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It's not just about aesthetics anymore

The way Bob Grover sees it, landscaping of the future will be both attractive and functional. Grover is president of 10-year-old Pacific Landscape Management in Portland, Ore.



Bob Grover, president of Pacific Landscape Management in Portland Ore., believes future landscapes "will become the functional workhorses of mitigating the negative impacts of the urban environment through processing water and stormwater."

Photos courtesy of Bob Grover.

"We are really excited about the sustainable movement in landscaping," says

Grover. "Historically, landscaping has been solely for the beautification of our urban environment. The design thought was, 'How can we take the concrete jungle and soften it by using plants?' That is shifting. We're seeing more rain gardens to process the water off the roof, and more bioswales and stormwater retention ponds to process the water off of our parking lots."

The company is a full-service commercial maintenance and landscape enhancement provider. Landscape services include mowing, pruning, spraying, planting flowers, operating irrigation systems, spreading bark dust and pruning trees. Additionally, Pacific Landscape Management tackles water management, irrigation renovation, seasonal color, perennial plantings, snow and ice services, fertilization, shrub care, pest control, aquatic management and environmental restoration. At peak season, Pacific Landscape Management employs 100 people.

Grover believes future landscapes "will become the functional workhorses of mitigating the negative impacts of the urban environment through processing water and stormwater. It won't just be about beauty anymore." Although he loves plants and making properties beautiful, he didn't enter the landscape industry because he wanted to be an organic landscaper. "I've always been somewhat skeptical of the organic movement because it is so rigid," he says. "But, the sustainable movement has become more common in the marketplace."

Five years ago, Grover noticed a change. Oregon is regarded as progressive in its environmental movement, perhaps ahead of most of the country in terms of customer requests for sustainable landscaping solutions. "I believe we're on the leading edge of something that is going to be common throughout the United States," he says. For Grover, a sustainable approach had to make business sense. "I'm not the 'If you build it, they will come' kind of guy," he says. "I need to see that there is market demand. We started to see that five years ago. We discovered that when you start becoming more sustainable, it's not a black and white decision. It's basically a commitment that over time you're going to reduce the impact of your business and service on the environment. That's a little bit more reasonable." That meant reducing chemical usage, reducing the amount of water used and looking to become more organic, he says. "It's not saying we're 100 percent organic, but we're evaluating and lowering the impact of what we do on the environment," he adds.

The transformation started small and has grown to where the fertilizer Grover now uses is 50 percent organic, whereas five years ago it was 100 percent synthetic. His customers' water usage has been reduced by 25 to 30 percent. "It's exciting, and it's something where we're seeing improvement every year," he says. "We're better than we were last year, and the next year we'll be better again as we learn and hone and work the system."



Pacific Landscape Management has built a prototype "Soil-less Green Wall" at their facility in efforts to perfect the technology for eventual use on customer sites.

Renovating landscapes with native plantings is the largest segment of Pacific Landscape Management's installation practices. "The use of native is significant," says Grover. "There isn't a current requirement for natives, but we're seeing that's what the architects are designing more and more because folks are interested. Our general philosophy on that is natives in their right place are really important. Native plant material used in the wrong place is not necessarily healthy."

Grover tells his clients that native plants are important adjacent to a native parcel, on the perimeter of a property or when it's planted in an environment more typical to its original environment. "We like to see people put adaptive plants in the concrete jungle-parking islands and parking strips," says Grover. "I'm trying to educate folks that there is a difference between adaptive and native. A native plant outside of its natural environment is very poorly adaptive to that environment and will require as much or more maintenance than an ornamental plant that is adaptive to a hot, dry, exposed environment."

In 2008, Pacific Landscape Management undertook a comprehensive evaluation of its landscaping procedures to determine where the company could reduce its impact on the environment while maintaining quality and customer service. The result: the type and amount of chemicals used, the integration of organics into its fertilizers, promoting water-saving technologies, converting equipment to newer lower emission models, replacing managers' vehicles to lower emissions and improve miles-per-gallon performance and helping customers evaluate their sites for ecological enhancement.

Meanwhile, the company endeavored to be a role model for its clients by making modifications at its own site. The company's efforts to improve energy efficiency and environmental sensitivity included installing a bioswale to filter the runoff from its service yard, installing solar panels to produce power and the wash pad was renovated to comply with Cleanwater Services standards. The company also set up a demonstration rain garden on its site by

removing the existing foundation planting, digging out the swale, planting it with water-tolerant plants and lining it with boulders and rocks. The swale accommodates water from a typical rain event, keeping it out of the stormwater system and allowing it to infiltrate back into the soil. An overflow captures excessive rain to prevent overflow.



The company's efforts to improve energy efficiency and environmental sensitivity included installing this bioswale to filter the runoff from its service yard.

There is currently a "disconnect" with respect to how some entities set up bioswales and stormwater processes, says Grover. "They tend to be designed with all native plant material," he says. "They're trying to mimic a native environment, and then they put a fence around it and say it's native so you really don't need to maintain it. They don't want you going in there and putting in pesticides because it's supposed to be processing the water. What happens is the desired plant material in there dies and gets taken over by blackberries, weeds and other undesirable things. We're trying to encourage folks to integrate those into their landscape. Treat it like a formal landscape. Allow us to maintain it to make sure those plants are healthy. We'll fight off undesirable weeds and noxious plant material so it will be a functional and attractive part of the landscape as opposed to fencing it off and putting it in the back-40."

The company also maintains green roofs, which are popular in Oregon. Green roofs offer clients several benefits, including a 70 to 90 percent reduction in stormwater runoff during the summer and 20 to 40 percent in the winter, reducing heating and cooling expenses by 25 percent, doubling a roof's lifespan and reducing urban heat island. Portland offers financial incentives for those who install green roofs.

Because green roofs are porous and lightweight, they don't use traditional soil, so the moisture-holding capacity on a green roof "is not that great," Grover says. "One of the most important aspects of a green roof is making sure you're keeping it irrigated enough during the hot periods," Grover says. "It's really delicate. You don't want to over-irrigate it because the whole theory of a green roof is to capture, hold and process some of the water that's falling out of the sky. If you're irrigating it too much, you're

taking that irrigation water and dumping it down the drain as opposed to when we're trying to capture water and keep it out of the drain."

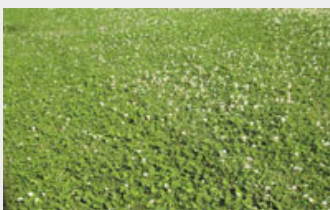
It always surprises Grover to see weeds on the top of a 10-story building. Part of his company's maintenance is to rid the site of those weeds. "The weed seeds blow in the air and up onto the top of a building," he says. "We have to make sure we're keeping the green roof healthy so it impedes weeds."

Most of the plant material used on green roofs is low-growing ground cover. "It has to be pruned," Grover says. "A lot of it blooms, and you have to shear down the blooms after they are done blooming. Some of the green roofs also have some grasses or other ground cover or some shrubs, so those will take maintenance throughout the year to prune or shear them down."



Pacific Landscape Management maintains several green roofs in downtown Portland.

The company also provides tree care. "We have lots of trees here, and I don't believe the general property owner appreciates trees or their proper care," Grover says. Preventative maintenance is rare and has become one of his company's biggest challenges. "I know some areas in California where trees aren't as plentiful or naturally-occurring and their trees are much more appreciated," he says. "I see companies in California do significantly more pruning, thinning and preventative maintenance on trees where we find people don't do that enough here."



Pacific Landscape Management is pioneering the use of Ecological Lawn mixes that require less irrigation, fertilizer and mowing.

While it may seem that the Pacific Northwest doesn't face the same water challenges as the arid Southwest, for example, Grover says that's simply not the case. The region has its own unique water challenges. "People are always surprised to know that water is a huge deal for us as well," notes Grover. "The Northwest gets a reputation for being rainy, and we are, but what that means is we get more days of rain, but we actually get less rain than most other regions of the country." Portland gets an average of 36 to 40 inches of rain per year, says Grover.

"If you go to Chicago, it's more like 60," he says. "The difference is we get frequent rain from September through May. It will slowly dry out going into the late spring and summer, and then it will slowly start to get rainy again in September and October. But, we have lots of rain days where we'll get a trace or a tenth of an inch. Somewhere from the early part of July through the early part of September, we essentially get no rain." That calls for an intense irrigation season in what Grover calls the "desert summer." "We'll usually start in early parts of May and irrigate through early parts of October," he says. "Middle July and August is hot and very dry. Every commercial landscape here has irrigation. You would have a very simple or boring landscape if you did not have irrigation because it's so dry in the summertime."

Pacific Landscape Management also works with its clients to certify them for the Salmon Safe Certification, which requires a management program to reduce stormwater runoff and nonpoint source pollution to help protect Pacific Northwest salmon watersheds. Grover's company is passionate about training, education and certification, and ensures that those working in the field know procedures, with safety being paramount. "It's very important to us that we're hired to be the experts that everybody out there wants to have," Grover says.

Carol Brzozowski is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and has written extensively about environmental issues for numerous trade journals for more than a decade. She resides in Coral Springs, Fla.