

About one-third of all cemetery managers contract out landscaping work and other aspects of cemetery management

Cemetery care smarter, more economical

The sheer volume of acreage at cemeteries dictates the need for reduced labor through subcontracting and proper plant selection.

By ROBERT E. REAVES

trust fund that exceeds \$12 million. Like Spring Grove, these cemeteries emphasize sculpture and landscape management.

Forest Lawn Memorial Parks in Southern California have set the aesthetic trends for many years in the cemetery industry. One example is the trend to use grass-level markers instead of monuments and obelisks. With five cemeteries in Los Angeles and Orange County, about 530 acres are developed under turf or under some type of landscape. Thousands of visitors come to see the outstanding examples of architecture and statuary at Forest Lawn

parks each year. An endowment care fund stands at \$175 million.

Contractor trend

About one-third of all cemeteries contract out both landscape and other aspects of cemetery management—especially where it makes good business sense. As an example, Spring Grove no longer does its own road repair. They also contract with local arborists for stump grinding and extensive tree pruning. Instead of raising its own annuals at on-site greenhouses, annuals are purchased from local greenhouses at half the cost. "Any prudent business manager must constantly ask the question whether it will cost less to do the work from the inside or outside," notes Smith.

Jon Stephenson, vice president of Greenwood Memorial Park and Mount Olivet Cemetery says before you make a decision to hire a contractor, you must completely understand what it costs for maintenance. "If you choose to contract out the landscape management, do it in increments, mowing, fertilization or tree care."

The last thing a grieving family wants to see is a loved one's grave site covered with tall weeds, and a marker that sinks into the ground.

Quality cemetery management and correct interment site preparation reduce these problems. A good plan can work for in-house crew or outside landscape contractor, at any size facility.

Spring Grove Cemetery and Arboretum of Cincinnati, Ohio, is a fine example of quality cemetery management. Chartered in 1845, it covers 730 total acres, 425 acres of which are mowed and developed. Not only does the park have a renowned arboretum, it also contains 14 lakes and 45 miles of high-crowned roads — perfect for bicycles and hiking. Tom Smith is senior vice president there.

Greenwood and Mount Olivet Cemeteries in Fort Worth, Texas, were dedicated in the early 1900s. The landscapes at both cemeteries are managed by skilled in-house crews. To ensure the perpetual care of the cemeteries, this association has a

Stephenson explains you should carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of contracting outside help. "With in-house workers you maintain control, but when you subcontract you eliminate employee taxes and benefits."

David Macdonald, manager of maintenance at the Hollywood Hills Forest Lawn Memorial-Park, says the skills of the in-house crew help determine whether or not to hire a contractor. Forest Lawn is fortunate to have an incredibly skilled management team, but other cemeteries could find outside contractors a big help.

Service driven, detail oriented

Environmental Care, Inc., is a national, full-service landscape management company that offers cemeteries a wide array of services. In addition to mowing, a few of its services include tree care, turf management, irrigation, pond management and pest control—along with the specialized equipment and skilled specialists needed to get the job done.

"There is a definite trend in the industry toward hiring outside landscape management companies because they help improve the bottom line. An in-house staff is very expensive and a contractor can do the job for significantly less money with trained labor," says Maureen Anami, operations manager for the Los Angeles branch of Environmental Care, Inc. Anami knows cemetery management. Prior to joining ECI, she worked at a major cemetery in Southern California.

Anami says good communication between the cemetery and the landscape management company is essential.

"Each day we check in with the cemetery foreman at 6 a.m. to get a list of memorial services for that day," says Anami. "Everything changes from day to

day, so we must be flexible, service driven and detail oriented — to do whatever it takes to get the job done."

Anami says improvement of a cemetery's bottom line is where ECI really shines. An example of this is in the area of water conservation. "We've got water consumption down to a science through ET-based irrigation. We've saved clients 20 to 30 percent in water costs and sewer charges, and in California that's a big deal."

Mowing becomes a challenge

Mowing and trimming around markers takes the greatest amount of time. Scheduling is very difficult because of the unpredictable number of services. Each day typically begins with a morning meeting attended by all the managers and supervisors to review the locations of services. The entire crew must be aware of traffic patterns and plan mowing and other management activities around the memorial services.

Spring Grove crews follow a rigorous range standard for turf height — 2 ½ to four inches at all times. "We take turf height measurements every week as benchmarks so that everyone gets a report card on their

performance," says Tom Smith. "Our mowing team uses the 90/10 theory. We may mow 90 percent of the property, but 10 percent of what we didn't mow is what 90 percent of the people see." The major turfgrass here is Kentucky bluegrass.

Monuments, markers and floral decorations are an ominous mowing obstacle at cemeteries. "Many cemeteries create their own headaches," remarks Jon Stephenson, of Greenwood Memorial Park and Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Fort Worth, TX.

"Properly maintained cemeteries must have strict guidelines on the proper placement of flowers, use approved vases and should only allow artificial flowers during the non-mowing season."

Plant growth regulators

Plant growth regulators (PGRs) should definitely be considered in a cemetery management program, since they can provide a significant reduction in mowing and trimming. "Cemeteries have obstacles that create mowing and trimming difficulty," says Joe DiPaola, Primo product manager at Novartis. "PGRs help cemeteries to grow a better turf without a sacrifice in turf

quality. Use of PGRs can mean 50 percent reduction in mowing — between mowings and actual mowing time." With less mowing time, crews are then able to pursue other tasks.

Smith agrees. "We started experimenting with PGRs in 1969, and we've tried to cooperate with every chemical company that has a product." He says that PGRs do not replace mowing and trimming, but definitely give breathing room to the maintenance team. "We make pre-green up applications of PGRs to our turfgrass through Memorial Day, as well as applications on Japanese Yew and other woody plant materials to slow growth."



Ornamentals placed at this Spring Grove intersection add color and texture, reduce turf maintenance and are a more attractive sight for visitors.

Forest Lawn has closely looked at plant growth regulators and has even done some trials with Primo. "Although Primo does suppress growth and improves turf color, the cost associated with its use were actually higher than turfgrass management without Primo." However, Macdonald is quick to point out that the cost-effectiveness of PGRs will be different at every cemetery. He says it depends on crew size, type of turfgrass, and the goals of the cemetery.

Pea gravel firms up soil

Settling soil is a persistent problem that

away, Mount Olivet's soil has a high clay content — prone to shrinking and swelling. "For heavy clay soils, we backfill with sand around the outer container, followed by a backfill to the grade. We tamp the soil, resod and tamp again to limit settling," explains Stephenson.

Forest Lawn's crew prepares the internment site with a backhoe. After the memorial service is completed, the soil is backfilled with a backhoe that has a hydraulically-operated tamping attachment. "If tamped correctly, we only have limited settling," says Macdonald. After thorough

not damage the cemetery markers or survey pins like other aeration equipment. Hydroject has nozzles that fracture the soil with high velocity water pressure and creates channels and crevices in the soil that encourage root growth.

However, core aerators continue to be very popular. "We find that the smaller Ryan walk-behind units work better in the developed areas of a cemetery, with pull-behind units more suitable for the larger, undeveloped areas," adds Anami. Like other aspects of cemetery management, Anami says you have to do whatever it takes to provide a top quality appearance.

Training conferences help

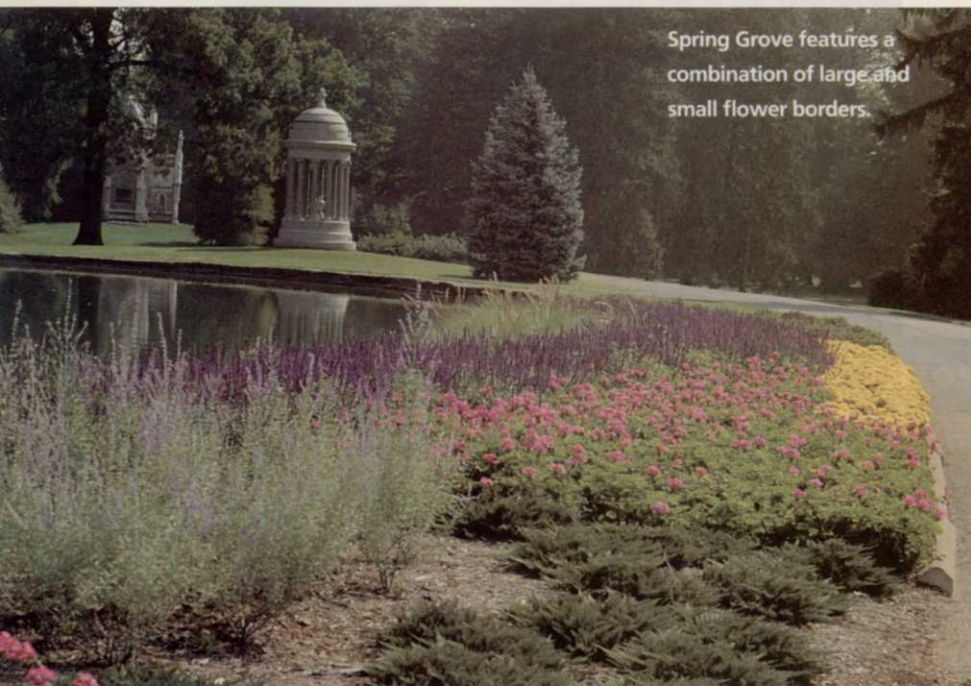
Within the cemetery industry, the commitment to ongoing training is very impressive. As an example, Greenwood/Mt. Olivet sends its crew to Texas Cemetery Association Maintenance Conferences, as well as the International Cemetery & Funeral Association University (ICFA) held at the University of Memphis.

Stephenson says ICFA University is made up of several "colleges"—week long classes on team work, new equipment, floral color in the landscape, pruning and other aspects of maintenance. "The caliber of this school demonstrates the professionalism of this industry," he remarks. ICFA University is very important in providing accreditation within the cemetery industry.

Spring Grove makes horticultural training available at no cost to its employees. "Several of our employees are going for a B.S. degree in horticulture at the new evening-only program at the University of Cincinnati," boasts Smith. "Our employees love it and we pick up the full tuition."

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For more information on the International Cemetery & Funeral Association University, Contact Tina Evans at the ICFA. Phone: 703/391-8400.



Spring Grove features a combination of large and small flower borders.

can be traced back to the internment preparation. "This is a very delicate matter and is the the number one concern of our customers," says Smith. To manage the problem, Spring Grove places a small aggregate pea gravel around the edge and up to the top of the concrete burial container, followed by a backfill of top soil. This method works well in areas of the country with severe winter weather and heavy soils.

Soil type has a direct impact on the degree of settling a site will experience. For example, the soil at Greenwood Memorial Park is very sandy and settling is not as much of a problem. But only a few miles

soil tamping, the sod is rolled back in place, and is immediately watered and tamped. "We experimented with sand to backfill internment sites, but noticed little difference in the amount of settling."

Soil compaction is evident

This constant disruption of the soil and heavy equipment of 22,000 pounds or more brings about the need for frequent turf aeration.

"We need an innovative aeration technique for this industry. Probably the best equipment on the market right now is Toro's Hydroject," advises Smith. He says Hydroject is noteworthy because it does