

# Cemeteries Offer Park-like Settings and Much More

## BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES

Some of the largest planted and managed landscapes in our communities are cemeteries. Though they're not used for recreation or other large—or even small—public events, they're historical, necessary and deeply valuable both personally and community-wide. Even more, they have to continue into the future and in some cases are already centuries old.

They are extremely challenging to manage for a number of reasons:

- They are usually large and sprawling, ranging from several acres to hundreds of acres in size.
- They rarely have good access to water/irrigation.
- They are usually home to large old trees that need care but may have far outgrown the space originally allotted to them.
- Frequently they are under the care of a church or other organization with limited time and resources.
- Because of their large size and limited boundaries or fencing, they are vulnerable to damage from deer and other wildlife.
- In order to keep gravestones visible, which are close together and abundant, mowing and trimming is a time-consuming priority.
- Plantings can vary dramatically from one plot to another, requiring different types of care and equipment at different times of the year.
- New burials and management require heavy equipment that can kill plants, damage roots and compact soil.

### Learning and Conserving What Remains

Given their long history and all the challenges they pose, we have a lot to learn from our cemeteries. Their worth goes far beyond plant selection, i.e., a place to see long-lived trees and other plants. They shelter native prairie and woodlands and they offer quiet places for reflection, inspiration, walking and bird-watching. A few examples, both past and present, can help us to realize all they have to offer.

In Illinois, only 2,300 of its original 22 million acres of tallgrass prairie remain. Chris Benda and others with the Illinois Native Plants Society and Illinois Natural History Survey searched out old cemeteries and were able to find “untouched, pre-settlement prairie at pioneer cemeteries... It is as if the pioneers, in their deaths, left us a few seeds of life,” Benda said.

If you're looking for a beautifully planned and managed cemetery, Omaha's Prospect Hill Cemetery (one of Nebraska's oldest cemeteries, founded in 1858) would not be high on your list. Nevertheless this all-volunteer site gives us a glimpse of what survives, including native and adapted trees of the eastern deciduous that transition to tallgrass prairie. \*A historical note is that it contains the grave of a “Buffalo Soldier,” an honored name given to African-American troopers by western Native American tribes.

### Places of Quiet, Reflection, Refuge

In west Philadelphia where land and quiet are at a premium, a 54-acre 19<sup>th</sup> century cemetery called The Woodlands put out a call for volunteers, hoping to get 25 volunteers for weeding and planting. This year they will oversee more than 130 gardeners eager to put their hands in the soil, grow some flowers and get away from the noise, concrete and fast pace of city life. Many of Nebraska's cemeteries, including Prospect Hill mentioned above, also have adopt-a-plot programs, so check locally if you're interested.

Even back in 1916 in the wide open spaces of Nebraska, an article by Miles Greenleaf waxed effusive about the bird sanctuary offered at Omaha's Forest Lawn Cemetery. He wrote, “Few who have attempted the study of bird life know how difficult a thing it is to find a cardinal upon the nest, and how timid these glorious redbirds are in the parks and public woods. Is it not strange that they should know that Forest Lawn cemetery is sanctuary for them, and that they are as safe therein as in the sequestered depths of the forest primeval?”

### The Value of Stewardship

Land has always been valuable. Far beyond its monetary and functional worth, people have always found important ways to manage it that ultimately extends care to themselves. Whether it's for historical research, conservation efforts, outdoor classrooms, regional plant selection, wildlife habitat, even picknicking or other park-like uses, cemeteries are well worth a visit. While this article focuses primarily on cemeteries as landscape, any usage needs to be conscious of their deeper, more profound meaning for those with loved ones in them.

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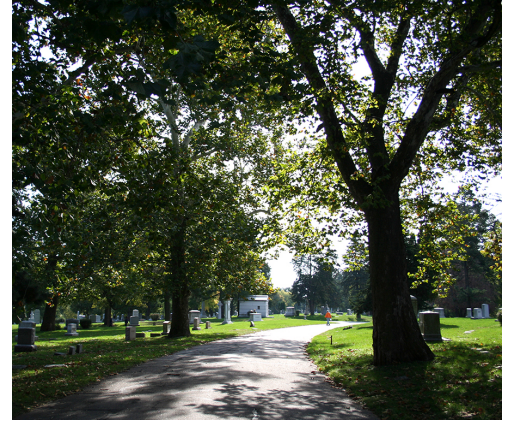


PHOTO: Forest Lawn Cemetery in north Omaha has been open since 1885. It was designed as a park with wide, hard-surfaced roads and rolling hills that wind through a forest-like setting. It's the only cemetery in the midwest that is an Arboretum and a Bird Sanctuary, and its 349 acres include four Nebraska State Champion Trees.