

TRUCK TALK

We pick the brains of two Green Industry fleet managers



Paul Hurlock, *Fleet Manager*
ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design
Venice, Fla.

Landscape Management (LM): How did you wind up on this career path?

Paul Hurlock (PH): I've been a car guy for a long time. I moved down from Canada six years ago to look after the fleet here. My background is automotive and I worked for Lamborghini for many years and then for Chevrolet. I have a unique perspective from being on the other side of the fence for so long.

LM: What does the job entail for you?

PH: The purchasing of all our vehicles and managing the maintenance for them. In some cases I will design or spec-out what is needed. I also monitor gas consumption.

LM: What types of trucks are in your fleet?

PH: We have a total of about 105 trucks in the fleet. They'll range anywhere from a half-ton extended cab pickup, which would be driven by our account executives, to three-quarter-ton pickups with service bodies on them for the mechanics and irrigation crews. We have one-ton dump bodies for our shrub crews, for debris. I also have class 5 pickups for my landscape crews that are used to tow. I also have three medium-duty trucks used in our tree division. And I have a large Peterbilt that has a trash body on the back with a crane to move debris.

LM: Do you typically lease or buy your vehicles?

PH: Ninety-nine percent of the time I purchase them. If I do lease, I generally only lease them on a three- or four-year lease and run them down to the dollar. Here and there we'll do a lease, but there really haven't been any major advantages or tax breaks to leasing over buying. Because of the way we

stage our business with three different shops throughout the area, most of our vehicles don't get a lot of mileage because they're only going into communities within an approximate 10-mile radius.

LM: So how long do you typically run them?

PH: Our shrub trucks in particular don't go very far, so I have some from 1999 or 2000 still. I have some trucks that are 12 years old and still relatively low mileage, so it doesn't make sense to get rid of them. But for the most part, the bulk of my vehicles are 2006 or newer.

LM: What's the biggest challenge you face in the position?

PH: Trying to deal with some of the things that get done to the trucks. They get stuck, go through a fender bender or are run without oil.

LM: How have you combatted this problem?

PH: We really put a lot of emphasis on having a good-looking fleet, so we encourage our crews to take pride in the vehicles. There's only so much you can do when it comes to keeping a vehicle looking new, but we have been pretty successful in convincing our crew to at least check the oil every day. Besides trying to instill a sense of pride in the crews, we offer some rewards here and there. A supervisor will go out from time to time and stuff a \$10 bill in the dipstick handle. Then we'll see if the crew finds it by checking the oil. If they don't, we can tell them, "You missed out on 10 bucks today simply by not checking the oil." That's definitely helped.

LM: What's your best maintenance advice?

PH: Definitely regular oil changes. It's a small thing that is so important. We're also big on safety here. We're not a company that's going to let our crew drive around on bald tires. Our tire bill is huge because we don't mess around.

LM: What do you drive personally?

PH: I have an Infinity SUV that I drive but I probably drive my Camaro more than anything. That's part of me being a car guy. It's a 500 HP 2010 Camaro SS that I go drag racing in.

LM: Is that your dream vehicle?

PH: I love my Camaro but if I could drive anything it would probably be a Ferrari or a Lamborghini.



Paul Osborne, Fleet & Facilities Manager
Swingle Lawn, Tree & Landscape Care
Denver

LM: How did you get into this field?

Paul Osborne (PO): My father was a mechanic when I was younger. I changed my first motor at 12 years old and knew early on I wanted to do this as a career. Then at age 27 I ended up with two back surgeries in one year, so it was clear my days as a mechanic were limited. I'd already been running a commercial shop since the age of 20 so I decided to make the change over to full-time management. I still like to work on the vehicles from time to time.

LM: What jobs do you handle in your role?

PO: I handle the fleet and facilities for Swingle Tree's Denver and Fort Collins locations. That means everything from the alarm systems to managing the employees who cut the grass at our facilities to dealing with the utilities and creating and managing the budgets for both locations.

LM: Walk us through a typical day.

PO: I start at 6:15 a.m. and am sitting behind my desk looking through any notes my afternoon shift mechanics left me. Then I'll start answering emails and working on any reports. I may also go out and talk to the crews. Once my computer work is taken care of, I may be doing one-on-ones or senior staff meetings. I also do a lot of vendor negotiations and have appointments with them throughout the week. Afternoons may be spent working on vehicle maintenance reports or entering data into fleet management software. I also do a lot of side reports on different pieces of equipment. If we buy a stump grinder, I can tell you how often we're utilizing it so we're not buying a new one unnecessarily.

LM: What trucks do you keep in the fleet?

PO: We have over 200 pieces of rolling stock, along with chippers/trailers. We utilize lawn care vehicles both residential and commercial, tree-spraying vehicles, chipper trucks, shrub dumps, bucket trucks and some other vehicles that complete Swingle's corporate fleet.

LM: Do you purchase or lease your vehicles?

PO: The cost of capital makes it pretty advantageous for us to purchase right now. Of course we're always looking into

leasing because it keeps us honest and gives us a great "Plan B" if something falls through with a purchase. It's always smart to have an alternative plan.

LM: What's something you've learned with your years of experience?

PO: To cross utilize our equipment. We not only do landscaping and arborist work, but also Christmas lighting in the winter. So our equipment never really gets that downtime period, like most other landscape companies. So scheduling can be a challenge when it comes to equipment use. Cross utilization has been the answer.

LM: How do you think the industry sees the fleet manager role?

PO: I think fleet managers, in general, need to gain some credibility. A lot of people just see them as mechanics that have stepped up but there's a lot more to it than that. Fleet managers need schooling and training to read P&L statements or a balance sheet. They need technical skills to help steer a company in the best direction. I would urge fleet managers to take their role seriously and realize they have to be a professional. It's important to finish your degree. That adds a lot of value to the company you're working with.

LM: What's your best maintenance tip?

PO: To send out oil samples. When doing preventive maintenance, I always send out oil samples and use those reports to set intervals. If I've been changing the oil at every 3,000 miles and after sampling oil, realize I can get 5,000 or 6,000 miles out of it, I've just saved us 100 percent of preventive maintenance costs on that vehicle for that cycle. I would urge other fleet managers to utilize technology. You can really find out what works best for your fleet by utilizing technology.

LM: What do you drive personally?

PO: I'm pretty tall at 6 feet 5 inches, so I drive a full-size pickup.

LM: What's your dream vehicle?

PO: If they made one to fit me, probably a Callaway Twin Turbo or Ferrari F40.

LM: What do you see yourself doing down the road?

PO: I see a transition towards retirement. The same way I transitioned from mechanic to fleet manager, I see myself eventually transitioning from fleet manager to consultant. I have a lot of experience in DOT compliance, safety, asset acquisition, disposal and utilization, establishing key performance indicators and benchmarking, and it would be a shame not to continue to utilize that. At some point in the future, I see myself as a consultant where it would free up a little more time for myself but also still allow me to utilize the gifts I have.