

CEMETERIES: A different type of landscaping

A feeling of comfort is the aim of memorial park superintendents. That means attention to fine details, like well-manicured headstones and trees.

OAKWOOD MEMORIAL GARDENS



Jack Sloane

Time marches on. Archibald Stadium in Syracuse, N.Y.—where football greats Jim Brown, Ernie Davis, Jim Nance, Floyd Little, and Larry Csonka used to romp—has been razed. The Carrier Dome has been “raised” in its place.

And literally in the shadow of the new dome lies Oakwood Memorial Gardens, where president Jack Sloane realizes that time, indeed, marches on.

Sloane, a 40-year cemetery veteran, will soon take with him the halcyon memories of sunny autumn Saturdays and Ben Schwartzwalder's Syracuse University football teams. In two months, he's turning operations of Oakwood Memorial Gardens over to son Greg.

Sloane's face crinkles with a smile and his eyes light up remembering the Orangemen. “Friends would always ask to park at the cemetery so they could walk to games. So I saw most of the games, because somebody always had extra tickets in exchange for a good parking spot.”

Oakwood has the longer history (Oakwood was established in 1859, the university in 1870). And the cemetery's 200 acres sport 300 varieties of trees and shrubs, including a medisequoia tree whose seed came from Tibet and an out-of-place bald cypress which is normally indigenous to semi-tropical areas.

“The State University of New York (SUNY) College of Environmental Sciences uses our cemetery for teaching,” says Sloane. “One year, they found gypsy moths and they had the state come in and spray for us.”

Maintenance of the cemetery landscape is not easy, mostly because of vertical markers but also because of trees, shrubs, and rolling hills.

“One year, a mower salesman told me his machine could mow anywhere. I told him to try one of our hills, so he brought his mower out. I never heard from him again,” Sloane remembers, the smile returning.



Tulip-lovers would appreciate Oakwood's landscape, where 2,500 tulips make their annual spring appearance.

Another problem is the soil: clay over shale that drains well but is so hard that very little grows well.

Oakwood maintenance crews man seven Excel Hustlers and one new Ferris Co. (Onieda, N.Y.) 60-inch riding mower. Twenty-one-inch Lawn Boy push mowers and plenty of string trimmers are also used by the eight-person summer crew.

Though Sloane hasn't used pesticides in the past, they have been implemented recently.

“We've started a program for weed control,” he observes. “We had a company fertilize and spray 2,4-D this spring.”

“We're also going to try some grass retardants on some of the older hillsides.”

“The last three or four years, too, we've been using Roundup around the vertical markers,” Sloane adds. “We have kids with sprayers following our trimmers.”

Because of its reputation, Oakwood always displays plenty of flowers. “This year, we've planted more than 2,500 geraniums, 500 narcissuses, 2,500 tulips, and \$1,000 worth of petunias and marigolds,” Greg notes.

The 40 years working for cemeteries (33 at Oakwood) have been good to the elder Sloane. He's met many notables, including Eleanor Roosevelt, who attended her son-in-law's funeral at Oakwood. Jack has also been president of the New York State Cemetery Association (1966) and the Syracuse Kiwanis (1967). He is current president of the New York State Turfgrass Association.

“I've enjoyed every bit of my career,” he concludes, wistfully looking out his office window to the cemetery's landscape. “The nice thing is that you meet a lot of people and you're not tied down to a desk.”

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LANDSCAPE PROFILE

ROSE HILLS

Oakwood's 600 burials a year pale in comparison to Rose Hills Memorial Park, which conducts about 30 services a day. Rose Hills is one of the largest—if not the largest—cemeteries in the country with 400 acres of lawn, 2,400 undeveloped acres and 20 entrances. The Whittier, Calif., cemetery has enough acreage to last another 175 years.

"John Gregg, the founder, used to tell us he had a dream," says gardening foreman Joe Hernandez. "He wanted to make this the biggest mortuary in the country."

Gregg passed away in 1959, but his dream lives on. Rose Hills conducted its 200,000th burial last fall.

"I enjoy the job," notes Hernandez, who has been at Rose Hills since 1958. "This is an entirely different ballgame than most landscape management. You have to be very careful what you say to the public and you have to be a little more respectful.

"People who come here are in a different frame of mind; they're not here for fun. But you get used to it like anything else."

The rose garden for which the cemetery is named contains 7,000 flowers. In addition, each of four churches have gardens, there is a Japanese garden and a garden at the Memorial Chapel.

"Roses do real well here," Hernandez observes. "But in April and May, it occasionally gets overcast and we have to fight mildew; in July and August we're fighting mites."

Most of the landscape is bermudagrass and kikuyugrass, though some poa annua exists. Grass is cut at 1¼ inches. The kikuyu gives Hernandez headaches.

"We tried to kill it out with Roundup," he says. "It seems like you burn the area out, but the darn stuff comes back."

Trimec and Mecomec are also Hernandez favorites. They are used for clover control. "I try and stay away from the stuff you need a permit for," he says.

Dallisgrass used to be a problem, but no more. "We were the first to use MSMA 20 years ago," remembers Hernandez, "but now we find that Roundup is just as good."

Rose Hills employs 20 landscape



Above, the Rose Hills mausoleum, which features one of four gardens on the 400 acres of lawn. There are 2,400 undeveloped acres and 20 entrances at the Whittier, Calif., cemetery.



For 28 years, Joe Hernandez has roamed the almost 3,000 acres at Rose Hills cemetery.

maintenance personnel, including regular crews for gopher control, tree maintenance, rose garden maintenance, and hand watering. ("Most of my boys have been here more than 20 years," he says. "My lead man has been here 30 years.") An additional 60 contracted workers of United Park Services help care for the cemetery's landscape.

Before contracting landscape maintenance to United Park Services, Rose Hills used seven-gang mowers. Now, it's strictly a few Locke walk-behinds and 30-inch Promasters, plus some 3-hp hand edgers and Weed Eater string trimmers.

Hernandez began as a temporary gardener/mower at the cemetery.

"I figured the Army was going to catch me," he recalls. "But my wife caught me first."

Mary Helen, his bride of 28 years, saw a career for her new husband. She visited Fullerton Junior College and registered Joe for horticulture courses. "I took the entrance exam and enrolled," Joe says. "Once I took the identification course, I really got interested. It snowballed. I went to night classes for 13 years, two nights a week."

His favorite task is visiting nurseries to buy specimens.

"I'm on the freeway a lot," he admits. "I look for plants ahead of time and like to spread my business around."

—Jerry Roche

LANDSCAPE PROFILE

HILLCREST/WEST LAWN

The policeman walked into the office and solemnly announced, "You're under arrest."

There must be some mistake, Hans Bross thought. But he looked out his door and saw his foreman with a camera. He knew it wasn't a mistake, just a practical joke.

His crime? Showing too many pictures of his grandchildren.

It was all to raise money for the American Cancer Society.



Park super Hans Bross.

You have to have a sense of humor to work in a cemetery, Bross says.

Bross had visited his father's grave at Hillcrest Cemetery in Omaha, Neb., for years. As the owner of a landscape business, which he had inherited from his father, he always noticed the poor quality turf and the trees in desperate need of pruning.

When he tired of his business, he answered a blind ad in the local paper, and soon became park superintendent at Hillcrest and West Lawn.

"He (the general manager) asked me if I had any qualms about working in a cemetery," Bross says. "I never had given it any thought. I had a bit of a misgiving that it would be a boring job. But I've been here 11 years and I haven't been bored yet."

The two cemeteries total 185 acres and are divided only in that flat markers are used at Hillcrest, while upright monuments mark graves at West Lawn. A crew of 10 full-time and about five part-time in

the summer maintains both sites.

The biggest challenge? Trees. About 1,500 by Bross's estimate. At one time his crew removed about 40 Austrian pines. A recent wind storm ripped down five trees, including several rare American elms.

Just as a golf course superintendent essentially has every member as boss, a cemetery manager has to answer to every plot owner. And some do complain.

Buffalograss sparks many of the complaints. "It greens up late and turns brown early," he explains, his Paul Newman-blue eyes sparkling. "They think it's a weed. It's scattered. If it were all in one place I could explain it."

The other problem with buffalograss is that the sod can't be saved and replaced after the crew digs a grave. Most of the cemetery is a fungus-resistant blend including Baron, Georgetown, Fylking, and Benson A-34 Kentucky Bluegrass with some fine Manhattan rye. Bross is even growing a small sod field to save on costs of replacements.

When saving the sod, it's easy to pinpoint grub and sod webworm problems. A dose of diazinon or Oftanol usually takes care of it.

Although he's experimented with PGRs around headstones, his crew uses Weedeaters.

Another major concern is staining the stones with fertilizers. After trying several, he settled on slow-release Nitroform-Blue Chip from BFC Chemical or Par-Ex brand.

Only the new sections of the cemetery are irrigated. About 30 acres remain undeveloped, although Bross develops and seeds a new section about every two years, based on plot sales.

Besides his landscape duties, Bross takes care of cremations.

Bross, a member of the Board of Directors of the Nebraska Turfgrass Foundation, says the cemetery industry has a long way to go. "Until this industry starts to recognize that there are professionals out there and will pay accordingly, they're going to have problems," he says.

He'll work for the cause now, but he talks frequently of retiring, taking off in a motor home, and spending winters traveling through the South with his wife Eleanor. Of course they'll always return to Omaha to be near the grandchildren.

Want to see their pictures?—

Heide Aungst

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