



Michelle Gabel / Staff photographer

Jim COWBURN is the acting superintendent of Syracuse's greenhouse. Cowburn, shown Tuesday at the city's greenhouse on Onondaga Avenue, watches over 375 planting beds around Syracuse.

City's Planting Beds Flower

DICK CASE

POST-STANDARD COLUMNIST



Blooms are busting out all over town. The man most responsible for this is Jim Cowburn, acting superintendent of the city greenhouse.

Among other things, he watches over 375 planting beds around the city. That's a lot of plants for a crew consisting of a chief and four people, but they're there for us.

I think Jim loves his job. "I'm not an arborist," he explains. "I do the best I can. I press a lot of flesh."

That he does. The cell phone in his city truck rings a lot. He talks. He connects. He waves at passers-by. He waves at buses.

"I know everybody around here," he exclaims.

Jim is married to the former Lisa Pollock, who teaches in the Lyncourt District. They have two young children and live in Strathmore. He says the family is supportive of his long summer hours: sometimes 4 in the morning until 7 at night.

"Right after Mother's Day, we go crazy on plantings," according to Jim, who's in his 15th year as a city employee. He's been at the greenhouse three.

He took over from Alix Krueger, a city parks manager who supervised the area. Alix set the pace for putting plants in the ground all over the city, not just the 26 parks entrances we used to do.

Jim says he saw the number of brightened spots increase in Mayor Matt Driscoll's second term, up maybe by 100.

"Now we add about 10 a year," he says, dumping recycling bins of mulch on a refreshed bed in the median in the 100 block of Strathmore Drive.

The crew plants twice a year, spring and fall: tulips in the spring, which are put in the autumn before, and mums and azaleas in September. Many of the beds are in places that never flowered before, such as the median along the West Street arterial.

The effect is startling, especially when we consider Jim's running on a shoe-string budget, helped by donations and other community gifts of plants and manpower.

Jim's boss, parks commissioner Pat Driscoll, admires the work of his long-time pal.

"Jim's really stepped up," Pat told

Crew plants tulips in spring, mums and azaleas in fall

CREW, FROM PAGE B-1

me. He says neighborhood participation is key with a slim parks budget to cover more than 900 acres of city parks land.

“We’ll provide the plants and help people put them in,” Jim explains, handling a call on his cell from an Eastwood neighbor looking for plants for Melrose Avenue. “Then we’d hope the neighbors will look after the beds.”

This usually works. Later, as we drive around in Jim’s pickup truck, he points out community gardens that were abandoned by neighbors. This is sad.

“Our people really care about the plants,” he continues. “They nurture them, like little babies.”

Their work centers on the city greenhouse on Onondaga Ave-

nue, a complex of six connected buildings where it’s pretty warm most of the year.

There are rows of growing plants, piles of mulch, stacks of clay pots and a cluster of large pots — Jim calls them barrels — filled with plants and ready for Eastwood’s business district. Next door is a row of potted ferns — these are “stage plants” — which are moved around town for various city functions.

John Bialy is the main man at the greenhouse. He’s worked this job 31 years, starting under his uncle, Ben Kuppel, the legendary greenhouse superintendent who had the job more than 30 years. John works with the stub of a cigar in his mouth.

Jim stops to check on Anthony Sokolowski, who’s been on

this job five summers. He’s loosening soil on the Strathmore bed before planting a rose of Sharon surrounded by lilies.

The boss gives him a hug and says with his huge smile, “Strathmore’s the model. Everybody says they want to look like Strathmore.” He grew up nearby on Carleton Drive.

He and the commissioner, Pat Driscoll, got into the Strathmore neighborhood early to “make it look nice” for the annual homes tour, June 16.

Watering the beds was made easier a few summers ago when the Department of Public Works, a partner of Parks, came up with the idea of a 210-gallon tank moved around in the back of a pickup truck.

Jim shows me finished beds

and beds in progress in our quick drive downtown and into the eastern part of the city. Lipe Park — the new sculpture park on the West Side — is ready to plant; Fayette Firefighters Park, Forman Park, the MOST are done, while Columbus Park waits for neighborhood helpers.

The Meadowbrook neighborhood’s looking good, same for Outer Comstock, both with active community collaborations. Jim remarks that the South Side could use some green-up. He also hopes the Destiny USA folks think about putting in some gateway plantings once that project comes along.

Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. Reach him at 470-2254, or by e-mail, dcase@syracuse.com.