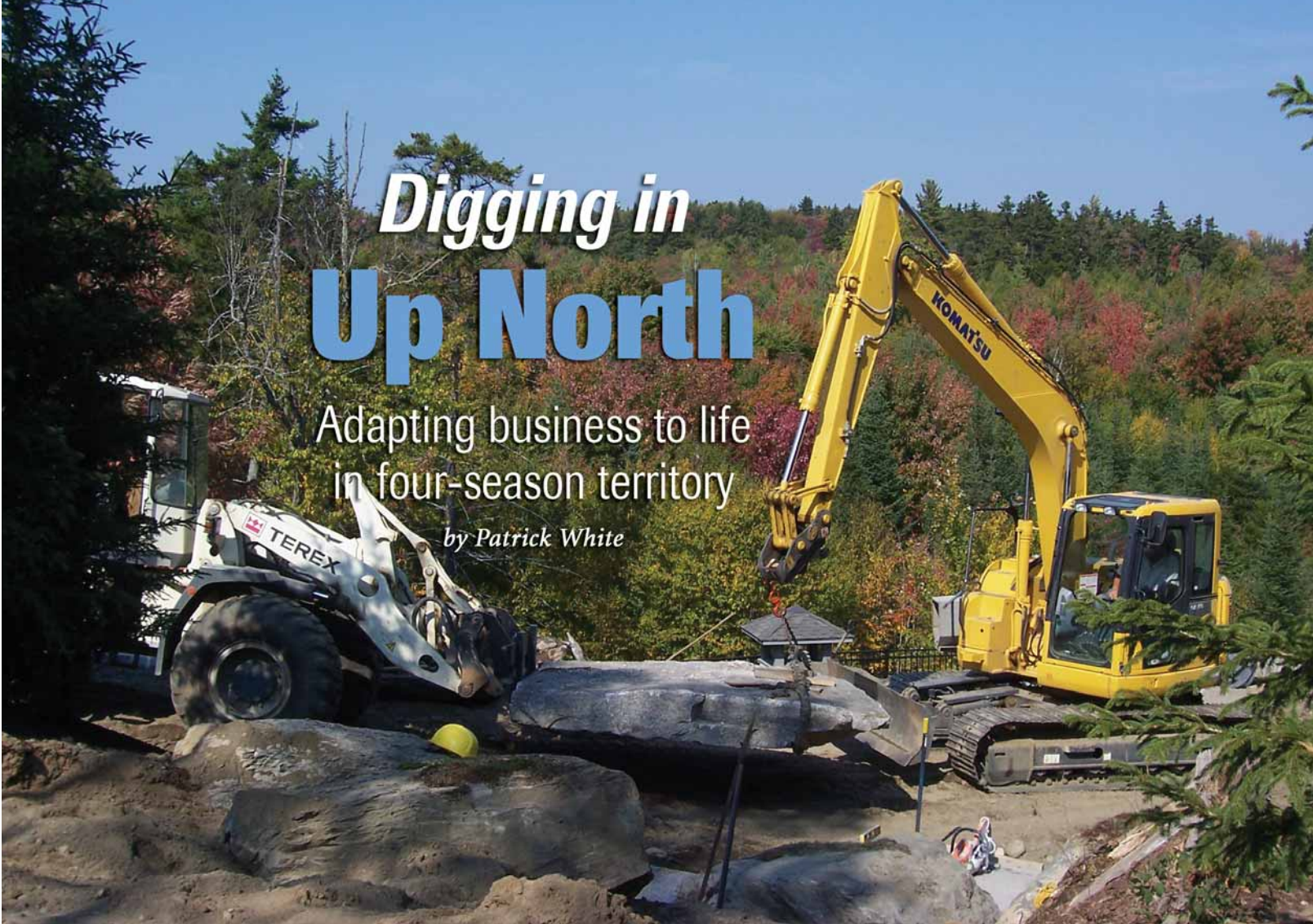


Digging in Up North

Adapting business to life
in four-season territory

by Patrick White



Atlantic Landscape Construction boasts a huge array of heavy machinery, allowing the company to take on large-scale landscape construction projects.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ATLANTIC LANDSCAPE CONSTRUCTION.

The plight of landscape contractors who work in hot, dry areas of the country, where water restrictions have become a fact of life, has been well documented. However, let's not forget about the challenges faced by companies working in regions where rain, snow and thin soils pose their own sorts of problems.

"We have all the same expenses—the facilities, the equipment, the overhead—but we only have seven or eight months a year to pay for it all," says Tim Francis who, with his wife, Sam, and son, Chad, owns and operates Atlantic Landscape Construction in Ellsworth, Maine. The company has been in business since 1975 and moved to its current location in 2001.

The staff, which includes two in-house landscape designers, numbers about a dozen year-round and swells to nearly 50 during the busiest parts of the construction season. "We probably pay a lot more overtime than a company in the southern part of the country," Francis says, "because we

have a shorter season to get the work done. Our average work week is 50 or 60 hours."

With the shorter, Northeast work season, Francis says it becomes all the more critical to scrutinize the financial aspects of the business. For example, he says, there are many smaller jobs he can't go after because it doesn't make financial sense to do so at the expense of taking on more lucrative, larger-scale projects during the limited working season.

It also means focusing on the company's strength: construction. "We're just not in the right type of area for it to make sense for us to offer maintenance," says Francis. "It's not like a big urban area, where a company works its way down a single street doing maintenance. Here, it's rural, and there is a lot of distance between properties. How do you recoup the expense of all that travel time?" It can also be a tough sell to convince a homeowner to properly maintain their new landscape, as well, he adds. "There are many people who will spend

\$400,000 to have us install a landscape, but then are reluctant to spend \$25,000 a year to maintain it the way it should be."

Offering landscape maintenance services would also necessitate the need for additional employees, something the company struggles with already. Frustrated by a lack of willing, local labor, Francis turned about 10 years ago to bringing in workers for the summer months from Puerto Rico. "We fly them in, fly them out; we built a house for them, and there is a vehicle here for them," he says. "We have a good relationship with a number of people there who have worked for us for years, and they're U.S. citizens, so we don't need to worry about green cards and all the paperwork that's involved with the H-2B-type programs."

He says that the late start to the growing/working season in Maine would likely make it a challenge to take part in any federal government temporary worker program, because all of the workers would likely be

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spoken for by the time they were needed so far north. Instead, says Francis, the relationship with the Puerto Rican workers has worked smoothly. “We treat them well and try to really take care of them. This year, we brought up 15 workers, but there were as many as 200 people there who wanted to come work for us,” says Francis. “As ridiculous as it sounds, we may at some point need to build another house for them. I sometimes wonder how we got into the house building business, but that’s the way it is. We just can’t find the people who live up here who want to work.”

There are some advantages to working in Maine, says Francis. “It’s usually not so brutally hot that it’s unpleasant to work outside, and we are able to have a little more flexibility in terms of planting than areas that experience severe droughts.”

Customers in this popular summer vacation area tend to prefer landscapes that mimic the natural scenery. “When they come to Maine, they usually want the landscape to be more native, to blend in with the environment,” says Francis. “They want

outdoor spaces—terraces and patios—but they want the house to look like it’s always been here, so they generally want birches and evergreens and native ground covers like ferns and blueberries in lieu of bark mulch.”

Atlantic Landscape Construction primarily services owners of second homes (and third and fourth homes) who summer on the coast of Maine and its many islands. While those homeowners return to warmer climates at the end of the summer, the company uses the winter months to prepare for the next construction season. “I’ve tried doing the plowing business, but I’ve found that it’s better to devote our limited workforce during that time to maintaining and repairing all of our equipment to get it ready for spring,” says Francis. “We’re not doing transmissions and engines, but there are many other maintenance projects we can do ourselves. And, if we need to order a part during the winter that takes a couple weeks to arrive, it’s not a big deal. We try to get all of our vehicles inspected during January and February, so we don’t have to deal with that during our busy season.”

The two in-house designers are busy, as well, during the “off-season.” There is a lot of estimating work to be done on projects so plans and figures can be presented to

clients in order to get approval and be ready to move ahead when the snow recedes.

With a large fleet of mechanized equipment and skyrocketing fuel prices, Francis says he’s become more focused than ever on the importance of budgeting and planning to account for increased costs. “It’s a difficult thing. Sometimes I feel like an oil dealer,” he says. Not long ago, the company’s monthly fuel bill was \$10,000; now, it’s \$24,000. “You have to explain to customers that costs are going up; I tell them I would like to work cheaper, but I can’t. To be successful in this business, you have to know what your costs are, and little adjustments make a big difference.”

Francis also travels extensively during the winter months to tag trees in the ground that can then be delivered to Atlantic Landscape Construction’s facility in the spring. “We try to line up as much of the plant material we need as possible. I don’t want to be traveling around doing that during our busy season. We want all of our ducks in a row, so we’ll be ready to start working,” he says.

The company’s offices sit on a former apple orchard; approximately 2 acres of the 12-acre site have been established with drip irrigation to hold plant material, mainly

Tree moving is one of Atlantic Landscape Construction’s specialties. The company maintains a selection of large trees under irrigation at its headquarters.





Inset: The company's in-house designers and construction crews work together to create landscapes that work with the native soils and climate of Maine.

Above: Atlantic Landscape Construction provides design and build services to clients—many of them summer residents—on the coast of Maine.

trees. “Our specialty is having a little bit larger than average trees. We typically have 25 to 30-foot shade trees lined up in irrigation, and sometimes even bigger. We can handle pretty much any size tree,” says Francis. He opts not to use tree spades for several reasons: they can’t be custom-sized to each individual tree, and they typically include a tremendous amount of soil (and weight) beneath the tree that isn’t needed by the shallow roots of Maine-grown trees.

“In Maine, we have very wet soils,” he says, “and most of our trees are relatively shallow-rooted. So, we do a lot of pipe-digging.” In this technique, crews dig out around a tree to be sure they won’t be cutting roots any bigger than finger-size, and then drive 2-inch diameter pipes underneath it, which are then welded together with spacers and affixed with U-bolts to provide a custom-sized platform underneath the tree for easy lifting. “That allows us to dig an 8, 10 or 12-foot diameter ball, whatever the tree needs,” Francis explains. “We finish it off with burlap and wire. We have really good luck with this approach.”

On one current job—which Atlantic

Landscape Construction has been working at for two years—crews have moved approximately 50 trees in the 40 to 50-foot-tall range. “We were moving them on-site, so there were no power lines or bridges to contend with, so we could move them all vertically,” says Francis. “We just moved them with huge loaders or on tractor trailers.”

The company frequently installs landscapes created by a number of local landscape architects, in addition to those crafted by its own in-house landscape designers. There is no fee charged for initial conceptual drawings provided by the in-house designers. Once approved, detailed plans are prepared. For customers who decide to go ahead with the project, Atlantic Landscape Construction will credit those design fees against the cost of the construction project, up to 5 percent of the total build cost. The company only provides design services on the projects it will build. “We don’t offer designs as a stand-alone service,” Francis says, “We’re just too busy. This company is supposed to work together; from the time the phone rings, to the design to the equipment heading out, we need all of the pieces to make this thing work.”

Francis had an opportunity recently to see the entire 50-person staff come together when Atlantic Landscape Construction stepped forward to install the landscape on a project for ABC’s “Extreme Home Makeover” TV show. The company solicited donations from many vendors and contributed nearly \$100,000 in time and materials to the effort, which Francis says was a memorable experience. “The real challenge for us was how much we could do in a short time with all of our people and equipment. Usually we’re all spread out on eight or nine different sites; to bring everyone together was really amazing. We designed and installed sod, plantings, irrigation, granite pavers. We had everything lined up, and by the end of the first day, we had caught up to the site contractors. So, we came back the next week and finished it up in four or five hours—in the rain.”

In Maine, that’s just part of the job. **LHC**

Patrick White is a freelance writer and editor who is always on the lookout for interesting and unusual stories.