

Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round That Old, Old Pond

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Every time I step on a golf course, I see acres and acres of well-kept, fine turfgrass. I'm truly impressed with a Golf Course Superintendent's ability to meet the demands of today's golfers. I have a passion for lovely, smooth and fast greens. Lately though, I have taken a closer look at another type of grass on the golf course, ornamental grass. I now have a passion for lovely, colored and hardy ornamental grasses.

Ornamental grasses have been around a long time, but until recent years, they really weren't used extensively in the landscape. I'm beginning to see a change though, especially on golf courses. I recently took a long look at a nice looking pond on our golf course and said to myself, "I'm going to tie a yellow ribbon around that old, old pond!" My inspiration came for the awesome displays of ornamental grasses that I had more frequently been seeing along roadsides, on private property and on Southern golf courses of America.

My search for the right grasses for this project made me aware that my options were abundant. It soon became a choice of what look we wanted, and how much money were we willing to spend on this yellow ribbon. There were no less than six local nurseries with wonderful plant material at reasonable costs. That yellow ribbon was now becoming a mix of colors, but wonderful ones at that. My final choices were *Miscanthus sinensis* "Silberfeder" Silver Feather, an elegant, upright grass of six feet with shimmering white fan-shaped blooms, *Miscanthus sinensis* "Purpureascens," with growth to four feet, and leaves that turn bright red-orange in the fall and *Calamagrostis acutiflora* "Karl Foerster," a showy, five foot tall grass with showy, feathery plumes. Buying in bunches always pays off, and we were able to find a very large wholesale nursery here in the Twin Cities that was selling quart pots of established plants for \$2.30 per plant. If you're looking for results the first year, and a better chance of survival, buying rooted, potted plants is preferred over bare root divisions for ornamental grasses. After measuring the length of the pond



Two-year old plantings, Hole 4, Hillcrest Country Club. Front to back, *Miscanthus* "Purpureascens," *Miscanthus* "Silver Feather," *Calamagrostis* "Karl Foerster"

perimeter, and deciding on how deep our ribbon would be, we placed our order for plant material and supplies. A good rule of thumb is to space plants equal to their mature height, but this depends on the look you want to achieve. We decided to plant with four foot spacing. Another good rule of thumb, which also depends on what you want to achieve, is a minimum of eight feet for your buffer or ribbon of plants around the pond.

These rules of thumb will help you accomplish several important things: it gives you some insurance in case you lose a couple of plants here and there and it will generally be thick enough to allow nesting of ducks, songbirds, butterflies and other small wildlife. It will act as a barrier to the pond for geese and it will give you more flexibility and creative freedom to vary your plant groupings and textures.

There are several ways to go about preparing the site for planting. I prefer not to use herbicide to get rid of existing plants or grass along water. My choice is to pull or dig any undesirable plants and use a sod-cutter to remove sod and other matted plant material. In this ribbon project, I also chose to seed the entire buffer with a mix of perennial and annual wildflowers and sheep fescue. Preparation of the soil for seeding is easily accomplished with the use of a small garden tiller or can be hard-raked by hand. A couple of

(Continued on Page 7)

Yellow Ribbon—

(Continued from Page 5)

inches of loose soil will provide good seed to soil contact necessary for germination. Dispersal of the seed is best done with a small hand-held spreader. I highly recommend the use of wildflower seed along with the ornamental grass in these situations. The wildflowers will provide good color the first year and beyond, while the ornamental grasses become more established. Sheep fescue will provide a nice nurse crop for erosion control and aesthetic purposes while the wildflowers mature. Seeding rates for wildflower seeds are typically 6-12 pounds per acre, there are usually about 500,000 seeds per pound, and prices range from \$20-40 per pound, so you undoubtedly get a lot of bang for your buck (and a lot of color for your ribbon). I always use the higher rate with wildflower seed. The use of an erosion control product can be beneficial, but many of the rolled matted versions do not allow a large amount of the wildflower seedlings to poke through the material and become established. I prefer the bagged, recycled paper products that can be easily spread with a small walk-behind spreader, which spread out and hold water once they are wetted down on the surface. A new variety called Penn Mulch comes with a small amount of starter fertilizer which is helpful for plant establishment, and has performed very well in these ribbon projects for me. Once you have done the measuring, figuring, searching and purchasing of materials, this is a good ribbon recipe:



Ornamental grasses and wildflowers near the 17th tee at Hillcrest Country Club.

- 1) Pull out or dig up any undesirable broadleaf plants.
 - 2) Remove grass and other matted vegetation with sod cutter.
 - 3) Till or hard-rake to a minimum depth of two inches and smooth.
 - 4) Spread wildflower and sheep fescue seed over site and rake in.
 - 5) Spread erosion control and plant aid mulch.
 - 6) Plant ornamental grasses at desired spacing.
 - 7) Lightly and frequently water daily until established.
- If your site affords you the opportunity to plant small colo-

nies of woody plant material (both deciduous and evergreen) on the boundaries of the ribbon, you should use that opportunity. This will add even more textures for all four seasons and will dramatically advance your efforts to increase the songbird population. Plant shrubs and small trees that will benefit wildlife like crabapples, hawthorns, dogwoods, birch, serviceberry, winterberry, plum, cherry, mountain ash, lilac, arborvitae, yew and viburnum to name a few. You will notice the increase in songbirds and other desirable creatures soon after planting and will be just as pleased



Eight- to 10-foot plant ribbon.

when you begin to hear the positive comments from the golfers about the beautiful ribbon of color and unusual texture that you've added to the course.

These projects are best done in the spring, which will allow for a full year of development of the ornamental grasses before winter. Once established, very little maintenance is needed for all of these plants. In early spring each year before new growth begins, the wildflowers and ornamental grasses must be cut back to the ground or burned if permitted and supervised closely. If this isn't done, growth will be delayed and full potential not reached. String trimmers work fairly well, but burning is recommended at least every other year. Injury to the plants and the loss of winter ornamental value will result if cutting or burning is done in the fall. If you would like to find out more about ornamental grasses for this region, contact the University of Minnesota Extension Service to order the North Central Regional Extension Publication #573, titled *Ornamental Grasses for Cold Climates*, written by Mary Hockenberry Meyer, Don White and H. Pellett, all professors in the Department of Horticultural Science at the University of Minnesota. This is a wonderful reference for species names, growth characteristics, ornamental value and hardiness.

Ornamental grasses offer a change of pace from the well-manicured turfgrass on golf courses. They're fast-growing plants, ornamentally attractive throughout the year, require little maintenance, have very few pest problems and add a terrific variety of texture and color to the golf course landscape. Go for it! Tie a yellow ribbon around that old, old pond!