Heather Management

Heather is an important feature of many golf courses and integral to their character. There are often some areas on the course where it would be beneficial to manage it in order to keep it in good condition. There are also often many opportunities to reinstate heather or extend its coverage throughout the course.

Traditionally heather is managed through controlled burns. The burn removes the woody part of the plant, and underlying litter. It helps to 'chit' the heather seed and encourages germination. It is important that the burn does not go deeper and into the peat. Not only is this a safety hazard it will also kill off the plants and seed bank, resulting in the growth of rank, weedy species, rather than heather regeneration. Burning is temporarily unsightly and may necessitate course closure on safety grounds. It is therefore little used on golf courses. Mechanical management is a more realistic and achievable method for most clubs.

It is important to manage established healthy stands of heather appropriately. Heather grows in a cyclical fashion, from the young building phase where it is short and dense and flowers profusely, through a mature phase before it becomes degenerate and woody, all over a period of approximately twenty to thirty years. From both a golfing and wildlife point of view it is ideal to keep heather at the building and mature phases. Topping every three to five years, and removal of cuttings will keep the heather in good condition. This treatment encourages plants to tiller, leading

to spread and a dense growth habit. The cut should be to approximately five or six inches, or at least to a height which retains the young shoots. If all shoots are removed and the plant is cut down to the woody stem then it is unlikely to regenerate at all.

Heather can be encouraged to spread into adjacent areas, or where it is currently degenerate by a variety of techniques. Ground scarification, hollow coring and turf stripping to expose the seed bank and create good growing conditions for heather have all been used to good effect on many courses. Very often these techniques will lead to natural regeneration of heather, where there is an existing seed bank in the ground. However if there is a diluted seed bank, or none at all, it may be necessary to scatter heather clippings from areas where heather has been topped to facilitate regeneration or purchase seed or heather turves. Care should be taken not to scatter clippings too thickly as the brash can shade out seedlings trying to establish. It may be difficult to establish heather in an area of high soil fertility and years of accumulated thatch.

Scottish Golf would recommend a trail plot be attempted to assess whether this technique is suitable and to monitor success. This could perhaps be in a less sensitive part of the course. It need not be an extensive area but would be extremely valuable to the club in establishing what management is required to reinstate heather stands.

Each course is different, with different ground conditions and climate. It is advised to try a variety of the techniques in trial plots, to find out which is the most successful. Larger areas can then be identified where regeneration is desirable, and the techniques can be employed with more confidence of success.

Other factors that affect heather health and regeneration include shading by trees and trampling. Heather does not survive well in areas that are regularly and heavily trampled. Efforts aimed at regeneration should be targeted where there is least traffic. Where possible traffic should be

directed away from heather stands and golfers encouraged to avoid taking their golf trolleys through the heather. Therefore traffic management in such areas should be reviewed. Areas where regeneration is being attempted should be designated as 'ground under repair' to allow the heather to re-colonise. Informing members of the reasons behind these measures is therefore crucial to the project's success.

Heathland and woodland management are tied together in many places on golf courses. Whilst it is good practice to stop trees regenerating to any great extent on heather these sites are also important for native woodland, which may not be regenerating well. A balance needs to be sought and areas for specific woodland and heathland management clearly identified to maintain the landscape and setting for the golf course. Management decisions are necessarily subjective. There are no hard and fast 'rules' for decisions on which areas should be managed as woodland and which should be managed for heather. Careful account will need to be taken of the value of both habitats in the context of the golf course, the landscape and ecological value.

It is tempting to leave heather unmanaged in the belief that it 'will look after itself'. However heather is very much a man-made habitat and periodic management is essential to ensure its continued health and vigour.