



FILLING A VOID

More garden centers are adding landscaping services to fill a growing market need — and reaping the profits.

By Janis Keating

An increasing number of garden centers are diversifying their offerings, adding landscaping services for those customers who, instead of “do it yourself,” prefer “do it for me.” Despite the millions of Americans personally involved in gardening, hectic lifestyles have created a market segment of consumers who enjoy having nice yards but lack the time — or inclination — to tackle the work themselves.

“More people want you to do it for them; they don’t want to repeat frustrating experiences [such as] wrong plants, wrong site, etc.,” says Grandma’s Gardens & Landscape owner Doug Rhinehart. “I’m seeing this trend across the board, all age groups. Yes, some are over 65 and have health issues; they’re not able to plant bigger things. However, even young people who are capable just don’t want to waste valuable spare time. They would rather pay someone else to do the work, and they get a better finished product.”

A Profitable Venture

Rhinehart, who’s owned the Waynesville, Ohio, business since 1979, has done landscaping work from the beginning, but “within the last couple of years, we’ve seen an increase in small landscaping jobs: tree planting, installing plants and perennials. People come to the store, look around, see plants or trees they

like, and we’ll tell them how to ‘do it yourself.’ They usually look at each other and then say, ‘How much will it cost for YOU to plant it?’” Rhinehart doesn’t see much of the touted recession. “This part of our business has really grown, it’s had a 20 percent increase over last year.”

In fact, the business began as a landscaping company, and a good percentage of its sales are still in that area. “We have a design fee, and offer a total package that includes all the ‘bells and whistles’ — water feature, hardscape, plants,” he says. “There’s a minimum charge of \$200 for a land-

scape design/layout. We’d landscape as well as plant trees for customers, for a fee, but we didn’t do anything in between those extremes.

“But then more people had smaller projects they wanted us to do,” Rhinehart recalls. “We charged a small, \$50 fee for an ‘over-the-counter design,’ a little sketch we’d do at the store, and we started installing some of those projects. Last year we had enough business from these small projects, \$500 to a couple thousand dollars, that we added a second crew, which works maybe three or four months a year.” Offering his customers more options gave Rhinehart more opportunities for sales: “Then we had customers who didn’t want a \$200 full design: ‘What would you charge us to come out and tell us what to do with

this small area?’ For that, we charge \$100 for a 45-minute visit and an on-the-spot sketch.

“We were amazed what that market segment turned into,” he explains. “Our biggest job, which we landed from an on-the-spot sketch, ended up totalling \$35,000 — and at first, they just wanted a small perennial bed!”

Rhinehart gives his employee Jerry Schelhorn, a Purdue horticulture grad, credit for some of these ideas. “Jerry does the quick sketches for us. Customers bring in photos and measurements, and Jerry, with his over 20 years’ experience, has a good knowledge of what plants work well together. Jerry said, ‘I think we should do this; let me try,’ and the business growth has been amazing.”

In addition to its menu of services, Grandma’s Gardens & Landscape uses technology to educate customers. “We all have laptops, which contain our photo albums, that we can take to jobsites, so we can show suggested plants to customers. Also, we installed a big flat screen TV in the store, adjacent to our ‘design-showing’ conference table, so I can show customers the plants for their design. When we’re not presenting, slides of beautiful plants are continually displayed on the TV. Store customers will watch and learn; the TV is an enjoyable sales tool. They’ll say, ‘I didn’t know you did that work,’ or ‘What’s that plant? I *have* to have one!’”

More of the Same

Massi’s Gardens & Landscaping in Painted Post, N.Y., has been offering landscaping services for a



Above: Grandma’s Gardens & Landscape in Waynesville, Ohio, uses its products and landscaping services to beautify the surrounding town. **Top:** A well-planned landscape adds value to any home. “We gave them a Tuscan garden,” says owner Doug Rhinehart. (Photos: Grandma’s Gardens & Landscape)

dozen years, and owner Lisa Mass hasn't seen many changes to her customer base.

"Although we started in commercial, we also do residential landscaping. We've made site visits for quite a while, but they're not for 'advice'; customers usually want us to do the work."

And in these shaky economic times, Mass's Gardens & Landscaping is actually seeing business pick up: They've even added a crew this year to handle surplus jobs. "We work with the economy the way it is at any given time. Our area had an economic downturn earlier in the century, [but] now we're keeping busy," Mass says. "I don't know why people are putting more work into their homes; perhaps it's because gasoline prices are up and they're spending more time at home. People may be putting more money into their property because they know they'll be staying there, especially if they're near retirement."

Looking ahead, Mass says she's not clear on "what next year will bring yet," but she remains optimistic: "There's always work out there — you just have to find it."

Expanding by Thinking Smaller

In Waterford, Calif., Frantz Wholesale Nursery is in the process of opening a "landscape center" in spring of 2009. Why now? "We were a successful business, selling to landscape companies, retail garden centers and box stores. In this economy, we felt it was prudent to vertically integrate, to diversify," explains Retail and Propagation Manager Nathan Heinrich.

The company, which started in 1976 on three acres of land, now covers nearly 400 acres of California's central valley. Yet, with all that space, "...we were not set up to let people roam, to allow customers to 'shop us,'" Heinrich says. "We thought — how about we cut out the middleman and sell to the public, as well as landscapers?"

Frantz Wholesale Nursery is betting big on smaller projects. "We're not looking for huge projects," he says, "Especially as water gets more expensive and home sites get smaller. We're geared more toward smaller companies and jobs, doing custom work for people who know what they want. We have the inventory to do large projects, but we're aiming for smaller landscape jobs."

Although they offer large com-

binations of plants for sale, everything from gallon perennials to 60-inch box redwood trees, their biggest seller is the staple 15-gallon tree. "These days, we're selling more perennials, grasses and native plants that don't take as much water," Heinrich adds.

"We're going to give this exciting

new venture a try...to reach a broader market," Heinrich concludes. "After talking to landscapers and people in general, we think we'll do substantial business. For one thing, there will not really be anything like us in the area — and no other grower within 100 miles sells its own plants." ■

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