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Turf Under Pressure

In the UK we can proudly say that we are a nation of great gardens many of which are open for public viewing. However, it would be interesting to see how many if asked would say that they visit these gardens just to see the green turf, most of course would say it was the flower, shrubs or trees and that the turf was just something nice to walk on. Undoubtedly that is precisely its purpose but nonetheless it is vital in its own right and adds remarkable dimensions of beauty to its surroundings which just wouldn't look as good without that lush green foreground.

This wonderful green carpet is under constant pressure from torrents of human traffic. Such is the situation in many of our formal garden areas at Anglesey Abbey Gardens, the Dahlia Garden is one such garden that has needed some special attention to maintain high quality turf. The garden displays a crescent shaped border of 250 mixed tall Dahlias and is a major feature at Anglesey Abbey and during 1999 had to cope with 100,000 pairs of feet during a six month period.

The management of the turf is described in the following action plan that begins in early spring until late autumn.

Early Spring (Late Feb-Late March)

- The early lawn feed is applied now which should be high in Nitrogen. If Moss is a problem then we apply something like, Greenmaster Mosskiller with a cyclone fertiliser spreader. This product is already high in Nitrogen (14.0.0) and so no other feed is required. Note: Since beginning the aeration treatment (detailed later) problems with moss are decreasing.
- Mowing begins during this period depending on the season. We use a 36" pedestrian Dennis cylinder mower with all clippings boxed off. By April we would expect to mow at least weekly and during the heaviest growing season May-Aug twice weekly.

Mid Spring (April – Late May)

- Aeration of the turf surface begins using either a mechanised pedestrian driven spiker/slitter or the manual method of spiking with a digging fork. The choice of method will depend on the moisture content, if it is too wet then the manual method is best.
- With the surface well aerated with holes that are approx. 4" deep we now give our first application of Rubber Crumb Turf Reinforcement (3mm-size crumb). This is vigorously swept into the holes and top surface area to help maintain an open surface that will be free draining. In the areas nearest to the entrances that need more help to resist compaction we have used the heavier grade rubber crumb (2mm-6mm).
- During early May the first of the Spring/Summer fertiliser application is made. For a number of years we have used organic feeds based on poultry manure. At present we are getting very good results from Terralift lawn fertiliser with a nutrient ratio of 8.5-5-5. Further applications of the same will be given at approx. 8-9 week intervals.
- Mid – late May is the time we will normally apply any turf herbicide. This of course is necessary where there may be a heavy infestation of turf weeds. We use Tritox applied with a Walkover sprayer that covers 24" width of turf.

Summer (June – Mid Sept)

- Mowing continues as mentioned.
- Feeding usually once during this period but this will depend upon rainfall or irrigation.
- Irrigation is essential to maintain an ongoing healthy turf, we are using an automated system with pop-ups fitted along one side of the grass area these direct a broken spray across the turf and also onto the Dahlia border. Dahlias require a lot of water so this has been an additional reason for ensuring good free drainage.
- During July a further aeration of the surface is need as this is just prior to the main onslaught of feet to this area, the Dahlias are expected to be at their best August-October. Rubber crumb is again applied to the whole area and swept into the holes. The fine grade (3mm) only is used at this time as it easily blends into the turf surface and is not visible after 4-5 days.

Early Autumn (Mid Sept – Oct)

- Mowing continues until first frosts.
- Late October is the main time that we would carryout scarifying that will lift any thatch that may have developed. We use a 24" Sisis Autorake for this operation. We would normally spike or core the turf surface prior to scarifying. Feeding will immediately follow these operations because it has the maximum opportunity to penetrate into the root system for a good uptake.
- Irrigation ceases.

Additional Operations

- Before beginning the aeration program we have in the past at this time used machines that pump compressed air deep into the underlying soil layer down to a depth of 18". This method helps to send the air into areas that may have become heavily compacted and thus create many small cracks at this level and upwards. This may still be necessary every 5 years but at present is not needed. It is vital that good drainage is secured before heavy rains begin.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly the application of Rubber Crumb Turf Reinforcement to the Dahlia Garden has greatly improved the vigor of the grass and ultimately the ability to withstand the ever-increasing pressure from pedestrian traffic.

Richard Todd
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