

Indoor holiday decor

McHale Landscape Design's move toward interior holiday work has strengthened client relations.

MCHALE LANDSCAPE DESIGN, based in Upper Marlboro, Md., promotes itself as a "property management" company. As such, its crews handle a slew of services for clients in a "one-stop shop" effort—everything from gutter cleaning to fall annual installations and exterior holiday lights for clients throughout Maryland, Virginia and Washington D.C. A few years ago, one of McHale's exterior holiday displays led to an interior job for a residential client's second home in St. Michael, Md. That job has become an ongoing account and a service the business plans to grow.

"(They) asked if we could take over their interior holiday decor since they liked what we were doing on the outside and trusted our crews," says Samantha Fischer, Maryland Eastern Shore maintenance regional manager for the \$21 million company. "We're not as busy in the winter with landscape maintenance, so we have the extra time to focus on interior decorating."

While McHale's Virginia division has completed three indoor projects, this was the first for its Maryland Eastern Shore division.

The company, Fischer says, is content with the service's slow growth, though.

"There's a fine line of getting too many clients for a service like this," she says. "Three or four clients could make it a nice, profitable service, but too many more would mean we couldn't devote the time needed to do the job right. The client and I start throwing around holiday ideas in the spring."

The service is more of a customer service builder than a major moneymaker, Fischer says. The client sets the budget, from which Fischer buys decorations and factors in labor.

In terms of adding interior holiday work to the company's service lineup, there weren't any additional costs or equipment needed—the service only required ladders, which the company already had for hanging exterior lights.

"We just needed to train staff to be extra cautious while working on the interior,"

Fischer says. "Working inside requires just a little more care."

Fischer says any company could add a service like this, but it does require having at least one staffer with an "eye for design" to oversee the work. "It's not just sticking a Christmas tree in the corner; we do every single room," Fischer says. "Last year, the (St. Michael's) client wanted a



McHale begins planning its interior holiday decorating jobs in spring.

wonderland theme and we incorporated the entire house."

That effort even included importing fake snow and putting it in the children's rooms. Poinsettias also were brought in, wreaths and garland were hung and two decorated Christmas trees were installed.

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Fischer devotes a lot of her time to the project, utilizing extra staff as needed to hang items and follow her plans. "It takes a crew of about five people, though they're not at the property every day," she says.

Once the holidays pass and the clients return to their full-time home, the crew comes back in for clean-up. "We wrap up the decorations and store everything in tubs in the client's attic so it's ready for future use," Fischer says. "We have the client's cleaning service lined up to come in right after us and do a good cleaning."

From an internal standpoint, Fischer says the interior holiday decor service has been really enjoyable for her, as well. "Throughout the year, I'll get ideas from landscaping shows and magazines," she says. "I really enjoy seeing it all come together."

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

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: McHale Landscape Design

HEADQUARTERS: Upper Marlboro, Md.

ADD-ON SERVICE: Interior holiday decor

WHY INTERIOR HOLIDAY DECOR?

Doing interior holiday decorating was a natural extension from doing exterior holiday lighting—particularly for clients with vacation homes who aren't regularly on the property to do it themselves. This service is more of a customer service builder than a huge revenue driver.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE? The timeline—there are typically only three full weeks to have the decorating complete.

BEST TIP? Have your theme decided before Thanksgiving, giving yourself plenty of time to prepare.