



Scott Mutthersbaugh / Times-News

The New Leaf Society has completed 24 landscape projects throughout Alamance County in the past five years. This particular site is at the median of South Church Street near Burlington City Park.

## New Leaf Society increases county's 'curb appeal'

You only have one chance to make a first impression. Real estate agents call it "curb appeal." It is what we do when we size up a place. Whether it is a place to spend the night while we travel, stop for gas, or decide if this is where we want to buy a home and raise a family. We are visual by nature. If a place does not look good and inviting, we move on to the next exit, neighborhood or town.

Appearances play a big role in economic development. Potential businesses look at community resources as part of their decision making process. Their new home must be conducive to their employees and families. It is the job for our local Chamber of Commerce to sell our community.

There is no finer example of marketing through appearance than Elon University. Parents and students consistently rank the appearance of the university as one of the deciding factors in their choice of institutions. Elon's emphasis on landscaping and grounds maintenance has won them much national recognition. Peers in higher education visit the campus hoping to emulate this facet of Elon's success.

A few years ago, Alamance County was described as "one long commercialized strip along the Interstate highway" by a potential new industry looking to relocate. Comments like this were disturbing to those that recruit business to our area. To one individual, Allen Gant Jr., CEO of Glen Raven Inc., community appearance became a new priority for economic development. Interest in trees, shrubs and flowers were no longer going to be confined to garden clubs. It was soon to become an agenda for the Chamber of Commerce, local businesses and city officials.



Rett  
Davis

Gant created New Leaf Society in the fall of 2007. Its purpose was defined by his objectives. The first objective was to develop beautiful landscaped gateways and corridors throughout the community. The second objective was to enhance the downtown area of Burlington. The third objective was to improve landscaping in all areas.

I was called to Mr. Gant's office the week after I retired in 2007. I had just finished a 34-year career of being an agricultural agent and county director for N.C. State University's Cooperative Extension Service. It was during that meeting that Mr. Gant laid out his vision for New Leaf Society and asked me to take the lead in putting this vision into action.

The following week, staff members from Glen Raven, Elon University and the city of Burlington and the Chamber of Commerce took a trip to Spartanburg, S.C., to study an organization called the Noble Tree Foundation. This foundation was created to enhance the appearance of Spartanburg, making it a more desirable place to live and work. Roger Milliken, President of Milliken Mills, created this foundation. He endowed this foundation with \$1 million and challenged the private sector to match this gift.



It is the commitment of private donations that enables these organizations to be successful. Both public funding and grant monies have dried up through the years for various reasons as well as a downturn in the economy. As a result, Glen Raven, Inc. committed a matching donation of \$100,000 for three years to fund New Leaf Society. The private sector, including individuals, corporations and local businesses were challenged to help make this a successful venture. New Leaf Society has received more than \$700,000 in donations since inception, all from private funds.

Success is not just measured by the amount of money you raise, but how it is spent. Good stewardship and maximizing these funds called for partnership. Capturing the talents and like interests of others in the mission of New Leaf Society was crucial in our development. Representatives of Glen Raven, Elon University, city of Burlington, town of Mebane, Alamance Visitors and Convention Bureau and the N.C. Department of Transportation guide the selection of projects, plant material, and implementation.

In the past five years, New Leaf Society has completed 24 landscape projects. In addition, public art has been added as one of our objectives. We have planted more than 5 miles of thoroughfares, including all of University Drive, Mebane Street Extension, Rockwood O'Neal Drive and South Church Street beside City Park. We have restored Fountain Place in the historic area of Burlington. Downtown Burlington has planters along its streets and very soon, so will downtown Mebane. The town of Haw River has a freshly landscaped entrance to its new Red Slide Park, thanks to our donors and various parks in our community have additional trees for shade.

We select our plant material from some of the finest nurseries in North Carolina. Our plant criteria are based on sustainability. Our goal is to select plants with the greatest visual impact. From daylilies to crape myrtles to oaks, these plants offer diversification and beauty. Our landscape



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**The median of O'Neal Street near Turrentine Middle School is one of the beautification projects the New Leaf Society has taken care of in the county.**

contractors have planted 3,110 trees and shrubs since 2007.

Projects, both past and present, can be reviewed on our web site at [www.newleafsociety.org](http://www.newleafsociety.org); we also are on Facebook. These sites provide a comprehensive look at our mission, objectives and projects. We invite the public to get involved and offer both comments about our work and suggestions for future projects.

The business community and private citizens have answered the call by Allen Gant Jr. The results are visual and grow more impressive each year. Visitors and residents alike are greeted with flowering trees, shrubs and perennial plants as they drive through our community. A committed group of volunteers and partners from industry, local business and the public sec-

tor are committed to the objectives of New Leaf Society. Through good stewardship of contributions and plants, we are making Alamance County a more desirable place to live and work.

*Rett Davis is the retired director of the Alamance County Cooperative Extension Service and is a certified arborist. You can email your questions to him for his weekly Saturday column in Times-News' Homes: Inside & Out to [Rett\\_Davis@ncsu.edu](mailto:Rett_Davis@ncsu.edu).*