

# What Can Brown

## Do for You?

BY RON FURLONG

For starters, it can save a few bucks . . . as well as the environment

**Y**ou know that saying, “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”? I think it’s fence. Maybe it’s “the other side of the hill”? Or maybe “the other side of town”? Anyway, you know the saying. Imagine for a moment a time in the future, maybe the not-too-distant future, when that saying changes from “the grass is greener” to “the grass is browner.” Doesn’t quite have the same ring, I admit, but we may just be headed in that direction.

Golf course superintendents are as guilty as anyone in wanting the golf course green and healthy. I’d be lying if I said aesthetics didn’t matter to me. They matter to me

*Continued on page 46*

*Continued from page 44*

probably as much as playability. I guess that leads to the question of what is aesthetically pleasing? Does turf have to be green to be appealing to the eye? Are we conditioned to the point where we think grass has to be green? What if we opted for some yellows? Or, yes, even a few browns.

What can brown do for you? Well, deliver your packages on time of course, but what else? Imagine intentionally shooting for a certain level of browns in your fairway, and another level in your primary rough. Maybe even a third shade in your secondary rough, or perhaps we're getting into the wispy shades of yellow in the deep stuff. What would be some of the positives to such an approach?

- How about the chance to feel like you're making a significant contribution to the environment. How? Well, no mow zones for one. Also, you'd be creating out-of-play areas, enhancing wildlife and cutting down on fuel and pollutants.

- Creating biodiversity.

- Creating more diverse aesthetics. You can only have so much lush, green, manicured turf on your golf course. Wildflowers, wetlands, native grasses . . . the list is endless.

- Better fairway playability. Lush turf on your fairways does not always equal great playing conditions.

- Make your members into longer hitters. Roll, baby, roll.

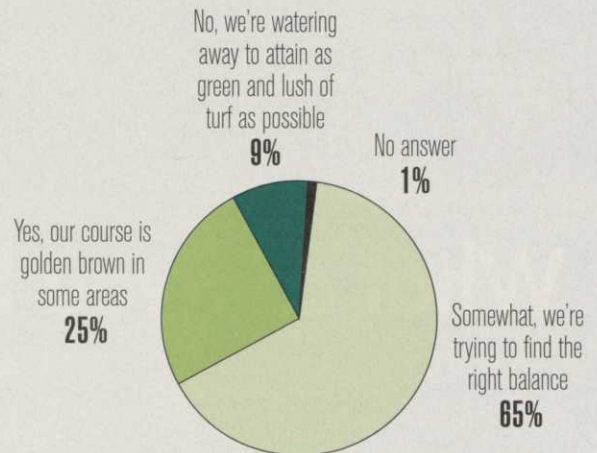
- Here's a good one: Save money! Less water, less fuel, less equipment repairs, less labor.

The very quotable A.W. Tillinghast, the great golf course architect from early in the last century, once wrote: "I do not endorse the necessity of watering the entire course, or I might say the desirability, no matter how much money you may have. Surely watering may be carried to the extreme, as certainly is the case frequently in the watering of putting greens. . . . In many cases there is the tendency to rush to the conclusion that the fairway turf is dead after a drought because the plants are browned and seared. I do not recall in these parts (northeast United States) ever seeing any well-established fairway turf permanently destroyed by drought. Apparently dead, the grass will be restored to color when the rains do fall finally, for the roots are alive. . . ."

I won't take this forum to present any arguments against Tillie's agronomic theories, but his words do invoke consideration, even today.

Returning to golf's roots, that's what we're talking about here, as in the way the game was meant to be played. But be careful now, technology is not such a bad thing. Things have improved, and the manner in which we accomplish tasks is more often than not better. But maybe a very small, cautious step backward, gingerly extending your toe into

## Are you managing water use as efficiently as possible?



Editor's note: Findings are based on responses from 380 superintendents.

the past, is possible here. Maybe a little more knowledge of the true nature of this sport's past is in order.

In 1842, William and Robert Chambers printed the following words in the *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*: "To appreciate golf fully, it must be studied in some such school as that of St. Andrews, where its whole character is fully developed, in consequence at once of the admirably adapted ground, and the enthusiasm of the votaries."

The "admirably adapted ground," of course, is not all that green. We all watched a wonderful Open this past July on the hallowed grounds, which were shimmering in yellows, browns and a slight hint of green. Jack bid his farewell on the bridge and not a dry eye in the house could be found as he extended his arm around Tom Watson and the two of them basked in the true color of the sport — brown. I don't remember any commentator mentioning the lack of lush, green turf.

If one were arguing the side of green against brown, perhaps he would present as his visual example the storied grounds of Augusta, nearly as legendary as St. Andrews. Just as it would be hard to argue against those on the side of the browns of St. Andrews, it would be nearly as difficult to deny the perfection of that pristine golf course in Georgia. The very green golf course in Georgia. So who would win the debate? I have no idea, but I think what we're left with is maybe aiming for a bit of both worlds.

It is undeniable that water, pesticide and other restrictions are going to change the way golf courses are managed in the future (it is already happening on many properties), and consequently, the way they look. This decision of choosing brown may be made for us. But

*Continued on page 48*

*Continued from page 46*

maybe we can choose where our browns and yellows will be. Maybe we can dictate where shortcuts may be made and choose agronomic decisions based on playability concerns as well as environmental concerns.

One obvious choice would be the lessening of irrigation on the fairways and letting them brown a bit. I work at a golf course in western Washington where we actually welcome a color other than green when we can get it. This region is lush and green most of the year. A chance to firm it up and let the ball roll down the fairways is welcome in July and August.

I would also think the wall-to-wall practices many of us implement with regard to water need to be considered and perhaps amended. Do you need to water the rough? If your answer is "yes," OK. Then, do you need to water the secondary rough? Yes? OK, then do you need to water out-of-play areas you are not even mowing? Do you have some? Could you have more? Seasonal wetlands, areas that only hold water for part of the year, are another great way to increase biodiversity.

In consideration of what brown can do for you, and how it might affect what the modern-day golfer perceives as "playability," let me pass along a few words from the one and only Old Tom Morris. Here he is writing about the shameful removal of the whins at St. Andrews a good 100 or so years ago (I have to admit I have no idea what the heck a whin is, but that's beside the point), and a few words on some other hazards there. I must say after reading his words, I have a strong inclination to turn off the fairway irrigation, stop raking the bunkers and try to grow some gorse.

"In St. Andrews the whins have ceased to mark with their golden bloom the heathery boundary of the course. Yet what skill was needed — especially with a side wind — to avoid the seylln of the whins without being caught by the Charybdis of the bunker! It was no joke to extricate the ball from a dour whin; but this has been ruthlessly removed for a different style of play.... The heather at the sixth and ninth holes is scarcely worth calling a difficulty. Where are the rushes at the second hole? Besides



**This area of native grasses at Newton Country Club in New Jersey was formerly maintained turf.**

these, players have to contend with streams, roads and railways; and in some greens with trees, hedges and walls.... Unplayable snares like rabbit holes should not be called hazards, because no one can remember where those are."

Think about the words Old Tom writes above — "... a different style of play." He is not talking about this different style of play kindly. What do you think Old Tom would think about our "green" mentality today, and the bite we've taken out of the golf courses over the last 20 years? The golf courses look good, and they probably play easier than they did in years past, but is that really where we want to be?

"What skill was needed to avoid the seylln of the whins without being caught by the Charybdis of the bunker!" I don't know what the heck that means, but I agree with it! ■

*Ron Furlong is the superintendent of Avalon Golf Club in Burlington, Wash., and a frequent contributor to Golfdom. He can be reached at RF7500@aol.com.*