

# Virginia TURFGRASS<sup>journal</sup>

Journal of the Virginia Turfgrass Council

November/December 2020

## Member Spotlight on VTC Member **CHAD PEEVY**

Alternative Weed Control in Turfgrass

Virginia Agribusiness Council  
2021 General Assembly Outlook

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## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT ON

# CHAD PEEVY

*VTC Member and  
Assistant Director of Grounds & Landscapes  
(A Division of Facilities Management)  
at Old Dominion University*

Chad Peevy at  
Saluting Branches  
in 2019



### How many years have you been in this position?

I am headed towards my 15th year with ODU. The position has changed over the years, but the position's objectives remain mostly the same.

### How did you decide to pursue a career in turfgrass management?

The truth is, by proxy. My first green industry job was right out of high school. It was at a retail nursery in Northern Virginia where I grew up. I delivered trees, sod, mulch, and other bulky items. When at people's houses they would often ask me about lawn care, so I had to be familiar enough with turf to help them.

After college, I did park maintenance which included mowing/trimming, but I spent most of my career in arboriculture. In 2006 when I accepted my position at ODU, turf care was a huge portion of the job and certainly the portion many considered to be most important. My understanding and education on turf care has been evolving ever since.

I would not wish to mislead people, there are so many turfgrass managers who are so much more knowledgeable than I am. While turf management is a senior responsibility of my position, I tend to view it collectively, i.e. a component of the entire Grounds Management occupation.

### What path led you to your current position?

I worked my way through college by working at retail and wholesale nurseries. My intention was to become a forest ranger. After college, I moved to West Virginia to work for their park system — I was in park maintenance while waiting for an opening as a ranger. One day I was on selective timbering crew for a fire control project and realized how much I missed maintaining plants. I also realized I didn't like the cold weather.

I moved to South Carolina and took a job with a tree planting company that helped build golf courses. My exposure to the turf managers along the SC coast at some of the most esteemed golf courses in the nation intrigued me, particularly the IPM side of their job. Personal reasons brought me back to Virginia and I was fortunate enough to gain a position with Bartlett Tree Experts who sent me to their school of Integrated Pest Management. I was a professional arborist and IPM technician for a few years before moving on to ODU.

I had a strong background in many aspects of the green industry and wanted to enter public service to apply my skills in one place where I could see impact. One place where I could watch the land change over time, if you will. I also wanted to work with a team that was dedicated towards integrating urban landscapes — trees, shrubs, and turf all working towards the same objective. The objective to beautify and enhance our urban environment while optimizing all the benefits plants can provide for a community and the people within it. I am certainly fortunate to work for an agency which supports such objectives and to be surrounded by the talent and creativity of my co-workers.

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### What is the best part of your job?

Universities are interesting places. So many people of different cultures, ages, and backgrounds... all in pursuit of bettering themselves and improving the world around them. It is inspiring and makes me want to work equally as hard to help frame a background for the time they spend here. The landscape of ODU should not just be space between classrooms, rather, these grounds should provide an opportunity. So, for me, the best part is to see people learning and interacting with our outdoor campus. To know that a complete ecosystem exists in the middle of an urban setting where people can find some reprieve from the stress and pressure of their day. This is important work.

### What are some unique challenges of your job?

That list is long, but I would be remiss not to claim the top challenge is the volume of people and the schedule of events. I learned early that when managing turf and landscapes at a university campus, you can take any traditional agronomic or horticulture maintenance calendar and throw it right out the window. ODU has over one million visitors each year and often the people are congregating in only a few locations of the entire campus.

The Kaufman Mall is the flagship lawn of our turf program, but it is also the most centralized and visited location for campus life. When we would normally seek to aerate, overseed, fertilize, etc., the business cycle of the University hosts recognitions, tours, recreation, and celebration right there on the lawn.

So many people wanting to enjoy that green space is a humbling acknowledgement of our efforts, but it also means

the staff here must adapt and adjust management practices for maintaining that turf. Whether it is a turf technician finding a way to edge the lawn safely when surrounded by thousands of passing students or a plant health care tech considering the public impact from the scent of a fertilizer product...the challenge is omnipresent. Again though, ODU Grounds staff are true professionals who rise to the occasion.

### How have you and your team adapted to new operations implemented in recent months due to COVID-19?

Altered schedules, adjusted team sizes, additional training, and a whole lot of new personal protective equipment. Seeking to be positive of the situation, we have become more focused and intent with our time. One day there may be half staffing levels and the next there may be more or even less. One truck headed to a single location in the past may now take three trucks. This is how it goes, but the logistics of this situation have forced questions about what truly matters, why is it done this way, where do we have the biggest impact? These were questions which demanded answers for us to proceed. The result is that we are getting those answers and, in the process, revealing improved professionalism and improved teamwork.

### What inspired you to serve the VTC?

That's easy, Tom Tracy did. Tom had asked me to help with VTC's 'Come to the Bay' conference committee. The committee needed a professional arborist and I don't recall how Tom found me, but he did. I was hesitant due the amount of boards I already participated with, but Tom had a vision for what Come to the Bay could achieve and the leadership role VTC could take.



Kaufman Mall, Old Dominion University



Facilitating conversation and education across green industry boundaries, bringing in environmental sector professionals, stormwater experts, elementary school-age students...the vision was big, but the vision was important. How could I not agree to help? Tom was about to redefine the essentiality and unity of all green occupations for the future of our trade. I loved it.

**What do you feel is the biggest challenge facing the turfgrass industry right now?**

I think turfgrass is facing a truly existential threat from a long and slow perception which miscategorized managed turf as a point source polluter. Not just in Virginia either, but nationwide. The idea that managed turf is damaging the Bay, our rivers, our estuaries...this idea is very much in the public realm of discussion and is absolutely making its way into politics. I will refrain from waxing poetic about my thoughts regarding the politics or any assumptions of people's individual thoughts on the matter, but I would suggest that now, perhaps more than ever, it is essential for turfgrass professionals to educate themselves and advocate for the value of what they provide. Your voice will make a difference, it could be *the* difference.

**What is one lesson you've learned the hard way in your career?**

Listening to others. I mean, truly listening – with an intent to understand another's position, their objectives, their hearts. It's one lesson, but it took many teachings for that lesson to resonate with me. I do believe that listening to others is a central component of leadership. Whether you lead a small crew of turf techs, a regional office, or even just yourself - creating an openness to hear others which is honest and genuine will improve your personal abilities and your career. It seems a shame it took me so long to arrive at something I was capable of the entire time, but I suppose that is why I suggested it was a hard lesson for me.

**Do you have a mentor in the industry? Who?**

I have been gifted to have many mentors, but the first person who often comes to mind is Rob Springer with Bartlett Tree Experts. I was a young tree climber with Bartlett, Rob was the company's regional Safety Director. When I first met him, Rob seemed like a hard leader, but he was always fair; he was also then and is now the most competent climbing arborist I have ever known. Yes, I learned a whole lot about climbing and the physical mechanics of trees from him, but he was the type of guy who went beyond the 'how' and the 'why'. He framed a process so that it mattered to you as a person.

He taught me to see and take ownership of my own value and the value of what I did for a living. Equally, he instilled a value for the other professionals around me. I still quote some of his lessons on a regular basis. And he taught me most of this by doing, rather than by saying it. He was highly influential to my skills development as a leader and an inspiration to my career. You should love what you do and when you do, other people will know it, not by your words, but by your actions.



Kadi and Memphis in our backyard in Yorktown, Virginia



Memphis 'playing' chess

**What do you do in your free time?**

These days I just appreciate being around my family and enjoying my time with them. I like the stereotypical things green industry people tend to like – hiking, nature, being on the water and all that. My wife is Kadi, we have a son, Memphis, and one dog named Biscuit and one dog named los Cuchillos (her name means 'the knives', really sharp teeth on that little dog).

My family and I enjoy traveling to do those things, which has been limited of late for obvious reasons. Truthfully, I have just come to respect the collective struggle we have all shared together these past few months. It made helped see them again, see people again, if that makes sense.

**What would your advice be for people entering the turfgrass industry now?**

It will never get easier, but if you love it, it will always get more interesting.

Find someone worth knowing who does this very well and learn from them. Ask them to teach/coach/mentor you if that's what it takes but find that person(s) nonetheless. If you want to be a true professional one day, get involved and get active with an organization like VTC or ISA and get certified. I promise you will find personal leaders to help you out. My success was not built by myself, but by the great people around me and such people do not appear by accident. This industry is deliberate and the great people in it are passionate educators and life-long learners. Seek this as well, you will take their place one day. 🌱