

# School's in for education in turfmanship

Trinity Lutheran College, Gold Coast QLD

**Trinity Lutheran College on Queensland's Gold Coast is a school with a difference, because it's the grounds manager who is teaching the right way to do things.**

Most people would point to a golf course or major sporting venue if asked to nominate the finest grounds in their district. Very rarely would a school be singled out as, generally, they are not recognised as paying particular attention to their grounds. However, there is one college that is the toast of the coast for the picturesque quality its grounds. And one man can take all the credit.

Bob Cray is the grounds manager of Trinity Lutheran College on the Gold Coast, a sprawling landscape of classrooms, gardens, play and lunch areas and a playing field. Trinity presents a challenge to any horticulturist with its diverse turf and plant requirements and its sheer size. But Bob Cray is not just any horticulturist.

Aided by the knowledge and astute guidance of his distributor advisor, John Hume from Globe (below left), Bob put in place a turf renovation and maintenance program that would raise not only the quality of the school grounds but also its stature as a showpiece of the district.

To say the grounds are magnificent is not an overstatement. In particular, Trinity field is recognised as being the best in the district - the benchmark for other sporting grounds to meet in turf quality and health. They weren't always this way.

## Get the soil pH right and the rest follows

"If you get the right soil pH", says Bob, "then your ferts are really just fine tuning. At pH 6.5-6.8 nutrients are available to the turf. If the soil is too alkaline, it will lock up nutrients.

If it's too acidic, aluminium emerges, and when you're down to around pH 3 the turf can die from aluminium poisoning. If you don't get the pH just right, your ferts won't work effectively."

Bob began making his own soil, now at 15,000m<sup>3</sup> over the last five years. For his mix he gathers waste from horse stables, city council scarification, sawdust from the nearby coffin makers and dredged materials from pool excavators.



Bob Cray (right) with John Hume from Globe

After much trialing, Bob has his Trinity soil at pH 6.8 and uses it for garden beds and turf renovation. It takes two years for the soil to complete its maturation cycle and reach the pH level Bob wants.

"I use only Scotts products. They're designed to work at a neutral pH. Once a year I spread Sierrablen with a landscaping blend. This gives the grounds a good long term feed. For new lawns, I can't go past Scotts Turf Starter.

## Controlling pH soil changes from year to year

False readings from pH tests can occur:

- After lime applications or sulphur-based fertilisers
- After applying organic matter
- Increased microbial activity
- Testing the soil only and not the thatch

A good tip is take pH readings in winter when microbial activity is low. It is also advisable to take readings from both the thatch and the soil, as lime can be caught in the thatch after application and give a false high reading. As a general rule, maintain your pH between 5.5 and 6.5.

That's where the good colour comes from. I've tried not using it and seen the poor results, so I know it works."

Water restrictions hit Trinity hard. Only minimal watering was allowed then none at all. Even though Bob was unable to over-sow, his fields, unlike others in the district, were holding up reasonably well. When the rains came his fields bounced into life.

"I was mowing a few centimetres off every couple of days." He credits using quality fertilisers for the turf's ability to withstand adversity.

### Grounds for improvement

Bob Cray is president of the Gold Coast Grounds Association. When he joined the fledgling association some seven years ago, he could see its potential, as yet unrealised due to a lack of direction and commitment.

He set about, as he calls it, 'making us more professional'. He asked turf and hort related companies to sponsor the meetings and used the funds to hold regular BBQs to encourage people to attend. He invited speakers from turf and industry to address the association and organised Globe sponsored Turf Tours for members to see and learn what it takes to become better at what they do.

Bob took the association a step further by introducing industry training courses, opening a path of knowledge to such areas as tractor training, ACDC reticulated licences (Applied Chemical Distribution and Control Act) and horticulture studies.

The educational requirements for becoming a groundsman on the Gold Coast have been raised. Whereas Level 3 qualification in Horticulture was standard, Level 4 is now the norm. As more people join the association, the numbers undertaking the higher learning are increasing.

Bob is sending out a clear message to schools and organisations on the Coast who are not yet members. "Get your people to join the Gold Coast Grounds Association and we will train them", he says.

### Best in his field

Throughout the exciting growth of the association, Trinity was held aloft as the benchmark for ground care and presentation. Bob acknowledges the valuable help of his mate John Hume from Globe. "We couldn't have done all this without John.

"And I'd like to thank Scotts for giving the association a \$700 spreader. A lot of the members couldn't afford to buy one. This way they borrow it and just buy the fertiliser they need."

"I'd say most members use Scotts products. I tell them you want to look as good as Trinity, use the best there is."

## Trinity's pitch for the Olympics

During the Sydney Olympics, the Norwegian women's soccer team was training on a field not too far away from Trinity College. The unforgiving surface of their

hard, dry pitch was causing training injuries among the elite athletes. Shin splits, ankle injuries and jarred knees were ruining the chances for this highly rated team.

One of the team saw the perfect surface of the Trinity

College pitch and asked could they use it for training. Bob and the college were happy to oblige. The result? The women from Norway won gold at Sydney 2000. By way of thanks, they donated a signed jumper to the college.



Growing success