

Gorse and Broom Management

Broom adds colour when in flower, and year round structure, texture and challenge to a golf course. However, the club may want to consider the use of gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) in place of broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) as it is slower growing and less labour intensive management is required, plus gorse is more beneficial for biodiversity.



Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) adds colour when in flower and year round structure, texture and challenge. Gorse scrub in particular is an important wildlife habitat, providing perching, feeding and nesting habitat for a variety of birds such as Linnet, Stonechat, and Yellowhammer. It also provides cover for the many small mammals such as voles, mice and shrews that are the main food source for Weasels, Stoats, Owls, and Kestrels.

Stoats and weasels can be valuable allies on the golf course. They predate heavily on rabbits, as well as other small mammals and birds. They can play a significant role in rabbit control. They favour rocky crevices and burrows as habitat. Creation of rock piles in rough grass and gorse thickets, and maintenance of dry stone dykes will contribute to a healthy population of both species.

Sustainable gorse management provides a wide variety of age and structure within the gorse, which is ideal for wildlife and creates an interesting and attractive challenge for the golfer. Future

management should aim to ensure that a diverse age structure is maintained and that the stands of gorse are not allowed to reach a woody degenerate stage all at the same time.

Mature gorse plants can withstand, but do not thrive, in areas with severe frosts, and seem to prefer habitats sheltered from cold winds. Gorse growing in the UK suffered severe frost damage during a winter when temperatures fell to -5.4 °F (-20.8 °C). However, the plants recovered completely within 2 years due to trimming back of frost damaged vegetation and compliance of standard gorse management practise.

Gorse grows cyclically, from the young establishment and building phase to maturity, and finally a degenerate phase where it becomes woody and leggy with little growth at the base. Gorse reaching such a stage can be regenerated by cutting back to six inches (15cm) or so above ground, and the cuttings removed from site. This will allow light in to regenerate the cut plants, and raking up the litter beneath will help to expose seed from which plants will regenerate. This management should be carried out in a cyclical manner to ensure that there is Gorse at all stages of growth throughout the course.

This treatment can look unsightly for the first couple of years until the gorse has grown. If necessary the visual impact can be lessened by cutting at the back, or in the centre, of the stands. When that new growth is well established and vigorous, the more visible areas can then be cut, with less visual impact.



Gorse eradication work is best done in the early winter period, from October to December. Early cleared gorse appears less prone to regeneration, possibly because the winter frosts do more damage to the longer exposed roots.

Gorse coppicing works are often more effective if carried out later in the winter, after the worst frosts have passed. It can be necessary to protect the coppice gorse stumps from rabbit grazing through the erection of temporary rabbit enclosures, either standard specification rabbit fencing or enclosure panels.

No gorse removal/management should be carried out during the bird nesting season (April – September) as disturbing nesting birds is in breach of the Wildlife & Countryside Act. It would also be advisable to ensure no badger sets or fox earths are present before going ahead with clearance of gorse.

Gorse areas may look particularly sparse and 'spotty' once the mature, leggy gorse has been removed. To create a dense scrub feature then replacement planting must be undertaken. It is recommended that broom/gorse is planted at no more than 1.5m distance (and preferable less if budget allows). If rabbits are a problem then rabbit netting the area would be the most cost effective protection. It can be removed once the young plants are established. It is also worth considering introducing local rules to protect areas of new planting, on a temporary basis until the planting has established.

During the first spring after planting, cut back all stems by about a quarter to one-third to encourage bushy growth. Once established, clip back new growth after flowering each year using shears, to keep growth dense.

If the course have a lot of leggy or frost damaged gorse the club could contact a local conservation volunteer group (SWT, SNH, BTCV, Volunteer Centre, Community Service, etc.) to assist in its management and replacement.

Broom can also be managed in this way but is less likely to survive if cutting is left until the plant is very old and woody.

Some areas of broom may look particularly sparse and 'spotty' once the mature, leggy broom has been removed. To create a dense scrub feature then replacement planting must be undertaken. It is recommended that broom/gorse is planted at no more than 1.5m distance (and preferable less if budget allows). If rabbits are a problem then rabbit netting the area would be the most cost effective protection. It can be removed once the young plants are established. It is also worth considering introducing local rules to protect areas of new planting, on a temporary basis until the planting has established.

Broom can encroach and out-compete the heather and grasses. The club should consider what it is they want to establish in each area and manage accordingly as in time if left to nature this area will lose the heather and grassland and be dominated by broom – losing interest, colour and habitat variability. To keep the variability it is suggested the club aim to arrest this process of succession. The scrub/broom can be cut back to desired limits, the rough grass mown periodically (with clippings removed and preferably composted) and the heather topped. This will manage the grassland and inhibit further scrub invasion. Ideally the scrub stands should be cut back periodically to and allowed to re-grow, creating a diversity of age and structure within the habitat.