

On Course with Heather



Heather is an important and integral feature on many golf courses, providing both strategic and ecological value.

From a golfing and wildlife perspective it is beneficial to manage separate stands of heather between the building and mature phases of the life cycle as this phased management programme will support greater ecological diversity. To help maintain a healthy stand, topping at approximately 125-150mm every three to five years or at the very least prior to it reaching the woody stage, removing cuttings whilst retaining young shoots will encourage plants to tiller, spread and produce a dense growth habit.



Jayne Leyland, Rigby Taylor's Grass & Flower Seeds Product Manager looks at the opportunities and benefits heather can bring to a golf course

Species of native heather thrive in distinct habitats. True heather or Ling (*Calluna vulgaris*) common on mountains and moorlands, flourishes in low nutrient or acidic soils, producing pale purple blooms from July to September. Bell heather (*Erica cinerea*) prefers drier soils, producing larger reddish/purple flowers earlier in summer from May onwards whereas the pink-flowered, cross-leaved heather (*Erica tetralix*) thrives in damper soils, blooming between July and September. Nationally rare, but locally abundant the Cornish heather (*Erica vagans*) found inland in the warm, oceanic climate of the Lizard Peninsula is more tolerant of drought and alkaline soils, producing distinctive racemes of white, pink or lilac flowers from July to August. All provide a valuable source of food and habitat for pollinators and wildlife.

REGENERATION

Over a period of 20-40 years the cyclical life of heather evolves from the

young building phase of low growth and profuse flowering, on through the mature phase until it finally degenerates into woody, unproductive stems and eventually, death. Tempting to leave it to "manage itself", heather communities can be damaged by abandonment, erosion, trampling, shading by trees or incursion by scrub and grasses. Periodic management is therefore essential to regenerate and preserve a healthy stand in good condition. On many golf courses there will likely be opportunities to extend its coverage around the course.

SPREADING THE BENEFIT

A balance between heathland and native woodland is essential as both ecological systems provide invaluable habitats. However, strong competitor scrub and grassland vegetation, including silver birch (*Betula spp.*), bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), and tussock forming grass species such as purple moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*)



and cocksfoot (*Dactylis glomerata*) can restrict or completely extinguish heather stands and must be controlled appropriately.

Every course is individual and trial plots are an excellent option for finding the most appropriate method wherever an opportunity exists to regenerate, reinstate or introduce heather. Unwanted vegetation can be removed by flailing or using an approved herbicide, whilst turf stripping, scarification and coring can help

expose an existing native heather seed bank. Winter burning is rarely used on golf courses due to disruption to play.

Ripened heather seed can be harvested on site by brush harvester, turf cleaning machine or by collecting litter from under mature plants. This is both time consuming and unreliable as only a proportion of this seed will germinate the following year after sowing as it requires a period of vernalisation and is very slow to break dormancy. Dry heather litter is not only bulky but can also contain unwanted weed seeds for example *Betula spp.* Heather brush is sometimes used to cover and protect seed, but must not be spread too thickly as this could shade out the seed.

SEED & TURF

For more reliable seeding results, Rigby Taylor Flora Native 100% Pure Heather Seed (*Calluna vulgaris*) is Native British provenance sourced under the *Flora Locale* code of practice. Sowing rate is just 2g per sq.m (2kg per hectare).

A hand held seed fiddle or pedestrian spreader can be used for smaller areas, whilst a conventional seed drill or ATV mounted forced air applicator can be used for larger areas following the confidence gained from successful trialling. Once the new heather stand is established, unwanted species ingression can be controlled by topping or weed wiping if necessary.

For instant results and a more diverse heathland carpet, Heather Turf is an excellent option. Harvested from a sustainable source and subject to availability from October to March, the harvesting process forms part of an integrated management plan to regenerate the existing heathland. The turf is predominantly *Calluna vulgaris* but may also contain *Erica cinerea*,

Erica tetralix and a small quantity of other heathland species such as dwarf gorse (*Ulex minor*) and fescue species.

For larger heathland regeneration projects where the use of heather turf may not be viable or cost efficient, Heathland Mix is available in bulk bags. This specialist mixture contains 'arisings' from the previous heather turf harvest, small heather plants and heathland root systems along with indigenous soil containing a generous seed bank. Delivered in bulk bags, the product is simply spread evenly to a depth of around 50-100mm depending on application. Once spread, the product should be rolled in and watered until well established.

To support bio-diversity still further and as part of an integrated improvement project Rigby Taylor R Range 100% Fescue mixtures R5 and Pure Fescue, Flora Native 100% Specialist Habitat Grasses, common gorse seed (*Ulex europaeus*) and yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) can be integrated into the programme.



For more information, contact your Rigby Taylor area representative or alternatively phone, e-mail or log onto the website below.

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