



# WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS

English gardener  
has **best of both**  
**worlds** in Marco  
Island  
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Maintaining  
Mountview Cemetery  
in Billings is a job  
that never ends  
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Shades of Summer  
Landscaping adapts  
service offerings to  
properties  
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## Chris "Babe" Predella is Living the **Dream**

Babe's Lawn Care  
provides full-service  
landscape management  
to 200 customers  
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# Leaving the 'Cookie Cutter' Home

One way to grow is to offer a standard service to all customers, one that saves both time and money. This strategy, however, holds little appeal to Brad Paton, owner of Shades of Summer Landscaping in Hamilton, ON, Canada. In business for only five years, his approach is to adapt service offerings to properties.

"All of our clients expect our precise, trimmed grass edges. Some have an abundance of perennials to be maintained, while others feature unique shrubs for shearing," Paton notes. "We cannot pull up with a truck and trailer and expect to deliver the same service that we just

provided on another property. The same level of service, yes, but not the same type of service."

His style aligns perfectly with customers, many of whom have won some of Canada's most prestigious gardening awards. "My customers expect crews to deliver impeccable service," Paton emphasizes. "They expect bushes to be precisely trimmed, mowing lines to be straight, and crew members to accommodate special requests."

The approach may put pressure on the bottom line at times, even inhibit growth, but it also helps to differentiate his company from others.

## LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Prior to launching his company in 2009, Paton worked 17 years for an area landscape contractor. The experience was invaluable, and provided a substantial living. But as manager of the company's maintenance division, he wasn't able to fulfill his need to be creative. That changed when a friend/customer posed this question to him: "What's stopping you from going on your own?" Money was the short answer, but it wasn't the right answer for the customer who then offered to be a silent partner. They each put up \$50,000, and Shades of Summer Landscaping was born.



Shades of Summer crews share two Walker Mowers, each with high-lift dump attachments.





One of the new owner's first moves was to buy a Walker Mower with a high-lift dump. "The company I had worked for operated six Walker Mowers, and it was the first in the area to purchase the dump attachment," Paton recalls. "Providing maintenance services has changed dramatically, even since I've been in the industry. The high-lift dump is just one example of how companies like Walker Manufacturing have come up with ways to make it easier, in this case on your back. The extra money you pay for something like this pays for itself several times over in time and back relief."

The company's new mower featured a 31-hp, liquid-cooled engine and a 52-inch GHS deck. It was soon followed by a used commemorative model with a 28-hp engine, 48-inch GHS deck, and, of course, a high-lift dump. Three crews share the two mowers, along with two Toro 30-inch walk-behind mowers for particularly hilly or small yards impractical for the Walker Mowers.

"We mow Wednesday through Friday and half of Tuesday," says Paton. "Mondays and Tuesday mornings are reserved for properties that require special detailing, pruning, or even garden



renovations." As a full-service landscape company, Shades of Summer also applies fertilizer, and subcontracts irrigation and stone work. It also designs gardens and installs unique rock water features.

**Unique gardens highlight many Shades of Summer properties.**





Tracey and Brad Paton provide a customized, personalized service to 60 residential customers.

Given the nature of his 60 residential properties, mowing is only part of the maintenance regimen for Paton. Upon pulling up to a site, half the crew mows and edges while the other half spends time in the gardens. "We make a point to connect with customers, talk about their property, and discuss potential problems and solutions," Paton explains. "Each property is different and all my customers want to be involved. They want and need to communicate with their contractor, to know what's going on." It's this relationship building and attention to detail that helped kick-start Paton's new business.

#### LEAVING PAINS

Prior to starting his own company, the Shades of Summer owner had developed a solid relationship with property owners, many of whom wanted him to continue to maintain their yards. "It was a stretch for some of them initially," Paton says. "They would be leaving a proven company for a good practitioner, but someone yet untested as a businessperson. The calls I received, though, demonstrate how important it is to build relationships with customers and, of course, provide a service that meets if not exceeds their expectations."

At the end of its first year of operation, Shades of Summer had 25 high-

end residential accounts, likely a few more than its owner anticipated. In fact, one of his first challenges and something he still struggles with is growing too fast.

Overextending a company financially is always a threat during growth spurts, and knowing just when to add another crew is difficult. But, as Paton emphasized, even more important to him was finding the right people to staff a crew and, as the owner, having the time to spend with customers.

**"I tell my staff to look at every tree and shrub on the property before they leave it."**

He points to three estate-like properties adjacent to one another. His three crews maintain two of them, and the third one has lobbied for his service. "It's a beautiful property, too," says Paton, referring to the one he doesn't maintain. "But there's no way we can service it and still provide the personalized service we give to other customers, and that includes spending the requisite time with them."

Wife, Tracey, acknowledges her husband's penchant for communicating with customers. "Often, he works late

because he's spent so much time with customers. It's not casual conversation, either. He's truly interested in hearing about their ideas and sharing his with them. It amazes me. I've never heard a customer ask him a question he couldn't answer."

Relatively new to the profession, Tracey says her biggest frustration is the steep learning curve. "Until this spring, I worked in Toronto as a buyer in the fashion industry. The commute was getting long, anywhere from an hour to more than two hours, depending on the traffic. But I knew my job inside and out, so joining Brad in an industry I didn't really know has been an adjustment. It's also very physical work." She says the passion crew members share about their work has been an eye opener, as well.

Paton acknowledges this passion and adds that there's more to cutting grass than operating a mower. "I tell my staff to look at every tree and shrub on the property before they leave it. Most customers want their landscape contractors to be educated, identify

potential problems before they become problems, and to work with them to overall enhance their properties."

Not all property owners share his enthusiasm and sentiments. Some may not want to interact with their mowing contractor or pay a little more to have their properties better maintained. There's a demand for that service, too, but not something Paton wants to supply. His customers want a company that provides personalized service, whose owner brings in the Walker Mower, but leaves the cookie cutter home. **WTF**