

## LANDSCAPE PROFILE

**CASE CLOSED**

There's no question that award-winning Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland is one of the finest landscaped urban universities in the U.S.

by Heide Aungst, associate editor

**S**pring is John Michalko's favorite season.

Typically, spring is a time many find inspiration in a robin's song, a bouquet of fresh-cut daffodils or a radiant sunset.

But to Michalko, landscape superintendent at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, spring signals an end to the drudgery of snow removal and the beginning of "real" work.

"To the operators winter might not be boring, but to me it is,"

Michalko says. "I know what has to be done. I see what has to be done. Whenever there isn't snow on the ground, I go out and do it."

Unfortunately, the campus is usually hit with snow five months a year, thanks in part to its proximity to Lake Erie.

Michalko's crews always clear roads and sidewalks for early classes, even on days when the campus closes because city streets aren't clear, or a bitter windchill factor looms.

Snow is always considered when planning any type of landscape design. At CWRU, the design of certain areas includes a place to put plowed snow without damaging plant materials. Sidewalks are a certain width to facilitate plowing.

Since concrete and asphalt don't hold up well under freezing conditions, Michalko started using uni-stone interlocking pavers in 1983.

He also discovered the pavers worked well on tree lawns where excessive salt damage from salting icy roads prohibited solid turf growth.

**A different season, a different job**

But when spring comes, Michalko buries the winter blues and concentrates on readying athletic fields and beautifying the campus for graduation ceremonies in late May.

Case held commencement outdoors for the first time in 1985. It was such a success that the administration plans to continue the practice.



Springtime at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland means color in every corner of campus.



An early spring scene on the Case campus.

Michalko won the PGMS Grand Award for athletic fields in 1980 and plans to enter the competition this year. "Our fields are pushed to the maximum," Michalko says. Sometimes 60 intramural games are played on a field in one week.

Case has one intramural field for soccer and football which is marked with colored paints running in different directions. It also has six softball fields. Michalko uses a bluegrass/ryegrass mix on the fields.

The urban campus is at the hub of the University Circle area on Cleveland's cultural east side. Its properties are blended with those of the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Natural History Museum, the Cleveland Clinic, and the Garden Center of Greater Cleveland.

Because of the busy thoroughfares surrounding the campus, Michalko works hard at keeping even minor details, such as flowers around every university sign, in order.

A large volume of pedestrian traffic also makes the daily trek across campus. "Students will always take the shortest distance between two points," Michalko sighs. To prevent extensive turf damage, Michalko has built walkways and frequently uses shrubbery as a natural barrier.

Shrubbery must be maintained below three feet for security purposes.

Trees are trimmed regularly to promote their growth, enhance lighting, and increase visibility, he says.

Michalko says many schools are now planning landscape design in conjunction with security personnel. CWRU has done this during Michalko's eight years.

There are special considerations in working for a private university. For example, during finals week, works crews cannot run any power equipment before 9 a.m. "in case some students who were up all night studying want to sleep in."

#### **Vandalism: a big problem**

Perhaps the biggest problem

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Michalko must deal with is vandalism, ranging from broken sprinkler systems to spray graffiti.

It's often difficult to know if the vandalism was done as a fraternity prank or on a city kid's dare. "Kids will be kids," Michalko says.

One time the grounds crew set up stakes to tell where to snowplow. But during the night, someone moved the stakes. Needless to say, the crew never tried that again.

An advantage to working for a university, however, are the grants that come in earmarked for particular landscape use.

This spring Michalko and his crew will use funds from "friends of the university" to trim trees and plant new ones.

The money for special projects is used in addition to the regular operating budget, which Michalko wouldn't reveal.

"I tell the front office what I need and they handle the budgeting," Michalko says. "They'll tell me if I go over. One time we had a cutback and I was told to cut budgets, not people. New equipment and supplies went first."

#### **Managing people: a tough job**

Michalko uses a full-time, year-

round crew of 15. His philosophy is to pay them well and give them a good benefit package to keep them happy with their job.

The university's benefit package includes free tuition for the employee and his family.

Still, dealing with 15 individuals is the part of the job Michalko finds most difficult.

"They all have their own personalities," Michalko says. "But they take pride in the campus because they see it every day. I'd stack 95 percent of them up against anybody."

Michalko would rather be out working with Mother Nature than dealing with human nature. His plan for the campus includes a color code, which means there is color on the campus at all times.

According to what color they turn in the fall to further enhance the

autumn beauty of the campus.

A sugar maple will turn yellow, orange, and scarlet, while a tulip tree will turn yellow, a crown right pin oak will turn red and a sweet gum will turn orange and scarlet, he says.

Michalko works closely with landscape architects William Behnke Associates Inc. for all design changes.

Since 1977, many new vest-pocket parks, walkways and courtyards have been installed.

This year his major project is to renovate the landscaping around the dorms and fraternities, including adding an irrigation system. "All the major work is done," says Michalko. "There's just some minor tinkering left."

But for Michalko, that tinkering will probably never be finished. "My biggest challenge is trying to satisfy myself," he says. "I try to be a perfectionist. I want everything done just right."

Whether it's award-winning athletic fields, bright autumn colors or fresh spring flowers, Case Western Reserve University will always be in tip-top shape while Michalko is at the helm...even though snowplowing is a little boring. **WT&T**