

For a Greater Cause



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Georgia landscaping company incorporates spiritual values into business practices

With a degree in horticulture from the University of Connecticut, Steve Murray devoted his career to working with the land. As president of New Leaf Landscape Services in Gainesville, Ga., he underscores his occupational devotion with a spiritual devotion.



A crew from New Leaf Landscape Services moves a very old Dissectum Maple at the Chattahoochee Country Club in Gainesville, Ga.

The company's branding is rooted in being a Christian-owned business, and Murray says operating a "faith-based" organization sets his company apart from others in that its primary value is integrity. He attributes his firm's success to its core values.

New Leaf Landscape Services

Mission: "We are a team committed to honoring God by providing premium landscape service."

President and CEO: Steve Murray

Headquarters: Gainesville, Ga.

Market: Northeast Georgia and adjacent regions

Services: Landscape design and maintenance

Employees: 40 in peak season

Website: www.newleafls.com

"Whether we make money on the job or not, we're going to do the right thing," he says. "If we have to lose money to do the right thing, we're going to do the right thing. That permeates the whole company."

While New Leaf Landscape Services as a company is 22 years old, Murray bought it a decade ago while it was under another name and operated as a small, three-crew maintenance company.

Taking business to a different level

Murray changed the name to New Leaf Landscape Services and expanded its offerings to include full-service landscape design and maintenance.

"I knew the horticulture side, the landscape side of the business," he says. "But the ability to see how large companies ran their operations – their reporting systems and their financial systems – I would not have been as successful today without what I learned from both of those companies. It was a valuable lesson."

New Leaf Landscape Services offers umbrella services to its commercial and residential clients, including in-house design and installation, maintenance, irrigation, hardscape, outdoor lighting and water features.

Its service area covers northeast Georgia, as well as Gwinnett and Forsyth counties, the Braselton area and the fringes of Atlanta. Murray deliberately set up his office close to the interstate to quickly access these service areas.

Residential maintenance services include mowing; edging; bed line trenching; disease control; fertilization; general cleanup; plant bed weed control; hand pruning; tree pruning; leaf removal; seasonal color design, installation and maintenance; warm-season turf aeration for bermuda and zoysia; cool-season turf aeration and overseeding for fescue; tree removal and trimming; irrigation maintenance and repair; and mulch and pine straw installation. The same services are offered to the commercial sector, as well as retention pond maintenance.



Seasonal color at one of the commercial properties the company maintains, Northeast Georgia Medical Center.

The company subcontracts certain hardscape and grading jobs for which it may not have equipment, something Murray learned from working for other companies. "If you're not going to do something all of the time, you're better off with subcontracting it than trying to have all of that equipment and people on staff and not fully utilize them," he says.

Responding to market changes

New Leaf Landscape Service's customer volume is bigger in the residential sector, but the dollar volume is larger in the commercial sector, Murray says.

Back in the height of the market in 2007, the company's services were split 60 percent maintenance and 40 percent installation and design/build. These days, current market demands have pushed the company to 85 percent maintenance and 15 percent installation.

In 2010, the company headed back into a positive direction, Murray says, and he's glad he took the initial direction he did when he first took over the company by expanding its services. "When I was working at another landscaping company back in the late 1980s, I was always taught to lead with maintenance because of cycles in the economy and because of drought situations," he says. "It's real exciting to go after the big install projects, but that maintenance is your bread and butter for cash flow. That's helped us through these tough times."

Design with easy maintenance in mind

The company designs with an eye for easy maintenance. "Our landscape architect is constantly involved with me and our maintenance managers, and unless a customer has a high-maintenance plant they want, we're going to naturally design to low maintenance, because one of our goals with our customers is to reduce their maintenance costs with a design to help them save money," Murray says.

Some of the landscaping mistakes Murray has seen of other company's designs that his company ends up maintaining is the liberal use of fast-growing, inexpensive plants, typical of most builders. "They're pretty tame [plants] for the first couple of years and they quickly overtake the space," he says. "A lot of them are not even designing for the right space. It looks harmless when they put it in, but that's because of some cost factors or lack of knowledge on what the plant is going to do."

When his company takes over the maintenance contracts, clients are educated that regular pruning or a redesign would be in the best interest of the landscape design and maintenance.

Focused irrigation, chemical use

Murray also spends time educating clients on proper irrigation practices.

He finds that irrigation is common in the Atlanta market on properties with good landscaping, although he's had to educate clients further out that investing in irrigation helps protect their landscape investment.

"The biggest thing we try to educate our customers on is to try to avoid general coverage, unless it's a budget issue," Murray says. "We encourage them to use drip, spray or rotor zone depending on the situation and the plant material versus the turf area, because all of them have different requirements."

Murray's approach to pest control and fertilization is to use chemicals in a focused fashion. While a few customers request an organic approach, "typically, we're going to use chemicals, but we use them on targeted pests."

He says, "We tell our customers we're not going to come in and blanket spray their yard with chemicals. We know the pests, we know the time of the year they're going to be there and we'll handle those accordingly based on a site inspection. We're not just going to schedule unneeded chemical spray

applications. We're trying to be environmentally friendly."

The company has 30 employees, and that number increases to 40 during peak season.



New Leaf Landscape Services maintains the landscape at this residential property. Currently, the company's services are split 85 percent maintenance and 15 percent installation.

"We try to shift as many of our maintenance employees over to putting out mulch and straw as we can, but some of that labor is going to be seasonal," Murray says.

Communication skills critical for employees

"Communication with our customers is very important," he says. "We're also looking for a strong work ethic and ideally, folks with previous experience. The training time is short. You're trying to get as much experience to start with as you can."

Murray also seeks an employee who is a "solid citizen, with good morals, good ethics, somebody who's going to be a hard worker."

All employees wear uniforms of light green shirts and long khaki pants. "Uniforms are critical," says Murray. "In our industry, there are a lot of people who will show up and they'll all look different. They'll be in cut-off shorts and cut-off T-shirts. I think it's very important for the customers to see a professional image, not only from your uniforms, but your trucks being clean and your equipment being clean and in good order. It gives your customers a peace of mind and the knowledge that you're a professional organization."

Business decisions based on value, longevity

Murray likes using Exmark mowers. "We have found the quality and the price to be the best value and the equipment to have the most longevity," says Murray. "As far as the two-cycle equipment, Stihl is our choice when it comes to weed eaters and edgers."

Murray's first challenge in the business was building it up and sustaining it. "Over the last several years, it's overcoming the economic and drought conditions," he says. "It took some time," he concedes. "You have to stick to the plan and try not to deviate from it. It's a big challenge, because you're tempted to go off and try to find other avenues for revenue. Sticking with the plan was a challenge, but one that paid off."

Focusing on customer retention means that managers who oversee accounts are responsible for visiting and calling customers to ensure their satisfaction. "They're responsible for being on site with those crews and with the customers on a regular basis," says Murray. "We also have somebody who calls from our office on a quarterly basis to find out if a customer is happy and if not, what we can do to turn it around. We then have a follow-up system

from those phone calls, so we follow it to the end. It doesn't stop with a phone call, it stops once the situation has been resolved."

In his marketing efforts, Murray has found direct marketing to be fairly successful on the residential side, while knocking on doors, and getting in front of the decision-makers is what works for commercial clients.

"That's where the sales team comes into place," he says. "That's really the only way to get to those property managers and building owners – to make phone calls and knock on doors."

Lending helping hands

New Leaf Landscape Services does a great deal of community service. "We try to have every one of our maintenance crews do a yard at no cost," Murray says. That work may be for someone with a disability, an elderly person or anyone else who can't keep their yard up.

The company is also involved with Habitat for Humanity and does maintenance for several women's shelters in town, as well as helped raise money in the community to install a playground for a low-income apartment complex.

Carol Brzozowski is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and has written extensively about environmental issues for numerous trade journals for more than a decade. She resides in Coral Springs, Fla.