

A new division allowed Sonoran Gardens to add maintenance in the turf-free desert.

Custom growth

A Tucson-based landscape company finds a unique niche in the maintenance market.



GIVEN ARIZONA'S DESERT landscape, xeriscaping is often a necessity. As a result, many landscape companies here don't have a strong focus on traditional landscape maintenance. Instead, they drive much of their revenue from design/build projects with hardscaping. Still, when clients kept asking Sonoran Gardens in Tucson to tackle some of their maintenance work, the company decided to expand into the arena in a unique way—with a Custom Care division that would address all their clients' needs.

"This is a concept that's not so original in other parts of the country but out here it really fills a gap that's missing," says Sonoran President Chris Niccum. "Customers were calling us with their maintenance needs and it was obvious they wanted something that was full service. So we tried to address that with a Custom Care program in which the client receives a package that includes everything needed to keep their landscape top notch."

Since there aren't any lawns to mow, landscape maintenance might include general cleanup, plant care, insect and weed control, pruning, replacing outdoor lighting bulbs, adjustments to irrigation controllers and minor irrigation system repairs.

"Each landscape out here is really different, so it truly is a custom package," says Niccum. "We figure out exactly what each property needs to look its best and then include all of that in a monthly service fee."

Last August, Sonoran Gardens acquired the Contained Gardner, a company specializing in container gardens for residential and commercial clientele. Clients can now choose to add a container garden service, which has been a great revenue driver for the company. It has a biweekly maintenance feature (running approximately \$100 per month for a typical pot), during which a technician fertilizes, deadheads, checks for insects and performs other routine container garden maintenance.

In addition, twice a year the pots are completely emptied and replanted. Niccum says the service has been a nice fit with the core design/build component of his business. Clients may choose to do one or more pot installations during construction, which can run anywhere from \$500 to \$800 per installation.

When Custom Care was first launched, Niccum was able to use two existing employees to run the division—a foreman with the ability to handle maintenance work and a designer who had a great eye for property layouts. As the division has grown, Sonoran has hired a full-time manager and the staff has grown to eight.

Because he grew Custom Care slowly, Niccum says he didn't need much capital outlay. The division initially used equipment and staff the company already had and only added more as the need—and the revenue—drove it.

Niccum says communication is a huge part of what makes the division so successful. Clients always get a heads up before staff members visit the property and are asked if there's anything special they should pay attention to.

"When we're done, the client is sent a complete checklist of everything we did, whether it was fixing a leak, replacing a light bulb or replacing a plant—everything is itemized," Niccum says.

Also included in the package is a yearly landscape evaluation where a designer gives the client ideas for potential upgrades to plantings, lighting and more, he says. "That often ends up generating some new projects for us."

As Niccum looks to the future, he sees the division expanding even further. Pool maintenance and even handyman services are strong possibilities.

"Clients like the idea of having all their needs handled by one company that they already have a relationship with and that they trust."

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

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

WHY CUSTOM CARE?

"Customers wanted a company with horticultural experience to handle some of the maintenance needs they were hiring other maintenance people to do, and they wanted a full-service experience," says Chris Niccum, president of Sonoran Gardens.

TARGET CLIENT? The program targets high-end customers who aren't solely price driven, he says. "It's people who are willing to pay to get better service and better quality."

KEY TO SUCCESS? A focus on good communication has really driven the success of this service, says Niccum. "People like the idea of it being custom-designed for them and that everything is included in one single package."