

UNNATURAL EXPECTATIONS

Proper establishment and maintenance of naturalized areas can increase acceptance by golfers.

BY DARIN S. BEVARD

Naturalized areas are part of virtually every new golf course construction project, and older golf courses are naturalizing out-of-play areas to eliminate unnecessary maintenance. Benefits of these lower-maintenance areas include a reduction in regular maintenance that allows limited resources to be focused on other areas of the golf course. Pesticide inputs can also be reduced. Naturalized areas also provide wildlife habitat if properly maintained for this purpose. Aesthetically, they provide a positive contrast to the manicured look of certain properties. However, these areas are far from *no maintenance* on most golf courses.

In recent years, golfers have developed playability expectations related to every area of the golf course. In the past, high-quality tees, fairways, and greens would make any golfer happy. In recent years, maintenance of bunkers and roughs has received more focus as maintenance technology has improved. Not surprisingly, golfers are now voicing expectations for conditioning of naturalized areas! Consider some common-sense guidelines with regard to establishing and maintaining low-maintenance, naturalized areas, and complaints can be reduced. Those areas that are closest to regular play require the most attention.

ESTABLISHING NATURALIZED AREAS

Different factors impact the concern of golfers over low-maintenance and naturalized areas. Location, selection of plant material, and establishment technique all have significant impact on the acceptance of naturalized areas. Evaluate these factors prior to establishment of low-maintenance areas, and reception by golfers may improve.

LOCATION

The old saying in the real estate business applies to naturalized areas: it's all about location, location, location. If a naturalized area rarely or

never impacts play, it can be established to just about anything with few complaints. Let one of these areas eat golf balls on a regular basis, and it may be described as "gunch," "the weeds," the "tick farm," or other terms that cannot be printed here. Early discontent with naturalized areas can doom their future establishment on other areas of a golf course. Naturalized areas need to be located out of the regular lines of play or established with plant material that allows golfers to locate and advance their balls fairly easily. Otherwise, discontent will result because of lost balls and slow play.

SELECTING PLANT MATERIAL

For in-play areas, fine and hard fescues provide a good base material for naturalized areas. These grasses are not perfect, but they do provide many options with regard to weed control and maintenance. Fine and hard fescues maintain a relatively low growth habit and do not develop the density of some other grasses. With less density, they are more playable than some other grasses. The fine and hard fescues are drought tolerant and need little fertilizer once established. In the Mid-Atlantic Region, fine fescues provide a good base plant material for in-play naturalized areas.

In more out-of-play areas, there are many different options. Lovegrass, bluestems, broom sedge, and wildflowers, to name a few, provide a good appearance for the golf course. The concern for these types of plants close to play is that they can grow very thick and tall over time. This greatly reduces playability. Wildflowers also greatly limit weed control options and often require complete reestablishment every two or three years to remain attractive. Nonetheless, they offer a wonderful contrast in out-of-play areas.

Plant material selected greatly impacts appearance and playability of low-maintenance areas. The goal should be to select plant material that allows reasonable playability in areas that will frequently

be visited by golfers. In more out-of-the-way areas, the options for plant material are limited only by the goals for the appearance of the golf course.

ESTABLISHMENT METHODS

Numerous techniques have been used to establish naturalized areas. This section focuses on thoughts for successful establishment of in-play naturalized areas. Initial establishment of a pure stand of desirable grasses for these areas is critical for good playability. On new golf courses, establishing naturalized areas is easy. Focus on the sections noted above regarding location, plant material selection, and playability at initial establishment.

On existing golf courses, establishment can be more difficult. In many instances, the decision is made to eliminate regular mowing on existing primary rough. The locations of these areas are determined and the grass is allowed to grow up. Good results can be achieved with this method

when the areas are not regularly in play. However, if golf balls will regularly enter the established area, golfer discontent will result. Grasses such as tall fescue, perennial ryegrass, Kentucky bluegrass, *Poa annua*, and bermudagrass will provide dense, unplayable areas of high grass when allowed to grow unchecked. Finding a golf ball and playing a shot from areas established in this manner are nearly impossible.

For in-play areas on existing golf courses, better results can be achieved by killing off the existing turf first. Usually, a non-selective herbicide is sufficient for vegetation removal prior to establishment of a naturalized area. In recent years, some courses have used fumigants prior to establishment. However, this is usually not necessary for establishment of low-maintenance grasses. Once the existing grass is eradicated, the desired low-maintenance grasses can be established. Proper initial establishment is critical for success. With good establishment, a uniform stand of

Allowing naturalized areas that are definitely out of play generally will not raise the ire of golfers. While many reasons are given to eliminate naturalized areas, it usually boils down to playability and lost golf balls.



If golfers can easily locate an errant golf shot in low-maintenance areas, their perception of the golf course is generally positive.



grasses that can be managed for weeds and other problems can be obtained.

MANAGING NATURALIZED AREAS

Naturalized areas are low-maintenance, but not “no maintenance.” Complete elimination of maintenance and weed control can lead to the perception of naturalized areas simply being weed patches. Again, the farther away from regular play these areas are established, the less maintenance will be required. However, mowing, fertilization, and weed-control practices should be considered in low-maintenance areas.

FERTILITY AND IRRIGATION

After initial establishment of naturalized areas, fertilization and irrigation inputs should be kept to an absolute minimum. Apply a starter fertilizer at the time of seeding to aid in grass establishment. Irrigation also will help with establishment, but this should be the extent of fertilization and irrigation in these areas. After all, the goal is to provide an area that is aesthetically pleasing, low maintenance, and playable. Extra fertilization and irrigation will promote a denser grass that may contribute to lost balls and slow play.

MOWING

Mowing frequency of naturalized areas varies among golf courses. Most superintendents mow these areas two times annually, once in the spring and again in the fall. In recent years, additional spring mowing of these areas has been imple-

mented. A properly timed mowing in the mid-spring can reduce density, but still allows for seed stalk development. This allows for a good appearance from a distance, but allows golfers a better opportunity to locate and advance their balls. (From the standpoint of meadow-nesting birds, avoid mowing in May, June, and July throughout the North.)

WEED CONTROL

Most naturalized areas, especially those composed primarily of perennial grasses, receive some weed-control applications. Long residual preemerge herbicides are usually applied in the early spring to prevent the development of summer annual grasses and other weeds. After spring mowing, a broad-spectrum broadleaf herbicide may be applied to reduce weed populations in naturalized areas. Usually these two herbicide applications will control the worst of emerging weeds in naturalized areas. Limited herbicide applications will still allow a neat appearance to be maintained. Some weeds will escape herbicide applications as the naturalized areas seed out. However, as long as there are not too many, they are often viewed as providing character.

Naturalized areas were originally developed to reduce maintenance inputs on out-of-play areas on the golf course. As they have become more prevalent through new construction and establishment on existing golf courses, golfers have developed expectations for these areas. Rightly or wrongly, as golfers play other courses, they bring ideas back to their own course. If they play a course with naturalized areas that allow a nice appearance and good playability, they will prefer them to areas that are thick and unplayable. Proper location of naturalized areas can eliminate many headaches for the golf course superintendent. Selecting grasses and other vegetation for in-play areas that allow golfers to find and advance their golf balls without a long search will increase acceptance of these areas by golfers. If the naturalized areas are in play and extremely penal, there may be an outcry for renovation or outright removal. Keep playability in mind at the time of establishment and during maintenance of these areas to keep golfer complaints about naturalized areas to a minimum.

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