



That Extra Touch of Beauty

The campus had never looked more beautiful than it did this summer. The South Oval was a riot of bright multi-colored petunias while the buildings rimming the campus were accented with the more traditional red cannas and stark white petunias. The consensus was that this season Bob Rucker had indeed outdone himself—which is nothing unusual for the master gardener who has supervised the landscaping of the University's expanding campus for 14 years. The story of Rucker's care of 3,000 acres of shrubs, lawns and flower beds, written by Connie Ruggles and photographed by John Yack, appears on the following four pages.



With his face shielded against flying twigs, one of the University gardeners trims one of the many rows of hedges that border campus walks.

FOR most of us gardening is a seasonal avocation consisting of mowing the lawn and keeping crab grass out of the flower beds. But for Robert H. Rucker, University landscape architect, gardening is a way of life—a year around task of caring for a 3,000-acre yard that extends from the WNAD tower on the north to the Noble fisheries on the south.

Gardening on such a large scale would seem to require an equally large staff, but Rucker and his 25 uniformed men are able to stay ahead of the game of maintaining 2,000 North Campus acres (which include the air field) and 600 acres on South Campus while giving more intensive care to the 400 acres of the Main Campus and the outlying University housing areas such as Parkview apartments. Each man is assigned to a specific work area, and since some men have been responsible for the same areas for 10 to 12 years, the competition is keen to see who can produce the most beautiful spot on the campus. This summer the South Oval was hard to top.

The petunia test gardens on the south end of the South Oval featured 34 different varieties this year and provided the most spectacular display of color to grace the campus in many years, although this is the third year for the experiments in petunias. The seeds were sent to Rucker by Pan American Seeds in Colorado where 90 per cent of the world's petunias are produced.

"Some people think," Rucker says, "that if you experiment with something such as flowers, you have to plant them in rows in a field. I prefer to plant them in beds so other people can enjoy them daily. In fact, we're interested not only in knowing certain technical information about these plants, but we're also interested in knowing what people think about certain petunias and certain color combinations." By planting for display, Rucker

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planting, weeding, cutting only a part of the job for

not only tests the plants but also teaches a use of plants which is equally important to the industry from the standpoint of demand and sales.

Naturally the months from early spring through fall are the busiest ones for Rucker and his staff. During the summer 20 to 25 additional workers are hired to keep pace with the cutting of grass, weeding of flower beds and clearing areas for new plants. During the winter when the campus requires less intensive care, Rucker holds class one hour a week for maintenance employees to prepare them for the spring and summer rush.

"The classes are part of an in-service training program designed to give the men a better understanding of the over-all plan—what they are working with and why," Rucker explains.

As a branch of the main University physical plant, the responsibilities of the department of landscape grounds are varied, and during rush periods there is not always enough time to keep the campus flower beds cleared. This is particularly true during football season. In years past Rucker's crew was responsible for care of the football turf, practically a year around job in itself since the stadium is used not only for games but for the annual freshman assembly and for spring and summer commencement exercises. Now, however, two men are regularly assigned to this job, and Rucker's men supplement them in rush seasons. Rucker's crew cleans up the stadium after games and covers the field. It takes 18 men about three hours to cover the turf and nearly two hours to uncover it.

"Whenever we play Colorado," Rucker says, "it seems either to rain a flood or snow, and we have to leave the field covered until just before the game. It's quite a problem." In seasons when home games are bunched together work at the stadium takes up

a never-ending task yet Bob Rucker and his staff

most available time, and the rest of the campus must wait for its grooming.

When a new building is constructed on the campus, Rucker and his men are as much a part of the project as the bricklayers or carpenters. Rucker has charge of all landscape planning for any area of the campus and works directly with the contractor in planning walk layouts, drives and plantings for the new buildings. In addition to these duties in the Main Campus area, the department is on call for work at the Biological Station at Texhoma and Rucker himself does considerable outside work such as planning the grounds for the new state capitol buildings in Oklahoma City.

Caring for the University grounds, however, involves more than simply planting, weeding and mowing. The plants themselves must be produced in the University green houses either from seeds or cuttings. Two men, Charles VanNess and Frank Kreuzberg, work year around in the main greenhouse readying the plants for the crews. The greenhouse produces about 30,000 bedding plants a year. This spring alone 15,000 petunias were planted. The most common bedding plants on campus are petunias, periwinkles, cannas, lantana, ornamental pepper, ornamental grass, red geraniums, salvia and dianthus, which are experimental this year.

Just as any Oklahoma farmer rotates his crops to keep from depleting the soil, Rucker and his men rotate their crops of flowers. The same flowers are rarely planted in the same beds from year to year. Where last year there were petunias, this year there might be periwinkles to ward off soil deficiencies.

In addition to the outside garden work, the department pro-

continued



Charles VanNess is one of two greenhouse employees working the year around to ready thousands of bedding plants for the gardening crews.



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in spite of small children
insect pests, they keep th

duces and maintains about 1,000 tropical foliage plants each year for interior plantings such as those for the Will Rogers Cafeteria and the Home Economics Building. A few cut flowers are also kept on hand for official University functions.

Unfortunately the bulk of the visitors do not see the campus at its most beautiful. The past summer, for instance, the campus was virtually covered with red and white petunias and red cannas, all beautifully groomed, carefully laid out and lovingly cared for by the gardeners. The period when most visitors come to the campus is, of course, during football season, so this year Rucker has made plans to make the fall campus especially attractive. In June his men planted 5,000 yellow and white mums which bloom from mid-September to the time of the first killing frost, around the first week in November. The mums, which flank Owen stadium, were propagated in an amazingly short time. In mid-May the department put in 30,000 spring and summer bedding plants and then began growing the mums which were ready to be taken from the greenhouse by the end of June—just a month later.

Such long-range planning is the key to an orderly campus. In mid-summer Rucker was already planning for spring. He ordered his tulips from Holland and made the plans for plantings in the various areas. He has 14,000 tulip and daffodil bulbs ready to be planted this fall for spring, and around December 1 he will plant 300,000 to 600,000 pansies over the bulbs for winter. The pansies do well when the winter is not too severe, and Rucker plants them each year in the walk areas where they bloom from late December until around the first of May.

Such mass plantings, of course, calls for a complete stock of pest sprays, especially in a rainy year. One of the frustrations of

Pedestrians, litterbugs or campus inspection-ready

Rucker's job, however, is to have to spend money for pest killers that could better be spent for new plants.

In deciding on arrangement and variety of colors, Rucker keeps two main points in mind. The pedestrian sees the plants at short range and can notice small groupings and less vivid colors, but the motorist with a fairly long-range view has only a fleeting image of masses of bright colors. Both must be considered when the planting is done.

"The campus," Rucker says, "is to provide an environment for the student body to live and work and play. We want the students and the faculty as well as the general public to benefit from the surroundings."

In spite of the most careful planning, certain problems are inherent in large-scale, year around landscaping. The lawn, for instance, suffers a traffic problem. In a healthy, well established lawn there may be as many as 400 to 500 plants in a square foot. That means a girl with a size 7 or 8 shoe would step on about 325 plants with each two steps. Occasional strolls through the grass cause no damage, but when about 75 per cent of the many thousand pairs of feet which cross the campus daily aim in the same direction, the grass dies away.

The biggest problem on the campus is litter. Keeping it picked up is a never-ending job. But however frustrating litter may be, having to re-plant whole beds is worse. In housing areas where there are children, flower beds often have to be replanted several times a year because of the youngsters' fondness for pulling the plants up by the roots. Outright thievery of plants is a problem of varying severity. But Rucker and his men have learned to allow for such setbacks and just keep redesigning and replanting to keep the campus ready for inspections at any season.



Caring for wide campus lawns keeps the tractor mower busy all summer.



The numerous flower beds and rows of shrubs require ample watering to keep them fresh and beautiful during Oklahoma's summer dry spells.