



SEA WORLD

A major showplace in Orlando beckons visitors with spectacular vegetation given the undivided attention of Martin Schwerthoffer and his crew of 30.

by Barbara Betts

The biggest challenge for Martin Schwerthoffer at Sea World in Orlando, FL, is meeting the public's expectations.

With an estimated three million people trekking through the marine life park each year, the director of landscaping and his 30-person crew labor diligently to make sure Sea World looks good 365 days a year.

Making the turf green and the flowers look as bright in February as

they do in July is not always an easy job. Schwerthoffer and his crew have to work around limitations imposed by the sheer volume of people as well as the conditions of weather and soil. They try to meet the demand to be new and different.

Differences

Whether it means constructing a massive poinsettia tree and protecting it from sudden and unexpected frost or

watering an eight-foot hanging basket of impatiens, Schwerthoffer is always "trying to get something different."

"I think people expect unique things from us," he maintains.

His crew is constantly changing the 36 annual beds scattered throughout the park.

"We change so there's a continuous run of color; so it's always different. If a bed looks bad, you pull it," he says.

To meet these demands, the park's horticulturist raises some 30,000 annuals each year.

Demands on the park's greenhouse and nursery facilities continues to grow, not only to provide for the constantly changing color, but to provide for the demand for landscaping materials created by new Sea World projects. Crew member Jasper McLemore supervised the growth of more than 30,000 junipers in the last two years. The shrubs were recently installed around the new Shamu Stadium. Thirty different varieties of trees were

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also added for that project.

The greenhouse and nursery operation has grown in Schwerthoffer's eight years at Sea World. When he came, the park had one greenhouse. Now there are five.

The biggest reason for the increased nursery operation? Savings. Schwerthoffer estimates that about \$100,000 was saved by growing the trees and junipers to size.

The people

The crowds visiting Sea World are a major constraint for landscaping. The park is open year-round. It is important, the landscaping director says, to keep the grass green.

"People, especially from the North, come down here and expect to see green grass—no matter what the time of year."

Schwerthoffer says there are 38 acres of bahia grass and six of bermudagrass overseeded with ryegrass at the park. In the winter, except for the palm trees, the overseeded bermudagrass is the only green thing in the park.

The grass used to be kept green by painting it with a colorant. The color, Schwerthoffer says, was never very satisfactory. And it was costly to put down and maintain.

The overseeding program started two years ago with a search for the right ryegrass. Most ryegrasses, Schwerthoffer explains, were too thick. Then he started buying Lesco's CBS Blend ryegrass and is very satisfied with the results.

"It's turned out beautiful. The beauty of it is that it's a finer texture than we've used before. You can't tell it from the bermuda. We start overseeding in November. We get germination in a short period of time and have no browning or anything. It just

goes right to town. There's less cost involved and it always looks good," Schwerthoffer says.

The bermudagrass-ryegrass acreage has to stand up to tough foot traffic, too. On one spacious green section near the Rain Forest, Schwerthoffer estimates more than 200 band concerts are held each year. And the ryegrass stays green.

Specialized needs

And how many landscape managers have to worry about keeping a tropical rain forest warm in the winter? At Sea World, the Rain Forest is kept temperate, despite freezing temperatures, by 200 gas heaters. The heaters, placed every eight feet in the one acre tropical patch, keep the temperature up when necessary, about 20 degrees above that in the rest of the park.

The specialized needs of the Sea World landscape, quite predictably, extend to the significant part animals play in the natural beauty of the park.

The crowds visiting Sea World are a major constraint for landscaping.

Not only can a visitor see Shamu, sea lions and exotic fish, but can mingle with the 5,000 rabbits, innumerable ducks and deer who wander freely about Sea World in Orlando. While visitors love the natural feeling, Schwerthoffer admits the animals place limits on his ability to cope with common landscaping problems.

Challenge continues

For Schwerthoffer and his crew at Sea World, the challenges continue. Not only do they intend to fertilize early this fall to avoid having flush new growth killed in a winter frost, and use a fertilizer with minors to cope with a soil system that ties up the iron, they will continue to realize the demands of their constituency. The crew will overseed more this year to make more green grass this winter. And they will continue extensive plantings at the nursery to prepare for their next new project—a luxury hotel across the street from the marine life park.

Satisfaction for Schwerthoffer and his Sea World crew will continue to be the delighted faces of families enjoying the green grass and beautiful vegetation.

WT&T

Barbara Betts is editor of Lesco News.

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