

Aerification: An Indispensable Tool

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Aerify - a word that causes superintendents to duck and golfers to cringe. A word which always engenders strong feelings and none of them good. And yet, it is my contention that aerification is an indispensable tool for managing quality turf, especially on bentgrass greens. It should not be treated as an instrument of last resort, but should move to the top of our list of options. I can confidently state that in my short ten years in the business, at various golf courses around the area, I have never seen an aerification make the situation worse on bentgrass greens. Now I know what some of you are thinking, I did not say that I have never seen declining turf associated with aerification, only that I have never seen aerification cause turf to decline. I have seen greens decline after aerifying, but not because a hole was poked in the green. Many of the "bad" aerifications I have witnessed or taken part in were in reality, bad topdressing, or bad dragging, bad rolling or had incorporating of bad material. By "bad", I do not mean badly executed, **it** is just that sometimes, especially in the late summer, the typical practices associated with aerification, i.e. topdressing and dragging, do more harm than good. and give the aerification itself a bad name.

See if this sounds familiar: You are going to aerify the greens in the Fall, but you are generally hitting a window of six weeks from mid September to October. Friends, in Texas, this is late Summer, not Fall. The top has just started to recover, but the plant is still very weak. You core with half inch tines, pick up the plugs, and top. By the time you are dragging in the last greens, **it** is 92 degrees and the turf is stressing. The next day the turf looks bruised and beaten down. The first moving scalps some places that did not get smoothed out well. The following week, the high is near 100 degrees and your greens look like s--t! For two weeks all you do is field questions from people who want to know why a reasonably intelligent looking person would repeatedly tear up his greens just at the time they started to look good. You drag yourself into the office and swear that if you ever get the greens back you will never, ever aerify again, and you mean it!

Now, of course, I recount this scenario not from personal experience, but from what I have heard others have experienced. (Uh huh). Perhaps it is a stubborn streak, but I have responded to similar circumstances not by abandoning aerification, but by amending my particular practice of it, or scaling down the operation to make sure that I do what I can do well. I have gradually made a transition from thinking of aerification as a twice a year cultivation practice with 1 big cores to a one a month practice with small tines. This mirrors the trend in topdressing to make light and frequent applications, and for the same reasons. "Light" aerifications using 1/4 inch side eject tines or the solid star tines simply do not stress the turf and require much less effort to have the greens puttable the next day. The typical 1/4 inch side eject tine aerification with Ryan Greensaire II's requires only blowing off with back pack blowers and rolling back out with something (I use a hydroject). The holes are small enough that if you leave them open, the hole closes after rolling to about the size of a pencil. Topdressing the next week a little heavier than normal will fill in everything quite nicely and you have not stressed the turf at all.

These "light" aerifications open up the profile and produce much of the same benefits that

larger tines do, and yet they do not engender the same criticism from players, and do not stress the turf. I have used this procedure as a routine preventative practice and in areas that are actively stressing in the middle of the summer, and the greens have never gotten worse, and in most cases, they improved. The solid star tines are even less labor intensive and less disruptive of the putting surface, and they require only rolling back out to be ready for play. Using light, frequent aerifications allows you to stay ahead of the stress curve a bit and the stronger the green is before you poke holes in it, the quicker it will respond.