



# Blooming Dates

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

It only takes a few warm days in February to get most golf course superintendents I know to thinking about springtime and a new golf season. Those few days this year, plus a chance encounter with Emeritus Professor Ed Hasselkus at a Wisconsin Genealogical Society Fair in town, reminded me of one of the most pleasant and educational activities I have ever experienced. I'd like to tell you about it because I suspect most of you would have enjoyed it also.

In the spring semester of 1971 I was only a few months home from the Vietnam War. Life was beautiful – I was a grad student home safely, enjoying Cheryl and Amy (1½ years old). I was learning by leaps and bounds and getting caught up with what I'd missed as a soldier in Uncle Sam's Army.

One of the things I had missed was the second semester of Dr. Hasselkus' course on woody ornamentals. Since it wasn't eligible for graduate credits, I was taking it purely to learn. The material was wonderful and, as most of you know, Ed was an exceptional teacher. Each class was exciting, until he told me he wanted me to do a phenology project that year as a part of the course. I wasn't sure what the word meant, but found out as he detailed what was expected of me.

Each year he assigned an appropriate student the task of recording the blooming dates of trees and shrubs in Madison. It seemed a simple proposition to me, even an interesting one. Although not arbitrary, it was subjective. First I chose "typical" plants either on campus or in the Arboretum, ones not influenced by a microclimate such as a lakeshore location or a site next to a building with a southern exposure. The specific date was determined by the subjective estimate of when 50% of the buds were fully open.

It was fun early on, and easy. I scouted the Arboretum twice a day, a simple proposition since I drove near there on my way to and from campus. I found trees and shrubs well before the buds popped and watched them.

But as the weather warmed, the task quickly increased exponentially. I was watching dozens of plants every day at both locations. On some woodies the 50% mark was reached quickly, while on others I waited and waited. As the semester lengthened we moved to the flowering crabapples and the lilacs. Suddenly it seemed like a full-time job! The Arboretum has an enormous collection of lilacs, one of the finest in the world. I put on miles by foot, walking

the campus, walking the Arboretum and sometimes trying to confirm my date with other trees located in Madison neighborhoods. At times it was almost overwhelming and I cursed my blind perseverance to get the job done accurately to the best of my ability.

But it was a great experience. On those days when Cheryl and Amy were with me at the Arboretum immersed in the color and fragrance of apple or lilac blossoms, I wondered, "how could life be any better?" The lessons learned went beyond the raw data. My sense of the pulse of nature, my sense of observation, and a subsequent interest in phenology were the result of Professor Hasselkus' project.

Actually, I would bet many golf course superintendents are phenologists. "Phenology comes from two Greek words – "phainesthai (to appear) and "logos" (to study). It is an area of science that studies natural

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events that happen periodically in relation to seasonal and climate change. So if you pay attention to when the first robin arrives, you are participating in phenology. The same is true for the first skein of geese, the first day the ice is gone on your favorite lake (Mendota, for me) or the day you open the golf course.

There are all kinds of natural events on a golf course to make note of: the first 80 degree F. day, the first 90 degree F. day, and the first time we crack 100 degrees F. I note when the *Poa annua* seeds (50% of the plant population), the date when the soil temperature at a 2 inch depth at 2:00 p.m. is 60°F. (*Magnaporthae poae*), and the last night I hear the crickets chirping. Lots of folks notice the first time the thunder claps and the lightning strikes; supposedly we will have frost exactly six months after that. Many are interested in the date of the first snowfall, the last freezing day and the first killing frost. And of course, I still pay attention to the blooming dates of trees and shrubs on the course, in my yard and about town.

If you think about it, you would undoubtedly realize that Wisconsin and our land grant university in Madison were home to one of the best known practitioners of phenology in our time – Aldo Leopold. Read his famous “Sand County Almanac” and you will quickly see how detailed he was while recording seasonal events like bird migration and flowering dates. His work is an inspiration for curious amateurs like me.

Whenever you bump up against an interesting endeavor, whether it's genealogy or phenology, I have noticed that there are usually others similarly interested. In our state – you guessed it – we have the Wisconsin Phenological Society. I don't belong, although I am sure it would be a rich experience. I am perfectly happy keeping in tune with nature and the constantly evolving seasons in my little corner of the world at Blackhawk. It adds enormously to what is almost daily an intriguing experience.

And I thank Professor Hasselkus for that. ♻

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