



Making Mechanical Weed Control Work For You

By Elliott Dowling, agronomist, Northeast Region | July 21, 2017



This area was allowed to grow naturally and, with repeated mowing, has become a weed-free and playable stand of fescue.

At many golf courses, maintaining naturalized roughs is more complicated than simply allowing grass to grow naturally. In fact, “naturalized” roughs often are not natural at all. Naturalized roughs can become extremely labor-intensive if golfers expect them to have weed-free conditions, a uniform appearance, good playability and minimal impact on pace of play. For courses that do not have adequate labor and spray equipment, managing weed populations and grass density in naturalized areas can be especially challenging. Fortunately, there are cost-effective mechanical methods that can help.

Mowing naturalized areas three or more times per season at an approximate height of 6 inches will reduce weed competition. Frequent mowing will result in a loss of seedheads for that season but they will return the following year, if allowed.

If regular mowing is impractical because of limited resources or steep slopes, allowing [goats and sheep](#) to graze in naturalized rough areas can also be effective. Goats and sheep eat a wide variety of grasses and broadleaf weeds, eliminating the unwanted growth that superintendents often target with herbicides. The animals are comfortable on uneven terrain and have an excellent work ethic.

Some courses find that routinely [burning naturalized roughs](#) helps to eliminate unwanted weeds and spreads desirable fescue seeds. Burning can reduce reliance on chemical herbicides and helps manage grass density. Controlled burns are especially effective on uneven or steep terrain that is difficult to mow or spray. Before burning, check with your local fire department for information about regulations and restrictions related to controlled burns.

Maintaining naturalized roughs is a good way to reduce mowing time, add interesting contrast to a golf course and make a facility more economically and environmentally sustainable. However, naturalized roughs are not without their challenges, notably weed control. If your facility struggles with weeds and undesirable grasses in naturalized roughs, perhaps it is time to investigate one of these mechanical weed-control techniques.

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