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Southern Ontario – A Place to Grow

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Most Ontarians are unaware; but recently, there was a proposal from Queen's Park, that every farm in the province be allowed to sever three lots from their property and sell them on the open market. The thinking was, that this sudden influx of available building lots would reverse the trend of rising housing prices. While this may have sounded good in a boardroom in downtown Toronto - when someone actually did the math, they realized that it would have made it essentially impossible to farm, due to Minimum Distance Separation rules. And even if one were to ignore the MDS legislation (which keeps a pig barn from operating next to someone's swimming pool) – this one decision would have taken more acres of farmland out of production, than all the urban sprawl of the past few decades combined.

Wearing my County Councillor hat, I made several impassioned speeches about the uniqueness of the climate, water, and soil quality of Southern Ontario, and how fortunate we are to live in this magical place where regular rains, nutrient rich soils, and temperate climate allow us to produce more food per acre, than anywhere else in North America. Back in my University of Guelph days, they used to make us memorize things like wheat production by province, so I knew where to look for the statistics. To give some perspective: in 2022, wheat production in Ontario was just over 96 bushels/ acre, Manitoba was only 59 bu/ac, and Alberta was 52 bu/ac.

In short, we live in the best place in North America to grow stuff – and that includes turfgrass. Now that my professional role has expanded to include other parts of the country, I'm beginning to see how much



Poor soil, long periods of drought, prone to flooding when it does rain, and poorly drained. Sounds like a perfect location to build a golf course! (Did I mention that it's always windy?)

more difficult it is to take care of a golf course on top of a mountain, next to the ocean, or on the dry, sandy prairies.

In Ontario, we think of a drought as lasting a few weeks, and when one occurs, we can irrigate relatively freely. In the region south of Calgary, a drought might last for months, and irrigation water is much more difficult to get. An Arizona course can expect to spend more than a quarter million US\$ annually for water rights, and similar programs are being considered for the Canadian prairies. When rains do come, the average southern Alberta course can expect 350 millimeters of rainfall per year, and most of that barreling out of the mountains in the month of June, washing your golf course to Saskatchewan. And if you're lucky enough to have a well, there's a good chance that it is so high in sodium, that you'll toxify the soil if you use too much of it. In Toronto, we can count on 831 millimeters of precipitation, high quality irrigation wells are plentiful, and we haven't had a truly horrific flood since Hurricane Hazel in 1954.

When it comes to soil, being a glacial floodplain and ancient lake bottom has deposited a growing medium that the rest of the country can only dream of. At Highlands Links in Cape Breton, there were only two

pockets of decent soil on the entire property, and in the late 1930's, Stanley Thompson had eleven feet of it removed (by hand) and spread "no more than two inches thick" on top of the piles of rocks, boulders, and hardscrabble that made up the other fifteen holes. As a result, the only three holes with a reasonable amount of topsoil, are now eleven feet more prone to flooding (one with briny seawater). Most courses in the Rockies did the same - or capped million-year-old granite outcroppings with sand, which is like growing grass in beach sand on top of a parking lot. Speaking of beach sand, that's all there is from the Rockies to Winnipeg.

The soil is so unstable, that when the early settlers broke up the native grasslands with moldboard plows, it caused the dust bowl within two decades. Apart from Muskoka, soil quantity and quality really isn't something that we worry much about in Ontario.

Living under the influence of the Great Lakes means that our climate has more temperate winters, less heat waves, and more predictable precipitation patterns – which certainly makes our job easier. It's no surprise, that in the early days of golf in Canada, many other regions didn't even try to build traditional greens, but built sand greens instead. There aren't too many folks left who have actually played them, but I'm told that these environmental nightmares of packed sand and oil, made a pretty good putting surface. Before widespread irrigation, this was the best anyone could hope for.

Years ago, I worked for a Superintendent, who often said, "Doug, if we do nothing – grass grows." While this might be true for those of us here, it's certainly not true in many other parts of the country. So let's raise a glass to our comrades across the nation, and take a moment to be thankful for the advantages that we have, growing grass in Ontario. ■