

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR PINE STRAW COSTS

Tips on Evaluating a Pine Straw Proposal

By Brandon Baxter

NatureScapes Director of Maintenance Operations

Drive through a business district or a residential neighborhood and you will notice the number of properties that use pine straw in their landscapes is staggering. Pine straw is clearly the ground cover of choice in the south. Its popularity stems from the many benefits it offers, including its obvious visual appeal. However, ensuring that your pine straw proposal combines value and quality is sometimes a hard lesson to learn.

Follow these four important tips when evaluating your next pine straw proposal. They will make a difference in your property's landscape and help save you money in the process.

Tip #1: Be more concerned with quality than quantity.

One reason quality is more important than quantity is because bales of pine straw are not all created equal. If two bales are sitting next to each other and are approximately the same size, one may be filled with debris such as pine cones and sticks, and the other may be pure pine straw. You can probably guess that the latter will cover more property and look nicer overall. The debris-filled straw will require more bales to cover the property and drive up your cost.

Additionally, there is no industry standard regarding bale *size*. For instance, five bales from five different vendors may not all cover the same number of square feet. So while Landscaper A may estimate 500 bales to cover your property, Landscaper B may estimate 600...and they may both be right.

"We are committed to deliver high quality landscaping at an affordable price, and that's why we include a guaranteed price for pine straw in our proposals. Our customers are highly satisfied with this flat rate because they know they can trust us to use the right amount of pine straw to keep their properties healthy and looking their best."

**– Rick Upchurch,
NatureScapes
President & CEO**

Tip #2: Require that the proposal includes installation management.

Next, the quality of the installation is important. To ensure the best end result, ask this question: Will the installation be closely managed to make sure the pine straw is free of debris, the beds are properly trenched, plants are dusted off, and the straw is neatly installed in the bed and not overflowing onto the sidewalk or grass?

There is a misconception that the do-it-yourself method will be more cost effective. However, rarely do individuals outside of the landscape industry have the time and expertise to effectively manage the process of spreading straw. With professional pine straw installation, you save time and money because the work is done correctly the first time, making re-application due to carelessness or debris-filled pine straw unnecessary.

Tip #3: Insist on guaranteed pricing.

Let's get to the bottom line, literally. Your pine straw proposal should include a guaranteed price. This means whether it takes 500 bales of pine straw or 600, you pay the price quoted in your proposal.

Why is this important? In part, it gets back to Tip #1. Not all pine straw bales are created equal; therefore the number of bales it will take to cover a property may vary. If your proposal reads that it will take 500 bales at \$5 each, and you will only be charged for the number of bales used, you expect a bill around \$2500. However, more often than not, the number of bales required will increase...along with your total bill.

Tip #4: Understand ground cover alternatives and their real costs.

Pine straw is not the only ground cover available, but it is the most cost effective. Another common alternative, hardwood mulch, is more expensive and so is the labor to install it. For instance, compare approximately \$3 per square foot for wood mulch to \$1.10 to \$1.20 per square foot for pine straw.

Plant ground covers, such as ivy or lirope, are good alternatives, but must be viewed as long-term investments. The initial plant cost is expensive, and you will still need pine straw to supplement the plants while they are young. However, after a few years when the plants have matured and filled in the space, your annual pine straw expense will decrease and the plants will pay for themselves. This is a great investment for those with patience.

For more information or a free pine straw estimate, contact NatureScapes at (770) 923-7023.