourself!

BY DARIN BEVARD



Implementing aeration strategies on cool-season turfgrass during severe summer stress may cause damage that requires weeks to recover. Simply because the date of aeration is on the calendar should not mean there are not other options. It is important for both superintendents and golfers to be flexible.

During the last two years, weather extremes throughout much of the country have provided major challenges for golf course superintendents and their ability to maintain expected playing conditions. The intense heat in the Southeast, the extreme drought and heat in the southern U.S., or flooding rains experienced

in much of the Mid-Atlantic Region and portions of the Midwest, just to name a few, remind us that Mother Nature reigns supreme in the golf course business. In spite of these weather extremes, expectations for golf course conditions remained at a high level.

This places the superintendent in a precarious position, and decisions

are often made to satisfy immediate expectations when the goal should be to keep the grass as healthy as possible during stressful conditions. Short-term thinking usually contributes to turfgrass decline and deteriorating playing conditions that could have been avoided. What follows are a few suggestions for superintendents and



Golfers can help by following cart and other traffic restrictions put forward by the superintendent. Albeit slightly inconvenient, the ultimate goal is to prevent damage to the course.

golfers to limit some of the most common causes of self-inflicted injury.

READ THE LABEL

This should go without saying, but misapplication of pesticides, growth regulators, and fertilizers is a major source of self-inflicted turfgrass injury. In many cases, a proper pesticide application is made, but environmental conditions are such that the grass is more susceptible to damage from a particular product. Even fungicides that are applied to help the turf can have negative impacts in certain instances. There is a lot more information on the pesticide label than just what pest is controlled and the rate of application. Simple language on the label may warn that a particular product should not be applied above or below a specified temperature or under conditions of

moisture stress. Some labels go as far as cautioning against application to a specific turfgrass species or cultivar under certain conditions.

Fertilizer applications also should be scrutinized. Applying the wrong fertilizer at the wrong time can cause severe turf burn that may require weeks to recover. Know the material that you are applying and its release characteristics. Even stabilized fertilizer products can lead to foliar burn when conditions are questionable. Understanding the release characteristics of a product is critical because even a perfect fertilizer application can burn the grass if humidity and temperature conditions promote rapid release of the fertilizer product.

In short, read the entire label and double check application rates and timings. It may save you from great hardship.

BE FLEXIBLE

In the Mid-Atlantic Region, core aeration of putting greens is often scheduled in the second or third week of August. While this is not the ideal aeration timing, it provides benefits for the golfers and the golf schedule. When all goes as planned, the greens are healed by Labor Day, and the fall golf season is not interrupted by a major aeration event. The downside of this timing is that the weather can still be very hot and stressful, and the grass may already be weak. Core aeration and cleanup are stressful for any turfgrass area, even when weather conditions are optimal. It may be necessary to perform a less aggressive aeration strategy or postpone aeration for cool-season grasses if summer stress is severe at the time that aeration is scheduled, especially on putting greens.

In too many instances, superintendents have done a splendid job managing the grass through the severe summer heat only to experience major turfgrass decline in late August following aeration. Just because aeration is on the schedule, the date should not be carved in stone. Be flexible, and the same suggestion applies to golfers too. Communicate why a certain practice should be postponed. Someone may have to putt on aerated greens in the fall, but it beats putting on severely damaged greens from August into October.

Flexibility is not only necessary with major practices such as aeration. Simply mowing the greens or other turf areas when they are too wet can create damage that will take a long time to heal. If at all possible, avoid mowing when soil moisture is too high. Ironically, wet conditions that persisted throughout the spring and fall of 2011 in many parts of the region forced mowing in spite of concern for mechanical damage to the turf. Golfers were screaming that the rough was too thick and tall, and the grass was getting so tall that forgoing mowing would have been more of a problem than mechanical damage. Sometimes there is no right answer when challenging weather conditions persist.

WHAT ABOUT THE GOLFERS?

Avoiding self-inflicted problems is not all about the superintendent. Golfers play a major role. Superintendents do not try to shoot themselves in the foot. Maintenance decisions are made on a daily basis in an effort to meet golfer expectations and keep the grass alive. Golfers need to realize that stressful environmental conditions often call for conservative maintenance strategies until the weather improves. This may mean that the greens are not as fast and fairways not as firm as many desire.

Golfers should abide by cart restrictions, signage, etc. These restrictions are implemented to protect their investment and preserve playing conditions, not to inconvenience the golfer or make the superintendent's life easier. Frost delays are not a mechanism to allow the maintenance staff to "sleep in." Damage from carts or other traffic that is inflicted on a single day may require several weeks or more to recover. And to achieve recovery often requires extra agronomic inputs, which in turn has financial implications on the budget. Listen to the reasons and rationale behind the decisions that are made.

Finally, flexibility is needed in the golf calendar. Aeration programs may need to be rescheduled if the weather is not conducive to implementation on the originally scheduled date. This may be inconvenient at the time, but it is much less than the inconvenience caused when areas of dead grass develop on a green from an ill-timed aeration that could require weeks to recover.

THE GOLDEN RULE

If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. A shadow of doubt in your mind regarding a maintenance practice during periods of turfgrass stress should be a big red flag. Call it agronomic intuition, if you will. While one does not want to use weather as an excuse, the weather, in fact, is the number-one factor in daily maintenance decisions. If you do not feel comfortable with a maintenance practice (for example, grooming or verticutting) when the turfgrass is under considerable environmental stress, then do not do it. There is a reason you feel uncomfortable, and the reason is that the practice in question has the potential to create problems. Don't risk it.

Golfers need to adhere to periodic cart and traffic restrictions, and they

should be supportive of maintenance decisions that are made to protect the turf, which ultimately protects the main asset of the facility — the golf course. Tolerating a short period of less aggressive maintenance or a day or two of cart restrictions may result in better playing conditions a week or two down the road. Do not be shortsighted.

Looking at dead or damaged playing surfaces that were affected by the implementation of a routine maintenance practice that was supposed to be beneficial can be heartbreaking. Avoid self-inflicted damage by making cautious decisions when the weather is not in your favor. The pressure to meet daily golfer expectations can be immense, but it is easier to explain healthy grass that putts "slow" rather than dead grass that plays "fast." Trust your agronomic intuition.

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Mower damage was a major problem in the Mid-Atlantic Region throughout 2011. When wet weather persists long enough, it may be necessary to sacrifice some of the wetter areas in an effort to maintain the turfgrass stand as a whole. This can be a difficult decision.