

Tree management

Trees are beautiful and necessary on most golf courses, but because of abundant trees, many American courses inadvertently have hurt their agronomics and playability.

While superintendents and golf course architects don't agree about everything, we're generally in accord that too many American courses have too many trees. Many superintendents have an inherent conflict with trees, and golf course architects generally think overplanting limits design options and doesn't look attractive or natural.

There is, however, a widely different perception among golfers about trees on a golf course. Looking back, heavily treed American courses were probably inevitable, factoring in American ingenuity, the concurrent rise of golf and the "city beautiful" movement, which emphasized parks and tree planting to humanize and renaturalize crowded cities.

The gradual change of opinion is reflected in the writings of the first generation of golf course architects in America who didn't like trees in virtually any form.

"Trees in the course are a serious defect, and even when in close proximity prove a detriment," wrote C.B. Macdonald, the father of American golf course architecture in 1906. And in 1928, he wrote: "I should like to make this distinction – no course can be ideal which is laid out through trees."

The tide changed slightly when golf course architect Harry Colt softened his stance in 1920. "Trees are a fluky and obnoxious form of hazard, but they afford rather good protection, and if a clump of these exists at such a spot, it might well be considered justifiable to leave it standing," Colt wrote. "Where very few trees exist, every effort should be made to retain them, and in every case the architect will note the quality of the timber with a view of retaining the finest specimens."

Donald Ross took similar positions. "As beautiful as trees are, and as fond as you and I are of them, we must not allow our sentiments to crowd out the real intent of a golf course of providing fair playing conditions," Ross wrote. "If it, in any way, interferes with the properly played stroke, the tree is an unfair hazard and should not be allowed to stand. On the other hand, there is no need to ruthlessly cut down everything before us. If it can be arranged so that holes are slightly elbowed, trees can frequently be

spared. On hot summer days, they are most welcome, especially around tee boxes."

Besides the cost savings of using the natural landscape, Alistair MacKenzie also saw a more practical side to trees. "On an inland course, the only way, except at enormous expense of providing hazards as high as sand dunes, is by the use of trees in groups," MacKenzie wrote. "Trees make an excellent corner for a dog-leg. Firs, pines, cypress, silver birch and California oak make beautiful backgrounds for greens."

In 1933, the "Good Doctor" eloquently condemns poor planting style. "Playing down a fairway bordered by straight lines of trees is not only inartistic but makes tedious and uninteresting golf," he wrote. "Many green committees ruin one's handiwork by planting trees like rows of soldiers along the borders of the fairways. Alternative groupings of trees, planted irregularly, create most fascinating golf and give players the opportunity of showing their skill and judgment in slicing, pulling round, or attempting to loft over them."

However, green committee chairmen took another piece of advice from Colt's partner, C.H. Alison, to heart. "If you have any planting to do, do it at the start," Alison wrote. "Trees take a long time to grow."

To expedite tree growth, many ignored the experience of A.W. Tillinghast by planting quick growing varieties, which tend to be short lived. Tillinghast wrote: "Trees of the better sort, well shaped and really fine specimens, are admired and loved by the vast majority of people in all walks of life everywhere." He also abhorred straight planting lines. "Fairways should be rather irregular in shape and not like bowling alleys extending through the woods," he wrote.

George Thomas wrote: "Trees and shrubbery beautify the course, and natural growth should never be cut down if it is possible to save it; but he who insists in preserving a tree where it spoils a shot should have nothing to say about golf course construction."

William Flynn captures the new beliefs in 1927. "Old ideas have been discarded, and the prevailing belief is that trees, most emphatically, have a fixed place on a golf course," he wrote. "This is true for many reasons. First, because there are few, if any, sites available that are devoid of trees and it is very costly to cut them down and remove them. Second, trees add beauty to a golf course forming picturesque backgrounds and de-

lightful vistas. Third, their shade is most refreshing on a hot summer day. Fourth, they are of great practical value in segregating the various holes."

The overplanting problem isn't new and was recognized by these experts almost as soon as it began. Our love of trees allowed tree-planting committees to hold sway for almost a century. Even when no money was available for other things, clubs – despite cautions from generations of course architects and superintendents – planted trees that have filled in almost every conceivable gap between fairways and, as they matured, crowded and narrowed fairways.

Golf could be more interesting if green committees weren't so focused on increasing difficulty through tree planting. The agronomic problem caused by trees is summed up by a veteran superintendent who asked, "Do you want turf or trees?"

After seeing the long-term results of continual tree planting, we've seen many high-profile courses succeed with tree-removal programs recently.

Most courses should focus on tree management rather than strictly planting or removing trees. Courses built around mature timber will have problems eventually. Your course should plan for removal and replacement of selected older trees, substandard varieties and diseased trees to keep a viable mix of young, medium and fully mature trees for long-term health.

When planting trees, consider the turf's need for morning sunlight by planting them no closer to the fairways, greens and tees than their mature height on the east side, or tell your members to expect highly trafficked areas to begin a slow decline.

Plant trees in naturalistic clumps of three to 12, leaving gaps in between to allow the possibility of a recovery shot. One superintendent objected to my tight spacing of trees initially, fearing it would increase mowing time. Later, he said the extra time of detail mowing between trees spaced 10 to 12 feet apart was more than offset by production mowing in the open areas.

I marvel at how clubs can find money to plant trees, but have no money to get proper advice on how to do it. Others won't use golf course architects, who have a grasp of playability and aesthetics, in favor of a local landscape architect or nurseryman who doesn't. The cost of moving trees will offset any fees eventually. GCN



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