

Go Native

It can satisfy environmentalists – and be good for the bottom line, too

AN ANALYSIS BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



Not long ago, most Americans didn't pay attention to food certified as "organic" by strict USDA guidelines. But now that more people are aware

that an "organic" label means you are likely to be supporting local farmers and eating more wholesome, nonindustrialized food, the movement has taken hold. Large food product corporations are even trying to jump on the organic bandwagon.

The "native" plant movement took on a similar connotation for most Americans: It sounds nice, they said, but what does it re-

golfers feel it's time for the industry to tell the nongolfing world that it embraces native looks and all practical means necessary to use less water. And making a pitch to convert out-of-play areas and clubhouse landscaping to native plants might be simpler than you think.

What does native mean?

Once established, some native revegetation — in the form of plant material, wildflowers and prairie grasses — can help sustain wildlife, require less water and less care, and appear healthy for many months of the year with occasional bursts of color. But it's important to match native plants to their appropriate sites according to soil, sun and water availability.

Slowly, sometimes reluctantly, a native golf movement has begun with movements like the GCSAA's push for courses to give an acre back to nature or Audubon International's for-profit, environmentally friendly certification program. However, the native golf trend will only expand into a revolution if golfers can be sold on the benefits to their local environments and, more selfishly, their pocketbooks.

With rising costs and water privatization looming (or already a deregulated disaster in some cities), golf courses must find ways to reduce water. It is *the* essential issue for the golf industry. Converting out-of-play areas, grassy hazards and clubhouse landscaping can make a difference.

Selling native

After the "rounds played" slowdown in 2003, the golf industry should be open to short-term

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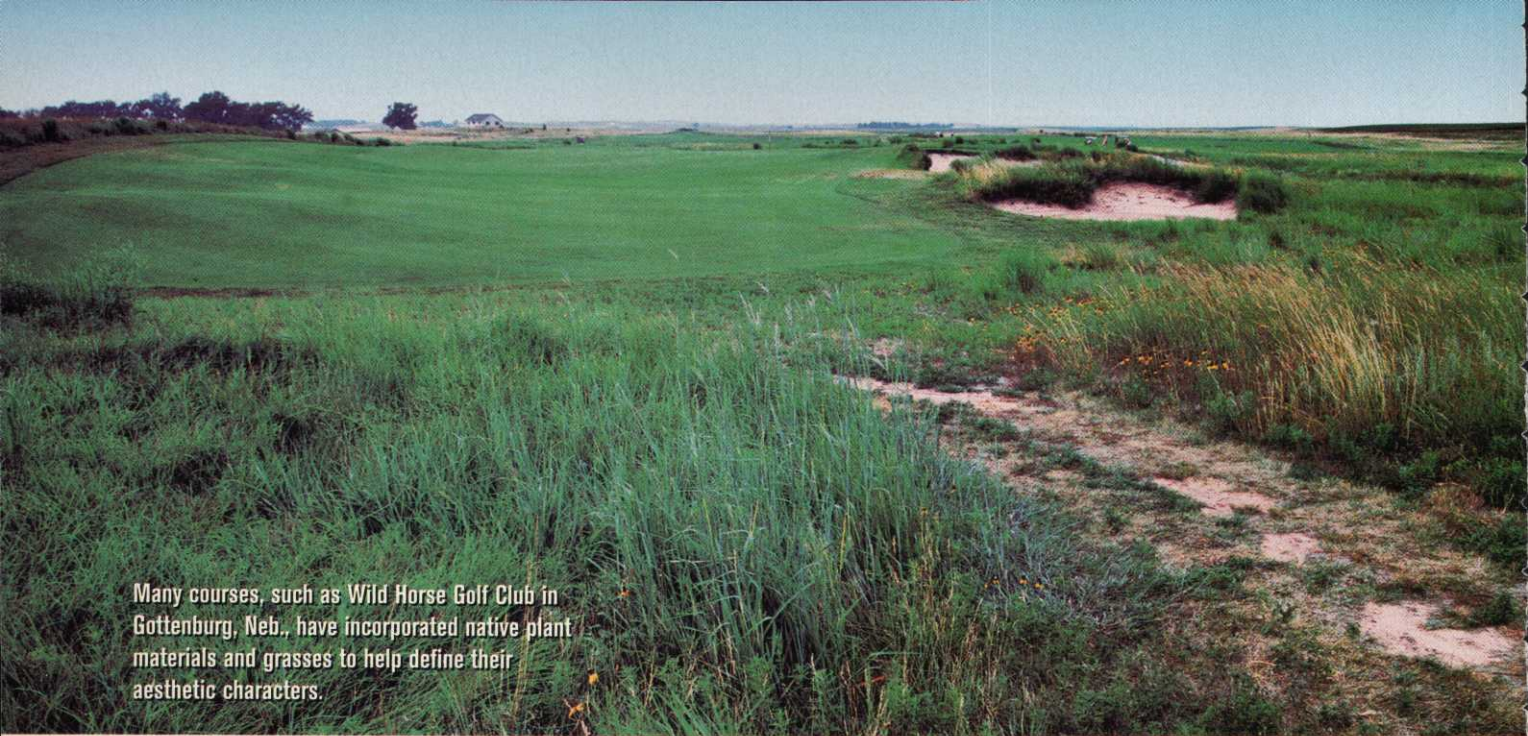
*"Only as far as the masters of the world have called in **nature** to their aid, can they reach the height of magnificence."*

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON

ally mean financially or aesthetically to use natives in landscaping?

But if there is any doubt that incorporating native plants can make a financial difference and create a more environmentally friendly image, note that business parks have been converting their landscapes to native plants. When big companies jump on the bandwagon, you can almost guarantee the movement is here to stay.

What does this revolution mean to the golf industry? Some would say nothing, but plenty of superintendents, architects and even a few



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Many courses, such as Wild Horse Golf Club in Gottenburg, Neb., have incorporated native plant materials and grasses to help define their aesthetic characters.

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investments that reduce long-term water and maintenance costs. We've heard the warnings about water usage. But as many have already found out, bucking the modern American golf aesthetic will not be easy.

The average American golfer wants his or her golf course to be part Disneyland (vibrant, but sanitized), part cemetery (wall-to-wall turf and trees), part corporate statement (we're in control of our landscape) and part gameboard (precisely defined fairways and roughs). Golfers also expect their courses to be lauded as masterpieces that are unique to the world of golf, even though they look just like five other courses in the neighborhood.

The greatest designs in the world tend to avoid the characteristics that most golfers want in their home courses. These epic designs have vaulted their way to the top of rankings despite their close ties to a native, sometimes rugged environment.

By my count, 14 of *Golf* magazine's top 20 courses in the world for 2003 could be classified as "native" courses. They reflect a sense of place by playing through native surrounds. Many are highlighted by native shrubbery, accenting bunkers or neighboring prairie grasses.

A case could be made for other courses in the top 20 trying to soften some of their man-made edges. At Pebble Beach Golf Club, efforts have been made in recent years to restore native grass areas and a more rugged, indigenous look to the bunkers.

Native giants like Pine Valley, Cypress Point, Shinnecock Hills, Royal Melbourne, Pinehurst,

"The prairie has a beauty of its own, and we should recognize and accentuate this natural beauty, its quiet level."

— FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Sand Hills, Pacific Dunes and every Scottish links have become unusual commodities because they incorporate native plant materials and grasses to help define their aesthetic characters. Golfers will travel long distances to experience these one-of-a-kind settings.

Sure, the holes would still be fun to play without the color and texture provided by indigenous plant material. But these designs are elevated to supreme status because they look like nothing else in the world. The smells, sights and even the sounds prove unforgettable because of the indigenous environment and the lack of intrusive, non-native touches.

Pointing to the best courses in the world may be the strongest selling point for those hoping to return out-of-play areas, grassy hazards, clubhouse landscaping and other portions of a course to native material.

Every region of the United States has its own native flavor, and golf has ignored this in favor of importing looks not inherent to the local environment. More often, the construction process clumsily plowed away all existing plant material, with the builders arrogantly insisting on starting over with the costly re-landscaping handed down to the customers.

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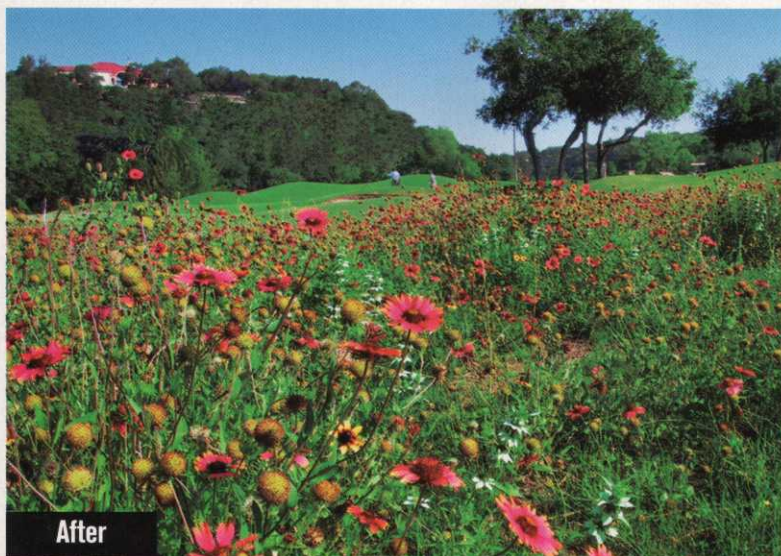
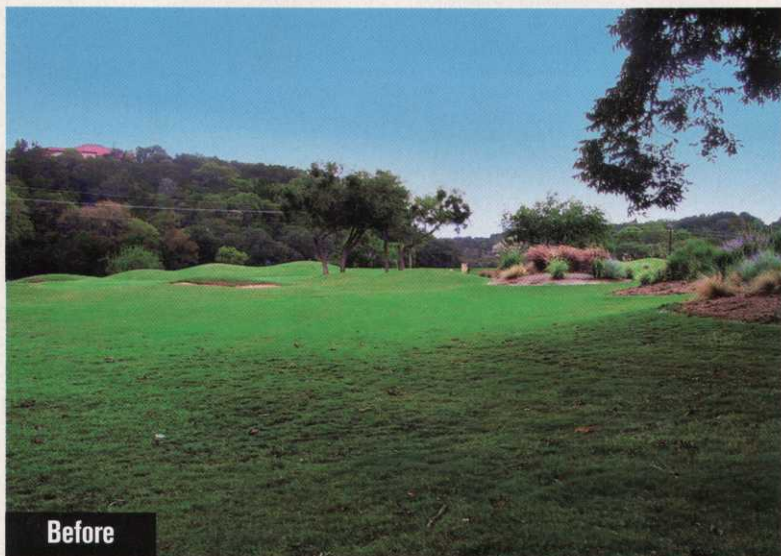
Native Courses

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Golf's environmental hubris has led to an extreme economic impact where increased water usage and expensive maintenance is required to sustain areas that could just as easily be left alone or cared for in a limited way.

Only recently have architects and superintendents detected a backlash from environmentalists, many who view golf courses as chemical waste dumps — not because of any substantial data telling them so, but simply based on the aesthetics of golf. Even middle-of-the-road Americans who wouldn't call themselves hard-core environmentalists will point to wall-to-wall pinstriped green, offset by a fountain-adorned lake and blinding white bunkers, as just a little too unnatural.

Lost Creek Golf Club's No. 4 hole before and after the club returned a large area to native wildflowers.



The most extreme views we hear describing golf include "garish," "obnoxious," "excessive" and anything else that conjures up images of disproportionate water and chemical use. Sometimes the outside views are reasonable, but most times they are baseless — except when it comes to modern golf aesthetics. No, a golf course can never look as natural as a meadow or unfettered native area, but a little effort can take some of the edge off and earn a course more acceptance in its community.

Still, some golfers take pride in the way their courses stick out like sore thumbs. They like the front-lawn look of courses that appear to be in control of their environments. At the same time, the golfers don't like paying more for water, and they wonder why their courses aren't recognized in rankings. The thought never crosses their minds that the added expenses and sterilized settings fail to create experiences that differentiate their courses.

When selling the native look to members and golfers, superintendents shouldn't hesitate to point to the magazine lists and suggest that the best courses in the world attract people from all over because their environmental experiences are distinctive. They should cut out magazine photographs and put them in an album. They should do anything they can to show how a more revered design weaves its way along and through a native setting that one can't find anywhere else.

Assuming these ideas don't work, there's always the economic argument.

Saving water

Austin, Texas' Lost Creek Golf Club, operated by ClubCorp, recently joined forces with the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center to return several acres to native wildflowers. The Austin Watershed Protection Agency has been creating buffer zones along the Barton Creek, on which the course borders.

A self-described "native nut," superintendent Steve Houser has seen architects take "existing properties and go backwards with them." Lost Creek was not unlike many other Texas courses when it was designed in the early 1970s. It provided playing pleasure, but it lacked color and texture.

Under Houser's supervision, the club started a three-year plan to create the required buffer

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The native look can be aesthetically pleasing.

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zone along Barton Creek while expanding the mandated 75-foot zone to 300 feet, with plans to eventually convert 11 acres of property to wildflowers, grasses and native trees.

Houser estimates that instead of 30,000 gallons a week devoted to irrigating roughs in the areas now or soon to be converted to natives, Lost Creek will use 2,500 gallons a week to establish the areas and then let them go.

Heather Venhaus, environmental designer at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, worked with Houser and club officials on the Lost Creek project, the first for the Austin-based nonprofit organization that is the leading voice for the North American native plant movement. She said Lost Creek provides an educational opportunity to golfers not familiar with native plants.

Venhaus relied on Houser's input as well as case studies from Audubon International. She also recommends Donald Harker's *Landscape Restoration Handbook* for anyone taking on a native conversion project.

Touch, patience required

A deft touch is necessary when implementing native revegetation. Too often, the landscape architecture approach is used: plants are located in straight lines; coordinating colors look a little too well harmonized; and hydro-seeded areas have so many varieties mixed in that the effect is dizzyingly unnatural.

Superintendents should tour local botanical gardens or native plant society-recommended sites to learn more about native plants. They will not only discover the quality of the indigenous plants, but they'll learn that the seasons for establishing various plants or grasses vary.

"We see this as an avenue to broaden golf's horizons," Houser says of Lost Creek's effort. Houser also says the club's environmental approach has allowed it to "relieve some of that stress we're under."

Golf is certainly going to be under stress for the next few years if predictions about water availability and prices come true — which is why now is the time to relieve some of the burden through native revegetation. ■

See Them to Believe Them

The best way to convince green committee members, general managers and golfers that natives are attractive plants and not weeds, is to see them in a landscaped or maintained environment. Virtually every state has a native plant society that can point you in the direction of native-friendly places. Botanical gardens are devoting sections to natives and some are exclusively native plants, making it easier than ever to see which plants, grasses or wildflowers might look best to establish at your course.

Here is a list of resources and Web sites:

Botanic gardens, including native:

Alabama: Birmingham Botanical Gardens
California: Strybing Arboretum and Botanical Garden (San Francisco), The Living Desert (Palm Desert)
Georgia: Callaway Gardens, Atlanta Botanic Garden
Illinois: Morton Arboretum (Chicago)
Iowa: Des Moines Botanical Garden
New York: Brooklyn Botanical Garden
New Jersey: Tourne County Park (Morristown)
New Mexico: Living Desert and Zoo (Carlsbad)
Tennessee: Cheekwood Gardens (Nashville)
Wisconsin: Wehr Nature Center (Franklin)

Native gardens, prairie grass research centers and reserves:

Arizona: Sonoran Desert Museum (Tucson)
California: Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden (Claremont), Theodore Payne Foundation (Sun Valley), Santa Barbara Botanical Garden (Santa Barbara)

Idaho: Idaho Botanical Garden (Boise)
Kansas: Cimarron National Grassland (Elkhart)
Massachusetts: Garden in the Woods (Framington)
Maine: Wild Gardens of Acadia (Acadia)
Missouri: Center for Plant Conservation (St. Louis)
Nebraska: Prairie/Plains Resource Institute (Aurora)
Nevada: Desert Demonstration Garden (Las Vegas)
Oklahoma: Oxley Nature Center (Tulsa)
Pennsylvania: Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve (New Hope), Brandwyne Conservancy Wildflower and Native Plant Gardens (Chadds Ford), Shenk's Ferry Wildflower Preserve (Holtwood)
Texas: Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (Austin)
Washington: NatureScaping Wildlife Botanical Gardens (Vancouver)

Web sites

- Grand Prairie Friends (information on prairie grasses): www.prairienet.org/gpf
- California Native Plant Society: www.cnps.org
- Center for Plant Conservation: www.centerforplantconservation.org
- Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center: www.wildflower.org
- Native Plant Conservation Initiative: www.nps.gov/plants/coop.htm
- National Wildlife Federation: www.nwf.org
- Wild Ones-Natural Landscapers: www.for-wild.org
- Audubon International: www.audubonintl.org
- USGA Wildlife Links Program: www.usga.org/green/research/reports/2002/wildlife/index.html