

Taking care of a county

With 419 square miles of territory and a north-south length of 36 miles, Anne Arundel County is one big grounds maintenance challenge

BY JASON STAHL

Mike Burton usually has to explain himself when he tells people about all of the roadkill he takes care of as horticulture supervisor of Anne Arundel County Central Services, Annapolis, MD. That's because the roadkill he's talking about doesn't necessarily have fur on it.

"It's our plants," Burton says, referring to the plants found in the medians along 11 miles of the county's busiest roads. "About 30 to 40 times a year, we respond to a call about a car driving into the median and killing some of them."

And there are countless other times when Burton and his five-man crew will stumble upon some unreported "roadkill," so it's anybody's guess as to how many plants wear treadmarks each year.

But massacred plants are only one of the problems Burton has to deal with when tending to the median strips. Lanes have to be closed to protect his crew from cars that whiz by at up to 55 miles per hour, and that, according to state and county regulations, can only be done between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., requiring advance scheduling to ensure productivity.

The application of pesticides has to be done during the off hours of the day.

"That's a nightmare," Burton says. "When we use a power sprayer, we have to use low pressure so it doesn't blow into traffic."

Lots of ground to cover

Median strips compose only a fraction of the 419 square miles Burton and his crew handle. Over 116 landscapes in and around office complexes, senior centers, libraries, gateways, police stations, sediment ponds and other places require their attention. With such a huge territory to cover, Burton has turned his crew into one lean, mean efficiency machine.

"We have to be efficient because going from one end of the county to the other takes an hour and 20 minutes," he says. "When we head in one direction, we make sure to make several stops."

Efficiency is also required with water use, as only five of Anne Arundel's sites have automatic irrigation. To water everything, including seasonal plantings like annuals, mums and pansies at 24 different sites, Burton makes use of two 400-gallon water trailers. The tanks are filled using outside faucets at various facilities, but three portable water meters were recently ac-



PROPERTY AT A GLANCE

Location: Anne Arundel County Central Services, Annapolis, MD

Staff: Anne Arundel County Horticulture Department

Members: Rodney Gott, Gary Burns, Ron Offer, Jeff Puls, Stan Speaks, Mike Burton

Total budget: \$406,000

Year site built: 1988-1993

Acres of turf: 71.5

Acres of woody ornamentals: 9

Acres of display beds: 32.6

Total paved area: 40.8 acres

Total man-hours/week: 240

(photo above) Crew member Rodney Gott prunes deadwood from a juniper at the Heritage Complex entrance island.

quired to tap into hydrants to water such inaccessible areas as the landscape showcases in the median strips.

Chain gangs and crossing guards

Any time Burton gets a chance to increase his manpower, he jumps all over the opportunity with the enthusiasm deer and rabbits show when eating his plants. All mowing is contracted out, but when the number of soda bottles and cigarettes start to outnumber the flowers in the median strips, the local chain gang is called on to form a trash clean-up crew.

"I give them guidance and the materials to do the job," Burton says. "In some cases, each day worked outside means one day taken off their sentence."

When the requests for pesticide applications started becoming more than the few licensed pesticide applicators could handle, Burton started training and licensing people on the county's custodial crew, library staff members and his own crew members. Now, over 20 individuals in Burton's command are pesticide technicians.

"That has greatly reduced the requests we get and allowed things to be serviced that we don't have time for," Burton says.

Burton even caded a few workers out of what would seem like an unlikely group — crossing guards. "Of course, crossing guards only work during the school season, but the county was looking to make them full-time," he says. "The ones who opted to continue their employment through the summer had various options, so I asked if we could use these people. So far, they've been great at keeping our plants alive."

Burton also took advantage of a teen opportunity program sponsored by the local police department last summer. Any time the local garden club or Eagle Scout troop wants to get involved with his crew's everyday activities, Burton welcomes them.

"You can't have a good program without good people," Burton says. "People



Stan Speaks and Ronald Offer of Anne Arundel Co. Central Services work on Solomon's Island roadway median, where signage and visibility are important for safety.

typically have a bad impression of government workers but my guys are great. One of our guys was planting flowers one time and he turned to me and said, 'We actually get paid for this?'"

A balancing act

In addition to coordinating his horticulture staff, additional personnel, contractors, and community participants, Burton must keep up on other county departments.

"The county's management strongly encourages interdepartmental cooperation," Burton says. "For many of our projects, we receive the use of personnel and equipment from road operations, utilities, traffic maintenance, water operations and others."

To expand the capabilities of his crew, Burton made sure that four of his staffers became class "B" state certified drivers. Even though there is no equipment in the horticulture department that requires a heavy duty truck license for operation, the licenses enable crew members to drive trucks borrowed from other departments. At any time, Burton's crew has found it necessary to borrow arrow boards for lane closures, bucket trucks, heavy tonnage dump trucks, a 5,000-gal. tanker truck for watering roadway plants, and backhoes.

Special projects

The Anne Arundel crew's responsibilities recently expanded to include Tipton Airport at Fort Meade, which had been neglected ever since it was put out of service nine years ago.

Because of a drought, however, the department hired a subcontractor and, after three-ft. tall weeds were cut down, Burton's crew applied a concoction consisting of industrial pre-emergent, Round Up and Schism to eliminate any re-growth. **LM**

Who is Anne Arundel?

When someone first hears about Anne Arundel County in Maryland, the first question that pops up is: Who is Anne Arundel, any way?

She was Lady Anne of Arundel, who longed to voyage to the new world but never got to realize her dream.

Each year, usually in May, a company called Homestead Gardens formally celebrates the arrival of the Lady Anne Arundel daylily. This year, to commemorate the county's 350th anniversary, Homestead Gardens donated 300 daylilies to be planted at all five county gateways.