

## Stormwater woes

Twin Oaks Landscape differentiates itself by fixing clients' stormwater problems.

**C**HRIS SPEEN, GENERAL manager of Twin Oaks Landscape, in Ann Arbor, Mich., was looking for a differentiator. There were a lot of landscape businesses in his area and they all offered the same services. He wanted to not only stand out from the crowd but offer a unique service that could drive additional revenue. He set out to find what was lacking in his area—and what he found was a need for stormwater management.

"A plumber goes as far as taking care of the internal problem and getting the water outside, but what happens after that?" says Speen. "That's where we come in."

Launching this new service was no small feat, and Speen had to team up with a civil engineer to offer it properly. The civil engineer completes drawings and puts the certified stamp on official plans. Since the job involves roadways, drainage ditches and retention ponds, there's a lot at play.

"We tell our clients it's an opportunity to protect their asset or infrastructure," explains Speen. "In the past, people may have ignored the retention pond for 20 years and then have to put a ton of money into solving a problem. We talk to them about a maintenance program where they're paying a smaller fee for an ongoing service and they can often prevent those problems. If we can do a little bit of work each year, it's much easier for a group like a homeowners' association (HOA) to budget for that than to wait 20 years and have to fix a huge problem that wasn't budgeted for."

While the work got started with HOAs, Speen also has contracted with municipalities and does work on a smaller scale for individual residential properties that have stormwater management issues.

To start the service, the biggest investment was the partnership with a civil engineer, Speen says. Twin Oaks has a design/build division, so it already had an excavator and a compact loader, plus an underground camera with scope.

"The resources were already there, so the question was, how do we get the equipment we already have to do more work?"



A before-and-after look at a Twin Oaks stormwater management project.



The service has seen a return on investment and it drives off-season revenue.

"We were booked for December and January working on stormwater management," Speen says. "It's the time of year when you can typically only make money doing snow services, so we've found this has been great winter work."

Though it has been successful, Speen cautions that it takes hard work. To get a client on a stormwater management program, it can require six or seven meetings before any income is generated.

"It's a big time commitment," he adds. "We primarily research jobs that bring us income throughout the year—on a monthly payment plan—as opposed to one-time jobs, though there are times these can work out as well."

Because the size and scale of the jobs are so vastly different, there's a range in pricing. Speen has some accounts that pay \$500 a month, while others pay up to \$6,000 a month. "The key is getting the details on the client's budget and what they're prepared to spend, and then building a plan that works for them," he says. "Our company is not focused so much on price, but on value. We offer high value by conducting the service the right way, and ultimately saving them thousands by managing their stormwater runoff properly and in good timing."

Payton is a freelance writer with seven years of experience writing about the landscape industry.

### » SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**COMPANY:**  
Twin Oaks Landscape

**HEADQUARTERS:**  
Ann Arbor, Mich.

**WHAT?** A stormwater management service

**WHY?** "In this business, people ask all the time: 'What do you do specifically?'" says General Manager Chris Speen. "Once they like your landscape services they want to know what other services you offer. So we were looking for something different, a long-term relationship based on trust and loyalty."

**HOW?** "We teamed up with an engineer and started to separate ourselves from the pack and gain new business with this new service," says Speen.