

# SAY NO TO “BACKUP TREE PLANTINGS”

*Sometimes taking precautions is more trouble than it's worth.*

by DAVID A. OATIS

**M**OST of the courses I visit believe they have several key trees that, according to the golfers, *make* particular golf hole(s). Often there is concern that the hole will be ruined if a tree is lost, so extra care frequently goes into the maintenance of the perceived key trees. In truth, some of these trees already are causing turf or playability problems because they are too close to the line of play and/or fine turf areas. If an approach shot to a green from the center of the fairway must be maneuvered around a tree to reach the green, you probably fall into this category. The same can be said if a tree is making it impossible to maintain reasonably healthy turfgrass.

Once the trees have been there a long time, golfers gradually come to accept and sometimes even enjoy the overly penal playability problems they cause, and it is common for lightning protection to be installed and extra pruning, pest control, or fertilization performed on these key trees. This is all to the benefit of the tree; however, the next step in tree loss paranoia is to plant a backup tree, or two, or three . . . And that's when the situation really starts to get out of hand.

Some courses do in fact have a key tree or two, but the relative value of the trees usually is less than perceived, and overplanting of trees on golf courses is one of the most common, damaging, and expensive mistakes that can be made. Overplanting adversely affects turfgrass and tree health, and it produces poor playability. Although occasionally it is possible to plant backup trees successfully, more frequently they wind up being a bad idea that adds little and takes away much. Murphy's Law comes into play with most backup tree plantings:

## **Murphy's Law of Backup Tree Plantings (with apologies to Murphy)**

- The key tree, for which the backup is planted, magically gets healthier once the backup tree is in the ground, and the life span of the key tree is extended indefinitely.

- The backup tree grows directly into the key tree and competes with it for moisture and nutrients. Eventually, the form and shape of the backup tree are destroyed by the competition.

- Once the backup tree is planted, it detracts from the stand-alone majesty of the key tree. In some cases, the key tree can become totally obscured by the backup tree(s).

- If the key tree does die, it falls on the back tree during a storm or during the removal process, so the time and money invested in the backup tree are wasted.

- Finally, and most importantly, the backup tree rarely is planted in the right spot and eventually causes playability problems. Sometimes its placement just cannot create the proper strategy, because the key tree occupies the necessary spot.

Though uncommon, there are situations where planting a backup tree makes sense and can provide a satisfactory solution for the impending loss of an important tree. If you fall into this category, keep these thoughts in mind:

- Plant the tree with its eventual size in mind. Unless it is already mature, the tree should not come directly into play for a number of years. If it comes into play within the first few years, it is probably too close to the line of play.

- Although it involves more planning and communication, it is sometimes possible to plant one or two extra trees

along with the replacement, with the idea being to remove the extra trees as the key specimen matures. Unfortunately, with committee and personnel changes, it is easy to forget to remove the extra trees, and they often grow into and deform the most desirable tree. If you choose this approach, it would be wise to require the removal of the extra tree(s) in the by-laws of the course!

- Avoid the temptation to plant a fast grower that will have instant effect. This type of tree usually is soft-wooded, messy, and has surface roots and a shorter life span. A better course of action is to choose an appropriate variety for your area that has the proper growth characteristics and few pest problems.

- Remember that larger trees are more expensive to plant, and the survival rate declines as the size increases.

Unfortunately, most backup tree plantings do not benefit playability, aesthetics, or the key tree. In fact, backup trees usually clutter up the golf course and detract from the health and/or aesthetics of the key tree. More often than not, the best course of action is to spend a few more dollars on the care and maintenance of the key tree (assuming it truly is an important one) to extend its life span. Once the key tree fails, simply replace it with a large (read *more expensive*) specimen. It can be tough to convince golfers of the need for tree removal, but generally it is a simple task to convince them of the need to plant a tree.

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