



Banks With Interest

There are many benefits of tall grasses and other vegetation along golf course water features.



Native grasses, sedges and other plants help protect this creek and provide cover for wildlife.

Have you ever found yourself asking why there is a strip of unkempt grass surrounding a pond? Or, why has the maintenance crew stopped trimming the creek banks? If so, you are not alone. Fear not, these areas are not the result of a complacent staff nor are they an insidious attempt to increase golf ball sales. The vegetated areas, often referred to as buffer strips, are becoming more common on golf courses where they serve several functions including protecting water quality and preventing bank erosion. Native plants and vegetation in these areas also can add interest to a golf course while enhancing the natural design of a water feature.

The vegetation in buffer areas helps protect water quality by filtering nutrients and sediments from runoff water. This filtering occurs as dense, above-ground vegetation helps slow surface flow, encouraging infiltration of water into the soil where nutrients and other contaminants are absorbed and degraded by plants and soil microbes. Deeply rooted plants and dense vegetation in buffer areas also help stabilize soils and slow scouring from flowing water that causes erosion. Furthermore, buffer areas can provide shelter for nesting birds and aquatic organisms and a food source for pollinating insects and other animals. Emergent aquatic plants growing along the edges of water features provide similar benefits in protecting and enhancing water quality and ecology. Allowing vegetation to grow naturally also reduces maintenance costs.



Buffer areas can be composed of grasses, forbs or mixtures of plant materials. Plants that are best-adapted to growing conditions at the site and can produce dense top growth and large root mass are most-effective. The size and maintenance of buffer areas usually depends on the area's location and proximity to play. Severely sloped areas are best-suited for wider buffer zones, whereas narrow buffer areas may be sufficient in areas with less-severe slopes. Plants or grasses in buffer areas often are allowed to grow to maturity and cut on an annual basis. However, some selective cutting and removal of unwanted plants may be done to maintain an acceptable appearance of buffer areas. Areas that have a significant impact on pace of play may be mowed more frequently or maintained at an intermediate height. Often, the vegetation in buffer areas is marked as part of the hazard.

Next time you see tall plants bordering water features do not be too quick to condemn these areas and instead appreciate the environmental benefits they provide and the added interest they bring a golf course.

For more information on establishing buffer zones and their benefits, refer to the following [Green Section Record](#) articles:

[You Can Bank On It](#)

[Transforming The Lakes](#)