

FEATURES

Eco-Friendly Arboriculture

by Don Dale

Going green across the country



Part of the green process at Boston Tree Preservation is making its own compost tea from worm castings like these. Photos Courtesy of Boston Tree Preservation unless otherwise noted.

Tree care companies that are not promoting a business philosophy that fits the current and popular image of “green” are missing a trend that not only offers a lot of personal satisfaction, but also provides a good sales pitch.

Without a doubt, arborists are generally committed to trees and, by extension, the health and beauty of landscapes and the great outdoors. Yet, that is a long way from being green if a company doesn’t recycle its waste, use natural chemicals where possible, use integrated pest management techniques, or promote vehicle and office efficiency. And it’s missing the boat—the big marketing boat—if it doesn’t advertise that it’s doing so.

Maryland

John Anna, owner of Adirondack Tree Experts in Beltsville, prominently displays the fact that he practices “ethical tree care” in the Washington, D.C., area.

His goal is to make a positive contribution to the planet’s sustainability. He advertises his company as green, and the company’s primary effort is recycling.

“We own our own recycling facility. Everything we bring in goes to one of our two yards,” Anna says. The company does not dump any of its green waste. Instead, it goes to one of the yards to be turned into chips or to be recycled

as firewood, fine furniture wood or pulpwood.

From the waste he creates what he calls “leafgrow,” a mixture of soil and mulch that is great for the local clay soils and allows him to return the organic matter to landscapes all around the area. He has created a market for his leafgrow, with clients willing to pay \$8 per yard in bulk. The returns help pay for the expense of his recycling center, which employs several people and a tub grinder. The cost is also offset by not having to pay the approximately \$250,000 per year he once spent in landfill fees.

Anna notes that this wasn’t an effort to attract clients to a green company, but clients do like the idea. He does it out of a personal commitment to the environment. He says it is a true waste to take a mature tree with maybe 50 years of life behind it and toss it in the dump. Seeing that tree reused as furniture or even firewood makes him feel better, and he is also cooperating with the U.S. Department of Agriculture research facility in Beltsville to provide chips for a new furnace system it is developing that uses recycled wood.

The other prominent green aspect of Adirondack Tree Experts is its commitment to the wildlife saved from tree pruning or removal jobs. His six crews are strictly instructed to save any squirrels, birds, raccoons or other tree life, and Anna's wife Felicia is the designated runner. They take the salvaged animals to the Second Chance Wildlife Center in the area, and they support the center financially, as well.

Montana

Scott Makoutz is a young guy in Bozeman, and as a biology graduate who wants to make a difference in the world, and appeal to the progressive citizens of his city, he has taken a different tack on the green label. He is a devotee of sustainability. Yes, it's a buzzword, but it's also a focus and, with Gallatin Tree Care, a working philosophy.



Boston Tree Preservation takes green indoors by using recycled materials and other conservation ideas in its office.

Makoutz's focus is on designing tree management plans for locals, many of whom live in, or on the edge of, forested areas. He's big on helping create living spaces where trees assist the homeowner in creating a sustainable living environment. For example, it may involve selecting a deciduous tree to plant on the south side of a house to provide shade in summer and allow sunlight into the house in the winter.

When he started the company three years ago, Makoutz says he realized that there are practical matters that must be addressed in order to pay the bills. He won't hesitate to use mainstream chemicals to attack a pest if necessary, but his focus is on holistic tree health. As such, his small company, with two full-time employees, acts more to keep the landscape in balance, and keep trees healthy and free of stress.

Sometimes it means cutting trees in a forest setting in order to provide more nutrition and sunlight for the remaining trees, and sometimes it means using natural predators to quell aphid outbreaks. He's also planning to use biofuel for his diesel trucks at some point. It's all part of a commitment to the environment, and to sell his skills to potential clients who have similar ideas.

Photo Courtesy of Adirondack Tree Experts.



No tree is wasted from Adirondack Tree Experts' jobs, with much of it being recycled through this yard for furniture, firewood and other uses.

Idaho

James Molinaro, owner of Countrywide Tree Care in Boise, has a similar mindset, but directs it in a different direction. He specializes in fertility treatments that are not only part of his personal belief system, they also pay off in his marketplace.

"I'd say 90 percent of my business is organic plant health care," Molinaro says. He lets his community know that his focus is on a preventative approach to disease and pests via the use of organic products. He has worked in the tree care industry for 10 years, but when he started his own company four years ago, he decided he wanted to be a part of the natural trend he saw burgeoning around the nation. His customers like the approach.

He promotes the use of microorganisms, such as mycorrhizae, in soil additives; organic pest control treatments, like neem oil; and soil amendments that include natural products, such as sea kelp, humic acid, compost tea and hydrolyzed fish, to improve tree health. He offers organic solutions where possible, including deep-root inoculations of biostimulants to bring back malnourished trees. He offers an annual organic fertility package, and he also offers trees for transplant from his small, organic nursery.



This furnace utilizes waste wood to heat Boston Tree Preservation's 10,000-square-foot office.

California

There is a call for natural tree care practices in certain parts of the country. That certainly is true of South Lake Tahoe, where, according to Bill Probst, owner of Arborcare Organics, the locals demand tree care that protects their. A devotee of natural plant care from his days as a student at the University of Massachusetts, he is a proponent of talking to clients about the benefits of organic tree management and creating adherents.

"You have to be able to sell this to these folks," says Probst, who notes that many landscapes in this upscale community are worth over half a million dollars. In general, his green pitch sells well here, where residents are concerned about the health of pets and people from harsh chemicals and can pay for alternatives. In addition, there is a tremendous amount of concern about toxic runoff into Lake Tahoe, a jewel in the nation's waterways. "They're very appreciative of the sensitive environment in which they live."

Probst tries to set his business apart by promoting preventative and organic tree care. For example, where possible he sets up tree monitoring programs that allow him to go to a property twice a month and look for pests, mechanical damage from weed whackers, nutritional needs and other factors, such as soil compaction. He preaches addressing the needs of each tree, rather than a landscape in general. A big part of his monitoring program is looking at a property's irrigation system so that roots don't suffer from flooding.

It is important to him to train his six employees in the precepts of natural and organic practices. That stretches even to chain saw maintenance. His crews not only know how to sterilize saw chains that have been used on diseased trees, but they also must do weekly saw tuning and cleaning. Chain sharpening is important not only to efficient working, it reduces saw emissions and fuel use markedly.

Probst features organic fertilizers and soil amendments. He's big on placing mulch rings around trees to reduce soil moisture loss during drought periods, and he buys composted horse manure from a local dealer. He also advocates saving trees versus removal where feasible.

This philosophy comes out of a personal commitment, Probst says, and this makes his sales pitches natural and effective. "I dedicate myself to the environment and my clients, because this is my passion."

Massachusetts

The prize for being green goes, without a doubt, to Peter and Betsy Wild, owners of Boston Tree Preservation. Like other organic tree care workers, they utilize compost tea for plant health and pest repellence, but they go a step further. They use four recycled, industrial containers to brew their own tea. They start with a large worm farm that recycles their kitchen waste, and use the worm castings and other natural ingredients, such as sea kelp, to brew enough tea to serve most of the company's tree fertility needs.

Peter says he can produce up to 1,500 gallons per day of compost tea concentrate, which then can be diluted for different uses, but he usually runs at about half capacity. They also use other commercial amendments—all organic—as well as natural pest controls. He says he now spends about \$20,000 less every year on fertilizers, including the cost of manufacturing them, while delivering a better service.

"It's totally sustainable," he says. Another big effort at the Boston company is its biofuel. The company salvages vegetable cooking oil from Whole Foods and other restaurants around the area, converts it through a simple process

at its facility and uses it to run the company's 30 service and sales trucks, which were all converted three years ago. It's 100 percent biofuel in the summer and more diluted mixtures in the winter.

Boston Tree Preservation's focus on sustainability carries into the office facility. Not only did the Wilds rebuild the interior of the office two years ago with green materials, but they also installed waterless urinals, energy-efficient lighting and other conservation measures. They also converted the heating system to one that uses a renewable resource: wood. The company installed a wood furnace to heat the 10,000-square-foot building.

Now, the company converts much of the waste wood from jobs to fuel for the furnace. Another process sends wood chips for sale to other enterprises using a different type of furnace system. Not only does the company save an estimated \$200,000 per year on all of these green methodologies, by Peter's estimate, he says that a company could install any or all of them and have the investment regained within a six-month period.

Peter and Betsy say that this is more about adhering to a conservation philosophy and letting their customers know how they feel. They estimate that 60 percent of their clients are enthusiastic fans of sustainability, and part of the reason is that by saving money on these methodologies, they can cut costs to customers.

Don Dale is a freelance writer and a frequent contributor. He resides in Altadena, Calif.