

# Ingenuity helps carry on Pinehurst's reputation



John Clark doesn't really 'steal' good ideas to keep Pinehurst beautiful. He says he just 'borrows' them.

by JERRY ROCHE / Editor-in-Chief

**P**inehurst. When you're talking horticulture, the word "Pinehurst" ranks right up there with "Disney," "Pebble Beach" and "The White House."

Head horticulturist/grounds supervisor John M. Clark is no different than the many thousands of his colleagues at lesser-known institutions all across the country. His problems are just more numerous and more complicated. And they're not always solvable by throwing money at them.

"There are no open purses and no unlimited deep pockets," says Clark, a certified grounds manager (CGM) with the Professional Grounds Management Society. "That type of situation is a myth. We're like any other business: we have to watch each and every penny."

Because visitors to Pinehurst Resort & Country Club have come to expect eye-popping vistas, Clark must use his ingenuity to get the most "bang for his

buck," just like anyone else. And he's not afraid to borrow good ideas.

"Partial pre-finishing was an idea we got from Disney World," Clark relates. "Instead of going with cellpacks of 32 cells to a flat, we will start using 2½x2½-inch cubes in which annuals are grown. We pre-finish perennials in a 3½-inch pot. Starting next spring, when we take out pansies that are in full flower, instead of putting in a new plug, a pre-finish plant will minimize color loss. We want to get transition color in before anybody else. We can't afford to wait until the pansies go out."

The only difference between Pinehurst and other grounds operations is scale, Clark contends. He has 20 people working for him, and 10 additional are hired for four to five weeks, just to plant annuals.

"I admire people who don't have the huge scale we do," he notes. "They are folks who have to figure out innovative ways to do the job safely and efficiently with not as much equipment availability. I've been there, and I know it's a challenging job."

Pinehurst crews plant 100,000 annuals and hundreds of perennials every year. Having an assembly-line mentality has helped Clark cope.

"We use a ½-inch drill with a 'bulb bit' to speed up the plugging of annuals and perennials," he notes. "One person pops the hole, two people put the plugs of annuals in the holes and cover them up. We can average—with two groups of five people—5000 to 7000 annuals in the ground in one day, fertilized and mulched."

Grass is sometimes a small problem, too. Pinehurst has 13 acres of non-golf turf-type tall fescue, proprietary bermudagrass and common bermuda. But the only problem worth mentioning (except for mowing) is fungus on the fescue—mostly brown

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patch because of the humidity.

No, the big problem is color in the landscape.

"The requests for and expectations of color have gone through the ceiling," says Clark, who has been at Pinehurst since 1987. "I'd say they've quadrupled in that time. So we're using more special fall and winter color, and we're working to improve our transition so we never look void of color.

"We have more than 8,000 sq. ft. of greenhouse space this year, with an additional 3,000 sq. ft. planned for next year. With that extra space, we can [test] the All-American selections and see if they work here."

Part of the key to successful color is successful planning, since the color is year-round and a large part of the budget.

"We plan our color six months ahead of time," Clark says. "The growers offer us a percentage discount for having our order booked by May 31st for fall and winter color, and by September 30th for spring and summer color."

#### **Dream job**

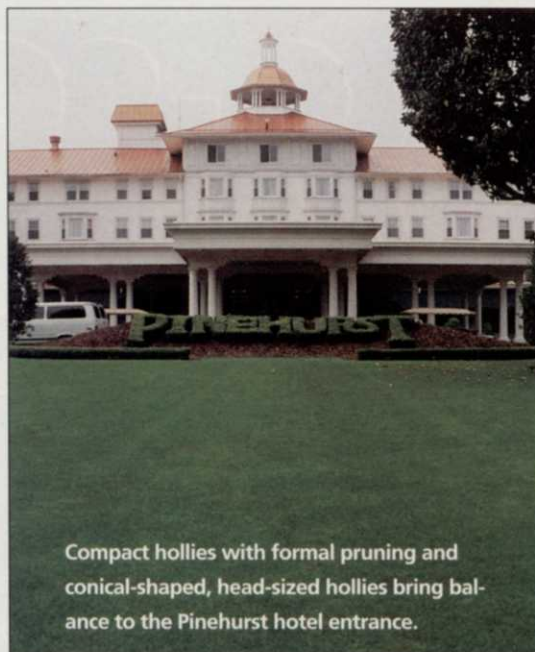
Despite the color concerns, there are many things to like about the job. For instance, the U.S. Department of Interior and National Park Service certified Pinehurst as a National Historic Landmark in June, so Clark now feels like preserving part of U.S. history and culture is part of the job description.

Frederick Olmsted was original Pinehurst designer of the resort and village. Monuments to him still remain, the towering, majestic oaks that dot the grounds.

"Everyone who works here carries on the tradition of hospitality and camaraderie that has made this area famous," Clark says.

"At the time I applied for the position, I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to allow me to incorporate some landscape ideas and designs I'd been pondering. The ideas really lent themselves to the formal landscape preservation of Pinehurst, too.

"I see my job as enhancing the history of the preserved landscape that's been here



Compact hollies with formal pruning and conical-shaped, head-sized hollies bring balance to the Pinehurst hotel entrance.

for more than 100 years—not recreating the landscape. It has been a dream job."

His predecessor, Lanny Garner, was the grounds manager who really brought the Southern "feel" back into the perspective of Pinehurst. Clark just added some personal "touches."

"My first project was to reformatize the front of the hotel area," he says. "It was a hodgepodge of shrubbery. The *Formosa azaleas* had grown absolutely huge. You couldn't see over them from the front porch, and you couldn't see the wonderful expanse of turf. So we brought rhyme and reason into the design by planting compact hollies with formal pruning and conical-shaped head-sized hollies."

#### **Special projects**

Making topiary and responding to the weather are two ongoing programs, though they're pretty much seasonal. Pinehurst displays "mock topiary" in the shape of what they call their "Putter boy" and "Tour boy," four flamingos and—in season—an Easter bunny. "They're wire forms covered with *vinca minor*. We also do Christmas tree shapes out of myrtle and we plant poinsettias, in season.

"In December, we clean up the natural areas, do small projects: tree pruning, moving and transplanting plant material. In January and February, we do ice and snow removal with our 'Ice Patrol.' The ice

storms here can absolutely wreak havoc. This past winter was as close to a total nightmare as I can remember. We lost six trees."

Clark especially remembers February of 1995 when high winds felled more than 75 trees on the resort grounds and golf courses and in the Pinehurst community. Because the year-round residents are so closely-knit to the resort, Director of Grounds and Golf Course Maintenance Brad Kocher took resort crews out onto the public driveways and lawns, and helped clean up debris.

"The chain saws and pick-ups were all coordinated by Brad Kocher and the other golf course superintendents—before the clean-up of the golf course and resort grounds," Clark says.

#### **Behind the scenes**

As with any successful venture, the people make the difference. Clark is surrounded with quality co-workers—and they're more co-workers than anything else because he gets his fingernails as dirty as anybody else on the payroll.

"We're specialists, but there's a lot of overlap," he claims. "I'm grounds superintendent, and Tim Kemper is the grounds assistant. Brad Kocher is director of grounds and golf course maintenance, Paul Jett is superintendent on Pinehurst No. 2, and manages the croquet and lawn bowling courts. We have an irrigation department and a vehicle maintenance department that maintains 120 vehicles.

"We have a lot of 'non-traditional' employees, too. Cynthia Alexander is our greenhouse foreperson. Michelle Buie is her assistant. We have a lot of minorities; interns from England, Australia and New Zealand; lots of retirees, including two who work in the greenhouse.

"We work our schedule around the retirees' hours, and people like Dr. Dick Nickerson—who is a retired tomato breeder for the Campbell's Soup Company—is an inspiration to us. This is a learning experience; there's a wealth of knowledge here." □