

Grounds Check

Vetting landscape service providers ensures they add value to site maintenance plans.

By Sabeena Hickman

Busy facility managers (fms) might take the landscaping around their buildings for granted. With many other pressing issues and challenges, how much focus should be given to groundskeeping as long as the site looks presentable? The answer is that there are proven operational, economic, safety, and mental health benefits that can be gained from properly maintaining the landscapes surrounding commercial and institutional facilities.

The University of Washington's Urban Forestry and Urban Greening research website, created by Kathleen L. Wolf, Ph.D., lists just some of the economic benefits of commercial landscapes. For instance, one study found 7% higher rental rates for commercial offices with high-quality landscapes. Meanwhile, shoppers in another study claim they would spend about 10% more for goods and services in central business districts having high-quality tree canopies. Additionally, shoppers indicate that they will travel a greater distance to visit a district with high-quality trees and that they will spend more time there once they arrive.

A well maintained landscape around a facility can also reduce heating and cooling costs, reduce street noise, improve safety, and provide mental health benefits and stress reduction.

Roger S. Ulrich, Ph.D., of Texas A&M University notes in a study, "The fact that there is limited but growing scientific evidence that viewing gardens can measurably reduce patient stress and improve health outcomes has been a key factor in the major resurgence in interest internationally in providing gardens in hospitals and other healthcare facilities."

Ulrich also notes that, "There is considerable evidence that restorative effects



PHOTO: PLANET/PHILIPPE NOBILE PHOTOGRAPHY

When researching landscape service providers, facility managers (fms) should make sure a company's bid accurately captures scope of work, includes a startup plan, and demonstrates the ability to offer multi-year plans with designs and budgets so fms can plan for the future.

of nature scenes are manifested within only three to five minutes as a combination of psychological/emotional and physiological changes."

With such a valuable component of the overall property at stake, how can fms make sure they hire a landscape contractor who will not only provide great care but also provide added value?

Evaluating Service Providers

Fms who want to ensure they hire a high quality landscape company should look at the company's current work, safety and training practices, and employees' level of education and accreditation. A first step is to find out how long they've been in business and get a sense of how they approach customer service, quality control, safety compliance, training programs, communication methods, and responsiveness to special requests and emergencies. Fms can ask service providers for references of similar properties in order to review their work and see their crews in action.

Second, fms should make sure a company is licensed and insured to operate in their state and are in good standing. Managers should also look for a company with a staff that has landscape industry certification and are members of a national and/or state landscape association. These are all indicators of the provider's commitment to maintaining the most current knowledge and skills.

Third, safety should be a primary concern in public spaces. Fms should ask about a company's safety record and what requirements they have in place for personnel and equipment. Professional landscape companies put safety first through extensive training, power equipment certification, and regular meetings. Safety programs, such as the STARS Safe Company Program, help companies improve their safety records by tracking and decreasing incidents of vehicular accidents, employee accidents and illnesses, and more.

(Continued on page 18)

Grounds Check

(Continued from page 16)

Another safety indicator is the Experience Modification Ratio (EMR) score, which reflects a company's overall safety record and is applied to its insurance premium. A lower EMR means fewer accidents. EMRs are calculated and published annually by a state or national rating board, but the best approach is to ask a company directly for its EMR score.

Finally, fms should make sure prospective landscape management companies have extensive and ongoing training programs on every aspect of their business from horticulture to production, operations, equipment, time management, account management, and customer service. A good provider will be able to point to examples of training programs and materials.

Hiring a professional landscape company should be driven by the prime facility objectives. Before approaching a company, fms should think about what their goals are regarding their grounds. Many larger companies offer a wide variety of services from landscape design and installation to basic maintenance to services, such as lawn care treatments, irrigation, tree care, outdoor lighting, snow removal, and holiday decorating. These capabilities make it possible for fms to obtain just about any combination of services.

Bill Horn, Landscape Industry Certified, vice president at Terracare Associates, a Northern California and Colorado based landscape management company, encourages fms to develop their own specifications when hiring a service provider instead of relying on the company to outline a scope of work.

"Some businesses put out an RFQ, which rewards the lowest priced operators," says Horn. "We suggest releasing an RFP instead, listing all the desired professional qualifications and a complete scope of work. That way, facility managers can be sure to get everything they are looking for in the contract and they won't end up getting nickel and dimed by a low cost company."

Making The Most Of The Service

At the bare minimum, fms should expect to work with a company that delivers what is expected. However, fms can get more from these agreements when working with a company that goes above and beyond and acts as a partner, offering suggestions and adding value to the facility.

(Continued on page 20)

Versatility In Utility Vehicles

By Darryl Heffline

The groundskeeping staff at any large facility is a do-it-all faction. A grounds crew could be planting flowers along a walkway in the morning and hauling laundry to be cleaned by day's end. Even transporting facility guests from one location to another can be required at times.

Much like the grounds crew, a facility's vehicle fleet must be flexible and nimble with an innate ability to transition from job to job with efficiency. So it is of utmost importance to know what options are available to turn a utility vehicle (UTV) into a true full facility vehicle, whether it's being used to maintain a corporate campus or a vacation resort.

Every facility manager (fm) has different needs for his or her vehicle fleet, and these needs can dictate the ideal power source for those vehicles. UTVs can be powered by either gasoline or an AC or DC battery source, and both options have benefits for facilities.

A gas powered fleet is great for fms who already have a gasoline cost figured into their department's budget. It makes it easier to

manage fuel costs for a vehicle fleet if there is already a host of other gasoline powered tools (e.g., string trimmers and edgers) being used.

Other crews may benefit from an electric UTV. Resort facilities, for example, are often ideal for electric powered models because these can be operated around guests without disturbing them. Electric powered vehicles can work at night and around an area, like a pool or outside eating area, where ambience may be disturbed by the noise and odor associated with a gas powered model.

When selecting a UTV, it is also important to think about what is underneath the vehicle. Most UTVs on large campuses are traversing from job to job on slender pedestrian pathways. These paths are often not designed with vehicles in mind, making them too narrow for some UTV designs. Every time a vehicle slips off the path, it poses a hazard to the lawn underneath. Expensive sprinkler systems can bear the brunt of UTVs slipping off track, since sprinklers are usually installed just off the pedestrian walkways. Repairing a damaged lawn requires time and money, but this can be prevented with a narrower vehicle body style.

One accessory that should be considered for damage prevention is a turf tire. Turf tires

make it safe and easy to go from pavement to the lawn with minimal disturbance to the natural landscape underneath.

Cargo beds are what transform UTVs from people movers to project movers. But even a cargo bed can be further maximized to increase use and efficiency. For example, some cargo beds can be customized with a power dump feature. This feature turns the vehicle into a miniature dump truck. The vehicle can then unload materials—whether it's fresh topsoil for a landscaping job or laundry being sent for cleaning—without the need for extra workers to be pulled from other jobs to help. The dump bed reduces physical stress on the workers. Additionally, rear-slip differential available on some vehicle models improves traction on any surface without tearing the turf.

Whether the task at hand is hauling trash, unloading laundry, or moving equipment, ensuring a facility's vehicle fleet is as versatile as its crew will increase efficiency and, ultimately, protect the facility management department's bottom line. ■

Heffline is vice president of commercial business for Augusta, GA-based Cushman Products at E-Z-GO (www.cushman.com).



Grounds Check

(Continued from page 18)

One way that landscape companies provide added value is in suggesting ways to save resources and money through efficient water usage and other sustainability practices. Many landscape companies have water management specialists and professionals educated in sustainable practices like the use of drought tolerant, low water native plants; composting of green waste; and installation of water saving irrigation systems. Many companies can also assist with green building certifications, EPA's WaterSense program, or an fm's specific sustainability goals.

Richard Restuccia, director of water management solutions at ValleyCrest Companies, Inc., suggests fms ask prospective companies if their staff members are certified at the state or

national levels as water managers or landscape irrigation auditors. Several national and state associations have directories of members who are certified for water management and best practices. "People don't realize how tough it is to become certified," says Restuccia. "Those who are certified are extremely knowledgeable about water management."

Restuccia also suggests that fms ask prospective companies to look at their current water usage for landscaping and suggest ways to save money. For example, installing smart controllers for irrigation systems not only saves water by sensing the conditions each day and watering only when necessary, but these also offer savings on water bills. Another strategy is to convert irrigation spray nozzles from sprinklers to rotating nozzles, which spread heavy droplets of

water at a slower pace, making them more targeted and effective.

Fms who hire a qualified, professional landscape firm will find a partner who adds value to their property. The key is to start with the desired objectives and results for grounds management, and then focus on a company's customer service, licensing, safety, and education. One way to find and vet candidates that meet rigorous criteria is to search directories at national landscape associations, or by looking on the websites of state landscape and lawn care associations. **TFM**

Hickman is CEO of PLANET (www.landcarenetwork.org), a Herndon, VA-based national trade association for landscape professionals.

Do you have a comment? Share your thoughts by visiting the Comments section in the online version of this article at www.TodaysFacilityManager.com. Or, send a note to tfm@groupec.com.



SECURE YOUR PERIMETER

(for pennies a day)

CAST LED Perimeter Lighting System™

- ▶ Remarkable Energy Savings
- ▶ Simple to Install
- ▶ 25w/100 ft. Fence
- ▶ Complete Kits for any Length Fence



Winner of Six
Industry Awards



www.cast-lighting.com - 973.423.2303

Patents
Pended

Enter 002 at <http://www.todaysfacilitymanager.com/productinfo.php>