

Hungry, Young and Friendly

In four years, Seacrest Services has become a leader in South Florida landscape maintenance

By Maureen Hrehocik
Associate Editor



In the summer, mowing at Century Village and Leisureville is done every seven to 10 days.

commitment to his work and has been responsible for streamlining and making cost and labor-efficient many aspects of the landscaping operation.

Lopez practices the Integrated Pest Management method of pest control, irrigates on an as-needed basis, uses only zero-turning radius mowers, and, as a rule, cuts his grass higher than most. He expects the best from his workers and usually gets it.

Seacrest holds the maintenance contract to Century Village and Leisureville, both in West Palm Beach, and each covering about 150 acres. Management sources declined giving the worth of those contracts for competitive reasons.

Century Village, according to Lopez, was the largest condominium complex in the United States when it was built in the 1970s, with 7,500 units and 15,000 residents.

The sweet smell of success. Seacrest Management of West Palm Beach, FL, knows it well. The company, specializing in condominium/apartment landscaping, building services, janitorial and pest control, increased its business 50 percent this year to \$4.5 million. The landscaping portion alone increased 316 percent; impressive statistics for a company that's only been in business four years.

Ralph Lopez, vice president of landscape operations, has been largely responsible for the impressive jump in income. The success of the landscape division is as much a personal triumph for the 31-year-old as it is a business triumph. Lopez, the son of Spanish immigrant farm workers, has always set high personal goals for himself. He has transferred that



Tree-trimming is done with lightweight trucks to reduce stress on the turf.

There is no time sharing. Seacrest also maintains 25 other condominium developments from Ft. Pierce to Ft. Lauderdale, and has recently opened a Tampa division. Total acreage under its care is between 12,000 and 18,000 acres, 600 in turf acreage. The landscape division employs 60 people.

Bill Kerns and Neil Valentine bought the company in 1978 after working for it since 1968. Lopez was promoted to vice president last year after working as landscape division manager.

Lopez says the hardest thing he has to deal with are the condominium association boards; those people living in the complex elected to protect the interest of the residents.

"The changeover of personnel on boards is high, and usually what the boards are interested in is the bottom line which isn't always in the best interest of the maintenance program," Lopez says. "They are always considering how the maintenance fee looks to the potential buyer. Everyone is a resident expert (about maintenance). Trimming a tree can be traumatic."

The largest part of the maintenance fee at Century Village and Leisureville goes towards mowing.

What compounds the problem is that Lopez believes that in South Florida, the landscaping contributes greatly to the salability of the property.

"Most of the time, the board doesn't know what it takes to maintain property properly," he said.

Proper maintenance is no stranger to Lopez.

"With the Integrated Pest Management method, we treat on an as-needed basis and that way we have less chemicals in the atmosphere. It's also safer for the residents."

At the new Tampa division, mole crickets are a problem.

Two years ago, South Florida experienced a severe drought. Lopez began cutting his lawns higher and less frequently. He also used a slow release fertilizer. He changes his mower blades twice a day to get a good cut. His zero-turning radius Hustler, Heckendorn, Grasshop-

per and Dixon mowers give him the kind of maneuverability apartment and condominium care requires. He also has a prototype Heckendorn zero-radius mower with 91-inch "bat wings" that can mow in a zero radius of 54 inches. The machine is worth \$11,000.



Ralph Lopez, vice president of landscape operations for Seacrest Services, sits on the firm's prototype Heckendorn zero-radius mower with 91 inch "bat wings."

"We have the best of everything—mowers, people, management, and blend it to make a hybrid landscape maintenance firm." —Lopez

Cherry hedge and ficus are the predominant plants used at Century Village and Leisureville because of their disease-resistance and low maintenance. While some bahiagrass is used, St. Augustine is the predominant grass. Lopez contends with diseases and brown patch by using Daconil and Captan. Cutting height is 3 to 3½ inches.

"We go for structure here, not esthetics," Lopez says. "We try to put as little stress on the turf as possible."

His cutting schedule is dictated by the condominium contracts, but during the summer, mowing is usually done every seven to 10 days, in

the fall and spring, every 14 days, and in the winter, once a month.

Lopez uses a 100 percent slow release sulphur-coated urea fertilizer.

"The leaching effect provides a good, even green all-year round," he says. "Some people think it's cost prohibitive to use, but you use less in the long run because it's concentrated. Having to spread less fertilizer also means a savings in time and labor costs."

He fertilizes in the spring and fall and uses a 24-4-15 mixture in the summer.

"We change the analysis with the climatic conditions."

No selective herbicides are used at Leisureville or Century Village to take care of the torpedo, nut and bullgrass problems.

Irrigation on both properties is done from man-made lakes fed from the flood control districts. Century Village is irrigated manually. Leisureville is manual but is being converted to automatic because of problems with line breaks.

Palm Beach County takes care of flying insect control. Seacrest does do ground spraying around walks and households.

Bad drainage and trees planted by developers without their full growth potential in mind are continuing problems for Lopez.

Most of the trucks in the 50-vehicle Seacrest fleet are Mazdas. Lopez has Chevrolet and Ford cherry pickers with hydraulic buckets. Seacrest also buys used Bell Telephone trucks because they're light enough to be driven on lawns. Because of using the IPM method of pest control, Lopez's Swift 300-gallon sprayer truck is sufficient for his needs. He also has the usual assortment of string trimmers, leaf blowers and edgers. The company employs a full-time entomologist, Terry Lyons, and arborist, Ron Cower.

Seacrest prides itself on the type of working environment it provides for its employees. Incentive and hard work pay off in a variety of ways.

"We take a professional approach to everything," Lopez says.

"Follow-up is very important."

Seacrest material are people who are "hungry, young and friendly." Operational meetings are held twice a month for supervisors and foremen to clear up problems and "rap."

"I treat my people the way I'd like to be treated," Lopez says.

When a customer calls in to commend a worker for a job, the call gets posted on a "motivator board," that way everyone notices a job well done. Even the Seacrest shirts are incentive-oriented—non-supervisory personnel wear tee-shirts, supervisors have collared shirts. Picnics, softball games, Christmas parties and get-togethers help cement the family atmosphere Seacrest is proud of.

"We have the best of everything—mowers, people, management, and blend it to make a hybrid landscape maintenance firm," Lopez says.

Lopez himself is somewhat of a

hybrid. With no formal landscape or management training, he credits all of his landscape knowledge to the University of Florida Extension Service.

Lopez says the hardest thing he has to deal with are the condominium association boards.

"They have always been there when I needed them," he says. "I love this business and it will always be a part of my life."

His responsibilities at Seacrest include assisting the five-member sales department, doing proposals, public relations, buying equipment, setting up projects, doing time studies and keeping the lines of communication open in the company. He is a member of the

Florida Turfgrass Association, Florida Pest Control Association, Florida Grounds Maintenance Association and is on the Horticultural Advisory Board for the Palm Beach County Extension Service.

Lopez has worked as an estate groundskeeper and had a gardening and landscape business with his brother. But it's at Seacrest that he is realizing his real potential.

He readily admits he is not a "fat cat executive" and prefers to be outdoors driving tractors and "smelling freshly cut grass and grease on lawnmowers."

"I like to be at the pulse center of what's happening, not in an office somewhere," he says.

He's also a man who doesn't like to dwell on past accomplishments. Lopez has already set a new goal he'd like to help the company reach by 1984—that of doing \$5 million in business. With his past track record, he is well on the way to helping Seacrest realize it. **WTT**

Are you a Miser with Fertilizer?



If you're cutting down on your fertilizer and water bill,

OREGON GROWN CHEWINGS AND CREEPING RED FESCUE

is the grass you need. It's fine bladed and blends very well with other turf grasses. The fine fescues are noted for being real misers when it comes to low maintenance turf areas.

Use Oregon grown fine fescues for seeding or overseeding any turf area. It's the Miser grass!

OREGON FINE FESCUE

COMMISSION

2140 Turner Rd. S.E. • Salem, Oregon 97302
503-585-1157

