

# Gaining Grounds

**Three simple precepts can keep superintendents on track when creating maintenance budgets for areas outside the golf course**

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., MANAGING EDITOR



**W**hen Dave Smith became the superintendent at Fawn Lake Country Club in Spotsylvania, Va., the clubhouse didn't exist. Once the owners built it, however, it didn't take the general manager long to ask Smith to take care of its surrounding flower beds.

"We never had a sit-down meeting about it," Smith says. "They assumed I would take

over the responsibility, and I assumed I would take over the responsibility. But budgeting for it has been a challenge because of the way my responsibilities evolved."

Smith has learned how to create a budget for these extra responsibilities on the fly, but he doesn't recommend his colleagues do it that way.

"We're learning as we go along, and we'll get the process down for good soon," Smith says. "It's been a little bit of a learning curve as the responsibilities multiplied."

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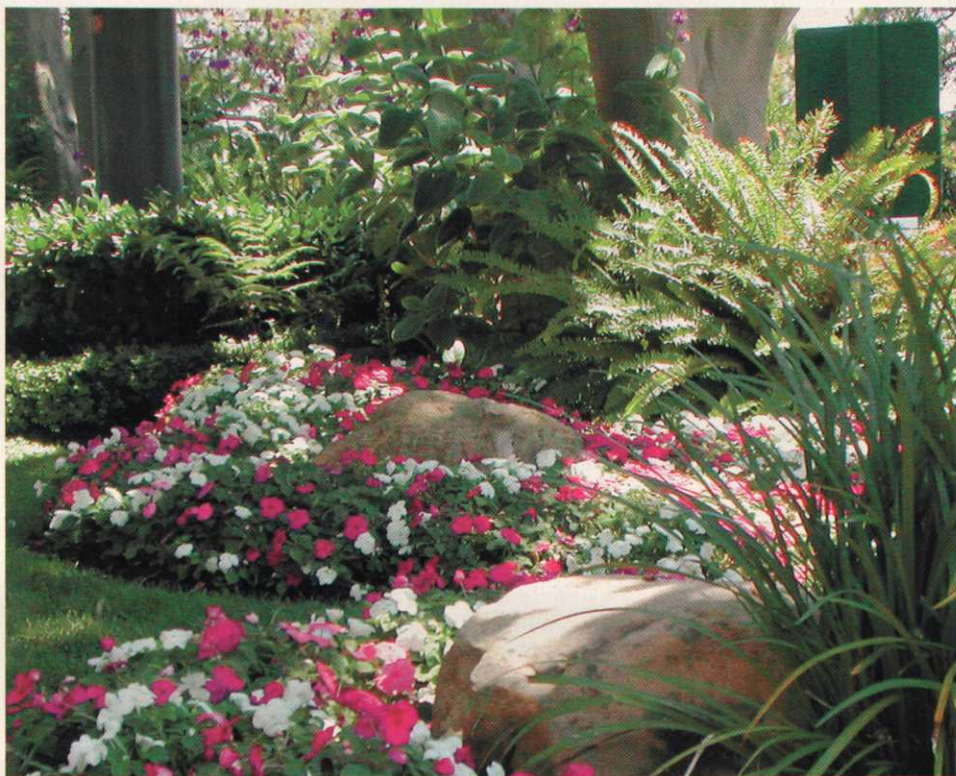
When members start adding intricate landscaping at the club's entrance (as they have at the Big Canyon Country Club), the superintendent should ask them to hire a staff horticulturalist.



BIG CANYON COUNTRY CLUB



The skill set necessary to take care of flowers isn't the same set necessary to take care of turf.



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Smith's story isn't uncommon. Superintendents start out being responsible solely for the golf course, but shift into more of a grounds maintenance role as new landscap-

**"You don't need to be a horticulture expert, but you'd better listen to the one you hire."**

JEFF BEARDSLEY  
BIG CANYON COUNTRY CLUB

ing and other maintained grounds are added. Experts say superintendents should live by three precepts when they budget to meet these new responsibilities.

First, realize that most golf courses will keep adding to the responsibilities without adding money to superintendents' budgets unless they speak up. Golfers and members often don't realize the amount of work it takes

to maintain landscaping, so superintendents need to tell them when it becomes a burden.

Second, experts say superintendents must fight for a separate grounds budget so they can document costs more clearly. Superintendents should also fight for separate staffs because the skill set for turf care isn't the same as the one required to care for flowers and other grounds.

Finally, as with all other maintenance functions, superintendents must manage the expectations of the budget committees so they can properly budget for the job, say people who've gone through the process for years. If superintendents can stick to these three principles, budgeting for grounds maintenance doesn't have to be difficult.

### **Containing 'landscape creep'**

Dan Dinelli, certified superintendent at North Shore Country Club in Glenview, Ill., felt its presence as the years progressed. Something outside his consciousness weighed him down, stretched his resources thin and added more pressure to an already pressure-packed job. Then one year it hit him — "landscape creep" increasingly ate up his time and that of his crew.

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Suddenly, Dinelli found himself responsible for taking care of the tennis courts, pool and clubhouse — 5 acres of high-end landscaping in all — in addition to maintaining a top-notch golf course.

"The members kept adding to the landscape, and this isn't just any landscaping. This is high-end, high-maintenance stuff," Dinelli says. "Most superintendents work hard, and they just keep moving forward from one job to the next even as more gets added to their plates. The problem is that I eventually reached a point with the landscaping that my department couldn't absorb it anymore."

Dinelli asked his budget committee to fund an additional seasonal worker to maintain the landscaping. His board, however, reacted skeptically.

"We'd been doing it on our own for so long that they had a hard time understanding why we needed another body," Dinelli says. "I

realized it was my job to get my facts together to persuade them."

At North Shore, the budgets are mixed together under the rubric of "greens and grounds," so Dinelli says he couldn't provide the budget committee with historical information on how much it cost to take care of the landscaping. To combat the shortcoming, he asked three local landscaping firms (including, ingeniously, the company that did landscaping for one of the committee members) to price out how much the job would cost. The number, \$30,000, staggered the committee.

"They quickly saw that the \$18,000 I requested to add a seasonal staffer wasn't bad," Dinelli says. "It crystallized the issue for them."

### Separate staff

Jeff Beardsley, superintendent at Big Canyon Country Club in Newport Beach, Calif., says

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**Dan Dinelli, certified superintendent at North Shore Country Club in Glenview, Ill., says his members kept adding high-end landscape until he couldn't handle the extra maintenance duties with his existing staff.**



NORTH SHORE COUNTRY CLUB



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NORTH SHORE COUNTRY CLUB

**Hiring a seasonal worker to dedicate his or her time strictly to the landscaping is more cost-effective than hiring an outside firm to do the work.**

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it's important for superintendents to maintain separate staffs for grounds maintenance functions.

"The quickest way to have the project done properly is to have a dedicated staff do it," Beardsley says. "With some of the landscaping demands, it's the only way to keep the club members satisfied."

Once members realize that the grounds around the clubhouse make the first impression on visitors (in the hotel business, they call it curb appeal), they start to understand the importance of hiring experts to handle it instead of adding the duties on the golf course maintenance staff.

"We can't be experts in everything and having dedicated experts on staff mean the grounds will get the same level of attention as the course," Beardsley says.

Beardsley oversees a staff horticulturalist and four employees to look after the areas around the clubhouse and other peripheral

grounds. Though they report to him (and he handles their budget requests), the horticulturalist sets the agenda and makes sure the flowers are taken care of properly. Before Beardsley makes the case for how much money the grounds budget needs, he walks into the horticulturalist's office, sits down and listens.

"You don't need to be a horticulture expert, but you'd better listen to the one you hire," Beardsley says.

(Beardsley declined to put a number on how much he spends on the grounds, saying his low-key, high-end club isn't typical — and he might find himself in trouble if he made the number public.)

### **The expectations game**

Beardsley says he views his job as figuring out what the members expect the grounds to look like and then giving them the actual budget figures on what it will take to do it. If the

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Water features around the clubhouse often require extra labor and time for their care.

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members decide they want to rotate the flowers on a quarterly basis (to keep the color palette fresh as the seasons change), Beardsley and his staff are happy to do it. But it costs money, and members often decide they have other priorities for where the money should be spent on the course when presented with the hard numbers.

"During tough financial times, the landscaping budget is the first item they cut," Beardsley says. "If you're meticulous in showing them exactly what it costs to care for the landscaping, you put the decision in their hands about what to do."

"That doesn't mean you're trying to evade responsibility," he adds. "But it is *their* golf course, and they should make the decisions about what to cut out of the budget."

Smith, whose evolving role as the grounds maintenance supervisor left him playing catch-up from the beginning, says educating golfers about the grounds maintenance costs

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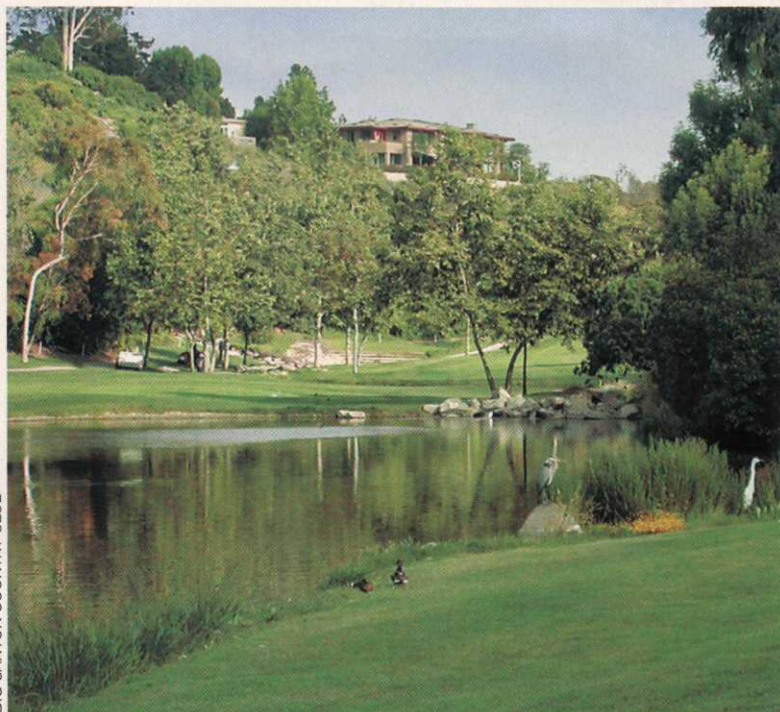
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**Big Canyon Country Club superintendent Jeff Beardsley also maintains a separate budget to care for the slopes that surround his course.**

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is the most important aspect of creating a budget for it.

The original general manager at Fawn Lake designed the landscaping around the clubhouse with a certain look in mind. When a new person replaced him two years ago, the vision changed radically. Smith and his crew ripped out the old landscaping and planted new flowers, trees and shrubs. Unfortunately, the new general manager expected it to look as finished after the renovation as it had before — especially after he'd spent all that money on it.

"I had to explain to him that it wasn't going to look like a finished product right away, and that he was expecting too much," Smith says. "Problems arise when expectations move beyond what can reasonably be expected. We learned from each other how to match the expectations with the ability to provide for them, and the whole process is moving more smoothly."

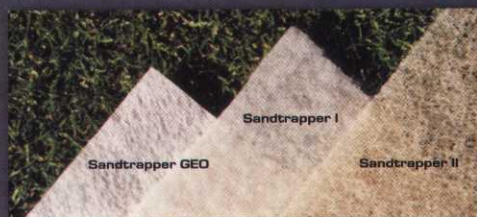
He chuckles. "We're getting there." ■

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