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A Day in Her Boots

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A day in her boots



Carol Gallagher trims a hedge like she's frosting a cake. Artfully and effortlessly, she guides the gas trimmer back and forth at just the right angle to produce a smooth, manicured finish.

My frosting, on the other hand, is more of the whipped variety with peaks and valleys in the hedge, my arms vibrating after handling the 20-pound trimmer for all of five minutes.

After 13 years as a Linfield College groundskeeper, Gallagher makes gardening look easy. Slender and petite, she wields power tools that turn my shoulders to jelly and maneuvers heavy equipment on a regular basis. Gallagher covers the northwest corner of campus, about 17 acres that include the President's House, Oak Grove, Pioneer, Walker and Riley Halls, and the academic quad. Her section, bordering Highway 99W, contains two campus entrances and is often referred to as the face of Linfield. And what a stunning face it is.

But, when complimented on the campus beauty, Gallagher is quick to acknowledge co-workers. With seven groundskeepers tending Linfield's 193-acre campus, it is clearly a team effort.

"It's always nice to hear," she says with a smile. "Not many people get that perk in their job. A lot of it is because it's beautiful here, not because of anything I did. These trees have been here a long time."

For years, I've heard the scratch of Gallagher's rake outside my Melrose office window and have picked her brain with gardening questions in passing, so I am excited about this chance to ride along. She hands me equipment for the day – clippers, gloves, safety glasses and ear plugs

Carol Gallagher creates vibrant displays of color using hardy, deer-resistant plants such as begonias, impatiens, black-eyed Susans and zinnias. "I love them all for different reasons," she says.

Gardening by the seasons at Linfield

FALL:

Mow, edge, blow, rake leaves, fertilize lawns

WINTER:

Leaves (raking and blowing), prune deciduous trees, split wood, shovel snow

SPRING:

Mow, edge, fertilize lawns, prepare flower beds for planting, plant flowers, spruce up for commencement, put up flower baskets, spray weeds

SUMMER:

Mow, edge, blow, prune shrubs, spray spring blooming plants and shrubs, weed flower beds, fertilize lawns and flowers and shrubs, spray weeds, prep for wine festival and weddings, water areas without auto irrigation, rake shrub beds

Carol's tips

- Edge often, for aesthetics and plant health. The buffer protects tree bark from mower.
- Fertilize flowers weekly. Gallagher uses MiracleGro Bloom Booster.
- Prune at the proper time.
- Choose plants suited to specific areas, based on size and sun needs.
- Pull or spray weeds when small, every 10 days.

Carol's favorites

TREES:

Redwood, October glory maple, giant Pacific dogwood, Jacquemonti birch

FLOWERS:

Rudbekiah (black-eyed Susan), begonias, impatiens and zinnias

AROUND CAMPUS:

All of it, particularly the older areas because of the mature trees

replace my usual phone and computer – and we climb into her cart, a 2006 Vantage. The two-way radio crackles with the voice of a colleague across campus. In the cart bed, I recognize Gallagher’s standard equipment – a rake, scoop shovel and blue plastic garbage can. Garden clippers rest in a holster on her belt. “I feel lost without them,” she admits.

Our first task is fertilizing the 54 giant flower baskets hanging around campus. Although the baskets are automatically watered twice daily, Gallagher fertilizes weekly and sprays for bugs twice a month. On a typical day, she will fill her tank four times during the three-hour fertilizing task.

We begin at the President’s House, the electric pump humming from her cart as she guides the watering wand from basket to basket, then stops abruptly to pluck a well-hidden bud worm from a flower. “This little bugger will eat the blooms,” she says.

While I admire the sweet violets, zinnias, vinca minor and other flowers lining the curved beds of the president’s yard, Gallagher looks beyond the beauty and sighs. “I haven’t been able to get to these beds yet,” she says. “There is not enough time.”

Near Pioneer Hall, we pass a young triangle-shaped bed with a fuschia-colored crepe myrtle surrounded by sword ferns, creeping phlox, mini-rhododendrons, sweet violets and alyssum. Gallagher tells me she planned the bed with the help of her husband, Ken, a former landscape designer, to replace an overgrown spruce tree and heather.

“The tree was too big and we took it out a few years ago and...” her voice trails off mid-sentence as she leaps from the driver’s seat and nabs a tiny slug making its way up a fern leaf. She pulls two weeds on her way back to the cart, picking up the conversation. “I wanted the colors to go with the crepe myrtle, and chose ferns and rhodies to go with the old-fashioned feel of the building.”

Gallagher constantly sees things I do not notice – slugs, bugs and garbage – and deftly scoops them up with a shovel or gloved hand. Her collection so far this morning includes a discarded napkin, a plastic drink lid with straw still attached, various weeds and a spilled breakfast of yogurt, blueberries and granola from the sidewalk in front of Riley Hall.

Later, as we linger on the back patio of Pioneer Hall to water, fertilize and deadhead four large barrels spilling with color – zinnias, marigolds, delphiniums, begonias, geraniums, salvia, lobelia, alyssum and more – Gallagher explains the secret is in the soil.

“Start with the soil,” she says. “If you have your soil prepped right, then it’s mainly watering, fertilizing and knowing when to prune.”

Gallagher is no fair-weather gardener. During inclement weather, she pulls on waterproof rain gear, muck boots and a hat.

“Rain is not a reason to slow down,” she says. “In the fall, the leaves are all-consuming, all day every day. If it’s icy, we’re putting down ice melt. When it’s



Laura Davis, left, assistant director of communications, helps Carol Gallagher weed the flower bed south of Northup Hall in the academic quad. To get a feel for what it takes to maintain Linfield’s beautiful campus, Davis spent a day working side-by-side with Gallagher.

snowy, we’re shoveling snow.”

That’s just the way Gallagher likes it. She much prefers being outdoors to indoors, no matter the weather.

“I love the work,” says Gallagher, who began gardening at 10 with her dad, making 10 cents an hour. “It’s creative and I get a lot of exercise. I like the satisfaction of doing a job and looking back at it. My favorite part of the job is working with and getting to know the students.”

There is plenty of heavy work – bending, pushing, lifting, clipping, hauling. Today, we hoist hefty buckets of debris from under a fir tree into the back of her cart. Tomorrow, she will be lifting something else. Her advice for a quick pick-me-up?

“Take an Excedrin and eat a Snickers bar, and you can go far,” she says with a laugh. “That’s what’s kept me going all these years.”

As we edge, I learn the difference between hard edges (sidewalks) and soft edges (flower beds, trees). She also explains noise restrictions. During the academic year, she has a two-hour window each Wednesday afternoon to mow, edge and blow the academic quad, a task that can only be accomplished with the help of co-workers. Near residence halls, she limits her work to after 9 a.m.

“I have to work fast to get my lawns done in the allotted time,” she explains, and I note the pride and ownership of her statement, typical of the Linfield ethos. Throughout the day, she refers to “my” flowerbeds, “my” baskets and “my” shrubs.

At the end of the afternoon, inspired and tired, my head swimming with gardening tips, I dig out the most important pearl of wisdom and head to the bookstore for a Snickers bar. Now that’s what I call gardening. ■

– Laura Davis