

Street beautification a challenge for landscape planners

By Chris Young

Posted Jul. 8, 2012 @ 12:01 am

It takes a tough plant to survive on the mean streets.

Not all plants and trees can withstand the dirt, grime, heat, exhaust and road salt thrown at them and still come back every year leafy green or with a defiant blaze of color. So the task of beautifying the city's streets, like the recently announced project to spruce up Springfield's east-side entrance along Clear Lake Avenue, creates a challenges for landscape planners.

The good news is the lessons learned by working on street projects translate nicely to the home landscape. Mark McWilliams, co-owner of CopperTree Outdoor Lifestyles in Springfield, says the industry watchword these days is sustainability. He is a landscape architect currently serving on the board of the Illinois Green Industry Association. "What I see is a big push towards native," McWilliams said. "Native is very sustainable."

Native plants and trees usually are identified as those already here when the first settlers arrived. They adapted long ago to the extremes of our Midwest climate. "The problem is a lot of our native species are not very exciting," he said. "They will hack everything we throw at them, within reason, but I prefer to look at their brothers and sisters that truly aren't quite native, but have their backbone and mothers in the natural world." By the process of selection or by hybridizing native plants, McWilliams said, nurseries over time have produced plants that are more brilliant in color and bloom for longer periods.

Kent Massie of Massie & Massie Associates, a land planning and landscape architecture firm in Springfield, said the Clear Lake Avenue corridor presents a narrow canvas with a variety of restrictions. Plants have to fit into small spaces, especially on islands between lanes or at intersections. Throw in multiple government entities, right-of-way restrictions and buried or overhead utility lines, and a simple beautification project can get complicated fast. The crossover, where Jefferson and Madison streets come together to form Clear Lake Avenue, is the best opportunity for a showy display. "That really is a nice entrance to the city," Massie said.

Plant choices will be fairly simple. "Ornamental grasses (that look a lot like prairie grasses) will be woven into the area along with beds of daylilies," Massie said. Daylilies aren't native to Illinois, but they are popular in landscaping. "They will grow in about any situation," he said. "And they have a nice grassy appearance the rest of the time." Elsewhere along Clear Lake, Massie said decorative lighting and some ornamental trees, suitable for planting beneath power lines, will provide the bulk of the enhancements. "I wish we had more area to work with so we could make more of a splash," Massie said.

To make that big splash at home, McWilliams recommends planting perennials in masses, not just one or two at a time. "Don't buy three perennials of one type," he said. "Don't buy five. Buy 10 or 12. Put them in a sweep and run them together." Businesses have been trying some of the same techniques. "I love Scheels," McWilliams said. "They planted big masses of grasses, daylilies, catmint in rock beds. It gives that totally woodland, native feel. "Bass Pro Shop in East Peoria did the same thing."

Letting plants combine randomly, like a native prairie, can look weedy unless cared for. "But if we've got a big sweep of little bluestem that rides into a Coreopsis sweep, all of a sudden we are getting the movement, color and texture moving from one side to another," he said. Even if home gardeners lack that green thumb, plants that survive in harsh urban environments have the best chance to do well at home. "Even in a home landscape, usually a plant will get a little more care and be a little more protected than in a street situation," Massie said.

There is no perfect street tree. “All trees have habits people don’t like,” said Kent Massie of Massie & Massie Associates. Native nut-bearing trees work great in lawns, but no one is interested in having acorns falling on sidewalks or walnuts on parked cars. Trees either produce seeds, sap or broken limbs.

“For a while, everyone was planting Bradford pears,” Massie said. “Until they realized that at about 15 years, they start to split, and they have become invasive (spreading into areas where they are not welcome).”

“To me, the arborists get a little too carried away, either too native or too far the other direction,” said Mark McWilliams of CopperTree Outdoor Lifestyles in Springfield. “A mix is best.” Right now McWilliams uses a lot of red maple and black gum. There’s also a new variety of elm resistant to Dutch elm disease, called the Princeton Elm. “You almost have to go with trees that are like weeds, the toughest ones out there,” Massie said. “We use a lot of hackberries, elms, honey locusts.” Fortunately, nurseries are producing hybrids that grow well and leave out undesirable features like thorns.

Massie said one reality is that street trees must be replaced on a regular basis. “Along sidewalks, they can get too big for the space, or they start to decline under stress as they get older,” he said. “The past few days have been just baking trees.” Trees have the ability to cool an urban landscape, a feature that is especially noticeable on days when the temperature approaches 100 degrees. “Yesterday, I was driving down South Grand Avenue, and it is pretty harsh at Fifth and Sixth streets,” Massie said. “As you get a little farther west, it is better (with more tree cover). Then, when you cross MacArthur Boulevard, the temperature drops immediately. “We need the trees, especially for days like today.”

One of Mark McWilliams’ favorite flowers with its roots in the prairie is a Coreopsis known as Full Moon. A handful of native Coreopsis species occur in Illinois. Full Moon produces big, showy flowers and blooms for a longer period than its native relatives. There are others, like Karl Foerster grass, which McWilliams describes as being “upright, like wheat,” and a shrub rose called Home Run. “Some of the shrub roses are tougher than nails,” he said. Also new is a purple coneflower with dozens of blooms called Pow Wow. Some native grasses are in demand, especially prairie dropseed and little bluestem. “There is a variety (of little bluestem) called Carousel,” he said. “With just a little bit of a variation, it is going to be outstanding in the landscape today.”