



## Hard times for good greens

When doing more with less, these superintendents focus on what's most important.

The No. 5 hole at Marvel GC is an example of what superintendent Chris Gray means when he says "Golfers will forgive a lot of things, but not when it comes to the playability of greens." Gray has been using more generics to save money.  
Photo courtesy of Chris Gray

Dan Gleason

**Many a time when I** was a boy visiting my resourceful Irish grandmother in Chicago, she'd have to make dinner on short notice for a lot of relatives or neighborhood friends. She rarely had a big budget to work with because my grandfather, a teletype operator for the *Tribune*, earned a modest salary.

That didn't deter my grandmother. She would rummage through the cupboards and the refrigerator to see what was on hand to figure out how much she should spend with the grocer, down to the penny. Next, she'd pull out a weathered old book of family recipes and get creative. She could take one thick steak and feed four or five people by creating a nifty meat and pasta dish or making a magnificent stew. By the time everyone sat down at the table, she'd worked up a feast. Even though it was thin on the pricey stuff, nobody else knew it.



Personal contacts have helped Ed Vera, superintendent at Country Club of Green Valley (pictured here), just south of Tucson, keep his greens in top shape. Picking up the phone and calling a colleague or an expert, he says, can mean the difference between success and disaster. Photos by Meggyn Costa



What does that have to do with golf courses?

Well, being a superintendent in these shaky economic times requires the same kind of creative work; not with recipes, but with budgets. This is especially true at smaller operations lacking bottomless pockets, assuming bottomless pockets exist anywhere anymore.

Many superintendents now have to rummage through the proverbial cupboards to see what's available and figure out how much they can spend, just like my grandmother did. And with most turf product costs going up and up and up, even superintendents whose budgets don't get slashed have to stretch them.

And nearly everyone agrees that the first priority must be the greens.

### **It all starts with the soil**

Patrick Rinkleff, 26-year-old superintendent at Appanoose

Country Club in Centerville, Iowa, says he's been able to depend heavily on some of his own innovations as well as help from his purveyors to keep his prize greens in great shape, in spite of having "a string-thin budget." After three years running the operation at nearby Elmhurst Country Club in Oskaaloosa, last year was Rinkleff's first at the Centerville course, and one that members say produced greens that were in the best shape they had ever putted on at their club.

Greens are Rinkleff's priority, and "they'll get what they need when they need it, no matter what." Appanoose, a nine-hole course that opened in 1923, lost a significant number of members over the past decade or so because of a tough economy and competition from a recently opened nine-hole public course.

Three greens at the course were rebuilt some 30 years ago, but the six original greens are old push-up dirt that, although much smaller, require more care. The club has only 140 members and no option to assess them. As one board member points out, "It's all we can do to get the members to pay for food cards to keep the dining room going."

That situation presents a challenge for Rinkleff, a two-year GCSAA member, to keep the greens in top shape. He has only two helpers, both part time, and has a tight chemical fertilizer budget. What has helped him more than anything, he points out, is a sales rep who is all about "soil first."

"Everything I do here starts with the soil," Rinkleff says. For the past few years, he's worked with Jerry Dizeo, a sales rep with Reinders, a 140-year-old turf and chemical dealer out of



For Patrick Rinkleff at Appanoose CC in Centerville, Iowa, keeping greens looking good and being healthy “starts with the soil.” Rinkleff has targeted the greens’ soil because of lingering disease problems and sodium buildup from effluent. Photo by Cheryl Brewer

Elm Grove, Wis. “We send out soil samples to Jerry, then he analyzes them and recommends products.”

Rinkleff has targeted soil correction in his greens, which have several lingering diseases and a residual effect from high sodium buildup from the effluent the club was using. “I have had tremendous support from Ron Clark, our club president, and board members Tom Anders and Steve Wehrle,” Rinkleff emphasizes. “They spearheaded an effort to have a second pond dug, and we no longer have to use reclaimed water or deal with the sodium issues.”

Thanks in large part to the new pond, Rinkleff has “cut my ideal budget in half without sacrificing the quality of our product or our greens. Barring anything unforeseen, I’m going to be right at budget this year, if not a little lower.”

### **Organics, biologicals to the rescue**

“Because we increased our use of biological and organic products, we have knocked \$3,500 off our annual budget,” says Pat Blum, superintendent at semi-private Colonial Acres in Glenmont, N.Y., for the past 14 years. Considering that

Colonial Acres is a nine-hole course on a tight budget, \$3,500 is a significant savings.

“I have been using a lot of organics and biological controls since I started here in 1995,” explains Blum, whose father was a superintendent in a nearby community. Blum worked with his dad when he was a teenager, helping out and mowing greens.

“When hard times came and prices for synthetics increased some 20 percent across the board,” Blum says, “because I was using biological and organic products, my prices didn’t rise at all.”

Using biologicals and organics have also helped Blum win an assortment of state and national environmental awards, including the prestigious national honor, the EPA Performance Track Outreach Award in 2006. In 2002, Blum was the National Public and Overall Division winner of the GCSAA/*Golf Digest* Environmental Leaders in Golf (ELGA) Awards.

Additionally, to reduce the cost of product and the amount of stress on his push-up Penncross bent greens, Blum now mows only four to five times a week, at 0.1875 rather than 0.15625, and he can still Stimp the greens to about 9 after a topdressing. “Our greens can take a lot of play. The disadvantage of Penncross is you can’t cut them down like you can some newer varieties, but the advantage is that you can beat them up.”

Blum uses corn gluten, a 10-percent organic pre-emergent

control, and microbial feeders that are “like a vitamin shot to the soil. I use bone and feather-meal fertilizers and yucca extract, which are alternatives to a wetting agent and keep us from wasting water.”

He vertically cuts greens three times a year and aerifies twice a year; one a Vertidrain and the other a core aerification.

The bottom line, Blum says, is that players love his greens. Membership has grown to 100, and with a well-conditioned course and attractively priced greens fees, a lot of public players and members of private clubs in the competitive Albany area are regularly playing his course. “Last year,” he notes, “was the first time we turned a profit since 1999.”

### Stretching with generics

“This is a cash-flow business,” states GCSAA Class A member Chris Gray. “When it became very evident that play was going to be less than our expectations, we had to lower the budget, and so we had to get creative.”

Gray, a member of GCSAA’s Strategic Communications Committee, is superintendent at Marvel Golf Club in Benton, Ky., and a 15-year veteran of the business. The courses there depend heavily on play from tourists, so when gas prices went up and the economy stuck a knife in the travel business, clubs around the area had to tighten their belts.

“I run a small crew of three to four,” Gray explains, “so I couldn’t cut labor costs. After carefully examining my budget from the previous year, the best place to cut was with pesticides, herbicides and fungicides.”

Gray started using more generic products to save money. He says he was torn because he felt loyalty to some of those companies that had always been helpful to him and had supported the industry, “but my first loyalty has to be to the company I work for.”

Gray, a 10-year GCSAA member, has been in the business since he started working part time at a course in his hometown near Lafayette, Ind., as a kid. “All we had was a flashing red light and a nine-hole course. My neighbor was the superintendent and I started cleaning out carts in exchange for golf privileges, and he eventually showed me how to use a t-mower.” He got a superintendent’s job right after graduating from Purdue University and has won a wide array of environmental awards, including the National Public and Overall division of the ELGAs. Gray won the award in 2003 and 2007 for two different courses, the only two-time winner. Last year he won Rain Bird’s Intelligent Use of



**Above:** When Jim Papa of Forest Creek GC in Austin, Texas, needed to save money while keeping his greens healthy, he transitioned his TifDwarf greens from spoon feeding with foliar products and returned primarily to a fertility program. The savings were significant, he says. Photo courtesy of Jim Papa

**Left:** Chris Gray, superintendent at Marvel GC in Benton, Ky., says that when it became clear that the course’s play was down, it was time to get “creative.” Photo courtesy of Chris Gray

### Water Award.

Gray had been experimenting with several generic products and found “there wasn’t any less effect than with the brand products, but there was a significant cost savings.” He speculates that he’s saved “about \$10,000 to \$15,000 annually by using generics.”

Additionally, he had been using a lot of liquids in the hot summer months, some of which were high-dollar products. “I went back to Plant Marvel,” he says, “which is an industrial grade of Miracle-Gro. I can get a bag of Plant Marvel for \$35 to \$45, as opposed to a pure liquid for \$200. They aren’t actually apples to apples when you compare them; the liquid has more minors, and the like, but if you’re looking for the big three nutrients it’s a no-brainer to go back to the water solubles.”

Like Pat Blum’s greens, Gray’s also are Penncross bent. “Greens are one area where you don’t dare skimp,” he says. “Golfers will forgive a lot of things but not when it comes to the playability of greens. That’s the bread and butter, and you have to take care of that.”

Gray says he’s increased his use of wetting agents so that he doesn’t have to water as much, saving him not only the water cost but also the electrical cost that can run “anywhere from \$3,000 to \$4,000 a month.” Gray estimates that using wetting agents as part of his regular maintenance program saved him about 450 hours of irrigation time last year and a significant part of his budget. “When you overwater, you

promote diseases and have to spray more, which costs more. I saved at least two or three sprayings at \$3,000 each last year.”

Marvel GC is an Arnold Palmer course that was one of the last designs Palmer did with his long-time partner, the late Ed Seay. The course’s environmentally conscious owner decided to seed the tees and fairways with Transcontinental, a hearty and insect-resistant variety that Gray estimates saves him some 10 to 15 percent over 419 Bermuda when he adds up the fertilizer cost.

### Relying on contacts

As teachers tell college students, don’t ever hesitate to ask questions; it’s the best way to learn. Ed Vera feels the same way about being a superintendent. He worked his way up into the head job at Country Club of Green Valley, just south of Tucson, Ariz., starting as part-time summer help after getting out of the military nearly 20 years ago. He learned a lot on the job by asking questions of the right people.

Now in his second year as head superintendent, he realizes the value of talking to colleagues, sales reps and other experts in the field.

“My best tricks are my contacts,” says Vera, a 10-year GCSAA member. “I’ve established a lot of them over the years.” For example, Vera established a trade-off relationship with David Kopec, Ph.D., who teaches golf and turf sports management at the University of Arizona in Tucson. “I do a lot of consulting with Dr. Kopec. I let him come out and run tests here and experiment with chemicals, and in exchange, I pick his brain.”

Green Valley, a private club developed as a retirement community in the 1960s, has lost members in the past few years. Vera’s budget is a little tighter, but he has one advantage over most Arizona courses: His club has its own well and he doesn’t have to use effluent. “Still,” he notes, “our water is tightly restricted by the Arizona Department of Water Resources.” As a result, Vera uses more wetting agents, having been cut back on his water allotment from 850 to 705 acre feet.

“At one point, I was fertilizing our greens eight times a year, but now I’m down to five or six times a year. Thanks to a lot of consultation with colleagues and with other contacts I established in the industry, we are doing a better job of negotiating for products and keeping our greens green.”

Picking up the phone and calling a colleague or an expert can be the difference between success and disaster, he says, adding, “If something happens to the greens, as the superintendent, you’re out of a job, no matter how you try to explain what happened.”

### Fertility program helps in Austin

When a revenue and expense tracker told GCSAA Class A member Jim Papa that it was time to adjust his budget at Forest Creek Golf Club in Austin, Texas, he transitioned his TifDwarf greens from spoon feeding with foliar products to primarily a fertility program. The move yielded significant

savings, he says. While his is a relatively small operation, every expense is entered into an expense generator, and all revenue gets logged into a revenue generator, so he always knows where he is on revenue versus expenses.

The Pittsburgh native has been at this Austin course for 17 years, the same length of time as his GCSAA membership. “Our challenge, like the challenge for any course, is to fulfill golfer expectations,” Papa explained. “We are in a very competitive area, so it’s even more important, especially, to have excellent greens.” There are five daily-fee courses within 10 to 15 minutes of Forest Creek, Papa notes. “We have lower greens fees than many of the courses around here, so if our conditions are good, we’re going to get a lot of play.”

Because his greens are well kept and the greens fees are \$55 on weekends as opposed to around \$85 at nearby courses, Papa says 2009 was one of Forest Creek’s best years.

“The fertilizing program has saved me in the budget and created healthier turf with less fungicide application and less overall stress on the greens,” he says. “I’ll do without new flags and cups before I’ll miss a fertilizer application.”

Forest Creek uses reclaimed water that’s high in sodium content, so Papa has to flush the greens frequently. “We don’t treat the water; we treat the soil with gypsum and calcium to remove the salt from the root zone. It’s not any cheaper in the long run than getting the sodium out of the water, but the sticker shock of retooling to equipment to do that is cost prohibitive for our course.”

In another successful cost-cutting measure involving pre-emergent herbicide applications, he says he’s moved in about 16 feet throughout the property and left that last part around edges untreated. “That probably saved me \$2,300 in just one application by not maintaining those booms with as much intensity as we had in the past.”

“We used to mow the fairways and tees three times a week,” Papa says, “and now we are down to twice a week, which is significant in man hours and amount of fuel we are saving.”

For those superintendents wondering if they can ever save enough, Colonial Acres’ Pat Blum shares the following: “In this economy, a lot of superintendents are spending sleepless nights wondering what they can do in the face of budget cuts. My advice to any course that is struggling is to go back to the old school and let superintendants run the courses. Don’t let board members — doctors, lawyers, dentists and other business people — run the course. If you do, a lot of courses are going to go under.

“But if clubs and courses believe in the superintendent,” he notes, “they will very often navigate through troubled waters. That’s what we were bred to do — to get courses through the tough times.”

**GCM**

Dan Gleason lives in Tucson, Ariz., and has been a contributing editor for several golf magazines. His writing awards include a best feature article of the year award from the Golf Writers Association of America.