



TREE PROGRAMS FOR GOLF COURSES

By Kenneth J. Altorfer

When your editor asked me to write an article on tree programs for golf courses, it came as a surprise and as such, I had no clear way on how to present my views in writing. So, with a short attention span with a pencil, I hope this matches your short attention span in reading.

While I will end up on a very positive manner, I begin with some negatives as to the role a nurseryman plays in working with golf courses on tree planting programs. Following are some things I don't do or try to stay out of when there is not consensus to guide me. Some may seem quite harmless, but they are important to some club officials.

- Never interfere with the architecture of the course.
- Do not purposely influence the game of golf.
- Do not suggest leaving lower branches on large conifers or suggest removing them.
- Do not criticize a tree nursery on the course property (or suggest one).
- Do not suggest the planting of trees to prevent cross-cutting on dog legs.
- Do not naturalize too much.

Now, let's be positive. Sure — I have opinions. Sure — I am asked. Sure — I respond.

Most of my opinions are not necessarily based on my education, nursery experience or golf course experience. Certainly the opinions were formulated from actual experience, but most of what I say and do is just common sense.

Some observations, I have made in the past few years with reference to planting programs on

golf courses:

- As always, intentions were the best (seems to be the case with people who golf and love their course).
- Maintenance of plant material was casual, if at all.
- Tree plantings were usually sparked by an individual (member, pro, or superintendent) rather than a general desire by the membership.
- Tree programs, when in effect, seemed to be challenged almost annually by new chairmen or other officers of the club.
- Many (not most) superintendents did not visibly support planting programs (they didn't have much to say, actually).

I would like to approach the somewhat controversial subjects listed above on a one-to-one basis. These are not isolated subjects, however, and I am aware that golfers have strong opinions on how their course plays, how it looks, and how it is maintained.

Let's start with the architecture of the course. If there wasn't a good plan and if the course is helter-skelter, and if there won't be funds for a golf course architect, then I guess nature takes its course and everyone can take a crack at it.

If the course was designed by a good course architect, then I will lay back until I am sure what the architect intended before proceeding. I liken my role to that of an interior decorator working on a beautifully designed structure. If nothing is done, no harm is done. If too much is done or if the concept is wrong, then the architecture of the structure has been changed. If a course has been well designed, the message should be loud and clear as how to proceed with a tree program.

I will not influence the game of golf on purpose. Obviously, plants can slow the game and they can constitute a hazard. These have to be accepted, but only in a reasonable way.

About removing lower branches of large conifers. I think it is a tough decision, I would like the branches to stay on. If shot-making is that important, then remove the branches.

But why were the conifers planted in an area of play if a drop penalty is not acceptable? Or, why wasn't it a matter of record that

lower branches were to be removed when they interfered with shot-making?

What about the club starting its own nursery? It's a great idea, but seldom do I see it work. Why not? To start, growing a good tree from a seedling or young whip is no easier than buying ten pounds of grass seed and growing good turf. A golf course superintendent has his expertise, a nurseryman has his. Then, since there is a time lag in starting a nursery and harvesting, I've seen the initiative lacking because the faces have changed. What was once a chairman's or superintendent's pet project, may be neglected by their successors. I have seen large trees in rows, three feet apart, literally destroying themselves. What a waste!

I believe the solution is simple. Understanding the need for larger trees from time to time, on the course or around the club house, why not have them available on the course? They can be. All it takes is a good concept at the initial tree program. If trees are put in natural groups (from three to ?) throughout the course instead of in rows or singly, a tree or two can be removed from each group if the need arises. If there is no need, the trees remain where they are. This brings up a point. Tree planting programs usually start with a bang to play catch-up. Maybe the program is a one year shot. That means, all the trees will be about the same age, and at some future point may die at about the same time. Or that means, there will be no trees to transplant at some point. And that means, because of attrition, at some distant time, there will be another catch-up planting. A cycle that is all too prevalent.

Logically, the planting program should be an annual one, to take care of losses real or anticipated. Younger trees should be added to the natural groupings so that never again will there have to be a crash program.

Enough of the subject of a golf course having its own nursery. The subject is close to my heart.

Preventing cross cutting on dog-legs affects the game of golf, and again I will lay back until I get direction from someone or some group who has to make the decision. I will then act accordingly. But not in the obvious way if the

dog-leg is to protected. Effective prevention of short cutting starts as near the tee as possible. It is then backed up somewhere between the tee and the turn, and then finished at the dog-leg itself.

The subject of naturalization is a tough one for members and officials of a course. It is easy for me since I have a one-track mind when I come upon such a situation. When I see larger, native trees; Oaks, Maples, Hickory, Pine, Spruce, etc., in groves in areas that are really not in play, being mowed, I honestly feel that there is a lack of respect for these magnificent plants. Apparently, there is pressure to keep the course in an impeccable condition to please the eye. Not, however, at the expense of the well-being of these plants. These areas are usually not irrigated and I have seen cracks on the surface. Dryness, compaction, and soil temperature can stress these trees and as such, make them vulnerable to pests and diseases. In their native habitat, natural mulches accumulate protecting the root systems and feeding them. There is little or no natural rejuvenation possible under mowed conditions and since the environment won't allow germination of the progeny of existing plants, then it stands to reason that the environment is not what it should be for the parents. I think that priorities somehow get garbled. The speed of play or penalty potential seem to get in the way of protecting the lifespan of some plants. There should be some compromise.

I have addressed the subjects I try to stay away from when I observe differing views from within. I respect all viewpoints, but certainly disagree with some. A common sense approach still works.

At the beginning, I made a few observations. While they have not been specifically addressed, all of them have been discussed directly or otherwise. I have not referred to one, however. Actually, it was a little jab at superintendents.

There was a point in the past when superintendents had little to say about tree planting programs, and what they did say was negative. These viewpoints were molded primarily by the added workload. Today, this has changed. We are working now with

the superintendents directly with less contact with the Green Chairman or his committee. The superintendents are not only willing to take on the added load, but are actually prompting tree programs. This has its obvious advantages.

Equally important is the continuity that can be gained from superintendents who stay at a club for extended periods. No longer are tree programs as sporadic as they once were. Also, these programs are less likely to be jeopardized by a change in direction by the Green Committee. And I think that the present group of superintendents are more uniformly aware and appreciative of what a good tree program should be.

I have touched on a matter several times that I would like to pursue in a more direct manner. My whole working life has been with a quality nursery. As such, I have a high regard for our product as well as plants produced by other good growers.

I have seen the good results of planting programs using the proper plants. Only two things are needed: a well conceived program and persistence. The program doesn't have to be completed in one year. But once started, it should continue year after year even in a very modest way.

That's the way it should be. Unfortunately these programs somehow get shoved aside since there is the incorrect attitude that once trees are planted, that's the end of it. There is no end to it, anymore than there is no end to anything else done on a course.

The value of trees on a golf course is a subject that shouldn't have to be brought up. Just take a walk around the course with nothing on your mind. Admire the native trees 50, 100, 200 years old. Look at the younger trees you or your predecessor planted. Ask yourself, "what if they weren't there?"

Editor's Note: Ken Altorfer is Executive Vice-President of McKay Nursery in Waterloo, Wisconsin. He has helped many golf courses in Wisconsin initiate an intelligent and well planned tree planting program. A University of Wisconsin—Madison graduate with a degree in Horticulture Landscape Architecture, Ken started with McKay Nursery in 1949. He is a past president of the Wisconsin Nurseryman Association and had the distinct honor of serving as president of the American Association of Nurserymen in 1972-1973.

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