

Managing native grass

IRRIGATION, SPECIES SELECTION AND SEEDING RATES ENSURE NATIVE GRASS BENEFITS AREN'T OUTWEIGHED BY DRAWBACKS

by KEVIN J. ROSS, CGCS

Golf courses featuring native grass areas have existed for at least 200 years. But in the United States, native grasses have become en vogue during the past 25 years.

Native grass is any species indigenous to an area growing in nearby fields. These species survive with natural rainfall and no fertilizer or mowing. Pull them out of their normal environment, and they perform quite differently.

The extensive use of native grasses is often called the "Scottish look" because the practice can be traced back to the great golf courses in Scotland and Ireland. There are two primary reasons why the Scottish look

has become so popular recently.

The first is design value. Golf course design has moved to imitate the great architects and natural designs of the past, and what better way than to use design features of where the style originated, especially on older courses being restored to their original design intents.

Native grasses also suit courses that are built on open sites with little or no tree growth—an important consideration as more of the land available for golf course development lacks trees or strong, natural features. Such sites require designs that use mounding features to separate and define holes.

Architecturally, designers deal with fewer constraints during the routing process and in most instances, have an open canvas to work with when using native grasses. And the finished look of native grass areas offers aesthetic appeal even to the nongolf enthusiast.

The second major factor of this look's popularity is the environmental advantages native grasses provide. Native grasses reduce mower and labor costs and create natural buffer zones between maintained areas and waterways, ponds or nonmaintained areas. In addition, native grasses serve as a natural wildlife haven, providing an environment for small animals and stalking grounds for larger predators.

Native grasses also can be selected to meet the environmental needs of challenging climactic and soil conditions. Native grass species tolerate drought or wet (riparian) conditions, as well as alkaline, saline or acid soils.

With all of these advantages, are there any disadvantages to native grasses? The one debate concerning these areas is their effect on play. Many superintendents have heard golfers comment, "I hit my ball 2 feet out of the bluegrass rough, and I'm in this 3-foot-high area of thick, lush grass and can't find my ball."

The underlying question behind such comments is how native grass areas are managed. Establishment and management are the keys to having native grass areas perform as intended.

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Native grass cultivar selection often results in grasses that aren't native to the area. In some instances, there's no problem with this, but in other cases, mistakes are made with selection. The typical mistake is selecting a cultivar that performs more like a turfgrass than a native grass.

Another mistake is the seeding/establishment rates for these grasses. Many times, superintendents and architects use rates that are too high and create a stand that's too dense and acts like a turfgrass stand. For example, the normal seeding rates for native fescues should be 30 percent to 50 percent less than a turf stand. This will provide a thinner stand and a much more playable situation than with a higher seeding rates. The grass will develop with a clumping growth habit and will seed better and obtain the wispy seedhead look that's desirable.



Photo: Kevin J. Ross

Properly maintained native grass areas can offer excellent aesthetic contrasts and perfect playability.

Balancing design integrity, aesthetics and playability is the challenge superintendents face when managing native areas. To achieve this balance, irrigation design and watering are top management issues. Native areas that receive water, or get even partially hit by water, create thick, dense and unplayable conditions. For a new golf course, being able to control and/or turn off the watering in these areas is imperative once the course is established to let the native grass grow as it was intended.

The most challenging area of water management is the interface area where the mowable rough meets native grass. The mowable rough needs water, but watering 100 percent coverage is difficult without some overspray hitting the native grass along the edge. Failing to accomplish this task often results in golfers commenting that they would rather hit the ball 10 feet into the native grass than 1 foot into the rough. In truth, an inter-

face zone can become unplayable from irrigation water hitting the edge of the native grass stand, while 10 feet in from the edge of the native grass stand is playable because the area received no water. Facing such a situation, the best solution might be to live with some rough on the dry side by setting the irrigation arcs slightly on the short side. An alternate solution could be to control the fine line of watered native grass by selectively mowing it.

Perhaps the most difficult area of native grass management is around bunkers and on bunker faces. Golf purists agree that bunker faces ringed with native grasses have a look second to none, and adding surrounding native grass to a bunker can make a regular sand bunker increase two to three times in size. Again, controlling the watering in these areas is difficult, and when watered, the grass tends to become thick and unplayable. Around such bunkers, many golfers agree the sand is the place to be and not in the native grass around it.

A misunderstanding

Unfortunately, golfers often misunderstand design principles, strategies and hazards. Too many golfers expect every square foot of the course to be completely playable. Bunkers are hazards, according to the Rules of golf. Native grass edging isn't a hazard, but might play as difficult or even more difficult than other types of grass. The faces or fringes of the bunker are completely unplayable in some situations, and that's only if the golfer can find the ball. However, aren't these annoyances part of the game?

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to how to manage native areas successfully? The decisions about managing native grass will lie with each club and its objectives for speed of play and playability. Most certainly, the architect's design should be considered before changes are made to create native grass areas. But the most important considerations are careful irrigation management design, species selection and seeding rates. Attention to these factors can help ensure the benefits of native grasses aren't outweighed by the disadvantages. GCN

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Native grass areas can offer an environmental balance with nature.



Native grass edging around bunkers that receive water result in a penal situation.



Few golf course designs are carved out of true native grasslands such as Sand Hills Golf Course in Nebraska.

Photo: Kevin J. Ross

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