



## “The Golf Fore-um”

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As mentioned in an earlier column, trees can pose problems with respect to the play and maintenance of the golf course. Trees can also benefit the facility when they are the result of professional assessment and planning. As a matter of fact, a landscaping plan is an element of golf course development or improvement usually overlooked or given minimal consideration. Sometimes landscaping is considered a course enhancement but not a course necessity or a high priority. Lately, trees have been given a “bad rap” because on many older courses, golf architects and agronomists generally recommend their removal. I have been in that position many times after conducting personal golf course assessments. Golf architects recognize the value of vegetative plantings, which add to the playability and appearance of a course. Having your golf architect work closely with a landscape architect, horticulturalist, or an arborist, to execute your planning program, is paramount. Keep in mind, that a number of golf architects are licensed and highly experienced landscape architects.

More recently, it has become apparent that, with careful planning and patience, the strategic use of trees, shrubs, grasses and natural plantings also reduce maintenance. Particularly as golf course superintendents seek to minimize costs associated with frequent mowings and waterings, and fertilizer, the low maintenance approach of utilizing plant material is an attractive alternative. Remember, patience is required to reap the benefits of a tree assessment and enhancement program as part of an overall golf course master plan. Just like fine wines, plants take time to mature. Thus, although trees represent a low-cost, high yield investment, such programs will not satisfy individuals looking for a quick-fix. Sometimes this impatience leads to the implementation of an inappropriate, overly-planted and ill-conceived plan.

The initial phase of a landscape program entails the survey of the existing course conditions. Secondly, producing a complete inventory of existing plant material will distinguish higher value trees from problematic or lesser quality specimens. After these two tasks are completed, potential problem or low-interest areas on the course that have the potential to be alleviated or accentuated by vegetative plantings should be pinpointed. The golf architect’s checklist includes both functional and aesthetic requirements. The functional requirements include (a) strategic positioning, (b) safety barriers, (c) depth perception, (d) framing, (e) directional indicators, (f) shade, (g) windbreaks, and (h) erosion control.

In designing for facilities with a limited budget, the planting program may be implemented over a period of years with priority functional requirements first and aesthetic requirements that provide the finishing touch in the final phases. When possible, reserving a few available acres to establish a tree nursery can reduce the high cost of purchasing mature plant material. Seedlings are very inexpensive and, if properly cared for, in a few years could be moved into the previously selected

positions. It is wise to consult your State Forestry Representative or Department of Agriculture Extension Office for information on seedling availability.

Keeping program requirements in mind, a planting plan is developed as an overlay of the existing vegetation inventory. Native trees give the designer an indication of plant material that mature properly in the geographic area. This does not mean that only these trees or those of the same genera should be utilized. However, it does indicate what characteristics to look for in selecting new plantings that will blend with the existing landscape.

Prior to making selections based on plant characteristics, there are a number of site considerations to be reviewed. Site selection factors include (a) hardiness zone, (b) soil type, (c) soil moisture, and (d) pH of soil.

The hardiness factor is most important and will immediately rule out a number of plants. Plants must be suited to the climatic temperatures of the region. This is the one factor that cannot be resolved by planting or maintenance operations. A plant is either suited to a zone or it is not. In borderline cases, selection of an alternative specimen is advised. There are numerous plants that will prosper in the area yet fulfill the same requirements. The remaining four factors can be altered to suit the selected planting. But alterations in initial planting and tree maintenance are expensive and should be avoided.

The final step in the planning phase is plant selection. After reviewing functional requirements, aesthetic requirements and site selection factors, a designer should have a preliminary list of genera fitting the region and intended use of the golf course. Final plant selection can be made based on plant characteristics of specific species and cultivars.

Plant characteristics to consider include: (a) type of plant (evergreen or deciduous), (b) size (mature height), (c) plant form, texture and density, (d) rooting habit, (e) seasonal leaf color and size, (f) leaf drop and time, (g) insect and disease susceptibility, (h) storm damage susceptibility and life span, (i) fruit color and size, (j) flower color and size, (k) fruiting and flowering time, and (l) bark color. In selecting plant material, designers seek a balance by creating a harmonious landscape with several species - not to overwhelm, but to avoid monotony. There are varying plant characteristics available in cultivars of the same species.

The designer must also consider the effect of plant characteristics on the future growth of the golf course. Certain plants may be better suited to an area than another. For example, in an area requiring a narrow screen, a coniferous evergreen border would achieve the goals better than a grouping of broadleaf deciduous plants.

Similarly, a tree with a high open crown is preferable for use near a green to one with a low-branched thick crown, which would block light and air circulation required for successful turf growth. Also, plant material with large leaves, early leaf drop or objectionable fruits would not be preferable for golf course enhancements. Avoid plant material with shallow root systems and high moisture requirements. Numerous other examples could be cited. Vegetation on a golf course should not be selected for simply aesthetic or cost purposes. All aspects should be considered, keeping in mind that individuals have their own plant preferences. Above all, remember that a good landscape plan for a golf course not only has eye appeal, but satisfies basic functions as well.

Planting / landscape programs can be successfully or unsuccessfully implemented. Successful programs usually include evaluation and planning on the part of the golf architect in close collaboration with a landscape architect / arborist and the golf course superintendent. Unsuccessful efforts usually result from well-meaning but untrained facility personnel or even club members, who happen to like a particular tree or shrub and want to see it on the course, without regard for the issues outlined above. Consequently, to avoid an unsuccessful program, the best advice (as always) is collaboration with a professional.

*For further information on landscape architecture and golf architecture, contact Ed Beidel of Beidel Design Associates, Inc. at 410-707-5623 or email Ed at ed.beideldesign@att.net. Beidel Design Associates are golf architects, land planners and landscape architects.*

*An earlier version of this article may have appeared in industry publications.*