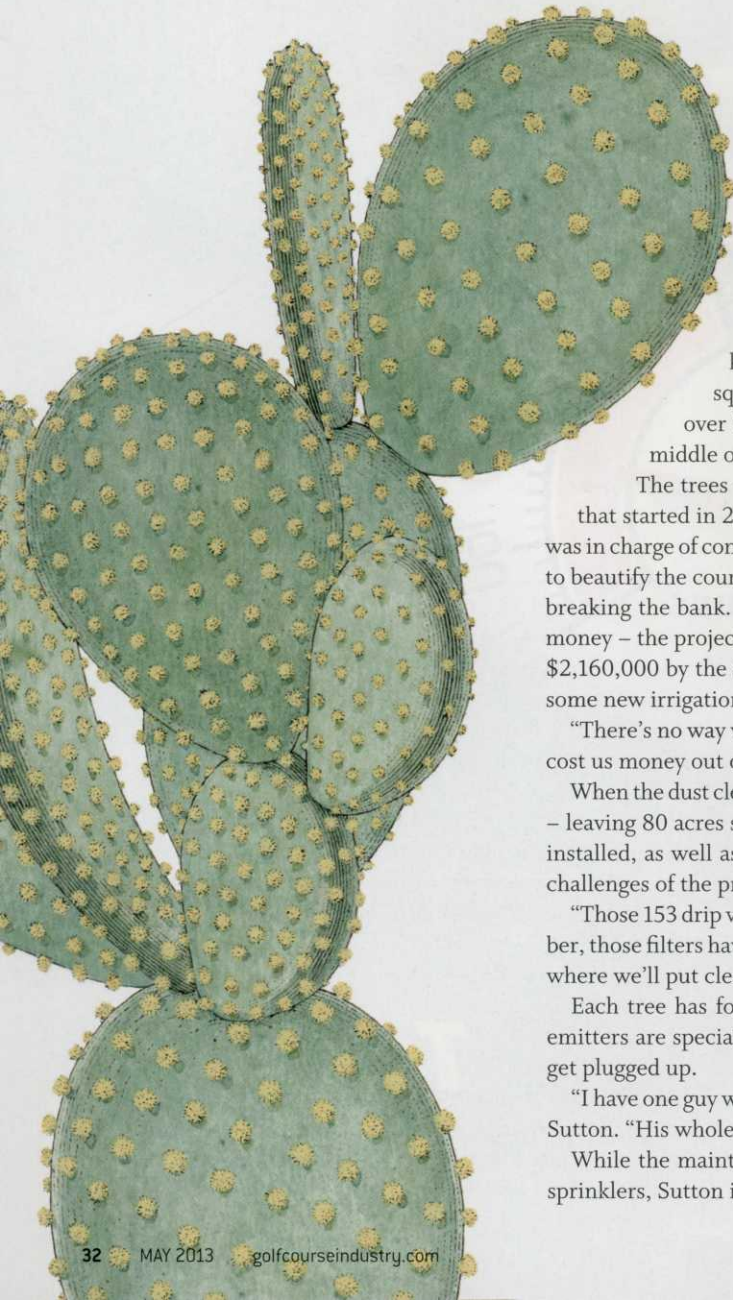




Desert *forest*

Wildhorse Golf Club's Scott Sutton says toodle-oo to 52 acres of turf in favor of desertscaapes and thousands of trees to save water and boost the course's wildlife population. by Jason Stahl



Scott Sutton is a self-professed tree lover. A golf course superintendent for more than 30 years and a Las Vegas native, he has built six courses and planted many trees all over the Las Vegas Valley since 1980.

"I've had the opportunity to see a lot of the trees I've put in grow and become beautiful specimens," says Sutton.

So when the Department of Forestry offered to donate nearly 350 trees last year to Sutton's course, Wildhorse Golf Club, he was all over it like a squirrel on an acorn. The donation bumped up his total tree count to just over 5,000, adding to what he calls his creation of a "suburban forest in the middle of Henderson, Nev."

The trees were just one part of an ambitious turf conversion project at Wildhorse that started in 2006 when Sutton contacted an ex-superintendent and friend of his who was in charge of conservation at the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA). The idea was to beautify the course, reduce water usage and attract more wildlife to the property without breaking the bank. Not only did Sutton not break the bank, he made money – the project cost just over \$2 million, and he was reimbursed \$2,160,000 by the SNWA. With the extra money, Sutton purchased some new irrigation controllers and sprinklers.

"There's no way we would have been able to do this if it would have cost us money out of pocket," Sutton says.

When the dust cleared, 52 acres of turfgrass were converted to desertscaapes – leaving 80 acres still covered in turf. More than 5,000 trees and 3,000 desert plants were installed, as well as 153 drip valves. The irrigation switchover has been one of the biggest challenges of the project, especially considering the course uses reclaimed water.

"Those 153 drip valves each have a filter, and during the growing season from April to October, those filters have to be cleaned twice a month," says Sutton. "We actually have extra ones where we'll put clean ones in and take the others out and manually scrub and clean them."

Each tree has four emitters, which translates to more than 20,000 emitters total. The emitters are special ones from Toro that can be taken apart and cleaned as they frequently get plugged up.

"I have one guy who does this task full-time, and he will never in his lifetime catch up," says Sutton. "His whole life is cleaning filters and emitters and trying to keep everything alive."

While the maintenance on the drip irrigation system has been more intensive than the sprinklers, Sutton is banking on that changing one day.





Fifty-two acres of Wildhorse's turfgrass were converted to desertscapes.

“They have a 40- to 50-year lifespan, so they’re at the end of their lifespan. That’s one of the reasons we put in all these new trees: to kind of enhance all the older trees that are starting to check out.”

– Scott Sutton, Wildhorse Golf Club

“I’m hoping eventually that the trees will get big enough where they will sustain themselves and not need much maintenance,” he says. “As of right now, though, it is one of the biggest budget items.”

The trimming is also a constant chore. One person is dedicated full-time to training, trimming and staking all the trees.

“He comes in with truckload after truckload of branches,” says Sutton. “We recently had 60-mile-per-hour winds, so he had to go through and make sure all the trees were staked and that we didn’t lose any.”

Sutton says the trees don’t experience a lot of diseases due to their dry environment, but insects can wreak havoc on occasion. Elm trees that were planted when the course was built 54 years ago are currently deteriorating due to Dutch elm disease.

“They have a 40- to 50-year lifespan, so they’re at the end of their lifespan,” he says. “That’s one of the reasons we put in all these new trees: to kind of enhance all the older trees that are starting to check out.”

With more trees has come more wildlife, which was a big reason why Sutton started the project in the first place. He estimates the animal population has increased tenfold since 2006, especially the birds. At last count, the course had 97 different species of birds, including herons, egrets and osprey that feast on the fish Sutton stocks in the nine lakes he cleaned up. There are no birdhouses on the course as they get



too hot for anything to live in, but there are bathhouses placed high in the trees on the course’s north side where it’s cool.

Sutton installed small, five-gallon trees and let them grow on their own – a method he is a big proponent of. Now, some of the trees that were planted in 2006 are big enough to offer significant shade that is appreciated by the rabbits and other animals, not to mention the humans.

Initially, the golfers were upset by the removal of turf since, in their minds, it created less playable lies for their errant shots. But Sutton says most of the turf was removed from out-of-play areas and also the property lines.

“But you can’t just leave it dirt,” says Sutton. “You’ve got to put in some decomposed granite or bark to cover it. We put in a fine screen decomposed granite of 5/16 minus, which enabled the golfers to hit right off the top of it. It’s just like playing off dirt.”

The homeowners also didn’t like the conversion initially because they says the trees blocked their view, but they eventually warmed to them when they realized they also blocked balls from hitting their houses.

“But as far as beautification, they absolutely loved it,” says Sutton.

Many courses in the Las Vegas Valley are now taking advantage of the water district program that Wildhorse did, but none have gone to the extent Sutton has to turn his course into a wildlife oasis. Also, the program has changed slightly with the downturn in the economy, with courses only allowed to perform up to \$300,000 per year (up to 300,000 square feet at \$1 per square foot) of turf replacement now.

“Before, they didn’t have a cap on it, so instead of only doing 6.7



Photo: Wildhorse Golf Club

acres per year, we were able to do that in just one phase over a couple months,” Sutton says. “There was a certain point in my project where it was going so good that they were paying up to \$2 per square foot.”

One of the program rules was that you had to put back at least 50 percent plant cover. In other words, once the plants reached full maturity, they had to cover 50 percent of the land.

“On our project, the water district estimated that we would have 87 percent coverage once our property’s plant material was full capacity because we put in a lot more trees,” says Sutton.

Sutton estimates that, after

taking out 40 percent of his turfgrass, he has reduced his water usage by 27 percent or 67 million gallons. Budget-wise, that translates to \$56,000 per year, plus a savings of \$14,000 per year on electricity. Unfortunately, he has not been able to utilize those savings as they have been absorbed in the budget.

Aside from the challenges the drip system has brought, another challenge has been weeds. Since 1959, the course’s turf had been fertilized and nurtured, so the soil is very fertile. Thus, when the turf was removed, any place that took water suddenly sprouted weeds like crazy. For the most part, Sutton has used

TAKE ACTION

Getting involved at your course

Incentive programs are available for a variety of projects throughout the country, from turf reduction to energy conservation programs, says Wildhorse Golf Club’s Scott Sutton.

“The first step is finding what is available in your area,” Sutton says. “For this program, you need to complete an application, host a site visit by a SNWA representative who will pre-measure the area to be converted and take pictures, and sign a consent agreeing that the land will never be converted back to turfgrass. Like a conservation easement, this consent transfers along with the land from owner to owner.”

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pre-emergent herbicides to keep the weeds under control, and the times he hasn't have cost him a ton of labor. However, he does have another control method.

"Because we're owned by the city of Henderson, I have access to labor from the court system – people who have to do community service as the result of offenses like speeding, domestic violence, DUI, etc.," Sullivan says. "This has saved me countless dollars in both labor and herbicide expense, and it's a more biological and environmental way of controlling the weeds."

As a result of Sutton and his crew's efforts, Wildhorse has been recognized as an Audubon Certified Cooperative Sanctuary. Sutton himself is one of

only two certified golf irrigation auditors in the state of Nevada.

Looking back on the project, Sutton, who confesses that he only likes to do things one time and thus makes sure it's right the first time, says there isn't much he would do differently with the project if he had to do it over again – other than maybe installing some different species of trees. Overall, he's incredibly thrilled with how it turned out.

"It didn't cost us anything to put in, so it's all gain for the property," he says. "It was all positive and good for the golfers, wildlife, etc. Everyone won." **GCI**

Jason Stahl is a Cleveland-based writer and frequent GCI contributor.



The irrigation switchover has been one of the biggest challenges of the project, especially considering the course uses reclaimed water.

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