

The Windy City captures international awards for environmental programs that spur social improvement.

# The Greening of Chicago

Story By Kathy Andrews  
Photos By Adele Hodde



Chicago has received numerous awards for its landscaping program, including first place in the 2003 "Nations in Bloom" competition.

**T**he numbers are astounding. Since 1989, 400,000 trees have been planted, 62 miles of new median planters constructed and an additional 30 miles of boulevards renovated. A single rooftop garden now effectively removes from the air pollutants created by 30,000 vehicles.

The work to green the City of Chicago is not going unnoticed.

In October 2003, Chicago placed first in the large city category of the international "Nations in Bloom" competition, a program rating cities on their livability. The 2002 large city "America in Bloom" award was bestowed on Chicago. In 2003, the American Horticulture organization awarded Mayor Richard M. Daley and the City of Chicago the "Great American Gardeners Award," in recognition of the significant urban horticulture contributions and work toward the beautification of an American city.

Barry Burton, Mayor Daley's point person for landscaping the city,



explained the greening of Chicago started with one simple desire.

"When Mayor Daley was elected in 1989, one of his hopes was to re-create the green landscapes he recalled as a youth," Burton said. "So many street trees had died, and not been replaced, that Chicago no longer had a welcoming feeling."

Other programs followed shortly on the heels of the boulevard tree planting program.

In the early 1990s, the city approached businesses along Michigan Avenue with a proposition—the city would construct planters along the Magnificent Mile if the



Quiet, colorful park settings along Michigan Avenue allow Chicago residents and visitors to take a break from a busy day of work or sightseeing.

businesses would maintain the plantings.

With the assistance of noted landscape architect Doug Hoerr, plantings were initiated. The cutting-edge combinations of plant materials started drawing the attention of visitors and business increased.

The interest in greening additional streets flourished.





(Photo by City of Chicago, Graphics and Reproduction Center.)

High above the hustle and bustle of the street sits Chicago City Hall's green rooftop oasis.

"Most of the plants used are species native to Illinois' dolomite prairies—plants like sedum, verbena and prairie grasses that can take heat and drought, and stay green throughout the summer."

The garden even contains two trees. Native species of hawthorn and crabapple sit high atop the city, perched over two of the building's columns to counter the additional weight.

"The garden serves as a huge air conditioner and filter that is helping stem the urban island heat effect," Burton explained. "Replacing the black roof top with green vegetation has dropped the summer air temperature around the building by 50 to 60 degrees, meaning the surrounding streets and sidewalks are cooler and there is decreased stress on the energy grid from over-worked air conditioners."

Burton is enthusiastic about Chicago's future greening projects.

"We often see neighborhood residents picnicking in the medians," Burton said. "People are now drawn to these green spaces because they are aesthetically appealing and easily reached from their home. A study by the University of Illinois confirms the value that urban greening projects have in improving both environmental and social standards."

Burton summarized with one simple phrase. "We're going to keep playing off our successes, with the goal of making Chicago one of the greenest cities in the world."

Randolph Street West, including a run-down warehouse district, was landscaped. Medians were constructed and planted on LaSalle Street and the entire length of Ashland Avenue was transformed with plants. An additional 30 miles of city boulevards were also improved with more frequent maintenance.

"Our intent with the boulevard planting program is to create sustainable gardens that require minimal upkeep, yet provide a variety of color throughout the growing season," Burton remarked. "Native species capable of surviving in a concrete planter, such as black-eyed Susan, purple coneflower and native

grasses, are combined with day lilies, carpet roses and daffodils. Where we can, we've planted disease-resistant elm, honey locust or ash trees, shade trees that fare well in a container."

The green mindset in city hall guided the transformation of the building itself. In 2000, a lightweight mixture of soil and minerals was spread across undulating membranes to create the base of a massive rooftop garden. Water falling on the roof is quickly absorbed by plants, or collected in a series of cisterns providing water during drier seasons.

"When selecting planting materials for the roof top garden we looked for plants that could adjust to growing in harsh conditions," Burton explained.

Boulevard plantings create picturesque backdrops for The Art Institute of Chicago (lower right) and south Michigan Avenue hotels and businesses.

