

## Premium Lawn Care



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High-end clients demand high-end maintenance

*Photos Courtesy of Lawns of Dallas.*



In the high-end planned communities of Dallas, well-tended common areas, such as around playgrounds, must be maintained to high standards.

Lawns of Dallas ([www.lawnsofdallas.com](http://www.lawnsofdallas.com)), which has 70 employees and last year had \$4.3 million in sales, likes to design, install and maintain any new project it bids on. It specializes in high-end commercial and residential projects, so the philosophy works out well, because those property owners are also focused on long-term, premium results.

For Connor Bales, part owner and general manager, this process begins with good maintenance planning. When bidding an install project, the company draws up a long-term plan that includes a proposal for maintenance to be done by Lawns of Dallas. Prospective clients appreciate this approach because it guarantees that their properties will have quality care in the future.

“There’s generally a better understanding of the cost of long-term, high-end maintenance [among high-end clients],” Bales says, with those property owners understanding the value of hiring a company that can both build and maintain their dream landscapes. They are also more likely to assure continuity of quality by working on long-term relationships with the maintenance company. “We like to sign our clients to two-year contracts. We have done three years, as well.”

To carry this out, a landscape company has to be set up from top to bottom with a goal of focusing on the commitment to manicured landscapes. Bales says Lawns of Dallas believes that employee focus is necessary from office

management to the crew in the field. The company instills in its senior management, supervisors, foremen and crewmen the idea that quality counts. Maintaining a good lawn starts with the company hiring “people of integrity and character,” he says, because that, even more than worker experience, is crucial.

The company’s experienced foremen are instrumental in hiring good workers and in training them properly. They are hands-on, both in on-the-job training and with use of the display garden that has been installed at the company headquarters. The garden is used to indoctrinate new employees in the art of manicuring different kinds of plants and landscapes. Training is also accomplished at weekly tailgate sessions where supervisors meet with workers; weekly staff meetings between management and supervisors; and monthly safety meetings, which are mandatory for all.

On-site, once a project has been completed, the pattern for maintenance is set by having supervisors and foremen walk the property and make a detailed list of the required maintenance practices. This is particularly important when the entire landscape is to be maintained by Lawns of Dallas. The company has its own tree workers and “enhancement” workers who take care of special jobs, such as the planting of annual color, so every landscaping detail must be accounted for, and then the proper equipment must be brought to the job.

Bales cites the example of two large homeowners associations, Savannah and Providence, owned by the same development group, in Denton County. These are planned communities that have extensive water features, lawns, sports fields, lakes, playgrounds, trails and multiple common areas. “It’s complicated, because at both properties there are several microclimates,” making the job even more demanding. The properties have both manicured Tifway 419 sports fields and common bermudagrass in other areas, as well as many different tree species and planting beds.



The properties that Lawns of Dallas maintains often contain parks, sports fields, lakes and other features.

Lawns of Dallas commits two full-time crews and a supervisor, a total of 12 people, to these properties. They also commit a variety of lawn mowers and other equipment. They have four Exmark rotary riding mowers, ranging from 50 inches to 72 inches; four 21-inch Honda rotary push mowers; four 36-inch Scag walk-behind rotary mowers; and one 36-inch McClain reel mower for the severely manicured areas, such as sports fields and around clubhouses. This selection of equipment gives the company a mower to fit any scenario.

“They want the turf to look really, really good,” Bales points out. The homeowners associations don’t want the machinery stored on-site, so Lawns of Dallas rents property nearby where it can be stored. The company also has its own mechanic to ensure the equipment is kept running and adjusted properly.

The properties’ high-traffic areas, such as select sports fields and clubhouse lawns, are also overseeded in the winter months to maintain a

uniform green. This necessitates not only a concerted effort in the growing and maintaining of the perennial ryegrass blend, but also a professional approach to transitioning back to bermudagrass in the late spring. Crews on the ground must also transition from the low winter mowing heights to the taller grass of summer.



It isn't just turf that must be manicured in upscale developments. That's why Lawns of Dallas has tree and flower maintenance crews.

The general maintenance portion of these jobs is under contract, but any special jobs are "paid-as-performed," meaning that the company will let the property managers know when trees need to be pruned, for example, and be paid extra for that work. The managers will let Lawns of Dallas know when flowerbeds must be at their peak. Communication is important, because the landscaper must organize tasks such as lining up growers to raise the flowers so they will be ready at the appropriate time. The properties hold a lot of special events and activities, so the landscape crew must always know what's coming up.

"We have really complicated seasonal color arrangements," Bales says, using about 900 flats of flowers for the spring beds alone. The company's enhancement crews spend a week planting the flowers, and then the maintenance crews will take over to do the rest of the work, like deadheading and planting replacements. He estimates that the 12-man crew spends one or two days a week doing this kind of non-turf detailing. They also keep an eye out for anything else the property manager should know about, such as structural problems or plant damage from rodents or rabbits.

Good communication is the key to much of the company's success, both within the company and with clients. Once friendly lines are established between the company and the client, issues can be resolved to the satisfaction of both parties without stress, which leads to good long-term relationships. It also has led to the addition of one other critical piece of equipment the company uses on such properties.

"This winter we made an investment for all managers and supervisors to have a Blackberry camera phone," Bales points out. It can be considered an efficient form of communication when somebody can see a problem, take a photo and e-mail it immediately to the property manager and ask for a cost overrun, then get a prompt answer.

"I believe that the margins can be higher with a smaller (client) portfolio in high-end properties," Bales says. Therefore, the company aims to have a limited number of upscale clients, rather than many lower-end clients. Those well-heeled clients are not only more committed to the upkeep of the

properties, they are also likely to recommend Lawns of Dallas to other similar-minded managers.

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