



Make annual plantings profitable

BY RON HALL / SENIOR EDITOR

Seasonal color can make your firm's reputation soar. Try these installation tricks to make it more profitable too

Who says you can't teach an established company, even a 125-year-old one, new tricks in installing seasonal color? Green Industry pioneer Akehurst Landscape Service, Inc., Joppa, MD, is among the landscape firms bringing new ideas to the service.

Installing annual beds is no longer something that firms offer merely to retain maintenance contracts; it has to be a profit center, too. In fact, some companies now focus on flowers even if it isn't to the extent of Atlanta-based Color Burst, which specializes in designing, delivering and maintaining seasonal color.

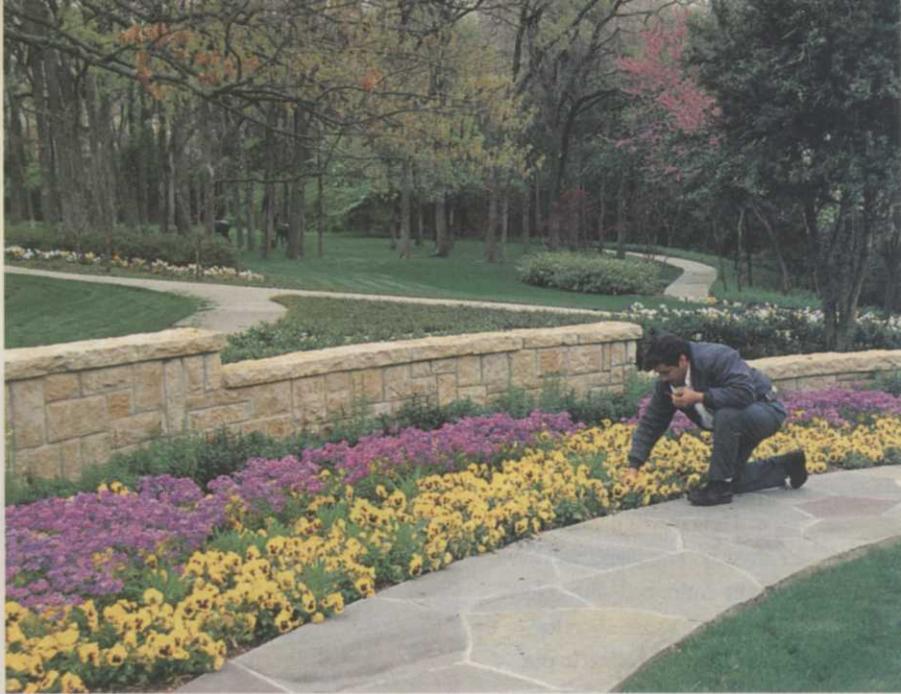
President Joe Burns remembers, as an employee of another landscape company, dreaming of running such a company.

"I thought, 'We're doing a lot of color and it's getting more and more important,'" he says. "It

seemed like it would be a lot of fun for a horticulturist (degree from Auburn University) like myself to get into this business." That was 14 years ago, and Burns says seasonal color has since evolved from being considered an attractive novelty to being a necessity for many property owners or property managers. This accounts, as least in part, for Color Burst's success in establishing branches in Birmingham, AL, Charlotte, NC and Nashville, TN.



Your goal should be to handle each plant just once when you're installing annual beds for your accounts.



Property managers have learned that “curb appeal” boosts occupancy rates at residential complexes, increases sales at retail sites and enhances corporate clients’ image. That’s not to say they won’t squeeze every splash of color they can out of their budgets. That’s why raising prices isn’t an option for most contractors. They find themselves caught between shrewd managers and aggressive competitors. They must continually massage their service delivery systems to find ways to wring more production from each labor hour.

Crews stay in contact

For instance, William K. Akehurst, manager of his company’s landscape department, has equipped some of his field supervisors with Palm Pilots — chip-driven, handheld organizers that offer instant data storage and retrieval, and e-mail messaging. On-site supervisors can instantly report on each job’s progress.

“We have the ability to put each crew’s schedule on the portable unit,” says Akehurst. “We can track when each job is started and stopped, and the Palm Pilot becomes an in-the-field time clock. At the end of the day, we can upload this information into our network. It lets us know exactly where we are with each job.”

Akehurst offers two caveats to using this technology — you must train employees to use it and you should have office software to use the collected data intelligently. “There is a learning curve,” he cautions.

Tracking installations doesn’t have to fall into the “rocket science” category, though. It can be as simple as affixing erasable boards on the walls in your company’s break room. The boards could show a schedule of each crew’s tasks and daily records of each crew’s production. (See “Planting for profits,” May 2000 *LM*).

Whatever system you use, the goal is the same — 1) establish production goals, 2) track them and 3) find ways to meet or exceed them. Basically, every job comes down to labor hours and production.

“All of our jobs are bid by hours,” explains Dee Sanders, South Bay Operations Manager for Gachina Landscape, Menlo Park, CA.

Sanders prefers to use smaller crews for color installs or changeouts, typically three people although some large jobs may call for as many as five. The rea-

sons are that crew members can travel to job sites in the same truck, usually a crewcab, and there’s less likelihood they’ll be standing around waiting for colleagues to finish their tasks.

Smaller is more efficient

“You don’t need large crews to plant flowers,” insists business consultant Jack Mattingly, Mattingly Associates, Woodstock, GA. “I think you can keep it to two- or three-person crews. One crew can strip out the old flowers and prepare the bed by tilling and adding compost. Then, a second two- or three-person crew can come to the bed at a later date to do the planting. Small crews allow workers to become more specialized and adept at their tasks.”

Mattingly also advises installation crews not to spend too much time planting flowers “in perfectly straight lines.” After carefully establishing the bed’s first row, an experienced worker with good hand/eye coordination can plant annuals without a lot of measuring and handling of plants more than once.

“With this system, if a worker’s down there on his hands and knees, you can just hand him the flower

continued on page 28

What client wouldn’t appreciate this striking design? Masses of flowers in two basic colors and meticulous maintenance turn this display into a showcase project.

Tips to streamline installations

- Establish realistic installation goals and monitor them
- Prepare beds thoroughly prior to the arrival of install crews
- Have growers ship annuals to the job site
- Two- and three-person crews work best for most jobs
- Don’t mulch where it’s not necessary
- Don’t overlook training women for your install crews

continued from page 27

that's out of the pot, and he can put it in the ground," says Mattingly. "If the plant is off a little bit, in a few weeks it won't matter anyway. The plants will have filled the entire bed with color."

Mattingly's suggestion for mulching flower beds is to put mulch only where needed. "You might want to mulch the primary flower beds in areas where people walk by or where there is lots of traffic and the area has to look good immediately," he says. "In three weeks, after the flowers start spreading, you don't see the mulch anyway."

Partner with growers

Apart from the installation process, contractors streamline seasonal color service by working closely with vendors such as growers. When a contractor and a grower develop a long-term partnership, both benefit.

"We have a grower to whom we contract all of our color, and he tries to grow what we're asking for," says Gachina's Sanders. "We try to get that information to him months ahead of time."

"We want to inspect their greenhouses and their operations," adds Joe Burns of Color Burst. "It takes a while, but once we get comfortable with a grower, we like to operate as a partnership."

With this type of relationship, a grower can save a contractor time and labor by delivering bedding plants directly to a job site.

"A lot of our jobs utilize a full

truckload of flowers, and we'd rather not have them come to our yard," adds Akehurst. "If we can get our growers to ship to the job site, the flowers just come off the truck and practically go right into the hole."

Don't forget employees

No matter what efficiencies you build into your seasonal color programs, none will work without trained and dedicated employees, including women who often make excellent installers,

says Joe Burns in Atlanta.

"The backbone of any company is good individuals who like what they're doing. That makes for happy customers, and happy customers make for repeat business," he adds. **LJM**

Don't cheat yourself by pricing too low

BY BILL PHAGAN

Do we really charge enough for seasonal color? A recent survey indicates that contractors pay an average cost of .55 to .80 a pot for a four-inch annual. The price that most contractors charge their customers for seasonal color is typically too little. Many contractors take the price of each annual and double it. Therefore, the .75 potted plant becomes \$1.50, which may still not be enough.

Here's another reason to reconsider your pricing. The American Nursery & Landscape Association reports that high energy costs hit greenhouse growers hard this past winter. Also, commercial freight carriers tacked on fuel surcharges of 5% to 10%, and growers paid more for the plastic they use to wrap and move plants. Costs will be passed on to you.

Consider what you must do to put flowers "in the ground" for clients, and you'll appreciate why you have to price this service carefully:

- ✓ Go over color, location and timing with the customer. Are you charging for your expertise?
- ✓ Find and order flowers (and hopefully not have to make 10 calls in the process)
- ✓ Pick them up or have them delivered
- ✓ Travel to and from the job site
- ✓ Improve soil in beds (don't forget the cost of labor and soil products)
- ✓ Till beds if they need cultivation
- ✓ Move plants at job site, pulling them from containers, placing them in holes and backfilling them smoothly and carefully
- ✓ Clean up the job site by collecting and stacking pots, etc.
- ✓ Apply a light coat of mulch (if required)

Don't forget state sales and other applicable taxes. Warranties and plant replacements — 30 days, 90 days? Who's responsible for watering the flowers and taking care of pests and nutrition? Is all that included in your price per four-inch annual?

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