

The Healing Landscape

Planning the 'Nature' in Your Cemetery

— by David G. Ward

In recent years, the belief that a well-designed landscape can play an important role in healing has quickly gone from theory to widespread practice.

A fast-growing facet of Landscape Architecture are “Wellness Gardens” that are often a part of advanced, high profile medical facilities. It has been documented that a pleasant garden or natural vista can measurably reduce blood pressure, pulse rates and increase mood-lifting brain activity. As a result, the medical community has begun to promote wellness gardens as a key component in the holistic approach to healing.

Whether ailments are physical in nature or emotional through the loss of a loved one, the beauty of a well-landscaped cemetery can help soften the blow and aid in the healing process.

While this practice may be relatively new to medicine, it is an historical part of cemetery design. The rural cemetery movement of the mid-19th century promoted rolling terrain, curvilinear roads and tree plantings that rivaled arboretums. Cemeteries were developed in outlying areas of large cities within reasonable travel distance. Many of these pastoral cemeteries had their own train stations and became a Sunday afternoon destination for families to visit loved ones and escape the city for a time.

In large cities, cemetery landscapes, and parks, are often the only large green areas that remain.

In many larger metropolitan areas, the city eventually grew to surround these beautiful properties. Instead of degrading their beauty, the closeness of the urban environment rendered them



A naturalistic cemetery landscape offers a peaceful setting for healing and contemplation.

more valuable than ever. In the largest of our cities, cemetery landscapes, along with parks, are often the only sizeable green areas that remain.

The designers of those original “rural cemeteries” knew the strong, healing and comforting effects of a beautiful landscape very well. Modern cemetery design has evolved through social changes, but the landscape remains at the core of a well-planned cemetery.

Landscape Architects of the original rural movement had the freedom to create random, naturalistic tree patterns throughout the property. Large family lots, often 20 or more graves in size, were then placed within that landscape. There were generous reservations at a time when land was abundant and relatively inexpensive.

The largest visual change since that time has been caused by the smaller, more mobile family structure, which in turn resulted in smaller lots – typically two graves in size. As a result, many more times the number of memorials occupy the same acre of land. At the same time, there is a greater need for a high yield of burial space. In effect, the

cemetery landscape has become compressed in scale, and the cost of labor and maintenance has created an “anti-landscape” sentiment among some groundskeepers. Poorly planned cemetery landscapes are usually the source of these feelings.

Lot owners can have tunnel vision for their own memorials and lots. If those lot owners are allowed to plant shrubs and even trees, the results can cripple maintenance and create hard feelings toward any landscaping. The problem is in a lack of control, not in the landscaping itself.

Yes, lot owners expect well-maintained lawns, but they value the plantings as much as ever. We have seen so many cemetery sections develop where the very first lot sales were clustered around a tree so that there is no denying their value. There are individual exceptions to this affinity toward landscaping, but by and large, landscape is the most powerful influence on lot sales.

It is a fine line to walk, but successful cemeteries, through well-designed landscapes, have the best combination of strong sales, loyalty and good

maintenance qualities. The key is in choosing the right plants and integrating them with the memorials in the right locations. It's a simple formula but one that considers many factors including aesthetics, seasonal changes, compact, upright and slow growth habits, regional hardiness, disease and drought resistance, minimal leaf or fruit "litter," efficient mowing patterns and a high yield of interment sites. To optimize this, the landscape design must be done at the same time and in concert with the section layout plans.

The recent increase of "cremation only" sections or gardens changes none of this, other than the use of somewhat smaller-scale trees and other materials to fit the smaller spaces involved.

To bring this somewhat complex array of factors together successfully for the cemetery, a detailed planting plan and specifications are necessities. While lot owners may inadvertently bring in some of the worst plant materials to the cemetery, garden centers with little or no knowledge of how cemeteries operate often do the same.

Specific plant materials that may do well in a commercial or residential landscape can easily fail in a cemetery. The difference is the availability of maintenance labor, space and the shelter from exposure. A highly specific planting plan avoids the failures and provides balanced priorities.

In our heightened appreciation of "green" qualities, very few people object to landscaping. Even in cemeteries, where they struggle daily to serve families, a well-designed landscape can be welcomed. At the end of discussion, it's important to understand that the greenness is the reason why those families have chosen to be where they are, to enjoy the comfort that the landscape affords them.

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Landscape support for features as seen at Holy Cross Cemetery in Lackawanna, NY.