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Keep the Forty Acres beautiful

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By **Elena Watts**



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Photo by John Foxworth

Brett Gustafson is changing the landscape of the University of Texas at Austin one bed at a time.

A landscape architect who has worked at the University for seven months, he keeps the campus' outdoor environment green while working to make it more sustainable.

With an electric smile emanating from his tanned face, Gustafson balances on the narrow stone border that cradles one of five progressive beds that span the front of the Biological Laboratories Building on 24th Street. Surveying his work, he hops onto a carefully placed boulder inside the bed. The colors and textures of agave, birds of paradise, lantana, Texas sotol, mondo grass and soft leaf yucca bring to life the narrow tract once overpowered by expired 40-year-old Burford Holly hedges. A path of river stones cuts through the middle of the five beds from the top of the hill to the bottom, mimicking the natural look of a dry creek bed.

"Because this is the Biology Building, where they study plants, they were really jazzed watching us put this in," Gustafson said. "This is just more interesting, you can be more involved, you can climb on the rocks – that's what I like about these landscapes. I hate landscapes with walls around them, you should be able to interact with and engage the environment."



[2]

Photo by Michael Baldon

The Landscape Services Improvement Plan (LSIP), a department-wide evaluation approved back in 2003, outlined the need for Gustafson's and other positions. However, due to budget constraints, Gustafson's position as designer and installer of UT's water-conserving, low-maintenance, durable plant life was not created until May 2010.

John Burns, manager of Landscape Services for 30 years who has matured in his position along with the University's landscape, said Gustafson brings new ideas and skills to their department.

"[Gustafson] is using adaptive and native plants in more attractive and noticeable ways," Burns said. "In the past, I would say, 'Put 30 salvia [plants] in that bed,' a massive amount of plants, but it wouldn't look as good — [Gustafson] has fresh design ideas."

Landscape architects who are designing for high profile locations such as The Domain, a ritzy Austin shopping center, are creating interesting landscapes that do not require much water once they are established.

"We are trying to implement that at UT...we're part of the community and we're trying to get in line with what everyone else is doing," Gustafson said. "If we were putting in plant material that required heavy watering, we would look foolish and uneducated working in an educational complex."

A recent example of modern, sustainable landscape replacing exhausted shrubbery is the five beds running along 24th Street in front of the Biological Laboratories Building. Impressed with the 24th Street project, Jacqueline Dana, senior academic advisor for the College of Liberal Arts, started the ball rolling on the renovation of the Computation Center's rooftop beds. She posted a comment on President Powers' Ideas of Texas website where faculty, staff, students and alumni share their ideas and concerns about the University.

"Historically, annuals [such as] pansies and petunias were planted in the beds," Dana said. "[I thought] the beds should be more sustainable—more water-friendly and less labor intensive." Of the computation beds' current stage of renovation, Dana said the boulders "look cool as hell and there are not even any plants yet."

Working with the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center, an organization founded in 1982 to protect, preserve and showcase wildflowers and other native plants, Landscape Services plans to tag the plants so that anyone with a Blackberry or iPhone can quickly find information about the specimens on the Wildflower Center's website with one quick swipe.

"So it will be an interesting landscape in terms of technology, native and adaptive plantings, and the way it looks," Gustafson said. "It's a whole different design from the design theory the campus had 40 years ago."



[3]

Photo by Michael Baldon

The majority of the work performed by Landscape Services is maintenance: pruning, trimming, clipping, blowing and keeping the campus clean. Until Gustafson's arrival, there was not a lot of time for rejuvenating tired landscapes.

"Before Brett, installations were put off because we did not have the budget to have a contractor come in and do the work," Burns said. "Maintenance never stops...so we did top priority maintenance work first and fit in installations [last]."

Gustafson, a native of Littleton, Colo., spent winters as a ski bum and worked summers in Des Moines, Iowa on landscape crews where he edged his way up from laborer to foreman.

"I thought that \$5.25 an hour was big money and [I] was able to work outside," Gustafson said. "Most of my friends worked at the mall, I thought I was the 'coolest' driving a big landscape truck, getting dirty and having a great tan."

His boss told him he had an eye for landscape design, which led to his focus in college. In 1998, he earned his degree in landscape architecture from Iowa State University.

Gustafson said he recreates the natural landscapes he admired growing up. "As a child, I loved climbing trees, making forts and playing in creeks," he said. Today, when he takes his three children on walks in the Texas Hill Country, he makes mental notes of the nooks and crannies where the plants grow.

"My guys (Angel Cruz, installation crew gardener, and Jared Muennink, senior landscape technician) are really dialed in on how I like to see a painting basically, the way rocks touch one another in certain areas and look natural," Gustafson said. "Not just ker plunk, put it down and put a plant next to it."

Plant durability is also important. Gustafson said that sustainable installations tend to hold up better to people cutting their own paths through beds across campus.

"With 50,000 students and 20,000 faculty and staff, that's a lot of people packed into 425 acres," Larry Maginnis, urban forester with Landscape Services for six years, said. "This is a city inside of a city and it's a lot of people, a lot of impact and a lot of our landscape doesn't hold up to that."



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Photo by Michael Baldon

Gustafson said his goal is to complete the two beds atop the Computation Center before Christmas. Next year, he wants to work with the School of Architecture's graduate students of landscape architecture to design University beds beginning with those north of Goldsmith Hall facing the West Mall. He wants to develop a competition among them that culminates in the installation of the winning design.

"I would also like to get the students involved in the installation," Gustafson said. "I know when I was in school in landscape architecture...it looks good on paper, but do it in the field and it's a whole different ball of wax.

"I'm trying to design and implement [landscapes] on campus that say, 'Hey we live in Texas. So let's make it look like Texas truly is — so that's the mantra we're using for each installation."

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