

Getting To The Root Of The Issue

By Larry Gilhuly, agronomist, West Region | September 15, 2017



Surface roots can result in poor playing conditions and cause damage to equipment, cart paths and turf.

Trees and golf: Are they a match made in heaven or a match made somewhere else? After a prolonged stretch without rainfall in the Pacific Northwest, the impact of trees recently has been in full view. At any golf course, the wrong trees in the wrong places can lead to three major concerns involving tree roots. While golf's Big Three will always be Palmer, Nicklaus and Player, the big three for tree roots include:

1. Competition for water and nutrients

Whenever the wrong tree is planted in the wrong area, there is no doubt that the turf directly beneath the tree will struggle. However, the area beyond a tree's canopy also can suffer during dry weather. Tree roots extend far beyond the canopy of a tree and are capable of stealing much needed water and nutrients from in-play areas. If problem trees must remain, frequent root pruning is advised.

2. Damage to mowing equipment and cart paths

Whenever certain undesirable trees – e.g., cottonwoods, spruce, poplars, etc.– are planted, rest assured that root issues at the surface will follow. The damage tree roots can do to mowing equipment interrupts mowing operations and can be expensive to repair.

Tree roots also can severely damage cart paths, requiring costly resurfacing projects. In most cases, root pruning alone will not solve severe surface root issues. Some have had success adding soil over surface roots; but often the best solution sounds like a chain saw followed by the shout, “Timber.”

3. Poor playing conditions

Perhaps the most negative aspect of tree roots is their potential to create poor playing conditions. Hitting your club against a tree root can damage your club or worse, result in a wrist or arm injury. Tree roots near the surface in high-play areas should be removed, covered or eliminated as part of a tree-management program.

Trees are an important component of most golf courses; but they don’t provide many benefits. When the “Big Three” issues associated with tree roots occur, it is often best to eliminate the issue through pruning, covering or complete tree removal.

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