

# Going 'natural' cuts costs

**Improvements at NWU are a great example of synergy—the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.**

■ Like most campus landscape managers today, Twyla Hansen has to deal with more restrictive budget constraints. Despite that, she has continued to upgrade the landscape at Nebraska Wesleyan University, a private liberal arts college in Lincoln. And she's doing it while reducing maintenance costs.

Within five years of her 1982 arrival, Hansen had a landscape maintenance program in place and working.

"The improvements are a great example of synergy—the theory that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts," Hansen says. "As the appearance of the campus improved, building maintenance improved too. In the end, both contribute to student and faculty recruitment efforts."

**Going native**—For the past three years, Hansen has been converting annual plantings on the 55-acre campus to perennials, mostly with native plants. Not only does this reduce costs by cutting down on the cost of annuals, but it has added interest to the campus, too.

"A lot of people have never seen some

of the prairie grasses and flowers that are native to this area, so they find these new plantings intriguing. Botany and biology classes study them frequently, and campus visitors like to inspect them," says Hansen.

The entire western half of the campus is one of the 50 sites that make up the Nebraska Arboretum, which was established to maintain native plants for education and study. Hansen has developed a donor program for the campus, to replace trees that die and to add new trees and shrubs.

"We're integrating the native ornamentals in with the trees and shrubs, not only to add diversity to the campus, but to demonstrate the types of plants that can be grown in this area," Hansen says. "Plus, the beds have a secondary purpose of separating turf areas from woody plants, to cut down on the amount of trim mowing we have to do."

Initially, most of the perennials were seeded, with seed purchased from a couple of specialty seed farms in the area. "Now, we're getting to the point where we can divide the perennials and do our own transplanting to new beds," Hansen says. "We've also started some from seed in our own greenhouse."

**Enter, buffalograss**—Hansen is moving the campus to more natural plantings in other areas, too. "We've been planting some low-maintenance areas to buffalograss," she says. "There are small turf areas in some of the outlying parking lots, and we've been putting buffalograss in many of those spots, both with seed and plugs. We've done it long enough that we now have our own little buffalograss nursery near the stadium.

"We have to mow them pretty regularly

the first year or two to keep the weeds down until the buffalograss fills in. Sometimes, we spray the area with Roundup while the buffalograss is still dormant but the weeds are already growing. Once the buffalograss is established, the areas take very minimal maintenance."

Besides the campus turf and plantings, Hansen's crew is responsible for the athletic fields.

"We have added both men's and women's varsity soccer to the athletic program, so we have those practice fields to maintain, along with the stadium turf, baseball field and a football practice field. And the rainy weather this summer packed out soil pretty well, so we're going to have to aerate the whole campus this fall. This is the first year we've had to put down a fungicide, too...another consequence of the rainy weather early this summer."

Most of the turf areas are seeded to turf-type tall fescue, again to lower maintenance costs. Most lawn areas get a spring and fall fertilization, but some areas are fertilized only in the fall.

"We're using more groundcover, too—species like wild ginger and hosta for shady areas, and some of the sedums for sunny spots.

"Going to more natural plantings requires a little different way of thinking. You can't expect to have that neat, clipped look. Sometimes, you don't know how tall the native plants are going to get, so you wind up with a more 'casual' look to your plantings," says Hansen. "But going 'native' is cutting down on our maintenance costs, and students and faculty seem to like the unique appearance of the prairie plants."

—Gary Burchfield

## Twyla's secrets to low maintenance

- 1) Use perennials for annual plantings—native plants like prairie grasses and flowers, where possible—rather than annuals.
- 2) Establish beds to separate turf areas from woody plants, thus cutting down on the amount of trim mowing.
- 3) Divide the perennials and do your own transplanting to new beds.
- 4) Plant low-maintenance areas to buffalograss.
- 5) Use turf-type tall fescue for reduced maintenance.
- 6) Use more groundcover like wild ginger, hosta, the sedums.

