

Diversify and Thrive

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One company gets ahead by offering many services



A Four Seasons Landscape management team member works at a residential living facility in Hartford, Conn.

Photos by Kelly Kearney, Four Seasons Landscape.

Bob St. Jacques believes that diversification is what has kept his company thriving for three decades. St. Jacques is president of Four Seasons Landscaping in Windsor, Conn., which is a full-service, turn-key landscaping company specializing in landscape construction, development, installation, hydroseeding, tree transplanting, landscape maintenance, snow and ice removal, sports field maintenance and erosion control.

Maintenance may include weekly mowing, lawn fertilization, irrigation maintenance, pruning and parking lot maintenance, such as line striping and asphalt patching.



A landscape management team tackles a property in Hartford, Conn.

Clients include commercial properties, condominium projects, homeowners associations and new developments. The company's projects span from green rooftop work to sports field renovations, private and public school field projects, wetlands remediation, specialty work and community givebacks. "We're finding that some of our clients who paid us to plant flowers in the past are now having us change the catch basin top or do some infrastructure work on the parking lot," notes St. Jacques. "We take a property and offer everything relating to the exterior of the building: asphalt, lawn and landscape and snow removal."

St. Jacques says that for years he has attended business seminars where the mantra was to do one thing and do it the best. "If we had done just that, we'd be having a real problem in this economy right now," he notes. "The key is to be diverse and offer your clients as many services as possible."

There was a time when his company's strength was in focusing on clients such as big box stores. "Luckily, we didn't get stuck on that," he says. "We did other things, too, because right now there are hardly any of those projects going on. Right now the economy is being set up to work for multiple types of people, and doing multiple things is what's saving us right now."

While most of the work that Four Seasons Landscaping does is conducted by its own employees, the company has partnered with other companies, such as chemical applicators and paving companies, to join forces and resources. "We are considered more partners rather than subcontractors," St. Jacques says.

Being diversified means Four Seasons Landscaping can offer its services to assist other landscapers who may not be able to provide their own clients a certain service. "We may not get the whole job in a commercial installation, but we might work for another landscaper and get a piece of the pie," says St. Jacques. "They might hire us to come in and hydroseed a project. Our goal is to work for as many people as possible, and if we can't get the entire project, at least get a piece of something out of it."

Four Seasons Landscaping's maintenance contract work is seasonal, from April through November. "There are various levels to our contracts, but most of them include everything from a spring cleanup to chemical work to weekly mowing, pruning and all of the way to the final fall cleanup," says St. Jacques. "Most of our work is on a year-to-year basis. We are finding a trend

of multiyear contracts for two or three years, but in our market it's been a standard one season at a time.

"We have some properties that are 12-month contracts where it includes snow removal and the landscape management, but we usually have a separate contract for snow removal and a separate contract for maintenance, and it can vary from there."

Some clients prefer to handle some aspects of landscaping themselves, such as chemical applications or irrigation maintenance.

Part of the company's success is attributable to tackling unusual jobs. For example, Four Seasons Landscaping installed trees in an area accessible only by railroad tracks. It was a reforestation project for the state of Connecticut to compensate for a wetland forest area the state was turning into a parking lot. Four Seasons Landscaping employees had to go down 1.5 miles of railroad tracks, a spur line, to access a 2-acre field to plant hundreds of trees. It was the only entry point into the area.

In another case, the company was doing a green roof for the Aetna building, hauling thousands of bags of soil to the rooftop via elevator. "We originally got involved because they were hoping to be able to use our blower to blow the soil in," says St. Jacques. "We did a lot of work for the general contractor and evaluated it because of layout and restrictions. It was determined we couldn't blow the soil in, so we got a special soil mix, had it bagged and brought it up on the freight elevator to the roof."

Four Seasons Landscaping averages 20 employees year-round, but hires up to 75 people as needed for a major snow removal job. Employees are cross-trained to handle all aspects of the company's services.

St. Jacques' favorite piece of equipment is the Ventrac mower. The compact, articulated tractor with multiple attachments is a key factor in helping the company cross over from construction to maintenance to snow removal. Jobs have gotten smaller, so the equipment has been an asset in all respects, St. Jacques says.

"It's the most versatile piece of equipment we have," he says. "There are no fancy computers. They're so simple. We have a lot of skid steers, tractors, loaders and backhoes, but we're finding the best thing for day-to-day operations is the Ventracs."



A landscape management team member operates a Ventrac mower in Hartford, Conn.

Most maintenance is done in-house to minimize downtime. He says, "We try to be as self-sufficient as possible. We have a fully equipped shop with spare parts and a mechanic. We're also set up with a road service truck so we can service and repair equipment on-site." Additionally, the company has partnered with other service companies to provide repairs and maintenance on more sophisticated and larger equipment. "That's key on how we buy equipment," notes St. Jacques. "We partner with a lot of local dealers, and we only buy their brand so we get that service."

There is a downside to being so diversified. St. Jacques points out, "We have so many different types of equipment and supplies, sometimes it's overwhelming with all of the equipment we have to have."

He's noticing several trends in the industry: one is toward more pervious surfaces, driven by the reduction in the type of stormwater management property owners want to have.

"We see more porous pavement and grass-paved parking lots," St. Jacques says. "We've done a fair amount of work with that. It reduces the water retention system they have to put in. I don't see as much of a trend toward green roofs as I thought there would be; most of the ones we're seeing are driven by public relations."

The company has always done a lot of hydroseeding for erosion control, primarily in stabilization for wetlands mitigation and permanent seeding work.

To give back to the community that has supported the business for 30 years, Four Seasons Landscaping maintains the gateway entry for the town of Windsor, has participated in Plant-It days of service and does maintenance for the local chamber of commerce building, all free of charge. "It's a benefit to be involved locally," says St. Jacques.

He is also involved in a number of trade associations and has served in positions for those groups. He says, "I'm a firm believer of giving back to the industry because you get 100 times back what you give in."

Going forward, St. Jacques says it's the equipment that will help his business to thrive. "We've always been very equipment-savvy, so we've always had to be on the cutting-edge with new equipment," he says, referencing such pieces of equipment as the bark blower and Reinco hydroseeding machine. "We're constantly looking at what's required for each job. We're finding as our job sites have changed and become smaller, we're now looking to right-sizing our equipment to our jobs."

Four Seasons Landscaping is looking for more efficiency with crew sizes, and more efficient routing is also an important issue, St. Jacques says. "We're more aware of where our dollars are going," he adds.

The company is doing more marketing through a quarterly newsletter, attending industry trade shows and has hired someone to get the company's name out to different markets.

Pondering the industry, St. Jacques says he sometimes fears it's becoming more commoditized. "For many years it was regionalized. If you were from one area, that's where you worked. They hired you because you were local, and they felt they were getting better pricing because you were from that area. With the increased number of national landscape companies, it doesn't matter where you're from; what matters is can you do it, and what is the price?"

St. Jacques is concerned midsized companies such as his will be squeezed out by large, national companies with branch operations and "Mom and Pop" operations operating from their home with a few trucks. However, he is heartened by efforts of the local chamber of commerce to promote support of local businesses. "There's been a lot of research done about what a local company gives back to the local community compared to a national company," he says. "I am seeing a lot of 'Mom and Pop' operations are struggling because they didn't have the resources or client base to be diverse in this economy. I'm beginning to rethink my theory that maybe a midsized company will prosper in the next few years to able to offer that local service. We're able to control our costs a little bit better and offer multiple services to multiple clients."

In the end, says St. Jacques, there is room for everyone.

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