

Plant warranties made easy

Avoid landscape installation meltdowns and plant warranty hassles by anticipating problems and bringing your clients into the loop — before trouble starts

By DANIEL WEISS

To make sure your policy gets the result you want, write it down. Then it's clear to your customers and your employees. A clear policy, such as one on plant warranties, shows which course of action is correct in certain circumstances.

If you install plants, your plant warranty policy will need clear definition. The most critical policy may involve negotiations between what your company promises to do and what the customer promises to pay. What is agreed to? What happens if a plant dies or is not available?

Returned dead plants aren't much of a concern in the era of Home Depot and other large chain stores. There, the customer brings in the receipt and gets a refund.

But as professional contractors, our interest lies in keeping plants alive the first time around and in reducing our plant replacement costs, which can seriously affect the bottom line. Plants are a different type of purchase than other services and products. Plants are living and need specific kinds of care until they can stand on their own. Your customer agreements should address the practice of keeping plants alive.

Clients need to know

How can you do this? Educate customers. They need to know:

- ▶ what a plant should look like at the time of installation;
- ▶ how their plant differs from the picture they may be familiar with; and
- ▶ how the plant should be maintained.

In the rush to complete an installation project, receive payment and move on to the next job, we can overlook customer ed-



This hydrangea was planted just days before the photograph was taken. It is wilting without water and will die shortly.

ucation. How much time do you spend with the customer, explaining the necessity of care needed to ensure establishment and survivability?

The first concern is getting the customer to agree to a watering schedule. This should be part of the plant warranty, along with the price and service schedule. But, without customer cooperation the newly installed plants, even the most hardy plant can—often does—die. Watering can take place manually or through an automated irrigation system, by watering can, by teaspoons, by rain dances. It doesn't matter. It just has to get done.

When you give a one-year warranty, what is that, exactly? Is your warranty for one year, including free labor and material? Do you throw in an extra year or two to make the deal better? The one-year warranty seems to be common in our industry.

How do you give a warranty for inappropriate or difficult situations? For example, a customer tells me she wants to have spreading junipers. I tell her they are not fitted for the shade and they will die there. She says her friend has them and she wants them. Do I warrant those?

Get specific

A plant warranty should inform your client when the warranty is valid and when it isn't. For instance, my company has a warranty that states the plant shall be replaced up to one year if the plant dies. This includes labor and material (which may include

mulch to replace disturbed areas, disposal fee of the plant, labor costs and new fertilizer or root start). Circumstances that will void our warranty include motor vehicle damage (like running over a plant with a car or other machine), chemical damage (such as deck stain that another contractor or the customer uses which kills the plant) or acts of nature (like storm or lightning damage).

And, our warranty will be void if the customer doesn't follow the watering schedule. This stipulation was added for several reasons. In our warranty process, customers agree that the landscape is a growing, living body that needs a certain kind of care that a new kitchen might not need. Before choosing the plants to install, our customers tell us if they like or dislike maintenance. We choose plants that not only fit the site, but also match our customers' other objectives — color, size and function.

Get customers' help

I explain the importance of water to a plant and how just a few days can destroy many plants or one plant. I also teach the customer to look outside frequently. I tell them; "Look at what you have. Does it look like it is doing well?" Many problems can be avoided if the customer watches what the landscape is doing.

In one case, a downspout had fallen off during the winter and in the spring, torrents of water drowned a stand of rhododendron. It could easily have been avoided. In another case, large Black Hills spruce were struggling. They had been planted in a raised berm, but showed signs of too much water. I asked the customer to cut back on water, then we installed a small drain tile and we saved ourselves hundreds of dollars in the costs of new plants, reparation of turf area from tractors, labor and other costs. Our customer helped us and helped themselves.

As part of your contract with your customers, you may decide to include visits to the property for a period of time, to water the plants as needed. This may be a great way to monitor the conditions of the plant environment after the installation is complete. The relationship between landscape installer and customers is more than "services rendered, services paid."

Weather worries

How does weather affect plant warranties? In the last few years, Michigan has had extreme weather — hot, dry summers and cold, snowless winters (except for the last one). We continue to install projects even during the hot summer months. In those circumstances, we may use more potted material than B&B stock and might not take the plants to the site until they are ready for installation.

Two specific areas can be problematic after new installations: the initial watering schedule and watering before winter. Different plants have different rates of establishment in the landscape, but they all require water to survive. If it is not in the contract for the installer to maintain them after the project's completion, then the customer should understand his or her obligations.

Watering before the onset of winter is important for many plants, especially in dry northern winters. Canadian hemlock, *Tsuga canadensis*, is a favorite plant to fill that shade spot on the property. It will need protection, plus a good watering schedule before water is unavailable during the winter.

I have noted that in most instances, the best system in the long run includes customers that provide the necessary care to their plants, and our focus is on choosing plants adapted to their site. This helps the plant survival rate be much more successful and eliminates the need to use the plant warranty at all. **LM**

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Part of planting (and warranty) success is proper plant site selection. This Catawba rhododendron will tolerate the heat of summer since it is placed in a shady location, out of drying winds. It is also irrigated regularly.