

SNOW REMOVAL

A Big Part of Full-Service Landscape Management

by Ron Hall, assistant editor



Full service is a term heard more and more today from landscape maintenance companies. Snow removal, although seasonal, is a growing part of full service landscape management.

Readers have discovered by using the same sound business practices they use for growing season industries (and much of the same equipment too) they can build a lucrative off-season business.

Maintenance contractors sometimes don't have a choice. Snow removal is an integral part of the year-round condominium and apartment maintenance accounts they worked so hard to get. They HAVE to provide professional snow removal.

WT&T talked to Green Industry businessmen from across the nation and learned that whether they push snow for that all-important winter cash flow or as part of their regular maintenance tasks, there are several factors that determine their success. Three kept popping up: planning, equipment, personnel.

Bill McGee of Smith Lawn and Tree, Kansas City, MO, thinks planning is a major reason why his company is successful in providing snow removal for 43 commercial locations in his area. He wants his employees to know their territories and duties long before snow flies.

"We take our men out and let them look at all of our areas, usually sometime in October," McGee says. Besides acquainting the men to their routes and duties, this pre-season tour can pinpoint potential problems, like shrubbery or landscaping that's likely to get covered and possibly mangled by machinery.

Each of Smith Lawn and Tree's four-wheel-drive trucks contains a 12-page booklet giving locations and the types of equipment to use for particular jobs, and many of Smith Lawn's trucks are equipped with two-way radios. "We do this so that if somebody not familiar with the route has to do the work, he'll know what to do," McGee explains.

The Kansas City firm uses 16 pieces of equipment in its snow removal battles, including a small fleet of four-wheel-drive trucks with plows, one John Deere tractor with a blade, and two Hustlers which double as riding mowers in the summer. When the snow falls the Excel Hustlers are equipped with cabs, heaters, windshield wipers, and blades to work in and around sidewalks and touch-up areas.

Other companies also provide accessories to turn what is generally regarded as summer equipment into

snow fighting machinery.

For instance, Bunton recently announced optional attachments for its turf tractors, including an insulated cab with windshield wiper and defroster. Blades and snow throwers are available for the Bunton tractors, attachments other manufacturers usually offer for their turf tractors as well.

Although Bob Coles at Minnehaha Falls Nursery, Minneapolis, provides both snow removal and hauling, the hauling generates more cash and is generally easier on his equipment. He charges on an hourly basis and handles such commercial accounts as



A Ford tractor mounted with a Sweepster broom makes short work of snow along a driveway.

hospitals, government buildings, and businesses.

Coles uses a total of 15 pieces of equipment in his snow business, including pickups and two-ton trucks equipped with Western plows.

Wear and tear

Wear and tear on equipment and higher insurance premiums should be carefully considered by those planning to offer snow removal for profit, he cautions.

Jim Moren, facility manager for Beachill Development Company, deals with an average of 50 inches of snow annually in Manchester, NH. At the 320-unit Beachill complex, just 40 miles from the Atlantic coast, blankets of wind-driven snow off the ocean create a big problem in 18 parking lots and 11 miles of sidewalks.

"We get a lot of heavy, wet snow and that's the hardest to remove," Moren says. "Anybody can remove that dry stuff."

Moren attacks snow with an arsenal of versatile machinery, often the same he uses during his summer maintenance duties. He just adapts

their use from summer to winter by adding the necessary attachments.

The heart of his snow removal effort is a pair of 17-hp, four-wheel-drive Kubota tractors equipped with class A hitches (the same used on farm equipment). In the summer the tractors can be fitted with a backhoe, rototiller, or lawnmower, and in the winter with plows. "I'm not saying they'll do everything perfectly," Moren says, "but they're versatile pieces of equipment."

For clearing sidewalks to the individual housing units Moren uses four 8-hp Simplicity snow blowers which he describes as "the best on the market."

Bob Nagel of Bob's Lawn Service in Eden Prairie, MN, a suburb of Minneapolis, uses John Deere snow blowers, a Bobcat, and seven Ford trucks with Western snow plows to service his snow accounts who became customers as a natural extension of his lawn care business. "It just kind of fell in place," Nagel says of his 10-year-old snow removal business.

Like Nagel, Craig Christenson of Midwest Turf in Wayzata, MN, uses a 3/4-ton Ford pickup equipped with a Western plow. Many of Christenson's snow removal customers are also lawn maintenance customers.

"A lot of people want service 12 months of the year and they want to deal with one person instead of a lot of different people," Christenson says. "So, if you're willing to expand yourself, you open yourself up to a bigger market. If things start to get too big, we subcontract some of it out."

Some of the largest accounts in the northeastern Ohio city of Akron are handled by Fred Azar whose landscaping and snow removal businesses are only six years old. Azar believes in getting the most out of his equipment, so he preaches maintenance.

"In changing from landscaping to snow removal I have to make sure everything is tuned up and in perfect working condition. Breakdowns are usually more annoying and more expensive in winter," he says.

The heart of Azar's operation is 16 four-wheel-drive dump and pickup trucks and an assortment of front loaders and tractors he also uses in his landscaping business. "That way they're not sitting around all winter," he explains. "They're out there making me money."

Among his 75 accounts is Akron City Hospital with its heliport which Azar must keep free of ice (he uses an alcohol-based solution) and miles of sidewalks which he assaults with an army of 15 Toro snow blowers.

"There isn't one special manufac-

turer I buy from," Azar says. "I want the best I can get because when you've got business rolling and something needs to be opened up, you have to be ready. I can serve my clients better by offering the best quality I can and that means that I have to have the best equipment I can get."

But getting the best equipment money can buy is often a difficult decision because of competing features on similar products from major manufacturers.

For instance, John Deere, Simplicity, and Gilson Brothers all recently introduced walk-behind snowthrowers with 5-hp engines, big enough for most walkways and driveways but maneuverable enough for homeowners. Professional snow removers generally use 8-or-10 hp heavy-duty models.

The new, walk-behind snowthrowers, the John Deere 524, the Simplicity 555, and Gilson, which is offering one model with a 4-hp Tecumseh and the other with a 5-hp Briggs & Stratton engine, give prospective buyers a lot to think about in just that one size.

The competition is just as keen in other types of snow removal equipment and purchasers say they end up favoring those lines that are easiest to maintain and offer the best dealer service.

Bob Sutz of Sutz & Sons Corrective Landscape says he uses John Deere tractors in both landscaping and snow removal because of the service he's received from his dealer. Sutz, of West Seneca, NY, just outside of Buffalo, bought his first John Deere tractor several years ago and now uses four: 318 and 650 models equipped with front-mount blowers, and 1050 and 1250 models with loaders and 3-point hitch snow blowers.

Sutz, no rookie snow jockey, has been in business since 1970 and prior to that drove a snow plow for the township. Most of his accounts are small plazas and large restaurants, and he suggests that businessmen should plan for snow when they build.

For instance, improperly placed planters and landscaping could cost a businessman an extra \$300 to \$500 a winter. "If we're on the job an extra 40 or 50 minutes working around something each time we go out it's going to cost more," Sutz says.

"When they bring in architects to design these businesses they could reduce their snow removal 10 to 20 percent if they had somebody that did commercial snow plowing come in and show them some of the things they should look out for."

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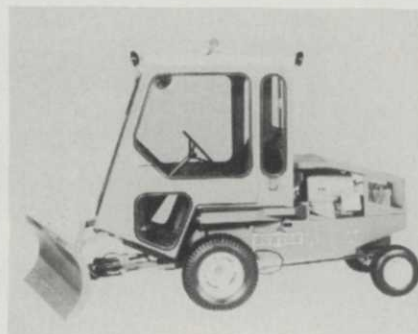
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Optional attachments include rotary broom, snow blade, snow plow and snow thrower. All attachments are 60 in. wide.

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Brooms play a role

Although most professional snow removers use either large blades or plows to push the snow or spinning metal augers to throw it (or a combination of blade and blower), sweeping with a rotary broom is better in some situations. This became apparent to millions of television viewers a few winters back when a Sweepster motorized sweeper spun onto the artificial turf at stadium at Foxboro, MA, whisked a neat little swath through the snow, enabling the New England Patriots to kick a last-second field goal to defeat the Miami Dolphins in a National Football League playoff contest.

These brooms, with their spinning polypropylene bristles, can be quite handy when removing snow from decorative pavers, artificial turf, grass, and other surfaces that could be damaged by a rigid blade. They come in a variety of sizes, from walk-behind models to Sweepster's four-foot diameter sweeper (requiring over 300 horsepower just to power the brush) that clears a 20-ft path. **WT&T**

Coming in December

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