Boundary plantings offer course privacy

By Jeanne A. French and R.P. Korbobo

Just how private is your course? Some clubs have come to realize that what they thought was a beautiful green wall of privacy around their golf course was nothing more than empty air space after removal of the trees for various legitimate reasons.

Such catastrophes can happen almost overnight. Many golf course members have awakened to the sad realization that much, if not all, of the tree growth around the outside of the course was never really on their property.

Highway construction

Add to this situation the fact that highway departments, whether the public objects to them or not, in about 99 percent of the cases put their roads right where they want to. All too frequently it is right through your course. On one 36-hole layout in New Jersey, a big super-highway came right down between the two courses and took a 600-foot-wide swath right out of it. On the one course, the highway was at the same elevation as the first and second holes. On the other course, the highway left them with an embankment up to 30 feet high.

Fortunately, the Greens Committee saw the necessity of immediate starts to overcome this vicious scar left by highway department surgery on their course. Within the next three or four years, there will be close to a thousand trees, both deciduous and coniferous, planted along these particular holes, not only to screen out the busy traffic, but to help with noise abatement.

Another reason for stripping the plantings along the edges of the golf course is often residential or commercial construction.

Don't waste time

The important action that must be taken if one or more of these things have happened to your course, is to get going as soon as possible. Trees take a long time to mature, so every year you wait, you are simply postponing the inevitable need for new plantings.

The objects that you will be trying to screen may be many. Sometimes you have a screen job within your course and it is usually the dump area or the
work shed area. This is needed on many of the courses that we visit. More often, the need for screening is created by outside distractions. There is one course where the objects to be screened are white roofs of hundreds of private homes and garden apartments. These roofs are nearly a mile off the course. However, they catch your attention when you walk down three particular fairways and create a very distracting situation for the golfer.

**Height of object**

The next important item to consider is how much space is available for the new planting. This space factor can, by a rough rule of thumb, be broken down into four different categories. The first one would be considered minimum, and that would be from zero to five feet. Under these conditions, you have to be extremely knowledgeable to take advantage of every inch of available space.

The next category would stretch from five to 20 feet of width. This might be called a narrow space. Here your problem gets much easier but still it is not the easiest. In the first category you may have to work with nothing more than a fence, a wall, or a narrow hedge. In the second category you can still work with those same items, but you can add trees of small to medium size. In unusual cases, land sculpturing may help solve the problem.

The third space description would be from zero to 50 feet in width. Here you have much more freedom and it won’t demand such intense planning. You can still work with fences, but trees and shrubs will be your most likely material.

The fourth category, which very few courses would be able to claim, would stretch up to 150 feet in depth. In this case, you could do it all with trees and shrubs. This would be the simplest boundary planting to create as far as making critical decisions are concerned.

**How high?**

Not only does the ground elevation come into play when you try to develop a screen planting but also the height of the objects to be blocked from view. In the majority of instances the objects are usually one story houses. These are not too much trouble to hide.

The next category would be two story houses. Once in a great while they might be older houses three stories high.

The third category, of course, would be commercial buildings of almost any height. Sometimes this even includes water towers, communications, electronic towers, smokestacks, etc.

**Year round play?**

The next question that you must throw into your mental computer when making your plans for boundary plantings is the subject of how many months of the year your course is in play. Certain courses close down completely for a few of the winter months. Others play around the calendar. It only follows that on those courses where play is for 12 months of the year, the boundary plantings take on more importance.

**Sun or shade?**

Extremely important is the consideration of degree of light in various locations. The problem here is one of orientation in relation to the sun. Since golf course holes are at various angles in relation to the sun, there is no one answer as to which plants will be best suited to each hole. We realize that particular plants can be used either in the sun or the shade of other trees while others either need full sun or at least a half day of it. It would be disastrous if anyone just indiscriminately planted trees either near to or under larger trees without really knowing what he was doing concerning the light requirements of various tree species.

**Wind as a factor**

We must take into account the prevailing winds. Do you live in a part of the country that gets “northeasters”, such as the East Coast does? Or do you live in some part of the country where it is almost as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow that the winds will be out of the north or the south. Perhaps your course is along the ocean with its own set of problems. And so it goes. Each section of the country has its own wind patterns and the wise landscape designer knows about these and works with them.

**Color**

The question of color in the landscape picture should be uppermost in the designer’s mind. A pleasant composition should be created in these boundary plantings. This is especially so where there is a lot of depth to work with. Each season of the year can be a changing and attractive picture.

Take the common flowering dogwood as an example. It grows naturally in about 25 states. It is an extremely attractive tree during its spring flowering season. Its white (or pink) blossoms accentuate the horizontal branching effect that the tree is noted for. In the summertime it has shiny deep-green foliage. In the fall the foliage color is most spectacular. And after the leaves drop it shows off its attractive red berries until the birds eat them. In addition, the branching habit is so attractive it is a pleasure to behold all through the winter months. Then picture a wet, sticky snow or a beautiful ice storm covering these same trees. This is why you must be
able to take into account all four seasons when you make a choice of trees for your boundary planting.

Noise abatement

These boundary plantings can carry a bonus with them if the initial problem was created by road construction. If such is the case, then still different requirements must be brought to bear on the choice of the plants as well as the distances apart at which they will be planted.

On a 36-hole layout in New Jersey, the first tee on one course is only about 20 feet away from the highway! There is a chain-link fence on the property line. This fence will ultimately be covered with an evergreen English Ivy (variety Baltica) and the space between the fence and the edge of the tee is already filled in with 87 young American Holly trees.

These were planted only five feet apart between plants and five feet between the rows in a staggered formation. The written orders on the golf course analysis simply state, "Never prune". The reason for this is because holly leaves stay on the tree with very little resistance. Therefore, most of the plants should be trees or tree-like shrubs.

We will consider the shrubs as a separate group. We can divide the trees into three categories. Sketch 1 shows typical silhouettes and approximate heights at maturity (over 30 years of age) of the three groups, small, medium and large. When we say trees, we include the conifers (cone-bearing trees, such as pines and spruces). Sketch 2 shows the most commonly used conifers. If trees in your part of the country are not shown, check with your Cooperative Extension Service Specialists in ornamental Horticulture Landscape Design. You can also talk to local Landscape Architects and reputable Nurserymen.

Small trees are usually covered with conspicuous ornamental flowers of various colors. These trees vary in height from six to eight feet on up to about twenty feet. The medium-sized trees occasionally have colorful flowers on them, but not always. The height range of these reach from 20 to 40 or 45 feet. The large shade trees rarely have conspicuous flowers on them.

Colorful flowers are a great variable depending upon what part of the world you are talking about. The closer you get to the tropics, the more colorful the flowers become. Many more medium- and large-sized trees are covered with explosions of blossoms in those areas. The average height of the large shade tree should be considered between 50 and 80 feet and sometimes all the way to 100 feet high.

Silhouettes

The silhouette of a tree is always drawn as though the tree were standing free as a perfect specimen. This ordinarily gives a false impression. There is no way of telling what will happen to any tree when you use it in a landscape composition where it will be competing for soil nutrients, light and space. Therefore, the silhouette sketch only gives us a starting point.

We have placed trees, large trees, as close as 10 feet to each other when we knew full well that if it were growing out freely in the middle of a field it would easily reach a diameter of 70 or 80 feet. However, we were trying to re-create a natural effect. Therefore, some of the trees can be placed very close together while others are planted 30, 40, 50 and more feet apart. You then could plant understory trees to get a true woods effect. The use of understory plants makes a better screen. The understory plants will always have their foliage mass down low while most large shade trees would lose their lower branches as they mature.

This is not to confuse you or scare you, but it is simply to make you aware of the fact that this is not simply a guessing game.

Hedges

If you went back to the first two or three categories mentioned at the head of the article, you will see we called for a possible use of hedges. In this case, we can bring some plants down to as close as two feet from each other. The same effect can be had with other plants that would also give you a hedge as the ultimate screen and these plants could be as far as eight or 10 feet away from each other.

In a coming article we will cover various trees and shrubs and hedge plants by name and give approximate distances for planting.

Leaf texture is usually placed in
three categories: refined, medium or coarse. On a boundary planting that might be 100 feet or more away from the viewer, the texture would be only a small part of the problem. If the viewer is coming within 40 or 50 feet of the plant's foliage then texture becomes rather important. And if the viewer observes the plant at close range, texture becomes extremely important.

To give you an example of what we mean by texture in foliage, let's take two extreme examples. On the one hand, if the reader lives in that part of the country where as a boy, he used to smoke the “cigars” of the Catalpa tree, he will quickly recall the large leaves on these trees. They are also almost as rough as sandpaper to the touch. This would be an example of an extremely coarse foliage.

Now moving to the other extreme where we are looking for a highly refined foliage, I can't think of anything better than the recently popularized Dawn Redwood. It is a cone-bearing deciduous tree. Each tiny that you would hardly know that you were touching it. That is a highly refined foliage.

For medium texture you'd include such plants as Honeylocust, Scarlet Oak, Willow Oak, willow trees of various types, and many others.

Any superintendent who has ever raked leaves will soon recall that certain ones were so coarse, and so hard to handle, that you got to dislike that tree purely on the basis of its foliage texture.

Deciduous or coniferous?
The logical next question is, “Do you plant all deciduous plants (those that lose their leaves during the dormant season) or all conifers? Or do you mix the two?” The best landscape composition comes from a mixture of the two. However, you need plenty of depth to do a professional job in composition where you include both types.

The best composition is to be found in nature. One must have years of experience and preferably some formal training to sit down with a piece of paper and design something for the next 50 to 100 or 150 years into the future that won't turn out to be just a tall, flat green wall.

The inside shape of the boundary planting is all important, especially if you have anywhere from 30 to more feet of space for planting. It should not be a straight wall of tree trunks. It should have gradual curving bays and interesting promenories. Occasionally you might have room to set a specimen tree (see above) standing in one of those open, grassed bays. We will cover the use of specimen trees in a later article on composition and design.

How many plants?
We can just hear the impatience building up in most of the superintendents and Greens Committee chairmen who are reading this article. “When are they going to get around to the most important question of all—how many plants will it take?”

The answer is not so much in how many will it take as it is how many can your budget and labor force handle in any one planting season?

It is much better to plan ahead for such projects, especially if you are planning to do the work with your own labor force. We do not recommend this but it is a way of really reducing the total cost.

We are fully aware of how busy the superintendents are, especially in the spring. If they are in a high rainfall area such as the Northeast, it stretches their patience to the last thread in just trying to get the grass cut. We can imagine what would happen if they had 200 trees sitting down in the storage area, and the weather was such, they couldn't get out and plant them. So careful planning is extremely important.

Try to envision just about how much could be handled in any one planting season. It is much better to do it gradually than to get discouraged from overextending yourselves.

Ordinarily, on a course that is already blessed with some trees we usually add at a minimum of five to 10 trees on each hole and a maximum of from 30 to 40. Most courses that handle their own planting take on only from one to three holes a year. This is just about all the superintendent and his work crew can manage. If the weather is right it is not too bad. If the weather goes against them, it can become a nightmare.

Spring or Fall?
The next question comes, do you plant in the spring or the fall? Again, the answer is check with your local authorities, especially your Cooperative Agricultural Extension Service or the local nurserymen in your particular area. In the northern temperate zones, it is usually a case of too much rain and mud in the spring. The Fall seems to be the better time because heavy vehicles aren't so apt to bog down or make ruts in your roughs or fairways.

The disadvantage of fall planting is that if it is not done as soon as planting is possible, there will be practically no new roots set before the oncoming of winter. That is the big advantage of spring planting. Each plant can set out a new crop of roots before winter sets in.

Maintenance and the planting techniques will be covered in a subsequent article. We hope that this discussion on boundary plantings has inspired you to give consideration to your course's individual problems.