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On Course

The Natural Alternative

By Trent Bouts

By eliminating most synthetic inputs, Harmony Club is positioning itself for long-term sustainability, on and off the course

For most golf course operators, if grass, memberships and revenue are growing, then all is well with the world. But Byron Collins, owner and developer of Harmony Club near Fort Collins, Colorado, believes he can better achieve all three goals by growing something else first—the soil. The first-time course owner has put his faith in a maintenance regimen that is heavy on organics and light on anything synthetic.

“You can spend a lot of money on chemicals that give you a big bang in the short term, but when the bang is gone, so is your buck,” Collins says. “Instead of throwing a chemical down and making the course flash up for a brief period, we’re working toward soil conditions where the roots will go deeper, the plants will be stronger and more resistant, and they won’t need as much water.”

Harmony Club opened in the summer of 2007, and Collins soon became concerned about the long-term viability of what he characterizes as a “thin layer of topsoil pushed back in place once the shapers were done.” In league with Course Superintendent Mitch Bowers, Collins committed Harmony Club to a path that leads away from Main St. maintenance practices and down a road that focuses on microbes, not molecules. “I hate to use the cliché, but it seemed a little more natural to rebuild the soil with earthen materials,” Collins adds.

To that end, Bowers uses a large amount of organic compost on fairways and roughs, and a variety of tea on his greens. Both applications are laden with microbes that break down waste materials and debris from mowing and turn it into soil that’s rich in nutrients. He buys the products, certified pathogen-free, from a local supplier and also “brews” his own, using clippings, sand, lime and gypsum.

Three years on, both Collins and Bowers say it’s still too early to declare mission accomplished or specify absolute outcomes or savings. However, both say they’ve been “very encouraged” by the progress to date.

“Initially, I’m not sure it saves any money, but in the long-term, as it builds up the soil, I think it will,” Bowers says. “Healthy soil helps build plant immune systems. This is my fourth growing season, and we haven’t had one disease outbreak. There’s been a little Poa [annua] on the fairways, but that’s about it.”

Bowers, who has been in and around golf for more than 20 years, admits his practices put him “in his own little world” when compared to those of his colleagues. “It’s all based on trial and error, really,” he says.

Even so, it’s not like he or Collins were jumping without a parachute. Bowers makes good use of a relationship he has established with Dr. Tony Koski, a decorated turfgrass specialist from Colorado State University.

“He supports the fact that I’m on a different route than most other courses,” Bowers says. “He makes monthly visits, and will offer some thoughts here and there. I think he gets excited about what we’re doing, and it’s helpful to have his eyes taking a look at things.”

Ultimately, though, it will be Harmony’s 140-plus golfing members whose excitement levels matter most. That’s why Bowers uses the club’s regular newsletter to spread the natural gospel.

“We’re a private club, pretty much golf only, and naturally there are high expectations,” he says. “So I try to teach members that, yes, some weeds might occur, but hopefully, we can reach a point where, given the benefits, they see that as acceptable.”

Bowers is careful to point out that his program isn’t totally organic. That may be an admirable aiming point, but he isn’t about to alienate golfers in the meantime. He makes one fungicide application against snow mold each year, and uses herbicides to spot-spray for the worst of the weeds in the spring.

That may explain in part why Harmony Club has not used its pro-organic focus as a marketing tool, although it was cited in the submission the club made to win the Colorado Golf Course Owners Association’s Course of the Year award in 2009. Neither Bowers nor Collins could be labeled “extreme greens,” but both do share a heartfelt desire to do as well as they can by the environment while doing well in their business.

“Sure, it was a conscious decision to do what we’ve done with our approach to maintaining the golf course,” Collins says. “But the intention was not there to do that so we could use it as a marketing tool. It was just the conscientious thing to do.”

Instead, Harmony’s members are arriving at the gradual realization that the club’s methods are grounded in, well, the ground. “They read about it and ask about it at our annual meeting, and they’re impressed by what we’re doing,” Collins says. “We’re still too inexperienced, and it’s still too early to make absolute numeric valuations of costs or savings. But in the long haul, I do absolutely believe there will be savings that will be significant.”

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