



PHOTOS BY ROCKY WOMACK

Trying New Ground

Advice for landscapers venturing into hardscapes

by Rocky Womack

Charles Anderson has entered the hardscape area of landscaping because of the demand in the South Boston, Va., region.

Listening to the customer goes a long way in understanding his hardscape needs. Charles Anderson, president and chief executive officer of Charles Anderson Lawn Care Service, Inc. in South Boston, Va., prides himself on communicating with customers so he can meet their expectations, which helps his business thrive.

Charles and his son Bruce, operations manager of the company, hope to capitalize on the growing outdoor hardscape market. They have expanded the company's offerings to include the building of patios, retaining walls, fountains and rock pathways, as well as installing irrigation systems. While the pair and their crew have designed and installed some hardscapes, they still welcome any advice from more experienced hardscapers.

The voice of experience

Mark Boyer, president and secretary of Roots & Shoots Landscaping, Inc. in Danville, Va., is glad to offer anyone entering the hardscape end of the business some tips when designing hardscapes in the Southside Virginia area.

He says that when building segmental retaining walls, landscapers should follow the manufacturer's exact specifications for

designing them. He says to level out the foot of the wall, so the rest of the wall goes in smoothly. Otherwise, the landscaper faces some tough decisions later.

Boyer also says it is important to install a proper drainage system behind the wall so water releases from the enclosure. If this guideline is not followed, the wall could blow out from too much water building up behind it. He says landscapers can compact a backfill behind the wall with dry dirt.

When building patios, Boyer says landscapers must remember to put down a proper base of 4-inch compacted gravel, and then compact it. Add 1 inch of sand and smooth it out on top of the base, being sure to slip sand in between the cracks. This technique makes for a firm, strong system, he says.

For driveways, Boyer advises using a 12-inch gravel base. If landscapers fail to put down a firm base, the driveway will sink, he says.

Nothing is worse than having to redo something. That is why Boyer suggests using interlocking pavers. They can be removed in case the landscaper or someone else should need to go underneath at a later time, such as to dig a sewer line. When finished, the person can easily

replace the interlocking pavers versus having to dig up sections and rebuild the hardscape.

When installing irrigation for the first few times, Boyer says landscapers must know their water source. How many gallons per minute will it take to pump the required water amount and at what pressure? He says nothing is worse than installing a system and realizing afterward that not enough water pressure is available.

Certification

Pete Bryant, president of Southern Exposure Landscape Management, Inc. in Greensboro, N.C., points out the importance of certification. "Learn about the Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute [www.icpi.org] and their classes and certifications," he says. "This program has been invaluable in gaining understanding, and has been very critical in landing the jobs I'm estimating. If a home owner has two companies that they are deciding to choose from; one is certified and one is not, if the prices are remotely close, the home owner will choose the certified installer every time."

Information about training and certification for installing segmental retaining walls

is available from the National Concrete Masonry Association at www.ncma.org.

Get hands-on

Even after reading about techniques in books landscapers can get in over their heads. "Don't bite off more than you can handle at the beginning," Bryant says. "Some of the projects that come before us now are complex, multileveled that include stairs, landings, patios and lighting all together. If you are offered a job such as this in the beginning, sub it out and learn from it. That type of knowledge is much better learned by sight than by books. Establish a relationship with someone who does know what they're doing, and learn from them while still making a little off the top and not having all the liability on your shoulders while you're inexperienced in the field."

Once the landscaper is ready to try his hand at hardscaping, Bryant warns against practicing his craft on someone else's property. He says the material and labor is too expensive for mistakes; you don't want to return later to repair and/or replace the work.

When a landscaper has completed several successful hardscape jobs, Bryant suggests taking photos of each one and bringing them along in a professional notebook to show potential clients. He suggests marketing to current clients as well; because they will respond positively to the work you've already done on their lawns.

Something that has had positive results for him is setting up a Web site (www.wemakedirtlookgood.com) so customers can review his hardscape work. This saves the landscaper time, because he can direct potential customers to the site rather than driving to the customer's home to show them his portfolio.

"You'd be surprised at the response you can get," Bryant says. "At first, I thought I'd be turning people away by not spending one-on-one time with them, but it has turned into just the opposite."

"I'm not the only busy person out there," he adds. "My clients are just as busy and have enjoyed the flexibility and convenience of being able to research my company from the comfort of their own home or office."

Outdoor escape

Anderson has entered into the hardscape end of landscaping because he says more affluent families in the South Boston, Va., area are starting to entertain more at their homes, especially on the outside. When they do, they want their neighbors and friends to see aesthetically pleasing outdoor patios, stones walls and rock walkways.

What's driving this trend? Is it people's lifestyles today, or do they have more

income? "It's probably a little bit of both," Anderson says. People are stressed out in their jobs, so they want peace and quiet at home, he says. They seek out the comforts of home and outdoor living, such as a soothing fountain, lush plant life beside a walkway or a pond with fish.

Like many other midsize towns and counties, South Boston and Halifax County, Va., are growing areas in the southern part of the state. More people are moving in from outside the county, particularly from the north, and bringing with them cash and a willingness to spend.

Bruce estimates that business at Charles Anderson Lawn Care Service has doubled in the last three years. "I can see it increasing 25 to 30 percent this year," he says. "I would like for it to grow not beyond a manageable state; something that we can manage and produce a good product and good service for our customers. I don't want it to grow beyond what we can control. We're fortunate enough to have the clients that that could probably happen."

Company background

Anderson started his business in 1983 while working full-time at a local plastics factory. In 1994, he left that job and went into the lawn care business full time. "As time went on, I had to make a decision... so I decided to go into this. I could just see the potential and need for what I was doing."

He leased a building on U.S. 58 beside the World of Sports recreational complex in Riverdale, Va., in 2003. Two years later, Anderson moved into and leased a building in South Boston, where he operates from today.

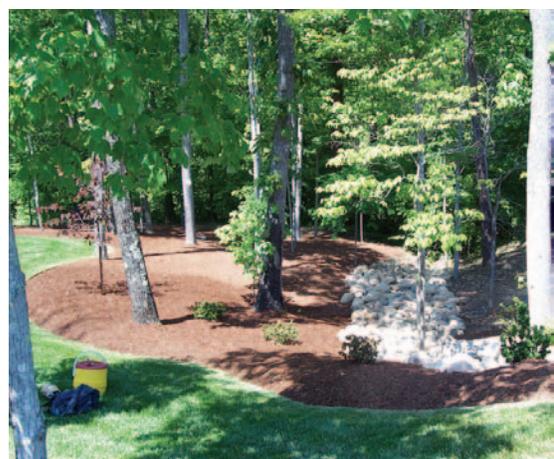
He employs more than 25 people, manages about eight crews and concentrates on mostly commercial clients, currently servicing about 12. He maintains 40 high-end, residential clients out of 100, and subs the other 60 jobs out to smaller lawn care operations because the large, commercial accounts take up more of his employees' time.

Charles Anderson Lawn Care Service continues to grow, and that could mean more crews, especially with the increased work involved in the hardscape offerings. Bruce says he has no magic number of crews in his mind to do the work, as long as quality is maintained.

"If it gets to where we have 15 crews, and if we have good, quality people to manage them, that's not a problem," Bruce says. "My main focus is offering a good service and keeping people happy."

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Top, Charles Anderson Lawn Care has started doing more stone work for high-end, residential customers. This hillside was once covered once with old, thick, English ivy. Middle, Charles Anderson Lawn Care used rocks to control erosion and add aesthetic value in this front yard. Bottom, More home owners are asking landscapers to install operating water fountains.