

# Some native plants for golf courses are low maintenance eye-catchers

## Planning, design, site choice and planting procedures are keys to better native plant survival.

by Randy Cave,  
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■ One of the most challenging tasks of golf course management is "pleasing the customer."

Not only does the potential member have to be enticed into the club by curb appeal, but the environment inside must be appealing, pleasant and natural. Many courses have the exotic appeal, but end up being a maintenance headache. Little do the superintendents realize that many native plants can create the same environment with little or no overall maintenance.

From what I have learned, observed and experienced in the landscape industry, people want to see more natural, less chemically treated, less heavily pruned plants. With the move in this nation leaning towards an environmentally safe world, naturalizing

any area could be the answer to many problems. Many native plants can tolerate drought, have little or no need for any chemicals, and—if used correctly—will require minimal maintenance.

The Atlanta Athletic Club, situated northeast of Atlanta on the Chattahoochee River, is surrounded predominantly by native hardwood forest. However, the golf course is mainly composed of loblolly pines. Because a monoculture species dominates the course, we are at high risk of losing all or part of it to any given pest or disease of these pines. Therefore, by incorporating native species around the course, we will minimize tree and plant losses due to any one disease or pest.

Attending Lake City Community College Landscape Division in Florida, I learned the importance of integrated pest management. The other portion of my studies concentrated on the significance of using native plants in a landscape. With many of the problems that face golf course and landscape industries today, such as restrictions and regulations on water and chemicals, it seems only natural to turn to more drought tolerant and immune species of plant material. The key to using this type of plant material is to be found in the planning stage.



This perennial rock garden showcases a variety of native plants: wax myrtles, silverbell (tree), sedum, rudbeckia and bright-yellow yarrow.

## Where to find native plants

■ Native plants are not abundant in the landscaping industry, but this is bound to change. I believe that over the next decade, native plants will become more popular due to the change in world opinion toward water and chemicals. For now, though, they are not easy to find, but certainly not impossible.

There are several guides to help you choose the right native plant for your site. Regional botanical gardens and horticulture schools are good sources. One guide I recommend is *Identification, Selection and Use of Southern Plants* (Claitors Publishing); and *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*, (Stipes Publishing).

Books like these would be used to decide what plants will grow best in certain areas.

—R.C.

What are your needs? Membership input is important, but not critical. There are other things to consider that members may never realize.

For instance, native landscapes can screen undesirable areas without looking like a fence or a hedge. Small patches strategically placed between two points can block one view from another. Areas we considered disguising included restrooms, ditches, culverts, unused open areas, drains, retention areas, and areas between adjacent tees and greens. One of the most important points to remember is to keep the native appeal in mind.

The times when one can do any major planting are limited. Golf play, availability of plants and planting requirements can narrow your scheduling. Late fall and early winter are good times because many of these plants are dormant. This also decreases loss due to heat stress and shock.

Many of these plants can be accommodated to most sites, as long as the bed is sufficiently prepared.

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## NATIVE PLANTS FOR GOLF LANDSCAPES

Trees	Zone	Comments
American beech	3-8	Sensitive to compaction
Black gum	4	Tolerant of most conditions
Sassafras	4	Tolerant, long taproot
Sugar maple	4-7	Vigorous; many cultivars
Florida maple	7-10	Use in place of sugar maple
Dahoon holly	7	Heavy fruiting, tolerant
White oak	4	Long-lived, drought tolerant
Sourwood	5	Outstanding color, tolerant
Redbud	4	Many cultivars
Mountain laurel	4	Streams/banks, partial shady areas
May hawthorne	7	Understory, edible fruit
Parsley hawthorne	7	Tolerant; best in medium shade areas
Wash. hawthorne	5	Large thorn; very tolerant
Witchalder	6	Understory, does well in acid soil
Wax myrtle	7	Likes partial/full sun; salt tolerant
Paw paw	5	Pest free, shade tolerant
River birch	4	Adaptable, acid soils
Musclewood	2	Transplant when small
Greybeard	4	Fragrant; drought tolerant
Silverbell	7	Substitute for dogwood
Witchhazel	4	Autumn and winter flower
Myrtleleaf holly	7	Evergreen; heavy fruiting
Red bay	8	Evergreen and aromatic
Willow oak	6	High-branching; does well in wet soil
Shumard oak	5	Mammoth shade tree
Bald cypress	4	Good soil stabilizer
Winged elm	7	Shallow root system
Silver maple	4	Several cultivars available; vigorous

Shrubs	Zone	Comments
Bottlebrush buckeye	6	Showy white flowers
Serviceberry	4	Understory; adaptable
Red chokeberry	4	Moist conditions
American beautyberry	7	Best in poor soil
Sweetshrub	7	Spring, autumn flowers
Cliftonia	7	Fragrant flowers
Leatherwood	6	Grows well in low, wet soil
Huckleberry	7	Understory; edible fruit
Rose mallow	6	Perennial flower from May to October
Spiderwort	5	Perennial; prefers shade
Georgia holly	7	Late autumn performance
Iris spp.	6	Use for riverbanks, streams, lakeside
Leucothoe	7	Shade tolerant
Fetter bush	7	Understory; slope coverage
Native azalea	6	Many native species listed
Buddleia	5	Attracts butterflies
Oak hydrangea	5	Large shrub; understory
Anise	8	Fragrant, hedge-type plant

Source: Randy Cave

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On the whole, plants that are field grown (bagged or balled and burlapped) transplant well as long as most of the roots are intact.

If the plants are container grown in a potting type mixture, there are two possible approaches. One is to amend the entire eventual rootzone with a similar mixture; the other is to shake a majority of the potting soil away and assimilate it to a new soil. Either way, a hole large enough for a sizable amount of roots should be dug and loosened up for the plant. Use enough balanced fertilizer on each plant and water it in thoroughly. Common planting practices, such as planting shallow-rooted plants slightly raised and staking trees, still apply. However, native plants are usually sensitive to any drastic changes in environment, so planning, handling and first-year care are essential.

### Once native plants take to an area, there is little care needed, other than corrective pruning.

Once native plants take to an area, there is little care needed, other than possible corrective pruning to strengthen a certain plant. It is advisable to fertilize occasionally. Most native plants prefer late winter fertilization.

Whatever your needs are for plant material in any given area, native plants can usually satisfy them. Each golf course has its sensitive spots that need attention, and native plants can usually tolerate these harsh environments with little care. Planning, designing, site choice and planting procedures are keys to better native plant survival.

Since winter is usually a slack period for crews it is a good time to work on this kind of project. I feel that native plants are the plants of the future. Mostly pest free and drought tolerant, there are a host of usable and adaptable native plants for almost any area.

—Randy Cave wrote this article as landscaping superintendent for the Atlanta Athletic Club. He is now a horticulture and landscape design student at the University of Georgia. This article is reprinted by permission of the Georgia Golf Course Superintendents' "Thru the Green."