

Maintenance at Sarasota's Crown Jewel

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The lavish grounds of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art



St. Augustine grass is planted in the area of the Museum of Art. Over 300,000 people visit the Ringling Estate annually.

Sarasota, Fla., the city on the western side of the Gulf of Mexico, has been for generations the home of the rich and famous. However, humid summer weather, Gulf breezes, salt mist and occasional hurricanes present challenges for lawn and landscape professionals in the area. Maintaining the lush lawns of these historic mansions requires knowledge of dealing with the elements.

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art site welcomes over 300,000 visitors annually, and is the legacy of a circus entrepreneur and his wife who collected art and traveled Europe in search of unusual circus acts. When John Ringling died in 1936, he left his art collection and estate to the state of Florida. In 2000, the Florida transferred stewardship of the Ringling Museum to Florida State University. The 66-acre tract contains the Museum of Art, Ca' d'Zan Mansion facing Sarasota Bay, Circus Museum and Historic Asolo Theater.

Kevin Greene, landscape superintendent for the estate, is a graduate in ornamental horticulture with a major in landscape operations from a two-year technical school. "I am a certified landscape designer and a certified arborist through the International Society of Arboriculture. Ten of my 13 years' experience in landscape are in a managerial capacity."



Pots of bougainvillea are plentiful at the Ringling Museum of Art. This slow-growing plant is also used as a shrub and planted in various places on the grounds.



Unusual art combines with tropical plants in the Ringling Estate. Salt spray from hurricanes can damage some of the plant material.



Nine full-time employees of the grounds department take care of the 66-acre Ringling Estate. The mansion, built in the Venetian Gothic style, was the home of John and Mable Ringling.

Throughout the year, outdoor maintenance is ongoing. Greene understands the need to perform the majority of ground maintenance before the public arrives for the day. “[Only] on rare occasion would we perform a duty that would pose any possible conflict with the public. On these occasions, we practice due diligence that protects both the public and ourselves.”

Nine full-time employees within the grounds department take care of the 66-acre estate. Occasionally, high school students perform volunteer work as a requirement for their college application.

The estate includes the grounds and gardens, as well as Mable’s Rose Garden planted in 1913. Through their various travels, the Ringlings obtained many plants as gifts. Mable often referred to these as her “onesy-twosy” garden, and she shared them with friends. As Sarasota is home to many retirees, adult volunteers help in the rose garden. Often, these volunteers had careers in agriculture and landscape development prior to retiring and moving to the area.

Within the museum gardens, the St. Augustine grass provides a lush shade of green. The varieties are Floratam in sunny spots and Seville in more shaded areas. Other sections of the campus are planted in bahia grass and some sections have bermuda grass.

An underground irrigation system operates off of a 20 hp submersible pump that pumps from a 700-foot-deep Florida aquifer. The irrigation system has more than 1,500 sprinklers situated on more than 40 different valves, covering over half of the 66-acre estate.

Although the estate does not have a field nursery for seasonal plants, it does have a holding place. During construction, such as moving a walkway or paving, plants can be relocated for a brief period, then returned to the grounds. Another purpose of the holding area is for preordered plants waiting to be set in soil.

Division of labor on a large estate

"With the landscaping responsibility of a 66-acre estate, there are many duties that must be scheduled," replies Greene. The work load is divided into zones. Greene uses this zone system of landscape maintenance rather than a broadcast approach, because he believes it provides a greater sense of ownership and helps with employee morale. There are a few duties that are considered a broadcast approach, such as mowing with the riding mowers and heavy equipment operations, which are performed by the appropriate qualified staff.

As with other southern gardens, annuals have a long growing season in the South. The annual flowers are cared for by in-house personnel, and the tree work is divided among contractors, consultants and the in-house crew. Estates of this size often hire outside contractors to perform work-related jobs.

Care of Unusual Trees

"The estate owns a large collection of trees," says Greene. "For example, we have the largest group of Banyan trees in the region, and we also have a 'State Champion' Ear Tree, *Enterolobium cyclocarpum*." A "State Champion" tree is the largest tree (either in diameter at breast height or overall size or spread of its canopy) within its respective genus in the state.

Located throughout the tropics, Banyans can be damaged by freezing temperatures. The majority of the Ringling's collection of Banyans dates back to the Ringling era (1900-1930s). Although their aerial roots extending down from the canopy are fascinating to view, they pose a challenge with their aggressive nature and ability to grow on almost anything—including roads, sidewalks and statuary. Another challenge is keeping walkways and ground clean of the fruit the Banyan produce. As the trees age and become massive, the fruit produces a mess as it falls to the ground.

The right tool for the right job

Greene says, "We use a wide variety of power equipment in our operations at the Ringling Museum. Our riding mowers are predominately Gravely, but we still have an older Toro riding mower. Our push mowers are Toro, and our hand-held power equipment is mostly Echo and Stihl." They use John Deere Gators and a John Deere compact utility tractor. Other gear includes a JCB mini excavator and a JBL 45-foot lift.

Blowers are used extensively in the operations at the Museum. "We use backpack, hand-held and PTO-driven blowers," says Greene. "We also use the Billy Goat lawn vacuum and the good old-fashioned lawn rakes."

Control products on the grounds

Sarasota has adopted a fertilizer ordinance that prohibits fertilizer from being applied within 10 feet of a body of water. With the Ringling Estate bordering Sarasota Bay, they must abide by this ordinance. "These guidelines really do not hinder our operations," remarks Greene. "We select the right plant for the right place and create the best environment for these plants and we do not have to fertilize."

The estate uses a wide variety of chemicals in their efforts. Sarasota County requires that all persons applying fertilizer commercially obtain a "Certificate of Completion from a Sarasota County approved Best Management Practices training class." The entire staff has obtained their certification for the application of fertilizers, and they have six certified pesticide applicators in the grounds department.

One slow-release fertilizer lasts six months and is not influenced by temperature or moisture; it also reduces the number of annual applications from four to two. Another factor is the reduction of insect infestation that would attack an excessive amount of new growth caused by a high nitrogen application. The landscape staff uses biological controls and encourage beneficials as part of the integrated pest management (IPM) strategy.

Gardening by the sea

With the estate facing Sarasota Bay, salt spray from hurricanes can damage some of the plant material. "We are fortunate that we haven't lost any plants to salt spray," says Greene. "However, the salt spray has defoliated plants." The trees are kept clean, so the clean-up after a storm is usually routine and limited to smaller branches and old palm fronds. Like other Florida cities, Sarasota has had plenty of opportunity within the last few years to fine-tune its hurricane plans.

What do visitors say when they tour the Ringling Estate? Guests are genuinely awe-struck and often surprised by the beautiful grounds. Greene says, "We sometimes like to refer to the grounds as the 'Fifth Museum—the living collection.'"

The author is a freelance writer from Jackson, Tenn., focusing on the lawn care and landscape industry.