



Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport: Jody Taylor

By Dr. Ellen Vincent, Clemson University Environmental Landscape Specialist





Greenville Spartanburg International Airport (GSP) is unique for its celebrated landscape. This award winning facility has always known that trees set the tone for any choice destination. They have over 20 years of landscape beautification awards from the Spartanburg Men's Garden Club. Airport development was the brainchild of business owners Roger Milliken, President of Pacolet Milliken and Company Enterprise and Charlie Daniel, co-founder of Daniel International Construction (and former United States senator from South Carolina). They petitioned the legislature for an airport in this location back in 1958. Harvard graduate and Landscape Architect Richard Webel, of Innocenti & Webel, was the original landscape designer for GSP. The entrance redesign in 2005 was the work of Landscape Architect Mark Byington, of Innocenti & Webel.

Roger Milliken's penchant for trees is legendary in the upstate of SC—he installed an arboretum on his textile company headquarter grounds—so it is no surprise to find choice trees installed at GSP. The entrance drive holds clusters of conifers that resemble a botanical garden celebrity list. Artistic arrangements include deodar cedar (Sanders Blue and Crystall Falls); red cedar (Burkii and Idylwild); arborvitae (Degroot's Spire, Globe, and Green Giant); cypress (Hinoki and Italian); and juniper (Taylor and Torulosa).

Jody Taylor, Grounds Supervisor, is the Airport's representative to SC Nursery and Landscape Association. He is a horticulture graduate of Spartanburg Community College (SCC) who still maintains strong ties with his alma mater. Taylor was self-employed both during and after his college years when his wife strongly encouraged him to seek work that did not require 80+ hours per week of his time. He entered the Airport as Landscape Crew Leader and after six enjoyable years became Grounds Supervisor. He has worked here for 20 years now and describes the location in this way: "The Airport is a place where business gets conducted; people travel for pleasure; and industry and plants meet."

Taylor supervises 15 Landscape Maintenance professionals at the Airport. This team oversees 3,500 acres. The airfield occupies over 300 acres and includes pavement, grass, and slopes. Turf on the airfield mainly consists of Bermuda and Bahiagrass. Aggressively maintained turf near the airport entrances and terminal covers more than 70 acres and consists of Tall Fescue and Bermuda. They select the seed blend based on National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) trials and choose a seed blend that performs well in the upstate climate. Drought tolerance and disease resistance are the



driving evaluating factors for GSP. Aerial and over-seeding usually occurs during late August into November by in-house staff.

There are 12 detention ponds designed for stormwater collection. Over 635 select trees occupy the site and include many sweetgum, willow oak, and red maple cultivars. GSP is also a Certified Tree Farm by the American Tree Farm System. In 2007, 770 acres of forested land were planted. Logging is part of the practice and in 2010 the Airport was awarded District 3 Tree Farmer of the Year.

Over five people, or one-third of this workforce, have worked on this team for more than 10 years. When asked why people choose to stay at this location; Taylor suspects it might be due to



a culture of fairness and high standards of performance. The focus is on quality rather than quantity at GSP and crew members are encouraged to voice their perceptions, concerns, and solutions for problems. "It is not all about production" he explains; "it is about getting it right." When asked where the fairness practices stem from he easily tracks it back to Facilities Manager Ronnie Bullard.

In an introductory email to me he initially referred to staff as "heroes". During our interview he mentioned merit increases and service awards for landscape employees; financial support for obtaining a pesticide license or professional certification; and a harmonious family-oriented environment. This is most evident during inclement weather

when the crew stays on site during the storm event. They stand ready to clear tarmacs, roads, and sidewalks of snow and ice for the duration of the event. Providing excellent customer service is a goal for each team member on a daily basis. Taylor explains "We strive to be the safest, most efficient, user-friendly airport in the world. We are a community." The crew is completely cross-trained and is ready at a moment's notice to move from mowing lawns, painting runways, or mulching trees; to carrying customers' bags if the terminal elevators are out of order.

Environmental practices focus on water conservation and erosion control. Rainwater is currently harvested at the general aviation terminal and reused in the toilets. Drip irrigation is installed in tree and shrub landscapes. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) involves using scouts—one a certified arborist and the other a turf specialist. One crew leader is a Certified Landscape Technician (CLT) while two individuals: Taylor and Landscape Crew Leader Josh Waldrep, are Certified Erosion Prevention and Sediment Control (CEPSCI) Inspectors.

The biggest challenge at GSP is of course, people. Trash, including large quantities of cigarette butts, is scattered on the grounds while vehicles parking on the soil are two of the most obvious human offenses. Taylor estimates that it takes 60-80 hours per week to pick up trash and this activity is shared among employees. Soil compaction results from vehicular activities and is remedied using a device they created that simulates an air spade. The process resembles vertical mulching and is used mostly around the conifers planted in the medians. Using the air spade they "blast or bore" a 12-18" hole, 2-3" in diameter into the compacted clay soil using air. They then fill the holes with a

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mix of decomposed pine bark, native topsoil, and quarry dust along with 14-14-14 w/micro-nutrients slow release fertilizer.

Plans for the future involve implementing the new master plan created by Seamon Whiteside & Associates. This plan emphasizes water conservation and plant biodiversity. Roadside buffers are planned to capture stormwater and a centralized computer control system for irrigation is intended. Plans also call for the installation of water conserving nozzles and heads on irrigation and rain sensors. Biodiversity is present by including a variety of tree species for aging trees that need replacing that include Shumard oak, nuttall oak, tulip poplar, and black gum.

One of the most dramatic changes that is already in motion is revamping the Airside Garden. This space originally utilized extremely lucrative airplane parking spaces on the tarmac in an effort to provide the traveler with an exciting landscape garden experience while at the airport. The newly designed space will contain water features, trees, turf, and container plants for public enjoyment. The exquisite emphasis on landscape beautification and maintenance at Greenville Spartanburg International Airport is testimony to both its rich history and the green future of this impressive facility.



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