

In Search of Greener Grass

Disenchanted with the golf business, a superintendent seeks solace in the landscaping profession. But what he finds surprises him

BY JIM BLACK, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

I've never really trusted anyone who hasn't been fired at least once," my brother told me. "If you haven't been fired, you haven't been trying hard enough."

My brother passed this piece of wisdom on to me in an attempt to console me after my own unexpected dismissal from my job as a golf course superintendent.

Since that time almost four years ago, I've job-hunted my way through prospect after prospect. I made it to the elusive top-five finalists for some jobs. But for others, people didn't even acknowledge my application.

Eventually, I ended up settling for irrigation/spray tech positions and assistant superintendent positions. But let me tell you, having been the top dog before, this proved difficult.

So, totally frustrated, a thought began to creep into my mind: "What else can I do besides this?"

Eventually, an opportunity came about that answered this question. I was offered a position as a foreman for a landscaping company.

But another internal question emerged.

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"How can I leave the golf business for the landscaping business?" I asked myself. After all, golf is the business I love, the business I trained for, bled for and lost sleep over. How could I even think of leaving it?

The more I thought about my situation, the angrier I became. I began to feel as though the golf business was not treating me fairly, and I was being led down one rabbit hole after another.

I sat down and made up a list of the things I wouldn't miss if I were to leave the golf business:

- Irrigation breaks at 3 p.m. on a Friday.
- Having to work every holiday.
- Steamy mid-Atlantic summers.
- Irate golfers who blame you for their bad golf.
- Being enslaved to watching The Weather Channel.
- Worrying about the golf course when I'm home at night or on weekends.
- Feeling the need to drop by the course on my days off.
- Having to deal with crew members who don't care about what they do.

With all of those headaches, why not take a chance on landscaping, I thought. It's basically the same genre of work, I figured.

Certainly, I know enough about installing flowerbeds around clubhouses and tee boxes. Landscaping around homes couldn't be all that different, right? Why not give it a try?

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The job prospect was great — a relatively young brother-owned landscaping company in need of some professional direction and organization. The hourly money was better than my current salaried assistant superintendent position, but the hours were longer.

After my potential employer and I agreed on a handful of promises to each other — kind of a you-scratch-our-backs-and-we'll-scratch-your-back

Should I Stay Or Should I Go?

Jim Black left his job as a golf course superintendent for a few different reasons. Mainly, he was disenchanted with the golf course maintenance business and wanted to try something new. According to the Herman Group, a firm that specializes in workforce and workplace issues, these are the five main reasons people change jobs:

1. "It doesn't feel good around here." Workers are concerned with a company's reputation; the physical conditions of comfort, convenience, and safety; and the clarity of workplace's mission.
2. "They wouldn't miss me if I were gone." Leaders might value their employees, but they don't tell them often enough. If people don't feel important, they might leave.
3. "I don't get the support I need to get my job done." Contrary to opinions heard all-too-often from management, people really do want to do a good job.
4. "There's no opportunity for advancement" It's not about promotions, although many deserving people desire to move up. The issue here is learning. People want to learn and sharpen their skills.
5. "Compensation is the last reason people most leave." Workers want fair compensation, but they want the first four items on this list more. You know the saying, "You can't pay me enough to stay here." It's true, too.

situation" — I gave my two-weeks notice to the golf course.

The two weeks went by slowly, but finally the day came to switch jobs. Taking a deep breath, I jumped over the fence and into the truck with my new boss and some friendly amigos. We headed across town to a very big landscape job — installing pavers!

All the way around this house, we did paver patios, paver walkways, flagstone patios and flagstone steps.

And don't forget the fire pit. I have to admit, it was awesome by the time we finished. But my back was aching, and my fingers were bleeding from handling the concrete and mortar.

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Ironically, when it came time to actually landscape around the finished product with plant material, I was assigned to another job. The only chance I had to see the final results of our hard work was when I was instructed to go back and water the new plants and flowers when the homeowner went away on vacation.

I guess it goes to show that no matter what you think you might be getting into, the “greenness” of the other side is all relative.

That first job proved to be the precursor of things to come. First it was pavers, then it was tree work, then cleaning gutters and yard cleanup, and then siding removal. Finally, a landscaping job came around.

It was not at all what I expected from my new career in the landscaping industry.

But when September came, things got better. I was placed on aeration duty. I was provided one crew member and a trailer full of lawn aerating and seeding equipment. Except for the myriad obstacles you have to maneuver around at any given home, I enjoyed aerating and overseeding on such a small scale.

I was even able to share some of my insider aerating techniques, opening up my co-workers' eyes to new and more efficient aeration and seeding methods.

After one particular aeration job, my boss received a call from the homeowner who complained that we “didn't do the job right.” The homeowner said he couldn't see any holes in the grass and thought we forgot to put down any seed.

I had to explain about the magic drag mat (I pulled the mat by hand around his yard — no utility vehicles here) I used to break up aeration cores and drag the seed into the holes. I kindly told my boss to ask for the homeowner's patience with this matter and, needless to say, he ended up with no reason to call back.

When I finally came to enjoy doing different things at different places in my new job as a landscaper, I was struck by another notion that discouraged me. When a landscape job is over, I'm out

of there. I don't get to see a project grow. I don't get to nurture it or keep it beautiful.

When I'm done working on it, it's not mine anymore.

On the other hand, when you're the superintendent of a golf course, you have a sense of ownership. It's your golf course to see, nurture, maintain and keep beautiful.

I guess it just goes to show that no matter what you think you might be getting into, the “greenness” of the other side is all relative. After eight months with the landscaping company, I was able to count on one hand the number of actual flowerbeds I worked on.

With all this said, I had to admit to myself that I was yearning for the links again. One night while I was sitting at my desk, I decided to jot down a list of the things I missed about being on a golf course:

- The satisfaction of conquering a tough irrigation break and getting the system up and running again.
- Preparing the course and making it extra beautiful for the holiday golfers.
- Hand-watering during steamy mid-Atlantic summers.
- Watching golfers having a great time playing great golf.
- Timing a seed, fertilizer or pesticide application perfectly with the weather.
- Having an “Aha!” moment at home that solves a big problem at the course.
- Dropping by the course on my day off for a quick look-see.
- Training and leading a crew that shows pride in the golf course they help create.

For those of you out there in the same situation as I was — wondering if the grass is really greener on the other side — I recommend you look very closely at your own shade of green.

I realize that there's nothing in the world like working on a golf course. ■

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