

Landscape waste disposal: No free ride

Lawn/landscape business owners come up with individual strategies to deal with landfill bans and rising costs.

■ Eric Cross says his Hackettstown, N.J., company used to have a problem getting rid of landscape wastes. But not too much anymore.

"We worked around it," says Cross, of Duke's Landscape Management. "We had to."

No wonder. The admonition "*No Landscape Wastes*" is being bolted onto the gates of landfills across the United States. To date, 22 states have banned yard and garden wastes from landfills. More probably will follow.

Even where they can still be dumped, collecting, moving and getting rid of things like leaves and grass clippings can be a sizable expense, particularly in urban centers.

Pampered Lawns, headquartered in Houston, brings its landscape refuse back to each of the company's four locations, and disposes of it in 40-cubic-yard containers. A commercial refuse hauler then, at a charge of \$250 per load, takes the material to a landfill.

"It is an expensive proposition," admits owner Dwane McNabb. "We have looked at the possibilities of separation and grind-

ing. I feel that at some point it could be more economical to separate and either have a storage area to have a grinding service come into, or haul it to them and convert it into compost."

Lots of options? An informal survey by *LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT* magazine indicates that green industry business owners are exploring all options to deal with the clippings, brush, and leaves generated in maintaining clients' properties.

Almost always they must meet the issue alone, keeping a wary eye on how much it will increase costs to customers.

"It's a tough enough industry. We don't need any extra expenses," says Cross.

Many landscape managers are trying to reduce waste at its source.

"We don't bag clippings unless it's absolutely necessary, like inside a fence around a pool area," says Cross. "We just have to educate the customer that the clippings break down. The customer has to realize that clippings do not promote thatch and create other problems."

Steve Browder of SDB Services in Charleston, S.C., says, "Some of my customers don't even realize that I'm using a mulching mower. Some are reluctantly accepting that we want to leave the clippings on. Most are aware enough because of the publicity that clippings are getting, and they're gladly accepting it anyway."

Here are some other possible solutions:

1. Higher cuts—"We're mowing grasses at 3- or even 3 1/2-inch heights," adds Kevin Mill of Mill Brothers Landscape &

Nursery, Fort Collins, Colo. "It's taken us years to bring our height of cut up. People used to think that two inches made for the best look."

But, Mill admits, "We're still having a hard time trying to convince some of our customers that you don't have to bag the clippings every cut."

2. Leave the clippings—

Russell M. Riega of R&R Landscaping in Lodi, N.J., often sees only two options: either leave the clippings on the lawn or put them on a truck and look for a place that will accept them.

"When it's applicable, we leave the clippings. But when we can't, dumping is a problem. I could pay \$120 for one load," says Riega. His company works in about 30 communities, and each town has its own regulations about what it will and will not accept, he explains.

Riega thinks manufacturers of mulching mowers still have some work to do. "We need better mulching machines, machines that can chop the clippings even smaller," he says.

3. Recycle—Waste management experts claim that the sheer volume of organic landscape material shortens the working life of landfills. This is both an economic and—to a lesser extent—envi-



ronmental issue. Developing a new landfill is increasingly costly. Some of this expense comes from fulfilling ever-more-stringent environmental considerations.

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Anyway, waste experts reason, much of the 33-35 million tons of landscape waste created annually on America's maintained properties can, and should, be recycled into useful product.

Charleston's Browder was one of several business owners telling LM that they've recently purchased chipper/shredders. So, while some woody refuse can be chipped or shredded into mulch, more landscape waste is starting to end up in compost facilities at either municipal or commercial sites. Large-scale composting is making noises like it's going to erupt into a

full-blown industry.

Writers Robert Steuteville and Nora Goldstein in the May 1993 issue of *BioCycle* magazine, for example, claim that the number of yard waste composting facilities increased from 2,201 to 2,981 from 1991 to 1992—35 percent!

Grass clippings represent most of the waste generated by landscape professionals in spring and early summer. But many compost sites are still wary of accepting clippings. Usually, these sites have a longer history of composting leaves. In fact, many compost facilities count on a certain volume of leaves as an ingredient in their compost "recipe."

3. Watch those charges!—That doesn't necessarily translate into a free ride for landscape professionals. Compost facilities, even community-operated ones, often levy dumping charges.

Lebo Newman of Redwood Landscaping, for example, says it costs \$20 to \$30 a cubic yard to dispose of landscape waste in compost facilities near his home base of Santa Rosa, Calif.

Likewise, Paul Stolar of Longmeadow (Mass.) Landscaping, pays to dispose of leaves in a community compost site. Like many such facilities in the Northeast and New England, Stolar must prove that he

actually works in Longmeadow before he can dispose of the leaves. The site will not accept grass clippings though.

4. Waste holding areas—Meanwhile, lawn/landscape business owners like Scott Wagner of Landmark Landscape Management in Richmond, Va., look to either sign agreements with neighboring farmers to take some of their leaves. Or, they're buying or considering buying additional property to serve as landscape waste holding areas.

Landfill charges, he says, are "almost prohibitive." And, in the late fall and winter when the rains come, wet leaves can add up to a staggering bulk. And expense.

Adds Kevin Mill in Fort Collins, Colo., "we're definitely thinking about acquiring some land to hold some of this material which we can then reuse."

He also says he is going to have to do a better job of explaining the problem of landscape refuse to clients.

"I don't think we've—and I mean both our company and in the industry itself—done a good enough job of showing them through the course of a season, particularly in dollars and cents, what they could save if they weren't paying us to handle all these clippings and material," says Mill.

—Ron Hall



This 3-acre yard waste disposal facility in Erie County, Ohio, is operated by Barnes Nursery. Recently blacktopped, it's a first-rate site that will receive organic material that's no longer allowed in Ohio landfills.