



Hydraulic mulching process has saved labor costs because it requires one less worker than blowing straw does. (Below) Freedom Park is one of Charlotte's 91 parks and is one of the oldest.



# MULCHING HELPS CHARLOTTE GROW

Park system saves in labor costs and gains versatility in maintenance program

By HENRY FOX,  
Operations Supervisor,  
Charlotte Parks and Recreation Department

Hydraulic mulching may just be the edge needed for flexibility and as an alternative to straw for mulching. It has provided mulching options in our park system that we didn't have before.

The Charlotte Parks and Recreation Department in North Carolina consists of more than 1,600 acres of property, providing Charlotte's 315,000 residents with a variety of leisure-time activities. Facilities include 91 parks, 16 recreation centers, three pools, a golf course, stadium and other amenities. Annual budget for fiscal 1982 was more than \$4.5 million.

The department is divided into several agencies, including Park Operations, which I supervise. The 220 people in this area are responsible for maintaining, beautifying and landscaping new and existing facilities.

Turf establishment is a critical component of any park department's annual program. Charlotte's is no exception. A good program, in my mind, has to be versatile; I think ours is. And one of the reasons is our ability to use the hydraulic mulching. The process has saved us labor and developed quality grass. It has been es-

pecially effective on steep slopes and for erosion control.

## The hydraulic mulching process

The site is tilled to loosen the soil and eliminate weed growth. Mulch, seed, water and fertilizer are mixed into a slurry in a hydraulic mulching machine. The machine is especially-equipped with a mixing tank and mechanical agitator to keep the ingredients in suspension. The machine also has a mulch gun. The slurry is pumped through the gun and hydraulically sprayed on

*continued on page 68*

the ground. Because the gun can be aimed accurately from a considerable distance, we can reach hard access places with this process.

Up until two years ago we had used only straw to protect seeds during germination. Then we purchased a Finn Equipment Company hydraulic mulching machine for \$10,000. At that time several Conwed representatives came and spent a couple of days working with my landscape and construction foreman, Leon Shanklin. They

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The labor advantage of hydraulic mulching may become more significant in coming years.

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demonstrated the hydraulic mulching process and proved its effectiveness for turf establishment in varied situations.

Probably the strongest advantage the product has over straw is the labor savings. Shanklin is able to apply wood-fiber mulch with just one other person, the truck driver. On the other hand, just to run the straw blower requires a third person. That doesn't include the extra men needed to seed and fertilize. The fact that we can use fewer men to spray mulch is important, especially if someone is sick or on vacation. The labor advantage may become even more significant in the coming years as we operate in increasingly tighter economic conditions.

Another problem with straw is that it is often scarce in the early spring. We can't count on having it when we need it. That's never true with the Conwed product.

Tenacity is another advantage for mulch on banks and slopes. Wood fibers form a tight mat over the seeds so they can germinate. This "mat" prevents erosion and washout from rain.

Even though they are less expensive, I've never considered paper mulches since they'd probably have chemicals. Because of the poor quality of much of North Carolina's soil, we're very conscious of using natural products

*continued on page 83*

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question of well, so what, what am I going to do with these men? Certainly, training and vacations can only last for so long. Many companies which employ technicians on a year-round basis shift from maintenance, training and vacations to sales. That is, the technicians solicit on the routes for which they are responsible either increased or continued use by existing customers, or developing programs from other customers who have been solicited in the past

An essential part of the technician's job performance during the off-season could rest on his ability to sell services in the areas he worked during the year.

but have not selected to use the turfgrass employer. Therefore, an essential part of the technician's job performance during the off-season could rest on his ability to

**MULCHING** from page 68

which are biodegradable and organic. In addition, it reduces soil moisture evaporation.

**Tips for good turf**

We use wood-fiber mulch for projects 7,000 square feet or larger. The reason we set a minimum is that we don't want to leave a partial load in the hydraulic mulch equipment. We've found that four bales of mulch gives us good coverage on 7,000 square feet. Then we reload if the job requires it. Shanklin recommends greasing the equipment daily, and he takes it in for routine maintenance twice a year.

Shanklin's assistant opens the mulch bags and hands them to him for loading. Shanklin then does the mixing. When it's time to spray, the driver returns to the cab of the truck while Shanklin does the hose application. The mulch's temporary green dye serves as a visual guide to even coverage.

Typical projects are probably

sell services in the areas in which he worked during the year.

A turfgrass employer who decides that he does not want to develop a pay system which would provide for year-round employment could supplement an employee's unemployment insurance. This supplement would limit the employer's ability to actually have the individual working during the off-season at various times, and there is an unreliable aspect to it—there is no assurance that the individual will not accept other employment after collecting the unemployment supplement from the employer. There are ways to avoid this, such as treating the unemployment supplement as a loan, which is extended to the employee after he signs a note to be payable upon his return to work.

Regardless of whether a turf employer structures his pay program for seasonal or year-round employment, he should oppose all unemployment compensation claims except those caused by layoffs. An

*continued on page 86*

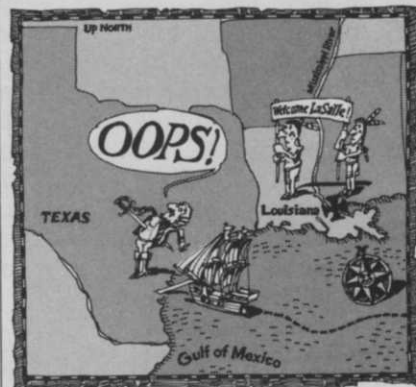
similar to those any park and recreation department would have. For example, Charlotte has 120 athletic fields. In mid-1981, we wanted to convert two baseball diamonds into a soccer field. We used Hydro Mulch fibers to develop grass on the skinned infields.

Late in the year we hydraulically mulched 18 acres of land acquired from the county. We created gently rolling hills for this multi-purpose athletic field, which would include two little league fields, one regulation baseball diamond and a soccer field. We sprayed in November in order to have grass for the spring season.

From August 15 to November 1 is our fall season, during which we seed the Kentucky 31 Tall Fescue, Creeping Red Fescue and Kentucky Bluegrass. We use the same seeds in our spring season that runs from February 15 to April 15. Then until mid-June we use the warm season Bermuda grass.

*Continued on page 86*

René Robert Cavelier de La Salle led an expedition across the Atlantic in 1684 to colonize New Orleans. Unfortunately his campaign failed. He missed New Orleans and landed in Texas. His faulty sense of direction was not overlooked by his followers who eventually killed him.



# The right campaign in the wrong place can kill you.

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Conwed mulch promotes germination of these grasses by retaining moisture and shielding the seeds from temperature fluctuations.

**The Future**

Our mulch use will definitely expand in the coming years. Through a \$9.7 million bond issue passed in 1978, Charlotte has funding for new recreation areas. The money is earmarked for natural

preserves, district parks, neighborhood parks and special facilities. We just purchased, for example, almost 700 acres for a natural preserve. It will have hiking, camping, scenic trails, lakes and other features. Wood fiber mulch will help us develop grass in appropriate areas.

In short, the addition of hydraulic mulching to our landscape program has given us greater flexibility.

We know we have a desirable, labor-saving alternative to straw.

That's important in light of our expansion plans. We conducted a study to project community needs to 1990. The study recommended we more than double the number of athletic fields to 250 and increase other facilities as well.

We'll be working with creek banks, flood plain land, swells and other spots where erosion presents a problem. Wood-fiber mulch is a good choice in these cases, and I'd recommend it to other park supervisors facing similar situations. **WTT**

**LAYOFFS** from page 83

individual generally is ineligible for unemployment compensation if his termination was caused by poor attendance, violation of company policy, disregard of a supervisor's request, poor work performance, or dishonest act, such as falsifying time records. Whenever possible, the employer should give a "final warning" prior to termination, so there is no doubt that the employee is informed of the consequences of his future conduct. If an employee is ineligible, the turf employer will save money by paying a lower state unemployment tax.

The very nature of the turfgrass industry requires creative approaches to minimizing the financial detriment of employee turnover due to layoffs. **WTT**

**MOWERS** from page 65

can trim closer and mow on a slight grade, some things big machines can't claim. The big riders cost anywhere from \$9,000 to \$12,000 while a walk-behind, self-propelled unit costs between \$2,200 and \$3,000. They are less expensive than tractors and are more serviceable. Our 40-inch mower fits between the wheel wells of compact pick-ups and the 48-inch will fit similarly on a standard-sized pickup."

Carl McCord is preparing to reveal his time-motion study results in the near future. At that time, the specific types of jobs and efficiency of various mowers will be known. It is a trend worth watching. **WTT**



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