

LANDSCAPING

Property Management is the profession of maintaining property values. Almost always, one of the biggest expenses of an association is landscape maintenance. After working for an upscale developer in the beginning of my career in property management, I was taught the importance of having a well manicured property and using this as one of the key sales tools.

Landscaping is able to hide a lot of problems. Unfortunately, I believe it is one of the most overlooked areas by property managers and the homeowners alike. Landscaping is a very tough business with a very small profit margin, similar to property management. The general attitude is landscaping is easy and that landscapers are all alike. This could not be further from the truth. I have found few landscapers that are knowledgeable in the proper horticultural practices to promote a good overall landscaping growth.

Often times, I have seen a property go through transition, change landscapers and watch the property go down to the point where much of the landscape material needs to be replaced at a considerable expense to the homeowners. But, I have also seen developers allow the landscaper to install the wrong type or poorly planted material which will eventually die (some plant material can take as long as a year before it eventually dies) well after transition and again at the homeowner's expense.

The Board tends to always want to take the low bid in an effort to keep the assessment down, which is understandable. However, the landscaping of a community has a tremendous impact on the property values. This is where it is vital to have a property manager separate from the landscaping company to ensure the association gets the "best value". By having the manager and landscaper from the same company, it is an inherent conflict. Is the manager acting in the best interest of the association or the landscaper? This is why "full service management" doesn't work. When it is time to bid out the landscaping, are you really going to get a fair bid process.

Unfortunately, I have seen property managers that don't know the difference between selloum and ficus (two commonly used plant materials in South Florida), or the different types of fertilizer to be used on different plant material. While I agree a property manager doesn't have to be an expert, he or she should know enough about a particular area to ensure you do not get the wool pulled over your eyes. It behooves a property manager to learn basic landscaping, and when this happens, you will find yourself qualifying landscapers to bid on your properties in the following way:

1. Are they able and knowledgeable to make irrigation repairs and perform irrigation maintenance?
2. Do they have the right equipment for the task required?
3. Do they know the name of the plant material on property and the proper way to maintain them?
4. Are they licensed to spray the various chemicals to keep insects and fungus under control or are you, the property manager, going to have to subcontract this area out?
5. How many employees do they have?
6. How long do they plan on being on property to get the job done?
7. How quickly will they be able to react to complaints?
8. What other properties do they work on in the area? (This will allow you to see the quality of work they perform).
9. Walk the property and see what problems they notice.

There are two main times during the course of the year that landscapers often change accounts. The first is in October and November when the Board's turnover and new budgets are approved and old contracts renegotiated. The second time is June/July when the landscaper can't keep up with the work during the height of the growing season. The landscaper usually figures that they are losing money and are looking for ways to cut corners in order to save labor costs, thus the property suffers and is not maintained the way it should be.

Usually in late spring, early summer, I like to have a hard prune performed to make sure the property looks manicured for the arrival of the "snowbirds" in the fall. This is also the time of year to walk the property and check for dry spots and infestation.

I prefer that the landscapers do any necessary spraying of pesticides and fertilizers. However, because of liability concerns, the landscaper must be licensed to perform any spraying or use of pesticides, etc.

Almost every association has at least one homeowner from up north who is a landscape expert. But, Florida is different, and to do things the way they do them up north is simply unnecessary and much more expensive.

However, it has been done before, just to keep the peace! The crew foreman is the key to the success of the landscape company. I always insist that the foreman speak some English so that I can communicate how I want the property maintained. It is also important that someone on the crew is able to speak to the homeowners when they come out to ask questions, etc.

Irrigation must have a preventative maintenance program, Q.C. (quick check), because irrigation systems constantly need maintenance. I usually allocate 5% to 10% of my total landscape budget for irrigation maintenance on a good system.

I figure if I can keep the landscaper in line, then I have avoided 50% of the complaint calls from homeowners. This is why I don't feel it is advantageous for a management company to perform landscaping services. It is difficult to work in the best interest of the association and at the same time have an interest in the landscape company as its owner. The two eventually conflict.

Landscapers do work very hard and I feel they need to get paid a fair fee. Always look at the bids closely, because all too often the low bid is not the best bang for the buck. Oftentimes, the association tells me they're not cheap, but they want value for their dollar.

Steve Inglis, PCAM, is President of Bristol Management Services, Inc. in Jupiter, Past President of the Community Association Institute (CAI) and has earned The PCAM Designation through extensive Association Management training.