

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

KEEP IT SIMPLE!

by BOB BRAME

Agronomist, Mid-Atlantic Region, USGA Green Section

KEEPING IT SIMPLE in golf course maintenance does not mean turning your back on modern technology. As an industry we have progressed a long way over the last few years. We cannot hide our head in the sand and survive for long. However, keeping it simple does mean *first things first*.

A truly successful golf course maintenance program is built on a solid foundation. This includes good water management (drainage and irrigation), a good grass-growing environment (sunlight, air movement, and a reasonable mowing height), and proper fertilization. At times, fine-tuning strategies are placed in front of a solid foundation. Think about these examples.

A plant growth regulator is being used as a means of reducing *Poa annua* in putting greens. The idea is to stunt the growth of *Poa annua* so that the stoloniferous, lateral growth of bentgrass will fill in and crowd out the *Poa*. Sounds like a reasonable strategy, right? Yet, when these same greens are being mowed *below* 1/4 inch, a contradiction occurs. At ultra-low cutting heights the mower will scalp down into the crown of the bentgrass plant. The weakened bentgrass is now more prone to disease, and the turf canopy is thinner, allowing weeds to encroach. *Poa annua* is given a green light. A proper mowing height is part of the foundation of a good maintenance program, and the use of a growth regulator is a fine-tuning strategy. Foundation elements must be in place to realize full value from fine-tuning strategies. Problems always occur when we get the cart before the horse.

We are seeing more and more biostimulants being used in maintenance programs, sometimes by themselves and at times in combination with fertilizers. For the purpose of this discussion, let's assume they do enhance plant growth (there is some disagreement on this point, depending on the actual biostimulant being used). If they do create a growth response, how can you tell what is occurring because of the biostimulant and what is caused by the fertilizer? Biostimulants may have value, but anything that



New equipment innovations can help improve the playing surface for the game of golf, but new technology doesn't replace the required basics: direct sunlight, good air movement, and proper irrigation and mowing practices.

camouflages the superintendent's ability to monitor the growth response occurring from fertilization should be viewed as a potential problem. First things first.

We have a wide variety of tools (equipment and pesticides) available today for the maintenance of golf course turf. However, modern technology cannot replace the grass plant's need for direct sunlight and good air movement. It makes very little sense to invest time and money in the maintenance of quality turf and not provide the grass plant with what it needs to grow. If trees are blocking sunlight penetration, do some selective thinning. If underbrush is restricting air movement, remove it. The bottom line

is that sunlight and air movement are foundation elements in producing healthy, stress-tolerant golf course turf.

Today's golf course superintendents are expected to wear a number of hats. Yet, it is the actual conditioning of the golf course for which the superintendent is ultimately evaluated. The pressure for perfection has, more than once, caused well-meaning superintendents to shoot themselves in the foot (I've been there, and I've seen others do it). Keeping it simple would suggest making sure your foundation is solid before trying to fine-tune. During the heat of battle, stay with what has worked in the past. When in doubt, don't do anything! Keep it simple.