

U.S. landscaping pros volunteer at Arlington

Annual project keeps cemetery trim, offers a way to say thanks

By Patricia Sullivan, Monday, July 25,10:11 PM

About 8,400 trees grow on Arlington National Cemetery's hilly 562 acres, not to mention the flowering shrubs and the annual and perennial flowers. Where there are not trees, there is grass, 562 acres of it, softening the always startling sight of hundreds of thousands of stark white headstones lined up with military precision.



Duane Richardson, front, and Sarah Lavigne, both of SavATree in Springfield, help equip a tree with lightning protection during the annual volunteer landscaping project at Arlington National Cemetery.

Some of the trees date to the Civil War; some of the grass is freshly planted. All require a hand in a place where 4 million visitors tread each year.

Enter 400 volunteers, who on Monday joined the cemetery's maintenance staff to seed, mulch, prune, lime, aerate and install irrigation. They were professional landscapers (and their children)

who come from around the country each year to spend one morning doing the tasks and providing the \$200,000 in supplies and labor necessary to keep the property in shape.

“Whether you’re a veteran or not, just coming up here to volunteer to do this work, to thank those who gave a lot — it just means so much,” said Tim Price of Memphis, an Iraq War veteran who is in his fifth year of volunteering.

He muscled bags of mulch into a tractor bed, not long after his group of volunteers installed lightning protection on some of the more vulnerable trees. The day before, he had visited Section 60, where veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are buried, including a member of his Army brigade.

“That seemed to put a little more importance” in what the volunteers were doing, Price said.

Kathryn Condon, executive director of the Army National Cemeteries Program, said the volunteers have been invaluable to Arlington officials and the public who come to honor those who have served.

“We also get the expertise of these contractors,” she said. “The irrigation crew told us we weren’t getting full use out of our sprinklers. They not only told us, they fixed it. It’s like getting a day of free consultants coming in.”

Norman K. Goldenberg, a lobbyist and incoming president of the Professional Landcare Network, which organizes the effort, has volunteered with the program from the beginning. The reason for their labor is never far from view.

“We run into mourners,” he said. It would be hard not to; the cemetery averages 27 funerals a day. When a funeral procession passes by, the volunteers get out of the way and stop work until it passes, he said.

After Monday’s work was finished, under darkening rain clouds, the leaf blowers quieted and the pickups were reloaded for the trip home. The road out of the cemetery wound through pin oaks and flowering dogwoods, tulip trees and cherries, crape myrtle and maples that will throw splashes of color across the landscape come October.

At the turn on to Memorial Drive, a long black limousine waited, with an honor guard ready to escort the next funeral procession up the road and through the trees to the waiting grave site.