



Putting The Natural Back Into Naturalized

When it comes to weeds – it’s personal. One person’s most hated weed is another person’s favorite wildflower. This difference in perception is even greater if we include wildlife and insects in the discussion. While a rough composed only of turfgrass might be visually pleasing to many golfers, it is far less appealing to wildlife – particularly pollinators. Who are the pollinators that would like to make golf courses their home? The list includes hummingbirds, bats, butterflies, moths, flies, beetles and most prominently – bees.

Most people recognize the importance of pollinators (and have heard the estimation that one out of every three bites of food that we eat depends on pollination) but many may not realize that golf courses can play a significant role in promoting pollinators – particularly in urban communities. Fly over a major metropolitan area (or use a mapping program to “fly” via your computer) and it is immediately obvious that golf courses provide some of the last remaining green space in an urban landscape otherwise dominated by concrete and asphalt. It is no wonder that golf courses attract humans and wildlife.

Unfortunately, many golf courses eliminate critically important pollinator habitat in their roughs through their weed control programs. Compare a monostand of turfgrass to the habitat requirements for bees, butterflies and birds. The following suggestions are offered by the Xerces Society in the USGA publication, [Making Room for Native Pollinators](#).

- Choose plants with a diversity of color
- Choose flowers of different shapes
- Have plants flowering all season
- Include both perennials and annuals
- Use local native plants

The last suggestion to use local native plants is often the easiest to implement. For most golf courses this is simply a matter of leaving the area alone long enough for the native plants to dominate. Eliminate irrigation, weed control and frequent mowing and prepare to be surprised by the diversity of “weeds” that begin to grow. But there lies the rub. These areas will



not be visually attractive to most humans – particularly during the first few years. The process can be sped up significantly by removing turfgrass and planting native seed mixtures but some golfers will still be inclined to refer to these areas as “weed patches” and may put pressure on the maintenance staff to eliminate them.

The key to successfully creating pollinator habitat on golf courses is to pick the right spots. Most courses have large areas that seldom if ever come into play. However, since even very small plots of native plants can provide significant habitat for pollinators, even the most heavily played course can usually find a few areas to naturalize. It is also very important to communicate to golfers why these areas are being established and the contributions they make environmentally. One good communication tool is to point golfers to the USGA website page [Insect Pollinators Need More Habitat](#).

The publications referenced above include a great deal of information to help golf courses continue to contribute to the health and well-being of humans and wildlife through the establishment of areas composed of a wide variety of plants. The most difficult step might be changing people’s perception of what constitutes a weed.



This overhead image of a portion of Los Angeles graphically depicts the desirability of having golf courses in dense urban environments. Humans and wildlife are attracted to these green sanctuaries.