

## Naturalizing Areas To Reduce Inputs And Enhance Habitat

**Burlingame Country Club**  
**Buddy Snowden, superintendent**

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### Issue

In 2007, Burlingame Country Club was forced to make operational budget cuts that included reducing the size of the golf course maintenance staff. To maintain the same playing conditions with fewer staff, Superintendent Buddy Snowden realized that he needed to reduce the amount of highly maintained turf on the golf course. By not grooming certain out-of-play areas he could save money on equipment, labor, irrigation and chemical costs. Maintaining these areas less intensively would also allow more resources to be focused on the primary playing areas down the middle of the golf course.



*Naturalizing out-of-play areas along the perimeter of the course and around tees has saved time and resources at Burlingame Country Club.*

## Action

The green committee and key staff members identified specific areas that could be converted into naturalized vegetation without impacting playability. Perimeter areas with extreme slopes seemed like an excellent place to begin the process. These areas did not normally come into play and required labor-intensive maintenance on a regular basis. Turfgrass areas around tee complexes were another good option for naturalization because golfers seldom play a shot from those areas.

Forty acres in total would be converted from normal rough to high rough and maintained at a height of 4.5 inches. These areas would only be mowed occasionally with a specialized mower and would receive less irrigation and plant protectants. No seeding or renovation project was required; the turfgrass already growing in these locations would simply be mowed higher and less frequently.

## Results

Converting 40 acres of highly maintained turfgrass into naturalized areas led to significant savings. Mowing these areas only once annually saved an estimated \$30,000 in labor during the first year of the program. Annual irrigation was reduced by approximately 20 percent.

The biggest challenge was changing the perceptions of the membership. At first, golfers were concerned about the new naturalized areas because they were accustomed to seeing everything on the course highly groomed. Regular communication and education efforts during the first season of the project helped golfers understand the benefits of the new naturalized areas and built support for the changes. Club managers also listened to feedback from the membership and adjusted some of the naturalized areas to address golfer concerns.

Managing weeds in the new naturalized areas will be an ongoing challenge. With an average annual rainfall of 90 inches, it doesn't take long for blackberry, locust, poison ivy and other native plants to overrun the grasses. This has the potential to cause playability and aesthetic issues if not managed properly.

Thoughtful planning, management and communication have made the new naturalized areas at Burlingame Country Club very popular with golfers and managers alike. They help reduce the operational budget, allow resources to be focused on the primary playing areas and they are aesthetically pleasing. People are also amazed to see all the new wildlife utilizing the naturalized areas. Everything from bears to bees are enjoying the naturalized areas at Burlingame Country Club.