

On new turf

A Maryland firm finds artificial turf installation can be a nice addition to design/build work.

WHEN A CLIENT asked Four Seasons Landscaping & Nursery for an artificial turf putting green, it led to a new division for the Damascus, Md.-based company. The company's always focused on design/build (with no maintenance division). Adding an artificial turf service fit well with that niche. Today, the company installs artificial putting greens but also artificial grass for a variety of purposes.

In fact, putting greens are probably the least popular installation for Four Seasons right now. The company found a larger market in selling artificial grass installation to kennels and day care centers.

"Adding artificial turf to a kennel or day care adds value to their companies," says owner Doug Del Gandio. "An outdoor space with a lot of dogs is hard to grow grass on. It gets trampled and dug up. But with the artificial turf, a kennel can still offer a clean area for the dogs to play. Similarly, day cares have to worry about the kids getting muddy in regular grass but an artificial turf eliminates that. It's also hypoallergenic and has some soft padding, which is nice for playgrounds."

Del Gandio says he's seen a growing market for colleges and high-end high schools converting their sports fields to artificial turf. He hasn't gotten into that area, but he says he's seen other companies become successful with it.

"The schools see it as an obvious return on investment because with no mowing or fertilizing, they're ultimately making their money back," says Del Gandio. "But that's a large application and it's more for companies who focus on this full time. For us, it's just an add-on service right now."

As the market grows, Del Gandio believes it will become a bigger money maker for his business. "We're still pretty new to it and doing about 15 projects a year, but as it becomes more of a mainstream idea, I could see it driving a lot of revenue for a company like ours."

Right now, 100 percent of the company's marketing effort is web driven. It had previously tried direct mail, with little luck.

"People don't know a lot about artificial grass right now, so they're already getting online to find out more about it," says Del Gandio. "As they do that, the first thing they'll do is a Google search to see who offers it."

With putting greens there's an opportunity for repeat revenue, says Del Gandio. "The putting greens do require maintenance and we tell our customers that they need to have us come back at least once a year to roll the green," he says. "You want the putting green to play like a real golf course, and in order to do that, we need to get the roller on it for a couple of hours to make sure it's laying right. But that's the only recurring service that comes out of artificial grass. Once you lay down the turf there isn't any future maintenance work that needs to be done. The product is permeable and rainwater goes through it. And if it doesn't rain for a while and you want to wash it out, you can always hose it down."

Although putting greens aren't the most popular application right now, Del Gandio says he could see them coming back. "They're somewhat expensive to install, so it tends to be customers with expendable income that want them, which isn't as many people in this economy," says Del Gandio, adding that a typical 800-sq.-ft. to 1,000-sq.-ft. putting green would cost \$10,000 to \$14,000 to install. Synthetic turf applications for general use range from \$8,000 to \$12,000. "They're sort of viewed as a luxury. But there are also so many practical applications for artificial grass, which continue to drive the market in commercial opportunities like playgrounds, day cares, veterinarian's offices and kennels. I definitely see this as a growing service for our company."

Payton is a freelance writer with seven years of experience covering the landscape market.



Artificial turf installation prospects go beyond putting greens.

>> SERVICE SNAPSHOT

WHAT WAS THE LEARNING

CURVE? An artificial turf manufacturer helped Four Seasons build a green at its facility as part of its training process.

"There really wasn't a huge learning curve," owner Doug Del Gandio says. "It's very similar to laying a paver patio and is the same kind of base, but you're just laying down turf instead of brick in the end."

WHAT WAS YOUR INVESTMENT?

For a design/build company that likely already has excavating equipment and a roller, the cost of training is the biggest investment, says Del Gandio. Small tools specific to artificial turf would cost less than \$2,000.