

Back to School and Beyond



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

This growing central Illinois landscape company tackles sensitive public school and restoration projects



Peter Martin reseeds areas near the track after heavy equipment wear on previously seeded locations.

PHOTO BY LEE RIGGS

Prairie View Landscaping owners Peter Martin, 31, and Tyler Pilchard, 29, started their lawn maintenance and landscaping business in 2005 after working for a landscaper for several years. Located in the central Illinois city of Bloomington, Prairie View has grown and expanded while shifting its focus from primarily lawn care to a mix of about 80 percent landscaping and 20 percent lawn care.

Prairie View has 13 employees and is organized into work crews with foremen. "On about 90 to 95 percent of our projects, either Tyler or I will be on the job site," Martin says, noting the importance of hands-on participation. In addition to providing excellent service, Prairie View has focused on building relationships, a significant factor in the company's success.

Although the new construction residential market has been reduced, landscaping business in Bloomington has seen more of a shift in focus rather than the severe decline experienced in much of the country. The area's strong technical employment base includes two major insurance companies and three higher education institutions. New residential development is continuing on a less aggressive scale along with commercial and public projects, which include an increased focus on stormwater management.

Prairie View Landscaping & Lawn Care, Inc.

Headquarters: Bloomington, Ill.

Owners: Peter Martin and Tyler Pilchard
Founded: 2005
Markets: Bloomington-Normal and central Illinois
Services: Hardscapes, landscape maintenance, lawn care
Employees: 13
Website: www.pv-landscaping.com

Schools, including the McLean County Unit No. 5, fall under this category. This fall it opened George L. Evans Junior High School, one of four new schools in the region. And a significant stormwater management project is underway with the restoration of Kickapoo Creek in conjunction with a residential development. That project, completed with interagency funding, will result in a large green space area with low maintenance costs to the city.

Prairie View was the successful bidder as subcontractor to Stark Excavating, Inc. for the landscaping on both projects.

Landscaping for safety

Prairie View installed the school's lawns, trees and plantings as well as the turfgrass field inside the track. The field will be used for soccer and football. The school's overriding concern was security, so plantings were kept to a minimum near the building and walkways, with no foundation plantings that could obscure visibility. Several trees and ground cover were planted in a central courtyard, which has controlled access and represents less of a security concern.

The Bloomington-Normal community is located at the edge of an ice age moraine that left an open windy environment. Because of these conditions, durable species of native trees were selected. Stone Leaf Nursery, Goodfield, provided red oak, black gum, red maple, London plane and tulip trees.

Turfgrass establishment

"The sheer size of lawn was a challenge," says Martin. "We had to break up the soil to about 3 to 4 inches of what we call fluff." The heavy clay soil that remained after the topsoil had been stripped away was compacted by construction equipment.

While tall and fine fescue lawns are becoming increasingly popular in central Illinois due primarily to lower water requirements, a traditional bluegrass mix of Kentucky bluegrass, red fescue and ryegrass was designated in the landscape design.

Prairie View maintained the lawn and trees for the first year. Then the property became the responsibility of the Unit 5 grounds crews. Their familiarity with maintaining bluegrass lawns was a primary consideration in selecting the turfgrass seed mixture – 50 percent Kentucky bluegrass, 25 percent red fescue, and 25 percent ryegrass from FS Custom Turf, Bloomington, Ill.

"We used a Triple 19 starter fertilizer and seeded with a Brillion seeder," says Martin. Central Illinois springs are normally wet, and the past two springs have been wetter than normal, producing narrow windows for the landscapers to prepare the soil for seeding. Wet springs are generally followed by hot, dry summers. Daily watering helped to germinate the seed. After the turfgrass was up, it was watered two to three times a week, depending upon conditions.



True to its name, Prairie View used natives species to beautify Kickapoo Creek.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PRAIRIE VIEW LANDSCAPING.

This past September, some areas needed to be overseeded, including areas where heavy construction equipment had damaged the turf on the school ball field. Prairie View installed North American Excelsior straw mats on all slopes with straw mulch blown onto other newly seeded areas. The Illinois EPA has strict laws for erosion control that require turf establishment before the permitting process is complete.

"We installed about 40,000 square feet of sod from M & M Turf in Lexington," says Martin. Areas adjacent to sidewalks and the building, compacted areas that are traditionally difficult to establish from seed, were sodded.

To meet stormwater management requirements, runoff water is channeled from the parking areas through a series of bioswales and pipes to a retention basin at the back of the school grounds. An underground geothermal heating-cooling system is installed under the baseball fields.

Bruce Brown, landscape architect with The Farnsworth Group, Peoria, Ill., designed the project for the school, and J. G. Stewart Contractors, Inc., Bloomington, Ill., built the ball fields.



No, this will not end up a mulch "volcano"; it will be spread evenly to discourage weed growth and protect the tree from mower damage.

PHOTO BY LEE RIGGS.

Kickapoo Creek restoration

Prairie View began working on the Kickapoo Creek project in Phase 2 of three phases, and will finish landscaping work on the stream bank and riparian corridor this fall.

The Grove, a 480-acre residential development in Bloomington, Ill., was started before the major economic decline hit the nation, and while building has slowed, construction of new homes is continuing. Kickapoo Creek runs through the development, and it is being restored to a more natural, meandering creek. The creek, with adjacent wetlands, and surrounding area are designed to accept water from The Grove, as well as from the approximately 8,000-acre agricultural watershed that drains into the area.

Prairie View installed native plants along the stream bank and in wetlands

and the area referred to as the upland area, basing those designations on the differing levels of water needs of the plants. Native plants include love grass, Indian grass, prairie cordgrass, and big and little bluestem along with sedges and rushes.

Stark Excavating lined the stream bank with rock, which was buried beneath several inches of soil. Prairie View used native seed on the stream bank, installed native plants in the wetlands area and used Buffalograss seed in Phase 2 of the upland trail. The bicycle trail is seeded completely in grass, but will eventually be paved with grass buffers running alongside the trail that will eventually connect with a major existing area trail, Constitution Trail.



Restoring the meandering nature of this stream resulted in a healthier wetlands.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PRAIRIE VIEW LANDSCAPING.

Buffalograss, normally associated with arid climates, has provided thriving turf on the upland area. Bryan Cross, Kaskaskia Engineering, Taylorville, Ill., project biologist, says the trail was seeded in a traditional bluegrass and fescue blend in the first phase. Prairie View completed Phase 2 and Phase 3 trail seeding in buffalograss. It established well despite this past spring's many rainstorms.

"We've recreated a prairie stream with no trees," says Cross. Over the years, farmers created buffers of trees between the farming area and the altered streams. While the Kickapoo Creek had been deepened and straightened, it now has curves that provide more storage for water. While the wetlands areas is expected to flood with normal rains, the floodplain area is designed to accept floodwaters after heavy rains.

"As a passive park, it provides the benefit of a very large green space with very low maintenance," says Cross. "We'll be doing rotation burns and will remove biomass. It will have high value of aesthetics in a functioning ecosystem."

Storm sewers from the residential development will empty into the wetlands area, where water will be naturally filtered and will enter the creek only when exceptional rains occur, often referred to as the 100-year flood. If the creek receives excessive water directly from the agricultural watershed, it will overflow into the surrounding area. The overflow will be stored in the wetlands and will be filtered before re-entering the creek.

Don Roseboom, U.S. Geological Survey, notes the complex interagency participation in the Kickapoo Creek project and cited its contribution to improved water quality and water management. The project is one of 27 National Nonpoint Source Monitoring Program projects across the nation. The Grove developers donated nearly 90 acres of land for the project, and it incorporates funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

"The City of Bloomington wanted a park there, so the city is involved," Roseboom says. A 20-acre city park with ball fields and a playground will be developed between a new school and the new residential development.

In addition to public projects, Prairie View continues its focus on expanding business in commercial and residential landscaping. "A lot of people are interested in upgrading their outdoor living spaces, and we install a lot of paver patios and retaining walls," Martin said.

Prairie View installed landscaping for a newly constructed Kirby Memorial Hospital in nearby Monticello, Ill., and obtained the seeding bid for a Gaelic Park, a Bloomington community park.

Nancy Riggs is a freelance writer from Mt. Zion, Ill., and has been covering the green industry for Turf for more than 20 years. You can contact her at NFRIGGS@aol.com.