

## Equipment Grows With Austin Firm

*As business — and volumes—have increased, Austin Landscape Supplies has answered with larger processing capabilities.*

Patrick Whittlesey, knows a thing or two about planning for the unexpected. The Texas native and owner of Austin Landscape Supplies, has been in tree care-related businesses for more than 40 years and at one point well into his career, after feeling fairly secure, had to restart his business from the ground up. Then, that business, like most everyone else's at the time, had to deal with the fallout from the 9/11 attacks and the Great Recession of 2008. Through it all he's remained focused on maintaining slow, but steady growth, refusing to fall into the trap of overbuying or overbuilding. This sensible approach is reflected in the equipment purchases—particularly the grinders—he's made since establishing Austin Landscape more than a quarter century ago. From a small chip processor to his current unit, a track-mounted Rotochopper FP-66, the goal has always been the same: get the production to best meet the demand. Today, he is seeing volumes of brush and wood waste the likes of which he's never seen before, yet he is comfortable in knowing that he has the ideal grinder and support equipment to meet that need.

### Thinking Ahead

Whittlesey established Austin Landscape in 1986 as a traditional landscape supply company, armed with a lot more dreams than available capital and resources.

“Truth be told, we started this business with \$4,000 and some innovative ideas,” he says. “We initially focused on providing soils and soil blends created from landscapers' and utility companies' chips, but I knew from previous experience

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that there was a decent market for mulch out there. So, as we gained more experience, that became something of a focus for us: turning those chips into a saleable mulch product. To gain some familiarity with what equipment was available, we attended a lot of trade shows throughout the area. At one of those in San Antonio in 2006, we struck up a conversation with the team from Rotochopper (St. Martin, MN); it turned out to be one of the luckiest things to happen to this company.”

At that show, Whittlesey learned of a unit Rotochopper offered, a CP-118 Chip Processor, that could transform his ordinary wood chips into a high-value colored or natural landscape mulch—in a single pass.

“The 118 seemed like the ideal tool for us,” he says. “Not only would it enhance the composting process by downsizing the material (something we were sorely in need of), it would also help us take the next step in building our operation, so we committed to it and were suddenly in the mulch business.”

### **Bigger and Better**

The CP-118, says Whittlesey, served them well for about three years, as they purchased chips from area utility firms and landscapers, and created a mulch product which they sold in bulk. As word of their operation spread, however, more and more people from the area they serve—primarily Williamson County, which includes the towns of Georgetown, Cedar Park, Leander and Round Rock—began to inquire about dropping off their tree and brush waste.

“We knew that bringing in such material was the next logical step in our development, but also knew it was beyond the capabilities of our chip processor,” he says. “So we once again talked with Rotochopper and were soon the owners

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of a newly-reconditioned MC-266 horizontal grinder. From a production standpoint, it was everything we could ask for in a grinder: we were getting outstanding volumes through it, we were meeting the increased demand for our mulch products, and so on.”

Whittlesey used the MC-266 for another three years when he learned about Rotochopper’s new FP-66 grinder. Offering many of the same features as the larger B-66, the lower horsepower of the FP-66 seemed like a better fit for his needs. When he heard that it would also be available on tracks, he became even more interested.

According to Whittlesey, the concept of a track horizontal intrigued him because, while their existing grinder was more than doing the job, having onsite mobility would address so many vexing issues for them, including cleanup, fueling, accessibility to piles, etc.

“There are certain problems that you encounter as part of the grinding and colorizing process,” he says. “For example, material always gets underneath any machine and needs to be removed; that’s just the nature of the beast. However, we also learned that water, from both the dust suppressant system and from the colorizing process, can make things a real mess under the machine—sometimes to the point that the grinder would become mired in the soil and need to be pulled out using a loader. We felt that a machine on tracks would alleviate all those concerns, so we placed our order to get the first track-mounted FP-66 off the line.”

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### Perfect Fit

Today, operating out of its 8.4 acre site in Georgetown, Austin Landscape takes in roughly \_\_\_ cu. yds. of material annually from landscapers, homeowners, and utility contractors and creates a variety of hardwood mulch products ranging from colored, to natural, to organic, to a playground-grade material that has been certified by the International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association (IPEMA). The new grinder, says Whittlesey, fits his operation like the proverbial glove.

“For us, adding that new machine was a real game changer,” he says. “We can now take in more material, bigger material, a wider range of material, and process it faster than ever before. Certain features on it have also gained us some inroads into new markets. For example, the enhanced cross-belt conveyor magnetic system played a huge role in allowing us to make our playground grind and get that valuable IPEMA certification.”

Austin Landscape’s business is a classic example of a closed-loop approach: the people and companies who supply their feedstock—landscapers, homeowners and utility contractors—are essentially the same ones who buy their products. In addition, however, the company has also begun selling mulch and soils to area municipalities and just recently started to bag its mulch product.

“At present, the bagging operation is still small; we hardly have the capacity to generate mulch in volumes large enough to serve the home improvement or big-box stores,” says Whittlesey. “But it is just another facet to our operation geared toward meeting our customers’ needs.”

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### Success in the Mix

Despite all the focus on the mulch operation, the soils component of Austin Landscaping Supplies' business is still alive and thriving. Comprising two acres of their site, the compost operation takes in horse manure from area farms, combines it with a rough grind mulch and static-composts it to create the basis for its soils products.

“The entire process takes about six months,” says Whittlesey. “We turn the windrows using a tractor pulling a Sittler compost turner which has an injection system that adds the water needed for the composting process. Once it is ready, it is gathered, run through a McClosky trommel, then custom-blended to create any of the ten different soil mixes we offer our customers.”

It is that nice “blend” of the traditional with state-of-the-art that is allowing Austin Landscape Supplies to make the incremental gains has to date. The new grinder features an integrated colorizing system which Whittlesey's crews use to create hardwood mulch in red, brown and its most popular color, black. In addition, the company also offers a native mulch and, when the feedstock allows, cedar. Whittlesey's belief that the track-mounted unit would benefit them in a number of ways, has, indeed come to pass.

“The tracks are an upcharge versus the traditional wheel-mounted grinder, but in my estimation, it is worth every penny in the benefits its provided—and we've only had it less than a year,” he says. “We no longer have to move a pile to grind it, we can take the machine straight to that pile, which reduces wear on the loaders. For maintenance, we can easily move the machine to a paved area, improving the work environment for the mechanic and reducing the risk of puncturing tires on the support vehicles. Even though the company offers grinders with engines as

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large as 950 Hp, we ordered ours with a 630 Hp Cat engine which will still handle anything we can feed it, but is giving us a nice savings in fuel costs. The people at Rotochopper promised a lot with this machine and it's delivered on every promise. Cliché as it sounds, I really feel that: 'Once you go track, you'll never go back.'"

### Special Delivery

Because Whittlesey has been a Rotochopper customer for better than seven years, he is well-positioned to comment on the level of support he's gotten from the company at every juncture of his growing process. He says that, when it comes to commitment, he would put the company up against anyone.

"There's no better example of how far they will go to ensure satisfaction than in the circumstances surrounding delivery of the new grinder," he says. "We told the company that, in order to take advantage of a big tax break, we needed to have the machine by the end of December. That put an added level of demand on a company that was literally rolling out their first unit of this kind. But, true to form, they came through and delivered the grinder to us between Christmas and New Year's. To me, that speaks volumes—that and the mountain of mulch it can create in a single eight-hour period. We couldn't be happier with our decision."

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