

## Local and Lovin' It



Source: [www.TurfMagazine.com](http://www.TurfMagazine.com)

By treating his customers like respected neighbors, Kansas City's Mike Allmon sees greater opportunity in his intentionally small service area



Mike Allmon, CLT, president of Complete Turf & Landscape, providing a plant health inspection.

PHOTOS BY DAVID RITZ.

Mike Allmon, CLT, president of Complete Turf and Landscape, Kansas City, Mo., remains cautiously optimistic about his ability to grow his five-year-old company in spite of this troublesome economy. He's going to do it by remaining local – very local: the company provides the majority of its services within 10 miles of the shop.

Keeping the client base so close at hand means Allmon spends little windshield time between stops, which allows him to price competitively against larger firms. It also serves as a daily reminder of the importance of providing customer-pleasing service. He knows he's likely to bump into his customers just about anywhere in his neighborhood, and he wants these greetings to be cordial.

"I don't want to go to the grocery store and be embarrassed in talking to people who say I messed up their grass," he says.

### **Complete Turf & Landscape**

**President:** Mike Allmon, CLT

**Headquarters:** Kansas City, Mo.

**Founded:** 2006

**Service Area:** Kansas City, Mo.

**Services:** Landscape design and installations; residential mowing and maintenance, commercial maintenance, container design, turf fertilization,

shrub and tree fertilization, sprinkler maintenance and repair, shrub and tree pruning, pest diagnostics and treatment

**Employees:** Five (peak season)

**Website:** [www.completelandscapekc.com](http://www.completelandscapekc.com)

## **The benefits of residential customers**

Allmon's small service market includes some of Kansas City's historic residential neighborhoods. He offers mowing and maintenance, lawn care, landscape design and installation and container gardening to commercial and residential clients. When he started the company, he resisted doing residential work.

"I thought residential customers could be a pain because you spend so much time with them, but the more I did residential, I started seeing how much potential business I was losing, and now it's grown to 50 percent of my business," says Allmon. Homeowners chatting up his service to friends and neighbors resulted in more business than he anticipated.

"Nothing's better than to have three residences in a row where you're doing the mowing, chemical, pruning and snow removal all together," he says. "That's when you start making pretty good profit margins. I'm not spending my money on fuel driving around because my accounts are close by. I can slowly expand outward from that concentric circle. Striving to sell new jobs in my service area is my biggest benefit."

## **A world of experience**

Allmon got a working taste of the green industry when he was 14 helping his father, a city forester who also had his own tree care business. In 2006, after studying at the University of Missouri and working for a large landscape firm and two golf courses, he decided to start his own company.

He didn't enter the industry without credentials, having earned an associate degree in applied science, grounds and turf management from Longview Community College and his CLT (certified landscape technician) designation from the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET).

Allmon's experience working on golf courses taught him the finer points of turfgrass management. "When you're working on a golf course, you're never even looking off the ground. You're not looking at trees, shrubs, flowers – you're always looking at grass. You get good at finding diseases, pests and problems, and correcting them."

## **The focus on green practices**

Landscape design and installation focuses on 'green' practices in plant selection and site preparation by using native plants, xeriscaping and water conservation when possible. Kansas City has done a good job of educating property owners of the wisdom of using native plants, he notes.

Even with his emphasis on green practices, Allmon does not advocate a completely natural approach to lawn care. In fact, he's convinced that lawn care chemicals can be used safely if they're used wisely.

"I don't necessarily think you need to be organic," he says. "I've probably had only four calls this year from people asking about organic lawn and pest solutions. I think there's a general perception out there that they're not as effective as traditional chemicals."

That said, Allmon treats lawn care products with the respect they deserve. "I've got a wife and kids, and I've got to look out for myself. I don't want to drop dead spraying chemicals out there. I tell people it's more effective to use a federally regulated, licensed product on their lawns," he says.

## **Low-maintenance designs**

Using CAD, Allmon's landscape designs lean toward lower maintenance. Generally, he designs so that a property can be maintained with a 36-inch mower and not with a push mower. He encourages clients to install ground covers, such as ground ivy and English ivy, rather than just mulch. "It spreads well, looks good and keeps the weeds out," says Allmon. He also advocates the use of slow-growing shrubs.

Maintenance services encompass mowing and trimming; shrub and tree pruning; mulching; turf, shrub and tree fertilization; pest diagnostics and treatment; sprinkler activation maintenance, repair and winterization; annual flower design, installation and maintenance, and spring and fall cleanup. These tend to be annual contracts.

"Commercial maintenance is a lot more inclusive, whereas the residential can be just mowing," he says, adding that 80 percent of the mowing accounts also involve chemical applications.

For other tasks, such as pruning and mulching, Allmon finds his clients like to do those, at least initially. "Then somebody gets sick or their back gets hurt and they want to talk about mulching," he says. "A lot of my business has grown from mowing for customers who just decide they want me to do the rest of the work."

Complete Turf and Landscape also offers container design services, including design, installation and maintenance, including weeding and fertilizing. He enjoys the creative nature of this service, and it also allows him to quickly change up a landscape design with less effort than renovating a plot of land. The biggest challenge to container plantings is sourcing the right plants. Sometimes he selects natives, sometimes tropicals. He fertilizes the containers three times each season.

## **The return to "original integrity"**

Allmon says the trend in his area is that property owners are returning to landscapes that reflect the age and personality of their homes. He calls it returning a landscape to its "original integrity," but property owners

sometimes don't always see it that way.

"Sometimes you get a house that's been turned over several times in the last 25 years. Everybody has had a different idea or vision about what they wanted to do. They didn't go in and re-do it, so they just put their own mark on it. There's no continuity to the landscape. It's broken up in different areas. None of it flows."

Regardless, just about every client realizes the benefits of having a landscape that's easy maintenance and doesn't require constant irrigation.

"Eventually, water restrictions are going to come through to everybody. There's no reason you can't have a great landscape that truly reflects the character of the property and also be environmentally sensitive about it," says Allmon.

## **Challenges, from employees to weather and more**

So far, Allmon and his small group of employees (three full-time and two part-time) have been able to keep up with production, but if Complete Turf and Landscape keeps growing, he's going to need more good employees, and he thinks that could be a problem.

"It's been terrible lately," he says. "The first thing I look for is the legal ability to work in the U.S. There is a vast amount of labor out there that is illegal or has phony documentation. I don't want to be on the government's radar as someone who hires illegals. If people come into work, they've got to show me their paperwork." He also looks for dependability and a commitment to the job.

"It used to be a couple of years ago, you'd put an ad on Craigslist and find six good guys, but now I'm checking references hard," Allmon says. "They say they can run 15 different kinds of equipment, but when the rubber meets the road, they can't."

Weather has been another challenge for Allmon, as it was for all contractors in the region.

"It's been crushing us," Allmon says. "We went from a wet spring and early summer to really hot with no water and plants dying." To address that, he is constantly visiting client properties, keeping in touch with vendors and speaking with others in the industry to keep on top of the challenge.

Although Allmon is confident of his ability to grow his company, he says the U.S. economy is going to have to help him out in that regard. He's hopeful, but not overly optimistic that's in the cards short term.

"I don't see that landscaping is going to be a first priority for people coming out of the recession." He says. "When they come out of the recession with a few extra bucks in their pocket, they're not going to put landscape designs in, they're going to pay down their credit cards or put more money back into savings for their kid's college."

Nonetheless, he says he will continue to offer good value for his company's services and manage costs so he can manage expansion.

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.