

LAWN & LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY

Extended warranties on plants can be another profit center



Most contractors offer season-long or one-year free replacement, but this idea is raising interest.

■ The practiced eyes of Wally SaBell, 47 years in the landscape business, tell him that the hollies will die.

Even before summer arrives, they'll die along with much of the other plant material at the newly-opened chain restaurant on the busy Denver street. An out-of-state crew—the restaurant managers says it's an in-house operation—didn't match design and plant selection with Denver's high and dry climate. The cost in both labor and materials to replace the plants with more appropriate selections will be great.

Who will pay these costs?, asks SaBell rhetorically.

This case, admittedly extreme, illustrates the importance of landscape warranties. They're not to be taken lightly, SaBell believes.

Landscape contractors don't subscribe to a single philosophy in guaranteeing their plantings or their work. How can they? The variety of services they offer, and the uniqueness and size of the projects they tackle make this impossible.

For instance, a few years back SaBell's firm landscaped a 13-block-long mall project in Denver. One element of the project was planting 270 six-inch-caliper trees (among other things). As the specs required, SaBell had costed 27 extra trees into the bid. He kept these trees readily available. As it turned out, he lost just a single tree, and that was prior to installation.

More fortunately, SaBell says, just after the final tree went into the ground, his firm, in a separate contract, began maintaining the site.

"Many times, a contract will go out without a provision for the maintenance to be done by the contractor who installed it," says SaBell, now in his mid-60s and very active as a landscape consultant. "That's unfair to the contractor. It can also be unfair

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Warranties protect a property owner's investment.

Courtesy Post Properties, Atlanta

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to the eventual owner of that property."

But some landscape pros have neither the expertise nor the resources to bid such ambitious projects. Also, some contractors don't offer maintenance services.

It's no wonder that they can feel caught in the middle—sometimes implementing a design that isn't their own, then relying upon the property owner, or another contractor, to maintain the integrity of their installation, at least through the warranty period.

Even so, landscape warranties, whatever their particulars, are almost as common as landscape companies.

Warranties offer protection for property owners. They may also indicate that the contractor is confident of his/her service. But, most importantly, they allow the contractor to compete in the marketplace.

There are complications though, although few probably as clear-cut as these examples:

- The new landscape that isn't watered for three weeks because the property owner went on vacation.
- The freshly planted evergreens that turn brown because the family collie finds it a convenient place to urinate.
- The young tree girdled by the dog chain wrapped around it.

Typical is the warranty offered by Patrick McGrady's Pro Green of New Castle, Ind.: one year on plant material. A longer warranty can be arranged if Pro Green maintains the property, too.

Environmental Design's Joel Lerner: Why shouldn't the customer have the option of buying an extended warranty?



"We have to use some judgement," cautions McGrady. "We have to look at the job itself. For instance, if it's a nice-sized job and it's a valuable client, we don't ask a lot of questions. We just take care of it."

Deanna Walker of Turf Tenders, Bellingham, Wash., says her firm guarantees their plantings for one growing season. "We will give an added warranty if we maintain it for a full year," she says, adding that seasonal, or one-year free replacement is "pretty typical" in her marketplace.

A new idea—But Joel Lerner, president of Environmental Design, Chevy Chase, Md., wonders why a warranty can't also become an additional profit center for a contractor.

He says he's considering developing "an extended warranty" plan similar, in purpose anyway, to those offered by auto or appliance dealers.

The landscape contractor, most simply explained, calculates the cost of the "extended warranty" into the original cost of the project, and presents it to the potential client as an option.

"What if we offer an extended warranty and on the warranty we stipulate that we'll do site inspections on a scheduled basis. And we'll provide the customer with plant condition reports," says Lerner. "Maybe on this warranty we can write in a plant replacement clause to."

Clients buying an extended warranty afford the contractor the opportunity to stay in touch with them.

"I think it would indicate to the client that we want to see this property as much as we can to make sure everything is right," adds Lerner.

"Why not?," says Greg Carlson of Carlson Landscaping, Duluth, Minn. "Extended warranties are done for just about everything else."

Even so, his warranty remains similar to most others in his northern Minnesota market, one year on plants and related services.

"You have to say that you'll stand behind your work, then honor that. Otherwise you'll never get a job," Carlson says.

Most contractors, in fact, agree that a long-term warranty program will work—as long as they're getting paid for it.

—Ron Hall

Fighting weeds...and fires, too?

Lawn care technicians find that volunteering for the local fire department is a rewarding avocation.

■ What does Curb Appeal, a professional lawn care company, and the Stafford, Va., volunteer fire department have in common?

They're staffed by some of the same people, including Curb Appeal owner Charlie Robertson, a 20-year fire department veteran.

This spring marks the fourth year in
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'We work our jobs on a contractual basis,' says Charlie Robertson.