

Tropical trees can turn a Minnesota backyard into a pool-side paradise.

ADD-ON SERVICE

Offering palm trees outside of a tropical climate may not be a big profit booster, but this Minnesota business owner found it offers value in other ways.

BY CASEY PAYTON

Palm trees and Minnesota are two things that don't seem like they'd go together. But James P. Sweeney saw an opportunity to fill a niche market by bringing palms to the Twin Cities. Sweeney, who is also founder and senior designer for Mom's Landscaping & Design, founded PalmTreeDirect.com to deliver a unique, resort-like theme to his clients' properties.

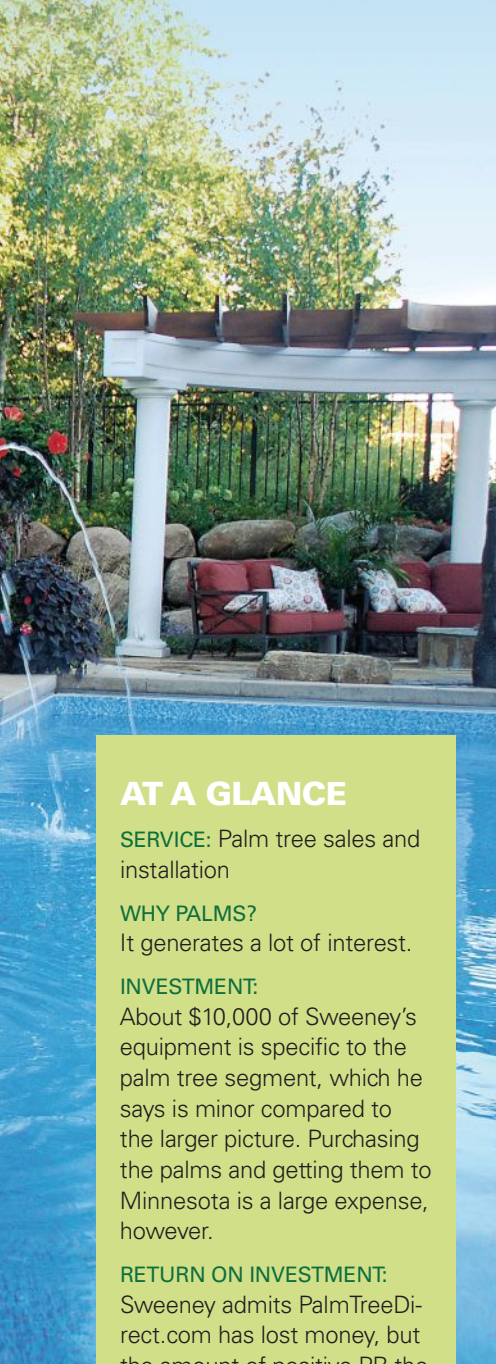
Several years after founding Mom's Landscaping, Sweeney decided that the idea of offering a palm tree service could really deliver that extra "wow factor" to his clients. "It's a fun and inter-

esting service," he says. "We all dream and aspire to the creation of an oasis or a little getaway, but including an actual palm tree in the landscape is unique and unexpected in a market where there are no hardy tropicals."

Though PalmTreeDirect.com is a subsidiary of Mom's Landscaping, from the start Sweeney wanted to market it as an "add-on piece that could also stand on its own," he says.

"The idea was to create a website and market and brand it differently than the main business," he explains. "By doing

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AT A GLANCE

SERVICE: Palm tree sales and installation

WHY PALMS?

It generates a lot of interest.

INVESTMENT:

About \$10,000 of Sweeney's equipment is specific to the palm tree segment, which he says is minor compared to the larger picture. Purchasing the palms and getting them to Minnesota is a large expense, however.

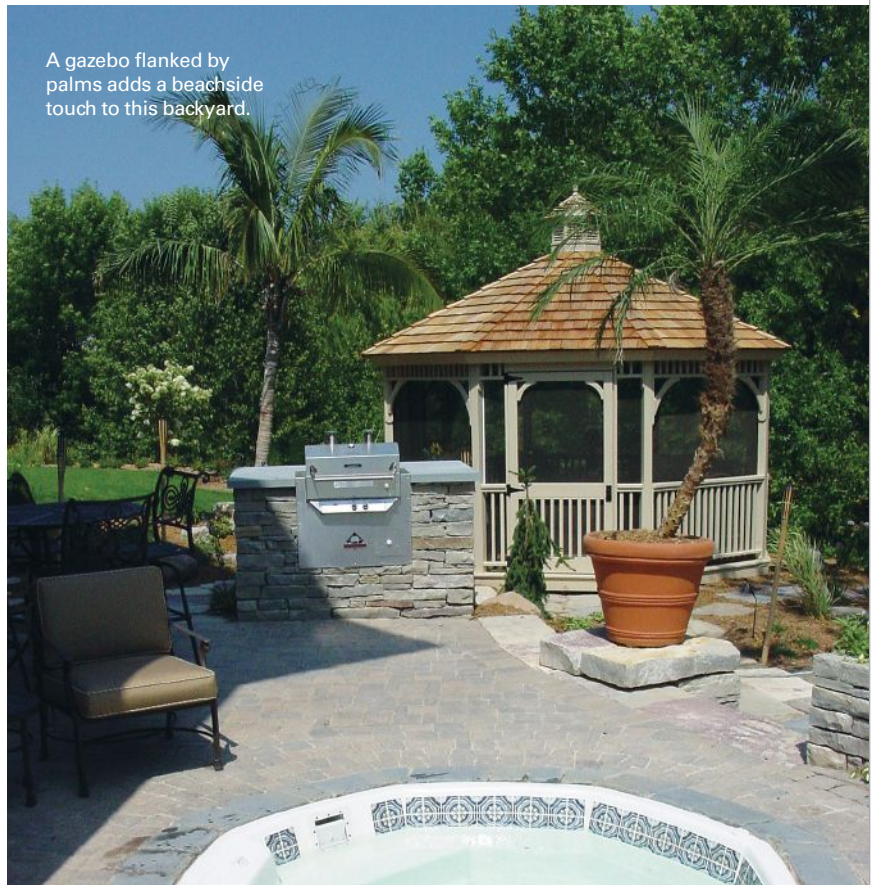
RETURN ON INVESTMENT:

Sweeney admits PalmTreeDirect.com has lost money, but the amount of positive PR the service has generated, combined with business it's driven to his primary company, far outweighs the expense.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE?

Transporting and handling the palms is never simple, and the season is really short. "We decided that we wanted them big for the true wow factor," he says. "The majority of them are in the 15- to 25-ft. range. The logistics of handling that kind of tree aren't simple."

A gazebo flanked by palms adds a beachside touch to this backyard.



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that, it has been able to stand alone and be specific to its target market."

Initially, Sweeney pursued a rental market by trying to rent out the palm trees for events. But he soon realized that there were opportunities for repeat customers from his landscape clientele.

"It turned out that people who would get a palm tree put in their backyard wanted to do it on a regular basis," Sweeney says. "We bring the trees out around Mother's Day, and normally come out to cut them down sometime in November."

Adding the palm tree service didn't require any major investment. The same staff and equipment used to do everyday landscaping could also handle the palm tree installations.

"We have very little palm tree-specific equipment," he says.

Getting the palms into Minnesota is costly, however, and Sweeney admits that there's no big money to be made

with a palm tree segment. In fact, he admits he's lost money providing that service.

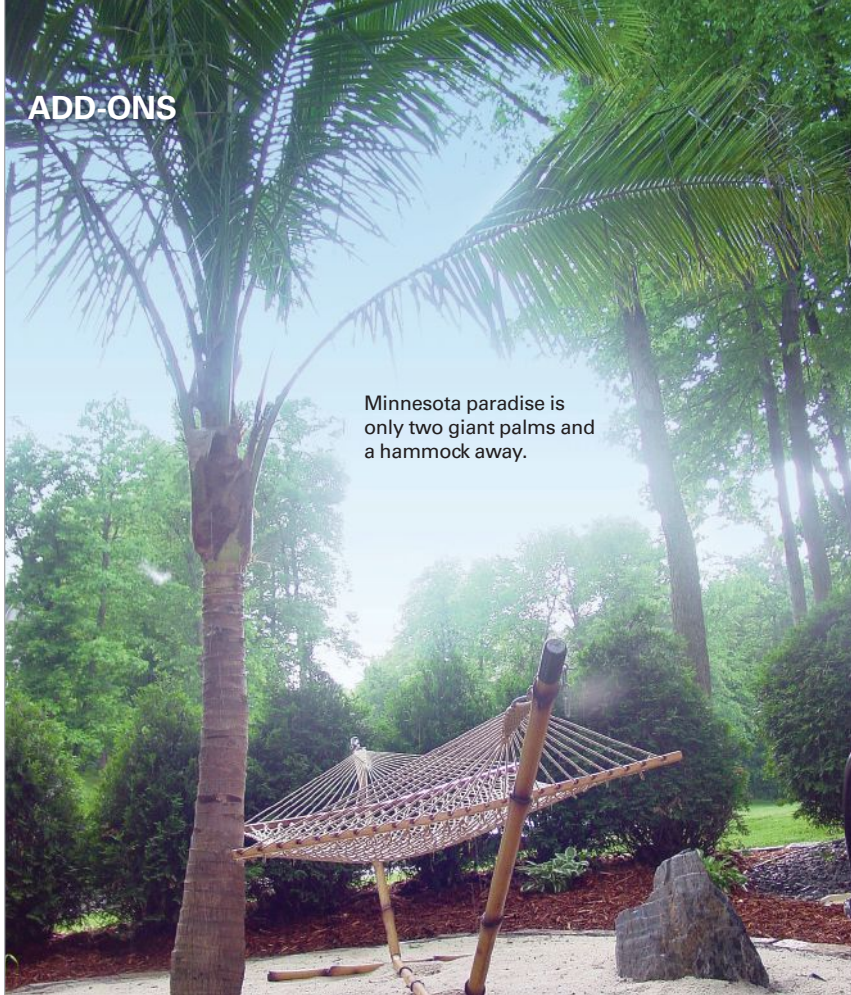
So why does he continue to offer it? Sweeney says it brings value in other ways. For one, he says he personally enjoys working with palm trees. But more importantly, it keeps some of his top customers happy. Plus, Sweeney says, this service has brought his company extra exposure.

"The palm tree business creates a lot of interest, which makes it valuable enough to continue doing it," he says. "The great PR it's gotten us has been well worth the cost. People are really interested in it."

In fact, that interest has generated business even through customers who didn't end up customers of PalmTreeDirect.com.

"A unique thing that's happened is that people see our ad about palm trees and call us up because the palm trees got their attention," says Sweeney.

ADD-ONS



Minnesota paradise is only two giant palms and a hammock away.

“While we come out to do a consultation and talk about the space the family wants to create, a lot of those people don’t actually end up going with a palm tree. But marketing the palm tree service to people has been valuable in showing them we’re creative and we think outside of the box — even if they don’t go with a palm tree.”

Sweeney says that in the end, it boils down to creating a space that’s interesting. By offering a palm tree service, his clients know he can add some original flavor to their landscape.

“Almost every single person can connect the image of a palm tree to this relaxing and wonderful oasis feeling,” he adds. “The sunlight coming through the palms and the movement of the palm fronds is so fantastic — it’s something that everyone enjoys.” **LM**

Payton is a writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

PHOTO COURTESY: MOM'S LANDSCAPING & DESIGN

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The advertisement features a blue and white color scheme. On the left, a white fiberglass sprayer tank is shown with a pump and nozzle assembly. A small dog is sitting next to it. Below this, a truck is shown with the sprayer tank mounted on its bed. On the right, a larger white fiberglass sprayer tank is shown with a pump and nozzle assembly. Below this, a truck is shown with the sprayer tank mounted on its bed. The Reddick Equipment Company logo is prominently displayed at the top and bottom.