Use these maintenance hints to bring paradise—or a reasonable facsimile thereof—to your neighborhood.

by STEVE & SUZ TRUSTY

Think of Hawaii—sandy beaches, perfect soils, ideal weather and lush vegetation. But even paradise needs a little help from its friends to meet tourists' vacation expectations.

The island of Kauai's "red dirt"—a sticky, mucky clay—is one hindrance to plant growth at the Kauai Marriott Resort and Beach Club in Hawaii. Landscape superintendent Kevin Gavagan, however, has a multitude of answers to local problems.

"Red dirt is hard to push a shovel into, and it sticks to the shovel when you dig it out," explains Gavagan, who adds that the material drains and dries quickly to compensate for high moisture. "We create specific, pot-like planting areas for plants that prefer lighter soils. We tailor fertilization programs by plant type to include sufficient nitrogen at the proper intervals to sustain even plant growth."

Salt-resistant seashore paspalum thrives on the lawn areas bordering the ocean.

Gravel beds were added to the water features so they'd serve as biological filters.

High moisture, low light

It rains nearly every day in Kauai, so little irrigation is needed. And while the stunning rainbows breaking through the clouds delight tourists, light levels are too low for some sun-loving plants.

Almost unbelievably, seasonal fluctuations are also a factor. "Though seasonal changes are minimal by most stateside standards, by December we've gradually lost one hour of light and five degrees of temperature, so adjustments must be made," says Gavagan.

"We do frequent changeouts of the annual beds to keep color at its peak. Impatiens here hold prime condition for about two months. In similar settings on Maui, they'll last five months. We also use the annual beds to create seasonal effects, such as the massive plantings of poinsettias during December."

Other solutions

Gavagan increases landscape color with a wide variety of trees and shrubs so that several different plants will be in bloom at any given time. Some provide only a few weeks of color, but add texture and shape to the overall design. Others, like the bougainvillea, bloom year-round.

"Plants grow rapidly here, so tree and shrub trimming is a constant task," observes Gavagan. "At approximately 40 pounds each, a falling palm frond could cause injury or property damage. To avoid liability, coconuts must be removed when they approach the size of oranges."

Coconuts washing up on the beach become seedling trees. Windborne seeds sprout wherever they find a roothold. Small plantlets form in the blossoms of plants like...
Kevin’s tricks:

Create pot-like planting areas for plants that prefer lighter soils.

Frequently change annual beds so plants are seen at their peak.

Shape and control taller plants.

Selectively remove some new plants promulgated by Mother Nature.

Use seashore paspalum on areas bordered by salt water.

Avoid susceptible plant materials; use cultural practices to discourage pests.

Use ferns and vines as groundcovers.

To correct areas with heavy soils.

To create seasonal effects where seasons are subtle.

To allow sun penetration and air movement to understory plantings, turf and groundcover.

To maintain diversity of the original design.

To keep invasive weeds and grasses from getting a foothold.

To let natural predators work and avoid extreme pesticide use.

To provide cover for natural predators when people traffic becomes intense.

Native grasses are imports

Tourists seeing the Hawaii of today assume all the lush plants are native to the area, but many are tropical imports. Most are propagated for landscape use; others have escaped cultivation and “naturalized” throughout the islands.

To retain some of that original biodiversity, and to spread interest in and appreciation of the Islands’ unique beauty, Gavagan plans to establish “pockets” of native areas on the property. “We’ll plant natives in natural settings, mark the plants with their botanical names and Hawaiian names, the background of the plant, including the story behind its name, and its original and current use.

“For example, the kikuyugrass that holds the beach together against winds and washing was named for the priests, the kikuyus of the old island culture who held the people together throughout adversity.”

—S.T.