

# Taking a stab

York Landscape opts for verticutting to remove thatch and ramp up revenue.

**A**MONG THE GREATEST nemeses of a lush lawn is thatch, a layer of dead, organic debris that develops between the blades of grass and the soil surface. While contractors commonly turn to power raking to tackle thatch, Pinellas Park, Fla.-based York Landscape takes the high road with its verticutting service, removing thatch and excessive top growth from turf using a machine to slice rows into the ground for new seed to drop in. Owner York Somerville has been verticutting for about 30 years, and says he's seen only a sliver of the Green Industry adopt the add-on, too.

"Customers don't understand what it is or what it does," says Somerville, who first learned the practice in Long Island, N.Y., where he used a verticutter for overseeding lawns. "It's something golf courses do all the time, but it's not as common for residential landscape."

The buildup of thatch can occur on many turf varieties, but it's especially prevalent in creeping-type grasses like St. Augustinegrass, which Somerville often maintains. Thatch accumulation can increase disease and insect problems, cause watering issues and create an undesirable "spongy" feel to the grass, among other complications.

Compared to power raking, Somerville chooses verticutting because it opens up the soil so well.

"Contrary to popular belief, and even information you may find on the Internet, a power rake will not remove thatch," he says. "It only will remove surface debris. The best way to remove thatch is by investing in a verticutter."

## GETTING STARTED

Somerville notes some verticutters simply make cuts into the ground while others (overseeders) make cuts and drop seed. He operates a machine that doesn't distribute seed. Those in the South may have trouble finding a suitable machine, he says.

"The verticutters seem to be built for Bermudagrass or grasses you find up North," he says. "I'd been using a machine that was more than 30 years old and it just recently broke. I bought two newer ones but had to modify them to work on St. Augustine."



Verticutting removes thatch and excess top growth from turf.

York Landscape puts a two-man crew on its residential verticutting duties for the four months out of the year it offers the service (typically two months in the spring and two months in the summer). "Larger commercial sites certainly could use verticutting and you'd need a bigger crew," Somerville says.

You can't do much damage to a lawn with a verticutter, he says, but there are some hazards to look out for.

"You just need to be careful to always mark your sprinklers and be prepared to fix one if you break it," Somerville says, adding that's a practice most maintenance companies likely are already familiar with.

Somerville prices his verticutting jobs based on the size of the lawn. In other areas, companies will give consideration

to weather variances and whether their verticutting involves seeding. Although he didn't disclose financials from the add-on service, Somerville says it's proven to be popular among clients and a bit of a revenue booster for the company.

Even so, York Landscape doesn't heavily market verticutting outside of its mention on the company website and through upsells to existing customers.

"You don't need to be a wonderful salesman to pitch this," Somerville says. "It's one of those things that can have a pretty dramatic effect on how a lawn looks and that's always an easy sell to people who are already investing in their lawn."

In addition to being a sure way to remove thatch and thin a lawn, Somerville says verticutting also allows a lawn to breathe, stimulates new growth, aerates and prepares it for seeding. "Verticutting is important to all types of grasses because all lawns create thatch," he says. "It's really a no-brainer."

Payton is a freelance writer with eight years of experience writing about the landscape industry.

## SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**COMPANY:** York Landscape

**LOCATION:** Pinellas Park, Fla.

**SERVICE:** Verticutting

**WHY:** It's the best way to remove thatch, Somerville says, which is a huge problem in his region.

**BIGGEST CHALLENGE:** Finding equipment. "I have yet to find a piece of equipment built to work well on St. Augustinegrass," he says. "I've always had to make modifications."

**BEST TIP:** "Look for the best machine you can find," Somerville says. "If you're in a region where St. Augustine is not your primary grass, you shouldn't have an issue with finding a piece of equipment that works great on your lawns."