

## Special order

Chalet adds revenue in lawn renovations with a specialty application process.

**O**N CHICAGO'S NORTH SHORE, creeping bentgrass is a common infestation that's difficult to control. Because creeping bentgrass is thick, matty and chokes out other grasses, it's a nuisance that many customers feel spoils an otherwise beautiful lawn. It's also prone to disease. For customers with bentgrass- or nimblewill-infested lawns, Chalet in Chicago's northern suburbs is turning the problem into an opportunity. It has implemented a specialty application service for lawn renovations.

Tony Kacinas, assistant manager in Chalet's soil and turf department, began trialing Syngenta's Tenacity, an herbicide with the active ingredient mesotrione, and found that it was producing happy customers by killing creeping bentgrass and nimblewill yet retaining desirable grasses.

"The old school way of renovating a lawn meant killing everything off and starting from scratch," Kacinas says. "I hated killing off good grass that didn't really have to go. Now we're able to keep that grass, which makes the renovation much easier because we have a base to build from."

After completing some successful trials, last year Kacinas signed up 15 lawns for the specialty application. "The feedback was really good, so this year I have 40 lawns on the docket," he says. "We've actually hired a specialty applicator to handle this service, along with other specialty applications we are offering. It became too much for me to handle on my own."

Kacinas says that the specialty application market is growing as more clients begin to value customized services.

"We know that not everyone has bentgrass or nimblewill, but we can target this to those customers who do," he says. "Whether they're on our fertilization program or not, this is something that we can market to both existing and new customers."

Because the product creates white spots on the lawn as the bentgrass and nimblewill die, Kacinas says it's important to educate customers so they have realistic expectations. That's why Chalet informs clients that the white spots mean it's working.



Tony Kacinas enrolled 40 lawns this year.

The company also uses iPads to show clients before-and-after photos of other properties that have received the application. "We're able to show them what the lawn looks like throughout the process so they're prepared for the white spots and not calling us in a panic," Kacinas says. "It's always smart to set a client up with proper expectations. Once they understand that you don't have to kill all of the grass, people appreciate that they're just dealing with some white spots."

The initial process includes three applications, each two weeks apart. Then the entire lawn is slit seeded. Chalet charges per square foot for the chemical application and a separate fee for slit seeding, which includes the cost of the seed.

Once the lawn is in a healthy state, Kacinas signs up customers for an annual clean-up application for any root systems that may have survived or seeds that may remain in the soil. It offers an opportunity for recurring revenue and keeps the customer happy.

"You don't want to go through that three-step application process only to have the bentgrass come back two or three years later," says Kacinas. "A once-a-year clean-up spray ensures the customer is getting true quality and that their expectations are being met."

Because the repeat service adds to the workload, Kacinas says he'll pace the new service's growth.

"We already have the 15 lawns from last year that we need to go back and do a one-time clean-up on," says Kacinas. "Next year, we'll have 40 additional one-time clean-ups on top of all the new sprays we're doing. So each year we'll be seeing more work."

With the success, he says the service promotes itself by word of mouth. Customers happy that their bothersome bentgrass is being dealt with are telling their friends. Chalet also has started promoting the service through its retail garden center.

"Customers are really excited to hear that we have a new process to help them get rid of this pesky old problem."

The author is a freelance writer with seven years of experience covering landscaping.

### » SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**COMPANY:** Chalet

**HEADQUARTERS:** Wilmette, Illinois

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 275

**2011 REVENUE:** \$25.5 million

**PROJECTED 2012 REVENUE:** \$25.5 million

**ADD-ON SERVICE:** Specialty application service for lawn renovations.