

# Preparing Your Cemetery for Winter

If your cemetery is located in the northern latitudes, then winter brings special challenges for roadway and facility maintenance, landscape care, daily operations and even sales activities. The sources of these difficulties are the simple but unalterable forces of cold temperatures, strong dry winds, snow, and ice.

Preparing for winter needs to be more than protecting your plant materials. It needs to include strategies and procedures to prepare for, and deal with, the impacts of these natural elements. Your plan needs to address:

- Maintenance Procedures
- Operational Strategies
- Site and Facility Designs
- Landscape Designs

Because of changing site and facility conditions as you grow and expand, changing labor conditions, and even changing climate conditions it may be valuable to step back and assess your facilities and grounds, your equipment, your policies, and your history with respect to how you prepare your cemetery for winter.

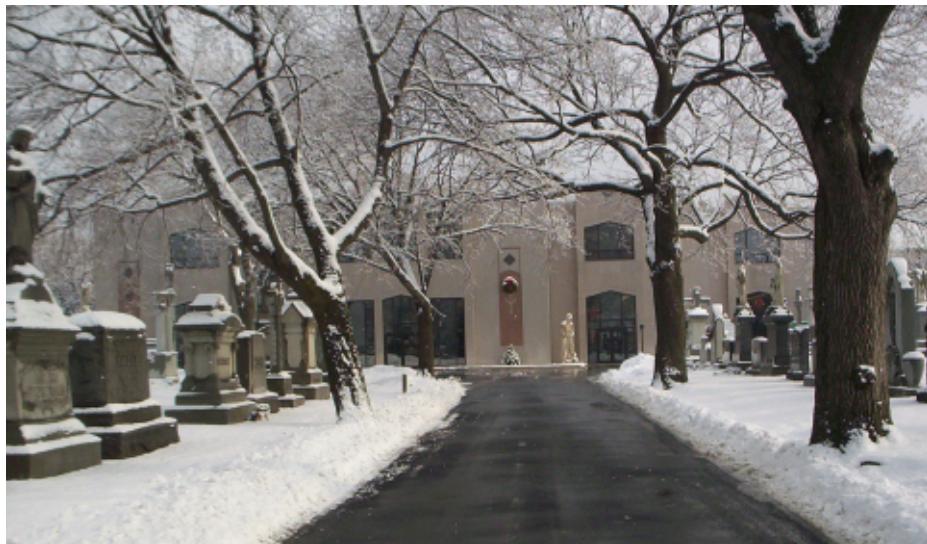
This fresh look can reveal opportunities to update and tailor your strategies to enhance operational efficiency and reduce costs. There are also ways to design future facilities and landscapes that will reduce maintenance time and costs, and will enhance the character of your cemetery in the winter months.

Consider the following issues in your assessment and your planning:

## MAINTENANCE PROCEDURES

Fall is the time to take advantage of reduced routine lawn and garden maintenance requirements to prepare your facilities, infrastructure and equipment for winter. During this period, you can focus on the following activities:

— by Jack Goodnoe



- Drain and clean irrigation lines and hoses;
- Winterize fountains and unheated toilets with antifreeze additives or turn off and drain all supply lines;
- Insulate all active and exposed water supply lines and faucets that are subject to freezing under extreme conditions;
- Winterize and perform routine maintenance on all trucks, backhoes and other motorized equipment;
- Clean the underside and moving parts of all lawn mowing equipment. Fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides are very corrosive to metal and paint;
- Clean, sharpen and oil all blades and tools to enhance their life and improve their performance. This will save money and time in operations as well as prolonging the life of the equipment;
- Test all snow plows and blowers well before the threat of snow;

*continued on page 10*



## *Preparing Your Cemetery for Winter, continued*

- Check that all grave heaters are working properly and fuel supplies are adequate;
- Check that backhoe frost hooks, frost buckets, or pneumatic hammers are sound and in good working order;
- Seal cracks in sidewalks and walls, and patch pot holes in roads. These can capture water and be worsened by destructive freeze/thaw cycles;
- Clean the below-grade catch basins of all drainage inlets. Accumulated leaves and debris in these catch basins can hold water and remain frozen when surface snow and ice is melting off the roadways;
- Check the condition of all roofs and gutters before leaf fall. Remove leaves and clean gutters and drains to insure the drainage of melting ice and snow;
- Install and annually inspect heat tapes at roof and drain locations which are subject to ice accumulation;
- Place snow plowing stakes in critical locations along roads and parking areas and to mark fire hydrants, bollards, etc. that will be covered by snow. Install them before the ground freezes;
- Stock an adequate supply of salt for ice removal;
- Check your supply and condition of snow plowing stakes.

### **PROTECTING LAWN & LANDSCAPE**

To prepare your lawns and landscape to survive the winter and recover quickly in the spring you should:

- Raise the cutting height of your mowers for late fall grass cuttings;
- Weed and feed key lawn areas and over-seed lawn areas with weak turf in the fall. Fall applications can be especially effective when applied correctly and at the right time;
- Water all newly planted trees, shrubs and groundcovers into the fall and winter for as long as the ground is frost free. They will go into the winter stronger, and there will be water available in the soil as soon as the ground

thaws and typically before you begin irrigating or watering;

- Trim weak or damaged tree limbs that could break from snow, ice, and winds;
- Thoroughly cut and remove all seasonal garden debris. If left in the gardens these materials can harbor pests, and many soil borne diseases can survive the winter in this material;
- Mulch or dispose of tree trimmings which can also provide homes for unwanted animals;
- Wrap or screen (with burlap) all special shrubs that are susceptible to wind burn or grazing deer;
- Protect shrubs and ground covers that could be subjected to salt spray or runoff from deicing operations;
- Spray newly planted, sensitive evergreens with an anti-desiccant coating;
- Protect the trunks of young trees with tubing that will prevent eating or rutting of the bark by deer;
- A good time to plant new trees in your cemetery is in the fall when they are dormant, when lawn mowing has stopped, and before snow removal begins. It is very important to adequately water these fall plantings. When properly installed and adequately watered they will winter well and get a strong head start early in the spring.

Site conditions for plant materials and turf will vary dramatically, even within your own site, with respect to soils, rainfall and snowfall, ground moisture, sun and shade, and wind exposure.

It is wise to consult your local landscape architect, agricultural extension service or agronomist regarding planting and maintenance issues and to assist in developing detailed procedures that are appropriate and tailored to your cemetery.

### **OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES**

The effectiveness of maintenance procedures is enhanced by having a supporting set of policies to define and manage these procedures. These include:

- Create a check list of all winterizing requirements and procedures;

- Train and retrain the staff, especially new hires, in these procedures and expectations;
- Have a record keeping system to document and monitor the maintenance and training procedures;
- Put emergency staffing strategies in place to respond to snow storm or wind damage emergencies;
- Establish priority service contracts and procedures with outside providers for immediate turn around on emergency snow removal, tree trimming and cleanup services if needed. Know where these services or people will come from and know in advance how much they will cost if you need them in a hurry;
- Develop a snow removal priority plan. Update this plan as new sections and facilities are added and review it with staff annually;
- Have policies and procedures in place for managing customers and providers in response to emergency situations that could interrupt or postpone services.

### **SITE & FACILITY DESIGNS**

Site development and buildings can be designed to anticipate and accommodate adverse weather conditions in ways that will enhance operational efficiency, limit liability risks, and reduce maintenance requirements in winter conditions. These include:

- Use pitched roofs on mausoleum structures to reduce and even prevent the costs and liabilities associated with snow and ice damage to flat roofs, structures and interior finishes;
- Control and manage sliding snow from pitched roofs with appropriate architectural and landscape designs;
- If you experience heavy snow falls you should design the parking areas of all new facilities with adjacent lawn areas that can be used for snow storage. These need to be strategically located to facilitate plowing procedures and should be clear of plant materials that would be damaged by snow cover. Engineer these areas to temporarily retain water and release it at a controlled rate as the stored snow melts;

- Give careful consideration to the design of drainage flow and collection patterns in parking areas, plazas, patios, and sidewalks to avoid dangerous ice sheeting on driving and walking surfaces during freeze/thaw cycles.

### **Landscape Designs**

Your grounds and landscape plantings can be designed to minimize winter damage and will make your cemetery attractive and inviting even in winter conditions. Following is a check list:

- Choose plant material species that are proven to be hardy in your climate. Consult your local landscape architects horticulturalist, or nurseries for recommended species and varieties. For example, a popular mid-sized tree is the ornamental pear tree. The common variety, however, is prone to breakage from snow and wind. Other varieties, however, are more durable. Research your tree plantings well with your local landscape architects and nurseries;
- Tree plantings that follow the cemetery roads or highlight road intersections not only enhance the character and comfort of the cemetery but are important in the winter landscape as guides for snow removal equipment when roads are snow covered;
- Design landscapes and gardens that incorporate plant materials that have special interest in the winter. Choose plants that are hardy in your climate and have interesting branching or bark patterns when the leaves are gone, or have colorful bark or berries that remain into the winter. Place these plants where these attributes can be highlighted and appreciated such as against building walls or near sidewalks or outside the windows of your sales rooms;
- Include species and varieties of flowers that have a late, extended, or even a second bloom in the gardens at entrances and around buildings. Many ornamental grasses are available that are attractive through the winter. They can be a strong landscape feature when the surrounding trees and shrubs have lost their leaves;
- Plant salt-tolerant shrubs and ground-covers in gardens that may be subject to spray or runoff from roads and walks.

**Post Script:** I often recommend that cemeteries create what I call a “*sales garden*.” This is an area in which you can display a variety of higher density burial options in a small, well landscaped space; and is best located near your office. This can ease the impact of winter weather on sales activities because it gives the sales personnel the ability to discuss the variety of available burial options without having to travel to distant and separated parts of the cemetery with the customer in inclement weather.

This *sales garden* can also be designed with the winter landscape in mind as noted above to include plantings that are hardy and attractive in the winter months, and to provide areas for snow storage when the walks need to be kept clear.

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