

# Sydney showpieces are in green hands

Globe Australia, Sydney NSW

## **Sydneysiders and visitors have long admired the Royal Botanic Gardens, Government House and the Domain. Who keeps them looking so good and how?**

It is almost mandatory in a Sydneysider's life to have at least once strolled through the Royal Botanic Gardens, perhaps stopping to sit coolly in the Domain under one of the massive Port Jackson figs. For city workers who play lunchtime sport, the Domain playing fields are their Monday to Friday home ground. Further around toward the harbour it is not uncommon to see school children milling and giggling on the lawns of Government House, their education complete until a teacher has futilely attempted to explain some part of our history over their noise.

These grounds and gardens always appear to be in perfect health and provide a green oasis against the blue backdrop of the harbour and the white sails of the Sydney Opera House.

The Royal Botanic Gardens comprise the Botanic Gardens, Government House and the Domain, and all three locations come under the same grounds maintenance program. You could be forgiven for thinking that the program has teams of landscapers and gardeners allotted the responsibility of maintaining the grounds in their outstanding condition. The truth will surprise you. It's just Martin Holmes and a small team of tradesmen and apprentices who look after the whole lot.

"Three different locations, three different public uses, three different maintenance requirements," says Marty, who has a masters degree in horticulture.

"The Domain is a sports and festival area used seven days a week. Government House is used for special functions – we have to have it in top shape for those occasions. The Royal Botanic Gardens have to look good all the time – the public and government expects it."

For example, when an area is squashed by festival activities, Marty can expect calls from government and the public to recondition it quickly. Adhering, of course, to stringent water usage and budget restrictions – both set by the people who want beautiful gardens, his employer the government. How do Marty and his team keep around 120 acres of public land looking so good?



Martin Holmes inspects the condition of the Domain's turf with Globe Australia's Sydney representative, Craig Campbell

## **Common sense green keeping practices**

The impressive health of the Queensland Blue Couch grounds of Government House is a result of Marty and his team combining their green approach to landscaping and horticulture with selected products they know will do the job.

Marty prefers to use a pendimethalin combination product with high iron that gives long-term weed control and a regular, controlled flow of nutrients to the turf. "It costs me a little more, but over time you get balanced growth," explains Marty. "You don't get peaks and troughs, which are not good for me with large areas to manage with few staff."

For Marty, quality grass that looks after itself is the biggest thing. He tries to promote common sense green-keeping practices that the average gardener can use.

"Pick the right grasses for the location. And maintenance is important for a healthy body of grass. Mow regularly, not too low, and don't take clippings out, turn them back in. That way there is not a big drain on nutrients – they revolve."

Marty also recommends aeration up to 12 inches deep to open up to the ground for air, water and nutrients. On heavy use areas, he'll do this two or three times a year.

"We only fertilise high profile areas. 60% of the grounds we don't fertilise. We're going into our 3rd season maintaining health by aeration. We apply sustainable methods, whether in green keeping or horticulture, thereby using less water and fertilizers."

The Domain used to be turfed in Durban, a grass suitable for low light and low traffic areas. As traffic increased, Durban was substituted with Soft Buffalo. While this turf wears tougher and develops a good lush green, it doesn't tolerate low light quite like Durban.

The playing fields, which undergo very high quality usage, are Kikuyu over-sown through the winter months to encourage the Kikuyu understory. But Marty needs to have the fields ready for February when all the sports activities commence. Christmas and January are busy months for the team.

In the Domain, Marty uses soil samples to identify any extra nutrients required for the turf. The fields are watered twice a week at night to avoid transpiration and evaporation.

### Pure lawns for the public

Marty believes that if grass is healthy and not under stress, it tends not to create conditions for insect infestation or weeds. If insects or weeds are present in certain areas, he looks at the conditions that are favouring their growth.

He knows that even healthy lawns need a helping hand to stay that way. Marty has achieved long-term results in his weed maintenance program by using pre-emergent herbicide with controlled release fertilizer.

The Pendimethalin herbicide creates a barrier at the soil surface to protect against grassy weeds. It kills the weed seedlings before they reach maturity.

"After a few years, the herbicide eliminates seed banks. Following any renovation we re-apply herbicide, as the renovation breaks the herbicide barrier. And we keep reapplying it every eight weeks over the growing period.

"The grounds are a lot of hard work for a small team but it's paying off. We're getting pure lawns. We hope the public like what they see."

Next time you're taking a pleasant stroll through the Royal Botanic Gardens or Domain, spare a thought to Marty and his small band of green thumbs. The grounds and gardens would not look so beautiful were they not in the most capable hands.