

CONTRACTORS, ARCHITECTS, NURSERYMEN DISCUSS JOB ESTIMATING

In the July 1978 issue of *Weeds Trees & Turf* we looked into some of the more critical areas of friction between landscape contractors and landscape architects. This month we've added a third party to the relationship, the nurseryman.

Lake County Ohio is an area east of Cleveland famous for its large nurseries. In this area members of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, the Lake County Nurserymen's Association, and the Ohio Landscape Contractors' Association, met in October for a panel discussion on estimating landscape construction.

Two men from each association participated in the panel moderated by this editor. Discussion covered the areas of installation out of season, availability of plant material after two hard winters and some streamlining by nurserymen. Remarks made by panel members and persons in the audience may have value to all landscape contractors, landscape architects and nurserymen.

Out of season installation

Severe winters, late springs, and wet autumns the past two years have placed unusual limits on digging and planting times. Growers are under great pressure to dig during shorter springs and contractors find optimum planting time reduced to weeks. Occupancy regulations requiring landscape completion are forcing contractors to install and the growers to dig under less than optimum conditions, often in the summer. All these factors result in higher prices, the need for alternative plant material in specifications, and increased reliance on container material.

Tom Hill, T.W. Hill Co., Landscape Architect, Parma Heights, Ohio

"For summer installation, you have to be conscious of the need for irrigation and the availability of water at the job site. Provision in the specifications for the added cost of tanking water to newly planted or sodded areas is necessary in some instances.

"In the winter, you have more breakdowns in equipment and personnel. Efficiency drops. Handling earth, excavation, and drainage are all worsened. Things to watch for are replacing the soil and properly compacting it, and protection by mulching and complete wrapping to get the plant material through to spring.

"We maintain a cost data file and therefore can refer to costs of past jobs that are similar. Basically, the LA knows the catalog price for a given size of a given plant. From his file he finds bids from contractors on a similar material, so he can figure the markup.

"We all use a multiplier factor in estimating. This can work for or against contractors. A mul-

tiplier for a deciduous job results in overpricing of material. A multiplier on evergreen jobs results in underpricing. If we had a cost factor based upon ball size, we would have a more rational basis of planning costs."

Mike Deeter, Thomas H. Bonnell & Assoc., Landscape Architects, North Canton, Ohio

"We try to stress to clients that certain times of the year are best for particular planting. If the client wants to do planting out of recommended seasons, we notify him of problems involved. We also inform him that some type of maintenance program is necessary by the contractor at additional expense or the client will have to assume the burden of loss himself.

"As for estimating, we as an office don't consider any additional amount for out of season work. Granted there are more difficulties out of season, but we estimate it as a factor (two to three) times the wholesaler's price. If a client is not equipped to maintain a certain planting, we build it into the contract so that the contractor has 60 to 90 days to care for the material after installation."

Bill Hendricks, Lake County Nursery, Perry, Ohio

"Containerization has really changed the availability of plant material. This has made plant materials and the use of summer or out of season installation a big factor in the nursery and contractor industries. The only problem with containerized plants is that the plant material is not of the size landscape architects would like to see. Maybe a certain degree of change in sizes should be looked at for out of season installation. Much has been done, such as wilt proofing with summer digging, but it means additional cost."

Gail Ruckel, Warner Nursery, Willoughby Hills

"I think that almost any plant can be planted if it is dug at the right time. If a plant is dug out of dormancy, the price doubles. You can wilt proof, put it inside and under permanent mist. If the plant isn't dug at the proper time, it's going to cause problems all the way down the line. If the planting was not bid for out of season installation, I don't think contractors can afford to do it out of season."

Peter Knight, Knight & Staller Landscape Architects, Shaker Heights, Ohio (in audience)

"If the nurseryman is notified in advance of an August planting so that you can dig in the spring, is summer planting feasible?"

Bill Hendricks

"Any spring that I've ever been through is still 60 days short of what we need. How we can get August digging done when we can't get our April and May digging done, is a mystery to me."

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Ed Connelly, Connelly Landscaping Co., Avon

"We buy extra material and ask if we can make substitutions. When we buy material in the spring we immediately chip it in. If it roots in the chips, we question whether or not to move it in August even though money is tied up on the job. We will wilt proof and move them most likely rather than tie up the money.

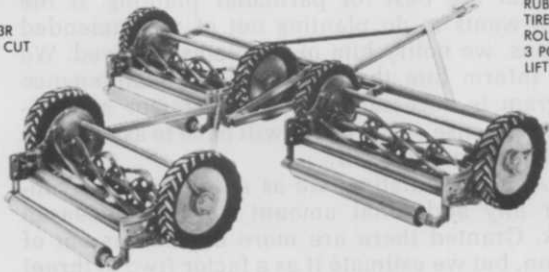
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"Often after the first frost, architects will call for an installation date within the week, when we aren't even on the nursery's schedule yet. To explain it is another 30 or 60 days away is very difficult. We try to cover this during our initial meetings with the client.

"We can't operate in just spring and fall, we've got a twelve month payroll to meet. We have a pretty good thing in containers. As far as the B&B trees go, the cost must go up to cover extra precautions."

Nick Panagopoulos, R.B. Stout Landscaping, Akron, Ohio

"We generally don't consider out of season while pricing since it's also hard to believe dates for installation in contracts. I bid the job the way it takes to get the job."

Dennis DiSanto, The DiSanto Companies, Cleveland, Ohio

"I think installation out of season is beneficial to all of us. We may not want to do it, but if we look at nine out of ten specs that are submitted to us by architects, they give dates. We know when a client comes to us and wants to open July 27, which means the landscaping must be in then, we are going to do everything in our power to have that landscaping in. This August we probably did more landscape installation than we have done in quite a few months.

"We have to adjust our thinking to please the client, but it has got to start with the landscape architect. There should be adjustment in pricing for summer installation, some variance in the guarantee, and some flexibility of plant material to be used.

"Handling material dug in the spring and planted in the summer is tricky since the plant is disturbed twice. Also, the major cause of plant failure is improper drainage, not out-of-season planting."

Harold Kuznick, Petite Fleur Landscaping, Cleveland

"Our major problem has been with the general contractor not having the site prepared at the right time. Often the contractor will say he'll have the site ready for you in two days, and when you have the plant material delivered it's not ready."

Ed Losely, Herman Losely & Sons Nursery, Perry, Ohio (in audience)

"All three segments of the market are not professional enough to be the experts and tell the public that this is the time to do the work. When you say you can't do it, there is always some guy in the bushes who will do it in July. You should also consider, we lose a lot of material sitting undisturbed in the nursery."

Availability of plant material

What architects would like to have and what nurserymen can provide at a reasonable cost often conflict. Nurserymen face higher taxes, labor problems, and unpredictable digging periods.



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What appears in nursery catalogs may not be there when installation is held up by general contractors, or at least not at the same price. The contractor faces transportation charges if local nurseries run out of desired plant material. Finally, alternative plant material and sizes help the nurseryman deal with out of season demand. Slower growing specimen material is becoming uneconomical from the grower's standpoint since it ties up valuable space in the nursery.

Bill Hendricks

"The architect often does the design three to eighteen months in advance from catalogs. We publish a catalog for the purpose of selling out our stock and we often do. That should be understood by architects and contractors.

"Substitution has a bad connotation. The word alternative means the same thing but seems much more acceptable to clients.

"We're plant factories anymore. If we plant 1,000, we want to harvest 999. Labor won't let us overplant. Because we are plant factories, what is available is limited. Those big four and five inch trees that architects love to work with are too expensive for us to grow. You have to start considering what we can grow for you. Insistence on large specimen plants will result in pricing your clients out of the market.

"Containers are taking over, but they are not giving you all the sizes you want. B&B materials and the problems they present often result in smaller sizes and alternatives."

"We can't afford to tie up the land for slow growing material. We can't afford to buy an extra 50 acres to let it set."

Gail Ruckel

"The demand for plants, especially larger size plants is tremendous. We can't grow enough for all the needs. You can't go by catalogs entirely.

"Architects should check the roots more than the caliper. Also, certain plants are better in containers than B&B, such as pyracantha and some of the hollies. When people check the catalog for availability, and then wait two months and ask for an odd ball type of plant, they will have a hard time finding it at the right size."

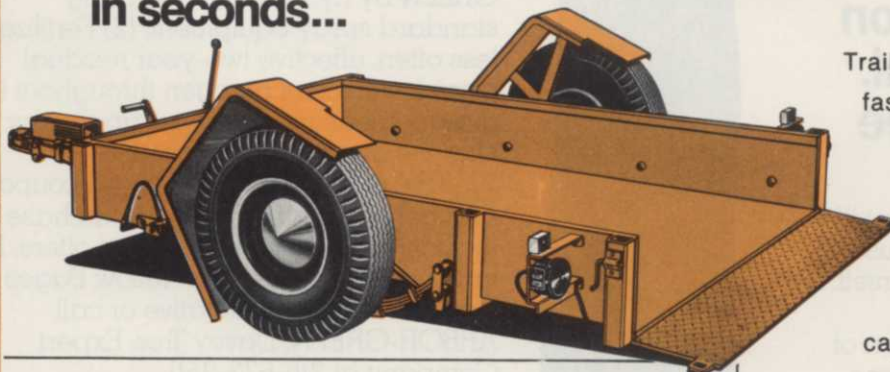
Ed Connolly

"We are trying to inventory plants in order to have them when we need them. It's a real hassle and it's not the best for the plant nor is it the most profitable. I try to estimate what the demand is going to be and then buy certain plants, like crab-apples. However, we are not nurserymen.

"I still like to see specimen plants. Some nurseries still try to provide them. Maybe size limita-

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tions for specimen plants may help the nurseryman meet the demand profitably. And if architects specify a real specimen plant, they should be ready to help the contractor find it."

Nick Panagopoulos

"I think it's up to the nurseryman to select the specimen plant for the contractor and not try to shove off some bad material on him."

Dennis DiSanto

"The architects today in doing what they consider a good job for the client are requesting larger specimen plants. The client should have an alternative. I think eventually the cost of larger plant material, the securing of it, and the cost of transportation are going to price the project completely out of the client's desired budget.

"We lost a nice job this spring because we bid according to specifications. They required 500 nine to ten ft. tall hedge. We searched the country and found them in Connecticut, and we bid them. We lost the job because another fellow said he couldn't find them and bid on smaller plants from a local nursery. The cost of transportation was nearly as much as the price of the material locally. We should have offered a bid on the specified job, and an alternative bid. Maybe it would behoove the

architect to give the client as well as the contractor an alternative."

Ed Losely in audience

"The nurseryman has to meet prices of nurseries that didn't get hit as hard by the last two winters. The same plant may react differently in different winters. I think it may be because of seed source. Seed can come from almost anywhere. For northern Ohio seed should be collected from a northern source. Different seed lots come from different places in different years. You are never really sure that the seed is from a northern enough source to provide the desired winter hardiness."

Mike Deeter

"When we first determine what we need in the way of plant material, we start calling contractors and nurserymen and review bid forms from past jobs. The architect has to make the phone calls.

We contact state extension for information on winter kill and the success of certain plants in the area. The resources are out there. Availability of certain types of plants material is really the responsibility of the landscape architect." **WTT**

Reported by Bruce Shank, editor.

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