

Mulch makers

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Every time Austin Weaver trimmed the end off a board to make a truss at Ottawa Roof Truss, he looked at the scrap and figured there had to be a way to put it use.

For a while, he turned the scraps into wood shavings and sold them to area turkey farmers for bedding. But when he lost that business to a fire, Weaver and his son, Chuck, started converting the truss scraps into landscaping mulch, and in 1994, Michigan Wood Fibers was born.

Austin Weaver died of cancer shortly after the new company was formed and didn't see the small business he helped launch in Borculo grow into one of the largest producers of landscape mulch in Michigan.

"We pretty much service all of Michigan. I've hauled mulch to the U.P. We are in Detroit, all over. But our primary range is within 125 miles of Borculo," said Nate Weaver, Chuck's son and the company vice president. "It's not uncommon for us to ship 40 or 50 (140-yard) semi loads of mulch in a day."

Michigan Wood Fibers is nearing the height of its busy season, as landscapers and homeowners gear up for spring.

That means stockpiling raw materials and grinding the mountains of mulch that eventually cover the firm's property from front to back. Today, the 20-acre site just off 96th Avenue north of town is virtually buried in mulch and materials waiting to become mulch, some of the piles reaching up to 40-feet high.

The raw materials come from many sources, Nate Weaver said. The wood comes from forest companies and saw mills, from pallet companies and furniture factories.

For some companies, Michigan Wood Fibers is a place for them to dispose of scrap materials, rather than burn it or dump it in a landfill. But all of the products that end up as mulch have one thing in common — they are no longer useful to anyone else.

"We are kind of at the bottom of the food chain. We are kind of the last resort," Weaver said. "If someone can take a log and saw that up and make a shipping pallet out of it, there is more value to that than there is to mulch.

"Sometimes, the value is in just getting rid of it. We are kind of a place for them to get rid of the materials without incurring such a large cost," he added. "When we first started, a lot of the wood was going to the landfill or they were burning it. We gave them an outlet for their waste."

Once that waste ends up at Michigan Wood Fibers, it is processed through the company's grinders. Depending upon the type of mulch being made, the material often runs through the grinder two or three times.

After the material is ground up, huge magnets extract any nails or other metals from the mulch, which is then brought out to the back of the property and allowed to age, bringing out the natural color.

Some of the mulch is dyed in one of five designer colors — red, black, gold, light brown and dark brown. The colored mulch is a growing segment of the company's business, Nate Weaver said.

But, he added, mulch in general has been popular with home owners lately.

"The demand has been really great over the past few years because people spending more time at home and doing projects around the house," he said.

Nate Weaver said the company does about 70 percent of its sales in the spring and early summer, but production continues throughout the year in preparation for the busy season.

"Some people think we retire during the winter," Weaver said. "There is a lot of prep work getting your business in order so when it's time to go you are ready to roll."

Michigan Wood Fibers has about a dozen full-time employees, and adds four or five more to handle the demand in the spring. The company's primary customers are small garden centers, landscapers, churches and even some municipalities who use a large quantity of mulch, Nate Weaver said.

For nearly two decades, Michigan Wood Fibers has been a family-run business. Chuck and Nate have been joined in the business by Nate's brother, Grant, who is the company's dispatcher.

There are three other brothers who work outside the family business, and several grandchildren who might be waiting in the wings to join the firm some day.

"We have a good solid business and we are keeping it going and hoping there is a little room for growth," Chuck Weaver said. "It would be really nice to keep it in the family."

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