

Landscaping

Retail Facility Business recently asked some experts about landscaping trends pertaining to retailers and retail centers. Our experts are: **W. Edward Crotty**, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Newport, Kentucky-based Divisions Maintenance Group; **Carleton Beach**, director of landscape services for Chicago-based SMS Assist; and **Matt Hoskins**, key account manager for Norristown, Pennsylvania-based USM, Inc., An EMCOR Company.

RFB: *What are some of the latest trends today in retail landscaping and exterior services management? Where do you see the industry in 5 years?*

W. Edward Crotty: (1) *The return of the customer:* When retailers started cutting back their budgets in response to the recession, landscaping was one of the first things to go. We never stopped being diligent about managing the turf and mulch beds, but more decorative items like flowers were severely reduced.

Commercial landscape installations are good for about 10 years, and those needing renovations have been put off for a while now. Today there are lots of properties out there in major need of landscape renovation right when the competition for customers is starting to heat back up.

As retailers ratchet up their attempts to entice customers in the door, curb appeal is going to take a bigger priority than it has in recent years. I look to see an increase in the number of renovations as well as an increase in the service levels and aesthetic enhancements on the properties. In short, maintaining a consistent brand image has never been more important.

(2) *Irrigation will be revolutionized:* There is a lot of exciting technology being introduced to the industry today — from bio-engineered plants that require less maintenance to development of plant growth regulators and season-long fertilizers.

I believe that before anything else, though, we'll see a revolution in irrigation. Most irrigation systems today waste tons of water, and as a society we're

losing our tolerance for waste of our natural resources.

Finally, we have technology that is accessible enough and at the right price point for us to actually implement some changes. New technology like weather-based irrigation controllers that analyze and respond to the actual moisture needs of the plants and soil allow us to water only as needed. Systems like this can save 15% to 20% of your water waste, and can usually adapt to your existing systems. There are very few arguments for sticking with the status quo, where landscaping installations are watered on a timer system whether it's needed or not, sending most of the water (and your money) down the drain.

Carleton Beach: Since the downturn in the economy, there have been some changes in the selection of plants for various projects. The downturn left many of the nursery stock providers with overly large inventories of traditional cultivated plants. Naturally, the prices on these plants went down, which made them attractive, but the maintenance on many of them is still higher than on native plants. On the other hand, some planners began to choose native plants, which can be more expensive to purchase because they are often grown by less numerous, specialized growers, but cost less to maintain.

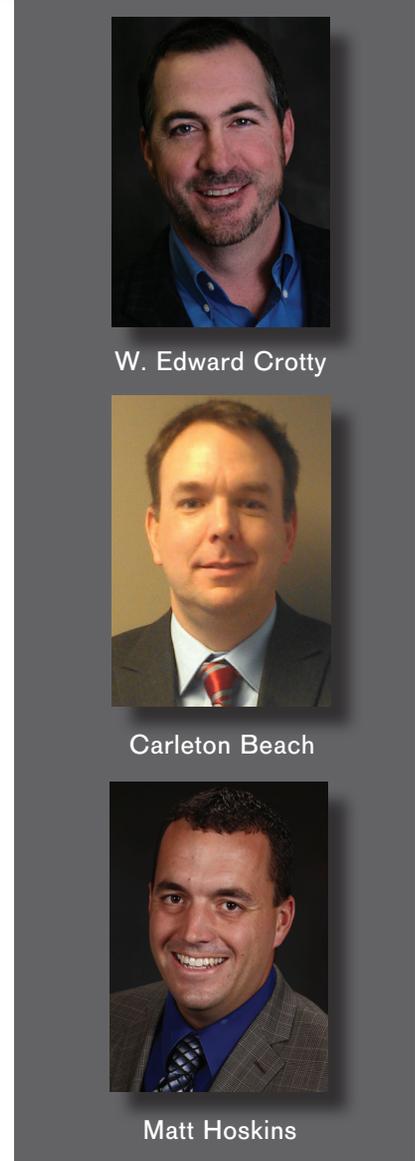
So plant purchasing has changed, but it will change again soon as the big nursery stock providers begin to run out of their surplus stock. The cost of purchasing plants will go back to relying on a supply-demand model and things will even out, as will the rest of the industry. I believe in 5 years the industry will actually be stronger, as the market expectations and pricing come to equilibrium.

Matt Hoskins: One key trend that will positively affect the retailer's bottom line is the consolidation of vendors. Retailers are looking to manage budgets tightly. As a result, many are turning to maintenance and management firms with national coverage and subject matter expertise capable of tailoring scopes of work and returning a "best-value" solution to exterior services. Within the landscaping realm, water conservation projects; natural, native and xeric plantings; and organic practices and products are being integrated at an accelerating pace. With the progression of technology, plant hybridization and recycling efforts, these practices can be easily applied in the typical retail landscape, often with little to no capital investment and an incredible return on the investment. Over the next few years, we will see a more efficient industry — cost-wise, scope-wise and water-wise — on the part of retailers and contractors.

RFB: *What can shopping centers do to promote water conservation? What about other sustainable landscaping design options?*

Crotty: Many water conservation efforts today are focused more on water control — or capturing and directing the runoff when it rains. It serves two purposes: limiting the amount of runoff that is directed to storm sewers, and providing a source of hydration for plant life without drawing water from the main supply. Smart irrigation, green roofs and permeable pavers are gaining traction in the U.S. as they become more accessible options.

Also, bioswales, which are contoured water harvesting ditches



W. Edward Crotty

Carleton Beach

Matt Hoskins

designed to slow and capture runoff by spreading it horizontally across the landscape, are slowly showing their value over the widely used detention pond. Detention ponds, if not attended to properly, tend to become unattractive and stagnant. Bioswales, however, utilize plant life that thrives in the moist environment while helping to control the water, making for a naturally more attractive (and effective) water management system.

Beach: Water conservation is a growing concern, and a first step to consider is retrofitting existing landscape irrigation systems with state-of-the-art controllers. Today's technology makes it possible to use live-weather data and to operate irrigation systems by remote control to maximize efficiency in the event of heavy rains, drought or line breakage. These updated systems can accurately measure flow and automatically shut off when rates exceed a maximum in the event of a system failure.

Parking lots are a less obvious

area focal point for water conservation, yet they have numerous effects on water in the environment. For example, rainwater on a lot will run off to a concentrated point as opposed to filtrating into the soils as it would in a natural area. Also, in summer months, paved lots produce heat islands and affect the rates of water loss in surrounding plants, increasing the need for supplemental watering. Finally, the maintenance of paved areas in winter frequently introduces soluble salts into the environment.

Consequently, creating smaller lots would do a lot to conserve water. If that is not an option, designers can incorporate a greater percentage of non-irrigated, native plantings into the lots to conserve water, provide a hedge against drought and reduce the introduction of salts and other de-icing agents into the environment.

Hoskins: Shopping center owners and managers can be proactive, evaluating individual properties and taking concrete steps to be water conscious in a variety of basic ways. Is there irrigation spraying into roadways or standing water at the bottom of a slope or in the gutter? Maybe the irrigation system is running while it is raining. These seemingly pedestrian and everyday occurrences often go overlooked and can be written off as simply “part of doing business.” To the general public, however, this demonstrates a lack of concern for the environment that can result in lost customer visits.

Once problem areas are identified, appropriate, efficient and long term solutions should be sought. High-efficiency sprinkler nozzles, drip irrigation and controllers that automatically adjust with the daily weather are a few straightforward fixes that can be applied and retrofitted to the current system at minimal cost.

Once the fix has been implemented, brag about the results. For example, display water savings to customers on-site, to corporate executives and directors and to competitors. With a concerted effort to reduce water con-

sumption, the owner can realize significant cost savings, and the local aquifer can realize a real benefit, as well.

RFB: *How can retailers spruce up their landscape on a tight budget in a challenging economy?*

Crotty: Consider a different mulch. Mulch is one of the biggest landscaping budget line items for most retailers. Finding ways to save on mulch is likely to yield bigger savings than anything else. If you are currently applying mulch in the spring, and find that it is losing color just when retail is approaching peak season (the holidays), you may want to consider switching to a black stained hard wood mulch. Although the upfront cost is slightly higher, it is more cost effective than a second round of mulch each year.

Beach: The key to upgrading on a budget is to have a well thought out strategic plan that can be used to comfortably reduce certain cultural or aesthetic standards to lower costs. By lowering those standards, some money can be saved that can then be applied toward incorporating new components that provide long term value.

For example, a floral budget could be reduced in favor of new tree plantings. Another option would be to reduce mulch applications to save costs. The goal should be to apply the savings to the landscape budget to reinvigorate it for long term gain. Investments in lawn rehabilitation or tree and shrub planting will have continued positive impact.

Hoskins: Retailers can employ simple fixes and shouldn't think that a complete renovation is the only way to get a new look. Often, a slight change in a maintenance practice or added service will make a real difference. When capital infrastructure projects are planned, use them as a way to implement landscape renovations or improvements, as well — killing the proverbial two birds with one stone.

RFB: *What should a retailer, property manager or shopping center owner look for when hiring a landscaping/exterior services provider?*

Crotty: There are two tell-tale ways to ensure you're dealing with a quality service provider. First is the state of their equipment. Any landscaping service provider worth their salt understands that their equipment is their livelihood and is critical to servicing their accounts. You need to feel confident that they are going to be able to handle the work you are asking them to perform. Do they have enough equipment/assets to handle multiple properties? If one of their mowers breaks down, will they still be able to respond to your request? How do they go about planning for repairs? Some of the best providers employ mechanics on staff to keep their equipment running at peak performance. That's the type of provider you're looking for. You can spot undesirable qualities, like overuse of subcontractors, too little experience, insufficient support staff or financial insolvency just by looking at the way they regard their equipment.

Second, be sure to look for a passionate provider dedicated to their trade. The biggest mistake we see is that customers don't always have adequate resources to vet properly. One quick question to ask is “What other services do you perform?” If your landscaper tells you they also perform plumbing work, you may be setting yourself up for conflicts.

Beach: The first thing any manager should look for when hiring a service provider is that the company has a certified staff with industry accreditation. Accreditation shows a number of things, including that the company has a certain level of commitment to hiring and retaining skilled workers who will provide the expected level of service.

After that, the key to hiring the right provider is making sure that the company will deliver the

right services at the right price. Often, especially in trying financial times, it is tempting to simply hire the company with the lowest bid. But with a closer look, it might turn out that the services that company provides do not mesh with your portfolio. Be certain that the price you like comes with the service you actually need.

Hoskins: Experience is the major factor to consider when hiring a landscaping or exterior services provider. In the landscape industry, knowledgeable professionals with a solid track record and full-service capabilities can be hard to come by.

Look for a provider with many years of experience — not only in exterior services, but also in *retail* exterior services. There are a host of important considerations that need to be accounted for at a retail facility, and even a large company with mostly residential or office building clientele may not fully understand what's required to meet a shopping center's needs.

A friendly and presentable staff is also important. While on-site, exterior service providers are often the first impression of a retailer's brand; ensure that it's a good one with uniformed staff who are familiar with the property and able to communicate effectively in a face-to-face conversation.

Lastly, seek a provider who will not only maintain the exterior assets, but one who will improve upon them in a cost-effective and progressive manner. **RFB**