

Naturalizing: A Superintendent's Perspective

Going natural can be a win-win situation, but it pays to follow good advice and start slowly.

by PETER SALINETTI, CGCS, CCM

OUR CLUB IS LISTED WITH Audubon International as a charter member of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses. When we joined, my initial feeling about the program was that it felt like the right thing to do as someone who was concerned about the environment. The first few years we just paid our dues and received the mailings sent out from Audubon's headquarters. Occasionally I would take out my certification packet and look over the resource inventory information and feel somewhat overwhelmed. It's my suspicion that a great

number of superintendents feel the same way when they first join the program. One winter, feeling somewhat guilty for having put my certification packet from one desk drawer to another, I finally decided to work on my resource inventory. When that was done, I slowly began to chip away at the six certification categories.

One category I found to be particularly interesting was Wildlife and Habitat Management. This category encompasses the management of non-play areas to provide habitat for wildlife on the golf course. Certification is granted for management practices and

habitat enhancement projects that maximize the use of the golf course property to provide the best possible habitat, given the course's location, size, and layout. A description of wildlife food, cover, and water enhancement projects, a list of wildlife species on the property, and a simple map showing habitat areas are required documentation. At the Schuyler Meadows Club we are blessed with about 200 acres of very diverse habitat.

When I received my initial report back from Audubon International summarizing my Resource Inventory Report, I was particularly interested



Areas like this no longer need the irrigation system to survive.

in their recommendations regarding naturalizing non-play areas. Their report included the following comments: "We are pleased you have some no-mow areas and wildflower areas on the course. Look for other non-play areas that you currently maintain with mowed grass and target these for naturalization with taller grasses, shrubs, or trees. You may be able to reduce mowing on the 122 out-of-play acres by naturalizing some of these areas. Further naturalization will extend available habitat, add distinctive contrast to the manicured look of in-play areas, and substantially reduce maintenance time spent on mowing. Areas between fairways, under smaller stands of trees, and along wooded edges may be suitable. These areas do not have to be large — you can start small and expand over time, where possible. Initially, you may be able to simply mow once or twice per year to allow taller grasses to grow. We also recommend adding plugs of native

grasses and perennial wildflowers to add diversity and beauty over time."

Additional comments included: "At the Schuyler Meadows Club, you have a great potential to provide habitat for wildlife, maintain a high degree of environmental quality, and offer golfers a challenging game. Based on your resource inventory, it looks like you have begun to balance these needs. We commend your current efforts to leave natural vegetative buffers around the creek, allow natural areas around the course, and continue to expand your integrated pest management plan."

We did follow the advice of Audubon International and start naturalizing slowly and in small areas. We had no idea how quickly this concept would gain acceptance with our members. Now, we cannot have a green committee meeting without the subject of additional "no-mow" areas being discussed. Our course is 71 years old and has a tremendous amount of the older types of fescues in the unirrigated parts

of the rough. When unmowed, the grasses provide a beautiful contrast to our maintained turf. To quote our Green Chairman, Dan Walsh, "We've always been looking for ways to make our course more interesting and exciting — how do you spell *fescue*?"

So, naturalizing has added a new challenge to our golfers' game, and they're happy. We have much more habitat for our wildlife, and they're happy. We spend a lot less time mowing rough, and I'm very happy. Talk about a win-win situation. Give some serious thought to naturalizing, but follow Audubon's advice — start slowly.

PETER SALINETTI serves the Schuyler Meadows Club, Loudonville, N.Y., as both Superintendent and General Manager. In 1995, the Schuyler Meadows Club became the first fully certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary golf course in New York State.



Contrast and definition are other benefits of naturalizing.