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Do it faster and cheaper

Do you have ideas about how to do your job better? Are you short on money and long projects that need doing? Here are some helpful ideas that worked well when I served as a park and tree superintendent in Massachusetts.

It's the little things that count

Look at the budget and your expense ledger carefully, especially if you're a big operation. Notice the little items that appear frequently. For example, how often do you buy work gloves? Is it a reasonable figure or are the gloves disappearing too fast?

If you're spending too much on small things like gloves, issue your employees an equipment allowance and let them be responsible for their own gloves. They'll make them last longer if they have to pay for new ones. You can also stipulate that if they show up for work without the gloves, they go home for the day. The same idea works whether the item is gloves or work boots, uniforms or pruning shears.

How do you keep padlocks from disappearing from trucks, sheds or gates? We purchased our locks with long shanks, then attached the shanks to an 18-in.-long cable with a malleable clamp. The other end of the cable was attached to the truck, shed or gates. This way, the locks could never disappear without willful intent. It may only save you \$25 a year, but it adds up.

Have you tried spraying herbicides in your shrub beds when the weeds are small, then repeating this process once every couple of weeks? Have you asked customers if they would mind having their lawn sprayed with growth retardant to reduce the mowing bill? If you have design



The top of a schoolbus salvaged from a junkyard became a portable roof for Phillips' dump body.

skills, ask the customer to pay for a remodeling of his or her landscape to eliminate hard-to-maintain plant material or mowing obstacles.

Junk or treasure?

Is there a recycling facility nearby where you can see what others are throwing away that you can use? For example, we discovered one autumn that a contractor had thrown away a leaf machine with a blown engine. Our shop added a few new parts to it, and suddenly we had a machine that lasted a few more years.

Black nursery pots are a valuable recycling item. If you can't use them yourself, see if the nursery wants them back. Garden hobbyists often look for these pots. For example, hosta collectors often grow their plants in these pots because they want to grow them in the shade of a large tree but don't want the tree's and hostas' roots competing. Other growers like to keep their plants semi-

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portable by growing them in pots in the ground.

Did you know that a school bus and dump truck are exactly the same width? We found a school bus at a junkyard and, for \$100, had the entire roof cut off. Then, our welding shop turned the bus top into a portable roof for our dump body. The truck can now be a chip truck towing a brush chipper or a leaf truck towing a leaf machine. When the top is removed, it can haul snow in winter or soil in summer.

Much about mulch

Is it better to mulch a garden bed before or after planting? If you do the planting first, you can cover the plant with the pot it came in, spread the mulch to the correct depth, then remove the pot. It keeps the mulch out of the plant's leaves and reduces time on the site. The mulch is also far enough from the trunk of the plant to prevent crown roots from becoming a problem.

Consider getting a mulch blowing machine or contractor to do your annual mulching. For one of our jobs, the sprayed mulch took only two hours to apply. That's a lot more economical and efficient than tying up a three-person crew for two days. The savings will easily pay for the cost of the sub-contractor.

Check out new equipment

Check out all the latest equipment, not just new mowers. Several years ago, we discovered a riding mower that could cut grass while moving at 7 mph. Furthermore, it could hop over curbs and drive down sidewalks from place to place without having to be hauled by trailer to every stop.

Other equipment has helped when we complete a paving project. We often have to raise the soil at the edge of the new pavement. A new device converts a winter

sander truck, which is never used in summer, into a loaming machine. The loam is conveyed to the device (a hydraulic truck conveyor), which takes the place of the sander spinner, and the loam is conveyed to the side of the truck. This allows the truck driver to drop the loam right on the pavement's edge. Now, we can get 1/2 mile a day of completed loaming done, which is twice as fast as using a conventional dump truck and loader.

Another fairly new piece of equipment comes from the body-swap group of manufacturers. These manufacturers have developed a series of landscape bodies that can be interchanged on the same truck frame. We can use one of several conventional dump bodies, some flat beds, an enclosed body for hauling plants from the nursery, a sander for winter use and several custom bodies that hold a large tool box and wheel barrel rack next to the dumping platform, all on the same truck. It takes the truck operator only about ten minutes to drop one body and pick up another.

One of the best pieces of equipment that has come out in a long time is the rotary tiller manufactured by Blec. In a single pass, the Blecavator pushes rocks, sticks, weeds and sod to about six inches below the ground surface and leaves the land

smooth and ready for reseeded or sodding. Even if you do a second pass, you still save an incredible amount of time. We purchased our machine for \$15,000, which was taken from an \$85,000 ball field renovation project (the estimated cost for a conventional turf renovation project.) The cost savings with this machine covered its purchase price in this one project alone.

Hopefully, these ideas will make your job go faster, more efficiently and improve the morale of your workers.

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