

Heather as a feature of the golf course

A feature of many heathland golf courses is the abundance of heather, presenting an impressive background to the golfing landscape. The view from the tee of a heather-lined fairway can be an intimidating sight to most golfers who have learned to respect its penal effects. Many good scores have been ruined by the heavy punishment meted out by this wild shrub when attempting to play recovery shots from a tangled mass of wiry stems.

Heather can be controlled in a number of ways and one of the most popular methods with greenkeepers nowadays is to trim it in the spring or autumn with a tractor mounted rotary mower. Another and much older method is judicial burning, which helps perpetuate the heathland habitat and keeps in check the unwanted growth of saplings. Unfortunately, the burning operation is not always acceptable, or possible, on golf courses, which means that the heather has to be cut and any unwanted invasion of trees dealt with by pulling them out. Many courses have started out as open heathland and have become more and more woodland due to the uncontrolled encroachment of birch and other common species of tree.

When the heather gets too long and dense, it can be frustrating and time consuming for golfers searching for balls. At Sunningdale, I prefer to control the heather with the use of a tractor mounted rotary mower. It does quite a good job of topping the shrub to a reasonable height. This work is usually done in the spring or autumn after the plant has flowered without any evident detrimental effects to its growth or vigour.

On the natural heathland courses in Surrey, heather is a more resilient plant than it would seem to be. While it

**By Jack McMillan of Sunningdale GC
and president of EIGGA**

does not cope well with the effects of concentrated traffic, it usually has the ability to recover well if traffic can be stopped or diverted. It is also shallow rooted and I have found that this characteristic allows it to be transplanted successfully to feature the steep slopes of bunker faces, tees and other suitable spots on the course, adding a touch of colour to the scene.

I have found that transplanting heather is a relatively simple operation during the winter months and it is the same kind of job as lifting and relaying turf. When the sods are cut at a reasonable thickness, they handle well in transport and laying.

The stages of this work are as follows:

1. A suitable area well out of play should be chosen for transplanting.
2. Top it over with a rotary mower and rake up the debris.
3. Cut with a sod cutting machine around 1½in to 2in thick.
4. Lift and stack carefully for transport to the site.
5. When laying on steep slopes always work from the bottom upwards and butt each section firmly together.
6. On the steep slopes of bunker faces it is sometimes necessary to anchor transplant sods with wooden pegs or small wire hoops until they are firmly rooted.

In my experience, heather transplanted by this method generally takes root fairly quickly provided it is laid on a

soil bed similar to that from which it was lifted. Using the plant as a special feature on awkward background slopes helps to reduce time-consuming maintenance work, which is a prime consideration nowadays.

At my club, we jealously try to preserve as much as possible of the traditional heathland flora and fauna with which we are richly endowed. The heather is one of our precious assets. It adds a dash of colour and is a vital factor in the playing strategy of the courses and long may it continue to flourish!



Heather planted on the steep slopes of a tee makes an attractive setting...



An area where heather is being transplanted.



Heather growing around the fringes of a Sunningdale bunker...