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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

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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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LAWN/TREE CARE

The grass master

Ohio's Applicator of the Year proves there's more to quality lawn care than fertilizer.

By BETH GERACI

Matt Tyler takes out the trash. He rakes the leaves, mows the lawn, even brings in the groceries.

No, that's not life at home. Those are some of the extra steps Tyler takes for his lawn care customers on the job. And they're just a few reasons why the Ohio Lawn Care Association (OLCA) named him its 2012 Applicator of the Year.

The award is designated for a lawn care applicator who demonstrates professionalism on the job and leadership at his or her company, and there's no doubt Tyler embodies both of those things, says Matt Ellis, Tyler's boss at Grass Master Inc., who nominated Tyler for the award.

"Once he started working for the company, he raised the bar for everybody else," Ellis says. "He's humble. He demonstrates a level of professionalism that we consider old school now." For example, Ellis says, Tyler watches out for his older customers, knows his clients' dogs and even spent an hour repairing a client's lawn mower.

"I've blown out their garages for them, just little things like that," Tyler says of his old-school style. Why? "I don't know. If they need help, they need help."

Tyler, 49, has worked as a lawn care professional for 24 years, 10 of them at Grass Master, based in Canal Fulton, Ohio. He's both honored and humbled by his Applicator of the Year award. "It's

really, really appreciated," he says. "It's nice to be recognized as an individual who cares and works hard."

THE VOTES ARE IN

Applicator of the Year nominations are voted on by a nine-person board consisting of chemical manufacturers, distributors and lawn care companies from around Ohio, including Ellis—who serves as the board's vice president.

At first, board members could not nominate their own employees for the award, but that has since changed. "We thought, 'We've got these fantastic nominees and it's really not fair that they wouldn't be considered,'" Ellis says.

Nominations pour in from any of 300 Ohio Lawn Care Association members statewide. The award also is advertised through the Ohio Turf Foundation and at John Deere Landscapes locations around the state so that non-members can nominate candidates.

Tyler is the fourth recipient of the award—a plaque in the shape of Ohio.

Through his professionalism, honesty and willingness to do more than his job requires, Tyler has acquired

quite a fan base on his route. Unfortunately for some of those fans, Grass Master recently changed up its routes to increase its density.

To some of Tyler's customers, it felt like a cruel joke. Says Ellis: "I told one customer, 'Tyler's not going to be your guy anymore. We're changing the routes.' And the customer said, 'No way!'"

IN-HOUSE IMPACT

Tyler has made an impression not only in the field, but also at the office.

"He's great. He is a pleasure to work with," says Grass Master office manager Carolyn Swinehart. "He's very cooperative. If you ask him to do something, he will do it."

Swinehart is so impressed by Tyler's work ethic that she was eager to share a complimentary letter from one of his customers. "We have been customers of Grass Master for 14 years," the letter stated. "The great looks of our lawn are mainly due to your products and your service technician Matt Tyler."

Tyler takes such praise in stride, saying he's just an ordinary guy who listens to his customers and uses common sense.

"I mean, yeah, I work long hours some days and it's a little much sometimes," he says. "But if you pace yourself it's all right. It's satisfying. It's gratifying. It makes it all worthwhile." **LM**

"I've blown out customers' garages for them, just little things like that. I don't know. If they need help, they need help." —Matt Tyler



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PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN

Shilan is editor of FromDesign2Build.com. Contact him at 201/783-2844 or jshilan@gmail.com.

The problem with negotiating

Q We work in a very competitive market and quite often our clients want to negotiate the price when we present the proposal. We don't want to artificially inflate the prices to give us some wiggle room, but we also don't want to lose money. What's the best way to handle this?

—Edward Thompson, Sunrise Landscape, Milton, Ontario

A The short answer is a quote from the movie "The Fugitive." It's a hostage situation and Tommy Lee Jones (as Deputy Marshal Samuel Gerard) simply says, "I don't negotiate." Now clearly I cannot say it as cool as he did, but the message is very clear.

As we all know, the reason some clients want to negotiate is to lower the price and get something for nothing. Let's be honest; most of us try to do the same thing with our own vendors.

Let's walk through the typical scenario. You present your proposal to the clients, including everything they requested at a number you feel is reasonable. They're happy you included everything on their wish list; unfortunately, they aren't as happy with the price. So what do they do? They ask if you can do it for less. You want the work, so your first reaction is to say "OK." It seems innocent enough. Well I can tell you it's not. The biggest problem with opening the door to negotiations is as soon as you do, everything from that moment on is going to be a negotiation.

What happens when you agree to negotiate? The first thing you do is lower the price so you can get the work. As soon as you agree to the new adjusted price, you get the follow up question, "That includes sales tax, right?" You agree to the price including sales tax because it's a decent job and it's only a few more bucks out of your pocket. If you're like most contractors you tell yourself you'll be able to make the money back on change orders.

However, before your clients sign the proposal they hit you up with a few "you know whats." "You know what, can we make it 20 flats of annuals

instead of 15 flats?" "You know what, can we use 2-gallon perennials instead of 1-gallon?" "You know what, can we just include those couple of step stones?" Each item isn't such a big deal by itself, but before you know it you've just given away some hefty profits and you haven't even started the job.

Once the job begins you're now entering phase two of the negotiating process. This is where it's open season on the "would you minds" and "while you're heres." You know exactly what I'm talking about. As you're doing the installation, the homeowner or property manager seems to always come outside asking you or your crew to do favors. The client knows you're a pushover so he's going to take advantage of you every step of the way. When you do try to submit change orders he either dismisses them as being invalid or negotiates them down to half of what you billed them for.

You know what else? It doesn't stop there. What do you think is going to happen when you finish the project and submit your final bill? You got it—negotiations. Does this sound familiar? "You guys did a great job and we want to cut you a check for the balance, but since we went over budget we need you to adjust that number down a bit. Also, we want you to extend the plant warranty to two years instead of one and include an IPM program for the first year until the plants had a full growing season."

At this point you'll agree to just about anything because you need the payment to make payroll and have a big stack of payables. Since all of the profit has been negotiated out of the project you tell yourself that you did a great job and that's payment enough. You're satisfied you have another customer who will recommend you for future work and you'll definitely make money on the next one.

What's the best way to deal with a client who wants to negotiate? Give them a fair price and do your best Tommy Lee Jones. Simply say, "I don't negotiate."

To submit a question for Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.



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RAMTRUCKS.COM

A new division allowed Sonoran Gardens to add maintenance in the turf-free desert.

Custom growth

A Tucson-based landscape company finds a unique niche in the maintenance market.



GIVEN ARIZONA'S DESERT landscape, xeriscaping is often a necessity. As a result, many landscape companies here don't have a strong focus on traditional landscape maintenance. Instead, they drive much of their revenue from design/build projects with hardscaping. Still, when clients kept asking Sonoran Gardens in Tucson to tackle some of their maintenance work, the company decided to expand into the arena in a unique way—with a Custom Care division that would address all their clients' needs.

"This is a concept that's not so original in other parts of the country but out here it really fills a gap that's missing," says Sonoran President Chris Niccum. "Customers were calling us with their maintenance needs and it was obvious they wanted something that was full service. So we tried to address that with a Custom Care program in which the client receives a package that includes everything needed to keep their landscape top notch."

Since there aren't any lawns to mow, landscape maintenance might include general cleanup, plant care, insect and weed control, pruning, replacing outdoor lighting bulbs, adjustments to irrigation controllers and minor irrigation system repairs.

"Each landscape out here is really different, so it truly is a custom package," says Niccum. "We figure out exactly what each property needs to look its best and then include all of that in a monthly service fee."

Last August, Sonoran Gardens acquired the Contained Gardner, a company specializing in container gardens for residential and commercial clientele. Clients can now choose to add a container garden service, which has been a great revenue driver for the company. It has a biweekly maintenance feature (running approximately \$100 per month for a typical pot), during which a technician fertilizes, deadheads, checks for insects and performs other routine container garden maintenance.

In addition, twice a year the pots are completely emptied and replanted. Niccum says the service has been a nice fit with the core design/build component of his business. Clients may choose to do one or more pot installations during construction, which can run anywhere from \$500 to \$800 per installation.

When Custom Care was first launched, Niccum was able to use two existing employees to run the division—a foreman with the ability to handle maintenance work and a designer who had a great eye for property layouts. As the division has grown, Sonoran has hired a full-time manager and the staff has grown to eight.

Because he grew Custom Care slowly, Niccum says he didn't need much capital outlay. The division initially used equipment and staff the company already had and only added more as the need—and the revenue—drove it.

Niccum says communication is a huge part of what makes the division so successful. Clients always get a heads up before staff members visit the property and are asked if there's anything special they should pay attention to.

"When we're done, the client is sent a complete checklist of everything we did, whether it was fixing a leak, replacing a light bulb or replacing a plant—everything is itemized," Niccum says.

Also included in the package is a yearly landscape evaluation where a designer gives the client ideas for potential upgrades to plantings, lighting and more, he says. "That often ends up generating some new projects for us."

As Niccum looks to the future, he sees the division expanding even further. Pool maintenance and even handyman services are strong possibilities.

"Clients like the idea of having all their needs handled by one company that they already have a relationship with and that they trust."

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

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

WHY CUSTOM CARE?

"Customers wanted a company with horticultural experience to handle some of the maintenance needs they were hiring other maintenance people to do, and they wanted a full-service experience," says Chris Niccum, president of Sonoran Gardens.

TARGET CLIENT? The program targets high-end customers who aren't solely price driven, he says. "It's people who are willing to pay to get better service and better quality."

KEY TO SUCCESS? A focus on good communication has really driven the success of this service, says Niccum. "People like the idea of it being custom-designed for them and that everything is included in one single package."



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for the owner and one for the irrigation or maintenance technician.

PVB Lock Box // PVBLockBox.com

ESP-Me

The new ESP-Me controller builds upon the features of its predecessor, the ESP Modular. Contractors can install the optional three- or six-station modules and expand the ESP-Me from its standard four stations all the way up to 22 stations, eliminating the need to stock multiple controllers or teach crew members how to install and program them. Other features include delay watering, seasonal adjust by program and the total run time calculator.

Rain Bird // ESPMeNews.rainbird.com



Roam XL

The Roam XL is a long-distance remote designed to let professionals communicate with multiple controllers from up to two miles away. Its signal is strong enough to go through buildings and still communicate with a controller more than a half-mile away. It features a simple user interface with 128 different programmable addresses.

Hunter Industries // HunterIndustries.com/roamxl



Sapien

A two-wire controller with 63 stations, Sapien now features a new line of customized enclosures that protect the system from weather elements, vandalism and pests. The enclosures are available in heavy-duty plastic or stainless steel as wall mounts or pedestal-style. No special wiring or field grounding is required with Underhill's 2Wire products.

Underhill International // Underhill.us

XCI Cloud

The latest version of the XCI Cloud, which allows users to manage an unlimited number of irrigation sites and controllers online, features odd-even water scheduling, full integration with Blackberry mobile devices (alongside its existing iPhone functionality) and GPS site and controller location information. Cyber-Rain central irrigation control systems automatically adjust watering schedules based on local weather information, and there is no monthly fee for weather feeds.

Cyber-Rain // Cyber-Rain.com

