



SOUTH FEATURES

Creating a Community Garden

by Ron Barnett

Landscapers' professionalism and concern shines through

PHOTOS BY RON BARNETT.

Six a.m. on a Saturday morning, and rain began to fall—not the sort of day that most landscapers would enjoy heading out to a job, especially one that wouldn't pay a cent.

However, this was no ordinary job.

On this day, members of the Carolina Association of Lawn and Landscapers (CALL) joined forces with dozens of volunteers to make a dream come true. They were set to create a community garden, including an outdoor classroom, at the Richard Riley Child Development and Family Learning Center of Greenville County (S.C.) Schools. It's a tradition for this organization of about 60 landscape and lawn care companies in the upstate South Carolina area.



Putting finishing touches on the labyrinth. Riley Center is in the background. Inset, Susannah Horton, center, holds a blueprint of her design for the Riley Center project. She is flanked by Clemson Horticulture Professor Mary Haque,

“It’s good to give back to the community,” said Jim Minkler, one of the founders of the association.

A few drops of rain fell during the day, but nothing that would have prevented this project’s completion. Nearly 100 people turned out for a groundbreaking attended by Richard Riley, former governor of South Carolina and U.S. Secretary of Education in the Clinton administration. There wasn’t enough work for all the volunteers.

“We’ll get it all done today,” said Chris Baird, another founding member of CALL and owner of The Right Way, a lawn care and landscaping company based in Greenville.

By the time they were done, the group had laid 7,500 square feet of sod, planted dozens of shrubs and trees and transformed what was a vacant lot into a park.

It was all done with volunteer labor and materials donated by the suppliers of the lawn and landscaping firms that participated.



Beth Bagwell (second from left) and Mary Hague (second from right) with students from Dr. Hague’s horticulture class

Strong communities

CALL pulled together all the manpower and materials for the project, but the vision originated with a child abuse prevention program run by Clemson University called Strong Communities. Beth Bagwell, project coordinator for Strong Communities, started working on the project more than a year ago with the idea of creating a space for parents, as well as children of the community, “especially those on the margins of society,” she said.

The work project was timed to coincide with Child Abuse Prevention Month. She teamed up with a landscape design class at Clemson and met with parents and community members to find out what they would like the park to be like.

Horticulture Professor Mary Haque assigned each member of her class to draw up a design.

“There’s a movement now called ‘no child left indoors,’ kind of based on No Child Left Behind,” she said. “We’re trying to get children who are kinesthetic learners outside into the field learning about ecology, learning about plant-animal relationships.”



Jim Minkler, one of the founders of the Carolina Association of Lawn and Landscapers, puts a foot to a shovel during the project at the Riley Center.



Mario Walker rakes around a tree that has just been planted at the Riley Center

Student Susannah Horton’s design was chosen for the project. Among the features the community wanted was a labyrinth and an outdoor classroom, Horton said. Her design also includes several “storybook gardens,” depicting gardens out of children’s literature, such as a Secret Garden, a Giving Tree Garden and Mr. McGregor’s Garden from Beatrix Potter’s “The Tale of Peter Rabbit,” which will be filled with ornamental vegetables. Turf areas for “free play” are also part of the overall design.



Digging a hole for a shrub with a bobcat

Horton’s design included numerous tea olives, hollies, Japanese maples and willow oaks. Trees were planted in memory of Ann “Tunky” Riley, wife of Richard Riley who died recently, and several other recently deceased community members, including Ja’Veion Mayes, a four-year-old boy who was murdered.

Generous suppliers

CALL does projects like this every three to four years, Baird said. They’ve refurbished a veterans’ park in Simpsonville, S.C., and done improvements at a Greenville County park on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Madawaskaa donated country manor block for the learning center. Carolina Fresh Farms donated 15 pallets of Tifway bermuda sod overseeded with rye. Mulch in Motion donated a

mountain of mulch. Joe Matthews, a local craftsman, donated an arbor.

McCleer Construction donated gravel for a base for pavers. Pioneer Pavers laid the pavers and Atlantic Supply donated the water tap for irrigation. Rain Bird donated some of the irrigation materials, and Central Irrigation Supply donated the rest.

Landscape Market donated plants, Upstate Greenery donated shrubs and Easley Nursery donated a tree. Cemex donated the pavers.

“Everything just fell into place,” Baird said. “When we do a project like this, 98 to 100 percent of all the materials are donated by our suppliers.”

Professional society

The Carolina Association of Lawn and Landscapers undertakes service projects like this for the opportunity to do something good for the communities its members serve. A secondary benefit is that they also raise their profile as professionals by undertaking such efforts, said Mario Walker, president of CALL.

“One of the reasons why I like to do things like this community project is to get the word out and let them know that there are professionals out in the community, and whenever they need any advice or somebody who knows what they’re doing, they can go to our Web site [www.call-landscapers.com] or get in touch with one of the guys,” he said.



Terry Creamer, project manager for the Riley Center project.



A pallet of Tifway Bermuda grass awaits installation

Walker, who runs a company called Landscape Solutions, said CALL, established in 1993, is one of the more active professional organizations for local landscapers, with monthly informational meetings.

“What I envision the group being is ... a bunch of professionals together to educate each other, get educated and try to add some professionalism to the landscape business,” he said. “I mean, there are so many people out there doing things the wrong way. So, our main goal is to try to

teach each other how to do things the right way, do the right practices and learn what you are doing.”

Walker’s company specializes in landscape maintenance, but he’s learning design at Spartanburg Technical College.

“When somebody comes to one of our meetings, and they see what we’re doing, they usually want to join,” he said. “It’s not really a competition thing, because a lot of guys think, ‘everybody’s out to get me and they might get my business.’”



Chris Baird, one of the founding members of the Carolina Association of Lawn and Landscapers.



Getting ready to plant shrubs.

“There’s enough business to go around for everybody,” he explained, “and my thing is, I’m not in competition with every Joe Schmo with a lawn mower and a weed eater in the back of his truck. I’m against the guys who [don’t] know what they’re doing.”

“Your landscape is an investment, so you don’t want to go in there and hire any Tom, Dick and Harry to come in and destroy what you paid good money for.”

Many of the association members have a set number of clients they can take, and after that, they refer to other members, Walker said.

“You get to know some of the other guys in the industry, and it takes away some of that cut-throat kind of deal, instead of everybody being strangers and thinking everybody’s out to get them.”

At its monthly meetings, CALL has speakers from area universities and government agencies who cover topics that help members better understand the science and regulatory issues that relate to their businesses, Walker said.

Once in a while, though, they get together just to do something wonderful.

Ron Barnett is a freelance writer and has been a frequent contributor to Turf over the years. He resides in Easley, S.C., and is always on the lookout for new and interesting stories in the Carolinas, Georgia and east Tennessee.

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