



GOING GREEN

**With the Nobel Peace Prize going to an environmentalist,
the world's push to improve its habitat has not
been lost on the golf industry.**

By Cathy Miles Ralston

“Not everyone is a golfer or appreciates that activity, but everyone should appreciate the contribution golf courses make to the local environment.”

Dan Dinelli, longtime certified golf course superintendent at Glenview's North Shore Country Club, isn't speaking idly. As urban sprawl erodes open space and concrete and steel replace prairie and woods, a golf course takes on new roles. It becomes a verdant oasis within its community, its turf, trees and other plant life giving off oxygen, stabilizing the soil, filtering air and water. It serves as a refuge for native species of flora and fauna. Increasingly, "the golf course becomes a model for the entire community of what sustainable resource management looks like," notes Joellen Zeh, manager of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, which recognizes golf courses that document their environmentally friendly practices.

Gone are the days when greenkeepers mowed from one property line to the

next. Disappearing, too, are misconceptions of the golf industry: that pesticide use is lavish and indiscriminate, that taking care of the landscape is secondary to providing good conditions for golfers. In the latter decades of the last century, a new mindset took hold. It's a mindset that has a natural synergy with the mentality of most golf course superintendents, who are the primary stewards of their properties, and the factors that draw people to golf.

"Superintendents have gone into the industry because of their love of the outdoors and the environment," says Kim Erusha, director of education for the United States Golf Association. "Golfers enjoy being outside and the interaction with their surroundings. It just makes sense to improve that environment as much as possible."

million in research devoted to developing better grasses, reducing pesticide use, improving water conservation and enhancing wildlife habitat. The USGA employs 18 agronomists who "can take that research and put it in the hands of superintendents who make the day-to-day decisions on what happens at the golf course," Erusha says.

With heightened public awareness of environmental issues, golf course practices come under the microscope. "People's main concern is how pesticides are being applied and if they are impacting the environment," Erusha says. "They want to know about water use. And they wonder how golf courses impact the wildlife utilizing the area." Fortunately, what's happening at the golf course is fre-

Since the 1980s, the USGA has responded to the growing emphasis on the environment by partnering with land-grant universities to sponsor more than \$27



quently reassuring and enlightening.

For starters, integrated pest management (IPM) is virtually par for the course. “Part of IPM is using cultural practices that will minimize the need for pesticides,” explains Chris Pekarek, assistant superintendent at Village Links, a CDGA member club in Glen Ellyn, Ill. “You could aerify an area more to reduce thatch so there’s less disease pressure. You could remove dew by dragging a rake across fairways on days you’re not

mowing so moisture, which incubates disease, is removed.

“At Village Links, we don’t want diseases on the playing surfaces, but we set a threshold and we won’t treat until it reaches a certain level. Our golfers are pretty tolerant and don’t mind a little dollar spot on the fairway or a few dandelions. Once it hits that threshold where our customers are going to be dissatisfied, then we treat. Because we’re spraying on a curative basis only,

we’re using less pesticide, herbicide and fungicide.”

Thanks to research, today’s chemicals often are kinder and gentler than their predecessors. Choices include organic alternatives superintendents can use proactively to promote healthier, stress-resistant plants.

Water quality and conservation of that resource is another area where golf courses have demonstrated leadership. “Water is our profession’s No. 1

issue nationally,” says Dinelli. “It’s a resource that needs to be cherished and protected, and across the board we do a good job.”

Modern irrigation systems are computerized and highly maneuverable, allowing superintendents to factor in recent rainfall and forecasts to make daily, even hourly, adjustments in where and when they water. Facilities also have changed from full-circle to partial-circle irrigation heads, reducing irrigation coverage and saving water. Reasons Zeh, “There’s no need to water natural areas and cart paths.”

Village Links and North Shore are good examples of another environmental initiative many courses are undertaking: enhancement or creation of native habitat to restore a natural setting and attract wildlife.

Pekarek remembers a vastly different landscape at Village Links in the early 1970s, when he joined the staff. “We were a municipal course that mowed from fenceline to fenceline, to the water’s edge, with no natural areas,” he said. “We had the idea of trying to create a more natural-looking piece of property but didn’t know how to accomplish it without letting things grow wild and look unkempt. When Audubon joined forces with (the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America), we saw it as a great opportunity to follow a program that gave us the guidance we needed to take care of the course in an environmentally friendly way.”

Today, Village Links’ five miles of pond shoreline are 50 percent buffered, providing wildlife habitat and a natural water-filtration system. The property’s original trees, selected in the late ’60s for being “clean” plants that wouldn’t sully the golf course with seed packets, berries or nuts, have given way through a massive mid-’90s planting initiative to 80 percent native trees, such as oak and hickory, that also furnish food and shelter for wildlife. Additionally, some 40 out-of-play acres have been converted to natural prairie areas.

Dinelli launched North Shore on the path to environmental leadership in 1981, when he convinced the powers-that-be, including his father—then the superintendent—to cultivate a wildflower garden in an extensive out-of-play area near the seventh hole. “I remember being teased about the ‘weed patch,’” Dinelli recalled. “But this was a large mowed area that lent itself perfectly to planting wildflowers.”

Under a program directed by Audubon International, golf courses increasingly are finding ways to provide a habitat for wildlife. That’s a common practice for superintendent Dan Dinelli at North Shore Country Club.



In ensuing years, this would become Dinelli’s approach to introducing or extending naturalized areas. “It wouldn’t be architecturally consistent to introduce fescues between tees and fairways here,” Dinelli points out. “The opportunities lie in the out-of-play and fringe areas where we can feature wildflowers, native grasses and low-maintenance plants to make it inviting to wildlife.”

Diversification of the landscape, a Dinelli catchphrase, is about more than aesthetics. “Some people still find it difficult to appreciate naturalized areas that resemble a prairie more than a formal garden,” admits Dinelli. “I try to foster an appreciation for diversity that goes beyond ornamental. Diversity is healthy. With trees, for instance, if you had a lot of elms or ashes on your property, you’re in harm’s way right now.”

That healthy diversity attracts wildlife, too. North Shore, like many of its peers, has promoted habitats for bluebirds, purple martins, and wood ducks—but the course also is home to a nesting pair of redtail hawks. “For a raptor or bird of prey . . . to be here, that’s a biological indicator that the environment around them is healthy,” says Dinelli. “Our

ponds have wonderful bass, crappie, turtles and frogs, and we also stock rainbow trout, which are doing well.”

Naturally, a golf course resides within a larger community. So it only follows that a superintendent’s environmental stewardship has implications beyond the course property lines. Communicating the golf industry’s successes in this area does more than allay the public’s concerns; it dispels the notion that golf is a game for the elite without any real value to society. It illustrates why a golf course is a community amenity for everyone, not just the golfers.

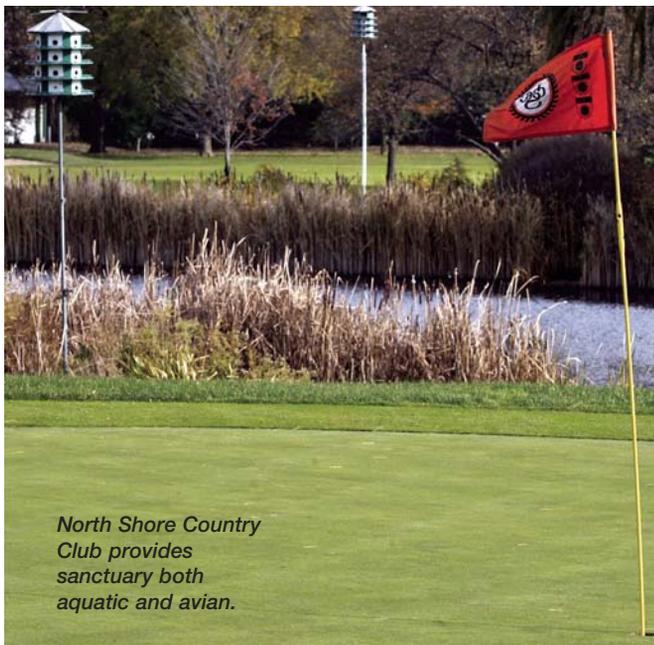
Pete Leuzinger, a turf management instructor at Kishwaukee College and consultant to golf courses pursuing Audubon recognition, has a ready example.

“The heavy rains in Chicagoland in August left many golf courses flooded,” Leuzinger recounts. “That’s because they were providing stormwater retention/detention for the local neighborhoods. Golf courses saved a lot of basements from flooding.”

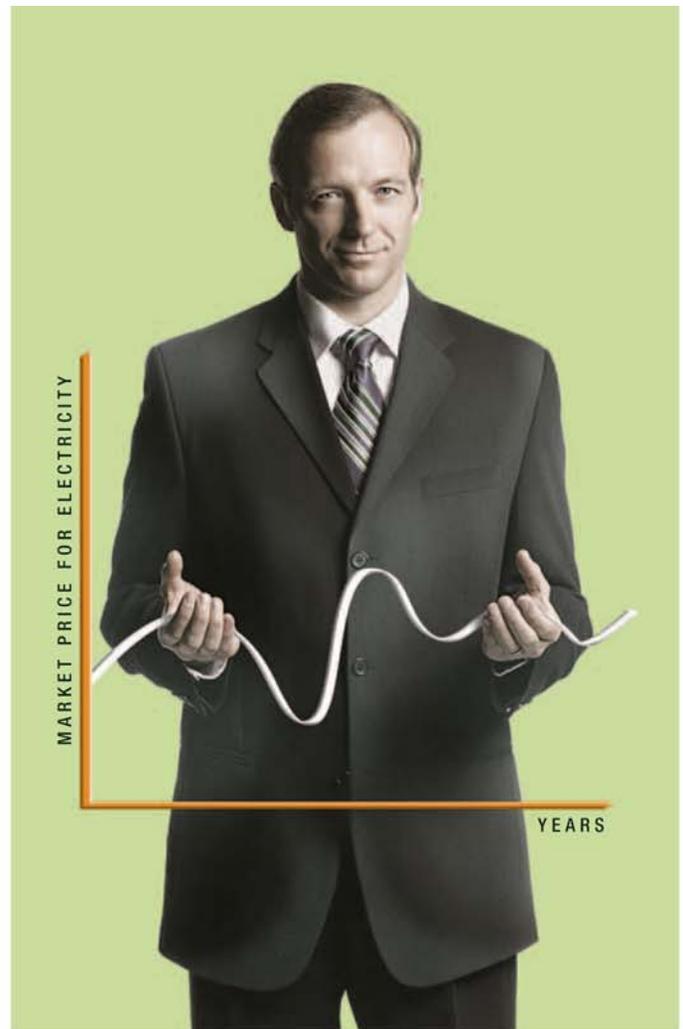
Using a software program called City Green, Dinelli has even tried to quantify his facility’s environmental impact. After receiving tree-inventory data, City Green calculates the collective environmental benefit of a property’s trees. “It looks at five different pollutants that trees help with and tells you how many tons of pollutants were mitigated,” Dinelli explains, “how much oxygen is given off, how much CO₂ the trees store, how much water is retained by the trees onsite, and the coolant effect on the surrounding community.”

At Village Links, Pekarek founded a backyard wildlife program to invite local residents to learn about what was going on at the golf course and mirror it on their residential lots. “To this day, we have 370 families that are members of the program,” Pekarek says.

Efforts to engage the community illustrate why Audubon



North Shore Country Club provides sanctuary both aquatic and avian.



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considers public outreach an important tenet of the ACSP. At present, the Audubon Web site shows only 48 Illinois courses—North Shore and Village Links among them—have achieved certification. The fact that a relatively small number of courses have gone through the Audubon program, however, is no reflection of the industry’s commitment to environmental stewardship.

Audubon is a valuable information resource, and most golf course superintendents are managing their properties consistent with Audubon’s recommendations,” said Luke Cella, executive director of the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents.

“Involved with Audubon or not, today’s golf course superintendent is working with the environment every day. A superintendent truly realizes the impact that not only we as golf course superintendents, but we as humans, have on the environment.”

Cathy Miles Ralston is a former editor of Chicago District Golfer.

Home Lawn Care 101

You, too, can be an environmental steward. Whether you’re tending an expansive country estate, the standard quarter-acre in suburbia or a postage-stamp plot in the city, here are some practices you can employ to cultivate an environmentally friendly landscape.

- **Diversify your landscape.** That often means “reducing the amount of turfgrass,” notes North Shore Country Club superintendent Dan Dinelli. “That’s the number one thing people can do,” agrees Chris Pekarek, assistant at Village Links. “We encourage decreasing the amount of mowed turf by 50 percent. Your yard will look better, be better for wildlife, and you’ll use less fertilizer, water and time in upkeep.”

- **Properly maintain the turf you do have.** That means mowing the lawn at a healthy height and reducing the use of chemicals. It does not mean letting the dandelions run amok. “There are so many invasive plants,” warns Pekarek. “But use pesticides according to label and make sure you’ve really identified your problem before you put product

down.” Advises Dinelli, “Educate and train yourself. You may not need all three steps of these calendar-based annual applications.”

- **Use water judiciously.** “An inch a week is about what we put on heavily irrigated golf course turf,” notes Pekarek. “That’s a tremendous amount of water. Take a knife or screwdriver and poke around in turf areas to see how dry it really is. Look at the forecast, too. If it’s going to be cool, or rain, then hold off on watering.”

- **Be smart about plant selection.** “Ensure your landscape is one that includes plants hardy for the area and offers some basics for wildlife, like food or shelter,” Dinelli recommends. Enlist expert resources to make your selections. “The Chicago Botanic Garden, Morton Arboretum, even

most of the local garden centers have well-trained people who can be good resources,” says Dinelli.

- **Amend your site.** That means enriching the soil so it’s more viable for plant life. “Much of our area features heavy clay soils that are poorly drained,” says Dinelli. “I would add organic matter like compost. High-quality compost can do wonders in encouraging plant healthy that later will demonstrate itself in hardy plants that can weather stress better.”

- **If you use a lawn service, choose a company that uses organic products and shies away from conventional pesticides.** “Multiple companies in the Chicago area fit this criteria,” says Pekarek.

—Cathy Miles Ralston

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