

Can eco ethics become par for the golf course?

A clutch of outlier clubs are making water savings, energy efficiency and environmental protection a priority — and developers of residential enclaves are taking note

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At Augusta, home of the Masters golf tournament, every emerald blade of grass is mown in the same direction, its height specified to a fraction of a centimetre. This world-famous private club has persuaded golfers that every course should display similar perfection — a state researchers refer to as Augusta National Syndrome — to the chagrin of groundskeepers everywhere.

But on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, approximately 1,040 miles to the north, the invitation-only Vineyard Golf Club is taking a different approach. Its 235 acres of neatly clipped greens are surrounded by wild parkland, rolling dunes and tall fescue grasses — a wilder look than that typically found on courses in North America.

“Our version of perfect is different to others in the States,” says Kevin Banks, the club's superintendent. Early on summer mornings, his team is out whipping the fairways with climbing ropes to remove humidity and dew. “The longer the grass sits wet, the higher the chance of a disease outbreak,” he explains.

The course has been 100 per cent organic since day one: one of the conditions the Martha's Vineyard Commission set for approving the course's development in 2002 was that the land be kept free of synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers to protect the island's water supply. The club uses bio-based pesticides such as the biofungicide Rhapsody and granular fertilisers made from crab shells and seaweed to create more disease-resistant turf.

While the area enjoys moderate annual rainfall, the course is also "tight on water usage", Banks says. "We constantly monitor the moisture content on the putting greens with handheld probes, so we only water the areas that need it. Unlike some courses in Texas or Florida that use fans to cool them in summer, we use the wind."



The climate-conscious ethos at Ombria golfing estate in the Algarve attracts buyers © J Hogg

Club co-president Drew Marcus says that in spite of the organic regime, Vineyard Golf "plays like any other top golf course and our membership has a sense of pride that we are breaking new ground and being environmentally responsible".

The club may be an outlier, but its model is becoming increasingly relevant in the face of climate change, increasing water pressure, and the accelerating costs of energy and fertiliser since the start of the wars in Ukraine and Iran. Residential developments around golf courses in particular are making water management, nature protection and energy efficiency a priority — because they increasingly matter to homeowners and potential buyers.

It just makes financial sense that a course that's embedded in nature will be rewarded with higher returns in the long run

Juha Torni, buyer of a branded residence at Ombria golf estate, Algarve, Portugal

There's a big push to be "down with brown", says Adam Lawrence, founder of Oxford Golf Consulting. Part of that effort is persuading players that golf courses are "living things" that shouldn't always look immaculate.

Juha Torni, a 59-year-old golfer and chief financial officer based in Helsinki, Finland, says he was motivated to buy a €690,000 one-bedroom Viceroy-branded residence at Ombria, a three-year-old, GEO-

certified golfing estate in inland Algarve, Portugal, in part because of its climate-conscious ethos.

"It just makes financial sense that a course that's embedded in nature will be rewarded with higher returns in the long run," he says. "If it means a course looks more natural to save water and protect nature, I'm happy with that."



Sentosa Golf Club in Singapore claims it is the world's first carbon-neutral golf club, irrigating its two championship courses with harvested rainwater, stored in its on-site reservoir lakes

For many courses, water is the most pressing issue. In California's Coachella Valley, desert clubs have come under fire for continuing to plant fairways with fine-bladed bentgrass, which needs constant mowing and watering. As of 2021, larger courses were drawing more than a million gallons of water per night in the summer, according to a report in the Los Angeles Times. California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, which was passed in 2014 and comes into full effect in 2042, is forcing these courses to reduce their reliance on groundwater.

But at other desert courses such as Camelback Golf Club in Arizona, which is surrounded by golf-view homes worth millions of dollars, lush fairways have been converted into deserts with native planting and drought-tolerant grass such as bermuda and zoysia. In Camelback's case, removing 140 acres of irrigated turf saves 43mn gallons of water annually.

Basingstoke Golf Club in Hampshire, in the UK, is among the courses experimenting with artificial grass. That may seem to fly in the face of sustainability, but bio-based products, made from natural materials such as hemp and soya "capture an enormous amount of embedded carbon. They look similar to real grass but work all year round and the club doesn't need to worry about maintenance," claims Michael Walker, chief executive of SYN Lawn UK.



Costa Navarino, Greece, uses excess run-off from local rivers and recycled water from its on-site plant for irrigation

In Singapore, where rainwater is in abundance during monsoon season from December to March, Sentosa Golf Club claims it is the world's first carbon-neutral golf club. Surrounded by jungle, with views across the busy shipping lanes of the Singapore Strait and the city's central business district, Sentosa irrigates its two championship courses with harvested rainwater, stored in its on-site reservoir lakes. "There are no wells or purchased water," says Andrew Johnston, Sentosa's general manager and director of agronomy.

The club's irrigation system reduces both water and energy usage by up to 40 per cent. Johnston and his team are studying how much carbon is captured and stored within turf grass, soil and vegetation. "It's an area that has not been widely quantified in golf before, but understanding the potential could change the way the environmental role of golf courses is viewed," he comments. The aim, he adds, is to work "more in harmony with the ecosystem, rather than constantly try to correct it". A similar system is in place at Costa Navarino in Greece, which irrigates its four championship courses using self-built reservoirs filled with excess run-off from local rivers and recycled water from the on-site plant.

Other courses are inviting nature in. Jamie Goldberg, a London-based commercial real estate lawyer at Farrer & Co and a “golf nut” who advises clients on golf investments, points to Scotland for authentic courses where sheep graze the land and irrigation comes from the sky. “There’s a trend for going off the beaten track to more rugged places like the Machrihanish Golf Club on the Kintyre Peninsula,” he says of the 150-year-old course where the wind-battered beach forms part of the first tee.



In North Yorkshire, Hunley Golf Club has dedicated about half of its 104 hectares to wildlife...



...including these barn owls

In North Yorkshire, Hunley Golf Club has dedicated about half of its 104 hectares to wildlife. And at Harewood Downs Golf Club in Buckinghamshire, grass between some holes is being permitted to grow long to attract butterflies and birds; other parts of the course are being rewilded. The club is also building three reservoirs that, combined, will store 100 days' worth of water and remove the club's reliance on mains sources.

Members want the course to be as natural as possible, not just for moral reasons but also for the skills aspect. Playing in different climate conditions brings a welcome challenge to the game

Rob Crocker, Harewood Downs Golf Club, Buckinghamshire

“Members here definitely want the course to be as natural as possible, not just for moral reasons but also for the skills aspect. Playing in different climate conditions throughout the year brings a welcome challenge to the game,” says Rob Crocker, 60, a retired pharmaceutical consultant and the club's former captain. “Golfers of my generation are on board and we also have a big section of junior players who are very environmentally aware,” he adds.

Three donkeys help keep the grass clipped at Alcanada Golf Club in Mallorca, in addition to pruning tree branches and keeping vegetative growth in the forested area around the 13th hole in check. “It eliminates the use of herbicides and helps to prevent fires,” says Gary Hobson, managing director at Engel & Völkers Mallorca North estate agency, which has villas for sale close to the golf course.

Prospective buyers, he adds, “appreciate strong sustainability features and energy efficiency” — although “they are not usually the primary deciding factor” when making a purchase.



Three donkeys help keep the grass clipped at Alcanada Golf Club in Mallorca, in addition to pruning tree branches and keeping vegetative growth in check, eliminating the use of herbicides and helping to prevent fires © Octavio Passos/Getty Images

In spite of their advances in water efficiency and biodiversity support, forward-thinking golf courses have made less progress on reducing pesticide dependence, to the detriment of the health of both humans and wildlife. Research published by the American Medical Association last year found that living within a mile of a golf course was associated with a 126 per cent higher risk of Parkinson's disease, due to possible pesticide exposure and drinking water contamination. But US courses continue to use them, partly due to the higher costs of alternatives — and also, paradoxically, because going organic can lead to greater nutrient run-off, which in California can violate the state's new Clean Water Act laws.

I've started to think more about the contradiction — that you want a golf course to be perfect, but pristine comes at a price

Anders Naslund

extracts to enhance plant health. “Chemical inputs are used only as a last resort,” he says.

Reservoirs have been built at eight of its 10 sites. “The ambition is to eliminate the use of any mains water for irrigation by 2028,” says Thompson.

But as the Vineyard Golf Club and others show, it can be done. Caspar Grauballe, a Copenhagen-based golf course architect, points to Copenhagen Golf Club, founded in 1898, as a model for sustainable course management ahead of its time. “They aren’t allowed to use pesticides or touch the tall rough, but they have some of the best greens in Denmark,” he says. “It takes a lot of hard work, much of it done by hand, and it’s a case of the survival of the fittest. Weeds, fungus and disease emerge when grass is weak.”

Ridding courses of pesticides and fertilisers altogether can’t be achieved “without fundamentally changing playing conditions”, according to Simon Thompson, chief executive officer of Burhill Group Limited. The group has significantly reduced pesticide use at its 22 courses in the UK, prioritising cultural controls such as optimised aeration and thatch management, and fertilising with seaweed



Courses are irrigated with recycled water at Sotogrande in southern Spain © Jacob Sjoman

Climate volatility is bringing new challenges to his work as a course planner, he says. “It’s chaotic now. We’re seeing more extreme weather — heavy rain and long drought periods in the same locations — and the design of irrigation systems and large-scale drainage has become much more intense.” His current projects include the upgrade of Losby Golf Club in Norway, where 80 per cent of the green has been lost to ice. “They need to get water off the play area as quickly as possible, before it freezes,” he explains.

Anders Naslund, 55, an IT consultancy director and golf lover from Stockholm, recently bought an apartment in Sotogrande’s Village Verde, within easy reach of the resort’s five 18-hole courses. Visiting his Spanish holiday home recently has opened his eyes to the challenges of keeping courses in peak condition. “In Sweden, the rainy climate means water usage hasn’t struck me as an issue. But since buying in Sotogrande, where there are signs informing players that the courses are irrigated with recycled water, I’ve started to think more about the contradiction — that you want a golf course to be perfect, but pristine comes at a price.”

Rita Jordao, Sotogrande’s head of marketing, is confident that golfers’ expectations are shifting. “People don’t expect to see Augusta everywhere they go.”

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