

Prune for Winter Cash Flow



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Winter pruning can be a smart business move for any company offering landscape maintenance services. The key is matching the services provided to your clients' needs and to the expertise of your staff. Consider also the investment you want to make in specialized equipment.

The right fit pays dividends in cash flow and client connections as well as giving the site – and your crews – a jump start for spring. Managed well, it contributes to the company's overall effectiveness and efficiency.

In any pruning, there are three main factors to consider: the health of the plant; the safety of the condition of the plant in terms of potential damage to it (including its surroundings); and the aesthetics and symmetry of the plant individually and within the landscape setting.

Coordinating the process

BIO Landscape & Maintenance, Inc., based in Houston, does business in much of Texas. It provides commercial landscaping, detailed landscape site maintenance, tree planning and health care, plant health care, tree pruning and tree removal.

"We keep detailed inventories of each site that tracks the past history of what we prune and when we prune and documents the time it takes to do the pruning. Working with the averages of that history, we can assign our crews appropriately," says Pedro Berreles, operations manager.

In cold climate regions, winter pruning deals primarily with dormant plants. With deciduous shrubs and trees, the leafless branches provide the best opportunity to assess structural conditions and identify dead, damaged, diseased or insect-infested branches. The freshly pruned areas are less susceptible to insects or diseases. The healing process doesn't compete for plant resources as it would during the active growth period when energy is directed to leaf and branch formation.

Polish Your Selling Points

Many clients are more aware that pruning may be needed when leaf drop exposes bare branches, so polish your selling points. Here are some key items to emphasize. As a professional, you understand plant needs and plant growth patterns and can make the best decisions in pruning for optimum plant health and appearance. You have the proper equipment to prune plants correctly. Your employees are trained in safety measures so they can protect your plants and property from damage during the pruning process. You have the equipment to properly handle and remove pruning debris.

Spread your message in one-to-one client meetings. Offer your expertise to the media. It's great advertising with your only investment the time to prepare and respond. This can be especially beneficial when winter storm damage is anticipated or has occurred. With heavy snows, ice storms or high winds, you can become the "go-to expert" for the media in helping the public deal with the aftermath.

When cold weather limits maintenance work options, winter pruning puts your crews on your clients' properties, reinforcing the long-term relationship.

Working as an arborist in the Chicago area for 20 years before moving to Texas, Berreles is well-aware of the similarities and differences of winter pruning in different regions.

"The pruning procedures are basically the same. The difference is the types of trees and how they are adapted to and react to the climate. That impacts the timing of the pruning and how light or heavy the pruning will be," he says.

Typically, Bio Landscape & Maintenance crews are equipped with standard pruning equipment year-round: hand pruners, loppers, pruning saws and pole pruners. These include powered models mounted with the equivalent of a small chain saw.

Berreles says, "Any pruning work requiring a standard chain saw is handled by our enhancement crew members. They have the skills and training to tackle the pruning of larger plants."

The company retains approximately half of its employees over the winter.

"We want to get all our dormant pruning wrapped up before March so we coordinate the crews to make that happen," explains Berreles.

"Whenever you're pruning, always do the entire front area of the site, so the aesthetics are in balance," cautions Berreles. Sparse winter landscapes make partial pruning of the front section even more visible than light pruning during the growing season. He will assign a double crew to a site if one crew can't complete the front section during one visit.

"For our contract clients, we can prune the rest of the property in sections, doing one-quarter to one-third of the site at a time, as long as all of the

work within the section is completed in one visit. We want balance within the section as viewed from outside and inside,” says Berreles.

One plant in abundance on Texas properties is *Lagerstroemia crape myrtle*, a flowering plant that blooms on new wood, so it performs best with winter pruning.

“Some clients want them cut way back. Others prefer them selectively pruned, with no branching at the bottom and a vase shape on top,” says Berreles.

“It’s a labor-intensive project that we generally offer as a separate, additional service. For those that want it included in their service package, we’ll set up the contact showing the total cost both without the pruning and with the pruning, so they can clearly see the pricing.”

If the company is only doing pruning at a site, they’ll put more people on the property and finish the project within one or two days. They’ll generally use the same process when working with a new contract client whose property is overgrown.

“At times we’ll do winter pruning primarily to make the property more manageable for our crews,” says Berreles. “Perhaps a hedge along a building is becoming too tall to reach from ground level or is beginning to cover up some of the windows. We can allocate the staff to get it trimmed in a day, so the site’s regular crew can handle the pruning during the growing season.”

Gregory Guinn is co-owner of Florida Outdoor Landscape, based in Winter Park, Fla., and providing a broad package of lawn and landscape services in the Orlando area. Winter pruning is part of that package, though it differs from the pruning in cold-weather regions. With the mild climate there are so many choices of plant materials that the variables are greater from site to site, so each one has different pruning needs.



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Prune branches at the trunk or at the point of attachment to a major branch. This gives the tree a symmetrical and aesthetically pleasing appearance.

Guinn says, “Our winter season is actually the slower grass-growing season. It starts in November and runs through February into early March. Our crews go into bi-weekly status. The lawns may not need to be mowed as often, but we’ll generally mow every other week. That gives us more time for enhancement and pruning services that are harder to fit in when the grass is growing faster.”

Even in Florida, leaf drop by deciduous trees and shrubs makes the winter the ideal pruning season for the removal of weak or damaged branches, shaping and size control. Crews also trim hedges of all types and do the thinning and shaping on many of the evergreens. They do the selective pruning of plants that bloom on new wood for a bigger splash of color in the spring.

There are freezes severe enough to cause frost damage to some of the more

delicate plants, even if they're covered. Commercial properties and most homeowners want their plants pruned to remove the damaged foliage and restore symmetry, even if more aggressive pruning is scheduled for early spring.

"Our cold spells generally are not long enough to cause enough ground cold to impact the root systems. So once we're into March, we'll trim many of the plants all the way back and normally, they'll come back strong," says Guinn.

The winter work generates cash flow. "We don't have huge margins that go just to winter pruning," says Guinn. "But with the biweekly/weekly service mix we do keep most of our staff on full-time, year-round."

How high do you go?

The major investment decision in pruning applies to work with large trees. Do you want to commit the personnel time for the necessary training in procedures and safety to tackle trimming and removal of large trees? Do you want to own the necessary climbing equipment, chippers, and perhaps one or more lift bucket-equipped trucks?

Many small to mid-size landscape maintenance companies report they prefer working with a dedicated tree care company for all tree work beyond that which can be accomplished from ground level.

Some LCOs handle this collaboration as a subcontractor relationship. Though that does raise insurance and liability issues between the companies involved, it retains the one-source accountability and invoicing they feel is important for their clients.

It also opens the opportunity for their own crews to work in conjunction with the tree care crews, clearing away debris and tackling the chipping, for example. That provides work for their employees and additional income. And, when dealing with storm damage, it gets the job done faster allowing both companies to increase the number of clients they can serve.

Other LCO's handle the collaboration on a referral basis, developing a relationship with one or two tree care companies they trust to provide their clients with the level of service that meets their standards. In exchange, the tree care companies agree to give the referred clients similar priority status to their own customers. Most also refer their clients to the LCO for landscape maintenance other than tree work.

While the referral arrangement reduces the level of control of the services provided, many LCOs report a high level of success over the long term for both the companies involved and their clients.

The amount of large tree work their clients require prompts some landscape maintenance companies to handle it all in-house. The cost to benefits ratio is the deciding factor and that varies greatly per company.

A small company can be effective with a single, skilled and highly trained individual making the tree assessments and either doing the work, or overseeing the work of others he or she has trained in the proper procedures.

Larger companies may determine it's more cost-effective to have several staffers qualified for large tree work. In-house arrangements are especially beneficial during winter pruning when crew time is more flexible.

Whatever the range of services you decide to offer, winter pruning has another advantage for companies in any region with new, fairly inexperienced personnel. They can be teamed with the most proficient crew leaders to learn the specific techniques for each type of plant with hands-on training.

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