by Susan Loving

ICCFA Magazine SUBJECT SPOTLIGHT

Davis Cemetery District Office Manager Susan Finkleman and Superintendent Joe Cattarin

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➤Finkleman has been office manager since 2005 Cattarin has been with the cemetery since 1981. Grounds foreman Ken Troth has two full-time workers and seasonal help.

➤**Davis Cemetery District** is in Yolo County, California; its boundaries are somewhat larger than the city of Davis.

➤The cemetery has 27.75 acres, about 10 of which are developed. There are close to 7,000 interments; the cemetery handles about 100 interments annually.

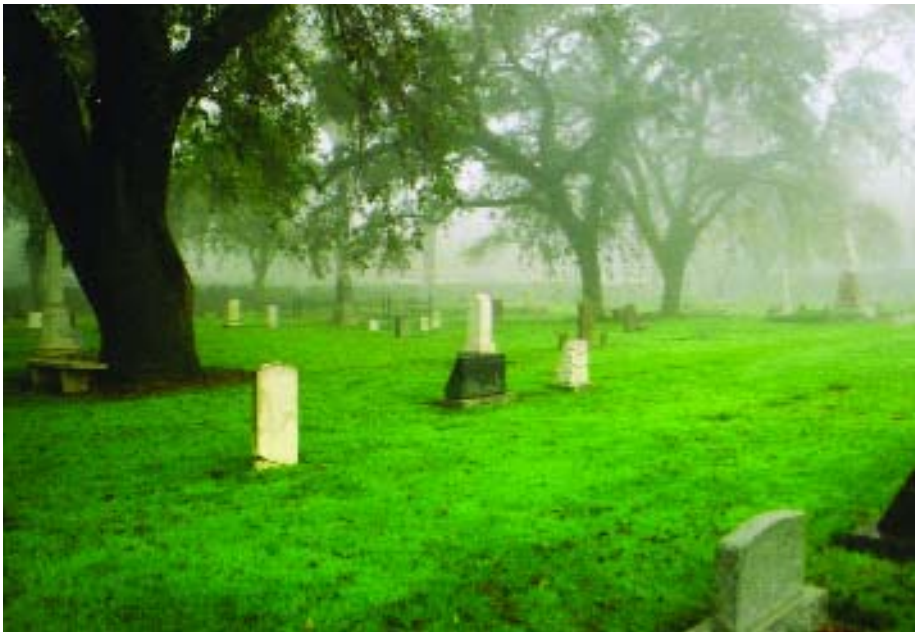
➤California allows special districts for a wide variety of purposes, including cemeteries. Davis Cemetery District was incorporated in 1922; the oldest burial dates to 1855. Most of the land came from the Chiles family; some had belonged to the Catholic Church and was signed over by the bishop in 1929.

➤More than half of the cemetery's revenue comes from property taxes (a portion of taxes paid by people who live in the district); the other half comes from cemetery fees.

➤Interment is restricted to district residents, former residents and those directly related to someone buried at the cemetery.

CEMETERY MANAGEMENT

Cemeteries supported by tax dollars have to be especially careful with resources. The three-member staff of Davis Cemetery District has found that adopting certain "green" practices is helping them conserve money as well as the environment.



Mature California live oaks tower over monuments on a foggy winter day in Davis Cemetery.

Going 'wild'—and going for the green

The Davis Cemetery is much like any other. The staff handles burials, deals with grieving families, works to maintain the grounds and brainstorms ways to get members of the community more involved in the cemetery.

Davis' Web site lists six goals under a section titled "Our vision." The first four could easily apply to any cemetery: keeping Davis as an inviting space for remembrance, enhancing its spiritual function in the community, maintaining its focus as a center of local history and creating an attractive environment that encourages visitors to enjoy art, nature and civic history.

Goals Nos. 5 and 6: enhancing "the existing ecological function of the cemetery as an open green space and a sanctuary for native plant and animal life" and reducing the use of pesticides. Those "green" goals are certainly not unique in cemetery management, but they do hold special appeal both to the ecologically aware residents of this Northern California community and to a cemetery staff interested in conserving resources of all kinds.

Davis, California, a university community located about 15 miles west of Sacramento, is a city of

Davis Cemetery District Board Members (from left) Val Dolcini, Ted Puntillo, Chairman John Bonner, Vice Chairman Ann Evans and Dennis Dingemans. Board members are appointed by the Yolo County Board of Supervisors.

65,000 described on the municipal Web site as "environmentally aware and socially innovative" with "more bicycles per capita than any other city in the nation."

So it's not surprising that the cemetery's planning includes a major focus on being "environmentally responsible," as Office Manager Susan Finkleman put it. Earlier this year, she wrote to a letter to ICCFA Magazine praising the National Wildlife Federation's inexpensive and simple Wildlife Habitat certification program (see page XX for details), in which Davis Cemetery particpates. We talked to

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A panoramic view of part of Davis Cemetery. Over the past few years, cemetery staff has been removing non-native plants and

Native plantings and ground fog at sunrise facing the swale on one side of the property.

Finkleman and Superintendent Joe Cattarin about why they recommend the National Wildlife Federation program to other cemeteries and how it fits in with the cemetery's vision.

I looked up the National Wildlife Federation site and didn't see a "cemetery" category on the application. What category did you select?

Finkleman: We're a "backyard habitat." We noted on the form that we're actually a cemetery.

Did you have to do any work, change anything, in order to qualify as a habitat?

No, we really didn't. We had talked to Audubon International about their certification programs and there were a number of areas where we would have had to do quite a bit to get certified, but one thing we were able to get right away from AI was the environmental planning certificate. We did have to fill out a lot of paperwork, but we were already pretty much doing what we needed to do to qualify.

(Editor's note: For more on Audubon International and cemeteries, go to the ICCFA Reading Room at www.iccfa.com and select Web Extras.)

For National Wildlife, we just had to answer some simple questions about what we're doing, pay $15 and that was it. On December 27, 2006, we got a letter with our certificate enclosed.

What did the cemetery gain by doing this?

The process started with Audubon International, which made us focus in on more specific things we could do that would be environmentally responsible and that would involve the public more, explain to them more what we're doing.

We've put up official signs about being a habitat and we have a bulletin board out front with photographs of some of the birds and mammals and native plantings. We've started to put signs around the property explaining what some of the native plants are.

The native plantings actually started several years ago, before we got involved in any of the certification. And we found that people would come to the office and ask us, "What are those weeds?"

We've learned that one of the things we need to do is put signs up explaining that those "weeds" are such-and-such native grass or flower. Also, we explain that we're trying to use an integrative pest management approach, and that doing these things is attracting more birds and wildlife.

It's amazing how once people understand what you're doing, they have a whole different attitude about it. Suddenly the native plantings don't look like weeds anymore, they look like these wonderful, interesting plants.

Tell us about your integrated pest management program.

Cattarin: It incorporates judicious use of pesticides, applied at the correct time in the correct amount. That's half of what's involved: Using the chemical as it's intended.

The other half that more people are starting to address involves trying to integrate native grasses and other insect-harboring shrubs into your landscape to bring natural pests back into the environment. The insect population has close to doubled with the increase in the beneficial grasses and shrubs.

Our mammal and populations have grown, too. We have more rabbits, and a family of turkeys that we didn't have before.

Have there been any negative side effects?

Cattarin: Not yet.

What is the cemetery trying to accomplish through the schematic planting plan (page XX)?

Cattarin: We're trying to have less lawn. Minimizing manicured turf would be a major change. We'd have some lawn mixed in with native grasses, flowers, boulders and non-landscaped areas.

Is water conservation a concern there?

Cattarin: Yes. We get 16-18 inches in a good seasonal year, mostly from December to May. Native plants require less water than turf.

Your Web site mentions you have two "turf" labyrinths.

Cattarin: One was designed by the ceme-

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replacing them with native plants. The process has become more organized with the help of a 2006 planting plan (see page XX).

CEMETERY MANAGEMENT

The schematic planting plan for Davis Cemetery District by Hammond + Playle Architects, Davis, includes a columbarium, which will provide the cemetery's first above-ground option for cremation memorialization.

tery manager at the time and has been here about 30 years. An Eagle Scout created the other one.

What does a "turf labyrinth" look like?

Cattarin: It's just grass of different heights, created by different mow heights. It's almost like having our own crop circles.

How far along have you gotten on completing the projects in the schematic planting? Is it something you're working on gradually?

Finkleman: Yes. We've put in the three rings of redwood trees. They're small of course—baby redwood trees. We've planted the "avenue of color," the flowering trees running along the internal cemetery roads, and some of the citrus trees have been planted. The plantings along the north fence line are still being worked on. The native grasses haven't gone in yet in that area.

There are two ponds in our master plan; one is permanent, the other is ephemeral. (The ephemeral pond will be there in the rainy season but dry up during the summer.)

The architect is working on plans for the permanent pond (indicated by "pond and gathering area" on the schematic planting plan). It will have an outdoor amphitheater/gathering area around it; there will be a series of terraced semicircles with large flat boulders/stones where chairs can be placed. We think it will be completed in the spring of 2008.

The ephemeral pond has a swale around it. We're going to pull out all of the

Cremation families choosing burial plots, upright memorials

We have no above-ground options (such as niches) for the interment of cremated remains. We have areas specifically designed for in-ground interment of cremated remains, and we also will inter them in casket plots.

What we're finding more and more is that people in our district are overwhelmingly choosing to buy casket plots for cremation interments. The main reason they do it is because they can have an upright marker. In the small plots specifically designed for cremation, we have regulations that say that you can only have a flat marker.

More and more people in our district are interested in having very unique memorialization; they want to have uprights and they're happy to pay the additional price. Plus, they can put multiple cremation interments in there.

If you have an upright memorial and list, say, four family members on it and put all of their remains in that plot, it becomes a cost-effective choice, too.

Cremation rate dropping

It's odd, but for us, cremations have gone down the past few years. I'm not sure why that is, because it's not true overall for other districts. The state of California cremation rates are increasing, yet for us, they aren't.

In 2004, we had 64 cremation interments. In 2005, we had 55. In 2006, we had 41, and of those 41, 14 were interred in casket plots.

It could be because with cremation there's no pressure to inter in a timely manner. We find, for example, that people walk into the office who have had somebody's remains literally on the shelf for five years and now they're ready to inter them.

Our full-body burials are remaining fairly steady. What's going up a lot is our companion crypting or double-depth interments. We had 13 in 2004; we had 23 in 2006. —*Susan Finkleman*

non-native species and replace them with native trees, bushes and grasses. We will be doing our first major plug planting of native grasses and sedges this fall.

The swale area eventually will have a full gathering shelter (with a roof) near it, but it won't be built for a couple of years. Plans at this point call for the shelter to be based on a round Native American sweat lodge design, but those plans are still in flux.

Overall, we plan to continue working with the ideas we've gotten from everybody to minimize our use of electricity and pesticides, and to be as environmentally friendly as possible.

We recently installed solar panels on our equipment roof shed to get us totally off the electrical grid. It's a building with a pitched roof, one side of which is now totally covered with solar panels that provide electricity for the office and for the well and irrigation system. We are very pleased with the system so far.

Do you use municipal water?

Finkleman: Occasionally there are seasons where it's so dry our well gets too low and we have to go to municipal water for a short time.

What's the gathering shelter site near the pond going to be like?

Cattarin: We're morphing the area into more of an amphitheater by the pond. The shelter will be typical of the covered gazebos people are putting up in cemeteries out here. They can accommodate the viewing of the casket before it goes to the burial plot.

Do you handle "green" burials?

Finkleman: We do greens and modified greens, pretty much anywhere on the property. The most fully green burial we've ever done involved a body wrapped in a shroud. It was a traditional Muslim burial, so the family participated and were involved, with some assistance, actually getting into the plot and arranging the body so that the head faced Mecca.

We do a lot of modified green burials, which means we're not using a vault, we're putting a casket directly into the ground. Ideally, it's a plain wooden casket, but that's not always the case; people pick whatever they want. Ideally in a green, there's no embalming, but we've done modified greens where the body was embalmed.

In any case, the bodies are going in without a vault, so it does necessitate a change in the way that we approach the burial. We use something called an iron. Normally we put that in before we put the vault in, but when we're not using the vault we've got to leave that iron in there, and with double-depth greens, we're thinking about making a deeper one.

Wildflowers and native grasses in a coping. Visitors appreciate native flowers and plants more when you explain what they are and why you're using them.

We leave the iron in there until everything is done and the casket has been lowered to make sure the dirt we dug doesn't cave in.

We put dirt around the casket, and a couple of feet above it. We do put a vault lid on top, and then cover that. The vault lid is basically a cement slab about 3 inches thick. We use it because otherwise you get a lot of waving of the ground; it undulates over time, and we don't want that. We want it to remain flat and remain firm and steady for the marker.

We cover the vault lid over with more dirt. We've found there's a lot more compaction with the green burials, so we have to pile the dirt higher. Even though we "mud in," at the time, we still have to put in more dirt, and generally we have to go back in a week or so and fill in some more, which we don't do with a vault.

What exactly is the "iron" you use for the green burials?

Finkleman: It's a rectangle with a lip on it that shores up the sides of the graves.

Cattarin: It's an interment support system we found out about from another cemetery in the valley. It keeps the dirt supported so people can walk up to the lowering device, up to the open grave, and not fear that it's going to cave inward. It's removed when we close up the grave.

What is your rationale for being so focused on environmental concerns?

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Among the creatures that call Davis Cemetery home are yellow-billed magpies, a family of turkeys, and baby jack rabbits. The cemetery is home to 23 known species of birds as well as squirrels, toads and cottontails—but not deer. The cemetery posts photos of its furry and feathery residents on a prominently placed bulletin board.

Cemetery, small yard—either can become a Wildlife Habitat

Becoming a National Wildlife Federation certified Wildlife Habitat does not require either big bucks or a large property. Any cemetery should be able to do it, and a funeral home with a "yard" it can dedicate to wildlife habitat can, too. (Under "size of property," the application lists "less than one-eighth of an acre" at the low end and "more than10 acres" at the high end.)

The application costs $15. Properties that receive the Wildlife Habitat designation receive a certificate, become a member of the National Wildlife Federation and receive the organization's "National Wildlife" magazine.

The two-page application asks for basic contact information and then requires the applicant to check off what the property is providing for wildlife in the areas of:

A sign lets visitors know the National Wildlife Federation has recognized Davis Cemetery as a certified Wildlife Habitat.

National Wildlife Federation

- The federation was organized in 1936. Its headquarters is in Reston, Virginia, 1.800.822.9919.
- An application for habitat certification can be downloaded at ***www.nwf.org*** (do a search for "certified habitat"). The Web site also provides information on creating and managing a habitat.
- Known as the publisher of "Ranger Rick" magazine, the NWF's stated mission is to "inspire Americans to protect wildlife for our children's future."

• at least three food sources (for example, feeders or plants that provide seeds, nuts, fruits, sap and other nutrients),

• at least one water source (such as a pond, lake or birdbath);

• at least two places with cover (wooded areas, meadows, ground covers, thickets, roosting boxes, etc.);

• at least two places to raise young (mature trees, ponds, wetlands, meadows, nesting boxes, etc.);

The final question asks the applicant to check off the sustainable gardening practices being used. At least two practices must be in use. Among the choices are using mulch, using a drip or soaker hose, reducing erosion through ground covers or terracing, practicing integrated pest management, using native plants, composting and eliminating chemical pesticides.

Finkleman: Mostly it's just an ethical commitment we have as individuals and as people who are responsible for the taxpayers' money. We feel it's a wise use of taxpayer funds to make choices that ecologically benefit the community, as long as they are in keeping with our primary purpose as a cemetery.

We really wanted to look for all the ways we could involve the community and have people feel a sense of pride and ownership in the cemetery, because of course it *is* their cemetery. A cemetery needs to have community involvement, because when community members really take responsibility for the cemetery—because they've been out here and planted some plugs of native grasses or counted birds or whatever—they become an integral part of making sure the cemetery stays maintained and vandal-free. They're here, and they care. ❑

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