Landscape Standards of Practice

2021

The University of the South (Sewanee) campus, nestled among its 13,000 acres of rolling woodlands atop the Cumberland Plateau blends a wilderness aesthetic with the more formally organized landscapes found in the built environments of campus and town. This blending, regardless of intent, is deeply seated in the history and traditions of landscape management at the University. The landscapes of the campus built environments have never been highly manicured.

Though perhaps less intentional, funds for grounds management have also been traditionally low and tight - especially for the acreage. This led to a long history of not using chemicals and fertilizers on the property and contributed to the eschewment of manicured “perfection.”

Both the rustic blending of a wilderness aesthetic and the legacy of not introducing costly chemicals and fertilizers have been wholeheartedly embraced by the contemporary grounds maintenance administration. This current appreciation and ethic being more formally grounded in the tenets of sustainability, an appreciation of native plant assemblages and ecology, and the practicalities of labor demands.

The foundation of the grounds approach and landscape standards of practice at Sewanee is that of culture. By applying a broad, ecological and thoughtful cultural approach to the landscape, the biological and mechanical interventions of an integrated management plan are largely included. Thus significantly reducing the need for more resource-intensive biological, mechanical, or chemical inputs.

Basic Guiding Tenets

- Sewanee is located in a wilderness. When the landscape standard gets overly “fussy” it looks out of place.
- Fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and irrigation will not be used unless the grounds team can’t think of a better way to approach or handle the situation.
- Where possible, an essential intention is to create habitat diversity and increase landscape function.
- As little intervention as possible is best for the dual constraints of labor and budget.

Lawns and Edges

The University maintains mixed species lawns that are not reliant on irrigation, pesticide, herbicide or fertilizer use. Over the years Sewanee has intentionally reduced the total area of maintained lawn, but there is still quite a lot of it. An example of recent and intentional lawn reduction is found at Lake Cheston. Careful note was taken of popular paths and lawn pieces that received regular use as lawn. The rest was then allowed to grow up and is mown seasonally as a transition space.

Care is taken to create transitional spaces so that mown lawn does not directly abut an unmaintained natural edge. These transitions are often less frequently mowed areas or seasonally mowed areas. The plant assemblage will grow tall, but periodic mowing prevents woody materials from establishing. These transitional spaces offer excellent habitat and forage.

Some lawn spaces do not receive active use and have lots of canopy coverage. These parcels are treated as parks. Due to the high canopy coverage it can be a struggle to keep lawn turf established. As a result, leaf areas are utilized. This reduces the area needed to mow, which in turn decreases fuel costs and usage and there are fewer bare spots, which lends a more pleasing view.

Many of these park spaces - notably Manigault Park, the Cross, and the landscape between the School of Theology, Gorgas and Quintard - also have a fairly even-aged stand of canopy trees. Owing to intensive mowing practices in the 50s and 60s, there is not much coming up behind the tree plantings to replace them. These tree stands are beginning to reach the end of their lives and to prepare for the future losses, the grounds team is utilizing the leaf areas for replanting. Species are intentionally planted for diversity and succession.

During landscape installation drip irrigation systems were used to support the first two years of establishment. This practice, except in a few small areas, has largely been phased out in favor of hand watering and passive watering systems such as irrigation bags. In new installations mulch is used to help contain soil moisture in combination with either irrigation bags or visits from a groundskeeper with a wand and a water trailer in an effort to deliver 1” of water each month during the driest seasons. This eliminates the costs of installing, maintaining, and uninstalling drip irrigation systems.

Highly Visible / Highly Trafficked Landscape Parcels and Sports Fields

Despite the efforts to blend natural areas with mixed species lawns and create transitional areas next to unmaintained woodland parcels, there are some landscape parcels that are highly trafficked and highly visible, which warrant a differentiated approach. For example, sports fields, the Quad, the lawn of Fulford Hall, Chen Hall, the Sewanee Inn, and a strip of turf along University Ave from the corner of Georgia Ave to McClurg.

Many of these spaces are where the University hosts graduations, alumni dinners, and other high-profile guest entertainment events. As such they do receive some petroleum-based fertilizer and in some cases, notably from Georgia Ave to McClurg, there is minimal, permanent irrigation present.

There are also three locations of sports turf that are utilizing both irrigation and fertilizer. In contrast, there are three pieces of artificial turf - the baseball infield, football, and soccer fields - which were installed in the last 10 years and do not require higher intensity maintenance.

Highly Curated Landscape Parcels

The Sewanee Golf Course is the most highly maintained landscape parcel on campus. It is curated by a separate team and was renovated 10 years ago. At that time a focus was made to incorporate rough areas with warm season native grasses and to manage the areas in such a way as to support a fair amount of ecological diversity. A natural byproduct of the species assemblage and management is that the areas are visually stunning year round.

Additionally, there is an event lawn located behind the Sewanee Inn and adjacent to the golf course which is highly trafficked. Due to location and the aesthetic preferences of Inn management, this parcel is curated by the golf course team using much the same approach as is used for the golf course.

The golf course does routinely use irrigation, but the water is pumped from irrigation ponds on course grounds. Water on the plateau is expensive and University grounds and maintenance endeavor to avoid using municipal water for irrigation. Petroleum-based fertilizers and some fungicide are also applied to the bermuda grass golf course landscape.

Pesticide Use

The only areas in which periodic and specific treatment is warranted are in some sports fields. Otherwise, pest issues haven't arisen in lawn and garden areas to any extent that require treatment.

Herbicide Use

Herbicide use at Sewanee is limited to direct application in problem areas. Specifically, the use of Roundup or glyphosate, is limited to use in combating weeds in the cracks of sidewalks, cracks in roadways and the edges of maintained landscape beds. Periodically a stump will require a direct application of glyphosate, garlan or other herbicides to prevent suckering and maintain elimination of the plant. Most often these efforts are applied only in maintained landscape pieces and are limited to species such as kudzu, english ivy, wisteria, privet, and tree of heaven.

In the lawn areas there is no context in which an herbicide intervention is warranted - even during dandelion season. The lawns are mown and though dandelions often sprout up within two days, leaving the lawns looking a bit rough, the intention is to shift mindsets and overcome deeply ingrained traditional groundskeeping ideals. This situation is almost always harder on the groundskeeping staff than on visitors and residents, who don't mind as much.

Native, Exotic, and Invasive Species Use and Management

Natives species are preferred to exotic species as landscape elements are replaced or new elements established. An effort is made to match the originally intended aesthetic or function. If a comparable native cannot be used, an exotic/ornamental species will be used, but never one with invasive characteristics.

Efforts are made to prevent problematic nonnative, invasive species from establishing in manicured or maintained spaces. Lawn areas are regularly mown and transitional spaces are seasonally mown. This methodology is generally successful.

Some nonnative invasive species are “grandfathered” into the landscape by dint of their historic and/or beloved presence in well-known places. However, close management of those species is necessary. For example, a nonnative, invasive species of wisteria is a beloved characteristic of Rebels Rest. Though the plant is allowed to thrive in the area, its seed pods are intentionally removed to prevent spread and further invasion of the species into nearby areas.

A recent collaborative planting paired and celebrated the sustainable reuse of agricultural byproducts with a native plant assemblage and visual beauty. During a renovation of Lake Cheston a large wildflower meadow was established on a hillside. The meadow itself is beautiful, great for pollinators and caused a great stir of appreciative attention. The planting methodology utilized spent, round, straw bales, no longer useful to area farmers, spread as a thick mat and seeded directly with wildflower seeds. It was very successful and is a replicable collaboration for future.

Managing landscape byproducts such as leaf litter, grass clippings, and trimmings

Sewanee boasts a well-treed campus and though the lawn area has been reduced, there is a lot of lawn that needs to be uncovered by January to promote water penetration and late winter grass growth. The leaf litter is largely removed using vacuum systems on the mowers with impellers to chop the litter. Additionally, a large truck-mounted vacuum is used for leaves along roadways and edges. Further leaves, where applicable, are blown into leaf areas in park-like landscape parcels.

The collected leaves are then piled and flipped to create leafmold compost for later use. Lots of leaves are also delivered to the University Farm where they are incorporated as a ground cover and mulch in field and bed areas - adding to the soil organic matter and a conferring a host of additional benefits to the crop areas. To prevent losing leaf piles to wind, the grounds team uses pine straw to net them down.

Future Ambitions

The Sewanee grounds team continues to look for ways to replace or substitute the small amount of petroleum-based fertilizers still in rotation. A future ambition is to devise a way to efficiently and cost-effectively use and spread dry vermicompost for landscape nutritional support.

Another successful, high-touch landscape element Sewanee plans to replicate is the McGriff rain garden. The upfront cost of such a finely managed landscape element with a long establishment period is substantial. However, the garden represents greater habitat diversity and function than can be gained from a lawn or leaf bed. In addition, it supports bioinfiltration of surface runoff water and is visually striking. There are definitely more high visibility areas on

campus that warrant that amount of resource and labor to achieve significant landscape function benefits.

Finally, the newest residents of Clement Chen Hall - Vice Chancellor Brigety and his family - are very interested in native plants and pollinators. The family do not plan to use the house grounds for entertaining guests to the extent that their predecessors have. They instead prefer a commitment to less traditional and more sustainable management and plantings. Though the vision and plan are still in progress, the intention is to phase in conversion of the Chen Hall lawn space to something more ecologically sound - as well as visually pleasing.