

# 50 Ways to Survive the Busy Season

The logo for Turf, featuring the word "Turf" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A green grass blade graphic is integrated into the letter 'T'.The logo for Tree Services, featuring the words "Tree Services" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small green leaf graphic is above the 'e' in "Services". Below the main text is the tagline "Taking Tree Care to New Heights" in a smaller, italicized font.The logo for DesignBuild, featuring the word "Design" in a black, sans-serif font and "Build" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font. A small orange square graphic is above the 'i' in "Design".The logo for PLOW, featuring the word "PLOW" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letters are slightly slanted to the right.

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The first 100 days of the busy season – or the “[100 Days of Hell](#),” as you may have not-so-lovingly referred to it – are difficult for any landscape professional. It largely comes down to the age-old problem of having too much to do and not enough time. Coming from the quiet off-season, all of that added pressure can be a bit of a shock to the system. But in this competitive industry there’s really no time to waste. *Turf* reached out to landscape professionals across the country to ask them how they gear up and get through the worst of spring. They shared some of their very best tips. From time management to equipment prep to even hiring issues, here’s what they had to say about not only surviving but thriving during the busiest time of the year.

## **Prepare, prepare, prepare.**

1. “Make sure that your crews are familiar with the customers by name and location before the first day of work. Consider a notebook full of satellite photos of the customers’ properties.” **–Joe Flake, owner, Target Lawn Care, Paola, Kansas**
2. “Be proactive when it comes to getting this year’s price lists from your suppliers. Don’t wait for them to get it to you. Ask for it.” **–Ken Scherer, owner, Hillsborough Irrigation & Landscape Services, Hillsborough, New Jersey**
3. “Don’t get caught finding and repairing an irrigation mainline leak in the first 100 days of the busy season. Look at your irrigation water meters in advance for those mainline leaks and breaks that are not obvious during the rainy season because the ground is saturated with puddles.” **–Chad Sutton, water resource manager, Gachina Landscape Management, Menlo Park, California**
4. “Take a full inventory of remit envelopes, yard signs, marketing materials and other items you might need before the season starts and then order accordingly. You don’t want to run out during the busy season and have to pay a fortune for rush shipping.” **–Eric**

- Taylor, manager, Lynch Plant Health Care, Sudbury, Massachusetts**
5. "Manage the chaos. Anything and everything that can be done early has to be. There won't be time when it gets busy." **—Chris Lee, president, Earthworks Inc., Alvarado, Texas**
  6. "Write down on paper all the ideas that are in between your ears during the day – every day." **—Brian H. Labrie, president, B.H. Labrie Landscape Co. Inc., Merrimack, New Hampshire**
  7. "We try to have a soft shutdown of all of our operations sometime in the middle of February. Other than a snowstorm event, we try to have everybody take it easy for a week so we can prepare to hit the ground running come busy season." **—Nick Nykorczuk, president, Creative Pavers Inc., Gibbstown, New Jersey**

## **Boost efficiency.**

1. "Keep an old-fashioned list. Whether this is on loose leaf paper, a dry erase board or a smart device, it should be made and updated every day. Goals for tasks need to be completed by day's end are the priority." **—Michael Pasquarello, landscape architect, Elite Landscaping, Berlin, New Jersey**
2. "Loading and fueling your vehicles and equipment in a staggered fashion at the end of the day avoids the morning circus." **—Rob Reindl, founder and CEO, Oasis Turf & Tree, Loveland, Ohio**
3. "Save training for rainy days. When the weather's good, you have to go full-steam with production. But there are often lots of things to cover that will keep your team more productive all season long." **—Kevin Denby, chief marketing officer, Oasis Turf & Tree, Loveland, Ohio**
4. "We have a list of all of the businesses and large properties that we service. We put those customers on the schedule early and get them out of the way before the craziness hits." **—Liz DeNinno, co-owner, Pinnacle Irrigation and Nightlighting, Haddon Heights, New Jersey**
5. "Invoice someone for something every single day. Don't ever fall behind on billing. Keep it fresh. If you fall behind with billing during busy season, which is already time-consuming to begin with, you're in trouble." **—Brian H. Labrie, president, B.H. Labrie Landscape Co. Inc., Merrimack, New Hampshire**
6. "If you want to reduce hedging time, now is the time to do hard-pruning and lower the height of those hedges. This will make it easier for your crews to maintain. You can also start naturally pruning those and eliminate hedges altogether." **—William Cruz, senior branch manager, Gachina Landscape Management, Menlo Park, California**
7. "We have a facility and yard assistant who loads and washes trucks in the late afternoon/early evenings. Managers are responsible for providing load tickets for the following day. It helps to get the crews, particularly the construction and enhancement crews, out faster in the morning." **—Dean DeSantis, president, DeSantis Landscapes, Portland, Oregon**

## **Equipment and vehicles.**

1. "Using enclosed vehicles allows you to fill your equipment out of the rain so you can continue working even in light rain." **—Rob Reindl, founder and CEO, Oasis Turf & Tree, Loveland, Ohio**
2. "All of our landscaping equipment is washed, cleaned and maintained before being stored for the winter. If it has a motor, the oil and filter are changed. The idea is to be able to put a key in it and start it. Equipment should be ready to go." **—Fred Oskanian, owner, Terra Lawn Specialists, Collegeville, Pennsylvania**
3. "Inspect your vehicles and equipment mid-winter. Don't wait until spring in case parts have to be ordered. Visit local equipment suppliers and check out what's new in the industry in case you wind up needing a new piece of equipment." **—Ken Scherer, owner, Hillsborough Irrigation & Landscape Services, Hillsborough, New Jersey**
4. "We're big on preventive maintenance. During the offseason we keep crew leaders on for a minimum of 20 hours a week in the shop, getting the equipment ready to go for the busy season." **—Tony Szczechowski, general manager/owner, Pro Edge Lawn Care Ltd., Holland, Ohio**
5. "Fuel up all equipment after work so you can start fast in the mornings without any delay." **—Brian H. Labrie, president, B.H. Labrie Landscape Co. Inc., Merrimack, New Hampshire**
6. "Don't push your equipment to the very edge. It's better to replace something early than to have it go down in the field." **—Tony Szczechowski, general manager/owner, Pro Edge Lawn Care Ltd., Holland, Ohio**
7. "I've hired a mobile fueling company that comes in three days a week in the evening and fuels all of our trucks. They barcode each truck so not only do we save on labor to fuel trucks but we have a good tracking system of how much fuel each vehicle uses." **—Dean DeSantis, president of DeSantis Landscapes, Portland, Oregon**
8. "Have all tools purchased, spray painted/ marked and put in piles for easy spring distribution. Tools should already be sharpened and lubed. We have all vehicles and equipment completely looked over and serviced prior to the start of the season." **—Mike Wheeler, managing partner and operations manager, Boreal Property Management, Jackson, Wyoming**
9. "We used to get so busy that we were hiring out of desperation. Basically if you were breathing, we'd put you to work, whether you were good for the job or not. That wasn't always good for business. Now, we've adopted the mantra of 'always be a recruiter.' We are hiring yearround so that we're never doing it out of desperation." **—Giuseppe Baldi, account manager, Baldi Gardens Inc., Arlington, Texas**
10. "Overhire because 18 percent of our maintenance labor is likely not going to be able to cut it. Do not get stuck in a bind of having to settle for poor workmanship or not having enough employees to service your customers." **—Eric Taylor, manager, Lynch Plant Health Care, Sudbury, Massachusetts**

11. "We've learned it's best to overstaff than to be understaffed. We do a lot of hiring in the slow season and are fine having a few more guys than we really need. That's always better than a few less than you need. Plus, when you're overstaffed, if you lose a guy it doesn't throw a total wrench in the operation. There's always someone to step up and fill in." **—Giuseppe Baldi, account manager, Baldi Gardens Inc., Arlington, Texas**

## **Improve productivity.**

1. "Work all the time you work. In other words, don't get hung up doing things that aren't on your task list for that day." **—Michael Pasquarello, landscape architect, Elite Landscaping, Berlin, New Jersey**
2. "Our team forgoes any vacation time or time off during the months of March and April. By having everyone here, we know we can be at our peak productivity-wise." **—Kevin Denby, chief marketing officer, Oasis Turf & Tree, Loveland, Ohio**
3. "Don't slow down. Even if you're running fewer crews/employees and there's not a natural sense of urgency, create urgency and look for things that can be done before the busy season really kicks in. If you're not sure, look back at last year's worst days and you'll find some tips. Always keep a swift and purposeful pace. If you keep the pace steady, even if the days are shorter, there's not this huge acclimation process to get everyone back into high gear." **—Chris Lee, president of Earthwork Inc., Alvarado, Texas**

## **Time management.**

1. "Set certain times to check email and respond each day. Continually checking can really bog you down, not allowing sufficient time to complete tasks with your undivided attention." **—Michael Pasquarello, landscape architect, Elite Landscaping, Berlin, New Jersey**
2. "Start to think of ways to limit time that your crews are on each job site. Are you sending the right amount of men to do the job? Do they have the right equipment for the job? Have you trained them to use the equipment most effectively? Have you routed them in the most efficient way? Think about where you can make changes." **—Gerald Boutin, general manager of the maintenance division, Denison Landscaping, Fort Washington, Maryland**
3. "Use production charts throughout the year. As contracts come in, record that in your charts and as you do the work, highlight it in another color so you know it has been done. I typically use yellow as it shows up nicely." **—Gerald Boutin, general manager of the maintenance division, Denison Landscaping, Fort Washington, Maryland**

## **Focus on your employees.**

1. "Keep your team motivated! Don't take for granted that just because spring is great for the business that it's all roses and sunshine

for your team. Chances are, they're working their butts off and there's a fatigue factor that can kick in after a little while. Come in with energy and positivity and it will be infectious to your team. A couple of impromptu happy hours go a long way." **–Kevin Denby, chief marketing officer, Oasis Turf & Tree, Loveland, Ohio**

2. "We have monthly branch BBQs, which helps with team building and also says 'thanks' for all the hard work that everyone is putting in." **–Dean DeSantis, president, DeSantis Landscapes, Portland, Oregon**
3. "Reach out to your returning seasonal employees. Meet them with a call early to reaffirm their work date. Don't be caught short-handed when busy season rolls around." **–Ken Scherer, owner, Hillsborough Irrigation & Landscape Services, Hillsborough, New Jersey**
4. "We spend a lot of time getting 'associate buy in.' As an employee-owned company [employees own 79 percent of the stock], employees have everything to gain by being a better company. We reorganized our company to create a board of vice presidents. There is a VP over every type of work we do. The idea has been to open up communication and spend more time with each branch and department. We are listening better to our associates. Our goal is to push most of the decision-making down to the people doing the work." **–Larry Ryan, owner and founder, Ryan Lawn & Tree, Overland Park, Kansas**
5. "Set clear personal and company goals and potential rewards for all employees, regardless of level, before the busy season starts. If your entire workforce is invested in getting the work done as efficiently and promptly as possible, the first couple of months will go much smoother and allow you some flexibility to take on more customers." **–Eric Taylor, manager, Lynch Plant Health Care, Sudbury, Massachusetts**
6. "Since it is required of our crew members to work Saturdays during the busy season, we create our Saturday work schedule ahead of time so they can plan accordingly. All technicians must work Saturdays during April and May." **–Liz DeNinno, co-owner, Pinnacle Irrigation and Nightlighting, Haddon Heights, New Jersey**
7. "Our biggest thing here is transparency. We open our financial plan to everyone on the team in February. Of course we don't show salaries or personal information, but we show them what our P&L burden is, what our gross profit is, and what our plan is to get there, including how each person is accountable for their piece to reach that goal. This year we're also implementing a profit sharing plan so they have even more reason to want to be efficient. Instead of just posting numbers and saying 'hit them,' we show them why it matters." **–Tony Szczechowski, general manager/owner, Pro Edge Lawn Care Ltd., Holland, Ohio**

## **Customer relations.**

1. "I think customer retention has a lot to do with surviving the busy season. We retain 96 percent of our customers every year, which is high for the industry. I take losing a customer incredibly

seriously if it's for any reason other than moving. Your existing customers should get your attention – business owners often lose sight of that when they become so focused on growing. But customer retention helps with long-term growth. And when you already know your clients so well, it makes life easier, even in the busy season.” **–Fred Oskanian, owner, Terra Lawn Specialists, Collegeville, Pennsylvania**

2. “Work with your clients. Communicate and incentivize them to let you do some of the work earlier or later than usual. Help them understand the logistics of the season starting all at once and how they can get ahead by helping you get ahead.” **–Chris Lee, president, Earthworks Inc., Alvarado, Texas**
3. “We used to say that every phone call that came in was a great lead but come busy season we would find ourselves flooded with calls and then running around for meetings even though many of the potential customers didn't end up being the right fit for us. Now we try to spend a good five or 10 minutes on the phone with every lead, finding out what they really want. Are they looking for maintenance throughout the year or a one-time small mulching job? If it's the latter, and they don't have any big landscape jobs on the horizon, it's probably not a good fit for us. Running around for small mulching jobs was a time vacuum. Spending more time on the front end talking to potential customers is helping us use our time efficiently.” **–Michael Pickel, president, Pickel Landscape Group, Landenberg, Pennsylvania**
4. “Even though we offer multiple services such as lighting and gutter cleaning on top of our core irrigation services, during those busy months we restrict services to just irrigation. We also do email marketing to encourage customers to turn their systems on early. We will often leave the controllers in the off position but our marketing reads ‘Make sure your irrigation system is ready when you are.’” **–Liz DeNinno, co-owner, Pinnacle Irrigation and Nightlighting, Haddon Heights, New Jersey**
5. “Offer an early order program to your customers for plants, hardscape products, mulch, etc. This can help with early season cash flow and also cut down on the amount that the phone rings later.” **–Joe Flake, owner, Target Lawn Care, Paola, Kansas**
6. “For new clients, turn your estimates around fast. Get their email address so you can send the estimate electronically. Set their expectations with the initial call. Be honest and tell them when you will really get to their job and how long it will take you to complete it.” **–Gerald Boutin, general manager of the maintenance division, Denison Landscaping, Fort Washington, Maryland**
7. “Pre-qualification during that initial phone call is key. Develop a template of questions that can be asked in order to save added time in the long run. These questions should include completion time frame, budgetary range, lead source, email, phone number, address and other information that is pertinent to you. This also makes tracking leads easier in the future.” **–Michael Pasquarello, landscape architect, Elite Landscaping, Berlin, New Jersey**
8. “Making the time to meet with everyone who is calling in during the

busy season becomes too much to handle so we've started staggering our marketing materials. We do a direct mail campaign but will pick and choose how many go out each week during busy season. Staggering the marketing helps us handle more leads." **—Tony Szczechowski, general manager/ owner, Pro Edge Lawn Care Ltd., Holland, Ohio**

9. "Check in with your customers on up-andcoming projects or to be sure they still want the same services as last year. We send out a product service checklist to all our customers before spring. This allows them to check off the services they still want for the new season. It also makes them familiar with all of our services in case there were some they didn't realize we do." **—Abby Gilbert, gardening division manager, Snow & Sons Tree & Landscaping, Greenfield, Massachusetts**

### **Don't forget self-care.**

1. "I like to go on a vacation somewhere tropical and remote in order to mentally relax before the season starts." **—Mike Wheeler, managing partner and operations manager, Boreal Property Management, Jackson, Wyoming**
2. "Always remember that summer does come after spring and that's when we get to breathe again." **—Gerald Boutin, general manager of the maintenance division, Denison Landscaping, Fort Washington, Maryland**
3. "Manage your stress. We all go through it and most of us will indeed live. Don't fracture relationships with clients or employees in the heat of the moment." **—Chris Lee, president, Earthworks, Alvarado, Texas**