

# A SWINGING SAFARI

Superintendents at the Mount Kenya Safari Club in East Africa lack most of the equipment and expertise of even the most backward landscape manager in the U.S. Yet they maintain a beautiful club that attracts an international clientele.

by Ann Reilly

**"P**aradise" is the best way to describe the Mount Kenya Safari Club, the famous resort and hotel located half-a-day's drive north of Nairobi, Kenya. Built in 1959 by actor William Holden and two non-Hollywood friends, the magnificent hotel and landscaped grounds are set into the side of the country's tallest mountain at an altitude of 7,000 feet.

The club's location halfway up the mountain is perfect. It's not so high that it lies within the cloud cover that often envelopes the mountaintop, yet it's high enough that its position on the equator does not translate into too much heat.

For about five years (shortly after Holden's death) and until one year ago the grounds had been in a steady rate of decline. Only recently has it been completely renovated.

What has happened at the Mount Kenya Safari Club is almost miraculous, based on the short amount of time it has taken. Most labor-intensive was weeding and replanting. (All plants are brought in from Nairobi nurseries, although in the future the club staff plans to propagate most of its material itself.)

## Emphasis on color

There is a great deal of emphasis on tropical and exotic plants: monstera, ficus, fuchsia, schleffera, bouganvillea, giant honeysuckle and succulents are among the many. The importance of color in making a dramatic landscape is realized here and at other sites in East Africa, and obtained to a large degree from flowering annuals. Salvia is one of the best producers in this climate, along with petunias, ivy geraniums, geraniums, begonias and gazania.

Perennials grown across most of the



Superintendents Zachariah Mehru (r) and Joseph Lucas are the primary source of education for Mt. Kenya Safari Club's 60-person landscape management staff.

U.S. are abundant, behaving somewhat differently due to the differences in climate. For example, daylilies are practically everblooming all year long. Other plants are closer to the material grown in the southern parts of our country. Agapanthus, tiger flower and calla lilly are truly perennial and never seem to be out of bloom. Because the club is on the equator, there is no summer/winter effect.

Soil is difficult to work with. It is a red loam soil that can change from dust to mud in a matter of minutes.

Because of the problem with the soil, all of it at the Club is improved with cow manure, which is readily available. The manure is worked into the soil deeply to improve drainage prior to any planting. Agricultural lime is also used to raise the pH and double super-phosphate or bone meal is incorporated into the soil before planting.

The Club is maintained by two su-

perintendents: Zachariah Mehru is primarily in charge of the ornamental plantings and Joseph Lucas the turf, but each shares the responsibilities. Because no educational opportunities are available in East Africa in the areas of ornamental horticulture or turfgrass management, superintendents are not easy to find. Lucas attended a school in South Africa where he learned plant identification and some basic golf course care; Mehru had attended forestry school in Kenya and got his experience working for the horticulture unit of the City Council of Nairobi.

## Many hands needed

Working for Mehru and Lucas are 60 crewmen, 30 full-time and 30 part-time. This might seem like a large staff for a 100-acre facility, but keep in mind that it is intensely landscaped and that very little power equipment is available. The crew's only educa-

Ann Reilly owns Horticultural Communications Ltd. and is a noted freelance garden writer. Her current project involves editing a new edition of the Time/Life Books garden series.



At an altitude of 7,000 feet, Mt. Kenya Safari Club stays cool in times of dire heat yet lies just beneath cloud cover.

tion in horticultural and landscaping practices is what they are taught by the superintendents.

Diseases are rare on ornamental plants and turf in this part of East Af-

rica, and no type of prevention or control is ever needed. Insects are around a bit—they haven't ever seen a beetle or a grub on the property, but they have their fair share of white ants.

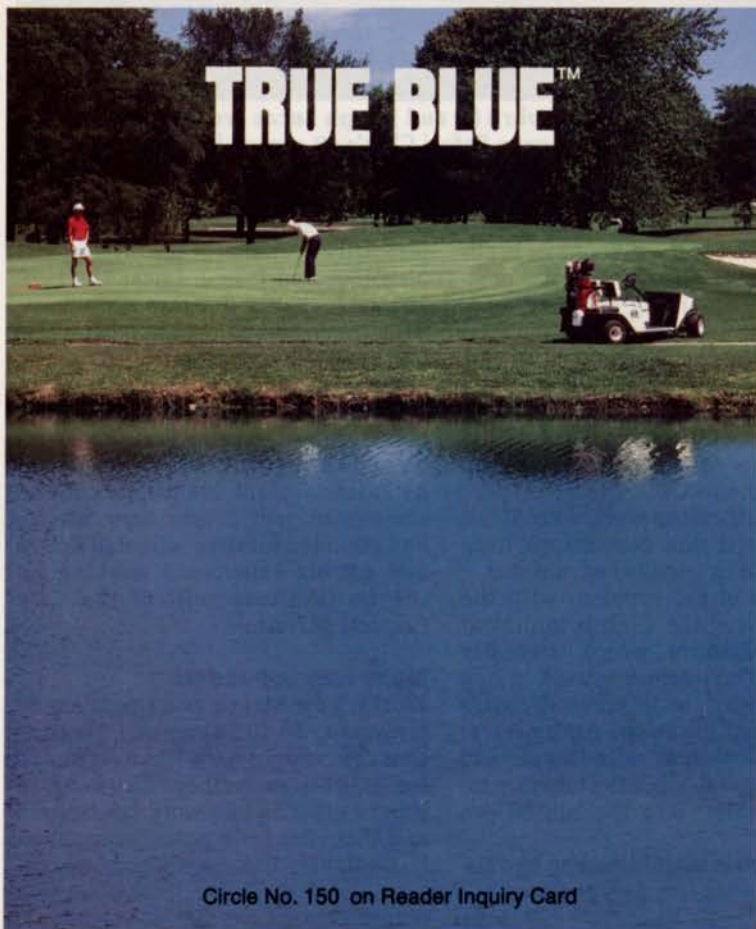
Insect control causes no problem. Malathion, diazinon and dithane are the most common insecticides, sprayed every 14 days when a problem exists. There are no licensing requirements; Kenya is an agricultural country and insecticides are easy to obtain.

Herbicides are not easy to find, though. Weeding is all done by hand, achievable in the flower beds but near impossible in turf.

The biggest problem with pests at the club is the wild animals. Superintendents in deer-ridden areas will understand the frustration of finding chewed plants and soggy footprints in the morning after the wild game has visited the night before. Ambush insecticide is used as an animal and bird repellent, but is giving far from complete control. The club is not fenced in, so the animals are free to roam. They won't usually go too near the buildings and bother the flower beds, but they will do a lot of damage on the golf course.

Fairways and tees are fertilized every six months with a mixture of super phosphate and calcium ammonium nitrate. Again, fertilizers are easy to come by because of the agri-

*continued on page 76*



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JANUARY 1989/LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT 73

## Who is better off—Americans or Africans?

What is amazing to me at the Mount Kenya Safari Club—and in the rest of East Africa as well—is the ingenuity taken to accomplish the same job we're used to doing with some sort of powerized equipment.

I watched a woman removing footprints from the lawn by watering them by hand and brushing them out with a broom made from a few tree branches. That same broom was used later in the day as a rake to collect grass clippings.

When new planting beds are added, the ground is broken up by hand by a man or woman using a jembe, a homemade tool that looks something like an ax. That same tool, not a shovel, is used for digging holes.

Flowers aren't planted with trowels. When new beds are ready for plants, the soil is divided with a machete-like, "Crococile Dundee"-sized knife, the plant dropped in, the knife pulled out and the soil tapped into place.

The day before I left for Africa, I

received a letter from superintendent John Lucas asking me if I could bring him a book on golf course management, which he can't buy in Kenya. Not having time to do that, I took him and Zechariah Mehru a box of old magazines which were the first of its kind they had ever seen. Nothing exists that is even close to our turf associations or golf course superintendents groups.

Are we better off? In many ways, yes; in others, I'm not so sure. Throughout East African clubs, hotels, lodges and restaurants are landscapes that will rival the most impressive in our country. Yet they are accomplished with little equipment and little more resources than manual labor and imagination.

I think we have a lot to learn from the East Africans, if only to bring ourselves back to earth once in a while to realize how fortunate we are in so many ways. Yet, since they can produce the same results,



**African ingenuity: a broom made of tree branches is used to remove footprints from the clubhouse lawn.**

and seem to be much happier in their simpler life, who is really the better off?


—Ann Reilly □

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## SAFARI from page 72

cultural economy. Urea is used on the greens, mixed with a top dressing of soil and compost before it is applied. Flower beds, when properly prepared, will last for two to three years before they need another fertilizing.

Cut flowers abound throughout the club—in the rooms, hallways, restaurants, even on the bulletin board. Although the former cutting garden was allowed to deteriorate, leading to the purchase of all cut flowers today, the cutting garden has been replanted and should be producing its own roses, chrysanthemums and alstroemeria within six months. When these plants reach maturity, it will eliminate the twice-weekly delivery of flowers from greenhouses outside Nairobi.

## Greenhouse effect

Mehru hopes to have a greenhouse soon to replace the one that no longer has a roof. Cut flowers can be grown outdoors, but a greenhouse is necessary for starting annual seeds and protecting some plants from the sun and insect problems.

Container plantings are usually mulched with sheets of moss. When

that is not available, a combination of shredded paper and wood chips is used. I watched several women filling planters to decorate a spot outside of the restaurant. The plants they were using were grown in paper or plastic sheeting and placed as-is into the container, with this paper/bark mulch put in between the roots to keep them more moist.

Watering is done manually. When necessary, sprinklers are turned on and off by hand. Unlike other sections of East Africa, this area has no water shortage problem as the runoff from the snow-capped mountain offers a constant supply.

Turf in the lawns and on the golf course is kikuyugrass, a tough and coarse grass that is considered by many superintendents in California, where it grows in the U.S., to be a weed.

Lucas is in the process of removing the kikuyugrass on the greens and replacing it with bentgrass. It is difficult to kill, however, so he'll probably dig it out. The bentgrass will be planted with plugs, as grass seed is not available in East Africa. At the same time, new bunkers will be added, but not cart paths. Carts are still not allowed; everybody walks.

## The do-everything grass

Kikuyugrass is used on tees, greens and fairways. It's mowed to different heights and is perfectly adaptable to these varying growth conditions. Greens are cut to  $\frac{1}{16}$  to  $\frac{1}{8}$  of an inch and fairways to about one inch with a Toro three-gang mower or Bunton greensmower. Grass is usually cut about twice a week.

The amazing thing about kikuyugrass is its perseverance. When Lucas wanted to raise and level the tees, he simply added a four-inch layer of soil and compost on top of the current tee. In a matter of weeks, the grass was growing through the new soil layer.

Mt. Kenya Safari Club, then, is a truly beautiful attraction. Thus, the club is surrounded by large private homes. One belongs to Stephanie Powers, a good friend of the late actor Holden, who also runs an animal orphanage nearby.

For six weeks every year (not when the weather is best), the club closes to the safariers and is reserved for its members only. Mt. Kenya Club offers golf, bocce, lawn bowling, horseback riding, fishing, tennis, mountain climbing and a pool. **LM**

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# IRRIGATION IDIOMS

Taking on maintenance of an existing irrigation system often provides unwanted and unexpected headaches. Here's how to avoid the Tylenol.

by Jerry Roche, editor

**Y**our landscape company has just agreed to perform regular maintenance on Wonder Company's five-acre irrigated landscape. It's going to be a nice money-maker, you're thinking.

But on your crew's first trip to the site, one of your mowers runs over a protruding sprinkler head. Instant chaos. Not too long thereafter, another head springs a leak. A bad leak. Later that same summer, in mid-July, the lawn develops a large round brown spot: another head has malfunctioned and the grass burns out.

What promised to be a profitable account has turned into a nightmare.

What could you have done to avoid some of the aforementioned problems?

Michael Essenwein of RainBird has some answers, as he told members of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America at the recent Green Team conference and trade show.

"Rather than have to use a band-aid approach, you should outline a preventive program first," said Essenwein.

The first step is to locate a site plan through the company under contract. Even if you need to go all the way back to the original landscape architect, do it.

Next, you need to locate the point of connection, where the irrigation system ties into a water source. That will be one of two spots: a pump or well or a potable water system. "You should be concerned with the potential for problems and correct errors in the existing system," Essenwein said.

Check that the connection to a potable water system has the proper (and working) backflow system, or you could be in for big troubles. "Install the proper valves here, if necessary, to isolate the irrigation system," Essenwein adds.

At this time, also check the irrigation pipe exposed to the air that leads into the ground. Galvanized pipe is always better than PVC.



Essenwein: "More people are using moisture sensors to eliminate a water cycle after a recent rainfall or when the soil is already moist."

If the point of connection is exposed it should either be boxed or, more preferably, placed under the cover of landscape plants. This will avoid accidental mower damage.

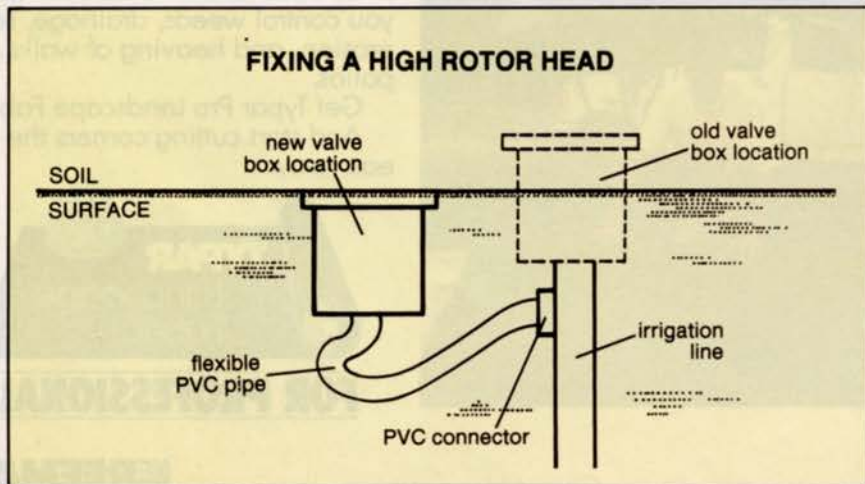
Next, go to the controller. This will be either a solid-state unit with a keypad and LED display, or a mechanical unit with switches and dials. The newer solid-state models are more versatile in their programming capabilities and lend themselves more easily to drip irrigation. The older mechanical models are usually easier to program.

"Find the instruction manual," Essenwein suggested, "even if you have to go to a local distributor. Don't shy away, though, because of water conservation considerations, from electronic solid state models. They are the coming thing."

The next task that has to be performed is to sequence the system through its zones, turning water to each station on and off.

"And with water conservation efforts, more people are using moisture sensors to eliminate a water cycle after a recent rainfall or when the soil is already moist," Essenwein noted. "If there is one, familiarize yourself with it. If there isn't one, it's a good idea to install one."

Next step is to locate the valves by starting at the wiring on the controller. Check the wiring using an ohmmeter. If you retain the account for





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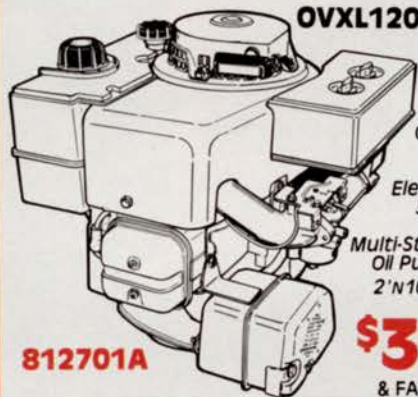
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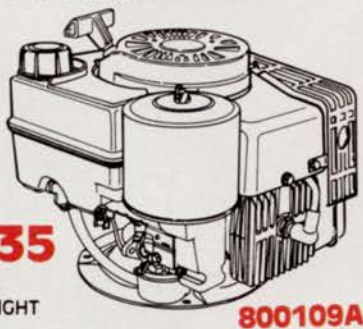
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The first step when installing an irrigation system is to locate a site plan through the company under contract. Even if you need to go all the way back to the original landscape architect, do it.

more than one year, "it's a good idea to do it every year," Essenwein suggested.

If a valve is not working, the problem is either the controller, the valve or a break in the line. Essenwein pointed out that Progressive Electronics has a device that will track underground wires to minimize trenching damage. He said to make sure to disconnect the valve wire from the controller and hook up an earth ground before doing anything else. "If you don't have success with the Progressive Electronics unit," he noted, "some irrigation contractors offer this as a service." When the break is found, repair it using waterproof connectors.

The newer, solid-state models are more versatile in their programming capabilities and lend themselves more easily to drip irrigation.

"Not having waterproof wiring is the single most important factor if there are problems," Essenwein said. "Put them in at the valve, if they are not. If the wire to the valve is pulled tight, then you might even need an extra length of wire."

Too much water pressure on the line creates a lot of problems. Check the flow control and adjust it as necessary.

If, during testing, the head gets stuck in the "up" position, you'll have to remove sand and debris from the seal. Replace it now, before it is broken off. You may have to take the unit apart and clean the filter screen, too.

"For heads above grade, flexible PVC pipe is available to correct the problem," says Essenwein (see illustration). "For loose soil around the head, ground stabilizers are available. And for broken heads or nozzles, the Geyser-Off is a remarkable device that cuts water to the head or nozzle off when water is flowing through at a high rate."

Take lots of notes during your first run through the system.

"All irrigation systems are bound to fail from time to time," concludes Essenwein. "If you understand the product, it'll be easier to choose something that will do the right job."

LM

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