

Creating And Maintaining Low-Input Roughs

Trysting Tree Golf Club
Nat and Larry Giustina, owners

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Issue

Nat Giustina and his son Larry envisioned creating a golf course that could be economically sustainable while addressing water and environmental issues on a flood-prone site near the Willamette River. Located in the heart of grass-seed country—i.e., Willamette Valley, Ore.—the Trysting Tree Golf Club was opened in 1988. The owners knew from the outset that achieving their goals required selecting the correct grasses and developing a maintenance program that would keep the course economically and environmentally sustainable.

Action

The fairways were seeded with—and are still dominated by—colonial bentgrass and fine fescue. The non-irrigated roughs are primarily comprised of drought-tolerant tall fescue. A minimal amount of bunkers were built, and the greens and tees were elevated above normal flood levels. Trysting Tree offers exceptionally firm and fast playing conditions “down the middle”, with unique roughs that offer challenge without slowing down play.

Since 2010, Golf Course Superintendent Pat Doran, CGCS, has instituted a unique rough-management program. Doran carefully controls growth and mowing during spring to produce both exceptional visual contrast and very playable rough. The rough is maintained at 2 inches in the primary areas and 4 inches in the secondary rough. Through careful observation and timing, the last rough mowing occurs in late May or early June. After that final mowing, the rough is not irrigated and no fertilization is applied for the remainder of the season. The only growth is the seed heads.

Results

The use of drought-tolerant tall fescues has allowed Trysting Tree to maintain playable rough without supplemental irrigation during warm, dry summers that would be extremely stressful for cool-season grasses with less drought tolerance. Since large areas of rough receive no irrigation, a significant amount of water, fertilizer and labor has been saved since the course opened.

Before initiating Doran's maintenance program, Trysting Tree used 37 million gallons of water annually. In 2010, under the new program, Trysting Tree reduced water use to 20 million gallons. In 2011 they used 22 million gallons of water, with similar water usage reported in the following years. The result has been "wispy" stands of grass in the rough that provide a strong visual contrast to the irrigated fairways. Seedhead production in non-irrigated rough areas provides yet another pleasing visual contrast. Furthermore, balls that land in the rough are easy to find and the costs normally associated with mowing, irrigating and fertilizing large areas of rough have been virtually eliminated.



The non-irrigated rough between fairways provides a good contrast to the desired playing areas of the golf course.

By implementing a "firm-and-fast" philosophy, and placing economic sustainability and natural-resource management at the forefront, Trysting Tree is a perfect example of doing more with less. The golfers that enjoy the course definitely agree.