

Sayin' It's So Doesn't Make It So

We are all guilty of “looking for results” when we want to see them. In evaluating treatments on turf, check plots will help you maintain your objectivity.

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Placing a small, untreated check plot on the edge of a green shows precisely the effectiveness of an application, in this case when a Poa annua seedhead suppression treatment was made. To create the check plot, a piece of plywood was placed on the green to prevent the product from contacting the turf during the application.

Golf is largely a game of subjectivity. Sure, golf scores are not subjective, but our opinion of just about everything else about a golf course and a round of golf is filled with subjectivity. It is subjectivity

that shapes our opinion of golfers, course design, strategy, aesthetics, and playing conditions. In fact, most golfers have great difficulty separating their opinion of a golf course and its conditioning from the way they played

on a particular day. More bluntly, golfer opinions of golf courses largely depend on how they played.

There is also a fair amount of subjectivity in turfgrass management. Surprised? After all, turfgrass manage-

ment is a science, and it seems completely counterintuitive that subjectivity would be associated with a science-based profession. Truth is, there will always be an element of subjectivity when it comes to turfgrass management, but it can be lessened quickly and easily at any golf facility.

THE SOLUTION? CHECK PLOTS

Turfgrass managers do not use check plots often enough. For those without a background in research, check plots are simply untreated areas. Check plots, or controls as they are often known in the research world, are important because they provide a baseline to compare against when making evaluations and identifying statistical differences among treatments.

The same concept works for golf facilities. When trying a new product, practice, or technique, placing an untreated check plot right next to a treated area allows for easy side-by-side comparisons. Although it is not necessarily statistically valid for research purposes, treated areas can quickly and easily be compared visually to untreated areas, and the difference, or lack thereof, can provide a good indication of whether the treatment was effective and worthwhile. To be sure, the effects of some treatments may not be immediately obvious, and depending on the peculiarities of weather patterns and a host of other variables, initial results may be misleading. Some treatments may prove beneficial in the long term, though they may not provide an immediate positive response. The opposite also can be true in that treatments that provide immediately positive results may not make a significant difference long term. Confused? Manufacturer marketing claims can be confusing too, but using check plots can help you sort through them and better evaluate product performance.

If check plots are so simple, why wouldn't every golf course superintendent use them? The answer is simple. Turf managers are extremely busy, and it can be time consuming to carefully locate and mark them out,

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particularly when multiple treatments and treatment combinations are made over the course of a season. Some express concerns regarding check plots being too visible, affecting playability, or potentially harming turf. These are legitimate concerns and challenges, but they can be overcome. The value of including check plots so far outweighs any potential shortcomings that it is worth jumping through a few hoops to include them.

When asked about the effectiveness of a product or practice, turf managers often respond by saying that it “seems” to work well. Some will vociferously defend the merits of a program or treatment, but when asked where the check plot is, they often admit that they really don't know how well it worked after all. Whether it is a dietary supplement for our bodies or trying a new product or technique on turf, we are all guilty of “looking for results” when we want to see a response. We may desperately hope a product works, or desperately hope it does not, depending upon which result best validates our point of view. Personal biases are a fact of life.

Still not convinced? Maybe this will do it: Over the years, there have been a few new products that reached the market and caused undesirable side effects. In a few instances, the side effects were extremely undesirable and occasionally expensive to correct. Evaluating new products in a test area before making large-scale applications throughout the golf course is an insurance policy that might help you avoid significant and long-term problems.

The truth is, there are no substitutes for properly designed, replicated, scientific studies. While new products are tested extensively, product testing cannot simulate every possible condition that exists on every golf course. Thus, including check plots, particularly when trying something new, can provide valuable information that is specific to your golf course. As this year comes to a close, implementing check plots is a New Year's resolution that every golf facility should make.

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