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When college athletic fields are fields of dreams

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This argument isn't likely to win many fans: colleges and universities should continue to invest in athletic fields to make them better, increase their value, and ensure their longevity.

With the cost of higher education being what it is, public opinion may suggest that allowing college administrations to spend even more money is a foolish thing to do. But the fact is that the cumulative effects of well-maintained athletic turfs and state-of-the-art field irrigation systems can protect student athletes, protect schools from high repair and replacement costs, and improve venue aesthetics to attract more spectators (which, in turn, adds to the university's income). It even helps the environment.

According to research by American School & University magazine, "The importance of athletic fields has increased in today's society because of the popularity of sporting events. As a result, education administrators face challenges when dealing with their athletic facilities." Many athletic fields are outdated, overused - or both. School administrators trying to make the right decisions about their athletic facilities wonder how their boards of directors, their student populations, the parent contingent and their financial executives will react to whatever decisions are made. What many don't realize is that issues can be traced to field maintenance, irrigation systems and other landscape-related responsibilities - not necessarily constructing entirely new facilities.

Landscaping pros today have the skills, tools and technologies to repair and rejuvenate any kind of athletic field. Infield skin repair, laser grading, deep tine soil fracturing, top dressing, sand injection, core aerating and other landscaping projects and methods can improve playability all year long, extend the life of a field and add an invaluable level of player safety. Green industry irrigation offers various ways to achieve the healthiest turf possible while at the same time controlling costs.

"Smart controllers" are often employed today to link facility-based land maintenance systems to local weather stations. The information from the weather stations is combined with data on soil infiltration and solar radiation directly at the field site (soil infiltration and solar radiation have an effect on ground conditions), and then all the information is fed to a central computer. That, in essence, becomes the brain of the entire system. It can monitor conditions around the clock, adjust the watering schedule, and make many other decisions for optimum care. The head-to-head sprinkler systems in use today provide uniform water distribution that is the equivalent of artificial rainfall wherever and whenever it is needed.

With a green system there is no overwatering. (No under-watering, either.) It is a decisive way to conserve natural resources, reduce environmental impact and save money, while still building and maintaining a healthy turf.

In fact, there are some systems today that can reduce water needs by as much as 80%, and when they are combined with efficient motors and pumps, energy consumption can be reduced by as much as 25 percent. That's a statistic that most peopleâ€”especially today's ecologically-conscious

college studentsâ€”will find very agreeable. And better yet, we install onsite weather stations that collect very local data and can link with smart phones. That means that irrigation systems can be controlled at a moment's notice, with one touch of a button, from anywhere in the world.

Administrators looking to upgrade should make sure their landscape contractor is up to date on all modern irrigation methods and has on staff certified irrigation designers, horticulturalists and specialists in greenhouse supervision and facility management. What better environment to show the value of professional dedication and expertise than at a college or university? Similarly, higher education is the perfect backdrop to promote advances in technology, such as real-time, remote, internet-based water management systems and new processes like evapotranspiration. In the past few years alone, Winterberry Irrigation has completed irrigation projects for the following colleges and universities: Yale Bowl, Fairfield University, Wesleyan University, Eastern Connecticut State University, Central Connecticut State University, Western Connecticut State University, United States Military Academy, and UMASS- Boston.

College sports and healthy athletic fields: it's the perfect matchup.

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