The Palm Court on the University of Miami campus.

TROPICAL ARBORETUM

The University of Miami in Coral Gables, Fla., boasts a landscape cornerstone of 25 palm tree varieties. And the landscape has just begun to be taken seriously.

by Heide Aungst, associate editor

The University of Miami in Coral Gables, Fla., could be described as a tropical paradise. But just a few years ago it was a wasteland.

No one paid much attention to the school's landscape. Lethal yellow wiped out most of the coconut palm trees, and landscape design seemed almost nonexistent.

Then, in 1982, Edward Foote was named university president. "The president came here with a dream, and that dream is being carried out," says Clarence Lefler, director of the physical plant. Lefler was in his position only a few months before Foote took over the campus.

Foote's dream was to make the university into a tropical arboretum. With more than 25 varieties of palms on campus, many donated fully-grown from the estate of a wealthy widow, his dream is coming true. Campus landscaping is so important to Foote that he even requires the crew to cut the hedge outside his office in an A-frame, which allows light to get to the under branches.

"President Foote's philosophy is to create a setting so the kids know they are in south Florida," says Alan Weber, director of grounds/landscaping for ARA Environmental Services. "He feels it's conducive to learning."

The university has contracted with ARA since 1978 for grounds maintenance, custodial, and moving services, explains Boyce Level, ARA resident manager. Level has worked for ARA for about three years.

Though not employed by the university, Weber and Level work directly with Lefler on planning and maintenance.

87 foster children

They affectionately call Lefler "Dad," an appropriate title for a man who, along with his wife Lois, have raised five children of their own, adopted one, and have been foster parents to 87 others. Lefler projects the same deep sense of caring with "his" campus, as he does with his children.

"Our goal was to first do a bunch of little spots on campus to get the overall feeling of improvement," Lefler explains. He negotiated four groundskeepers to do small projects taking less than a week, such as planting a hedge.

One of these projects was to plant ferns under the ficus trees, known

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A well-landscaped plot on the south Florida campus.

for their extensive root systems. Ficus trees cannot be planted near buildings since the roots can easily break through the concrete.

Several ficus trees grow on the banks of the university's lake, since the roots protect the bank from erosion.

The 6.3 acre lake, located at the back of the campus, is equipped with its own alligator and barracudas.

Although the crew cleans the man-made lake regularly, no chemicals are used to upset the ecological balance of the saltwater intrusion in the lake.

"We haven't transformed the lake into a swimming pool," Weber says. Many of the plants on the banks are left wild to maintain the natural look. Steps carved out of coral stone are located on one side of the lake. Weber says no one could afford to buy similar steps today.

It is hard to decide whether the lake or an area known as "Palm Court" is the most beautiful part of the campus.

Palm Court was developed two years ago. Royal palm trees surround a cascading jet 7,000-gallon fountain. Concrete blocks are arranged in a checkerboard pattern between the trees where students can sit and study. A brick paved pathway leads up to and encircles the fountain.

That pathway causes Weber a few headaches. Since everything grows so rapidly in southern Florida, weeds and grass pop—up quickly—occasionally between the bricks. Crewmen spray the bricks but are careful to avoid killing neighboring turf.

St. Augustine turf is used on the approximately 250-acre campus, of which 150 acres are intensively maintained. "St. Augustine grows horizontally. It takes the heat, covers rapidly and doesn't need to be highly maintained," Weber says.

Regular pruning

When Weber started working on the university about a year ago, he discovered most of the grass under the trees had turned brown from lack of light.

The trees are now pruned regularly to allow the light to get to the turf. Also, removing the lower branches makes the campus safer for the many blind students.

Weber tries to achieve a balance with planting shade trees so students can get relief from the heat and pruning trees back.

The pH levels are so high in south Florida soils that plants need extra nutrients to grow. Fertilizers alone don't provide enough nutrients, so crews regularly spray through the leaves.

Weber also puts a weather shield, most frequently on the palms, which is a thin coating used to maintain moisture in the leaf and prevent windburn and sunscald.

The university's irrigation system stretches nearly 100 acres. Watering is crucial because of the quick drainage of the sandy soil.

Weber often uses a polymer under the root system of a newly-planted tree since it can expand and hold 30 times its size in water. Overwatering, however, can cause an outbreak of dollar weed, the campus' biggest enemy next to fireants which also invade regularly.

Weber says he goes through equipment faster than northern schools because it's used year round. He uses his lift trucks most extensively and keeps at least five chainsaws on hand because of the amount of pruning.

The baseball field, home to the high-powered Hurricanes, has synthetic turf, which suffers from mildew.

The crew maintains two soccer fields and two football fields of bermudagrass. The four fields are all practice fields only and, therefore, don't require special maintenance.

Weber would rather put his time into designing areas on the campus. Although the university often contracts out for landscape design, Weber prides himself on the areas of campus he has designed.

Before coming to the university he worked at Miami's Baptist Hospital. There, he won the American Association of Nurserymen's national award for institutional design. He will receive his award in Washington, D.C. this month.

One area he has designed is the student union. He says he's most proud of this since so many people walk through the area each day.

Weber put in planters with ferns, crown thorns, and solotaire palms to brighten up the union. With the combination of Weber's design changes and Lefler's designated three-man crew for short term projects, the campus is indeed resembling paradise.

The hurricane factor

But when paradise is located in southern Florida, your crew has to be prepared for hurricanes. Hurricane season runs from June to November.

"Ahead of hurricane season we do a massive trimming program," Weber says. "We take coconuts off the palm trees and pick up all the loose stuff."

Level says the university has a set procedure the grounds crew follows during a hurricane threat. "We have a red team and a blue team," Level explains. "One is on call while the other goes home and gets ready to clean up after."

Lefler says the last hurricane to directly hit the Miami area was in 1965. Still, he charts the paths of all recent hurricanes along the Atlantic coast.

Another problem is Haitian and Cuban employees. Most are not trained in groundskeeping, and often the language barrier makes it difficult for Weber to communicate.

He has learned a bit of Spanish to open communication lines. That's not uncommon for a landscape director who holds degrees in history, hotel and restaurant management, and horticulture.

The crew seems to enjoy working at the only major U.S. university in the subtropical zone. (Texas, Arizona and California are subject to freezes lasting consecutive days.)

Weber says sometimes it's hard to motivate the crew in the steaming summer heat and he gives them more frequent breaks to cope with high temperatures and high humidity.

Some crew members pick their own coconuts from the campus palm trees, freeze them, and drink the ice cold juice for relief.

The most recent project is re-landscaping the panhellenic building. Lefler says such special projects usually cost an estimated $3,000 to $25,000. He describes his general maintenance budget as "just over $500,000."

The University of Miami is home to about 15,000 students, many of whom come from out of state for the warm weather and beach not even 10 miles from campus.

The traffic through the campus can damage plant materials. It has become second nature to Weber and Level to tear down signs stapled to tree trunks as they walk by.

Both have such easy going personalities that they quickly overlook the damage done when students sit on plants or tear leaves off shrubs. "That's OK. They should enjoy the atmosphere," says Weber. "You can't worry that everyone's going to step on your plant...As long as they don't bang it up too much."

To campus visitors and even returning alumni the campus doesn't look "banged up" at all.

"In the last year we've had very positive reports," Lefler says. "The exciting thing is when someone who graduated six or seven years ago returns. The change is so dramatic."

The radical changes are past now. Small planting projects, the addition of even more varieties of palms, and design modifications in conjuction with several building renovations are planned in the future.

Although the university's new look was first envisioned by only one man, everyone on campus now shares in the pride of maintaining it. The University of Miami is a tropical paradise. **WT&T**