

# CLEARING PROFITS WITH THE SNOW

The work is difficult and the hours long, but landscapers are making the necessary efforts—and money—from snow removal.

by Jerry Roche, editor

**S**now removal is not an art or a science. Rather, it is a lot of both.

"It is an expensive business, but money can be made, given the right set of circumstances," says Thomas Mann of The Caretakers, Eagan, Minn.

Mann, Bill Peterson and Eldon Dyk were members of a panel on the art and science of snow removal during a recent meeting of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America.

They offered a series of tips on how their businesses make snow removal more profitable.

"We refer to snow removal as 'blood money,'" says Peterson of DuBrow's Nurseries, Livingston, N.J. "They're days of hard work and sleepless nights."

Dyk, of Allen Keesen Landscape, Denver, Colo., refers to the winter job as a necessary evil. "There are profits involved, but so are liabilities. For those reasons, we only remove snow

for our regular landscape customers."

The major liability is taking a plow into an obstacle hidden by the snowfall. That's why Keesen drivers visit their sites in early October for a visual inspection.

The Caretakers keeps a "Plow Book" for drivers. The book contains a schematic for each job and special notes on high priority areas, where to dump the snow and phone numbers for emergencies. Mann says it's a three-ring binder with an acetate cover that works well. "Drivers must know all jobs," continues Mann.

And "corners, drains and fire hydrants must be marked beforehand," Peterson adds.

DuBrow's subcontracts most work to 22 subcontractors who use 40 pieces of equipment. DuBrow's maintains 22 pieces of equipment for its own use, including four-wheel-drive pick-up trucks with eight-foot plows, two-wheel-drive dump trucks with eight-foot plows and other trucks with 10-foot plows. "We also have Case W14s and W20s with two-yard buckets that can pile snow very high. We use those in community parking lots," says Peterson.

## An eye on the storm

To get one step ahead of the game, Mann's company monitors local television broadcasts and regularly communicates with the National Weather Service. Most of the company's plowing is done at night, when the heaviest snow seems to fall.

Other problems associated with snow plowing, the trio notes, are scheduling and communication.

"With one to four inches of snow, we start at 4 a.m.," says Dyk. "With more than four inches, we're starting around 2 a.m." At Keesen Landscaping, supervisors are notified of an overnight snowfall. The supervisor then calls plow drivers, who in turn call their crews. "Plowers and two shovelers are sent out at the same time. Each driver has a regular route.





In case of emergency, a mechanic becomes available at 6 a.m.," Dyk says.

Mann says The Caretakers tries to plow in two stages. The first stage is the "open-up" stage which is completed by 7 a.m. so employees of commercial clients can get in and out of parking lots first thing in the morning. The second state is the "complete" stage, which is full cleaning of the lots.

"Communication is very important with commercial customers be-

cause everyone wants to open up at 7 a.m.," Mann says.

The three contractors seemed to agree that the maximum length of snow plowing shifts is eight to 10 hours, for safety's sake. Crews out longer might suffer from fatigue and therefore might not exercise safe judgment.

DuBrow's sets up its entire snow plowing unit to handle up to 25-inch blizzards.

Mann has found 7½- to 8-foot plows to work best. And each of the trucks is equipped with a double battery system to cope with the sometimes frigid Minnesota winters.

Many companies like DuBrow's hire part-timers just to work snow shifts. DuBrow's, according to Peterson, usually hires 40 extra people just to shovel, most from the unemployment lines.

How to pay the help? Mann has a standard rate for up to six inches of snow; for six to 10 inches, the standard rate is doubled; for 10 to 14 inches, the standard rate is tripled. For more than 14 inches of snow, Mann pays employees by the hour.

To insure his financial stability, Mann also uses what he calls a "no-snow" contract. That is, if it doesn't snow through the winter, his company still gets a standard minimum retainer for being available.

"It pays to have a variety of types of contracts," notes Mann. "There are 10 different ways to set up a contract. There's a monthly rate as soon as the snow comes, a yearly rate, a yearly rate with minimum, an hourly rate and so on."

Sand, salt and calcium chloride are the most common materials to melt ice and snow on sidewalks. Mann, for instance, charges \$165 an hour for salt and sand applications.

Is snow removal "blood money," then? Judging by the panel of ALCA experts, maybe. But it's green, and it is money. **LM**



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(Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

- 1A. **Title of Publication:** LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT MAGAZINE
- 1B. **Publication Number:** 08941254
2. **Date of Filing:** September 9, 1988
3. **Frequency of Issue:** Monthly
- 3A. **Number of Issues Published Annually:** 12
- 3B. **Annual Subscription Price:** \$25.00
4. **Complete Mailing Address of the Known Office of Publication:** 1 East First Street, Duluth, St. Louis County, Minnesota 55802-2067
5. **Complete Mailing Address of the Headquarters of General Business Offices of the Publisher:** 7500 Old Oak Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44130
6. **Full Name and Complete Mailing Address of Publisher:** Dick Gore, 455 East Paces, Ferry Road, Suite 324, Atlanta, Georgia 30305  
**Editor:** Jerry Roche, 7500 Old Oak Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44130  
**Managing Editor:** Will Perry, 7500 Old Oak Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44130
7. **Owner. All Common Stock of Edgell Communications, Inc., is owned by New Century Communications, Inc., 7500 Old Oak Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44130. Holders of 1% (1.0% or more of the outstanding shares of New Century Communications, Inc. as of August 31, 1988:** Robert Edgell, 12700 Lake Ave./Apt. 2006, Cleveland, OH 44107; Kidder, Peabody Group Inc., 10 Hanover Square, New York, NY 10005; Labovitz Corporation, 880 Missabe Building, Duluth, MN 55802; NCIP Limited Partnership, 880 Missabe Building, Duluth, MN 55802; Wicks Communications, Inc., 407 Centre Island Road, Oyster Bay, NY 11771.
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9. **Does Not Apply**

10. **Extent and Nature of Circulation**

	Average For Each Issue During the Preceding 12 Months	Actual For the Single Issues Published Nearest to Filing Date
A. Total Number of Copies (Net Press Run)	50,779	50,823
B. Paid and/or Request Circulation		
1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors	None	None
2. Mail Subscriptions	48,202	48,145
C. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation	48,202	48,145
D. Free Distribution by Mail, Carrier, or Other Means, Samples	1,861	1,763
E. Total Distribution	50,063	49,908
F. Copies not Distributed:		
1. Office use, left over, unaccounted, spoiled	712	915
2. Returns from news agents	None	None
G. Total	50,775	50,823

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