

## LANDSCAPE PROFILE

# THE BIG BOYS

Cypress Gardens, one of the most beautiful parks in the country, boasts more than 8,000 thriving plant species. That makes landscape horticulturist Norm Freel stingy with his time.

By Jerry Roche, editor

**N**orm Freel is a busy man. Ask him for an hour or two of his time and he gives you 45 minutes—maybe.

And with good reason: he is horticultural vice-president of the 223-acre Cypress Gardens, arguably the most beautiful park in the country.

These are the big boys of the landscape maintenance industry.

"We're not perfect, but we know we're damned good," says Freel.



More than 7,500 chrysanthemums were grown by nursery manager Gary Smith for Cypress Gardens' Mum Festival

"We try to offer the public a 365-day-a-year flower show. We've got to look good, whether we're in a freeze or extreme drought conditions.

"A guest could visit the Gardens 52 weeks of the year and each time see different plants in bloom. And you'd have to travel to 70 countries at different times of the year to see what you could see in a single day here."

You want big?

- The Gardens boast more than

8,000 thriving plant species and more than 12 million annual blooms.

- Freel oversees the 223-acre complex with a year-round crew of 47 employees.

- Fifty acres were overseeded with ryegrass four months ago. For the job, Freel ordered 12 tons of turfseed.

- Typically, his crews will apply 45 to 50 tons of fertilizer a year.

- For last winter's Mum Festival, one acre of nursery space was

temperature gets under 40 degrees—well, that's the most nerve-wracking time of all."

Over the years, Cypress Gardens has purchased more than 1,500 kerosene, natural gas and propane heaters. It takes the crew about four hours to put the heaters out. But the worst part is that Freel can never be absolutely sure when to have them stoked up. "There are a lot of variables in the weather," he admits.



last winter.



Horticultural vice-president Norm Freel watches over his gardens.

needed to supply 7,500 chrysanthemums in seven colors.

- More than 1,000 trees are planted each year, most of them home-grown at Cypress Gardens' own 25-acre nursery.

"In our landscape, we've tried to create 'vistas,'" Freel says during a walk through the sprawling park. "I'm a believer in big material. I like things to look like they've been in five to ten years. We try plants, products—everything from seaweed to chicken feathers."

#### Weather woes

Despite Freel's immense responsibility, his No. 1 problem is no different than that of most smaller landscapers: the weather (believe it or not), despite the fact that Cypress Gardens rests on former swampland in sunny central Florida.

"Eighty percent of our material is either tropical or sub-tropical," Freel says, pointing to some beautiful giant cascading bougainvillea. "But in the last seven years, this has been a very temperate area. When the

#### Turf technique

The evident quality of the park is testament to the dedication of its Division of Horticulture.

Maintenance of the turf takes fully 50 percent of the department's time. Thirty mowers from 18-inch Snapper two-cycle trimmers to 70-inch Excel Hustlers are used on St. Augustine, Floratam, Bitter Blue Seville, Survive and other hybrid turfgrasses. Freel also hopes to seed some areas with newly-released Floralawn; and in non-irrigated areas, Argentine bahiagrass is used.

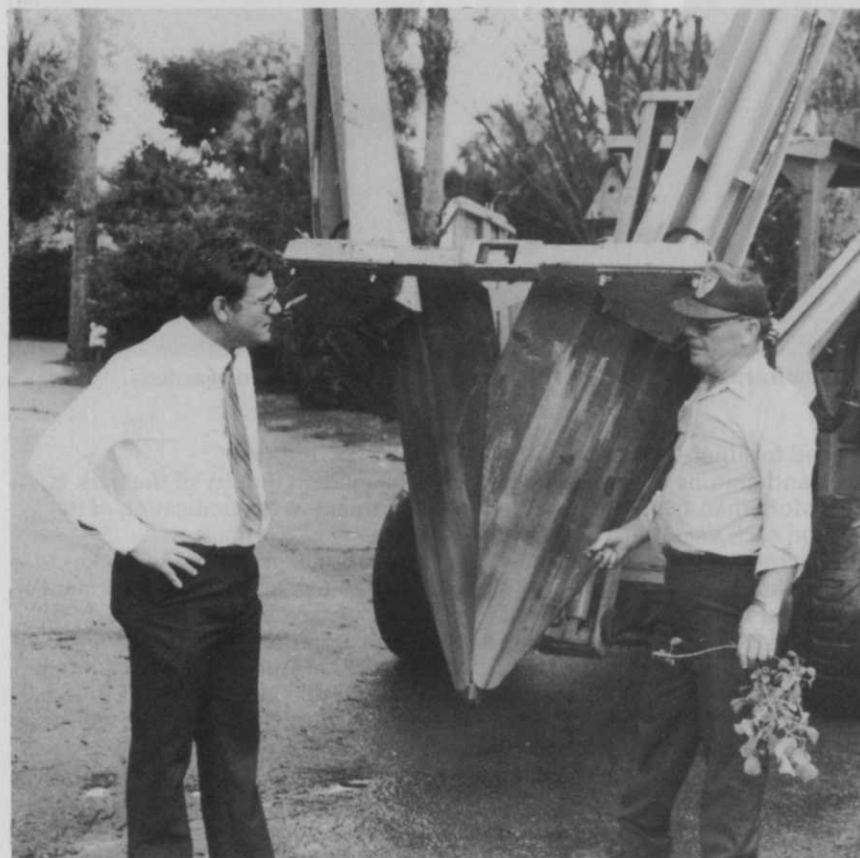
Freel talks about the park—every little gardenia, every blade of grass—with the pride of a father. He is totally dedicated to his job.

"I'm 35 years old, and I've been with Cypress Gardens since I was 18 when I started digging holes," he says. "I've done it all."

His day begins at 6:30 a.m. six or seven days a week. Both Freel and landscape maintenance superintendent Mike Wallace spend anywhere from 50 to 70 hours a week on the job. When Freel says, "I don't expect my employees to do



A view of a portion of Cypress Gardens from the 153-foot Kodak Island in the Sky.



Freel (left) discusses current problems with Ellis Lindsey, a 40-year veteran at Cypress Gardens.

anything I haven't done," you almost have to feel sorry for the employees.

### Smart cookies

Freel, who has a pair of two-year college degrees plus 40 hours completed toward his bachelor's in ornamental horticulture at the University of South Florida, is not solely responsible for the park's beauty. He retains an advisory board

consisting of Dr. Thomas Scheen, Jack Siebenthaler and Everett Miller.

Dr. Scheen is a member of the University of Florida faculty. Siebenthaler is a private consultant and landscape architect. Miller is former director of Longwood Gardens, and a park designer.

When it comes to picking and choosing materials, Freel gets the input of the advisory board,

management and his own "color foreman."

"We're usually planning one year ahead," he observes. "We can do anything if we have the lead time and budget."

### Constant testing

To determine how to best keep the park blanketed in year-round color, Freel notes that there is not a single seed in the standard catalog he hasn't ordered and tested at the gardens.

"If something new comes on the market, we get it at once," he says. "If it flourishes, great. If it doesn't, we try the next thing that is introduced. It's a continuous process with perhaps 40 or 50 cultivars under test at all times."

To do this, Freel has more than 40,000 square feet of greenhouse plus the nursery, which is run by 10-year veteran Gary Smith. Freel says a single year's plant growth displayed at one time would blanket 100 acres and fill several football stadiums clear to the upper press box.

### Deep roots

Freel is continuing the tradition set by his predecessor Bob Kuntz, who was originally hired by Cypress Gardens founder Dick Pope Sr.

It was Pope who, on Jan. 2, 1936, opened the gates of Cypress Gardens. It was Pope and his wife Julie who literally dug the drainage canals and planted the first flowers by hand, converting a desolate snake-infested swamp into a beautiful park in four years.

Ignoring cutting ridicule and titles like "Swami of the Swamp," "Maestro of the Muck" and "The Barnum of Botany," the Popes changed the alligator-ridden wasteland into a series of beautiful canals and paths winding through seas of brilliant bougainvillea, hibiscus and azalea.

A monument to the Popes' efforts still stands today: a 45-year-old banyan tree originally planted by Dick Pope Sr.

In the time it took for the sapling to grow into a magnificent beauty, the park expanded to include all known native plants and exotic flora from every continent.

So the importance of his job does not escape Norm Freel:

"Cypress Gardens and Sea World, we're the big boys of the garden business. We've got to be good." **WT&T**