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Botanical Garden helping set standards

The Cleveland Botanical Garden is on the forefront of setting new nationwide sustainability standards for landscape projects — not only by pushing the green envelope on its own, but by developing new guidelines for everyone else.

The University Circle garden was selected by a nonprofit group to be one of 150 pilot sites across the United States, Canada, Iceland and Spain where a new voluntary rating program will be evaluated.

“We’re thrilled to be a part of this — to be able to share and learn of others’ great ideas and for the privilege of showcasing this to the public in Northeast Ohio,” said Natalie Ronayne, executive director of the Botanical Garden.

The Sustainable Sites Initiative already has the support of the U.S. Green Building Council, the nonprofit trade organization that expects to incorporate the landscape guidelines and performance standards into future updates to the LEED rating system.

LEED — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — is essentially a third-party certification program that has become the nationally accepted standard for design, construction and operation of sustainable buildings.

But those standards don’t yet incorporate landscape design.

That’s where the Botanical Garden and the other sites come in — helping to set the benchmarks for what it means to have a sustainable landscape, regardless of whether the site also has a building. The group chose a wide array of sites for testing the standards, from urban sites to wild areas.

The Sustainable Sites Initiative will use the feedback from the garden and others on its 250-point program to revise its final rating system and reference guide by early 2013.

The initiative is a partnership of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center at the University of Texas at Austin and the United States Botanic Garden.

The group said it selected the Cleveland Botanical Garden because of its “extensive environmentally friendly elements.”

Architect Bill Doty, who is designing a visitor-friendly living roof for the Botanical Garden’s 1,920-square-foot visitors center, said the Sustainable Sites Initiative represents the next wave in green project development.

“I call it LEED on steroids because it addresses almost everything on site,” Doty said. “Building designers will someday be thinking about composting, soil depth and quality and using what we call the ‘natural capital’ all around us — the water, the vegetation and all of the raw materials that we haven’t really appreciated.”

Doty said the roof project will not only be beautiful, but also functional and will “explain to regular people how they can do this on their own.”

Garden officials also hope to rework the landscaping on the east side of the garden grounds. That’s the site where the Garden successfully planted low-maintenance grass seed (which never exceeds six to eight inches tall), only to see it fail once planted in vacant, urban lots.

Ronayne said that was a perfect example of the changing nature of sustainable landscaping because the early reaction to the rougher appearance of slow-grow grass wasn’t all positive.

“What in one person’s eyes is a beautiful meadow is weeds to someone else — even to some of our longtime members who thought, ‘What’s going on, isn’t the Garden cutting its grass anymore?’” she said. “But the idea of being green and being beautiful isn’t mutually exclusive.”

The garden has had other green successes:

- All 20 of its outdoor display gardens are managed with best practices for water conservation, integrated pest management and landscaping.

- It collects and reuses all the rainwater from the 18,000-square-foot Eleanor Armstrong Smith Glasshouse.

- And it collaborates with other museums on green projects nationwide, such as a program using vegetation and soils to filter and absorb stormwater on the streets of New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward, which flooded during Hurricane Katrina.

“Sustainability isn’t new to the Garden,” said Peter Vertes, a spokesman for the garden. “But now, we’re taking another step in making it work better for us and for others.”