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Natural Areas Are Not Maintenance-Free

Todd Lowe,
USGA Senior Agronomist

Most golf courses are a blend of manicured turf areas amongst areas trees, shrubs, and other landscape plants. Naturalized areas are important golf course features, as they not only benefit wildlife, but improve the overall golfing experience. They provide habitat and food for a variety of birds and animals, which also provides golfers with a more fulfilling experience than simply chasing a white ball around 18 holes of turf. It is not uncommon to see many different types of birds, mammals and even reptiles during an average round of golf in our region.

It is thought by some well meaning golfers and even superintendents that naturalized areas can be installed to reduce maintenance costs. While these areas can reduce many routine inputs like mowing irrigation, fertilizers and pesticides once established, they are not maintenance-free.

Naturalized areas that are not periodically weeded, pruned, or edged can take on an unkempt appearance that is unacceptable to most golfers. Out of play natural areas require less maintenance, but areas that are adjacent to golf coursetees, fairways, and roughs are generally maintained to a higher level of aesthetic quality.

Otherwise, succession occurs, where these areas can be overtaken by other plant species (weeds) and become overgrown over time. Maintenance practices like weed control, pruning, edging, and even mulching should be considered when certain plants are selected and naturalized areas are installed on the golf course. Maintenance practices in natural areas do not occur as frequently as those in manicured turf areas but they can be intensive.

Natural areas are important for both the environment and the game of golf and should be encouraged; but don't be confused – these areas are not totally maintenance free.

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