

# Dandelion debate

Plant is symbol of divide over chemical use in local parks

By **Melissa Castro** Herald Staff Writer

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**O**n a quiet back road near Turtle Lake, a metaphorical battle is being waged between neighbors Katrina Blair and Scott Sallee. The two fight over city contracts, but the differences are philosophical, ecological and – for Blair, at least – almost religious.



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Scott Sallee, owner of Scott's Pro Lawn Service, applies weed control to the lawn at Santa Rita Park.



SHAUN STANLEY/Herald

Fort Lewis College Environmental Studies graduate Jordan Smith sprays a compost "tea" on a 1.5-acre test plot in the Hesperus Peace Park in the center of campus as part of a class project about chemical-free landscape techniques.

Blair, who lives in a rough-hewn log cabin with a solar-paneled roof on the north side of County Road 205, has been pushing Durango city officials for chemical- and pesticide-free parks since 2007. Sallee, who lives on the south side of the road in a neat stucco house surrounded by a moat of lush green grass, owns Scott's Pro Lawn Service, which has held the \$15,583 contract to spray the city's parks since about 1996.

Each has their own view of what defines a healthy park, be it the level of weed-proliferation or the nutrient level in the soil. But this time of year, both are exhausted by what appears to be a losing battle.

### The wonder weed

On Monday afternoon, Sallee was spotted spraying the grass along Camino del Rio, and on Tuesday, he sprayed Greenmount Cemetery – apparently, even the dead don't like dandelions.

On Wednesday morning, Sallee and a co-worker were spraying Memorial Park, hoses splaying from a company truck while the two doused the turf with a combination of nitrogen, phosphorous and "2,4-D" (dichlorophenoxyacetic acid).

"So here we are again," he said. "We're working our butts off, and we still have a long way to go."

Later in the day, as dogs bounded across Memorial Park and young couples sunned themselves on the freshly sprayed grass, two of Blair's employees were battling dandelions at a condominium complex with nothing but a 3-foot "Weed Hound" tool. The two had punched, twisted and pulled 10 to 12 buckets of

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Fort Lewis College Environmental Studies seniors Anne Pesata, left, Andrew Watts, and Jordan Smith, spread compost as a top coat to a 1.5-acre test plot in the Hesperus Peace Park in the center of campus as part of a class project about chemical-free landscape techniques.

dandelions the day before, only to return to a lawn full of freshly sprouted yellow flowers.

"It would be a lot easier if people didn't mind dandelions," said one of Blair's employees, the one-name weeding wonder, Chako, as he wiped his dark brow. "Dandelions are good – they're beautiful, you can eat them, and they're safe for children to play on."

The fruits of Chako's labor will be used for the May 14 Dandelion Festival, which aims to raise money for Turtle Lake Refuge's organic lawn-care project and to highlight the glories of the weed. Blair uses them for soup, tea and even making musical instruments.

#### A losing battle

It's not that Sallee, the hired spray gun, is opposed to organic approaches to lawn care. He's happy to apply organic fertilizer to the city's two "chemical-free parks," Brookside Park and Pioneer Park, and he's offered the organic alternative to residential customers for 15 years, he said. Yet, despite the popularity of chemical-free public parks, only 8 to 10 percent of his customers opt for organics on their own lawns, he said.

The city's experience at Brookside Park, which has been chemical-free for three years, may explain why: The weeds are winning.

Since eliminating herbicides from the park, weed cover has increased from 5 percent to 30 percent, said Ron Moore, the city's parks and cemetery manager.

"The weeds are slowly crowding out the grass," Moore said.

Blair's Turtle Lake Refuge, the organization largely responsible for the local chemical-free movement, took the lead at managing Brookside's weeds for the first couple of years.

It's not clear how effective its weed-abatement efforts were, though, and the city asked Turtle Lake Refuge to stand down last summer, Blair said.

"To be honest, that wasn't our goal," she said. "Our goal was to harvest and honor the plants."

Parks Director Cathy Metz said the city would welcome Turtle Lake's ongoing support, but she said the group does not "appear to be interested in a long-term commitment."

Losing the 2011 bid to weed and feed the city's organic parks – the contract that went to Sallee – may also have dampened Turtle Lake's interest in volunteer work.

"It's so heavy to put that burden on just a few people if you don't see (dandelions) as a problem," Blair said. "We want to be honored in our efforts. If more parks became chemical-free, that would be a huge service that would make us want to continue."

#### Across the nation

At least 19 U.S. cities have some pesticide-free parks, said Kim Leval, executive director of the Eugene, Ore.-based Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides. Some, such as Portland, Ore., are struggling to keep their programs afloat as both budgets and volunteer interest dwindle. Others, such as Chicago, have virtually eliminated chemicals from their park systems.

Metz calculates that the organic approach costs Durango \$0.009 per square foot versus \$0.007 for the traditional approach, and acknowledges the city will need more volunteer help to maintain the program.

Chicago actually has saved money by eliminating chemical usage across 90 percent of its 6,000 acres of turf, said Chicago Park District's director of natural resources, Adam Schwerner. But until the city mounted a dandelion-education effort, spring weather would bring a barrage of complaints as the dandelions commence their annual assault.

"It gives the impression that we're not managing parks," Schwerner said. "But if you mow on a Tuesday, the dandelions will be back by Friday."



But by distributing a simple, cheap one-page flier to select city leaders and public institutions, the park district also managed to virtually eliminate the complaints.

"The message was, if you see dandelions, it means you have a healthy lawn," Schwerner said. "We went from hundreds of complaints to maybe six."

Still, there are a few parks in which the Windy City just can't stomach weeds. Where tourists congregate – like Grant Park, the site of Barack Obama's historic victory speech – the dandelions shall not.

And that's where Sallee also would draw the line.

"I'm happy to do whatever the city wants," Sallee said. "But it seems to me that tourists are going to be a lot more attracted to parks that look like their lawns back home."

mcastro@durangoherald.com

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