

MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



DeSantis Landscapes, like every other business, has left a carbon footprint on the environment. But today, the company is looking to erase that mark.



Dean DeSantis

COMPANY: DeSantis Landscapes Inc.

PRESIDENT: Dean DeSantis

HEADQUARTERS: Salem, OR (with a branch office in Oregon City)

CLIENT MIX: 60% residential; 40% commercial

SERVICE BREAKDOWN: 50% design/build; 50% maintenance

2010 REVENUE: \$4 million

NO. OF EMPLOYEES: 60 employees in peak season

DEAN DESANTIS HAS always had an appreciation for the environment. But after spending six post-college years traveling abroad, he was even more deeply affected by what he saw.

"I was able to see firsthand the effects of what man had done to our environment around the world," says the president of Oregon-based DeSantis Landscapes, which has offices in Salem and Portland. "That really hit home for me."

Today, as a business owner, DeSantis has been able to do something about it. The process has been an invaluable lesson.

Since the company started focusing on improving the environmental impact of its internal business operations back in 2005 (now branded as the "Earth Sense" program), some serious changes have taken place for the \$4 million business. Today, DeSantis Landscapes, a company that is 50/50 in design/build and maintenance services, has reduced its carbon dioxide emissions by more than 500,000 lbs. That's the equivalent of taking 45 vehicles off of the road. At the same time, the company is saving money on fuel costs, receiving tax breaks, and enhancing its reputation as a leader in sustainability.

One of the biggest

changes that DeSantis made was to switch his management team members from pickup trucks to hybrid passenger cars.

"I drive a Prius and get 45 miles to the gallon, which is a big difference from what I used to get in my pickup," says DeSantis.

The company has also made the switch to biodiesel instead of petroleum diesel for its fleet of trucks, tractors, large mowers and other equipment. DeSantis says that switch was a big learning experience.

"We have two 500-gallon tanks on-site where we store fuel, and one of the things that happened was that the biodiesel actually started to clean the inside of the tank by getting all of that crud and gunk off of the sides. The problem is that it started going into our fuel lines...but as soon as we got over that hump, we haven't had any problems."

DeSantis is now also working with the local office of Enterprise Fleet Management, a full-service fleet management company for businesses with medium-sized fleets, to offset 100% of the company's verifiable greenhouse gas emissions for the entire fleet. It's part of Enterprise's nationwide comprehensive environmental platform pledge to match a portion of each customer's greenhouse gas offset

purchases (up to a national total of \$1 million).

While these changes are starting to pay off for DeSantis, the cost of going green isn't always cheap upfront. But DeSantis says the return on investment does come eventually.

Take, for example, the solar panels that the company had installed on its roof. DeSantis says that the projected return on investment was about 3-and-a-half years, a time span he's just reached. He now expects to save about 15% to 18% on power costs.

And it's important to remember that payoff also comes in the form of goodwill and good publicity. DeSantis says he feels great about what he's doing for the environment, but it's also been a wise business decision to let other people know about his efforts.

"We knew we couldn't just roll this out quietly," he says. "We also needed to couple the efforts we were taking internally with education for our clients, so we developed several informational pieces and put them on our website for people to access."

Today, DeSantis is proud of what he's achieved — and he looks forward to doing even more. He's become a leader of sustainability and hopes others will follow in his footsteps, adding: "I'm reminded of a quote that says the best time to plant a tree is 100 years ago, but the next best time is *today*."

Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.