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SOUTH FEATURES
High Style

by Patrick White

Resort sets the standard for luxury landscaping



The main drive entering The Breakers Palm Beach sets the stage for guests with an impressive landscape of turf, trees, flowers and tropical plants.



Thanks to The Breakers' seaside location, wind can be a challenge in maintaining the turfgrass and plants. Using the right irrigation system components and keeping plants healthy helps the landscaping stand up to the desiccation.
Photos courtesy of The Breakers Palm Beach.

When guests check in for a stay at The Breakers Palm Beach, a luxury resort in Florida, they expect relaxation, but they also demand perfection. That means that not only do the amenities and rooms meet the highest standards, so do the grounds.

In fact, the landscaping is a critical part of The Breakers experience. "Many guests are looking for a tropical experience. They expect palm trees and big leafy plants and bright colors. We try to provide that experience with a diversity of plant material with grounds that feel like a private estate," explains Lloyd Singleton, landscape manager. The grounds are even responsible for the first impression guests get when arriving at The Breakers. "Our main entrance is pretty spectacular," says Singleton. The discriminating clientele is not alone in its praise of the landscaping: The Breakers recently was awarded the 2009 Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS) Grand Award, the group's top honor.

The resort totals 140 acres, including a 90-acre golf course. Separate golf and grounds crews are responsible for care of those two respective areas. "The responsibility of the grounds team is pretty broad, we cover everything from signs and pavement to the interior plants and all the landscaping in between," explains Singleton.

The grounds staff includes 24 full-time employees. "About 20 to 30 percent of our time is outdoor cleanup work," he estimates. "We sweep, remove clippings and scrub everything to be sure it's pristine, and we have to do everything very quietly, so we don't use a lot of

two-cycle equipment. Our day starts at 6 a.m., but we're not allowed to use any power equipment at all until after 8:30 a.m., and we're limited to 65 decibels maximum on our two-cycle equipment, so there's a lot of pan-and-broom work. It's very labor-intensive. For example, we do a lot of trimming with Felcos instead of power hedge trimmers."

He says the hand-trimming has advantages beyond noise reduction, as it allows the staff to give the plantings the natural look the resort is after. "We want things to look full, but never overgrown," says Singleton. "Another one of our standards is to have no visible

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soil, so we want to have complete plant coverage wherever possible."

One area of particular interest to many guests is the resort's front lawn, which stretches out below the front porch of the hotel. "It's a heavy guest use and event area," Singleton explains. "It's a very inviting place for people to walk around or just relax." In addition to this daily activity, special events, including an annual exotic automobile show, place serious demands on the turf of the front lawn.



The goal at The Breakers is to have the grounds create the feel of a private estate. The attention to detail was recognized by the PGMS in 2009, when the group presented The Breakers with its Grand Award.

Prior to the renovation, the lawn featured TifDwarf, which was overseeded with rough bluegrass (*Poa trivialis*). "It used to look OK during the season, but the *Poa trivialis* would not recover from heavy foot traffic, so we would be topdressing with seed, and everything was so dependent on the weather as to how the lawns looked and responded. It was just never very consistent," Reid says.

March and April, when the overseeded grass began to die out, was also among the busiest times of the year at The Breakers. "That was the time when we really had to look our best, and the grass was struggling," he says. "The paspalum is just so much better. It has a brilliant green color year-round, and it gives us the striped-up look even in the summertime, which you obviously don't have with bermudagrass."

Reid says that Aloha was chosen from among the various paspalums on the market for its wear tolerance. When the annual auto show approaches, the grounds staff applies a topdressing about one week prior in an effort to cover and protect the crown of the grass a bit. "Not only are the cars there, but you've got a highly concentrated area of foot traffic. The lawn looks a little rough the next afternoon, but within a couple of days, you'd never know the event had occurred," Reid says. "As soon as the event ends, we jump on it with solid-tine aerators, then topdress it and give it about a .25 pound of nitrogen and a full pound of potassium. That helps to jump start the grass a little bit, and it seems to respond very well to that treatment."

The paspalum also stands up to the salt that's present on the ocean lawn, which is right beside the water. "We offset that with some higher calcium applications, just to flush the sodium out of the soils," Reid explains. "The paspalum, being a saltwater grass, can hold up well with a little bit of salt or a lower quality of water." The latter isn't a concern, given that The Breakers' irrigation system features a reverse osmosis component to ensure good quality irrigation water.



The prominent Front Lawn at The Breakers was renovated in 2006. One of the notable changes was to replace the TifDwarf bermudagrass with a brilliant green Aloha seashore paspalum, which keeps its color year-round and doesn't require overseeding.

There is still some 419 bermudagrass along the entryway and various walkways on property, and that is overseeded. "We go with a 250-pound rate of perennial ryegrass. Those are non-traffic areas, so it really holds up very well," Reid explains. There also is Palmetto St. Augustine that covers the lawns surrounding the owner's cottages at The Breakers. All grounds areas are mowed with walk-behind mowers, a combination of Tru-Cut and Toro 1600 mowers.

When it comes to maintaining the turfgrass or plantings, wind is a challenge here, explains Lloyd Singleton. "Plants can desiccate, and we do a lot of trimming of brown tips and try to keep the plants as healthy as possible so they can withstand the wind damage." The Breakers is currently testing some new heads designed to create larger water droplets to help when watering in windy conditions. During the renovation to the front lawn, Toro 810G rotors with trajectory adjustment



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were installed to help combat the effects of wind. "Ultimately, our biggest concern is getting the water where we need coverage, and they've worked out very well for us," says Reid.

Tree maintenance is another large component of the grounds staff's work. "We have literally hundreds of palm trees, and quite a few deciduous trees, as well. Our philosophy with palm trimming in the landscape is that we try to do it frequently, but not drastically. That way we maintain as much cover and leaf as possible so the palm can generate food and remain strong," explains Singleton. A 20-foot extendable pole pruner is used whenever possible, with a high-reach unit used on taller trees near sidewalks. "Palms do drop a lot of leaves, so we are up in the trees pretty much every week somewhere on the trees," he adds.

Guests are continually strolling throughout the grounds, taking in all of the lush landscape, he points out. The area around the front lawn features benches where guests can sit amidst the plantings. There's also an organic vegetable and herb garden, where chefs from The Breakers harvest ingredients for the restaurants. "It's very interactive, there's nearly always a guest in there sampling something or watching or looking at the names of the plants," says Singleton.



The grounds staff cares for all interior and exterior plants. With hundreds of palm trees on the property, pruning and leaf collection is a regular part of the job.

When English fluency allows, the grounds staff is trained to be able to answer questions from guests regarding the landscape and different types of featured plants. "I like to look at us as gardening hoteliers. We are always aware of the opportunity to service guests," explains Singleton, who previously served as landscape manager at Universal Studios in Orlando. While The Breakers grounds are much different, Singleton says he did bring with him an approach that has proven to work well at both facilities. "The theme park was so large that we created teams that all had a lead. We've replicated that here. In the past, there was just one title for gardeners. Now we have

an entry-level groundskeeper, a midlevel gardener and then a lead gardener. We've divided the resort into five different areas, each with a lead gardener and then a complement of midlevel gardener and entry-level groundskeeper underneath them," he explains.

The approach creates ownership of each area, and responsibility of seeing things that need to be done in that area, he says. "It even creates a little bit of healthy competition between the teams," Singleton adds. "It also provides an advancement opportunity, so someone coming in as an entry-level gardener can see that there is growth potential for them in horticulture."

Patrick White is a freelance writer and editor who has covered every aspect of the green industry in the past 13 years. He is based in Middlesex, Vt., and is always on the lookout for unusual stories.

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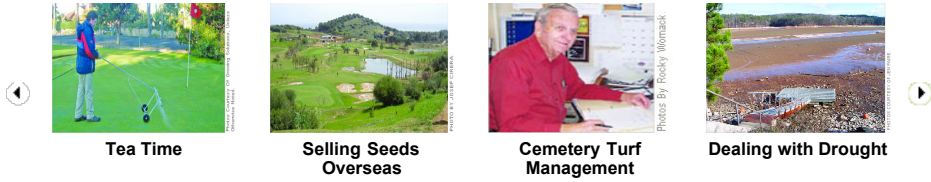
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