

Does Your Church Have “Curb Appeal?”

Many homebuyers decide whether or not to look inside a house or take it seriously based on its **curb appeal**—the view they see when they drive by or pull into the driveway. Is it possible that people look at churches in the same way? How would your church rate? Is the grass mowed? Are the shrubs trimmed? (You do have shrubs don't you?) Are flowers blooming in season? If you cannot answer yes to all these questions, then perhaps you need to get your grounds committee together. Don't have a grounds committee? Form one.

Lots of bright colored flowers and nice healthy shrubs are available right now, so let's get planting. Wait! Before we start to plant, we must have a plan. Survey the church grounds and consider where shrubs or flowers are needed and which of the existing plants need to be trimmed or removed. Consider the amount of sun or shade an area will receive. Then decide what plants will best fill your needs. If you don't have a member who feels comfortable making these decisions there are many resources available to you. OSU Extension offices have a lot of free information on plants selected for Oklahoma conditions. Reputable nurseries will be happy to make recommendations. There is a wealth of information on the Internet including the websites of garden supply companies.

A plan should be drawn out showing what plant is to be planted where. (The plan need not be elaborate.) That way anyone can refer to the plan and work on the project whenever time is available. This eliminates the oft heard excuse “I would be glad to work on that flower bed out front, but I don't know what I should do.” Note: make lots of copies of the plan and make them readily available.

Maybe you need to do more than can be accomplished this spring. Establish priorities and start with the basic plants. Other plants can be added as monetary and labor sources come available. Any shrubs should be planted very soon, or left for a fall project. Container grown materials give a bit more flexible, but even they will do better if planted when the weather is moderate. Remember, Arbor Day is in April.

It is probably best to plant mostly perennials. Perennials may not be as showy as annuals, but they come back year after year and require minimal care, usually just cut back the previous year's growth. A good compromise is to make a basic “skeleton” with shrubs and perennials, and then add bright blooming annuals as needed and as resources permit.

Be cautious when buying plants from Lowe's, Wal-Mart, Home Depot, etc. Many of the plants stocked by these stores are fine. However, they will also have plants that are not hardy in our area. Anyone see delphiniums thriving here? We all recognize gardening in Oklahoma is a challenge. The line dividing USDA Planting Zones 6 and 7 runs right through the Stillwater District. A plant that thrives in Sapulpa may struggle in Ponca City. A plant that is labeled “Full Sun” may not survive a hot windy Oklahoma summer. If it is a plant you really like, try planting it where it gets some afternoon shade.

Shady areas sometimes provide us with the greatest challenge. A few suggestions: Hosta – many varieties available. Can be quite small or very large, very hardy; Vinca major or minor makes a very good shade ground cover; a nice shrub for shade is Japanese Kerria. It stays green year round and has nice yellow flowers in the spring. There is a single and double variety. The double has much showier blooms. (We have Kerria doing very well against the north side of our building where it gets very little sun.) Liriope (Monkey Grass) works well both as a border and a ground cover and grows in both sun and shade. Note: Do Not Buy either Liriope or Vinca. Just ask around, someone will be glad to give you some as both plants spread rapidly. Actually Liriope can be invasive, but it is reasonably easy to keep in bounds. Liriope should be mowed quite short in very early spring just as the new growth is emerging. Winter conditions can wreak havoc on last year's growth. Hosta is also easy to divide to gain additional plants. Anyone who has a hosta bed would probably be willing to share some with you.

For full sun and our unrelenting summers Crepe Myrtle is a dependable plant. It comes in several colors in both standard and dwarf varieties. It can be allowed to grow as a shrub, or (my preference) pruned as a small multi-trunked tree. It is a rapid grower and will need pruning back annually. Another good plant to take the heat is the Indian Blanket Flower, also known in its showier hybrid version as Gaillardia. While billed by nurseries as a perennial, the original plant may or may not survive severe winters. However, it reseeds easily and comes back every year. You just have to learn to identify the small plants so they don't get pulled up as weeds. The old-fashioned coneflower provides lots of color and reseeds itself to come back year after year. It does tend to be invasive.

In order to conserve water and control weeds use lots of MULCH. Many varieties are available for purchase. My personal favorite is cottonseed hulls. They do not blow and form a very efficient weed control, but they can be pricey for a large area. Most tree service companies will give you the chips from the limbs that they shred. This makes rather coarse mulch but it is effective if applied liberally. In Payne County, the Expo Center will load (for free) bedding from stock shows. The center also maintains a large compost pile that is also available for free.

A good way to learn what plants are good for your area is to observe what is thriving as you drive around, or better still as you walk. If you don't recognize a plant that you like, stop and ask. Most gardeners are anxious to share information. They may even share the plant with you.

Hopefully these ramblings have caused you to think about the curb appeal of your church and provided you a few ideas to get you thinking about what your church needs.

Let's get growing.