

Berea College Beautifully Unique



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New CGM Matthew Partain leads a dedicated staff at historically progressive Kentucky college

Matthew Partain is the newest recipient of the prestigious certified grounds manager (CGM) distinction awarded by the Professional Grounds Managers Association (PGMS). While maintaining his position as grounds coordinator at Berea College in Berea, Ky., Partain completed the stringent requirements of the program in less than one year.



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PHOTOS COURTESY BEREA COLLEGE.

Believing continuing education is critical in keeping current with the newest science and information available, the five-year veteran at Berea continued to manage and develop the 220 acres of grounds on the main campus. With a crew of six full-time technicians and 29 part-time student-workers, the tasks at hand include not only maintenance of the grounds and athletic fields but overseeing hundreds of mature trees interspersed within an area dotted with beds of perennials and annuals located in high-visibility campus areas.

The industry's newest CGM explained why he undertook the exhaustive work entailed to earn the award. "The certification is an extremely comprehensive test that covers all aspects of grounds management. I knew before I started the process it would be very challenging, and that was one of the drives for me to push for completion. Quality opportunities for professional development are not only a great way to gauge ability, but most importantly to learn and enhance skills."



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The grounds of Berea College in east central Kentucky are awash in colors each spring as the redbuds and tulips shake off winter.

The PGMS certification is a two-step process. It features both an open-book and a closed-book exam. The closed-book segment includes review of insects and diseases, trees and shrubs, chemicals and fertilizers, turfgrass, soil and management. The open-book examines trees and shrubs, site-inventory, operation-inventory, turfgrass management, ground covers, pavers, irrigation, management skills, budgets and finance.

In addition to the examinations, the open-book segment requires the applicant to create a CD of the property they manage. The CD displays plant inventory cultivars, plant varieties, irrigation and an accompanying map with interrelated visuals to support a working document for CGM mentors to help each applicant through the certification trials.

"I spoke with three different CGMs throughout this process who were very helpful to me: Gerald Dobbs of Michigan State, Walt Bonvell of Xavier and Susanne Woodell of Biltmore Estate," says Partain. "It's important to point out the diversity of experiences from these managers and that I feel very comfortable contacting them at any time with questions. Networking is another positive attribute of the CGM program"

The initial requirements to take the exams includes having a Bachelor of Science degree in a green industry field with four years of experience in grounds maintenance, including two years supervisory; a two-year degree with six years of experience, including three years supervisory; or eight years of grounds management experience, with four years supervisory.

After receiving the award, each CGM must earn additional credits to maintain their accreditation by continuing education and/or professional associations through attending seminars, earning professional certifications (e.g. pesticide, first aid etc.), teaching, writing or through various social interactions promoting the disciplines.

Partain encourages his employees to further their education as well, and one of his associates is working toward his certified landscape technician award from PGMS.

Program based on plant health

With a bachelor's degree in landscape management from the University of Georgia, Partain went on to work, learn and study at some of the finest resorts in the South, including Walt Disney World, Biltmore Estate and The Greenbrier.

In managing the grounds at Berea College, he has incorporated his experiences and education to develop healthy and sustainable grounds that include a surprising spattering of clover. An ongoing battle with turf compaction, as a result of heavy foot traffic and vehicles usage, is sometimes magnified

because many areas of campus have thick shale layers, which drain poorly after heavy rains

One of the Best Colleges in the South

Berea College is in the small but rapidly growing town of Berea in east-central Kentucky. The city of about 13,500 located in a forested area of low mountains on the edge of the Cumberland Plateau is known for its regionally famous arts and crafts festivals – and of course the college of the same name.

Berea College, the first interracial and coeducational college in the South, began as a one-room school in 1855 by the Rev. John G. Fee, an abolitionist with a particularly strong and stubborn sense of right and wrong. He believed in a school that would be an advocate of equality in education for men and women of all races. From the beginning, Fee saw the school as adhering to the principals of “anti-slavery, anti-caste, anti-rum and anti-sin,” according to information on the college’s website. Very early in its history it also committed itself to serving as an institution to people of south Appalachia. More than half of each incoming class is drawn from this region of the country. The college provides all students with full-tuition scholarships. Admission to the college is granted only to students who need financial assistance.

Today, the liberal arts college of about 1,500 students remains true to its original mission, which includes “to encourage all members of the community a way of life characterized by plain living, pride in labor well done, zest for learning, high personal standards and concern for the welfare of others.”

For the past decade, Berea College has been consistently ranked by U.S. News & World Report as the one of the best colleges in the South, and was ranked as number one among liberal arts colleges in 2011 by The Washington Monthly College Ranking.

“Our turf care relies mostly on an organic approach of twice-a-year core aerating with a Ryan Tracaire aerator pulled by a Kubota L3010 tractor, organic fall fertilizing and selective overseeding,” say Partain. “Even though we are the Bluegrass State, much of our general campus has been converted to low-maintenance turf-type tall fescue blends cut high at 3.5 inches. In order to limit widespread chemical use, the college has a tolerance of some broadleaf weeds in the turf, including a love for clover.”

It all begins each November and December with soil samples analyzed at the local county extension office. Multiple samples are taken throughout the campus, with emphasis on sports turf fields. The samples report pH levels and records the phosphorus and potassium levels.

“Athletic fields get the most sampling, and we will go so far as to test right, center and left field on the baseball outfield separately,” says Partain. “This year we have determined left field requires 250 pounds of lime

while the rest of the outfield soil pH is fine. We don't want to over-apply a product that is not needed, for both cost savings and environmental waste reasons. If we start to have any issues with turf, we would consider a more in-depth soil test as we tried to CSI the problem."

Spring and summer growth requires having two team members mowing non-stop, using two Scag Turf Tiger 61V zero-turn mowers and a Kubota F3680 with a 72-inch front-mount deck. The team also uses an Exmark Viking 48-inch walk-behind for the tighter areas and steeper terrain.

A New Holland LX565 skid steer gives them versatility in the growing months and allows them flexibility when refurbishing areas on campus. The Kubota doubles as a winter workhorse for sidewalk snow removal and features a 50-inch Sweepster broom attachment.

Surrounded by 7,700 acres of forests, the school's more than 1,600 students enjoy the scenic campus amenities.

"Our campus is filled with mature trees, so that's a natural focal point," explains Partain. "We have a historic hotel and block of local shops on property that's made more attractive with incredible containers and color, and have been incorporating building landscapes with masses of low-maintenance hardy perennials positioned in small annual beds. We keep our annuals beds small for ease of maintenance but strategically positioned to maximize visibility."

Sustainable features



In addition to the main campus, Berea College offers many sustainable features including the garden and greenhouse, which are used to grow local foods and provide instruction in the agriculture and natural resources curriculum.

Berea is often cited as one the most prominent liberal arts colleges in America. A work-study school, the college offers many work-related programs that allow students to work 10 to 15 hours per week to defray their tuition expenses.

Kentucky's first integrated college, the school is proud of a heritage that includes enrolling both white and black students, in equal numbers, after the Civil War. That tradition continues today with minorities making up about 25 percent of the student body. The college motto is "God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth."

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