

# ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

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## Looking for a “Fast Food” Version of the USGA Spec Green

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**I**T'S COME to this: After listening to golf course architects, builders, superintendents, and others complain endlessly about USGA specifications for green construction, and watching them modify the specs a hundred different ways to meet their own desires and beliefs, I've decided that what these people must really want is a “fast food” version of the specs!

What constitutes my definition of “fast food” specs, you ask? It's simple. Green construction according to the “fast food” method must be all of the following:

- EASY
- FAST
- CHEAP
- FOOLPROOF

Unfortunately, building greens is not the same as flipping burgers. If you look around long enough and set your taste standards low enough, it's possible to find restaurants that serve food that meets all four performance characteristics. If anyone tells you he can build greens that meet all four standards, though, my advice would be to look elsewhere.

It's not hard to find greens built with the first three characteristics in mind — EASY, FAST, and CHEAP. They're the ones that often fail and must be rebuilt, or else cost many times their original expense in terms of extra maintenance costs, poor-quality turf, aggravation, and unhappy golfers.

The fourth characteristic — FOOLPROOF — is the standard the smart money goes with. It means building a green according to the method most likely to succeed, a method that ensures

good drainage, resistance to compaction, consistently good turf conditions, and, with judicious maintenance, decades of good performance. It means a method of construction based upon good scientific principles and years of proven field experience; in other words, the USGA recommended method of green construction.

Why wouldn't everyone build FOOLPROOF greens? Some critics say that USGA greens are too difficult, time-consuming, and costly to build. But are these criticisms justified? Let's take a look, comparing USGA specs to other methods of green construction.

**EASY** — USGA greens are fully described in a 24-page booklet and a 25-minute videotape. Laboratory personnel and Green Section agronomists are available to answer questions and provide other assistance. Sure, it takes some planning and coordination to build USGA greens, and it takes more steps than the alternative fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants method. But which method is actually easier? With USGA greens, all you have to do is follow the directions. One point in favor of the USGA specs.

**FAST** — It's true, building a USGA green is not the same as deciding to get in your bulldozer, pushing up some “native soil,” planting some grass seed, and calling it a green. It requires seeking out the best materials, allowing time for laboratory testing, mixing the components carefully, and following through with all the details to ensure success. One point in favor of the critics, but nothing that some planning couldn't change.

**CHEAP** — Okay, okay, the best materials sometimes cost more (but often not), and it could cost a few hundred dollars for laboratory testing and a few thousand dollars more for the time needed to put down the intermediate coarse sand layer. And let's really go first class and hire a quality-control person for \$40,000 on a \$500,000 (or more) green construction project. The extra cost for doing it the right way to ensure long-term success is usually less than 10% of the total. Another point in favor of the specs.

**FOOLPROOF** — Admittedly, there is little that is foolproof in the world, but USGA greens are by far the safest bet when it comes to green construction. For all of the criticism, no one has come forward with a scientifically based, time-tested method that's better, or even comparable.

During the past year, we've heard from every imaginable corner of the game about how the USGA ought to change its specs to make them easier, faster, and cheaper. Not surprisingly, most recommendations best served an individual's needs, rather than the needs of golf courses for top-quality greens. Rest assured, however, that the USGA is not going to put its name on construction methods designed primarily to make green construction easy, fast, and cheap, without including the foolproof. If we ever endorse “fast food” green construction techniques, it only will be after extensive scientific investigation and extended field testing, and after the fat and cholesterol have been removed, too.