

The Rocky Road to De-Treeing Your Course

Areas Supers Reveal the Ins and Outs of Selling and Implementing a Tree Management Program on Their Course

Grass dies beneath them. Their branches obstruct the natural line of play. They hog sunlight and water and even pose safety hazards. Yet golfers insist on protecting them.

What are we talking about? The mature trees on our golf courses—of course.

Superintendents at older clubs throughout the country have long recognized the meddlesome effects of trees on golf course turf and playability. USGA agronomists, golf course architects, arborists, and turfgrass researchers have penned countless articles on the merits of selective tree removal. Yet trying to convince green chairmen and club members of the benefits of “de-treeing” our golf courses is still a delicate matter, if not uphill battle, for many golf course superintendents.

Tree removal is so politically and emotionally charged, in fact, that some courses begin chainsawing trees on the q.t.—to avoid the wrath of tree-hugging members.

One course that admits to such surreptitious tree removal is the famed home of seven U.S. Opens, Oakmont Country Club outside of Pittsburgh. In the dark of night, then superintendent Mark Kuhns assembled a SWAT team that worked by headlights clearing trees—and every bit of evidence—in the wee hours, while members were still asleep.

Sad that it had to come to that. But fortunately, that’s a practice of the past, taking place more than a decade ago. Since then, after much quiet persuasion and politicking, Oakmont has gotten the go-ahead to fell at least 3,500 trees, fully restoring the golf course. Oakmont is, once again, just as architect Henry Fownes had intended it to be: with a renewed emphasis on the bunkering and the dramatic contours of its fairways and greens—rather than on trees, or as the Scots have dubbed them, “bunkers in the sky.”

Oakmont is not alone. Many of America’s 100 Greatest Golf Courses—and many Met area courses—have initiated tree-removal programs to bring back vistas, eliminate double hazards, and first and foremost, improve turfgrass conditions. The process for most have followed a similar path to Oakmont’s: initial wariness—even opposition—giving way to almost unanimous support of the results.

With more area courses looking to embark on tree removal projects of their own, we thought we’d ask member superintendents who have sold their clubs on tree removal to share their formulas for success. Here’s what’s worked—and how it’s helped their courses. Has it been worth the fight? All would give their efforts an unequivocal thumbs up.

Pelham Country Club
Pelham Manor, NY
Jeff Wentworth, CGCS

Our program was not an easy sell. We tried to soften the blow by marketing it as a tree *maintenance*—rather than removal—program. Pelham is serious about the 1,260 specimen trees on the property. We had a complete inventory done in 2002 by

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StrataPoint, Inc., which included a GPS map and tree care and tree removal recommendations.

We worked long and hard to convince “the powers that be” that various trees should be taken down. We targeted trees that were affecting turf growth and playability, that were in poor condition, or that were not indigenous to our area, such as willows, Siberian elms, and Bradford pears.

We started by digitally photographing each tree to be removed and describing its condition. This year, we did 98 trees, posting information on each of them on our website in addition to presenting the info to the Green and Golf committees and then to the membership at an open meeting.

When all was said and done, we had near-unanimous support to remove all 98 trees. Working with our arborist, we took down 78 of those trees this past January and February. In 2005, we'll remove the remaining 20.

As part of this plan, we agreed to replace about one-quarter of the trees we cut. Most of them were placed along property lines, primarily near the first hole and range, where they were used as screens. We were careful not to locate any trees where they would affect play or fine turf areas.

This first go-round was a sort of trial run for the rest to come. And so far, so good. Turf health has improved in many areas, particularly on the 8th and 13th greens, which each had a 36-inch DBH oak growing within two yards of the putting surface. The overall aesthetics of the course have also improved, and the features on the 1st and 4th are dramatically more visible. Better still, the members are very happy with the results.

Next year, we plan to work with ArborCom Technologies to pinpoint trees surrounding the 10th and 15th greens to either be removed or selectively pruned so that we might improve growing conditions in those areas. We are also hoping that the service will help us to pinpoint and then do what's necessary to highlight the many specimen trees in those areas. The trees surrounding holes 9, 10, 13, 14, and 15 were specimens on the property before the course was constructed, and they're now an integral part of the golf course.

Scarsdale Golf Club

Hartsdale, NY

Matt Severino

Selling a tree management program at our club was relatively easy. It helped, of course, that I had Dave Oatis's USGA Turf Advisory Service report, which supported most of my recommendations. I was primarily concerned with improving the turf quality or poor growing environments on our 13th and 16th greens and on our 17th green and tee.

Before taking an axe to any of the trees, we formed a decision-making group made up of me and five members, including two of the most vocal tree huggers at the club. We toured the course, looking at all the trees in question and made a decision on each and every one. We agreed to remove most of the trees I proposed but decided to delay some others to see if turf conditions improved with pruning or more selective removals.

Tree replacement was also part of the program. It's easier to sell a tree removal plan if you promise to replace trees where needed. But really, it's wasted effort to cut down one misplaced tree and then plant another. In some cases, you could plant trees in places that don't affect turf areas, but at that point, it becomes a numbers game of cutting and planting trees.

The approval process was quick, requiring that I present a tree removal plan to my Grounds Committee and later to the board. I was spared presenting the plan to the entire membership.

In the end, we removed 30 mature trees on the three holes. It wasn't a large number, but the trees were all large oaks, which were noticeable to the average golfer. Despite the obvious void, the membership has been happy with the outcome, and better, the club is receptive to future tree work.

Sleepy Hollow Country Club
Scarborough, NY
Tom Leahy, CGCS

We called in numerous industry authorities to help us market our tree removal program at the club. We began the process seven years ago, seeking counsel from the USGA, ArborCom, our own arborist, and our architect, Ken Dye.

Our objectives were ambitious. Like most superintendents concerned with turf quality, I wanted to improve microenvironments around the property through selective tree and brush removal. In October 1998, we called in ArborCom to study six sites for us. They sent Herb Waterous, who pinpointed trees that were blocking sunlight on some of our green and tee sites. We methodically removed those trees that blocked the most light, particularly morning sunlight, which is so crucial to long-term turf health.

Another part of our plan was to showcase our course's numerous majestic trees. Many were being choked by vines and underbrush that needed to be removed in order to improve their health and appearance.

Last but not least, we wanted to showcase rock outcroppings and vistas of the Hudson River that had become obscured over the years as saplings grew and trees matured.

In the past seven years, it's safe to say we've taken down several hundred trees per year. Most of those removed were nonspecimen trees or trees that were poorly formed due to overcrowding.

The membership was hesitant about our tree removal plans at first, but we moved slowly, making sure to build confidence along the way.

Now, everyone seems to realize that our tree program has enhanced the beauty of our site, improved our river views, and ultimately, enhanced turf conditions.

Siwanoy Country Club
Bronxville, NY
Dave Mahoney

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We removed more than 250 trees throughout the course during our golf course renovation project, which we completed more than two years ago. We closely followed the recommendation of the architect in deciding which trees to remove.

We had the luxury of having the nine holes we were working on closed while the work was being completed. When the golfers came back out the following spring, the work was done, and the trees we removed were hardly missed.

Our goal was like everyone else's: We were overplanted and needed to remove trees to improve turf growth. We also strived to highlight one or two of the more impressive trees in various areas of the course by removing surrounding weaker trees that were cluttering the area and impeding the growth of the more desirable trees. When the work was done, we were left with one or two trees in each area as beautiful focal points.

If I were to recommend one thing, it would be to be aggressive in the removal process. If you do a bare minimum, you're still going to have shade problems, and those who were against removing trees will still be upset. It's hard for anyone to argue against the process when the turf dramatically improves.

Woodway Country Club

Darien, CT

Larry Pakkala, CGCS

Marketing a tree removal program is always controversial, and when there's a large number of decision makers involved, it's difficult to get a consensus on what needs to be done.

Our decisions to remove trees took considerable time, research, and money. I met countless times with my Green Committee to discuss the agronomic, as well as design issues dictating tree removal.

Before initiating these discussions in 1998, I'd been struggling to grow grass in heavily shaded areas on several greens and tee complexes. They were located in a section of Woodway known as "the Hill"—a knoll thickly populated by beautiful old oaks.

I had learned to grow grass on the greens in these areas, but it required an extremely labor-intensive maintenance regime, and each year, by fall, the turf's carbohydrate reserves would start to become depleted, and the greens would begin to decline. Worse, they would become susceptible to disease problems. Finally after some of my greens were hit with necrotic ring spot, which didn't heal until the following spring, I called in ArborCom to conduct a formal sunlight analysis. We were the first in the area to use their service. The Care of Trees, Woodway's arborists for the past 45 years, had recommended we consult with ArborCom.

Working with the company's founder, Scott Robinson, and with Herb Waterous, whom we all know, we were able to pinpoint the trees that were the culprits in impeding light beneficial for growing turf.

Scott and Herb recommended we remove 50 trees from the Hill, which is where our 6th and 10th greens and 7th and 11th tee complexes are located.

To date we've removed 20 of those trees. Though this was a compromise, enough trees were removed to allow in the early morning sunlight necessary to substantially

enhance turf growth. All the turf in this area is *Poa annua*, which tolerates lower levels of sunlight. If it were bentgrass, more trees would have had to come down.

I have to say, our tree removal project was a complete success. The membership was extremely pleased with the outcome, and so was I.

Westchester Country Club

Rye, NY

Joe Alonzi, CGCS

Tree removal is rarely popular to start. It's no different at our club. To help ease the controversy and assure the membership that our decisions to remove various trees were well grounded, we consulted with the USGA, our arborist, and our architect. Together, we identified our weakest turf areas, which—no surprise—were shaded by trees. Then we agreed on a tree removal plan on a number of our green surrounds, tee surrounds, and specific landing areas.

None of the trees we removed were quality specimen trees. Most were silver maples, Norway maples, white pines, spruces, and willows. After our initial round of removals, the complaints and grumblings seemed to subside.

Our tree program is ongoing. Over the course of 10 years, we've removed hundreds of trees, all in the name of improved sunlight, less turf stress, and ultimately, better playing conditions. Some of the removals actually brought back the architect's original intent on how that particular hole should be played.

People, for the most part, were happy with the outcome—though there will always be those who disagree with any tree removal effort.

Oak Hills Park Golf Course

Norwalk, CT

Glen Dube, CGCS

Seeing is believing in my book. I marketed our tree removal program by taking members of my Green Committee out on the golf course the spring of 2003 to show them how the shade from surrounding trees was hampering our greens' recovery from the severe ice damage we sustained earlier that year.

All went well until I tagged the proposed cut-downs with fluorescent tape. I did this so various tree companies could see what we wanted to take out and then bid on the job. That's when the tree-loving public came out of the woods, protesting the fact that we were planning to take out so many large, healthy trees.

Needless to say, after the bidding process was over, the tape came down, and the controversy stopped—until the work was completed this past winter. Then some of the neighbors joined the tree-loving golfers and demanded to know why we cut down so many trees. After explaining the formula for photosynthesis and the role sunlight plays in that process, things settled down a bit.

When all was said and done, we had removed a couple of hundred trees from around about half of our green complexes. Selecting trees for removal was not a snap

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decision. I went out and inspected all of our problem areas at various times over the course of six months to isolate only those trees that had to be removed. I call it the poor man's ArborCom.

One facet of the project that I found to be very important was that we cleaned up before we opened in the spring. All of the wood was removed from the course and stumps were ground out, filled, and seeded—even though it was March.

I'm happy to say that, this season, our greens are in much better shape. That usually equals happy golfers too. Many people think the course looks better without the trees. But the reality is, once the leaves on the surrounding trees came out, many golfers didn't even realize we had removed any trees. Out of sight, out of mind, I guess!

Old Oaks Country Club

Purchase, NY

Mark Millett

As part of the golf course restoration project we just completed, we took a long, hard look at all the trees on our course. Our objective was, first and foremost, to improve agronomics and playability. We've seen a big improvement in turf quality around green complexes, particularly on holes 4, 5, 14, and 17. We've also been able to reestablish much of the rough in strategic areas on various holes. The results have been so dramatic that our membership doesn't even blink an eye, now, when we talk about removing a tree. They've seen how selective tree removal can improve playability.

The other objective of our tree removal program was to highlight some of our specimen trees. Old Oaks has a number of beautiful, large hardwood trees that are positioned strategically throughout the course. These gorgeous specimens were being hidden by smaller, undesirable species that had sprung up over the years.

During the renovation, I worked with club members and Ken Dye, our golf course architect, to determine which of these trees should be removed to not only help reestablish these grand specimens, but also create beautiful vistas throughout the course. This, like our other tree removal work, was well received.

Key to our success in reestablishing turf where we'd taken down trees was digging out the stumps rather than grinding them out. Completely removing stumps may seem more disruptive to the area initially, but the turf comes back faster in the long run.

Elements of a Successful Sell

When all was said and done, all the superintendents we spoke to seemed to have a similar formula for developing and selling a tree management program at their clubs. Here, in short, are the steps they recommend for gaining buy-in to your tree removal wants and needs.

1. Build credibility. Convincing influential people at your club that you're a knowledge expert, if not an authority, on tree removal is the most important step in getting a program approved and launched. Know the trees on your course and your golf course architect's

original design strategies. Have credible sources—articles, books—on the subject at your fingertips to support your case.

It also never hurts to arrange a game with some of the powers that be and point out opportunities for improvement as you play the course.

2. Bolster your case. Conduct a feasibility study. Seek the counsel of outside professionals, such as a certified arborist, USGA agronomist, golf course architect, or a firm like ArborCom Technologies Inc. or StrataPoint, Inc., which uses computer modeling software to help identify shade problems for turfgrass (see XXX).

Each of these specialists can help you evaluate the trees on your course from a number of perspectives: tree safety and health, the strategic nature of trees relative to the course design, and how trees are affecting turf conditions.

During this step, it helps to take a tree inventory, identifying tree types and their environments (wetlands, exposed dry areas, etc.). Identify nonnative species that were planted over the course's life. This will help in justifying the removal of certain trees.

Always have the context of the original design in mind when choosing what stays and what goes. Original course photos and drawings are invaluable here.

Take pictures and incorporate them in your presentations to club officials and members for a more professional approach.

3. Submit your plan. Your plan should be chockfull of benefits, but light on details. Presenting an overly detailed plan at this point could do more harm than good. It may appear that you have a predetermined outcome in mind, and people will be more apt to dig in their heels.

Do be sure, however, to include some approximate costs and a timeframe for completion. Another helpful tack: before formally presenting your plan, run it by any key influencers who support your efforts. They can give you the feedback you need to ensure your plan is well received.

4. Start with a “pilot” project. Begin with a small pilot project that is guaranteed to be a success. Pick a location that will visibly improve turf quality or create a beautiful vista. During the process, be sure that member play is interrupted as little as possible. That means working quickly to remove trees and clean up. Grind or remove the stump, backfill the hole, topdress, and seed. End of story.

5. Go for the “series.” Let's face it. A great pilot is more apt to lead to a successful series—of tree removals, that is. With a successful start to your tree removal program, you're ready to seek approval on the full plan. Here's where the real selling begins. Recruit friends to begin conversing with other members about the success of your pilot project and the merits of a larger initiative. Get your key influencers to work on anyone who may be opposed to the plan before your presentation.

When you present, be concise, discussing general benefits. Don't get into the details of every tree. You want to be and act knowledgeable. Those who call out or interrupt during a presentation generally aren't well informed. Be sure that someone on your board is prepared to help quiet these mindless intimidators by supporting your case.

Tip: It's best to begin by talking about how you'll improve the health of landmark trees before launching into a discussion about tree removal. This will put tree huggers at ease and point to the fact that this is an overall tree *management* plan, not a tree massacre proposal.

POSSIBLE POPOUTS

Did you know the time and money spent on maintaining weak turf could easily reach in the tens of thousands dollars each year—especially when you factor in the added expense for additional fungicides, labor for hand watering, safety pruning, and other high-maintenance practices.

So deeply rooted are trees in American golf that one in every 10 courses has some leafy reference in its name: Think of our own Old Oaks, Birchwood, Willow Ridge, and Oak Hills to name several.

Tales Sure to Turn the Tides in Favor of Tree Removal

If you're struggling to convince club officials of the merits of initiating a tree removal program on your course, why not let the pros do the talking. What follows are industry professionals' no-holds-barred sentiments about ill-conceived tree planting on golf courses.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Tree Placement

Donald Ross, golf course architect

“As beautiful as trees are, and as fond as you and I are of them, we still must not lose sight of the fact that there is a limited place for them in golf. We must not allow our sentiments to crowd out the real intent of a golf course, that of providing fair playing conditions. If it in any way interferes with a properly played stroke, I think the tree is an unfair hazard and should not be allowed to stand.”

George C. Thomas Jr., golf course architect

“Trees and shrubbery beautify the course, and natural growth should never be cut down if it is possible to save it; but he who insists on preserving a tree where it spoils a shot should have nothing to say about golf course construction.”

Jack Nicklaus, golf pro turned architect

Pinehurst No. 2 is the best course I know of from a tree-usage standpoint. It's a totally tree-lined golf course without one tree in the playing strategy of that golf course. I love what Donald Ross used to do at Pinehurst. Every year, Ross would walk through the trees and say, ‘That tree has gotten too big; you can't play a recovery shot from there anymore. Take that tree out and that tree out and cut the branches off that one.’ Then if you hit it in there, you could get in and play a recovery shot back out. Too many trees prevent recovery shots, and I think the recovery shot is a wonderful part of the game.”

Ben Crenshaw, professional golfer

“What I love most about Augusta National is that it allows ‘full expression of recovery.’ The wide corridors between the tree-lined fairways enable stray shots to still be played off turf, instead of punched sideways out of trees.”

Ron Forse, golf course architect

“Golf courses were not intended to be arboretums. Many golf courses’ original design intents and strategies have been altered or nullified by trees. Golf courses should be designed and built predominantly around ground features, whether they be existing natural topography or manmade features, such as bunkers and swales.

“One of the principle aspects of a good golf course is that it is strategic. Without alternate routes to the green, a golf hole becomes one-dimensional and takes on the characteristics of just one repetitive avenue of playing the hole. And once our golf holes lose their interest and only reward the physically superior, the true thrill of the game is lost. It is a common misconception that one should not see another golf hole from one

you are playing. Cutting off vistas violates the enjoyment of views across the golf property. Some of the great courses like Oakmont Country Club and Winged Foot Golf Club in own back yard have done major tree removal projects in order to bring back the vistas and eliminate double hazards.”

On Tree-Induced Turf Woes

Jim Snow, national director, USGA Green Section

“Trees are a natural part of our landscape, and they serve a lot of practical purposes on courses, strategic as well as aesthetic. But trees sneak up on you. They get bigger little by little, and over 20 to 30 years, they have a huge impact on golf courses, even though people around them all the time don’t realize what’s happening. Golfers need only look in their own backyards to be reminded of the inherent difficulty of growing grass beneath trees.”

Dr. Frank Rossi, turfgrass researcher, Cornell University

“It is a conundrum where trees are given equal value to the turf that provides the surface of the game. Superintendents are charged with managing an unnatural environment where turf must compete with trees for essential light, water, and nutrients.”

Gary Watschke, Agronomist, Northeastern Region, USGA Green Section

“Trees can strike turf at three angles. The negative effects can be from overshading, reduced air circulation, and root competition. A turf manager can play the game with one or two strikes, but given all three, his turf is out.”

Dr. Jim Baird, Agronomist, Northeastern Region, USGA Green Section

“In general, turf that receives regular traffic and wear requires approximately 8 to 9 hours of daily sunlight to sustain growth and recuperation. Approximately half of this sunlight is required during the morning hours when photosynthesis is optimum and in order to dry out the turf canopy to reduce disease incidence. Moreover, competition from tree roots for available water and nutrients can be just as deleterious to the turf stand. Speaking from experience, most visits that I make involving extensive turf loss are related to poor growing environments caused by surrounding trees. This was especially true of the winter injury that occurred on many golf courses in 2003.”

Ron Forse, golf course architect

“Green committees are often absent-minded to sunlight issues. Trees should never be planted so that important parts of the east and southeast sides on the golf course are severely shaded. It’s vital that the morning sun be allowed to reach the ground so the soil can warm up. This allows the turf to grow throughout the day, thereby helping it recover from stress and damage. Our tall wooded friends should also never be planted too close to greens, and shallow rooted trees, which bring so many safety problems with them, simply have no place on a golf course. In general, when it comes to trees, less is more.”

Reed Mackenzie, USGA president

“I hate trees. They end up costing you a lot of money. You get areas where you can’t grow grass. People become attached to trees, and their attachment is irrational. Trees get diseased and they fall down.”

Herb Waterous, consultant, ArborCom Technologies, Inc.

“I wish I had access to computer modeling technology when I was a superintendent. The process of mapping trees is so valuable, it really should be factored into golf course superintendents’ budgets. It should be an integral part of their tree management programs—not called on as a last-ditch effort to save their greens.”