

# CALIFORNIA LANDSCAPER NURTURES PLANTS IN URBAN ENVIRONMENT



**Century City** in West Los Angeles was tagged a "modern Acropolis" by Time Magazine. This city within a city was meticulously designed to resemble what might be called the perfect metropolis — all the atmosphere and fast-paced excitement of a big city without the narrow alleys, dingy streets, and usual unpleasant characteristics of many large urban areas. It has developed into one of the most prestigious sections in the Los Angeles area both for businesses as well as luxury high-rise residential properties. One striking attribute that sets apart Century City is its beautiful landscape. Walkways, boulevard medians, and huge landscape beds are maintained with cosmetic precision.

The responsibility of keeping Century City, California, green is a complex full-time job that requires a unique problem-solving ability. Landscape supervisor John Zessau and his assistant Frank Valesquez are literally "on-call" 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to handle any landscape related dilemma that might arise in Century City. Zessau said it's not often that the job will require night calls, but if it does, "Frank and I can get to practically any location within 30 minutes from where we live . . . if a main irrigation line blows one of us is right there to handle it."

"That's one major advantage we have in our operation. We are able to provide a service that really can't be

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**All plants grow** in concrete beds above parking garages, including large coral tree.



provided by an outside source. Everything here is done "in-house". We contract out for very few jobs," Zessau explained. His 15 man staff of full time employees gives Zessau the flexibility to properly manage this highly complex landscape system.

Caring for countless flower and plant beds, 12 acres of lawn, and more than 25 miles of walkways and roadsides, is an incredible task by itself. But what makes the undertaking even more difficult, is that nearly all of the horticultural environment of Century City is artificially created. It is one of the largest "container grown landscape" projects in North America. Underground parking lots catacomb most of the complex, requiring that much of the native soil be removed. "When a new high rise or other major structure goes in, that's when we get into the act. Quite often the planting areas around these new developments are nothing more than huge concrete planters," Zessau noted.



Continues on page 70

Exotic plants flourish in contained plant beds.

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## Century City

Extreme care is required when creating these flourishing gardens over concrete and steel. "Many are awkwardly located in and around structures. Once the landscape job is completed, we can't get in there again with heavy equipment. So if a tree dies or there is a drainage problem, we're in a world of trouble," Zessau continued.

Drainage is the most important consideration in these super containers. "Without a proper drainage system we'd lose the plants to rotting and disease," he related. "The bottom or first layer of the planter consists of rock with drainage outlets underneath. The middle layer is made up of sand and above that is the topsoil. The topsoil is a 60-40 mixture of organic matter to sand." Zessau explained that planter depths vary with the deeper ones containing as much as eight feet of topsoil and sand — enough to support large trees . . .

While drainage systems and growing mediums have been successfully developed and maintained and few plants have been lost at Century City, one factor caught Zessau and his crew off guard. That factor was wind.

"Due to the proximity of this project to the Pacific Ocean, sometimes when the wind rushes between these buildings, we get a venturi effect," Zessau observed. "This effect is similar to a vacuum and can be very harmful to anything not secured, especially young trees," Zessau added.

Century Plaza Towers are the two largest buildings in Century City. These twin structures, standing side by side, have caused gusting winds of up to sixty miles per hour. Zessau's crew planted some sturdy young *Ficus* in the Plaza between Century Plaza Towers and the ABC Entertainment Center. These trees were then bolted into the concrete with sturdy guy wires to insure their growth and safety. The guying and staking of all trees and large plants have become an important commodity in the landscape business at Century City. "And we've learned that pruning trees (a regular function) is unnecessary in some locations, since the wind does it for us," he said.

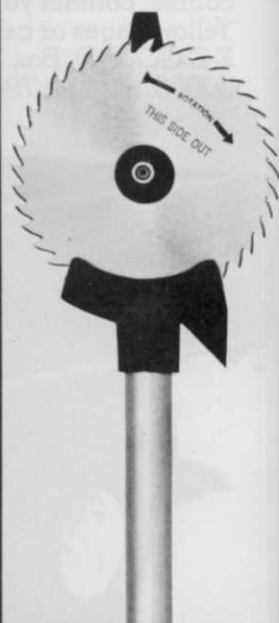
Another problem caused by the wind is irrigation. The only means considered feasible in the initial plans was the overhead sprinkler.

*Continues on page 72*

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John Zessau

## Century City

But with winds in some areas gusting to 60 miles per hour, this hardly seemed logical. "So," said Zessau, "what we've done in these areas is to switch from overhead to drip irrigation systems. Slow release hoses that run along the ground emit just enough water for the plants' needs," he said. "Being a ground level watering device negates the wind's effects."

Century City's overall landscape design incorporates countless varieties of flowers, bedding plants, shrubbery, lawns, and trees. Wind is obviously a factor dictating what plants go where. Zessau pointed out, however, there are many other factors involved. Shading patterns must be considered. In such an intensive architectural environment, some areas are shaded nearly all the time by one structure or another. Plants adaptable to very little sunlight must be utilized once shading patterns are established. Another factor is location. Some landscape areas are not easily accessible, so plant variety has been chosen accordingly. In these difficult-to-reach areas hardy plants are planted, which require little attention.

### Labor savers

As development continues in Century City and landscaping needs increase along with it, Zessau says he has been able to keep his work force at a minimum through the judicious use of fertilizers and chemicals. He says, "judicious", because when spraying insecticides, for example, he backs up his decision to spray with a recorded schedule of plant checking and insect observation. "Many people still think you should spray on a calendar basis. So when aphid season comes along they spray. I don't agree; I only spray when I know there's a heavy infestation." He also knows, however, that failure to treat for aphids or thrips when necessary can require expensive replacement of plants.

The two chemicals that Zessau claims are absolute necessities in his operation are growth retardants and herbicides. "They're the real labor savers." With ivy, for example, he can get away with much less pruning than is normally required through the use of an effective growth



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## Century City

retardant. "Instead of having to prune mountains of ivy every month we can reduce the number of prunings by a third," he said.

Because such a good horticultural environment is created for plants in Century City, weeds also flourish. Besides heavily infested plant beds, Zessau is constantly plagued with weed growth in expansion joints, where the asphalt on the streets meets the curb, at the divisions and cracks in sidewalks, and so on. "We use Round-up herbicide on a regular basis to kill these existing weeds," he related. "In our annual beds, however, we like to use a pre-emergence herbicide to hold weed populations down over long periods. We've been most impressed with Devrinol (Stauffer Chem. Co.) herbicide because it keeps weeds back for so long in our beds. It keeps them clean for the whole season. We've also had a lot of trouble with weeds growing in the ivy," he continued. "When we have to renovate (cut back) the ivy, sunlight gets in and promotes weed growth. What we've done is spray devrinol down through the ivy after renovation. We've also been able to save water here, because we don't have that heavy thatch in the ivy to absorb all that moisture."

In Zessau's comprehensive fertilizer program he begins by categorizing the various landscape beds in the development. He explained, "We categorize the different planters by location and accessibility. In the hard-to-get-to areas we apply a slow-release type of fertilizer, while the easily

*Continues on page 87*



Turf area on edge of complex.



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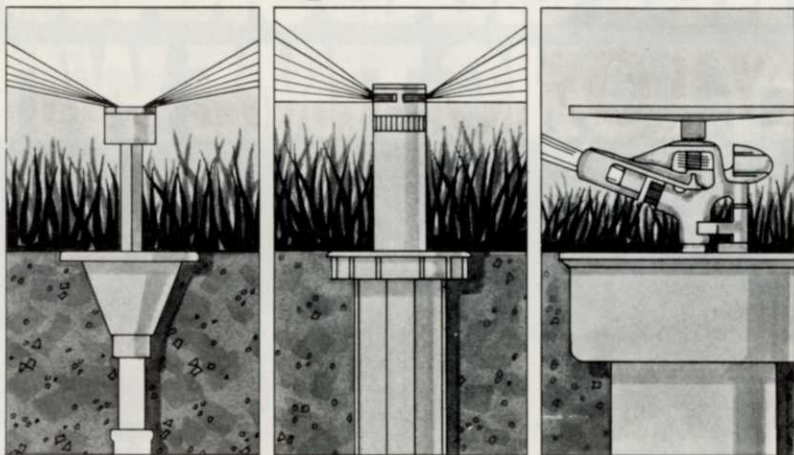
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## Century City

accessible places are treated bi-monthly with a quick release fertilizer. The slow release is applied once a year and then we have intermediate fertilizers for areas scheduled for treatment three or four times a year." Zessau's fertilizer decisions are not made by guesswork, though. His soil amendments are scientifically formulated from soil samples and lab analysis done by O. A. Matkin, Soil and Plant Lab, Los Angeles. Zessau credits Matkin with a major role in the overall up-keep of plant nutrition at Century City.

Decisions concerning fertilizer breakdown and concentration are only one aspect of Zessau's soil amendment program. Fertilizer applications are common at Century City. Fertilizers are applied when needed and Zessau has learned that when spraying any chemical in an urban area people are inevitably going to be concerned. "I don't care if you're spraying water — somebody is going to get uptight about it," he said. Zessau has found that a little psychology goes a long way; instead of applying liquid fertilizers, he's switched to granular mixes. "Oddly enough, people don't look twice if you're applying a granular," he observed. "The only time we ever apply a liquid fertilizer is in extremely hard-to-get-to places where we sometimes inject the fertilizer into the sprinklers. This can also be a tremendous labor saver when you consider the fact that we don't have to send a man carrying a 100 pound bag of granular fertilizer climbing up into some awkward bed."

Sprinkler systems, both overhead and drip, are all hooked up to automatic timing devices which saves Zessau's maintenance crew countless hours. Taken a step further, Zessau explained that some of the development's sprinklers are even more sophisticated — triggered automatically when tensiometer readings in a given bed fall below a certain moisture level.

Landscape technology obviously has come a long way from the days of peat moss and a hoe. For John Zessau, it's taken what would have been a horticultural pipe dream twenty-years ago and made trees grow over six story underground parking lots, made roses flourish in steel and concrete; and helped ivy thrive for miles over a thin layer of sand and backfill mix. **WTT**