Vernon Hills Park District’s Century Park is Illinois’ First Park District Park to Earn Arboretum Accreditation

The Vernon Hills Park District’s Parks Foreman/Horticulturist, Rick Krocza, had a vision for the District in his first week of employment in 2015. While on a tour of Century Park, he quickly counted 60 plus tree species. Aware of the ArbNet Arboretum Accreditation Program, he enlisted the help of District employee, James Schubert, Certified Arborist, and contracted Graf Tree Care, to aid in the inventory of tree species through Geographic Information System (GIS) tracking. Through this process, Rick was able to identify how many more species of trees were needed to achieve Accreditation. Rick explained, “In just three planting seasons, Century Park changed from a beautiful public park into a living collection of uncommon trees to serve as an example of diversification in our urban forest, and I’m just getting started, there are so many more species and varieties of trees to add.”

The ArbNet Arboretum Accreditation Program, established by the Morton Arboretum, is based on self-assessment and documentation of an arboretum’s level of achievement of accreditation standard. It is the only global program to officially recognize arboretums based on a set of professional standards including an arboretum plan, collection with a minimum number of 100 species or varieties of trees, and public education.

Rick’s vision also included presenting the Century Park Arboretum as an educational tool to horticulture programs. “The diversification of trees in Century Park allows others to realize the abundance of trees that can be planted and thrive in the Midwest region of the United States”, he added. Moreover, each species of trees will be labeled in Century Park with a plaque and QR code further offering detailed information about the tree. His hope is that people in the park will self-educate themselves on trees that can be planted on their properties. Rick plans on offering educational programs through the Park District in addition to park tours.

The Century Park Arboretum, the first Park District park in Illinois to earn Arboretum Accreditation, is situated on 113 acres of land and water in Vernon Hills, Illinois, that was developed in 1976. It is a dynamic urban collection of 120 cultivated tree and woody plant species, along with some native grasses and wildflowers with plans to be further expanded to showcase sustainable landscape management and the restoration of urban ecosystems. The Arboretum boasts a walking/biking path system that loops around Big and Little Bear Lakes, with access to parkland for recreational activities. Three bridges are present connecting the path system.

Century Park is a mecca for summer activities including baseball and softball, cricket, basketball, volleyball, bocce ball, horseshoe, two playgrounds and exercise stations located along the trails. The lakes provide enjoyment for fishing, sailing, kayaking/canoeing and even stand-up paddle boarding! A Community Garden is lakeside and available to those wishing to grow a vegetable garden. The abundance of open space contains 11 picnic shelters for small gatherings. Summer festivals and Park District special events are also held in the park.

The recreational opportunities continue into the winter months at the two outdoor ice rinks, sled hill and cross country skiing paths. The Century Park Pavilion offers ice skate rentals and also serves as a warming house serving hot chocolate on cold, winter weekends. Parking lots are present at three locations surrounding the park.