

Exclusive Golf Course Is Organic, So Weeds Get In



Julia Cumes for The New York Times

Natural vegetation thrives between the fairways at the Vineyard Golf Club in Edgartown, Mass.

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EDGARTOWN, Mass. — Standing alongside the 13th green at the Vineyard Golf Club on Martha’s Vineyard, Jeff Carlson spotted a small broadleaf weed between his feet. As the superintendent charged with maintaining the club grounds, he instinctively bent to pluck it, then stopped.

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A cormorant flying over an irrigation pond, where weeds are removed from the water by hand.

“We have a weed here or there,” he said unapologetically.

It was the rarest acknowledgment in American golf course landscaping — the [Vineyard Golf Club](#) is not meant to be as unnaturally perfect as many of the country's best-known courses.

Opened eight years ago, the club is thought to be the only completely organic golf course in the United States, its 18 holes groomed without the use of a single synthetic pesticide, fertilizer, herbicide or other artificial chemical treatment.

“When we started here, some of my peers thought this golf course would be a dust bowl,” Carlson said, walking across a lush, smooth green toward a rolling, verdant fairway. “I admit I wasn't so sure it could be done myself. People said we were crazy.”

The club has a more prominent endorsement now. The nation's first golfer, [President Obama](#), is expected to play here while vacationing this month, after playing the course twice last year.

With golf courses increasingly being criticized for environmentally unfriendly practices, the Vineyard Golf Club has become a petri dish for alternative maintenance techniques. Carlson has learned to kill weeds with boiling water and a natural foam cocktail and to remove moss with kitchen dish detergent, and he has transported microscopic worms from Iowa to attack turf-ruining grubs. He has disrupted the mating cycle of damaging oriental beetles with a strategically placed scent and has grown grass that he believes is more resistant to disease because it developed without chemicals.

The staff at the Vineyard Golf Club are now seen as environmental pioneers, with many in the golf industry examining their methods. The club's organic model could become the successful experiment that helps push thousands of courses toward using fewer pesticides, less water and more natural grass-growing procedures.

“Everyone won't be able to go fully organic, but we're proving you can severely cut back on synthetic chemicals,” Carlson said.

When the Vineyard Golf Club opened, it was the first club in 30 years built on Martha's Vineyard, where the wealthy, many of them environmentally conscious but also accustomed to playing on chemically enhanced private courses, have long kept summer homes.

Opposition to the project on this liberal-leaning island was fierce. It helped the project that the land was also zoned for a 148-lot subdivision. The Martha's Vineyard Commission eventually allowed the course to be built with conditions prohibiting the use of any product whose active ingredient was synthetically produced.

Bill Wilcox, a water resource planner for the commission, called the club a good neighbor and said he knew of no major complaints against it.

Although the club is private, with 288 proprietary members — the initiation fee is \$350,000 with annual dues of \$12,000 — the deal with the commission includes a condition that 125 island residents be accepted as members with no initiation fee and annual dues of \$725.

Carlson, 61, had experience building a golf course with conservationists watching, having worked with the noted architect Michael Hurdzan during the 1990s in the creation of the Widow's Walk Golf Course in Scituate, Mass. That course is known as America's first environmental demonstration course, although it was maintained with some synthetic materials.

"Nobody had tried what we were trying," Carlson said.

Cruising the Martha's Vineyard club on a golf cart last week, Carlson recalled one of his earliest jobs in the business, in which he mixed mercury-based fungicides by hand, occasionally near the on-course house where he lived with his wife, Kathy.

"Kathy has beautiful, thick red hair, and it started to fall out," he said. "She went to the doctor, who did some tests and was told she had heavy-metal poisoning. Obviously, I stopped using that stuff. All these years later, it has been kind of satisfying to be trying something so very different."

In the golf community, there is no clear definition of what constitutes an organic course. A 79-page report prepared by a consortium of golf and environmental experts proposed definitions earlier this year but did not settle the issue. The report listed about two dozen courses that call themselves organic, but noted that most used some synthetic chemical pesticide, fertilizer or wetting agent.

"The Vineyard Golf Club has gone further than anyone organically, especially for that level of golf course and considering what they've achieved over the years," said Paul Parker, the chief author of the report.

When Vineyard Golf Club opened in 2002, Carlson was in hand-to-hand combat with fungal diseases, insects, grubs and the skunks, crows and raccoons that tore up the turf to get to the grubs. There was also the matter of teaching the membership that nothing in the rules of golf mandated that the game always be played on green grass.

“We had to promote the notion of playability rather than visual perfection,” Carlson said.

Still, the grubs were particularly vexing. A synthetic insecticide application would have made things easy. But Carlson discovered a specific kind of beneficial nematode, a roundworm that would attack the grubs from within the soil. It occasionally meant flying in the nematodes from Iowa packed in dry ice.

When it came to the skunks, crows and raccoons, the club went old school. It turned to a retired local fisherman — whom some have compared to Carl Spackler, the character played by [Bill Murray](#) in the golf movie “Caddyshack” — who was known on the island for his ability to trap and remove those creatures.

Nothing at the Vineyard Golf Club, now in its ninth season, is left to chance. To prevent fungal disease, crews go out daily at dawn using a long, whip-like device that whisks condensation off the grass throughout the course’s 69 acres. And visitors have their shoes cleaned before they play to keep contrary grass seeds or diseases from infiltrating the fairways and greens. The club’s maintenance labor budget is higher than those of most clubs its size, but Carlson said his net costs were the same “because of the money we save on traditional pesticides, which are very expensive.”

The Vineyard Golf Club greens are devoid of weeds or major blemishes, and they roll true and consistent. The fairways have patches of crabgrass and clover that are barely noticeable. What is most obvious in a walk of the holes is a striking and scenic layout pocked with deep, distinctive sod-faced bunkers designed by the British architects Donald Steel and Tom Mackenzie.

“Yes, it is not perfect out there, but even if your ball comes to rest next to a shaved-down broadleaf weed, it’s not going to affect your shot,” said Gene Mulak, the club’s golf pro.

Private golf course members are notoriously hard on superintendents, but Carlson says those at the Vineyard Golf Club are “real environmental pioneers because they put down the money for this experiment.”

Sally Rorer, a charter member, said members were proud of the club's organic approach.

"It makes it easier to put a sandwich down on the ground between shots, too," she said.

What practices and techniques might be transferable from Martha's Vineyard, where golf courses are generally open only eight months a year, to other parts of the country is debatable.

"Most golf courses wouldn't make it with an approach so organic, especially year after year with changeable weather," said James Snow, the national director of the United States Golf Association's Green Section. "But over time, we're going to be using less synthetics, and that's a good thing."

These days, walking past the occasional weed, Carlson has moved on to other goals.

"We're trying to be like any other golf course," he said. "I don't want people to come here and say, 'That was a real good golf course for an organic golf course.'"

"I hate hearing that."

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