

Edging Away From Manicured Maintenance

A gradual shift to a more natural look benefits wildlife and pleases golfers.

by JEAN MACKAY and PAUL DOTTI

EDGEWOOD Country Club is a private, 27-hole golf course set on 185 acres in Rivervale, New Jersey. Within close proximity to dense residential and commercial development, the golf course serves as one of the larger remaining open spaces in the area.

A predominant natural feature of the property is its many large oak and beech trees, complemented by a diversity of trees and shrubs associated with the Appalachian oak forest ecological region. Twenty-six acres of woods, 25 acres of meadow, and several wetland areas which total three acres comprise the golf course's primary habitats.

Once highly manicured in the same fashion as many "typical" country clubs, Edgewood began to alter many of its maintenance practices as a result of participation in the ACSF, begun in 1996. One of the most dramatic changes can be seen in many of the formerly mown golf course roughs – which now boast a striking array of wildflowers and native grasses. Indeed, the golf course naturalized nearly 30 acres of formerly mown turf, improving both the aesthetics and wildlife habitat throughout the course.

"With rapidly diminishing open space due to increasing land development all around us, it is our duty as superintendents and stewards of the

land to preserve wildlife," reflected Paul Dotti, Edgewood Country Club's superintendent. "Our wildlife has greatly increased now that we have created new habitats and preserved the original ones."

Maintenance staff and golfers alike note increased hawk and fox activity, more goldfinches and butterflies in the wildflowers, and a growing number of bluebirds nesting in bird boxes placed in the natural areas. Dotti also reported a decrease in Canada goose activity – mainly due to Edgewood's dogs – but with nighttime assistance from their now resident foxes.

Gaining Member Support

"At first, it was kind of a tough sell," explained Dotti. "Our members are conservative and liked a more maintained appearance. So I tried naturalizing one spot at a time, adding more here and there as support grew. We have a very tight layout, so I have to pick and choose areas carefully."

Dotti used a monthly newsletter column and various committee meetings to communicate about the project and respond to questions and concerns. As the natural areas bloomed, so have compliments from guests, neighboring superintendents, and members themselves.

But for Dotti and his crew, the increased wildlife activity and greater diversity on the golf course are equally satisfying. "That's my favorite part of it," reported Dotti. "Seeing the foxes, hawks, and bluebirds, and knowing that we're doing the right thing for golf and the environment is really great."

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On The Cutting Edge

Results of Edgewood's Naturalization Project

- **Improved habitat** by naturalizing 30 acres of formerly maintained turf.
- **Increased native and naturalized plantings** by planting bunkers and tee banks with more than 8,000 plants, including little bluestem and weeping love grass, grown in Edgewood's greenhouse.
- **Increased bird populations** by adding 30 bird boxes. Edgewood saw no bluebird activity in 1996, the first year the boxes were placed on the course. By 2000, bluebirds occupied 20 of the boxes, tree swallows occupied five, and wrens nested in three.
- **Increased wildlife activity**; noted increases in species, including foxes, hawks, butterflies, and songbirds.
- **Improved aesthetics** and added diversity and interest to the golf course.
- **Reduced maintenance time**; reduced rough mowing by nearly 16 hours per week.
- **Eliminated chemical use** to control pests in formerly maintained turf areas.
- **Saved water**. The use of approximately 250,000 gallons of water a year was eliminated due to naturalization. Installation of quick-coupler valves and additional part-circle heads also enables staff to more precisely irrigate turfgrass areas.
- **Financial savings**. Edgewood saves about \$10,000 annually on pesticides, fuel, labor, and equipment wear and tear from the initial investment of \$4,500 for labor, seed, and mulch.

Setting Goals

Before naturalizing, Edgewood staff set goals and communicated with club committees and members to increase support for the project.

Edgewood's Goals:

- Return the golf course to a more natural look.
- Create wildlife corridors and protected habitat areas.
- Increase bird nesting sites.
- Reduce pesticide and water use.
- Reduce labor and fuel use.