

Do-It-Yourselfers, Pain or Profit?



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Some contractors now welcome working hand-in-hand with homeowners

Linda Beattie says that do-it-yourselfers that contemplate or, in some cases, begin ambitious turf and landscaping projects, such as installing pavers or building a decorative pond, eventually turn to a professional to help with the job or fix what's been screwed up. Even so, she feels there's a growing trend for professionals to help do-it-yourselfers with landscape projects. That suits some contractors just fine.



A client that wants to DIY can help perform leaf removal in the fall prior to the landscaper mowing their property.

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Professionals and homeowners team up

Beattie feels the trend is accelerating thanks to the economy. Some homeowners are taking the time or may have extra time due to a job loss, and feel (rightly or mistakenly) they can do the work, especially if they have professional guidance.

Among the typical services are:

- Landscape design. (Actually, clients' input is always needed here. The biggest challenge for professional and homeowner alike is defining the extent of nonprofessional input.)
- A list of plants that will succeed in a given area, and plant brokering for hard-to-find plants.
- Recommendations on how and where to plant.
- Suggestions on materials and where to purchase them.
- Labor for some of the jobs, though not all of them.

"You build confidence as you start to mow customers' properties. Then they think of something else they would like done and they keep coming back," says Beattie, public relations specialist for Schiller Grounds Care, Inc. "Any work on a property gets ideas flowing."

Beattie says the mission of her company, Schiller-Pfeiffer, Inc., is to make it easier for grounds care professionals, serious do-it-yourself homeowners and, increasingly, the partnership between the two. Schiller-Pfeiffer is the manufacturer of Classen, Little Wonder and Mantis brand gardening, landscaping and turf care equipment, and Commercial Grounds Care, Inc. Mantis, its most consumer-suited equipment, is sold as a homeowner brand, but it's also popular with commercial landscapers. The company's instructions for suggested projects like digging ponds, raised beds or cutting sod with a Mantis tiller-cultivator also get ideas flowing. Little Wonder equipment is also popular for small-scale projects.

"Manufacturers do supply how-to information," Beattie says. "Once you download those sheets, they're cool to hand out to customers."

Undoubtably the most common DIY landscape maintenance activity by homeowners is mowing. The fact is that many homeowners (including a larger number of women) love to mow grass, and manufacturers have responded with sleek, fast, new high-end consumer zero-turn mowers. The longtime workhorse of residential mowing, the garden tractor, while still popular because of its versatility is being replaced by zero-turns on many so-called "estate properties."

Also, increasing sales at big box stores of materials such as wall blocks and pavers make it clear that many homeowners feel confident installing hardscapes, albeit generally smaller projects, such as small decorative walls.

Seeking a helping hand

Michael Reustle of M.R. Landscape, a 30-year full-service business in Sellersville, Pa., that retains 20 to 30 customers at a time within a 20-mile radius, has branched out to do-it-yourself services to expand business. Reustle used to have hired help, but decided he was better off on his own – and relying on willing homeowners to help. Now, he'd even like to beef up his do-it-yourself jobs, which make up 25 percent of his work, to over 50 percent.

"The idea is to connect with those who want to participate, to help install or help design," he says. "It's always going to be a small percentage of the business, but it's an area in which I've seen growth."



A sod cutter is the first tool in creating a new path, landscape area, garden or even patio, and is instrumental in cutting crisp, clean tight tree rings. These are all tasks the customer can do themselves before the landscaper comes in to plant materials, lay pavers or whatnot.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RYAN.

When he decided to go it alone, Reustle bought more equipment to make it easier, and acknowledges that homeowner help also helps boost his bottom line, since he's saving on payroll expenses. "All a lot of jobs require is cheap labor, and it has to be cheap to compete," he says.

M.R. Landscape designs and installs landscapes including plants and hardscapes, such as retaining walls and walkways. The company also has a 4-acre nursery. Reustle began offering do-it-yourself services 20 years ago. "Most [clients] like to see what's going on," he says, "and I have a good time with them."

Reustle offers a minimum 20 percent discount, based on the size of the job, for clients who offer to lend a hand. It's not a hidden service either. He advertises it and offers it on estimates.

"I make them aware of it," Reustle says. "Sometimes they hire me because of that fact. It's really more of a marketing thing. I don't always benefit from the homeowner's help, but at least I get some help."

Not all clients are capable of doing the work, but, in his mid-50s, Reustle says he's slowing down and could use reliable help that's already on the job site because the client lives there. Homeowners often jump at the opportunity, because they are interested in the work and also looking to save some money with the discount.

The primary challenge is getting homeowners to realize how difficult turf and landscape work really is, but Reustle figures if a homeowner's hands are already leaning on a shovel – typically watching him work – he might as well get him to use the tool on his behalf.

Services for the do-it-yourselfer

For over 30 years, Ettingers Landscaping & Garden Center in Montoursville, Pa., has been designing and installing landscapes throughout north-central Pennsylvania. According to the company website, its design department includes do-it-yourself designer Kim Welshans. All of Ettingers' designers have degrees from Penn State University or the Pennsylvania College of Technology.

Turf Construction Company, Inc. in Vineland, N.J., also has service programs for the do-it-yourselfer. The company can provide plans for use by any reputable landscape contractor. Basic landscape or irrigation plans start as low as \$400, according to its website. All the company's landscape design experts need is a property diagram with the dimensions and the locations of buildings, such as houses and storage sheds. The designers will prepare a professional and accurate price estimate based upon the information provided.

Despite caveats, long-term rewards

Beattie warns, "Be careful of offering 'you-maintain-it' services, because you might find that the customer no longer needs you. But, after an installation, do-it-yourself can be as simple as 'watering the grass as

directed,'" she says.

Mantis project help has been online for over a decade, and homeowners who want to share their accomplishments can mail in plans and email photos. The site is also a refresher for professionals.

"The goal for existing [commercial] customers is that it helps produce additional customers for them," Beattie says. "The more education a customer has about new and cool projects that are possible with landscaping equipment, the better. If you educate a customer, that might give one more reason to keep coming back to you – for more education."

Often, Schiller-Pfeiffer will receive correspondence about a project, and then demonstrate it in its own open and wooded test areas in Southampton to see if it works and if all steps and facts are accurate before it posts the project.

Learning and sharing, Beattie says, is often the basis for bigger projects for smaller landscape companies. After the initial service, a client asks about planting a bed, and then there's maintenance of the bed and mulching the bed. Then there are add-ons, which is all a good thing, though it takes time away from the bread and butter: mowing.

Maybe "do-it-yourself" is just getting a customer to help with maintenance to help free up a crew to take on additional mowing or landscaping jobs. "You say, 'You maintain it, and here's how you do it,'" Beattie says.

With the downturn in the economy, people want to enjoy their yards, and they seem to be a lot more involved in their yards and in projects, or at least portions of projects.

"I hope landscapers continue to talk to customers about do-it-yourself, that it becomes part of more of their protocol," Beattie says. "If in the end, they give the customer too much to do, then the work will come back, though to start it might be best to limit the amount of do-it-yourself work and achieve a harmony, but not so little that it takes [a professional] out of the picture. Like everything, it's better as a partnership. That's what's sustainable."

The author has been published in national and regional magazines as well as daily and weekly alternative city newspapers. A gentleman farmer in Quakertown, Pa., he writes about people, social trends, historic preservation and 18th century America, agrarian culture, land use and sports and recreation topics.