Roughs populated with native species are not maintenance-free. Key problems to be aware of to keep your native areas from going wild.
By John Torsiello

The pros and cons of the native—or naturalized—roughs is pretty simple. "The pros are that native rough areas are aesthetically pleasing to the eye, easier to maintain and are good for wildlife," says Tim Moraghan, founder of Aspire Golf Consulting in New Jersey. "The cons are they are a pain in the ass when you hit your $5 Pro V into them and can't find it due to density."

Moraghan's assessment is intentionally glib, but it strikes a chord. A $5 hit in the wallet for the paying customer notwithstanding, more and more owners and superintendents are turning to a wide variety of grasses to naturalize rough areas on their courses.

"Converting mowed, irrigated rough areas to native grasses can reduce water, fertilizers, and pesticide inputs and may reduce mowing," says Dr. Anthony Koski, extension turfgrass specialist, Colorado State University Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture. "However, it is important to understand native areas will not be maintenance-free. In fact, if they are neglected they can quickly become weedy and unsightly."

Older areas must also be maintained to prevent the invasion of shrubs, brambles and trees, Koski says. Grass species—especially if a mix of grasses—will change over time. "The species of weeds, and you will have weeds to deal with, will change over time, as well."

Major advances in breeding of turf type tall fescues since the early 1980's has encouraged more use of tall fescue as primary or secondary rough, says Zenon Lis, vice president of sales at Ohio's Birmingham Seeds. In traditional cool-season grass growing climates and the transition zone of the U.S., interest in less maintenance has driven the use of tall fescue. "Tall fescue is used now in areas where there are limits placed on annual fertility and chemical applications," Lis says. "The turf quality in high performing NTEP-rated tall fescues is excellent, mimicking a wide bladed bluegrass. They can be cut at 1.5 inches or higher, up to natural plant heights non-mowed."

Another group of species that has garnered more interest in golf rough use, are fine fescues. These species consist of hard, sheeps, creeping red and chewings fescues. The hard, chewings and sheeps fescues have been used more as "no mow" grasses in far roughs and out of bounds areas. They can grow to 8 to 18 inches high and cascade over themselves if left in a natural state.

Fine fescues have an interesting ornamental look, Says Lis says. "In warm-season grass areas in the lower transition and farther south in the U.S., weeping lovegrass performs similarly as the fine fescue 'no mow' grasses above. These all have the potential to be left alone with literally no maintenance when established, except for occasional weed control and spot seeding for fill in."

A similar scenario occurs regarding mowing height adjustments for roughs further south where Bermudagrass is the prevailing fairway grass. The roughs are also defined as primary and secondary by height of cut. So, the cut gets higher the further away from the fairway.

Out of bounds or far rough areas may be near or around sensitive waterways, so "no mow" grasses can be used here, says Lis. Native grasses such as buffalo grass, little and big bluestem, switch grass, wildrye and other species are being used to define extreme far rough and out of bounds areas of play. Some native grasses take a year or longer to show their "true potential," and weed control can be difficult in the establishment year. Some of native grasses above have a far reaching geographic potential for usage, in both cool- and warm-season grass areas.

Traditional cool-season grasses for golf roughs are the normal species used in fairways, including Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, fine and tall fescues. "Generally, the roughs start as a higher cut area from normal fairway heights," Lis says. "So superintendents mow at 1.5 inches for a primary rough, and a further out secondary rough would be mowed at a 3-inch or higher height of cut."

An easy way of transforming mowed rough to native is to simply stop mowing and irrigating the grass, Koski says. Unmowed bluegrass and fescues (both tall and fine fescues) can make for an attractive rough. Similarly, unmowed Bermudagrass in the south can provide a native look as well. This can be a good test to see what the native rough will look like in certain areas of the course. If the look isn't a good one, the grass can be mowed back to down to turf height.

While grasses are generally the plant of choice for native areas, wildflowers are an option. The advantage of using grasses is they are familiar to the superintendent when it comes to management. Further, weed control is easier with grass roughs; selective weed management in wildflowers is complicated (for some mixes) to impossible. An added plus of going native, says Dr. Koski, is that, "Conversion to the native look—and especially if using true native species—can be attractive for many forms of wildlife on golf course: birds, butterflies, and bees and native pollinators."

Depending on the grasses established, the native area will require some sort of vegetation/biomass management. This might entail mowing in the fall or spring and clipping collection. Burning every other year is an effective biomass management tool, where practical and allowed. Dr. Koski says weed management is essential during the establishment years one to three. When established successfully, weed management can be done on a spot basis. He adds, "Fertilization of native areas should not be
bluestem, Koski says.

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Excess irrigation creates

necessary. Fertilization often

courages weed growth and

provides little benefit to the

establishing grasses. However,
on some very poor soils,

including those low in organic

matter, some starter fertilizer

might be warranted."

The most common mistake

made in the establishment and

ongoing maintenance of native

grass areas is excessive irriga-

tion – especially once the grass

has become established, leading
to weed problems in native

areas. Excess irrigation creates

a stand that is so dense that it

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opportunity to attempt a shot.

Depending on whether

grasses are warm- or cool-sea-

son species, there are specific

windows of time when they

can be planted in rough areas

for optimal success. While

combinations of cool- and

warm-season species are "natu-

ral" and commonly sold by

seed companies for native con-

versions, weed management

is complicated with a cool/

warm mixture. Herbicides

safe for use on warm-season

species (imazapic; Plateau, for

example) are often not safe on

cool-season grass, and vice-

versa. If burning is desired as

a biomass management tool,

then warm-season grasses are

a better choice, since they burn

more easily. If true natives are

preferred, it is important to

do your homework to find the

best-adapted natives for your

area – and a good source of

seed for those grasses.

One true native grass that

seems well-adapted for use

throughout the U.S. is little

bluestem, Koski says.

“This is a native, warm-

season, shorter-growing spe-

cies that has a remarkably

broad native range, from the

Northeast to California, and

fairly far south into the humid

Southeast,” he says. “A couple

of other widely-adapted na-
tives, though taller than little

bluestem, are indiangrass and

switchgrass. The grama grasses,

particularly blue and side-oats,
can also be used throughout a

broad range of the U.S.”

While not native, the fine

fescues (hard, chewings, sheeps)
can provide a native look and

will do well everywhere except

the deep Southeast.

Dr. Fred Yelverton, co-direct-

tor of the Center for Turfgrass

Environmental Research and

Education at North Carolina

State University, cites studies

that show a wide variety of

plants are used in naturalized

rough areas. “The main thing

people need to know about

these naturalized areas is that

they are not low maintenance.

Superintendents who have

these areas on the golf course

will tell you they are pretty high

maintenance.”

He says plant species some-
times best for naturalized areas

are Andropogons, but proba-
bly the most common species

used are fescues. “Fine fescue

is very common but many of

these areas have other plants

(Andropogons) planted in the

naturalized areas. The more

species you put in these areas,

the greater the difficulty in

managing them. Weed man-

agement is typically the most

important part of maintaining

naturalized areas.”

Choose a pant that performs

well in your area. If not, you

will be in constant re-estab-

lishment mode, says Yelverton.

The most common symptom

of poorly adapted plants is

weed invasion. “For instance,

fine fescue typically gives the

desired look for most of the

country, but in the warmest

climates or the desert, fine

fescue will not work.”

If unsuitable plants are used

in a region, they may not sur-

vive, leading to the cost of

replanting something else,
says Chris Hartwiger, a USGA

senior agronomist.

“If the proper plant is used

in the wrong location, extra

maintenance may be required

to facilitate less searching for

lost golf balls,” he says. “If

expectations are not commu-

nicated clearly to management

and staff, the finished product

may be disappointing to some,

leading to a change in species

or different management.”

Plants suited for native ar-

eas run the gamut and should

be researched and selected

based on the region a course is

located in,” Moraghan says. “I

constantly preach do not force

a square agronomic peg into a

round hole.”

Fescues, broom sedges, and

red top bent grass may work

well in cool-season arenas,” he

adds. Tall fescue for “way out

of the way” areas can work.

Wildflowers “look great” but

are time consuming to estab-

lish and can end up with weed

patches. Warm-season golf

courses may have a limit to fine

fescues, but the further south

the less successful you will be,

Moraghan adds. GCI

John Torsiella is a Torrington,

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  By Bob Vavrek http://bit.ly/1pwwbr8

• The Use of Non-Mowed Fine-Leaf Fescue Grasses on Golf Courses. Fine-leaf fescue is a versatile candidate for use in many areas

  around the golf course. By M. Alhamed, Vany, and Kevin N. Morris http://bit.ly/1m3y009


  ly/1dKnuxS

• Native Spaces. A growing trend that’s good for the environment - and, in some cases, the budget. By Megan Leonhardt http://bit.

  ly/1Lx2z5v