

Maximize Your Curb Appeal

Jeff Dover

Landscaping maintenance can help draw customers in or drive them away

In my time, restaurant landscaping was not handled through facilities. Local operators or area directors usually worked with small, local landscapers to keep the areas maintained or handled the work themselves, using in-house personnel. But due to the changes within our industry over the years, facilities is now responsible for overseeing the contracts and efforts of local or national landscaping providers.

This article deals with the basics of proper landscaping methods and techniques to minimize water usage while still maintaining a beautiful appearance. I will also summarize key items to look for in a landscaping management partner.

The Importance of Curb Appeal

Besides food, service and price, a restaurant's first impression is very important in customers' eyes as they drive by and decide where to spend their hard-earned dollars. A brand can suffer significantly if the building is unkempt and unappealing.

Curb appeal is usually the first item customers notice. This is why landscaping is so important. During the "landscape season," it's important to keep the grass green and freshly mowed, plants and shrubs healthy and trimmed, and the overall landscaping in good condition. Your landscaping partner should be able to easily accomplish this.

Going Green

As part of the growing green initiative, it make sense both economically and ethically to ensure your landscaping methods are saving water wherever possible while still doing an adequate job. Most restaurants have an irrigation system that periodically waters plants, shrubs, trees and grass. How often is it checked for proper operation? Are the time settings correct? Are the spray patterns appropriate?

Normally, all this has to be manually checked on site. With today's technology, it now makes economic sense to look into installing a smart irrigation system, which can be managed online. The systems use new sensor technology to understand soil moisture levels, with reference to the time, date, weather conditions and geographical orientation of the building. The technology can constantly monitor the watering metrics to ensure you are not wasting water and plant life is getting what it needs.

This helps maintain the landscaping without manual checks, while also saving money on the water bill. It even eliminates the need to adjust or reset the manual timers. With water becoming ever more valuable due to the recent droughts around the country, relying on this new technology will likely become standard practice. Some states may require its use in the future.

Most restaurants do not have smart systems, but there are still several areas where water use can be minimized:

- Schedule watering for early in the morning or right after sunset to minimize evaporation.
- Adjust the watering time and schedule depending on season. Obviously, plants need less water in the cooler months.
- Aim sprinklers correctly to only water plants, shrubs, trees, grass and so on. Do not water sidewalks, parking lots and patios. Watering in paved areas not only wastes water but will prematurely wear the surface of the asphalt.
- Periodically check the system for leaks and broken heads. Install a rain-sensing device for auto-shutoff.
- Plant regional, site-specific, low-maintenance plants, which require minimum water.
- Keep at least 2 to 3 inches of mulch in planting beds to help retain moisture.
- Do not plant in the warmer months unless absolutely necessary, as more water is needed to establish plant growth.

Find a Partner

The goal of any organization is to have a good-looking, well-manicured facility that presents a great first impression to the customer and is relatively easy to maintain. Establishing a good business partner for your landscaping maintenance is a must.

Consider these tips and guidelines for finding a strong landscaping management partner:

- Determine a detailed scope of work for each location. Group them by region or state, as restaurants located in different geographical areas will have different landscaping seasons and require varying service schedules.
- Break out each service to easily compare the different charges from each contractor. Itemize main services such as weekly lawn mowing, fertilization service and times, tree/shrub trimming and seasonal mulching.
- Determine appropriate timing for RFP completion and contract awarding. Make sure to allow several months prior to the start of landscaping season for all documents to be completed, reviewed and acted upon.

Following the practices and guidelines contained in this article will help you protect your brand, save utility dollars and meet your green initiatives for years to come. And remember, the more detailed the scope of service, the better. For additional expertise, talk with a RFMA landscape vendor who can provide the proper minimum frequencies for each service.

I'm always looking for feedback. Feel free to contact me at (972) 805-0905, ext. 3, or email at jeff@rfmaonline.com.

Dover and out.

Jeff Dover's facilities career started in 1985. He has been employed by several major chains (Ponderosa, Steak & Ale, Bennigan's, TGI Friday's, Fuddruckers and recently Five Guys Burgers and Fries). His technical education enabled him to take the lead as energy manager, facilities manager and director of facilities at the various brands.