

Desert's 'Green' gem

Versatile public works employees of this small Arizona city give residents and tourists what they want—lots of trees and acres of green grass.

by DON DALE

The logo of the City of Litchfield Park, Ariz., is a line of palm and orange trees resplendent on a white background. The logo, in fact, is an accurate representation of a city so green that it stands out vividly among the other desert suburbs of the greater Phoenix metropolitan area.

In an era of strict water conservation and xeriscaping, Litchfield Park, located just west of Phoenix, is making a commitment to its green look. But it places a burden on the budget and landscaping staff of the city of 38,000.

"We've seen a value for it since way back," says City Manager Bob Musselwhite, who points out that ever since the

city was set up by the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company in 1916 it has specialized in trees.

"We get criticized a lot for the amount of water we use," Musselwhite says, but the city feels strongly that the green look not only attracts new residents, it also lends a more homey atmosphere to the community.

"This type of element in our landscaping and design of our cities is critical in bringing us together," he maintains.

The man who bears the burden of the landscaping is Bob Gaunt, maybe



A green image is emphasized throughout Litchfield Park, Ariz.

the only public works director in the state who has a horticultural background rather than one relating to streets or buildings. He estimates that over 50 percent of the cost of public works salaries in Litchfield Park goes to landscape.

'Trademark look' high maintenance

The trademark look of the city is its alternating palm and orange trees along main downtown thoroughfares. It has been this way for decades, but it still requires a lot of effort to maintain.

"We lose quite a few to lightning," Gaunt says of the palm trees. "They're not a problem otherwise. We have about 1,400 palm trees. That's how many we trim a year."

Actually, because of safety concerns, the city contracts private trimmers to do the specialized job of trimming palms. Gaunt reserves his force of eight employees for other work.

One of the biggest jobs recently has been to replace some of the 60 or 70-year-old sour orange trees which line the boulevards.



Public Works Director Bob Gaunt, left, and City Manager Bob Musselwhite think the money spent on maintaining the city's trees and turf is well spent.

wards. A recent two-year drought killed many of them.

"We've got a pretty extensive program to replace them," says Gaunt. "We replace 40 or 50 per year."

Pruning the trees is also a big job for public works. The city has an extensive pathway system, and the orange trees overhang the distinctive red concrete paths. The trees are trimmed so that people can

"We're trying to educate people who live along the right of ways to help us water those trees," says Gaunt, to avert heavy drought losses.

walk under them.

That presents another horticultural problem. When citrus tree trunks are exposed to the harsh Arizona sun, they sunburn. Trees can die. So white paint must be applied to the trunks every year.

Many of the street medians and fringe areas of Litchfield Park are planted with oranges and palms. But the city has gone to more drought-resistant vegetation such as Mondale pines, Chilean mesquite, heritage live oak and cactus in its new plantings away from city-center.

Most orange trees are either on drip or bubbler irrigation, says Gaunt. The adjacent palm trees can survive on natural rainfall plus the little water they pick up from the orange tree irrigation.

"We're trying to educate people who live along the right of ways to help us



water those trees," says Gaunt, who points out that this could avert heavy death losses in drought times.

Litchfield Park has no city ordinances addressing what trees residents can plant, other than pollen producers such as fruited olives and mulberries. Those are banned, and the city is actively removing them for the health benefits of residents and visitors. The city is a tourist area with the Wigwam Resort the city's biggest economic asset.

"We took out about 60 fruited olives last year and replaced them with other trees," Gaunt says.

Turf care is another heavy labor cost for the city. Half of the crew at times is busy mowing.

"Mowing takes basically two days—that's with four guys," Gaunt explains. Most of the rotary riding mowers are mulchers which improves aesthetics after mowing.

Common bermuda/perennial rye

All city grass is common bermuda, and in order to keep the dormant turf looking good in the winter the city overseeds everything except its soccer fields. Gaunt uses perennial rye for overseeding instead of annual rye, because it requires less water



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Tree-lined boulevards give this desert city its character. Note the white paint used to protect the trunks of the citrus trees.

and mowing.

The city considers the rather large cost of the overseeding—10,000 pounds of seed—this winter alone was hefty. But it's necessary to keep up the city's image during the season when it gets most of its tourists.

'Tree City' image a boost

The city has four parks that, with other grassy areas, bring the mowed areas up to 23 acres. The heavily used soccer fields are not overseeded, because the rye would just be ruined, and it is a slippery playing surface.

"We have one desert park," says Gaunt. It has been planted with desert vegetation, mostly native, such as cactus and ocotillo.

Nevertheless, Litchfield Park is still a green city. Its distinctive downtown boulevards and commitment to trees have made it a designated Tree City, USA by the National Arbor Day Foundation three years in a row, and it obtains state funds to help maintain its green image.

Maricopa County found out how dedi-



When the county erected this wall, it created openings to save the beauty of trees like this Aleppo pine.

cated the city was to its trees when it widened a boundary street and erected a barrier wall between it and the city. Public works made sure the country saved every tree it could, and the engineers got in the spirit of things so thoroughly that they even erected masonry fences with holes in them for trees to lean through.

Many tasks done well

Gaunt points out that the secret to a small municipality such as Litchfield Park being successful with such a large landscaping commitment is the public works employees.

"The secret is that everyone has to be versatile," he says. His crew of eight may all be working on streets one day and tree plantings or irrigation maintenance the next.

Gaunt designates specialties within the work crew to facilitate landscape maintenance. For example, one man is the pri-

mary tree trimmer. But all employees work on turf or trees at some time, and hiring people with good attitudes and sending them to training seminars when possible enables Gaunt to keep the green areas looking good year-round.

The city tries to cultivate an "ownership" attitude in its public employees; they more the identify with the city as their own, the better they do in their work.

Musselwhite says there is a lot of hassle in keeping a city green in the low desert, but Litchfield Park has a distinctive image. And the city and residents are committed to keeping it. **LM**

—Don Dale is freelance writer living and working in Willcox, Ariz.