

Adding Flower Color to a Golf Course

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One of the most frequently heard comments I hear from golf course superintendents is:

“I would love to add more flower color to my course but I don’t have lots of money for plants and even less time and money for maintenance.”

When I inquire about the current program, invariably the gardening is a concentration of annual bedding plants and the favorite plant choice is. **Red Geranium.** Sometimes, the color choice has been changed to pink or salmon to disguise the repetitive design choice, but usually, geraniums are the main ingredient. Ironically enough, geraniums are one of the most expensive annuals on the market and require a high level of maintenance to ensure quality. If geraniums are not watered, fertilized and dead-headed on a regular basis, they create a mass of light green foliage edged with brown leaves, and flower intermittently. The plant choice is wrong if your budget and maintenance staff are limited.

“But I can’t change the flower scheme, members would complain. It would start an upheaval at my course just shy of a revolution.”

Changing the flower planting scheme at a golf course can create change...**Positive Change.** If the proper steps have been taken, **the change will be positive.** Analyze the location, size, composition, quantity and maintenance ramifications of every pot, basket and flower bed currently located on the grounds. Use the following seven questions as a guideline for evaluating the worthiness of each site.

1. Are the flowers located in a high traffic area for maximum visibility and appreciation? First, concentrate your time and money near the clubhouse and patio areas. First impressions often make lasting impressions. Then consider other locations where golfers might find themselves loitering (Tee boxes) and intersecting areas of the facility that golfers and visitors can appreciate the same flower area.

2. Are the flowers irrigated or easily watered? Dragging a 200-foot hose to a site, three times a week, is expensive maintenance. Irrigate, relocate or convert to perennial species entirely. Once established, perennials require much less watering.

3. Does the flower require edging because the riding mower cannot get close enough? The outside

lines or curves of a bed should be designed with an understanding of the turning radiuses of the riding mowers. Rethink a design if extra labor is necessary to trim the turf around the site.

4. Is the bed size small and easily overlooked? If the flower bed is big, bold and can’t help but be noticed, even from afar, it will be appreciated. Sometimes large beds that are designed and positioned to be seen from a distance have a huge advantage. All of the weed understory is not topic of conversation. . . no one even notices.

5. Is the flower bed comparable in size to an average homeowner’s garden? Repeating the average homeowners’ style of gardening is a sign that you too have “average” expertise. At the golf course, the bed should be large, grandiose and eye-catching. (Think of Disney World. . . do you remember any of the flower beds? They are big, spectacular and memorable.) One large, well-executed flower bed will always command more attention and compliments than ten scattered “homeowner” models. Every site has different factors influencing design, but 150 square feet is a good **minimal** size to consider.

6. Are the pottery, containers or baskets larger in size than the typical residential landscape? The bigger, the better, applies to them for three reasons.

1. Lightweight items are too great of a temptation for some paws.. Thievery is a problem.

2. Small containers have such a small water reservoir that on hot days, plant material wilts.

3. Again, the **bigger the better** approach will always command more attention from the customer. The quality of a planter is also a reflection of style or “lack of” style. Whiskey barrels are great color accent around a maintenance building, but they are “tacky” when used around a clubhouse or within a golf course. Absolutely beautiful pots and containers are available. . . . invest. Select a style that never requires moving.

7. What is the distance between various flower beds, pots and baskets? Do you find your crews spending more time driving or walking between flower sites than maintaining them? When the flowers are located in scattered sites throughout the grounds, time, labor and dollars are inadvertently consumed by moving from site to site, not by the true maintenance of the flowers. A time management study of the repeated loading, unloading and reorganizing of the utility cart would convert any non-believer. Consolidating the flowers into fewer, larger and more spectacular beds is more economical and more rewarding.

I can feel the frustration, agony and financial drain caused by the flower program. Even on courses that are

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Flowers—

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fortunate enough to have on-site gardeners.

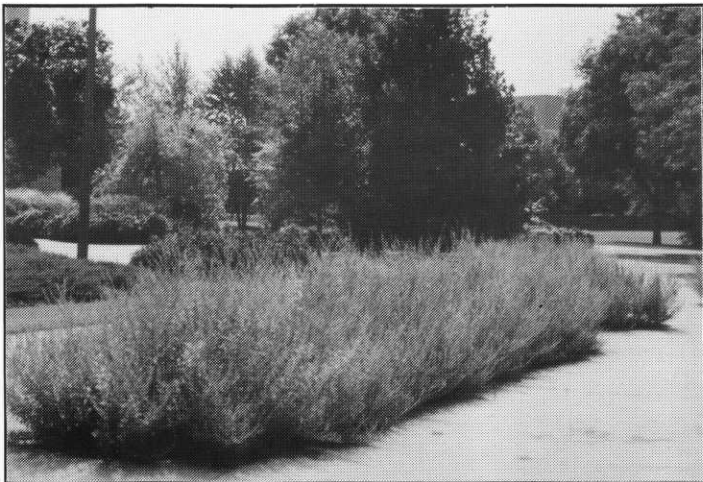
How did an earnest, virtuous, attempt to “add more color” evolve into a dreaded blackhole? Simply put. . . poor design coupled with poor plant selection.

Begin the process by transforming the smaller, more insignificant beds to herbaceous perennial plants. Fill in the entire bed with one, possibly two, different plants. If you decide to get fancy and add a large variety of plants the gardener must have a higher skill level. Spring arrives and it is difficult to figure out which of the plants are “good” and which are weeds. I have seen perennial beds that have nurtured weeds to the flowering stage, only then to recognize them as the “weed.” **Minimize the complexity of the bed.**

The cost of smaller-sized, herbaceous perennials can be equal to that favorite flat of Geraniums that you buy year after year. The difference between the two is that the Geraniums will continue to get more expensive and the perennial will become more valuable. After the first year of “babysitting” a new planting of perennials, the maintenance cost is easily estimated at less than half. Geraniums require babysitting every year. . . forever. What are some good plant choices?

The plant choices are endless, but three different plants are worthy of discussion. Russian Sage, Daylily and Peony

Russian Sage, *Perovskia atriplicifolia*, is a plant that is relatively unknown. Why? It is a plant that did not receive just recognition until the last five years. It was selected by the Perennial Plant Association as the “1995



Russian Sage

Plant of the Year.” This recognition is equivalent to a movie receiving an Oscar nomination and the sales and usage have catapulted. Russian Sage has silver stems and small, grayish foliage. It reaches heights of nearly 4 feet with its sprawling habit. The light blue to lavender flowers are in spikes 12” long beginning in late July and continuing through August. It is hardy in zones 3-8. Used either as a specimen or in a mass planting, it requires a sunny, dry location. Russian Sage is intolerant of shade and poor drainage. One particular variety, ‘longin,’ has stiff upright stems and a more formal appearance than the species. If you ever get the chance to visit the college campus of Gustavus Adolphus in St. Peter, Minnesota in August, you will be a forever fan of this plant. Massive beds have been used to light up the central corridor of the campus. It is beautiful beyond description! My only criticism of the plant choice at the site is that it has peak flower performance when very few students are on campus. It is equivalent to a golf course concentrating its landscaping efforts for winter color. . . nice that the staff can enjoy it!

Daylilies, *Hemerocallis* varieties, have always been a stable, positive contribution to the landscape. Today more than ever, fabulous improved varieties of this plant are available at very reasonable prices. Ten years ago, I remember the thrill of getting my hands on twenty pots of the most coveted new release, ‘Stella de Oro,’ a tetraploid flower. I paid nearly \$10.00 per small pot, with a few leaves, and knew I had a bargain. Today, due to expanded production and availability, these plants would sell for approximately \$1.50 per small pot. (Forget what I previously mentioned about “investment” in this article.) Frequently when visiting golf courses I see the use of Daylilies, but they are the old orange, unimproved, “ditch species.” Purge yourself of this old inventory. Bring out the herbicide, rototil and replant with new releases.

Peonies, *Paeonia* varieties, have also been a positive contribution to the landscape, but I rarely, if ever, see them used on golf courses. Why? I am not sure, because they are the lowest of maintenance plants. Have you ever driven by an old, abandoned house when the Peonies are flowering? Mother Nature brings the property back to life. Peonies create a small, rounded shrub about three feet tall. In late spring and early summer they have a ten day display of very beautiful, large white, pink or red flowers. The timing of the flower display is exactly when the golfers/consumers in Minnesota are starved for warm weather, golf, and summer. The color is refreshing and invigorating. Single specimens provide color but a very large, mass planting can be well worth the effort.

Some gardeners dislike Peonies because just when the flowers are reaching their peak display they become too heavy and lodge to the ground. Remember the farmhouse, no one had fertilized in twenty years. If high levels of fertility are supplied to peonies, the stems become too fleshy. Additionally, the correct cultivar choice makes a tremendous difference. Select the single flowering, Japanese

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Flowers—

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varieties. The flowers have less weight. Another criticism is, "but they only flower for ten days." Unlike many perennials when they have finished flowering, the foliage of Peony creates a very clean, bright green, rounded shrub. Visit the peony collection at the University of Minnesota Arboretum in Chanhassen, Minnesota two times in a year. Go in the spring to select your favorite cultivars and gain in August to appreciate the clean, kept habit of the shrub.

**"You've convinced me, I don't ever want any flower beds on my course. It's more bother than it's worth."
Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!**

If you built a poorly designed golf course and seeded it with poor grass varieties, would you reach the conclusion that the golf course was a bad idea? Probably not. You would conclude that the design and plant selections were wrong. . . not the idea to have a golf course. Flower beds require the same correct design and plant selection.

A golf course is a business, and failure to attract new and repeat customers will lead to the demise of the business. While the "flower lovers" may not be the favorite customer at the business, their money is equally green.

Human behavioral sciences have researched the influences of color on our moods and our actions. This research serves only as a reinforcement to knowledge we intuitively know. Colors inspire positive moods and more importantly, positive consumer behavior. Golfers are consumers. Yes, golf is a sport. Yes, it becomes a passion for many. But where a golfer elects to leave their dollars on the quality of the golf course, the price, and the energizing "unquantifiable" reaction to a facility. Flowers contribute to this last category. Any questions, call (800) 626-6429 or E-mail address: flowers29@skypoint.com

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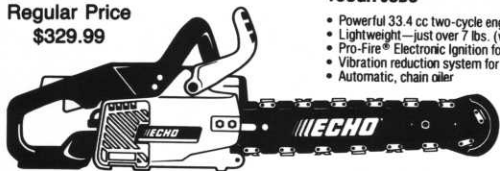
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