

# 7 Easy Ways to Trim Your Landscaping Bill

BY MATT FREDMONSKY

**L**andscape budgets at multifamily housing communities can reach hundreds of thousands of dollars annually when taking into account all the planting, mulching, mowing, fertilizing, pruning and other onsite work needed to maintain a safe and attractive living space.

Various studies have underscored the myriad health and economic benefits trees and green space have on residents and property; they are well worth the investment and, regardless of the size of the community—or the budget—there are many ways to save on your landscape costs without sacrificing value.

## Mulch Responsibly

Mulch, both in planting beds and tree wells, is most effective at a depth of 2 inches to 3 inches. Proper mulch depth helps regulate soil temperature, retain the right amount of moisture and suppress weed growth.

Laying mulch any deeper can stifle oxygen supply to a plant's roots and hold too much moisture, which promotes fungal growth and can eventually rot a plant stem or tree trunk.

Rich Chilcoat, National Sales Manager for The Davey Tree Expert Company, says mulch is often overused, and he's seen it piled up as high as 8 inches.

"From a client standpoint, they're paying for mulch they don't need," Chilcoat says. "Then they're going to pay for the mulch to be removed and potentially a tree, shrub or flowering plant to be replaced."

Mulch cultivation can save on material costs yet make beds look like new. Mulch spread at a proper depth in spring can be turned over in June and August to give beds around areas such as the management and leasing offices, pool, laundry facilities, signs and

building exterior a fresh appearance for just the cost of labor.

Consider eliminating mulch beds that have not received new plantings in several years or where annuals were removed to save costs. Remember to apply mulch selectively. Consider only installing new mulch for areas where the previous layer has decomposed or washed away.

## Mow Strategically

Shawn Fitzgerald, Technical Advisor for Davey Tree, says property use should dictate where and how often turf grass is mowed.

"You want to mow the high visibility areas," Fitzgerald says. "You want to mow around the pool, but do you need to mow along the fence line or back woods line where nobody goes?"

Mowing large fields and lawns far from the main entrance or common areas consumes a lot of fuel, time and manpower, all of which are reflected in an invoice.

Review the property and determine if a grassy area is used for athletics, aesthetics or not at all. Lawns that aren't used but mowed regularly might be converted into wildlife meadows for butterflies and other fauna with infrequent mowing.

"Some people would call it weeds," Fitzgerald says, "but I think it's beautiful. It's a meadow. Any time you can, cut back on labor, that's a landscaper's number one cost—and it's the number one cost to the client."

## Irrigate Efficiently

Water is expensive. In areas where water restrictions are in place, irrigation systems must perform well.

Chilcoat suggests having a certified irrigation technician conduct an audit of the system to measure efficiency.

# 1 Mulch



# 2 Mowing



# 3 Irrigation



# 4 Perennials



# 5 Soil Test



# 6 Native Plants



# 7 Contractors



“Often, with unaudited irrigation systems, 30 percent to 40 percent of water is wasted,” Chilcoat says. “It either runs off down sidewalks and driveways into storm systems, or it evaporates because too much is applied at the wrong time of day.”

An audit will identify areas of the system that may be putting down too much water or are potentially leaking. A certified technician can recommend if less-efficient spray heads can be replaced with more efficient drip sprinkler heads depending on the plants or turf being watered.

Proper and efficient watering means the system is running at the right time of day and with the right amount of water as determined by the type of plant being watered.

Installing a rain sensor will prevent the irrigation system from running during rainstorms and help to minimize the water bill.

Also, consider installing a flow sensor, which can shut down sections of an irrigation system if there is a break or problem in a line or sprinkler head.

## Annuals to Perennials

Annual plantings can provide the “wow” factor for communities looking to raise or maintain occupancy levels.

On the flip side, annuals are labor- and maintenance-intensive, and that means they carry a hefty price tag.

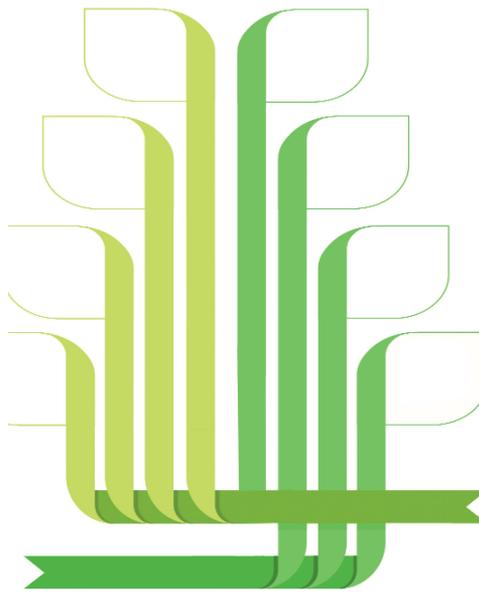
“If a property manager came to me and said they want to cut costs in their color program, I would recommend switching these beds to perennials to save costs,” Fitzgerald says. “Annuals are very high maintenance.”

Fitzgerald recommends switching over to perennial plantings in low visibility areas.

Chilcoat says perennials are much lower maintenance and eliminate the expense of annuals in the future.

“For the cost of two rotations of annuals, you can install a perennial dollar for dollar,” Chilcoat says. “So, in essence, you don’t pay any more money, and for the years moving forward you don’t have that expense.

“If a property manager has a \$10,000



budget for color, you can cut half of it and, moving forward each year, that manager essentially has \$5,000 in their pocket to do other things.”

## Test the Soil

Ask the landscape contractor to conduct a pH test on the soil. The pH level is the measure of acidity and alkalinity in soil, and how much of either determines how well a plant can grow through the availability of nutrients.

“If the soil’s pH is too high or too low, some nutrients become insoluble, limiting the availability of these nutrients to the plant root system,” according to research from the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

“The first thing a landscaper should do is a pH test to determine if they need to raise or lower the pH of the soil,” Fitzgerald says. “Then determine what kind of turf grass it is, whether a tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass, and determine what fertilizer should be used for the turf species.”

Fertilizer can easily be over-applied—a wasted expense—with little to no effect on the turf if the pH balance is off.

“If you’re using the wrong fertilizer for the turf species, you’re throwing money out the window,” Fitzgerald says. “If you have a perfect pH, then the turf should only need two fertilizer applications per year, but some companies that don’t do a pH test may try to sell you eight applications per year—six more than are necessary or effective.”

Chilcoat likens maintaining the pH balance to servicing a car.

“It’s sort of like getting a tune-up for

your car,” he says. “If a car is not tuned regularly, it doesn’t run as efficiently and resources are wasted. The same goes for turf.”

The secret to success when fertilizing and establishing a lush lawn lies with the root system.

“It has nothing to do with the leaf blade above the ground,” Fitzgerald says.

“You want to fertilize at the appropriate times when the root systems are active, which is spring and fall.”

Fertilizing turf during summer months when the root system is inactive is a wasted expense, Fitzgerald says.

## Choose Native Plants

A common mistake when picking plantings for a landscape is to choose species that originate outside that geographical area. The result can be a tree, shrub or flower that needs excess fertilizer, watering and other maintenance to survive.

“Plants grown outside that region are not accustomed to soil types, the weather or moisture quantities,” Chilcoat says.

For example, in the mid-Atlantic, some community owners have chosen to plant birch trees because their ornamental nature adds a charming element to the landscape; however, birch trees like cooler, less-humid weather and grow better in the Midwest and similar areas.

## Certified Professionals

Landscape budgets are an inevitable cost of doing business for property owners and managers, and while spending the landscape budget wisely will save money, there remain certain areas that aren’t worth skimping on.

Paying for the expertise that comes with a certified landscaper, arborist or state-licensed applicator can save money in the long run by avoiding costly landscape repairs, such as the need for replacement plants and the expense associated with managing them. Certified professionals can set a landscape management plan that eliminates costly, unnecessary and even harmful practices. ■

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