

CELOS INFORMATION BULLETIN NUMBER 6: REDUCING TURF DAMAGE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD PARKS

Neighbourhood parks are meant for people, and in a city as big as Toronto, parks get so much use that it can be tough on the grass. This bulletin examines the causes of turf damage and the remedies for it.

PROBLEM: SPORTS FIELDS.



Soccer field at Dufferin Grove

Most sports fields are available for drop-in play in the intervals between scheduled permits. Intensive use of sports fields can mean that part of the field is bare earth. In some regional parks, the City limits access by fencing the sports fields to restrict their use. An example is at Christie Pits, where a very large area is reserved for high-level baseball and kept locked the rest of the time. This results in excellent turf but limited access, and is not desirable for neighbourhood parks. Most soccer players, for example, would tolerate patches of bare earth in preference to being prevented from playing by locking the fields.



Campbell Park soccer field June 2008

REMEDIES: Grassy outdoor sports fields need good soil and ample watering to be in reasonable shape despite intensive use. In the example from Campbell Park on the right, the whole field was harrowed and reseeded, but the soil is so poor that the grass is already sparse again when the soccer season is barely underway. Fields like this need the poor soils topped up with organic material and seed, and aerated yearly. In a sports field that gets such intensive use, an irrigation system is a good idea.

**Note: Irrigation systems only help if they're turned on. In the dry summer of 2007, the Dufferin Grove soccer field irrigation system was not turned on until mid-July because of a shortage of city plumbers.*

PROBLEM: PATHS AND OFF-PATH PICNIC/ACTIVITY AREAS.



Erosion at Dufferin Grove



City vehicle ruts beside path



Garbage piles damage grass

Feet are the main cause of damage to the grass bordering paved park paths, or areas where many people walk or picnic. For example, the centre part of the Dufferin Grove path pictured at the left is paved. But for many years there has been bare earth on both sides, because so many people use the path to walk through the park or shop at the weekly farmers' market. The paved part of the path is too narrow to fit all the people. In this photo the damage is compounded by **erosion** from the un-terraced hillside at the left, which spills sand far out into the adjacent grass every time there's a heavy rain. **Moving vehicles on wet ground** are the second main cause of damage. These are mainly city vehicles. In addition, deep shade from trees makes it hard for grass to grow underneath. Also, **piles of garden waste** left near flower beds will damage grass, as do leaf piles if they are not removed or shredded in fall or early spring. **Winter snow plowing** making snow roads or moving snow away from rinks can cause extensive damage by scraping right down to the ground, and also through the piles of mixed mud, leaves and snow they leave behind.



Winter snow plow damage

Leaves kill grass if not removed



Leaves kill grass if not removed



Leaf piles damage grass



Grass cannot grow in deep shade

REMEDIES: Lots of feet in a park means lots of use, which is a good sign. So some turf damage should just be accepted. But there are also some remedies to minimize the amount of bare earth:

- Reduce the frequency with which service vehicles drive on unpaved paths or wet ground. At Dufferin Grove Park, a heavy garbage truck drives to each trash bin, even after a rain, leaving ruts on unpaved or narrow paths, and on the grass. Twice every day the washroom door-lockers drive their truck right across the park, instead of parking on the street and walking a short distance to lock the doors. Such trips should be reduced or the vehicles should be small and light (light hybrids, not trucks).
- Remove or shred leaf piles in the fall or early spring so they don't choke the grass.
- Terrace hillsides if they show erosion. (Stairs are terraces too.)
- Plan ideal snowplow routes in advance of winter, to avoid turf damage from scraping earth and dumping the snow-dirt mixture in piles that kill the grass below.



Garden waste pile not removed

- Remove piles of garden waste or garbage bags promptly to let the grass grow – grass needs air and light. Note: under trees with low-growing branches, grass can't grow – such trees can have mulch spread under them instead.

NOT A PROBLEM: VEHICLES PARKED ON PARK GRASS FOR MAINTENANCE OR EVENTS.



OPSEU barbecue - five cars



Korean festival - Hyundai display



Maintenance trucks parked on grass

Vehicles actually do very little turf damage if the parking is occasional. Parks service vehicles routinely park in the centre of Dufferin Grove Park and all other city parks when grass is cut or an area is being serviced (washrooms needing plumbers etc.). In



Trinity Bellwoods fine after midway



Christie Pits fine after Korean festival

warm weather, parks are full of special events that involve parking for the whole day. A day or two afterwards, the grass is fine. Many parks have summer midways on the grass for up to three days, and still they recover fast.

Farmers' market parking: not a problem:

Farmers who have a lot of produce generally need to sell from their truck. This is because (1) public health has rules about not stacking food near the ground (2) farmers' food needs a cool and protected storage space and (3) there's less strain on the farmers from lifting. Farm trucks answer all these needs, if they can park on the grass (when the market is located in a park: a park is ideal because of the shade, coolness and pedestrian safety).



Farmer's market produce van

Permits has long allowed vehicles in parks for special events, since turf damage is usually minimal.



Mayor and Councillor at Dufferin Grove market

Recently **Parks** has pushed for only allowing their own city vehicles to park on the grass. However at Dufferin Grove it is clear that farm vehicles parked on the grass once a week in summer do not damage the turf any more than parked city vehicles or special event vehicles do.

For more information, or to contribute new insights, please contact CELOS at bulletins@celos.ca.