

Theory and Practice Meet in an Academy

LANDSCAPING PROGRAM

BY MELVIN C. NISWANDER

In the past half-century American—and Seventh-day Adventist—secondary students have increasingly come from urban and suburban areas rather than from farms and rural communities. Secondary boarding schools have had to adapt campus industries to take into account the background and experience of their students as well as changing market conditions.

In the early days, academy graduates could go directly into the ministry, teaching, and some aspects of nursing with a few summer courses in college that related specifically to their specialty. Today's world is infinitely more complex and technologically sophisticated. It demands far more of the worker than the world of the early 1900s.

Students on academy campuses work to pay their tuition and to fulfill the Adventist work ethic. But not many schools offer work opportunities that prepare students for future careers. Campus labor becomes, in many cases, a type of scholarship. Rarely are these skills marketable beyond the boundaries of the campus.

Vocational education programs do prepare some students to enter the workplace. The program at Shenandoah Valley Academy (SVA), in New Market, Virginia, currently offers instruction and practical experience in the following areas: Agriculture technology, commercial food service, electrical wiring, horticulture

and landscape management, secretarial science, technology of building maintenance and construction, and welding.

This article deals with one of the more unusual aspects of the vocational education program, horticulture and landscape management. Started several years ago by Mrs. Jean Strickland, wife of the academy vice-principal, as a means of beautifying the campus, the program has become a year-round project. Since its inception, the work/study program has indelibly changed the physical appearance of the campus and has enhanced the work skills and attitudes of the participants and the student body in general.

Due to the effort of Mrs. Strickland and her students, the campus has become a colorful oasis in the spring and summer, with flowers lasting until the first heavy frost, usually in early to mid-October.

The student labor, plants, seeds, and bulbs are provided by the academy. The tools, instructional personnel, and raw materials—in this case, land—are already available. To save money, Mrs. Strickland doubles as the person in charge of the student center.

Background

Mrs. Strickland began to formulate her program after she learned about a credit-granting horticulture program at Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System in Charlotte, North Carolina. Later, while visiting Andrews University, she noticed students were planting annuals in some of the flower beds on the campus and decided that a similar program could be successful in Virginia. She recalled the emphasis Ellen White gave to physical labor in agriculture and landscaping as a means of developing the mind, character, and body, especially this quote from *Education*:

Let the teacher seek to awaken an interest in beautifying the school grounds and the schoolroom. A double benefit will result. That which the pupils seek to beautify they will be unwilling to have marred or defaced. A refined taste, a love of order, and a habit of care-taking will be encouraged; and the spirit of fellowship and cooperation developed will prove to the pupils a lifelong blessing.¹

Mrs. Strickland sought to develop a plan that not only taught students about plants, soil conditions, and growing environments but also provided a practical ap-

Not many schools offer work opportunities that prepare students for future careers.

plication of Ellen White's formula, also set forth in *Education*:

In the cultivation of the soil the thought-

ful worker will find that treasures little dreamed of are opening up before him. No one can succeed in agriculture or gardening without attention to the laws involved. The special needs of every variety of plant must be studied. . . . The care of the young plants, the pruning and watering, the shielding from frost at night and sun by day, keeping out weeds, disease, and insect pests, the training and arranging, not only teach important lessons concerning the development of character, but the work itself is a means of development.²

Similar sentiments were expressed by Thomas Jefferson, third president of the

United States, who dedicated himself to agriculture at his home, Monticello, outside Charlottesville, during a respite from public life from 1793-1796. He wrote: "No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden."³

The Proposed Program

SVA's principal saw merit in Mrs. Strickland's two-pronged program of instruction and practical application. Her proposal included the planting and cultivation of evergreen varieties, perennials, and flowering annual plants. Winter classroom instruction and some outdoor work on warm days would be supplemented by planning, building, and maintaining flower beds around the campus and by planting shrubs, ground cover, and trees to replace older species blown down by high winds or destroyed by disease.

"The horticulture program provides a laboratory for the students to develop good work habits, learn new skills, and put into practice classroom theories. Students earn one-half academic credit each semester," Mrs. Strickland says. In addition to classroom study and outdoor work, the students take a field trip each year to an arboretum and a perennial farm.

Through the efforts of the horticulture students, a U-shaped area between the administration building and gymnasium, mostly abandoned for seven years, was converted into an attractive gathering place for those attending events in the gym. This was one of the first and most needy areas attacked by the squad of landscape gardeners. The only striking feature of the barren patio was a Jeffersonian serpentine brick wall extending from one corner of the gym, across the open end of the patio, but leaving an access walkway from one corner of the administration building to the patio. Along the wall, Mrs. Strickland's crew planted flowering perennials and annuals. They added magnolia grandiflora, replaced the ground cover, then planted vinca minor, chrysanthemum pacificum, ajuga, Mary Todd day lilies, English ivy, and narcissus bulbs.

Then the student horticulturalists moved to the flagpole area in front of the student center, planting peonies, sedum, coralbells, Shasta daisies, coreopsis, asters, candytuft, and spring flowering bulbs.

The work/study program has indelibly changed the physical appearance of the SVA campus and has enhanced the work skills and attitudes of the participants and the student body in general.

Wrought iron benches around the periphery of the flower bed created a natural student meeting place, located almost equidistant between the boys' and girls' dormi-

tories and close to the cafeteria.

The next area to receive a major facelift was the grass island between the main road and the parking area in front of the administration building. Here, Mrs. Strickland and her crew built raised beds, or berms, to accommodate 20 varieties of day lilies, shrubs, trees, and more than 40 different perennial plants.

From spring well into the fall, geranium sentinels are stationed in four large urns beside the two-story columns defining the entrance of the administration building.

The landscaping students have also developed many small beauty spots all over the campus in the recesses of buildings, at the meeting of sidewalks and roads, and in hidden and unexpected areas. As students round a building corner, they are often greeted by nodding impatiens and petunias of various colors.

The landscaping students have planted more than 50 trees on campus in a four-year period. The slow-growing trees will

delight future campus residents, as those that were planted on the lawn of the campus between 1908 and 1940 have shaded many students since then.

Mrs. White wrote: "As a relaxation from study, occupations pursued in the open air, and affording exercise for the whole body, are the most beneficial. No line of manual training is of more value than agriculture."⁴ Landscaping, or "soil cultivation," is referred to often as a branch of agriculture in her writing.

One of the primary objectives of the program is to provide active labor in the out-of-doors for participating students. An equally important goal is to teach the students a practical skill that can provide them a part-time income while they pursue college or other studies.

Student Reaction

And what about the students who participate in the horticulture and landscaping program? What do they get out of this activity?

Amanda Sabol says, "When I'm gardening, I learn about many different types of plants and flowers. I learn how to plant them and how they should be taken care of. I can't wait to landscape around my own house."

"Since the time I started working on the grounds of SVA, my whole attitude towards flowers and other [growing] things on the campus has changed. . . . Now I believe the student body appreciates the campus more than they used to," observed Everett Litten.

Danielle Radford took a practical view of her participation in the program by noting, "When I first signed up for landscaping, I didn't realize how much fun it was going to be. Not only do I get to work outside (when it's warm enough), but I also learn

One of the primary objectives of the program is to provide active labor in the out-of-doors for participating students.

many facts about the flowers and how to plant them, things that I can use when I get my own house."

You can usually spot the crew on campus by looking for their battered red Nissan pickup truck, pulling a utility trailer loaded with tools, mulch, dirt, and plants. Darian

Copiz says proudly, "Through this job I have learned discipline, horticulture, how to drive [in the Nissan pickup], as well as more about other people. This job has also been a period of time off from the worries of school."

In summing up her experience, Stephanie Carmody said, "All in all, I like my job and say [that] if you have to work, work with nature."

Changed Attitudes

Beautifying the campus has given the students a greater appreciation of their school and of the need to take care of the campus. As Everett Litten noted, "They [the students] do not walk through the flower beds just because it is a shorter route or throw trash on the bushes and flowers." The lesson learned by the general student population from the intense labor of building and maintaining the beds and raised islands is that of respect for beauty and the hard work of others, as Mrs. White said would happen.

To inspire interest in the landscaping activities among the students, Mrs. Strickland holds a weekly campus trivia contest, which is worth \$2 or more to the first two students to come up with the correct answer—questions such as, "What is the name of the tree by the duck pond, just turning green?" (A weeping willow.) The question is flashed on the electronic bulletin board in the cafeteria, so all the students have a chance to participate.

Fund Raising

Each spring the horticulture students sell perennials to raise money for campus equipment or to buy more plants to renovate existing beds or plant new ones. Although the program is not a money maker, the

academy administration supports this kind of campus labor because the results of the student effort are lasting and visible, while providing the students with the kind of experience with nature often cited by Adventist and non-Adventist educators as the ideal combination of theory and practice.

Other schools are also recognizing the value of campus beautification. James Madison University, located in nearby Harrisonburg, Virginia, and boasting an enrollment of 11,200, strives to create a pleasing environment. The school spends \$18,000 per year on plants and flowers, as well as employing 18 people full-time to maintain the campus and athletic fields. JMU President Ronald Carrier, commenting in a newspaper article on the building and landscape program of the university, said, "Learning is enhanced when you feel good about yourself, when you're part of an environment that is attractive. When

Each spring the horticulture students sell perennials to raise money for campus equipment or to buy more plants to renovate existing beds or plant new ones.

where people care about who they are. . . . In an environment that is attractive, we think you can learn a lot better."

SVA's horticulture and landscaping stu-

dents are enthusiastic about their work, and their dedication and industry have made the campus more like an idyllic oasis. The landscaping project clearly supports Ellen White's recommendation as one way to develop mind, body, and spirit. In addition, it provides the students with a potentially marketable skill for the future. ☞

Melvin Niswander is a member of the Shenandoah Valley Academy board of trustees and serves on the Potomac Conference Executive Committee. He previously had a long and distinguished career with the U.S. Army, USIA, Voice of America, and as Public Affairs Officer at U.S. embassies in Spain and Nicaragua. He also attended the National War College.

REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), pp. 212, 213.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 112.
3. Quoted from a plaque at the Visitors' Center, Monticello, Virginia.
4. *Education*, p. 219.