

THE BATTLE AGAINST THE EVERGREEN

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....some thoughts on golf course planting.

There are few more depressing sights than a mass of recently planted evergreen trees - all of the same species, all equidistance and all the same height. Imagine the prospect in 10 or 15 years time - a wall of dark green vegetation, unchanging from one year to the next in height and spread - little growth below the canopy, no understorey, no change in colour with little if any wildlife. Whether these be groups of pines, firs, larch or (God forbid!) Cupressus, their very presence in such numbers suggests a lack of understanding of landscape and a single-minded view of the golf course. Fortunately this happens more often on upland slopes in Scotland and the foresters there are being given a hard time as a result.

But evergreens are often planted on golf courses in response to function rather than beauty - to hide a dismal view - to create screens or to protect boundaries. Even though planted small, they will grow quickly and provide year-round protection and isolation.

But function is not the only task that trees perform on a golf course. What of the brightness of spring flowering trees, the subtle shadows of leaves contrasting in shape and size? What of the beauty of autumn colours heralding the season of winter fairsomes.

Trees, handsome in themselves, give just as much to a golf course as those doing a useful job. There is also an argument that the two must work in harmony, why not combine evergreen and deciduous plants? This diversity of species and growing patterns distinguishes our woodlands. Sometimes it is lacking on our golf courses.

The protagonist of the evergreen argues for speed of growth. Evidently conifers are mostly fast-growing. The Scots Pine and Spruce, planted at 1.0m. high, will reach 12 metres in 20 years and the European Larch, 16m. in 20 years. So within a short space of time, cover can be provided. But what of native deciduous trees? Willows (20 metres in 20 years), Birch (10 metres in 20 years), Wild

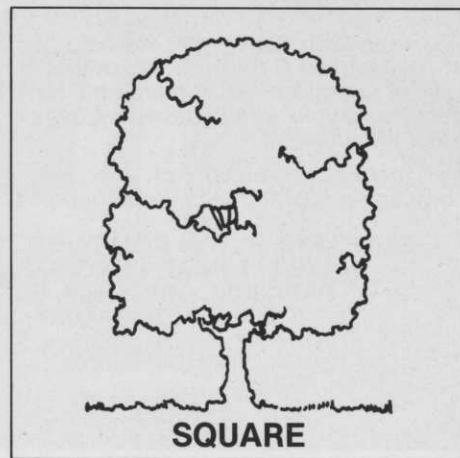
Cherry (15 metres in 20 years), Poplars (15 metres in 20 years), Field Maples, Alders, Hornbeam and Hawthorn are all fast growing given the right space, planted at the right size and given occasional maintenance.

Sometimes it is also thought that conifers are the only family that will grow successfully in exposed areas as shelter belts. That argument has a certain truth but evergreens are not the **only** plants that grow well in poor conditions. In most planting the conifers will act as a nurse species, protecting the young deciduous plants from the vagaries of weather. Once they have reached a certain height and the deciduous trees are fully established, the evergreens can be thinned out, leaving some as a backcloth to lighter deciduous trees. Local authorities who are always pleased to advise on such matters rarely advocate a ratio higher than 25% of evergreen to deciduous. The remaining 75% should be a mixture of some of the faster growing deciduous plants and slower growing species like Oak, Beech and Ash. The species chosen will depend on the site, natural soil conditions and longer term planning requirements.

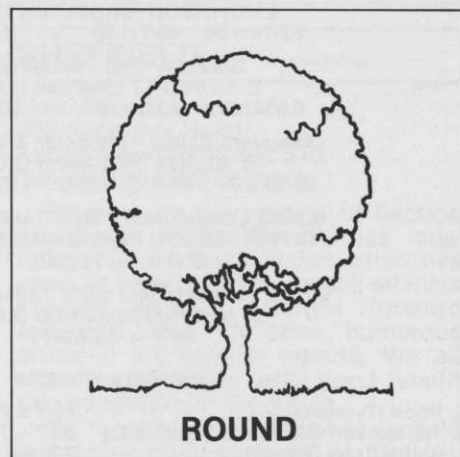
Finally some will say evergreen trees make their presence felt throughout the year and are always an obstacle to the golfer. This argument, at least, is irrefutable.

But beyond these initial considerations, what we are trying to achieve is a reflection of the local landscape and vegetation to create a natural harmony of the golf course with its surroundings. As Walter Hagan said "You're only here for a short visit. Don't hurry. Don't worry. And be sure to smell the flowers along the way". Though this should not be interpreted as an excuse to plant exotic plants with standard roses around tees and greens, its message is clear. Golf offers us the opportunity to savour the countryside and appreciate the changing seasonal faces of the landscape.

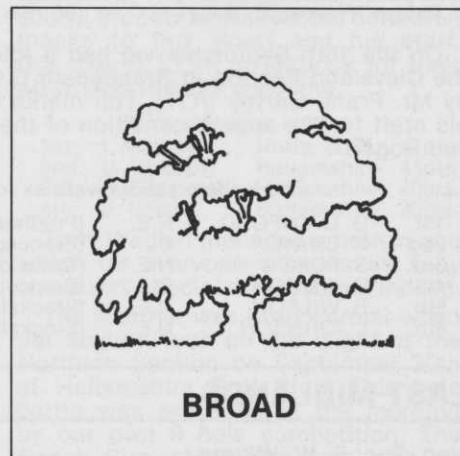
DIFFERENT TYPES OF TREE FORMS



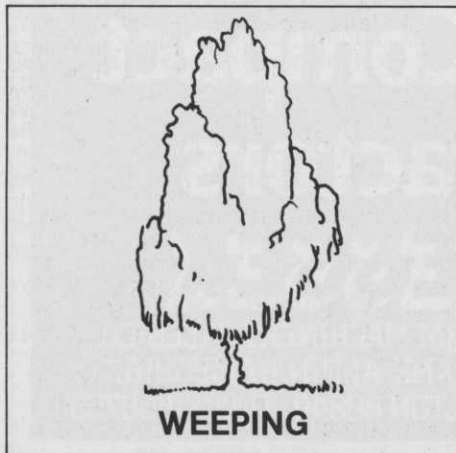
SQUARE



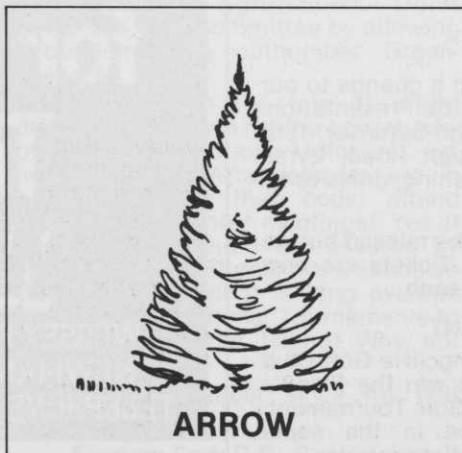
ROUND



BROAD



WEeping



ARROW



HORIZONTAL



Natural use of existing trees to frame the Belfry's 9th green

Where massed conifer planting has taken place, there is little else that can be used as a guide for tree selection. So what can we use for inspiration? At the outset this should come from two sources both related to "association". Association with local character and soil.

When establishing local character we must assess local tree species, their natural habit of growth, their groupings, how they are spaced and how these groups are interrelated. In nature, single stands or monocultures are rare so they should not be seen newly planted on golf courses.

Secondly one must look at the association of soil. All soils and landscape situations have typical plant associations from which one can almost identify the soil types and their pH. The Oak, Hazel and Holly all thrive on heavy clay soils, the Beech, Whitebeam, Wayfaring Tree, Spindle and Blackthorn on chalk hillsides. Pine, Birch and Heather occur typically on the thin acid soils; Field Maple, Hornbeam and Crab occur abundantly on limestone.

That of course is just the beginning. Having established the main species that will provide our medium and long term planting programme, the next

aim is to decide on the shapes, means and overall policy of the planting. Are we trying to connect two belts of woodland at either end of the course, or to develop from this woodland, gradually thinning out the density of trees to create a mixture of parkland and woodland? Is there a water course running through the site which requires its own special treatment or are there extensive vistas which should be retained? The questions are numerous and particular to each site. If the course and its surrounds are relatively bare of trees, local inspiration still requires great care and planning. That should not entail a rash of evergreen plants.

So far we have not mentioned golfing criteria in planting. These have been documented in much more detail in other articles and books and there is not enough room here for a repetition of such criteria. For successful establishment, a knowledge of leaf size, the spread and depth of roots and tree positioning vis à vis the tees, fairways and greens are all critical and must not be overlooked for a successful solution. But if we are to bring back sincerity into some of our golf courses then first an appreciation of the landscape, soil types and local character is essential.

Finally a personal plea. In natural woodland, there is no clear transition between tall woodland trees and the field (ground) layer. The edges favour smaller light-demanding trees and shrubs in an area described by ecologists as the Ecotone, - "mixed communities in the transition area". In these areas, wildlife and plants can thrive.

There are some places on the golf course where such planting is inappropriate - around greens and tees where air circulation would be obstructed and perhaps where poor tee shots land and balls are lost, delaying others on the course. But elsewhere, gradual reduction in height from the main body of woodland to the rough margins of the fairway gives naturalness to the view.

Nobody should damn the use of evergreen trees outright, either in the landscape or on our golf courses. With discretion they can add considerably to our options. In that sense at least they make the job easier. But don't think it is all that easy. The best landscaping schemes were never seen by those who planned them. We have to look fifty to a hundred years ahead. Let's hope we who choose and plant the trees will be remembered kindly.