

## NATURALIZING GROUNDS AREAS

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### Why Naturalize?

There are many reasons to consider naturalizing grounds areas, but most revolve around reducing the level of maintenance. This reduction in maintenance can save considerable costs, both short and long term. By naturalizing areas, ground managers can realize an immediate reduction in inputs including labor, water, fertilizer, pesticides and equipment needs.

Besides the reduction in costs, naturalized areas can also have other positive impacts. Efforts to attract wildlife, increase plant diversity, create better transitions from maintained areas to natural areas, and buffer sensitive natural areas from negative environmental impacts are other reasons to naturalize. Aesthetics may also be an important consideration when deciding to naturalize areas. Aesthetics certainly come into play when the primary reason to naturalize is more than just to reduce maintenance. Sometimes creation or restoration of a unique habitat is the goal, such as a prairie, woodland, wetland or shrub border.

When enhancement of habitat or other environmental benefit is the goal, then short-term costs may not be reduced. In fact, it may take more money to accomplish these goals than the grounds manager is spending to currently maintain the area. At some point after establishment the long-term costs will be reduced compared to the current maintenance level as the naturalization is achieved. For most projects, this payback usually occurs in a 3-5 year period.

### Methods of Naturalizing

For many ground managers, the easiest and most cost-effective way to naturalize an area is to simply stop maintaining it. This will certainly accomplish cost savings if that is the primary goal. It may even accomplish other goals, whether intended or not, such as improved wildlife habitat, better buffering from sensitive areas, and improved design transitions. But often the aesthetics of this approach is unacceptable. To the untrained eye, the area may look like a bunch of weeds, an oversight of your crew or simply laziness in overall maintenance. Educating your “customer”, the people that see and use these areas, and certainly educating those that oversee your work will help all interested parties to accept this naturalization. Focus not only on the cost savings but also on the environmental benefits achieved. Articles in newsletters, signage on site, and a couple of well placed nesting boxes will go a long way towards achieving this acceptance.

When short term cost savings is not the primary reason to naturalize an area, more planning and preparation are required. First, identify specifically the reasons that naturalization is desired. What aesthetic or environmental goals do you wish to achieve? Determine whether these goals are appropriate for the site in question. For example, it's difficult to create a wetland in well-drained soil at the top of a ridge. Clearly identify your goals and create a concept plan, either graphically or in writing. Evaluate the following:

- Public relations needs/education
  - methods to communicate your goals to supervisors and users
  - signage, displays, brochures
- Establishment methods and costs
  - methods of establishment
  - availability of plant material or seed
  - expertise to accomplish the establishment
- Future maintenance and costs
  - many areas will require more money initially to establish before costs savings are realized.
  - does your staff need additional training or equipment to accomplish the required maintenance?

- are there restrictions that would prevent you from doing certain required maintenance practices (i.e. prescribed burns)?

Part of your planning should be a thorough site inventory and analysis. What do you have on site and will it work in achieving your desired end result. During this inventory, some of the features you want to identify include:

- Soils
  - soil test
  - determine surface drainage
  - use a soil survey to determine soil type, texture and profile
- Hydrology
  - especially important for wetland habitats
- Vegetation
  - are there desirable species already growing in this area or will you need to completely re-vegetate the area.
  - what invasive species are present that may cause your goals to be delayed or fail.
  - can vegetation from other areas be moved to help accomplish your goals
- Exposure
  - sun or shade
  - predominant winds
  - will conditions vary in other seasons i.e.) winter wind
- Uses of the area
  - will naturalizing enhance or conflict with the current uses
  - will additional uses be created by naturalizing an area
  - how will you and your staff respond to the change in uses

Once the site inventory and analysis is complete you can then develop a final plan and a budget. Your plan can be all graphic, all in writing, or a combination of the two. But planning is critical. Do your homework. You may want to hire a professional to help you achieve your goals.

On most projects where naturalizing is desired, and where habitat enhancement or environmental improvement is the primary goal, one of two directions will be taken:

- complete renovation of the area including killing of existing vegetation and total re-establishment

OR

- selected removal of unwanted vegetation, establishment of desired species and concurrent management to encourage desirable vegetation remaining.

This decision is obviously based on the site inventory and a determination as to whether any desirable vegetation is present in the area.

Finally, a critical element in naturalizing any area is patience. It may take several years to realize your goals. During this time, unique management strategies may be required. Continue to evaluate the progress of the area and be flexible enough to modify management practices in response to what you see developing. Most naturalization projects take 3-5 years to establish and longer periods to develop the final desired look. But with patience, naturalization can meet your cost savings goals and contribute significantly to habitat enhancement and other environmental and ecological goals.