

Making house calls for plants

Plantscapers keep businesses' greenery first-class treatment

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The employees of Plantscapers come and go like a whisper. They are here, and then they're gone. No one may notice them except the ficus.

"We're a very quiet company," said spokeswoman Meggan Wood. "We take care of your plants without disrupting your daily business."

Clients include restaurants, banks, offices and medical centers. They can buy or rent plants from Plantscapers, whose technicians make regular house calls to keep greenery in the pink.

"They've been doing a good job for us," said Mike Guenther at Chili's Grill & Bar, 5804 Bosque Blvd. "They keep the plants alive. If one dies, they replace it for free. We've got close to 75 plants here, so dealing with them is not something we have time to do. They come by to dust them, clean them, do whatever is needed."

Plants contribute to the ambience of Chili's, Guenther said. He wants them hanging around.

Besides creating a mood and softening architectural hard lines, plants actually fight indoor air pollution and improve the air quality of air employees breathe, according to studies by NASA and the Environmental Protection Agency.

"We rent plants, and Plantscapers does such a wonderful job of keeping things lively, green and fresh," said Susan Armstrong, support services director at Christus Regis/St. Elizabeth Centers, 400 Austin Ave. "Living plants are so much better to have than silk or plastic. We want to create a natural environment, especially in the nursing home side. They replace plants that are looking sad or wilted, and they always have some very good suggestions when we want to make a little bit of a change. They make sure we have a nice variety of texture and color."

Susan Sadler and her husband, Chris, bought Plantscapers in April 1999. They hired Wood fresh from the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor to market the company, though she also gets involved in plant care. A handful of full-time and on-call "technicians" tend the plants of 50 clients in Waco, Temple and Killeen.

Plantscapers discreetly goes about its business, but it carries no wallflower label. Susan Sadler and Wood blossom at chamber of commerce mixers and meetings of hotel and motel managers. Sadler gets prickly at the suggestion Plantscapers is a watering service. She is certified as a plant technician by the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, and she devours books and magazine articles on plants. Employees undergo rigorous training before she lets them loose on clients.

"These people are delightful," said Earl Patrick at Coldwell Banker Jim Stewart Realtors, 500 N. Valley Mills Drive. "Susan Sadler is great, and she's surrounded herself with some really good technicians who know what they're doing. Typically, they get the watering done fast. But if a plant needs more, they do it. They clean leaves. If they find a bug or something, they spray or do whatever they need to do to keep the plant looking good."

"We bought the plants originally, and they keep them up," Patrick said. "When a plant gets to looking bad, they replace it on their nickel. I guess they feel they should keep it looking nice."

For competitive reasons, Sadler did not want to discuss rates. She said customers have many options, and Plantscapers will accept work from companies "with five plants or 200 plants."

Plants sold or rented by Plantscapers are shipped to Texas from Florida or Hawaii. Sadler keeps them in a holding area just off Wooded Acres Drive, next to the Quizno's sandwich shop.

The crew at Plantscapers not only cares for growing things, Wood said, it will help business owners choose the appropriate plants for an office or restaurant and will gauge the sunlight for proper placement.

Wood said businesses need to let their employees know not to tamper with plants being cared for by Plantscapers.id.

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