

Tom Lupfer — Sustainable Landscaping Committee Chair

by Meta Levin

1993 was not the best of years to be out on the job market, even with a Bachelor's degree from Northwestern University. So, rather than continue on in a field for which he had decided he was ill suited, ILCA Sustainable Landscaping Committee Chair Tom Lupfer picked up the lawnmower with which he had earned money while in school and headed out to do what he knew best. The rest is history.

With that same determination, he approached ILCA Executive Director Scott Grams last year about serving on a sustainable landscaping committee. There was none. "How about starting one and becoming the chair?" asked Grams. Lupfer jumped right in. Since August, an eight-member team has been meeting, roaring through an initial agenda with efficiency.

"Our committee represents a broad scope," says Lupfer. "We have people from large and small companies, maintenance, irrigation and a supplier."

The committee's first job was setting criteria for new ILCA awards categories in sustainable landscape maintenance and construction. They segued from that to scheduling a seminar for Mid-Am, defining curriculum and taking care of all of the necessary details. "Our goal at Mid-Am is practicality," says Lupfer. The committee wants the seminar to highlight the marketability of sustainable techniques, as well as how to manage projects, he says.

Committee members also are working toward developing standard operating procedures for industry seminars and events in an effort to ensure that they reflect sustainable practices. They are putting together a media guide for distribution to and by landscape contractors who use green techniques, as a way of generating publicity for themselves, as well as the industry.



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In addition, the committee is reaching out to other industry organizations to form alliances with the goal of standardizing terms and objectives, says Lupfer. The Midwest Ecological Landscape Association (MELA) and the Illinois Chapter of ASLA are important collaborators in widening the definition and implementation of sustainable practices.

Lupfer notes that he's been using sustainable practices for a long time, even before he recognized them for what they are. "I was trying to save money," he says. For instance, each time he gets a new maintenance contract in his business (Lyons, IL-based Lupfer Landscaping LLC), he evaluates the turf with an eye toward reducing the amount of cutting necessary. Instead of burying sump pumps, he incorporates them into water features.

"Now that appeals to a much broader customer base, not just the idealists," he says. "This gives some practical reasons and justifications for (employing sustainable techniques)."

Lupfer started his company in 1993, a few years after earning a Bachelor's degree in political science from Northwestern and deciding that he didn't like working in politics. During high school

and college, he had mowed lawns for his older brother. So he packed equipment into his 1988 Pontiac Grand Am and began mowing lawns for his parents' friends, taking on small installation jobs and other work as customers asked. It was, he says, quite a spectacle when he pulled up to a job site. Still, one job led to another. Before he knew it, he had employees.

"I had to hire my first employees pretty quickly," he says. "By the second spring, I had two full crews. I was the foreman for one of them."

He also realized that a Pontiac Grand Am was not going to do it, in part because its carrying capacity was limited. "I could only get a few rolls of sod in it at a time," he says.

In 1995, he found ILCA while looking for ways to get a better education. "I knew that I was going to have to find a way to distinguish myself from other small operations," he says. "As a Northwestern graduate, I figured that education was the best way to do that."

As much as he liked ILCA, he got busy and dropped out for a few years, renewing his membership in 2005, when he thought he might have the time to get active.

Now he is looking forward to leading the Sustainable Landscaping Committee into the future, not only defining the terms, but producing resources for ILCA members to use. 