

Elkington, Swayze eye golf landscaping niche

By J. BARRY MOTHES

HOUSTON, Texas — Australian pro Steve Elkington has a reputation for being something of a modern renaissance man.

Besides a silky smooth, classic golf swing, and a taste for understated, elegant clothing, Elkington, who once received an art scholarship, also nurtures an elaborate collection of flowers, bushes and trees at his Houston home and has a cultivated eye for detail and aesthetics.

Now, Elkington wants to take that flair and bring it to everyday golf courses. He calls the concept "golfscaping" and, along with associate Jack Swayze, a longtime professional arborist, he's launched an intriguing, if still untested new business called Major Landscapes.

The more predictable diversion for professional golfers in recent years has been to open "signature" golf course design operations. Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Tom Weiskopf, Ben Crenshaw, Gary Player, Fuzzy Zoeller, Johnny Miller and more recently Davis Love, Nick Faldo and John Daly are all examples of this. It's probably not a coincidence that all of them, with the exception of Love, have also won at least one of professional golf's four major grand slam events.

And now comes Elkington, the winner of last year's PGA Championship at Riviera and one of the rising stars on the Tour.

Elkington, however, isn't focusing on designing golf courses. Not yet anyway. Instead, he and his associate Jack Swayze have launched a company on the concept of "golfscaping"—in essence, landscaping a golf course from a professional, expert perspective.

Golfscaping, in Elkington and Swayze's vision, means integrating grasses, plants and trees onto a golf course in a way that not only increases the natural beauty and aesthetic experience of playing the course, but also makes the golf course healthier and easier to maintain for the superintendent. For existing courses, they said "golfscaping" can revitalize the appeal and solve maintenance problems.

Elkington, 33, has had a life-long interest in horticulture. A recent profile of him in *Sports Illustrated* was titled, "In Full Bloom." He is the master designer behind Major Landscapes. His associate, Swayze, has worked in and closely with the golf course industry for more than 23 years. For the last 20 years, Swayze has worked out of the Houston area for Davey Tree Company. One of his frequent tasks was helping golf course superintendents diagnose problems with trees, plants and turf.

Swayze said a chronic problem on new and existing golf courses is the overplanting of trees.

"Planting trees is always a

popular program," Swayze said. "But maintaining trees is always put on the back burner. If you put it in the ground, somebody has to take care of it. People usually don't take into consideration the maturity of a tree. You design with a 10-year plan but what do you do with them in 15, 20 years. Trees become sacred."

Something many golf course designers and even greens committees fail to consider, said Swayze, is that trees planted or left along fairways grow at an

accelerated rate.

"They're getting aeration, fertilization, irrigation," said Swayze. Those faster-growing trees also compete directly with the turf that surrounds them for water.

"One thing I've noticed in the south is that you get a lot of live oaks planted on the course and it's tough to grow turf under them," said Swayze. "They plant them along the fairway and they get bigger over time and they can kill the turf, not to mention block a lot of shots."

Major Landscapes was launched last July. It has yet to sign on to a full-blown project, but Swayze said the company is very close to working on a project in south Texas. He said Major also will seek to become actively involved with advising and assisting golf courses interested in achieving certification from Audubon International.



Steve Elkington (right) and arborist Jack Swayze.

"Landscape architects design from their perspective," said Swayze, "but we're also looking at the management side, what's easiest for the superintendent to maintain."



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