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A Day in Her Boots

Laura Davis
Linfield College

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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.

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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.
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 bloom,” 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 fuchsia-colored crepe myrtle surrounded by sword ferns, creeping phlox, mini-rhododendrons, sweet violets and albusium. 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 the voice of a colleague across campus. In the cart bed, a 2006 Vantage. The two-way radio crackles for a Snickers bar. Now that’s what I call gardening.

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

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