

As Good as it Gets



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Goodhouse Landscaping focuses on quality, attention to detail



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Goodhouse employees use mowers with 60-inch decks and sets them at a 3 1/2-inches to create a smooth appearance on lawns and discourage weeds. Photos courtesy of Goodhouse Landscaping.

At just 22 years of age, David Goodhouse is already a veteran in the lawn care business. He started mowing neighborhood lawns at 14 using a John Deere mower as part of his father's Vermont property maintenance business.

"My dad did all sorts of work – firewood, plowing, logging – and everyone also wanted him to mow their lawns. He had about 10 lawns that I took over when I was old enough and I made that my business," Goodhouse recalls.

He officially formed Goodhouse Landscaping in 2007 to specialize in lawn services, though he continues to work frequently alongside his father providing field mowing, brush chipping, excavation and other property management jobs for rural homeowners.

Goodhouse Landscaping

Owner: David Goodhouse

Founded: 2007

Headquarters: Reading, Vt.

Markets: In and around Reading, Vt.

Services: Lawn and field mowing, as well as lawn maintenance

Employees: N/A

Website: www.goodhouselandscaping.com

But mowing is Goodhouse's primary focus, and something he approaches with attention to detail. He now has approximately 40 mowing accounts in and around Reading, Vermont. Most are residential, but he also cuts several larger, managed properties. Goodhouse has two employees and he works along side them in order to get all of the accounts serviced once each week. Like many business owners, he says it's difficult to find dependable help and employees who will pay attention to the details, which is what he looks for when hiring.

While newer accounts might initially be different, and some customers might have special requests, Goodhouse Landscaping typically mows most of its lawns at 3.5 inches to look more uniform and also to discourage weeds. "With the terrain we encounter, that height seems to look the best. It's not so high that it looks bad, but it's long enough that it helps cover up a lot of uneven areas," says Goodhouse.

Some customers might be inclined to want a shorter cut, in order to mimic a golf course look, but once they see the lawn mowed at a slightly longer height they almost always like the look, he adds. "If they had been cutting it shorter before there would likely be uneven spots showing. At this height, everything is even, so it really does look more like golf course."

Just follow the directions

Goodhouse says that when he takes on a new lawn he begins by evaluating what direction to cut it. "The number one factor in deciding is the way the land moves, and number two would be efficiency, what direction gives you the longest path. If you can go at your longest points and the ground is not too uneven in that direction, you take that because it's your easiest way," he explains.

On most accounts, he tries to change up the direction every so often to avoid turn-around marks being in the same spots all the time. Generally he tries to cross the strip patterns at a perpendicular angle. "If you just try to shift the stripes over in the same direction it won't look as good," says Goodhouse.

Goodhouse Landscaping has striping bars on mowers. "The mowers will stripe on their own, but not as good," he observes, adding that the striping bars make the biggest difference on uneven lawns. "They really help on uneven areas because there's an actual rolling bar between the wheels that helps the deck ride," he explains. While striping is important to him, the most important consideration is to follow the terrain to get the best possible cut.



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There are few flat lawns in the Vermont countryside. This makes it difficult to “follow the terrain”, and a challenge to get an even cut with a crisp striped look.

“We run 60-inch decks, so you pretty much have to follow the contours and swales. Following the terrain is probably our biggest challenge.” There’s not much flat ground in the mountains of Vermont, so most lawns present this sort of situation, he adds.

Because he is out working on all the jobs, Goodhouse can personally keep an eye on the quality of cut, which helps determine when blades need to be sharpened. “Usually we get about 20 to 25 hours of mowing time. I like to sharpen them at least once per week,” he says, noting that he has a blade grinder so he can do the work in-house. Maintaining sharp blades is important for the health and appearance of the turf, but there are benefits from a business efficiency standpoint, as well.

Be sharp, stay sharp

“It lets us mow at top speed. We can get an OK cut even if the blades aren’t really sharp; it’s just a matter of how fast we can go. We try to keep the blades as sharp as possible just so we can mow at top speed on each lawn,” he says.

But the job doesn’t end with the mowing, he emphasizes. “To make a lawn really look good, it takes a good mowing, but you then have to follow up with a good trimming, too,” Goodhouse states. His crews mow and then cover the property with trimmers, not only for the edges but to help “blend” any uneven areas on the lawn. “If you trim first, you’re going to be guessing where you’re going to be able to get with the mower. When it’s already mowed, you can see any high spots and really even everything out,” he explains.



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Because the owner David Goodhouse visits every job site, he can personally check the quality of the work on his client’s properties.

Goodhouse has been using Exmark mowers in his business for some time and says he sticks with that brand. “I like its overall reliability, and also the cut it provides compared to some others,” he explains. Currently he is using a combination of zero-turn and walk-behind mowers, depending on the application.

“We use the walk-behinds on hillier terrain; they really work the best there,” says Goodhouse. “The newer zero-turn Lazars are much better on hills, but still it’s better to have a walk-behind in those situations.” Not only are walk-behinds safer on steep slopes, but they also produce a better cut without tearing up the turf as a riding unit can in hilly situations.

Goodhouse will have his mowers all paid off by the coming growing season, so

he is planning to invest in a new Exmark zero-turn unit. "I just want to keep my line-up fresh," he explains. A new unit would allow him to relegate one older unit in his fleet to back-up duty, and would also allow him to keep productivity up even if another mower required maintenance. "Sometimes it's just little things, but it can be a real pain if you have to drive 40 minutes back to the shop," he says.

Goodhouse Landscaping's hand-held equipment, including trimmers, blowers, edgers, hedge trimmers, is all STIHL, which Goodhouse says he's found to be durable and dependable. "They really seem to last," he reports. He also has found STIHL's power sweepers to be particularly helpful on spring clean-up jobs. "They really help get the dirt off the lawns from all the sanding and plowing during the winter," he states, noting that when there is particularly heavy build-up on the turf, power broom attachments on the front of his walk-behind mowers tend to work even better.



In the winter, Goodhouse provides snow removal and salting/sanding, primarily for residential customers. He works in conjunction with his father on this aspect of the business, servicing about 100 accounts. The operation runs five trucks equipped with Fisher plows, as well as one tractor-mounted plow, which is used for steep driveways and other hard-to-access areas. "Two of the plows are V-plows and they work really nicely," says Goodhouse. He notes that the plowing business involves a lot of wear and tear on equipment, and frequent maintenance requirements. "The plows sit around for most of the year, so you need to do a lot of maintenance to get them ready and make sure they work when you need them."

In the future, Goodhouse plans to continue growing his lawn maintenance business. He has done some advertising, but says he's seen more results from word-of-mouth from existing customers. "I'm definitely looking to expand the number of mowing accounts. But I don't want to get too big. I think people really want to be able to know who is providing them the service, they like to see you actually on their property," he's learned. "You can get bigger, but you have to find a way to keep it personal."

Patrick White is a freelance writer and editor who has covered the green industry the past 15 years. He is based in Middlesex, Vt., and can be contacted at pwhite@meadowridgemedia.com.