

ROOTS OF CAMPUS VITALITY

A Guide to Grounds Maintenance

BY ED BAUER

The landscaping of a college campus serves as more than a backdrop—it reflects institutional pride, creates first impressions, and provides functional spaces for learning, recreation, and community building.

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Grounds maintenance on a college campus is a sophisticated endeavor requiring attention to aesthetics, sustainability, safety, and operational efficiency. Yet when done well, it appears effortless.

Our comprehensive guide explores every facet of campus grounds care, offering facility managers a roadmap to optimize maintenance practices. By addressing lawns, athletic fields, trees, shrubs, pathways, and hardscapes with a focus on timing, best practices, and professional insights, facility managers can ensure their campus thrives year-round.

The Role of Grounds Maintenance in Campus Life

A well-maintained campus enhances aesthetic appeal and reinforces institutional values. It's not a stretch to say that along

with favorite professors, time dedicated to academic exploration, and friends a student will look back fondly on the beauty of the exterior environment that helped define their campus days.

Increasingly, environmental stewardship is an important part of responsible grounds maintenance. Sustainable practices promote biodiversity, reduce waste, and contribute to green certifications.

Functional safety of course is critical. Proper care of pathways, fields, and outdoor structures reduces hazards for students and staff. These efforts may go largely unnoticed—but should someone get hurt due to a poorly maintained structure or uncleared path, that's a serious problem and an avoidable blemish on the institution's dedication to safe navigation around campus.

Core Areas of Focus
Lawns and Green Spaces

Lawns and green spaces are the heart of campus landscapes, offering areas for relaxation, events, and unstructured play. The maintenance challenges here are heavy foot traffic, leading to soil compaction and wear, and weather-related stress, such as drought or excessive rain.

To achieve the best results, look to:

Soil testing: Conduct regular tests to assess pH and nutrient levels. Amend soil based on test results.

Mowing: Maintain grass height between 2.5–4 inches, depending on turf type. Avoid cutting more than one-third of the blade height in a single mowing.

Aeration: Alleviate soil compaction by aerating in the spring or fall.

Irrigation: Water deeply but infrequently, ideally early in the morning.

Seasonal maintenance: In the spring, focus on fertilization and weed control. In the summer, regular mowing and spot irrigation are high priorities, while falls calls for overseeding and preparation for dormancy.

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Trees contribute shade, beauty, and ecological benefits, but they require regular care to remain healthy and safe. Challenges include pests and diseases like emerald ash borer or oak wilt, as well as storm damage leading to structural weakness.

Athletic Fields

Athletic fields demand specialized care to meet performance and safety standards for sports programs. The challenges include high-impact activities causing rapid wear and the imperative to maintain even surfaces for player safety.

To achieve the best results, look to:

Turf selection: Choose hardy varieties like Bermuda grass or perennial ryegrass.

Irrigation and drainage: Use subsurface drainage systems to prevent water pooling and ensure turf health.

Aeration and topdressing: Conduct aeration to improve soil structure and apply topdressing to level uneven surfaces.

Field marking: Use eco-friendly, non-toxic paints for field lines.

Seasonal maintenance: In the pre-season, focus on fertilization and reseeding. During

the season, weekly mowing and repairing high-traffic zones are a must. Post-season calls for deep aeration and reseeding.

Tree Care

Trees contribute shade, beauty, and ecological benefits, but they require regular care to remain healthy and safe. Challenges include pests and diseases like emerald ash borer or oak wilt, as well as storm damage leading to structural weakness.

To achieve the best results, look to:

Pruning: Remove dead or damaged branches to prevent hazards and promote healthy growth.

Fertilization: Apply slow-release fertilizers in spring or fall to nourish roots.

Mulching: Spread mulch around tree bases to retain moisture and suppress weeds, keeping it 2–4 inches from the trunk.

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Monitoring: Inspect trees regularly for signs of pests or disease.

Seasonal maintenance: Winter is the time for dormant pruning and storm preparation, while spring is ripe for inspection and fertilization. In the fall, your focus is on leaf management and winterization.

Shrubs and Ornamental Beds

Shrubs and garden beds frame buildings and pathways, adding color and texture to the landscape. Challenges include inconsistent blooming and seasonal dieback, as well as pests including aphids and mites.

To achieve the best results, look to:

Reconsidering plant selection: Use native or drought-tolerant plants for low-maintenance care.

Mulching: Refresh mulch annually to conserve soil moisture and suppress weeds.

Pruning: Shape shrubs after their flowering cycle to encourage growth.

Integrated pest management (IPM): Monitor and address pest issues using minimal chemical intervention.

Seasonal maintenance: Spring is the time to plant new species and fertilize existing beds. In summer, your focus is on deadheading flowers and managing pests. Fall is the time to prepare beds for winter by cutting back perennials and adding compost.

Pathways and Hardscapes

Pathways and hardscapes, such as patios and plazas, are essential for navigation and social interaction. Challenges here include erosion, cracking, and surface discoloration and the need to conduct comprehensive inspection and repair to ensure accessibility and safety.

To achieve the best results, look to:

Conducting inspections: Check for cracks, uneven surfaces, or loose pavers.

Cleaning: Use power washers to remove dirt, moss, and algae.

Repairs: Address minor cracks early to prevent further damage.

Sealants: Apply sealants to concrete and asphalt to enhance durability and weather resistance.

Seasonal maintenance: In the spring and fall, focus on campus-wide inspections and sealing projects. Summer calls for routine cleaning and debris removal.

Grounds Maintenance Equipment

Investing in the right equipment is crucial for efficient campus grounds care, with needs that go beyond the essential tools for lawn care (commercial-grade mowers, aerators, and seed spreaders), tree care (chainsaws, pole pruners, and stump grinders), and pathway maintenance (pressure washers, blowers, and compact utility loaders).

This is a great time to consider investing in emerging technologies, including electric equipment to reduce noise and emissions; automated mowers to provide consistent care for expansive lawns, and drones to facilitate aerial inspections of large campuses.

Sustainability in Grounds Management

Integrating sustainable practices can reduce resource use and contribute to green certifications like LEED. Consider practices that require less water, reduce waste, and use renewable energy to make the campus landscape more sustainable and resilient.

Native landscaping: Choose plants adapted to the local climate to minimize irrigation needs.

Water management: Install rain sensors and drip irrigation systems to optimize water use.

Composting: Convert organic waste into mulch or soil amendments.

Renewable energy: Power maintenance equipment with solar or wind energy.

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In short, maintaining a college campus's grounds is an ongoing effort that requires strategic planning, specialized equipment, and a commitment to sustainability. By addressing the unique needs of each area and following a seasonal approach, facility managers can ensure a thriving, welcoming, and functional outdoor environment.

When executed with care and expertise, campus grounds maintenance becomes a cornerstone of institutional excellence, fostering pride and engagement among all who step onto the campus.

Professional Advice and Resources

Consulting with landscape architects, arborists, and groundskeeping experts can elevate maintenance standards. Recommended resources include:

National Association of Landscape Professionals (NALP): Offers certifications and educational materials.

Arbor Day Foundation: Provides guidance on tree care and sustainability.

Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA): Specializes in athletic field maintenance.

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.

Seasonal Maintenance Schedule

Season	Tasks
Spring	Fertilization, aeration, tree pruning, and planting.
Summer	Mowing, irrigation, pest control, and pathway cleaning.
Fall	Overseeding, leaf management, and winterization.
Winter	Snow removal, equipment maintenance, and dormant pruning.

