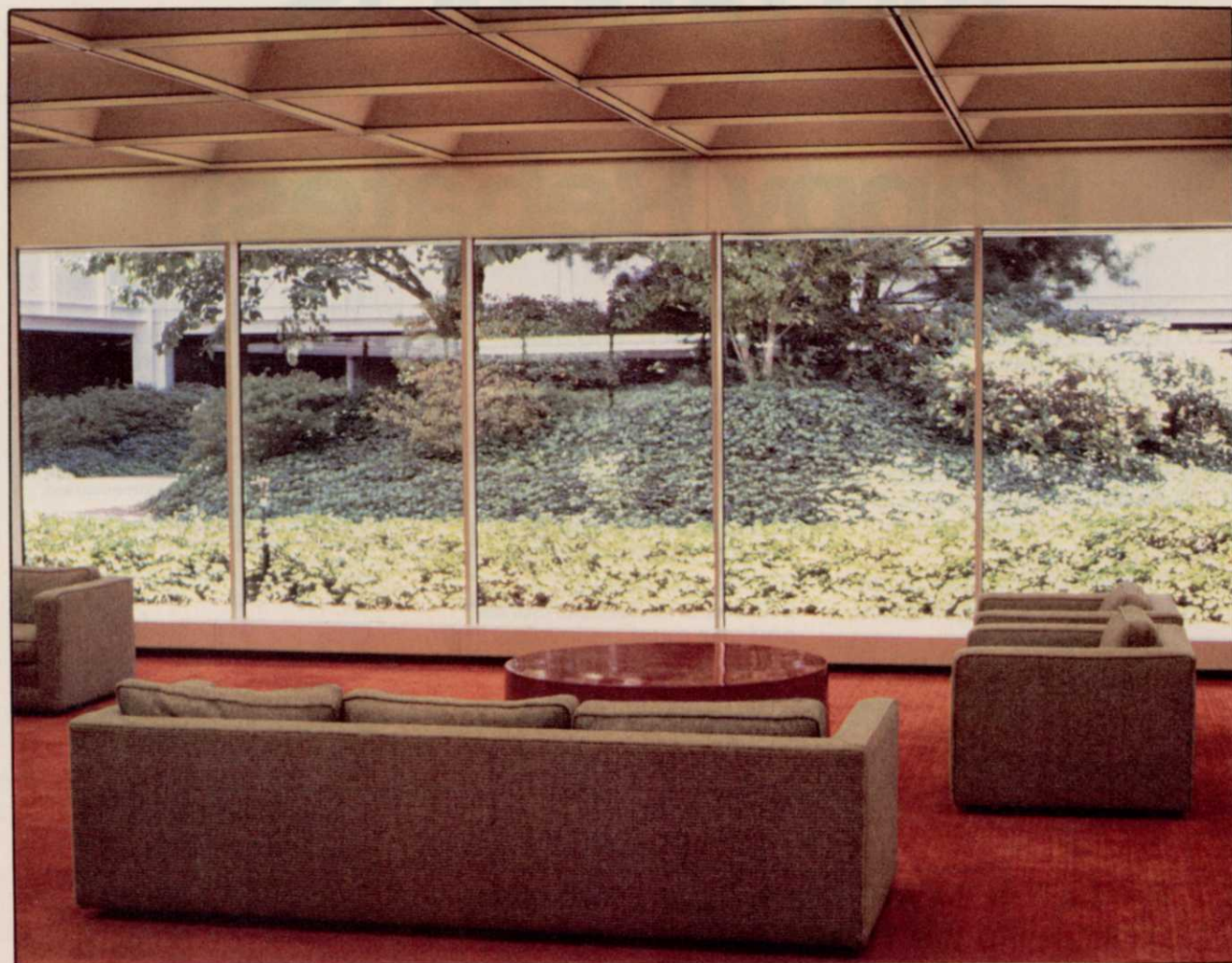


GE SUPERINTENDENT HAWKS SPECIFICATIONS FOLLOWING EARLY TURFGRASS DISASTER

By THOMAS PACIELLO



View makes you feel like your in the headquarters of one of the country's largest corporations.

Two years after Elmer Toth accepted the job of superintendent of grounds and facilities for General Electric's corporate headquarters in Fairfield, CN, he could drop a quarter and not hit a blade of green grass. As you can imagine, GE's appreciation of proper maintenance skyrocketed.

The original turf failed because the topsoil left by construction crews was poor and the turfgrass used was not winter hardy. One cold winter and one hot summer wiped out acres of turf. Since Toth

joined GE following construction he could only try desperately to

Toth's main job is to decide how specifications should be altered from one year to the next.

save a poorly specified turf.

Those days are just a memory now. Visitors at GE are tempted to

bring along a three wood to tee off the fairway-like lawns. All of the 45 acres maintained are handled by contractors under the supervision of Toth. Specifications are his keys to control.

Outside contracting, according to Toth, has worked out just fine. "We're very happy with our contractor, Michael Labriola Inc. They take a lot of pride in their work and that is very important to me." He admits that there is a big difference between contractors and in-house staff. "With outside contractors I

follow a 'hands off' policy unless they stray from the schedule," said Toth. "You must be very careful in who you pick. The lowest bidder might not be the best choice." In dealing with contractors, Toth pointed out that one of the most important elements is well-written specifications. Toth wrote both the contract and the specs so he is intimately familiar with their contents. Every spring Labriola submits a schedule that details just how and when his firm will perform all the tasks outlined in the specs. One of Toth's main responsibilities is to decide just how the specs are altered from year to year.

The specs are divided into three areas: grounds maintenance, landscape maintenance and lawn maintenance. Grounds maintenance incorporates sweeping and snow removal duties, lawn maintenance details the fertilizing, irrigating and mowing of all lawn areas, and landscape maintenance pertains to ornamentals, trees, ground covers and other areas.

Winter is a particularly busy season at GE due to the harsh weather. The maintenance crew plows continually when it snows, not giving the snow a chance to build up. The roads are also covered with a sand/salt mixture. Since its opening GE has only had to close the office once due to untravelable roads.

Spring is the toughest season for the crew, due to the number of jobs

One cold winter and one hot summer wiped out GE's turf

that have to be done. Any damage that was done during the winter has to be repaired. This is also the time that all planting, trimming, pruning, and in general, preparation for the growth season takes place.

Mowing and keeping the lawn green are the two basic tasks during the summer. A lot of irrigation and fertilizing goes into maintaining the green color.



Toth (left) and contractor Labriola (right) plan five years ahead for GE.

Fall is the only relatively slow period at GE. Leaves are removed from lawn areas with air brooms and Toro Groundmasters. A snow fence is erected to battle the harsh winds which would otherwise dump snow on the driveways. During the fall the trees are checked for problems and additional pruning is done if necessary.

In maintaining a good relationship with his contractors, Toth noted that chemical application timeliness is one area that he keeps a watchful eye on. "When I see the contractor's schedule I have to decide on the accuracy of the chemical applications," said Toth. "The fluctuating weather always makes this difficult and we sometimes disagree on which dates will provide the best control." He points to the application of crabgrass herbicide this year. It was very warm in May, which foretold of an early spring. Following the herbicide application the weather got cold and rainy and the crabgrass failed to germinate until July. Meanwhile the herbicide was diluted and ran off with the drainage. The result was more crabgrass at GE than usual, although it was not a devastating problem. Toth pointed out that with insect and weed control he is opting for less than

100% if he can significantly cut down on his chemical usage. All the chemicals eventually drain into a number of holding ponds and Toth believes it is environmentally sounder to move towards an IPM (integrated pest management) ap-

The lowest bidder might not be the best choice

proach rather than overusing chemicals. This will be a gradual process, however.

One of the reasons Toth is vigilant on chemical application is because of the results when there is an error. "I make sure the spraying is done on schedule because if you miss, you might not have another chance to control the insects, weeds and disease," said Toth. "With exterior work you may have to live with your mistakes for a year before you can rectify them. Do it right the first time so you don't have to do it again." Toth had a mite and lacebug problem on his pieris and rhododendron. This caused a yellow mottling on the leaves that can't be remedied this season.

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Trimming and all other landscape tasks are performed by Labriola's crew.

The landscape maintenance contract is very inclusive of the many areas that make up a corporate headquarters. One of the few duties that is not in the contract is the replacement of trees. Toth forecasts future budgets as much as five years ahead and tree replacement is one of the areas that he leaves out. By forecasting so far ahead Toth is able to secure funds for projects ahead of time and also be cost effective in his maintenance. While his forecast for 1983 is detailed, his forecast for 1987 is much more vague. He adds more detail to each upcoming year and always stays five years ahead. He told *Weeds Trees and Turf* that this was difficult for the first five years of the contract period but now it is mostly fine-tuning. The contract is budgeted at approximately \$200,000 for 1982 and that includes funds for emergency projects that are necessary but don't appear in the specs. The contract is increased yearly, usually around 10-15% according to the ravages of inflation and the increased scope of the con-

tract.

Being at GE since its opening in 1974 has been a big asset to Toth, particularly in detailing the specifications of maintaining the landscape. "To be plunked down on a property with no prior experience is very difficult," said Toth. "It takes at least a year to see how the property reacts to the four seasons. The experience helps because I've learned that nothing happens twice quite the same way." Toth regrets not being at GE during the construction period because there are some things he would have done differently. It is no wonder the original grass failed when you realize it was planted on a poor topsoil foundation and it was quick-germinating but *not* winter-hardy. When Toth was installing the irrigation system he decided to top-dress and reseed everywhere and his efforts paid off. The foundation is a predominately tight clay soil and aeration twice a season is a must.

Curiously, because Toth can control the moisture levels on the

grounds he does not look forward to nature's inconsistent rainfall. It also wrecks havoc on the mowing schedule. During the summer the grass is mowed once per week and it can take two to three days for the crew to finish all the lawn areas. Even with its large water usage, GE was not restricted during the Northeast water crisis. GE uses city water, which is preferable due to the lack of silt and other particles but Toth is making plans for future conservation so he won't be caught short. The company policy is to keep as much lawn area as possible so in a crisis situation the lawns would get high priority.

One of the unique areas at GE is due to the building design. Described as three square doughnuts, each of the three buildings contains a three-story, 75-sq. ft. atrium. In each atrium is a circular compilation of shrubs, trees and ground cover bordered by a path, which is in turn surrounded by a strip of shrubs, hedges and ground cover. The atria are inaccessible but provide a pleasing vista for employees who border them. The weather conditions vary considerably from the lawn areas and are much more greenhouse-like. There is much less air circulation and it is warmer. The plants have suffered from wilting, leafspot and aphids but the spray program and syringing have helped battle any large infestations.

Toth regrets not being at GE during construction

Since he brought the grass back in 1976-77 Toth has battled infestations at every front and won more than his share. And he did it in a suit and tie without having to push a mower or squirt a sprayer. Armed with detailed specifications as to what he wants done and fortunate to be affiliated with a conscientious landscape maintenance contractor, Toth has maintained General Electric grounds to golf course standards. **WTT**