

## Pros in Parks: Integrated Programming for Reaching Our Urban Park Operations Audience

### Abstract

In addition to regular job duties, such as tree care, mulching, irrigation, and pesticide management, urban park workers have faced environmental changes due to drought, wildfires, and West Nile virus. They simultaneously have endured expectations to manage growing, diversifying park usage and limitations on career development. An integrated programming approach is used to provide training to frontline parks department employees in the cities of Arlington and Fort Worth, Texas. Results indicate high levels of adoption of practices, enhanced staff morale, and identification of potential future leaders. The program also introduces an urban audience to the broader array of Extension programming and services.

**Laura M. Miller**  
County Extension  
Agent, Commercial  
Horticulture  
Texas A&M AgriLife  
Extension  
Fort Worth, Texas  
[lmiller@ag.tamu.edu](mailto:lmiller@ag.tamu.edu)

**Jamie Rae Walker**  
Extension Specialist  
and Assistant  
Professor  
Texas A&M AgriLife  
Extension  
Dallas, Texas  
[jamie-rae-walker@tamu.edu](mailto:jamie-rae-walker@tamu.edu)

### Introduction

Over the past 5 years, North Texas parks departments have endured budget and staffing reductions (Trust for Public Land, 2011) while also facing issues related to growing populations (City of Fort Worth, 2014), increased park usage (Trust for Public Land, 2011; National Recreation and Park Association, 2013), and environmental issues, such as drought (Borisova et al., 2013; Dolesh, 2012), West Nile virus (Merchant, 2012), tree damage (Skelton & Josiah, 2003), flooding (Gretchen, Allred, & LoGiudice, 2014), and wildfires (Dolesh, 2012; Kapp, 2013; Morris, Megalos, Vuola, Adams, & Monroe, 2014). Park employees must be trained to manage these matters in addition to maintaining the knowledge needed for their regular duties, such as custodial work, tree care, mulching, irrigation, pesticide management, and attending to safety issues (Warren, Rea, & Payne, 2007).

Training is necessary to keep staff up-to-date on best practices and changing regulations as well as to improve employee retention and provide opportunities to identify potential managers (Krofta & Panshin, 1989; Kutilek, Gunderson, & Conklin, 2002; Ramlall, 2004; Martin & Kaufman, 2013). Current budget and staffing situations, coupled with the need to keep staff proximate to work sites,

limit opportunities for park employees to attend regional, state, and national programs. Furthermore, most training topics require tailoring to meet specific local operational needs.

## Program Development

In 2006, Tarrant County's horticulture agent worked with the parks and recreation departments of the cities of Arlington and Fort Worth to provide employee training in horticulture. Committee members expressed interest in further developing the training, and in 2008, it evolved into the Pros in Parks program. Primary goals included increasing job knowledge, professionalism, safety, environmental practices, and job satisfaction. Topics for instruction were expanded beyond horticulture basics to include land management issues and trends and to emphasize career development related to parks, communications, community development, and management and personal development (e.g., health and financial management).

## Program Delivery

### Planning Committee

Initially, topics were chosen and evaluated by the Tarrant County Commercial Horticulture Advisory Committee. Over time, a Pros in Parks Task Force was developed, and it currently comprises park operations managers from four local municipalities, urban foresters, the county horticulture agent, and the municipal parks specialist.

A task force–driven approach allows for topics and trends to be identified with input from stakeholders (Webster & Ingram, 2007), expands access to trainers on interdisciplinary topics and skills, and creates an unbiased, evidence-based curriculum. The task force devises a list of issues facing frontline staff; the specialists and agent identify emerging practices and research relevant to land management, parks, and career and personal development; and attendees provide topic suggestions through previous session evaluations. The result is a program series covering horticulture and land management basics, emerging land management and parks practices, and relevant topics for career and personal development (see Tables 1 and 2).

**Table 1.**

Topic Selection Criteria for *Pros in Parks*

Required job skills, such as tree pruning, weed identification, mulching, and safety
Content specific examples, such as pesticide training with examples specific to park employees
Current issues, such as drought, wildfires, and West Nile virus
Trends, such as population densification, nature-based play, diversification in urban populations and recreation uses, and park design trends
Relevant content for career or personal development
Requests from previous session evaluations

Other relevant curriculum or research (e.g., presentations offered at related conferences or lecture materials offered at local universities)

**Table 2.**

Select Examples of Session Topics

Athletic field management	Money management	Pruning and maintenance
Basic horticulture	Park safety perceptions	Quality control
Customer service	Park trends	Social media
Drought	Personal safety	Tree hazard identification
Earth-kind landscape	Pesticide applicator	Turf management
Equipment and safety	Plant disease diagnosis	Urban stream management
Event management	Plant identification	Water conservation
Health and wellness	Planting and pruning	Weeds
Leadership in changing times	Playground maintenance	Wildlife in your park

## Logistics

*Pros in Parks* is a series of regularly scheduled educational events. Employees attend the entire series or specific sessions. Each topic is offered once a week in two cities, Arlington and Fort Worth. Training space is provided by the host parks department. Operations staffs from other communities are welcome to attend when space is available. Trainings are offered during the winter months, the best time for attendees. A small educational fee is paid by each city.

Extension specialists and agents in pesticide, turf, water, forestry, entomology, and horticulture serve as the core group of instructors for land management topics. The municipal parks specialist, other Extension subject matter specialists, or experts from local parks departments, universities, and businesses are used for the related career and personal development topics.

## Teaching Methods

It is crucial to understand the culture of the audience (Webster & Ingram, 2007) and use a balance of teaching and hands-on or action-based activities. Assessments indicate that attendees are accustomed to active workdays, so a variety of teaching methods are used for *Pros in Parks*. In the classroom, computer-generated presentations are most common, but these are enhanced with activities such as working in small groups, participating in question-and-answer sessions, and using

classroom response systems. Such activities engage participants and ensure that important concepts are understood.

When appropriate, longer segments of time are spent on outdoor activities, such as surveying urban streams, participating in photo scavenger hunts, pruning trees and shrubs, rebuilding a pitcher's mound, conducting inspections, evaluating hazards, mapping, and practicing safety activities. Because some park employees have limited English proficiency, a translator is available on-site (Webster & Ingram, 2007).

## Outcomes

To determine program effectiveness, retrospective postsession surveys are administered after each session. Select examples of learning outcomes and self-reported knowledge gain and intentions to adopt are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
Select Examples of Percentage of Attendees with  
Reported Increase in Understanding and  
Intention to Adopt Practice

Topic	Increase in Understanding	Intention to Adopt
Customer service	69.0%	84.0%
Good cultural practices for turf management	73.7%	80.0%
Insect repellents	52.0%	85.0%
Plant problems caused by too much and too little irrigation	58.7%	84.0%
Plant selection for water conservation	63.0%	89.5%
Planting and pruning techniques	90.0%	94.4%
Park safety and playground maintenance	83.0%	80.0%
Park type	78.0%	84.0%

classifications		
Social media	77.0%	84.0%
Staying safe	46.0%	85.0%
Sun protection	39.0%	85.0%
Trends in parks	79.0%	84.0%
Weed identification and herbicide selection	75.7%	92.3%

Supervisors from participating cities indicate that although reported increase in knowledge is inconsistent, intention to adopt practices is consistently high. From their perspective, the sessions serve as knowledge gain opportunities for newer employees and skill enhancement for long-term employees. They also indicate that the program serves as a team-building exercise and contributes to staff morale, in addition to helping them identify future managers.

### Conclusion

As municipalities continue to work with constrained budgets, changing environmental impacts, increases in density and park use, and a high number of retirements, trainings will grow in need and demand.

Data from previous participants' feedback indicate a need to further develop the program by offering a certification and by placing additional emphasis on topics that can support attendees' career retention and advancement. Feedback also emphasizes a need for the program to incorporate more hands-on and interactive learning opportunities and sessions offered in various languages, particularly Spanish (Wyman et al., 2011).

*Pros in Parks* is replicable for urban audiences throughout Texas and nationally. By using a committee-driven approach to select and package Extension expertise, agents can offer an impactful educational and personal development program for urban parks operations staff.

*Pros in Parks* strengthened the partnership between Texas AgriLife Extension in Tarrant County and the participating parks departments. Furthermore, many of the participants (18% Black and 31% Hispanic from 2009 to 2014) indicated that they were not aware of the breadth of Extension services. Thus, by using an integrated Extension planning approach, the program serves as a way to introduce this urban audience to broader Extension programs and resources (Young & Vavrina, 2014).

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