



Colorful wildflower beds make great habitat for butterflies and other pollinators. Photo by Kyle Sweet.

Get a Little Wild!

...wildflowers that is.

By Kyle D. Sweet, CGCS

Several years ago, while touring a golf course with a fellow superintendent here in southwest Florida, I came upon a flowering area like I had never seen before. This “typical” bedding area surrounding several pine trees and running alongside the cartpath from green to tee was beautiful and had been established in wildflowers.

All it took was that one area and I was hooked.

Within a couple of weeks I had contacted a seed seller, decided planting areas, determined my planting methods, and done the first of many wildflower plantings here at The Sanctuary Golf Club.

Flowers on the golf course have always been an interesting topic. I was

involved for years in planting annuals to provide that southwest Florida seasonal splash, but I always looked at the annuals as a foreign object throughout the course: there for a short time, but requiring a significant amount of maintenance. Planting, watering, fertilizing, weed control and pest control all needed to be considered with annual plantings. If you would like to reduce your maintenance and still provide that seasonal color splash, wildflowers will work. We plant our wildflowers in mid- October and have had terrific results as well as enthusiastic member feedback for the past four years.

We began by choosing several areas throughout the course that provided good sun exposure and were not going to affect the playability of the golf hole.

In most cases these areas were pine straw areas or, in some cases, turf areas where we cut sod to remove the turf.

Once the areas were chosen, a tractor-drawn rotary tiller was used to till the soil to a depth of 4-6 inches. Once the area is tilled, we raked it smooth, removing rocks, roots, and debris from the planting area. We’re ready for seeding at this point. We have always applied the seed by hand and once the seed is on the ground, follow up with a light raking and generous watering to help cover the seed. The post-application raking and watering encourage soil/seed contact as well as help protect your seed investment from birds.

Irrigation or hand watering is recommended to get the seed started. Communication with your staff will be crucial at this point. These new plants look just like all those unwanted broadleaf weeds in the fall and more than one superintendent I’ve spoken to lost his new seedlings to a herbicide application.

Watering will not be required once



This wildflower bed, above, offers a colorful transition area from the turf to the woods. Photo by Kyle Sweet.



Dull lackluster pine straw in out of play areas can be brightened up by planting wildflowers. Photo by Kyle Sweet.

the young plants have emerged and we have learned that excess watering actually shortens the life of the flowering of several varieties. We post signage to keep carts out and rope off the area until flowering begins. This limits the chance of a mistake by our staff or damage from golf carts.

Now sit back and enjoy the show. Keep an eye out for tall unwanted weeds that will need to be removed by hand and get copies of all your information about the seed and your procedures.

“Why?” you ask. Homeowners and golfers will be asking about the new look and you can help spread the use of maintenance-friendly wildflowers throughout your club and community.

A few wildflower facts :

The wildflowers mix we use comprises several native and non-native varieties that are recommended in southwest Florida.

Native wildflowers are defined as flowering plant species native to Florida, with emphasis on herbaceous annuals and perennials.

If you use a mix of seed, several varieties will provide varying heights, colors and textures to provide a “native” natural look.

Hummingbirds and butterflies drink the nectar from wildflowers and small birds such as finches, pine siskins, buntings and sparrows will visit the wildflower areas, eating the seeds produced.

The native wildflowers, blanket flower (*Gaillardia pulchella*), black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) and lanceleaf tickseed (*Coreopsis leavenworthii*) do well throughout the state of Florida.

There are several species of *Coreopsis* that do well

throughout Florida. *Coreopsis* is our state wildflower.

Beginning in 2003, a group of wildflower producers, working in conjunction with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, is developing strategies to increase planted wildflower acreage and seed production to better provide for the increased demand for native species.

The planted area at The Sanctuary for 2007 is nearly one acre at a cost of \$5,000 in seed. Compare to the cost of annuals: 1 acre, planted at 12-inch spacing requires 43,560 annual plants. At 49 cents each, that much ground would cost more than \$21,000.

If you choose a “mix” of wildflowers, keep a heat-tolerant variety such as blanket flower that will last through the summer months until the next fall.

In Florida if you are relying on a good presentation for the fall/winter months (November–April), annual reseedling of the areas will probably be necessary.

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Birdies and Bees: How superintendents can help native pollinators

Pollinators are in decline across North America and golf courses can play a role in their conservation. These are two of the findings of the recently released National Academy of Sciences report, Status of Pollinators in North America.

Pollinators — including butterflies, bees, beetles, flies, and hummingbirds — are arguably one of the most important groups of animals. The work they do in moving pollen from flower to flower results in successful seed set and fruit production for over 70 percent of flowering plants. We rely on these plants for much of our food, and wildlife rely on them for food and habitat. Imagine spring without flowering meadows, summer without berry picking, and fall without pumpkins, and you get an idea of how the work of pollinators impacts our lives.

What can a superintendent do? The NAS report identified habitat loss and fragmentation as one of the main causes of pollinator declines. Golf courses can help significantly with reversing this trend by providing flowers and egg-laying sites.

Even on the most compact urban golf course, flowering plants can be part of the landscape. On more extensive courses, out-of-play areas offer great opportunities for creating prairie-type habitats rich in native flowers.

For greatest benefit, the flowers should bloom throughout the growing season. Add in some wooden blocks drilled with holes or create patches of bare ground in which solitary bees can nest, include hostplants for butterfly caterpillars, and your course can support healthy and diverse pollinator populations.

"As superintendents we can create and maintain habitat with little effort," said David Phipps, CGCS, superintendent at Stone Creek Golf

Club, in Oregon, and president of the Oregon Golf Course Superintendents Association. "All we have to know is how to recognize these little critters and what their habitat looks like. When you get down on their level, you can surely see their beauty and the remarkable world in which they live."

Pollinator conservation is well-suited to golf courses because habitat can be small scale and broken into patches. Flowers or nesting sites can be scattered across the course and because pollinators can fly, they can piece together these resources into a habitat that works. For example, they may nest in a snag on one side of a fairway and forage in the flowers on the other. This mobility also means that on-course habitat will support pollinators that can visit flowers growing in adjacent gardens and farms.

The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, based in Portland, Ore., can offer information and practical advice about pollinator conservation on golf courses. To learn more about the NAS report and download detailed guidelines on creating habitat on golf courses, visit the Society's Web site, http://www.xerces.org/Pollinator_Insect_Conservation. Or contact Matthew Shepherd, pollinator program director, at mdshepherd@xerces.org or 503-323-6639.

In general, there is a greater emphasis being placed on wildlife conservation on private lands across the United State. Golf courses, and the superintendents who manage them, are playing an increasingly important role in environmental stewardship. Providing habitat for pollinators is one of the most valuable ways golf can benefit a healthy environment. An acre of habitat for butterflies and other pollinators on each course will add up to far more than 10,000 acres nationwide, a significant contribution to conserving these beautiful—and essential—creatures.

Credit: GCSAA Chapter Services