

Dare to be Different



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Terracare stands out with new approaches to landscape management



Corporate Courtyard, in a Class A office park, is a diverse environment achieved through the implementation of a complex plant palette. The plant mix used not only allows for visual interest, but also helps define the outdoor eating and congregating area, rooms created from black-eyed Susans, coneflowers and ornamental grasses, while the canopy of the locusts provides protection from the Colorado sun. What has been created is a respite for the employees.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERRACARE.

Since its inception in 1985, Terracare Associates in Littleton, Colo., has reinvented itself over and over through name changes and ownership by various equity investors. Each time, the company has emerged with new approaches in becoming a standout in the landscape management industry, offering services that are different from an average landscape maintenance contractor.

Headed by Dean Murphy, company president, Terracare endeavors to differentiate itself from others by hiring certified and highly educated employees who care for millions of square feet of client properties. Additionally, company managers seize upon emerging trends with an eye to how Terracare can meet the affiliated needs of those trends.

What has made his company successful to date is offering services in niche markets that other companies don't exploit, Murphy says. "Or, if they do, it's all they do," he says. "The array of what we offer and the level of professionalism we provide is certainly different." Terracare provides turf maintenance, irrigation management, tree maintenance, shrub and bed maintenance, seasonal color programs and snow removal to the commercial sector. Those services are provided in the greater Denver, Colo., area and in California's East Bay and greater Sacramento areas. Clients include homeowners' associations, colleges and universities, and large commercial

entities, such as the 2,200-acre Coors campus in Golden, Colo.

While Murphy has worked the residential side of the market, "people operate differently and the structure has to be different," he points out. "Your connectivity to the customer is different. I've done both in my career, and residential is much more high-touch. The client typically has little knowledge about what you're doing, so there's a large educational component. It's a lot more intensive time-wise, whereas with commercial clients, most of the time they understand what they want. We do talk to almost every client every week, but it's a different level and the expectation is different."

Another side of Terracare's business is public infrastructure management, such as right-of-way mowing, all-inclusive roadway and roadside management packages, as well as snow removal on a citywide scale. Typical clients are municipalities, special districts, cities and counties.

"It's a different business model for this industry," Murphy points out. "We're an outsource for a number of public agencies. For example, we have a contract with a city in Colorado where there are more than 100,000 people in the city and we are the public works department for them. So, whether it be street maintenance, concrete maintenance, sign installation and maintenance or snow removal, we do that for the entire city." In many other instances, Terracare assists public works agencies in the timely completion of critical infrastructure projects.

Murphy notes there is an increasing demand for outsourced public works services. "The national trend is to at least look at whether it makes sense to outsource," he says, pointing out that municipalities have taken blows to their budgets in the past several years, with some going as far as to file for bankruptcy. "It's now become a viable question, whereas in the past, the answer was always 'no, they're much more efficient in-house,'" Murphy says. "County commissioners and city managers are questioning the status quo and asking their departments if they really are efficient. There are opportunities, and we've been able to garner a number of those."



Terracare handles the maintenance at Murphy Creek, a multifamily residential community, complete with clubhouse, school and common areas.

Water management is another service offered. For the last 15 years, the company has executed services in aquatics management for new and established lakes that includes excavation, liner installation, mechanical systems installation, planting, landscaping, hardscaping and stocking of fish. Lake maintenance services encompass water quality maintenance, vegetation control, algae control, debris removal, mechanical systems maintenance, aquatic harvesting and chemical applications.

"In California, we do a fair amount of work keeping lakes balanced, and that's partially a chemical issue," says Murphy. Providing lake maintenance is an unusual service for a landscape maintenance operation, Murphy points out. "You have to have a fair level of education with your staff to make it work or you can get yourself in a mess," he says. "One of our employees has a

doctoral degree in this area. A lot of landscape companies don't have the expertise we have."

Terracare employs 200 to 425 people, depending on the time of year. The Colorado operation is more seasonal, and employee numbers fluctuate in response to those needs. In seeking the ideal employee, Murphy looks for someone who can handle the technical aspects of the job. "We like technical certifications – that indicates that people are dedicated to the industry," he says. "We're looking for other things that are a little harder to spot. Do they have a heart for this industry? Do they have a heart for this business? Do they have a desire to excel in whatever they do? Are they willing to follow a process we've put in place and we've been successful with? We certainly like folks who are educated in the industry, too – that they have a formal degree that is in some way related to our business."



The flower bed scheme for the Mechanics Bank locations throughout California provide instant recognition, color and sense of whimsy within the urban landscape. Proper maintenance by Terracare has ensured that the entire landscape thrives year-round.

While there is a move afoot in landscaping toward more chemical-free approaches, Murphy's company uses chemicals, but is working towards using them in a more environmentally sensitive way, he says. "We try to minimize the number of 'spray everything' applications, even if it's fertilizer," he says. "We'll do the fertilizing with a very high-quality, slow-release fertilizer and maybe fertilize one time less and spend more money on the product. In terms of weed control, we would rather treat things as needed than to do blanket sprays all year. We've really gotten away from that. Chemically, we're working hard to go in that direction."

Murphy sees water conservation as one of the most critical issues facing landscape maintenance operations. Terracare endeavors to create more water efficiencies on client properties through the use of technologies like ET controllers. Employees are certified in nearly every type of control system on the market. "We've spent a lot of time on that, and it's been very effective," Murphy says. Denver has a program to motivate large commercial users to save water, offering financial incentives for those who maintain water consumption levels below specified volumes. "We have some folks who get a five-figure check back every year," Murphy says. "They're saving water, and they're saving money."

Murphy says his company's greatest challenge is that competition is still tough. "We're seeing prices are still on their way down," he notes. "They have tended not to recover yet. That's critical. Part of that is good – it tightens the industry up and tightens us up in terms of production. Part of that is really below market value, and that's a little bit frustrating."

Terracare is utilizing technology and business practices to get an edge over the competition. For example, the irrigation system on each client's property is mapped with a Google Earth profile. "We're also being careful about the equipment we choose," says Murphy. "it's not about which equipment is

efficient but most efficient. We ask, 'For this particular job, what would be the most efficient array of equipment to do the job?' That's a big deal."

Murphy says his company has become better at routing than ever before. "Our density is very critical," he says. "Part of our challenge has been to tighten up our route. We've got to know exactly where we're going and why. We've got to give the client exactly what they've asked for."

"You can cut yourself on the professionalism side, and then you're in the price game like everyone else. We decided not to do that. We've really worked hard to keep our level of professionalism very high."

Murphy has aggressive goals for the future. "We want to grow the business substantially," he says. "We'd like to potentially expand into other markets, and we certainly want to grow where we are. We certainly want to be best in class in what matters to our customer. Our definition is not always the same as our customers' definition. We've worked continually to align our expectation of what is the best with what our customer perceives is the best."

Additionally, the company has taken an internal approach to sustainability. "Our goal is to not only become more sustainable in the way we do things, but help other people do that," he says. "We spend a lot of time working through that, and we think that's the future – to look at the way you build and water your landscape to be more efficient and more sustainable."

Indeed, Terracare has become a standout in the landscape industry. The company was recently honored by the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado with an Award of Excellence for its work at the Fairmount Cemetery. In its submission for award consideration, the company described the property as "a majestic property that spans 200 acres located with the urban fabric of Denver. Its rolling grounds and rich history make it an ideal project that we are proud to be associated with. This intensely utilized and visited space creates several challenges for our team, as well as a time-consuming maintenance schedule that must always be sensitive to the site itself, as well as the visitor."

The cemetery was maintained in-house for many years, Murphy says. "Cemeteries are not immune to downturns, and Fairmount thought it could be more efficient to outsource maintenance," he says. "It's a challenging job. There's about 8 million square feet of turf there. The challenges, as you can imagine, are surrounding the configuration because you have headstones every X number of feet, and the amount of trimming you have to do on the job is significant. Fairmont's an old cemetery. It was always just a tired landscape, so to work within the confines of something that's been there a long time has always been a challenge. Now, the color of the landscape looks more vibrant."

Murphy says he sees a bright future for the landscape maintenance industry. "When you have millions of dollars tied up in property, it matters that you maintain it," he says. "There's always going to be a need for what we do. The way we've always done it is not going to be the future. We think part of our role is to lead that change. We're not going out and banging that drum. We're

quietly doing that on a daily basis, client by client.”

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