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WOW

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OLE MISS LANDSCAPE

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Creating the 'Wow'

*Jeff McManus has provided 20 years of magic for
Ole Miss's landscape*

By Jake Thompson
Photos by UM Communications, Rosie Vasallo

A college campus has several moving parts, and all of them are vital when trying to win over prospective students.

Landscaping might be the biggest factor of that first impression, and Jeff McManus, Director of Landscape Services at Ole Miss, is fully aware of the responsibility he has. For the past 20 years, McManus has been working to provide the best "wow" factor he can when people drive onto the University of Mississippi's campus.

"You're trying to create the wow," McManus said. "You're trying to create that curb appeal. We're so attracted by the cover of the book. That determines if we're going to read the book. It's the same with universities, and studies are out there that show 62 percent of perspective students will decide if they're going to go to a university based on the way they feel

after a few minutes. A lot of that is how it looks."

Prior to arriving in Oxford in 2000, McManus spent time working at two large resorts in Orlando and Miami. There are many similarities and differences when shifting from a large destination resort to a university full of 20,000 students, plus faculty and staff.

In wanting his staff to fully understand the enormity of their challenge in providing the best landscape and design possible, he had people go visit other universities and college campuses — off of recommendation by former chancellor Dr. Robert Khayat — and let them experience those first impressions.

Two years into McManus's tenure, the campus began receiving national attention and accolades. In 2002, the Professional Grounds Maintenance



Society awarded Ole Miss the Green Star Award for the Best Maintained University. The PGMS once again honored McManus and his staff's hard work with another Green Star Award in 2013.

Other honors include the Princeton Review naming Ole Miss's campus the most beautiful in 2013, and also including them in their list of Top 20 Most Beautiful Campuses.

The pressure to live up to the standard McManus set is not taken lightly by him or his staff. It is a continual effort every year.

"It's not just a plant; it's the whole concept," McManus said. "It's the whole philosophy of how you create your entryways, how you design your roads, how you design your heartsapes. All that works together. It can either work against you or work for you. ... If you're just out there putting in a fence or putting in a plant, you don't see the overall concept."

McManus credits Khayat for bringing a lot of different groups together to work toward the common goal of providing the best-designed campus

in the country.

Nothing is cookie-cutter or formulaic when it comes to the campus landscape design each year. McManus uses a base plan for his staff to go by, but then it comes down to what seasonal colors are in that given year.

Usually twice a year, McManus will do summer and winter colors, with two change outs.

"Your seasonal colors change each year," McManus said. "We do mix it up and change it up and try to create a different variety. We have pink tulips coming up this year. Sometimes they're red, sometimes they're yellow. We want people not to think, 'Okay, that's always got to be pink or always got to be red.'"

With the success of the landscaping department and the Ole Miss campus becoming a destination of sorts to capture photos throughout, there was an idea to maybe pull the curtain back and show the public how those tulips or the green grass on The Grove becomes to be.

Through an idea by Rosie Vasallo, who works at the Oxford-Lafayette Chamber of Commerce as the

director of retiree attraction, a landscaping camp was born.

Vasallo said she wanted to create something that she felt was missing for retirees to do, and even bring in others from other parts of the country.

While attending a conference, the question was posed to attendees: What is in your respective community that is not being tapped into? It caused Vasallo to rack her brain, thinking what was it that she had not tapped into in Oxford.

Then, the light bulb went off.

"All of a sudden it dawned on me," Vasallo said. "I love to work in the yard and HGTV is huge and I'm like, 'We have it right here.' The most beautiful campus in the country, and we have the guru behind it."

Once Vasallo got McManus on board and got approval at the chamber, the landscaping camp was born.

Entering its fourth year, the camp started out as a three-day event, but has now trimmed down to two days. The reception has been positive from the start and has only grown. This year's camp, taking place May 22 and 23, will have their largest attendance.



The camp has turned into a gift idea for people. One person gifted the camp to his fiancée, for example, and Vasallo said several husbands gift the camp to their wives.

McManus serves as the overarching emcee and host of the camp, welcoming everyone to the event with an opening ceremony and tells the story of Ole Miss landscaping.

"People that have never heard the story are



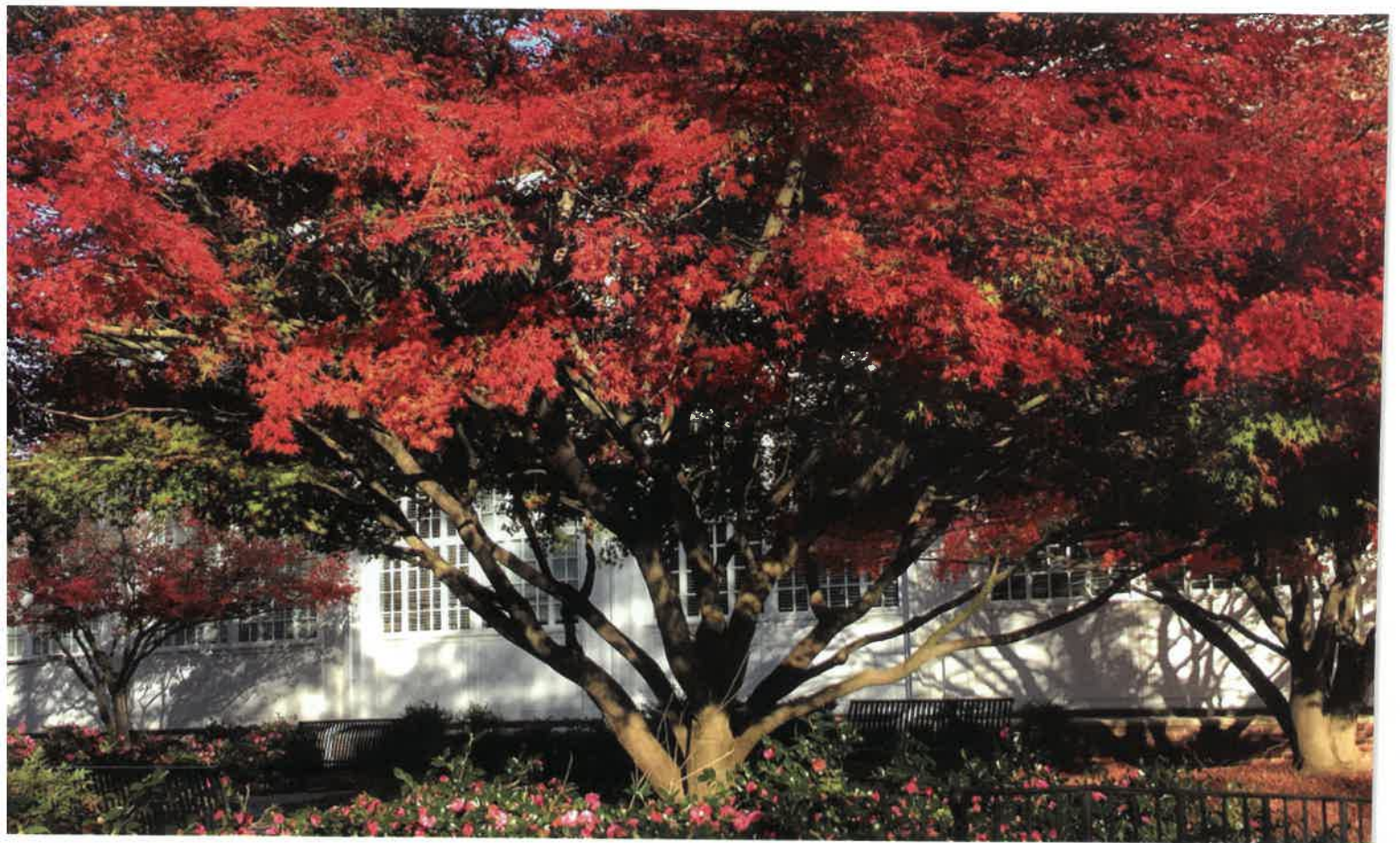
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enthralled with it," Vasallo said.

Revealing those secrets of how the Ole Miss campus is transformed every year and how people can possibly take some of those ideas to turn their front or backyard into a mini Grove or other locations on campus is the camp's biggest marketing tool.

It is similar to those back lot tours Universal Studios or Disney provides to guests at their theme parks, revealing a little bit of the magic.

"We love sharing the highlights of what people want to learn in the plant world," McManus said. "It gives us an opportunity to share in what they can do at home and what inspires them. ... I was

heavily influenced by Disney's philosophy in Orlando. I never really thought of that, but there's probably a lot of Disney practices that I'm not even aware of."

In working to possibly make Ole Miss the second-happiest place on earth, McManus frames his designs and work ethic through a favorite quote of his, by artist Ansel Adams. The quote says, "You don't take a picture, you create a picture."

McManus has created several pictures during his two-decade tenure for families, students and people from around the world to enjoy. He has no intentions of hanging up his landscaping brush anytime soon.