RECYCLING AND COMPOSTING: TURNING RESTRICTIONS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

By Helen M. Stone

Recycling and composting are viable options for every phase of the green industry. They can represent an opportunity for growth if you let new restrictions work for you instead of against you.

There's a good chance you are working in an area that already requires at least some reduction in green waste generated by your operations. If there are no limitations, you've probably noticed that your tipping fees are increasing. Even if you live in one of the few areas that still has no restrictions, it's safe to say that there are regulations coming down the road. The time to begin or accelerate your recycling efforts is now.

Businessmen are often drawn to the landscape profession because of the opportunity for independence and entrepreneurship. Perhaps this is the reason why many took the first step toward recycling and composting long before it became a governmental mandate.

Small Firm, Big Ideas

A small company often has an advantage because its size allows the flexibility to react to changes swiftly. "Although we provide a whole range of landscape maintenance services to many different types of clients, our niche is small residential," says Carrie Blazek, vice president of Bayberry Landscape in Silver Spring, MD. Blazek and her partner employ anywhere from one to five workers, depending on the season.

"We've reduced our green waste in many ways," Blazek explains. "We grasscycle, we build compost bins in our clients' backyards and we work with city recycling programs."

Bayberry Landscape's fleet of equipment includes both 26- and 36-inch mulching mowers. "We try to use them on as many accounts as possible," she says. "They do a good job. The only time we have a problem is in situations where it rains for several days in a row and we have long, wet grass. Then they tend to bog down."

Blazek says that Montgomery County has embraced green waste reduction with enthusiasm. "It has a center, where you can take clean yard waste, that costs less than half the dump's fees," she notes. Homeowners are encouraged to put lawn clippings in separate containers when trash is picked up. "We provide some of our clients with trash cans for their lawn clippings," Blazek says. "We stencil our company's name on them."

Award-Winning Compost

Garden Gate Landscaping, also in Silver Spring, MD, has won two awards for its recycling efforts. The design/build firm has its own nursery and a staff that numbers between 30 and 40. "We started recycling our soil back in 1989," says John Cimabue, a planting supervisor who oversees the recycling effort for the company. "We put sod and any soil we bring back from a job in a separate pile, and once a year we run it through a huge soil shredder and end up with topsoil that we reuse on our jobs. Grass clippings, leaves, spent annuals and tender prunings that are less than 1/2 inch in diameter are composted."

The materials are simply piled up, moistened and turned with a front-end loader. Urea is added to speed up the decomposition process. "It takes about a year," Cimabue notes. "We have several piles going, and it's an ongoing process. In the end, we have a great soil amendment. We never have to buy topsoil anymore."

Cimabue estimates that the company has cut its disposal fees by one-third. "We used to spend about $30,000 on dump fees, we've cut that figure to about $10,000," he notes. As an addi-
tional savings, about 300 to 400 cubic yards of
topsoil are generated a year. The composting oper-
ation takes about three hours per week, while the
topsoil recycling program takes about 120 hours
per year.

Filling A Niche
In Decatur, IL, Romer Brothers Tree Service
began its recycling operations about three years
ago. "Our first incentive was rising landfill
costs," says Mike Romer. After researching
ways to decrease costs, Romer discovered that
there were no local companies that offered
recycling services. They decided to take the
plunge and purchase a tub grinder and front-end
loader.

"We ran all of our tree waste through the tub
grinder, and it produces a nice, fine chip," says
Romer. "It makes a great mulch." The materi-
al is sold to homeowners. The company deliv-
ers truckloads of mulch county-wide, and never
has trouble making a sale. Romer estimates
that they have sold between 12,000 and 15,000
cubic yards of mulch.

In addition to processing its own tree waste,
the company also processes material for the
local university, nurseries, schools, park districts
and townships. Their portable tub grinder can be
easily moved to any site. Townships often will
accumulate green waste, call the company out
to process it, and then allow residents to pick up
truckloads for their gardens free of charge.

Romer estimates that if the company had to
use the county dump, it tipping fees would now run about $20,000. Although the initial invest-
ment was sizable, he says the move was a good
one. "We get more and more requests for the ser-
vice all the time," he notes. "In fact, we're planning to purchase another, larger tub grinder."

Recycling City Trees
"If we had to take our greenwaste to a land-
fill today, we'd probably be spending about
$300,000 a year," says Mike Ganues, forestry
supervisor with the city of Toledo, OH. The city
has more than 100,000 street trees and half a mil-
lion trees in city parks. Ganues says the forestry
staff of more than 30 people trims about 6,000
trees and removes about 2,000 each year.

"We double-grind our wood. We have both
a whole-tree chipper and what's called a waste
cycler. It can chip logs up to 7 feet in diame-
ter," Ganues notes. The chips are then pro-
cessed once more through a standard tub grinder
to produce a fine finished product. The chips are
sold to landscape companies, nurseries and
homeowners.

"We sell both retail and wholesale," Ganues
says. "If you purchase five yards or more, we'll
deliver it for $10."

Toledo also has a firewood program. "We mar-
ket the wood for about $90 a cord for mixed hard-
wood and $120 for oak," Ganues says.
"Homeowners also can buy a permit for $10 a
year and come into the yard and cut their own
wood." Proceeds from both the mulching and fire-
wood operations are turned over to the Toledo
Urban Forestry Council.

"The money is used for helping reforest the
city," Ganues says. "It's used for street trees and
nursery trees, as well as education programs. It's
also used to fund special planting projects, such
as highway beautification. The extra funds are
like icing on the cake."

Closing the Loop
The city of Laguna Beach, CA, has reached
an enviable goal. With the help of Integrated
Urban Forestry, a consulting firm, the city has
reduced its green waste to zero.

"We've developed what we call the Green
waste Reduction Implementation Plan, or GRIPFM," says Tom Larson, president of the firm.
The program was developed to follow sever-
al steps to implement a "closed loop," where
the need to dispose of any green waste in a land-
fill is completely eliminated.

First of all, greenwaste is reduced up to 30
percent through source reduction, "This is
accomplished through landscape management
and design techniques," Larson explains.

A sophisticated composting program produces
soil amendments, potting soil and mulch. "We
process the materials through a tub grinder,
and then compost it," Larson says. "We never
use the chips until they're composted and we have

TOOLING UP FOR RECYCLING: AN Equipment Primer

By Daniel Ingham

The tools available to turn yard trimmings
into profits range in size and price from
walk-behind mulching mowers costing a
few hundred dollars to massive diesel powered
tub-grinders costing $250,000 or more.

Mulching Mowers
The benefits of grasscycling, to the envi-
ronment and the pocket books of both contractor
and client are numerous. To do it right, though,
requires more than just taping a piece of card-
board over the discharge opening of your
mower.

For starters, you may just want to get a
mulching kit for your current mower. Most man-
ufacturers make kits specially designed for their
line of mowers, which consist of gates to
block off discharge chutes and mulching blades designed to operate with a standard deck
configuration.

True mulching mowers, though, are designed
to cut and recut the grass many times. Different
deck and blade designs are necessary to mulch
efficiently and provide quality results. There
are also some mowing and maintenance tech-
niques to be followed as well. It takes more than
just a good machine, it takes practice.

More horsepower is required to create the
additional lift needed to mulch clippings.
Crews may experience some initial problems
with grasscycling because they are failing to
run the engine fast enough for complete
mulching. Or, they may be trying to cover the
area too quickly, not allowing time for com-
plete mulching. Operators must slow down.
However, because there are no clippings to col-
llect, overall time and effort is reduced.

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