

The grass and trees at Augusta National Golf Club help make the course a treasure — but also an allergy nightmare.



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By Alan Blinder Photographs by Doug Mills

Alan Blinder and Doug Mills have sneezed through years of Masters Tournaments.

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At the Masters Tournament, beneath a towering oak tree, executives, sports agents, well-connected golf fans and club members in green jackets mingle as past and aspiring champions roam.

Bring a business card. Better yet, bring an antihistamine.

Augusta National Golf Club, where the Masters is held, boasts one of the world’s most beloved courses. It also presents a sniffle-and-sneeze-laden assault on the senses at this time of year. The oak by the clubhouse is but one of its scourges.

“The pollen is just killing my eyes,” Tiger Woods said years ago after he donned sunglasses at a Masters. “I’ve been sneezing and hacking all week, so trying to keep it out of my eyes the best I can.”

Pollen, it turns out, is an equalizer of players and patrons, as Augusta National refers to the spectators who gaze upon great golf. Given the hundreds of acres of manicured Bermuda grass and majestic pine, oak and magnolia trees, the cost can be misery.

The tournament begins Thursday, and weather conditions will help dictate how high the pollen counts peak by the time the tournament is scheduled to conclude on Sunday evening. Pollen-cleaning rain on Monday brought some relief. That relief was soon gone.

“I get out of my car in the morning, my eyes start watering,” Scottie Scheffler, the world’s top-ranked player and the winner of the 2022 and 2024 Masters, said this week. “It’s a little bit worse than normal years.”

Georgia has been enduring a mostly unhappy run.

On March 29, an Atlanta allergy clinic reported a pollen count of 14,801, the highest level the practice had measured in 35 years of tracking. Dusty pollen has sometimes grown disturbingly and disgustingly cakelike on driveways, mailboxes, playground equipment and doorknobs. And if you’ve got a car in a dark paint color, bless your heart (and maybe head to a carwash).



The first hole during the Masters Tournament Par 3 Contest on Wednesday.



Augusta National Golf Course has more than 30 varieties of azaleas, though the flowers are not typically a menace for allergy sufferers.



Tiger Woods putting drops in his eyes on the driving range at Augusta National in 2023. Over the years, Woods has complained about the pollen's effect on him during the tournament.

Part of the problem is that besides being a golf course, Augusta National is in, well, Augusta.

Although Hurricane Helene battered the local tree canopy and the Savannah River forms one edge of the city, there is plenty of grassland and farmland in the surrounding area. And winds can carry pollen for many miles.

In a recent report partly based on how much medicine people in a geographic area purchase, the Allergy and Asthma Foundation of America pegged Augusta at No. 12 on its list of “allergy capitals” in the United States. (Wichita, Kan., is No. 1.) Augusta has been on the list for years.

“Everyone thinks they have the worse pollen season depending on where you are because it’s a problem everywhere,” said Dr. Kathleen May, the division chief of allergy, immunology and pediatric rheumatology at the Medical College of Georgia. “But it’s on another order of magnitude in Augusta.”

And for better or worse, the Masters, first played in 1934, has almost always been contested in the spring, when tree and grass pollen levels are particularly high. Also, the tournament is held on a property that once housed a plant nursery. Each hole is named for a plant — No. 6, for example, is Juniper, while No. 15 is Firethorn — and around 1932, Augusta National began an effort to ensure that each hole had plenty of matching flora.

The club is fittingly proud of the horticulture that draws some to the Masters television broadcast, which, despite falling ratings, still attracted more than nine million viewers during last year’s final round. Augusta National estimates that more than 80,000 plants have been added to the course over the decades.

The azaleas are the stars, with more than 30 varieties, though the property also has an abundance of honeysuckle, roses, and white and pink dogwood.

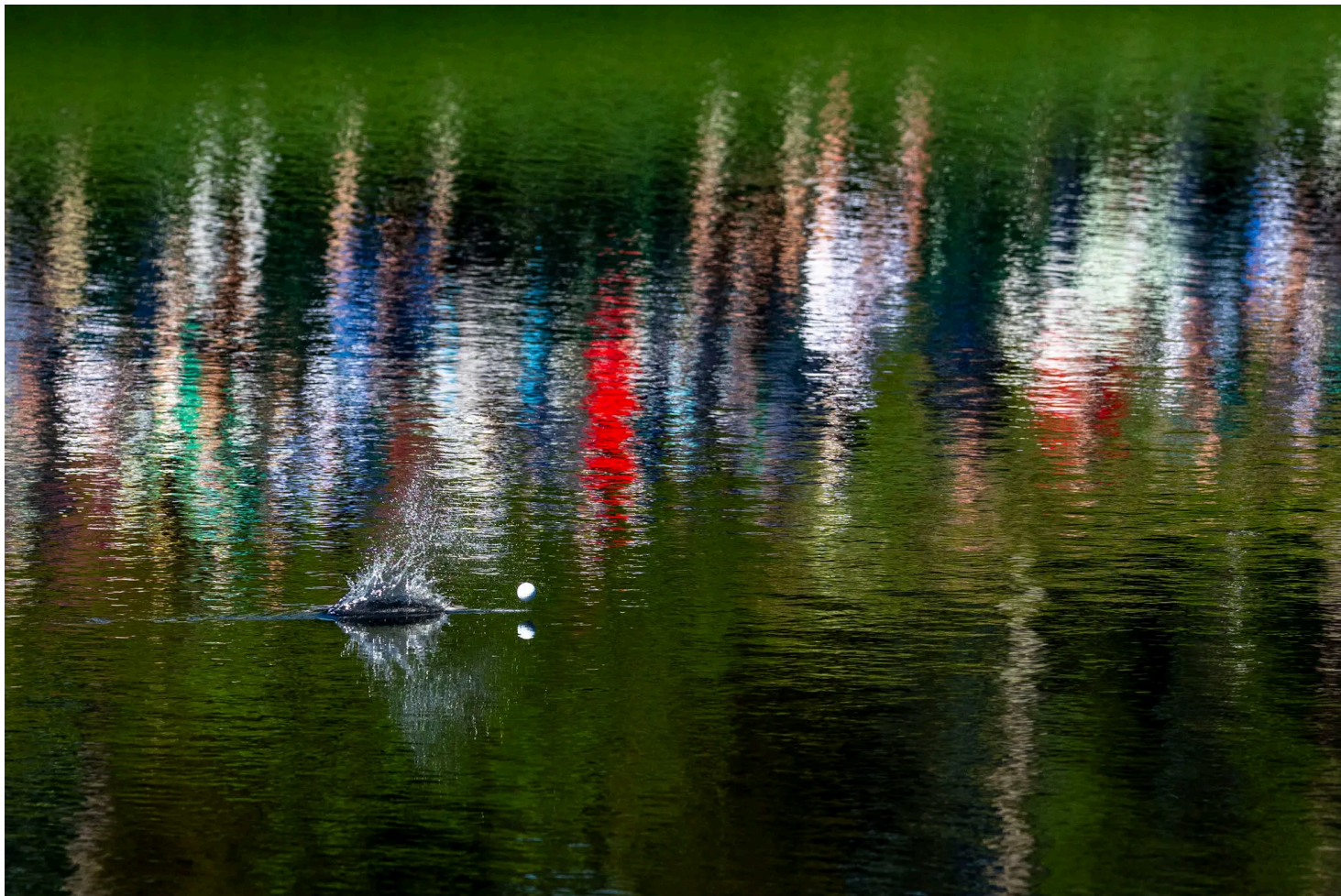
The flowers, though, are not typically the menace for allergy sufferers.

“Their pollen is really heavy and sticky and does not fly in the wind,” said Victoria Wojcik, the director of science and research at Pollinator Partnership, a nonprofit group. “When someone says, ‘Oh, these beautiful flowers in my garden are causing allergies, that’s really highly unlikely.’”

The grass and trees, though, are the stuff of nightmares.



Collin Morikawa stretched as he walked along the 15th fairway at last year's tournament. Majestic pine, oak and magnolia trees tower over the course.



Collin Morikawa skipped a ball across the pond on the 16th hole during a practice round on Tuesday.



Si Woo Kim and his caddy peeking toward the green after his shot went into the bushes in 2021. The Allergy and Asthma Foundation of America ranked Augusta No. 12 on the list of “allergy capitals” in the United States.

“Tiger is allergic to everything on the golf course,” Earl Woods, Mr. Woods’s father, said in 2003, according to an Associated Press report from the time. “He has taken allergy shots as a kid and he has developed a resistance to everything. But when he gets to Georgia in the spring, that pollen gets to him.”

Earl Woods, who died in 2006, added that his son’s rental home in Augusta would be outfitted with air purifiers to help him sleep and that he preferred to avoid medication.

Tiger Woods, who nevertheless has won the Masters five times, is missing this year’s tournament as he recovers from a ruptured Achilles’ tendon. In future years, though, conditions at Augusta National could be even more unpleasant because scientists believe that rising temperatures and carbon dioxide levels are driving pollen counts higher.

As allergy sufferers everywhere know, runny noses and itchy, watery eyes are difficult to contain. Some medicines, Dr. May said, work best when taken well in advance, in part because of their “priming effect.” Antihistamine sprays can help, she said, as can nasal saline.

On Reddit last month, golf fans filled a thread that blended dire warnings — “However much pollen you think is here at this time of year, increase that by 500%,” one wrote — with tips from their own allergy regimens, like to “eat a tablespoon of local honey each day.”

Many top players, accustomed to seeking any edge in a competition where a single stroke can be the difference between being a champion and a footnote, include allergy preparations in their routines ahead of the Masters.

Greg Norman, who spent 331 weeks as the world’s top-ranked player, recalled last month that he would load up on anti-allergy medicines. It was, he said, a desperate solution that was decidedly imperfect.

“That doesn’t really make you feel great either,” said Mr. Norman, who had three runner-up finishes at the Masters and twice won the British Open. “You do it because you’ve got to, really.”

Others, like Justin Rose, a U.S. Open winner, have tried modifying their eating habits. After he showed up at the 2015 Masters appearing thinner, Mr. Rose copped to having gone on a low-histamine diet in a quest to contain his allergies.

He tied for second that year.

But preparations do not always work. Paul McGinley was suffering so mightily one year that he cut short a practice round and headed for a pharmacy.

“You can be sensitive to one species and not another,” Dr. May said. “All you need is one of those sensitivities and you have trouble.”

Alan Blinder is a national correspondent for The Times, covering education.

Doug Mills has been a photographer in the Washington bureau of The Times since 2002. He has covered every U.S. president since Ronald Reagan.