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## SPECIAL Features: Lawn & Landscape Research Section

In addition to providing its readers with valuable business management information, *Lawn & Landscape* magazine also prides itself on providing the entire industry with the insightful survey data and analyses that paint a picture of the industry as a whole. We conduct a number of surveys on various topics every year, and much of the compiled data is presented here. Just click on the title of a survey to gain additional insight into specific portions of the industry. Information in this section includes:

- Mowing Report
- Nursery Material Survey
- Irrigation Industry Survey
- And much, much more!



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"Vision is the art of seeing things that are invisible."

— Roger Braswell

## A True Salesman

A few years ago, I learned an invaluable lesson about sales, although I didn't realize I was learning at the time. I was touring two landscape companies in Cincinnati as part of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America's Green Industry Conference. Both organizations opened their doors to hundreds of contractors on that November day, showing off their people, jobs, policies, equipment and whatever else we cared to see.

About the same time, a contractor was creating an equipment company called Dingo Digging Systems. Today, most of you know what a Dingo is, but that term meant little more than a strange Australian animal to landscape professionals six years ago.

Roger Braswell, the man behind the Dingo, knew he had to create market awareness for his new product to sell. So he used his relationships with these two companies to get his machine in both of their shops for the tours, even though these firms didn't use a Dingo at the time.

The lesson here is simple but powerful: If you are involved in sales, then you constantly need to be searching for sales opportunities. Roger understands this. I was in a car with him once in North Carolina. We pulled into a

parking lot and happened to park next to a landscape contractor's truck. Roger didn't know this company, but he knew that it wasn't a customer of his. Ever the salesman, he grabbed a Dingo brochure from the stack he kept (and I'll bet still keeps) in his truck, hopped out of the vehicle and put the promo-

tional piece under the contractor's windshield wiper.

Now, I don't know if that contractor ever purchased a Dingo or not, but I do know that the odds of him becoming one of Roger's customers increased because of that simple act.

Salespeople like to talk about the "funnel," a term they use to explain how sales success is predicated on the number of prospects you pursue, knowing that only a certain percentage of them will ever move all the way through the funnel and become actual customers. This was just one example of loading the funnel.

What does your sales funnel look like? I've talked to plenty of contractors all over the country this year, and the feedback about the market is pretty consistent: 2002 is a good year, but work has slowed this summer, particularly on the installation side. If this is true for your business, then you need to make sure you're working harder than ever to fill the funnel. A key portion of your sales strategy needs to be identifying all of the potential job opportunities you have. For example:

- What do your company vehicles look like? Do they appear professional, communicate what you do and include a phone number?
- Are your employees carrying basic promotional pieces with them that they can hand out to potential customers who approach them?
- When you're on a job, do you leave promotional materials with neighboring properties or post a sign that identifies your company as the one creating or caring for the beautiful landscape?

These aren't earth-shattering concepts. But they are solid ideas that can generate business. In today's economy, sales don't come easily. That means you need to work smarter to get the job done. And it doesn't hurt to make sure you're eyes are open all of the time, because there's no telling where that next sale will come from. ■

*Bob West*

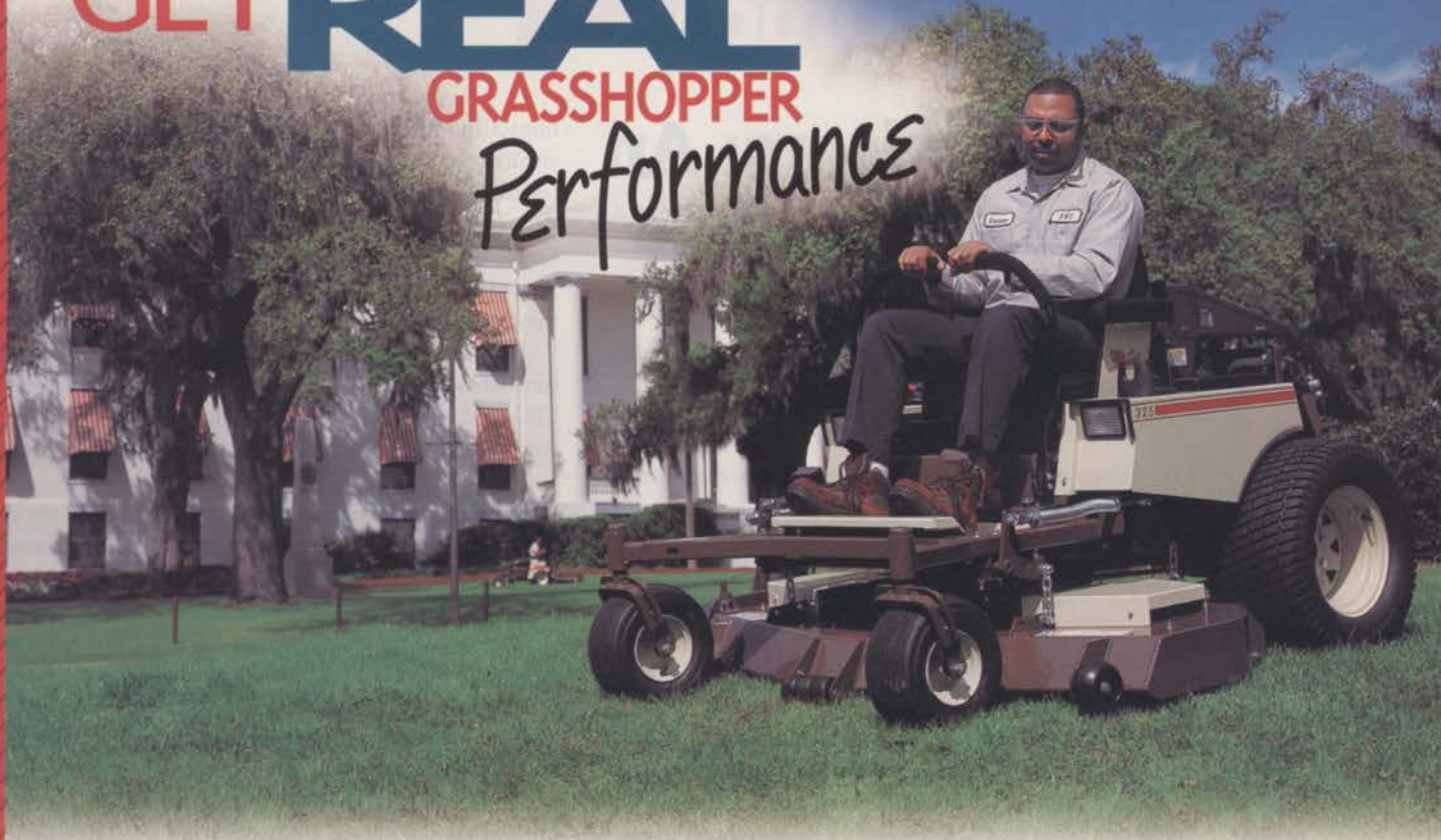




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## Trusted Advisors: An Essential for Leaders

If I asked you to think of one universal truth that is absolutely certain in every business, regardless of size, industry, location and operational dynamics, could you come up with one? You're probably familiar with this one: "The only sure thing in business is change." At the pace the world is moving, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who could argue with this. Can you think of another absolute truth that applies to every business?

It's tough, isn't it? Today there are few absolutes in the world of business. Everything, I mean *everything*, is open for debate.

After nearly 15 years of studying thousands of businesses, CEOs and managers, and resolving even more "people" problems, I have found one other absolute principle that holds true in almost every organization I've consulted with: *It's lonely at the top*. This one isn't new either, but it generally isn't thought of in the context of an important business absolute.

In fact, you may be thinking, "So what? I've heard that for years. Big deal." You're right. Amidst our unpredictable and chaotic world, a litigious society, multiple generations under one roof, unforgiving public markets, demanding customers and increased government regulations – *it is a big deal*.

It seems that we have more knowledge than ever before, yet we don't feel any smarter – just more confused. Decisions are tough to make and the answers are often out of our reach. Business owners and managers find themselves caught between a myriad of conflicting opinions and philosophical choices, old "rules of the game" that no longer apply and people who are complex, hard to please and difficult to manage.

Managing and owning a business is harder than ever – especially when your business is small and you are alone. In fact, until recently, I had no idea just how isolated CEOs, upper managers and presidents of organizations really are and, what's more, the difficulty this creates.

**BAD DECISIONS.** Each day, leaders must make a multitude of decisions that directly

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impact the future of their organizations. One seemingly small decision impacts the next, bigger decision, which then lays the foundation for a more critical choice. If the wrong decision is made early on, it can have a snowball effect over time. I have agonized with many CEOs who are faced with limited and sad options, which they would not have had if they made only one decision differently.


What most leaders need is a "trusted advisor." Someone to confidentially talk with who can help think through the issues. CEOs and business leaders easily lose their objectivity when they're in the midst of and living in the crisis of the moment.

**YOU'RE NOT ALONE.** As I travel around the country and meet with company leaders, time and time again I am struck by the profound need these people have for a professional, trusting relationship with someone who can provide wise counsel, frame the options and redefine the problems, and guide the individual back to basics. Sometimes what's needed is not someone to provide an answer, but rather someone to ask the right question. A trusted advisor does this. He or she understands the passion of the leader and respects the undeniable reality that the CEO and his or her business are intrinsically one.

The trusted advisor is more than a mentor or a coach. He or she develops a deep and personal relationship with the leader and provides a refuge where the CEO can escape from the noise and confusion of the business. With the trusted advisor, the leader need not worry about pretenses. He or she can reveal weaknesses, because in doing so, they allow greater access to emotion and inspiration. Trusted advisors listen and ponder the solutions. Their focus is introspective and their purpose is always to place the discussion on a different plane. Through continued questioning, the trusted advisor helps the individual to rediscover the "whys." Only then can he or she move on to the "hows."

Many leaders tell me that their work is no longer fun. They are alone and have become accustomed to making important decisions with their mirror as their only companion. These leaders get caught in a trap because they don't realize the limitations of their singular perspective. I believe that if more business leaders had someone they could turn to for counsel and advice, their work would again be fulfilling.

If you are one of the few fortunate leaders who has found this type of relationship in a consultant, spouse, friend, relative or colleague, perhaps you realize the immeasurable value and reward you are receiving. Don't lose sight of your unique opportunity.

If, on the other hand, you find yourself reflecting on how lonely it is at the top, there is a solution. If "the only sure thing in business is change," then change your thinking and find an advisor who can provide a fresh perspective. 





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## PEST PROBLEMS

### Ash Tree Alert

The tree-boring pest killing ash trees in southeastern Michigan was recently identified as the emerald ash borer, an Asian pest previously unknown in the United States, according to Michigan State University researchers.

It's no surprise that ash trees are suffering. Michigan ash trees have had a number of problems in recent years with diseases such as ash yellow and ash decline, which are brought on by drought, as well as poor growing conditions and secondary pests that kill stressed trees, pointed out Deb McCullough, forestry entomologist, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich. This year, the problem escalated. "There was a high number of ash trees dying in southeastern Michigan and no one had identified what was causing the high mortality rate until this year," McCullough said.

Because of the misdiagnosis of some of the ash tree deaths, the emerald ash borer gained a strong footing in Michigan, pointed out Arnold Farran, research and technical director, J.J. Mauget, Arcadia, Calif. "Usually you can isolate a problem like this pretty quickly, but because of the misdiagnosis not only has the insect been identified in five Michigan counties (Macomb, Oakland, Livingston, Washtenaw and Wayne), but also is rumored to be moving to the surrounding states as well as crossing the border to Windsor, Canada," he explained.

Emerald ash borer larvae are between 10 and 14 millimeters in length, 10-segmented

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Each American's view of the economy falls into one of five basic types, according to the *USA Today*/Gallup Poll's July 31 survey of more than 1,000 adults.

The unflustered and the comfortable – 54 percent of adults – express minimal worry about reducing spending. That suggests a sudden belt-tightening by consumers is unlikely since a minority number of people feel stressed, struggling or anxiously optimistic, Gallup revealed.

The Gallup also reported that by 2-to-1 Americans are more apt to rate the economy negatively than positively, which is why 71 percent say full recovery is more than one year off and why nearly two-thirds rate the stock market decline as a major problem.

Nonetheless, Gallup pollster David Moore said Americans are a long way from viewing current conditions as doomsday. "Most people," he said, "are generally comfortable with things or at least optimistic that they'll get better."

## Dealing with the DOWNTURN

Economic View	% of Americans
Unflustered	31%
Comfortable	23%
Stressed & stretched	20%
Strugglers	16%
Anxious optimists	10%

Source: *USA Today* and Gallup Poll

## MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

### Scotts LawnService Warms up in the South

MARYSVILLE, Ohio – There's no question what lawn care company is making big news these days – Scotts LawnService jumped into the headlines again with the acquisition of Centex HomeTeam Services' lawn care division. Scott's acquisition of the approximately \$20-million lawn care operation represents its third major deal this year, following the purchases of J.C. Ehrlich's lawn care business, Reading, Pa., as well as The Lawn Co., Cape Cod, Mass.

These deals have pushed Scotts LawnService's revenues to nearly \$95 million for the year, representing roughly 90 percent growth in 2002.

"This acquisition demonstrates our commitment to this business and propels our expansion into 10 more of the country's top 100 lawn service markets," said James Hagedorn, Scotts' president and chief executive officer.

In particular, this deal gives Scotts a strong position in Florida, where it previously lacked exposure. Now, Scotts LawnService operates in Fort Lauderdale, Jacksonville, West Palm Beach, Port St. Lucie, Orlando, Ocala, Melbourne, Tampa and St. Petersburg. In addition, Scotts bolstered its Texas presence by picking up locations in Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth and Houston. The bulk of the remaining business is located in the Atlanta, Ga., area.

Centex built up its presence in the industry via a number of acquisitions in the last few years, but the company ultimately decided that it couldn't benefit from the same strategic advantage of providing lawn care to the new home market as it enjoys with its structural pest control service.





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# Market Trends

(continued from page 12)

and cream-colored with small brown heads and little pincer-like appendages on their rear ends, McCullough described. They feed on the tree's phloem and outer sapwood, producing S-shaped galleries that look like roadways. Adult beetles chewing their way out of trees leave distinctive D-shaped exit holes on branches and trunks.

Most infested ash trees die in two to three years. It is estimated that the pest has been in Michigan for at least five years.

"There are more than a dozen other insects that bore into dying ash trees, but this one is different because it infests quite healthy trees as well as stressed trees," McCullough said. "So far, it has only been found in ash trees, but it can apparently kill all species of ash, including green, white and black ash, as well as several horticultural varieties."

Currently, the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) has imposed a quarantine to stop ash trees, logs and firewood as well as ash tree nursery stock from leaving

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## L&L Book Report

### Let's Get Results, Not Excuses!

Do these excuses sound familiar to you?

"That's the way we've always done it."

"That's his job, not mine."

"I didn't think that it would make any difference."

These three overused explanations are among the top 10 excuses overheard in the workplace, and Dick Bare recognized the familiar ring of a few of these one-liners in his own Norcross, Ga.-company, Arbormomics. After reading *Let's Get Results, Not Excuses!*, he considered their stipulations.

Authors James Bleech and David Mutchler point out, "Excuses are the indicator of most - if not all - of the chronic problems in corporate America. Where we find excuses, we will always find some combination of the others."

Excuses are the tip of the iceberg, so to speak - we learn how to make excuses when we are young and then we continue to feed them to others in a work environment when we are older.

"Oftentimes, with employees who have been around for awhile, you have more of a problem with them because they might say, 'That's just not my style,' or, 'That's just not me,'" Bare recognized, identifying with the "self entitlement" Bleech and Mutchler present in the 238-page book. Supervisors pay for these excuses with more work and stress.

Chock full of short stories illustrating common excuse-related dilemmas, Bare said the easy-to-read book spoke to growing landscape companies that simply can't afford to let excuses muddle their service and efficiency. "As landscape companies get large, that excuse business can't work anymore," Bare said simply. - Kristen Hampshire

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Those studies have consistently shown a positive effect on early plant growth and development and with mature plants under stress. Sod farms results show that turf can be harvested earlier due to increased root mass and quicker establishment from seed or sprigs. Mature turf has greater root mass with a noted "tighter" visual appearance and less susceptibility to stress.

The same benefits can be found in Prospect®, a liquid micronutrient for foliar application or for use in fertigation systems.

### Effect of Fertilizer with Prospect Plus on Creeping Bentgrass Density

Ohio Turfgrass Foundation Research and Educational Center - 2000

Treatment	Rate	% Turf Density
Check		60.00
Fertilizer (46-0-0)	0.014 lb. N/1000 sq. ft.	72.00
Fertilizer (46-0-0) + Prospect Plus	0.014 lb. N/1000 sq. ft. + 48 oz./acre	77.00

Seeded on August 4, 2000 with G-2 creeping bentgrass at a rate of 2 lbs. per 1000 sq. ft. Density measurements were based on % cover taken visually on 10/4 (8 weeks after treatment)

**Study Results:** "... a significant increase in creeping bentgrass establishment two months after seeding with the application of fertilizer and Prospect Plus compared to the untreated control." **A 22% improvement over check and more than a 12% increase over fertilizer alone!**

For more information, contact your local UHS representative  
[www.uhsonline.com](http://www.uhsonline.com)





# Market Trends

(continued from page 14)

the affected counties. Current injection treatments being used to treat this problem include the active ingredient imidacloprid.

McCullough and Farran advised lawn care operators in Michigan and surrounding states to keep an eye out for this insect. "It gets active in the spring and then again at the end of summer until mid-fall," Farran said. "You don't want this critter overwintering if you can help it. Since it had three years to gain a foothold, it's making the Asian longhorned beetle look like a small issue."

## REGIONAL REPORT

### A Look Inside Pennsylvania's Green Industry

HARRISBURG, Pa. – Pennsylvania's green industry generates \$3.1 billion in total sales to the state's economy and has become the fastest growing segment of Pennsylvania agriculture, according to a statistical survey completed by Pennsylvania State University.

The survey, which was a joint project between Penn State and the Pennsylvania Landscape & Nursery Association, found that Pennsylvania's green industry accounts

# Calendar of Events

## TO ENSURE

that your meeting date is published, send an announcement at least 12 weeks in advance to *Lawn & Landscape Calendar*, 4012 Bridge Ave., Cleveland, Ohio 44113.

**SEPT. 18** Nursery and Landscape Field Day, Virginia Tech Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center, Virginia Beach, Va. Contact: 757/363-3906

**SEPT. 18-20** 23<sup>rd</sup> CanWest Hort Show, Vancouver, B.C. Contact: 604/574-7772

**SEPT. 19** *Lawn & Landscape/Snow Business* Snow Management Seminar, Detroit, Mich. Contact: 800/456-0707

**SEPT. 19-21** Florida Nursery & Allied Trade Show, Orlando Fla. Contact: 800/375-3642

**SEPT. 20** North Carolina Landscape Association Scholarship Golf Tournament, Southern Pines, N.C. Contact: 919/816-9121

**SEPT. 20-21** CLT Exterior Exam, Milton, Ontario, Canada. Contact: 905/875-1805

**SEPT. 21** *Lawn & Landscape/Snow Business* Snow Management Seminar, Chicago, Ill. Contact: 800/456-0707

**SEPT. 21** CLT Exterior Exam, Mequon Wis., and Spokane, Wash. Contact: 800/933-9522 (Mequon), 425/385-3333 (Spokane)

**SEPT. 24** University of California, Riverside Cooperative Extension Turfgrass and Landscape Management Field Day, Riverside, Calif. Contact: 909/787-3320

**SEPT. 26** *Lawn & Landscape/Snow Business* Snow Management Seminar, Philadelphia, Pa. Contact: 800/456-0707

for 73,000 employees, \$1 billion in compensation and payroll and \$151 million in business-related taxes.

In addition to being the fastest growing

segment of Pennsylvania agriculture, the survey revealed the green industry to be the leading producer of all of the state's crop sales – 26 percent related to nursery and greenhouse crops.

Nationally, Pennsylvania's landscape industry also ranks high, placing within the top 10 in numerous categories, including number of farms producing nursery and greenhouse crops, number of horticulture organizations and number of open space acres.

# People

Hunter hired **Dean Armstrong** as the sales manager for eastern Canada and named **Charles Huston** executive vice president of sales, **Michael Cucchiara** vice president of sales for the Americas and **Brandon Meadows** international vice president of sales.

Massey Services promoted **Tony Massey** to executive vice president of the consumer services division, **Ed Dougherty** to the regional manager of Massey's central region, **Mark McGrath** to division manager for the PrevenTech Commercial Pest Prevention division and **Tom Jarzynka** to technical and training director of the PrevenTech division.

CoCal Landscape hired **Fred McAfoos** as chief estimator.

Environmental Industries, Inc. promoted **Ken Hutcheson** to president, U.S. Lawns.

Little Wonder named **Thomas Schwarz** chief financial officer.

Cleary Chemical announced that **Karen Hartman** and **Mike McGrath** joined the company as sales representatives.

Becker Underwood named **Brian Buckallew** product manager for its distribution sales business unit.

HighGrove Partners hired **Brad Jackson** and **Pat Whalen** as sales representatives, **Brett Wendel** as an estimator/irrigation manager and **Erik Jarkins** as a designer.



Dean Armstrong (top), Tony Massey

## IN THE NEWS

### LESCO's Second Quarter Results Show Progress

CLEVELAND – When Michael DiMino was named LESCO's president and chief executive officer in April, his goals were clear: boost sales while cutting costs to return the company to profitability. LESCO's second-quarter performance this year indicates that DiMino's plan is off to a strong start and he's not done changing the way the turf products distributor goes about its business.

LESCO's sales climbed 1.4 percent to \$166.5 million in the quarter, thanks largely to a 5.2-percent sales spike in the lawn care



**SEPT. 28** Lawn & Landscape/Snow Business Snow Management Seminar, Boston, Mass.

Contact: 800/456-0707

**SEPT. 28** CLT Exterior Exam, Boise, Idaho, White Plains, N.Y., and New Brunswick,

N.J. (written) Contact: 800/462-4679 (Boise), 914/788-9704 (White Plains),

201/703-3600 (New Brunswick)

**OCT. 4-5** CLT Exterior Exam, Columbia, S.C. Contact: 864/592-3868

**OCT. 4-6** CLT Exterior Exam, Sacramento, Calif. Contact: 916/448-2522

**OCT. 5** CLT Exterior Exam, New Brunswick, N.J., and Joliet, Ill. (retest only) Contact:

201/703-3600 (New Brunswick), 630/472-2851 (Joliet)

**OCT. 8** ALCA Essentials for Success, Cincinnati, Ohio. Contact: 800/395-2522

**OCT. 9-10** Southern California Turfgrass Council Turfgrass, Landscape and Equipment

Expo, Poina, Calif. Contact 800/500-7282

**OCT. 9** Interior/Exterior CLP and CLT Interior Exam, Cincinnati, Ohio. Contact: 800/395-2522

**OCT. 10** Interior/Exterior CLP and CLT Interior Exam, Wenatchee, Wash.

Contact: 800/395-2522

**OCT. 10** CLT Exterior Exam, Wenatchee, Wash. Contact: 425/385-3333

**OCT. 12** CLT Exterior Exam, Oahu, Hawaii, (written only). Contact: 808/326-9738

**OCT. 10-12** Northwest Green Industry Conference, Wenatchee, Wash. Contact: 509/662-1234

**OCT. 16-20** Independent Turf & Ornamental Distributors Association Fall Meeting,

St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. Contact: 207/933-6708

**OCT. 18-22** San Jose American Society of Landscape Architects Expo, San Jose, Calif.

Contact: 202/363-4666

market. Sales in golf and to national accounts were off 4.3 percent and 1.5 percent, respectively.

Perhaps most importantly, however, LESCO boosted its gross profit margin to 34.2 percent of sales, thanks to considerable cost-cutting. "We have created a disciplined culture of non-spending, which has eliminated approximately \$2 million in costs," DiMino told investors. "I feel good about the control we have over spending."

DiMino did share disappointment with investors that LESCO's sales aren't growing as rapidly as he predicted earlier this year, when he called for overall growth of 4 to 6 percent. While announcing second-quarter results, he lowered his growth forecast for the year to 2 to 4 percent without changing his bottom-line improvement estimates.

"Same-store sales are up 5.2 percent in lawn care and we're excited about that because [lawn care] is our biggest opportunity for growth and profitability," DiMino explained.

(continued on page 20)

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# Market Trends




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# Market Trends

(continued from page 17)

In addition, LESCO continues progressing with its hub-and-spoke concept to move inventory into the field and out of distribution centers. Three of these superstores are being developed right now in Cleveland, Ohio, Sebring, Fla., and Hamilton, N.J. DiMino noted that he would like to ultimately create six or seven such facilities in the next year or two with Chicago, Ill., and Atlanta, Ga., as two likely candidates.

DiMino pointed to LESCO's success in Florida as evidence of what this alignment can do for the company strategically. "We believe our system is eminently scalable," he asserted. "We have numbers that show us that in Florida we're 10 to 15 points higher in marketshare than anywhere else because we've got 50 stores working in concert with our Sebring facility. We dominate in Florida. That's a word we like a lot, so we're building the model to dominate."

As the company focuses on inventory management, one goal is to reduce the num-

(continued on page 22)

# Mattingly's MESSAGE

**EDITOR'S NOTE: Every month, industry consultant Jack Mattingly offers suggestions on key tasks for contractors to focus on. Here are his September thoughts.**

This is a great time to submit a customer survey.

First, plan on surveying every client. If you have many clients, share the responsibility with individuals in your organization who will be accountable for the survey issue and collection. Depending on your clients and your survey presentation, don't expect more than a 10-percent return. To boost return rate, you can provide your clients an incentive for returning the survey by attaching a dollar bill to the survey or providing a small indoor plant for their desk.

If you offer various services, track everything according to each particular sector: residential maintenance, commercial maintenance, landscape installation, etc. Track your scores in each category and determine if you are above or below average. When the returned surveys have been logged and tracked, be sure to share all this information with the managers, supervisors, foremen, administration, etc.

What should your survey include? Here are a few categories under which you can list specific questions: customer service, quality, people, office and image.

List no more than five questions under each category and allow your clients to easily make a check mark indicating a score from 1 to 5. Also, allow space for comments and a place for them to sign their name. Generally, bad news comes without a signature.

Jack Mattingly is a green industry consultant with Mattingly Consulting and can be reached at [www.mattinglyconsulting.com](http://www.mattinglyconsulting.com) or 770-517-9476.

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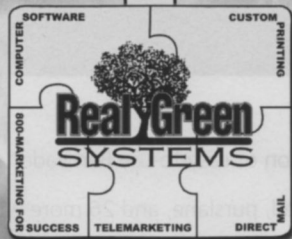
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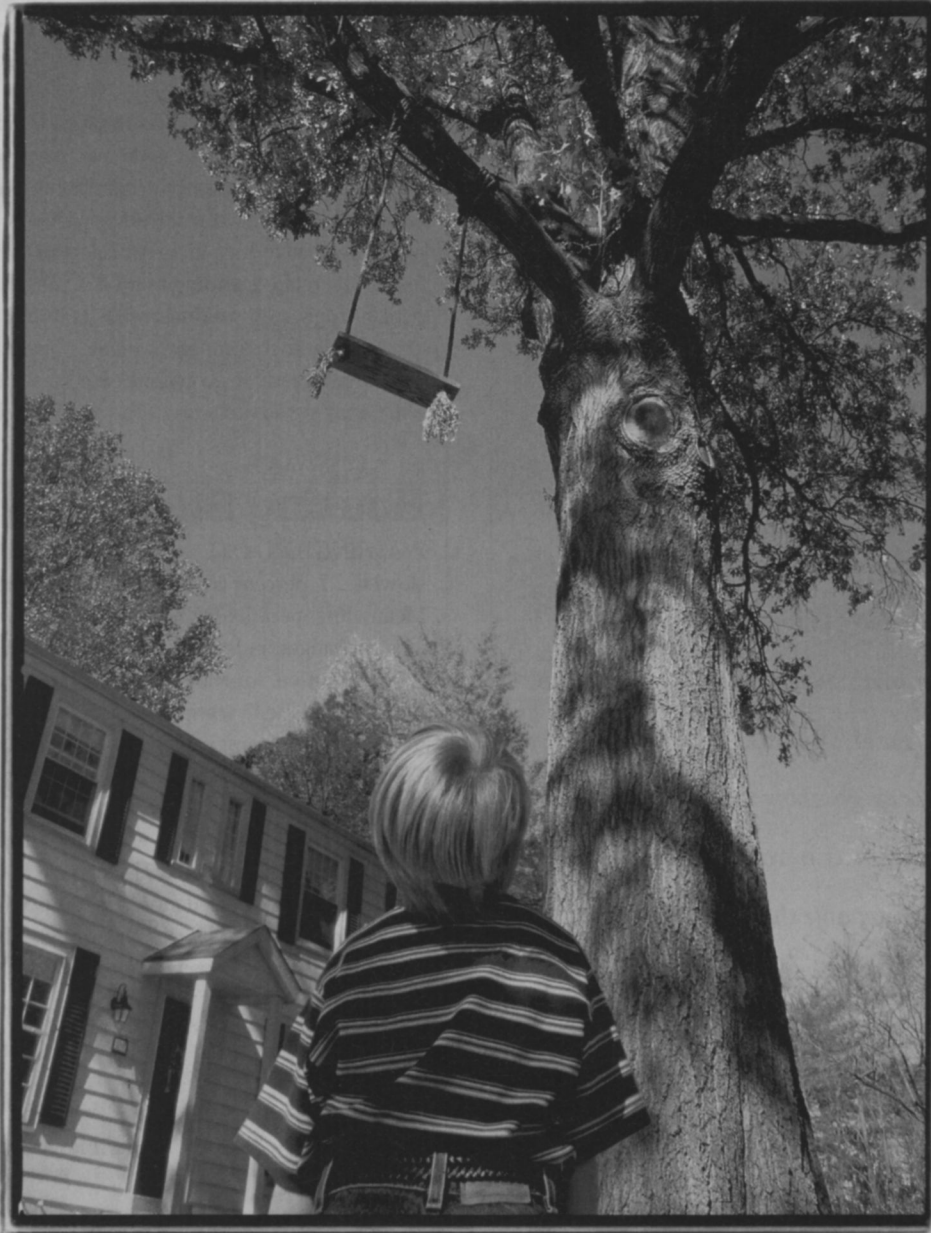
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USE READER SERVICE #44

## Market Trends

(continued from page 20)

ber of products it houses by more than half. "We are currently carrying about 22,000 SKUs (stock keeping units), and 12,000 of them are products that were previously discontinued," added Jeff Rutherford, senior vice president and chief financial officer, explaining the reasoning behind a liquidation strategy that is resulting in reduced prices on many LESCO products.

Ultimately, the company hopes to reduce its inventory to about 10,000 SKUs, about 65 percent of which will be replacement products for lawn care equipment.

Meanwhile, DiMino looks forward to adding products, particularly in the pesticide area as the patents protecting popular chemistries expire. "When active ingredients come off patent, we can reformulate them with our other partners and make more money when we reintroduce these products to the market with our brand name," he related, adding that LESCO's margin is typically 10 to 15 percent higher on products with its brand name than on products carrying another company's name. "There are a lot of those active ingredients ready to go generic over the next 24 to 36 months and we will be taking advantages of the every single one." — Bob West

### IN THE NEWS

#### Housing Starts Still Strong

WASHINGTON, D.C. — As expected, nationwide housing starts slowed 2.7 percent in July, the Commerce Department reported. Meanwhile, permits for new housing construction remained virtually unchanged in July at a 1.7 million-unit rate.

"I'd caution anyone against linking this report to some kind of housing 'bubble,'" warned Gary Garczynski, National Association of Home Builders president and a builder/developer from Woodbridge, Va. "Historically low mortgage rates continue to bring buyers to the market. Moreover, we're forecasting a healthy 1.65 million starts for all of 2002 — the best number in 15 years."

Housing starts declined 11.7 percent in the Northeast, while the South and West reported more modest declines of 3.6 percent and 4.3 percent, respectively. During the same period, the Midwest posted a 5.8 percent gain in housing starts. ■

### On the WEB

Stens — [www.stens.com](http://www.stens.com)

HH Pest & Turf  
Management Systems — [www.injecto-matic.com](http://www.injecto-matic.com)

University of  
Massachusetts Extension  
Drought Page — [www.umassdroughtinfo.org](http://www.umassdroughtinfo.org)

FINN Corp. — [www.finncorp.com](http://www.finncorp.com)

Versa-Lok — [www.versa-lok.com](http://www.versa-lok.com)

Midwest Lawn Scapes — [www.midwestlawnsapes.com](http://www.midwestlawnsapes.com)

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# Nursery Market Report

## PATRIOTIC PLANTINGS

# Red, White & Blooms

Red, white and blue continue to be hot color choices for 2002, as Americans strive to express their patriotism in different ways, even bringing this palette into their landscapes.

Fortunately for landscape contractors, there are a number of blooming plants in these hues, so it's simple to create garden vignettes or small containers featuring flowering plants. Choose from annuals like pansies, petunias, primulas, snapdragons and impatiens. Then, mix in perennials like bacopa, nemesia, salvia, phlox and accent with geraniums and perovskia for a simple, free-flowering garden.

Jack Williams, plant specialist and landscape designer for



Looking for blue plants to fit a patriotic container? Try *Nemesia Aromatica Deep Blue*. Photo: Ball Horticultural Co.

The Flower Fields, an alliance of U.S. growers based in Encinitas, Calif., designed a landscape of annuals and perennials that will bloom through fall. This easy-care landscape is recommended for a sunny bed 10 feet by 3 feet:

- *Rear* – three 'Comet White' *Argyranthemum*, seven 'La Bella Red' snapdragons (spring and fall) or seven 'May Night' salvia (for summer), three 'Russian Sage' *Perovskia*
- *Center* – nine 1-gallon size red 'Lauren' dwarf dahlias or red double impatiens, six 'Blueberry Sachet' *Nemesia*, five 'Rocky Mountain Red' or 'Rocky Mountain Scarlet' geraniums, six 'Vanilla Sachet' *Nemesia*
- *Front* – 18 low-growing annuals, for spring or fall, 'Penny' (continued on page 26)

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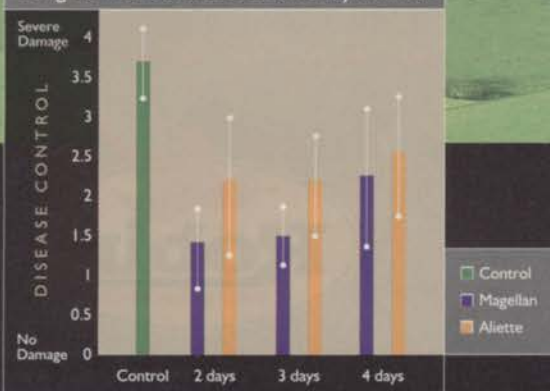
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# Nursery Market Report

(continued from page 24)

Deep Blue' viola on one corner and 18 'Accord/Banner' pansy on opposite. Replace in summer with 18 'Blue Showers' and 18 'Candy Floss' Bacopa. Fill in spaces with 'White Dream,' 'Ultra White' or 'Prime Time White' petunia.

Before planting, work the bed so soil is light and fluffy, and add time-release fertilizer. This low-maintenance landscape only requires changing out the seasonal annuals.



A simple patriotic vignette can be created for moist, shady locations using 'Goodness Grows' (blue) Spike Speedwell Veronica spicata in the center. Surround with three Lobelia cardinalis (red) and finish in front with ground cover 'White Uniform' Campanula.

A small, sunny garden vignette, perhaps at house entry, can be made with 'Blue Hills' Salvia nemorosa, 'Star Fire' (red) and 'David' (white) Phlox paniculata. Finish with ground

*Among the many options for creating a patriotic landscape are Abunda Jumbo White Bacopa (below) and Fiesta Sparkler Cherry Double Impatiens (left). Photos: Ball Horticultural Co.*



lawnandlandscape.com

Check this story online for information on more plants for patriotic plantings.

cover 'White Swan' Echinacea or 'Silver Princess' Leucanthemum.

To create container gardens, there are several options. In the center of a 14-inch container, plant one 'Americana' geranium. Around it, place fragrant 'Blueberry Sachet' Nemesia alternating with 'Vanilla Sachet' Nemesia. Or in the center of a 14-inch pot, place a 'Rocky Mountain White' geranium and surround it with several ivy geraniums, such as 'Bright Cascade' or 'Fire Blizzard.' Complete with 'Blue with Eye' or 'Blue Spark' Twilight Verbena.

These designs are most effective using 1-gallon plants for the centers and 4- or 6-inch plants for accents. Change out seasonal annuals for a year-long display. — Karen Dardick

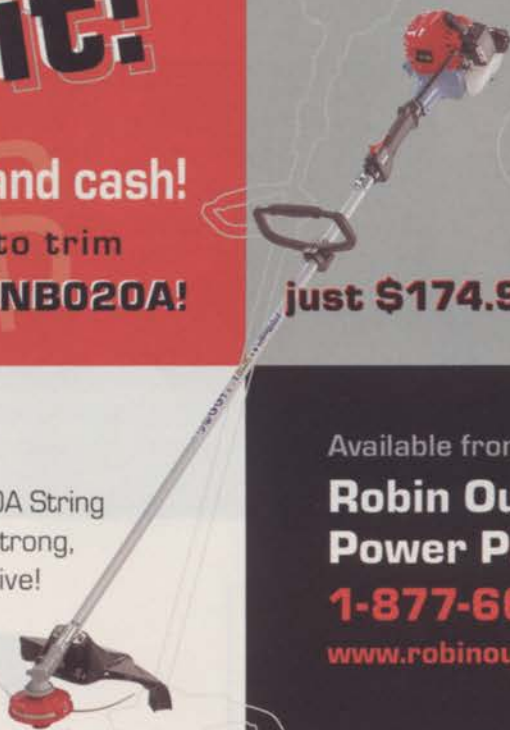
The author is a national garden writer based in Pasadena, Calif.



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## PLANT INVENTORY

# Managing Your Nursery Stock

Strong, healthy plant material is the heart of any landscape project, and managing your nursery stock can be the most important factor in cultivating your landscape company's reputation.

Whether you purchase your material from a wholesale yard, a garden center or directly from the grower, the source of your material is paramount in long-term plant success. Buy from suppliers that share the same standards of quality that you want your company to project. To revisit the old adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words," your first visual impression of a supplier's facility is most likely the right one. It should be clean and orderly. Plant material should be clearly labeled,



When purchasing containerized plant material, growers encourage contractors to take plants out of their containers to inspect rootballs, ensuring they are free from mold and insects. Photo: Moon Nurseries

properly spaced and easy to find. Sales staff should be knowledgeable and available to answer questions related to their material. Also, choose a supplier with quick product turnover – one that is constantly bringing in fresh material.

(continued on page 30)

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USE READER SERVICE #21



# Arbor Business

(continued from page 27)

If you are fortunate enough to have large lead times for your projects, try to get the first pick of the material. When a project is too large for your local wholesale yard or requires large caliper specimen trees, consider buying directly from a grower. This allows you to inspect and tag material in the field months in advance.

Remember, though, that wholesalers are usually finished tagging their summer stock by early spring. Unless you have a holding facility to carry product through from digging to installation, your best bet may be to contact your local supplier and ask them to reserve the material for you. Plus, they will no doubt appreciate being kept in the loop and will be more likely to save the best material for you in the future.

When selecting balled-and-burlapped stock, look for large and uniformly shaped root balls. As a rule of thumb, for every caliper inch of tree, the root ball should be approximately 10 to 12 inches in diameter. Also, ask what part of the country the tree is from and

check the root ball's soil content. Similar soils and hardiness zones help ensure a successful transplant. Stand trees upright in holding yards, and properly irrigate them and space them to avoid touching branches. Impeding trees create shaded and constricted environments that cause misshapen head growth.

Always take time to see if the tree has been properly pruned and that the head shape is uniform. Look for a dominant central leader that is straight and free from multiple branch angles and secondary leaders. Lastly, make sure there are no visible signs of insect or mechanical damage to the bark or leaves.

When choosing containerized shrubs, the same general rules apply. Additionally, make sure that the plant is in a proper container. A plant grown in a disproportionately small container may have a root mass that is too small to support the plant. Feel free to take the plant out of the container to make sure it is properly rooted and that the soil and roots are free from mold and insects.

The post-purchase care of plant material is just as important as the selection itself. Extra

expenses involved in transportation, holding and installation will be justified by a successful project and a happy client.

Ideally, plants make one trip, from the point of purchase to installation. The quality of this journey is of enormous value to your plant material. Make sure that all trees have been properly tied, stacked and tarped. Wind burn can ruin beautiful, healthy nursery stock. Do not double stack balled-and-burlapped trees, as the weight from one can damage another. If possible, ship containerized plants in an enclosed trailer.

Remember, quality trees and shrubs provide maximum landscape beauty and function, while damaged or under-producing specimens cause only frustration. Though the cost of quality plant materials may initially seem prohibitive, word-of-mouth referrals from happy clients generate business for years to come. — Anna Martin **LL**

The author is marketing director, Moon Nurseries, Chesapeake City, Md., and can be reached at 800/803-TREE.

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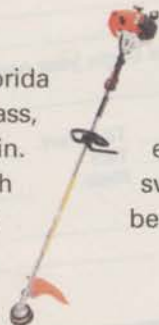
*Chuck Vannelli, V.P., South Florida Bushog*

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On

# Paper

## A Friendly Suggestion

When it comes to generating new accounts, Real Green Lawn Fertilizing, Walled Lake, Mich., has all the right moves.

Real Green uses a door-hanger to generate new accounts when technicians are out servicing existing customers. A simple drop-off that acts as an advertisement makes itself more welcome than "junk mail" by offering that little something extra.

"Essentially, this piece offers homeowners a free estimate," explained Dave Boulter, Real Green's vice-president of marketing.

The door hanger, which says, "While visiting your neighbor's lawn today, I noticed the following conditions in your landscape..." gives a potential customer a small-scale lawn assessment on the reverse side, detailing specifics like thin lawn areas or disease damage and recommending enhancement services.


The hanger also has a check-off area for common lawn problems, such as weeds, insect damage, compaction and disease, that could possibly spur a potential customer to call for more information.

There's also an area for the technician to write up a quick estimate of fertilization, pest control, aeration or whatever else the "doctor" orders on the client's site.

Boulter said that the door hanger was developed with the help of owner Joe Kucik about seven years ago.

"This way, lawn technicians can take these with them and drop five off in one direction and five off in the other direction in a residential neighborhood," Boulter said. "That covers a lot of area."

The door hanger, now one of many the company uses, also has a tear-off card at the bottom for the technician to take back to the office. The small card contains the potential client's address, estimate date and recommended services.

"The technician then brings the card back and sets up the property as a new client, recording all of their contact and landscape information, including the price quote," Boulter stated. "This way the technician either follows-up on the estimate or the customer contacts us." — Mandy Jenkins 

The author is contributing editor for *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and can be reached at [mjenkins@lawnandlandscape.com](mailto:mjenkins@lawnandlandscape.com).



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<input type="checkbox"/> Weeds	<input type="checkbox"/> Disease damage
<input type="checkbox"/> Insect damage	<input type="checkbox"/> Excessive thatch
<input type="checkbox"/> Thin lawn areas	<input type="checkbox"/> Mole damage
<input type="checkbox"/> Malnourished shrubs/trees	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	

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Ask for \_\_\_\_\_

<input type="checkbox"/> Fert.	<input type="checkbox"/> T&S Fert.	<input type="checkbox"/> Grub
<input type="checkbox"/> Core	<input type="checkbox"/> T&S	<input type="checkbox"/> Date
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**USE READER SERVICE #80**



by Nicole Wisniewski

Father-and-son team Bob and Kory Ballard strive to create a more perfect company.

Fourteen-year-old Kory Ballard wanted a new moped more than anything. So, when his father, Bob, told him he better get a job so he could afford it, he immediately got to work.

Ballard went door to door offering residential maintenance services through Ballard Mowing. Though a moped might not seem like the ideal vehicle to transport equipment, Ballard pulled a mower behind his moped, while a friend he employed carried the weed eaters and blowers on his.

What started with 10 to 15 mowing accounts grew to 35 to 40 lawns per week by the time Ballard was 16. He even put an ad in the local paper offering to mow an average-sized lawn for \$12. "We didn't have any overhead then, so our services were less expensive," Ballard pointed out.

By the time Ballard reached his senior year in high school in 1993, he employed a full-time crew that mowed mainly residential properties during the day while he was in class. At one point, Ballard said, the company was making \$1,700 to \$2,000 weekly. "Seeing my friends only make \$7 to \$8 an hour in other jobs made me aware that I liked what I was doing better," Ballard pointed out. "I felt challenged and wanted to keep going."

So, after graduation, he renamed the company Perficut Lawn Care and persuaded his dad to retire early and join the business as vice president. Fears that there may not be enough work for two were soon eliminated as the workforce grew to three employees and revenue doubled its first few years. By 1995, the company ran three trucks, had eight employees and sales of \$181,000. And after adding on additional services in 1997, the company grew to 30 employees, 11 trucks and sales of \$798,500.

Speedy growth that plateaued at \$3.3 million in 2000 forced the company to slow down and gain focus to increase profitability. Now, the Ballards are on a mission to tweak the company's full-service offerings and polish the Perficut name by perfecting the business.

**ADD-ONS ADD UP.** When Perficut began, it only offered residential maintenance services. But, as the business grew, it continued taking on larger commercial accounts, which, today, make up 70 percent of the company's work.

As the business' commercial accounts multiplied, so did client requests for additional services, so Perficut added irrigation in 1997, landscaping in 1998, and chemical lawn, tree and shrub care in 1999, in addition to buying a holiday lighting distributorship.

Incorporating these services went fairly smoothly, however some services were more challenging. For instance, Perficut subcontracted chemical lawn care until TruGreen-

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# Pursuing PERFECT





*"My father and I have different opinions about employee issues because he worked for people his entire life and I have not," said*

*Kory Ballard (right) of his father, Bob. "But his viewpoint helps me to better understand what the employees are feeling, so he's a valuable asset."*

*Photo: Rich Sanders.*

# TION

## **PERFICUT LAWN & LANDSCAPE**

**HEADQUARTERS:** Des Moines, Iowa

**FOUNDED:** 1989

**2001 REVENUE:** \$2.9 million

**2002 PROJECTED REVENUE:** \$3 million

**SERVICE MIX:** 70 percent commercial/industrial and 30 percent residential. 29 percent of revenue is maintenance, 16 percent is lawn care, 15 percent is landscaping, 15 percent is irrigation, 5 percent is tree care, 17 percent is snow removal and 3 percent is holiday lighting

**EMPLOYEES:** 24 full-time employees and 40 to 45 seasonal

**EQUIPMENT:** Vehicles: 8 management, 9 maintenance, 5 chemical, 5 irrigation, 4 landscaping, 3 lawn care; 23 utility trailers and 2 enclosed trailers; 13 riding mowers, 22 walk-behind mowers, 1 endloader, 2 skid-steer loaders, 3 other tractor/loader machines, 1 compact utility loader, 1 tractor, 4 aerators, trimmers, blowers and hand tools

### **THE PHILOSOPHY**

**MISSION STATEMENT:** To work together as a management/employee team to build a strong, stable company offering the highest quality in customer service while offering rewarding careers in the green industry. Perficut achieves its mission of providing quality services through the team effort of all our capable, motivated employees.

**FUTURE CHALLENGES:** Continue growth while maintaining a high level of customer service, and hiring and training capable management while offering growth opportunities within.

### **THE MANAGEMENT**

**PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT:** Kory Ballard started mowing at 14 years old and continued growing his company through high school. In 1994, Kory persuaded his father, Bob, to retire early from his factory job to help grow the company as vice president. Today, Kory runs the day-to-day operations working with management, while Bob handles the fleet maintenance and oversees two mechanics.

**DIVISION MANAGER:** Matt Boelman joined the company in 1995 and now works on customer relations, new sales and runs the maintenance and snow divisions.

**CONTROLLER:** Chris Harding has been with the company since 1996 and runs all the company's payroll and financial elements.

**At a  
Glance**



## Cover Story

ChemLawn bought out the company that did the work in spring of 1999. "They met with me and said they were going to start spring applications on our accounts," Ballard explained. "I didn't want to be affiliated with that company and chose not to let them take my customers. Then, I had to act quickly since we had to start spraying March 1."

Luckily, Ballard was familiar with company called MowPro and within two to three weeks, that company's owner, Kreg Longnecker, moved his home-based operation into Perficut's offices. "We bought his company and hired him to run that division," Ballard said. "Kreg had 15 years of experience and 20 accounts that we took on



Perficut Division Manager Matt Boelman (right) discusses job details with Foreman A.J. Foster. Photo: Rich Sanders

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and then he contacted all of our accounts personally letting them know that he was going to be taking over our lawn care work. By acting quickly, we retained all of our clients despite TruGreen's growth in the market."

Some service combinations, like holiday lighting and snow removal, offer challenges because they occur simultaneously and weather conditions affect their productivity.

But these services, though originally added to retain employees during winter months, now are some of Perficut's more profitable. Hence, making sure they run efficiently is vital, Ballard said.

The company reinstalls holiday lighting beginning Nov. 1, while many crews are finishing fall clean-ups. "If we receive early snowfall, all the holiday lighting is on hold," Ballard explained. "The real challenge is reinstalling 130 to 150 homes before we can start installing new sales. Many clients like to be installed after Thanksgiving and before Dec. 15, so this leaves a small window for the work. We also offer discounts to clients who are willing to let us install lights early."

To promote holiday lighting, Perficut direct markets to areas with incomes more than \$100,000. "We also have done some homes for free initially in high-end neighborhoods to encourage clients to request the service," Ballard said. "And we put a lighted sign at each home we decorate as another means of advertising."

These two services compliment the business and, together, attract a well-rounded client base. While holiday lighting is 98 percent residential, snow removal is 98 percent commercial. Ninety percent of Perficut's snow removal is done hourly and 10 percent is done on a monthly or set rate. "After the last two extremely different weather sea-

*(continued on page 38)*



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USE READER SERVICE #19



## Cover Story

(continued from page 36)

sons, we are looking to set up more large clients on a monthly rate," Ballard said. Having a mix of clients who pay hourly and clients who pay monthly ensures consistency in winter cash flow, decreasing the company's financial burden in case of a light winter. "Also, some of our commercial clients would prefer to be charged monthly

because they can budget better for the year and are safe from unexpected high hourly snow bills," Ballard pointed out.

To price monthly rates, which is difficult due to the variance in snowfall from year to year, Division Manager Matt Boelman averages out what clients have spent over time, making sure to cover his expenses. When

marketing these rates, Boelman targets commercial clients who spend more than \$10,000 annually with Perficut, including discount department stores and new office buildings that want to see blackout at all times and reduce their liability.

To reflect this growingly diverse service mix, Ballard changed the company name to Perficut Lawn & Landscape in 1998. That same year the company had grown to 60 employees and four division managers, who each run their separate divisions as smaller companies within the organization. Weekly managers meetings ensure constant communication and updates on each division's goings on, Ballard said. Then, each division manager supervises employees in his own way. The maintenance division, for instance, meets briefly every morning to keep the nine to 10 crews focused on each day's duties.

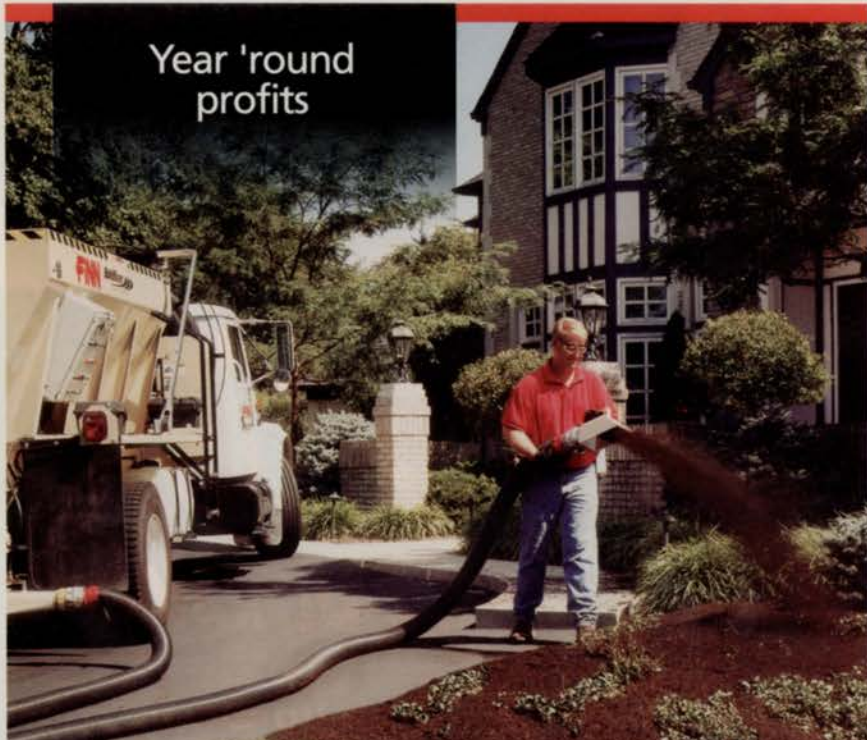
**FINE-TUNING FACTORS.** Though 2000 was the company's biggest growth year—reaching \$3.3 million in revenue from \$2.5 million in 1999—it wasn't the most profitable. "Things, like overtime, got way out of control," Ballard admitted. "Maintenance crews worked 90- to 100-hour weeks for months on end. We became too focused on getting work done instead of watching crews' hours as closely as we should have. Even during the ideal work-week we couldn't get the work done."

The company had to limit overtime. Ballard took a look at the schedule—every Saturday, crews came in to maintain a few industrial parks. Once Ballard weighed the management and employee time it took to maintain these 30-acre sites against cutting overtime and freeing up the schedule, he realized that the latter would be more beneficial.

"We stopped bidding those jobs," Ballard explained. "We paid overtime for crew workers all day Saturday and management's time to run the crews. We were growing like crazy and 20 hours of overtime for 40 to 50 guys adds up fast. So, we stopped bidding those industrial jobs and moved away from doing bid work on apartment complexes and office buildings that only want to be maintained on the weekends."

Keeping profitability in mind, Perficut also raised its prices for residential work by 5 percent in 2001, something it tried to do annually. This helped weed out clients who were too concerned with price. "This was a bless-

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ing in disguise," Ballard said, adding that the company lost less than 5 percent of its clients due to the price increase. "By raising rates, we eliminated the few residential accounts we wanted to without having to say we didn't want to take care of them anymore."

To raise prices, Ballard sent clients a letter explaining increasing fuel, employee and equipment costs.

Another way to control overtime was through reducing the number of hours foremen worked. Adding a night mechanic in charge of unloading and loading equipment, washing trucks and trailers and repairing machines meant foremen could get in and get out of the office quickly, focusing only on each day's work, Ballard said.

Even little changes can help reduce costs. Ballard noticed employees didn't care for their work uniforms the way they should have – they lost hats and tore the sleeves off of t-shirts or were careless with company clothing. "It got to a point where I was ordering 200 shirts at a time and didn't know where they were going," he said.

To increase employees' responsibility for their work wear, Ballard charges each new employee \$30 (\$15 out of the first week's check and \$15 out of the second weeks'

check) for company clothing, which includes a hat, three Perficut t-shirts and a coat or sweatshirt. Employees who want additional clothing have to buy it. "We offer specials in the fall and spring and give employees a lot of chances to get discounts on visors, rain pullovers or waterproof pants," Ballard said. "And now that they are paying for it, the number of lost hats and t-shirts is minimal."

And if employees who quit return some clothing, like the coat or sweatshirt, Ballard will reimburse them \$20. "But most of the time, they don't return anything," he said.

The new uniform rules are a part of Perficut's employee handbook, which employees must read and sign before they receive their first week's paychecks.

**BRANDING BASICS.** Though the company is known for its blue trucks, Ballard wants the Perficut name to gain more recognition in the Des Moines market.

So, he pursued an arrangement with the local NBC affiliate – WOW Channel 13. The channel chooses one company in each industry to be recognized as experts, and they do online chats, answer questions from community members and receive 20 commercials monthly, boosting neighborhood recognition.

**A**ll Perficut employees are required to wear uniforms on the job.

To distinguish foremen from crew, foremen wear white-and-blue-striped, button-up, collared shirts, blue hats and khakis, while crewmen wear blue t-shirts, blue hats and any pants they want as long as they are not torn, pointed out Kory Ballard, president of the Des Moines, Iowa-based company.

"This way clients can tell the difference between a foreman and worker on the job and they know who to go to with questions," Ballard said. "Also, the foremen feel good in this uniform – they take pride in wearing a special shirt that shows they are in charge."

Foremen also are issued lockers at work to store their uniforms and lunches or other personal items.

To help foreman keep their shirts clean, Ballard splits the cost of a shirt laundry service for maintenance foremen and a shirt and khaki laundry service for chemical foremen. Foremen pay \$3 weekly and chemical foreman pay \$6 weekly for this service. "They come in wearing a shirt from home and once at work change into a nice, clean shirt," Ballard explained. "Then they throw it in the hamper before they leave and go back home in their clean shirt they wore in the morning. Not only does this ensure they have clean uniforms, but it also means they feel good coming in and leaving work because they always have clean clothes to wear." – Nicole Wisniewski

## Squeaky Clean Service

Though the arrangement is expensive – approximately \$30,000 annually for the program – Ballard said it beats the *Yellow Pages*. "We run about five or six ads in the *Yellow Pages* for our different services and used to spend about \$3,500 a month total in there," Ballard explained, adding that today they only spend about \$1,500 monthly. "But we're in there with 150 other contractors. Sure, we make our ad look good as a quarter page and in color, but that just increases costs, and we're still not making a statement amidst the competition.

"But by being the NBC expert in Des Moines, we single ourselves out from the competition and show people we're willing to take some time to provide them with educational information in addition to an array of services," Ballard added.

To keep track of which marketing venture generates the most client leads, office managers who field customer calls fill out an information form that describes the customer, explains his or her requests and lists where the lead came from, Ballard pointed out, adding that the majority of prospects come through truck recognition. Additionally, the sheet acts as a formal call log to ensure calls are returned in a timely fashion – preferably 24 hours.

Another client educational tool Perficut started handing out this year is the *Homeowners Lawn Care Manual*. The four-page, two-color brochures cost 15 cents each and teach clients watering, mowing, seeding, aeration and weed and insect control basics while at the same time promoting Perficut's services.

This brochure, which took the company a short time to develop, puts the right lawn care information in clients' hands and helps eliminate constant phone calls on these topics. "It doesn't reduce calls as much as we thought, but I think it solidifies the fact that we're a local expert and that clients can come to us with their questions," Ballard said. "We're trying to be the local good guy."

To boost the company name and build business, Perficut also uses door hangers on

(continued on page 109)



*Terra-Firma culminates three businesses in one for a balance that strikes profit and pleases clients.*

# Common GROUND

Terra-Firma means solid ground.

The Latin words translate into more than a quirky and undeniably appropriate name for a landscape company, but also a philosophy Dave and Heather Schuster stick to run their million-dollar, Muskego, Wis., operation.

For the twosome, this "solid ground" means understanding their customers—it means setting principles to steer their multi-faceted organization and maintaining a synergy among the services and their own roles in the growing company.

Terra-Firma, quite simply, means business—business with balance.

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Dave and Heather Schuster have built a solid business by offering a variety of services that keep employees working year-round. Photo: Terra-Firma

"Dave's a problem solver and he understands how to get the job done, and I tend to be better at systems and organization and money management," Heather said, characterizing how the husband-wife team works together, managing Weed Man and Christmas Décor franchises along with their landscape maintenance and installation business. "The three businesses work together extremely well—the companies help each other with their weaknesses. Weed Man needs extra staff at certain times of year, Christmas Décor helps us retain year-round employees and Terra-Firma is a stable, well-known market player."

**A SUPPORTIVE START.** Dave and Heather built from the ground up what, today, is defined as solid ground.

"Dave had a strong idea about the way the work would get done and I had a strong idea about the way the business itself should exist," identified Heather, admitting they started the business without a plan and worked through the wrinkles most small companies, do—growing too fast, struggling to find qualified employees, and even balancing work and personal life. "I was very adamant from the beginning that this business should not be a 'Mom and Pop' organization where it is all about Dave and Heather. It had to become an entity unto itself that could exist without us."

Professionalism was paramount from the first days, when Heather decided to invest \$1,000 in a graphic artist to create a smart logo to represent Terra-Firma. "It's all the little things that make a huge difference to stay organized," she pointed out.

And, some of the not-so-little things also keep operations level, like a support team that includes a full-time mechanic and two office administrators, one with a horticultural degree. "This takes the pressure off of Dave and I so we can focus on employee and customer issues and planning," Heather reasoned.

*(continued on page 44)*



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(continued from page 42)

Heather manages the maintenance division along with the Weed Man and Christmas Décor franchise businesses. Dave handles the construction side of the business, which is split between residential and commercial accounts and represents 40 percent of Terra-Firma's overall revenue. A separate manager oversees Weed Man's day-to-

day operations, which represents 20 percent of the company, while the remaining 40 percent of sales comes via maintenance and irrigation work.

"The more our business grows overall, the more planning and budgeting and analysis that is required, and that is my job. To try to chart the course," she said.

Meanwhile, finding other reliable employees to follow the map isn't so easy. Heather admitted labor has been a challenge for the company, even though high unemployment levels have improved the application pool. Experienced workers are hard to come by, and those with positive attitudes are even more scarce, it seems. "Dealing with labor is a constant process where you find your skills – you practice with labor relations," Heather figured. "You try to get better with performance reviews, try to keep in touch with the crew and learn what is going on with their lives and how work fits into it."

Terra-Firma always accepts applications and networks heavily with local high schools for "safety net" employees to fill spots when the full-time staff thins out. "We try to hire for personality – they end up being such cheery guys, so it makes up for the fact that they don't have experience," she said.

Another reason Heather concentrates on character rather than resumes: Those with agreeable dispositions tend to deal better with change. And in a constantly evolving company, nothing is more important.

The hiring process can eliminate the bad apples, and Heather eventually discovered through trial and error a few key interview questions that identify motivated candidates. First, she asks potential employees to name their favorite boss and their least favorite boss and why. "It tells you how an employee views authority," she explained. "If someone says, 'My least favorite boss was always on me because I was running a few minutes late,' I wonder why."

At the end of the interview, Heather asks candidates what their references will say about them. "That helped tremendously," she said, surprised at most people's honesty.

Heather is pleased with the employee mix, which consists of 12 full-time and nine seasonal workers dedicated to either installation or maintenance, with two full-time Weed Man employees. The maintenance staff switches to Christmas Décor and snow services when seasons change.

**SYSTEMATIC GROWTH.** Part of Heather's practice as Terra-Firma matures includes finding the delicate balance between workload and man-power. "I believe in the theory that you're most productive at the edge of chaos,

(continued on page 46)



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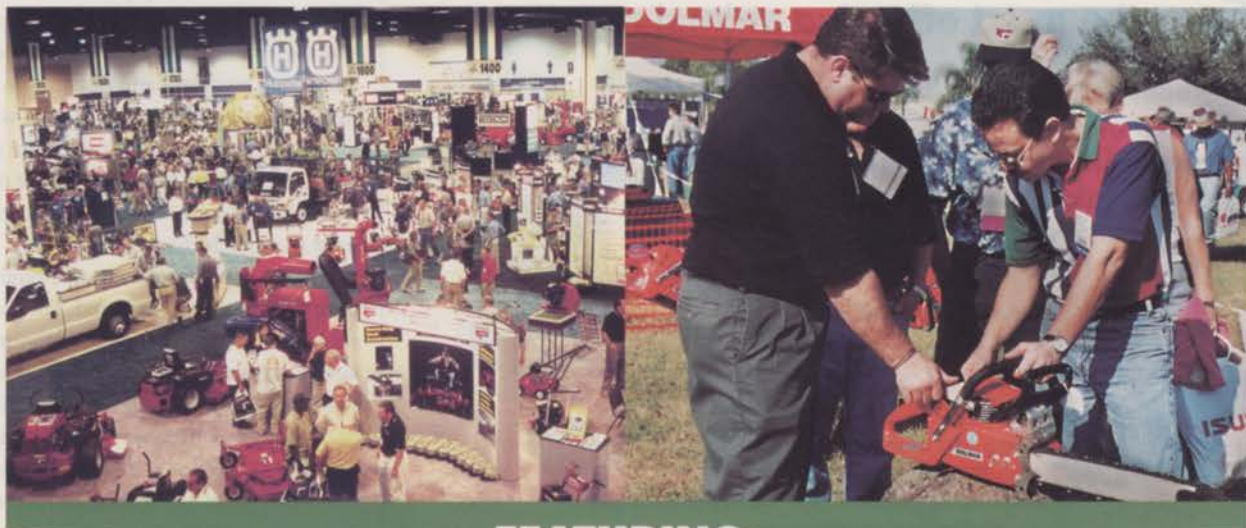


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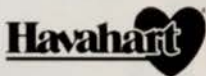


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## First Look

(continued from page 44)

but you can't go over the edge, and we were over the edge one season.

"That's not an uncommon story," she added, noting that the company plans to grow 10 percent this year, but it certainly won't repeat the mistake it made in 1998 when appealing contracts yielded business that Terra-Firma simply couldn't fit in the schedule. "We had a tremendous opportunity for work and we took it, so we hired more crew members and put a strain on our field leaders," Heather recalled. "It was way too much, too fast. We survived the season, but we were frazzled to the end. We decided that it is not worth the emotional turmoil to have that much chaos."

Solid, Terra-Firma was not, though it was covering quite a bit of ground. The company recovered by evaluating the optimum crew size, how many people each crew leader could reasonably manage, and how much work each crew was capable of producing each day. For Terra-Firma, this meant three-man crews that could handle \$300,000 in construction work and \$150,000 in maintenance work.

The next expansion steps Terra-Firma explored offered more rigid boundaries. Adding the Weed Man and Christmas Decor franchises provided the lawn care services clients sought and year-round work for employees while offering Heather a business formula and set of systems to operate the service. "Franchises are a quick way to learn a business and develop the systems," she said.

Currently, the two franchise businesses make up 30 percent of Terra-Firma's overall operation. But most of all, these stable profit centers round out the service mix. "It's very good as far as synergy," Heather noted – a testament to the equilibrium the company maintains in both theory and practice. "The three are much stronger together – the whole is stronger than the sum of its parts." **LL**

The author is Managing Editor – Special Projects for Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at [khamphshire@lawnandlandscape.com](mailto:khamphshire@lawnandlandscape.com).

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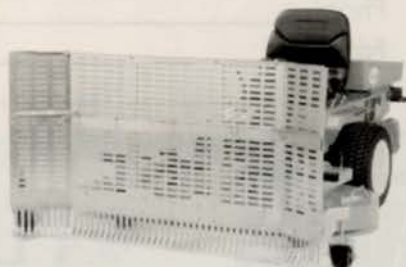
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## Financing the Winter

by Kristin Mohn

*Don't fall victim to the winter blues. Careful planning, sound financing and inventive service offerings help contractors survive winter's cold spells.*

When the weather outside is frightful, business inside may not be so delightful.

For many landscape contractors, the winter onset means not only cooler temperatures, but frigid sales figures and frozen cash flow. While many people happily gear up for the holidays and skiing vacations, contractors cringe – bracing themselves for the slower season.

However, the season's first frost doesn't necessarily mean impending doom. If business owners plan for the inevitable aspects of winter – fewer customers, decreased work and slower revenues – when the weather is warm, the colder months can be a time of preparation instead of panic. "We prepare annually for the winter because we understand it's going to be slow," remarked Jeff Aronson, president, As You Like It Landscaping, Potomac, Md. "We budget for that every year, and we know we have to do a certain amount of business to cover our expenses in the winter."

**LET IT SNOW.** In many parts of the country, winter is synonymous with snow and ice. Since no one appreciates slippery roadways and snow bank-blocked driveways, colder weather provides contractors with the opportunity to slide into snow and ice removal services. As an add-on to maintenance contracts, snow removal allows contractors to maintain year-long relationships with clients, noted Terry Hubbard, president, Fresh Cut Lawn & Landscape, Ida, Mich. "A lot of customers want a one-stop shop," he remarked. "It's a service that just goes along with the business."

In addition, offering snow services creates automatic jobs for employees who might otherwise be laid off in the winter, Aronson stated. "We do whatever we possibly can to get our guys out working in the winter," he said.

Hubbard markets snow and ice removal services to current customers only, to ensure that his company can handle the number of plowing requests they receive during a snowfall. "There's more plowing available than we want, and we have to base everything on what is available – how

*(continued on page 67)*

# Winning OVER WINTER





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USE READER SERVICE #155



## FOCUS ON:

# Trucks AND Trailers

by Kristen Hampshire

Follow a few basic road rules before parking a new vehicle in your company's garage.

Don't jump into just any bed.

Choosing a rig to transport crews from point A to point B shouldn't be a cruise-control decision or an impulsive, fast-lane purchase. Trucks communicate your company's business approach – neat and clean means professional and prompt, while rickety and rusty looks unreliable.

"I can't put enough of a superlative on it," emphasized Tom Sayward, president, Tuflex, Pompano Beach, Fla. "[A truck] is your main cost center – it can be your best friend or your worst enemy.

"If you show up in front of someone's home with a rattletrap, that doesn't exactly exude professionalism," he added. "When you pull up with an attractive rig it will make the customer feel confident in your company and it will be a direct reflection of your policies."

Furnishing your company with a truck fleet to meet your application needs starts with a self-assessment, includes some truck component background, and always involves feedback from employees. These signs can point contractors to the best vehicle options. "Know what you want your truck to do, and from there, the rest will fall into place," Sayward remarked.

**PROCEED WITH CAUTION.** Many landscape companies offer a menu of services – a four-course spread



Pickup or cab-over, accessorized or simple, trucks keep landscape contractors on the road to profit. Photo: Mitsubishi (above) GMC (supplement cover)

that includes installation, pruning, pesticide applications and maintenance. This diversity creates a more complex response to the simple question, "What do you want your truck to do?" Sayward agreed.

"It's almost a moral imperative today that you have multiple services," he recognized, adding that full-service companies need several types of trucks. "If a company provides not only lawn spraying but also lawn maintenance, they will have to have trucks that are set up for both."

Consequently, Bert Clattenburg's installation and maintenance divisions prioritize their vehicle specifications differently. From crew size to trailer load, the two segments find their unique needs necessitate distinct features to operate efficiently.

"Our landscape installation trucks are heavier-duty trucks with dump bodies on the back, whereas our maintenance trucks don't have to be as heavy but they might have to carry more personnel and a trailer with the mowers and two-cycle engines," explained the president of Rood Landscape Co., Jupiter, Fla.

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## FOCUS ON: Trucks AND Trailers

Rood's 70-truck fleet is predominantly one brand, which simplifies service. Since two in-house mechanics tend to maintenance, they easily can change out parts without worrying about special ordering for specific models. "It keeps inventory simple," Clattenburg noted.

And when it's time to park another vehicle in the garage, the mechanics simply consult a fleet management software program that details repairs made on each truck, mileage, maintenance checks and even when the trucks are fueled, since the software is tied into the company's gas pumps. Rood purchases about five trucks each year, but its spreadsheet log indicates whether trucks are "wearing out their welcome" and need to be replaced.

"We will do an analysis on an older vehicle before we do a repair on it to see how much we have invested into it already and if it is time to get a new vehicle," Clattenburg said.

Mike Binkley just purchased his third dump truck – the oldest rig in his 16-vehicle fleet dates back to 1994. His Collierville, Tenn.-based company, Rich-Way Landscape, houses four small pickup trucks for its landscape architects, three dump trucks for the installation crews and nine Class V trucks with towing packages to pull 16-foot open trailers.

The trucks are no frills – vinyl seats and uncarpeted floors so they can easily be cleaned out with a blower and a wet rag. But Binkley listens to his crew members when they voice preferences for creature comforts like air conditioning and radio. "Anything we can do to keep morale up is good," he commented.

He also considers their structural requests, which range from toolboxes to fold-down sides on dump trucks. "We bought a dump truck in 1997 and you had to lift the truck bed to fill it with gas," he noted. "One

of our employees asked for the design to be changed so he wouldn't have to deal with that, and he got that wish. They definitely put in their two cents worth."

But just as he weighs these preferences when purchasing trucks, he also times his vehicle acquisitions based on his projected company growth. He won't procure those new wheels unless sales steadily exceed past records – a two-month spurt doesn't count. "You can get overextended on purchasing trucks when you think you need them and you really don't," he identified.

**OVERSIZED LOAD.** When a company confirms a truck need, then it's time to find a fit. As Clattenburg and Binkley illustrated, mixing trucks to cater to service niches means exploring various specifications before the purchase.

But there are a few base characteristics all trucks should contain, pointed out Jack



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Warren, senior marketing manager for the Dodge division of Daimler Chrysler, Detroit, Mich. In a few words, reliability, durability and payload will ultimately determine whether your truck is on a smooth road to a long-lasting investment.

"This business is awfully seasonal, which means that when the weather is right, that's when you have to make money, and you want to avoid downtime," Warren stressed. "So, you are looking for reliability, first and foremost."

And in many cases, these workhorses need pulling power to tow heavy equipment and materials along with passengers. Trucks that can't carry their weight will end up costing contractors dollars from lost time, Warren added.

"You want to make sure the vehicle has the durability and will be a good, smart buy in the long run, and that it will have the payload and pulling power to do the job," he emphasized.

Most landscape contractors range between one-half to 1 ton, and those pulling flatbed trucks with materials like sod should edge toward the heavier end of this average.

Figure out if your truck's payload meets your towing and weight needs by first identifying the gross vehicle weight (GVW) rating of the truck. Say a truck's GVW is 8,500 pounds. Subtract the truck's weight of 4,000 pounds from this figure, and you can carry the remaining 4,500 pounds in cargo, Warren explained. Say your crew adds up to 800 pounds - this, too, must be counted as "payload" and has to be subtracted - leaving you only 3,700 pounds of cargo to carry in the bed.

"Weight capacities are often underestimated," Sayward noticed. "People will buy a truck and overload it."

Sayward suggested aiming high when choosing weight capacities - a little leeway to carry extra material never hurts,

and then heavy loads won't stress vehicles and cause eventual maintenance issues. "If a company has enough accounts to warrant a larger spray tank, they should generally go to the larger truck," he reasoned.

And more contractors are towing extra manpower, judging from the popularity surge in four-door, extended chassis cabs, Warren observed. Seventy-five percent of Dodge's heavy-duty trucks sold are extended or crew cabs. Many of the owners report the versatility of this design allows them to transport more people to the job site and drive around the family on off hours.

Meanwhile, Warren estimated that the pickup truck market sells more than 1 million units for commercial use, with landscape contractors one of the top occupational groups who account for 30,000 to 40,000 new pickups per year.

However, some contractors explore



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## FOCUS ON:

### Trucks AND Trailers

an alternate truck type, purchasing cab-over designs. A tight turning radius and appealing look turn on many landscape companies to this style, Sayward noted. "The turning radius is improved by about 25 percent - it turns in a much tighter space than a chassis cab of the same wheelbase," he indicated.

Contractors find they can haul as much material and equipment, if not more, in cab-over trucks, and the curb appeal wins praise from customers who appreciate having their company logos painted on the vehicles like billboards. "The bodies can be shorter and carry the same amount of product, and they look good," Sayward said simply. "They do present an attractive package."

These reasons and the sheer design flexibility influenced Rood Landscape Co. to begin adding enclosed, cab-over trucks to its fleet, Clattenburg said. "They are really geared for the landscape industry," he said, adding that the first cab-over the company bought last year was a cost-effective investment and offered versatility with a dual bed and dumping capabilities. He plans to add more of this type to the mix.

A testament to personal preference, Binkley countered that the enclosed bodies on cab-over models hinder productivity for his crews, who regularly load debris from pruning into their truck beds. "They don't have the room on those trucks for the debris we cut, so we end up carrying a trailer anyway, which is awkward with an enclosed truck," he explained.

"It still comes down to what you want the truck to look like," Sayward interjected, reiterating a hand-me-down phrase. "Research is the key word. Know what you want the truck to do." ■

*The author is Managing Editor—Special Projects for Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at khampshire@lawnandlandscape.com.*



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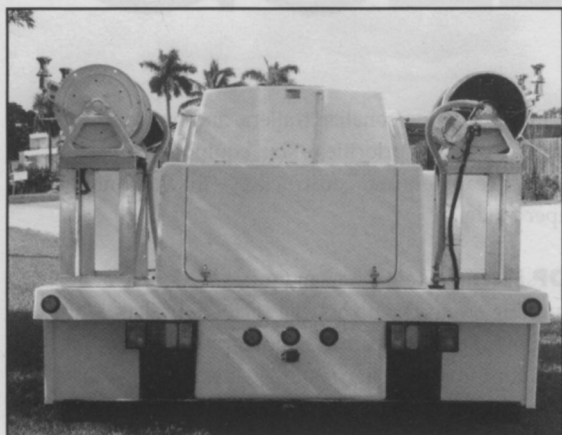
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## FOCUS ON:

# Trucks AND Trailers

by Kristen Hampshire

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How would you build a bionic trailer?

Start with a strong skeleton, custom build a body and add accessories to hold tools for every occasion. Open or closed, designed with a dump, decked out with organizers and decorated with company logos – pick your mix. Cloning isn't just for scientists and stem cell researchers – contractors can cull these qualities into a tailored style to fit their application needs.

"Trailers are vanilla for the most part – you can get one that just has a bottom and wheels and that can do what you need," remarked Mark Buron, controller, Leuders Companies, Medfield, Mass. "The more add-ons you get, the more you can do with them, whether it be the gates on the side or the enclosed models. You can get different specifications for what you need."

Preferences personalize trailers, and once contractors map out their priorities – size, equipment capacity, weather readiness and construction – they can mold a super model.

**TOP IT OFF.** Kent Petersen figures he does a lot less "running around" with his five enclosed trailers. Since his company, Stoney Creek Landscaping in Minocqua, Wis., is primarily design/build, he's not moving from job to job, and he knows that he'll need more than hand-held equipment to complete his projects. "Some of our job sites might be 30 miles from the nearest hardware store, so we keep our trailers stocked with parts and pieces," he related. "[The trailers] are pretty self-sufficient once they get on the job site."

At the end of the day, his crews simply store equipment inside, return tools to their shelves, toolboxes or carriers, and lock the back double doors. The 7-by-16-foot enclosed trailers are secure and keep essentials out of the northern Wisconsin weather. "We have inclement weather, so you see more enclosed trailers in our area," Petersen noticed.

Security and weather protection are two reasons many contractors choose wall-to-wall trailers that are topped off – in other words, enclosed. "Inherent advantages of enclosed models are the fact that you can leave your equipment in the trailer and lock it up vs. using an open trailer and storing the equipment in a



Open trailers can be accessed from both sides and allow contractors to easily reach equipment or load debris from the job.



building," noted Larry Huemmer, division sales manager, Wells Cargo, Elkhart, Ind. Lock-and-key convenience offers peace of mind. "If you stop to have lunch, you don't have to worry about someone stealing your string trimmer or lifting your mower and running off with it."

This might be one of the reasons why the enclosed style has grown in popularity, turning a "growing trend" into a common choice for contractors, Huemmer pointed out, noting that after 22 years in business, he remembers when these models were rare. Now, many view enclosed units as the Cadillac of trailers. "It is a status symbol," he recognized.

Petersen added this style tends to be more expensive than open trailers, but he's willing to invest \$7,000 per unit, noting that with several quality grades available, contractors can spend much more, or as little as \$3,000 on an enclosed trailer his size. For him, longevity justifies the capital expenditure. "I wanted to buy them once - these will last us our lifetime," he figured. "I was willing to spend up front to get a good quality."

Construction was key for Petersen's perfect trailer, and this consideration along with other structural factors will ensure his investment endures its life expectancy - in his case, a "lifetime."

Huemmer suggested once contractors choose the size by estimating the floor space their equipment will consume, they take a look at the undercarriage to make sure the "nuts and bolts" form a rugged body. "Get under that trailer and look at the chassis construction and make sure it is a durably built, tubular frame construction with crossmembers on 16-inch centers, and that the wiring is routed through the frame instead of exposed underneath the trailers," he advised, adding that trailer wiring is vulnerable and operators can lose their lights and brakes if it is damaged.

In addition, insist on sturdy corner posts on the body and check the stability of hardware like door hinges, cam lock and flush lock mechanisms, and electric lights. Sidewall liners should be composed of heavy plywood to withstand wear and tear, Huemmer advised.

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## FOCUS ON: Trucks AND Trailers

Accessibility is also a defining characteristic, and Petersen said most trailers offer three entrance options: two swinging back doors hinged on either side; one wide back door hinged on one side; a side entry; and optional drop-down ramps.

Then, there are accessories. Petersen's foremen design their own shelving, based

on how each prefers to organize a trailer. Some stack warehouse shelving inside the trailers to create space for smaller tools, while others recycle PVC pipe or garbage cans into equipment holders.

All these details create a virtual tool shed on wheels for contractors — a trait quite appealing to the efficiency-con-

scious. "We couldn't landscape without them," Petersen said simply.

**OPEN OPPORTUNITIES.** Buron aims to stash quite a bit of equipment on each of his nine open trailers. Admittedly, accessory racks are convenient for him — anything that allows him to hold more. "We have accessories to put our shovels, rakes and bags of seed," he listed. "We look for trailers that are capable of more than one function. Versatility is key."

Besides maximizing space, Buron praises open trailers' accessibility. He can reach over the side, grab a piece of equipment and return to the job without rummaging around inside. This easy-to-reach advantage beats simply carrying equipment in a pick-up truck, he added.

For Buron, bigger is better. That's what his crews request. "They want it as big as they can get," he remarked.

But Vernon Wood suggests that efficiency, not size, determines a trailer's value. "More effective is better," countered Wood, research and development, I/C Greenline, Springville, Ala. Consider a contractor who upgrades his 36-inch mower to a 72-inch model, he compared. A larger size doesn't mean the mower will complete the job more effectively if it is too wide for the property and ends up tripping on turns and scalping inclines.

Bigger isn't always better. But more well-organized is almost always preferable.

"If you can get that loose equipment off of the floor, you are freeing up space on your trailer so you have room for the mower or other wheeled equipment," Wood explained. "Equipment holders have become far more important in the last few years because they allow more flexible use of the trailer."

Back to accessibility, which unlike size, can truly enhance a crew's productivity in the field, Wood pointed out. "You want to get equipment on and off a trailer as fast as

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## FIVE WAYS TO TOW A PROFIT

1. Secure tools with accessory racks or keep them locked in an enclosed trailer.
2. Consider splitting equipment and crews onto two smaller trailers to hit more properties.
3. Organize loose tools for fast finding on the job.
4. Look into side access doors for curbside loading.
5. Determine your use for the trailer so you don't purchase unnecessary features.

you can because time is money – that's where accessibility comes in," he stressed. "You can walk around the perimeter of an open trailer and reach what you need and there aren't overhead restrictions."

While open trailers aren't secure from wandering eyes, certain accessories provide locks to prevent theft and confine equipment from breaking en route.

Some companies use both open and closed bodies, and Wood commented that "most guys will run around with one or two trailers their entire careers, and they are usually open."

**DUMP OUT DULL.** Contractors aren't restricted to just two trailers types – open or closed. While some figure in modifications like square feet, floor construction and handy tool racks, others might wonder, why not add the capability to dump out the trailer's contents?

Dump trailers appeal contractors who haul material, pointed out J.J. Wilkins, sales and office manager, U-Dump Trailers, Ocala, Fla. While dump trailers don't offer designated areas to haul small tools, contractors can pile in a couple mowers and also take care of mulch and dirt loads.

Like any tailor-made trailer, Wilkins asks customers about their habits before recommending options like weight ranges, side heights and tailgate types. Generally, 7,000-pound dump trailers fit the bill, allowing operators to haul mowers, a small tractor or skid steer, and of course, whatever load they might carry on the platform. Wilkins also checks to

see if her customers plan to pile in materials and equipment with a forklift, in which case she suggests fold-down sides for loading ease. Manual tarp rollers are also an option to keep debris from flying out of the vehicle. With a remote control on a cord, operators can even stand outside the vehicle and still unload the unit.

Each feature creates a personalized product, each detail creates a trailer characterized for a contractor's specific use. "A trailer is a custom thing," Wood remarked. **U**

*The author is Managing Editor—Special Projects for Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at khamphshire@lawnandlandscape.com.*

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USE READER SERVICE #165



by Mandy Jenkins

# GET a Clue

Clear decisions  
and thorough  
research take  
the mystery out  
of truck  
purchasing.

When buying a new vehicle, the easiest choices are usually the most fun to decide: Model, body style, engine options, color. The difficult, and arguably the least enjoyable part of buying a new vehicle, is when the first payment arrives.

Contractors can take "the hard part" out of buying by simply making sound financial decisions before acquiring a new or used vehicle.

**THE GREAT DEBATE.** The choice between purchasing and leasing a new vehicle for your business can be difficult, but Neal Roller, financing representative, TransAmerica Distribution Finance Corp., Hoffman Estates, Ill., said the decision lies in the customer's plan and expectations for that vehicle.

"You have to ask yourself, 'What is the useful life expectancy of the product I am going to purchase?' and, 'What will I be using the product for or to do? How much wear and tear will occur?'" Roller stated.

Bill Cox, owner, Lawn Management Co., Houston, Texas, agreed that potential buyers should decide to purchase or lease a truck for their businesses based on future plans. "It is better to buy a vehicle if you plan to keep it over a long period of time (more than five years) and keep up with the maintenance," Cox advised. "In a lease, you can rely on someone else to take care of it and the truck will be turned in a few years later. If you don't want to worry about maintaining vehicles and you don't want to keep them more than a few years, leasing is your best option."

Although he prefers to purchase his trucks, Joe Goetz, owner, Goetz Landscape & Irrigation, Centerville, Minn., said there are benefits to both pur-

chasing and leasing. "There are more short-term benefits to leasing and long-term to purchasing," Goetz stated. "In leasing, you may save a little cash flow because the payments are lower. Plus, you always have new vehicles. We want our vehicles longer and we like having them paid off where the only expense is general maintenance, so we buy."

Brian Akehurst, vice president, Akehurst Landscape Service, Joppa, Md., has purchased and leased vehicles in his fleet. In comparison shopping for financing rates, Akehurst decided to buy his latest vehicles based on last summer's favorable interest rates. "We shop around for the best rates and the best payment plans," Akehurst remarked. "In leasing, we have to be able to find a buyout plan we can live with if need be."

Another factor of the buy vs. lease decision could exist in tax advantages, Roller added. He suggested exploring possible tax breaks with an accountant, the IRS or a financial advisor before making a purchase.

**HOMEWORK TIME.** The decision to buy a new vehicle can be daunting to a small business not looking for a large investment right away. Used vehicles are an option for those who want that new-truck feel with a smaller price tag, but when considering a used truck, buyers should always be informed and consider the vehicle's previous use.

"We'll look at used trucks if they fit what we need," Goetz remarked. "But it is really difficult to find trucks like ours in good shape that are used. Heavy trucks just go through more and we're sure to look seriously at how hard it has been worked before we buy it."

Goetz said he usually has a local garage inspect a used



vehicle before making a purchasing decision, especially when buying from a private seller.

Cox admitted that after negative experience when buying a used vehicle he won't go into a deal blindfolded. "One time, the economy was bad and I had to buy a used truck," Cox explained. "The truck looked good on the lot, but after we had it, we found out there was water in the transmission and it had a few other problems. It was a complete disaster."

Akehurst, who seeks out used vehicles for expansion crews, insists on pre-purchase inspections and successfully finds suitable used trucks.

"The only way I'm going to buy used is if it has low mileage and if my mechanic has gone over it," he insisted. "I won't spend money without researching it first."

Akehurst's company goes through a lengthy research process before buying vehicles because its trucks are usually customized. He finds out what each truck will be carrying, what sort of jobs it will perform and how much traveling it will do before deciding on options.

"We spend a lot of time in the decision-making process," Akehurst admitted. "But, when you're buying a truck, you have to design it to work for you. You have to establish what are the most efficient set-up, body style and options that will work for whatever situation you're going to put that vehicle in."

Akehurst suggested that those looking for buying inspiration look no further than the competition.

"We're always looking for something new, so we look to see what other companies are doing," Akehurst said. "We take advice from our field workers and we tend to learn from others' mistakes."

**PLAN TO SPEND.** Finding out when it's time to add to a fleet or replace an old workhorse is easier if there is a plan in place for such an occasion. Goetz buys vehicles in 10-year cycles, supplemented by ongoing preventive maintenance and sound budgeting.

"We want each truck to last 10 years, but we know one is at the end of its cycle when it costs more to maintain than to

purchase new," Goetz explained. "We sell the old one and replace it with either a new or used vehicle. We work closely with one dealer who usually has a replacement all ready for us to get into."

Akehurst has a similar plan for replacements that ties into fleet growth. "We have a plan to change out our trucks

every 10 years or so," Akehurst stated. "We plan to get new vehicles when doing replacements and used vehicles when we want to add to the fleet."

If they're well cared for, those older vehicles don't have to go – they can easily be sold or kept around as backups. Akehurst added that the company's mechanics keep

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## FOCUS ON: Trucks AND Trailers

such detailed care of their trucks, they have no trouble selling them outright when they are replaced. "If we have an older truck that is still reliable, we keep it around the shop as a backup," Akehurst remarked. "This way if we have a truck in for repairs, we don't have to worry about renting or canceling appointments."

Goetz said he budgets for fleet growth when profit from the previous year allows for it. "Everything we buy is based on demand and every purchase has to end up paying for itself," he pointed out. "If we are going to get a predicted return on starting a new crew, we'll get a vehicle for it. If I need another plow truck for the

winter and it is going to supply another amount of income, I'm going to buy it."

Sometimes, wrestling with the dilemma of when to add a new truck may be difficult, but the decision should be based on what the company can afford.

"It's hard to plan for a new purchase, but you have to ask yourself if you have the work to support a new crew," Akehurst explained. "We also try to take a look at how many trucks we're currently paying for and try to see if we can fit that new purchase into the cycle."

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
**LET'S MAKE A DEAL.** Cox recommended that before making any buying decision, contractors shop around with familiar dealers to see what options exist.

Shopping around for rates, loans and financing options is the wisest choice in purchasing or leasing a new vehicle, Roller stated. "Many times the dealership will have a couple of options for the customer that may mean weighing different loan terms at different rates," he said. "Also, look for early payment penalties and any hidden fees associated with a loan. Make sure that everything is spelled out in writing for you."

Unless you part with a wad of cash up front, the usual options for "that hard part" — the payment — are to finance through the dealership or obtain a loan from a bank or financing company.

Roller advised that when picking a financial institution, name recognition does matter. He associates well-known banks with solid reputations. "If you seek out your own financing, go with a known company that has built a good reputation in the business," he warned.

Finally, build a solid relationship with your bank and dealer. A positive partnership can save time during the buying process and smooth out any service needs that crop up later.

"We have found a truck we like and a dealership who will stand behind that truck," Goetz stated. "It took us 10 years to boil it down, but they stand behind the deals they make. If you're loyal to them, they'll stay loyal to you." 

*The author is Contributing Editor for Lawn & Landscape magazine.*

USE READER SERVICE #167



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# TRUCK AND TRAILER

# Guide



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# Trucks AND Trailers

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(continued from page 46)

many trucks do we have, how many people do we have, etc."

As the saying goes, contractors should not put all their eggs in one basket when it comes to snow services – in other words, they can't place all their revenue expectations in one winter, Hubbard maintained. "One of the reasons we don't like snow plowing is that it's unpredictable," he said. "When we do it we make a lot of money on it, but the unpredictability is a real killer."

And, keeping employees on staff just in case snowstorms hit is not a profitable way to plan for the year, Hubbard continued. "We can't afford to keep someone on full-time if they're not going to be productive," he said. "So we budget very little on snow plowing and count on spring, summer and fall to get us through the year."

Therefore, the key to profitable snow and ice removal is to count on these offerings as extra revenue and not the bread and butter of a company's success, pointed out John

Zemkoski, president, Custom Landscape Systems, Edison, N.J. Although his company hasn't provided snow removal services since 1984, Zemkoski remembered expecting for snow-free winters and then reaping the benefits when snow actually did appear. "If you make money when you're supposed to, you don't have to rely on anything, and for us it wasn't worth making a few thousand dollars here and there," he said. "If you have to rely on snow you're going to starve."

**CREATIVE OFFERINGS.** Since weather can be fickle, which means snow one day, clear skies and roads the next, landscape contractors can benefit from offering additional off-season services to help generate revenue in the winter. For example, As You Like It Landscaping has turned to outdoor construction to expand its offerings and keep employees busy when the landscape season fades. As November approaches, employees look at their workload and talk to clients about any

construction they may be considering, Aronson explained.

When clients waver between planning deck or walkway construction in the winter, Aronson offers discounts to further drive winter business. "If we think we can push someone who might be talking about spring construction instead of winter, an extra \$1,000 off might convince them to do it in the winter," he remarked.

Therefore, with the discounted labor rate for wintertime services, employees stay active, resulting in reduced turnover when the spring rolls around again, Aronson continued. "If we put all our workers on unemployment, they find jobs elsewhere," he said. "We give the deep discount with the idea that we're keeping these guys working and covering the costs of people that otherwise we'd be laying off."

Zemkoski drives winter business by installing synthetic putting greens. By capitaliz-

(continued on page 70)

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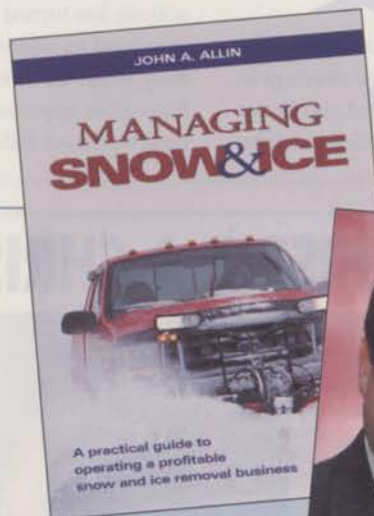
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## Financing the Winter

(continued from page 67)

ing on homeowners' love of the game and desire to practice when the courses close for the season, Zemkoski attracts additional clients and lucrative services to balance the reduced winter work. "We do the prep work, then finish it up before we get tied up with landscaping in the spring," he noted.

Inserts in customers' landscape invoices let them know about the putting greens, and referrals even spur new landscaping clients for the following season, Zemkoski added.

Finally, some services, such as leaf removal and fall clean-up, keep contractors busy well into December, Aronson pointed out. "Then, we do whatever we can from Jan. 1 through March," he said.

**LATE-SEASON PLANNING.** Even when services slow and extra offerings ebb, as they are bound to in the off-season, winter provides a good excuse to sit in front of the fire, crunch numbers and schedule for the season to come. Hubbard uses the winter to

reevaluate his customer line-up and decide which current clients fit well with the company year-round. "The No. 1 thing we look at is profitability, and we need to know that we're meeting our numbers," he stressed.

"We ask, 'Is that customer really within a comfortable radius of our shop?' We also look at the customers themselves. Our customers have certain expectations, and we need to see if those expectations meet with our reality."

Additionally, Hubbard considers year-round expansion during the winter, when he can sit back and analyze the company's financial situation, equipment arsenal and staff structure objectively. "Everything we use in the winter, we also use in the summer, except for the plows and snowblowers," he pointed out. "Our real money center is in the spring and the summer seasons, and based on the additional equipment we have added for that, we decide whether or not we want to expand plowing."

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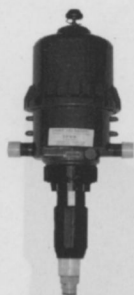


Check out this article online for additional ways to boost winter profit.

Contractors who sit down to discuss company needs, equipment decisions and budget revisions can prepare a realistic budget by the time the season starts, even though it will be tweaked throughout the year, Hubbard reminded. "We call the budget a 'living entity,'" he said. "It changes from day to day and from week to week."

Some winter activities may not drive off-season revenue but can maintain customer relationships for profitable seasons next year. For example, Aronson sends holiday cards and year-end thank you letters to summarize the year and let customers know what is coming up. And, he includes coupons to

(continued on page 109)



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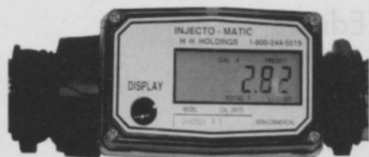
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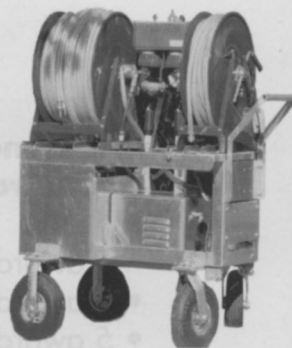
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by Lane Tredway

The powdery mildew on this Kentucky bluegrass is one of many turf disease conditions LCOs have to combat.  
Photo: Syngenta

# Disease DIAGNOSIS

*LCOs must tend to turfgrass diseases as they do human illnesses — with tender, loving care.*

Everyday, people come in contact with a variety of microorganisms (viruses, bacteria, fungi) that can make them sick. Thanks to our immune systems, we resist most of these pathogens. But when we are tired, stressed or not eating properly, our immune systems become weak and we get sick.

Turfgrasses are similar. A lawn is a diverse ecosystem, containing not only turf and beneficial microorganisms, but also a number of microbes that have the ability to harm grass. Grasses have defense mechanisms, similar to an immune system, that normally resist disease. However, when turf is stressed, defense systems break down and disease develops.

The majority of turfgrass diseases are caused by fungi, which require moisture to grow, but most turf diseases are enhanced by poor soil drainage, excessive thatch, poor air movement or extended periods of leaf wetness. Correcting these problems reduces disease development and improves overall turf quality. For example, irrigating before sunrise is best to remove large dew droplets and guttation water from the leaves and speed turf drying once the sun rises.

Cool-season grasses grow best in the spring and fall and are generally most susceptible to disease in the summer. Warm-season grasses grow most vigorously in the summer heat and are most susceptible to disease in the spring and fall. Here is a summary of important warm- and cool-season turfgrass diseases and how to manage them using a combination of cultural practices and fungicide applications.

**FOLIAR DISEASES.** Foliar diseases affect turfgrass leaves and are relatively easy to detect, diagnose and manage. They are

evident in their early stages, can be stopped with fungicides, and the turf recovers rapidly by re-growth from the crown.

**Red Thread.** Red thread, the most common cool-season turfgrass disease, develops when temperatures are between 40F and 75F, especially during extended periods of damp, overcast weather. This wide temperature range allows red thread to develop year-round in many locations. This disease affects ryegrasses, fescues and bluegrasses, but perennial ryegrass is particularly susceptible.

Red thread appears in patches ranging from 6 inches to several feet in diameter. The leaves turn straw brown in color and have bright red strands of fungal growth protruding from the leaf tips (Figure 1, page 78). These "red threads" are the means by which the fungus spreads from leaf to leaf.

Red thread is most severe in turfgrasses growing slowly due to nutrient deficiency, drought, low temperatures or lack of sunlight. Apply the majority of nitrogen (N) to cool-season turf in the fall and early spring to maintain strong vegetative growth when red thread is most active. Maintain phosphorous and potassium at adequate levels based on regular soil testing. Irrigate as needed to prevent drought stress.

Dull mower blades can increase red thread development by shredding leaf tips, leaving open wounds for the pathogen to infect. Frequently sharpen mower blades to maintain a clean cut and reduce the spread of red thread. Collecting grass clippings also can minimize the spread of this disease by removing the "red threads" from the site.

Certain fungicides provide effective control of red thread, but are usually not required except during extended periods of cool, damp, overcast weather.

*(continued on page 74)*



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## Turf Diseases

(continued from page 72)

**Brown Patch.** This disease of cool-season grasses develops during warm, humid weather and is a chronic problem in the South, where these conditions persist for several consecutive months. Brown patch develops when night temperatures exceed 65F, and the leaves are continuously wet for 10 hours for several consecutive days. Brown patch commonly flares up the morning after an evening thunderstorm or a heavy dew fall. Irrigation in the evening or late morning also encourages brown patch by extending the period of leaf wetness.

Brown patch appears as light brown or tan circular areas, ranging from 6 inches to several yards in diameter (see Figure 2, page 78). The key diagnostic feature of brown patch is the lesions on the turf leaves, which are irregular in shape, tan or gray in color, and surrounded by a thin, dark brown border (see Figure 3, page 78).

Excessive levels of N fertilizer favor brown patch development. High N levels

produce soft, lush leaf tissue that brown patch easily invades, so apply N fertilizer in small quantities during summer months.

When conditions are favorable for brown patch, fungicide applications may be necessary to prevent unacceptable damage. Many contact fungicides are inexpensive and provide control of brown patch, but they must be re-applied on seven- to 14-day intervals. Systemic products, while more expensive, provide 28 or more days of control.

**Large Patch.** This disease occurs during the fall and spring, when warm-season grasses are growing slowly as they enter or come out of dormancy. All of the major warm-season grasses (bermudagrass, St. Augustinegrass, zoysiagrass, centipedegrass) are susceptible to large patch, which appears in circular yellow or straw brown patches ranging from 3 feet to several yards in diameter (see Figure 4, page 78). Leaves of recently infected turf on patch edges are often orange, while reddish-brown or black lesions are evident on

leaf sheaths or stems of affected plants.

Excessive N applications in the fall and spring increase large patch severity. Warm-season grasses grow slowly in the fall and spring, so they require little nutrition then. Apply the majority of N fertilizer to warm-season grasses from May to August.

Large patch is most severe in sites with poor soil drainage, excessive thatch, poor air movement or excessive shade. Correct these conditions by installing drainage tile, aerifying and vertical mowing regularly in the summer, or by pruning and removing surrounding trees. Low mowing heights also encourage large patch. On zoysiagrass, large patch severity increases as mowing height decreases from 1½ inches to 0.5 inches.

Several fungicides control large patch. Preventive applications are most effective and provide complete control when timed properly. Apply the first application in the fall when thatch temperature drops below 70F for several consecutive days. Make sub-

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sequent applications according to the fungicide label. Fall applications are most important, but when disease pressure is severe, spring applications also may be required.

**Dollar Spot.** This disease affects most warm- and cool-season turf. Dollar spot develops when night temperatures exceed 50F for several consecutive days. Like brown patch, dollar spot also requires at least 10 hours of continuous leaf wetness.

Dollar spot appears as small spots, ranging from 1 to 6 inches in diameter, that are bleached white in color and sometimes have light brown margins (see Figures 5 & 6, page 78). The center of the lesion is often slightly narrower, resulting in a characteristic hour-glass shape. In the morning, when the turf is wet, a cottony white fungal growth (called mycelium) may be present.

Dollar spot is most severe in N-deficient turf. Regular N applications will maintain turf growth and dramatically reduce, or possibly eliminate, dollar spot development.

Drought stress and excessive thatch buildup also contribute to dollar spot development. To prevent drought stress, irrigate to wet the entire root zone, then irrigate again at the first sign of wilt. Regular dethatching and aeration will help reduce dollar spot development, especially for rapid thatch accumulators, such as Kentucky bluegrass, bermudagrass and zoysiagrass.

Most fungicides provide excellent dollar spot control. However, azoxystrobin and flutolanil do not control dollar spot and should not be applied when this disease is actively developing.

**ROOT DISEASES.** Turfgrass root diseases are difficult to detect, diagnose and manage. Root disease symptoms do not appear until the root system is significantly damaged and, once detected, root diseases are difficult to control because fungicides are not easily applied to the root zone. To make matters worse, turf damaged by a root dis-

ease recovers slowly because the crown of the plant is often killed. Here are some troublesome turfgrass root diseases.

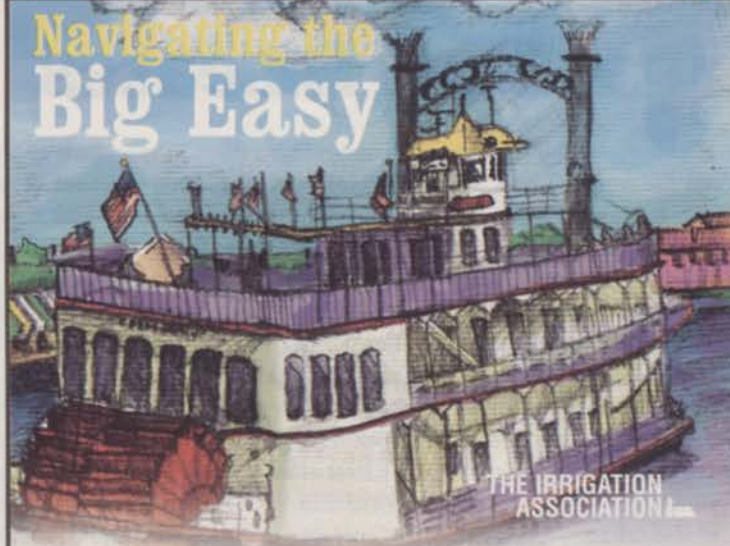
**Summer Patch and Necrotic Ring Spot.** These are root diseases of Kentucky bluegrass and the fine fescues. The initial symptoms of summer patch and necrotic ring spot are sunken and yellow turf areas. The turf in these areas declines rapidly, turning yellow and then straw brown in patches from 6 inches to 3-feet wide (see Figure 7, page 78). The recently infected plants on the outer edge of the patch are often a distinct orange or bronze color. The patches tend to recur in the same spot year after year, expanding a few inches per year, and, as the patches expand, turf or other weeds grow in the center.

Necrotic ring spot is a cool-weather root disease, and summer patch is a warm-weather root disease. Necrotic ring spot kills roots in the fall and spring, when soil temperatures are between 50F and 70F. Symptoms usually ap-

*(continued on page 76)*

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## Turf Diseases

(continued from page 75)

pear in late spring or early summer but may also appear in the fall. In contrast, summer patch begins to kill roots in the late spring, when soil temperatures reach 65F, and continues throughout the summer, with symptoms typically appearing in late June or early July.

Any factor that inhibits root growth will also increase problems with summer patch and necrotic ring spot. To promote strong root growth, Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescue should be mowed at 2 to 2½ inches, irrigated deep and infrequently, and fertilized with a 1-to-1 ratio of quick-release and slow-release N in the fall and spring. Regular aeration reduces compaction and can dramatically reduce damage from summer patch and necrotic ring spot. In addition, improve drainage by regrading the site or installing drainage tile.

Soil pH does not influence necrotic ring spot, while summer patch is most severe in soils with a pH above 6.5. Apply ammonium forms of N, such as ammonium sulfate, to reduce soil pH. When using lime to increase soil pH, avoid finely ground liming materials, which increase pH too rapidly.

Once you spot summer patch or necrotic ring spot symptoms, little can be done to control the disease. Fungicide applications may protect healthy plants, but plants showing symptoms will not likely recover. For best results, apply fungicides preventively.

For necrotic ring spot, apply fungicides in the fall and spring when soil temperatures are between 50F and 70F. Typically, two applications in the fall (October and November) and one or two in the spring (April and May) provide adequate control. For summer patch, apply fungicides in 28-day intervals in the spring and summer when soil temperatures are above 65F.

Foliar applications of fungicides do not adequately control root diseases. Apply fungicide to the soil to protect roots from infection. For best results, apply fungicides in a large volume of water (5 gallons per 1,000 square feet) or water in with 0.25 inches of irrigation immediately after application.

**Spring Dead Spot.** The spring dead spot pathogen infects and kills bermudagrass roots in the fall and spring, but symptoms don't appear until bermudagrass comes out of dormancy. As grass greens-up, patches of bermudagrass from 6 inches to several feet in diameter remain dormant and eventually



Figure 1.  
Red thread  
on perennial  
ryegrass.  
Photo: R.J.  
Buckley



Figure 2.  
Brown  
patch on  
tall fescue.  
Photo: Lane  
Tredway



Figure 3.  
Foliar  
lesions  
induced by  
brown patch  
on tall  
fescue.  
Photo: Lane  
Tredway



Figure 4.  
Large patch  
on  
zoysiagrass.  
Photo: L.L.  
Burpee



Figure 5.  
Dollar spot  
on Kentucky  
bluegrass.  
Photo: Lane  
Tredway



Figure 6.  
Foliar  
lesions  
induced by  
dollar spot  
on Kentucky  
bluegrass.  
Photo: Lane  
Tredway



Figure 7.  
Summer  
patch and  
necrotic ring  
spot. Photo:  
Lane Tredway



Figure 8.  
Spring dead  
spot in  
bermudagrass.  
Photo: Lane  
Tredway

## Common Turf Diseases

die (see Figure 8, above). Bermudagrass spreads slowly into the damaged area, so fertilize and cultivate it aggressively in the summer to speed recovery.

Soil compaction enhances spring dead spot development, so regular summer aeration of bermudagrass will reduce injury the following year while also encouraging damage recovery. Thatch accumulations more than ½-inch increase susceptibility to spring dead spot, so regular dethatching of Bermudagrass is important. Excessive N fertilizer in the fall also favors spring dead spot - apply the majority of N to bermudagrass in the summer when it is actively growing.

As with summer patch, spring dead spot is most severe in soils with a pH over 6.5. Reduce soil pH to between 5.5 and 6.0 by applying ammonium forms of nitrogen, such

as ammonium sulfate. Applications of potassium at a rate of 1 pound of potassium per 1,000 square feet per month during the growing season have been shown to reduce spring dead spot injury.

Attempts to control spring dead spot with fungicides have been marginally successful. Fungicides may not reduce the amount of disease that appears in the spring, but they speed damage recovery. Fall applications are most effective. Apply fungicides to the root zone for spring dead spot control, either by applying in 5 gallons water per 1,000 square feet or watering in with 0.25 inch immediately after application. **LL**

The author is assistant professor and turf disease extension specialist, department of plant pathology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, and can be reached at lane\_tredway@ncsu.edu.





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by Kristen Hampshire

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*Simple or state-of-the-art, controllers help irrigation systems efficiently water properties.*

*Photo: Buckner Autoscape*

Irrigation controllers today aren't quite as cumbersome as their antiquated predecessors, which kept time with grinding gears and rotors – a clumsy, mechanical mess that internally resembled a chain reaction of levers, pulleys and chutes.

Rather than a clutter of clockwork, controllers now are more computerized, with digital readouts, convenient memory features and adjustable functions to fit the needs of a site the size of a postage stamp or an expansive corporate park. But most of all, these mechanisms make efficient watering possible, pointed out Susan Basch, product manager, Rain Bird, Azusa, Calif.

"Controllers are an integral part of an efficient irrigation system," she noted. "They allow you to take the best advantage of the benefits that you get from other features of the irrigation system."

Of course, not all models are fit for a science fair, so contractors can achieve this efficiency with either more basic timing solutions or models loaded with the latest technological tinker toys. They just have to custom fit the controller to the property and plug in the numbers to keep irrigation systems running efficiently.

Basch summed up controller selection in a three-step process. "You need knowledge of the site, appropriate design and selection of your other components and, then, choose a controller that allows you to meet those needs," she said.

**THE MULTI CHOICE.** Controllers have come a long way, but Don Blackwell admits that contractors probably don't take advantage of all the "bells and whistles." "I would say as a general rule that these clocks have more features than the average site manager uses," said the president of Advanced Irrigation, Seattle, Wash.

Ed Mathieu tends to agree, noting that contractors can choose a dozen different controllers and push prices up to hundreds of dollars for the latest-and-greatest models, but that doesn't mean they utilize the extras. "The biggest mistake with controllers is that people don't use the technology enough," he said flatly, adding that there aren't telltale signs that a contractor isn't using a controller properly. Usually, brown lawns and water

*(continued on page 80)*



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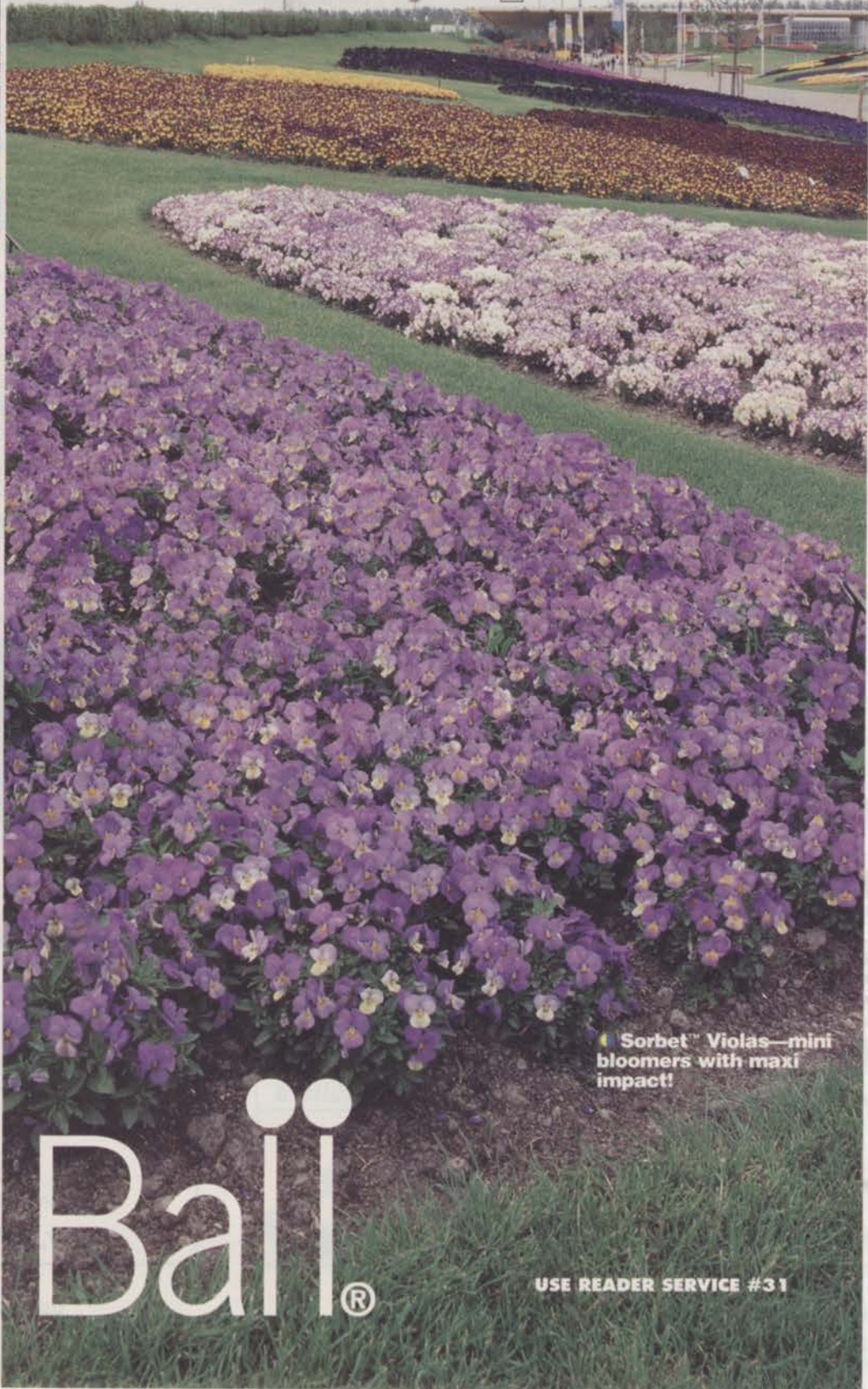
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## Controller Basics

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runoff indicate poor watering schedules – a bi-product of controller misuse.

In most cases, the output is only as accurate as the input, pointed out Mathieu, national sales manager, Baseline Systems, Salt Lake City, Utah. In other words, contractors must set clocks properly before their irrigation systems will spew results that please clients. "Contractors need to understand water and soil and plant relationships, and they have to understand irrigation, precipitation rates and scheduling," he explained. "You need to know how to do all of that just to set the controller to function properly."

Assuming technicians have done their homework and carefully surveyed the property – noting its sunny and shady spots, slopes and ruts, turf areas and plant beds – then they can flex the capabilities of these controller components.

"An irrigation system is efficient if it is programmed to water efficiently, which means the controller and watering times are

**D**o your controllers contain these convenience features?

- Multi-programming
- Multi-starting
- Water budgeting
- Ports and outputs
- Modularity
- Nonvolatile memory
- Self-diagnostics
- Rain delay feature

## Control Panel

set up to match the type of plant material that is being watered and the weather and climactic conditions that are going on at that point in time," said Jeff Carowitz, vice president, marketing, Hunter, San Marcos, Calif.

For properties with accurate irrigation prescriptions like this, here are some standard controller functions that can maximize an irrigation system's performance.

**Multi-programming** – A young oak tree and a spot of shady sod aren't thirsty at the same time. Since conservation calls for watering

only the minimum amount to keep the property healthy, systems that distribute equal water to these areas are less than effective.

Enter multi-programming. "This function ties in water use to plant coefficients," Mathieu defined. "So, you are not watering turf like you are watering a juniper."

Contractors can divide the property into several zones and set watering times on the controller with multi-programming to start and stop at different times, based on the needs of the particular area.

**Multi-starting** – Ever wonder why some soils soak up water and other soils let it sit stagnant in a pool? Run an irrigation system for 10 minutes on a slope with hard soil and more water will run off than run into the ground.

"The soil may absorb water so slowly that you can't apply water to meet the needs of the plants in a single cycle," Basch suggested. Multi-starting allows contractors to set the system for short run times with breaks, irrigating an

(continued on page 82)

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## Controller Basics

(continued from page 80)

area for 10 minutes but giving the soil breaks to soak in water.

Ultimately, this feature should decrease watering, Mathieu pointed out. "It allows the moisture to enter the soil at a much slower rate, maintaining a better reservoir and letting you water less often," he said.

"It allows you to break up that watering time into short watering increments with pauses in between," Basch added. "If I had a zone on a hillside and I needed 10 minutes of water but I could only water one minute at a time without losing water to runoff, I could set a Cycle+Soak for one minute with 10-minute waits in between."

**Water budgeting**—Spring rains don't stress irrigation systems—most properties start off the season wet and progressively dry out as summer wears on. That's why water budgeting functions are so valuable. Contractors can increase watering times in percentage increments for each month, stepping up run times based on seasonal needs.

"Water budgets allow a contractor to say, 'I want 20 minutes on my system in this zone, but I want 60 percent of that in April, 70 percent in May and 80 percent in June,'" Mathieu explained. "If the contractor programs that, his watering is basically in line with the consumption curve of the season."

Blackwell finds this quality especially useful for spring start-up, since Advanced Irrigation schedules appointments early to fit them all in the schedule. Without this adjustment feature, homeowners can forget to turn on the system and then wonder why their properties are brown in June, he said.

**CONVENIENT COMPONENTS.** While these "multi" features generally run standard on controllers, new technology has yielded options that lend controllers a mind of their own—or at least a little backup.

Features like nonvolatile memory and self-diagnostics ensure programmed data doesn't disappear when power shorts, while

modularity and ports for sensing devices give controllers an "open mind" to customize based on site needs and weather patterns.

These convenience features build a better system. "You want something that is reliable and has the features that contribute to the system being reliable," Carowitz reasoned.

**Nonvolatile memory**—Carowitz painted a familiar image of waking to an alarm clock that is blinking 12 o'clock. When the power goes out, a clock without battery backup loses its memory—it loses time and forgets to ring you out of bed in the morning.

Irrigation controllers aren't that different.

"A controller is like a giant digital alarm for your irrigation system," Carowitz compared. "For a long time, if the power went out it would clear the memory, you would install a backup battery, the battery would sit there, and if the power went out it would hold the program in the controller so it wouldn't be erased and go back to the blinking 12."

(continued on page 84)



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## Controller Basics

(continued from page 82)

"Now, things have stepped beyond that," he added. "If you forgot to replace the battery, the time would still clear. Nonvolatile memory is an additional chip built into the controller so when there is a power outage, the chip services as a backup to the memory. It remembers all the information so when the power comes back on, it's like nothing ever happened."

Basically, controllers with nonvolatile memory never require reprogramming due to power loss. This offers peace of mind for contractors who service a generous number of residential accounts.

**Self-diagnostics** – Now, imagine a fizzled wire connection or a poor electrical connection. Older controllers were equipped with fuses or circuit breakers similar to those in homes – a property could dry out before a contractor replaced the fuse.

Sophisticated self-diagnostics identifies faults in a station and skips over the trouble spot in the watering schedule so the rest of

the property doesn't suffer from one tripped circuit, Carowitz said.

"Instead of blowing the fuse and bringing the irrigation system to its knees, [self-diagnostics] will skip over the part that has the problem and it will tell the contractor where the problem is," he noted.

**Modularity** – Not all properties are created equally. In fact, some are cramped in suburban housing developments while others assume spacious proportions on large lots. When a contractor visits several properties during the day, the chances that each requires the same irrigation system components is slim to none.

Wouldn't it be nice if controllers could flex to fit all your jobs?

"Modularity allows you to configure the controller to the specific project," Carowitz outlined. "Instead of carrying on your service truck several different controllers for different sized yards and applications, you carry one controller and you add modular

components to it so you can customer configure it to the job."

**Ports and outputs** – When Mother Nature throws a curveball in the forecast, sensing devices can take the burden off of homeowners who might neglect their irrigation. And if they turn off the controller during rain showers, they might forget to turn it back on, pointed out Curt Winter, owner, Badgerland Irrigation, Middleton, Wis.

"When a consumer turns the clock off, unless they put a Post-it on their forehead, they won't remember to turn it back on," he remarked.

Rain and moisture sensors will shut off the irrigation system when the area reaches a certain saturation point and, then, turn it back on when the soil is dry again. Ports and outputs allow controllers to accept sensing devices like this, allowing a hookup for components that improve system efficiency. Mathieu noted. "It's the extra step – the extra mile," he said simply.

(continued on page 86)



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## Controller Basics

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**CAPABLE CLIENTS.** Of course, all the gadgets on the market won't improve systems if clients don't understand them. While contractors should look for controllers with features to maximize a system's efficiency, they also should consider the customers' comfort level and choose a controller that won't alienate them from adjusting their systems.

"I try to utilize controllers that I can convince my customers are easy to use," Winter noted. "Once I overcome intimidation and my customers realize they can touch it and they won't get shocked or the system will not stop working – once I get over that hump – we're home free."

So, Winter sticks with simplicity. He chooses controllers with clear, LED readouts and a dial with easy-to-read marked areas that identify "set station run times" and "set days to water." "For the most part, I find the customers will play with these

clocks, and that delights me," he said. "The more hands-on they are, the better they understand their systems and the better value they get out of their systems."

On the other hand, some clients are not tech-savvy and might not catch on to complicated controllers, Blackwell pointed out. "The old joke is, if you go into their house and the clock on their VCR is blinking and has never been set, you might not want to sell them a top-of-the-line clock," he related.

Blackwell asks clients if they use computers and gains a general sense of their comfort level with technology. When he walks through the property with clients, he explains the irrigation system in basic language. And in some cases, he discovers that the old-fashioned models fit the needs of his less "connected" customers. "It's what's best for the client," he figured.

Bottom line, whether a controller com-

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mands the irrigation system through a high-tech device or an antiquated clock, customers simply want assurance that their grass will stay green, Winter noted.

"As important as their ornamentals or turf are, people have more important things to fiddle with than their controllers," he said. "But the easier I can make it, the better the odds are that they will utilize it." **LL**

The author is Managing Editor – Special Projects for Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at [khampshire@lawnandlandscape.com](mailto:khampshire@lawnandlandscape.com).

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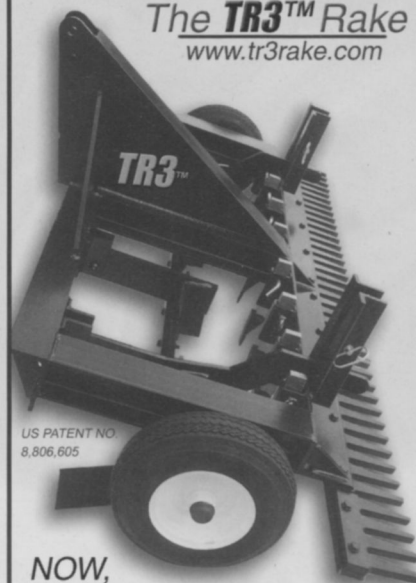
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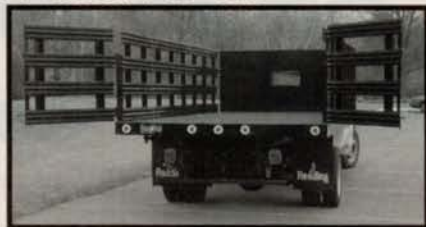
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## Wright Turbo 10 Catcher

- High-capacity system is designed to fit all Wright Stander and Sentar models
- Three intake venturis and perforated steel panels function as a simple venturi system, lifting the grass away from the walls



- Increased velocity results in tighter packing of grass
- Eliminates the need for expensive, power-draining, clog-prone fans and duct work
- Curved front directs grass to the back of the catcher, keeping it from clogging the mower
- Front section has capacity of 4.8 cubic feet and can be used by itself for small jobs or with the 6-cubic-foot rear section

Circle 206 on reader service form

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USE READER SERVICE #68



## Country Clipper Trek

- Features a 14-hp Kawasaki engine
- Forward ground speed includes five

speeds, from 2.3 to 7 mph

- Offers fuel capacity of 6 gallons



- Model 36W features cutting width of 36 inches and two blades per deck
  - Model 48W offers a cutting width of 48 inches and three blades per deck
  - Both models include a stand-up, floating deck and hydrostatic transmission
- Circle 207 on reader service form**

## Rock Solid PLUGR Aerator

- Features 5-hp Briggs & Stratton Intek engine with 6-to-1 gear ratio

- Offers 22-inch effective aeration width
- Delivers users up to 15,000 square feet per hour of productivity



- Includes a combination folding handle/ergonomic lift bar
- Offers wide quad-wheel stability
- Also includes v-belt drive and unibody construction

**Circle 208 on reader service form**

## Watts Pre-Engineered Valve Stations

- Custom-configured water flow control systems are built to meet exact project application requirements
- Valve stations are factory-assembled, tested and certified by independent agencies to ensure flow performance
- Provides uninterrupted water service to commercial facilities

- Offers a single connection point for irrigation services with agency-approved devices

- Fully customizable for any application
- Circle 209 on reader service form**



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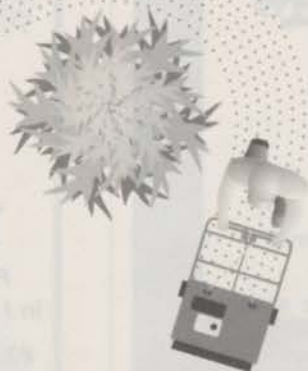
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# Products

## Thomas Tracked Mini-Skid Steer



- Ride-on model 25GT weighs 1,900 pounds and was developed to work in soft ground conditions while keeping the operator high and dry
- Loader's 9-inch rubber tracks provide smooth operation, increased flotation and maximum traction
- Features a 25-hp engine and more than 1,680 pounds of breakout force
- Universal attachment system allows skid steer to use Thomas as well as competitive attachments
- Equipped with self-leveling as standard, which eliminates material spillage

Circle 210 on reader service form

## TrynEx SweepEx Debris Leaf Pusher

- Ideal for lighter debris such as leaves, cans and bottles
- Extends the height capacity of the broom, allowing



- for greater material handling capabilities
- Consists of two steel uprights and a heavy-duty poly-fencing material
- Adds a strong net to the broom attachment, thereby allowing it to carry more materials farther
- Bolts to the front of any SweepEx Pro Series broom

Circle 212 on reader service form

## Unruh Dump & Go Truck Body

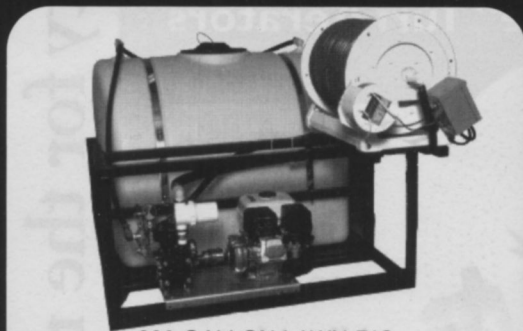
- Waste handling equipment with motorized bucket hoists and large capacity bin
- Eliminates the need to bag waste material and reduces personnel handling costs
- Has hydraulically operated moving floor

- Available in 3,000- and 6,000-pound capacity models with 6,000-pound model as a dedicated waste hauler for larger commercial turf maintenance operations
- The 3,000-pound machine is built to let operators simultaneously carry turf equipment and landscape waste on the same truck

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## Wheelwash Rhino System

- Truck tire/wheel cleaning system is suitable for short-term or temporary projects
- Entire system is modular, can be assembled on-site and up and running in a few hours
- Cleaning is accomplished with a multitude of high-pressure jets with extensive



spray patterns to cover all surfaces of tires, wheels and undercarriages

- Water recycling is included with the settlement tank/weir system, recycling 90 percent of the water
- Utilizes a horizontal centrifugal pump in cast-iron housing fitted with a cast-iron impeller, single mechanical seal and coupled with a 30-hp electric motor

**Circle 213 on reader service form**

## Caterpillar Multi-Terrain Loaders

- 247 and 257 rubber-tracked loaders feature a new suspended undercarriage that allows the machines to work in a broad range of applications and terrain
- The 247 model has operating capacity

of 1,354 pounds, operating weight of 6,665 pounds and ground pressure of 3.8 psi

- 257 features an operating capacity of 1,614 pounds, operating weight of 7,628 pounds and ground pressure of 4.3 psi
- Both models powered by naturally-aspirated Cat 3034 diesel engine
- 247 delivers 54 net hp while 257 is rated at 59 net hp
- Each includes a closed-loop, high-output hydrostatic drive system with an anti-stall system

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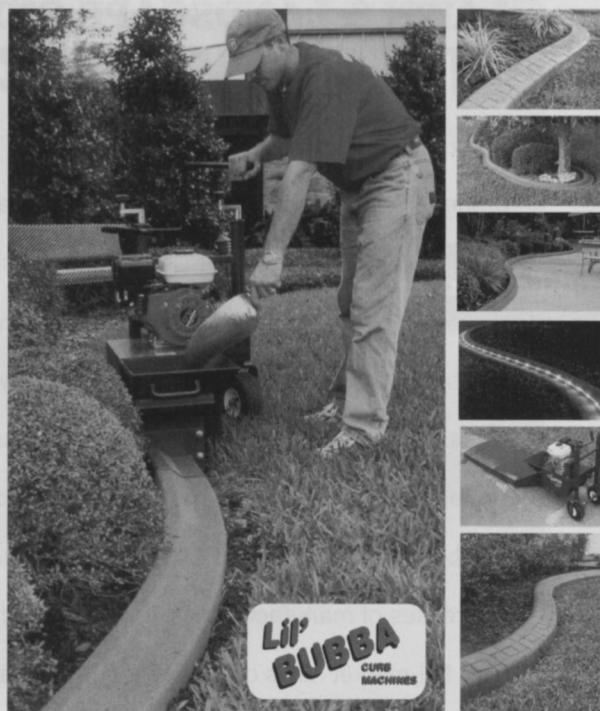


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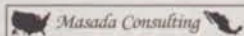


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# Products

## ASV RC-50 All-Surface Loader

- Offers height of 77 inches, width of 60 inches and a length with bucket of 128 inches
  - Caterpillar 3024C engine delivers 50 hp
  - Features an operating capacity of 1,500 pounds and a height of 115 inches to the hinge pin
  - Weighs approximately 4,700 pounds, but has a ground pressure of only 2.7 pounds per square inch
  - Can operate at attachments such as backhoes, augers, dozer blades and trenchers
- Circle 215 on reader service**



## Rain Bird Pro Software

- Business management system designed specifically for the irrigation industry
  - Paperless system that improves scheduling, dispatching and billing
  - Improves efficiency of the scheduling process and ties crews electronically to the office using hand-held devices
  - Crew members simply upload a daily schedule to a hand-held device by plugging into a phone-line connector at home or at the office
  - At the end of the day, crew members download completed work orders for billing, making it possible to invoice customers within 24 hours for faster payment
- Circle 216 on reader service form**

## Mertz Boxer TL

- A 24-hp Honda V-Twin engine powers this versatile, compact skid-steer unit
- Model TL-224-32 offers track width range of 32.5 inches to 41.5 inches
- Model TL-224-34 offers track width range of 34.5 inches to 43.5 inches

- Includes hydraulic flow of 14 gpm and hydraulic pressure of 3,000 psi
  - Unit weighs 2,025 pounds without any attachments
  - Features operating capacity of 640 pounds
- Circle 217 on reader service form**

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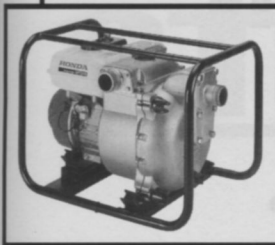
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# Products

## Honda WT Series Trash Pumps



- Features Honda commercial grade OHV engine
- Includes durable full-frame protection for on-the-job use
- Quick-release

pump case allows for convenient clean-out in short timeframe

- New, conical cast iron impeller design expands peak pumping performance
- Mechanical seal with improved wear resistance provides for easy seal removal and replacement
- Compliant with Environmental Protection Agency and California Air Resources Board standards

**Circle 218 on reader service form**

## Briggs & Stratton Vanguard 2/LC Engine

- Includes a 360-degree cooling water jacket to reduce engine and oil temperatures, increasing durability and extending engine life
- Advanced air and oil filtration systems further protect components and increase engine life
- Features a compact 752 cc displacement and a high hp-to-weight ratio
- Aluminum engine block further reduces engine weight and makes equipment easier to handle
- V-Twin design offers greater balance and low vibration, leading to smoother running and decreased wear

**Circle 219 on reader service form**

## Polaris UTV 1500 2x4



- Features 18-hp, V-Twin, air-cooled, 4-cycle engine
- MacPherson struts provide 4.6 inches of travel up front
- Includes rust-proof composite cargo box and a vehicle payload capacity of 1,250 pounds
- Offers spacious seating for three people
- Standard features include trailer hitch receiver, audible reverse alarm, brake lights, tail lights, 35-watt quartz-halogen headlights, hour meter, electric start and 360-watt alternator

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SEPTEMBER 02



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for extended operating time, and an ergonomically designed harness with padded hip belt to reduce stress on the shoulders and back. Additional features include sound baffling for quiet operation, and infinite control adjustment for reduced wind flow around flowers and delicate shrubs. Retail Price \$449.95.



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# Business Strategies Conference



## Strategic Planning For Your Company

### Why You Should Register

Variety of expert speakers and topics all focused on helping you develop a successful business plan for your company.

An opportunity to network with fellow industry professionals and trade ideas on how to grow your business.

Leave the conference ready to apply what you have learned in your business – see the results of your investment sooner!

Unmatched value – the depth of the material presented at the conference will have you ahead of the competition.

Easy to attend – the conference is scheduled for Friday and Saturday so you have less time out of the office.

### Featured Speakers



**MIKE FOTI**  
*Leadership Builders*  
"Seeing The Forest  
From The Trees"



**KEN HOCHKOEPEL**  
*Enterprise Analysis*  
(Formerly of Ruppert  
Landscape Co.)  
"Strategic Planning:  
A Blueprint for  
Success"



**TOM OYLER**  
*Wilson Oyler*  
"Building Your  
Business Plan  
Workshop"



**MARTY GRUNDER**  
*The Winners Circle*  
"Where To Find  
Customers" and  
"Implementing Your  
Strategic Plan"



**DON SCHLANDER**  
*Landscape Care*  
"Setting Priorities:  
Finding The Right  
Business Mix"



## Conference Program

### FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1

- 10:00 – 6:00 p.m. Registration  
8:00 – 11:00 a.m. Facility Tour  
Yardmaster, Painesville, OH  
(Separate admission required)  
Opening Session  
1:00 – 2:00 p.m. "Seeing The Forest From The Trees"  
Speaker: Mike Foti, Leadership Builders  
2:10 – 4:00 p.m. "Strategic Planning: A Blueprint for Success"  
Speaker: Ken Hochkoepfel, Enterprise Analysis  
4:00 – 4:15 p.m. Break  
4:15 – 5:30 p.m. "Workshop: Building Your Business Plan"  
Speaker: Tom Oyler, Oyler Wilson  
5:30 – 6:30 p.m. Welcome Reception

### SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 2

- 7:00 a.m. Registration & Continental Breakfast  
7:00 – 8:00 a.m. Contractor Roundtables  
8:00 – 9:15 p.m. "Setting Priorities: Finding the Right Business Mix"  
Speaker: Don Schlender, Terrain Systems/Landscape Care  
9:20 – 10:30 a.m. "Dollars and Sense: Planning for Your Financial Success"  
Speaker: Tom Grandy, Grandy & Associates  
10:30 – 10:50 a.m. Refreshment Break  
10:50 – 12:00 p.m. "Business Development: Where to Find Customers"  
Speaker: Marty Grunder, The Winners Circle  
12:00 – 1:00 p.m. Networking Lunch  
1:15 – 2:45 p.m. "Building From Within: Investing in Your People"  
Speaker: Frank Crandall, Wood River Evergreens  
2:45 – 3:00 p.m. Refreshment Break  
3:00 – 5:00 p.m. "Implementing Your Strategic Plan"  
Speaker: Marty Grunder, The Winners Circle

## Hotel & Travel Information

### Hotel Information

Rooms have been reserved for conference attendees at the Cleveland Marriott Downtown at Key Center. Reservations can be made directly with the hotel at 216/696-9200 or 800/228-9290 on or before Thursday, October 3, 2002, to receive the special conference rate of \$109 per night single/double. Please ask for the Lawn & Landscape Business Strategies Conference rate.

### Discount Travel Information

The Lawn & Landscape Business Strategies has arranged for special discount airfares to Cleveland for the conference. To take advantage of the discount rates, please contact Traveline Travel, the official travel agency for the conference at 888/743-8747 between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Eastern.

## Business Strategies Conference Special Events

### Facility Tour Information

YARDMASTER  
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2002  
8:00 A.M. – 11:00 A.M.

Take a tour of Yardmaster, one of Ohio's leading landscape contractors and a 2001 Lawn & Landscape Top 100 Company, when you sign up for the facility tour. Yardmaster is a suburban Cleveland full-service company with more than 150 full-time employees. You will tour the company's facility and have the opportunity to talk and ask questions of the Yardmaster management team. It is a great way to pick up new ideas for your business and compare notes with fellow contractors. The cost is \$20 per person. Advance registration and payment is required.

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Are you ready to commit three days to make a positive difference in your company that could last for years? If so, then consider signing up for Grandy & Associates' Basic Business Boot Camp. Join small business consultant Tom Grandy as he walks you through three days of intensive business training that is guaranteed to improve your company's financial management systems. You will learn how to:

- Create month-by-month cash flow budgets and track your progress on a monthly basis.
- Create a computer model of your company and learn the "what if" process of maximizing your profitability.
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- Develop a program for properly estimating hourly rates.

Your registration to the **Basic Business Boot Camp** will include more than \$1,000 worth of educational materials including Grandy & Associates' financial software programs, educational tapes and customized marketing materials. As a bonus, each company attending the boot camp will receive one complimentary registration to the 2002 Business Strategies Conference. For registration information, please call 800/432-7963 or online at [www.GrandyAssociates.com](http://www.GrandyAssociates.com). You can e-mail your request to [grandyasso@aol.com](mailto:grandyasso@aol.com). Space is limited to 20 companies – call today! Co-sponsored by the Lawn & Landscape Media Group.



Tom Grandy

### Contractor Roundtables

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2002  
7:00 A.M. – 8:00 A.M.

Participate in a real eye-opener of an event as you join fellow contractors for a series of roundtable discussions on today's industry "hot" topics including how to delegate responsibility, how to give performance reviews, "real world" marketing ideas, open book management, how to find the right employees and many more. The roundtables are included in your conference registration and you will sign up for the topic you are interested when you arrive at the conference.



# REGISTRATION FORM

November 1-2, 2002 • Cleveland Marriott • Cleveland, Ohio

## 2002 Lawn & Landscape Business Strategies Conference

**BY PHONE:** Call 800/456-0707 and ask to register for the Lawn & Landscape Business Strategies Conference (weekdays 9 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. EST)

**BY MAIL:** Conference Registration, Lawn & Landscape Business Strategies, 4012 Bridge Ave., Cleveland, OH 44113

**BY FAX:** Complete form and fax, with credit card information, to 216/961-0364 (24 hours)

**ON THE WEB:** Register on-line at [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com) and click on "Events"

(Please print or type. Form may be photocopied for additional registrants; one form per person)

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### REGISTRATION INFORMATION

Full Conference Registration

Group Registration (3 or more same company)

One-Day Registration

Facility Tour

You must be registered for the conference to participate in the facility tour.

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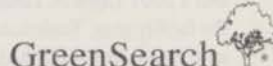
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Association Marketing Partners: Members of the Michigan Nursery & Landscape Association qualify for a \$20 discount off registration fees. The Lawn & Landscape Business Strategies Conference is a business-to-business event open to trade professionals only. Persons under the age of 18 (including infants) are not permitted in the educational sessions.

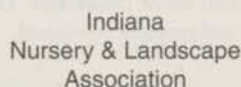
### CANCELLATION/SUBSTITUTION/REFUND POLICY/CONFIRMATIONS

All cancellations must be made in writing and faxed or mailed – voice mails and e-mails will not be accepted. A full refund will be issued if the cancellation notice is received before **October 18, 2002**. No refunds will be issued after **October 18, 2002**. Advance payment is **required** for the facility tour and evening reception. Attendees can notify *Lawn & Landscape* at any time that another individual will attend the conference in their place. All registrations postmarked by October 18, 2002, will be acknowledged by mail. *Lawn & Landscape* reserves the right to cancel the conference in the event of insufficient registration and will make full refund if this occurs. *Lawn & Landscape's* liability shall be limited to the registration fee amount.

### 2002 Business Strategies Conference Sponsors



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All classified advertising is \$1 per word. For box numbers, add \$1.50 plus six words. Classified display ads \$115.00 per column inch. Standard 2-color available on classified display ads at \$175.00 additional. All classified ads must be received by the publisher before the first of the month preceding publication and be accompanied by check or money order covering full payment. Submit ads to: *Lawn & Landscape*, 4012 Bridge Ave., Cleveland, Ohio 44113. Fax: 216/961-0364.

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## Cover Story

(continued from page 39)

neighbors' doors, particularly surrounding yards that received an application. "It's a simple door hanger that explains that their neighbor received an application from us and says if they want a free lawn analysis, please call us," Ballard described. "This contributes to the good guy image we're spreading because it helps people know when they should keep their dog or child out of their neighbor's lawn for a 24-hour period."

Even though Perficut continues to perfect client communication, it also strives to improve internal communication. Though Perficut is always trying to update employee handbooks and safety manuals, Ballard admits one of its biggest weaknesses is training new foremen and middle management. "I feel that we're the only ones who know what's going on sometimes," Ballard said of himself and key managers. "And we tend to keep adding responsibilities onto current managers instead of training others."

Ballard blames this lack of training on the little time available to perform the amount of delegation and schooling necessary for new management. "Things go so fast sometimes that we never seem to find the time to do this properly," he said. "It's something we have to work on this year because it's frustrating to me that if something were to happen to me or our office manager, no one would know how to take on that person's responsibilities."

Besides letting go of some responsibilities and increasing training, Ballard also wants to add one or two quality control-focused employees who spend time inspecting clients' properties and taking care of any stray weeds or trimming – the little tasks that get overlooked. "I hope that hiring someone to do this will alleviate some responsibilities from the other managers and ensure these tasks are taken care of before clients call us about them," Ballard said. "It's things like this – some fine tuning – that we're trying to do to perfect the company."

With a name like Perficut, one would think the company has flawless operations, but, according to Ballard, "I'm not going to say we don't make mistakes – it doesn't run perfectly smooth everyday, but we sure are trying." ■

*The author is Managing Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at [wnisniewski@lawnandlandscape.com](mailto:wnisniewski@lawnandlandscape.com).*

## Financing the Winter

(continued from page 84)

boost client morale. "What's been most successful for us in the winter is to maintain client contact," he said. "We've done a number of things in the past – deck work, cleaning out basements, etc. – because we have a rapport with the client and they trust us."

**WINTER FIX-ITS.** Since the majority of landscape equipment lies dormant during the off-season, winter is a realistic time to schedule maintenance, whether it's small repairs or large-scale overhauls. "We keep up with regular maintenance throughout the season, scheduling our equipment only for four days every week and one day off for maintenance," Hubbard explained. "But if we have any major work that needs to be done we do that over the winter."

Simply put, contractors should refine their equipment fleet in the chilly weather so that it's ready for the demands of spring and summer, Aronson said. "We do all of our trucks in the winter, as well as our mowing equipment, and overhaul our blowers," he listed. Additionally, Aronson brushes up his company's physical appearance in the winter so it can present a clean, organized image in the spring. "We maintain our yard and upgrade whatever we need to."

Zemkoski agreed, stating that he allots specific time for maintenance as each season ends. "We always take a week at the end of the season where we look at all of our equipment," he said.

Ultimately, even when temperatures drop, contractors shouldn't shiver in fear of the winter season. As long as business owners recognize the season will inevitably slow down, they can plan accordingly, Zemkoski offered. "We understand the winter as just being the three months we have to deal with," he said. "We then do our budgeting with that in mind."

As long as contractors approach winter with the expectation of a slower season, any extra revenue is a cold weather "bonus," Hubbard concluded. "We know we will make some money in the winter, and only count on a little bit of it," he said. "But if we have a good winter, it allows us the opportunity to expand into other areas." ■

*The author is Assistant Editor – Internet of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at [kmohm@lawnandlandscape.com](mailto:kmohm@lawnandlandscape.com).*



# Crafting a Company Manual at Buckingham Greenery

A company manual is an important tool for any landscape operation, helping to spell out policies and procedures for all employees. Buckingham Greenery in Buckingham, Va., is an advocate of these books.

A properly developed manual helps all employees know what is expected of them, creates consistency within the company, establishes rules and guidelines, and sets disciplinary actions for violating the rules. A manual also translates a company's business philosophies and desires into action and is an invaluable communication tool for efficiently running operations, bridging the gap between related departments.

The manual can be a training guide for new employees, and existing employees can use it as a reference tool. This helps avoid performance problems stemming from a lack of understanding or inconsistent approaches due to personnel changes.

Here are some guidelines on how we created an effective company manual. Once the appropriate information is compiled, papers can be assembled in portable three-ring binders and distributed to all new and existing employees.

1. *Start with an introduction to the company.* In our "introduction" pages, we included an overview of the company's history and our mission statement to provide employees with a business background. Many compa-

nies also include a vision statement. We also added information on who's who and everyone's pager, cell phone and emergency numbers.


2. *Cover human resources issues.* We felt it was important to explain company benefits, vacation packages, employee scheduling and policies regarding tardiness and absenteeism in our manual. We specified the various issues that merit disciplinary action, explanations of possible disciplinary actions and any applicable documentation. This ensures employees are aware of the results of their actions.

3. *Include job-specific information.* We provided detailed descriptions for each job in the company and any client contract information that might be helpful. We also shared job performance appraisal procedures and included any forms used in the process.

4. *Address safety procedures.* We also use our company manual to describe safety procedures and to provide basic safety tips. We stress the importance of immediately reporting accidents to the client and to the office. Additionally, we include samples of any documents that should be completed.

5. *Discuss equipment-related issues.* Here, we list an inventory of equipment issued for each position in the company, as well as procedures on dealing with lost or stolen equipment. Equipment maintenance tips also are essential to include in this section.

6. *Commit to regularly updating the manual.* We make the time and commitment to update the company manual as policies or procedures change. By doing so, each employee receives the most current information on company policies and procedures and confusion is avoided.

In the long run, a company manual saves money, headaches and litigation, since a well-developed and thought-out manual can ensure compliance with regulatory agencies such as Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Most importantly, a company manual strengthens operations. A comprehensive manual covering all departments within the organization becomes a "quality manual" for the whole company, ensuring consistent delivery of the best possible services. — *Monica Smith* 

*The author is director of horticultural services at Buckingham Greenery, Buckingham, Va., and can be reached at 800/322-4711.*

## FIVE KEYS TO *Crafting a Company Manual*

1. Start with an introduction to the company, which can include an overview of the company's history and its mission or vision statements.
2. Explain company benefits, vacation packages, employee scheduling and policies regarding tardiness and absenteeism.
3. Provide detailed descriptions for each job in the company, share job performance appraisal procedures and include any forms that are used in the process.
4. Use the company manual to describe safety procedures and to discuss equipment-related issues.
5. Commit to updating the company manual any time policies or procedures change.



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