Don’t Be Afraid to Ask the Question
Nobody Knows It All!!

For over 30 years working with the Turfgrass Industry as a member of the Maryland Department of Agriculture Team and since retirement as a Private Turfgrass Consultant I have and continue to see specifications which are wrong, ridiculous, dangerous, and at times down right stupid.

The problem is that we as Turfgrass Professionals try our darndest to fulfill or conform to these specifications instead of questioning things which we know are destined to failure. Why?

More often than not it is because these specifications are coming from a Governmental Agency, a Municipality, an Engineer, or an Architectural Firm that has more names lumped together than any Law Firm and we figure they are the experts and should know what they want.

The truth is they often do know what they want; they just do not know how to get there. But they are the professionals, so instead of admitting they don’t know how to get what they want, they reach for what references they have and choose something that in their mind makes sense or worse yet “get’s it off their desk”. This is why we see athletic fields with specifications from a State Highway Construction book, or jobs requesting plant species and varieties that are ok in Georgia but in no way are going to survive in our Mid-Atlantic climatic conditions, or specifying something that doesn’t even exist like “Maryland Certified Centipede Grass” or something so old that it is no longer even produced such as “Merion Kentucky Bluegrass” from the 1970’s.

I recently had a client working in Washington DC on a very prestigious field. This field is private field that is utilized fairly heavily from May through August on a daily bases and is the location of a performance for some very impressive people every week come rain or shine. This field had failed previously and was often nearly unusable for the weekly performances if it rained, so the decision was made to really do it right.

An Engineering firm was hired to solve the problem and on paper they did an excellent job. Two feet of soil was removed with perforated drain pipe installed in a foot of #57 stone with a very special top soil formulation, 12 inches thick, on top with Maryland Certified Tall Fescue Sod placed on the surface. The entire field (a little less than an acre) was designed with a ½ inch slope every 10 feet so that excessive rain would “sheet off” and go into specially designed storm drains.

The field was constructed during the fall of 2007 and the sod looked beautiful. Everyone was happy!! Then with the spring warmth irrigation started. People started complaining that the field was not staying level. They said that the field felt “spongy”. Then the sod started to rise with large air pockets underneath. When these “bubbles” were cut open the owners thought they had a methane gas escaping.

When I was asked to look at the site, it was determined that the soils were completely waterlogged and the gas they were experiencing was in fact “sewer gas” due to the soil loosing
all its oxygen pore space and going anaerobic. When soils become water logged and the oxygen pore space is lost, the natural bacteria and fungi in the soil die adding to the food supply for the anaerobic microbes which give off the nasty odor. The worse part was the fancy drain field that was constructed had never activated even though the soil above it had excessive water in every pore.

After a lot of finger pointing and material testing to prove the correct soil had been supplied and installed, as well as even running camera in all the drain pipes to see why they were stopped up (which showed they had no water in them). It was determined that the soil which had been specified was so heavy in clay and fine silts that it was compacting nearly 100% and it had insufficient soil particle distribution to allow the water to go into the gravel below.

I learned in this experience that Engineers and Agronomists don’t even utilize the same soil testing criteria. Agronomists and people trying to establish plant life have soils tested utilizing the USDA standards which for example identify clay as particles smaller than 0.002 microns while Engineering labs utilize ASTM standards which say clay particles are 0.005 microns or smaller.

The bottom line is that this entire problem and the expensive corrective actions, which are underway, could have possibly been avoided if the company hired to build this field, who has built many fields over the years, had just realized or spoke up to question how a field this heavy was going to sustain a viable turf. I don’t think they will hesitate to ask in the future.

So learn from their lessons and if you “think” something might be a problem, bring this issue to someone’s attention. My experience has been that once these experts realize they do not know it all they are receptive to suggestions and preventative help. If you find a situation where you fear this might look like you are trying to get out of doing a specific portion of a specification that a competitor is willing to do, get a 3rd party expert involved such as the University Cooperative Extension Service or contact a private consultant.

Regardless, never think they have to know more than you. You are the one in the trenches that know how to make grass grow. Go ahead and ask the questions. Nobody knows it all!!

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