

NORTH FEATURES

Campus Grounds Care

by Wendy Komancheck

The landscaping side of college life

Nestled in the northeastern section of Reading, Pa., Albright College educates 1,650 day students. A nationally ranked college, it is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and offers bachelor's degrees in a host of programs, including pre-dentistry, pre-law, pre-medicine and pre-veterinary.

Albright's facilities department, headed by Kevin Gaffney, and specifically, the grounds manager, John Wodehouse, take charge of the landscaping. Wodehouse says, "We're a flagship college, turfwise, utilizing some of the best turf-related technological breakthroughs. This year, we slit-seeded fine fescues in the natural turf fields. Mowing and fertilization requirements are forecasted to reduce when compared to perennial ryegrass or tall fescue. Fine fescue-type grasses are reliable components for our heavily used athletic fields. Bluegrass and ryegrass are the two major species planted on our 11 acres of natural turf."

Photo Courtesy of Albright College.



Kelchner field at Albright College.

Turf basics

Albright College sits on a 118-acre campus. Wodehouse says that 45 acres of the campus is wooded. "We utilize a mixture of perennial ryegrass and bluegrass in sunny common areas and fescues in shady areas. Our campus is rich with diversity among trees. We've over 47 species and varieties. Recently, we've added such specimens as Katsura trees [*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*] and Rutgers' Hybrid Dogwoods [*Cornus* x 'Celestial']."

Albright has eight full-time grounds employees, and during the summer, they add four full-time college students to their staff. In the spring and fall, they hire one or two part-time students.

Photos by John Komancheck, Unless otherwise Noted.



Some of the Albright College groundskeeping crew. John Wodehouse, grounds manager, is fourth from the left, and Kevin Gaffney, director of facilities, is the fifth from the left.

Wodehouse says, “We’ve a team meeting each morning where we [outline] our goals for the day and the objectives for the month.”

The Albright grounds team uses three pickup trucks outfitted with Fisher V-plows and salt spreaders for winter. They have three John Deere 1445 diesels, two of which have 72-inch decks and the other one a 60-inch deck. For plowing, two of the trucks have 4-foot snowblower attachments and snowplows, while one of the mowers has a 5-foot snowblower attachment and snowplow. They also use a Ferris 4000 zero-turn mower with a 27 hp Kawasaki motor and a 61-inch cut, as well as five mulching, 21-inch, self-propelled push mowers.

Other equipment includes a John Deere 850 with a Ryan aerator; an Olather slit-seeder; PAS-260 Echo string trimmers (which convert to blowers); edgers; dethatchers; pole saws; pruners; Echo backpack blowers and hand-held blowers; a Smithco field lining machine; a John Deere Gator 4x2; and a Rain Boy irrigation wheel 330 feet long with 2.5-foot pipe and a .5-inch nozzle. The groundskeepers also use lawn vacuums, leaf collection systems and various sprayers, among other turf care equipment.

Contracting big jobs

Albright hires outside landscape firms to assist them for their bigger turf and tree needs. Wodehouse says, “Turf-related, we rely on the professional assistance of Seedway, Emmaus Pa., [www.seedway.com]; F.M. Brown, Sinking Spring, Pa. [www.fmbrown.com]; Swavelly’s Lawn & Turf Care Inc., Reading Pa.; Tomlinson and

Bomberger, Lancaster Pa. [<http://www.tomlinsonbomberger.com/>]; and Edwards Landscaping, Birdsboro, Pa. [www.edwardslandscape.com].”

For tree care, Wodehouse says, “... we utilize Rocky’s Tree Service, Wernersville, Pa., Arborist Enterprise, Inc., Lancaster Pa. [www.arboristenterprises.com], and Arborcare, Reading Pa. [www.arborcaretreeexperts.com], for the removal of dead and decaying wood from mature trees on campus. Additionally, as consultants, they have provided information for our IPM tree care program.

“We use contractors for larger, intricate and highly skilled projects. In the spring and fall, these valuable suppliers and contractors perform preemergent fertilizer, grub control and broadleaf weed control applications, as well as assist us with slit-seeding. We do many projects ourselves,” Wodehouse says.

These companies include Spayds Landscaping, www.Spayds.com; Edwards Landscape and Nursery, and other local companies that specialize in wet-set flagstone and paver installations.

Albright’s grounds workers have a lot to do with just taking care of the three multipurpose athletic fields, which have primary and secondary usage. Eight sports are played on the fields: football, baseball, softball, field hockey, soccer, track and field, lacrosse and rugby. Wodehouse says, “Our fields are used year-round, with a week or two between semesters to perform maintenance and aerate.”

Photo Courtesy of Albright College.



Aerial shot of Albright College, Reading, Pa.

In the spring and fall, an operator mows the playing fields, which adds up to 12 acres, three times per week at 2 inches. Wodehouse says, “The rest of the season, [mowing] two times per week is sufficient to sustain the heavy traffic from multiple sports.”

The grounds team is responsible for lining, which is done with two paint sprayers, and is done by an employee with 35 years of experience at the college.

It's tricky to maintain the health of athletic turf due to its heavy use and abuse by players running and stopping while wearing cleats. The grounds team meets that challenge through aeration and overseeding. Wodehouse explains, "Heavily used fields need more perpetual care than others, [such as] aeration and overseeding, plus fertilization programs and IPM. Every three years, we renovate one field in fall, topdressing [with a] 1-1-1 compost mixture applied at .25-inch thickness, aggressively aerate and overseed in two directions, using top-quality, certified athletic field mixtures of seed.

"Late summer and fall fertilizer applications are performed in-house. For example, if a quick green-up is needed before a fall rugby game, I will apply a 40-0-0 (50 percent SCU) at a rate of .75 pound per minute before ample rain is in the forecast. My rain strategy has worked well in the past, however, proper weather conditions, calibration of equipment and application methods have to be perfect," he says.

For their athletic turf, Albright uses bluegrass and ryegrass. The varieties of bluegrass include Blue Chip, Rambo, Awesome, Everest and Liberator. Ryegrass varieties include Cadence, Goalkeeper, ASP 6004 and Fiesta Four. "In [the fall of] 2008, we overseeded fine fescue into our bluegrass and ryegrass fields. Anticipating deeper root growth and increased drought tolerance, I look forward to seeing the results of our overseeding," says Wodehouse.

Wodehouse and his employees use the 72-inch John Deere 1445 to mow the fields. The Ransom 72-inch reel mowers are used for baseball and softball during the spring months. They line the fields for baseball, softball, and track and field once a week, and fall sports, such as football, soccer and field hockey, require line painting at least once a week. If there's a home game on Fridays, the fields get another coat of paint.

Photo Courtesy of Albright College.



The Gingrich Library plaza, which was totally repaved and planted a year ago.

An open invitation

“We’re clearly part of the city, not set apart,” says Barbara Marshall, college spokeswoman. “There are businesses a few blocks away, an elementary school across the street and the neighborhood intertwines with the campus. Our landscape design is to take advantage of the history of the property and the buildings. The college has been on this site since 1928 when we merged with the college that existed here since the late 1800s. We have some very old trees and buildings. We treasure our open spaces. There are planters and flowers everywhere. Our campus invites people in.”

Sylvan Pond, an 18-foot octagonal pool surrounded by custom wet-set flagstone, with bluegrass turf is planted around the pond, is another area handled by Albright’s grounds department. Designed for students, faculty and others to enjoy the beauty of the campus, river birch, various types of maples, magnolias and viburnums surround the pond, as well as ornamental grasses such as fescues, miscanthus and chasmanthium latifolium. Grasses on the common areas include perennial ryegrass and bluegrass.

Of course, gas prices hit hard on Albright’s grounds department, but Wodehouse says, “We have been identifying ways to become more efficient and effective with logistics and daily scheduling to lessen unneeded trips from our grounds facility to and from campus. We purchased one electric golf cart for the transportation of people and provisions around campus.”

Due to the care by the groundskeeping team, Albright College invites the school and the local community to enjoy its natural beauty. Marshall says, “People always tell us how lovely our campus is.” The hard work; the variety of turf equipment; and the skilled contractors facilitate the campus’s beauty as an urban institution.

The author is a freelance writer based in Ephrata, Pa. She writes for various trade magazines focusing on landscaping, agriculture and business.