How to Achieve the Natural Look

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

With the need to conserve water becoming a necessary component of 21st century golf maintenance, one of the best ways to cut down on irrigation is through the use of native grass or meadow areas.

But too often, golfers hear "meadow" and think that translates to a wet, tall grassy area. These native areas are becoming more popular on new designs and older courses, however, where the look of wispy prairie grass instantly adds that rustic, rugged quality that so many modern layouts lack.

Using native grass in key open locations or to replace areas where problematic trees once stood hasn't been one of the golf industry's finest moments. There are some notable exceptions where native grasses were properly developed and water has been saved. But for the most part, meadows that were designed to save water and restore a rough look continue to receive too much irrigation.

Perhaps it's a developer, a green committee or — dare I even suggest — a superintendent's idea to install rows of irrigation to keep these areas lush. Whoever is to blame, the lack of common sense in maintaining native areas often makes them offensive to the golfers who have to play near or through them.

These grassy links-like areas should be crisp. They should receive minimal amounts of water, and should be irregular in coverage to promote the finding of balls (and to look genuinely natural). Most of all, native areas should take on colors other than dark green.

The only way to achieve the natural look is through careful watering practices, overseen by superintendents who understand natural areas. Nearby irrigation must stay away from native areas so that water is not hitting the first 15 feet of such areas. Using roller-based sprinklers to get them started and having nearby quick-couplers for occasional hand watering is all these areas usually need. Mother Nature's rain will handle the rest.

The common rebuttal from superintendents is that hand watering is too much work, but it's certainly a lot less work than the three-times-a-year fly mowing and clean up that courses go

IT STARTS WITH NATIVE GRASSES AND ENDS WITH SAVING WATER THROUGH PROPER MANAGEMENT

through when they overwater natives. This also doesn't address the money wasted in unnecessary water because someone wants lush meadows, not natural-looking prairies.

Besides managing how meadow grasses are watered, the proper selection of grass is key to making such a transition work from maintenance and aesthetic points of view. There are native grass nurseries throughout the country with specialists who have some perspective on which grasses are working (ask your USGA Green Section representative whom they would consult).

John Greenlee (*grnleenrsr@aol.com*) wrote the definitive book on ornamental grass and owns one of the nation's finest nurseries for such grass. An excellent series of paperbacks published by the Brooklyn Botanical Garden (*www.bbg.org/gardenemporium*) covers all aspects of natives, and many of the new drought-tolerant grasses that could come in handy for those out-of-play areas where irrigation and manpower are wasted.

If you find you're having trouble selling the concept of a prairie look, try to find photographs of famous courses where the natives appear beneficial and look like they receive minimal water and management. Show those pictures to your client or owner, who may claim the look is tacky.

The first step in saving water through the use of prairie grass is through management. Don't bother to develop the areas if you don't have the time, resources or golfer support to manage them with as little water as necessary. Otherwise, these meadows will become swamps and defeat their purpose — to add natural beauty to your courses while preserving precious resources.

Geoff Shackelford spent his summer transplanting on-site native grasses to improve the look and maintainability of waste areas at Rustic Canyon GC in Moorpark, Calif. He can be reached at geoffshackelford@aol.com.