

Petal TO THE METAL

Taking care of ornamentals
isn't the only thing being asked
of full-time horticulturists these days

By Thomas Skernivitz, Managing Editor

Bruce Williams spent 21 years without a horticulturist and the last eight years with one. Now, the certified superintendent of Los Angeles Country Club is looking for a new one.

Gardeners need not apply.



For every superintendent seeking a full-time horticulturist or thinking about acquiring one, Williams brings good news. While weeding out job applicants this spring, he discovered quite a few possessed more than just a green thumb. Many were certified horticulturists. Others were certified arborists. Some were both.

"I was a little bit surprised at the quality and talents of the people who were out there who were interested in working for me," Williams says.

Surprised but not disappointed.

"Today the trend is what it is with all positions on the golf course: You try to get better than you had before," Williams says. "A lot of places are no longer just hiring a gardener. They're hiring a qualified horticulturist."

That type of quality is abundant these days, according to Williams. At least in his area, the golf course industry, he says, has more to offer horticulturists than other markets. Salaries — even if they're commensurate to that of an assistant superintendent — supercede what horticulturists often earn, he notes. And there's something to be said about being stationed in one location.

"A lot of these people work for companies that manage large properties and estates ... and they have to take care of 20 different properties a day," Williams says. "Driving around in the L.A. traffic is not exactly fun."

Coping without a horticulturist can be dif-

ficult, says Williams, who had to do just that during his 21 years as superintendent at Bob'O'Link Golf Club, near Chicago. Degreed in turfgrass science, superintendents often have to hire an outside consultant or landscape architect in the absence of a horticulturist.

"For the most part, we're grass guys," he says. "And if you've got somebody else you can add to your staff who can compliment your background and training, it only makes for a stronger team."

In absentia

Some teams aren't afforded the luxury of a full-time horticulturist. In that case, the superintendent and his or her crew might want to think twice about begonias and roses.

"They shouldn't do flowers, except for maybe right around the clubhouse," says Kim Wheeler, the certified horticulturist at Chagrin Valley Country Club in Moreland Hills, Ohio. "Otherwise, they're going to be knocking their heads against the wall, trying to keep up with the watering of everything. The guys who are doing the turf have a hard enough time as it is, and they don't want to be messing with flowers. Even low-maintenance perennials require some weeding and dead-heading. I would definitely avoid annuals."

Wheeler, a native of Miami and graduate of the University of Georgia, dedicates most of her spring and summer days to flower maintenance. Nearly all of the 18 tees at Chagrin Valley are flanked by beds that are mixed with flowers and shrubs. The course even has its own 30-foot by 100-foot greenhouse.

"If you have a greenhouse, you definitely need to have a dedicated horticulturist," she notes.

Once fall arrives, Wheeler focuses on pruning, cutting back all perennials and grasses and tidying up beds. The holiday season means installing decorative lights around the clubhouse and making sure all plant orders have been submitted. Finally, in late winter she resumes pruning, knowing there will be little time to do so once the blooming season begins.

"That's why they have me here — for the flowers," Wheeler says. "I'd also like to spend a lot more time than I do on the shrub material and maintenance of that. Otherwise, you'll wind up having to replace a lot of

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**Some clubs discourage
ornamentals on the course.**

**Others, such as Arizona
National (formerly The Raven
at Sabino Springs) in Tucson,
Ariz., emphasize flowers.**

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material. It shows when I spend more time on the shrubs."

Leading the way

Wheeler does direct a small team that helps with her responsibilities. And that's exactly what Williams is seeking back in Los Angeles. His eventual horticulturist will manage a staff of four gardeners.

"In my case that person has to have the ability to lead a team," he says. "They've got to be able to run their own set of books. They've got to be able to not just give four people something to do each day, but they've got to be able to manage those hours. Do I need overtime this week? What's the best schedule that's going to work for the plant material?"

Williams said a horticulturist — especially one who has idle time during the winter — could also focus on the course's status with the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program and learn more about

government regulations specific to a topic such as underground storage tanks.

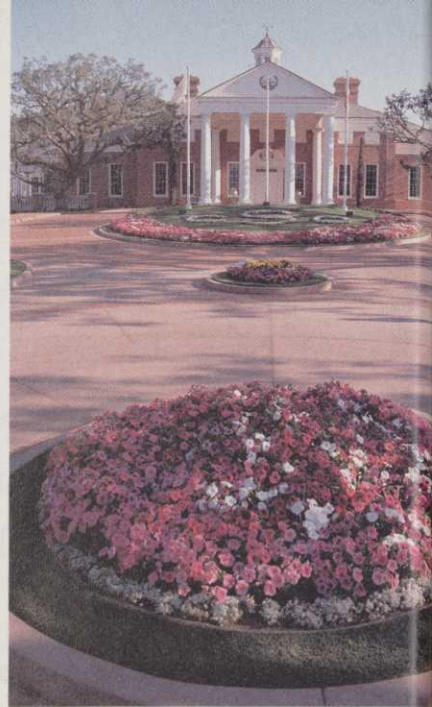
"If you bring in a horticulturist and you're paying that person a full-time salary, they've got to do a lot more than just take care of the flowers," he says.

Of course, that might scare away a few candidates. "A lot of people who are trained as horticulturists will avoid working for a golf course if they think they're going to be doing things besides horticultural things," Wheeler says. "They may not be interested in turf."

In any case the horticulturist should have a game plan that will make an impact on the customer.

"If you want people to come up the driveway past your flowers and say, 'Wow, that's nice,' that's one thing,"

Without a dedicated horticulturist, intricate displays such as the entrance to Sherwood Country Club in Thousand Oaks, Calif., would be difficult to tend.



Williams says. "But if you want them to go, 'That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life,' that's a different level. You get one by having a couple of guys throw some flowers in the ground. You get the other by having a strategic, logical plan and changing that plan on an annualized basis." ■

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