

Tree Care?



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You bet, but read this first

Is it possible to multitask in the landscape business and offer maintenance services for both lawns and trees? Many successful green industry contractors say yes, but caution that diversification isn't simple and requires expertise in all service areas.

Larry Ryan, owner of Ryan Lawn & Tree, based in Kansas City, Mo., feels that branching out into tree care is a serious undertaking, and is best contemplated only after a lawn maintenance business has perfected its turfgrass operations.

Ryan speaks from a unique perspective. He has a degree in forestry, but began his business in 1987 by focusing on lawns – only after learning from a former employer's experiences. "When I graduated from college long ago, I went to work for a tree care company, and I saw that it really was difficult to sell those services. His business really didn't grow until he began to offer lawn care services. Then he had a customer base to market tree services to. Lawn care is easier to market," Ryan says.



Cedarlawn Tree offers both tree and turf care services. The company employs about 10 certified arborists.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CEDARLAWN TREE.

Even then, Ryan took a cautious and thoughtful approach to expanding his company's tree services. Taking things step by step is part of his business DNA. "We started in 1987, but didn't start offering tree pruning until 1994," says Ryan. "And we also waited after that to start offering tree spraying. We started small," says Ryan, whose company now has six lawn maintenance branches across Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma, but not all offer tree care services. "We add it [tree services] when they're ready," says Ryan. "They have to build their management structure strong enough so that they can

spread out. So we just do it one step at a time.”

No matter the size of a company, it’s only natural to consider expanding, says Ryan. “You’ll be out mowing a lawn and a customer will ask you, ‘Why don’t you guys do trees, too?’ So you’ll get back to the office and think, ‘Oh my gosh, everybody is saying we have to be in everything.’ But, really, it’s only a certain percentage that wants you to offer all the services. You have to be able to ignore that until you’re really ready to expand.”

Tacking on tree care services, and especially tree care services, merely to boost revenues or, more ominously, to attempt to rescue a failing enterprise, can turn out to be a disaster. Consider that adding tree services, beyond chemical services and pruning, requires serious supervision. What owner or top service manager can be in two places at once?

Be aware, also, that while turf and trees share space in a landscape, they really share little else in common. “Tree care is totally different than lawns, so it takes a different mindset to do trees well,” emphasizes Ryan. For starters, he says, while lawns are maintained at ground level, climbing into trees requires specialized training, adds a new element of risk, and also requires employees with a fair amount of courage and attention to safety.



Larry Ryan only expands to offer tree care services once the turf care program is running smoothly.

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“When it comes to climbing, you really have to learn it and learn it well,” stresses Ryan. That, of course, entails finding and training employees qualified to do tree care work. And it might take more than a single employee. In fact, there are several reasons for having at least two employees skilled in tree work, one of them being you don’t want to be dependent upon a single person when contracted jobs must be done. “So you have to make a commitment to grow big enough to have at least a couple of people doing it.” Having only one tree care specialist on staff can leave a company in serious trouble if that employee leaves or is injured. That’s why tree care employees within the company all are trained to do every aspect of every job rather than being specialized.

Also, there’s little chance to use the same equipment in both tree care and lawn care. Other than pickup trucks to transport crews, there’s hardly any equipment crossover between the two, reports Ryan. That means having to purchase dedicated tree care equipment, such as climbing ropes and equipment, chain saws, chippers and stump grinders, for starters.



Larry Ryan says lawn care provides consistent cash flow but tree care tends to ebb and flow.

Although Ryan says that it’s not necessary to own a fleet of tree care equipment when getting started, eventually most owners will be faced with the

decision of whether or not to purchase some big-ticket equipment. Because of his company's commitment to ensuring that every employee on the tree care crews can climb, Ryan Lawn & Tree, which has been offering tree care for more than 15 years, purchased its first bucket truck within the past year, and only recently began to offer removals.

There are other, less obvious, pitfalls to consider, as well. After Ryan began offering both tree and lawn services, he noticed an unhealthy sense of competition between the two separate enterprises. "The people in lawns would think they were the most important, and the people in trees would think they were [the] most important," he recalls. One specific incident helped to alleviate the problem, Ryan explains, "We had a really bad ice storm and there was enough brush on the ground that the lawn guys couldn't take care of the lawns until all the brush was cleared up, so then everybody jumped in to work together, and it really brought our company closer together." It gave both sides of the company a look at – and appreciation of – the work the other does. That's something he continues to foster.

Last, and certainly not least, there are serious financial issues relating to starting up or expanding tree care services. "With lawns, you can spread your work out over the year so that you have a consistent cash flow," says Ryan. "Tree care tends to ebb and flow. For example, pruning often is in demand after a storm, or in the spring when everyone wants their landscape looking perfect." Tree care is often "more reactionary," so it's more difficult to schedule in advance or on a regular basis, he emphasizes.

Even with all of those cautions, Ryan sees compelling reasons for offering both tree and lawn care services, the most obvious being the ability to market two sets of services to the same customer base. Of course, it works the other way around, too, a tree care customer often becomes a lawn service client, as well. "There's quite a bit of that, especially if you do a good job," says Ryan. The other benefit is the ability to better manage a particular landscape. For example, if a lawn is performing poorly due to too much shade, many property owners would probably welcome a suggestion to thin, prune or perhaps even remove certain trees.

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