

IT MAKES ME CRY!

Golfers have no love affair with weeping lovegrass that is not in “out-of-play areas.”

by PATRICK M. O'BRIEN

WEEPING lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*), an introduction from East Africa, seems to have found a home at many American golf courses. Over the past 30 years, courses have established lovegrass in the rough or around bunkers for erosion control or ornamental appeal. Lovegrass is also fashionable because it provides a flavor of the British links and seaside appearance. Unfortunately, it has inflicted pain on many golfers who have had the misfortune of hitting into these unplayable and overgrown lovegrass areas, where recovery shots are impossible or severely limited.

Why has weeping lovegrass been so popular when golfers hate it so much? No doubt its fast establishment rate, low cost, drought tolerance, and ability to grow on low-fertility and high-sand soils subject to erosion are valued. It can reach a height of two to four feet in a few months after planting from seed. Weeping lovegrass forms an extensive root system that can stabilize practically any soil. Lovegrass also provides an outstanding visual impact and makes a big statement to golfers wherever it is planted. Superintendents like lovegrass since it is environmentally friendly, requiring minimal mowing, pesticides, and fertilizer.

From the golfer point of view, it is the top of the plant that causes all the problems. Weeping lovegrass is agronomically unique in that it has solid stems without joints. Grasses typically have hollow stems with joints that are easy to mow and play from. Twenty to 50 stems can form at the base of the plant, making it difficult to find the ball and impossible to advance the ball any great distance. If you want to “Tiger-proof” a golf course, weeping lovegrass is the grass to plant in the rough. No



Weeping lovegrass makes recovery shots nearly impossible.

miracle recoveries will ever happen at these sites!

William C. Campbell, renowned amateur golfer who played in the U.S. Amateur over six decades from the 1930s through the 1980s, had an incident with lovegrass that would make anyone weep. In the 1980 U.S. Amateur at Pinehurst #2, Mr. Campbell needed only a double bogey on the last hole during the second round of qualifying to advance into match play. Pinehurst #2 is Mr. Campbell's favorite course, and he had played more than 100 competitive rounds at this site over the years. On the 18th hole, he pushed his tee shot right and he got tangled up in the weeping lovegrass. Both the golf ball and club head were impeded by the solid stems of the weeping lovegrass, and he was only able to advance the ball about 20 yards, but right into another lovegrass plant. He faced another impossible shot, and after several attempts he finally got the ball on the putting green, where he holed a long putt for an 8 that allowed him to “avoid a 9,” says Mr. Campbell. If he had avoided the weeping lovegrass, he would have easily made it into match play during his 37th Amateur appearance. Pinehurst #2 has since taken out all the weeping lovegrass.

Weeping lovegrass presents too many perils to the golfer to plant it in in-play areas. The golfer is either very lucky to have a shot or not lucky if impeded. Too much chance is involved and the risk is too great, especially if the golfer has not hit that bad of a shot off-line.

There are other alternatives for American golf courses that want to establish native or tall grass areas near “in-play” areas. Broomsedge, a native grass, is an option but establishes more slowly. The good news is that broomsedge has hollow stems and joints, so the golfer has a chance for recovery. Broomsedge can be seeded or plugged into existing weeping lovegrass areas, and over time it will take over these areas and create a desirable landscape without the golfer complaints. Some types of fine fescues work well in cooler climates.

Weeping lovegrass is a fetish at American courses, and it should be removed if it is near play at bunkers, mounds, putting greens, or rough that is close to the fairways. Lovegrass is highly resistant to herbicides, but several sprays with Roundup should eliminate it.

Too many courses are proud of this ornamental grass and won't cut it, and this is a mistake. Weeping lovegrass can enhance a golf course if planted in the right areas, but if planted in the wrong areas, it can make it virtually unplayable. Lovegrass is not a prerequisite to having a traditional golf course. What to do with all those lovegrass plants now on American courses? Weave baskets!

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