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Grounds for Success

Commended for a commitment to sustainability, safety and overall beauty, UC Santa Barbara's Facilities Maintenance grounds staff has scored a national accolade.

The Professional Grounds Management Society honored the "Gaucho Grounds" team through its Green Star Awards program, which recognizes the country's best-maintained landscapes. The plaudit is reserved for institutions that have demonstrated excellence in maintaining high standards for the look of campus landscapes, and for a focus on workplace safety and sustainability.

"This award is really a reflection on the crew and their hard work, and their commitment to maintaining a beautiful campus for us all to enjoy," said Raimond Calderon, UCSB's superintendent of grounds. "We have a very extensive landscape here at UCSB, with plants from all over the world and extensive turf areas for Division I sports fields. It takes real professional groundskeeper care to keep things looking the way they do. This award is a testament to the team's professionalism — and to UCSB's commitment to maintaining a beautiful, eco-friendly campus."

It's no easy task.

Native, non-native, drought-tolerant species and more can all be found amid the campus's unique landscape, which runs the gamut from manicured athletic fields, to bioswales, to an aloe garden, even a staff-crafted topiary. There are areas designated as "living labs," where specific plant species are incorporated into university curriculum and used for on-site field trips and experiential learning

projects.

Groundskeepers are constantly navigating the challenges that come with salt water intrusion and high soil salinity — courtesy of the campus's proximity to the ocean — and actively conduct deep soil sampling and analysis in concert with students and faculty in the geography department.

"Our campus is probably among the largest in the UC system with the type of landscaping that we have," Calderon said. "Our groundskeepers are very familiar with the plants in their respective zones, including extensive watering and nutritional requirements. There is a lot of knowledge here — and more all the time. We are constantly training our crews in tree care and horticulture maintenance, as well as in safety practices and protocols and sustainability. That's our commitment."

Green waste is almost 100 percent recycled and reused on site — even trees that come down are chipped and returned to campus as mulch. And, Calderon said, aside from sports turf, where there are intensive and specific maintenance requirements, UCSB has cut its use of commercial fertilizers by 98 percent.

More than 90 percent of UCSB's manicured landscape is now irrigated with recycled water, which saves 19.5 million gallons annually of potable water, according to Matthew O'Carroll, the campus's refuse, recycling and water efficiency manager. And in the remaining areas, he said, potable water irrigation has been cut by 50 percent.

There's more.

"The grounds staff plays a key role in UCSB's sustainability efforts," said O'Carroll. "On an annual basis, they apply over 20 tons of spent coffee grounds from the University Center eateries to the campus landscape as a soil amendment and are incorporating the use of alternative energy equipment such as backpack blowers and lawn mowers to reduce the university's carbon footprint."

Gaucho Grounds maintains 230 acres of intensively planted and irrigated landscape, which includes 20 acres of sports turf and 20 acres of ornamental turf. All lawns are cut weekly, walkways cleaned weekly, 2,000 refuse cans serviced daily and foundation shrubs trimmed quarterly. Then there is the campus tree population, some 10,000 strong, which is pruned as needed.

“We’re maintaining a city here, essentially,” Calderon said. “It’s a big job. We’re happy to do it. People come here from all over the world and we want them to feel like this is the best-looking place they’ve been. It’s definitely a wonderful place to work. I hear guys say all the time, ‘I get to work here.’ You can have your lunch at the ocean, or swim or surf on your lunch hour — that makes for a great work environment.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.