

What do you want to know about my field?

Back in August 2005 I wrote a "Q&A" that addressed questions asked during one of our University turfgrass field days. I always find it interesting the questions asked by people with different turf backgrounds. But what about questions asked by people with almost no turfgrass knowledge? A few days ago I found myself standing on Florida Field (University of Florida's football field) addressing over 300 Master Gardeners at their annual state conference. I should note that the conference coordinator apologized for the low turnout. A few hours before the conference started the southern half of Florida was experiencing winds over 100 miles per hour due to Hurricane Wilma.

For those of you that are not familiar, the Master Gardeners is a program that started back in the 1970s. The original intention was to train a group of volunteers, primarily mature retired individuals, to help disseminate horticulture extension information. It is a volunteer organization that has been hugely successful across the country. According to the Florida Master Garden website, their duties include answering horticulture questions over the phone, in person or through the media; participating in public service projects; giving education program; and supporting youth activities. In Florida there are almost 4,000 certified Master Gardeners that contribute over 300,000 hours of service each year to the state. I am sure your state also has an active group of these trained horticulturists.

So, if you are a regular reader of this column you are probably asking yourself, What is the question? Well, this month the question is about questions. Have you ever thought about what people want to know about your facility, or how it is managed, or what you do every day?

My experience with Master Gardeners is that they are an inquisitive group. I had few doubts that I would have a rapid-fire question period at the end of my presentation. For that reason, I kept my presentation brief and then told them they could ask whatever questions they wanted. These people are on the front line of information every day. They ask questions so that they can answer questions later.

I presented a brief history of the stadium as provided by the Athletic Association, then named the grass on the field by species and cultivar. I explained core aeration and topdressing, providing some schedules of when they are done. I talked about fertilization and pesticides, being sure that I addressed proper use and best management practices. I ended my presentation time by outlining the painting schedule and pre-game preparation so they could appreciate the team approach to getting a field ready for competition.

The questions started immediately where I left off, painting. They had no idea it took about 150 gallons of paint to get Florida Field ready for a game.

They wanted to know if special paint was used or was it "off the shelf"? How long does it take to paint the field? Do you roll or spray on the colors? How fast does it dry? How long does it last? Does the paint damage the turf? How are logos applied?

Someone then asked about the soil profile. Many of these Master Gardeners have advanced degrees and are very knowledgeable about gardening. The sand profile discussion quickly turned in a discussion on pH, specific fertilizer products, and infiltration rate. In some cases I was not armed with the specific data that was asked. I knew the answers in general, but they often asked for specific terms.

Ever test running backs for their 40-yard dash times with different mowing heights? Does the coach specify the mowing height based on the teams they are playing? Is the field mowed just once a week like my lawn? Well, at least I can answer the turf questions with conviction. The mowing/mower question and answer time went on for at least 15 minutes.

The mowing questions led right into questions on artificial turf. Some had heard that the University had recently put in a practice field with artificial turf so they wanted an update. The artificial turf issue is a little touchy with some diehard Florida fans because the school had an artificial turf game field for 19 years before a certain coach insisted it be changed (and then the team started winning more consistently).

Well, the questions kept coming for nearly half an hour. Most were on the subject, a few were not. Afterwards, I was struck by how much we can share with people that know so little about athletic field management. We often take our knowledge for granted, assuming that other people know our role and the task we work at

each day. I think we fail to realize that we are the best communicators of what we do and why we do it. Those "above" us or around us do not always recognize our expertise.

So the question for today is, "Have you ever thought about writing an article for your local paper or other publication related to your field or your profession?" I believe many people might be interested in what it takes to prepare a field for a season or a game. The average person has a perception that a sports turf manager taking care of a field is not much different than them taking care of their own lawn. **ST**

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