

Building a Smart Team



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Christy Webber Landscapes, Chicago, Ill., has received numerous awards for excellence over the years, and for Christy Webber, president, her landscape business is about much more than making the grass look good. It's about sharing the outdoor life, which she loves.

"I'm definitely an operations person," says Webber, 50, who relies on her well-trained staff to handle the business aspect of the business. She enjoys the hands-on aspects of landscaping, but always has an eye to growing the company, including folding in acquisitions if they're a good fit. Her company generates about \$30 million annually and employs about 400 people.

Christy Webber Landscapes

Owner: Christy Webber, president

Founded: 1988

Headquarters: Chicago, Ill.

Markets: Chicago and surrounding suburbs

Services: Commercial and residential landscape design-build, installation and maintenance; snow removal; and retail garden center

Employees: 400

Website: www.christywebber.com

Located on Chicago's west side on a 12.5-acre eco-industrial park, Christy Webber Landscape's beautiful headquarters, named Rancho Verde, a redeveloped brownfield, has won numerous awards. The headquarters building is certified LEED Platinum, the highest classification granted by the US Green Building Council for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED). The firm is a CWL – a certified Woman-Owned Business Enterprise with the city of Chicago and Cook County and a certified Female Business Enterprise with the state of

Illinois.

With an impressive list of residential and commercial clients, the firm has been recognized for its work on major Chicago sites that include Millennium Park, McCormick Place West, Soldier Field, and O'Hare and Midway airports. Projects have included the installation and maintenance of green roofs at a number of Chicago sites.

Successfully blending the outdoors into today's living is important to Webber, and to reach that goal she has recognized that successful management strategies are a must. She has incorporated these strategies into her business and sees them as essential for the industry as a whole for both large and small landscaping businesses. She notes the importance of landscape companies reinvesting in their companies to help assure successful operation.



Finding a niche

Webber grew up spending extensive time outdoors, mowing grass and just enjoying nature in her native rural Michigan. She earned a physical education degree at University of Denver, cutting grass to earn extra money while in college, and tried teaching in her field before moving to various other jobs. She eventually found herself doing odd jobs that included cleaning houses or caring for yards, and she realized that she loved working outdoors. She was soon in the grass-cutting business, moving into lawn care and landscape maintenance followed by small landscape design-build projects.

She bid on her first major municipal project in 1997, and obtained a landscape installation contract for Millennium Park, launching Christy Webber Landscapes as a significant player in the Chicago landscape business scene. The firm received an Illinois Landscape Contractors Association 2010 Gold Award for landscape maintenance at Millennium Park and has received numerous awards in both residential and commercial landscape design and construction, and maintenance.

"Following the Millennium Park contract, we obtained a lot of DOT work on medians and boulevards," Webber said. With the growing business, staff steadily increased. "I had horticulturists, so I didn't hire more," Webber says. "I hired people with business smarts."



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

The company has installed green roofs at a number of sites, and done projects at O'Hare and Midway Airports and at Millennium Park. It has also helped beautify Soldier Field, shown here, where the NFL Chicago Bears play.

While Webber has continually emphasized the delivery of quality work in all segments of her company, she has also focused on assuring efficient

management. In 2006, Christy Webber Landscapes acquired a landscaping firm in Blue Island and began expanding services to the surrounding suburbs. Commercial snow removal became a major segment of operations for the firm.

"We had some good snow business," Webber says. A retail garden business was acquired in 2008.

Weathering the storm

While Chicagoland continued to grow and expand, the landscaping industry saw major growth as well. Christy Webber Landscapes successfully bid major jobs, and the company grew as a result of those successful municipal bids and commercial jobs. "As an incumbent in the bidding process, I knew how the city worked," Webber says. "I understood the system for bidding and knew what they were looking for." Concurrently with the economic downturn, a number of Chicago administrative changes have impacted the bidding process on increasingly fewer jobs.



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

Christy Webber, originally from Michigan, has always loved the outdoors and still enjoys the operations, hands-on side of her business.

As the economic downturn began, landscape businesses across the nation felt the impact, and the Chicagoland landscaping industry took a major hit. With the economic decline, municipal work declined. "We see different decisions, different markets and less municipal work," Webber says. "Too many companies go low without consideration to profit margin and overhead. We didn't go low just to keep busy."

She adds, "We made some mistakes, but we hired great entrepreneurs and a great CFO, Roger Post." Providing quality landscape service has been a consistent expectation and having good staff in operations has been an essential part of that quality work delivery. For Webber, the challenge has been in successfully managing the business aspect in landscaping for which she strongly credits having the right staff in place. Having that right staff at all levels of the operation is an essential element to her success.

She notes the importance of allowing people to grow with the business and replacing staff that did not grow in the ways needed to assure successful business management. The business mix has changed with an increased in contracts with homeowners associations, and with that change, a continued focus on profit margins in bidding contracts with homeowners associations has been necessary.

Both Webber and Post agree that the biggest challenges and the greatest opportunities for continued growth lie with continually improving business management practices so that the company can compete successfully against national maintenance companies.

"Our short-term issue focuses on having the right resources. The longer-term issues are on developing the right layers of management. We need to continue developing our great staff so I can continue with acquisitions," says Park.

Webber says that among the lessons she learned the hard way was not buying proper equipment soon enough. "We often didn't buy the proper equipment, and it cost us more to do many jobs such as specific mowing jobs," she says.

Obamacare looms

Looking to the near future, Webber is concerned about The Affordable Health Care for American Act's impact to the industry and the ability of landscapers to meet the health care provision requirements while still operating legally. Providing health care for all employees will be a major outlay for landscapers throughout the industry.

"Screening potential employees to be sure they are legal to work is very difficult for landscapers who operate legally," she says. "For those who operate legally, I do not see how it is going to work. Landscapers will have to pass along the cost."

In an industry where the rising cost of doing business is already a major concern, assuring that employees are legal and meeting the health care requirements loom as a major future concern.

And, of course, there's always the issue of unrealistically low bidding on projects, which has grown after the 2009 Recession and its aftermath. Webber says her company pays close attention to profit margins in bidding, purchasing proper equipment and making sound business decisions builds business success, not beating down everybody else's price.