

Theme park crews serious about safety

by TERRY McIVER / Managing Editor



Joe Parr: 'Everyone is eager, enthusiastic and fairly aggressive, so it's wonderful. There's a great spirit of optimism.'

Amid the fun that comes with working the grounds at Busch Gardens is an incredible attention to safe work habits.

A variety of topics are covered in bi-weekly safety meetings. One week they might review equipment safety; two weeks later it's first aid or protection against sunburn and heat stroke. Heat stress is avoided by proper diet (diluted Gatorade and fruits), clothing (big hats and sunscreen lotions) and rest.

A month free of any workmen's comp claims earns the entire crew breakfast on the company.

On the other hand, safety violations bring stiff penalties, says Joe Parr of ISS Landscape Management Services. Parr oversees the Busch Gardens crew, which tends the grounds at the huge theme park located just outside of Tampa, Florida.

"If they're spraying without safety glasses, we send them home," says Parr. Repeat offenses could result in termination.

"People are pretty good about [following safety regulations]," says Parr, "and they expect [to be disciplined]. If we're not enforcing it, they ask why not."

To get the big work done before guests arrive, work schedules must be exact, and the people who do the work must be courteous, quick and accomplished. In any month, a half-million guests storm the gates.

Parr says his best leaders "have a quality we can't instill in them. It's that work ethic. They want to get the job done right. We know the landscape industry doesn't pay as well as it should, so they've got to take pleasure in their work; they've got to take pride in what they do.

"We have a lot of people who put in extra hours just because they want to make sure it's done right. We know the client expects that," says Parr.

There's quite a "college crowd" on the ISS/Busch Gardens staff, many of whom came to the park trained in turf & ornamental horticulture. Parr says some of his best workers have come to the company from Auburn University—including vice president Dale Elkins—and from the University of Florida and Florida's Lake City Community College. Parr is a Virginia Tech grad who owned his own business for a time, and later worked for the Disney Co.

Training hits all bases

Each ISS landscape employee is trained in all maintenance duties, so anyone can pitch in at a moment's notice. As employees gain expertise in a certain duty, their progress is updated on a training board in the shop.

"The supervisors might need to pull a few of them to get a project done," explains Parr, "so they take a quick look [at the training board] as a reference to see what any one person is trained in."

The staff is divided into three crews: a "support crew," an "area crew" and a "turf crew." The turf crew works only on turfed landscape areas. The area crew works on detailing, with each area crewperson responsible for 10 areas around the park. The specialty crew handles the tree and hedge pruning, fertilizing and special projects.

According to Parr, Busch Gardens management has plenty of confidence in the ISS crew, which gives ISS some freedom to make long-term decisions. The management services company has handled the Busch account since 1974.

ISS people must of necessity get along well with theme park employees—those people who sell the

tickets and check the seatbelts—since they often work close to one another. Crowds and hot days can make anyone ornery, so cooperation is almost a motto.

"We don't have too many problems," says Parr. "You can take care of everything with a handshake and a little diplomacy."

Watching water

The landscape crews arrive early, which gives them first dibs on the oft-rationed water supply. In a warm-weather climate such as Florida, water use is closely-monitored. "You can take only so much water from the aquifer each day. We come in early so [other park personnel] can use the water the rest of the day for sidewalks and rides.

"We've got to have all our stuff done and out of the way before the park opens at 9 a.m. That's another reason why we come in at 5 a.m. We're still doing some stuff in the background after 9."

Chemical applications are either made very early in the morning, or certain areas will be closed for two or three days during applications.

Parr says he and his supervisors are looking ahead to staffing needs and budgets for 1996, as well as general troubleshooting.

"We think about what we could have done better from the year before as far as turf or shrub selection and maintenance."

Plans include a completely automated irrigation system within the next two years. An "Egypt" theme park is also going up soon.

"We've added one supervisor, and will add a second supervisor late this winter or early next spring. Right now we have about 47 to 50 people at Busch Gardens," Parr says.

Most of the turf around the Gardens is St. Augustinegrass. Zoysiagrass was recently added as a groundcover. The least visual areas are seeded with bahiagrass.

ISS is an international multi-service company based



Trees are planted a good distance from visitor paths and protected from any nearby construction.

in Denmark. It employs 115,000 people in a variety of facilities maintenance activities, including landscaping, security, custodial services and catering.

The ISS Florida landscape division recently won nine National Environmental Awards from ALCA for its work at Walt Disney World, the Orlando International Airport, the Busch Gardens "Land of the Dragons" exhibit, and six other properties. □



Pretty—but pesky—flamingoes are tough on the Busch landscape. 'They stand in one spot and shift from foot to foot to soften up the ground beneath them,' explains Parr.