

BUILDING A BETTER TOOLBOX

Tools you can use! PART 2

Don Savard, CSFM*

The Information Toolset- Gather the Facts!

Grounds management is challenging! It is more than keeping the grass cut; rather, it is an art and science of handling change. We have little control over funding and no control over the weather. Often we work with limited resources. Whether their grounds management operation is big or small, well funded or not, successful grounds managers use good information about their site to make informed management decisions. This information is another tool in the management toolbox.

Every site has its positives and negatives. When you know what you have to work with and you can predict with certainty how it will perform under different conditions, you will have an advantage. To get to that point, you will need to inventory what you have, and then evaluate it. I like to start with a basic tool- a property survey that includes the following items:

1) An accurate property area measurement, expressed in square feet or acres will be helpful for purchasing materials or hiring services such as aeration. It is useful for calibration purposes and for budgeting. It is very important for regulatory compliance and record keeping.

2) An inventory of the desirable turf grasses or ornamental plants growing on your site. With this information, you can predict how much fertilizer is needed to keep it healthy, what problems it might have, and what its cultural needs are. You might find plants growing outside of their normal temperature zone. Note the condition that the plants are in, good or bad, and ask why? Be sure to look around for clues to support your findings.

3) A list of pest problems and populations. Is there any insect, disease or weed activity at the present time, or is there evidence of past damage? Even if there is no evidence of pest problems or damage, that is also significant. Find out why.

4) An evaluation of how the site has been maintained. Is the maintenance good or bad, and why? Notice how the site has

been used or abused? Are there noticeable traffic or use patterns?

I like to survey my site often. It forces me to look critically at the site, discover problems early and evaluate how well my program is working. I like to photograph the site too. Document the date and time on this document as well as the photo image. It provides a good progress report.

Soil testing is the next tool in the information tool set and in the area of turf management and horticulture is used to measure the fertility levels, the physical texture and the soluble salts present on your site. Samples are collected, labeled and sent to a soil testing lab, either at a land grant University, or a private laboratory. You provide the information that the lab requests and indicate which tests you require and pay the fee. The lab will test the soil, and send you a test report and give you nutrient recommendations. I like to test my soil annually at the same time each year. Doing this provides me with a good "snapshot" of my soil conditions and helps me evaluate my progress each year. I use the same lab each year because the testing protocols are consistent from year to year. A good testing lab can be helpful for tests other than soil. Plant pathology labs can detect and identify insect and disease problems in samples and can diagnose nutrient deficiencies in plant tissues. Water quality tests quantify levels of contaminants or imbalances in irrigation water.

Obtain or draw an accurate site map showing the property boundaries, and the locations of buildings, utilities, trees and site amenities. If you can, get a topographic survey map of the site. A detailed map is an important tool for communicating your ideas, planning site improvements and for correcting drainage problems.

Good information will help you get the best results. Results will improve your credibility with the people that you work for. And there is nothing like success to make your job easier.

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