

CRADLEY Heath Liberal Bowling Club hosts crown green competitions several days and nights a week. The season starts in earnest in mid-April for the West Midlands venue, which plays in the King's Swinford and Oldbury leagues.

Head groundsman Barry Hardwick, a member for 30 years, knows all about the continuing commitment to greens maintenance which is necessary to keep the surface in prime condition for such an intense season-long programme of competition.

And as captain of one of the home sides, his expectations for perfect turf are every inch as high as those of his team mates. Unlike flat green equivalents, Cradley Heath's green can stage up to four games simultaneously - all the more reason to ensure premier playing conditions across the entire area. Bents and fescues predominate in the sward to withstand the wear and tear the green sustains, with Barry overseeding regularly to help rid the green of the Poa Annuua that caused him so many headaches in the run-up to the new season.

"I'd worked on the green throughout the winter and it looked great," Barry recalls, "Cutting the sward to 10mm then down to 4 or 5mm that play dictates by the end of April." But a weather pattern of warm days and cold nights damaged the turf balance, creating bad patches, which delayed the development of the green to its optimum state.

Like all fine turf, Cradley Heath's green requires a year-round maintenance regime that includes regular brushing, Verticutting, mowing and application of turf treatments such as wetting agents, fungicide and fertiliser.

Barry relies on the services and support of Ian Corcoran of amenity distributor WFS Border to develop a comprehensive year-round programme to help him apply timely treatments to deliver the results bowlers and he himself expects.

Over the last five years, Ian has fine tuned a fertiliser and maintenance programme to suit all of Cradley Heath's requirements.

First he conducted a soil test for analysis to measure levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, and using these results a balanced fertiliser programme was put together and given to Barry as a guide. "We have total control of what we apply to the green," says Barry, "and we know what's working. Both Vitax granular and liquid feeds and supplements are used in the programme, along with a monthly application of wetting agent."

As part of Barry's water management programme, the wetting agents help improve the penetration and uniform distribution of water into the soil rootzone.

Ian said: "They help reduce water usage and aid uptake of nutrients, while reducing



BELOW | Barry has set up a programme to keep the green in optimum condition

ABOVE | Cradley Heath green

Gamechanger for BOWLS GREEN



the risk of Dry Patch."

In October, after the season's play has stopped, Barry undertakes his annual renovation, consisting of scarifying, spiking, overseeding, topdressing and the application of Vitax preseed fertiliser.

Eight weeks later, he begins fortnightly cutting and spiking, providing there is no frost. As long as the icy weather stays away, the work on the green continues for

52 weeks a year. "You can have a perfect surface one year then the weather can strike to ruin your work," Barry states. "We seldom if ever have two seasons the same. Turf diseases such as Dollar Spot, Red Thread and Fusarium can all invade the green so I am forever keeping a vigilant eye out for attacks.

For more information about the products available, go to www.vitax.co.uk