

Seeing Red



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Distinctive Landscaping stands out in a unique way



A Distinctive Landscaping crew member provides detailed mowing services at a residence in Franklin, Mass.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JASON SCOTT.

Jason Scott started Distinctive Landscaping in North Attleboro, Mass., directly after college and focuses on creating, maintaining and designing green spaces. While he was in high school, he worked with his father maintaining the yards of 32 customers. He earned a degree in landscape contracting from the Stockbridge School of Agriculture at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Distinctive Landscaping's client base is 95 percent residential, with a small amount of commercial accounts.

Scott enjoys building relationships with the residential sector that he finds more difficult to create in the commercial sector. He invites his customers to call him for anything. On his company's website (www.redtrucks.net) he offers a 30-minute response with free estimates. That response is what differentiates his company from others, Scott says. "We're very up on technology," he adds. "We'll be in touch with customers within 30 minutes, and often we can have a proposal in-hand within 24 hours. It's that responsiveness that people are looking for."

The company has eight employees servicing seven towns. Scott looks for a good attitude when hiring an employee. "I want attitude and [I'll] train for skills," he says. "There is a lot of turnover in this industry, so a lot of people have the necessary experience, but not the right attitude." Scott himself has a great deal of experience and industry involvement. He's certified by the Massachusetts Association of Landscape Professionals, is a certified snow professional by the Snow and Ice Management Association and an accredited Organic Land Care Provider by the Northeast Organic Farming Association. He's a former board of director for a community organic farm in

South Natick, Mass., and a committee chair on the membership committee for the Massachusetts Association of Landscape Professionals



An employee of Distinctive Landscaping edges beds at a North Attleboro, Mass., residence.

Scott believes the reason his company has been successful to this point lies in consistency. "We constantly get compliments that our men are always in uniform. Our trucks are always clean. We always insist on putting a quality product out there," he says. "I think that's what's kept us going. Our focus is heavily on maintenance. We can almost forecast how that's going to go. We might lose a few percentages because of the recession, but there's always going to be that flow of maintenance work to keep the guys busy."

Maintenance services include:

- Lawn mowing, which is done high to reduce weeds and increase root development. Although the company removes grass clippings after each cutting, workers leave clippings a few times during the season to contribute to soil health. Edges and obstacles are trimmed with a string trimmer.
- Lawn fertilization, a chemical lawn program, and the company gives a 10 percent discount to clients who prepay for the service. An all-inclusive program includes five granular fertilizings, one pelletized lime, grub proofing, crabgrass control, and surface insect and weed control as needed.
- Organic lawn care, which is a whole systems approach assisting with the elimination of synthetic pesticides by building soil health and using cultural methods to grow healthy grass.
- Spring cleanup includes tine-raking the lawn, hand-raking gardens and beds, cutting back roses by request, and removing winter debris and sand contamination from lawns and mulch.
- Edging and mulching service includes hand-edging, installation of desired mulch color, debris removal and hard surfaces blown upon request.
- Shrub pruning includes hand-pruning where necessary, encouraging inner growth by making intelligent pruning cuts, shearing where necessary and small ornamental tree pruning up to 15 feet.
- Fall cleanup to prepare for winter dormancy.
- Irrigation sprinkler service includes startup testing and clock resetting, midsummer service for seasonal time adjustments and irrigation winterization.
- Lawn renovations include core aeration, overseeding, compost topdressing, light grading and hydroseeding.

Scott says his goal is to package all of the services to make them more attractive to customers. "We get a lot of calls for one-time work, spring cleanup or just mulching," he says. "We're working hard to create bundles and service packages."

Scott started promoting organic landscaping a few seasons ago. Yet, he's had

to “teeter the hybrid route after realizing the organic market wasn’t as large as I thought it was going to be,” Scott says. “We do offer a full organic program, but we also offer a synthetic program to satisfy the whole market. We’ll do organic fertilizers, but some spot-treatments for weeds with chemicals. I’m all over the board with it. I don’t feel like I’ve gotten my hands around it. The market is not quite strong yet for that.” Scott attributes that to the fast pace of society. “People are looking for instant gratification,” he says. “A lot of the new construction and houses that have been built really don’t get any soil put back on their property to create a lush lawn, so when looking at organics to grow a healthy plant, it gives us nothing to work with, so we have to start from scratch. So I think for budgetary reasons it’s not feasible.”

The use of synthetics can create a “costly chemical cycle,” Scott says. “You do get trapped, because once you start, you almost have to wean that lawn off of the synthetic program to get it to go organic. It’s so dependent on getting those nutrients every six weeks,” he says.

He’d rather concentrate on building better soil and encourage living organisms in the soil. “Pesticides and synthetic fertilizers can strip the beneficial organisms from the soils and only feed the plant,” he says. “The underlying basis of organic lawn care practices is the management of the soil. Organic matter provides nutrients, moisture retention, texture and [an] environment to sustain high populations of microorganisms.”

Scott says one of his biggest challenges is in Internet marketing of his business. “This year has been super hard for us to rank,” he says. “I feel like we work hard at it, and we’re up on search engine as far as blogging and tweeting goes and very involved in social media. It’s been a challenge to get our company to rank, even in the towns we service.”

As for equipment, Scott says he “loves the Toro Dingo compact loader. We use Exmark mowing equipment. We use RedMax backpack blowers and Stihl string trimmers.”

Scott has built a branding for his company based on red trucks and red uniforms. “People are trying to associate themselves with how they might know us, and nine times out of 10 they ask if we’re the guys with the red trucks. And we say ‘Yes, that’s us.’ So, we started a brand around it,” he says.

Going forward, Scott says he’d like to add a quarter million dollars in revenue to where the company is now, which is between \$500,000 and \$600,000. He’d also like to optimize his company’s Internet presence. Additionally, he’d like to bring on a full-time maintenance account manager so he can focus on business development.

As for the industry, he believes as the U.S. emerges from the recession and the business sector begins to grow more, “it will separate the real companies from the companies that just popped up because of the times, and we’ll start to identify again those strong companies.”

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.