

What should PGA Professionals know about Turfgrass?

By Derrick R. Griffitts, PGA
Facility Manager/Course Superintendent
Clear Creek Golf Center
Shelbyville/Shelby County Parks & Recreation

Day to day the PGA Professional has little to think about when it comes to turfgrass. However, there is maybe nothing more important to a PGA Professional's occupation as turfgrass. Without turfgrass a course is but a field of dirt. Now a lack of turf may work for desert courses, but for courses in Kentucky; a course with no turf is a course with no play.

Until 2009, I knew absolutely the minimum about turfgrass. All of what I knew had been learned through the PGA and somewhat from a distant family farming background. It was in that year my course superintendent announced his expected retirement in 2011, and I decided to learn the turfgrass side of the business to help offset the declining environment of golf. My goal was to occupy both the PGA Professional and Superintendent roles simultaneously. Overall the savings to our operation was approximately 35% of our labor budget. After working through the University of Georgia's satellite turfgrass program and two seasons of shadowing my superintendent, I learned what I needed to manage my 40 acre turf complex. Overall the result has been very successful, but let me tell you that first stretch of hot summer weather created a mass of sleepless nights. Nothing can prepare you for the stress of 95-degree F weather, with nights above 75-degrees F, and humidity levels running over 80%. It was at that time I truly began to appreciate what superintendents go through when working with mother nature.

So when it comes to the "best practices" to share with my fellow PGA Professionals, it would be of little benefit to explain my views on cultural vs chemical care of bentgrass greens and their role in a balanced IPM program. So, the best thoughts I believe I can pass along is first and foremost turfgrass, trees, and ornamentals are living, breathing, feeding things. They go through life cycles just like we do in that they're born, they feed, some reproduce, and they all eventually die.

Most importantly to the PGA Professional, I believe that to anyone in our business it would be to their advantage to learn in more depth any turfgrass topic they would discuss in the golf shop. This may include the following:

Turfgrass Types – Not to say you need to memorize every single specific variety of turfgrass, but know the basics. Say for instance, it would be to a professional's benefit to know specifically your warm vs. cool season grasses. Very importantly know that we are in the "transition zone" meaning we can potentially grow both warm and cool season grasses, but also cannot depend on as consistent of a growing cycle as certain areas of the country. As well, know the difference between annual

grasses vs perennial grasses. I.e. “poa annuum” or annual bluegrass is a cool season grass that we all have grown to know and love. It lasts one season, starting with germination, then goes to seed (when it gets bumpy), drops seed to start the next season, and dies in the heat. Lastly, know the different broad types of turfgrass we have here in our area; bluegrass, ryegrass, fescue, bentgrass, bermuda grass, and zoysia grass. Some are better for heat tolerance, some require less water, some recover faster, some are better at handling disease, some are better in the shade, and some even have more wear tolerance. They all have their own individual characteristics.

Aerfification/Verticutting/Topdressing (Cultural Control) – Know exactly why you do this. Yes, for the most part it is to alleviate compaction, but it also is to improve flow of nutrients to the roots of the plant, to change the profile of the soil, to remove thatch, to improve disease resistance, and change area relative firmness of play. Soil in our area is predominantly clay, and normally alkaline (aka basic), which can require sulfur to adjust pH levels to adequately allow for nutrient retention and uptake in plants.

Pesticide Usage (Chemical Control) - The definition of a pest is anything that shouldn't be where it is, so for that matter anything can be a pest. Bugs, weeds, disease can all be considered pests, but they are all contained/eradicated differently. Grass Pest – Herbicides. Insect Pest – Insecticides. Fungus (Disease) – Fungicides.

Educating yourself - You can of course contact the USGA or the University of KY Dept. of Agriculture. They all have courses and resources, both online and in person. I would encourage you to also look to your superintendent, on-course supplier representatives (i.e. Site One Landscapes, formerly Lesco/John Deere Landscapes), YouTube, the Internet, the Library, and probably the most overlooked would be your local Cooperative Extension Office. Your local coop can offer a broad array of insight on many things including soil recommendations. You can even get soil samples processed for free through their office (there service may be a bit less thorough than paid for lab processing). Remember, as a taxpayer you pay for the Cooperative Extension office via your county property taxes.

Communication - Lastly, the one most important lesson I have learned now from being on both sides of the golf course counter is that neither job is easy and has its own challenges. For the PGA Professional we are expected to handle/be responsible for anything and everything that relates to the customer experience. A superintendent is expected to contain mother nature, while playing handyman to everything around a golf course. Neither is easy, and yet both are dependent on one another. Take it from me, I have worked with superintendents that get the idea and want to be part of the team, while others I have worked with feel the professional and customers just get in the way of their “garden” of a golf course. With this notion in mind, just remember the key to working with any superintendent is communication and sometimes that communication can be difficult and seemingly

one-sided. However, after most superintendents feel you are listening and empathizing with their role they can many times become your greatest advocate. If you fight for them, most of the time they will fight for you.

Thank you for taking the time to read this article, as I hope it has been helpful. If at anytime I can be of assistance to you, or your facility, please don't hesitate to contact me via the contact info below. I can assure you this, if I don't know the answer, I can help you find the answer.

Fairways and Greens!

Derrick R. Griffitts, PGA

griffitts@pga.com

(502) 345-3285 (Cell)

(502) 633-0375 (Shop)