

Tea for two

Reducing the use of chemicals on the golf course is good for the club's bank balance and its environmental footprint, but the approach can be risky. Jenny Yu speaks to two head greenkeepers who have tried something different – using compost tea and a liquid bio stimulant extraction instead of fungicides – to find out if this organic tactic really can work

As more pressure is applied on us to use fewer chemicals, keeping a healthy growing profile is becoming more difficult.

With an approach of minimal fungicide use, problems can occur in the growing profile – thatch, black layer, nematodes and poor rooting for example, which all makes an unhealthy plant. Plus, greenkeepers are suffering from the economic climate with reduced budgets, but still have to provide a good playing surface.

How can this be done? By using compost tea is an alternative answer, which is said to give healthier and natural turf, and provide the growing profile all the good biology needed to enhance roots and relieve plant stress. A good compost tea should have Species Rich Diversity (SRD) – no additives are needed during the brew process if the correct material and brewer is used; using any additives will only give you a quick fix and cause bigger problems long term. *Greenkeeping* speaks to two greenkeepers who have opted to use compost tea to improve their greens and fight disease, who asked the question of all the products they used: 'what is working in my profile and how much can I save?'

Gary Williams Head Greenkeeper Bearsted Golf Club

What were the reasons that drove your decision to use compost tea on the course?

I was looking for organic products that would help me to reduce my fungicide applications. I wanted to find something that would help fight the fungal attacks naturally before it happened again.

What criteria did you use to evaluate the current offerings in the market?

I needed to find a cheap, safe product that stimulated the good bacteria and fungi within my root zone, so I could incorporate it into my current programme / budget. I searched the internet and came across compost tea. The more I read, the more it fascinated me. Allotment growers had been using compost tea for years to enhance their crop, although this was a simple compost and water mix in a bucket, which required stirring daily to release the nutrient until ready to use. I then came across the modern way of brewing compost in a vessel which allowed air bubbles to pass through the compost to extract goodness quicker.

Which organisation are you currently working with and why?

I contacted a couple of companies to discuss the benefits of using a compost tea on my greens, but the brewers they were selling were out of my budget and I didn't want to



Gary Williams



commit that amount of money without knowing whether the product would work for me.

I came across XL Pro Bio and Clive Pearson at the Saltex show. He was selling a 50 litre brewer (enough to spray a hectare) for peanuts and after hearing what he had to say, I knew I wanted to try it. I purchased the brewer along with some compost to try.

Is the product easy and safe to use, and is it cost effective?

The brewing process is very simple and needs to be started at least 24 hours before spraying onto the greens. The compost comes in 2.5kg containers which is the correct amount needed, so just pop off the lid and tip into the brewer, simple!

The cost was under £50 to do a hectare, which suited me perfectly. I initially applied at two week intervals during times of high disease pressure (spring to autumn) to help protect the grass plant further.

↳ disease and fungicide use



What results have you seen, how quickly, and what has it meant for the club?

It's early days yet and I'm not kidding myself that this product is a quick fix. It will take time before I hopefully see a reduction in fungicide use, but I am convinced this compost tea is working for me in that it is feeding the good bacteria and suppressing the fungal diseases beneath the surface and around the root zone of the plant. I have definitely noticed an improvement over the autumn-to-winter period, in particular the density and colour of the sward. My greens look healthy and no other product has been applied whilst using it. I strongly believe it's one tool in my box that will help me in reducing fungicide applications in the long run.

What has impressed you most about your experience with XL Pro Bio and would you recommend XL Pro Bio?

I was impressed with Clive's enthusiasm for the product. He is a passionate about his compost tea. So much so, it's hard to talk about anything else! His knowledge and advice has been invaluable since I've been using this product as I am still learning myself. Anyone thinking along the same lines as me and wanting to reduce fungicide applications, I would recommend they give Clive a call and try it. Future legislation could well become tighter, so try something different and make up your own mind!

Jeff Pearson Llanfairfechan Golf Club

What were the reasons that drove your decision to use a liquid bio stimulant extraction?

I had been reading up on them and liked the fact because they are organic, they were easy to apply with no risk to the operator or the golfers. Plus, of course, the price of them being low, which in these economic times kept our treasurer happy. And I wanted in particular to see whether they prevented fungal diseases, for example, fusarium, which we suffer a lot from.

Which organisation did you contact and which product did you select for use on the course?

We contacted Clive Pearson of XL Pro Bio and discussed with him the product and I liked what I heard. So thought I would give it a try.

How long have you been using Biolift on your greens?

We have been using it now since the summer of 2012.

Historically and almost without fail, annually, the course has suffered outbreaks of fusarium. What have you experienced this year?

We have not had a single sign of fusarium on the greens even with the heavy snow that we have experienced this year. In the past this has always caused snow mold on almost all the greens.

Following on from the continual rain in 2012 which may have caused nutrients to leach, and snow at the beginning of this year, what condition are your greens in at present and how have the members responded?

The greens have responded well and the colour and the condition of the greens for this time of year has been noticed by both our members and members of other courses in the area.

The XL BioLift helps the roots to take up the nutrients so even when they are leached out quickly they help with the take up of the nutrients that are left in the soil.

What method did you use to apply XL BioLift, what overall benefits of using the product have you seen and would you recommend it for those courses working to a budget through 2013?

I used a walk-behind pedestrian sprayer to apply XL BioLift. The main benefit to us has been the money we have saved through not having to use expensive fungicides to cure fusarium which we usually get on our greens each year. When you think some products cost £175 to spray the greens once. XL BioLift costs us £75 for 10 litres, which allows us to spray the greens four times. This obviously keeps a smile on our treasurer, Graeme Dextor's face! So I would thoroughly recommend this product to any club operating with limited resources.

Having made the initial application, how soon did you see results and how much additional root zone growth did you experience?

I applied XL BioLift to the greens at one litre in a 25 litre tank of water and sprayed over 500 square metres, following up two weeks later with a half litre of XL BioLift in 25 litres of water over 500 square metres, then repeating the half-litre treatment at about three to four week intervals. I noticed the difference after the second application in the greening up of the sward and after about three months noticed the root zone growth growing further down. XL BioLift was used with an aeration programme of pencil tining the greens, which is our normal pattern.



Jeff Pearson