Web Syndication:
New Tools for Accessing and Delivering Information

Tim Rhodus, Victor van Buchem, and Bud Witney
Professor, Associate Editor, and Systems Manager
Department of Horticulture & Crop Science
The Ohio State University

hcs.osu.edu

Since 1994, we have been publishing information to the world-at-large and the Green Industry specifically using a variety of online communication technologies. Initially, our communications consisted of various web sites designed to organize and communicate information using only a few options. Since most of the sites contained primarily text, they were organized by keyword topics. Some of the sites served as a reference to other sites containing similar information and they were presented as alphabetical listings. Finally, a few of our sites were frequently incremented with “new” content so they were organized according to date.

Over time, many of our web sites have evolved from static to dynamic authoring, managing, and communicating of the available content. By using various database and server technologies, we have enabled faculty and staff to author new content in a web site from anywhere, at any time, and using any computer system. This evolution also enabled authors to directly enhance their information with photos, videos, and pre-programmed web searches simultaneously contained in other digital collections. As a result, end users received the benefit of a “rich” information site as they seek the latest news stories, crop recommendations, or management tips.

However, our strategies for getting the word out about new ideas and discoveries have not always reached those who are looking for information when they most need it. Using monthly or weekly newsletters, FAX mailing lists, e-mail lists, or relying on clients to visit a web site (or series of web sites) when they desire “news,” puts the burden on the end user. Web syndication offers an alternative to frequent browsing and signing-up with numerous content deliverers.
HCS News & Web Syndication

Over the past three years, Victor van Buchem, HCS Communications Coordinator has worked with faculty, staff, alumni, and friends of the department to create the News web site (hcs.osu.edu/news). With over 275 news stories, the site offers a “fantastic resource for keeping up with the news stories about our programs, our teaching, our research and our extension work.” Source: Dr. Stephen Myers.

Every two weeks, over 5,000 individuals are sent an e-mail message with the latest news stories headlines and a link to the full story, which normally includes numerous photos and hyper links. However, what about the millions of others in Ohio and beyond who do not receive the News e-mail or have not browsed our site? For them, Bud Witney, Systems Manager has been improving our server technologies to include web syndication.

“Syndication is a method of making content available to a range of outlets simultaneously. Syndication is important in several different forms of mass media. In print syndication, individual newspapers or magazines buy news articles, columns, or comic strips. In web syndication, web feeds make a portion of a web site available to other sites.” Source: Wikipedia.org

RSS, defined as “Really Simple Syndication” or “Rich Site Summary” is used when creating a web page that contains short descriptions of web content together with a link to the full version of the content. This information is delivered as an XML file called RSS feed, RSS stream, or RSS channel. An orange rectangle with the letters XML (or RSS) is often used as a link to a site’s RSS feed. In other words, an RSS feed can be constructed which contains the latest list of news headlines and the respective: author, date of publication, brief summary, thumbnail photo, and a link to the complete story.
Web Syndication: New Tools

The first advantage of RSS is that end users can start to receive news feeds that they choose to monitor and no longer have to browse various web sites looking for something useful. Subscriptions are free and as simple as clicking on a link and telling your news aggregator software that you want a specific site monitored for new stories. Filtering incoming stories by keywords is also possible. Once a person has several of their favorite news sites “loaded,” they can much more efficiently and quickly scan the list of “latest news” titles. They will be able to spend less time browsing the Internet and more time focusing on their business.

The second advantage of RSS is that our News headlines (containing a description of each news story and a link back to our web site for the full story) can be simultaneously published on any other web site with no extra effort. Once this is in place, our news stories may be viewed by people who are not on the News mailing list and have not seen our web site. This is a win-win situation for both the end user and content authors. Setting up the News feed on another web site requires very little time and costs nothing.

How can you use RSS?
Syndication technologies allow end users to personalize news on their own desktop computer in three different ways. The first method is using a web browser, such as Mozilla’s Firefox, to incorporate RSS feeds that will be downloaded and viewable through the browser. In the case of Firefox, the automatically updated feeds are called “Live Bookmarks.” These bookmarks are created by subscribing to selected news “feeds.” The HCS News feed is available at: hcs.osu.edu/news/rss.lasso

Through the browser interface, users can view a variety of updated news headlines without navigating to each different web site. This browser method for viewing syndicated news currently limits the user’s control over the system and lacks a sophisticated interface. However, all the web browsers are expected to offer this convenience in the near future.

A second method for downloading syndicated information is through a browser plug-in. This method incorporates the “feed” into your browser window and allows the user to quickly scan through many different sources and headlines in

HCS News headlines saved as “Live Bookmarks” in Firefox browser.
The plug-in approach to syndication gives the user more control over the organization of the feeds and creates a more inviting appearance by allowing for colors and images. By embedding the content into the browser via the plug-in, users gain easy access to updated news content and easy web navigation. Windows, Macintosh, and Linux users can download a plug-in called Lektora.

The third method of syndication incorporates RSS feeds into a variety of different “readers,” giving you access to the headlines in a variety of different ways. News readers or aggregators are software programs that will collect, update, and display RSS feeds from any number of sources. As with the other two methods, users subscribe to web sites that offer syndicated content and can explore the updated information each time the reader program is launched. These readers are independently running programs that allow a user to see the latest news without using a browser. A number of free and commercial news aggregators are available for download. Some of the most popular news readers include: Amphet-aDesk, NetNewsWire, Sage, Straw and Radio Userland.

As stated above, authoring news/newsletter articles with a goal of RSS distribution has become very commonplace by professional news agencies, broadcasters, and thousands of individuals via their personal weblog (BLOG). Having their content syndicated (published simultaneously) on other web sites helps to spread the news more quickly to a greater number of readers. For example, people who browse the new eXtension web site (intranet.extension.org) are able to view headline news from land-grant universities across the U.S., including OSU Horticulture and Crop Science department.

While the eXtension example uses a sophisticated server technology for aggregating and presenting RSS feeds, a very simple JavaScript solution can be copied and inserted into your company or personal web site.

With a few extra coding commands, the following “From the Chair” can be generated to present the OSU HCS News in your web site. This layout will automatically check for any news updates whenever a client visits your web site.
The following code is appropriate for visitors to your site with Java-enabled and non Java-enabled browsers. See sample output to the left.

```html

Feel free to e-mail Rhodus.1@osu.edu to receive a copy of this script.
Turf Extension and RSS

Developed by Dr. Karl Danneberger, Superintendents’ Korner was originally developed to keep Ohio Golf Course Superintendents abreast of current topics important in daily management of golf course turf. “SK TurfNotes” are provided on a continual basis to readers across the globe and primarily cover abiotic and biotic stresses that are presently occurring. When you visit the web site (hcs.osu.edu/sk) you will notice at the bottom left corner, under the picture of the OSU flag, a small RSS icon. Click on the icon to subscribe to TurfNotes using Lektora or copy the RSS link page (hcs.osu.edu/sk/notes/rss.lasso) into a news aggregator program.

TurfNotes postings are syndicated on the Central Ohio Golf Course Superintendents Association web site (cogcsa.org). Notice how the inclusion of TurfNotes blends in with the existing site design. (See opposite page)

To include TurfNotes on your web site use this JavaScript:

```html
<noscript>
</noscript>

Feel free to e-mail Rhodus.1@osu.edu to receive a copy of this script.

Superintendents’ Korner TurfNotes web site
Superintendents' Korner TurfNotes headlines on PulpFiction news aggregator.

TurfNotes headlines appearing simultaneously on the Central Ohio Golf Course Superintendents Association web site.
RSS 2.0 and Enclosures

Up until now, we have been describing how text-based news stories can be authored, delivered, and syndicated using RSS. What about the other times of the day when you do not have access to your computer and the Internet? What about those news stories that are more educational in content and require you to look at something while listening to an expert describe a key diagnostic or identification feature?

Wouldn’t it be great to have an RSS news feed channel that carried audio news stories and could be downloaded to an Apple iPod? You could listen to these audio news stories while you drive to and from work, while you inspect the nursery or landscape job, or while your employees are on break. Imagine having employees listening to audio notes about the latest pest alert or latest tip for improving plant health while they relaxed.

Welcome to Podcasting

Building on the tremendous interest in RSS and syndicating news stories, developers have extended RSS to include enclosures. Think of a radio news story being sent out to your computer with the headline title and the attached audio file. This is the heart of podcasting. While the term “podcasting” is a blend of Apple’s popular “iPod” and “broadcasting,” podcasting does not require an iPod. Any digital audio player or computer can run an appropriate aggregator to convert podcasts for playback.

“A podcast can be described as an audio magazine subscription, in that a subscriber receives programs without having to get them, and can listen to them at leisure. It can also be thought of as the Internet equivalent of timeshift-capable digital video recorders (DVR’s) such as TiVo, which let users automatically record and store television programs for later viewing.” Source: wikipedia.org

At the time of this article, we are completing our first set of recordings for several different podcast tests. Stay tuned to the HCS News web sites for additional information on which news sites will also carry podcasting services.

In Conclusion

The explosion of content on the web continues! It takes considerable time to stay “up-to-date” with everything out there. Web syndication offers easier access to relevant information without having to browse numerous web sites. In the near future, web syndication will bring you the news that you expect and demand at the time and place of your choosing.

About the HCS Digital Technology Team…

The OSU Horticulture & Crop Science Digital Technology Team consists of Dr. Tim Rhodus, Professor; Bud Witney, Systems Manager, Victor van Buchem, Associate Editor, and Elaine Eberlin, Systems Specialist.

The team is responsible for the design and maintenance of the systems, databases, and much of the content contained in the numerous web sites positioned within Horticulture & Crop Science in Virtual Perspective (hcs.osu.edu)

For additional information, e-mail: Rhodus.1@osu.edu