

## Get Wild

Native vegetation can energize your golf course, but proper planning is imperative to the process

By **Jeff Bollig**



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

Formerly Turfgrass: Matt Taylor, the certified golf course superintendent at the 36-hole Royal Poinciana Golf Club, says this wetland was man-made and then adorned with natural areas.

*Photo: Courtesy of Royal Poinciana Golf Club*

Native vegetation on the golf course can result in reduced inputs, add striking color contrasts and provide excellent wildlife habitat.

So, creating such features is a no-brainer, right?

Only with detailed advanced preparation, says a panel of golf course industry experts with experience in native plants.

### Begin with education

Jan Bel Jan spent more than 20 years working for architect Tom Fazio before starting her own golf course design company more than five years ago. With a degree in landscape architecture, she has worked on countless ventures with native complexes. Like any other project, Bel Jan says a scope of work needs to be created, including the selection of plant varieties, location, ongoing maintenance requirements and aesthetic impact on the property.

"I use the cliche 'right plant, right place,' but would add 'for the right reason,'" Bel Jan says. "It begins by making sure the project minimally impacts playing areas to avoid pace-of-play issues. Then, develop a list of materials that are native to the area. Next, know your property and make sure any plans and plants tie in with the existing features and those of the property that surrounds it. Then, understand and envision the plants as they mature. This helps define spacing, sizes, quantity, purchase and installation costs and final selection."

Greg Lyman, an award-winning environmental consultant, says the industry is in a better place regarding the installation of natives thanks to the work of public park systems, university research, the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf and a growing body of golf course case studies. He is in lockstep agreement with Bel Jan that planning and preparation is vital to success, but also notes that the best plans will go awry if not properly communicated.

"It's really no different than adding a bunker or a water feature or moving a green," Lyman says. "You need to present the native projects in a similar manner and be able to answer questions as to cost, what it will look like, what wildlife will be attracted, and what the impact will be on play."



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

What It Takes: While proper planning is vital for native areas, "it's not rocket science," says Matt Taylor, the certified golf course superintendent at the 36-hole Royal Poinciana Golf Club.

### **The stigma is waning**

Lyman and Bel Jan believe the trend toward using more natives began 25 to 30 years ago because management and owners more readily understood the benefits, and there was a shift on what a golf course should look like. They believe the concept of wall-to-wall green is dying and say there is growing acceptance that golf courses can provide wildlife habitat via naturalized areas.

In 1990, the USGA Green Section Record featured an extensive case study on how a private club within the city limits of St. Louis could add native vegetation and still provide the beauty that exotics had previously provided. In the piece, which was written by a superintendent, the argument was that the success and allure of public gardens could be replicated on golf courses.

Almost 25 years later, facilities can take much of the guesswork out of such projects, as resources abound to help ensure successful implementation of natives including public park officials, university extension offices, universities, consultants and those in the golf industry who have taken the plunge with much success.

### **It only makes cents**

Tim Hiers, the golf course manager at Old Collier Golf Club in Naples, Florida, has considerable experience with native species, including working with Bel Jan when he first started including native features on courses. Never one to stray far from the economics of golf course management, Hiers takes a common-sense approach to integrating native areas.

"We don't have a sustainable model to maintain golf courses," Hiers states, as if he was testifying at a hearing on Capitol Hill. "The cost of maintaining a course since 1970 has gone up as much as 750 percent, while the annual CPI has gone up 2.5 percent. It's simple math. Is it cheaper to have 100 acres of maintained turf or only 70 acres of it?"

The savings come with a caveat, however, according to Hiers. As golf course superintendents have been faced with doing more with less due to budget cuts and increasing costs, they have had to look for ways to keep from sacrificing quality. Hiers says he hasn't necessarily reduced his budget, but adding native areas has allowed him to reallocate resources to in-play areas.

### **Naturalized Areas Provide Opportunity for Maintenance Staff to Learn, Hiers Says**



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

*Photo: Courtesy of Old Collier Golf Club*

Leave it up to Tim Hiers to have every angle covered when it comes to managing a golf course.

So much of the discussion about native vegetation focuses on the golf course and golfers, but Hiers, the golf course manager at The Old Collier Golf Club in Naples, Florida, is quick to add a third aspect where naturalized areas can have a positive contribution - the golf course management team.

"I feel I have an obligation to provide professional development opportunities for staff," Hiers says. "I remember learning so much earlier in my career when we took on similar projects. It prepared me to advance in my career. Let's face it - there is enough turf to maintain. This gives them some variety and teaches them a different aspect of golf course management.

"We all need to get out of our comfort zone," Hiers continues. "I have had staff learn a great deal about wildlife management through these projects by giving them additional responsibilities. I have been able to delegate to them. The response has been positive. They like learning something new and doing something different in their work."

To that end, Hiers suggests that superintendents delegate the project to an assistant or a group of staff members. It helps to build an individual's résumé, while lightening the load on the lead superintendent.

*- Jeff Bollig*

"That's all part of the communications process," says Hiers, a certified golf course superintendent. "If you're going to sell it as a cost-saving effort, you need to first understand there will be an investment to get started, and then some labor for ongoing maintenance. That has to be figured in. But I find most superintendents have used the savings to focus on other aspects of the course that need more attention."

### **A positive message**

Hiers also points to the public relations value provided by incorporating natives on golf courses. He has conducted numerous golf course tours for Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials, schools, community groups and others, with positive feedback. He said the opportunity to position golf courses as being compatible with the environment, and in many ways leaders of environmental stewardship, has been crucial to shaping perception in his region.

Kyle Sweet, the certified golf course superintendent at The Sanctuary Golf Club on Sanibel Island, Florida, manages the only facility in the nation surrounded by a National Wildlife Refuge. Thus, his management programs must be developed with significant care and approval from preserve officials. Sweet began to add acres of native areas because he knew water supplies were going to be compromised in the future.



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

Before and After: An area before (top) and after (bottom) it was naturalized at The Sanctuary Golf Club.



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

"It's everywhere," Sweet says. "Golf courses are facing water shortages and, at times, mandatory cutbacks. It really doesn't make sense to put water on areas where there is no play. That's what drove me to look at how we could put more areas into native plants."

### **Starting the project**

Matt Taylor, the certified golf course superintendent at the 36-hole Royal Poinciana Golf Club in Naples, Florida, says while proper planning is imperative, "it's not rocket science."

"While you need to study what others are doing, you have to know what works best for your course," Taylor explains. "Even though Tim or Kyle might be a few miles away, elevation and soil conditions might dictate that I use different varieties or features. We took out 6 acres of maintained bermuda and installed waste bunkers with some natives. That might not work for other facilities."

As is often the case, labor and money might be in short supply, so it's important to take advantage of available resources. It might be that the master plan calls for implementation in stages and/or outside resources might need to be contracted. The first two or three years will be spent on establishing the areas by first eradicating weeds and then nurturing the young natives.

Imperative in the early phase of the project is working with management and golfers to understand how to design and implement it without impacting play. That is where being clear on what the project will look like in the long term is important, so a decision can be made in the beginning without the need for changes in later years.

### **Maintenance is needed**

Speaking from experience, Hiers, Sweet and Taylor are quick to point out that while native areas have frequently been portrayed as no-maintenance features, this isn't the case. While labor is typically reduced, weeds must be controlled and periodic clearing is necessary. Some golf courses will burn areas similar to what is done by farmers in prairie lands, while others will use Bush Hogs or other devices.



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

Dealing With Water Shortages: Kyle Sweet, the certified golf course superintendent at The Sanctuary Golf Club on Sanibel Island, Florida, removed turf and installed aggregate material and native plants on this hole.  
*Photos: Courtesy of the Sanctuary Golf Club*

There are advantages and disadvantages to burning versus the cutting and clearing of plant matter. Burning returns valuable nutrients to the soil in the form of potash, but getting permits to do controlled burns can be tedious. In addition, unpredictable wind conditions can challenge even the most experienced technician.

Hiers, Sweet and Taylor don't do any maintenance on these areas in the off-season, which generally corresponds with wildlife having migrated and limited play on the course. Still, care must be taken to not disturb what the wildlife has created. In one particular berm at The Old Collier Golf Club, there are 14 gopher tortoise dens that snakes, frogs, rats, mice and other animals call home.

Water management is also important, according to the three superintendents. Care must be taken to make sure irrigation heads do not throw water on these areas because this will promote overgrowth and the appearance of weeds, and extra labor will be required to eradicate them.

### **Enhancing the experience**

Lyman believes that ownership and superintendents should share an additional message with golfers, focusing on what native complexes add to the golf experience. He says the contrast and changing colors throughout the year provide for a striking backdrop to the game.

"Again, we have enough of a body of work to show us what a golf course can be by incorporating different vegetation into the property," Lyman says. "The early adopters had to sell on faith that golfers would like it. The evidence is pretty clear in my mind that the experience for golfers at courses that have converted is perceived to be better."

*Bollig, who spent nearly 18 years at the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America including as senior communications director, can be reached at [jbollig84@gmail.com](mailto:jbollig84@gmail.com).*