Grass Roots Initiative Launched at National Arboretum

Colien Hefferan presenting remarks prior to on-site groundbreaking (l to r): Scott Aker, Kevin Morris, Zoe Clarkwest, Hefferan, Geoffrey Rinehart, Michael Stachowicz

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Editor
Turf News

Grass Roots, a new exhibit that will highlight the environmental, economic, aesthetic and recreational benefits of turfgrass, was officially launched in November with a groundbreaking at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C.

A collaboration of the U.S. National Arboretum (operated by the USDA's Agricultural Research Service) and the National Turfgrass Federation (NTF), Grass Roots is the centerpiece of a four-year initiative "committed to helping citizens, including national decision-makers, understand new and emerging science underlying our nation's beautiful lawns, athletic fields and gardens," said National Arboretum Director Colien Hefferan.

The groundbreaking ceremony featured a welcome from Hefferan. Attendees, including several stakeholders and donors, also heard from Geoffrey Rinehart, coordinator of the Grass Roots Initiative; and Kevin Morris, executive director, National Turfgrass Evaluation Program, who also serves as president of the National Turfgrass Federation.

Rinehart and Morris provided insights into the genesis of the Initiative and the collaborative efforts involved. Please see the accompanying logos of the organizations, including The Lawn Institute, that have provided financial and in-kind support.

The program included a landscape design perspective from Jenny Wienckowski, MLA, and co-founder, Rain Underground, Baltimore, MD, which designed the exhibit and consulted on its programming and messaging.

Giving the keynote presentation, "Can We Sustain our Love for the American Lawn?" was Frank Rossi, associate professor, Turfgrass Science, Cornell University.

Sod Donated by Maryland Producers

Several members of the Maryland Turf Association (MTA) who are donating sod to the exhibit attended the program. "We've also been in talks with the Virginia Sod Growers Association," says the Grass Roots Initiative's Rinehart. When the exhibit opens next spring, visitors will be able to see more than 50 varieties of grasses in different settings.

Tom Warpinski, Central Sod Farms of Maryland, Inc., Centreville, MD, and MTA president, says that between 50,000 and 70,000 square feet of turfgrass sod will be donated to the exhibit from Maryland producers. The sod will be installed sometime in mid to late March.

Several species, including tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, zoysiagrass, bermudagrass and bentgrass, will be delivered. "The turfgrass used will be types or varieties capable of growing in this area, highlighting the various colors, textures, growth characteristics, benefits and uses of different types of grasses," Warpinski says.

"We're pleased that the Initiative will

Left to right: Tom Warpinski and Bill Warpinski, Central Sod Farms, Inc.; Kevin Morris, National Turfgrass Federation; Doug Lechlider, Laytonsville Landscaping; Gary Wilber, Oakwood Sod Farm; Raul Berrios, National Hispanic Landscape Alliance; Greg Lyman, GCSAA; and Bill Love, William Love Design.

help educate the public on the benefits of turfgrass," Warpinski says. For years, the media has portrayed turfgrass in a negative light as it relates to fertilizer and water use, he says. The Initiative will provide educational programs on the proper management of turfgrass and its important functions (such as erosion control and stormwater management) in the environment.

"This four-year exhibit has been given a prominent place on the Arboretum grounds and will benefit the entire green industry," Warpinski says, adding that the National Arboretum has some 500,000 visitors each year.

Geoffrey Rinehart and Scott Aker from the National Arboretum had spoken to the MTA at its last general meeting and all members present were enthusiastic about providing help with the project, Warpinski said. The following MTA members have attended meetings about the project: Ross Moreland, Shady Oaks Turf; Doug Lechlider, Laytonsville Landscaping; Tom and Bill Warpinski, Central Sod Farms; Doug Barberry, Barr-Net, Inc.; Gary Wilber, Oakwood Sod Farm; and Vernon Cooper, All States Turfgrass Consultants.

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Agricultural Grasses

The exhibit will also showcase agricultural grasses, such as cereal rye and winter wheat, during the winter and corn, sorghum and millet during the summer. "We wanted to show that grasses like these are critical to food and forage," Rinehart said.

Construction of the new exhibit will be carried out this winter. This will include removal of some existing vegetation as well as final grading and installation of hardscape materials. "We plan to have it open to the public by late spring," said Rinehart.

The exhibit will include a green roof using native grasses. This will enable visitors to compare the stormwater and heat reduction capacity of green roofs to those of conventional roofs.

Zoe Clarkwest, MLA, and co-founder, Rain Underground, said that the exhibit afforded a unique opportunity to work only with grasses. "That intrigued us," she said. The exhibit will show how sodded turfgrass functions in the landscape. Rain Underground also has designed large swaths of ornamental grasses that will show "grasses in all their glory," Clarkwest said. "We played with color and seasonality."

William Love Design has built a pond into the exhibit. To show how overflow water can be managed, the designers have planted a natural grass swale next to the pond. To comply with stormwater regulations and rebate programs in the state of Maryland, Clarkwest said that stormwater features must be planted to 80 percent native grass.

The swale near the pond leads into a rain garden feature. Meanwhile, another area of the exhibit features a sunken planting bed (grasses only) using landscape conservation design principles. It is placed along the side of a road specifically to manage run-off.

The interactive exhibit will highlight the results of turfgrass research and communicate that managed turf landscapes are essential in conserving soils, retaining and filtering water, said Hefferan. The exhibit will be thematically linked over the nearly 450 acres of the National Arboretum by displays and gardens.

The Grass Roots website (*www.usna.usda.gov/Education/turfgrass.html*) was also launched in November. It features the 2014 exhibit site plan and, along with other social media *(www.facebook.com/NTFGrassRootsInitiative and Twitter @Grass_Roots_NTF)*, will provide updates on the exhibit's progress. In addition, the website features a history of USDA turfgrass research; myths and facts about turfgrass; and more turfgrass information and links to other websites.

Over the next four years, the Grass Roots Initiative will include professional and scientific symposia, homeowner-focused workshops and lawn maintenance demonstrations. For more information or to donate to the Initiative, please contact Geoffrey Rinehart, Grass Roots Initiative Coordinator. Tel. 202-245-5965; *Geoffrey.rinehart@ars.usda.gov.*

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