

Old Problem, New Solution

Rotary decompaction leaps across the pond

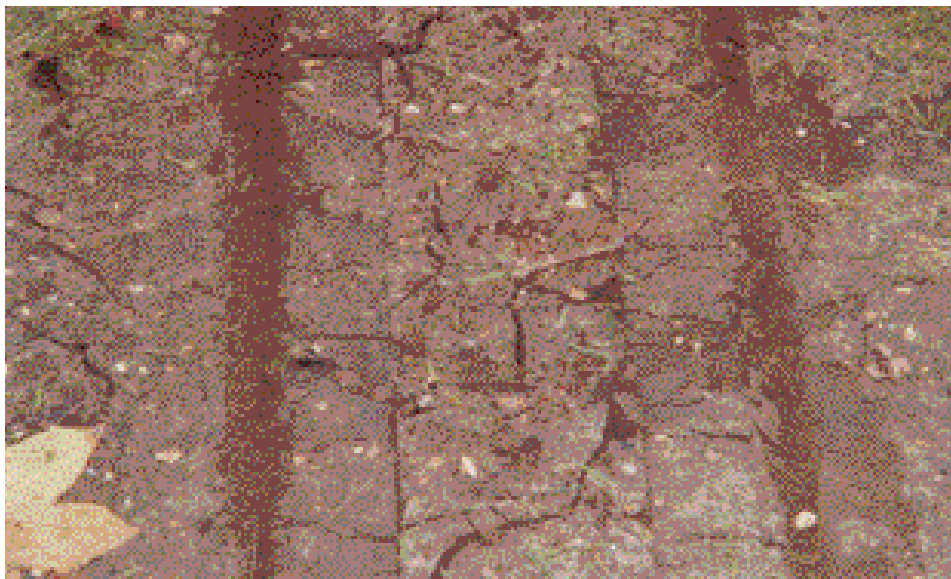
by Trevor Schoenmaker

Throughout England and Europe, rotary decompactors are popular alternatives to deep tine aerators for many turf managers, providing ease of use, effective results and minimal surface disruption. Rotary decompactor technology is now available across the United States. A variety of sizes and options are available from such manufacturers as Blec Landscaping Equipment Ltd., EarthQuake Turfcare Ltd. and Redexim Charterhouse, Inc.

Rotary decompaction in action

Wellington College in Berkshire, Eng., boasts a nine-hole golf course, 17 sports fields, formal gardens and open spaces.

Facilities manager Martin Brandom explains, "We have a golf course crew and a grounds crew. Both departments share specialty equipment like aerators and sprayers. The sports fields are used for soccer, field hockey, lacrosse, cricket and rugby. With so much use, they have little time to recover, and we were suffering under a steady buildup of compaction,



Bare soil after decompaction with a rotary decompactor.

poor root growth, impaired drainage and unhealthy surface appearance." The golf course was suffering, too. "For a small course, we get a lot of play. We had the

same issues on the course as on our sports fields."

What was needed was a way to loosen the compacted soil and get air, water and nutrients moving more freely.

Before purchasing a rotary decompactor, Brandom did his homework. He says, "We can work nearly twice as fast as a deep tine unit of the same width and can decompact down to 10 inches. The machine leaves the surface ready for play. There's no heave and no surface disruption, yet heavy rain quickly disappears and the ground feels lighter, springier and more open. This machine most definitely works.

"The machine has not stopped running since we got it. The results have been so impressive that, at times, it is difficult to find enough time to share the machine between departments," says Brandom.

The golf course crew has decompacted most of the fine turf areas and greens approaches on the three-year-old course. As a result, the turf is healthier in appearance and growth, drawing compliments from golfers. Likewise, the sports fields are healthier, more attractive, easier to maintain and safer to play on.



An EarthQuake Model T-155 rotary decompaction unit being used at Duck Hollow Golf Course in Uniontown, Pa.



Turf surface after rotary decompaction shows minimal surface disruption.



Denny Fellers, superintendent at Duck Hollow Golf Course and president of Fellers Turf, both of Uniontown, Pa.

Rotary decompaction comes to America

Denny Fellers, superintendent at Duck Hollow Golf Course and president of Fellers Turf, both of Uniontown, Pa., is at the cutting edge of the rotary decompaction market. Fellers owns the EarthQuake Model T-155, which covers a 60-inch swath and will go up to 10.25 inches deep.

Says Fellers, "I offer both deep tine and rotary decompaction services. A lot of my customers are so familiar with deep tine that it's hard to convince them they will get better results with this machine. Unless one of my customers really needs to pull cores (in order to put something different into the soil), I will recommend 'earthquaking' every time."

Fellers likes the smooth operation and relatively low downtime of a rotary decompactor versus his deep-tine machine. "This machine is virtually indestructible. The only

things I have had to replace are the blades, which get shorter and thinner with use."

When asked how the machine performs on a golf green, Fellers said, "Awesome. If I am doing a green, I make sure the guy gets some fertilizer down a week before I come in and is ready to topdress and irrigate right after I finish. On greens, I like to use worn blades, because they are sharper and do a really clean job. We brush in the topdressing, run an old mower over the green, and it's ready for play."

Fellers continued, "It's really comfortable to run, there isn't that jarring and banging on the operator and tractor you get when you deep-tine."

He also uses the machine to prune roots encroaching on fairways and greens. "The blades wear back and get really sharp. At slow speed and depending on the kind of tree, I can cut roots up to 3 inches in diameter."

How does rotary decompaction work?

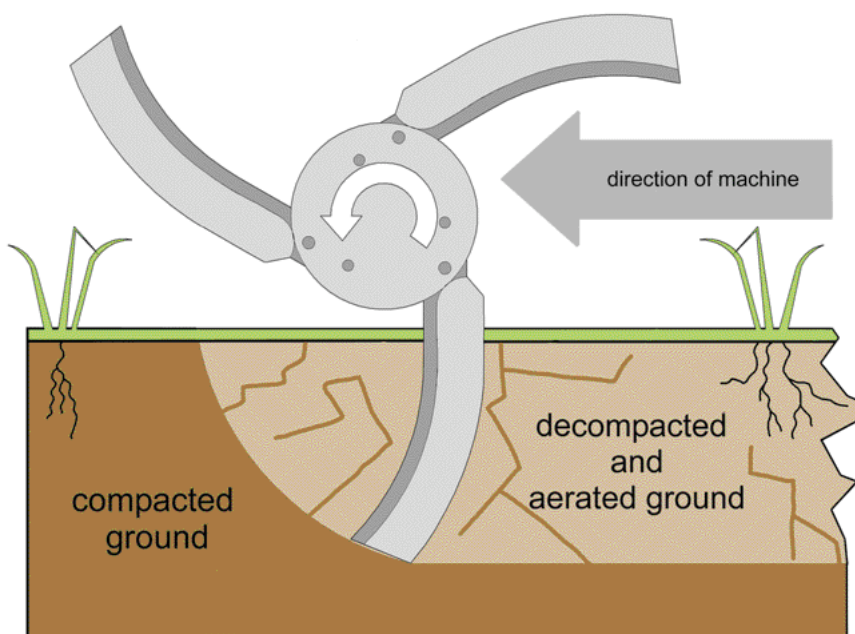
The key to the rotary decompactor's success across a wide range of golf and sports surfaces is the lateral wave action produced by its rotating tapered knives as they pass progressively through the soil at varying depths.

The sideways movement of the soil helps open up natural subsurface cracks and fissures while avoiding heave and minimizing disruption to play. The overall result enables the soil to breathe more easily while encouraging drainage and the free movement of air, nutrients and water.

Rotary decompactors have a variety of options available, including smoothing rollers, topdressing brushes, coulter knives and sand injection systems. Units range in size from 3 to 8 feet in width and work from 2 to 22 inches deep. These machines require tractors ranging from as little as 30 hp to as much as 100 hp and beyond.

Aggressive decompaction throughout the entire soil profile provides clean, playable results at the surface. Deep tine aeration is still an important tool for turf managers who need to pull cores and change soil composition, but rotary machines can be the answer for those managers who need to effectively battle compaction in the root zone while minimizing disruption.

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