

Bennington College Grounds

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In the period since I was hired by Bennington College, I have had an ongoing interest in the campus and grounds. As a professional botanist and ecologist, I have tried to contribute to both the maintenance and improvement of the grounds over the years, working with a succession of superintendents and maintenance staff, interested faculty, and students. Many have contributed concern, effort, time and ideas, to the extent that very busy - perhaps overextended - schedules have permitted. There has been a good deal of changeover in personnel in the maintenance area: Ralph Larsen and Jim Martin as superintendents, Dick Streeter and then Bill Rudd as grounds supervisors, then Bob Ayers and Greg Moon. Each of these has worked very cooperatively with the ongoing Faculty Art and Architecture Committee, which has had a membership of both faculty and students, many of whom have contributed unstintingly of both time and effort. For a period this committee had a grounds subcommittee, which I chaired while I served on the Art and Architecture Committee, and especially Arnold Ricks and later Ken Kensinger as Art & Architecture Chairmen were concerned and active. Rebecca Stickney, whose experience and concern predated my own, was both interested and consulted and during the period the three groundsmen - Robert McIntyre, Frank Ryan, and more recently Bill McDonald - have continued to work very hard to try to keep up with the endless amount of work. They have accomplished an incredible amount.

What the College has got from the above arrangement has been a pretty fair amount of grounds care for an incredibly low expenditure of money - necessarily because the College has been perennially short of money. Only one of the maintenance supervisors had any horticultural training - that was Dick Streeter. We all wanted very much to keep him, but the College was unable to pay him what he was worth, so he went on to head up the Grounds Operation at UVM.

There have been problems with the arrangement, too, of course:

- 1) turnover in grounds workers combined with lack of training and supervising of new people has resulted in some recurring headaches, e.g. mowers "barking" the trunks of newly planted young trees, chewing up the signs on the labeled trees and shrubs on the Campus, or cutting brush where it shouldn't be cut and not cutting it where it should.

- 2) turnover at the top has produced a recurring need to reestablish aims and guidelines all over again - more tact, more effort, more temporary discomfort on both sides.

- 3) occasional differences of opinion among faculty members as to what should or should not be done: location of parking lots, what should be cut, what should be pruned, etc.

4) just plain lack of financial commitment and adequate personnel to do much more than keep up. This has to some extent been mitigated by the volunteer work of a lot of students over the years. However student volunteers need organizing and some supervising, both of which take time and effort. I've done what I could here, but I'd be the last to claim that it has been enough.

There are a variety of possible views as to how the grounds should be maintained ranging from the very formal approach to doing nothing. My own views, which I believe have been shared by most who have been involved are in the direction of informality, low maintenance cost, practicality, but good care. The following are just some of the concepts, approaches, and ideas that we've pursued.

1) The Bennington Campus is a beautiful, rural campus. Its glory should be informal, natural; building aesthetically with what we have. By judicious planting of interesting species that produce both beauty and are of educational value, we have begun to develop on the inner campus an Arboretum. What we have already added, and what we hope to add, I will detail later. What I think we should avoid is the danger of overmanipulation - to the extreme even of "suburbanization." One can see that trend on some campuses (particularly at large institutions where empire-building might exceed a wiser, softer touch and an eye for natural beauty).

2) The inner campus can indeed become an arboretum of trees and shrubs, both native and exotic, that need not require high maintenance costs.

3) While some flower beds are desirable, they should not be overdone both because too many change the character toward too much formality, and because they are high maintenance operations. Mostly, flower beds can be maintained by student volunteers - we've done some of that. Also, several faculty members have begun to take an interest in and contribute some of their own time to plantings around their houses.

4) When we plant trees, we are trying to plant them in groups or clumps that fit well with the landscape, rather than scattering them about individually. Or, we plant at the periphery of open spaces, near buildings, etc., and leave the wide sweeps of lawn to provide attractive vistas, large spaces.

5) In addition to specimen trees of botanical interest, we want to plant more trees and shrubs which are attractive and colorful particularly because of either flowers or leaf color in fall.

6) Most of us have opposed, I believe for very good reasons, the idea of bringing in a high powered (and expensive) landscape architecture firm from outside to "landscape" the campus. By such action we would very likely lose the unique beauty we already have - the character that should and can develop from our own sense of what is beautiful and important.



7) There is no reason, given wise leadership, that we can't develop natural processes that will contribute to organic good management. Years ago we made the conscious decision - again for good ecological and financial reasons - to avoid spraying to the extent possible. That was a wise decision. We have from time to time had leaf composting; but at times, for whatever reason, that has waned. It should be reinstituted. Leaf compost is a comparatively cheap and valuable soil conditioner and fertilizer.

8) The wider campus part of our 550 acres can and should be left pretty much alone. It is a very valuable resource to use in ecological and botanical studies. We have a fair variety of plant communities in various stages of succession - admittedly we are short on really old-growth forest, but the only way to get good examples of that is in fact to let some areas completely alone. There are aesthetic and spiritual values in areas that are available for members of the community to visit where they can be quiet and alone to enjoy unmanipulated nature. By trying to "open up" or develop for "greater use" such areas, we end by destroying the very thing we should prize.

9) There are clearly areas in the inner campus where more work would be desirable. Judicious pruning of trees and shrubs is needed (this requires knowledge, great care, and some talent). For a lot of trees it is just a question of removing dead branches. The apple trees should be pruned regularly. Careful mulching of shrubs and young trees is needed. And supplementary watering in periods of drought, weeding around young trees and shrubs, and fertilizing trees and shrubs, are ongoing maintenance needs. We have done some of this with student labor, and our three maintenance men do some of it when they have time. But more is needed.

10) Planting of evergreen tree species as windbreaks helps a great deal in energy conservation. We have got a start on this on the West to North side of Vapa (see later); and West of Greenhouse.

11) Dickinson Pond has been and continues to be of great aesthetic value and an important educational resource for Biology. It is of course gradually filling in. At some point in the future some decision should be made as to whether dredging a part of it would be a good idea. But again I would suggest that we avoid haste and/or the heavy hand.

12) There is ongoing interest in developing the Brick Garden as a horticultural space, in which especially dwarf fruit trees can be grown and an experimental garden established. Progress on this has been slow but steady. Students have worked on cleaning it up, planting fruit trees, etc., and this will continue.

13) A series of vegetable garden plots for students and faculty have been available. Use of these has varied from year to year, but each spring Botany students have prepared, planted, and tended a student plot.

14) The Horticulture Dept. at UVM established a trial plot for some of the varieties they've been developing. In exchange for systematic records of max-min temperatures through the winter (read by our students) we have been given the trees and shrubs. Some of these were of no special interest to us, but we have transplanted Rhodendron, and several tree species to other parts of the Campus.

There follows in the interests of systematic records and information for all concerned, a list of what has been done (in the 14 yrs. that I've been here) in the way of planting.