



Planting for profits

By splitting workers into prep and plant crews, Hillenmeyer increased efficiency

BY RON HALL/
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So, you think planting annuals is a simple operation? Think again. It can put a crimp in your operation if you don't have a system to do it efficiently.

That's what Hillenmeyer Nurseries, Inc. discovered when it really looked at its annual plantings — its system of installing annuals was taking too much time and labor. The steps it took to return profit back to this particular service offers a lesson for any landscape company.

"We had estimates that were all over the board," remembers Stephen Hillenmeyer, president. "We had some projects that we were doing real well on and some that we were losing on."

The 150-year-old full-service landscape firm headquartered in Lexington, KY, brought in business consultant Jack Mattingly to help improve operational efficiency. Mattingly helped the company to establish production rates for all of its services — including color changeovers.

The process of establishing production rates isn't difficult, explains Mattingly, but it does require taking a measuring wheel to job sites and carefully mapping properties.

Then, using a stop watch, you time the actual

work that's being done whether it's mowing, trimming, blowing off sidewalks or, in this case, planting annuals. Once production rates are in place, management can more effectively track and budget labor for each task. This is a powerful tool in controlling overtime costs, particularly as field foremen are given responsibility to see that their crews meet these budgeted labor hour targets.

The next step for Hillenmeyer Nursery, at Mattingly's suggestion, was to design and post a 4-ft. by 8-ft. production schedule board for all production employees to see. The board displays each crew's tasks for the day and the next two weeks, along with the labor budgeted for each task.

Account managers post this information and make any necessary changes before crews arrive for work. At day's end, when the foremen fill out their time cards, they note how long each task took on their section of the board. (Make your own production schedule board by buying a dry/erase board and 1/4-in. pinstriping, to make lines, at any large office supply store. Total cost is about \$40.)

"It is not the whole answer. You still have to use your judgment," explains Hillenmeyer. "But by establishing consistent production rates, we have something to compare."

While budgeting labor for large property maintenance is mostly a matter of measuring and timing, Stephen Hillenmeyer wasn't as sure about how to get a handle on his company's substantial annual plantings — until he went out and saw for himself.

For years, his company used 16 or 17 people divided among three crews, each crew doing both the site prep and the planting. When he visited a planting site, he discovered all five people working in a group in a section of a large property.

"It was an eye-opening experience," he admits. "They had flowers pulled out of the pots and the flowers were withering and dying on the ground as they prepped the site. The flowers inside the van were wilting, too. It was just a disaster. No won-

der it was taking so much time."

The experience led the company to re-vamp its planting program by splitting the workers into separate crews, one into just preparing sites, while other two-person teams followed behind and planted flowers. It also established production rates.

"When the prep crew people went on a site, they knew that they had, for example, an hour and 15 minutes to get it prepped and get out of there. They knew this because it was on the schedule board," says Stephen Hillenmeyer. "Then, all the planting crew needs to do is start unloading flowers and putting them in the ground. The transition between prepping and planting saves a lot of time."

How much? In 1999, nine people did

the same amount of work that 16 or 17 had the previous season.

With a "old" system, a person was expected to plant 20 flats (32 pots per flat) a day. In the new system, the planters are each regularly planting 30 flats daily per person. One two-person crew installed 97 flats in one day in 1999.

The crews were planting more efficiently thanks to the prep crews and a specially designed trailer that Hillenmeyer's talented shop people constructed. During planting season, the trailer is equipped with racks that hold 100 flats of flowers with room for tools and a water tank, in case the flowers start to dry during the planting process. **LM**

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