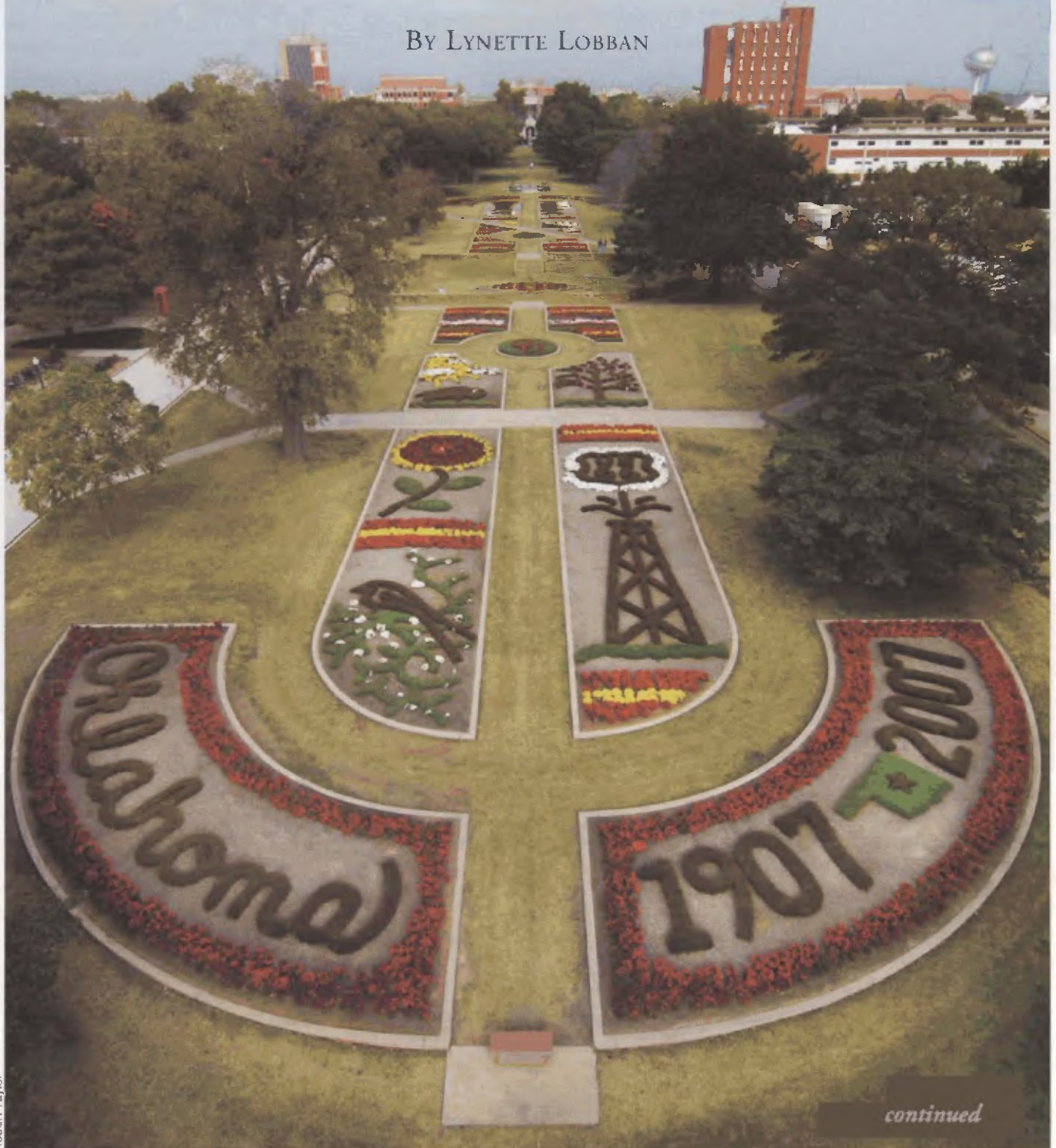


THE CENTENNIAL MUMS

For decades, OU landscapers have tapped their creative resources to top the south oval chrysanthemum display of the preceding season. This year they really pulled out all the stops.

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN



Robert Taylor

continued

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shapes in a coloring book. Some 16,000 plants and 640 hours of labor later, OU landscapers have created a work of art celebrating the history of the state in living color.

Between the arched entry ways on the north side of Lindsey, the word “Oklahoma” is spelled out in cursive, reminiscent of the “rope” font used in promotion for the Rogers and Hammerstein musical of the same name. To the east, the dates 1907-2007 also are depicted in mums, with a miniature state of Oklahoma filling in as the dash.

Continuing north, visitors will find a shaggy buffalo basking under the rays of a prairie sun, while a scissor-tailed flycatcher soars above budding mistletoe. Prominent Oklahoma images like a gushing oil derrick, a wagon pulled by a team of horses, even a twister wresting two trees from the earth — are all created in a variety of mums and Joseph’s coat, a dark green foliage that will turn reddish in the autumn sun.

On either side of the “Passion Pit” lay

two large Indian blankets, in stripes of red and yellow, purple and pink. The landscapers even made flowers out of flowers. “When we created the state wildflower [Gaillardia pulchella], the trick was to create bands of color with different shades of yellow, orange and red mums fading into each other, just like the real thing,” says Brookins. “So we have to be really careful how we plant. We don’t want to find a color in the wrong place when they bloom.”

Another challenge for landscapers?

“Mums don’t come in blue or green,” deadpans King. Despite color limitations, the crew successfully rendered the Route 66 emblem, a blooming redbud and an American Indian chief in full headdress.

The detail, when one considers the unpredictability of the medium, is amazing. The eye of the buffalo and the leather straps on the wagon team, demand ongoing review and refining after the initial

“We tighten up the pattern before Homecoming, do a little fine tuning,” says King. “All over, we’ll check for color, fill in or take out if we have to.”

The upkeep of the gardens is endowed by the Pitman Family South Oval Gardens Endowment established by the family of Morris Pitman, a 1932 petroleum engineering graduate, who died in 1999.

“I had the honor of meeting Mr. Pitman, walking the grounds with him. He was in his 90s and sharp as a tack,” says King. “You could tell the gardens were important to him.”

The chief landscaper says his favorite part of the job is receiving compliments from OU students. “They will be walking through here on the way to class, and one of them will stop and say, ‘nice job,’ or ‘this looks great.’”

“There’s nothing better than that,” says King. “That’s why we’re here.”

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.

Although a successful Homecoming weekend falls primarily on the padded shoulders of the Sooner football team, no one stresses more the week before the game than University of Oklahoma landscape director Allen King. Over the years the annual blooming of the chrysanthemums on Van Vleet Oval has become as much an anticipated part of the October weekend as tailgate parties and a Sooner victory.

Even though rains delayed planting by more than 30 days, King and crew fussed over the tiny mums like premature infants coaxing them into first blush by the time visitors made their way to the stadium. Full bloom had to wait for the Texas A&M game in early November.

The autumn tradition began decades ago when the south oval was set ablaze each fall with yellow mums, glowing like a million tiny suns from Lindsey Street northward. Over the years, OU landscapers have incorporated more ambitious color schemes and designs, from arching rainbows to the crisscross pattern of formal English gardens.

This year, in celebration of the Oklahoma Centennial, King decided to pull out all the stops. Three years in the planning stages, King and crew transformed the beds on the oval into botanical quilt blocks of Oklahoma state symbols — intricate appliques of bird and beast, stitched by hand, one plant at a time.

“The staff got together and started brainstorming,” says King, now in his 19th year with the University. “Once we decided on the designs, I drew all the beds to scale. Then the fun starts.”

With assistant Brandon Brookins issuing advice from atop a 15-foot-ladder, King lays down the outline of each bed, plant by plant. Then the crew comes in and fills in the outline like

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Landscape director Allen King directs his crew from on high. The bucket gives King a bird's eye view so workers can clip and prune the arrangements to perfection. Two ponies pull a wagon across the south oval in this Centennial quilt block. Landscape technician Kymberti Butler, now in her seventh year with the OU mums, removes clippings from the "Oklahoma" bed. King's assistant, Brandon Brookins, grooms the wagon team. King and Brookins touch up the foliage where a scissortailed flycatcher perches among branches dotted with mistletoe.