



The Right Tree In The Right Location

From golf's earliest days in the United States, golfers have had a love affair with trees. However, early golf course architects learned their trade on links courses in Europe and did not believe trees belonged on golf courses. Golfers' love of trees won out and many golf courses implemented tree-planting programs. When appropriate tree species are planted in appropriate locations, they can serve many important and valuable functions on golf courses. Trees sequester carbon and provide food, cover and habitat for wildlife. In terms of playability, trees can create separation and add strategy. They are effective at hiding unwanted views, but they also can block attractive views. Unfortunately, many golf course tree-planting programs are overzealously implemented without proper guidance and foresight. Due to the slow growth rate of trees, it can take years to fully appreciate the extent and severity of the numerous problems caused by excessive tree plantings.

The problems trees cause for turf are straightforward. Tree canopies block sunlight and air circulation which are needed in abundance to fuel photosynthesis and cool turf. Light and air flow are especially important to turfgrass on golf courses because of the demands placed on golf course turf by golfer traffic and demands for good playing surfaces. In the absence of adequate light and air flow, turfgrass is less vigorous, more subject to stress and disease infection, and slower to recover when it sustains injury. In high-traffic areas, trees funnel traffic and their root systems effectively compete for moisture and nutrients, further weakening turf. When improperly located, trees can hide key architectural features and make a large property feel small and claustrophobic. Trees also can make a course overly penal and very one-dimensional in terms of playability.

There are thousands of tree species, but many are inappropriate for use on golf courses because of unique, undesirable characteristics. Species prone to surface roots should be avoided. Fast-growing species typically are shorter lived and have softer wood that is more prone to breaking. Some species are especially messy, frequently dropping leaves, fruit, bark and branches. When located near greens, tees, fairways, bunkers or other in-play areas, cleaning up after messy trees can absorb considerable resources. Other species are prone to pest and disease problems. Thus, it is important to



carefully research tree species and only choose those that are appropriate for golf courses and are well-suited to your particular climate.

Understandably, most golfers like trees and many are unaware of the problems they can cause. Debates over tree problems, and the unwelcome solution – removal, can become emotional issues that golfers sometimes have difficulty accepting. One of the best approaches is to develop a comprehensive tree-management program.

Tree-management programs start by evaluating existing trees and proposed tree plantings and include both short- and long-term recommendations. Expertise in areas like turfgrass, trees, pests, diseases, sun position as it varies during the year, golf course maintenance and architecture, etc. is needed to effectively evaluate tree plantings. USGA Green Section agronomists have training in all of these areas and are well-equipped to help golf courses develop tree-management programs.

