

Building a compost pile

■ According to the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, here is a good formula for building a compost pile. A properly made pile will reach temperatures of 140 degrees in four to five days. At this time, you'll notice the pile "settling," a good sign that it is working.

1st layer: 3 to 4 inches of chopped brush or other coarse material on top of the soil surface allows air circulation around the base of the pile.

2nd layer: 6 to 8 inches of mixed scraps, leaves, grass clippings, sawdust, etc. Materials should be "sponge damp."

3rd layer: 1 inch of soil serves as an inoculant by adding micro-organisms to the pile.

4th layer: (optional): 2 to 3 inches of manure provides the nitrogen needed by micro-organisms. Sprinkle lime, wood ash and/or rock phosphate over the layer of manure to reduce the pile's acidity. Add water if the manure is dry.

5th layer: repeat steps 1-4 until the pile is almost the recommended height, then top off with 4 to 6 inches of straw and scoop out a "basin" at the top to catch rainwater.

Planning your business around Mother Nature

■ Not even Mother Nature can slow down a good landscape company like Acres Enterprises in Wauconda, Ill.

"The secret is to start early and keep as organized as possible," says Pat McEntee, vice president of sales. "We'll sit down in June or July when it's 85 degrees outside and actually start talking about our snow-planting business."

And when spring breaks, "we're poised and ready to go out the door," says McEntee. "Planning for spring is done at least by the prior September."

Certainly, by New Year's Day upper management knows how many foremen

they'll need, what kinds of equipment will be purchased, and deadlines for various contracts.

Who's involved with the planning process? All seven managers: owner Jim Schwantz, McEntee, operations vice president Jerry McMaster, accountant Rob Reblin, landscape maintenance supervisor Dave Lett, garage manager Bob Nedli and office manager Candice Simeon.

Some landscapers would say Acres is top-heavy in management, but it's paid off. Since the company's 1983 inception, it's grown into a \$4.2 million business.

Some of the innovative ideas Schwantz

and his staff implement:

- A computer hook-up with a national weather service that helps minimize the effect Mother Nature has on business. With some accounts 1-1/4 driving hours away, crews can be more efficiently diverted to dry areas. "When the call comes in from the field," notes McMaster, "sometimes we can tell them to sit tight and the storm will blow over." Adds Schwantz: "And it's an awesome tool for knowing when, where and how much it's going to snow."

- A minimum of three parties or picnics per year are scheduled: two for workers and their spouses, and one more that includes children. In eight years, no staffers have been divorced. "We try to keep our families happy, and in the spring that's a challenge," McEntee notes.

- Business cards for all foremen. Besides lending an air of professionalism to the company, the cards give the foremen a sense of pride, knowing they are depended upon to help keep customers happy.

- The annual budget includes what is called a "Caring Fund," out of which comes compensation for any equipment lost, stolen or broken during the year (\$18,000 budgeted for 1991). When the fiscal year ends, anything left in the fund is divided among the employees as a bonus; in the past, between \$80 and \$600 per employee.

"We've got a good handle on things," says Schwantz. "We're not so much a seat-of-the-pants company like a lot of others. All of us as a team have always known where we were going. We manage well; it's gotten us where we are and will keep us there."

—Jerry Roche



Members of the Acres team: (standing, left to right) Candice Simeon, Jim Schwantz, Rob Reblin, Dave Lett, Pat McEntee; (kneeling) Bob Nedli, George Kaiser, Jerry McMaster.

HOW MUCH PLANNING?

The amount of lead time Acres Enterprises of Wauconda, Ill. uses for annual planning purposes:

Job	Lead Time
Capital improvements	18 months
Selling strategy	8-12 months
Budgeting	9 months
Supply purchases	5 months
Seasonal decision-making	4 months

Source: Acres Ent.