

WARNING

THIS COULD DAMAGE THE HEALTH OF YOUR COURSE

THE MASTERS

Television Commentator and former Ryder Cup golfer, Ken Brown, offers thoughts and advice on Augusta and The Masters

Beware, "Masters" is back at a screen near you, from Georgia, the must see Augusta National Golf Club. Golfers from around the world will watch the yearly drama unfold gripped by the golf and the outstanding arena that Augusta provides.

The course will be an avalanche of spring colours, immaculately manicured emerald green fairways lined with columns of cathedral pines and the yellow, pink and red of the azaleas. Add to this almost guaranteed sunshine and you have what appears to be a heavenly setting for golf.

Surfacing from what has been a cold and snowy winter it is easy to be tempted into thinking that this is what our own course should resemble. It is rather like being seduced by Charlie Dimmock and rushing out the next weekend to buy some expensive decking to cover over what is already a perfectly good lawn forgetting that you have just opted for a rather expensive, less practical and high maintenance alternative.

This Georgian horticultural golfing playground is achieved with vast amounts of money and an army of green-keeping staff. The carefully selected cultivars of grass have been developed specifically for Augusta greens with the exact amount of water and fertiliser applied with eye dropper precision. The on course weather station predicts any necessity to use the sub-air system which controls the temperature of the soil. The shrubs are cosseted to ensure their flowering is simultaneous with Masters week. The course remains closed for six months of the year. At Augusta green-keeping has become more of a science than an art.

The effect of this spectacle has been to influence golf club committees to follow suit. With enough water and fertiliser the green and

stripy look can be readily achieved, however as with most things in life you can have too much of a good thing. Excessive water and fertiliser can encourage the proliferation of meadow grass which in time shrouds out the finer fescues and bents resulting in thatch and poor drainage. There is a huge difference between perfect looking turf and perfect turf for playing golf.

The course conditioning for the Opens on the Old Course at St. Andrews has always been just right. Despite the large greens only around a thousand pounds a year is spent on fertiliser and we are always presented with wonderful natural putting surfaces which are both delightful and just as nature intended. Efforts to preserve the native characteristics have been consistent with Alistair Mackenzie's thoughts that St Andrews Old Course was "too sacred to be changed". Imagine you are on the first tee and your view of the Swilken Bridge is obscured by a row of leylandi cypress dividing the first and eighteenth fairways, a simply ridiculous idea. Why then consider planting rhododendrons and laurel at

your club? Maybe more thought should be given to our own indigenous species such as heather and gorse dependant on the setting.

In times when money is tight clubs should keep things simple, less can be more. Decisions should be made with planning, professional advice, and forward thinking. When planting trees think fifty years and not five, it will cost you more to take them down than put them up. Clubs don't need greens running at 1.1 on the stimp meter, narrow fairways cut at 1/2 an inch in a tartan stripe and long rough. The mantra "difficult" equals good for 99.9% of golfers doesn't hold water. There's never been a more important time than now for clubs to make sure that golf takes less time, is more enjoyable to play and costs less.

Augusta National is the perfect place for Masters golf, but The Old Course at St Andrews is still the bench mark for golf.

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