

Texas-size tasks

Veteran grounds foreman Tony Sullivan relies on soil tests, efficient irrigation and the dedication of his 23-person crew to maintain UTEP's unique and varied landscapes.

By DON DALE

A landscape manager needs to be sharp to work at a university with over 15,000 students. Making his job even more interesting is the fact that the university, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), lies in the Chihuahuan Desert but has a variety of landscaping.

Tony Sullivan, UTEP's ground maintenance foreman, relies on solid turf and landscape management fundamentals to keep the grounds—which must fit in with UTEP's Bhutanese architecture—looking good.

This campus is "built on bedrock" in the stony hills east of the city. The soils are alkali, and short on sulfur.

"The turf tends to not be as

lush or green," says Sullivan who swears by soil testing. Regularly he sends samples to a reliable consultant at a professional soil testing laboratory. If he doesn't, he realizes, the turf can get away from him quickly. This is especially true on athletic fields which are being constructed or renovated.

"By soil testing you get a good idea of what you need to apply to your soils and your turf," says Sullivan, who spent 20 years in grounds maintenance in the U.S. Air Force before coming here.

He says that not only the long-term health of the turf benefits, but also the budget. A lot of money has been saved here on chemical amendments that might have been used in

guessing how to improve yellow or dying grass.

Sullivan says that common bermudagrass is the standard on campus. That is not written in stone, though.

"In one new field we had fescue, but it wasn't holding up well," he says of UTEP's new women's soccer field. So he re-sodded it with Tifway 319 bermudagrass.

Winter overseeding is not customary on campus fields, but the new soccer field is an exception.

"We have a small sod farm," says Sullivan. It's a small area set aside for sod cutting. If an area is going to be disturbed by construction, a crew member cuts and transplants sod for later use.

Irrigation? You bet!

Irrigation is a big deal in a region that brags about seven or eight inches of rain annually. Most of the campus has been converted to automatic controllers, and even those are being upgraded.

"We're in the process of installing Maxicom computerized sprinklers," says Sullivan. Those eventually will be controlled from one central computer. "We'll also have soil moisture sensors, and the system will be able to detect breaks."



Drip irrigation is a must, and it's installed even in the most isolated little planter. The exception is where native plants such as ocotillo and barrel cactus make up the display.

The soil here is so dicey that turf crews use hand sprayers to apply soil wetting agents prior to fertilizing. The wetting agents are irrigated in for a few days before nutrients go on.

Tricky tree maintenance

Tree maintenance can also be tricky. Many campus trees are deciduous, but there are also a lot of Mondale pines and Italian cypress. The trend is toward more drought-tolerant trees such as mesquites and palo verdes, both native to the area.

"We have a lot of mulberries," Sullivan says. Those are the fruitless variety, but the pecans and pistachios on campus bear fruit.

Tree nutrition is done mainly through drip injections, but he also uses Mauget equipment to inject nutrients right



Tony Sullivan: soil tests tell you what products to apply, and they help save money!



▲ UTEP grounds staff is assigned specific areas to maintain.

◀ The College of Business surrounded by native vegetation.

into the cambium layer of trees. The same equipment can be used to control insect pests such as elm leaf beetles.

Palm tree pruning is another problem, but the UTEP crew handles its using a High Reach. "The tall ones we do once a year," says Sullivan. "The small ones that might obstruct a sidewalk, we do more often."

Well-delegated, busy staff

Sullivan has developed an

efficient method of using his 23-person staff. Two are assigned to irrigation installation and maintenance, and three, including Sullivan himself, hold pesticide application licenses.

The rest of the crew is divided into more general duties. Generally, they maintain the same couple of buildings and their surroundings. This instills a sense of pride and ownership in the crews, he believes.

"We know who's supposed to do it," Sullivan says. If the pruning, edging, planting and trash hauling have not been done in a certain area, it's easy to determine who's responsible. Mowing, on the other hand, is done by most everyone over a two-day period.

Sullivan's department is extremely safety conscious. UTEP provides free goggles, lifting belts, gloves and coveralls. His budget for this equipment is \$3,500. "We also budget \$1,200 for training. Also our people attend defensive driving training," explains Sullivan.

Safety not only reduces hazards to workers, it saves the university money. Sullivan points out that in the past three years, due to the safety programs, UTEP's physical plant has reduced its workman's compensation costs by \$600,000.

One luxury that Sullivan

likes about the university, in addition to its well-designed physical plant office and workshop area, is a 2,800-square-foot greenhouse. It's used as a nursery, particularly for the drought-tolerant plants that go in around campus. He also raises a few flowers for beds.

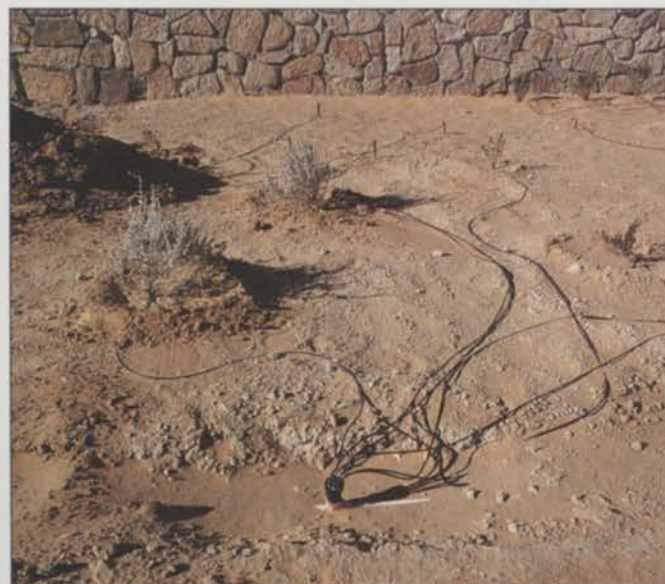
The nursery also provides the plants for the university's annual plant sale which raises funds for the grounds.

The UTEP campus is fond of its unusual vegetation, but it is moving toward more of a native look.

This is seen in low-use areas such as medians along streets and on slopes adjoining buildings and parking lots.

These drought-tolerant plantings need very little maintenance or irrigation, and they bear the striking look of the southwestern deserts. □

—Don Dale is a freelance writer based in Willcox, Ariz.



◀ Drip irrigation is part of the installation of a new planter.