

# WOMEN: A NEW SOURCE OF MANPOWER IN ARBORICULTURE<sup>1</sup>

by Sandy Forgacs

"Lack of trained personnel" has been named in recent years as the greatest weakness in the industry of arboriculture (1), and manpower problems have been widely discussed (4). At the same time, the large-scale movement of women into the national labor force has been called "one of the most dramatic social and economic changes of recent decades," and all forecasts say that the upward trend will continue in the coming decade (3, 5). Given these two conditions, it seems likely that women will increasingly seek and gain employment in the field of arboriculture in the coming years.

Since this field has traditionally been considered to be a man's profession, this change is bound to be met with a certain degree of resistance, if not outright rejection. I think that all arborists would agree that harmonious working relationships would be to the ultimate benefit of our profession. So, in hopes of contributing towards that harmony, I would like to do three things in this paper: 1) share some of the experiences of women working in arboriculture 2) identify some problems that may occur, and 3) offer suggestions as to how some of the problems can be avoided.

## The Survey

Rather than simply base this paper on my own experiences as an urban forester, I decided it might be more informative to provide an overview of what a number of women in the field have experienced. Not knowing more than three or four such women, I used the 1981 ISA membership index for the United States to obtain a list of names and addresses. I sent questionnaires to all names which were almost certainly female, and to names which could have been either male or female. My cover letter requested that the questionnaire be discarded if the addressee was male. Out of 180

questionnaires mailed, I received 39 responses from women who were either currently working in arboriculture or had done so in the past.

The types of jobs held by these women varied widely, the most common being municipal foresters/arborists, horticulturists, and Cooperative Extension staff people (see Table 1). Fifty-nine percent of these women are or were publicly-employed; 41 percent privately-employed. The most frequent employers, in decreasing order, were municipalities, tree or landscape maintenance firms, the women themselves (meaning they were self-employed), the Cooperative Extension Service, state governments, and county governments. These employers accounted for over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the women who responded. Municipalities alone employed over  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the respondents.

The women were generally highly educated. All but two had received some additional training beyond high school, and 77 percent had received at least a bachelor's degree. As might be expected, most have been working in arboriculture for a relatively short time. The median number of years in the field was 4; the median number of years at their present job (or last job in the case of two women who had retired) was 2½.

**Physical labor.** I asked these women whether physical labor was a regular part of their job, expecting that most were in managerial positions. Surprisingly, nearly half responded "yes" to this question, and another 18% responded that physical labor was sometimes required. This left only about  $\frac{1}{3}$  who performed no physical labor at all.

Of those who did perform physical labor, 65% felt that it was more difficult for them than for male co-workers. Several mentioned that if heavy lifting were involved, they were generally unable to per-

<sup>1</sup>Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in Indianapolis, Indiana in August 1983.

form as well as a man. However, several others felt that the desire to do well in many cases compensated for a lack of brute strength.

Women who performed physical labor day in and day out often mentioned that they had learned ways to make the job easier. One woman who does a lot of climbing said, "Of course the work requires development of more than average strength, but that develops in very short order when working. More important is realizing your capabilities and limitations and developing techniques which compensate. With simple things like extension handles for tools to give increased leverage and lightweight chainsaws, there is no reason why a woman, or a small man, can't accomplish the same job as a 'big macho dude'."

**Acceptance.** I wondered how well these women felt they had been accepted by five different groups of people: 1) male supervisors, 2) male co-workers, 3) male subordinates, 4) female co-workers, and 5) the public. Overall the

response was quite positive. A majority felt they had received "good" to "excellent" acceptance in every category. (I should note here that my method of tallying the answers to this question was somewhat less than scientific. I asked for essay answers on these particular questions, so I could get a good feel for what these women are experiencing. Most responded with a one-word answer like "good" or "excellent", and then elaborated, but a few just wrote general answers. These I put into a category such as "good" or "fair" myself, judging from what they said. Admittedly this was an opportunity for my own biases to enter).

The following is a breakdown of the responses received for each category:

*Male supervisors.* Almost 3 out of 4 of the women rated their acceptance in this category in the range between "good" and "excellent." Many mentioned that they were initially faced with skepticism and had really had to prove themselves, but

**Table 1. Job titles and numbers of women who responded.**

| <i>Publicly-employed</i>  | <i>Privately-employed</i>  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>U.S. Government</b><br/>Gardener - 1</p> <p><b>State</b><br/>Urban Forester - 2<br/>Supervisor, DED Program - 1</p> <p><b>County</b><br/>Landscape Architect - 1<br/>Arborist Technician - 1<br/>Agricultural Biologist - 1</p> <p><b>Municipality</b><br/>Arborist/Forester - 8<br/>Landscape Horticulturist - 1<br/>Grounds Mechanic - 1</p> <p><b>Park District</b><br/>Horticulturist - 1</p> <p><b>Shade Tree Commission</b><br/>Secretary - 1</p> <p><b>Cooperative Extension Service</b><br/>Horticulturist - 2<br/>Urban Forester - 2</p> | <p><b>Tree or Landscape Maintenance Firm</b><br/>Arborist/Representative - 2<br/>Supervisor/Foreman - 2<br/>Laborer - 1</p> <p><b>Landscape Consultant Firm</b><br/>Horticulturist - 1</p> <p><b>Golf Course</b><br/>Assistant Superintendent - 1</p> <p><b>Botanical Gardens/Arboretum</b><br/>Horticulturist - 2</p> <p><b>Utility Company</b><br/>Forester - 1</p> <p><b>Private College</b><br/>Faculty Member - 1</p> <p><b>Self-Employed</b><br/>Consultant - 3<br/>Landscape Designer - 2</p> |

most felt they had eventually passed the test. One woman commented that that is the way it should be. "No one should slide into a profession," she said, "without accreditation, proof of ability, integrity, and knowledge."

Judging from other comments, though, I got the feeling that most women expected to have to prove themselves, but didn't expect the testing period to be so long. For example, a woman who considered herself a success at her job nevertheless pointed out that even after four years on the job she still felt she must continually prove herself. She wrote, "A guy seems to go through a probation time before he's accepted into the 'fold'. A woman is always on probation, never quite accepted."

**Male co-workers.** Here the acceptance rating was somewhat lower, with 60% in the "good" to "excellent" range. Several women mentioned that age appeared to be a factor here. Usually they felt they were more likely to be accepted by men under the ages of 35-40. The few major problems mentioned in this area included backstabbing by co-workers, a feeling of being constantly gossiped about, and a feeling that males considered female co-workers to be inferior.

**Male subordinates.** Degree of acceptance in this category was about the same as with male co-workers. The women who performed physical labor right along with men generally felt quite well-accepted, and often attributed their acceptance to the fact that they all performed the same work.

One problem mentioned by women who didn't feel well-accepted in this category was again a tendency of older men not to accept them. Also mentioned was a tendency of unskilled workers to judge women by their physical work, even if that work was not a vital part of their jobs.

**Female co-workers.** One out of every five of the women had no female co-workers. Of those who did, 90% felt "good" to "excellent" acceptance in this category. Most felt it was easier to communicate with female co-workers than with males.

Incidentally, although I did not specifically ask about acceptance with female clerical help, several mentioned that they had some problems here. It seems that sometimes they feel resented or envied by female clerical help, and occasionally have trouble getting typing done if they

themselves can type.

**The public.** This is the category where many of the women really seemed enthusiastic about their acceptance. Almost 80% felt "good" to "excellent" acceptance. A common remark was that they were usually greeted with surprise at first, but acceptance followed. A number of the women did extensive public relations work as part of their job, and really seemed to enjoy this aspect of their work.

A few noted that their acceptance by the public varied widely. Interestingly, for the most part these women seemed to feel that they were least likely to be accepted by older women than by any other group.

**Major problems.** The next question I asked in the questionnaire was "Have you experienced any major problems related to the fact that you are a woman working in what has often been considered a man's field?" Only half felt that they had. The most commonly-cited problem was a feeling of being unaccepted or not taken seriously at their jobs.

The next most common problem was the feeling of having to prove oneself continually, and being tested over a long period of time. Other less common problems included a lack of confidence in their own mechanical abilities, loneliness due to being the token women in an organization, and unfair salaries.

**Special breaks or opportunities.** Another question I asked was whether the women felt they had received any special breaks or opportunities because of their sex. Fifty-six percent felt that they had, in one way or another.

The most common answer involved employment opportunities. Fifteen percent believed that some kind of directive to hire more women had possibly influenced either their own hiring, or the hiring of other women in the field. (Incidentally, nearly all of the women who believed this were publicly-employed). Other opportunities, such as an occasional free lunch, additional courtesies, or cleaned-up language, generally seemed to be regarded as inconsequential.

Several women thought their sex gave them a distinct advantage over men in that their uniqueness made it easier for them to make professional contacts. Another advantage some felt was

significant was the belief that a woman was more likely to be trusted by the public. They felt that in general people were more willing to open a door to a woman than a man.

Finally, one woman ironically noted one additional "advantage." She said, "In some instances I come across as being better than I am because on first impression it was assumed I didn't know anything!"

**Necessary qualifications.** My final question was "Do you think arboriculture is a good field for women to enter?" All but three answers were positive, but almost every woman qualified her answer by listing characteristics she thought were necessary for success. Of number one in importance was a willingness to work extremely hard. This was followed by a sincere interest in the work, intelligence and ability, and dedication and determination to succeed. Other qualifications mentioned included tolerance, ability to handle stress, and patience.

### Conclusions

Though the number of women working in arboriculture still appears to be quite small, women are currently succeeding in a wide variety of jobs in the field. The qualities a woman needs for success in this field are probably those that anyone, male or female, needs for success in their chosen field. However, at the present time a woman entering this field is likely to be greeted with skepticism, and closely watched for mistakes for a long period of time. Therefore I personally believe that in most cases a woman must exhibit *more* of the necessary qualities than most men to achieve the same degree of success in this field.

On a more positive note, I also believe this situation will change with time: As more women enter this and other non-traditional fields, and more people get used to the idea of working women in general, acceptance should come more easily. In hopes of making this transition period easier for everyone concerned, I'd like to offer a few suggestions for both women and their current or prospective employers:

To the women:

1) Know your stuff! You will likely have to prove yourself for quite a while, and the best way to do this is to consistently have the right answers. If

you don't know something, admit it but find out the answer.

2) Get your hands dirty! In other words, get some hands-on experience, even if you plan to be in a strictly managerial position eventually. If you can't get this through your school, try to get it on a summer job, or if necessary, an entry-level position after you graduate. I think this experience is *especially* important for women, because in general they are less likely than men to be familiar with tools, machinery, etc.

This doesn't mean that you're going to be doing physical labor all your life, but it will help immensely when you begin supervising people who do. One of my biggest regrets is that I didn't realize the importance of this before I began my present job. I think my experience on the job would have been vastly different if I had.

3) Be prepared to be in the spotlight to a certain degree. If you're the only woman in an organization, you will likely be watched closely, talked about, teased, and sometimes criticized. I think the best defense is usually to ignore this kind of talk, unless it could seriously damage your reputation.

4) Have a sense of humor. Don't be overly-sensitive or take yourself too seriously. Several of the women surveyed mentioned that overreacting to unimportant things, like a thoughtless remark or a man's offer of unneeded assistance, will only make things more difficult and alienate possible allies. I have definitely found this to be true.

5) On the other hand, assert yourself on *important* matters. Don't be afraid to take an unpopular stand when you know you're right. In the long run you will only lose respect if you run from unpleasant situations.

6) If at all possible, get involved in a professional organization. You will meet other people who have faced *and solved* many of the problems you are experiencing. You will find much support and encouragement.

Many foresters from Chicago-area municipalities, myself included, attend informal monthly luncheon meetings to discuss common problems. These meetings have been invaluable to me. In fact, I credit this group of professionals with giving me the encouragement I needed to "stick it out" at my job.

7) Be patient! Realize that change will come slowly, but it *will* come.

Finally, a few suggestions for employers:

1) Keep an open mind. Consider each job applicant as an individual. Don't pre-suppose what a person can or cannot do based on their sex. They may surprise you.

2) When interviewing women job applicants, make sure that they have a clear understanding of the work involved. The few "failures" I have heard of involved women who apparently didn't realize what they would be getting into before they began a new job.

3) Give a woman employee a fair chance to prove herself. If she doesn't perform well in one aspect of the work, try her out in another, if possible. Remember that few employees can excel in *every* job in an organization. Success for the employer, in my opinion, lies in trying to place each individual employee where he or she is most capable.

4) Don't give a woman employee "special treatment." Doing so will only ruin employee morale and will actually make things harder for the woman in the long run.

5) Realize that you may have some employees who refuse to accept the idea of women in non-traditional jobs or feel threatened by them. Though they are entitled to their opinion, don't allow them to sabotage a woman's chance to succeed at her job. In the same vein, try not to let

gossip get out of hand; it can be very damaging if not controlled.

6) If you have a woman or women working for you in supervisory positions, make sure that job applicants know this fact. If the applicant has objections to working for a woman, it's obviously better to find this out before a problem arises.

7) Finally, if the woman just doesn't measure up after you've given her a reasonable period of time to learn the job and attempted to show her what she's doing wrong, let her go. It isn't fair to other employees, or to our profession, to do otherwise.

I think that if both women and employers would keep some of these things in mind, and use some common sense, the female sex can become an additional source of competent, hard-working, *valued* employees in all levels of our profession.

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