

Autumn's final push for profit

Commercial landscape management in a true four-season climate is often restricted to operational functions and sales efforts traditionally associated with a growing season of approximately eight months. By October and November, many landscape contractors are "putting their accounts to bed." While preparing a landscape for its winter ordeal can require a significant effort, and it can also generate sales revenue beyond the typical seasonal maintenance contract.


win/win scenario for both contractor and client.

Investment from both sides

What we sell, and ultimately provide, is a means by which property owners and managers can differentiate themselves from their competition. This allows the investment made in any commercial property to be earning year-round dividends. Why then, because of the winter weather, should such efforts to be shelved for four months out of every 12? We are asking our clients to allow the investment in their landscape to stop performing over that four-month period. Regardless of climate, today's leaders in the service industries are the ones who provide opportunities for their clients to market more aggressively when their competition is hibernating.

Here is an example:

In July, you invested \$100,000 in a 60-month bank certificate of deposit in an effort to generate regular income from the monthly interest on your balance. Five months into the first 12-month period, your banker calls to inform you that your account will not be earning interest for the months of December 1998 through March of 1999; and



This additional revenue can strengthen a contractor's position financially as the season closes, but I would like to suggest an alternative approach to landscape management operations in the second season. This is a practical approach to managing the winter season, as well as a different philosophical approach to serving the needs of our clientele. This approach continues to generate revenue for the landscape contractor throughout the winter (snow or no snow), while providing the property owner or manager with new tools for marketing the exterior of their property over all 12 months of the year. When planned for properly and executed professionally, these winter marketing efforts will result in a true

win/win scenario for both contractor and client.

Autumn can be a time of anxiety and pressure for professional landscape contractors as they squeeze in work before winter.

By KEVIN T. BLOCK

the same will hold true for that four-month period in each of the next five years. Your reaction would be predictable. Few of us would allow our investment to stagnate for four months without generating any type of income. We may determine that such news from our banker or broker warrants a search for a new financial planner.

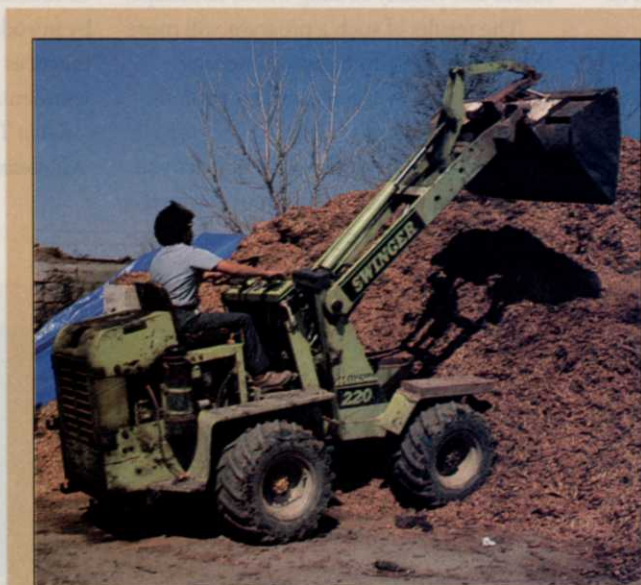
Similarly, if you allow your client's real estate investment to stagnate for four months out of every year, you are also allowing your investment into their landscape, in both time and money, to stagnate as well. You may also be unwittingly allowing that to happen if you do not have some type of winter marketing program set forth for their landscape. An oversight like this can foster an inaccurate perception of the value of a property's grounds, and may jeopardize your position with your client when such a perception is formed during what is traditionally considered your "off season."

Explain to your client that just as you would turn to an investment banker or other such financial expert to help you manage your money most effectively, teaming up with an experienced, proactive landscape contractor to evaluate and impact the condition of their landscape investment will assist them in promoting their landscape 12 months a year. If you are successful, the revenue generated from these operations will probably exceed your original expectations, and will most certainly come as a welcome supplement to the unpredictable revenues of snow removal services.

Make a visible impact

Certain established horticultural practices offer additional work and provide your client with a way to enhance and protect the winter landscape in very practical ways. Some of the more common practices are:

- ▶ Applying gypsum to turf bordering walks and curbs to minimize salt damage;
- ▶ Using antidesiccant sprays to protect plant surfaces from wind and salt vapor;
- ▶ Mowing late-fall turf to prevent fungus development;
- ▶ Wrapping shrubs to protect from winds and frost/thaw cycles;
- ▶ Using sound snow removal techniques to minimize damage from piled



Good quality mulch can be a decorative benefit as well as a horticultural benefit by protecting root systems from harsh temperature changes.

snow, plows, etc.;

- ▶ Having a plan for using ice melt compounds to avoid over-application in the throes of a winter storm.

Promote your investment

Once the preventative and practical operations of winter landscape marketing are in place, you can implement the aesthetic and artistic elements of winter marketing. Take advantage of winter's natural appeal with a focus on complementing the season's natural colors and textures. Combine preventive horticultural procedures with common decorative practices to highlight an otherwise stark winter scene:

- ▶ Cut pine boughs laid over bare flower beds, raised planters, etc., provide winter color, a pleasant scent and insula-

tion from severe cold.

- ▶ Decorative mulches such as shredded hardwood, nut or seed shells or wood chips offer color and texture in highly visible areas.

▶ Cut limbs from plants with brightly colored bark (i.e. red and yellow twig dogwood), artistically arranged in planters and flower beds offer beautiful displays in an otherwise barren corner of the landscape.

- ▶ Plant bulbs in fall for spring flowers.

Let your investment shine

The hottest and most effective opportunity for showcasing the beauty of the winter landscape is by installing decorative lighting. This has evolved into much more than simply hanging lights in the trees during the holidays. The phenomenal resurgence of holiday decorating provides a way of drawing attention to a landscape or property, creating a marketing tool that is being used in many markets as a year-round promotion. The revenue generated by such operations will augment snow removal efforts, since the maintenance of the lighting can often

be performed by the same individuals, often in the same visit to a property.

The key to a successfully installing decorative lighting lies in the planning and execution of a comprehensive approach, considering the impact both aesthetically and practically:

- ▶ Install the display according to a thorough plan for installation and maintenance, highlighting certain plants or areas of the landscape while protecting and minimizing plant or property damage.

▶ Start planning early to avoid the seasonal rush. Install early to accommodate the delicate nature of lighting materials and facilitate installation in warmer temperatures.

- ▶ Establish a budget and plan the display accordingly. A more concentrated use

of lighting in fewer areas or plants will have a greater impact than spreading out your light inventory over a broader area just to get the coverage. Provide your client the means to maximize the budget and still provide the greatest impact.

► Review installation techniques with your client prior to installation to ensure that the final look and durability of the display meets expectations. Loosely hung lights or scattered strings will draw more negative attention to your display than no lights at all.

► Inspect the installation from all angles to be aware of the image you are sending out to the marketplace. Using higher quality lights and meticulous attention to installation detail will result in a much more impressive display than a poor qual-

ity lights installed haphazardly.

Reaping what you sow

While we must acknowledge many of winter's limitations on marketing of commercial landscaping, we do not need to concede entirely. Early preparation in the way of evaluating, creating and implementing results in an aesthetically pleasing, horticulturally sound and visually striking winter landscape.

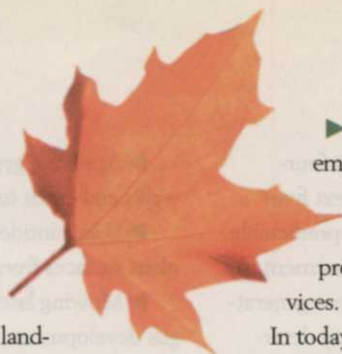
The results of such a program will more than justify the effort you will expend:

- the good will generated by your efforts on your client's behalf;
- the consistent off-season contact you have with your client while your competitors have no means to do so;

- the extra income that keeps employees busy and productive;
- the overall benefits to our industry by offering problem-solving, proactive services.

In today's competitive marketplace, astute property owners and managers are continually searching for that added advantage separating their property from their neighbor's. A progressive landscape contractor will consistently be in demand by introducing clients to new concepts and practices that will keep their and your investments working all year round.

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Tulip or other flowering bulbs provide good fall work for a contractor and wonderful early spring color in the landscape.

Decorative lighting provides a great opportunity to keep workers busy between snowfalls, and provides a wonderful source for marketing impact for your clients.



Snow removal services are the most common of operations used to offset winter expenses and supplement customer contact. Have your program and your equipment up to speed.

