



Cultivating the Perfect Setting

by Margaret French
photos by Gil Jain

The blooming of the chrysanthemums on the University's south oval is one of the more spectacular attractions for fall visitors to the campus. But the natives testify that the artistry of the landscape crews is evident year-round all over the Norman campus.

continued



Sprawled over 1,700 acres, the University of Oklahoma's Norman campus requires a tremendous amount of mowing and sowing, planning and planting, pruning and grooming to keep it all gorgeous. That mammoth, year-round task falls to the landscape department.

"We're in the 'pretty business,' and making the campus pretty is a whole bunch of little things," explains landscape manager Randy Lacewell, characteristically oversimplifying his department's responsibilities.

In 1971, when Lacewell joined the group charged with this never-ending chore, 52 full-time workers were employed to handle the job. Today, even with added buildings and the accompanying landscaped gardens, walks and terrain, a trim staff of 47 tends the process.

Quick to say he "would have" pursued a degree in landscape architecture had such been offered when he attended Texas Tech on his way to OU, Lacewell earned his degree in park administration, with a strong emphasis on horticulture and landscape. That background has helped mold the landscape department into an icon of efficiency.

Lacewell's assistant manager is Don Billings, who oversees two supervisors: Al Rainey, who is responsible for refuse disposal and mowing the areas south of Timberdell Road; and Kenneth Blair, who takes care of mowing on north campus plus the small engine mechanics, pesticide applicators and

equipment parts inventory. Also reporting to Lacewell is supervisor Bruce Elam, who manages the gardeners on main campus and in the housing areas, the operators of the big lawnmowers and other equipment and the construction crews.

Both modest to a fault, Lacewell and Elam can't give enough credit up the line to their immediate boss Ben Kinder, director of the physical plant, and the head of the division, Art Elbert, vice president for administrative affairs, but they also save special praise for the hands-on landscape crews.

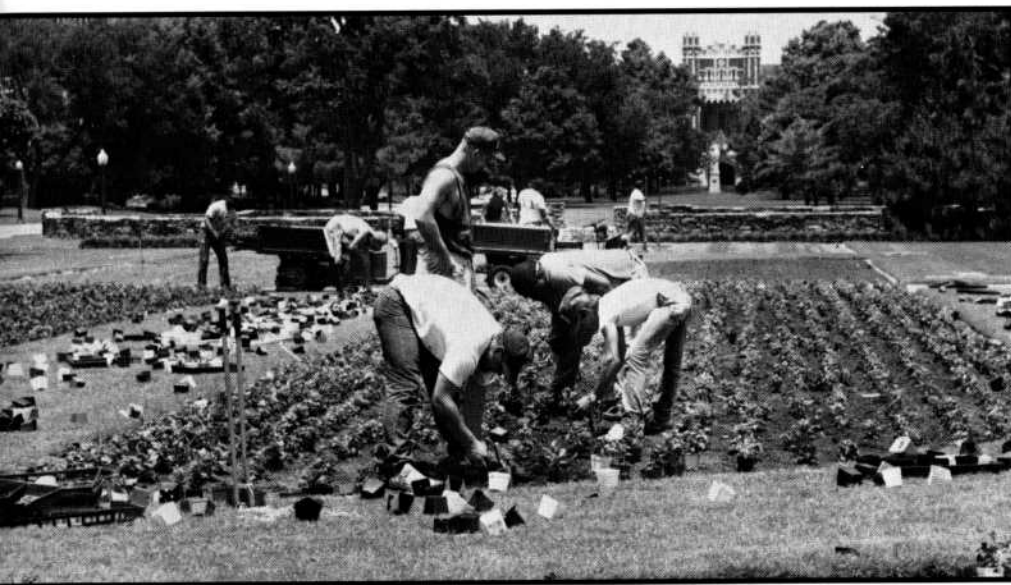
"I'd brag on any one of them," says Elam, now a 10-year OU veteran who moved north during the oil bust from landscaping for Halliburton in Duncan. "Everyone here is very professional. We have a wonderful staff."

Lacewell and Elam share what some might term a laissez-faire approach to management.

"These people are great," continues Elam, who is fond of visiting other University campuses when on vacation. "They require very little supervision. As far as setting up their areas, they know what needs to be done. It makes my job simple to have the assistant supervisors I have; it makes their jobs simple because of the people working with them. Without these people, no matter what expertise the management has, they're not going to get the job done. We can say, 'this is the project we want to do,' and they go out and get it done."

Lacewell delights in finding work





OPPOSITE LEFT: Even in the snow, the campus reflects the planning and care of dedicated landscape crews.

OPPOSITE RIGHT (top): A special crew is trained to install and maintain the labor-saving computerized sprinkling system.

(middle): Perennial favorites are the hundreds of pansies that begin their lives in the OU greenhouse under the care of two dotting attendants.

(bottom): Landscape workers unload young pansies for planting at the Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education.

THIS PAGE: When the time is right for planting the 20,000 mums on the south oval, it's "all hands on deck" as gardeners are pulled from throughout the campus to help. Due to the size of the order, the plants come from nurseries nationwide.



LEFT: The formal garden between Bizzell Memorial Library and Adams Hall is a landscape showplace with its precision-designed plantings. BELOW: The redbuds and jonquils bloom in springtime profusion near the fountain north of Adams Hall. OPPOSITE LEFT: The crape myrtles lining Brooks Street by the stadium were planted originally when the campus was being dressed up for the U.S. Olympic Festival in July 1989. OPPOSITE RIGHT: When heavy rains and unseasonably cool weather damaged the formal garden plantings, gardeners were on the spot to replace them. Admiring their efforts in the center of this photo are administrative vice president Art Elbert, physical plant director Ben Kinder and landscape manager Randy Lacewell.





Betsy Baker



concluded without his constant supervision and often walks the campus just to appreciate the efforts resulting from hard work. "The people who work for me know how important they are to me," Lacewell says, adding that Kinder and Elbert have been instrumental in keeping the morale high when budgets are low, impacting the campus greenbelt right along with academics.

"Over the past decade, we have had large fluctuations in available resources for all departments of the University," Elbert says. "However, everyone has worked hard to sustain the great progress we have made in keeping the campus looking great for the students, faculty and staff that we serve. A great deal of credit goes to all the employees in the landscaping area for not giving up during the lean years and taking great pride in their achievement."

"My biggest fear right now is budget increases not happening for two or three years," Lacewell says. "Staying level—plateauing out—won't work very well. You have to grow a little bit; that's why we're always doing the little things, if not on the scale we did before."

Enter the campus' existing human resources, which have been a godsend to the department, particularly in lean economic times. When Kinder announced several years ago that he wanted to dress up a campus eyesore, the fountain behind Adams Hall (now one of Lacewell's choice areas), faculty and staff—civil engineers, concrete

workers, carpenters, all who were willing to pitch in—were recruited to carefully provide decking to protect the big native elm tree central to the project.

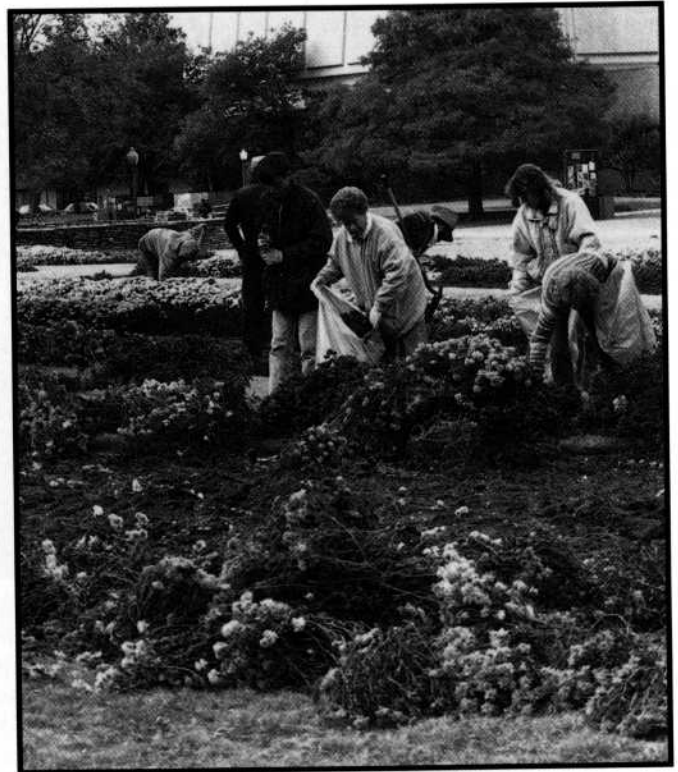
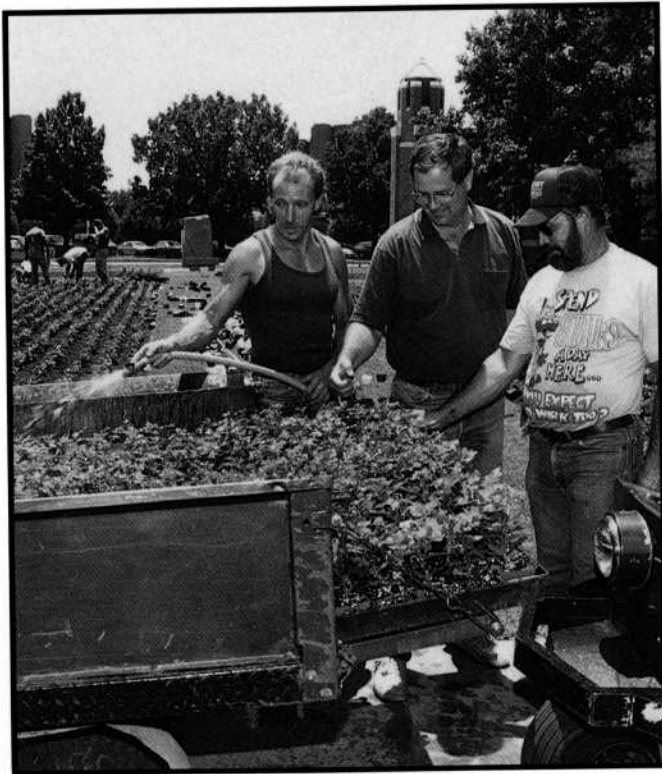
"Some of those names are lost forever," laments Lacewell. "There should be a plaque there with the names of everyone who helped."

Whether out of great pride or necessity, Lacewell and company always are looking for ways to fine-tune their work. One recent addition is computerized watering.

Of the main campus area, Lacewell and Elam estimate that 30 to 40 percent are tied into the automated irrigation system, with the work-intensive areas already on line: the north and south ovals, Energy Center, OCCE cottages, the airport terminal (for which the landscape department recently resumed responsibility) and other isolated areas around campus. Plans are drawn and awaiting funding for the wagon wheel flowerbed near the fine arts center, student union, stadium, Adams Hall, Hester-Robertson and the art museum.

Operational since 1988, the watering system consists of a computer-driven controller and area satellites. Specifications are programmed into the computer for a two-week period.

Meanwhile, a miniature weather station at Rhyne Hall tracks all the variables that possibly could impact watering: wind direction, humidity, current, minimum and maximum temperatures. A program set to deliver three inches of water to an area of



ABOVE LEFT: Supervisor Bruce Elam, center, inspects the mums destined for the south oval. Careful timing results in a mass of color for Homecoming.

ABOVE RIGHT: When frost finishes off the mums, landscapers loosen the soil and hoards of townspeople magically appear to claim the plants.

BELOW: Normal winters allow for catch-up work and some tree planting.

campus online would adjust itself to produce only one inch if two inches of rain were to fall at the sensor.

Obviously, the system reduces the labor-intensive task of hauling water hoses all over campus, especially to remote areas. Before automation, Lacewell notes, after a rain, "it would take one person eight hours going hard as he could to kill all our irrigation systems."

Of course, keeping the device at a peak level of operation requires constant tender, loving care from the landscape crew trained to maintain it, including sprinkler heads damaged by everything from landscape equipment, frisbees, footballs and feet, to vandalism, which fortunately has decreased from the days of cars careening through flowerbeds. Now the landscapers guard primarily against bicycles and pedestrians walking through hedges.

Letting people walk naturally has been a worthy lesson for Lacewell, who has learned over time that most people will obey the walkways, except the kind that "must have been designed by people in the military—the ones with the 90-degree turns," he chafes. "No one walks that way. We finally started putting in some walks that meander and make a pleasant little trip when

people cut through."

While landscape frequently has been able to solve the problems of "cow-paths" by providing ample sidewalks to train foot traffic away from the bermuda, occasionally they must concede defeat.

"Sometimes it's just the case of one single tree in a cowpath that diverted them back to the walks; in some cases we had to put in quite a bit of shrubbery; sometimes we had to bite the bullet and put in a serpentine path. You get better at it, but you can't out-guess the folks all the time. You think you have it, and the students will make a fool out of you real quick—students, staff, faculty—it's all of us."

Foot traffic diverted, the man responsible for transforming the turf from what everyone agrees was "pathetic" in 1983 to its current state of lusciousness is Don Billings. He accomplished the transition by bringing in shade and cool-season grasses, changing mowing and fertilizing patterns and mowing equipment.

Billings now has assumed responsibility for refuse disposal and more than half of north campus—approximately 900 acres—a project he predicts will "take some time." Pulling an old trick, he is starting with the establishment

of bermuda followed by “a lot of tree work” around the air terminal and selected buildings.

“We’re working on it,” he says, “but our responsibility has quadrupled on north campus. But I love new things; I love a challenge, absolutely.”

The workers in landscaping appear to genuinely love their jobs and feel compelled to tell the story. Elam, who balances his schedule while completing a bachelor’s degree in management, views the department as an active ingredient in the cozy relationship the University enjoys with the community. He regularly visits local nursing homes to present seminars on his work.

Always a popular topic is Elam’s *pièce de résistance*: the chrysanthemum beds on the south oval. He is responsible for concocting each year’s design, ordering the plants and raising them in OU’s greenhouses with two hothouse attendants. Each year’s mum show is in the planning stages in Elam’s mind long before the preceding year’s blooms are claimed by frost.

The tiny mum plants are transplanted to their outdoor homes at the beginning of the summer, then coddled, cultivated and pinched back over and over and over until the *go!* (or *grow!*) signal finally is given. Then the 20,000 mums burst forth, uniting into a carpet of bright, multicolored blossoms that have adorned the campus each fall since the early 1950s, becoming an OU trademark and a welcoming beacon precisely timed to coincide with Homecoming.

When frost does dim the color, the landscape crew is as eager to remove the blunted flowers as they were to plant them. The citizens of Norman flock to the annual event, taking plants to enhance their home beds for years to come. The gardeners repeat the gift-giving when the time comes to remove past-their-prime tulips.

“This is probably the best public relations project that happens with this University, giving away the mums and tulip bulbs,” Elam muses. “People call months in advance and ask, ‘when are we going to get the mums?’ I’ll bet 90 percent of the mums in this town came from this campus.”

In addition to caring for the mums, some landscape crew members also help with their purchase. Several employees contribute to the President’s

Partners fund-raising program and earmark their donations for mum plants.

In addition to the mums, the landscape department also plants some 20,000 flowers raised from seed in the OU greenhouses: pansies, petunias, salvia, alyssum, ageratum, dahlias, verbenas and impatiens, along with begonias, Joseph’s coat and geraniums carried over year to year from cuttings.

While the mums epitomize the entire landscape picture, they are only what shows the most, what is up front, as is all of the crew’s work—on stage, for everyone to see. There are the other items to tend to, more of the “little things,” as Lacewell calls them.

♣ Little things include planning their work around the activities of 20,000 students and 1,500 faculty and staff to remove trees or replace sod, even when that means shifting the work day by hours;

♣ Little things such as working like mad the week before commencement for the graduates, because this is “their year, and their campus, and we want them to be proud of it”;

♣ Little things like battling Mother Nature and her snow and ice that slow wintertime cleanup and spring preparations, mild winters that leave insects ready to pounce out ahead of every bloom, and flower- and shrub-killing freezes in May that leave the landscape folks “working to get back to square one”;

♣ Little things like manicuring thousands of junipers, crape myrtle, forsythia, honeysuckle, quince, evergreen and holly, sculpting a design of green continuity throughout the campus;

♣ Little things like fighting litter, which seems to ebb and flow along a four-year, unexplainable pattern. Some years, Lacewell says, “people will walk 30 feet out of their way to find a trash can; it just goes in cycles like that, and we’re in the worst part of it right now. People are real bad to litter, and the biggest problem is paper.”

That problem translates into perhaps the most rapidly growing and challenging part of the department’s duties: refuse, which in the 1990s means recycling. Lacewell estimates that where the University once was experiencing 23 percent increases in trash collections, recycling has reduced

that to a flat figure, with a possible reduction in sight by next year, a positive possibility.

“At least we’re not crawling anymore; we’re in more of a walk in terms of recycling for the University as a whole,” he sighs.

While Lacewell feels that little things work in concert to achieve landscaping goals, he firmly believes that his department is important to the University. Several years ago, he relates, university presidents from across the country were polled by the Carnegie Foundation concerning reasons students chose a particular institution.

“Entering freshmen in the particular year they did the survey said that aesthetics of the campus was the reason in 62 percent of the cases,” Lacewell notes of the presidential reply.

“The University is a business, believe it or not, and attracting top-quality students is our business. A lot of campuses have picked up on this, though I think we were a little bit ahead.”

Lacewell regards himself and his office fortunate, due in no small part to OU presidents who genuinely have cared about and recognized the importance of the campus appearance. Current President Richard L. Van Horn commented on “the gorgeous turf” during an early visit to Norman, Lacewell beams.

As far as past OU presidents, tops during Lacewell’s tenure was OU’s 10th chief, the visionary William S. Banowsky, rumored to have “moved an aesthetic-looking rock two inches to the left because he wanted it to be perfect. His involvement, his thoughts, perceptions—he was key in influencing a lot of people at the University of Oklahoma. He was very much into it,” Lacewell remembers.

“I have watched the University go up and down in my 20 years.” Thankfully, he theorizes, there is more of a consciousness right now for a beautiful landscape throughout most of the institution. “We hear more praise and appreciation from the departments than we’ve ever heard before,” he says.

And those people compliment the landscape department for creating and maintaining a beautiful environment for work, study and play, and for helping the University—along with the flowers—grow. □