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TREE PLANTING – GOLF COURSE STYLE

In 2005, I wrote about golf course tree planting, and it's time to revisit both design – this month – and installation – next month – in time for the fall tree planting season.

While some golf courses are engaging in tree-reduction plans, in many cases, it's because the course planted them in the wrong quantities and locations over the years, demonstrating the need for a good long-term tree and landscape plan. Some clubs add trees by committee, others use landscape architects, and while talented and well intentioned, landscape architects often know as little about locating golf course trees as the members.

Ideally, a golf course tree planting plan should be prepared by a golf course architect – many of whom are also landscape architects – who can consider all aspects to your tree planting master plan, including golf, golf course maintenance, and club politics.

Some general thoughts I have used in golf course tree planting over the years.

IT'S A GOLF COURSE. Strategy and playability trump landscape beauty. That small tree planted on the inside corner of the dogleg eventually blocks shots or narrows the play corridor. Only golf course architects know where trees aid safety, frame or block views and control traffic.

IT'S NOT AN ARBORETUM. Turf health also trumps landscape beauty, making trees of secondary importance to shaded turf. I use light density, high branching trees (having once knocked myself off a gang mower by not noticing a low-hanging limb) and avoid trees with brittle limbs and short life spans – like Cottonwoods. The same goes for attractive, but high-maintenance trees, knowing how low trees are on the golf course maintenance totem pole.

IT'S NOT AN ARBORETUM, BUT . . . While I usually avoid the highly flowered Augusta National look, sometimes, landscape accent is required. I strive to limit ornamentals to where they will get multiple views, while avoiding slow play and lost golf balls. I once took a non-golfing, summer intern to a meeting for experience. Ignoring my instructions to remain silent, he suggested planting low branching pines in play areas to cause lost golf balls, which was exactly opposite of what the public golf course owners wanted to hear!

IT'S NOT A SOD FARM, EITHER, BUT . . . The agronomic needs of golf turf takes precedence over trees, which must be located to provide early morning sunlight at tees, greens and high-traffic, cart-use areas.

WATER CONSERVATION. Trees often require more irrigation than turf, so landscaping must fit in the context of your irrigation and water conservation plans. Landscape irrigation will move more to drip irrigation, which should force tree planting into tighter clusters. I favor this anyway, as the straight lines often planted on golf courses look artificial. In some areas, water quality affects tree foliage, also requiring drip irrigation.

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LONG-TERM EFFECTS. If done as part of a long-term master plan, I consider not only where the greens and tees are now, but also where they will be at the completion of the master plan.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS, PART II. A tree management plan allows for aging and dying trees. Maintaining a healthy tree community requires annual replacement of 2 to 3 percent of your trees.

Long-term thinking also reduces the emphasis on currently popular – but unproven – trees . . . think Dutch Elm disease. I have seen young, wet-behind-the-ears landscape architects ignore hard-learned lessons in using borderline hardy trees in tough climates. Old timers know extreme conditions killed off similar trees well before the “young pup landscape architects” were even born.

CLUB POLITICS. Given the sensitivity towards tree issues at most courses, I find that golf course architects are more in tune with the course politics, and probably better at guiding the decisions through your political process.

In short, don't forget your trees in long-term facility planning, and don't forget that your golf course architect is probably the most conversant in how trees affect the golf experience. **GCI**