

TREES

on the golf course



IF you want to get the best out of something you have to look after it. Whether the object in question is a piece of machinery, a golf green or a tree, neglect maintenance and problems will be stored up for the future.

Don't think, however, that tree maintenance is horrendously complicated and difficult. Trees in the wild grow from seed to maturity perfectly adequately without man. As little interference as possible is more a measure of good maintenance than of uncaring neglect.

By Tony Gentil



A small conifer trying to compete with surrounding vegetation.



"Mindless" vandalism...



...and the "official" variety, where the tree is being strangled by a tie.

THE maintenance of trees on golf courses divides neatly into two elements. Firstly there is the period immediately after planting until the tree becomes established. The second element is the remainder of the tree's life, during which it will develop, mature and decline. Both periods pose their own problems and so I want to consider each separately.

Maintenance up to establishment is in many ways, the most important and critical part of a tree's life. Problems which occur during this stage will grow with the tree and become increasingly expensive and difficult to rectify later.

If you can help a tree get off to a flying start, subsequent maintenance will be minimal. This is the easiest time to carry out maintenance because the trees are relatively small.

Forest transplants and whips should require the least attention and you can include under this heading trees which naturally regenerate from seed.

To trees of these smaller sizes, the main difficulty in becoming established is the competition from surrounding vegetation.

Keep an area of about a square yard clean round the base of each one. You'll find a herbicide is the best method to use, but be careful of spray drift, particularly when working with the smallest trees. If there is any chance of spray drift, fit a hood over the end of the lance.

You might decide to clear excess vegetation prior to spraying by using a strimmer. If you do, make sure that the spinning, nylon

cutting cords don't touch the bark of the trees, or they'll kill them.

An alternative method of suppressing vegetation round the base of trees is to use a mulch. Forest bark or wood chips are becoming increasingly popular as mulches, but a word of caution about forest bark. Make sure that it is partly decomposed before you apply it. Used fresh, forest bark from conifers can give off vapours as it starts to decompose, and these are harmful to some plants.

There is quite a handy idea for a mulch called a "tree-spat". This is a three foot square of roofing felt with a hole of about three inches diameter in the centre. Leading from the hole to one edge of the spat there is a slit, which enables you to position the tree-spat over the root area by sliding it in from ground level. You can buy tree-spats or make them yourself, depending on the resources available.

Self-sown seedlings may grow up in large numbers, perhaps only a few inches apart. As they develop you will need to remove some to avoid over-crowding. Aim initially for one per square yard. When they reach the size of whips they can be thinned again, to perhaps ten feet apart.

Don't worry about pruning forest transplants and whips; basically they don't need any. Occasionally you might have to remove a branch which has become broken, but other than that leave them alone.

I feel sorry for standard trees. Generally they have a very raw deal. Not only do they have to

overcome the trauma of transplanting, but they also have to survive the vandalism which follows.

I'm not talking now about the "mindless" vandalism of the anti-social lout who snaps their heads off, but the "official" vandalism of incompetent neglect by those who are paid to look after trees.

Standard trees are staked after planting and they are tied to the stake by one or more tree ties, depending on the length of stake. I reckon that something like 10% of all standards planted suffer from strangulation by tree ties that are never loosened.

This isn't an error of omission that occurs only on golf courses. You can see the strangled tree in botanic gardens, local authority parks and private gardens everywhere. It is as if once a person has planted, staked, and tied a tree, that's the end of the tree's need for care. The lesson is clear, check all tree ties three or four times during each growing season and loosen them before strangulation lets in.

Other points to watch in the maintenance of standards are:

- 1) To keep the area round the base clear of vegetation until the tree is established.
- 2) To avoid damage to the bark of the lower trunk by use of strimmers and mowers.
- 3) To remove the ties and stake as soon as the tree is windfirm.

The thought of having to look after a tree for the rest of its life can be a bit daunting. It's not a responsibility you can avoid though. Anyone who owns a tree is legally responsible for any problems it causes. If you are a golf course manager, whether you actually own the trees on your course or not, you are by definition responsible for their management.

How do you resolve this dilemma then, of having to look after trees without having an in-depth knowledge and trained staff? The law requires that you be sensible and adopt a responsible attitude.

You need to strike a balance between using your own common sense and calling in experts when something drastic needs to be done.

Maintenance involves keeping a watching brief. Get to know the trees on your course by looking at them every time you walk the course to look at the grass. You'll find a pair of binoculars are a great help for this job. Look for changes in their growth patterns.

For instance are any of them looking a bit thin on top, or are their leaves smaller than usual? These are often signs of problems in the root systems.

Can you see any signs of bracket fungi growing out of trunks or branches? Don't worry about trying to name the fungi, if it is there, you've got problems.

Are there any broken branches hanging in the top of a tree, or dead branches, obvious in the summer from their leaf-lessness.

All these are things which anyone with common sense can spot. Where, then, do you go from here? You have two choices, either call in an expert for a second opinion or to carry out the necessary maintenance yourself.

Unless you have highly skilled and well-equipped staff, leave hair-raising work to specialist contractors. Small jobs such as removing low branches might well be within the capabilities of your staff. A pole-saw is a cheap and highly effective way of removing branches without the operator having to leave terra firma.

If you feel that you need a second opinion about your trees or you want to call in a specialist contractor, it makes sense to use someone who knows what they are doing. The Arboricultural Association has a directory of consultants and contractors, all of whom have been rigorously vetted. You can obtain a copy of the directory from the secretary, Arboricultural Association, Ampfield House, Ampfield, Nr. Romsey, Hants. SO5 9PA.



Damage by a mower



Bracket fungi



A pole saw in action...



...and in close-up