



Keeping Columbia beautiful and clean

Community members, CA staff vital to keeping natural areas in top shape

By David Greisman

From the beginning, James Rouse knew how essential the open space in Columbia would be. He didn't just want green space merely encircling the developed areas. Rather, he envisioned open space integrated into the community so that people who came to Columbia could feel as if nature were a part of their everyday lives.

That's what we have now: 3,600 acres of open space maintained by Columbia Association, never mind the parks and land that belong to the county. CA's signature 94-mile pathway system laces its way among it all, bringing us to, through and among trees, grass and flowers; lakes, ponds, streams and rivers; and a variety of plantlife and wildlife.

But natural beauty doesn't remain beautiful naturally.

It also requires a consistent effort from CA's open space workers and specialists — as well as from those living in Columbia being mindful of how to be environmentally responsible. And when they see that others haven't been as caring and clean, they can say something, contacting CA's Open Space Management Division at 410-312-6330 or Open.Space@ColumbiaAssociation.org.

"Try as we might, we can't be everywhere all the time, so having extra sets of eyes from the community is beneficial," said Sean Harbaugh, the Open Space Management division's assistant director. "We hear from people on a variety of issues and concerns, whether it's a tree that fell on a pathway or, unfortunately, someone who dumped debris, leaves, Christmas trees or trash on open space."

CA also recently introduced a community resource liaison who walks and bicycles around Columbia's open space. The liaison, Kevin O'Connor, serves as a friendly face for anyone who may have questions while also working when necessary to remind people of rules and regulations.

"We want as many people as possible out enjoying CA's open space, but to do it responsibly so that others also can enjoy it," Harbaugh said.

Negative consequences

Many may remember the public awareness campaign from decades ago showing animals struggling with uncut plastic from beverage six-packs. Of course, any garbage introduced into the environment can have negative consequences — not just aesthetically, but for what's living out there as well.

It's not just trash. Yard waste also has an impact. John McCoy, CA's

CA has thousands of acres of gorgeous open space that includes lakes and ponds — and you can help keep it looking great.

watershed manager, says he has seen leaf deposits a few feet in size that smother whatever was trying to grow from underneath. It also can be flushed downstream, blocking the flow of water and causing flooding, or even getting into lakes and ponds.

"Too much organic matter, as it decomposes, soaks up oxygen and can lead to dead fish," McCoy said.

Pet waste, meanwhile, can create bacterial problems in CA's lakes and ponds. CA has garbage cans and even pet-waste receptacles positioned around its open space.

Fishing line recycling stations also have been installed; the line can otherwise take more than 500 years to decompose. People who fish at CA's lakes and ponds should do so with respect to the environment, which also includes only fishing in areas where it is allowed and not leaving any hooks behind. There are rules for boats, too, which require permits issued by Open Space.

Positive contributions

There's plenty more people can do to help.

Every year, CA and the 10 village community associations hold a Columbia-wide Cleanup Day, inviting volunteers to spend a few hours removing trash and litter from certain areas.

Rain gardens slow water runoff and reduce the pollutants that go into our waterways. CA has a program that can cover 75 percent of the cost of installing a rain garden.

A free soil testing program helps residents know how much fertilizer to use and what kind. Free bags are available at the village community associations.

And the Weed Warriors program replaces invasive growth with native plants, bringing the environment back to what it was meant to be.

"The open space is here for all of us to appreciate," Harbaugh said. "All of us can play a role in keeping it that way."