

MAINTENANCE

Free food

Educating clients about the benefits of leaving lawn clippings is an obstacle.

By STEVE THOMAS

Mike Maddrell, owner of Echelon Landscape Maintenance, Dublin, Ohio, knows the favorable attributes and science behind allowing leaves and clippings to decompose naturally on lawns. Maddrell studied turf management at The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute, Wooster, Ohio.

But he also knows his customers. "I've tried in the past to explain the benefits of leaving some residue on the lawn, but most people I've taken care of prefer clippings and leaves be removed completely," he says. "I prefer to not bag clippings, as they're good free food for the lawn."

Echelon employees typically cut once and leave the clippings, double mulching only when lawns are unusually long, due to springtime growing conditions. Clumps or clippings are then bagged or crews use a blower to disperse the excess residue.

Kyle Cooper, CEO of Property Masters in Marietta, Ga., understands that some customers always will prefer having their clippings removed. "We currently mulch the majority of our properties, unless customers request them to be bagged," he says. "When bagging, we calculate that cost and figure the charges by square feet and bill accordingly."

After collection, grass clippings are taken to Property Masters' facilities to begin the composting cycle, along with hedge

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PVB LOCK BOX

PVB LOCK BOX

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CLOCK BOX

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trimmings, leaves and other debris. The materials are then taken by Dumpster-load to composting sites, where they're recycled into mulch and topsoil.

Because "grasscycling" (allowing clippings to decompose on site) is the most efficient and least expensive method of handling clippings, educating customers is the real challenge, says Andrew Gembecki, co-founder of Natural Greenscapes Inc., Yorktown Heights, N.Y.

"We're starting to find customers trending to a more natural approach," he says. "We do a lot more mulching on properties and try to convert the non-believers," he says.

When properties are not mulched, Natural Greenscapes' employees blow yard waste into a pile and vacuum clippings.

"At that point our costs go up," he says. "Dumping fees, the costs of operating additional equipment and added labor costs all contribute to higher maintenance pricing, which is passed on to the client."

It's difficult for Gembecki to determine the added expense involved in picking up clippings and leaves, as opposed to mulching the clippings, because there are so many variables.

"Rates of grass growth in May are quite a bit different than October," he says. "Then again, there's a lot more debris and leaves in October than in May. And tipping fees have been rising steadily over the last several years because of lack

of space in landfills."

An informal survey finds a wide divergence in tipping fees across the country, from \$6 per ton in Dublin, Ohio, to \$42 per ton in Red Bluff, Calif.

"We've been offering the mulching as an option for about three years now and our clients love it," says Gembecki. "Not only is it more cost effective for our customers, but they feel like they're giving back by not sending their clippings and yard waste to some dump."

Mulching clippings and debris makes less work for crews, too. It also enables workers to complete their tasks efficiently.

Mulching mowers are designed to cut the grass blades several times by suspending the clippings above the bottom of the deck and allowing the grass to be sliced into very small particles.

The cutting feature allows for having less visible clippings and faster decomposition from shredding.

"In the fall, when leaves and clippings are heavy, I double mulch before I vacuum them," says Maddrell. "It reduces them substantially, and I can fit much more onto my truck. It also composts much faster, and I can then use it as a soil amendment the following season to till in beds."

Thomas is a Columbus, Ohio-based freelance writer.



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