

## Students Get Competitive Edge at PLANET Career Days

by Courtney Capstack

**A**N INFLUX OF students swarmed the Michigan State University campus March 29 to April 1, not because of a mid-semester attendance spike or to attend a March Madness basketball game, but for a chance to network and win a prestigious title at the largest national recruiting event and student competition in the green industry. This year, more than 900 university students from 53 schools across the country participated in Student Career Days (SCD), sponsored by the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). Offering a collection of informative workshops, presentations led by noted industry professionals, behind-the-scenes tours of local attractions, a bustling career fair, and a variety of individual and team competitions, it is no wonder SCD attracts hundreds of students and professionals every year.

“This event is just dynamic,” says PLANET President Jim Martin. “There’s across-the-board industry appreciation, from students and companies to the service provider community. It’s one of PLANET’s most successful, broadly participated events of the year.”

### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

No one dreamed that SCD would blossom into the leading attraction it is today when less than 200 students and 18 industry representatives attended the inaugural event, held at Mississippi State University in 1977. Originally sponsored by the Associated Landscape Contractors of America—which merged with the Professional Lawn Care Association under the name PLANET in 2005—the event debuted as a friendly competition between five colleges:

Ohio State, Texas Tech, Georgia Tech, Milwaukee Area Technical College, and Mississippi State. But the attendance doubled in the second year, and many representatives began to view the event as a valuable recruiting opportunity.

“We firmly believe one of PLANET’s most important missions is to advance educational opportunities,” says Martin. “Without a dynamic and healthy top tier



Students Mark Maslow and Nick Dangl work together in the patio construction event.

group of students entering the green industry, our profession would fall back. Our job is to make sure young people entering the work force know about this terrific career path and inspire those entering the field.”

### THE COMPETITIVE EDGE

More than 80 green industry companies attended this year’s event, which provided “educational sessions, networking opportunities, and competitive events that are directly related to the skills necessary for a career in the green industry,” says Jennifer Buck, SCD committee chair and a former student participant.

As a recruiting director for Chapel Valley Landscape Company in Maryland,

Buck also sees the event as a valuable chance for seeking potential employees. “SCD helps me to accomplish my professional goal of finding qualified employees and interns,” says Buck, “and it allows me to build my personal relationships with fellow industry members.”

In addition to commercial landscape firms, some non-profit organizations are finding SCD a valuable place to meet

### WHAT’S PLANET?

The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) is an international association supporting “lawn care professionals, landscape management contractors, design/build/installation professionals, and interior plantscapers.” PLANET supports more than 4,000 member firms from all aspects of the green industry. Bearing the slogan “We Are the Voice of the Green Industry,” it hosts a variety of programs, shows, and certification courses annually. Other upcoming events include a Summer Leadership Meeting June 20 in Ontario, Canada, a Specialty Symposium in Indiana that gives personnel an inside look at running a green industry business, and a Green Industry Conference and Expo in Louisville, Kentucky. To learn more about PLANET and how to get involved, visit [www.landcarenetwork.org](http://www.landcarenetwork.org).

prospective interns and employees. American Horticultural Society (AHS) staff members have attended the event for the last two years. “SCD is an important opportunity to both interact with students about to enter the workforce, and to establish a growing dialog with the faculty and students who can benefit from the many resources and programs that we offer,” says AHS Ed-

ucation Programs Manager Stephanie Jutila, who attended this year's event.

### TESTING THE BEST

This year, students competed in 24 individual and team contests in various categories ranging from personnel management, exterior and interior design, and irrigation troubleshooting, to wood construction, equipment operation, and tree climbing. With the help of contest descriptions, study guides, and identification lists posted on the PLANET website, students often prepare for hours before their competition.

"I attended for three consecutive years and learned something new each time," says Sonya Lepper Westervelt, a former student competitor from Virginia Tech. "This event gave me the opportunity to visit new places, make professional contacts, and compete in specialty areas, all of which positively influenced my knowledge of the green industry."

Stephanie Lavoie, a four-year competitor from Kansas State University, says "SCD events were all valuable, and I can



Virginia Tech student Zachariah Hancuff prepares to climb a tree in an arboriculture event.

attribute my career to attending PLANET." Lavoie currently works for Valley-Crest Companies in Dallas, Texas, one of many landscaping firms represented at the event.

Landscape architect and Associate Professor Robert McDuffie, who has led stu-

dents from Virginia Tech in Blacksburg to SCD for 10 of the past 12 years, also finds the event a worthwhile venture for his students. "Mingling with 800 other students from around the country has an eye-opening effect. The students see that the field of landscape contracting is actually pretty diverse, with a growing level of professionalism," says McDuffie. "Companies from all over come to put their best foot forward in hopes of finding their next best employee."

A different university hosts SCD each year. Michigan State University in Lansing is scheduled to host next year's competition, followed by North Metro Tech of Atlanta, Georgia, in 2008, and Cal Poly Institute of Pomona, California, in 2009. "SCD is a premier annual opportunity to see how great the industry is and to see students competing in their new career choice," says Martin. "I'm not sure there's another event like it in any other industry."

For more information about the SCD, visit [www.studentcareerdays.org](http://www.studentcareerdays.org).

*Courtney Capstack is an editorial intern for The American Gardener.*

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