

No Ordinary Family



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Father and sons run successful business in St. Louis

In 1993, Dan Jenkerson wanted to pick up some extra income in St. Louis, Mo., to help pay soccer expenses for his two sons. He initially hoped to mow 10 yards to supplement his regular income as a public safety officer in Des Peres, a St. Louis county municipality. His lawn mowing led to his founding St. Louis Lawn Care, Inc., and the business has grown from the initial 10 yards to more than 450 accounts. Sons Tim and Nick Jenkerson, now both college graduates, have joined their father to form a full-service lawn care business and are using business skills learned in their degree programs to grow the business further.



Nick, Tim and Dan Jenkerson (left to right) discuss expanding their lawn care business.

While new development is pretty much limited right now, lawn care continues to be of significant interest for homeowners and businesses, and St. Louis Lawn Care continues to expand. About 95 percent of the lawns maintained are residential and 5 percent commercial. Tim and Nick work full time in the lawn

care business, and Jenkerson continues to work as a public safety officer, as well as mowing lawns and devoting extensive time to equipment maintenance. Maintaining equipment properly and performing quality work are the key elements in the success of the business.



Nick mows a lawn with an Exmark mower, which St. Louis Lawn Care uses exclusively.
Photos courtesy of St. Louis Lawn Care.

Equipment maintenance

“Doing quality work and maintaining your equipment are the number one requirements,” Jenkerson said. He noted that proper equipment maintenance is a key element to producing quality work and avoiding delays due to equipment breakdowns. “Maintaining my equipment was easy when I started,” Jenkerson said. “I had one push lawnmower. Maintenance now takes so much time, but it’s so important.”

He added, “We use all Exmark mowers, and we maintain our lawn equipment and our trucks well so they last.” He noted that while lawn care techniques have not changed significantly in the nearly two decades that he has been doing lawn care, major changes have occurred in equipment. “The equipment is just so much better now,” he said. “The equipment does a better job in less time.” St. Louis Lawn Care purchases most of its mowing equipment from Milbrandt Lawn Equipment in Creve Coeur, Mo., which services its units. Equipment includes Exmark mowers, as well as Stihl trimmers for shrub and hedge maintenance.

“We all sharpen our own blades for mowing, and I do most of the other maintenance,” Jenkerson said. “We have a mechanic who comes into our shop and does major maintenance work, such as replacing truck brakes.”

Growing the business

Finding lawns to mow in the West County and South County areas of St. Louis came easy for Jenkerson the first year. The 10 yards he initially sought for mowing quickly increased. His sons helped with the lawn care through high school, and the business was soon viewed as a means to pay college expenses.

Tim earned an accounting degree at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. After working in public accounting, he started his own lawn care business and worked alone for about a year. "I played around with a website to see if it would increase my dad's business," Tim said. "He got a lot of calls, increasing his business a lot."

"I was up to doing about 100 yards when I was alone," Jenkerson said. With the increased business, Tim merged his lawn care business with his father's three years ago, and Nick joined the business upon earning a business degree at St. Louis University.

Providing lawn care

"We don't have a goal to do a certain number of yards," Jenkerson said. "We want to do a quality job on every yard." He described quality work in lawn care as being sure that everything needed on the yards is done, including mowing, trimming and cleaning up afterwards. "We don't leave clippings around and make sure everything is done," he said.

A number of services have been added to the lawn mowing and fertilizing to include complete lawn care of hedge and shrub trimming, aerating and overseeding. Additionally, St. Louis Lawn Care does light landscaping, including planting, mulching and building retaining walls. "We do leaf collection and just about anything needed for the lawns," he added.

Fertilizer applications are made on about 50 percent of the lawns that are mowed. Lawn care starts about mid-March with a spring fertilizer application that includes a preemergent. An application about six weeks later includes weed control.

"I stopped putting fertilizer on yards in the heat of summer some time ago," Jenkerson said. "In St. Louis summers, fertilizer just tends to burn out the grass." Most of the lawns are fescue grass, common in the transition zone.

A custom fertilizer mix from Helena Chemical Co., is designed to meet unique conditions of St. Louis. While springs are often rainy, summers can be unpredictable, ranging from extremely wet to extremely dry, but usually bringing high temperatures and high humidity to the city located adjacent to the Mississippi River. This past summer brought uninterrupted days of high temperatures, and a number of yards exhibited problems with fungus. "I talked to several lawn care people this year, and they all had the same problem with fungus," Tim said. Extra fungicides were required to keep the problem in check.



Tim begins aeration on a lawn with walk-behind Classen aerator.

Fall fertilizer applications are made about early September and late October. "We send out a flyer about aeration, and if our customers want it done, they let us know," Tim said. "We will do aeration and overseeding when the customers want it done. We like to use a pull-behind Lesco aerator with our Exmark LazerZ," he said. "If we can't use that, we use a walk-behind."

Jenkerson noted the importance of understanding customers' yards. "It's important to explain to them what we see that is needed and give them the choice." A significant portion of the business is from repeat customers and referrals.

Meeting challenges

Weather continues to be the most significant challenge to most green industry businesses. "St. Louis summers are hard on yards," Jenkerson noted. Special attention is needed to bring yards through the hot summer months, particularly yards that do not have in-ground watering systems. "We're very careful about adjusting our mowing heights for weather conditions," he said. Mowing heights are shorter in spring and are carefully adjusted higher as summer heat moves in.

"We're usually mowing until dark," Jenkerson noted. When rain prevents mowing on schedule, catching up on the mowing is essential. "Most people want their yards mowed weekly," he noted. That's where the importance of maintenance comes in, to assure that equipment is in good working order to avoid breakdowns that can produce unnecessary delays.

The business is a family partnership, and day-to-day purchases are made as needed by all three, and major expenditures are discussed before purchases are made. In addition to Jenkerson, Tim and Nick, St. Louis Lawn Care currently has three full-time employees. "Most people want 40 hours," Jenkerson said. "Keeping work for our employees is sometimes challenging." In addition to the various lawn services, St. Louis Lawn Care does snow removal in winter.

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