

PGMS Tours Big Ten Country

Site Visit to Michigan State University Gives Attendees Eye Opening View of Best Practices

There might be 12 schools in the NCAA's Big Ten Division, but when it comes to a dynamic landscape services department and general operations of the campus, there is nothing like Michigan State University; just ask the nearly 70 grounds professionals who participated in PGMS's Regional Seminar and Site Visit the last week of July.

As the nation's pioneer land-grant university founded in 1855, today Michigan State University is one of the top research universities in the world and is located on one of the biggest, greenest campuses in the nation. Approximately four years ago, the Grounds Maintenance Department changed its name to Landscape Services to keep in line with its forward thinking that the department provides on-going services to its campus "customers" (various other MSU departments to meet the needs of today and tomorrow and not just "maintaining landscape area installed in the past.)

Coordinated by Gerry Dobbs, CGM, manager of Landscape Services for the Michigan State University's Physical Plant, the conference was a real eye-opener for grounds pros representing other large educational institutions. Even Marvin Pettway from Michigan State's number one rival, the University of Michigan, was awed by what he saw (both men are pictured right).



The education conference kicked off with three excellent presentations. The first presentation "Facility Mapping Technology" featured the MSU Physical Plant's team of Adam Kingsbury, landscape construction coordinator, Brian Keesey, a GIS analyst, and Nick Voss, a GIS and map coordinator. During their presentations, they reviewed how they organize landscape installations with crews and contractors, provide staff with GIS data maps and coordinate installation of annual plantings as well as how mapping has helped in maintaining records and assisting in capital projects and maintenance requests on the 5,000 acre campus. The maps are used to increase efficiencies for routing snow removal, mowing and vegetation management as well as irrigation systems and campus signage.

The mapping presentation, which left most attendees envious, was followed by an updated presentation "Tree Talk" by J. Paul Swartz, an MSU arborist with Landscape Services as well as Dr. Deborah McCullough, professor of Entomology and Forestry. They focused most of their discussion on the topic "Saving Your Ash" and the destruction being impacted on native American ash trees by the emerald ash borer. While progress is being made in saving the landscaped varieties of ash, with a strong recommendation for the use of Emamectin Benzoate Pesticide, the speakers felt there was little hope for saving the forest trees.



From one "pest" to the next, the education program moved to a discussion on snow and ice challenges as presented by a panel of Michigan experts including Ken Stanton, CGM, grounds supervisor at Grand Valley State University, Robert Doletzky, senior supervisor for the University of Michigan Plant Building and Grounds Services, and Bill Ratliff, landscape services coordinator at the MSU Physical Plant. They reviewed the value of having on-going team meetings prior to and during snow season as well as the critical need for a snow removal manual. One good tip for landscape service teams is to make sure that your landscape design teams (if you're in a snow area) always remember to leave adequate space in the landscape around parking lots for the piling of snow. (Pictured left: Diana Bramble Rudolph gets a lesson on driving a large snow removal vehicle.)

From the classroom, PGMS conference attendees then boarded buses and headed off to visit MSU's Landscape

Services Building where they divided into four smaller groups and rotated for four highly interesting and exceptional presentations. These included a close-up look at the various equipment and systems employed for snow and ice response; Accubrine system for making salt brine; “ground proofing” landscape maintenance equipment; and using tutorials about plants, weeds, and pest identification to better educate front-line staff. Of particular interest were the creative talents of the MSU Landscape Services mechanics in developing tools and equipment modifications to overcome regularly occurring equipment issues such as mower front wheel mishaps due to hitting walls or better large-scale sidewalk edging techniques. In the case of the mower, mechanics came up with a solution by welding a steel bar along the side of the mower to allow the mower operator to get close to walls without fear of damaging the wheels. In the case of the sidewalk edger, the mechanics modified and improved a large edging blade system that is affixed to the front of a Bob Cat Tool Cat (pictured right).



During the visit to the Landscape Services Building, attendees also had an opportunity to meet with vendors who helped support the conference. These included Bartlett Tree Experts, Bobcat, Earth Service and Supply, Hoekstra Truck Equipment, LiveRoof, LLC, Proven Winners, Toro, and Superior Saw Co.

In awe, the PGMS attendees boarded the bus back to the conference center and wrapped up Day One.

Ah, but that was only Day One! Day Two put the jaws of the attendees “on the ground” as the day kicked-off with a visit to the MSU Surplus Store & Recycling Center. This expansive facility is responsible for the total coordination to recycle and re-use products from the campus. From compacting paper, plastic, glass and cardboard for resale to private recyclers to generating revenue from the sale of student-discarded books, furniture and bicycles, the facility is another MSU typical business modeled entity with the customer service attitude required for success.

Then it was on to the beautiful MSU Horticulture Gardens where, among other gardens, local horticultural suppliers provide beautiful product for test planting and evaluations. Beds of annuals and perennials also burst full of color to please the senses as guests and students stroll the garden paths.

A special garden within the MSU Horticulture Gardens is the Michigan 4-H Children’s Garden. This lovely creation is designed so that visiting children can use all of their senses to enjoy and learn about flowers and plants. They are encouraged to touch, smell, look and even taste a couple of flowers. From the fun “animal garden” featuring a topiary bear (pictured top right) - “Mama” bear is designed so a child may step between her legs to receive a bear hug and the planter bed is filled with plants that have animal names, such as Lamb’s Ear, Spider Plant and Snapdragons; to the pharmacy garden which features plants that help in the development of pharmaceuticals; the Children’s Garden is designed to be enjoyed by children; but PGMS attendees found it to be thrilling, too. Speaking of topiary, guests are welcomed to the overall gardens by “Wilbur” a 25-ft tall peacock floral topiary (pictured bottom right).



For a real switch of senses, PGMS guests left the Horticulture Gardens and headed to MSU’s Composting Facility which helps convert the bovine and swine manure to exceptional well-balanced compost which is later used on campus as well as sold to the general public. Chuck Reid and Tony Boughton gave an excellent presentation on the history of the development of the composting facility.

The next stop, after a brief lunch, was to the Big Ten athletic facilities of MSU. Led by Amy Fouty, athletic turf manager for Spartan Stadium and MSU, Andy Flynn, groundskeeper III, and Brian McDougal, turf specialist, the group toured the Skandalaris Football Center and indoor practice fields, the men's baseball field, women's softball diamond, soccer fields and the 75,000 seat Spartan Stadium (home of the Big Ten's 2010 champions) which was still letting new sod root after having been the site of a U2 concert only three weeks prior to the PGMS visit.



The final stop on the PGMS visit was to the Beaumont Nursery and landscape materials depot. The tour was led by Jay Andrews, nursery technologist and Steve Wallace, materials and logistics worker II. Every year, the Physical Plant's Beaumont Nursery cares for thousands of plants. As a vital member of the Landscape



Services department, the nursery: provides care for vegetation such as trees, shrubs, perennials and ground cover; promotes the expansion of campus plant life; and often provides woody plant specimens. It doubles as an educational facility as its doors are always open to students in fields such as botany and landscape horticulture, providing exciting opportunities for hands-on experience.

For the PGMS members and guests who had an opportunity to participate in the MSU conference it was a fantastic learning and networking experience. More pictures from the event are posted on the

PGMS Facebook page at www.facebook.com/ProfessionalGroundsManagementSociety.

Plans are now underway for the 2012 regional programs including a visit to Arizona in the spring and Oregon in the summer. Information will be posted at www.pgms.org when it becomes available.