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SATURDAY, 28 JULY 2012

Organic Golf, Can it be done?

Approaching rant territory here:

If you have been following my blog you will know that I have been experimenting with alternative pest control products for golf courses this season. So far I can say that I am completely amazed at how far these products have come in such a short time. It is much too early to jump to conclusion, but what I am seeing is very promising for the case towards organic golf course maintenance.



Two very promising organic pesticides

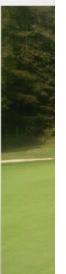
For someone toying with the whole "organic" thing it is unsettling to hear that both organic golf courses in British Columbia seem to have gone out of business. It's sad to hear but in my opinion it's not surprising. In my opinion there are a few reasons why organic golf courses have failed in the past and will continue to fail in the future. Of course these are generalizations and should not be taken personally. I do not have the actual reasons these courses are no longer in business.

Firstly is that in my experience they just can't compete with the economics of non-organic golf courses.

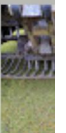
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With the use of synthetic products it is almost, dare I say, easy to achieve great course conditioning. These products work great and are cheap to use. They make conditions only dreamed about 20 years ago possible for even the mom and pop operations. Typically organic golf courses just can't produce the same conditions for the same cost as their competition. This could change with time and as newer better organic products become available (I could really use an organic source of urea maybe diluted urine or something).

You can't argue that these courses are organic but it is debatable whether or not these courses are in fact golf courses and not hay fields. It is not enough to just call yourself organic and hope people will come and golf. Golf is not nature, going for a hike in nature is. Golf is about a game, and that game requires certain conditioning that in most cases isn't achievable for most organic golf courses. This is one reason why organic golf courses typically fail in my opinion. Again, not all organic courses are like this, just a generalization.



If you want nature then go take a hike

The second seems to be a lack of proven organic golf courses practices. I am always excited to read about what the organic guys are doing. I like to hear about what they are doing that really works and what doesn't work so well. It seems that when most organic turf managers are interviewed I am disappointed in their responses. Their solutions seem fanciful and far fetched. You cannot compare growing turf at 2mm with growing organic tomatoes. I can guarantee that anyone can grow organic grass that is 2m tall with almost 100% success. The highest height of cut on most courses is maybe 5cm with the majority of turf at the 15-20mm range. Again, you can't compare this to a hay field. If you expect it will be that easy you are delusional. You can't go into organic golf with a plan that works for organic farming and expect it to work. This isn't agriculture.

Another observation is that most seem to have little understanding of the pests that they are fighting in the first place. In order to use alternative methods (cultural, registered organic pesticides) you need to have a vast experience with the pests you are trying to control. You can't ignore the pests. Simply stating that you have this one fungus that causes issues in the winter time doesn't help anyone. Instead maybe tell us what that particular fungus is and what you do that works to control it. **Jeff Carlson's presentation** goes into great depth about the pests he encounters and exactly what he does to fight them. This information is helpful and I would consider him easily one of the top superintendents in the world, organic or not. Maybe the interviews that I have read are dumbed down so that people who aren't turfgrass experts can understand it but I would really like to hear the specifics.



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Thirdly it's hard to learn anything from dead grass except "that didn't work." Simply committing to go "organic" is irresponsible unless you have a proven plan. The guys at the Vineyard Club had a plan from the beginning to be organic. They did all the research and prep work to make it happen. They didn't think they could do it as no one had done it before them but they tried anyway. If I committed to an organic program tomorrow my course would go out of business next year. My course just isn't set up to go full organic, yet.

Now ask me if organic golf is possible. Yes it is possible. Jeff Carlson has proven it plain and simple. It's not just him but also the chemical companies are now starting to make organic products that actually work unlike most of the snake oils that most organic operations have historically used. It probably isn't possible everywhere but as new products are developed maybe it will be.

I feel that the approach to organic golf in the past has been flawed. We have approached it all wrong. You can't just say you are going organic without a plan and you can't come up with a plan unless you are an expert. I'm sick of failed organic attempts. It really does nothing for the cause. Again it all comes down to the plan. These plans take into account location, construction methods, budgets, competition, the list goes on and on.

I'm sorry to sound so cynical but these "all-in" failed attempts really bother me. They only fuel the fire that organic golf is in most cases impossible.

I also can't stand pesticide bans. They totally limit the chance and ability to learn and get better. They are a negative way of dealing with the issue. How about offer an alternative that works, then take away the synthetic products. Again, you can't learn much from dead grass. Restrictions and hindrances for their use do work as we are seeing in Canada. Since the pesticide ban in Ontario and Quebec we have seen an increase in the number of organic turf products that actually work. I'm probably going to get some flack for that one.

What I have been working on for the past few years is a different approach to organic golf. I'm not claiming to be organic. I don't even expect to ever achieve total organic operations but it is always something to work towards. I like the challenge and learning process that it involves. I can see courses in the future being partially organic for certain parts of the year.

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What golfers see



What the agronomist sees

Currently I still use synthetic pesticides as needed as do all other turf managers. I am slowly incorporating organic products that I feel show promise to be effective to help me achieve a high level playing surface. My acceptable disease thresholds might be a bit higher than some but I have never had a complaint about disease on my greens.

Lately these organic products have become more effective as new research and technologies become available and demand for these types of products rises. Now the highly effective synthetic products have become a safety net for me. If for some reason my organic approach doesn't work I can fall back to the trustworthy, effective and safe synthetic products. With this approach I minimize the chances ending up with dead turf but maximize the learning potential. Face the facts, we don't know Jack about the interactions of everything in the environment and what impacts our inputs actually have.

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I'm not the only one doing this either. Most turf managers I talk to are doing the exact same thing.

One thing I think we as turf managers could do better is learn how to better use the products before discounting them as "useless" (by the way if anyone can find a good use for Zeritol let me know because as far as I'm concerned it's useless for turf). The new revolutionary modes of action the newer products have aren't a band aide approach like some of the more popular synthetic products (chlorothalonil) are. They require a total IPM program that addresses plant health from all aspects. Trying these new products requires some commitment. It might also require a change in our expectations for visual perfection. There is a clear and distinct difference between visual perfection and perfect playing conditions. As long as the surface performs as it was intended then maybe that's all that is needed.

Either way I think that the new products that are becoming available show great promise. I'm not saying that synthetic pesticides are bad, I just think that there is a better way of doing things. Typical synthetic pesticides directly kill the fungus and have little to do with the plant. I am not a fan of this mode of action for regular use. The newer products are inducing natural plant defense systems which allow the plants to better cope with the pathogens. This way natural selection is still permitted to function in the ecosystem (a good thing). I hate the idea that the pesticides I apply could give weaker species an advantage over the naturally disease resistant species.

A quick aside: It is totally an anecdotal observation but it seems that the less synthetic products that I use the less severe the disease outbreaks are. Where I used to get hammered with disease overnight I now see it come on slow and suppressed and am more often than not able to wait it out. It could also be the organic products suppressing the disease but not totally controlling it.



I was looking at fusarium with active mycelium for 2 weeks before I panicked. I am definitely developing a higher tolerance to this disease.

I will continue to work towards achieving total organic pest control at my course. Why not? What I won't do is commit to it until I can prove that I can do it. I will also continue to share my findings so that we can all learn together. There is no point in making the same mistake twice. I have a good idea why others have failed and I'm not going to make their mistakes.

Posted by **Jason Haines**



Labels: **IPM**, **Organic**, **Pesticides**, **Sustainability**

1 comment:



Scott Steele 6 January 2013 at 13:59

Great blog and commentary on your current experience with organic products. I think you have a really healthy approach to developing an increasingly organic program while maintaining the turf quality and playing conditions that are expected today. I'd like to see if we can work out a trial of our organic products, which you can see here: www.GantecTurf.com and www.GantecInc.com You can reach me at Scott@GantecTurf.com

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