

THE HAVE-NOTS

Because of environmental restrictions, some superintendents have a lot less tools to work with than the norm

At Machrihanish Golf Links, the fairway turf is indigenous to the site, and the height of cut is determined by the Scottish National Heritage.

BY ANTHONY PIOPPA / SENIOR WRITER

The multitude of tools at the disposal of the modern-day golf course superintendent is nothing short of astounding.

Mowers that can cut grass to a ridiculously low height, high-tech probes that tell not only how moist the soil is, but also how fast the water is evaporating.

There are irrigation heads that can be programmed to water a small area for 20 seconds once every other Monday, if so desired.

For a few superintendents, though, the number of implements at their disposal is limited or almost nonexistent, sometimes because of environmental restrictions, regulations or just a lack of water.

What if the everyday existence of a few superintendents becomes the norm for many more down the road, as pesticide use is restricted and water availability wanes?

At Machrihanish Dunes Golf Club in Scotland, Head Greenkeeper Kevin Smith has to let nature have its way through most of his course, which opened in 2009.

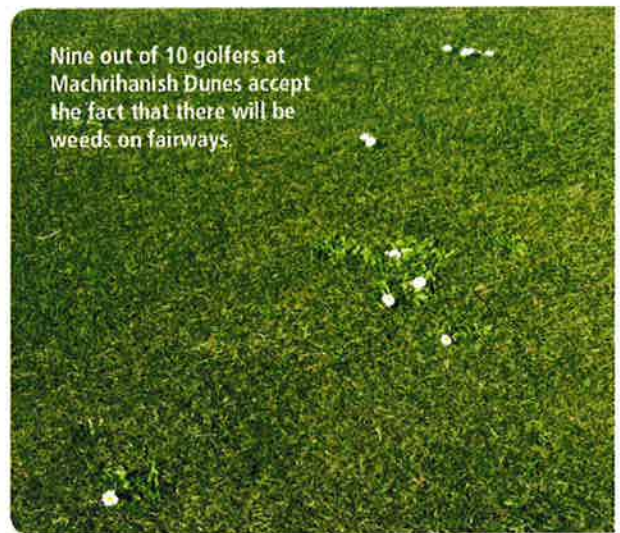
Three thousand miles away on the Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard, Golf Course Superintendent Jeff Carlson's job is made more difficult by the fact that he has only a handful of organic pesticides at his disposal.

In Colorado, Superintendent Matt Rusch of Applewood Golf Course must protect water used to make one of his state's most famous exports.

Perhaps no one has more restrictions than Smith. Because Machrihanish Dunes sits inside a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI or Triple S-1), as determined by Scottish National Heritage (SNH), most cultural practices are forbidden.

He can irrigate and manage the greens and tees, but nothing else. Sprinkler throws aren't even supposed to reach the approaches. Tees and greens can be treated with pesticides and fertilizers, but on the fairways the rules state no verticutting, aerifying, or the application of pesticides or fertilizers.

The developers of the course fully understood the restrictions when permitting the project and agreed to the rules. SNH allowed the golf course because it was thought the layout



could protect the sensitive dunes land that was being destroyed by the huge rabbit population, as well as assist in propagating the rare flower species throughout the site.

This means that weeds and flowers are found throughout the golf course, including fairways. The vast majority of golfers have no problems with conditions that would be considered a crime at most U.S. golf resorts.

"The boys in the golf house try and educate them," Smith says. "Nine out of 10 accept it; they know what they are getting into."

The fairway turf is indigenous to the site, and the height of cut is determined by SNH. Originally, fairways were mown at 20 millimeters (25/32 of an inch). According to Smith, SNH was sure most of the 15 species would die out if cut below 25 mm. Heights are now at 15 mm for the seaside holes and 13 mm for the inland fairways.

"The fescues are coming through strong now. The grass is really adaptive," Smith says. "It can take any situation."

SNH has discovered that the indigenous fescue plants are doing better and even spreading more now.

"The site is getting better protected and better looked after, and that's saying something for a golf course to say that," Smith states.

The results have surprised everyone, including *continued on page 41*

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THE HAVE-NOTS

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regime also includes nutrient and water management as well as over-seeding.

His goal is to “keep plants moving along and growing,” he says.

Carlson will get what he calls “superficial” dollar spot after Labor Day. Since almost all of the 10,000 rounds are played in the summer months, members don’t see the greens at their worst. Carlson said very light play in the shoulder seasons is vital for the recovery of the turf.

As for the weeds, crew members will do some hand removal, but that method on the entire golf course makes no sense.

“It’s very romantic when you’re looking at a 1,500-square-foot backyard, not so romantic when you’re looking at a 90-acre golf course,” Carlson said, calling it “the most demoralizing work. “You’d need 50 people full time to get rid of it.”

There is some hand weeding of greens and collars in the fall. If the invaders get really bad, the areas are sodded.

What Carlson has come to learn in his 12 years at the Vineyard Club is how much weather affects the occurrence and severity of weeds and disease, something that was lost on him in his previous jobs when he had all the latest chemistry at his disposal.

“The low pesticide regime comes with the realization [that] there are more variables in conditions,” Carlson says. “Pesticides really smooth out the road.”

As for his club’s membership, Carlson said they are proud of the fact that only organic pesticides are applied.

“These people are totally understanding of what they are getting into. I think a lot of them like the fact that they belong to a club that doesn’t use any,” he says.

Carlson, though, is baffled by one ongoing complaint.

“If a green putts well, they don’t see disease even if it’s on there,” he says. “What drives them crazy is seeing dandelions 30 yards off the fairway in the rough that will never affect their shots.”

For Rusch, weeds are his biggest foe at Applewood Golf Course, in Golden, Colo. For him, though, it’s all about the beer.

His golf course sits over the aquifer that provides water for the nearby Coors Brewery.

Since 1981, the course has been required to apply only organic products, notes Rusch, who has been superintendent at Applewood since 2005.

Rusch says he didn’t know the constraints of the site until his interview for the job was all but over. Once he found out the

The members of Vineyard Golf Club are proud that only organic pesticides are used. That said, they don’t like the dandelions in the rough.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE VINEYARD GOLF CLUB

ground rules, though, he accepted the job.

At the time, Applewood was nicknamed "Appleweed," according to Rusch. The conditions he inherited weren't acceptable.

Turf quality has improved significantly since he arrived, due in part to the growing number of effective organic products making their way to the market.

He can't eradicate all the invaders, and Rusch has come to accept that fact. "You live with weeds; you deal with weeds," he says.

At the time, Applewood was nicknamed "Appleweed," according to Rusch. The conditions weren't acceptable.

At Applewood, fairways are mowed between 3/4 inch and 7/8 inch. They are a mix of bluegrass and perennial rye, as are the tees. A layer of clay underneath the entire course creates a wonderful growing environment for clover, Rusch notes.

The push-up greens that were built in 1960 and were seeded for years with Penncross are cut at .125 inch. Rusch has been overseeding with Dominant Extreme. Three greens that were lost to desiccation a few years ago are 100 percent Dominant. He tries keeping green speeds between 8.5 and 9.5 on the Stimpmeter.

According to Rusch, the fact that he regularly plays his own course helps him keep a good eye on it.

"Me being a superintendent and a golfer, I get it from both aspects," he says.

Luckily for Rusch, the region of Colorado where he works is arid. He puts down neither pre- nor postemergents.

"Maybe after a rainstorm you have some pressure," Rusch said.

His method for combatting snow mold is to blow off greens when the white powder accumulates.

To thwart weeds on tees and greens, Rusch has the leafy interlopers removed by hand and the holes filled with seed and sand.

Rusch is determined that conditions at Applewood will continue to improve.

"You see what you can do if you care and put time and effort and sweat and blood and tears into it," he says.

What the superintendents of Applewood,

Machrihanish Dunes and the Vineyard Club understand is that their jobs will continue to change just as the turf will.

"It's a golf course. It's always going to be an ongoing project," Smith says.

"Hang in there, be patient," is Carlson's advice for anyone whose circumstances are similar to his.

He and Smith also relish the chance when

they are chosen to try a product that is still in the development pipeline.

"It's quite fun to be involved with," Smith says.

Carlson agrees.

"That's the fun part of the job." ▲

Pioppi is a columnist and senior writer for Superintendent magazine.



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