

Seeing the wood for the trees

By Cecil George

THE vast majority of golf courses in the UK have a tree or bush of some description somewhere or other. This has always been the case and where we get natural growth of trees they tend to beautify the landscape.

It is well known that birds, animals and wind carry and drop the seeds haphazardly, but although this form of transportation of seeds is most prolific, only a few survive and often in the most unused, untouched, unkempt pieces of ground imaginable.

For all species of trees to germinate, they must have the right pH. The majority of common conifers grow best on acid soil with a pH value between 4.5 and 5.5. If the pH is outside this range and, in particular, if the soil is neutral or alkaline (pH 6.5—7.5) many species will grow badly. Broadleaf trees tolerate soils with much higher lime content than

conifers do and will grow well in soil values up to 7.0. For poplars, a soil with a pH over 5.5 is essential.

This all sounds technical, but the truth is that so many people (especially those associated with golf courses and I *don't* mean greenkeepers) plant young trees of every description without troubling to consult the basic rules on how to establish wooded plantations and shelter belts on a golf course. They just stick them in and hope for the best and when results are not forthcoming, the committee wonders how the course down the road can grow trees and yet they can't.

For simple information about trees, any local branch of the Forestry Commission is only too willing to help. In some cases, they will come and plant the trees. There is a charge for this service.

From experience, I know the pleasure that can be had by walking over your course, admiring trees of great beauty you have planted, tended and coaxed through snow, drought and fire, the last of which can be a plague to any golf club trying to establish a wooded area.

There are always problems establishing wooded areas, not always from vandals or wildlife, but mostly from club members. We all know that no matter how hard any committee strives to enhance or improve the course, each member in turn will find that refinements are detrimental and then we are accused of planting obstacles and making the course more difficult for the high-handicap player!

This is why wooded areas have to

Continued on page 28...

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be planted with careful thought and I go back to where I started. Plant your trees out of play, if possible around the perimeter, behind teeing grounds—in places where no golf ball will land! For as sure as fate, if you don't, you will stand accused! Fences should (no, not should, *must*) be erected around young plantations. The rules of golf allow for this and must be applied. Otherwise, you will have members with caddycars traipsing through and over young trees inflicting severe damage in the process.

Even after 20 years of establishment in wooded areas, I can still point out the spots where the average wayward shot lands. These parts of any plantation will not even get off the ground. They will be trampled and run over by the caddycar maniac completely oblivious to the destruction he is wreaking while blindly marching in the direction of his ball. Protective fencing is essential when establishing a wooded area or plantation in the line of play. Notices can be put up, but they're invariably ignored, so fencing becomes all important.

The Victorians and Edwardians were great garden lovers and most of the public parks, landscapes and open spaces of today were created by them and although they did not plant trees on the scale of the Forestry Commission today, they planted them in profusion. The problem was, and still is, if you look at some of the woods planted around 150 years ago, you find a great mixture of broadleaf and conifers that don't seem to

complement each other.

A Forestry Commission spokesman told me that a good percentage of the wood should have been cut down when the trees became established. Those who planted the trees either died or moved on and so we find a fair number of woods with a conglomerate of species that should have been removed once the intended trees were established.

Heritage

Another part of our disappearing heritage is the hawthorn hedge. When I was a boy, the countryside was a maze of these hedges. Their disappearance may be due to the high cost of maintaining them and farmers allowing them to be neglected and die. Often they were removed and replaced with stob and wire fencing which, in comparison, does nothing to beautify the landscape. These old hedges gave shelter to animals and, more important, they housed a large proportion of birds and other wildlife.

The birds, in their turn, carried a wide variety of seeds to their nesting sites and then not only was there hawthorn in the hedgerows, but dog-rose, whin, broom, honey-suckle, brambles and a host of wild flowers and, of course, the odd sycamore, ash, oak, beech, rowan, scattered along the row to make up a beautiful landscape.

Once you get to the stage where you have the protective fencing erected and the areas in tree, then regular maintenance is most important. The young plants, more especially the conifers, must be tramped in, for they are surface-rooted trees and if not properly in the

soil, the roots come to the surface and the tree, as it gets older, can suffer or die during periods of drought. Great care must also be taken to prevent fire.

Fertilisation of the sapling is essential. There are many specially prepared fertilisers for trees and shrubs and one I particularly like is Enmag, which has always given me good results. It has the right balance of NPK and magnesium for my particular course.

Drainage on any course is all important and no tree will grow standing with wet feet. I have actually seen people digging holes, letting them fill with water and then planting trees in the boggy mess. There are certain trees that like water, such as willows, but not too much. So, once you have your plantations in, be kind to your trees and they will thrive.

Golfers must always be taken into consideration for, as much as they admire beauty, they do not want plantations interfering with their game. As I stated earlier, try to plant away from the line of play. I know this is not always possible, as in the case of tree-lined fairways. Unless the trees have established themselves and kill off the undergrowth, you will have to spend a lot of hours just keeping the grass down.

Today, with such aids as growth retarders and regulators, maintenance can be much easier, but I still feel, rightly or wrongly, that inhibitors can also stunt the growth of trees, so great care has to be taken with growth regulators.

Let us not delude ourselves that there is no work entailed in keeping wooded areas. Some committees consider that trees fill in unsightly spots and request that we plant such

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areas, but never consider the employment of extra staff to look after them.

Every greenkeeper with trees on his golf course knows that a certain amount of time and labour is required to look after them properly and that does not take into account leaf sweeping and wind and storm damage, which is always a regular occurrence in the autumn.

But even with all their faults, trees are beautiful and now that we have established our wood, and in spite of everything, we must maintain it.

Conifers, with their beautiful pine aroma, are not as difficult to maintain as broadleaves. Keep them well-trimmed at the bottom. When they reach around eight to ten feet high, remove some of the bottom growth and this will save you a lot of hard work, sore hands and scratched faces. Up to ten feet high, the branches are easily brushed and only a handful of waste has to be burned, but if you wait 20 or so years, as I have just done, it becomes a monumental task and a good deal of burning.

I know that all foresters thin out their woods at about five, six or seven years, but this is not recommended on a golf course. If you plant your trees at intervals of around nine feet you will get good ground cover and if you keep the bottoms clear, there will be no need for thinning.

I always ask myself the question of trees that are in play—are they a benefit or a hindrance to the golfer? If a golf shot does go off line and lands among the trees, then the golfer should be penalised.

I keep the branches of my plantations about six feet high. This makes a full swing impossible, but the chap who is nearer the green can still get a chip and run, or a half wedge shot, provided, of course, there is not a tree between him and the green.

After all, when an off-line ball strikes a tree and lands back on the fairway, you don't get an infuriated golfer telling you what you can do with your trees. The poor old greenkeeper seems to get blamed for everything.

I should have mentioned earlier that the dreaded protective fencing has to come down eventually, but not before you are satisfied that the trees are strong enough to stand the wear and tear of a busy golf course. If you can hold out against your adversaries a little longer about taking down the fence, then do so! The trees will benefit for every year the fence remains. An elaborate fence is not required, just stobs with a single wire or maybe even two wires—one low and one high.

Fact

Conifers live for a long time. As a matter of fact, the widest, tallest and oldest trees in the world are conifers—*Sequoiadendron Giganteum*. The trunk can reach a height of 310ft and the age of many of these trees may be up to between 2,000 and 3,500 years, although it is not possible to be certain since no species has ever died of old age, only as a result of some accident.

The *Sequoia Dendron* and the other giant *Sequoia Sempervirens*, the Coast Red Wood, are both native of California and Oregon. Sequoia commemorates the Cherokee chief and scholar Sequoyah (1770-1843) who devised an alphabet for the Cherokee language.

I don't imagine that we will ever get trees to that height, nor will we put our name to a tree, but we could plant the odd *Sequoia* and, who knows, maybe in 1,000 years someone will wonder who put it there. I am sure that Sequoia transplants are available, perhaps through local nurserymen.

Although conifers are large, old and beautiful, don't forget the broadleaves. After all, think of the age of some of our oaks, the lovely candle-like blossoms of the chestnut and there is nothing that adorns the countryside like the horse-chestnut and the red horse-chestnut with its delicate tinge of pink through the blossom. The red horse-chestnut is a hybrid, which arose by crossing with the American Red Buckeye. The flower-spikes of both these chestnuts are a magnificent sight when they open in May. Then there is the Ash with its lovely hanging bunch of keys. Ash fruits are so called because each seed, with its attached wing, has the outline of an old-fashioned key used for opening doors or chests.

The Sycamore is, in every respect, a typical Maple, but it was called a Sycamore when it was first brought to England for it was thought to be *Sycomorus* or Fig Mulberry as mentioned in the Bible. In Scotland, it was thought to be a Plane tree of the genus *Platanus* and both tree and timber are still called 'Plane' in Scotland. What child does not know the seed, or samarra of the Sycamore? We used to call them 'whirlygigs' due to the way they fall from the tree, spinning round like the rotor blades of a helicopter.

Where can you go in Scotland without seeing the lovely Silver Birch, a delicate tree with its characteristic drooping habit? It is said the Romans brought the Common Lime over and most of the places where 'lime' comes into a name is where they planted them. In July, the fragrance of the lime is really beautiful and it has a great attraction for bees during the summer.

We have inherited the magnificence of trees planted by our forefathers. Remember, you plant trees now for future generations to enjoy.

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