Maintained ornamentals add just as much to the overall experience at your course as manicured greens and fairways. Pest control expert Joe Cea outlines how to protect that landscaped beauty from varmints looking to make it their lunch.

by Joe Cea

While maintaining the grounds and greens of a local golf course there is one thing I have learned about golfers over the better part of the last decade – they are very passionate about their sport and how they play.

In spite of this zeal for the game and always striving for personal “bests” even bad play can be augmented by the beauty of the course itself. Every golfer has had “one of those days”. You know “Not my day today but you know what: it’s a beautiful day on a beautiful course...” Even in passing I’ve heard this quote more than a few times while meandering around the course carrying out my responsibilities. As part of the grounds crew I always key in on the last part about the grounds being beautiful. Indeed, I have first-hand familiarity that when it comes to the golf-
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Grow your own

To cut down on costs of consistently replacing wildlife damaged plants you may wish to consider a greenhouse to grow your own flowers.

While the start-up costs may prove high, this is definitely an investment where costs will be defrayed over time. Also, if individual gardens and flower beds scattered throughout the course prove too tough with multiple attempts, then you may wish to consider an arboretum with a nature trail. This not only shows off your plants, but can be more easily protected with everything in one area. This can be a fantastic feature to a course.

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Spray away

There are dozens of sprays and other repellents that can be applied to ornamentals to prevent various species of wildlife from destroying your expensive plants. Some work and others don't. The good thing about using any chemical repellents is that on a golf course the superintendent, or another employee, will generally have a pesticide applicators permit to handle the product.

Ultimately, experimenting with plant repellents may cost you more than replacing the plant itself. So you're better off with more long-term solutions. While spraying pesticides to reduce insect damage—which should be done in conjunction to reduce stress on plants to keep them blooming and beautiful—you may stumble on one that helps with other critters. It's important to keep a journal or some other notations until you find a combination that works in more than one maintenance area.

Elevated flower beds also prevent damage from our next contestant—rabbits. Rabbits are endowed with an amazing jumping ability. Even elevated flower beds will not prevent access. So the goal with an animal that is typically more numerous than deer is to reduce damage because 100 percent prevention is next to impossible. If you have flower beds on the ground a smaller fence (maybe 2-3 feet high) can limit rabbit damage.

Reinforce this by attaching either ½ inch x ½ inch or ¾ inch x ¼ inch galvanized hardware cloth to the fence and buried in the ground three to four inches and then folded outward another 3 inches or so to prevent digging underneath. This should cut down drastically on rabbits chewing the tops off your expensive flowers.

Recognition of which species is nibbling is important. Flowers with a clean cut and tower to the ground are usually rabbits because they are smaller and because their lower and upper incisors leave a perfect shear on plant stems. Deer, on the other hand, only have lower incisors and their cut is only sheared from the lower side leaving a ragged edge on top from tearing off the rest of the flower.

Other uses for hardware cloth are to aid in the war on chipmunks. Chipmunks are notorious for digging and eating the bulbs of many ornamental flowers, thereby costing golf courses not only for annual flowers but also perennials.

Chipmunk holes are about 2 inches in diameter and are frequented throughout the day. Obviously, these critters can be trapped. However, dead chipmunks in snap traps may not be something golfers want to see. A better, long-term solution is to prevent them from taking up residence. The trick here is to prevent them from digging and that's where the hardware cloth comes in.

In each flower bed, in addition to a weed barrier, cut out a section of hardware cloth and stake it down. Holes can be cut with heavy-duty scissors or metal shears to plant seeds or potted plants. The galvanized wire will allow for the plants to grow while preventing chipmunks from digging at and accessing any roots and bulbs. This same strategy will also work for other diggers such as voles that have a tendency to dig shallow tunnels through mulch and other soft soil.

Moles also dig tunnels, but are usually much deeper. So a shallow wire barrier would be ineffective. While moles, unlike voles, are carnivorous they usually aren't too much of a threat to ornamental flowers. However, it's their tunnels that become an issue for a course.

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