

WINTER GUARDIANS

Nurturing Campus Landscapes for a Flourishing Spring

BY ED BAUER

On college campuses, where the changing seasons create a beautiful and ever-changing mosaic of colors and textures, winter presents a unique challenge for facility managers. As the autumn leaves fall and temperatures plummet, the stewardship of campus landscapes becomes a delicate dance between preservation and preparation.

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In this in-depth exploration, we delve into the intricate strategies employed by facility managers across diverse regions, each grappling with its own winter nuances. From the snow-laden expanses of the north to the milder climates of the south, the goal remains the same: nurturing the campus grounds through winter to unveil a spectacular springtime revival.

Understanding Regional Variations

The tasks that come with preparing landscaping for winter are hardly one-size-fits-all. The season looks dramatically different depending on location, presenting different challenges and the need for innovative solutions.

In the northern reaches of the country, where winter is synonymous with snow-laden landscapes and freezing temperatures, facility managers face a distinctive set of challenges. The primary focus here is on snow and ice management, and heavy-duty snow removal equipment, plows, and de-icing agents are essential

tools. Snow fences are strategically deployed to manage accumulation, while cold-tolerant plant varieties are carefully selected to withstand the harsh winter conditions. Innovative approaches such as heated walkways and temporary structures to shield vulnerable plants reflect the adaptability and resourcefulness required in these regions.

Midwestern campuses, characterized by a mix of snow and fluctuating temperatures, demand a nuanced approach to winter landscaping. Facility managers in these regions lean towards winter-hardy plant selections, including evergreen trees and hardy perennials. They employ advanced techniques such as windbreaks to protect vulnerable areas from harsh winds, and snowmelt systems are integrated into high-traffic zones. The delicate balance between snow management and plant protection requires a dynamic and responsive strategy, showcasing the expertise of facility managers in adapting to ever-changing winter conditions.

In the southern regions, winter brings milder temperatures but introduces a different set of challenges, including temperature fluctuations and occasional cold snaps. Here, facility managers focus on winter irrigation to counteract potential drought-like conditions. Selecting plants that can withstand both chilly nights and mild daytime temperatures is crucial. Mulching, a practice often associated with colder climates, is still employed to regulate soil temperature and moisture. The emphasis shifts to maintaining overall plant health and preparing the landscape for the swift transition into spring.

A Winter Landscape Checklist

Other winter landscape tasks are more universal, including the need for strategic pruning and applying mulch. In some parts of the country, strategic storage of snow is another consideration. Here are a few of the ways facility managers protect landscaping while also planning for the arrival of spring.

Pruning for Prosperity:

Winter pruning is critical to maintaining a healthy and aesthetically pleasing campus landscape. Beyond the visual appeal, pruning plays a pivotal role in

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stimulating spring growth. Facility managers assess each plant species, applying customized pruning techniques to encourage resilience and lush foliage when warmer days arrive. The timing and precision of pruning become an art, balancing the need for rejuvenation with the protection of vulnerable plant parts.

Mulching as a Protective Blanket:

The application of mulch takes on a greater role during winter than mere weed suppression. In colder regions, the choice of mulching materials and the depth of application are carefully calibrated to insulate the soil, retain moisture, and foster a conducive environment for beneficial soil microorganisms. Facility managers in the midwestern and northern regions may opt for organic materials like straw or wood chips, while those in the south might use pine straw or hardwood mulch to cater to the unique needs of their landscapes.

Recalibrating Soil:

Winter becomes an opportune time for facility managers to delve into the foundational aspect of landscaping—soil health. Comprehensive soil testing is conducted to identify nutrient deficiencies, assess pH levels, and analyze soil structure. Armed with this knowledge, managers can implement targeted amendments, ranging from organic matter additions to the application of specific fertilizers. Cover cropping, a sustainable practice gaining popularity, aids in preventing erosion and enhancing soil fertility during the dormant winter months.

Eco-Friendly De-icing:

Traditionally, de-icing agents have been associated with environmental concerns, as they can adversely impact soil health and harm plant life. Forward-thinking facility managers are increasingly adopting eco-friendly alternatives to minimize these ecological footprints. Beet juice, a byproduct of the sugar beet industry, has gained traction as an effective de-icing solution that is less harmful to plants and soil. Sand is another eco-friendly option, providing traction without introducing harmful chemicals. Furthermore, some campuses are exploring innovative geothermal systems embedded in walkways to melt snow without compromising the surrounding landscape.

Snow Storage Considerations:

In regions with heavy snowfall, the strategic storage of snow becomes a logistical

challenge. Facility managers must identify suitable locations that balance accessibility, safety, and environmental impact. Designated snow storage areas, carefully selected and maintained, become temporary repositories for the winter precipitation. This approach ensures that when the thaw arrives, the gradual release of stored snow minimizes disruption to the campus landscape and infrastructure.

Communicating the Process:

Transparent communication lies at the heart of successful winter landscaping. Facility managers must convey the nuances of their winter maintenance practices to the campus community to foster understanding and collaboration. Newsletters, social media platforms, and campus forums serve as effective channels to share insights into the meticulous planning and effort invested in safeguarding the grounds. By demystifying the winterization process, facility managers empower the community to actively participate in the collective responsibility of preserving the campus landscape.

This also presents campuses with an opportunity to cultivate a culture of appreciation for the natural environment. Educational initiatives, workshops, and events centered around winter ecology and campus stewardship engage the campus community. Hands-on experiences, such as tree-planting initiatives and nature walks, instill a sense of connection and responsibility among students, faculty, and staff.

In winter guardianship, facility managers emerge as unsung heroes, meticulously navigating the needs in diverse regions to ensure the preservation and enhancement of campus landscapes. From the snow-covered expanses of the north to the temperate realms of the south, each region demands a tailored approach that reflects an intricate understanding of local climate nuances and ecological dynamics. The dedication and expertise of facility managers shine through as they orchestrate a symphony of practices, ranging from innovative snow management solutions to nurturing soil health and fostering community engagement.

As winter retreats and spring begins to unfurl its vibrant colors, the campus landscape stands as a testament to the meticulous planning and sustainable practices employed during the dormant months. Through region-specific strategies, the adoption of eco-friendly technologies, and a commitment to community involvement,

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facility managers ensure that the heart of the campus remains resilient, alive, and ready to embrace the promise of a flourishing spring. The fruits of successful winter guardianship extend beyond the beauty of the spring landscape to encompass a shared commitment to environmental stewardship and a campus culture that recognizes the interconnectedness of human activities and the natural world. In the cycle of seasons, facility managers stand as custodians, ensuring that the transition from winter's dormancy to spring's renewal is not only seamless but a breathtaking spectacle that captivates all who tread upon the hallowed grounds of the college campus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ed Bauer has been in publishing for over twenty years. In his early career years, he worked on the staff at Mount Union College and for the last twelve years as publisher and managing partner at Flaherty Media has been privileged to tour many private higher education campuses and talk with numerous staff members who manage these multiple building Facilities. He can be reached at ed@pupnmag.com.





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