

TURF NORTH FEATURES

Niche Market Success

There's room for the smaller organic-based companies, too, says this owner
By Carol Brzozowski

Richard Bajana started his business, Richard Landscaping, informally a decade ago, working weekends as a second job. It's now his full-time occupation and he says he's "dedicated" his life to pursuing the organic approach to landscaping with a specialization in rustic landscapes.

Richard Landscaping

Location: Bethesda, Md.

Clientele: Residential and commercial

Services: Organic land care, landscaping and maintenance; landscape design and installation; fountains; and lighting

The company serves clients in Maryland, Virginia and Washington D.C., with landscaping installation and maintenance services. Services include fountain installation, hardscape, plant installation, lighting, design, annuals and organic lawn care. His clients are primarily in the residential sector, although he takes on some commercial projects with LEED certification requirements.

A different mindset

Bajana started his business partly as a result of working for another landscape company a decade ago. That firm primarily handled contracts for the General Services Administration (GSA).



Richard Bajana working with his mason, Edin, installing a flagstone walkway on blue dust base at a residential property. The company also installed the gardens earlier.

"I was spraying a ton of herbicides and pesticides on a daily basis for two or three years," he says. The more of that he did, the more uncomfortable he became about it. Eventually, it was one of the factors driving him to start a company offering alternative services. In putting the business together, Bajana assembled a group of like-minded employees who "loved what they do and are like family," he says. "They know each other. I was lucky to find good people."

Bajana found clients through referrals. "We don't do advertising," he says. "We do good work and we try to take care of them." It also helps to hire a project manager who can look for work, he adds.

Bajana's philosophy about installation and maintenance work is "to create that atmosphere that client is looking for without leaving a huge footprint on the process," he says. "We try to reflect our clients in our installation projects when possible."

One of just a few

Bajana is proud to be one of the few certified organic land care professionals in the greater D.C. metro area. "You can approach landscaping in a different way," he says. "You don't have to use pesticides to keep a lawn looking good. Organic lawns don't mean neglected lawns. That's a wrong concept some people have." Bajana notes a growing market in his service area for organic landscaping, which is keeping his employees busy, he says. "But, we need to consider more projects with sustainable solutions, such as water and fertilizer consumptions," he says.

Working for nearly a decade with high-end landscape companies in the Washington D.C. area gave Bajana an opportunity to observe what he calls "the best and the worst of landscape practices." The best, he says, involves a balanced mix of good management practices, dedicated team work, and respect for natural interaction among insects, birds and humans. It's a balance he tries to strike in his own company.



Richard Bajana, right, with his nephew Sean, on the left, who also works with the company, and his son Juan David. Bajana hopes his son will continue the work he has started when he is older.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RICHARD BAJANA.

Bajana's organic approach is based on insights he developed as a horticulturist and through utilizing various techniques to determine what works best. When he worked for other companies, over several seasons he had direct responsibility for integrated pest management programs where he had the opportunity to test many products and evaluate the results. "Using that knowledge, I've been able to narrow our program's cultural practices to avoid dead ends, wasted money and lost time," he says. "We don't use practices that I've found to be either ineffective, redundant or have the potential to actually introduce foreign microorganisms that are not endemic to the client's landscape environment."



Foreman Medardo and his helper Ricardo install a catch basin to collect water coming from the downspout.

Three-step approach

Running a small company enables him to provide a non-standardized service, which includes a site analysis for each project and organic solutions to problems, Bajana says.

In using organics, choosing the right product to address a client's landscape starts with a good site inspection, Bajana notes. "Each property has a different problem, plant material and soil," he says. "The first thing you have to do is a good site inspection, not just test the pH. It's important not to get married to any one product. You work with the client and walk the client through the process. Once you have the soil where you want it to grow what you want to grow, you don't have to use so many pesticides and you don't have to do scheduled applications."

Richard Landscaping takes a three-step approach to a client's property.

The first step is to create a customized program based on a site inspection, which includes inquiring about previous management of the property, conducting a complete soil test, and clarifying the client's expectations. The site inspection includes site pictures for posterior analysis and observation. "We also note key plants and weeds that can give us some idea of the pH, compaction, drainage, shade and even fertilization we'll need to deal with as prepare our program," Bajana notes.

The actual work is the second step. Bajana says it is just as important to explain the job thoroughly to the crew as it is to gather the necessary materials, equipment and evaluate and inspect the property. "I believe this interaction between manager and crew is what keeps companies together - it saves time, money and ensures a good work environment," he says. "Ultimately, it results in successful projects and happy, loyal clients."

The third step is conducting follow-up evaluations. That entails conducting a new, complete soil test and surveying the client about their observations throughout the year. "This process also helps us determine if their property is ready to transition into a fully organic land care program or if we need to adjust the program," Bajana says.



The first fountain that Richard Landscaping did for an eye doctor (and now the symbol of the company).

Considering factors in sustainable maintenance

Before maintaining a client's property with an organic approach, Richard Landscaping considers whether a missing component needs to be added. "We might recommend that we solve an existing drainage problem," he says. "Whether installing drainage systems or collection gutters, we always try to do so artistically and in an environmentally-friendly manner."

In another instance, a client may have the infrastructure in place, but has made poor choices in plant selection with little variation in color, texture and seasonal interest that don't add much to their ecological environment, such as birds, butterflies and praying mantises.

Perhaps the client is unsuccessfully trying to grow grass where it isn't thriving or it lacks the organic matter needed to sustain a healthy soil biology, resulting in lack of performance or it exceeds water and nutrient needs.

"We consider all of these factors before we begin designing a new outdoor living space for our clients," Bajana says.

After the improved landscape is designed and installed, "we promote the sustainable maintenance of these properties, offering proven approaches that require less energy consumption and fewer unevaluated product applications," he says. "With all of these tools, we know we can prepare the best installations and offer truly sustainable organic land care service for any particular property."

Looking forward, Bajana seeks to obtain more federal government contract work, particularly with the GSA. He also wants to grow his own native plants to use in his operation. He says the industry is big enough to accommodate all types of landscaping operations, large and small. Smaller companies, such as his, have an opportunity to fill niche market for what he calls more environmentally services.

Meanwhile, the larger companies will continue to compete for the largest contracts "with lots of lawn," he adds.

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.