

Building on Solid Ground



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

The LaurelRock Company continues to grow with ongoing quality control



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The LaurelRock Company matches its professional residential services with a professional image.

Photos courtesy of The LaurelRock Company.

Throughout the years The LaurelRock Company in Wilton, Conn., has established a sound reputation through its national award-winning work for high-end residential clients. But like most companies in the industry, the company took a hit from the recession and had to recalculate its position in the market to ensure survival.

“We had a fantastic year in 2008,” says Burton DeMarche, president. “In 2009, we had the most challenging year economically that we ever had. By 2011, we were back up to the same revenue numbers as we were in 2008 before the recession, but the profit wasn’t there.”

The company’s goal since 2011 has been to continue the growth pattern in revenue and sales, but “be more aggressive on the profit front,” DeMarche says. “We’ve been succeeding in that, which is great. We have a great market here, so we’re focusing on continuing to grow our landscape management side of the business. We’ve been holding steady with our design/build and installation side of the business.”

The LaurelRock Company

President/Owner: Burt DeMarche

Founded: 1975

Headquarters: Wilton, Conn.

Markets: Fairfield, Litchfield and Westchester counties

Services: Landscape maintenance and design/build

Employees: 48

Website: <http://www.laurelrock.com>

High-end focus

The LaurelRock Company offers a broad range of maintenance and design/build services in a core market area of Fairfield, Litchfield and Westchester counties. The company also has done design/build work in second home markets such as Stratton Mountain, Vt., the Hamptons and the Hudson Valley, and has also installed rooftop gardens in New York City.

The LaurelRock Company is an outgrowth of a landscape architecture company DeMarche's father Dickson started with a partner in 1975 in Westport, Conn. DeMarche was a marketing major at the University of Connecticut and then switched to horticulture and business.

When he got out of school in 1990, he went to work for his father's landscape architectural business in construction management, but the company could not afford to keep him during what was then a bad economy, so DeMarche found employment at a local nursery as an assistant manager for two years.

"I learned I was more interested in starting something up on my own," he says. At that point, his father had split off from his partner and had his own company, so DeMarche suggested they put together a business plan. In 1993, they launched The LaurelRock Company. DeMarche's father Dickson serves as CEO.

Train and reward

One of the biggest lessons DeMarche has learned over the years is he should have started a training program and reward program for employees earlier in the company's growth stages.

"We got that up and running in this past year," he notes, adding that his goal is to go beyond the weekly tailgate talks to posting skill sets on the office wall for all to see.

"We would like to have each crew leader and crew members' names on the skills list and have the skills checked off as people pass that skill. You can see that one person has 20 out of 30 skills checked off and another person has five. It provides an internal drive to those guys who only have a few to get more of those skills checked off," he says.

By doing so, it will help everyone in the company to pursue continuing education and improvement.

“The only impediment to them doing that is themselves,” DeMarche notes.

DeMarche gives back to the industry through his involvement in PLANET’s Safety and Risk Management, Budget and Finance, and Design/Build Specialty Group committees, as well as PLANET’s Trailblazer mentor group.



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Burton DeMarche, president of The LaurelRock Company.

Keeping it lean

The primary strategy that DeMarche is employing to be more aggressive in pursuing profits is in following lean management principles.

“We’ve never been really heavy into extra trucks, extra equipment,” he says. “We’re very careful about how much debt we carry; we always keep that to a minimum. We always pay off our credit line on an annual basis.”

The company has modified its cash flow practices and how clients are billed. The billing has changed from a 10-month cycle of equal payments from March to December in conjunction with the months maintenance is conducted to a 12-month cycle.

“That’s evened out our cash flow for the year, which helps a lot,” DeMarche points out.

The personal touch

The company solely focuses on the residential market.

“We’re very fortunate in Fairfield County, because it’s one of the handful of locations in the United States that’s very affluent and people are looking for a very high level of service, and they’re willing to pay for that,” says DeMarche.

“We only sell contracts to a client for landscape management if they’ll take the whole package, which means plant care, turf care and all of the fertilizations that go along with those,” he says. “All of the pruning, the mowing and the spring and fall clean-ups are just a small portion of the contract.”

Treating each client as if The LaurelRock Company is their personal gardener has been a focus of quality control and customer retention.

The company uses both organic and synthetic approaches, with three turf health care programs.

“The most popular one – and the one we’re trying to get 100 percent of the

clients on – is called a ‘sustainable program’,” says DeMarche. “It’s organically-based, but it does allow for spot-treating weeds with an herbicide throughout the season.”

The initial application, which includes a preemergent in the spring, is not organic. All fertilizations after that are organic.

“When we’re out there, we’re spot-treating with a non-organic herbicide, but we’re not doing blanket sprays with it,” DeMarche says. “We also include aerating and overseeding as part of that process in September. It’s a more organic approach because the majority of the materials we use are organic, but it also allows us to meet the client’s expectations of having a weed-free lawn.”

The company also offers a straight synthetic program. “We try to discourage that and encourage people to go to the sustainable,” says DeMarche, adding that it does cost 50 percent more to go with the sustainable program.

There are also those clients who want only a 100 percent organic approach. “We use OMRI-certified material,” says DeMarche. “You do have clover in those lawns and other challenges.”



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The LaurelRock Company’s focus on the residential market allows it to provide each property with special tailored services.

Relationship-based service

To ensure quality control, The LaurelRock Company has three property managers, each of whom is responsible for 40 landscape management accounts.

“That allows for that property manager to create a relationship with each of their clients,” says DeMarche.

The manager is responsible for quality in all areas of maintenance on the property. Supporting them is a field supervisor responsible for overseeing the four weekly maintenance crews on a daily basis.

“That ensures we’re getting straight lines when we’re cutting, we’re doing a great job with the weed whipping, we’re making sure we’re weeding the beds thoroughly each week,” says DeMarche. “All of the day-to-day maintenance operations that really make or break how our client feels about the company is all very closely monitored by the field supervisor.”

DeMarche adds, “By putting the right people in place with the right levels of knowledge and the ability to lead the crews in our structure, I think that’s what makes a difference in quality control.”

Equipment

Mowers:

- 9 Exmark mowers: Turf Tracers, Lazars, Vantage
- 1 Gravely zero-turn mower

Compact Equipment:

- 1 John Deere 110 backhoe/loader
- 1 CAT 277B track skid steer
- 1 Brush Bandit chipper
- 1 Kioti FE loader with brush hog
- 1 Harley rake

Hand-helds:

- 2 Billy Goat leaf vacuums
- 1 Finn mulch blower
- 12 RedMax BP blowers
- 5 Little Wonder push blowers
- 9 Shindaiwa line trimmers

Developing leaders

The LaurelRock Company has 48 employees, of which 15 work year-round. Leadership skills and the ability to move forward based on systems the company has in place are skills DeMarche values.

“The goal of the company is to create systems and checks and balances that empowers each employee to do their job without having to constantly check back in with someone else,” he notes.

“It’s a challenge sometimes to train anyone to become really strong leaders who can go from a crew member to a crew leader to a field supervisor,” he notes.

That’s important as DeMarche seeks to continue to grow the maintenance side of the company.

Ethical principles

The LaurelRock Company’s core principles spell out the word “ethical”: Embrace teamwork; Think creatively; Honor the client; Invest in the environment; Continuously improve; Act with integrity; and Listen, learn and lead.

Those principles are discussed at staff meetings. “We ask for examples, such as ‘What is an example of great teamwork?’” DeMarche says. “The more we talk about it on a daily basis, it gets everyone thinking about it and it makes a difference in the use of those principles.

"I think that's another one of our success factors in our mission is making a positive difference in the lives of our employees, our clients and in our communities. By thinking a little bit broader beyond 'I'm coming to work to make a dollar today', what we really try to instill in everybody is 'What are you trying to do today to make a positive difference in the lives of those people involved in your day?' If you think that way, it makes coming to work a different experience than if you're just coming in to make a buck."

The LaurelRock Company boasts an extensive list of awards. The latest in 2013 comes from PLANET and includes three residential maintenance awards: the National Landscape Awards of Excellence Grand Award; the National Landscape Awards of Excellence Judge's Award; and the National Landscape Awards of Excellence Audience Choice Award.



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The LaurelRock Company sees more opportunity in estate gardening.

Continuing education

During the few idle winter months, The LaurelRock Company provides snow services to a dozen high-end clients, although that tends to not be a large profit center for the company, DeMarche says.

The winter is spent doing inventory and repairs on the equipment, trucks and tools.

"We get things back up to the level where we want them to be at the beginning of the year and to maintain throughout the next year," DeMarche says. "We also reorganize the garage and try to find some efficiencies in our setting that area up. That makes a difference on a daily basis on how quickly we get out of the yard."

The company also will engage in training for new managers and attend trade shows.

DeMarche also selects a book that all employees will read as a team. "We'll get the same book for everybody, read through the chapters over a period of five weeks and get together once a week to discuss it," says DeMarche. "One time we did a book called 'The Nordstrom Way,' which is about how Nordstrom's service is so superior to others and why."

Responding to trends

There are two areas in which The LaurelRock Company will be expanding.

One is estate gardening. "It's having a gardener on the property more frequently than fine gardening crews are on the property," DeMarche says. "We have that on one account and we just brought in another account."

The estate gardener will tend to larger vegetable gardens and cutting

gardens. "What that individual does for us is she will go on a property a half a day twice a week," says DeMarche. "She will work with the client on what vegetables and herbs they want in the garden and she starts the seeds up, plants everything, thins it all out and does all of the staking, so she totally maintains the vegetable gardens and the cutting gardens."

Creating green roofs is another area of expansion. The company has already done installations at a corporate office building and a restaurant in Norwalk, as well as a commercial building in Westport.

The green roofs are maintained on a weekly basis throughout the year.

Green roofs are also being installed on outdoor structures such as pool houses at residential properties. DeMarche says the company will be promoting green roofs more because of the environmental benefits they offer property owners.



The company's five-year plan is "to have all of our systems completely in place so we're functioning as a well-oiled machine and something that will allow us to continue to grow at a moderate pace," says DeMarche.

He's seeking annual growth of 15 to 20 percent, with a focus on the bottom line.

"Every point we gain on net profit allows us to continue to upgrade our equipment, facilities and programs and reinvest in the company in different ways to allow us to grow and to make life easier on a day-to-day basis for every person in the company," he says.

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