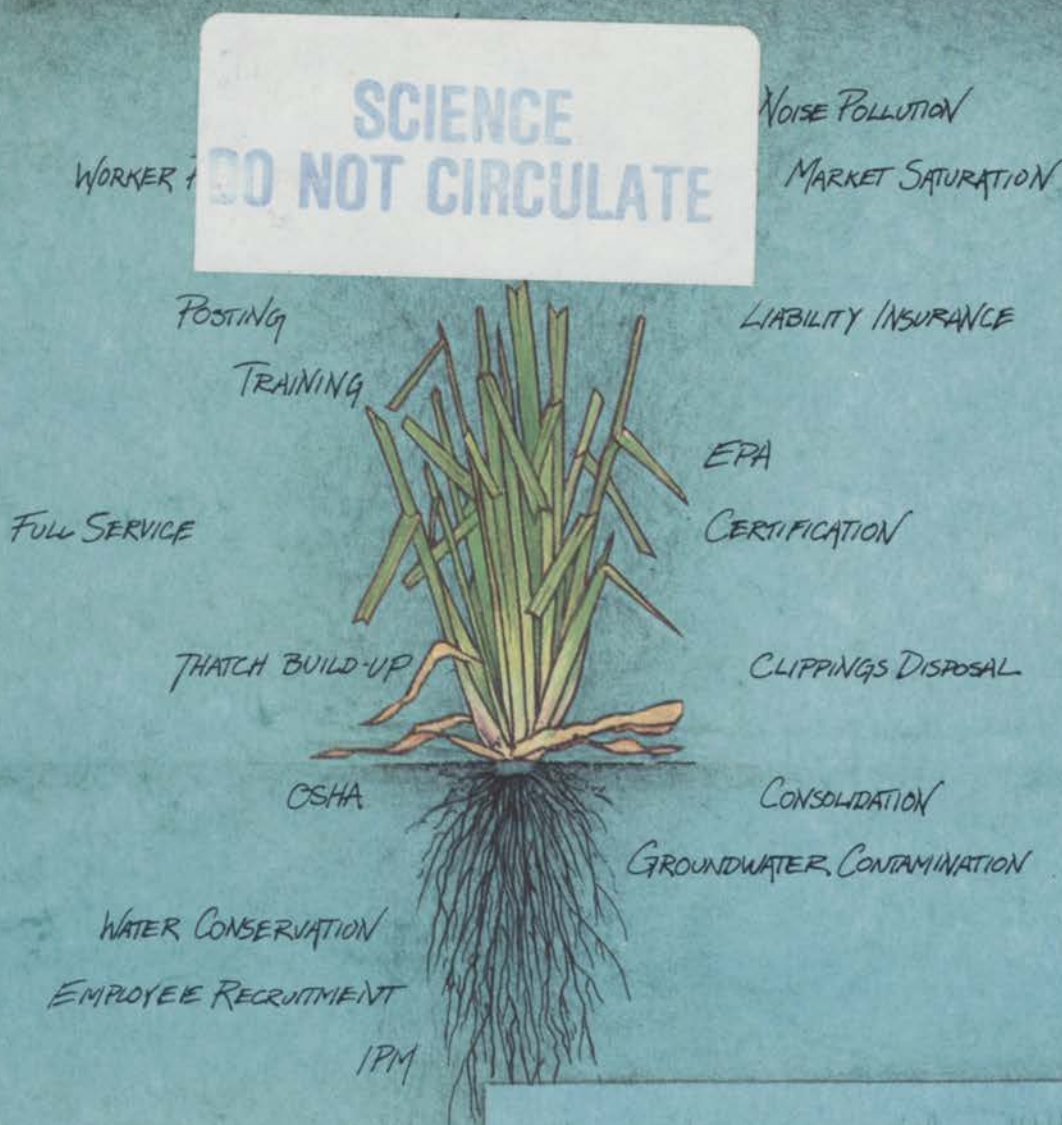


SUPPLEMENT TO

Lawn & Landscape MAINTENANCE



I S S U E S
MANAGEMENT
SPECIAL REPORT

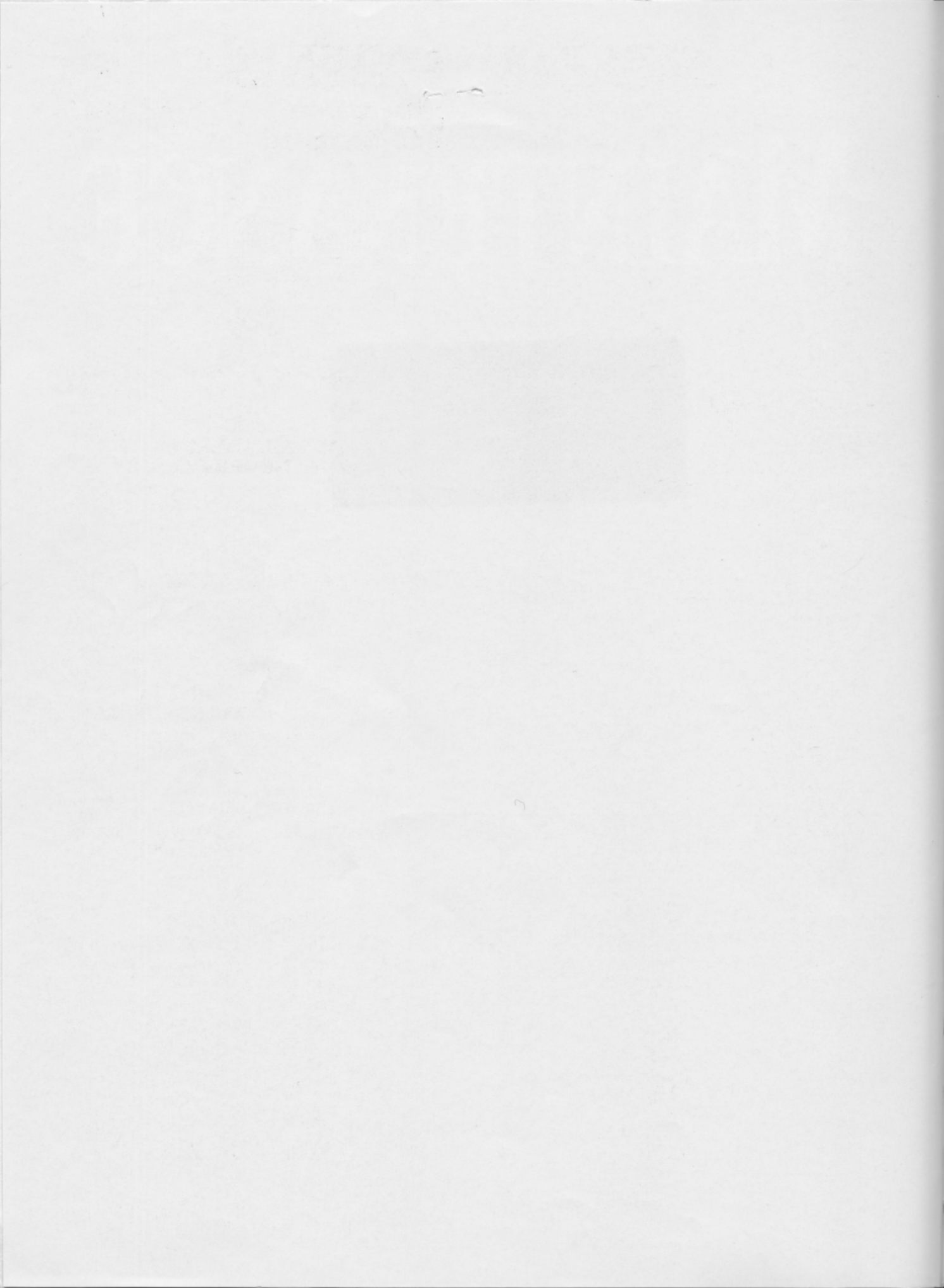


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Innovation and efficiency critical for long-term survival

TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR BUSINESS DESTINY

**Mounting clippings in
landfills magnifies the need
for alternate disposal
methods. Mulching mowers
and composting are two
of the more common
adjustments.**

The first year in the "Decade of the Environment" has without question lived up to its billing. Environmental issues abound — some mild, others extremely controversial.

But as we indicated last year in the first *Issues Management Edition* from *Lawn and Landscape Maintenance* magazine, green industry professionals are poised to deal

with today's issues more than ever before because of increasing experience levels and business maturity.

Yet, the green industry needs to keep moving forward; garnering support both from within and outside this vast industry. Support has only just begun with increased activity at the state association level, federal representation from national associations and efforts to create a public relations network across the country.

This isn't a bad beginning, but those who want to remain in the industry know it's going to take more. Issues like posting and prenotification, water conservation and the disposal of wastes must be addressed.

Posting and prenotification continues to be a volatile issue both on the local and state level, although the green industry has chalked up several victories against unreasonable legislation— attempts by some locales to usurp regulation set up by



Dominant Issues Facing the Lawn and Landscape Maintenance Industry

- Environmental and health concerns including:
 - groundwater contamination
 - heightened awareness of IPM practices
 - increased use of biological controls
 - rinse water recovery
 - product packaging
 - pesticide performance — potential for resistance
- Training
- Licensing and certification
- Heightened competition
- Skyrocketing insurance costs
- Water conservation
- Employee recruitment and retention
- Responsible pricing
- Disposal of horticultural wastes
- Impending economic recession
- Consolidation
- Service diversification

the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act.

The most widely publicized case using FIFRA as a defense against state regulation was in New York, where after two years of battle the green industry finally prevailed in getting state pesticide regulations dropped.

More recently, the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit unanimously affirmed a lower court's ruling that FIFRA preempts political subdivisions from regulating the use of pesticides through ordinances.

In addition, the appeals court ruling is expected to receive "full text publication" giving the decision credibility across the country.

Interest in the use of biological controls continues, and integrated pest management — in one form or another — has become widespread.

Long predicted horticultural waste disposal problems are now more than talked about, they're a reality. Forced to find alternatives to

dumping grass clippings in landfills, operators are leaving clippings on the ground or taking them to municipal or private compost facilities.

Not only does this alleviate overcrowding at landfills, it gives operators an opportunity to buy back and reuse valuable materials.

Maintaining a high quality and sufficient quantity of water are vital concerns — particularly in the West — leading maintenance operators to search for plant materials requiring less water as well as alternatives to traditional irrigation systems.

LawnLife, a Utah firm, contends with water shortages by fine tuning its computerized scheduling. The various municipalities in the area — Ogden City, Provo, Salt Lake — all have differing water restrictions, so LawnLife side-steps a scheduling nightmare by setting up its routes based on zip code zones.

Of course to make everything work, operators need reliable workers to carry out company goals, a job which can only be accomplished through adequate training.

"Training is the major issue today," said David Frank of David Frank Landscape Contractors, Germantown, Wis.

Meeting the issues of the 1990s will ensure continued success in maintaining landscapes and keep operators one step ahead of government regulation.

"But the challenge, he added, is finding, keeping and training the people. Getting work is not the problem, the issue is how to do a good job and that relies on people."

Pricing, an age-old green industry problem, can no longer be avoided. If operators want to feel like a real service industry, they must adjust their prices to reflect the value of their services.

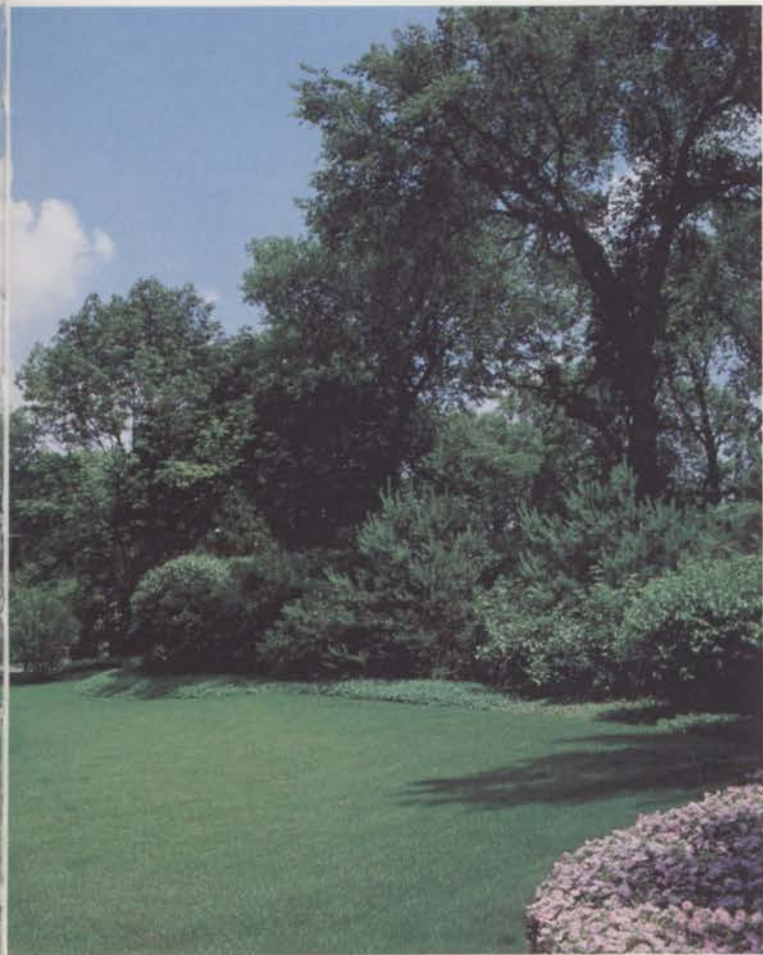
"We need to take a new look at our pricing policies because they often are counter-productive and encourage customers to cancel or reduce applications," said Neal DeAngelo, new president of the PLCAA.

Homeowners and commercial clients see an immediate value when neglected lawns are first brought to the desired appearance. But because good maintenance often shows no visible changes, customers may fail to perceive value in paying for maintenance visits.

And if that's not enough to keep lawn and landscape operators busy, threat of a recession is creeping into the back of their minds.

"It becomes the challenge of the landscaper, in the bad times, to reaffirm the value of services, to justify your existence," said Charles Racusin, president of Environmental Landscape Services, Houston, Texas.

On the following pages, you'll receive a whole range of ideas, suggestions and even some solutions for managing key industry issues.



Slowing economy doesn't deter Mariani Landscape from promoting **UPSCALE RESIDENTIAL SERVICES**



COMPANY NAME

Mariani Landscape

HEADQUARTERS

Lake Bluff, Ill.

FOUNDED

1958; originally named Vito Mariani Landscaping.

MAJORITY OWNER

Frank Mariani, founder's son

PRIMARY SERVICES

Landscape design/build and maintenance, catering mainly to upper-end residential accounts.

EMPLOYEES

40 year-round, 50 seasonal.

1989 GROSS SALES

\$5 million.

Delivering groceries doesn't rank high as a popular add-on service for lawn and landscape maintenance operators, but it's something Mariani Landscape of Lake Bluff, Ill., has done before. And the company's president, Frank Mariani, said he'll gladly do again.

"A couple years ago we had some pretty bad snowstorms," Mariani explained. "When the crews were out clearing snow, I told them to check with clients to see if we could do anything else to help them through the storm. One needed to get to the grocery store, so we went."

While that may be stretching the definition of full service, Mariani views it as simply serving his customers' needs. Great care for attention to detail and building a sense of goodwill among clientele is paramount to the firm's success.

Catering to residential accounts in the exclusive North Shore area of Chicago, Mariani is far removed from the

one-man pickup and mower operation. But just because his work is more elaborate and involved than simple mowing and blowing, doesn't mean his customers aren't interested in value for their dollar.

"It's no secret that our prices aren't the cheapest around, but we do have several serious competitors," he said. "To keep our clients we have to show them that we offer the better value, that they get the absolute best possible."

That's where creating the goodwill comes in handy. Providing them good service and paying attention to their little needs keeps them happy and satisfied. Sticking to a same-day mowing schedule, keeping a keen eye on properties, replying to service calls as soon as possible and offering plant life guarantees beyond the standard one-year are some ways the company accomplishes that.

The cost for replacing plants probably works out to about

2 percent or 3 percent a year. He'd rather spend money that way than by placing ads in an attempt to attract new customers.

"We don't think advertising can really reach the clients we want. If someone's looking for a bargain price we're not for them," he said. "Most of our new accounts come from referrals."

Mariani should know what he's talking about. Since taking over and redirecting the company his father founded more than 30 years ago, sales and profits have increased every year.

"We've been through a couple of recessions and slumps since 1973 and yet we improved every year," he said. "That's because we do a thorough job — one people are still willing to pay for during bad times."

While many economists are warning of impending doom and gloom, Mariani recently took a bold step and major investment for the future. Company headquarters were

Attention to detail and a sense of goodwill among clients are high priorities for Mariani Landscape and important to the firm's success (left).



To provide the best service, employees must be considered an investment, requiring workers with higher levels of education and experience (below).

moved to an 18-acre site that includes offices, shop area, covered staging area and storage.

The \$1 million price tag for refurbishing an old marble cutting factory into a company showpiece was money well spent, according to Mariani. He wants the remodeling to represent the company's commitment to the community.

Even with housing starts declining and the cautious economic mood being caused by Middle East instability, Mariani remains undaunted in the belief that the move will benefit the firm.

While the company's service reputation will assist in getting construction jobs, maintenance work usually doesn't fall off much during an economic recession, Mariani said. Customers cut back, but they keep the service.

"Grass always needs cut and trees always need pruned," he said. "Instead of having a couple of large anchor jobs, we'll probably move toward doing more smaller, basic jobs. Clients slow down and will put some things off, but it's rare for them to drop us."

Along with new headquarters came new services. Mariani offers a tour of the

grounds to give clients an idea of what can be done with their property, as well as consultations with landscape architects to plan designs. In addition, plans are under way to allow garden clubs and other groups to use the facility for meetings.

"There's a core of people who get really involved and want to know everything possible," Mariani said. "We'd like to bring in agronomists, horticulturists or some of our own people once a month to talk about different aspects of the landscape."

This will all help in the selling process, which Mariani wants to make a "soft" approach. Giving tours of the facility, letting prospective customers choose plants and trees, allowing them to choose their level of involvement and demonstrating the company cares about them and their needs all leads to satisfied, loyal customers.

To provide the best service — and that's the Mariani claim — employees must be considered an investment that management is committed to, Mariani said. The service level Mariani strives for requires people with higher levels of education and

experience.

"Experienced labor is more expensive and, of course, you have to pass that on to the clients," he said. "But it places a better prepared professional on the client's property — someone who is confident and knows what's going on."

The commitment goes beyond simply hiring people with experience. Mariani has monthly employee training sessions. These are designed to keep crew members updated on the latest techniques and to reinforce proper safety measures.

"Often someone will mention something at a meeting that other crews haven't run across yet," he said. "We call them training sessions, but they also act as a means for crews to interact and share information with each other instead of management always telling them how to do things."

Pricing, Mariani said, is always a complex process.

"There's a perception that because we're serving higher end residential accounts that our profit is much higher," he said. "People who think that don't understand the increased demands. You have to meet the needs and demands of the market you serve. The expectations in this market are high, so our expenses are high. Our profit in terms of percentage probably isn't that much different than other companies."

And as all lawn and landscape maintenance operators know, customers do not stand alone in creating demands. Legislators and regulators find their way into the picture.

In what is becoming a national trend, this past July Illinois banned landscape wastes from being dumped in landfills. This of course meant scores of operators had to find an alternative to bagging the grass clippings from customers' lawns.

Mariani, fortunately, had the foresight to begin looking for that alternative almost two years ago when talk of a

ban first emerged.

The Mariani solution is positive in all aspects, according to its architect. Arrangements were made with another contractor several miles away who has a composting operation. Mariani now dumps its grass clippings there and later buys the end-product compost for landscaping uses.

Advantages abound. The composting site is two miles away rather than five, contributing to a savings in both time and travel costs. Another financial benefit is the lower dumping charge.

The compost material this operation turns out is far better than what the company used to buy.

"By contributing our clippings and then using the compost material from the same operation, we can tell our clients that instead of just finding a new place to dump we are actually reusing the material," he said.

The company alerted all customers when the plan was initiated so they would know that clippings and other waste from their yards were no longer contributing to the state's landfills.

"There's been a lot of attention given the issue," he said. "Some clients have asked us to experiment with leaving the clippings on the lawn. We're doing it for them, but won't start doing that on a widespread basis for at least a couple years."

Mariani needs to be convinced that the mulching mowers on the market are dependable and will last as long as the equipment he's now using. With 13 maintenance crews, equipping them all with mulchers would be a sizable investment.

"We're in a comfortable position because we found a solution that is actually saving money over our old method and contributes to that goodwill feeling," he said. "When the time is right we'll get more involved in mulching."

Industry turnover rates challenged by customized TRAINING APPROACH

COMPANY NAME

Lawn Specialites.

HEADQUARTERS

Hazleton, Pa.

BRANCH OFFICE

Allentown, Pa.

FOUNDED

1978 by Neal DeAngelo.

OWNERS

Brothers Neal and Paul DeAngelo.

PRIMARY SERVICES

Residential and commercial lawn care, primarily chemical applications, industrial weed control and tree and shrub care.

EMPLOYEES

8 year-round, 28 seasonal.

1989 GROSS SALES

\$775,000.

Last year Neal DeAngelo faced facts.

As president of Lawn Specialites, Hazleton, Pa., DeAngelo for years had tried "everything" to overcome frequent employee turnover. The company introduced higher pay, year-round employment and a more professional emphasis — but no remedies worked.

"So last year I faced facts," DeAngelo said, "and decided since turnover is inevitable, I was going to find the best way to deal with it." The result is a unique approach for training workers in commercial and residential lawn care services.

DeAngelo realized the chief problem with high turnover was the time and cost of remedial training. Until last

Keeping clients happy helps build a steady customer base; vital to the success of any landscape firm.

year, Lawn Specialites mounted intensive, semiannual training seminars for all employees.

"Now we've scaled down our training," DeAngelo said, "so employees are only taught what they need to know for the season of the year in which they're working."

Lawn Specialites first revamped its training by dividing segments among its four key managers. When employees are hired, DeAngelo explains company policies and procedures. Another manager describes the firm's various application programs — while the other two managers review spraying techniques and agronomics, respectively. In addition, staff review meetings are held every three weeks.

New approaches to old problems is also at the heart of what DeAngelo called the lawn care industry's biggest challenge. "We need to take a new look at our pricing policies," he said, "because they often are counter-productive and encourage customers to cancel or reduce applications."

Homeowners and commercial clients see an immediate value when neglected lawns are first brought to the desired appearance. But because good maintenance often shows no visible changes, customers may fail to per-

ceive value in paying for maintenance visits.

DeAngelo believes maintenance operators should learn a lesson from pest control firms. "They tell customers, 'You have a problem and the initial corrective measures will cost you more. Then afterward, you can pay the regular maintenance fee which is lower.'"

Customers who cancel or skip applications risk return of their initial pest control problems, and of paying the higher fees for corrective action.

Shrewd pricing is also part of Lawn Specialites' strategy to capture customers for its expanded service offerings.

The firm began in 1978 with a focus on maintenance, but later dropped that emphasis because maintenance work ties up too much money in equipment and personnel, DeAngelo said.

Instead, in 1983 Lawn Specialites switched to chemical applications. DeAngelo began with a four-application program for residential and commercial customers, but ultimately settled on five applications. "That way I could lower the price about 8 percent," he added, "but still raise revenues because I was performing more applications."

Over the years Lawn Spec-





Lawn Specialties offers three levels of service designed to meet customer needs. A full tree and shrub program is also available.

make a profit."

Making profits is where operational strengths come in, DeAngelo said. Jobs must be worked professionally and expertly to squeeze profits from bare-bones pricing.

For DeAngelo, developing operational strength started from the ground up. He began Lawn Specialties a dozen years ago as an 18-year-old high school graduate who "was not cut out for college, and had to do something for a living."

With a pickup truck and lawn mower, DeAngelo began ringing doorbells. At first the going was tough. "People had trouble trusting a kid who still lived at home," he remembered, "and during the winter I made ends meet by pumping home heating fuels for a local oil company."

By being a perfectionist, however, DeAngelo's business grew as word spread of his quality work. Living at

than 250 clients. That year, DeAngelo's brother Paul joined the company, and the pair recognized the opportunities in chemical applications backed by the dramatic emergence of national lawn care franchises.

"Organizational skills are the qualities you need most in managing a company for growth. Otherwise growth can get out of control," DeAngelo said.

In the early years, DeAngelo was able to secure bank financing by keeping good records. Presenting an organized package to the banker was the only way an entrepreneur in his early 20s could obtain the capital needed to fund expansion.

Insurance rates don't cause DeAngelo undue alarm, though he admitted premiums are skyrocketing. "Society and the business community have brought a lot of this on by abusing the system and making unnecessary claims," he said.

For example, Lawn Specialties has never had a liability claim. The firm budgets for accident repair claims from customers; anything less than \$2,000 Lawn Specialties handles internally rather than turning it over to the insurance company.

As for worker benefits, DeAngelo said, his company follows the lead of many businesses today, asking employees to bear more of the costs for health-related insurance. It encourages them to spend more time understanding their benefits and to abuse them less.

DeAngelo and his brother are currently assembling a business plan to plot their firm's course through the 1990s. Part of the plan will continue the three-year emphasis DeAngelo has put on developing commercial customers.

"But unless companies like mine are willing to take a new look at old approaches," he said, "whether the issue is pricing or training or marketing, we won't survive."

ialties has gradually diversified getting into aeration, liming, fungicide, tree and shrub fertilizing and other services. To market all his services, DeAngelo has devised a three-tier strategy for addressing the varied needs of his clients.

The first tier is a basic five-application service, the premium second tier adds insect control and liming while the third tier, "Gold Club," provides all of the above plus disease control, aeration, slit seeding, crack-and-crevice spraying and other extras. A full tree and shrub program is also available at additional cost.

An integral part of DeAngelo's marketing to homeowners is an active customer education program. Professionally produced customer newsletters are mailed out five times a year.

"We also place a big emphasis on ringing the doorbell on every visit to explain services and answer questions," DeAngelo said, "and on making sure at least two people are always available at the of-

fice who can take calls and answer customer questions."

Pricing strategy also varies by types of clients. DeAngelo estimated his company's receipts are split 60/40 between residential and commercial customers — and maintaining that balance requires an understanding of what drives the market.

With residential customers, lawn care operators must be strong in marketing, DeAngelo said.

"Homeowners buy lawn care services like they buy insurance," he explained. "Once they start with you, they stay with you. The key is closing the initial sale and keeping customers happy. Do that, and you build a steady customer base."

By contrast, success in the commercial market demands lawn care firms have strong operations. "The work is usually obtained by bidding," said DeAngelo, "so you have to start from scratch and rebid each year for all your customers. To survive, your company must be strong enough to bid competitively and still

Shrewd pricing is essential to growing a customer base.

home enabled him to plow profits back into business expansion. Even the heating oil connection helped out, since the fuel company let DeAngelo use its tank trucks during spring and summer for lawn spraying.

Within two years, Lawn Specialties boasted more

Market saturation inspires reorganization at **HILLENMEYER NURSERIES**

COMPANY NAME

Hillennmeyer Nurseries Inc.

HEADQUARTERS

Lexington, Ky.

BRANCHES

Two retail garden centers and two seasonal (spring only) mini-stores.

FOUNDED

1841 by Francis Hillennmeyer.

OWNERS

Brothers Louis III, Chris and Stephen Hillennmeyer.

PRIMARY SERVICES

Wholesale and retail nursery, landscaping, irrigation, maintenance and design construction.

EMPLOYEES

120 year-round, 170 seasonal.

1989 GROSS SALES

\$6.5 million.

According to experts, 80 percent of family businesses fail the first year and among those who persevere, less than a third survive to the second generation.

But Hillennmeyer Nurseries Inc., of Lexington, Ky., has beaten the odds — through 150 years and five generations. Their secret? "We keep what works," said co-owner Stephen Hillennmeyer, "and change when necessary."

A proven approach, for example, has helped Hillennmeyer survive growing saturation in his local market. As the green industry boomed, the company lost business to new entrants in the field. Most of those customers have come back, however, because Hillennmeyer markets itself on the basis of quality, rather than strictly price.

"We advertise our firm as the best, and not necessarily the cheapest. Therefore our clients tend to value quality most," Hillennmeyer said.

While his marketing philosophy has not changed,

Hillennmeyer has reconsidered other company traditions which may help him weather the predicted recession.

"In recent years our commercial landscaping division has changed emphasis from construction to maintenance," he explained, "in part because maintenance is a stable area. Grass must always be mowed; even during a recession."

"When competition for office space rentals heats up, landlords entice tenants with aesthetic improvements. They often put more money into landscaping to distinguish themselves from the crowd," he said.

Economics, however, will in Hillennmeyer's view be eclipsed by environmental concerns.

"Companies will have to think more about recycling and disposal," he said, "which may be a problem, since authorities talk a lot about the issues — but don't offer many solutions."

As for Hillennmeyer Nurseries, the company is attempt-

ing to stay ahead of the issue by recycling plastic mulch bags and by working with a local composting operation to dispose of lawn clippings.

State and federal regulations on chemical applications will also figure heavily in operators' future plans. Last year, the city of Lexington enacted requirements for sign posting and customer prenotification.

"Everybody wants safety," Hillennmeyer said, "but as a businessman I have to consider how to cope with the need to hire a full-time staff person just to post signs and notify customers prior to any applications."

If economic and environmental issues are growing concerns, Hillennmeyer said, he believes demographic trends also pose a significant challenge. As the pool of young people who traditionally fill entry-level jobs is shrinking, Hillennmeyer is revising his employment policies in two ways.

First, Hillennmeyer is now





putting more weight on applicants' attitudes and values, even if they don't have green industry experience. In addition, the company plans to institute more safety and attendance incentive programs for existing employees.

Attracting and retaining good employees also requires a broader outlook.

"It's always been important to treat people well, and to offer competitive salaries and benefits," Hillenmeyer said, "but today we must show employees why the green industry is a good place to work, and how it can provide a satisfying career. For us, that starts with our training programs and continues on from there."

Since he took over the reins in 1985, along with brothers Louis III and Chris, the three men have tripled annual sales to nearly \$7 million.

"To achieve that growth, we needed a willingness to re-evaluate past practices, and even risk what has taken five generations to build — which

can be an awesome feeling," he said.

For example, Hillenmeyer's father and uncle pioneered retail garden centers during the 1950s. "But when they neared retirement, my father and uncle were understandably less interested in risk. After all, the company was doing a solid \$2 million annual business."

The firm's garden centers had kept their same locations for more than 30 years, enjoying an established clientele. Yet Hillenmeyer and his brothers saw how, over the years, most Lexington-area growth had occurred on the opposite side of town.

"We needed a presence where the people were," Hillenmeyer said, "but didn't feel a huge investment was justified." The solution? Hillenmeyer opened two retail "mini-stores" in high visibility locations that operate only during the spring buying season.

The retail division is headed by Louis Hillenmeyer.

Hillenmeyer Nurseries has responded to new challenges by adding a maintenance division, re-organizing its nursery and opening seasonal retail stores.

Brother Chris handles the wholesale and internal nursery, while Stephen has charge of landscaping activities.

Hillenmeyer's landscaping division has seen substantial change from its former ways. A maintenance focus required a new approach, as Hillenmeyer geared his division for the rigors of competitive bidding. Where previously the division relied upon a well-established customer base, now it pursues new business in a competitive environment. The payoff: \$1 million Hillenmeyer Nurseries annually performs in commercial maintenance contracts for private customers.

Irrigation is also a recent venture for Hillenmeyer.

"Lexington has historically relied on natural rain," he said, "but about five years ago a local Toro dealer got into sprinkler systems. My own plan is to provide full-service capabilities. By moving into irrigation, we hope to anticipate customer expectations, rather than react later when somebody else has captured much of the market."

Likewise in the nursery division, Hillenmeyer and his brothers have responded both to new challenges and opportunities. At one time the nursery totaled 400 acres, but is now 250 — with plans to sell another 150 acres.

"It's hard to sell land that's been in the family for generations," said Hillenmeyer. "But with today's containerized delivery services, the firm can obtain many plant materials on a weekly basis, cheaper than they can be grown internally. Thus the nursery grows mostly shade trees and ornamentals, while flowering shrubs and broad-

leaf evergreens are bought."

But if Hillenmeyer's acreage can grow more plant material than the firm itself uses, that too has been turned to an advantage.

"Three years ago we began wholesaling to the 'pickup truck' landscapers; the smaller firms that can't afford to buy by the truckload," he said. "They don't really compete with us anyway."

The sale of excess nursery acreage and plant stock has avoided the need to borrow, as has Hillenmeyer's approach to capital expenditures, buying one truck at a time, for example. Yet the biggest boost to expansion has been the expansion itself.

The company's growth has also meant an increased allocation of staff and resources to customer education and service. "Our goal is to create a customer base rather than sheer customer volume," said Hillenmeyer, "so our sales representatives really emphasize spending time with clients on a personal basis to find out their needs."

The growth of Hillenmeyer Nurseries is founded upon the three brothers' recognition that each brings special qualities to the partnership.

"Good communication between us is essential," Hillenmeyer explained, "and we all meet at least once a week. Each of us is equally committed to doing whatever it takes. We work from six in the morning until six at night, and often later during peak periods."

Facing the challenges of the 1990s requires united action, and for that reason Hillenmeyer is highly involved in the Associated Landscape Contractors of America.

"In a family business managed by three brothers," he concluded, "we know the key to growth and success is pulling together. The same thing is true on an industry level. The various segments must pull together for united action on behalf of the entire green industry — not just for the interests of one group."

Diversification at Senske Lawn and Tree Care RESULTS IN BOOM

COMPANY NAME

Senske Lawn
& Tree Care Inc.

HEADQUARTERS

Kennewick, Wash.

BRANCH OFFICES

Spokane and Yakima,
Wash.; Couer d'Alene,
Idaho.

FOUNDED

1947 by William Senske.

OWNER

Chris Senske.

PRIMARY SERVICES

Lawn and tree care,
pest control, industrial
weed control and
mowing maintenance.

EMPLOYEES

About 75 year-round,
125 seasonal.

1989 GROSS SALES

\$3.6 million.

After Chris Senske took over his father's firm, Senske Lawn and Tree Care of Kennewick, Wash., he took a good look around, evaluating exactly where the business stood.

"When dad retired in 1979," Senske recalled, "we served about the same 300 residential customers the company had served for 30 years."

Senske saw how then-emerging franchises were aggressively creating new business and wondered where he was missing out. Opportunity clearly beckoned, yet Senske was initially daunted by the thought of change.

"I joined the company after college in 1975, and within three or four months I was put in operational control," said Senske, who assumed the presidency in 1979.

Hoping to learn from others, Senske began attending regional and national professional meetings. Networking and finding out what other people were do-

ing was his first step toward growth.

Because Senske Lawn and Tree Care offered only expensive premium services, its market was restricted. To lower costs without compromising quality, Senske sought to improve efficiency — instituting denser travel routes and all-liquid spraying among other things.

"Once we could put together more competitive pricing," Senske said, "our initial growth strategy was the obvious one — geographic expansion. But in Washington that's a big commitment. Towns might be 150 miles apart, with nothing in between but desert or scrub. Branch operations can't get much support from the home office, so they need enough equipment and personnel to operate on their own."

Despite new markets and competitive pricing, Senske knew these alone would not guarantee sustained growth. "Our customers were looking for full service," he explained, "so for us diversification was at first a matter of simple survival."

The company responded by adding mowing maintenance to its basic services. Later, as opportunity became the prime concern, Senske offered tree pruning, pest control and industrial weed control. Today he has built a \$3.6 million per-year company whose peak work force of 125 serves four cities in Washington and Idaho.

New services meant a new outlook. Senske always assumed clients were chiefly interested in green grass. "But as I listened to customers, I found they really wanted lawns with no weeds. That was a revelation because to satisfy our customers in this area, we had to rethink

Specialism was the foundation of Senske Lawn and Tree Care, but changes in today's market forced the firm to re-evaluate its position.

our emphasis and approach."

Specialism was the foundation of Senske Lawn and Tree Care since it was founded in 1947, but today things have changed.

"Customers prefer to get answers from one company. They don't want one guy for mowing, another for trees and shrubs and another for spraying," Senske said. "There's more convenience and accountability when you deal with just one vendor."

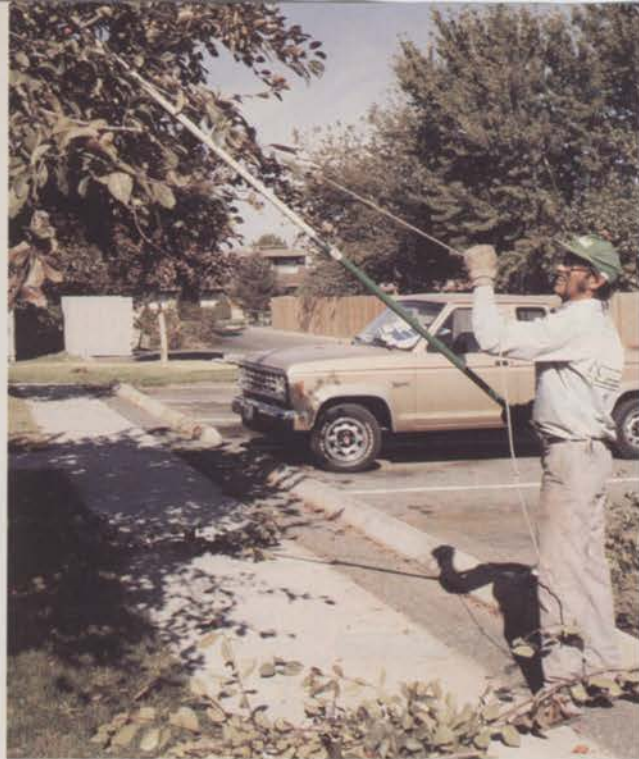
While other companies distribute newsletters or push programs, Senske prefers to find out what customers want then take the problem, solve it and explain what should be done.

Though he grew up around the lawn care business, Senske realized expanded services meant he couldn't do everything himself. As a result, the foundation of Senske's growth was hiring and cultivating a good team from the beginning.

"Good people is the key for growth, the basis from which everything else starts," he said.

In recent years, recruiting and retaining a top-notch work force has become more of a challenge. Nationally, the





pool of young people has been shrinking. Although he believes a lot of potential workers are out there, Senske still requires 100 employment applications to find 10 suitable workers.

"Our industry has to change its thinking about technicians," Senske said, "and stop regarding them as come and go jobs for young males. We need to think more like the delivery business, for example, where

a lot of employees work their whole careers as drivers."

To accomplish such new thinking, individual lawn care firms must give employees room to grow and a long-term future, Senske added. "Too often, technician jobs are seen — by employees and employers alike — as a dead end, just a way to make some money until you go somewhere else."

Senske has responded by

Determination to exploit new opportunities and make measurable goals will keep the company thriving.

boosting wage scales, and by keeping good workers on the payroll year-round.

"For a company our size, keeping 75 year-round employees may seem like a lot," he explained, "but we justify the cost as an investment. Experienced workers are more productive, and we also minimize replacement and training costs."

Senske admitted to making some bad decisions — particularly in the early 1980s — when he invested heavily in going after maintenance work at federal government installations. Though prospects at first seemed bright, budget cutbacks and public fears soon reduced or shut down Washington's nuclear research sites.

"If you plan carefully, things shouldn't be a gamble," Senske said, "but there's always the possibility your decisions won't work out. It's like playing the stock market — don't invest anything you're not prepared to lose."

Financing company growth also required Senske to depart from his father's ways. While his father's generation looked differently at borrowing, today, Senske said, he doesn't mind using the bank's money because there's never enough money when your company's in a growth mode.

Still, Senske admitted some of his father's conservatism has rubbed off. The company borrows mostly for capital investments and avoids loans for operating expenses. Before borrowing, Senske also does everything he can to raise funds by collecting bills and improving cash flow.

Keeping the cash flowing has been simplified by Washington's booming economy. Greater Seattle is among the nation's fastest growing areas, aided by thriving aerospace and electronics industries, and favored by an attractive quality of life. In turn, this

prosperity spills over to the state's Eastern tier, where Senske Lawn and Tree Care operates.

"Right now there's enough business to go around," said Senske, "but I can see where saturation may start to become an issue. The towns we serve aren't that big; Spokane has only about 350,000 residents."

Between franchises and independents, Senske said, most of the available market for chemical lawn care has already been captured. Indeed, he admitted, that fact was one reason behind his firm's decision to diversify its service offerings.

Senske also sees federal and state laws and regulations squeezing maintenance operators in the years ahead.

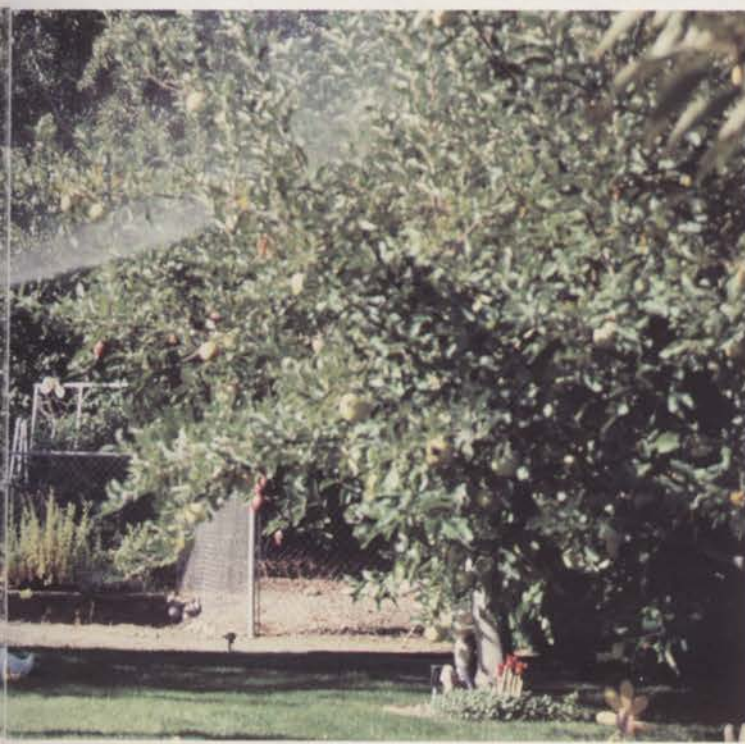
In particular, Senske expects tighter rules for handling wastes and toxic materials, for training and certifying applicators and for posting and prenottification.

"Protecting public safety and the environment is something we all favor," Senske said, "but many of the laws passed or proposed are hard to administer. A lot of small companies will be hurt, either through ignorance or compliance burdens. As an industry, we need to work with public officials to make laws both effective and workable."

Senske claimed the industry's future is bright. "Today people emphasize their quality of life more than ever before," he said, "and green plants and landscapes will always be associated with the good living."

Determination to exploit new opportunities will keep the company thriving.

"When you consider growth, whether through geographic expansion or diversification of services," he said, "you've got to make a plan and have measurable goals. Then you must focus on that plan and avoid straying too much — otherwise you won't know where your success, or failure, came from."



RECYCLING LANDSCAPE WASTES

Gaining the most from grass clippings



When mowing, mow often enough to remove only $\frac{1}{3}$ of the grass blade.

More than 32 states are studying legislation or have already passed laws that change the way people discard grass clippings and leaves.

In response, cities across the country are taking action to deal with rapidly filling landfills. It's estimated that half of the 16,400 U.S. landfills will be closed by the year 2000.

Because of strict licensing procedures that are lengthy and time-consuming, new landfills are being created slowly. What can maintenance operators do in the meantime?

Many communities are launching public education programs to inform people about the problem and ac-

tions they can take to alleviate it. The City of Milwaukee for example, found that 40 percent of its citizens would consider at-home lawn debris recycling if they knew how to go about it.

With the Wisconsin state law banning disposals to landfills scheduled to take effect Jan. 1, 1993, Milwaukee has already formed a Public Education Committee to help get the word out.

Landscape waste is estimated at 17 percent to 20 percent of the volume that goes into landfills in spring and summer, and a whopping 40 percent in autumn, said Bob Tracinski, John Deere's representative on the Milwaukee committee.

"John Deere has taken a leadership position in the development of public education materials on the recycling issue," he said. "In the fall of 1989, John Deere produced a 2-minute recycling consumer information video that was distributed to 100 TV stations across the U.S. More than 3.5 million people saw the video and got the message."

The message that John Deere promotes is consistent with information provided by extension agents and university turf specialists, and can be used by landscape maintenance professionals to pass the recycling message on to his customers and the gene-

ral public.

When mowing, follow the John Deere $\frac{1}{3}$ rule — mow often enough to remove only $\frac{1}{3}$ of the grass blade at each mowing. By following this rule, grass clippings are short and deteriorate quickly.

Clippings are about 85 percent water; when they break down, they return nutrients to the soil. In fact, experts have estimated that a season's worth of clippings is equal to about one application of a commercial fertilizer.

For every variety of grass there's a recommended mowing height. In general, the recommended height for warm-season grasses is from one to two inches; for cool-season grasses, from two to three inches. Mowing on the high side of the recommended range encourages grass to develop a deep root system.

If frequent rain makes it difficult to follow the $\frac{1}{3}$ rule, then use a mulching plate to keep clippings short. A mulching plate covers the discharge opening of the mower deck holding the clippings inside the mowing chamber so the cutting blades can chop the grass blades into small pieces.

The Milwaukee committee found that many people are worried about a build-up of thatch in the lawn if clippings aren't collected and removed. So any public education program must hit this

concern head on. Grass clippings decompose within a few days and don't contribute to thatch.

Actually, a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch layer of thatch is beneficial because it helps hold moisture in the soil. A thatch layer greater than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, however, can be harmful because it can act like a sheet of plastic preventing movement of air, water and nutrients into the soil.

Lawns need about one to two inches of water per week. Turf experts suggest watering deeply, but infrequently. Water so that the moisture moves 6 to 8 inches into the soil, encouraging roots to grow deeply.

The causes of thatch build-up are shallow watering and overfertilizing. When a lawn is watered or fed too often, the roots grow lazy. They stay near the soil surface where food and moisture are easily obtained.

Some extension agents are cautioning people to show restraint in fertilizing if they distribute the clippings on their lawn. The clippings return nitrogen to the soil as part of the recycling process.

In autumn grass plants go through a change in preparation for winter. The chlorophyll in grass plants must react with sunlight to manufacture sugars that are stored in the root system, bolstering root development through most of the dormant period.

As a result, it's not practical to chop tree leaves and distribute them across most lawns because the volume of debris would smother the grass. In addition, some tree leaves are tough and take a long time to deteriorate, especially the stems.

For more information about the John Deere recycling issue public education program, contact Bob Tracinski at Deere & Company, John Deere Road, Moline, Ill. 61265; 309/765-4459.

We gave the belt the boot

INTRODUCING THE NEW WET-DISK DRIVES FROM JOHN DEERE

Wet grounds can cause your profits to slip as quickly as the drive belts on some commercial mowing machines.

That's why John Deere has banished the belt, replacing it with a more reliable, more durable wet-disk clutch.

Of course, we don't

recommend mowing in the rain, or in extremely wet conditions.

But when you must, our new 14- and 17-hp wet-disk-drive mowers handle the situation well.

Helping keep you and your cash flow moving in a positive direction.

Disk-drive clutches are enclosed in the transmission case and lubricated for long life. No external drive belts. No moisture-induced traction loss.

The 5-speed, gear-drive transmission (with reverse)

can be shifted on the go.

Console and handle-mounted controls are within easy reach.

And the convenient hand crank lets you adjust cutting heights easily from $\frac{3}{4}$ to 4 inches.

An exclusive oscillating deck provides cutting widths of 48 and 54 inches in each horsepower size.

See your dealer for more information on the new wet-disk drives from John Deere. Or call 1-800-544-2122.

**NOTHING RUNS
LIKE A DEERE®**



INNOVATIVE SERVICES

Variety can positively affect your bottom line



High-quality property maintenance can significantly increase the value of a property.

With the variety of products and services available to customers today, the more unique programs a lawn maintenance company offers, the more it sets itself apart from the competition.

This sales approach, plus effectively taking advantage of changing market conditions and new products, has helped increase business for many service companies.

An example of this is an innovative approach to lawn maintenance and payment program that has helped increase the cash flow for Andy Hines, general manager of Shrub & Turf, Athens, Ga.

The combination of these two programs is working so well that Hines increased his prepaying customer income by 40 percent and reduced

his materials and time/labor costs by \$22.75 per customer, resulting in a 60 percent increase in profits for the first quarter of 1990.

Shrub & Turf started in 1978 and today serves 400 clients: 75 percent are middle class residential properties, 20 percent are estates and about 5 percent are commercial accounts.

The majority owner of Shrub & Turf is Ed Nash. Hines took over the reins at Shrub & Turf in 1989, a firm which today employs four people, including Hines and his wife Julia, who is office manager.

Hines believes the overall investment in landscaping and proper maintenance of a property is an appreciating asset for the client. On sales calls, he shows prospects that

high-quality property care can result in a 10 percent increase in the value of the landscape and property.

And to maintain the property, he recommends that clients budget between 8 percent and 12 percent of the assessed value of the property.

"We sit down with prospective clients, explain our program and show them what they get for their money," Hines said. "We describe our services and our 'techpertise' of lawn and landscape care, and we emphasize our knowledge about using products properly and effectively."

Last December, Hines sent an informational newsletter to his clients and prospects to remind them of his services. He also took the opportunity to introduce an early sign up and prepay discount offer for those clients who prepaid for the entire year's services in January and February.

"Considering our major weed populations in this area, mainly spurge, oxalis and woodsorrel, we gave a higher discount to our prepaying customers. Plus, we gave them a free application of Gallery herbicide," he said.

He said that way he can reduce his overall costs by reducing callbacks, and in return, customers receive value and better looking lawns for their upfront commitment to the company's programs.

"Before Gallery became registered in 1989, we didn't have a product available that would allow us to get preemergence control of so many broadleaf weeds so effectively," he said. "Plus, the product can be used on lawns, in landscaped areas and in natural areas."

Just as important to his profits, Hines said, the program saves the company \$22.75 or 31.6 percent in materials and labor costs per customer by not having to make repeat service calls.

The cost of Gallery is minuscule in comparison with constantly finding new customers or having a dissatisfied customer, Hines added.

Another program that Hines introduced last winter was the TEAM (Total Environmental Approach Management) program. The TEAM program comprises three basic elements: agronomic, mechanical and financial. This provides a total comprehensive grounds maintenance approach.

"People are tired of hearing all the negative talk about pesticides. What they want to hear is that we're licensed and we know what we're doing," Hines said. "They want to know that the materials we're using can be used without unreasonable risk or adverse effects. That's why the caution label on a product is important."

The TEAM concept goes beyond IPM. Hines incorporates financial management of property maintenance into the program, allowing him to further differentiate his services.

The results for Shrub & Turf have been profitable.

"The prepay program has increased our bottom line. We are averaging about \$390 per customer and our average prepay is \$480, which is approximately 30 percent of our customers," he said.

Saham
Wilson

Broadleaves won't be coming back to haunt you.



Introducing Gallery.™

Nothing's more terrifying than to hear a customer say, "They're back." Dreaded broadleaves. Costly callbacks. You want to scream.

Your nightmares are over at last. Elanco introduces the unique preemergence broadleaf weed control for turfgrass—new Gallery 75DF. Featuring an advanced new chemistry, it casts broad-

leaves into the dungeon and throws away the key all season long.

Your customers won't be haunted by spurge. Or oxalis. Or white clover. Or 41 other tough broadleaves. And you'll be haunted less by costly callbacks.

Yet turfgrass has nothing to fear. New Gallery is actually more tolerant on your turf than other herbicides. So there's no risk of off-site damage to nearby ornamentals, gardens and trees.

Put an end to the horror of broadleaves. Instead of hearing "They're back," start saying, "They're gone." With new Gallery. See your Elanco distributor. Or call toll-free: **1-800-352-6776**.

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INDUSTRY EFFICIENCY

Today's competition forces greater industry knowledge



Cushman President Stuart Rafos and the firm's new manufacturing facilities.

Despite a growth rate that has averaged 20 percent a year, some lawn care operators see the influx of new companies into the lawn care business as threatening to saturate the market.

While the number of companies in the business, estimated at about 5,500 five years ago, has grown only to somewhere around 6,000, the number of buy outs, consolidations and an increase in franchises makes the number of actual operations much higher.

Many firms continue to broaden their services while others, such as Greg Schreiner, choose to specialize in a specific service. Schreiner, who started Aeration Consultants in Denver just four years ago, today has 6,200 accounts and aerates more than 50 million square feet of turf a year; some of it twice or even three times.

With increased competition and more knowledgeable homeowners and grounds managers, lawn care operators are finding they have to be more professional in the services they offer, more efficient in their operations and more creative in their billing.

One of the biggest demands has been for more professional equipment, including machines that will run for six, eight or 10 hours a day

without constant breakdowns and stoppages. Until recently, much of the professional turf care equipment on the market was designed primarily for high-maintenance turf areas, such as golf courses.

"Home" lawn care equipment, on the other hand, was designed and built for occasional use. It was priced accordingly, but a company that specialized in mowing, for example, would be lucky to get a full season's use out of a walk-behind mower.

Aeration equipment was once much the same. It was comparatively large, expensive and designed for precision work and large areas like golf courses. Change, however, was soon brought about by increased awareness.

When Cushman introduced its walk-behind aerator several years ago — the Ryan Lawnaire IV — it was primarily used as a rental machine. Today, it's the standard aerator for use on home lawns.

One reason is the professional, more effective job done by the Lawnaire IV with its "coring" type hollow tines that remove more soil and deposit it on the surface. The coring action permits better oxygen exchange in the grass root zone, while the soil cores breaking down on the surface help break down thatch.

A side benefit is reduced ir-

rigation runoff, helping to conserve water and reduce the risk of groundwater contamination.

Cushman engineers, meanwhile, have continued to develop improved equipment for aeration and other turf maintenance work, from dethatching to overseeding. Two years ago, the Ryan Lawnaire 28 was introduced. Using the same technology developed by Ryan years ago for golf course aerators, the Lawnaire 28 immediately gave lawn care firms a professional, faster aerator for smaller areas like home lawns.

Built with a tricycle front wheel that makes it easier to maneuver around flower beds, driveways and trees, the Lawnaire 28 enables the operator to cover up to 24,000 square feet an hour. The improved maneuverability and increased work capacity not only leaves a more professional looking job when completed, it lets the operator get finished and on to the next yard faster.

New this year, the Lawnaire V walk-behind aerator was recently introduced to the market.

Based on the same design as the Lawnaire IV, the Lawnaire V covers a wider swath, 26.5 inches compared to 19 inches for the Lawnaire IV, and enables the operator to

cover about 38 percent more area every hour.

At the same time, the Lawnaire V is designed so it can still be maneuvered through home yard gates, work into lawn corners and cover slopes better.

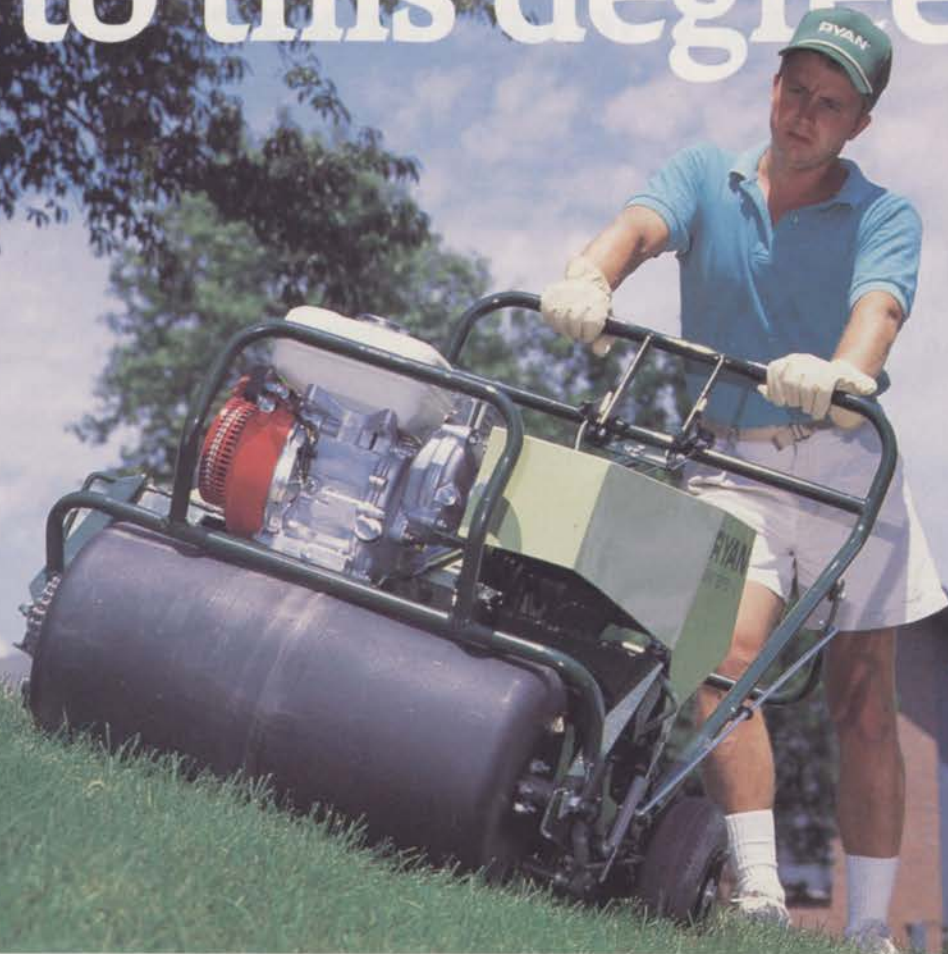
New products being considered at Cushman will help lawn maintenance firms meet future demands for more environmentally oriented services. These include equipment for grinding and composting grass clippings, vital to many areas where grass clippings have been or will be banned from local landfills.

Other equipment being studied will impact pesticide applications with the advantage of minimizing chances of runoff and groundwater contamination.

Along with innovative equipment design and engineering, Cushman has led the way in compiling and producing educational brochures that describe proper steps in lawn management and care. These publications cover topics ranging from aeration and overseeding to those geared to homeowners which lawn care operators can use to explain and market their services.

One publication, "Dawn of a New Age in Lawn Care," even helps lawn care operators correctly price their services.

Only Ryan[®] takes aeration to this degree.



Introducing the new Ryan Lawnaire[®] V Aerator

No one goes to greater lengths to meet your every aeration need than Ryan. The new Lawnaire V proves it.

Whether you're on slopes or in hard-to-reach areas, the LA V lets you aerate more quickly and effec-

tively than any other aerator on the market. And, with Ryan quality to back it up, the LA V will keep aerating over hill and dale, year after year. It's



another outstanding example of our commitment to being the aeration leader in the lawncare industry.

For a new slant on aeration, contact your local Ryan dealer or call toll free 1-800-228-4444 today.

RANSOMES

CUSHMAN

EAR TO THE GROUND

Operator input critical to new product development



Mobay's Research Park located just outside Kansas City, Mo.

Setting an example for the industry is key to the success of a company involved in the specialty chemicals business. Followers continue to follow and leaders continue to help the industry grow, consequently growing themselves.

Mobay Specialty Products Group is such an organization. Mobay is committed to developing and manufacturing the best turf and ornamental products possible.

Integral in producing such products is Mobay's ability and willingness to listen to people in the field. Every day, Mobay representatives talk with lawn care operators and landscape contractors, answering their questions and catering to their concerns.

By listening carefully to industry professionals and asking key questions, Mobay personnel can determine just what types of products and

product attributes are desired. The information gleaned from these one-on-one talks is relayed to research personnel such as Dr. John Ivey, research and development manager.

"There is a degree of science, logic and speculation involved in developing new products," Ivey said. "The science and logic come as a matter of course, but sometimes the speculation does not provide us the direction we need. By talking with men and women who are out there every day, we can learn from their hands-on experience."

"That professional experience allows these people to know what will work and what will not. By just talking with people and listening, we can develop the best products for the industry."

At Mobay's Research Park, located just outside Kansas City, Mo., and at the company's

Vero Beach, Fla., laboratories, millions of dollars and thousands of man-hours are spent each year on developing and testing new compounds. Mobay researchers run the compounds through batteries of tests to determine their viability either as insecticides, fungicides or herbicides.

Areas and qualities examined include efficacy, residual activity, spectrum of activity, minimum rate at which the chemicals are efficacious, environmental fate, ecological effects, mammalian toxicity and others.

Of course, this process is not a short-term endeavor. To bring a product to market, Mobay must extensively test the new compounds — no matter how long it takes. After Mobay's in-house testing comes the stringent federal registration process which can last three years or longer.

Mobay's teamwork with the end user helped to develop the revolutionary product TEMPO insecticide presently labeled for use on home lawns and ornamentals. TEMPO controls a wide spectrum of insects in a variety of lawn care situations.

According to Mobay Turf and Ornamental Product Manager Dan Meek, users of this advanced-generation pyrethroid can expect to receive effective control of many insect pests at significantly

lower active ingredient rates than most organophosphate, carbamate or other pyrethroid insecticides currently in use.

Additionally, considering the ever-growing impact of increasing public attention to pesticide use, TEMPO's low mammalian toxicity and low odor offer a big benefit to applicators. Equally important to industry professionals is Tempo's non-phytotoxicity to a wide range of ornamentals.

"Studies show that after treating an excess of 250 plant species with TEMPO, only three species showed any indications of sensitivity to active ingredients," Meek said. "Tests have also shown TEMPO to be compatible with all commonly used fungicides, miticides, liquid fertilizers and other insecticides."

Applicators can enjoy the extremely fast knockdown capabilities of TEMPO as well as its residual control for periods of up to four weeks. Even though TEMPO is primarily a contact insecticide, it also exhibits impressive activity as a stomach poison.

These qualities make it useful against damaging insects like leaf-chewing, bud-chewing and leaf-skeletonizing insects.

Adding it all together, it's clear that TEMPO has many characteristics needed to make it a beneficial product for tree care professionals as well as lawn care operators. TEMPO gives users effective broad spectrum control at low use rates, no phytotoxicity, low toxicity to mammals and no odor; all for a competitive price.

In addition to TEMPO 2 insecticide, Mobay Specialty Products Group offers a full line of products for the green industry. Mobay's Namacur, Oftanol, Bayleton, Dyrene, Morestan, Metasystox, Di-Syston and Sencor provide effective control for a variety of lawn care problems.

TURFSTEED
EVOLUTION
Turf-type fall
fascies taking the
market by storm



The only thing on this ad is Mobay's full line of proven products. There are no turf or ornamental diseases, no pests, and no blights of any kind. The same thing happens when you use Mobay products on your turf and ornamentals. Mobay Corporation, Specialty Products Group, Box 4913, Kansas City, MO 64120. 800-842-8020

TURFSEED EVOLUTION

Turf-type tall fescues taking the market by storm



Bonsai is the result of years of selecting dwarf fescue material from thousands of plant progeny.

One of the most fascinating developments in the turfgrass arena during the past 10 years has been the evolution of turf-type tall fescue.

Originally a pasture grass, work began 20 years ago to re-select this species for a finer, darker leaf while maintaining the ecological benefits of drought resistance, deep roots and reduced disease susceptibility.

Tall fescues are capable of growing well over a wide range of soil and climatic conditions. They have a deep, non-fibrous root system that when grown in turf do not primarily rely on moisture available near the surface, but instead forage for water at greater depths.

Consequently, while they do not necessarily use less water than other species, they do not rely as much on a regular irrigation schedule.

The tall fescues are the most heat tolerant of the cool-season grasses for general turf use and form the bridge between cool- and warm-season grasses throughout the transition zone where growing conditions for either type are less than satisfactory.

C. Reed Funk of Rutgers University was the pioneer in this field who recognized the advantages of the fescue species. He was largely respon-

sible for the release of the first generation of turf-types like Rebel and Falcon.

Though significant strides were made, early varieties were still a poor match with other popular turfgrass species.

Not until a notable amount of tall fescue was used in more intensively manicured turfs did most of the "finer" attributes of the species come to the surface.

Widespread probing in national tests and in research plots of other breeders demonstrated that these new tall fescues could really be attractive turfgrasses. Dark color, markedly reduced vertical elongation, greater disease resistance, a significant decrease in shoot density and much shorter basal leaf sheaths permitting shorter mowing were the new characteristics being discovered.

These latest developments which have drastically reduced the vertical growth rate especially during the shorter days of fall, winter and spring are popularly referred to — quite paradoxically — as "dwarf" tall fescues.

These can be considered the first true turf-type tall fescues, comparable to Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass in overall turf performance.

The market for these fes-

cues has been the fastest growing segment of the turfgrass business in the last decade. Sales have gone from less than one million pounds in 1980 to more than 60 million pounds annually.

The benefits of turfgrasses in general are innumerable and include:

- Production of oxygen (an acre produces enough oxygen for four adults daily);
- Cleanses pollutants out of the air and filtrates water;
- Cooling effects;
- Abates noise; and
- Controls erosion.

There is, however, the proverbial Achilles heel in most tall fescues; the significant vertical growth rates at certain times of year produce excessive lawn clippings requiring frequent mowing.

Since lawn clippings account for 18 percent of landfill space, more than 25 states have passed or are studying legislation to change the way people discard their grass clippings. An alternative to collecting and disposing of clippings is Bonsai tall fescue.

Bonsai is the result of years of selecting dwarf fescue material from the tens of thousands of plant progeny by Fred Ledebauer in Aurora, Ore. This six-clone cultivar was selected for its deep green color, its fine texture and its extremely dwarf

growth habit.

With an emphasis on reduced maintenance requirements, Bonsai also possesses an innate characteristic known as day length-associated dwarfism; as the days get shorter, so does Bonsai.

With more than 30 tillers per plant, most fescues have six to eight tillers, Bonsai has a color and density better than all but three entries in the National Kentucky Bluegrass Trials. Since Bonsai was bred to have darker green foliage, it's not likely to be over-fertilized in an attempt to improve color. Bonsai maintains a luxuriant green turf without excess growth.

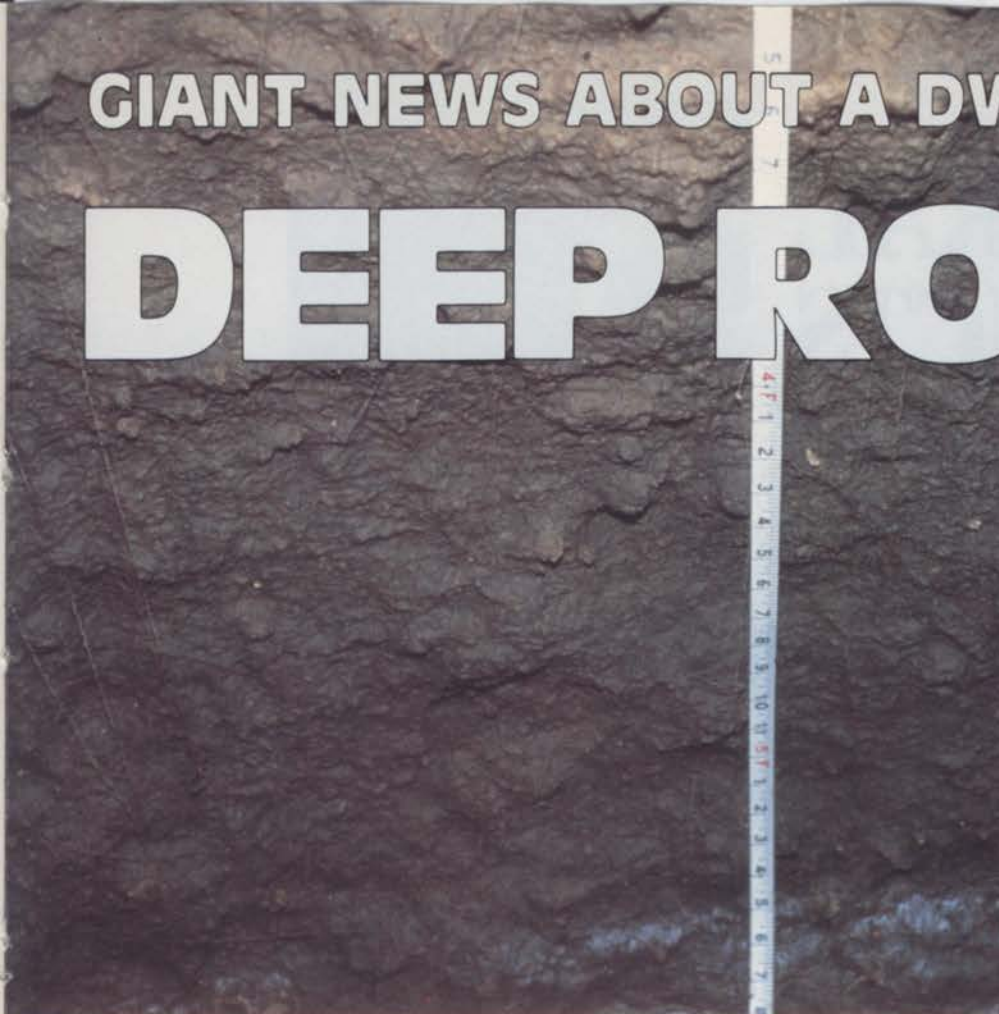
Using Bonsai in combination with a mulching mower virtually eliminates lawn clipping residue at most times of the year.

Another innate feature of Bonsai is its high endophyte content. The higher the endophyte, the higher the plant's ability to fend off insects like the sod webworm and chinch bug.

In the days of biotechnology and gene splicing, it's interesting to note that it's still hard to improve on what Mother Nature can provide, including tall fescues.

GIANT NEWS ABOUT A DWARF FESCUE

DEEP ROOTS



Bonsai Dwarf Fescue is as colossal underground as its performance is above ground. To prove our point we dug a hole in a Bonsai lawn. How deep do Bonsai roots grow? We stopped at six feet and they kept on going.

Above ground, this dwarf is shorter, finer, and darker than any other commercially available variety. Bonsai's darker color means you will use less fertilizer to maintain a dark green turf, and its dwarf growth habit requires much less mowing than any other tall fescue. Bonsai has more tillers per plant...a profusion of tillers at low angles that result in a turf of greater density, even at low seeding rates. Plus, this true dwarf fescue possesses an extremely high endophyte count for increased insect tolerance.

Bonsai's darker color is maintained by its extensive root system, which better utilizes available fertilizer and water. This high performance turf has a drought tolerance equal to or better than any other tall fescue.

Bonsai Dwarf Fescue — The big news is our giant roots.

Bonsai

TALL FESCUE
(DWARF TURF TYPE)



TURF
MERCHANTS

NATURAL PRODUCTS

Alternative methods for maintenance professionals



Ringer products rely on a natural protein slow-release process.

A long time ago — 10 years before the first Earth Day celebration — in fact, when the Blue Planet was perceived as larger, less vulnerable and more resilient than it appears to be nowadays, a far-sighted Minnesotan introduced a product that foresaw some current environmental concerns by several decades.

The man's name was Judd Ringer and the product, he hoped, would reduce the use of chemicals on home lawns. Called a "Killer Kane," the longish plastic tube with a hollow tip and filled with weed killer enabled homeowners to rid their lawns of unwanted vegetation simply by poking individual weeds on the spot without spraying the whole yard.

Today the company that began with Ringer's "Killer Kane" has grown to become an international business. But the Ringer Co. hasn't departed from its original strategy, marketing safe lawn products to commercial lawn service operators, professional turf managers and golf course superintendents.

Increased demand from a public that is becoming more aware of environmental issues and the fragility of our world has influenced landscape professionals to seek and use natural products.

The Ringer line is especial-

ly interesting because lawn and landscape turf professionals have had a double-edged sword hanging over their heads in recent years.

On one hand, chemical pesticides can destroy beneficial organisms, including some that help plants resist disease. At the same time, there are reports of emerging disease strains that are resistant to traditional chemical fungicides.

These concerns, together with fears of soil and water contamination have led a number of managers to try alternative methods, among them Ringer's.

Ringer's commercial line today includes Turf 10-2-6 for general turf applications, Flower/Foliage 8-6-5 for nursery and ornamental use and Greens 6-1-3 and Greens Super 10-2-6 for golf greens and tees.

Ringer fertilizers contain no synthetic components. They use natural protein sources based upon feed grade animal proteins (N), wheat germ, bone meal (P) and relatively new potassium sources such as sunflower seed hull ash (K).

Applied at recommended rates, they won't burn even sensitive turfgrasses, regardless of weather conditions. More importantly, since they are made of feed grade mat-

erials, no testing to date has shown any ill effects on humans, pets or wildlife.

Because all Ringer products strengthen natural soil and plant processes and allow for a much lower level of toxicity, turf so treated enjoys a healthy environment that keeps getting healthier.

One advocate of the Ringer approach is Tim Pearson, manager of Granulawn Inc. in Minnesota. The company serves more than 3,000 residential customers in the Minneapolis area.

Pearson said Granulawn recommends Ringer Turf 10-2-6 to customers who like the idea of using natural products on their lawns. He said that Ringer products are "more like a vitamin rather than a steroid."

"This is the third season we've used Ringer and it has exploded this past year," he said. "We probably applied 70 to 80 tons this summer. We are firm believers."

Another believer is the Arnold Palmer Golf Management Co., which manages 10 of the most prestigious courses in the United States, using Ringer products.

Turf 10-2-6, Greens 6-1-3 and Greens Super 10-2-6 are scientifically formulated for professional turf use and designed to complement existing programs.

Because they rely on a natural protein slow-release process, they won't burn during the worst summer heat. In fact, a Michigan study shows that even a five-time rate will not burn turfgrasses.

The products also help build humus and can be an important part of a thatch management program helping the soil to retain essential moisture and, conversely, drain excess moisture.

Turf 10-2-6 is the backbone of Ringer's lawn care materials. Granulated for easy application, it provides five to seven weeks of slow-release plant nutrient with a 1 pound per 1,000 actual N application.

Rates may be fine-tuned up or down, depending upon the condition of the turf and desired top growth rates.

Ringer Commercial Flower/Foliage is a new dual-function fertilizer providing optimum results for a variety of trees, shrubs and flower beds with the convenience of one granular application.

It is an 8-6-5 formulation that combines what were formerly separate products.

For information, contact Scott Boutlier, Ringer Co., 9959 Valley View Road, Minneapolis, Minn. 55344; 612/941-4180. In Canada, contact Rod Hermitage of AG-TURF Chemicals, 519/893-5360.



Ringer will give your turf a world of improvement.

Ringer Greens 6-1-3, Turf 10-2-6 and Greens Super 10-2-6 give you a whole new approach to greener greens, fairer fairways and tougher turf.

Natural protein, slow release nutrition. Ringer products use natural protein sources for slow-release nutrition without chemicals. Applied at recommended rates they will not burn.

More than a quick fix. Because they rely on a unique microbial action, Ringer products work by enhancing natural processes. Your turf has a healthier environment. And it keeps getting better and better.



Scientifically formulated, environmentally sound. Greens 6-1-3, Turf 10-2-6 and Greens Super 10-2-6 were scientifically developed for professional use. They fit right in with your present program and strengthen your current disease control efforts.

Try Greens 6-1-3, Turf 10-2-6 and Greens Super 10-2-6 for a season on a problem lawn. You'll find that because they are environmentally sound, they improve the world a little as they improve your turf a lot.

Call or write for details and the name of your distributor.

RINGER
Better, naturally



Lawn and landscape operators must meet the CHALLENGE OF PROFESSIONALISM

COMPANY NAME

Chapel Valley
Landscape Co.

HEADQUARTERS

Woodbine, Md.

BRANCH OFFICES

Sterling, Va.; satellite
offices: Bethesda, Md.,
Fairfax, Va.

FOUNDED

1968.

OWNER

J. Landon Reeve IV.

PRIMARY SERVICES

Commercial and
residential landscape
design, installation and
maintenance, as well as
irrigation design,
installation and service.

EMPLOYEES

150 year-round,
180 seasonal

1989 GROSS SALES

\$10.6 million.

"The biggest issue in the industry, without a doubt, is quality and professionalism," said Paul Drummond, manager of business development, Chapel Valley Landscape Co., Fairfax, Va.

It's a cause his firm has championed again and again, both in its support of better education for the industry and in its own approach to running a company.

"Landscape contracting is an easy business for anyone to get involved in," Drummond said, adding that any guy with a pickup truck and a shovel can enter the business purely as a profit venture.

Not that profit is a bad idea to any business, he quickly explained. But "you need to be in business to provide a quality service, and profit will be a natural product of this service." That particular management stance has brought Chapel Valley to its current prosperity.

One problem Drummond sees, however, is that these

companies just starting out may not yet have learned a professional approach to business matters such as pricing for profit or to general landscaping concerns either.

Thus, he fears, they may totally "misrepresent the industry, providing poor solutions to site problems, poor service and even poorer professional integrity.

"Landscape contracting is a service and it needs to be treated as a service," he added. If not, the entire industry takes the blame for the actions of the uninformed.

Another aspect of this same lack of industry and business knowledge, he warned, is seen in companies who promise the sun, moon and stars as a way of marketing themselves. They must "stop the unrealistic negotiating. We are finding companies telling clients they will offer lifetime guarantees on plants. This is not only ludicrous, but unrealistic."

Winning the job should be based on other merits, he

said, based on a long-term viewpoint. "Developers do not forget easily. When the market picks up, they will still expect these unrealistic guarantees and cheap prices for planting. It takes years to overcome this."

It is typical, he said, that the companies that offered these idealistic terms in the first place are the ones that will not be in business when the chips are called in.

But Chapel Valley, with its 22-year history, has proven itself. It has carved out its own market niche based on a service philosophy that encompasses both business and landscape professionalism at its best.

"The advantage we have is how well we have positioned ourselves in the market," Drummond said. To solicit work, the firm approaches the owners and developers rather than the general contractors who are looking for the lowest bid.

"The advantage of this orientation," he explained,



"is the solid base of repeat negotiated work based on providing a quality service." Owners and developers are typically inclined to pay more if they are receiving good service. "If you don't give them a reason to use the competition, they won't."

Customer service, he said, is not just a buzzword at Chapel Valley, but rather a vital job description that is expected from all levels of employees from top management down to work crews.

"Developing, building and maintaining a strong customer relationship is a total company philosophy," he said. "It costs less to service a client in the long run than to continually expel energy trying to win new clients, bidding work and cutting costs."

As manager of business development, he should know. He ably does both, spending half his time with marketing and enlistment of new clients and the other half overseeing the sales team and their contract negotiations.

However, he added, providing a full range of services is as important to maintaining a strong landscape busi-

ness as providing good service. This is vital, especially during the bad times, Drummond said. Focusing on only one of these areas, such as maintenance, has some obvious advantages such as improving cash flow, but there are several subtle disadvantages as well.

A company might refocus its management and capital resources, training, equipment and so on into purely maintenance operations, losing touch with efficiency and profitability in the area of landscape construction. It can also result in lost market share and clients, forcing the firm to spend years rebuilding and retraining for other neglected components when the market picks up.

And just as a downturn in business can lead to management errors, so can a business upturn.

"Another common mistake many landscape companies make when the market is strong is chasing jobs and not clients," he said. "The growing Washington, D.C., market attracted several out-of-town developers to large projects under way, and Chapel Valley's competitors filled their short-term backlogs with these jobs."

"This mistake is a long-term one," said Drummond. When the market tightened and development slowed, the out-of-towners packed up and went back to Atlanta and Texas, leaving the local landscapers "standing in the cold."

Chapel Valley's selection of its market niche avoids this entire scenario.

"Our orientation, and it's not secret," said Drummond, "is to maintain a strong relationship with the local deep-pocket developers first and foremost."

They also develop relationships with out-of-towners, he added, but the key in both cases is found in the word *relationships*. Instead of "chasing their tails" trying to fill backlog, Chapel Valley focuses on the long-term, "negotiating profitable high

A diverse service base helps maintain business in slow times and builds added sales revenues (far left). Fair Lakes Office Park, a sample of the work Chapel Valley accomplishes with its commercial accounts (below).



quality work for projects a year or two down the road."

That gives them the luxury of courting clients who aren't currently building, but will turn to them when the time comes. Meanwhile, current clients, satisfied with the service concept, keep them going with a strong backlog of work.

The company does do some bidding, he said, but because of its consistent backlog, it can walk away from any unprofitable "bidding wars."

"Profit is a byproduct of providing a quality service, and that's why we are in the business," said Drummond, outlining his firm's pricing strategy.

Chapel Valley sets its prices using an intricate, computerized jobcasting system. They are based on previous experience plus current expenses and revolve around the time, labor, materials and overhead involved.

"We usually have a good idea about what it will cost, but sometimes we are in left field," he said. "The newer companies, out of inexperience or an overabundance of competitiveness, may underbid. It generally takes a firm

three years to gain the experience that will teach them to set prices correctly."

But by that time, a lot of even newer companies have entered the market just as ready to underbid as the previous ones were, "and so it goes in an endless cycle," he concluded.

It's better just to avoid bidding altogether, he added, and do your prospecting for clients years in advance, so you can negotiate. "We've had little success at bidding," he said. "There is always someone who can do it better."

He also advised that enhancing industry professionalism and know-how can be accomplished by joining as many industry trade groups as possible.

The education gained through groups like these, plus the experience earned in the last 22 years, have helped Chapel Valley develop a marketing strategy based on long-term relationships and a realistic pricing policy.

It's their way of working to assure that the landscape industry continues to grow in professionalism and quality.

Landscape contracting is a service and needs to be treated as a service.

ness as providing good service. Such services as irrigation design, installation and maintenance, residential installation and design/build, on top of the typical landscaping and maintenance services, give any company, especially Chapel Valley, an advantage.

Keeping a diverse base like

Establishing an agenda for unraveling VITAL

WATER CONCERNS



COMPANY NAME

LawnLife Corp.

HEADQUARTERS

Salt Lake City, Utah.

BRANCHES

Ogden, Utah.

OWNERS

Denny Linnell,
managing principal.

PRIMARY SERVICES

Lawn care, lawn
fertilization, weed control,
tree fertilization, insect
control, vegetation control
and lawn aeration.

EMPLOYEES

45.

1989 GROSS SALES

\$2 to \$5 million.

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks," said Denny Linnell, vice president of LawnLife Corp., Salt Lake City, Utah, about his company's training program. "We want to train our people to our way of doing business. Therefore, we hire the inexperienced and turn them into LawnLife people. Then they carry out our philosophy: that the customer is always right."

The LawnLife customer may always be right, but the LawnLife staff isn't so shabby either. Starting from scratch, as they do, has forced the company to create a broad-based and extensive training program, one that demands a guaranteed expertise from its people.

For instance, all of its applicators are certified; it's a condition of employment there. New employees are asked to pass the state's agricultural department certification tests after reading state-supplied study guides before they are put on the payroll.

"We are asking them to invest their time and energy and to put a few bucks on the line, say \$10 or \$15, to work here," Linnell said. "If they are willing to put in that effort, they will make a good candidate."

In addition, new hires must pass a drug screening as well as physical and blood tests. Then they are given on-the-job field training with a veteran before taking over on their own.

But even after that initial effort, weekly and monthly training remains ongoing. Current employees take a written state test for recertification every three years after a state-run refresher course, plus contend with in-house training held during the slow winter season. Here they learn everything from products and their uses to public relations and equipment repair, like how to rebuild a pump.

"That way," Linnell said, "they are not hung up when something goes wrong out in

the field."

In addition, new employees are fully tested before being allowed to treat lawns. "We've been doing this for two or three years," he said, "and last year the test was reasonably tough. But they did quite well. If someone doesn't pass, they go over the unit until they are capable of passing."

One vital part of employee training means teaching them not just how to do the job and work with customers, but also why they should feel proud of their work.

They are made aware of its benefits and become confident that they are not destroying the environment. To this end, each receives a thorough understanding of every product and its safe use. In this way, they can educate and reassure their clients.

"It's the employees' right to know and understand every product you supply, to be comfortable with the technology," Linnell said. Con-



LawnLife wants the public to have the same confidence in its applications as employees do.

The LawnLife staff answers questions and explains concepts over the phone and sends out materials from such groups as the Lawn Institute, the American Council of Science and Health and the Professional Lawn Care Association of America — deemed "excellent" by Linnell. Staff have been known to read MSDS sheets to callers to reassure them or to refer them to a hotline for consumer questions.

"The callers all need different levels of comfort," Linnell said. "We don't care if after we explain things a prospect elects not to use our services, but we want that decision to be based on good information, not media hype."

And you have to get that same message of environmental concern to the media, he added. "You can't be intimidated. Media contacts are extremely important. You are a source of information for them."

LawnLife has often been called and interviewed by the press about lawn maintenance topics. The staff also believes in volunteering objective information to the media when relevant.

"You have to get your name into the media; establish contact," Linnell said. To further reach the media, he belongs to PLCAA's public relations network and sends out about 25 copies of its monthly industry news releases to the Salt Lake City press.

Lawn and landscape companies must also watch out for legislative activity in other states — Maine affects Ohio affects Utah. He believes that the industry should "subscribe to, read and study newsletters and other information about what's going on around the country."

Maintaining a high quality and sufficient quantity of water are vital concerns — particularly in the West. LawnLife has made its plans in this area.

The Utah firm contends with water shortages by fine tuning its computerized scheduling. The various municipalities in the area — Ogden City, Provo, Salt Lake — all have differing water restrictions, so LawnLife sidesteps what Linnell refers to as a "big scheduling headache" by setting up its scheduling based on zones, according to zip codes.

Application times become more flexible, and work can be set aside until the time is right, done in advance or ganged by sending multiple trucks to an area.

The computerized scheduling program also provides some benefits when it comes to billing, he added and it frees up enough staff time to allow the scheduling department to make personal calls

volume done quickly in one area."

LawnLife will, however, encounter a new water problem this fall. Its northern territory is receiving a two week earlier than usual cutoff of available secondary water from a reservoir to preserve the resource which can be treated for drinking, if necessary, in case of a winter drought.

"That gives us a certain volume of work to do in those northern areas," he said, as he makes plans to send 15 to 20 trucks to service the area and accomplish the fourth seasonal treatment "sooner than we'd like to treat."

LawnLife will prenotify its customers about this move and the environmental reasons for it, said Linnell, but "it will still cost us business."

Every winter, LawnLife monitors the snowfall and comes up with an estimate of how new weather conditions will be adapted to, coming up with a Plan B. Thus, any water restrictions will have already been anticipated and prepared for by the company.

It's this kind of planning that is the hallmark of LawnLife's success. The computer helps daily by planning treatment scheduling, taking into account conflicting city regulations on water use. The management plans seasonally to allow for the climatic variations that would mean a shortfall of precious water for treatment.

Overall, the company plans for the next decade by creating, through its training programs, a work force that has taken a proactive stance in educating the public about the importance and safety of the lawn maintenance industry.

**It's the
employee's
right to
know and
understand
every
product
you supply.**

to customers reminding them of impending visits.

"It's really not too difficult. We've adapted to the water situation and to us it's business as usual," Linnell said. "It helps to be this big. If we were a one-truck company and had to get this spraying done in two days, we'd really be in trouble. But we are flexible enough to get a large

tinued employee health and confidence in the company, and therefore job satisfaction, depends on this right to know.

The major issue of the next decade surrounds environmental legislation. In order to survive, lawn and landscape maintenance firms must become less "gun-shy" of addressing environmental issues. "It's most effective to address the issue head on," he said, "not to stick your head in the sand or lie to them."

In short, maintenance firms will have to "become well-educated, educate their customers in environmental matters and become politically active."

Now that it's entering the age of environmentalism, the company wants the general public to have the same kind of confidence about its applications that its employees do, so it responds to every customer who calls in with concerns.

According to Linnell, "You say, 'We're glad you're concerned. We are too,' and that makes them drop their guard and turn it into a discussion."

Adequate training can reduce EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

COMPANY NAME

David J. Frank
Landscape Contractors

HEADQUARTERS

Germantown, Wis.

BRANCH OFFICES

None.

FOUNDED

As a proprietorship 1959;
incorporated 1974.

OWNER

David Frank.

PRIMARY SERVICES

Full scope of landscape
architecture, construction
and maintenance
services.

EMPLOYEES

85 full-time, year-round.

1989 GROSS SALES

\$4 to 5 million.

David Frank started out as a mere lad in 1959 with a lawn mowing service, but he's gone from those humble beginnings 31 years ago to create a successful business earning almost \$5 million yearly.

What's more, he's kept some half-dozen of those same clients throughout his entire career. Obviously, he's been doing something right for a long time.

Frank ran into some management problems in 1982, however, he had the insight to realize the firm wasn't cultivating its resources.

"If we were to grow financially, without getting ulcers, we had to stop just working our people and take time to train them," Frank said. "It was a capital intensive move, both to take people off the

Task-oriented tests prepare employees and give management a better idea of individual skills before a new worker is expected to maintain an account.

work crews for training and to hire the right consultants. But it was the right thing to do. It has paid big dividends."

As a result, the firm now has a strong and substantial in-house training program reaching the entire company from technicians to office workers to salespeople.

"Training is the major issue today," Frank said. "This is a great industry, with tremendous growth opportunities for both firms and individuals. We are the beneficiary of environmental concerns that arose in the last two decades, and we carry the solutions to those concerns. There are few businesses enjoying that kind of positive reputation."

But the challenge, he added, is finding, keeping and training the people. "Getting work is not the problem," he said. "The issue is how to do a good job, and that relies on people. You can't fake it in this industry."

Keeping people — aye, there's the rub. Frank has managed it, and managed it exceedingly well. His turnover rate "is one of the lowest in the industry," and his construction department, which matches the size of his maintenance department, has not had a turnover in three years.

How does he do it? Well, first of all, his pay is competitive, "not just in the in-

dustry, but in the world of business in general," he said. Plus, he keeps most of his staff year-round and provides excellent benefits.

Mostly, though, he makes sure "people like what they are doing. If they feel that they are going someplace and getting somewhere, they will enjoy their job. You're lucky if they all feel like they are growing."

Making sure of employee growth begins immediately in the pre-employment process, with a "pre-qualification" test to find out two things: what the candidate knows already and what he or she needs to know. In this way adequate training can be arranged, and growth can begin.

Pre-qualification includes first of all a battery of general tests: literacy, arithmetic, even time-telling, a necessity in an industry like lawn maintenance where billings are figured by time allotments. The tests are task- and knowledge-oriented, too, assessing skills such as a candidate's ability at equipment operation, or testing prospective landscape operators about their knowledge of turf problems or their experience with perennials and annuals.

And then there is behavioral testing for such personality traits as cooperation and attitude. "These are driv-





en by the job," Frank said. "Salespeople must be outgoing and empathetic, for example, and planning skills are needed to orchestrate crews, while the office staff takes tests in organizational and reasoning skills."

These tests have been developed both in-house and by the Organizational Development Association, Philadelphia, Pa., a major consultant on personnel training to the green industry.

"We use a lot of their methods," Frank said. "This has worked well for us. There's often a chasm between a person's resume and his experience, and sometimes a person who looks good on paper will leave us scratching our heads after hiring."

One test that Frank employees have never taken is a drug test. Although he's heard the statistics about the problem discussed at seminars, he hasn't seen the need yet at his firm, and he may never have to. Management staff have been sent to seminars by Bruce Wilkinson, a drug and alcohol abuse specialist, to keep them updated on discovering and dealing with the problem.

Once on board, Frank em-

ployees benefit from a week of half-day orientation developed by ODA and known as KASH, for Knowledge, Attitude, Skills and Habits. It is a participative program which includes discussions, role playing and demonstrations as well as lectures. Trainees actually develop their own textbook by compiling various writing assignments.

"Educational psychologists tell us that one object of training is retention, and that only 10 percent of what people hear in lectures is retained," Frank said. "People in this business work with their hands, and holding their attention is challenging. Thus, the hands-on, practical approach, one that involves as many of the senses as possible."

The company knows that even if told to "do this," an employee might not truly understand the why's and wherefore's of the assignment. So the ODA strategy builds in a chance for trainees to explain what they have understood to the instructor, along with plenty of opportunity to demonstrate acquired skills before the end of the training period. Material is reviewed — closed book — by a trainee, chosen at random.

"It makes you pay attention," Frank said. "And it pays off. The more people understand, the better quality of work they do."

The Frank-developed testing program also takes this hands-on approach. For example, the landscape construction skills test includes a grading problem. An employee who doesn't get it right will not be sent out on a grading project. "We use the tests to identify skills and omissions, so the individual manager knows these and can address his training to it," Frank said.

In line with the multi-sense approach, videos are also an important part of the company's ongoing training process: 30 hours of tape have been produced in-house as part of the slow-season work effort, augmenting the 125 commercial tapes from trade associations available in the firm training library.

As part of his ongoing training, Frank also holds weekly educational meetings during the 30-week busy season, and devotes one to two days a week to training during slow times.

In addition, employees attend, at company expense for travel, tuition and time, a half dozen seminars a year. They are expected to read two or three hardcover books yearly. They receive subscriptions to the trade magazines at their homes — and pass quizzes on cover-to-cover readings of these. "It comes up in their reviews," said Frank. "They have to demonstrate how they are improving their knowledge. We feel strongly about education."

Since Wisconsin has no certification program, except for pesticide application, Frank has created its own certification for equipment safety. The company has about 700 pieces of equipment, in such variety that it takes special effort to master it all.

Unfortunately, a few years ago some employees who had

not achieved that mastery were involved in some near misses. "Nobody got hurt, but it was a close call," Frank said. To prevent further problems, he instituted a chart which lists all employees along one scale and all equipment categories along the other.

Workers must pass stringent tests in order to use certain equipment, and the results are designated on the chart. "They are certified, item by item, with demonstrations and road tests," he said.

As far as pesticide certification, Frank said, he believes that it should become a required part of the education process. "I would have the people I need if what is required as a job requirement would be required by educators to pass their courses. But horticulture courses, arboriculture courses, don't address the issue of pesticide certification."

At Frank, three-quarters of the people in the field are certified for pesticide application, although Frank maintains that "100 percent need pesticide certification."

Clearly, the approach taken at Frank Landscape Contractors, as the owner is so fond of saying, "pays off," and in some concrete ways. The pay-off can be seen in the core business Frank has been able to keep for more than 30 years, proving the customers' satisfaction. It can be seen in the low turnover rate of employees as well, demonstrating their job satisfaction. And then there's the company's safety record, its comprehensive training program and the growth it has manifested since its founding, all, as Frank is proud to point out, "without an ulcer."

Maintenance benefits need to be promoted through **STRONG MARKETING**

COMPANY NAME

Greenscape Inc.

HEADQUARTERS

Fayetteville, N.C.

BRANCH OFFICE

Raleigh, N.C.

FOUNDED

1979 by Michael Currin and Stan Owen.

OWNERS

Michael Currin and Stan Owen.

PRIMARY SERVICES

Commercial and residential landscape and irrigation design, construction/installation and maintenance.

EMPLOYEES

60 full-time, 75 seasonal.

1989 GROSS SALES

\$2.45 million.

An economic recession "would be the best thing that's happened in 10 years," according to Michael Currin, president of Greenscape Inc.

Throughout his central North Carolina service area, the market has been booming so long, there are too many new companies that should not be in business.

The 1980s influx of marginal operators has prompted Currin to avoid competitively bid projects. "Usually the lowest bidder is the company that made the biggest mistake," he explained, "and I can't afford to do that. Our mainstay is quality, so Greenscape prefers negotiated work, where we have a chance to sell our strengths."

Currin hopes a recession will weed out marginal competitors, though "I say that cautiously because strong

Services such as mowing and insect control are difficult for customers to drop in the event of a recession.

firms like mine can also be threatened." Nevertheless, Currin looks for a recession to yield other benefits for his business.

For example, Currin has interviewed more job applicants over the past 90 days than at any other time he can remember. Most applicants had previous green industry experience and came from companies that recently went out of business.

"Like other companies in our industry," Currin said, "it has been a challenge to recruit and retain good employees."

The number of workers in the labor pool has been shrinking. Perhaps in a recession, experienced workers will be easier to find and hire."

Commercial customers are likely to pinch pennies should a recession hit, Currin acknowledged. "Instead of five fertilizer sprayings they might cut back to four," he said, "or reduce less visible things such as remedial work or flower rotations."

Knowing cutbacks are inevitable, Greenscape emphasizes a team approach with its clients. Currin ex-

plained "we don't look horrified and give customers dire warnings. When a customer wants to reduce services, our attitude is to cooperate with them and together achieve the most cost-effective program."

However, basic services such as mowing and insect control are difficult for customers to reduce. Moreover, because many Greenscape customers are office building developers, they are often putting more money into landscaping. They know that landlords with full houses are the ones who maintain a good appearance.

As for the residential market, Currin doesn't see a recession having a drastic impact. "No matter what, my biggest competitors are the guys who sell boats or vacations. The challenge here has always been to convince them lawn and landscape services are worthwhile."

In recent years, Currin has tracked economic indicators and taken to heart warnings about an imminent recession. He noted what landscape firms in depressed states have done to survive, and has moved to imitate their example.



"If you look at Texas or Denver," Currin said, "the companies that survived usually had a solid base of maintenance work." For the past two years Greenscape has stepped up its emphasis on maintenance, and now Currin believes his company is well positioned to "grow and expand our way right through any recession."

Of course, Currin expects some competitors to draw similar conclusions and seek maintenance work more aggressively. "So all I can really do is just go out there, try to be the leader and let the rest take care of itself."

To Currin, full service is smart business. "We can control our projects better by doing it all from start to finish," he said. "Some areas, such as irrigation, aren't always the most profitable, but if Greenscape handles a customer's irrigation, then we'll probably handle the more profitable portions of their projects, too."

By providing a full range of services, Currin also avoids putting his eggs in one basket — part of his strategy for prospering despite a recession.

He conceded Greenscape may lose some sales because its marketing department is less specialized than some competitors. Yet Currin willingly trades these for stability and longevity.

"If we stress stability, that doesn't mean we're not dynamic or aggressive in our marketing," Currin said. Recently, as part of an effort to fill the void left by economically troubled competitors, Greenscape created a new marketing position to identify and assess new commercial customers.

The company is first looking along existing service routes, and by cross-referencing addresses in a local business directory, identifying potential clients.

Greenscape employees are also given lead sheets to fill out during their route travels, and offered attractive bonuses should their leads eventually be converted into customers.

Currin is likewise boosting efforts to build his residential accounts.

"In Fayetteville where there aren't many corporations, we mostly service homeowners and small retail firms," he said.

Having been in the city since 1979, Greenscape is one of the more mature businesses in the area. So it wasn't difficult to realize the firm's share of the marketplace had reached a plateau.

Though the prospects of recession have prompted aggressive marketing moves, Currin is cautious about expenses. Last year he bought out co-owner Stan Owen (except for a 6 percent share), and today remains careful

"My biggest competitors are guys who sell boats or vacations."

about not overextending Greenscape's resources.

"In a recession you've got to watch your fixed overhead," Currin said. "Or, to put it another way, watch your company lifestyle. For us that could mean sending people to seminars or out-of-town professional meetings; or we may spend less money on consultants. Of course, we'll have to take a second look at what employee benefits we can afford."

Currin admitted his biggest expense is labor. As a result, worker productivity will get special scrutiny as a recession looms. "My worry is not number of employees, but quality," he said.

To that end, Greenscape is actively recruiting from a wider pool of applicants — including women, and the growing Hispanic community.

In drawing from a wider labor pool, Currin said, even little things count. "Now we specifically mention 'man or woman' when we advertise in the newspaper for a foreman, where before we didn't say anything and potential

female applicants assumed only men usually filled these positions."

The company is also cultivating future talent by providing internships for horticulture students at regional colleges and universities. At any one time Greenscape employs 12 to 15 interns.

"We serve three customers — homeowners, small businesses and corporations. Each different type of customer has its own demands and requirements, and you need personnel who are familiar with the particular market they serve," Currin said.

Performing a \$500 residential job is one thing, and doing a \$150,000 commercial project is another.

To smoothly coordinate services in various markets, Currin has established a well defined company structure. Greenscape exists first at the corporate level, where administration and purchasing are handled through the Fayetteville headquarters.

The firm divides its operations into three profit centers — landscape, irrigation and maintenance. Its two customer offices in Fayetteville and Raleigh each have their own branch managers, maintenance managers, landscape/irrigation managers and sales offices.

Today Currin sees himself responding to current market conditions much as car dealers are responding to auto sales trends. "You see dealers who now operate several dealerships with various makes of automobiles. If sales of one car-make are flat, he has other dealerships to take up the slack."

In the same way, Greenscape is responding to its market by providing a full range of customer services. "At 39, I'm young enough to tackle the hard work required," he concluded, "but I'm also old enough to do something else in life where I could have more money and less sacrifice. I stick around because I love this industry."



Greenscape has responded to market demands for single firm maintenance by offering a full range of services such as edging to three types of customers.

**Maintaining
services,
professionalism
critical to**



SURVIVING AN ECONOMIC RECESSION

COMPANY NAME

Environmental Landscape Services Inc.

HEADQUARTERS

Houston, Texas.

BRANCH OFFICES

Austin and
San Antonio, Texas.

FOUNDED

1972.

OWNER

Charles Racusin.

PRIMARY SERVICES

Commercial landscape design, construction and management and tree preservation.

EMPLOYEES

150 year-round,
25 seasonal

1989 GROSS SALES

Unavailable.

The Houston area is just now beginning to dig its way out of a recession after the mid-1980s collapse in oil prices and overbuilding in the community.

But the experience of going through the recession caused by the collapse gave Environmental Landscape Services a sudden and outstanding education in how to survive hard times, a lesson that other firms on the brink of the current real estate crisis may well benefit from.

"We've recently gone through difficult years in terms of a down economy," said Charles Racusin, Environmental Landscape Services president and CEO. "That's no secret. So I can give others some insight as to what effects might occur."

First, he said, the real estate market is usually one that is severely affected by a bad economy. Since landscapers are dependent on real estate, any economic setback occasions a dramatic

difference in the way landscapers do business, as property owners and management companies react to stress by cutting costs.

"Their assumption is that cutting landscaping costs will save money, but they are fooling themselves," he said. "As the market gets worse, the competition gets keener, and curb appeal becomes even more important. It's not a question then of whether it's important to spend money to increase curb appeal."

It becomes the challenge of the landscaper, in the bad times, to reaffirm the value of services, to "justify your existence," according to Racusin. He must prove that he is even more valuable in bad times than in good. His own experience is to sit down with the owner and walk through it all; to educate him on the effect of appearance on marketability.

"Most of them are bright enough to understand this," Racusin said. "Cost vs. value — that's the key. That is the

barrier to overcome."

Everyone is sensitive to pricing at such hard times, and it must be done carefully. Dealing with the most cost-conscious buyers involves a delicate balance between meeting their expectations and serving their realistic needs.

"You assess, explain, communicate effectively the full value of your services," he said. "The key is to give him the input to make a better decision."

But another aspect of hard times can be the change in client. "Before, you dealt with the owners and developers, but now a developer goes out of business and there's a new entity, a management company or a lender," Racusin said. "They are usually bottom-line thinkers who may not generally take the long-term view. Some do, of course, but financial restrictions cause even those to have to deal with the present. So it's harder for you to deal with them unless



Environmental Landscape maintains an on-site holding area for dedicated as well as unexpected uses of nursery stock.



Maintenance crews keep equipment on the road; a service necessary for effective management of company resources.

you are selling price. We sell service."

So much does Environmental Landscape Services stress service that Racusin is not even willing to call them a landscape maintenance company. "We are landscape managers," he said, interested in maintaining the integrity of the design long after the installation.

This emphasis on providing ongoing service to a vertical market is one that served Environmental Landscape Services in good stead, helping it survive even after the Houston building boom ended.

But salesmanship during a recession brings up another factor, Racusin added: the psychological adjustments involved in going from good times to bad.

"Yesterday there were roses, today there are no roses. It's a psychological blow as well as a financial blow. Attitudes change," he said. "When things are comfortable and happy, they are willing to listen and they run a better ship. When the funds are not as easily attainable, things are more stressful."

At such times, people become more immediate oriented, not future oriented. "All of a sudden the future is

gone. There's no more 'three years down the road.' The pressure is on, and they are not as open to listen," Racusin said. "At that point, the challenge begins. You try to convince them to buy your service. You think ahead. But even if you practice your best salesmanship, and give it your best shot, the financial brakes are on."

Best efforts won't always work and the suffering can be phenomenal. It's an awakening experience, he added.

Part of the management strategy that helps a company adapt to hard times means having to reassess target markets from the past, Racusin said, to make sure you are not overlooking a market you previously eschewed as too unprofitable.

Diversify, he suggested. Look to other cities, other services — although Racusin himself has no plans at all to expand into any further towns, preferring to maintain a close eye on quality control.

And, he added, you should become more resourceful about your own management, re-examining your cost-effectiveness, re-examining your task management.

"That might not be possible for a larger company," said Racusin. "We find it

easier to have that kind of sensitivity, that kind of flexibility."

But ultimately, you must adapt psychologically as well. "You can't hang on to old beliefs. You have to reassess your own beliefs and goals. You can't be as profitable as in the past," he said.

It's vital to monitor and protect your own position in the industry. "My attitude was to increase and perfect our position" as a service-oriented company. To do that, he made a difficult choice: "My philosophy was to protect the integrity of the company, of the staff, of the jobs. We wanted to keep our people. So we sacrificed, cut back our profit margins, actually sacrificed our profits for our people."

Environmental Landscape Services has always stressed this responsibility to its employees. The firm insists on making just the right selection of employee in the first place, then trains and educates its people to provide outstanding service and holds on to these profitable resources with an outstanding benefits package that includes profit-sharing.

Ultimately, Racusin said, "integrity meant more to us

than profit. We knew that if you cut back on people, you eventually cut back on service, and thus on profits anyway. It's a crossways effect. We took the long-term view, and we held on to our client base."

The assumption too often made by business, he said, is that cutting profits means cutting services as well. But that was a route Environmental Landscape Services was not willing to take.

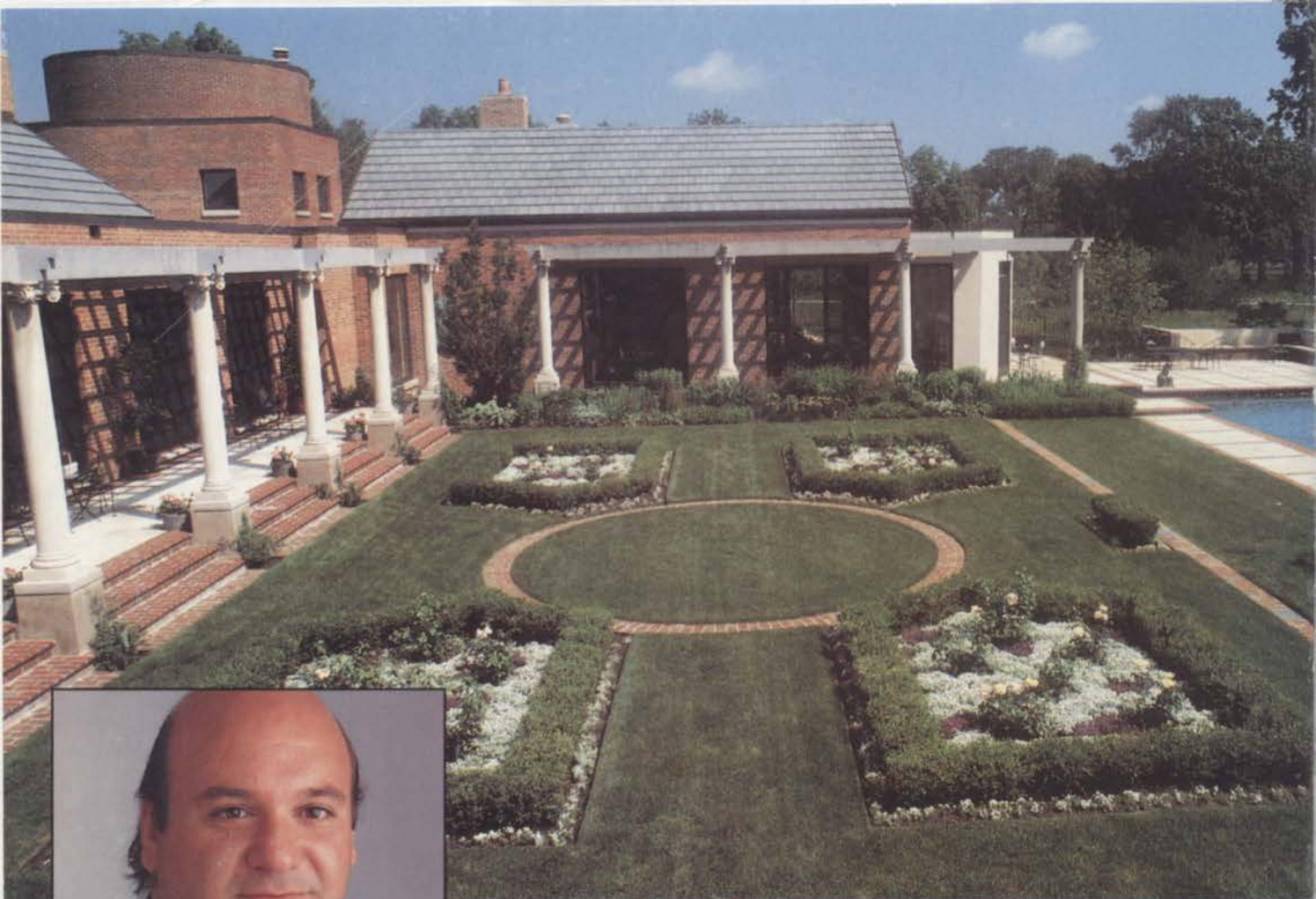
Racusin said he believes that cutting services and sacrificing your professionalism results in never regaining your image. Instead, it's wise to weather the storm with the customer; it creates a lasting effect.

Environmental Landscape Services' image in the Houston area rests on more than its ability. It also encompasses the firm's commitment to the city. This has been seen in such public ways as "Labyrinth," a massive landscape sculpture designed by Lenore Winters for the Houston Festival. The award-winning earthwork was installed and supervised by Racusin's company, contributing more than 200 hours of time and expertise as well as materials.

Moreover, Environmental Landscape Services participated with the founders of the "Clean Houston" civic beautification campaign in a major effort to rid the city's highway system of litter.

In a recession, this kind of public commitment can serve a company well, giving it the basic strength and staying power needed to withstand economic and psychological blows.

"You hold your head up, drive yourself forward, stay alive and survive, because better times will be around the corner. We're finding that out right now," Racusin said.



Frank Mariani, President
Mariani Landscape, Lake Bluff, IL

"AWARD-WINNING LANDSCAPING CALLS FOR THE RIGHT TOOLS"

Frank Mariani should know. His landscaping company has won nearly 20 national and state awards for landscaping excellence.

"We've switched 100% to Echo trimmers, blowers and chain saws," says Frank. "Besides doing a beautiful job, these tools are more versatile and hold up better than anything else we've used."

"With other trimmers and blowers, we were getting cracked housings and other problems that limited their working life to only one season or less. With Echo, we get much longer tool life—our mechanics won't let us buy anything else."



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400 Oakwood Road
Lake Zurich, IL 60047

"We've also had good success with Echo chain saws. The chain tension is easier to adjust, which prolongs chain and bar life. And they seem to hold their engine tune longer, so the men aren't always tinkering with the carburetion."

"All in all, we've found that Echo tools are better engineered in every way. And when you've got tools that last longer than the others, it adds up to big savings in replacement costs."

ECHO
THE RIGHT TOOL