

What to Expect When You're Landscaping

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Your roadmap to annual landscaping

If you have children, or know someone who does, then you are probably familiar with the book "What to Expect When You're Expecting." In this article, we've taken that concept and applied it to the landscape season.

For those of us who work in the facilities or property management realm, landscaping is about the series of actions we take to maintain our lawns, plants and mulch beds, with the intention of delivering a strong curb appeal.

Covering the Basics

As is the case with most trades, landscape work can be broken down into two main categories. First, there is the basic work that is almost always required and should be included as part of a contractual agreement. Second, there are other services that are not always needed or often done as an elective service outside of a base contract.

When we approach a landscape program, regardless of the geographic location of any client's portfolio, there are eight primary components that are almost always included within the basic landscape scope of work. Of course, there is some regional variation in how services are sequenced. Scheduling for sites that receive 12 months of service, like those in Florida, will vary from those that are more seasonal in nature, like the locations found in the Northern areas.

The Annual Scope of Work

We have roughly outlined the basic service offerings in the chronological order that they should occur. These functions include spring cleanups, mulching, irrigation startups, routine weekly services, fertilization and weed control programs, shrub and tree pruning, irrigation shutdowns and fall cleanups.

For most locations, the first service they will receive in any given landscape season will be the spring cleanup. The spring cleanup is intended to be a jump-start to the spring with a focus on returning the site back to its brand image after the winter. While it's only the first step in the process and is largely based around the removal of debris that has accumulated over the winter months, it should help to set the standard for the upcoming growing season.

Landscape beds should be treated with pre-emergent herbicides, treatments designed to reduce, prolong and prevent the growth of weeds in mulched areas. They can be applied as either liquid or granular applications. When used properly, they will curb the presence of weeds for 45 to 60 days.

The final step of most spring cleanups is what the industry calls "bed prep." This includes raking the existing bed surfaces to disperse any accumulated mulch from the previous season and to level any unevenness. While weeds are most actively present in the warmer months, certain weeds will prosper over the winter. Any unwanted plant growth should be eliminated at this time. Finally, all bed edges should be redefined where they meet lawn areas or hard surfaces such as sidewalks.

With our spring cleanup and bed preparation completed, the next step is to mulch the bed areas. Mulch is often the single most recognizable service that takes place within the landscape season. It truly provides the visual impact that everyone commonly associates with the transition from winter to spring, and is likely the single most impactful service. Aside from looking good, mulch also offers several horticultural benefits. Well-mulched planting areas will help to reduce weed growth, minimize evaporation and increase water retention in the plants' root zones.

Traditionally the most common mulch type utilized is hardwood. Hardwood mulch varies in makeup as it can be produced from tree bark, scraps from timbering and even recycled construction materials. In some cases, the mulch is dyed to take on a lasting color. Common colors include brown, black and very noticeable red. While a dyed mulch product will often come with a higher price point, it will often deliver a greater value as it retains its color much longer than traditional organic alternatives. Un-dyed mulches almost always start as a brown or black color and will fade to a grayish hue over time, usually within 90 days of application.

Energizing the Irrigation System

With your sites now taking shape, preparing your irrigation systems should be a priority. There are really a few basic steps that need to be completed. It begins with energizing the system at its water source. During this process, the primary water valve, which is most commonly found within the utility area of a building, is turned on and the main pipes of the system are filled with water, or "energized."

Once the system is energized, each zone should be tested for proper function, individual heads should be adjusted as needed and any repairs required should be identified and proposed for repair. The last step of the start-up process is to adjust the system's run times at the controller to adequately supplement natural rainfall.

Routine Service Visits

Without a doubt, the heart of any landscape program lies within routine service visits. These include the reoccurring services that are delivered on a scheduled frequency during the active growing season. The services provided under this line item are those that will have the most enduring impact. Without them we would lose that green, clean and well-maintained appearance.

Reoccurring services typically include the following:

- Hand picking trash and debris from the lawn and landscaped areas
- Eradicating weeds from bed areas. This is often accomplished by either hand picking or through the use of a herbicide

- Mowing of all lawn areas, using a guideline of never removing more than one-third of the grass blade during a cutting
- String trimming areas that are too small or otherwise inaccessible by larger mowing equipment
- Edging of lawn areas where turf grass meets sidewalks or curbs
- Hard surface weed controls. This is the eradication of weeds that grow in asphalt cracks, along curb lines and at the base of building foundations

The final step is the blowing and clean-up process, when grass clippings and other debris generated by the landscape visit are removed and the site is left in a neat and orderly fashion.

While those weekly services are being delivered, your fertilizer and weed control applications will also be performed. They will include pre-emergent weed controls, a minimum of three fertilization services and postemergent applications. Frequencies and product type may vary across your geographical footprint, but the foundation of consistent treatments is critical.

Additional Services

Additional services that will be in your base contract include pruning. Pruning is often segregated into two categories: tree pruning and shrub pruning. Regardless of whether we are talking about trees or shrubs, the reasons we prune are much the same. The intent is to control or maintain a plant's size, promote new growth and overall plant health, and ensure a safe environment.

When we look at pruning shrubs, our techniques will be categorized in two areas: pruning and shearing. Traditionally, pruning is a more detailed thinning of a plant, during which individual limbs are shaped to provide plant structure. Shearing is when an entire plant is trimmed to form a hedge or massing effect, which is what we most commonly expect on commercial sites.

Tree pruning is often viewed as three separate tasks: elevation of lower limbs, shaping and thinning or structural pruning. The most common type of pruning encountered on commercial or retail landscape sites is the elevation of lower limbs. This is when lower limbs are removed so they do not present a hazard to pedestrians or vehicular traffic.

Not all trees are included as part of base landscape contracts. When trees are tall enough that they can no longer be serviced from the ground with normal landscape tools and require ladders or other specialized equipment, they are no longer considered part of the base contract. Industry standards identify this height to be between 12 and 16 feet.

Regarding the timing of these services, you will find your northern markets are trimmed two times a year, while 10-month service states often see three prunings per year. The sites farthest south will see ongoing services, anywhere from four to eight services per year.

Heading into Winter

Once fall arrives, focus shifts to preparing for the winter. That starts with the shutdown or winterization of irrigation systems. Winterization is the process of removing all water that is present in the irrigation system to prevent it from freezing during the colder winter months and causing damage to the physical irrigation system.

This is accomplished by shutting the primary water supply that feeds the system, blowing compressed air through the lines to push the water out, and placing a lock-out tag on the supply valve to identify that the valve should not be opened until spring. Finally, the controller should be placed in the "off" position.

The final step to a complete landscape program is the fall cleanup. Fall cleanups are meant to remove fallen leaves from the lawn and planting beds to leave the property in a clean and orderly state. Common tasks include removing leaves and debris from the bed and lawn areas, cutting back and removing seasonal plantings, perennials and ornamental grasses, and disposing of these materials at an offsite location.

In addition to all of these core services, you will need to address out-of-scope items, including irrigation repairs, plant replacement and high tree trimming. However, the information shared in this article will provide you with the roadmap you can follow to a healthy, successful, landscape season. Good luck, and remember: Snow season is right around the corner.

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