

# The Benefits of Going Green with Natives



*According to the Illinois Natural History Survey, prior to European settlement (and golf!) approximately 22 million acres in Illinois were covered with prairie. Less than one-tenth of one percent of those acres remain today. For those of you who dilute chemicals often, this equals approximately 2,000 acres of remnant prairie remaining in our evolving landscape.*

I look at this figure and see an excellent opportunity to combine golf and habitat restoration. I do not advocate widespread, militant restoration, yet I think everyone would like to encourage earth-friendly practices. I believe 100% in the viability of managed natural areas on golf courses. There are many great examples of this being done in and around the greater Chicago metropolitan region by members of MAGCS.

Habitat restoration, specifically prairie restoration, suffers from a lack of understanding. The biggest misconception, and the highest hurdle to clear, is in the definition of what is and isn't natural restoration. In my view, restoration is anything that includes native plants in areas where they previously did not exist. I operate on the simple premise that something is always better than nothing. Incremental adoption and improvement is critical to the widespread acceptance of ecological restoration.

## **"Restoration is the art and science of creating eco-functional habitat."**

What does this mean? Picture the following scenario... you come to a decision point during a golf course remodel. You have to choose between conventional sheet piling at \$60 to \$75 per linear foot or a native shoreline restoration at approximately \$60 to \$70 per linear foot. The answer has both a quantitative and a qualitative component.



### **Functional/ Quantitative Decision**

To start, sheet piling has its place and always will. Once you have identified areas with gentler, below-water slopes that are out of play, you can begin to put together a rough project scope of appropriate treatment areas. Native plants on shorelines are excellent at preventing erosion due to their deep root

systems. With the proper maintenance, native plants become a cost-effective permanent solution. If you'd like to see an example of this type of work, review the photos of Horseman's Island at Cantigny Golf Course (Scott White, CGCS).

### **Qualitative Decision**

What is a golf course "supposed" to look like? Is it the structured feel of a formal English garden or is it the grassy expanse of St. Andrew's? And here comes that hurdle I mentioned above...Why put in grasses native to Illinois when they look like weeds? The sad part is that it's true; what the public identifies as prairie grasses likely are invasive species (weeds). Illinois prairie habitat is rare. Yet most golfers agree that a round of golf is better in an attractive natural setting. Colin Montgomery, one of the world's top players, has said, "A golf course which has been sensitively designed and managed in a way which works with nature rather than against it, is normally more interesting and challenging."

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**Improving water quality:** Fertilizers and pesticides are not required on natural landscapes. Thus, fewer pollutants end up in rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, or wetlands. In fact, once these areas are actively established (one growing season) they require absolutely no water!

**Providing habitat for wildlife:** Natural landscapes provide the food and habitat that animals need to survive. Everybody likes Monarch butterflies. Did you know they only feed on plants belonging to the milkweed family which is native to the Midwest?

**Integrated Pest Management (IPM):** Natural areas promote invite types of wildlife that feed on insects. Species that are drawn to natural areas, such as dragonflies, frogs, bats, and birds all feast on mosquitoes. No expensive, polluting pesticides are required in a fully restored natural area. Another attractive benefit — Goose Control — geese do not like tall grasses because they could be hiding predators.

**Increasing biodiversity:** As urban sprawl grows, often, it's the golf course that is the only open space remaining. Integrating the creation and conservation of natural landscapes into your plan is one of the only means of preservation for many valuable species.



**Educating people:** Few people have actually seen native prairie, wetlands, or woodlands. What many people think are prairie plants along roadsides are actually invasive species (weeds). Information transmitted through posted signs, web page photos, stewardship seminars, and an educated maintenance crew will strengthen community support for conservation and environmental protection. Creating an educational experience on the golf course can get the entire family into the game.

**Greening Self-Promotion:** "Going green" by incorporating native plants in your landscape plan is an environmental benefit that shows positive leadership and good-neighbor practices to your community.

**Golf Ball Sales:** Want to sell more golf balls at the Pro Shop? Native landscapes swallow golf balls.

### About the author

Doug Bauer has worked as a Sales and Project Manager for Tallgrass Restoration, LLC, for nearly four years.

During his summers in college he worked for the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service in California fighting wildfires. Recently, he came out of the woods and began shaving and showering regularly. He is now pursuing his MBA at the University of Chicago, in hopes that the green industry will continue to grow exponentially! He can be reached at (847) 925-9830 or [doug.bauer@tallgrassrestoration.com](mailto:doug.bauer@tallgrassrestoration.com) **-OC**

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