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A Resource for Landscapers

by Tom Crain

Extension departments offer services and training to the green industry

Doug Owens-Pike, president of EnergyScapes landscape firm in Minneapolis, didn't mind the many trips he had to make across town to visit the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum last summer to study a multitude of alternative turf demonstration plots they managed. He worked extensively with Bob Mugaas, University of Minnesota extension educator, to identify just the right seed mix from tall fescue to prairie junegrass, one called a "no-mow" and another "ecology," to use for a wide variety of customer's lawn installations. He could also send his lawn customers to view the same turf plots later featured in the "Cutting Edge" lawn care exhibit open to the public. "These demonstration plots were instrumental in helping me identify and install the most appropriate turf applications for my customers," says Owens-Pike. "Since these were alternative turf, it was also most helpful to allow my customers to see these lawns in a public, educational exhibit."

Sixty miles west of Minneapolis in the small town of Annandale, Becky Steiger, owner of Wild Ways to Garden, used her University of Minnesota extension office after finding an unusual species of beetle annihilating her ninebark bushes at a job site. "I had never seen this type of beetle before, and when I took it into the extension office, they identified it as a Calligrapha spiraeae beetle, and told me how to manage it," she says. From then on, she used them for various consultations for customer installations from pasture plants for horses to planting grapes. "I used to rely just on books to identify the best plant species, now I use them as a great second expert opinion," she says.

PHOTO COURTESY OF UMASS AMHERST.

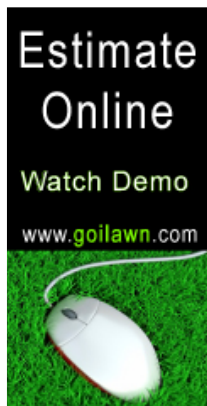


Excellent instruction and hands-on learning draw students to UMass Amherst's schools for turf managers.

Formally known as the Cooperative Extension System (CES), extension services fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Every state and territory has one at its land-grant universities (more than 100 in total), as well as a network of local or regional offices (nearly one in every county for a total of more than 3,000 nationwide) throughout the states. The universities and their local offices are supported by a federal partner in the CES called Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES), which distributes annual, congressionally appropriated formula grants to supplement state and county funds.

The extension system has been with us for more than a century. In 1862, U.S. Congress created the extension system with the Morrill Act, establishing land-grant universities to address exclusively rural agricultural issues. At this time, more than 50 percent of the U.S. population lived in rural areas with 30 percent of the workforce engaged in farming. Today, fewer than 2 percent of Americans farm for a living, and only 17 percent of Americans now live in rural areas. So, fortunately for the green industry, the extension service's role expanded from servicing farmers to including urban and suburban landscapers.

Extension service directors aren't out to compete with landscaping professionals. They



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don't have the resources, particularly in this time of severe budget cutbacks and layoffs, to make house calls on lawn and garden owners. And, they don't do home landscaping design or maintenance. Instead, they are in the business of supplementing, not supplanting, area landscapers. They often recommend their consumer clients seek out local professional service providers when necessary.

Many extension services that used to be free for the green industry, such as soil testing and disease diagnosis, are now fee-based due to budget cuts, but insect and weed identification services for the most part remain free.

UMass targeting turf

One of the oldest and most respected institutions of CES is the UMass Extension Turf Program formed in 1927 at a time when New England's small farms were disappearing and being replaced with green suburban lawns brought overseas by the British.

"Because New England has such great resources in lawn research and a vast suburban and urban landscape overall, it made sense to have a focus on turf," explains Mary Owens, UMass extension turf education specialist for more than 30 years.

UMass Turf operates two pivotal schools for landscapers. The intensive UMass Winter School for Turf Managers is the first program of its kind, full-time, seven weeks, five days per week, operating every year for the past 82 years except for a few years during WWII. The school is internationally renowned and geographically diverse, reaching about 70 superintendents of prestigious golf courses, athletic fields and other fine turf areas throughout the United States, Canada, South America and Europe every year. The second is Green School, offered in conjunction with the Landscape, Nursery and Urban Forest program, which is more focused on comprehensive landscaping, held every other year and certifying about 150 participants.

OSU teaming with innovation

Another unique and innovative extension program serving the landscaping industry is Ohio State University (OSU) Extension's Nursery, Landscape and Turf Team (ENLTT). It's a group of 24 diverse Ohio State University professionals from various OSU departments and field extension offices. The Ohio Nursery Landscape Association appropriates about \$300,000 every year to support the team's development activities.

"The mission of ENLTT, through our interdisciplinary and industry partnerships, is to improve the process of development, acquisition, delivery and support of accurate, practical and timely educational resources," explains Keith L. Smith, OSU extension director. "It provides a cost-effective way to help promote the building of a team of people who are better equipped to assist the landscaping industry through support by and for the representatives of the industry."

Sustainability demands building new programs

Many current CES programs focus their efforts on sustainability in landscaping resulting from increasing demands. Cornell University's Cooperative Extension (CUCE), covering northern New York State, has always been one of the leaders in sustainability efforts.

Laurie Broccolo, CEO of Broccolo Tree and Lawncare, Rochester, N.Y., has been working closely with CUCE from the first day in 1991, when she brought sustainable practices into her landscaping business with living walls, green roofs, rain gardens and eco-swales. Throughout the years, CUCE supported Broccolo's efforts to educate her peers on sustainability and IPM practices via teaching and leading seminars.

PHOTO COURTESY OF UC DAVIS EXTENSION.



"CUCE was one of the few key resources to go to for sustainable landscapes," she says. "I was very fortunate to have them close by." On a regular basis, she still uses them for soil sampling and assisting with essential research on problem sites. With the ash borer invading her area, she will be relying on them for essential consult. Over the years, Broccolo has taught for CUCE on sustainability and IPM practices. Now that the CUCE is extensively involved with the new Cornell University's Center for a Sustainable Future (CCSF), she will be ratcheting up her teaching for them.

The University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) is another leader in

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An educator at the University of California Cooperative Extension shows landscapers how to use a pilot tube to check sprinkler operating pressure to improve plant health and reduce water waste.

PHOTO COURTESY OF UC DAVIS EXTENSION.



An educator at the University of California Cooperative Extension demonstrates how to conduct a "can test" to determine sprinkler uniformity to landscapers.

sustainability training with a dedicated environmental horticulturist specializing in conducting applied research and educational programs for public and private arborists, landscapers, irrigation specialists and golf course superintendents.

"In Southern California, there is an ever-increasing demand for sustainability training," says Janet Hartin, UCCE environmental horticulturist. "Our main inquiries include identification and care of drought-resistant plants, efficient irrigation equipment and irrigation scheduling (based on evapotranspiration needs of plants), reduction and reuse of green waste (as soil amendments and mulch and through grasscycling), and reduced use of pesticides through IPM." Hartin is encouraged by the growing awareness of landscapers recognizing that they are one of the leading environmental stewards in the country, and therefore, are stepping up their knowledge and practices in this area.

UCCE's largest annual event is the Turf and Landscape Institute, featuring sessions on

sustainable landscaping, arboriculture and a session taught for Spanish-speaking professionals, regularly attracting around 400 professionals.

Online and video training

During this current recession, ECS is finding that many landscaping companies are reducing their training efforts. The University of Georgia's Extension Service Center offers a new series of online videos providing training for landscapers. Offered in both English and Spanish, the five "Safety Makes Sense" videos cover topics like lawn mower and equipment safety, poisonous plants and animals, appropriate clothing, sun protection, heat stress, heat stroke and repetitive motion injury, as well as how to communicate with supervisors.

"We knew the Spanish versions of our training videos would be popular," said Ellen Bauske, the center's program coordinator. "With the state's budget situation, we can't hire a full-time Spanish-speaking educator. The videos allow us to provide this training despite that."

Because of the popularity of the video series, the University of Georgia Extension Service is partnering with neighboring University of Florida Cooperative Extension to offer video training for English-speaking supervisors of Spanish-speaking employees.

The entire extension system is building a national online program called eXtension. One of the goals of eXtension is to develop a coordinated, Internet-based information system where customers can find round-the-clock access to specialized and personalized information and education on a wide range of topics, including landscaping.

Recession affects program

Officials are bracing for potential layoffs or restructuring at the cooperative extension service programs from Washington State to Florida, as the state and county governments that largely fund the programs say they must cut their contributions amid the recession.

"It's fairly common with the state budgets suffering as much as they are," said James Wade, director of extension and outreach for the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

According to a recent AP article, North Dakota (with a budget surplus) is only one of a handful of states where funding proposals for extension service has actually increased (16 percent for North Dakota State University). Fortunately, many states offering extension services for landscaping and grounds maintenance professionals are trimming back on average no more than 10 to 20 percent.

In hard-hit Michigan, Gov. Jennifer Granholm wants to combine extension and agriculture research budgets, and proposes cutting the total funding by half, from \$64 million to \$32 million. At Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, officials expect to lose more

than 100 extension instructors and staff under Gov. Bobby Jindal's proposed budget.

Despite the difficult times, extension programs for the landscaping industry remain a viable partner in education and research.

For the past 20 years, Tom Crain has been a regular contributor to B2B publications, including many in the green industry. He is also a marketing communications specialist for several companies in the travel, agriculture and nutrition industries.

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