

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Nine From the Complaint Line

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If you have time to whine and complain about something then you have the time to do something about it.

~Anthony J. D'Angelo

Not every business relationship runs smoothly. You run out of product ... your landscape customer plants a full-sun plant in the shade ... and the list goes on. But the best way to handle these little hiccups between you and your customers is knowing the best course of action.

So, we've asked around to find the most common problems growers and landscapers face, and learn how they handle each situation. Two words that were repeated throughout the conversations: communication and education. Both are vital to dealing with this distinct market.

ISSUE #1 Growers don't respond fast enough to issues, e.g. if the landscaper needs replacement product.

Jim Clesen, owner of Ron Clesen Ornamental Plants in Maple Park, Illinois, has been working with landscapers for more than 35 years; this segment comprises 60% of their business. In his experience, it's difficult to provide last-minute replacements or "extras" when he stopped growing on spec because of the marketplace.

"We're a little bit different from other greenhouses in that when I have a problem, I'm communicating it, especially when we have to find a substitute," said Jim. "But nobody's speculating anymore; everybody's been asked to squeeze their profits down to the bare minimum in order to not increase prices and still provide a quality product. It's not always as quick when a landscaper asks for an extra 20 or 40 flats."

Solutions/suggestions: Donal Nichols, sales manager for Mobley Plant Farm in Dacula, Georgia, learned the ropes by growing up on the landscape side of the business, which helps him when dealing with Mobley's landscape customers. "It's hard for the landscaper to get their customers to commit to anything more than two months ahead of time, which is not enough time for a grower," he explained.

Donal said they try to look at previous years to gauge whether more or less product is needed for the following year. This way, they're more prepared if a landscaper needs more plant material.

ISSUE #2 Landscapers don't plan ahead of time.

Bruce Hellerick, senior horticulturist for the Brickman Group, which provides landscape services around the U.S., said this is often true with many landscape contractors. However, lack of planning can be alleviated with a little communication.

"There are some organizations out there who understand the greenhouse system and that [growers] are placing seed orders the previous year in July and August," Bruce explained. "The greenhouses need lead time to get things ready versus showing up the middle of May and saying, 'Okay, this is what I need.'"

Bruce said good planning comes with a stable customer base—ergo, more organization offers more time to plan ahead. "We basically order in December for what we know we have for the following year. Then we pick up any extras that the growers have as we need them in the spring time."

"I think the landscapers do plan ahead; it's in their best interest to have everything in line," said Jim. "The problem is it's their customers who believe that growing happens in a blink of an eye. And a lot of times their customers are confined by their budgets, so some landscapers are offering incentives to order early, but it's sort of an uphill battle for them, especially here in the Midwest. A lot of these people aren't getting contracts until February and March."

Solutions/suggestions: Bruce says growers need to train the landscapers on when they should be placing their orders. This could be done by sending a little "cheat sheet" in July or August with tips for ordering plants next spring, for example.

Jim also suggested growers and contractors make the clients—such as the building owners and landscape architects—more informed about when the contracts are needed in order to get the product they want at the right time, which is usually a three- to six-month lead time.

Mobley Plant Farm encourages their landscape customers to ask their clients what they like and don't like about the current plantings, which gives them more insight for the future aside from pulling the numbers from the previous year. "It helps me bring this information to the table when we start ordering for the next year," said Donal.

ISSUE #3 Landscapers don't know enough about the process or have basic plant knowledge.

"I think that [statement] is unfair," said Jim. "I have no specific growing knowledge on what a tree or shrub is going to need if I plant it in my backyard in order to make it succeed. I've got to ask questions. Our green industry has so many areas of expertise; there aren't many people that overlap that know everything about everything and practice it on a commercial site."

Bruce said that every landscape worker can put a plant in the ground; however, not all of them know the plant's basics. But it's unrealistic to expect every person on the landscaping staff to have a hort background. And sometimes, it simply boils down to plant quality.

“Some greenhouses send insects and diseases with their plants, so it goes both ways,” said Bruce. “I get to visit lots of greenhouses and there are some that I will buy from and there are some I’ll never return to because I can see that the quality is not there. You’re only as good as your last crop.”

Solutions/suggestions: Jim says growers are fortunate enough to have resources that can help them with cultural questions, but the landscapers don’t have that luxury. So it’s up to their suppliers to educate them. “They look upon us to be able to [help] them,” said Jim.

Most landscapers already know which plants work for them, but that’s when the growers should step in and show them other alternatives with new and improved varieties that will provide their clients with better plants for the same price. “We have to show them how they were made to work for them,” explained Jim. “It’s our job to go ahead and make their jobs easier, tell them why they need annuals and why some of them fail.”

ISSUE #4 Landscapers don’t understand the true value of the plants. They don’t want to pay a higher price for better/improved varieties.

Is this a true statement? Bruce says yes and no. The economy actually dictates the prices landscapers will pay for products and not the buyers themselves.

“We can only pay what our clients are willing to pay,” stated Bruce. “So ultimately it’s our clients making that determination. Sometimes we try to convince the client that it’s worth it [to pay more] or we eat the cost or we cost share with the greenhouse.”

Bruce compares a landscaper’s customer base with the different segments of growers. “You’ve got greenhouses that are strictly wholesale for big volume. You’ve got greenhouses that are geared to only retail. Then you have others that are geared to the very upper end, so they’re charging a very premium price and they have the client that is willing to spend top dollar to get that product. It’s the same thing with landscapers.”

Solutions/suggestions: Every year, breeders introduce new varieties that are ideal for the landscape, but a lot of people don’t know enough about the older ones to make an informed decision on what to grow. This is when the grower can step in and tell them, said Jim. He asks his customers, “What do you want [the plant] to do? We need to do a better job of educating them. If we can show the customer the value, they’re willing to change.”

ISSUE #5 Not all growers offer guaranteed replacement.

Most growers will replace product if the landscaper notices a problem immediately after delivery; however, this situation is handled on a case-by-case basis. If there’s a problem within 24 hours after the product is shipped, Jim or one of his staff will visit the job site and assess the issue.

Solutions/suggestions: Growers encourage their landscape customers to communicate with them quickly if they encounter a problem, but to use common sense before placing blame on the supplier. If a full-sun

variety is placed in the shade or an entire bed dies because of overwatering, growers aren't obligated to replace those plants, said Jim. Which segues into the next issue ...

ISSUE #6 Landscapers think plant losses are the growers' fault.

Here, quality could be a factor, said Bruce.

"What we're buying is a root system," said Bruce. "If the plant comes with a very weak root system and it doesn't take off then it was never a good product to start with."

But the onus is also on the landscaper to ensure that once they receive the product, it's maintained properly until it can be planted. Sometimes, this could take a week or more depending on variables like the weather. Leaving the flats on asphalt or on racks in a dark warehouse will almost ensure that the plants will not thrive as well as they should.

Solutions/suggestions: Every time a shipment comes in, it needs to be checked for quality and any concerns should be immediately communicated back to the greenhouse. For the grower, if he or she notices a problem with the plant before shipment, the landscape customer needs to be made aware so other arrangements can be made to replace the product.

Donal also provides "storage tips" on what to do with the plants if they aren't immediately going to a job site.

ISSUE #7 Landscapers don't practice good soil prep or irrigation methods.

Sometimes what the landscaper thought was an issue with the plant turns out to be a soil problem, said Donal. "Sometimes they're not doing soil analysis or they'll try to shortcut on the bed prep and they don't realize it has implications for the entire season of how well the plants are going to do."

Donal has also found that some landscapers don't fully understand the difference between fertilizers and will often use the wrong type, which brings negative results.

Solutions/suggestions: "When our customers call us, one of the first things we ask is if they amend their beds every year," said Jim. Again, it comes down to telling the landscaper how preparing the soil actually saves them money on plant material, increases their plant performance, and reduces labor and pesticide use, said Jim. "I can't guarantee the bed's going to look phenomenal; I can just give you the best chance to succeed with the knowledge that we collect here. It's a vast industry that requires a lot of knowledge in a lot of specific areas, and many times those basic things are overlooked."

Mobley Plant Farm has an annual open house when they provide free workshops for their landscape customers and are looking to include bilingual classes, as well. "We provide it so we can give them the knowledge to help them be successful in the field because it doesn't stop when we send the plant out," said Donal.

ISSUE #8 Landscapers want full color at planting.

“Landscapers as a whole want that instant gratification and it’s just because they’re dealing with a customer who is used to going to the garden center where they see everything in flower,” said Donal.

Solutions/suggestions: Donal said he feels most landscapers do a good job of educating their customers that a “retail-ready” flower does not work well in the landscape. They work with landscapers on specific projects, keeping them informed of where the crops stand and whether they’re ready for planting. “There’s a lot more communication going on than in the past, which is good,” said Donal.

ISSUE #9 Growers think of the landscape trade as low on the customer totem pole.

Growers who supply multiple segments know this is not an ideal method of thinking. But it’s easier for some businesses to wear a multitude of hats and still maintain a high level of customer service. It’s a lesson Jim learned the hard way with his retail customers.

“A lot of people feel that [landscape] is a secondary business to supply and not a primary source. We did that; we looked at the retailer as a secondary market and we were so wrong in doing that,” he explained. Since then, Jim says they’ve re-committed to having multiple crops for their retailer clients.

Donal recalls hearing about some contractors getting the cold shoulder during his landscape days. “If you’re not a big landscaper, some growers tend to not give you the respect. Frankly, it’s a take-it-or-leave-it attitude,” he remembers.

Solutions/suggestions: The new Golden Rule for landscapers: Treat them like you treat your other customers.

“I think [growers] need to understand that it’s a different bird,” Jim said. “There are different needs for different customers and you have to be able to switch at the drop of a dime.”

“No matter how big or small the operation, I’m going out there regardless if you buy 100 flats or 10,000 flats,” stated Donal. “To me, that 100-flat landscaper this season may buy 300 next season. They’re the ones who help you grow.” **GT**