



At Druid Ridge, vice president of operations Bob Larson uses a combination of Roundup and Surflan for areas around headstones at the Baltimore, Md., cemetery.

# AN OUTDOOR ART MUSEUM

Rich in tradition, Druid Ridge cemetery in Baltimore is a unique 230 acres. Its unique head landscaper could be the reason.

by Heide Aungst

As if he were sitting around a campfire, Bob Larson recited his favorite ghost story.

"They call her Black Aggie...It's said people have died of fright in her arms..."

Larson continues, telling of fraternity dares to sit in Black Aggie's arms through an entire night. "She was beautiful," he remembers, as if he's lost a close friend.

He drives by the site where she once rested. An empty stone

remains, the family name "Agnus" engraved in the rock.

Black Aggie, a priceless black granite statue, is now in the Smithsonian Institute.

A visit to Druid Ridge Cemetery in Baltimore is like a visit to an art museum. Some of the statues marking graves date back to when the cemetery was built in 1896. So do some of the trees.

Larson, vice president of operations, points to a beautiful blue

atlas cedar at the entrance. The tree is nearing the century mark.

Nearby is a beautiful large purple leaf beech. The Japanese and maraschino cherry trees are beautiful in the spring, he says.

Larson's 230 acres are as much an artwork as the granite statues his crew mows around. Druid Ridge won the PGMS Grand Award six years ago.

### A home for wild ducks

A seven-acre lake, maintained with copper sulfate, gives visitors to Druid Ridge the sense of being in a park. In fact, Larson says, people visit regularly just to feed the wild ducks, which sometimes number close to 175.

But maintaining a cemetery is different from maintaining a park.

Ghost story over, Larson dismisses the myths of what it's like to work in a cemetery. "They're headstones, not tombstones," he says. "This is a



Druid Ridge, built in 1896, features a slew of trees close to 100 years old.

cemetery, not a graveyard.”

He confesses he was hesitant to take the job.

But in 1978, the cemetery's executive vice president asked Larson's brother, Mike, if he knew someone who could maintain a cemetery the way Mike maintains a golf course (he's superintendent at Rockville Golf Club).

Mike suggested they contact Bob, who wasn't very happy as assistant landscape manager at Johns Hopkins University. As identical twins, the brothers have a lot in common—including maintaining turf.

Larson never regrets leaving Johns Hopkins. “You don't have a bunch of drunken kids at night tearing up things,” he says.

He's also glad he's steered clear of golf courses. “I'm not married to my job,” he explains.

### Balance means happiness

Larson and his wife have four boys ages one to 16. His family gets all his attention when he's home. His job gets 100 percent when he's there. Balance is the key to a happy life, he says.

He also has to juggle working at two cemeteries. In addition to Druid Ridge, Larson oversees 430 acres at Loudon Park, a cemetery built in 1853.

He employs 13 full-time people and five part-time at Druid Ridge, and 25 full-time, 14 part-time at Loudon Park.

He divides his time about equally between the two sites, although Loudon Park tends to have more burials.

Digging holes for the caskets is the part of the job Larson likes least. “We're like utilities, you have to dig in all types of weather,” he says.

With Baltimore in the heart of the transition zone, Druid Ridge has both warm- and cool-season grasses. Larson describes it as “Heinz 57.”

Although some plots might be zoysiagrass or bermudagrass, the majority is Rebel tall fescue.

The head and foot-stones are lined up in aisles, making mowing easier. A small tractor always follows behind a large one to get missed areas.

That process saves time and labor. The crew mows at least once a week.

Larson uses only Ford tractors and backhoes because of their reliability. He estimates he has 20 tractors between the two cemeteries.

While other cemetery landscape supervisors squirm at the use of upright headstones, Larson says he prefers them. “Those flat stones freeze and thaw. They heave and move up and down,” he says.

### The proud inventor

Larson doesn't need tricks to trim around headstones. He uses a mixture of Roundup and Surflan, around July 1 each year, to kill the turf. Roundup initially kills the vegetation and Surflan provides the residual control.

“I think of myself as the inventor of that,” Larson says proudly. “I started doing that eight years ago, before it was labeled to be used together.”

Larson claims he doesn't do too many things out of the ordinary. With a budget close to \$2 million, he's free to do just about anything.

Larson calls his operation a “self-contained entity.” Loudon Park features a greenhouse where he grows all the perennials used in the gardens around the mausoleums at both cemeteries. The crew also does its own paving and construction work.

Only about three acres of Druid Ridge are irrigated. Larson doesn't do any special watering on the burial areas.

He fertilizes only once a year, usually in late September, with slow release nitrogen at 1½ pounds per 1,000 sq. ft.

Larson has experimented with Monsanto's new turf growth regulator, Limit. “It's the most promising one I've seen,” he says. “It works. But I think people are expecting too much out of the PGRs. Areas still have to be maintained.”

Some cemetery landscape managers use turf growth regulators around headstones to slow turf growth. Larson has used Limit on entire plots and has cut mowing in half during the six-week period it's active.

### Still a 'long way to go'

The use of PGRs or the Roundup-Surflan mixture to kill turf around stones are fairly modern methods of cemetery maintenance. But Larson feels the industry still has a long way to go.

“Cemetery maintenance people are not an organized group and they need to be,” Larson says. “About 95 percent of them are behind the times.”

He blames the cemeteries for not going after good, well-trained people. He also criticizes landscape managers who don't keep up on the latest developments in the industry.

The reluctance of others to get into the industry does have its advantages for cemetery landscape managers. “You can just about name your price,” Larson says. He has, after all, just bought his wife her first Mercedes.

But it's not the money that keeps Larson happy with his job. It's an overall sense of peace and contentment with life.

“If you're Christian, this is where life begins,” Larson says, shrugging off any suggestion of a deeper meaning behind that statement. “I'm just your average run-of-the-mill Catholic.”

Beyond religion, is the history lesson. “You're maintaining areas where people who helped form a country are buried,” he explains.

Confederate soldiers who defended Fort McHenry and writer H.L. Mencken are buried at Loudon Park.

Someday, Larson hopes to be buried in the cemetery he kept beautiful for so many years.

“Yeah,” he smiles, “I want to be buried on the highest spot and my epitaph will say, ‘I'm watching what's going on.’” **WT&T**