

Landscapers and Grounds Keepers Ryan Parisi

What does a job in landscaping in the Buffalo region involve?

The tasks of a landscaper or groundskeeper in the Buffalo region vary by the time of year and even the day. The jobs include mowing lawns, “edging” driveways and sidewalks, trimming bushes, trees and other vegetation, planting vegetation, removing old or dead vegetation, fall and spring “clean ups” which involve cleaning a property and preparing it for the next season, watering vegetation, maintaining overall appearance of property, mulching, weeding, and pruning among many others.



What does a landscaper do on a daily basis?

The type of jobs performed depends on the time of year and the assignment given by the boss. E.M., a landscaper for a small company located in Amherst, stated that the types of jobs he performs changes based on the time of year. In the beginning of spring, E.M. does a lot of work cleaning properties from the wear of winter and making them look good for the summer. This generally involves trimming trees and bushes, cleaning up debris, mulching and possibly planting new vegetation or creating new beds of flowers and rocks.¹

After the early spring and for most of the summer, E.M. mows lawns with the “cutting crew.”² Each member of the cutting crew has a specific task, and E.M.’s is riding the lawnmower. Another member is responsible for riding a smaller mower and the third member of their crew weed whacks. The other crew at E.M.’s work is the “landscaping crew.”³

R.U., an interviewee from a different company, is on the landscaping crew. When asked what he does on a daily basis he simply replied,

“Whatever the homeowner wants us to do.” He explained that the work done for each customer is different. Some days he is creating new flower beds, other days he is trimming trees and bushes, and so on. R.U. thought it would be impossible to list all of the tasks. In the fall the crews mow as long as the weather permits and then they do fall cleanups preparing the properties for winter.

What does a landscaper do during the winter months?

During the winter time E.M.’s only job is to plow snow from driveways, parking lots and sidewalks of residential and commercial properties. He earns one third of what he makes a week during the summer months.

However, many workers in this profession do not work during the winter time. R.U., a 25 year old landscaper, collects unemployment during the winter in addition to supplementing his income through “illegal sales” of drugs.⁴

How much do workers in the landscaping profession earn?

A landscaper’s salary will depend largely on their experience and seniority level. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average annual salary for a regular “landscaping and grounds keeping worker” in the Buffalo-Niagara Falls Metropolitan area is \$24,950.⁵ The average annual salary for a “first-line supervisors/managers of landscaping, lawn service, and grounds keeping workers” is \$41,840.⁶

R.U., a landscaper who works from April through October, made a total of \$14,000 “on the books” last year and \$8,000 - \$9,000 “off the books.” He earns \$11 per hour and is paid on the books by his employer up until 40 hours per week and then is paid off the books for the remaining time.⁷ He gets no benefits, but does receive small cash bonuses of \$50 to \$100 several times throughout the work year. He is also allowed to use his employer’s tools for free on side jobs in order to earn extra money⁸. He does collect unemployment during the winter.

E.M., the year-round landscaper and snowplower, has a similar pay arrangement with his employer. He gets paid for thirty hours per week “on the books” and the rest is paid off the books. He is paid \$10.50 per hour and said he made around \$10,000-12,000 last year⁹. He received no benefits from his employer.

D.D., a former landscaper, used to work summers during college from 2002 through 2006. Unlike R.U. and E.M., he was paid entirely off the books. The last summer he worked as a landscaper he was paid \$8 per



hour. This amounted to approximately \$2,000-3,000 per summer. D.D. indicated that his salary went up each year as he gained more experience, but he still did not earn as much as the workers who were employed the whole season.¹⁰

What type of skills, training or education is necessary for a job in landscaping or grounds keeping?

No formal training is required for the vast majority of landscaping jobs. While many employers prefer experienced employees, training is gathered on the job through experience¹¹. All of the workers I interviewed had no formal landscaping training or experience prior to being hired. However, employers do look for certain characteristics in their employees. Driving a vehicle is often involved so employees often need to be licensed. Employers also look for responsible, self-motivated individuals because these workers are often left alone with little or no supervision.¹²

Are there any opportunities for advancement?

Career advancement opportunities are very limited. While supervisors and crew leaders earn more than normal workers, it is apparent from the interviews that many workers are employed in small companies that don't have advancement opportunities. However, ambitious workers in this profession may decide to start their own business. The owner of the company that R.U. works for used to be an employee. After several years of working there he offered to buy the business off the former owner and he has operated it ever since¹³.



What types of dangers or injuries are prevalent ?

“Most of the work is performed outdoors in all kinds of weather. It can be physically demanding and repetitive, involving much bending, lifting and shoveling. Workers in landscaping and grounds keeping may be under pressure to get a job done...”¹⁴ Long term exposure to these conditions can lead to back, knee and joint problems.

Workers are also subject to constant cuts, scrapes and bruises. R.U. explained that small cuts and bruises are a daily part of his job. He also stated that bee stings were very common¹⁵. E.M.'s experience was injuries was very similar. He also indicated that his arms looked scraped and cut all season long.

E.M. has also witnessed more serious injuries. One time his boss had the tips of three of his fingers crushed off in a moving belt on a lawnmower. E.M. had to pick one of the tips up and put it in a plastic bag with ice so

that it could be reattached. E.M. also cut his leg climbing in the back of the work truck one time and needed seven stitches to close the wound.

Are there currently jobs available?

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are 2,760 landscape and grounds keeper workers in the Buffalo Metropolitan area¹⁶. In New York State there are around 46,220 landscaping and grounds keeping employees¹⁷. Accordingly there are large amounts of these jobs available to those who are interested.



Further, the low levels of education and training needed to perform the job, together with the low wages that are paid, lead to high rates of turnover in this profession. R.U. indicated that his employer is constantly losing and hiring employees. He said that even though his work only has around four workers at any given time, he'll usually work with at least a dozen different people over the course of the summer due to the high turnover.

What are the demographics of the workforce?

While I could not find statistics on the makeup of this industry, the interviewees were willing to make guesses and describe their experience. R.U. explained that he felt a large part of the workforce was Hispanic. E.M., on the other hand, felt the industry was probably 80% white, non-Hispanic, with African Americans and Hispanics making up the remaining portion. D.D. had a similar assessment to E.M.

All of the interviewees agreed that the profession is almost exclusively made up of males. E.M. estimated that it was "99 percent" male, while R.U. put the number at "95%."¹⁸ E.M. also said that many of the women he runs into are owners of the businesses. None of the interviewees has ever worked with a female.

Who are the major employers?

This profession is mostly made up of smaller, owner-operated employers. However, large businesses with lots of property may also employ their own landscapers. Large universities and colleges may also have their own grounds keeping departments. Golf courses also employ ground keepers to make sure their property is mowed and in pristine condition.

¹ Personal Communication, March 14, 2010

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Personal Communication, March 20, 2010

⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Website: www.bls.gov
(<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos172.htm>, Accessed March 22, 2010

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Personal Communication, March 20, 2010

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid note 4.

¹⁰ Personal Communication, March 21,

¹¹ www.careers.org, <http://occupations.careers.org/37-3011.00/landscaping-and-groundskeeping-workers>. Accessed
March 22, 2010.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid note 4.

¹⁴ Ibid note 11.

¹⁵ Ibid note 4.

¹⁶ Ibid note 5.

¹⁷ New York State Department of Labor “Occupational Wages,” <http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/lswage2.asp#37-0000>

¹⁸ Ibid notes 1 and 4.