

# SAY NO TO “BACKDROPS”

by DAVID A. OATIS

*Golfers have come to believe that every golf hole must have a backdrop of trees, but many holes would be better off without them!*



*This gallery of shrubs creates an unnecessary backdrop to the green. Dense backdrops result in a variety of problems for greens — both agronomically and in playability.*

**F**OR THOSE OF YOU who are regular readers of the *Green Section Record*, you may recall an opinion article of a similar title that appeared in the magazine some three years ago. “Say No to Memorial Trees” was the title and it generated a wide range of responses and discussion. Some of the responders applauded the message, while others were horrified. This is the second in an ongoing series and should elicit similar responses.

When polled some ten years ago, the Green Section staff overwhelmingly elected trees as the single biggest problem of turfgrass management on golf courses. If polled again today, the answer would remain unchanged. Trees add a great deal to our golf courses, but they also can create a host of problems, related both to agronomics and playability. Now there are many good reasons for planting trees, and improving safety may be the single best reason. However, there are an even greater number of poor reasons for planting trees, and the idea of creating a backdrop is one of the most common.

For reasons unknown to this author, the notion that “every green must have a backdrop” has in recent years become a pervasive belief. This belief holds that behind every green there must exist dense plantings of trees, shrubs, or other vegetation, and nothing should be visible behind the green save this “green wall.” As a result of this commonly held belief, the areas around

many greens have been grossly overplanted, and this has been to the detriment of the turfgrass, golf course maintenance budgets, and even to the beauty and architecture of many golf holes. An overabundance of trees can make it more expensive, and perhaps physically impossible, to grow healthy turfgrass. The playability problems caused by the plantings also can be severe, and balls narrowly missing the target may wind up lost or unplayable. Excessive planting also can be detrimental from an aesthetic standpoint, as it can obscure lovely views and create a more closed-in or even a claustrophobic environment. The unnecessary vegetation may block a view of the golf hole from the teeing ground or the landing area of the fairway. The original architecture of the hole can be lost, and the basic question of “why do we need backdrops?” begs asking.

Harkening back to the early days of golf, keep in mind that judging yardage was considered a skill and was an integral part of the game. There were no yardage aids in those days, and greens were purposely built without backdrops to provide greater challenge in judging distances. With the advent (read *proliferation*) of yardage aids, judging distance has virtually become unnecessary. It is a forgotten skill. If ever there were a need for backdrops, it has been eliminated with the advent of yardage aids.

From the aesthetic sense, dense backdrops greatly alter the look of a hole, and this can affect golfer perception. In the case of a green that is perched on a hill and surrounded with steep slopes, vegetative backdrops only serve to hide the defense features, which are the steep slopes. This can make the hole appear easier and more approachable than it actually is. The noted architect Allistair Mackenzie once said that a hole should look tougher than it plays. Backdrops often cause the opposite. Many of the older courses I have visited over the years once had spectacular views from various areas of their property. Trees and brush grow slowly, and 20 or 30 years of neglect can gradually obscure views that once were an integral and much-loved part of a golf hole. This happens so slowly that it can go virtually unnoticed.

There is much to be said for a green that appears perched atop a precipice. Hitting a shot to a green that has no visible bail-out area and with only nothingness behind it causes golfers’ thoughts to give way to doubt and mistrust. A green that appears unassailable just might be! Keeping greens open and exposed will allow for improved turfgrass health and more interesting golf. If you have backdrops behind your greens, take a look at the turf and see if it is suffering. Take a look behind the green and see what the vegetation is hiding. You might just be surprised to find that you have weak turf and have lost a magnificent view. If you are fortunate, you may also discover a fine, stand-alone specimen tree in hiding.

Undeniably, there are situations where dense plantings are desirable and perhaps even necessary for safety. Blocking out unattractive vistas clearly makes good sense, as long as turfgrass health is not compromised. However, more often than not, your best course of action is to “Say No To Backdrops!”

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