

VIRGINIA FIRM WINS

with expanded service



Nansemond Lawn & Garden is switching from open trailers to enclosed trailers for transporting equipment. "It provides better weather protection, as well as promoting our company appearance and serving as a mobile billboard," says owner Wayne Mansfield.

Wayne Mansfield's company mows 5 million square feet of turf every week, but his Nansemond Lawn & Garden offers customers much more.

by GARY F. BURCHFIELD

Wayne Mansfield started his lawn care business with a 10-hp John Deere riding mower and one employee, himself. That was in 1983. Today, Nansemond Lawn & Garden has 20 full-time employees and does better than \$1 million in business annually. And, Mansfield is looking for more growth next season.

Nansemond Lawn & Garden has customers all over Suffolk, from Virginia Beach to Chesapeake. (The company takes its name from a former Indian tribe that lived in the area.) Nansemond L&G offers landscape design and installation, seeding, lawn renovation, fertilizer and pesticide application and aeration, along with mowing. It has seven crews working every day, three of which do nothing but cut grass.

"We cut about 5 million square feet of turf every week," says Mansfield. That fig-

ures out to about 120 acres. "The key is that we handle complete landscape maintenance on half that area, or 2 1/2 million square feet."

Next year, the company plans to expand into irrigation system maintenance and eventually into installation.

"We continue to expand our services, both to keep ahead of the competition and because our customers ask us to do more," says Mansfield. "We'll plant annual beds in the spring, clean up leaves in the fall and clear snow in the winter."

Going commercial route

Mansfield says when he started his lawn service business, the industry was still relatively new in this area of Virginia.

"Now a lot of part-timers are getting into lawn mowing for a second income. That has increased the competition for mowing, especially in residential," he says. "So, we're focused more on commercial



◀ Increasingly, Nansemond Lawn & Garden has been moving into fine manicured mowing, but efficiency is still vital to the Virginia company.

work because most accounts want full landscape maintenance service and are large enough to make our labor and equipment time more efficient." The company's business is about 70 percent commercial and 30 percent residential.

Nansemond employees always wear company shirts on the job, and their equipment is kept clean and well maintained. Each crew is responsible for its own preventive maintenance and equipment cleaning each week.

"When we look professional, customers perceive they are getting professional service," Mansfield says.

He also requires that each full-time employee earn the required technical license for pesticide application, even cutting crews. Explains Mansfield, "even the mowing crews generally have to apply some Roundup to beds or driveways, and we want to make sure our people are properly certified."

The quality of work done by Nansemond crews and their on-time performance leads to frequent business referrals. As a result, Mansfield says he seldom advertises the company's services. "I place ads in our local newspaper three or four times a year, just as reminders, but it's our quality and dependability that bring us new business."

Speedy service

One advantage Nansemond Lawn & Garden offers over many competitors is its response time. "When we get a call from a

customer, especially if he has some kind of landscape problem, we aim to respond immediately or as quickly as possible," Mansfield says. "Plus, our crews have weekly routes they cover and our goal is always to have the work done on time."

As his business grows, Mansfield says he's more selective in taking on new accounts. "We take on only what we're comfortable doing, and when we can be sure of delivering the quality of work that enhances our company reputation."

When it comes to bidding for a new account, Mansfield doesn't low-ball his rates. "We're certainly not the cheapest bid, but generally we fall somewhere in the mid-range. We base our bids on time and materials. Occasionally we'll bid a job with the hope of adding future work, such as landscape construction or renovation.

"We used to bid on some contracts for local government. But it seemed it was always the low bid that got the job, so we just don't go after that work."

Mansfield has used and evaluated a lot of turf and power equipment in his 14 years in business. Starting with that first 10-hp riding mower, his lineup evolved through walk-behind mowers and, in the past four years, back to riding mowers.

Practical experience

Mansfield comes by his equipment knowledge from his experience as a farmer. He was involved in a family farm near Suffolk that grew 2,000 acres of peanuts, soybeans and small grains. Later, he got into the retail lawn and garden business, handling mostly seed and fertilizer. He took on some consumer power equipment lines for a year, before deciding to devote his energy to the lawn service business.

"The first couple years, I was lucky to

do \$15,000 a year," says Mansfield. Nevertheless, he saw the potential and hired his first employee the next year. "He was my trim man and blower man." The following year, he bought a second mower. "I just kept going. Those first few years, the business doubled every year."

As Nansemond's business grew, Mansfield aimed for more efficiency from his equipment investment, as well as his labor costs. Four years ago, a nearby dealer, Turf & Garden in Chesapeake, Va., convinced Mansfield to try a new riding mower. He was using walk-behinds, but Scott Dodson, Turf & Garden sales manager, convinced Mansfield to try the compact riding mowers, made by Walker Manufacturing.

Mansfield ended up selling all but one of his walk-behinds. "I keep one as sort of my security blanket," he says. Nansemond's crews now have four of the riding units.

"When we switched to the riders, it cut our mowing time by at least one-third, yet we have had no noticeable increase in our maintenance costs."

Mansfield says his operators quickly became used to the riding units.

"They quickly picked up the techniques for maneuvering the mowers, with one hand controlling both steering levers. They handle them well, and they maintain them well. "After all," says Mansfield, "the riders save them a lot of walking."

Nansemond Lawn & Garden still has a variety of power equipment and mowers in its equipment lineup, including some other riding mowers for rough cutting and large open areas where they don't have to pick up clippings. But more of their mowing today is fine "manicured" cutting. For that, Mansfield has determined that the compact riding mowers are making him money and building his business. □

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