

Spring Training for Your

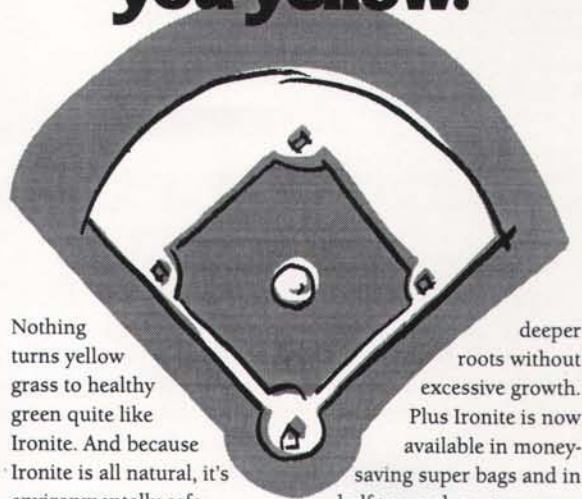


A high-pressure water hose can effectively blast sand/clay soil out of the edge of the turf. Photos courtesy: Jim Puhalla.

Baseball Diamond

By Jim Puhalla

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The opening of spring training is one of the most encouraging signs of the end of winter, and that's especially true in the north, where cabin fever is an epidemic by February. But for those of us who manage baseball diamonds, news from the training camps serves as a kind of seasonal wake-up call. If we haven't given the diamond any attention since last fall, it's time to get started.

But how much can you do? With the season fast approaching, any major reconstruction is obviously out; the field would never be playable in time. But that still leaves a number of renovation operations that can help make the field more beautiful and playable when the fans show up.

Let's look at three categories of work: 1. things we can do before the season, 2. things that should wait until after the season, and 3. things we should never do.

We'll focus most of our attention on the skinned areas, since those are the areas that normally need the most care. If a game is called because of field problems, the skinned area is usually the culprit. After all, most of the players use that area every inning.

What To Do Now

1. Lip Removal. One important process that can and should be done before each season is lip removal. Every season, dragging and weather conditions like wind and rain push lots of dirt into the grass at the arc of the infield and along the base lines. That dirt forms a lip that keeps rain from draining away into the grass the way it's supposed to. This lip also becomes a hazard to players because it causes erratic bounces of the ball, and because of the possibility of tripping. So getting rid of the lip is very important.

One way to prevent these lips from building up is to



A standard sidewalk edger can be used to remove small lips and to straighten the grass outline.

The small grass hill on this field (visible at lower right) was treated by sod cutting, followed by re-grading the soil to provide positive surface drainage.



regularly blast the grass edge with a high-pressure water hose, washing skinned area soil back out of the grass edge and onto the skinned area. On most fields, this should be done at least once a year, and preferably twice. Just focus the stream on the two to four inches of grass along the edge of the skinned area.

If a small lip (one to three inches) has already built up, edging with a sidewalk edger will probably take care of it. Your field should be edged along the base lines, at home plate and the pitcher's mound, and along the outfield arc. If the lip is already 12 to 18 inches wide, you'll need to use a sod cutter.

On some fields, the lip has already grown into a grass hill that's visible to the naked eye and may be three to five feet wide. It's advisable to go ahead and sod cut away those hills and lower the grade now, then seed or sod after the season. The infield will be a little larger than usual, but the improved drainage will be worth it.

2. Surface Leveling. The skinned area should be pulverized to break up the compaction that forms over the winter. Pulverized infield soil is also easier to work with in making minor grade changes.

You can perform those grade adjustments by hand, but the work goes faster with a tractor and level bar. If you don't have a level bar, you can easily make one in your shop, and you'll get a much smoother skinned area surface.

There are those who rototill to loosen skinned area soil, but we steer clear of tilling unless we are adding conditioners. Even then, we try to till shallowly during the season, to reduce the time the soil takes to re-settle. A good rule of thumb is: for each inch deep that you till, it takes one week for the soil to fully settle after the first heavy

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rain (e.g., after tilling two inches deep, the soil takes two weeks to settle).

3. Applying Additives. If your field tends to be too wet or too dry, a conditioner may be the answer. One effective conditioner is Agro-Tech 2000's Play Ball, which is one of the new generation of diatomaceous earth materials that soak up water when it rains and release it when the soil is dry. These can be added before the season, but should not be tilled-in too deeply if you plan to use the field right away.

Another good pre-season project is shaping the pitcher's mound and renovating the home plate area. They can be raked and filled to level out the wear and tear. Have a good look at the pitcher's plate to make sure it can withstand another season.

One possibility for the mound and batters' boxes is to install one of the new products, like Wessco's KLAOWG, which are designed to reinforce those much-abused areas. These are clay-based products that remain firmly bonded together, even in the face of



A pulverizer is a good tool for breaking up the top one inch of compacted soil; it also makes it easier to perform minor grade changes.

heavy rain and stress. After final grading, you dig out three to four inches of soil, install the material, then tamp it into place and cover it with skinned area soil. The result is a mound or box that doesn't cup out as badly or need as much maintenance.

4. Rolling and Dragging. Rolling the skinned areas with a standard garden roller helps to firm up the soil. Even when you do roll, it's a good policy to keep the team off the field after the first heavy rain until it has dried out completely. That cycle seals the soil into a good, consistent surface.

After one rain/dry cycle, you can begin regular dragging with a nail drag and mat drag and continue through the end of the season. Remember that poor dragging practices get soil into the grass and lead to lips. Start dragging six to twelve inches from the grass edge, keep dragging speed low, and lift the drag before you move off the skinned area onto the turf.

5. Turf Maintenance. Of course, there are also some steps that can be taken to get turf areas ready for play. As soon as possible, take soil samples and send them for testing. Use those results to plan your fertilization program for the year. Generally, you can start fertilization after 20 to 30 percent green-up of your desired species of turfgrass.

If you keep the grass longer during the off-season, begin to gradually work your height down as soon as you can begin mowing. Remember to cut off no more than one-third of the grass plants at any given mowing.

After the Season

Some processes should be deferred until after the season is over, unless you can count on a four-week period after the work to let the field settle. Remember that if you start a process and heavy rains delay you, the field might not be playable when the season starts.

- 1. Deep Tilling.** You'll probably need to wait until after the season for processes like deeply tilling the skinned area — especially tilling over two inches deep.
- 2. Adding Soil for Drainage.** Another post-season project should be adding soil to improve surface drainage. If drainage has been a problem, perform a survey to check the contours of the field, and plan to add soil to correct the grade once the season ends.
- 3. Seeding and Sodding.** Conduct your re-seeding or sodding operations on areas that were cut out to remove lips or hills before the season. Now you'll have time to till, plant and water correctly without concerns about game delays.
- 4. Aeration.** Core aeration of the field should be done after the season, unless you can remove the cores. Aeration should take place when the grass is actively growing — so if the season ends after growth has slowed dramatically (as in summer dormancy in the north), wait until

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fall to aerate. If, for some reason, you must aerate during the season, solid-tine aeration is a better practice.

- 5. Post-Season Mowing.** Plan your mowing program in the post-season to slowly change the height to reach the off-season levels. Don't just cut your mowing frequency in half, because that leads you to end up cutting off more than one-third of the plants when you mow, and leaves the turf vulnerable to pests and other stresses.

Practices to Avoid

It's a waste of time and money to install internal drainage in the skinned areas of a baseball diamond. Water simply doesn't percolate fast enough through skinned area soil to make French drains or other internal drainage structures practical. Typically, water percolates at about .01 inch/hour, not fast enough to do any good.

If drainage is a concern, improve it



A level bar up to ten feet wide helps get a smooth, consistent surface. This one was easily made in the contractor's shop.

through contour planning to provide surface drainage. That's the only way to have a substantial positive effect on the problem.

The one exception to internal drainage is installing solid lines for catch basins outside the playing areas.

Rules of Thumb

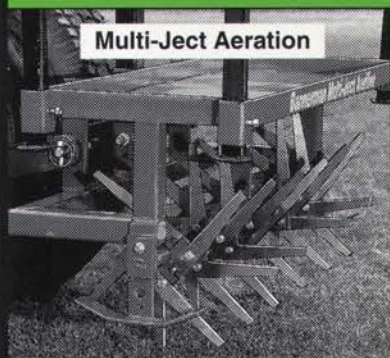
Two simple rules of thumb will help you determine whether to perform an operation now or wait until after the

season. The first rule is: cuts (soil removal) can be done now; fills (soil addition) should wait. The second rule is that each inch of skinned area soil disturbance takes one week to re-settle after the first heavy rain.

With a little planning and attention now, your baseball diamond can be more playable and attractive throughout the season. Remember that the field needs to recover from each process, and factor that recovery time into your planning, so your athletes will have the best possible field when competition starts. □

Jim Puhalla is the President of Sportscape International of Boardman, Ohio, and Dallas, Texas, and is the co-author, with Mississippi State University Professors Dr. Jeff Krans and Dr. Michael Goatley, of a forthcoming book, Sports Fields - A Manual for Design, Construction and Maintenance, to be published by Ann Arbor Press, Inc., Chelsea, Michigan.

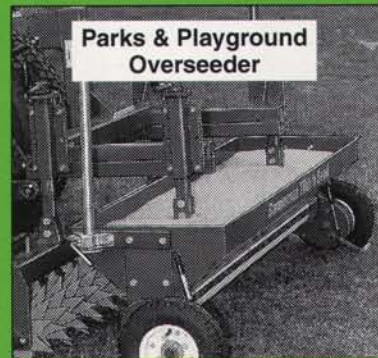
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