



California Native

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Why are native grass plantings becoming more popular on golf courses? Is it because native grass plantings provide economic savings by reducing inputs? Do native grass plantings enhance wildlife habitats on the golf course? Will the golf course blend into the existing landscape when native grasses are used?

The answer to all of those questions is a resounding yes. However, there are some basic premises that have to be understood before all of the benefits of utilizing native plant material are observed.

More and more golf courses are trying to imitate nature with the naturalized look in and around the golf course. This does not happen overnight nor does it happen by accident. Establishing a stand of native grasses requires an abundance of planning, patience and pennies.

A superintendent of a newly constructed golf course who has plenty of experience in planning a native grass establishment was Forrest Arthur of The Preserve in Carmel Valley. Forrest stated that without the commitment to proper planning and documenting the existing native plant inventory, the process would have had disastrous results. Instead, the native grass areas at The Preserve are one of the most intriguing aspects of the golf course.

Forrest had a good understanding of native grass plantings while serving as Superintendent of The Links at Spanish Bay. However, the amount of area to re-establish to native grasses at The Preserve was staggering. Prior to construction, Forrest and Paul Kephart, manager of Rana Creek Restoration, inventoried the native plant material on each hole. They took notes of the plant material for both the highland areas and the lowland areas.

Forrest was challenged by the permitting process to only have 70 acres of irrigated turf for the entire golf course. During the construction process, Forrest estimated they disturbed another 70 acres that had to be revegetated to its original pristine condition. The disturbed areas were hydroseeded with the appropriate blend of grasses to match the existing flora. Supplemental irrigation was used to help the seeds germinate and develop an acceptable stand. Forrest worked closely

with regulating agencies to plant the disturbed areas precisely back to pre-undisturbed conditions.

According to David Kaplow of Pacific OpenSpace, Inc., golf course superintendents need to learn the behavior of native grasses. Most experts agree that it can take up to three years to have an acceptable stand of native grasses. By taking longer to fully establish, Kaplow suggests superintendents have different expectations for native grass areas.

Roger Robarge, Superintendent at California Golf Club in San Francisco, has learned the value of patience when planting several acres of native grasses. Once a major tree removal effort was wrapped up, Roger and the Green Committee wanted to re-establish native plant material in the under stories of the trees as well as cleared out areas which were not in play.

Robarge worked closely with Kaplow to develop a plan and identify plants that would restore native grasses and shrubs throughout the golf course. Roger and his crew devoted plenty of manpower and inputs to keep the newly established areas weed free and well-manicured, which was extremely important to the Green Committee at the Cal Club. Robarge always strived to have the native areas golfer friendly, in case an errant shot ventured into an established planting. The initial native program was slated to last only two years, but Roger and staff have made a long-term commitment to keep the areas intact.

For as many success stories as there are on establishing native grasses on golf courses, there are probably twice as many failures. The two biggest problems with failed native grass plantings are poor site preparation and lack of weed control. Many superintendents have learned the hard way that there is more to establishing native areas than just sowing seed and waiting for it to germinate.

Paul Kephart suggests that superintendents understand the big picture when preparing a site for native grass plantings. Questions that have to be answered are: percent slope, direction of slope, soil texture and structure, climatic conditions, weed seed bank, maintenance strategies, irrigation availability as well as previously mentioned native grass inventory and seed selection. Once the entire

site criterion is addressed, the chances for failure are greatly reduced.

Proper weed control is essential if aggressive weeds are competition with the native grasses. If this condition persists over time then the native grass stand will not perform up to standards. Every effort should be made to be diligent in weed control efforts. Whether it is herbicides, mowing, hand weeding, etc., regardless of what method of weed control is used, the practice should be timely and uniform throughout the planting area.

Because of the cost, planting native grasses is not a seat-of-the-pants decision. Prices for the seed of native grasses can create some sticker shock when compared to commonly used grasses on golf courses. Some varieties often exceed \$10 a pound. However, once these grasses are established, they should be around for a long time.

Another pitfall is planting a mixture of grasses that may not be the right fit for the location, otherwise known as the shotgun approach. Performing an accurate assessment of existing plant material is essential for selecting the ideal grasses for each project. The best plant material for the location is not always the lowest priced. There are literally hundreds of people, businesses or consultants in the state of California that are connected in some way, shape or form to promoting naturalized areas. There is also a large amount of information available about native grasses on the Internet. An easy-to-understand website with helpful information about native California grasses and businesses that are closely associated with the environment is the California Native Grass Association (www.cnga.org). The website will be changed in the next few months to a more user-friendly site with tons of practical information and tips on how to manage and maintain native grass areas.

There is no doubt that more and more golf courses are reintroducing native grasses. Golf course owners, club managers, superintendents and even golfers are encouraging more native grasses plantings. Developing the native grass areas that blend well with the natural surroundings takes time, money and expertise. Becoming a true California Native is well worth the effort. /