

AWARD WINNING PARK SYSTEM DEPENDS ON EFFICIENCY FOR GROWTH

The Sunshine State may be a haven for outdoor enthusiasts, but the leisure needs of Palm Beach County's 620,090 residents and 1.6 million annual visitors are met by more than Florida's tropical weather.

Over the last ten years, George Irvin Jr., horticulturist for Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation Department, has helped institute a whole host of programs designed to appeal to the area's diverse, recreation-oriented population. Along with these new programs has come a parallel concern for upgrading and improving the park areas themselves.

"Because we are one of the fastest growing counties in the United States, we have had to do a lot of planning and experimenting, both facility- and maintenance-wise," the native Floridian explains, noting that acquisition and development of publicly-owned land and facilities for recreational use have almost doubled since 1973. "Year-round usage also necessitates a strong maintenance program that keeps the parks lush, beautiful and available to the public.

"The Parks Department is so large and diverse that my responsibilities range from landscaping and resodding, to tree and hedge trimming, running the spray department and nursery management," says the Florida State University graduate. Maintenance of baseball fields, tennis courts, buildings, signs, plumbing and the like is handled by other divisions within the department, he adds.

The 48 parks and recreation areas in The Palm Beach County Park System cover more than 4,000 acres of inland and beach front property. The average park covers about 50 to 75 acres, and is designed to fit the specific needs of the local community. "Many of our parks are geared toward neighborhood activities and are



Neatly groomed area in Japanese garden is maintained year-round by use of chemicals.

comprised of ball fields, play equipment and sitting areas," observes Irvin. "Others, like 1,053-acre John Prince Park in Lake Worth, have full-scale recreational facilities that include boating, tennis, picnic areas, and jogging and bike trails."

Ten New Parks

Maintaining parks for the largest county east of the Mississippi River is a challenge George Irvin has enjoyed for more than a decade. And, it's destined to become even more of a challenge with ten new parks slated for completion within the next five years. This expansion, together with little or no increases expected in his one-million dollar maintenance budget, has made cost efficiency one of George's overriding management considerations.

With an extensive background in professional landscaping that dates back to his ownership of a landscape business, Irvin is well-aware of the importance of an effective program to control undesirable vegetation. "Most of our parks were constructed with unsterilized soil, and I'd estimate every square foot of soil contains close to 10,000 weed seeds," says Irvin.

Over the years, Irvin and his crew have tried more would-be weed remedies than they care to remember. "Hand weeding proved totally ineffective," recalls Irvin, who cites torpedograss as his main weed menace. "We'd have a man out weeding all day, and 24 hours later two weeds had taken the place of the one he removed. We needed a better solution, so we turned to chemicals."

Seeking a different approach to weed control, the County Parks and Recreation Department started experimenting with Roundup herbicide in 1976. The product was applied at the rate of four quarts/acre on several 10 x 10 foot plots in sectors of John Prince Park that were off limits to the public. "We concentrate our maintenance efforts in areas of public use, so you can imagine the kind of jungle we had growing in these restricted areas," Irvin observes.

Using two men and one spray unit with a 300-gallon fiberglass spray tank, he experimented with both spot and broadcast applications, around signs, plant beds, tennis courts, baseball fields, and just about everywhere else in the parks.

Having eliminated much of the expense of hand labor, George Irvin proudly notes that he has cut his department's labor and herbicide costs in half.

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\$500,000 Nursery

As if the parks weren't enough for Irvin and his staff of 25 full-time employees to handle, his division is also responsible for Palm Beach County's 5-acre nursery. The \$500,000 nursery, one of the largest in southern Florida, is the starting point for such semi-tropical trees as Live Oaks, Black Olives, Pines and various Palms. Also growing in the nursery are such exotic trees as Orchids, Golden Rain, Royal Poincianas, Seaside Mahoes and Roseapples.

Surrounded by natural vegetation, the nursery has long been a catalyst for the proliferation of Irvin's worst weed nemesis, torpedograss. "Every weed that goes to seed is blown into the nursery by the wind. So our weed control program is predicated on eliminating weeds growing alongside the nursery and in the roadways," he states.

This overall maintenance and weed control program has proved successful not only from a cost standpoint, but from a beautification standpoint, as well. The department was a finalist in 1978 and again in 1979 for the National Gold Medal Award, an annual honor bestowed on parks and recreation departments who have es-

tablished themselves within the community and captured the imagination of local residents with unique, well-maintained facilities.

New Park

Obviously, the beauty of the County's parks is not simply in the eye of the beholder. And recent construction of Morikami Museum west of Delray Beach further confirms that observation. The 140-acre spread, donated to the County in 1975 by George Morikami, a Japanese immigrant, is a magical wonderland of Japanese culture. But, as George Irvin points out, it hasn't always been this way.

When construction began in 1975, the first step was to eliminate all the weeds that had overrun

Palm Beach County Parks draws from efficiency to meet growing demand for recreational facilities by visitors and residents.

the park site. "Torpedograss has been growing for so many years the roots were 5-10 feet long. We controlled the weeds by broadcast applying four qts. of Roundup mixed in 20 gallons of water per acre, and set to work building."

Today, the one-time swamp is a tribute to Mr. Morikami's heritage, complete with a cultural museum and tranquil Bonsai gardens. Constructed of materials resembling the rice paper walls and tatami mats traditional to Japanese architecture, the museum gives visitors a sense of having just arrived in the Orient. The newly constructed picnic area—with shelters resembling Japanese tea houses and accompanied by such exotic plant materials as Water Lillies and Cat Tails and such trees as Bamboo, Holly, Silk Oak, Spanish Cherry, Jasmine and Japanese Black Pines—contributes to the theme, as well.

Proud of the beauty of Morikami, George allows himself the pleasure of maintaining the gardens with his crew. Somehow, he manages to find time to constantly prune the trees in strict Bonsai tradition.

"Our growth is based on an ongoing evaluation of the community's interests and needs," he states, adding that five years ago recreational and athletic programming was non-existent. "Morikami is one example of this attitude; another is the recently-constructed Heart Trail in John Prince Park." The trail is one mile long, and features 20 stations that prescribe exercises to benefit the entire body.

With the implementation of \$56 million in bond issue funding, and more than \$20 million in state and federal grants, Palm Beach County parks are rapidly becoming the most utilized and admired in the southeast.

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