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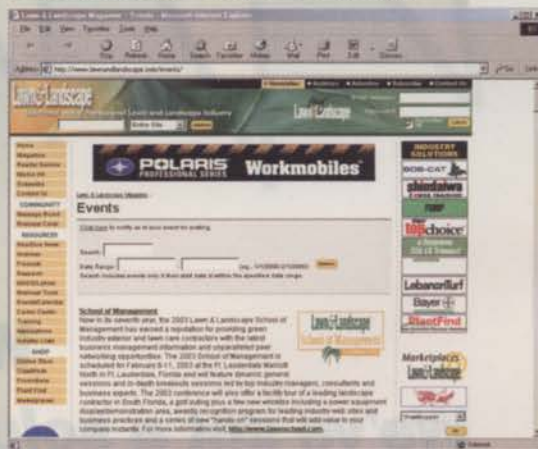
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SPECIAL Features: Lawn & Landscape Events

Need to take a one-day refresher course in business management or learn some quick and unique marketing techniques? Then think about perusing the *Lawn & Landscape Online Events* section so that you can see what new and exciting seminars are coming to your neighborhood this

summer. For instance, Marty Grunder's Marketing & Sales Bonanzas and Jack Mattingly's "Improving Profits and Growing Your Business" seminars should prove worthwhile. Look for details at www.lawnandlandscape.com/events.



Extra! Extra!

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"Lots of folks confuse bad management with destiny." –
Kin Hubbard

Where'd All the Orange Go?

A speaker at the 2003 *Lawn & Landscape School of Management* asked attendees to talk about all of the things going on in the world that are positive for their businesses. The room was silent. I was amazed, and I immediately thought about how much has changed in a few short years.

Next, the speaker asked the group of 125 or so to list the challenges they're dealing with today. The answers were plentiful. The economy. Weather. OSHA. Insurance costs. Noise regulations. Water restrictions. Labor. Nobody had trouble shouting out what might go wrong.

Given such a lengthy list of concerns, I could certainly understand landscape contractors being an unhappy bunch. But that's not the case. In fact, many of the people running good landscape firms I've talked to welcome this challenging business atmosphere and expect it to ultimately help their companies. How can this be? They'll tell you that anything that requires landscape contractors to be better, smarter business people ultimately benefits the entire industry. That's hard to argue with.

The well-known book "Built to Last" by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras explores the impact of challenging times on businesses by comparing the performance of two leading brands in a series of different industries over time. In each case, whether it's the manufacturing, hospitality, or air travel industry, the book examines the fortunes of one company that has stood the test of time and thrived while a once-worthy competitor has floundered.

Take Marriott Hotels and Howard Johnsons, for example. We all remember the days when the orange-roofed inns beckoned from highway stops all over the country. Not so today. But you'll be hard pressed to find

a major metropolitan area without at least two Marriott Hotels, let alone one.

What happened? Why did one hotel chain grow to become the biggest name in the industry while the other headed for the endangered species list? Obviously, as time passed and the two companies grappled with many of the same challenges, executives at each made different decisions. They focused on varying customers, enacted their own pricing strategies and implemented unique marketing programs. The results speak for themselves.

But what does this mean for the landscape industry? It means that the challenges arising before your business today don't have to be viewed negatively, although they do need to be taken seriously. Running a business in good times is often easy. But the best managers and the best companies are those that weather the storms and come out stronger than they were going in.

Today, you have the opportunity to make your company stronger. Challenges exist that you didn't have to face five years ago, so your thinking needs to be sharper. Make the right decisions and you'll be even better positioned when the economy rebounds and double-digit growth years come back.

Of course, the downside is obvious. No one wants to go the route of Howard Johnsons. But what happened to that company was not a predetermined fate – it was the result of poor management. Now is the time to embrace the responsibility you have and get excited about your opportunity. Where your competitors see a challenging economy, you have the opportunity to deepen client relationships by demonstrating your sensitivity to their own business struggles. While other contractors simply complain about noise and water regulations, why not use this as a focus for employee training so your company is better equipped to function in an increasingly regulated environment? Has the weather hurt business? Maybe now is the time to add a new service. And so on.

The business climate will never be perfect. The mid-to late 1990s may have been the closest thing to economical nirvana, but complaints about the lack of labor and weak cash flow were everywhere during those days. Instead of resigning yourself to suffering through the tough times, look for the opportunities to improve. They're all around you, and they may be the key to your future. ■

Bob West



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USE READER SERVICE #15

It's Vacation Time for Your Company

Summer is fast approaching and employees across the country are beginning to anticipate planned vacations, trips and a break from the daily grind. With the potential for a war looming and fears about the economy, for many, it seems that the inherent value of a free weekend and time with family has increased ten-fold.

As a result, this year your company may find that employees are more reluctant to forego vacations or to cash them in for extra pay – that is, if your policy allows for these options. By the way...when was the last time you reviewed or updated your company's vacation policy? Perhaps this is a good time to ensure that your company's program has kept pace with the changing labor force and today's challenging business environment.

Bloody from the battles of the mid-1990s labor war, many employers relaxed the waiting period in their vacation policies. Some also added time off for long-tenured employees and upped the ante for employees who stuck it out for even one year. If your company made these changes, it's not time to revert back to the old ways. In fact, don't expect the desire for more time off to end any time soon.

As the Baby Boomers retire and the Gen-Xers and Ys take over the workplace, more time off will remain at the top of the list as a key recruiting and retention tactic. While the veterans and Boomers invented the 60-hour workweek, you can count on Xers and Ys to reclaim their freedom and make up for the time lost with their parents.

Aside from these labor market issues, there are also policy considerations related to vacation time. As you review vacation benefits, here's a checklist of items to address:

Eligibility. Who is eligible? Are full- and part-time employees qualified? What about temporary employees? Be sure your policy defines eligibility criteria.

Jean L. Seawright is president of Seawright & Associates, Inc., a management consulting firm located in Winter Park, Florida. For the past fifteen years, she has provided human resource management and compliance advice to employers across the country. She can be contacted at 407/645-2433 or jpleggi@seawright.com.

Length of time. How much paid time will your company offer? Many companies provide one week after one year (or after six months), two weeks after two years and up to four weeks after 10, 12 or 15 years.

Accrual. Is there a schedule for accruing vacation or does vacation come due on the employee's anniversary date? If you use the accrual method, decide when time starts accruing.

Paid time-off calculation. How much pay do your employees receive for their vacation time off? The method of calculating vacation pay should be spelled out in your company policy or manual, especially for commissioned employees.

Carry-over. Will you allow employees to carry over unused vacation time from year to year? If so, is there a cap? Or, will you require employees to take vacation within the anniversary year that it comes due? (This is currently more common.)

Pay for time exchange. Can employees exchange vacation time for additional compensation? (Most companies require employees to take their vacation because they believe time away from work is in their best interest.)

Scheduling. How much advance notice is required for scheduling vacations? What happens if two employees request the same time off? (Usually, the most tenured employee is given preference.) Are there periods of time that employees cannot take vacation? If so, these should be defined. Can employees take vacation in less than full-day or weekly increments? Do they need special permission to take more than one week off at a time?

Holidays. What happens when a holiday falls during a vacation? (Most provide an additional day of vacation to be taken at an agreed-upon date within a certain timeframe.)

Leave of absence. If an employee requests and is granted a leave of absence, could he or she use any earned vacation time during the leave? Is this time provided in addition to the leave or is a portion of the unpaid leave substituted for the paid vacation time? (Note that some states have leave regulations that mandate how this is handled.)

Payment upon separation. When an employee resigns or is terminated, is he or she eligible for accrued, unused vacation time? (Most policies provide for unused vacation if the employee resigns with proper notice or is laid off. If the employee is terminated, vacation is usually forfeited. However, some states have regulations that require pay for accrued vacation upon separation, regardless of the reason.)

Regulatory provisions. Does your company policy comply with state and federal employment regulations? Is it applied in a nondiscriminatory fashion? (It's wise to have your policy reviewed by a professional who can help ensure your company's compliance with all employment provisions.) A well-written vacation policy that provides competitive benefits and fair provisions is just one more tool you can use to recruit and retain talent. And, these days, it's one that's especially important to our nation's workers. **11**



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USE READER SERVICE #16

TOOL TALK

Shipments Shrink

ALEXANDRIA, Va. – Shipments of commercial landscape products declined overall in the 2002 model year due to major U.S. drought conditions and an uncertain economic climate, according to the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI).

Commercial walk-behind mower shipments decreased 9 percent and commercial riding unit shipments dropped 1 percent.

Annual commercial riding unit shipments increased one and one-half times from 1994 until 2001. A lot of this growth represented new technology, primarily zero-turning radius riding units. Much of the demand for these riding units has been filled over the past three to four years and now product shipments are more closely linked to trends in the national economy, OPEI pointed out.

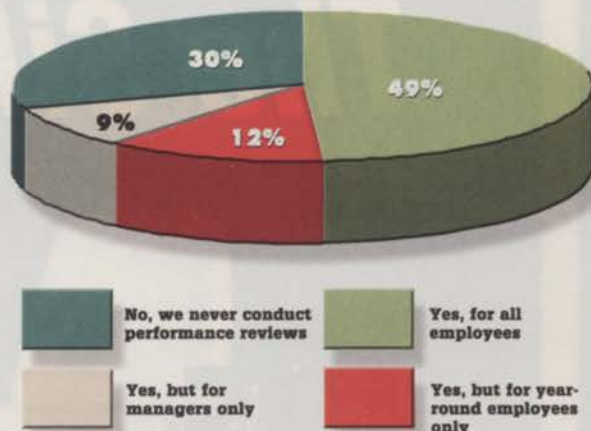
But the picture for 2003 calls for slight improvements, with forecasted shipments growth in all categories: a 1.1 percent increase for commercial walk behinds, followed by a 3.2 percent growth in 2004; and a 9.0 percent increase for commercial riding mowers in 2003 and a 7.4 percent growth predicted for 2004.



BUSINESS BASICS

Evaluation Education

Do you conduct regular performance reviews for your employees? Nearly 50 percent of landscape contractors conduct performance evaluations for all of their employees, while 12 percent do so only for year-round employees and 9 percent rate only managers' productivity levels. But what's surprising is that the number of contractors – 30 percent – who don't conduct reviews at all.



Not only do employee evaluations make workers aware of their strengths and weaknesses as well as providing them with improvement goals, but they also are motivational meetings that can help control employee turnover and improve a company's competitive edge.

Following are some tips from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Ala., on completing effective employee evaluations:

- *Be honest and fair in evaluating all employees.* Make sure to look at all evaluations as a group to ensure the appearance of biases does not exist. The purpose of performance evaluations is to take a realistic snapshot of an employee's performance. For instance, don't say an employee is improving

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IN THE NEWS

LESCO Unveils Growth Plans

Last year was probably a year most LESCO employees hope to never relive. The CEO was ousted and most of the senior management team was turned over. Profits were hard to come by. Dozens of new employees were hired. Rumors about the company's future swirled.

Well, the new man in charge, Michael DiMino, spent 2002 studying the company he took over nearly a year ago along with the industry it served. Now, he and his team have their plan for the future, which he introduced to investors.

LESCO®

The heart of the plan calls for a return to expansion mode with as many as 24 new service centers opening in 2003, some as soon as this month. And he doesn't want to see the new store openings stop any time soon. DiMino noted that the company's analysis illustrates that the market can support more than 500 new stores to go along with the 227 LESCO currently operates.

"We should always have a group of stores entering their third year of operation," he said. "In the third year, stores become profitable and defray the costs of additional new stores. Unfortunately, LESCO has not opened new stores since 1998, and for the next two years we will have to pay

(continued on page 18)



Steve Leisring

*Vice President of Operations
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Market Trends

(continued from page 16)

for store openings through the sacrifice of short-term earnings."

The first new service center will open in Haverill, Mass., early this month, and DiMino confirmed that LESCO has already signed 17 leases for new locations that will open this year, although he would not identify any additional locations at this point.

"It's no secret we can grow in the South and West," he observed. "Plus, there are plenty of opportunities for us to get more market share in cities and states that we're already in."

"We have a lot of information that indicates that the marketplace is ready for us to add stores, both from the customers' perspective and well as the net numbers," he continued, adding that some of the specific numbers are:

- The size of the lawn care supply market – LESCO now estimates this at \$6.4 billion. Of this, LESCO has 5.9 percent market share.
- Twenty-six million users of lawn care services – This is a number LESCO expects

(continued on page 20)



L&L

Book Report

Find it in 5 Seconds by Greg Vetter

Surrounded by paperwork piles and inundated with e-mails and memos, business owners can end up drowning in information.

Greg Vetter's *Find it in 5 Seconds* offers methods to tame modern day "information overload." "If you can manage your time, you can be a millionaire," remarked Roger Myers, president, American Beauty Landscaping, Youngstown, Ohio, admitting that he would practically break out in hives when confronting his office piles.

As his business grew, so did office chaos. But after two months of implementing some of the book's suggestions, Myers feels less like a run-away train. "(The book) offers a system to process and manage paperwork in a way that it all becomes easily accessible," he explained.

Instead of relying on a flurry of sticky notes and to-do lists, keep ideas and tasks on 3-by-5-inch note cards, the book advises. Order them based on their importance and throw them out when tasks are complete.

Rather than filing papers in manila folders, choose a color for each department. Myers' construction files are red and maintenance files are green. Human resources folders are blue. Yellow "action" files signify must-do projects and are kept in all employees' right-side desk drawers where they are most accessible.

From file cabinets to folders to inboxes and outboxes, the book outlines time-saving tricks designed to minimize clutter and maximize productivity.

"I know this sounds trite, but paperwork is a key frustration, and I feel liberated now," Myers commented. "It's such a relief to know there is a system so I can finally manage all this information." – Kristen Hampshire

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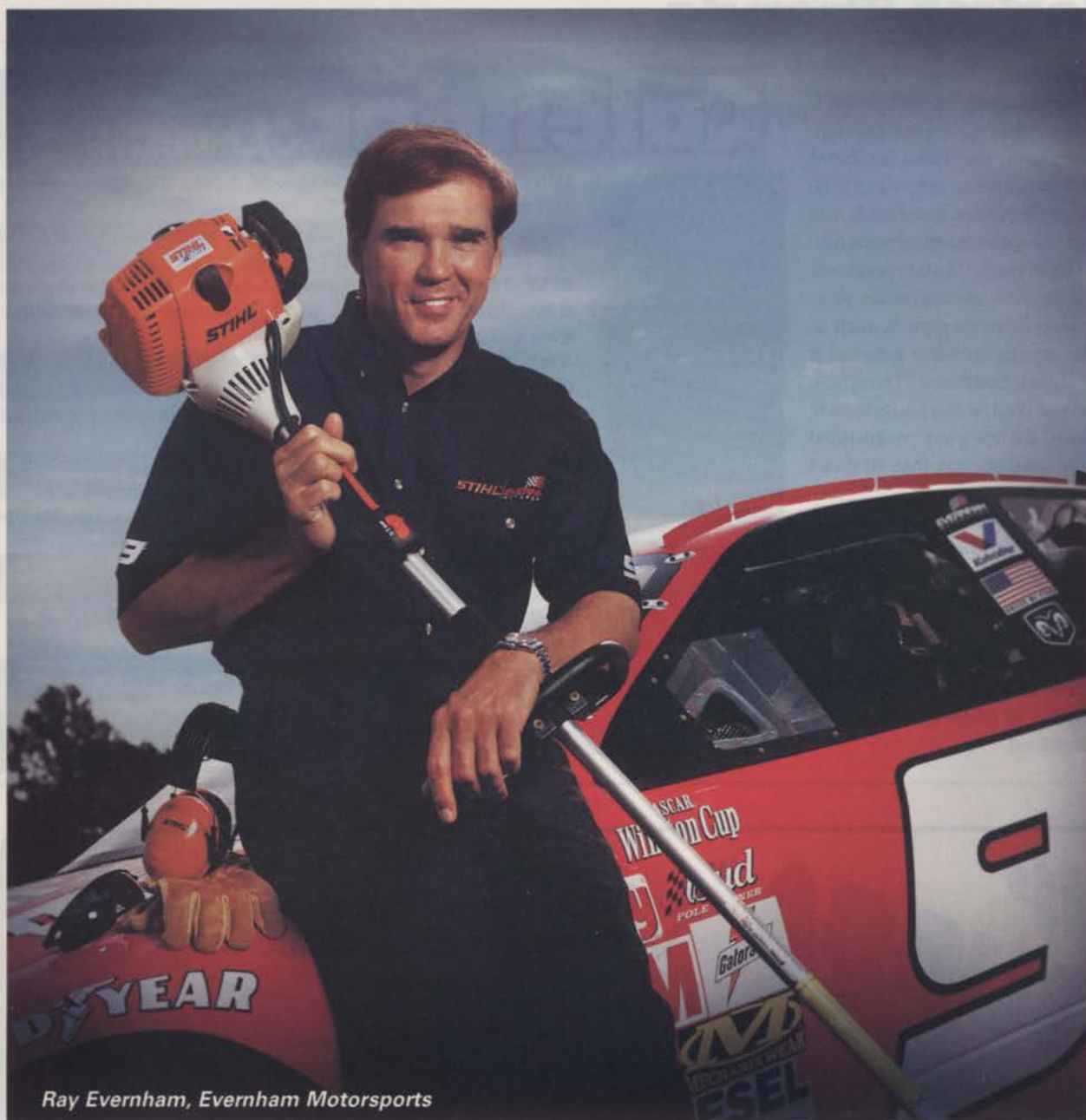
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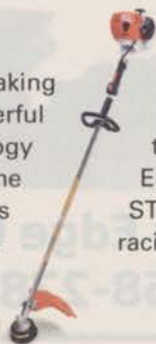
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USE READER SERVICE #19

Market Trends

(continued from page 18)

to grow. "Our customers' customer base is aging," noted DiMino, adding that the number of people over the age of 50 in the United States should double between now and 2014.

"More than 50 million households will become [lawn care] customers between now and the next eight years," DiMino predicted.

The company has already made some changes to help drive its growth, such as breaking the country into five geographic zones (Northeast, Southeast, Transition, Mid-Central and West) with a leader in each.

In addition, the company restructured its sales force, adding more than 60 direct sales representatives.

The new service centers are expected to push the company's growth from the 4 to 6 percent range to 6 to 8 percent annually, which is consistent with LESCO's growth projections for the industry. "This is an expected annual growth market of 6 to 8 percent, and there aren't too many industries that can say they're growing at that rate," DiMino maintained.

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,
OH 44113.

JUNE 12-14 Snow & Ice Symposium, Buffalo, N.Y. Contact: 814/835-3577 or www.sima.org.

JUNE 17 New York State Turfgrass Association Cornell University Field Day, Ithaca, N.Y. Contact: 518/783-1229.

JULY 15-20 American Nursery & Landscape Association Convention & Executive Learning Retreat, Boston, Mass. Contact: 202/789-2900 or www.anla.org.

JULY 29 2003 Midwest Regional Turf Field Day West Lafayette, Ind. Contact: 765/494-8039 or www.mrtf.org.

JULY 31-AUG. 2 SNA 2003 - The World's Showcase of Horticulture, Atlanta, Ga. Contact: 770/953-3311 or www.sna.org.

AUG. 6 Illinois Landscape Contractors Association's Annual Outdoor Summer Field Day, Ball Seed, N.H. Contact: 630/472-2851 or www.ilca.net.

AUG. 13 Wisconsin Nursery Association Summer Field Day, Manitowoc, Wisc. Contact: 414/529-4705.

AUG. 15-17 Texas Nursery/Landscape Expo, Dallas, Texas. Contact: 800/880-0343 or www.txnla.org.

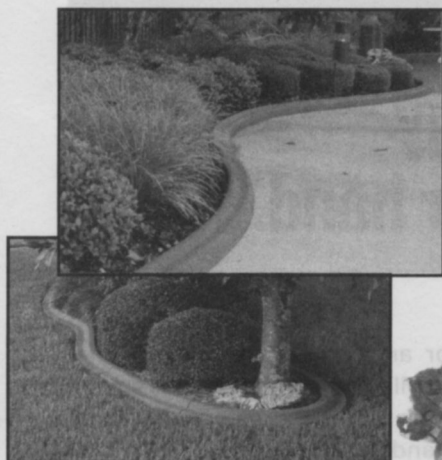
AUG. 20-23 CalScape, Irvine, Calif. Contact: 707/462-2276 or www.cipaweb.org.

SEPT. 7-11 51st Annual Florida Turfgrass Conference and Show, Tampa, Fla. Contact: 800/882-6721 or www.ftga.org.

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Letters TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,
The January 2003 issue of *Lawn & Landscape* is the finest publication I have ever read in the green industry.

Seriously, I read every piece of it last night. It took three hours and I think you deserve congratulations on a job well done. You are so ahead of everybody else – it is amazing. I just hope landscape contractors took/take the time to read that magazine. The article on strategic planning alone is a classic. I hope you keep kicking out issues like that. Great job.

Marty Grunder, president
Grunder Landscaping
Miamisburg, Ohio

was the first time I had attended such an event. I am glad I did. The speakers you brought in were marvelous. As always, some were better than others, but all were informative. The ability to meet and share ideas with other landscape business owners was worth its weight in gold.

I look forward to receiving your magazine each month. I have learned plenty over the last few years simply from reading it each month cover-to-cover. The numerous "how-to" articles and plentiful success stories, along with your insightful editorials, help give me knowledge, direction and vision. The School of Management provided the old cliché of "icing on the cake."

Bill Armstrong, Owner
Lawn Care extraordinaire!
Alexandria, Va.

Dear Editor,
I want to thank you and your gracious and talented staff for making the *Lawn & Landscape* School of Management such a success. This

ACQUISITION NEWS

ValleyCrest Buys Impact Group

CALABASAS, Calif. – ValleyCrest Cos. acquired The Impact Group, a Delray Beach, Fla.-based landscape company. The union will leverage the experience, relationships and resources of the two organizations to increase market leadership in south Florida. Financial terms were not disclosed.

Under agreement terms, The Impact Group will operate as ValleyCrest Landscape Maintenance. Impact Group President Ray Keenan and Vice President Bob DeFrain will assume responsibility as ValleyCrest vice presidents and oversee maintenance operations in Delray Beach, Miami, Ft. Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. "Although the maintenance industry is still fragmented, following the late 1990s roll-up activities, we believe the opportunities for strategic acquisitions remains strong," said Richard Sperber, president, ValleyCrest Cos.

(continued on page 24)

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
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Market Trends

(continued from page 21)

SERVICE SOLUTIONS

Create Client Cue Cards

Convinced that all customers are clueless?

Before grumbling and groaning at their renewal rejections, contractors should consider whether or not they're educating them on how to wisely purchase landscape ser-

vices. Sure, clients know when the price is right – but do they know how contractors figure the rates, and what costs they must include so that they can afford to show up on their properties next year? Probably not.

Contractors who help clients understand exactly what they are purchasing when they sign on for services might find that client hesitation lifts when it's time to check that "Yes" box the next season.

Kevin Kehoe, industry consultant, KehoeGuido Co., Laguna Niguel, Calif., suggested listing six questions on the back of customer contracts to aid in this education process. These queries inform customers about essential qualities their landscape service providers should boast.

Kehoe advised posting a headline on the top of this list, which should appear on the back of contractors' bids or contracts that

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People

At Rain Bird, **Ron Wolfarth** rose to the position of director, commercial division, **Steve Sharp** took on the position of marketing manager for the contractor division, and **Stan Wagar** was named director for the landscape drip division.



Hal White

Agrisel USA appointed **David Warman** to director of marketing.

As Toro's new residential/commercial sales director, **Jim Lohan** succeeded **Mike Ochoa** who advanced to the position of director, commercial business development.

Hal White joined Wright Mfg. as director of sales and marketing and will work to expand the company's dealer/distributor network.

John Deere Landscapes pulled **Brian Day** back into the green industry, appointing him southwest regional vice president. Day will focus on strategic growth in Arizona, California, Nevada and southern Utah.

Rebecca Evans accepted the position of marketing communications manager for the professional turf and ornamental group at BASF.

RedMax promoted **Tommy Tanaka** to manager of marketing and **Dustin Patterson** took a position as sales manager for the central region.

Sam Chandler was named North American horticultural sales manager for Dosmatic U.S.A./International.

Biosafe announced two new additions to their sales department. **Michael Hare** joined the company as Florida sales representative and **Daniel Nece** came on as Mid-Atlantic sales representative.

reads, "Protect Your Investment." Call attention to the fact that ignorance can burn a hole in their pockets, and clients who don't understand what they buy will lose money. Then, provide customers with this list of questions to mull over when they consider any service provider:

1. Did your service provider spell out service specifications? Is there a contract?
2. How many years has the company been in business?
3. Is the company licensed?
4. Does the company have insurance?
5. Does the company hold appropriate certificates? In what areas are they certified?
6. Does the company provide a warranty?

NEWS OF NOTE

GIE Media Boosts Online Integrity

CLEVELAND – GIE Media, parent company of *Lawn & Landscape*, took legal action to ensure the integrity of its message boards.

Recognizing that the message boards have the potential to be abused, GIE Media included a "Terms of Use" policy – a code of conduct that all message board participants must follow – in its Web site since its inception in 2000.

GIE Media recently took steps to further protect its users from abusive participants by filing a lawsuit in U.S. District Court against a participant on one of its Web sites.

In the past two years, the PCTOnline Message Board had been disrupted by an individual violating the "Terms of Use" policy. Several PCT Message Board users who were offended by the behavior stopped participating on the message board.

The GIE Media, acting in accordance with the "Terms of Use" policy, took action by deleting said individual's offensive posts, informing him of his violations, and blocking his IP address. Despite being banned from the board, the individual regained access to the service by signing up for user accounts with false e-mail addresses.

After several written warnings, GIE Media filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court on the grounds that the individual's offensive exchanges cut traffic to the Web site and as a result negatively impacted advertising revenue and sopped up valuable staff time required to bar him and his comments.

Upon being served with the lawsuit, the

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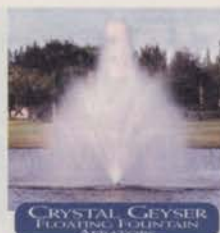
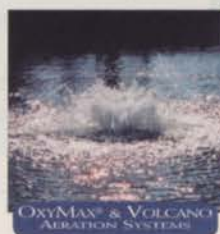
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Market Trends

defendant immediately signed an Agreed Order to: 1) permanently refrain from accessing directly or indirectly the PCTOnline Message Board, and; 2) permanently refrain from threatening or harassing any of the shareholders, officers, employees, or consultants of the PCT Media Group.

In exchange, GIE Media dismissed, without prejudice, its complaint against the accused offender. The Agreed Order was signed by Judge Lesley Brooks Wells in Cleveland on Jan. 27.

"Although taking legal action seems like an extreme measure, GIE Media is steadfast in its belief that all of our message board users and employees be protected from Internet harassment and personal attacks," said Richard Foster, GIE Media president. **LL**

Mattingly's MESSAGE

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

Now is a great time to draft job descriptions for every position in your company. Do not take this lightly - employees will take their descriptions "to the bank." Start by involving employees in listing their job duties by having them write their own descriptions and submitting them to you for review. Other management personnel also may help in doing the same for their subordinates.

Categories to consider for description:

- ☆ Position summary
- ☆ Management
- ☆ Quality control
- ☆ Client relations
- ☆ Performance
- ☆ Essential capabilities
- ☆ Field procedures
- ☆ Sales
- ☆ Administrative
- ☆ Supports

You won't use all categories for each job description. Pick the appropriate ones and then itemize the description of your expectations for each position. Now you have job descriptions to share with employees and assist in their understanding of your expectations.

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

Correction

An incorrect photo was placed with the text for Caterpillar's Landscape Tiller new product on page 116 in January's *Lawn & Landscape*. The photo is of a Caterpillar 303CR Mini Hydraulic Excavator.

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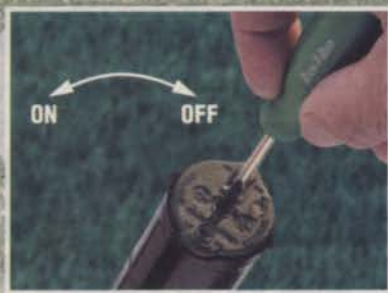
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USE READER SERVICE #27

Market Trends

(continued from page 16)

if he or she is not performing well.

- *Be consistent in your approach.* Don't create a situation where it appears that you bend over backward to create excuses for one employee while holding another employee's feet to the fire. Define your criteria for each level of ranking and use the same criteria for every employee. Don't set separate criteria for certain employees.

- *Give comments.* A number used to rank an employee's performance is useless without a written comment. Comments may confirm achievements or be constructive depending on the nature of the ranking.

- *Make your comments consistent with the rankings.* Don't give someone a "meets expectations" ranking if your comment describes a substandard performance.

- *Be realistic.* Don't inflate ratings – this only inflates an employee's expectations.

- *Rate the employee's performance, not the employee's attitude.* Keep your comments

job related and on the employee's ability to perform his or her job. Avoid phrases like "bad attitude," "not a team player," and other subjective comments. Instead, explain the behavior that has created the attitude.

- *Set goals with the employee.* Don't just criticize a deficient performer, set goals for follow up and improvement. Work together to create an action plan to help the employee in deficient areas. Set a follow-up period and be sure to reevaluate the employee at the appropriate time.

- *An evaluation should motivate an employee to want to improve.* The employee should feel excited about the challenges and his or her ability to meet them. If employees hear only about their failures and weaknesses, they'll start to believe they can't succeed. Instead of striving for improvement, they'll keep a low, defensive profile. If employees get support and encouragement from their supervisors, they'll gain the desire and confidence to keep trying. When the supervisors' suggestions for

improvement bring results – and recognition – employees are even more likely to listen to future suggestions.

- *Eliminate surprises.* The evaluation should be a "review" of the past year's performance. Through previous counseling and other communications, the employee should be aware of any concerns you might have about their job performance. The annual evaluation is not the time to "save up" all your complaints and "attack" the employee.

- *In preparation for the evaluation, ask the employee to review his or her own performance and expectations for the future by preparing a self-appraisal.* They might complete the same evaluation form that the supervisor uses or may draft a memo or list reviewing performance strengths and weaknesses and future goals. Having the employee go through the same exercise should make it easier for him or her to understand the process.

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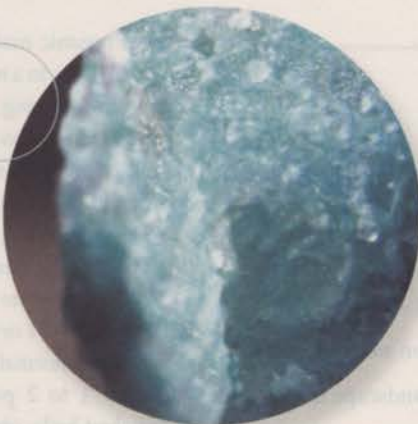
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Nursery Market Report

ANNUAL REVIEW

10 Steps to Fuss-Free Color

Annual flowers can provide landscaped areas with more seasonal variety and colorful accents than most plants. In fact, color can have more impact on the landscape than any other design element – but nothing has a more negative impact than a poorly maintained color area.

Color can be kept fresh by planting it in a well-prepared area and providing attentive care. These 10 guidelines from Don Wilkerson, professor and extension horticulturist, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, help contractors with each step of seasonal color care and management, from planting to deadheading, for greater success.

1. *Begin by preparing the soil.* Add organic matter to obtain optimum aeration, drainage and water-holding capacity for the seasonal color area. Generally, landscape beds should consist of at least 50

percent organic matter for best results. In addition, raise bed areas to a minimum of 4 to 6 inches to avoid “drowning” during rainy weather.

Soil analysis also may be useful in determining the overall chemical characteristics of the medium. Most annuals and perennials prefer a pH in the range of 5.5 to 6.5 for optimum growth. This may require the addition of dolomitic lime to raise pH or sulfur to lower it.

2. *Add fertilizer to new beds.* Select a fertilizer with a NPK ratio of 1-1-1 or 1-2-1 and apply according to label directions. A normal application rate on new beds is generally 1 to 2 pounds per 100 square feet. On established beds, obtain a soil test before selecting a fertilizer. Normally, 1 pound per 100 square feet is sufficient. Spade, rototill or mix until uniform and level off.

To reduce weeding maintenance, rototill a commercially available soil sterilant into the soil about three weeks before planting. Then just before or immediately after planting, apply a pre-emergent herbicide labeled for ornamental use and leave it undisturbed on the surface.

3. *Hold off on planting.* Most spring annuals can't be planted until after the danger of killing frost has

passed. In fact, many warm-season plants, such as periwinkles and caladiums, cannot tolerate cool soil temperatures. In this case, delay planting until the medium reaches 70 F.

4. *Water and mark beds for planting.* Just before planting, water the plants in their containers. Ideally, the landscape bed also should be moist. If the soil is dry, water the plants thoroughly immediately after planting.

When planting time comes, mark the beds based on specified planting distance. Pack material is generally placed on 4- to 8-inch centers. Jumbo packs and 4-inch materials are frequently planted on 12- to 14-inch centers.

5. *Dig hole, plant and fertilize.* When planting, dig a hole slightly larger than the root ball, set the plant in place at the same level at which it was growing and carefully firm soil around the roots. New plants will need to be watered well after planting and afterwards until they are established.

Apply soluble fertilizer high in phosphorus after planting. A fertilizer, such as 20-10-20, mixed at the rate of .5 pounds per 100 gallons of water will cover 400 square feet. Do not apply fertilizer to dry soil.

6. *Add mulch.* Adding a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch creates a decorative look, reduces weeds and conserves soil moisture for better growth. Try organic mulches, such as bark chips, pine needles, shredded leaves, peat moss or hulls. The following year, mix in the mulch to enrich the soil before planting.

7. *Avoid too much fertilizer.* Too much fertilizer can cause a



Annual flowers like 'Explorer Blue' petunia (left) may require pinching to maintain a compact shape, while impatiens like Cajun Mix (below) need deadheading to keep plants attractive and discourage disease. Photos: National Garden Bureau



lawnandlandscape.com

Check out our Online-Only Extras section for a detailed listing of spring-planted, summer-flowering annuals.

Nursery Market Report



Color makes a big splash in the landscape, but not if it is poorly maintained. Keep annuals like pansies and 'Cornette Mix' snapdragons (left) looking their best by pinching back after planting or first blooms to keep them free flowering. Photo: National Garden Bureau

buildup of soluble salts in the media, damaging plant roots. Check soluble salt levels regularly to make sure you are not overfertilizing.

8. *Water less frequently.* Deep, infrequent watering is generally better than frequent, light watering because the former encourages deep root growth. Don't allow plants to remain for extended periods in puddles of standing water because this encourages root diseases and overwatering symptoms, such as yellow leaves.

Water annuals about as often as turf. When annuals need less water than the surrounding turf, using raised flower beds will improve drainage and reduce the chance of overwatering.

Keep foliage dry if at all possible during watering. Soaker hoses work best, but if overhead sprinklers must be used, water disease-prone annuals as early as possible in the day so the foliage will dry off before night, reducing the chance of disease.

9. *Don't fuss over the flowers.* Many annuals require little additional care—their flowers fall cleanly from the plant after fading and do not need to be manually removed. Others, like marigolds, geraniums, zinnias, calendula and dahlias, require deadheading. Deadheading not only keeps plants attractive but also discourages disease and prevents plants from going to seed. This can be done with pruning shears or sometimes with fingers.

A few annuals, primarily petunias, snapdragons and pansies, may need to be pinched back after planting or after the first blooms to keep them compact and free flowering.

10. *Use proper cultural practices.* Disease-prone species require good air circulation and dry foliage. When this can't be done, use fungicide treatment.

Various pesticides can control the most

common insects, such as aphids, whitefly or spider mites. Mites and whitefly are less of a problem when plants are watered properly.

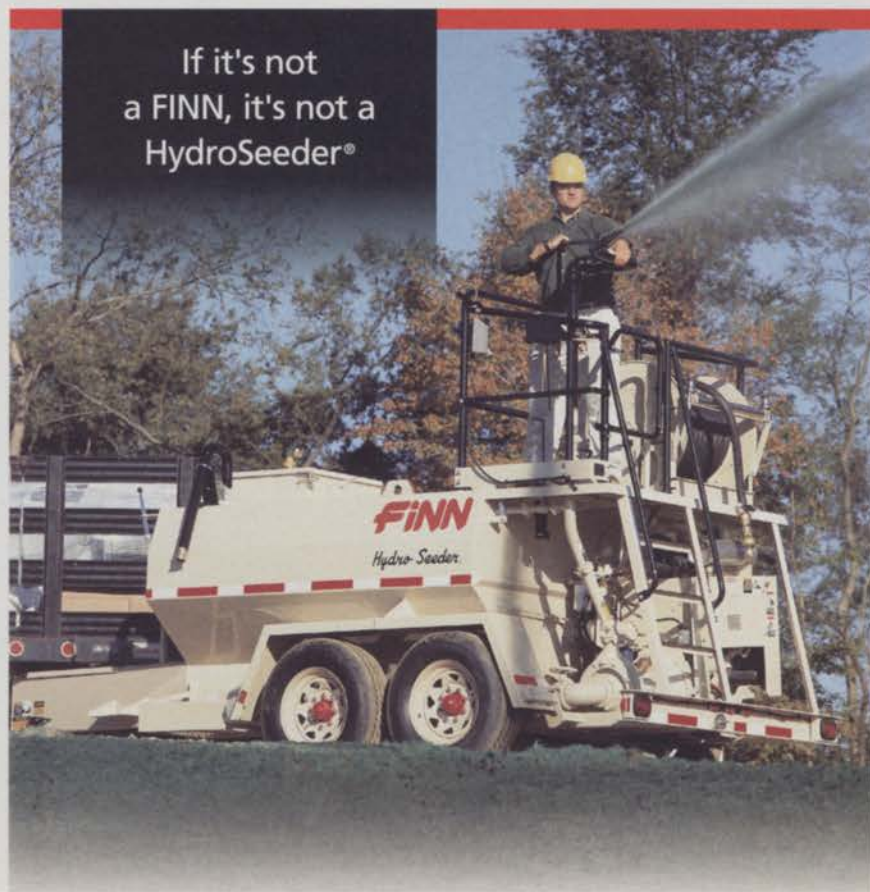
High temperatures increase insect populations, requiring more frequent pesticide treatment. Use caution with pesticides—always read the label before use.

Weeds may appear, even though mulch and pre-emergent herbicides are applied. Be

sure to remove weeds as soon as possible so they do not compete for water and nutrients.

Follow each of these 10 steps and select well-adapted varieties and landscape beds will flourish. — Ali Cybulski

The author is Contributing Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at acybulski@lawnandlandscape.com.



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Design Notebook

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For one Texan, the third time – not the first – was the charm in finding a design that complimented a home's distinct, Italian Renaissance character.

"The home was fairly new and it had been landscaped twice by two other companies, and neither one had given them the look they were wanting," noted Paul Fields, vice president and director of design for Lambert Landscape Co., Dallas, Texas.

Previous plantscapes just didn't fit the structure's fashion, Fields explained, adding that the Highland Park, Texas, home, constructed of limestone, needed an axial connection from the front yard to the back. An open foyer offered an opportunity to join the indoors with the landscape.

Another goal – setting the scene with established plant material. "The client wanted the landscape to have a feeling that the garden had been there for some time," he described. "That was achieved by the material and the detailing as well as the size of the plant material."

IN STYLE. Geometry played a significant role in design planning. Lambert incorporated parterre gardens and carefully pruned shrubs typical of the Italian Renaissance era.

"The site was level, so to give it an Italian feeling, which includes terraced gardens, we excavated and lowered the



Decorative garden statues and carefully pruned ornamentals set the stage for a Renaissance-era landscape that compliments the residence's architecture. Photo: Lambert Landscape Co.



Design Notes

PROJECT: Italian Renaissance Garden

LANDSCAPE COMPANY: Lambert Landscape Co.

DESIGNER: Paul Fields

PROPERTY SIZE: 1 acre

PROJECT TIME: Eight months

PLANTS INSTALLED: Magnolia Claudia Wannamaker, crape myrtle, Brodie juniper, Azalea, boxwood, lavender, East Palatca holly, Gardenia radican, roses, herbs and other perennials

PROJECT COST: Not Available

AWARD: ALCA Judge's Award

backyard 2½ feet and introduced limestone retaining walls around those areas," Fields described, noting that a masonry, stucco wall around the property's perimeter created access challenges and materials had to be lifted inside the walls with a crane.

"You couldn't just drive in a piece of equipment," he remarked. This impacted man-hours to a degree – Fields spent three months designing the project and installation took eight months.

Sticking to style, again, Fields emphasized the limestone material in the home by using it in retaining walls. "In the change in grade between the different terrace areas, instead of traditional steps there are grass steps," he noted, adding that the riser between the grass steps is limestone. "It's a unique transition between the spaces."

The series of gardens is connected with aisles of crape myrtles, and existing Pennsylvania bluestone laid in a herring bone pattern forms stepping stones that connect the walkway to the pool area. The effect is

a fluid line from the front yard, through the foyer, into the backyard grotto and pool area. "We tried to link the house to the grotto area through the landscape," Fields noted.

Plant material enforces this connection. The parterre garden was constructed of clipped boxwood. Terra cotta containers overflow with lavender and an alley of East Palatca holly lines one side of the property. Brodie junipers pruned like columns screen utilities and the neighboring yard.

Since the plant material was mature, much of it was obtained from New England,

(continued on page 36)

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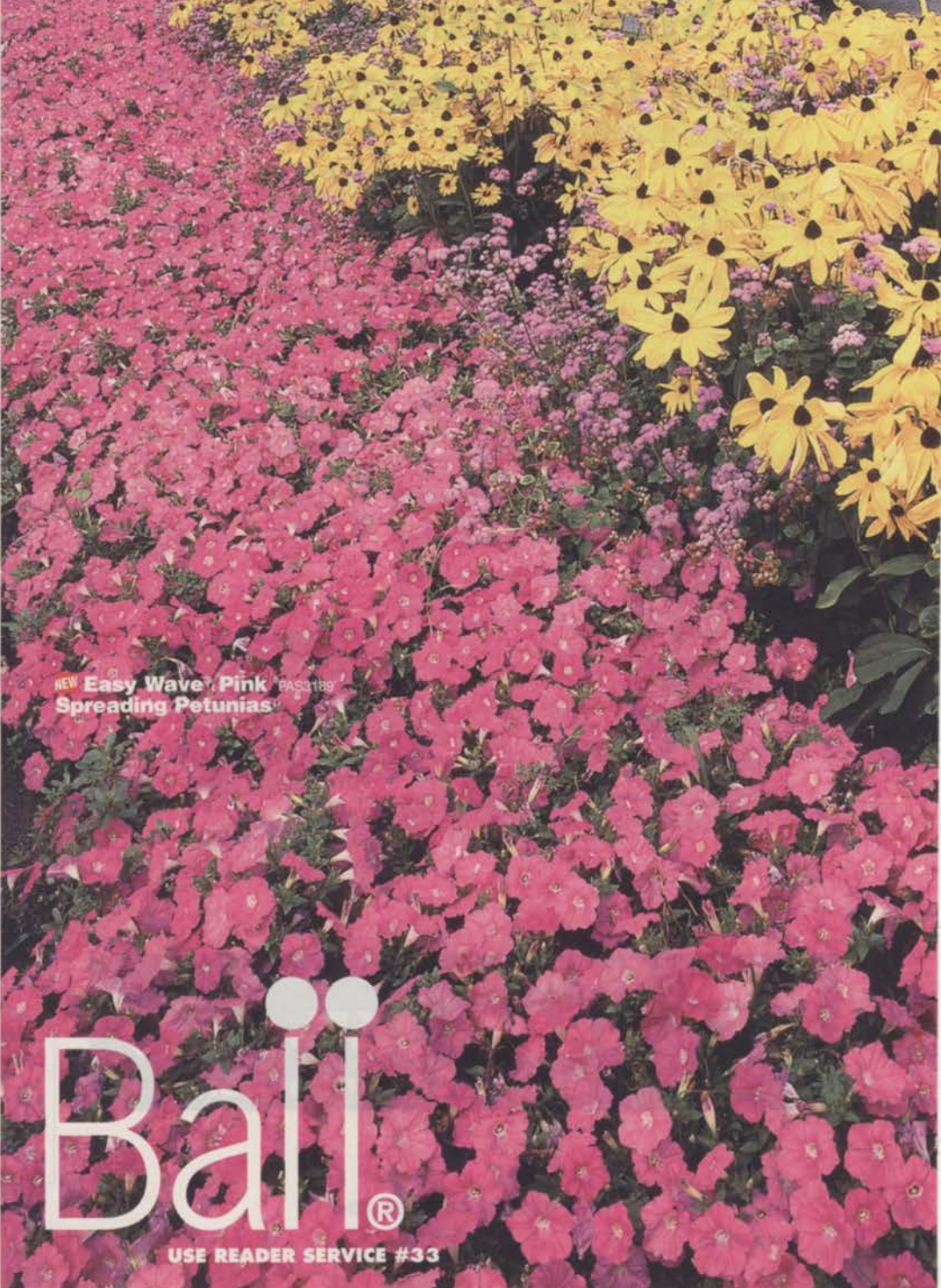
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USE READER SERVICE #33

Design Notebook

(continued from page 34)

South Carolina and Florida, all of it adaptable to the Texas climate, Fields assured. "Some of the magnolias we installed were 20 to 25 feet tall," he said.

Furthermore, 100-degree temperatures required extra installation care, he noted. "We had a week where we were in excess of 110 degrees some days and we were trying to plant

A parterre garden and rows of Brodie junipers pruned like columns contribute to the property's Italian Renaissance flair. Photo: Lambert Landscape Co.



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the trees," Fields described. "That was very stressful. We built canopies over some of the trees and installed misting systems in the tree tops to keep them cool until they were acclimated. Those were 10- to 12-inch caliper trees that were 30 to 35 feet tall."

FINAL TOUCHES. Polishing the Italian Renaissance look called for the "little things" – statues and final touches that finish off the design and enhance the property's aesthetic appeal, Fields said.

Early 19th century garden statuary – a set of four-season sculptures, in particular – lend an extra design touch. In the front yard, an existing driveway was replaced with a large motor court, composed of three different types of limestone arranged in a traditional Italian tumbling block pattern that resembles a three-dimensional cube. The perfect polish for this feature: "We swept garniere sand and compost in between the stones and we are growing thyme and dichondrin there to soften the look," Fields described.

Also in the front, the crews carved a retaining wall out of the hillside and built in a bench carved from limestone.

To top it off, Lambert Landscape Co. subscribes to organic installation and maintenance practices, avoiding synthetic fertilizers, Fields commented. "We have our own unique blend of organic amendments that consists of a lot of sand, horticultural cornmeal, Texas greensand and organic fertilizer," he listed.

These details and attention to the home's architectural time setting mesh, forming a perfect fit. "Visualize a long access with one end being the bench," Fields illustrated. "You can stand at that one end of the property and look all the way through the house to the other end." – Kristen Hampshire

The author is a Contributing Editor to Lawn & Landscape magazine, and she can be reached at khampshire@lawnandlandscape.com.



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USE READER SERVICE #35

ELM ENEMIES

Leaf Beetle Basics

In the Midwest, the elm leaf beetle is found wherever elm trees grow. Although all elm species are subject to attack, the beetle prefers Chinese elms and avoids the Wilson variety. Trees growing in urban areas are usually more heavily infested than those in forests or woods.

Leaf beetle eggs are bright yellow and spindle-shaped, and they are laid in clusters of five to 25 on the underside of elm leaves. Resulting young larvae are black and slug-like, while full-grown larvae are about ½-inch long, dull yellow with black heads, legs and hairs, and a pair of black stripes along the back.

The adult beetle is somewhat oval and about ¼-inch long. When newly emerged from the pupal stage, it is light yellow with a black stripe along each outer margin



An adult elm leaf beetle rests on a leaf. In mid-May, overwintering beetles release eggs underneath leaves. One week later, the eggs hatch and larvae begin to feed on leaves for two to three weeks. Only leaf veins remain after feeding. Photo: Gerald Lenhard, Louisiana State University



A larger beetle larva rests on this elm leaf, showing typical feeding damage – a leaf skeleton. Photo: Gerald Lenhard, Louisiana State University

of the back. As the beetle ages, the yellow color dulls to an olive green, and the black stripes become less distinct.

The adult elm leaf beetle passes the winter in protected places, like under rough bark, in cracks and crevices or in buildings, including houses and, especially, attics.

Starting about mid-May, overwintering beetles deposit their eggs on the underside of leaves. These eggs hatch in

about a week, and the larvae feed on the underside of the leaves for the next two to three weeks. Only the veins and upper surface are left, giving leaves a skeleton-like appearance. Heavily infested leaves turn brown as if scorched by fire.

When full-grown, elm leaf beetle larvae crawl down the trunk or drop to the ground and pupate at the tree base or in bark crevices. The adults emerge in about 10 days (during July), feed again on the elm leaves, and lay eggs for a second generation. Adults from this second generation hibernate unless the weather is warm enough for a third generation.

The first generation insects do most of the tree damage. Defoliated trees may grow new leaves the same season, but this second leafing becomes subject to attack by second-generation beetles.

Beetle-feeding alone will not generally kill an elm tree. However, severe feeding will weaken a tree, making it more susceptible to attack by other insects and diseases, especially Dutch elm disease. Although the elm leaf beetle does not carry this disease, the elm bark beetle, which attacks weakened trees, does. Even without secondary attack by other insect and disease pests, repeated elm leaf beetle damage may eventually weaken trees to the point of death.

Spraying of infested trees should be timed to kill the young first-generation larvae and, later, the second-generation larvae. Lawn care operators also can control elm leaf beetles by injecting a systemic insecticide into the soil around the tree roots in late May or early June. — Timothy Gibb

The author is extension entomologist, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, West Lafayette, Ind.

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Post-It Power

Three years ago, Derek Blumberg was trying to come up with a way to let clients know when Savage, Minn.-based Quality Seasons visited their properties to perform services.

Many contractors, as well as consumer advertisers and local politicians, use door hangers, so Blumberg felt they wouldn't stand out to his residential clients.

"Door hangers aren't immediate anymore," Blumberg said. "I think homeowners think of them as advertising, and when they see one they don't run to the door to see what it is."

But Blumberg remembered what does provide customers with an urgency to rush to the door – Post-It notes, such as those used by post offices to inform homeowners of awaiting packages or missed visits – so he implemented their use in his company three years ago.

The top of the note, which is larger than a typical desk Post-It note but smaller than a traditional door hanger, says, "We visited your property today." Quality Seasons technicians need only fill in the date and check off the service performed. Then they affix the note to the most likely client access point, such as a front or side door or near a mailbox. The Post-Its won't stick to wood, so technicians make sure to apply them to metal, glass or other smooth surfaces. "The Post-It pad stays neat in the truck – it's not a crumpled piece of paper in a door," Blumberg added.

And while door hangers cost between 4 to 8 cents each due to their larger size and circular cuts, post-it notes cost only 1.4 to 2 cents per note. To keep costs down even more, Blumberg prints notes in bulk – ordering 5,000 at one time – and uses a one-color design on colored paper to make the note look more like a two- to four-color piece.

"The Post-It notes help to build our accountability with clients as well," Blumberg said. "Instead of getting a bill two weeks after fall cleanup when more leaves have fallen and clients forgot you were there, the Post-Its act like receipts to help clients know when we were there and what we did on their properties."

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Also, since the note lists other services the company offers – not just the one the client currently receives – it acts as a soft marketing message, Blumberg pointed out.
– Nicole Wisniewski

The author is Managing Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine
and can be reached at nwisniewski@lawnandlandscape.com.



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by Bob West

Jeff Bowen owns Images of Green, a landscape company based in Stuart, Fla., catering to high-end residential homeowners and homeowners' associations. This year, the company's eighth full year, it should approach the \$2-million mark. And no one is more surprised by all of this than Bowen himself.

When he went to work for his father at T.W. Bowen Landscaping on Chicago's ritzy North Shore back in the 1970s, he wasn't necessarily chasing a future in the landscape industry. In fact, he describes himself back then as a "20-year-old who wasn't focused on his future or his career."

Bowen still sought and found employment throughout the next two decades, in a career that took him to Florida, then back to Chicago and, ultimately, back to Florida. Along the way, he kept picking up ideas and learning lessons that serve him well today, even though he wasn't necessarily filing them away for eventual use in his own business.

Bowen isn't a 20-year-old any longer. Instead, he's a husband, a father and a business owner, and he's most certainly focused on his future and his career.

ILLINOIS TO FLORIDA - TWICE. Jeff Bowen's first landscape lessons came courtesy of his father, a man who may have been short on praise but who possessed a sound understanding of how to service high-end residential customers. Bowen handled a variety of positions in his dad's company before his father unexpectedly passed away in the late 1970s.

Lacking the drive or desire to take over the family business, Bowen headed south to work with a large group that spent more than three years installing and caring for landscaping at a theme park that hadn't even opened yet. His group strove to meet the highest standards, and Bowen still recalls his days working at

Walt Disney World's Epcot Center and Lake Buena Vista with great fondness. "I learned about hiring for attitude and training for aptitude," he noted, adding that this was critical at a place where most landscaping took place after the park the closed at night. "Those are the things that make it such an outstanding company, and I think it will be that way forever."

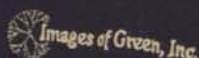
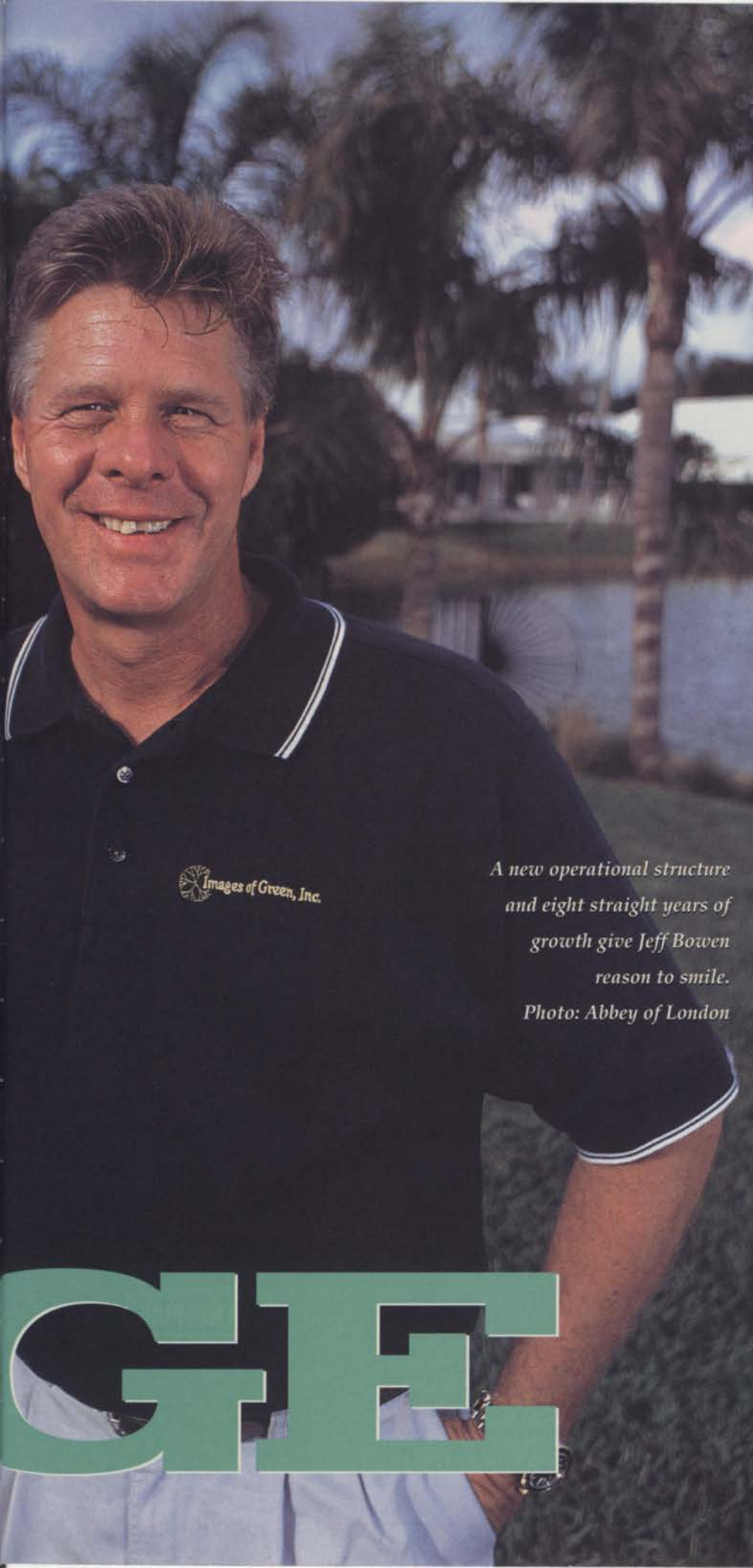
When his daughter was born in 1985, however, he and his wife chose family over fair weather and returned to the Chicago area. Unfortunately, Disney spoiled Bowen, and he struggled to find a landscape job he enjoyed. "I couldn't find anything I liked after Disney," he recalled. "I didn't want to be mow-and-go or simply production oriented."

Images of Green

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Bowen keeps
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reason to smile.*

Photo: Abbey of London

IMAGES OF GREEN

HEADQUARTERS:

Stuart, Fla.

FOUNDED: 1995

2002 REVENUE: \$1.4
million

**2003 PROJECTED
REVENUE:** \$1.8 million

SERVICE MIX:

75 percent landscape
maintenance, 25 percent
landscape installation

CLIENT MIX:

65 percent condominium/
homeowners' associations,
30 percent high-end
residential, 5 percent
commercial

EMPLOYEES: 28 year round;
75 percent of whom are
Hispanic

EQUIPMENT LINEUP: Nine
trucks, four enclosed trailers,
two open trailers, four riding
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Cover Story

(continued from page 43)

Ultimately, Bowen landed with a growing design/build firm based in the Chicago area but looking to expand into other markets around the country. "I ended up with The Brickman Group, where I got to work with Scott Brickman, his father and even his grandfather for a short period," noted Bowen, who was hired as a superintendent.

Working for The Brickman Group opened Bowen's eyes to a new side of the business – numbers management. "That's where I found out about budgets and business," he confirmed. "We had amazing budgets at Disney, and at my father's business, he ran the company by writing down his hours for the day while we ate dinner. My

mom took it from there. So Brickman was a whole new experience for me."

Bowen's Florida experience made him unique in the company at that time, so he was moved back there when The Brickman Group won a maintenance contract for a high-end residential community. As super-

(continued on page 48)

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When Jeff Bowen took a hard look at his company this winter, he saw problems. After being honest with himself, he noted that some of these problems stemmed from trying to convince himself that the company was doing everything correctly. Upon making that realization, he set about dealing with these issues to make Images of Green stronger, starting with the company's culture.

"I thought I had a real Hispanic-friendly culture, but I didn't," admitted the owner of this Stuart, Fla.-based company. "We used to serve donuts and coffee in the morning. Now we serve coffee and Mexican breakfast burritos."

Bowen has also embraced ideas he heard other contractors recommend but that he discounted as being too simplistic before. "Now we've got the flags up around the office showing which countries the guys are from, and the employees are really buying into this," he enthused, adding that 75 percent of his employees are Hispanic. "These things are so simple, but they're working and they really make a difference."

Employee training is also garnering more attention these days. "We're retraining all of our employees on all of our equipment," Bowen explained. "Training is something we've done, but we haven't done it with real compassion and commitment. Now, we train every Wednesday, and what we're really doing is working to change our culture." — Bob West

The Culture Club

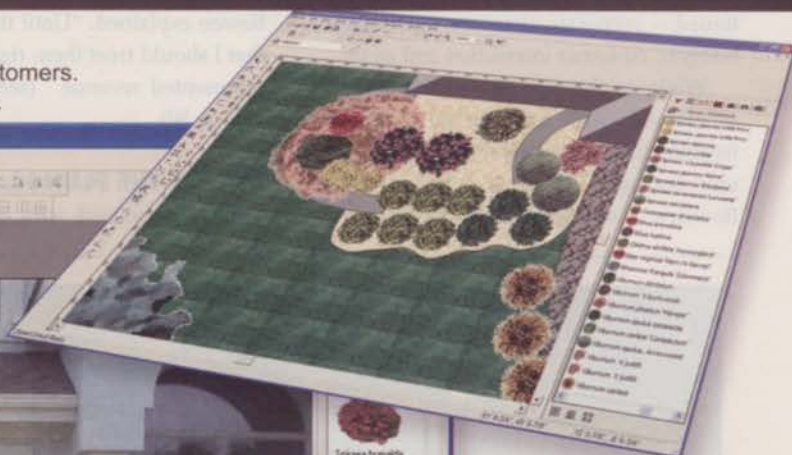
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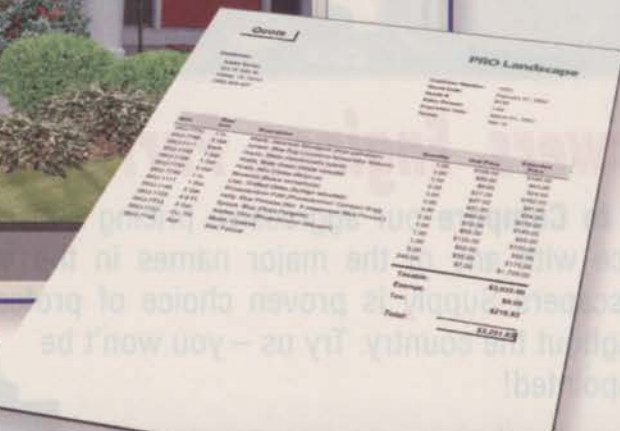
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What Are You Waiting For?

USE READER SERVICE #40

Cover Story

(continued from page 46)

intendent for the project, the education continued – corporate structure, governance, budgets, customer interaction and so on.

While on this job, Bowen also began a relationship with someone he credits for teaching him many valuable lessons, a general manager who was a key client of Bowen's. "Ted Herrle really helped me to

understand the client or the customer," Bowen explained. "Until then, I just knew that I should treat them right because they represented revenue." (see *The Customer Is...*, p. 50)

TAKING THE PLUNGE. Looking for the security associated with being your own

boss, Bowen opened up the doors of Images of Green in late 1995. Three weeks later, he had his first contract – a high-end homeowners' community the firm still manages today.

"I hired someone to help me and the two of us took care of that property," Bowen recalled. But subsequent jobs didn't all come that easily. "We got our first client because we knocked on the doors and made the phone calls, sent the letters and talked to every community manager that I knew."

"I don't profess to be a good salesperson, but I did what I needed to do," he continued, talking about a valuable lesson his father taught him early in life. "I was just a young boy when I was trying to sell something for school. I didn't do well, so I came home and I was crying. My father told me right away that if I was going to let that get me so upset that I was going to be in trouble because life isn't easy and you have to work hard to get the things you want and you can't be afraid. That was an important lesson that I've remembered to this day."

Fortunately, more jobs did come along, and the company neared \$400,000 in sales with seven employees after two years. Then Bowen realized what he had gotten himself into. "Things were going great, but all of a sudden I'm telling myself, 'Look at the responsibility,'" he explained. "It all seemed different because I didn't have the support I had at Brickman. When people want raises, it's my call. When people are problems, they're my problems."

Bowen came to the realization that he had to make a decision. "Do I stay mom-and-pop like my dad did or do I try to go corporate?" he wondered. "We were profitable and we were growing, so we decided to go for it."

BUILDING THE BUSINESS. Bowen knew what deciding to "go for it" meant, at least to some degree. He set to work creating a budget and putting certain spending limits in place. He developed operational systems. He formulated a plan.

"I'm very strict when it comes to growth," he pointed out. "I want us to grow into our growth. I think I'm a little unorthodox in that I'm more apt to hire a person today, pay the wages for training and burden to develop them into what we want them to be by the end of the year, which is when we really need

(continued on page 50)



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USE READER SERVICE #43

Cover Story

(continued from page 48)

them. A lot of companies don't worry about the people until they have the next job, but that doesn't seem organized to me.

"For example, right now we're looking to bring on a senior foreman that we don't need until June," he continued. "We may be over-staffed a little, but that shouldn't really hurt the bottom line."

LOVE 'EM OR HATE 'EM. There's no middle ground with homeowners' associations. Landscape companies either love these clients and build much of their business around caring for these high-maintenance, demanding properties or they shun the idea of taking on a job where 200 people consider themselves the client. But 65 percent of Images of Green's revenue comes from these jobs.

"You have to have an awareness of what your clients want," pointed out Bowen. "I simplify this by saying we're the clients eyes. We sell personal gardening or landscaping, we sell what we see."

Once this service commitment is reached, the benefits to these clients become obvious. "These customers know what they want and they're willing to pay for it," he pointed out. "Yes, it's often a competitive price, but I don't mind that. I love bidding work."

What are landscape companies all about? Doing quality work, making money and building up people are all possible answers, but those aren't Jeff Bowen's first answer. "Our business is about the customer," explained the president of Images of Green, Stuart, Fla. "If the customer isn't there, then my company doesn't exist."

Bowen credits Ted Herrle, a general manager and current client, for helping him learn this lesson. "What he really taught me is that kind of respect for the client," recalled Bowen, adding that Herrle helped him learn how to interact with customers as well.

"We have to communicate differently in different situations," Bowen contin-

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Bowen learned a valuable lesson about homeowners' association's priorities this year. "We raised our rates going into this year, which can be a killer for you in this market with so many price cutters out there," he explained. "But it hasn't affected us at all. That just showed us how important our level of service is."

But delivering this service has become more challenging as the company has grown, and Bowen knows that more changes are necessary. After all, he doesn't want to return to the mom-and-pop mode.

"At the end of last year, I was uncomfortable because I didn't feel like we were as efficient as we could be," he recalled. "I thought that we had real inefficiencies in our systems and operations, but I wasn't seeing them, no one else was seeing them and they weren't showing up in the profit and loss statements because we had such a great year."

Some warning signs were obvious, however. Images of Green generally employed about 25 people at any one point in time throughout 2001, but when the year ended

ued. "We're relationships builders. The happy, gratified client is easy to deal with, but what do you do with a client who is yelling at you at the top of their lungs? You listen carefully and listen for what's really bothering them. Usually, it's not what they're yelling about."

Bowen strives to maintain this awareness every day. "We have to always remember that we have to take [unhappy clients] at the beginning of the road and get them to the end of the road and make sure we keep them as clients," he pointed out. "You have to handle them without emotion and not get defensive. And that's something you show in your eyes, your lips, your hands and your body language."

— Bob West

The Customer Is...

Steady growth is every company owner's goal, and Jeff Bowen is no different when it comes to plotting out Images of Green's future. Each year has been better than the year before, and 2002 was the company's first big growth year, thanks to one key job.

1995 - \$200,000

1996 - \$400,000

1997 - \$625,000

1998 - \$690,000

1999 - \$800,000

2000 - \$875,000

2001 - \$995,000

2002 - \$1.4 million

Growth History

Bowen sent out 67 W2 forms. "We had essentially turned our crews over almost three times, and nobody wants that," he admitted.

Ultimately, Bowen trusted his instinct and decided to make changes. After talking to other contractors regarding various industry consultants, he brought in Rick Carver to teach his managers about Carver's Compass System. "Our Hispanic employees call me the big boss with many hats, and that fits," Bowen explained. "But now we're creating a system with incentives that we can hopefully use to keep our people and help them grow so they are trying to take over my job."

The new program is only months old, so Bowen can't evaluate it yet, but he likes what he sees thus far. "Our crews are trying to be more efficient so they can make more money, but they know that everything is quality based so they can't ignore that," he remarked. "And they're careful about spending money. I heard two of our employees talking the other day about how one wanted to get a new mower, but he didn't want to spend the money. I don't want us to hurt our performance by not having good equipment, so we got the mower, but I love the way they're thinking now."

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Professional Products

by Bob West

Green Lawns Plus puts its customers first as it continues building its lawn care operation.

Everybody likes to talk about how their lawn care company focuses on customers. After all, this is a service industry, isn't it? Green Lawns Plus in Marlboro, Mass., is no different. "Our whole focus from the beginning was to set ourselves apart from some of the companies out there, so we like to stress that we provide a personalized service," explained Cliff Drezek, operations manager. "We like to operate on a first-name basis with our customers."

Of course, anyone can talk the talk. That's the easy part. Those companies that can truly implement a customer-first focus into their business are the ones that set themselves apart from the rest.

WALKING THE WALK. A number of different elements go into quality customer service, none of which are too unique. But the effort starts with the company's lawn care technicians and their quick response to customer calls.

"We track every phone call we get in a log," explained Drezek, who also oversees the lawn care service. "All of the technicians have mailboxes, and they know they need to get their messages every day. From there, we monitor everything."

This constant updating and reporting builds accountability. "The technicians are supposed to write down the date an estimate call comes in, and we want them responding to that within 24 hours



Cliff Drezek credits the company's systems and follow up for keeping technicians accountable regarding service.

whenever possible," Drezek noted, adding that responding to client complaints in a timely fashion is even more critical. "We'll review their response time, and if we notice a pattern where things are taking longer than we like, we'll talk to the technician and address any problems."

But Drezek is a realist. He knows that immediate response isn't always an option. In these cases, communication can be an acceptable substitute. "I've gone so far as to tell our technicians that when you get the estimate request, call the customer and let them know that you're aware of their request," he commented. "Tell them we'll try to get out there in the next day or two."

Too many companies ignore the importance of such communication and service, Drezek noted.

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First Look

(continued from page 54)

"Spring and early summer are key in terms of being the first one to show up," he explained. "Just getting out there [for an estimate] shows we care, and it bodes well for our responsiveness when there is a problem. We hear a lot of customers complain about dealing with service people in general, but all they're looking for is some courtesy."

Technicians also boost customer service satisfaction levels by handling the same properties over time. "We want to keep the same technicians in the same areas from one year to the next so there's some familiarity," related Dreze, adding that company has seen its customer retention levels drop more in

(continued on page 58)

The bills don't necessarily stop just because the work does. Lawn care companies in northern climates often have to get creative to keep money coming in the door in the winter months. Holiday lighting has become popular in recent years, but fierce winter weather can make any roof-top service a challenge.

Green Lawns Plus hopes to boost sales while keeping its feet on the ground next winter. "Our high temperature should've been 41 degrees yesterday," noted the Marlboro, Mass., company's operations manager on a 19-degree day in late February. "The equipment is ready to go, so we have to figure out something to do."

Could that something be garage cleaning? Dreze thinks so, which is why the company plans on sending a direct mail effort to some of its better residential customers early next winter. "This is work that doesn't require much investment up front - we've already got the bodies and the trucks," Dreze pointed out. "We can straighten up the garages, wash the windows and sweeps the floors. Maybe we could even offer to install some storage or shelving as we get more comfortable, but we shouldn't be at the job more than an hour."

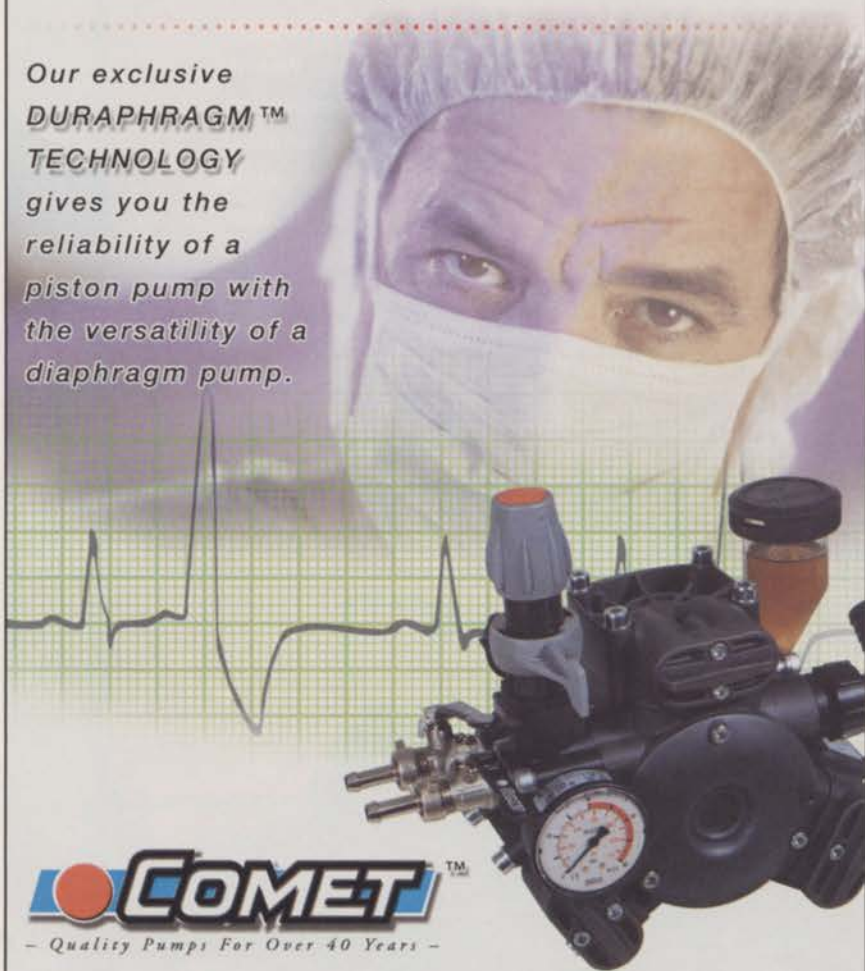
Obviously, adding new services creates new challenges, which is a good reason for starting slowly next year. "We'll send out a couple hundred post cards and see what response we get," Dreze noted. "Initially, when you don't know what response you'll get and whether or not you've priced the service to make it attractive, there are a lot of questions."

What the company hopes to accomplish isn't a question it needs to answer. "We're just trying to defray costs to keep the labor around in the winter," he pointed out. "That's especially important when you might not get on to the properties when you expect to." - **Bob West**

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First Look

(continued from page 56)

areas where technicians are moved or replaced midseason. "We want the customer to know the technician. Plus, if the technician knows his route and his lawns, then he'll be more productive."

SALES SOLUTIONS. Like most companies, Green Lawns Plus looks to collect as

many referrals as possible, but that's not going to be enough to provide the desired growth. "We don't do any telemarketing, but some time in early March we'll start getting in touch with our customers who haven't renewed yet for the coming year," Drezek explained, adding that telemarketing for new business simply hasn't ever

A number of **different**
elements go into *quality*
customer service. The
effort starts with the
company's **lawn care**
technicians and their
quick response to
customer calls.

provided sufficient return to justify the expense for the company. "We'll certainly upsell [customers we call] if they ask about something like a lime application or slitseeding service, but we're not calling them to sell."

After sending out renewal forms in early December, Green Lawns Plus encourages early-season customer renewals by offering a small discount for those customers who pre-pay for their year-long service by March 1. "About 35 percent of the customers take advantage of this, and we're on par with past performance again this year," Drezek observed, adding that half of the company's customers hadn't communicated anything about their 2003 service as of this cutoff point. Many people aren't ready to think about lawn care when snow covers the ground, so most follow-up calls are made once the first round begins and the callers can explain to customers that a technician will be in the area the next day.

At this point, Drezek just wants to know when those first applications will start. "This winter could really create some problems for a bunch of us," he admitted. "We don't want to see that window for the first round of treatments reduced. Plus, there are quite a few properties that didn't get cleared of debris before the snow started last fall. There's a lot of potential that we'll find mole and mice damage from rodents feeding on low-hanging evergreens, and we're seeing extreme desiccation due to sudden cold snaps on exposed turf."

Sounds like a perfect time to be focused on customer service. **ll**

The author is Editor/Group Publisher of *Lawn & Landscape*, and he can be reached at bwest@lawnandlandscape.com.

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USE READER SERVICE #49

Pricing Mowing Services

by Lauren Spiers

More important than revenue, contractors who perform commercial mowing must understand what they pay out before they bring more money in.

If train "A" leaves New York at 2 p.m. traveling west at 50 mph, and train "B" leaves Los Angeles at 3:30 p.m. traveling east at 40 mph, what time will they meet in St. Louis and what will each conductor's hourly wage be, assuming a 40-hour workweek?

Go ahead, roll your eyes – a ridiculous story problem like that deserves it. But when applied to pricing mowing services, landscape contractors better reach for their calculators and No. 2 pencils. Though computer spreadsheets have made the job simpler, headache-inducing math is a reality in the world of pricing commercial mowing services. After all, trucks, mowers and all the extras cost money – not to mention accounting for payroll, administrative costs, machine maintenance, etc. Even seemingly small conveniences like paperclips for the office staff or stamps to send invoices can add up.

Seasoned lawn maintenance veterans know this all too well and recognize that the only way to make up out-of-pocket costs is to price mowing services in a range that is high enough to cover expenses but low enough to stay competitive.

FIRST THINGS FIRST. Many contractors new to the industry struggle with the idea that they have to establish their pricing rates before they can go out and bid on a commercial job. Doing this means first knowing what it costs to be in business. "When it comes to what to charge to cut someone's grass, who thinks about their insurance? But that's a cost," reminded Mike Russo, founder, Russo Lawn & Landscape, Windsor Locks, Conn. "Whether the grass is cut or not, you have to pay it. With equipment costs, even if the equipment is bought and paid for with cash on the same day, there's a cost because it's going to wear out. If your price isn't high enough to afford more equipment, how could you go into business?"

Working backwards is often how contractors determine what to charge, so the first thing to look at is a detailed and updated profit and loss statement. According to Frank Ross's book *Pricing for the Green Industry*, a company's costs include "direct costs" like payroll, materials and equipment, and "overhead costs" such as equipment maintenance, fuel, insurance and rent. Contractors must recoup all of those costs, plus a little more if the company hopes to make money and not just break even.

After adding up total costs, the next step is to divide that number by the total man-hours for a specific job during the course of the maintenance contract. This gives the total cost per

(continued on page 62)

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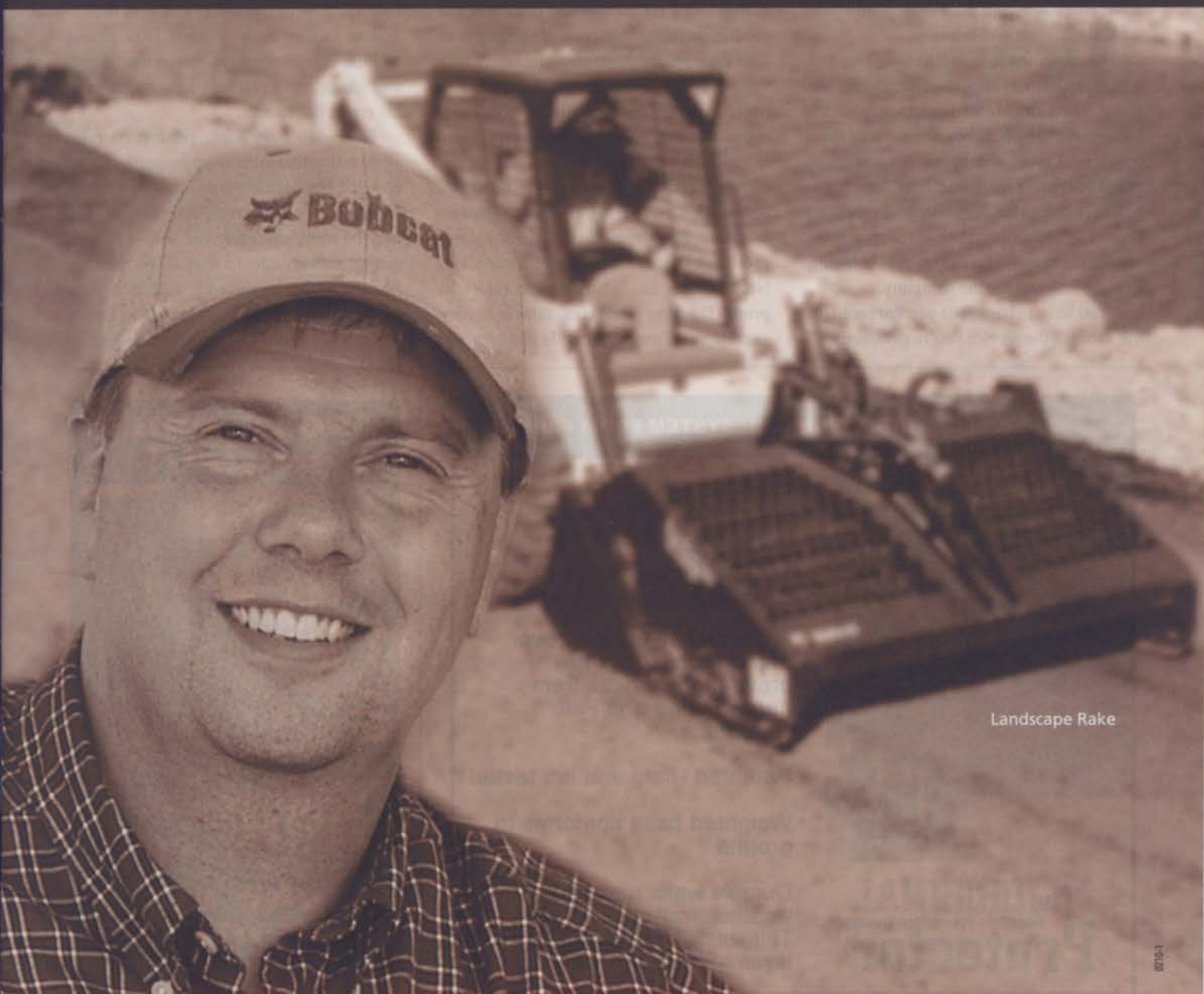
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USE READER SERVICE #50

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Pricing Mowing Services

(continued from page 60)

hour the company must make up on that job. For example, if providing a three-man crew and all necessary equipment costs \$150,000 per year, assuming the crew works a full 6,000 man-hours during that time period, the company must charge \$25 per hour to break even. Charging a nice, round \$30 per hour for the job puts \$30,000 profit in the company's pocket. Contractors can raise or lower that 20-percent markup depending on what the market will bear.

The math itself is relatively easy, but where do the most important numbers come from? The clock. Most landscape contractors agree that what they sell most in their business is time, and being as accurate as possible when calculating how long a job will take helps increase contractors' bottom lines. Logically, the more efficient a crew can be, the more jobs it can take on, bringing in more revenue for the company.

"You have to base your percent profit on the value of the service you're performing,"

insisted Tom Cooper, vice president of business development, Stiles Landscape Co., Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. "I can do a job and make 15 percent net profit and you could do the same job and make 8 percent net profit because I might be more efficient than you. You take what the market will bear and continue to improve your efficiencies."

To come up with the most accurate rates to charge, many contractors first determine the production rate of each piece of equipment in their fleet. Spreadsheets showing how many thousand square feet a certain mower can cover in an hour are available from most manufacturers, but many contractors prefer to run their own trials.

"Performing your own production rates really helps vs. looking at what the manufacturers say," remarked Dan Standley, president, Dan's Landscaping & Lawn Care, New Orleans, La. "That's real world vs. in print." Figuring production rates is as easy as taking a crewmember aside and bringing

Working backwards is often how **contractors** determine what to **charge**, so the **first thing to look at** is a **detailed and updated profit and loss statement**.

a stopwatch. With his own crewmembers behind the wheel, Standley can time his operators as they cover thousands of square and linear feet on every piece of machinery, and gauge more precisely how much work his crews can handle.

For bidding on a job, production rates allow estimators to break up properties based on what kind of mower or other equipment will be on them. A large, open acre of land may be most efficiently cut with a 72-inch riding mower; add to that a few parking islands easiest to cut with a 21-inch push mower; plus several hundred linear feet of

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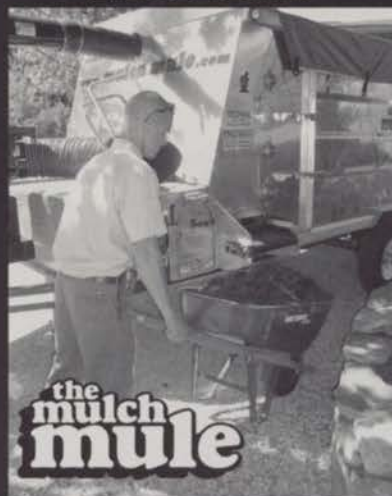
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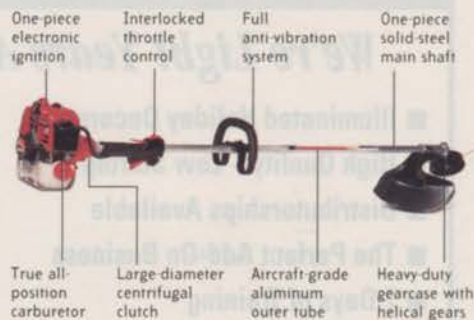


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Pricing Mowing Services

(continued from page 62)

edging and weedeating. Contractors can measure the property's square footage and use pre-determined production rates for each piece of equipment to calculate man-hours.

FRIES WITH THAT? Armed with the basic knowledge of how to price commercial mowing for profitability, the next hurdle for contractors is to understand that a "mowing job" is anything but. "Generally, clients are looking for more than some kid to cut the grass, so [mowing] is part of maintaining a whole site," Russo explained.

So what should a mowing contract include? This depends on the area of the country. For the most part, jobs include mowing, edging, tree and shrub pruning, weeding of plant beds, and blowing off and collecting debris. Greg Servello, president, Servello & Son, Orange City, Fla., mentioned that, for commercial contracts, he tries to include as many add-ons as possible. "We try to roll it up into one contract and become 100-per-

cent responsible for that contract," he said. "We try not to go in and just price mowing."

Getting customers to buy into additional services is a way to increase revenue, and Servello's approach minimizes competition. But when it comes to pricing, Cooper cautions that contractors may be able to make a greater profit by mentioning add-ons later.

"The more things that are included in the contract, typically the less your profitability," he reasoned. By including add-ons in a bid, "you're having to give competitive bid prices for something that, if it's part of the job after the contract, you're not forced to be the low bidder to get the job." Essentially, if contractors save something like mulching for upselling later, they can bump up their percent profit for that service since they already won the account. Including the same service as part of the bid usually means lowering the profit margin to keep the entire bid competitive.

Another important point to remember is that each aspect of a mowing job is multifac-

eted and must be measured and categorized to pinpoint necessary man-hours. Some questions Russo asks when it comes to mowing in particular are: Is it a small area? Are they cut up areas? Large, wide open areas? Does the site have irrigation? Does the grass grow vigorously or does it grow thin? If production rates were timed on a flat, open area, contractors need to remember that tighter areas with several obstacles or slopes may decrease the production time and increase man-hours. Also, faster-growing turf translates into more site visits.

Similarly, for tasks like hedge pruning, Standley encourages contractors to account for variables like size in addition to linear feet. Is the crewmember able to walk along and trim the hedges at waist high or will a ladder be necessary to reach certain areas?

To account for obstacles and variables, Cooper categorizes each aspect of a mowing job. For instance, "you're going to

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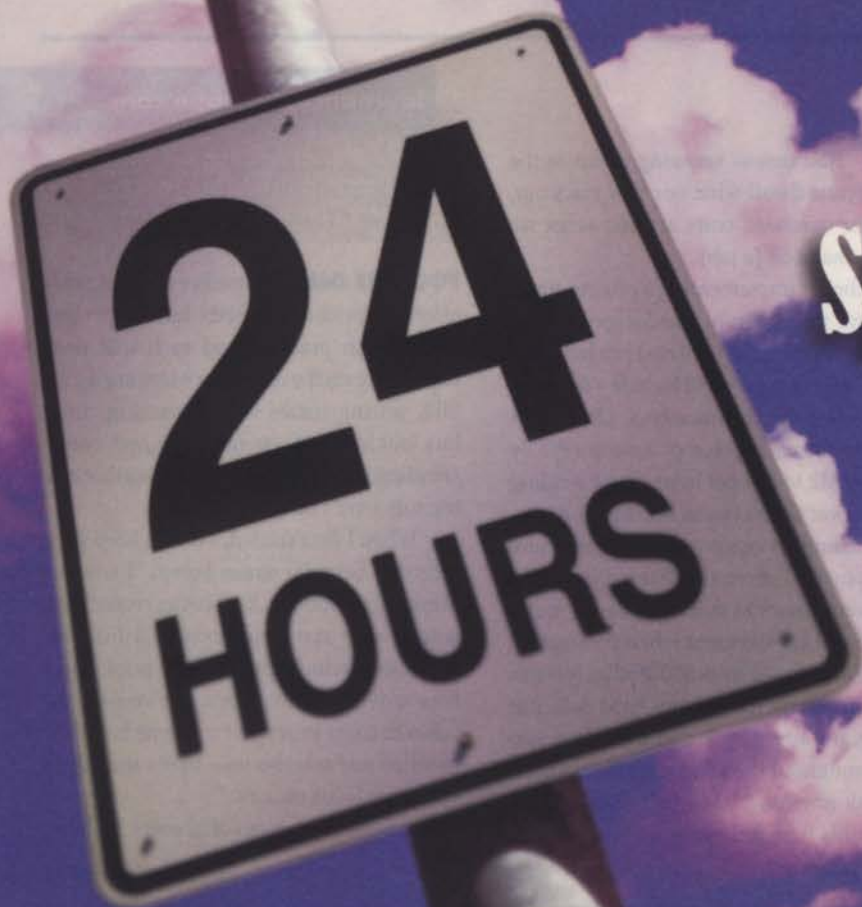


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Pricing Mowing Services

(continued from page 64)

have three basic categories for [any] riding lawn mower: easy, moderate and difficult," he described. Each of these difficulty levels is determined by the number of obstacles and the terrain in the area to mow. For obstacles like tree rings, fire hydrants and traffic signs, Cooper added, "you have to assign a numerical value to each one of those for weedeating. If there are 30 obstacles that account for an average of 3 feet of edging and weedeating, you have to plug that into the estimate of hours."

Compiling so much data for production rates and property measurements may seem like busywork, but Mike Mitchell, vice president of operations, Signature Landscape, Olathe, Kan., assures that it's worth the time spent. "Pricing in the industry is falling and the only way we're going to be able to remain competitive beyond giving what we believe is superior service, is to make sure we're giving it at a great value," he acknowl-

edged. "That means knowing down to the most minute detail what our true costs are, what our overhead costs are and what we want to make on [a job]."

Mitchell is implementing a pricing structure new to Signature Landscape. Rather than determining the total cost per hour of a job, the new structure will include a flat labor rate to cover the crewmembers, plus a per-hour rate for each piece of machinery. By charging \$12 to \$14 per hour to use a riding lawn mower for instance, Mitchell is essentially creating savings accounts for each piece of equipment. The money charged for its use goes directly back to that machine for maintenance and replacement when necessary.

"We've done some timed studies [of each machine] and we have pretty good data, but we're going to go back and track [the system] throughout the season in case we need to tweak anything," Mitchell said, adding that by this time next year, the new system will be perfected.

lawnandlandscape.com

See our Online Extras section for more information on pricing commercial mowing.

FOOL ME ONCE. There are a multitude of effective pricing methods landscape contractors can practice, and each will work depending on the company's size and goals. Still, pricing comes with a learning curve, but looking back on mistakes and understanding what went wrong ensures that contractors won't be fooled twice.

"When I first started, I didn't keep good records," Servello remembered. "Early on I think I, personally, kept better records that would have sped up business a little bit. Now we include production rates, man-hours, overhead expenses. We've had consultants come in and set up some boards to monitor our man-hours - that's something we really focus on now."

An industry veteran of 22 years, Standley

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Pricing Mowing Services

(continued from page 66)

agreed and emphasized that knowing those costs makes profitability possible. "You can't use the pluck-from-the-sky method," he maintained. "Guys go in and say, 'This property looks like it's going to be X - I think we can afford this.' Then you run into problems or extra work that you didn't anticipate. You want to do it to keep the job, but the bottom line is that you're losing your tail."

Standley added that working with the client to specify what each part of the job entails is essential. Does shrub trimming mean cutting 4 inches off the top of the bushes or just snipping scraggly branches? Defining these terms helps contractors know what their costs will be and keeps property managers happy with their service.

Cooper recognizes many problems companies run into on commercial jobs. Inaccurate accounting for downtime, travel time and

(continued on page 157)

Most landscape contractors handling commercial mowing accounts understand the need to determine production rates for each piece of equipment in their fleets. From there, contractors can determine the man-hours necessary to complete jobs, followed by the cost per hour to have crews on properties.

Generally, this dollar amount comes out to a flat fee per hour, but Mike Mitchell, vice president of operations, Signature Landscape, Olathe, Kan., took things one step further. "We have a basic labor rate, which is currently \$20 per hour for one crewmember," he explained. "Then, each piece of equipment has its own rate per hour that we tack on to that." This pricing method is new to Signature Landscape, and Mitchell explained that it allows the company to generate revenue for each mower and hand-held machine, so the money is already there when the time comes to buy new equipment.

"We've spent a lot of time researching the current properties that we're doing and comparing that to the new pricing system. It's falling pretty well in line," Mitchell affirmed. Tentatively, the cost per hour for each piece of equipment looks something like this: Weedeaters, blowers, stick edgers and other hand-held equipment will run a little over \$1 per hour. Mowers can cost up to \$12 to \$14 for larger machines. How did they come up with these numbers?

"We take the total cost of the equipment and then figure out that riding lawn mower 'X' should last us five years with an estimated 600 hours per year on it - that's 3,000 hours. You take the total price, divide that by 3,000 hours and that's your fixed cost." From there, Mitchell adds in estimated costs of fuel, oil, grease and mower blades, arriving at a final figure.

"It's not like we're reinventing the wheel," Mitchell acknowledged. "We borrowed a lot of information from different companies, we've networked across the country with people who do it better than we do so the system we come out with has the best of all those other operations." - Lauren Spiers

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USE READER SERVICE #63

by Ron Wolford

Learn about this bothersome weed to improve management methods.

Crabgrass CONTROL



Death and taxes are inevitable, or so goes the saying. And so, it seems, is crabgrass.

Lawn care operators (LCOs) often consider crabgrass the scourge of lawns. With the possible exception of dandelions, no other weed creates as many headaches or is responsible for as much of the lawn care product market.

Unfortunately, in addition to its irritating and persistent nature that annoys LCOs to no end, crabgrass, also known as finger grass, crowfoot and purple crabgrass, is one of the most difficult weeds to control once it has sprouted.

LIFE CYCLE LINGO. Crabgrass has been around for some time. It was first introduced into the United States in 1844 as a potential forage crop. Prior to that it was grown as a grain crop in China in 2700 B.C. Recently, researchers in Oklahoma have developed the only commercially available crabgrass variety in the United States called 'Red River,' which variety provides grazing for cattle and produces quality hay.

To adequately control this weed, one has to understand its lifecycle.

There are two types of annual weeds – winter and summer. Winter annuals germinate in late summer and early fall – they are dormant during the winter, flower in early spring or summer and then die. Henbit, for instance, is a winter annual.

Crabgrass, on the other hand, is a summer annual, meaning its seeds will germinate during spring

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Crabgrass seedheads (top left) appear in August and September. Large crabgrass leaves (top right) are pale blue green and 2 to 6 inches long, while smooth crabgrass leaves are dull green, purple tinged and 1 to 4 inches long. A faded crabgrass seedling blemishes lush, green grass (bottom). Photos: University of Illinois

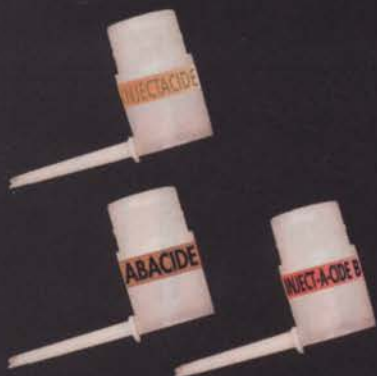


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BY LAUREN SPIERS

Flowering trees offer year-round interest that other landscape elements can't match.

IN Bloom

Consider the oak tree. Majestic. Strong. A time-honored inspiration for tree houses. Undoubtedly, oak trees and other species like it are the most well-recognized by homeowners, but landscape contractors find that smaller, more delicate-looking flowering trees add certain dimensions of appeal that escape the old standbys.

"They're just as shapely as [other trees] and they have spectacular flowers. You get a wonderful bonus during the bloom season," expressed Derek Burch, president, Horticultural Masterworks, Plantation, Fla. Because of the constantly warm weather, flowering trees thrive in Burch's area, but landscape designers and contractors all over the country

can introduce these color-bursting beauties into both residential and commercial landscapes.

Generally, flowering trees require the same levels of care and attention as their blossom-less counterparts. Still, horticulture and nursery specialists insist that there are a few details contractors need to remember when choosing, planting and caring for flowering trees. Likewise, keeping eyes open for new varieties and those gaining popularity ensures that contractors stay ahead of the curve when developing new designs.

BUDDING INTERESTS. Clients like to know that their landscape designers are on the cutting edge of industry know-how. When contractors understand new techniques and design trends, landscapes become more appealing and inviting.

In the flowering tree world, current trends are leaning more toward using new varieties of old favorites than toward bringing more obscure trees into circulation. What's so appealing about the new varieties? They're tougher than their predecessors.

"I think there's a definite trend with the flowering crabapples in bringing in varieties that are disease resistant," suggested Tom Demaline, president, Willoway Nurseries, Avon, Ohio. "The industry is growing new varieties now so the customer has a better product down the road." In addition to newer varieties of crabapples that resist scab and blight, newer species of Dogwoods are more resistant to borers than older varieties, and some newer fruit trees hold onto their fruit longer, avoiding messes in high-traffic areas.



FLOWERING TREES

There are many flowering trees available, but how can contractors choose among them? First, they need to look for good branching structures and buds during dormancy, like these yellowing blooms (below). Photos: Clean Cut (above), Horticultural Masterworks (two below)



Similar amendments make certain pear trees more appealing. "The Bradford [pear] is the one people like most, but it's also the one with the worst habits," remarked Gene Sumi, garden horticulturist, Homstead Gardens, Davidsonville, Md. For instance, Bradfords' branches tend to grow in a "V" shape, weakening the tree during strong weather. The pear varieties Aristocrat and Capital, though they don't have quite the same shape as Bradfords, have better branching and work well in the landscape.

Also, smaller trees are gaining popularity for both residential and commercial installation. "People are looking for trees with more of a dwarf size – something that's going to fit in a condominium courtyard or a smaller backyard," Demaline explained, adding that dwarf trees may have 10-foot-high by 10-foot-wide finished heads, as opposed to a standard 20-foot by 20-foot, making them easier to apply in tight spots. Burch mentioned that dwarves also are popular because they don't overcrowd yards.

Dogwoods are also very popular flowering trees, including the new Rutgers varieties: Constellation®, StellarPink®, Aurora® and Galaxy® dogwoods. Dennis Simeone, branch manager, Skinner Nurseries, Atlanta, Ga., noted that these varieties are more leaf spot and heat resistant, and also

are more resistant to borers that frequent flowering trees.

Utilizing stronger, more disease-resistant varieties ramps up the popularity of flowering trees, according to Jerry Fultz, general manager, Acorn Farms, Columbus, Ohio. "I think flowering trees have developed a bad name over the years because of poor selection upon installation," he commented. "[Contractors] don't pick out the proper disease-resistant trees, nor do they pick out cultivars that are landscape-friendly." So, beyond choosing trees that address clients' concerns and maintenance issues, determining the right kind of flowering tree to use in a landscape is just as important.

PICKING & CHOOSING. As with deciding which flowers and shrubs to incorporate into a garden design, contractors must consider several factors when selecting flowering trees.

"There are so many different kinds of flowering trees that it's necessary to find out just what kind of situation you have," Sumi insisted. "The first factor to consider



is size." He added that some homeowners believe that flowering trees simply don't grow as large as "regular" trees like oaks and sycamores, but that isn't always the case. And, obviously, planting a too-big tree in a too-small area can damage both the plant and the property.

"The tree has to stay in a confined spot and a commonly made mistake in landscapes is that the tree gets too big for the area," Demaline agreed, urging contractors to think about the tree's future. "Is that tree going to look good there 20 years from now or will it be too confined?" Dwarf ornamental trees are often the solution for spatial concerns.

Additionally, certain amounts of sun and shade are necessary for flowering trees to thrive. Properly placing trees requiring full sun, like redbuds and magnolias, ensures that they will bloom at the appropriate time and continue to flourish.

But size, space and sun are not the only considerations for helping flowering trees live up to their colorful potentials. "Many [flowering trees] come from areas that have a strong stress before they flower – winter cold for apples, peaches, pears; dryness for a lot of tropical plants," Burch maintained. "You need to be aware of the background of the tree and have it in a place in which it can get this stress. It triggers the tree into thinking about flowering."

Like all other plants and flowers, flowering trees thrive in designated United States Department of Agriculture hardiness zones throughout the country. Keeping trees within zones appropriate to their habits is essential for the tree to thrive. Simeone added some examples. Many flowering Viburnum, for instance, won't work

FLOWERING TREES

in zone eight, as well as evergreen varieties might. Dogwoods are similar, but cherries need a cold period in order to bloom.

Additionally, contractors need to consult with their clients before they head to the nursery. "I seek out from the client what their interests are," offered Melissa Turner, horticulturist with Homestead Gardens' landscaping division. "I find out if they prefer any colors over others, if they're going to be spending a lot of time in their yard and are looking for shade."

Bloom time is something homeowners often neglect to consider, sometimes because they are under the impression that flowering trees flower all year. "Generally, flowering trees have a two- to three-week flowering period, and it's going to be a shade tree or just a regular green tree for most of the year," Sumi said.

"If [contractors] factor in the bloom stages, they'll see that certain ones will start off in the spring really early and some go all the way into summer," Fultz noted. Overlapping these periods keeps landscapes interesting, by having at least one or two trees in bloom throughout warmer months.

A few final considerations when choosing flowering trees arise as contractors

scour nurseries for the right tree. "Make sure there's a solid rootball proportionate to the caliper of the tree (10 to 12 inches of rootball per inch of caliper), and make sure the tree has a uniform structure and is well-branched," Simeone advised, noting selection tips good for all trees. "Trees should have leaf or flower buds on them if they're dormant and, if it's leafed out, make sure the leaves have good color and aren't wilted."

"Look for trees that have good form – they're not lopsided on one side and they don't have a lot of crossbranching, which could cause problems down the road," Turner added. "If you have a really thick branch – a main leader – and it's crossed over another branch, they'll girdle each other and you'll end up losing both those branches, or you'll have to eliminate one and it's going to be a bad cut."

Working through a checklist of important considerations before installing a tree can reduce potential problems later. From there, maintenance becomes the issue.

HAPPY LITTLE TREES. After choosing flowering trees, contractors can follow plant and maintenance guidelines similar to those used for non-flowering varieties.

lawnandlandscape.com



Check the April issue online for tips on battling flowering tree pests.

For instance, planting depth is important for all trees. "The guideline is, no matter how [the tree] comes to the site, when it goes into the ground, the uppermost part of the main root must be right at the surface," Burch described.

Determining the best time to plant flowering trees matters as well. "Fall tends to be a good time to plant the trees – that way you can get them established before spring growth," Fultz reasoned. "But certain trees aren't best planted in the fall, so early spring is your next best bet."

"Planting time depends on the variety or the species," Demaline elaborated. "For a *Malus* or crabapple, either fall or spring is fine, or the summer if the tree is dug any time during the growing season because it's hardier. The *Prunus* varieties are better planted in the spring but can be planted in the fall if they're established and watered."

Then, once established, a tree will take care of itself as long as it is watered and fertilized properly. Aside from that, Simeone added, "don't prune before bloom," and cautioned that contractors should prune flowering trees only after the flowers have become unattractive. "Otherwise, you'll cut off the buds," he said. In terms of other pruning, Simeone also advised removing interior crossing branches, which can cause rubbing and make the tree more vulnerable to diseases and pests.

Overall though, flowering trees add a little something extra in landscape installations.

"You've got the flower in the spring, the fruit in the fall and the summer color and fall leaf color," Demaline observed. "As opposed to a shade tree, it gives you more variety to look at."



The author is Assistant Editor of *Lawn & Landscape* and can be reached at lspeiers@lawnandlandscape.com.

RAINBOW CONNECTION

White and pink blossoms are probably the most commonly seen colors on flowering trees, but contractors and their clients have a whole rainbow to choose from when sprucing up their landscapes. Here are a few flowering trees that represent the whole spectrum. – Lauren Spiers

Centennial Spirit Crape Myrtle <i>Lagerstroemia indica</i> 'Centennial Spirit' Plant Patent No. 6383	Clusters of red wine-colored flowers	Dark red flowers in summer	Zones 9-11 Full sun
Forest Pansy Redbud <i>Cercis canadensis</i> 'Forest Pansy'	Sweet pea-shaped pink clusters	Early spring blooms	Zones 5-9 Full sun
Yellow Bird Magnolia <i>Magnolia</i> x 'Yellow Bird'	Large, canary yellow blooms	2- to 3-week bloom period in late spring	Zones 6-9 Full sun
Tulip Tree <i>Liriodendron tulipifera</i>	Tulip-shaped greenish-yellow and orange flowers	Late spring blooms	Zones 5-9 Full sun
Blue Glorybower <i>Clerodendrum ugandense</i>	Two-tone violet blue and pale blue flowers	Abundant flowers summer through fall	Zones 10-11 Partial sun
Timeless Beauty™ Desert Willow <i>Chilopsis linearis</i> 'Monhews' Plant Patent No. 11078	Clusters of purple trumpet-shaped flowers	Continuous blooming spring through summer	Zones 4-8 Full sun
Aurora® Dogwood <i>Cornus</i> x 'Rutban' Plant Patent No. 7205	Star-shaped, white blossoms	Early summer blooms	Zones 5-8 Full sun

BY LAUREN SPIERS

Bigger jobs often require dedicated tree spades (left), but most landscape contractors find that skid-steer-mounted spades work best for them. Photos: Big John Tree Transplanting (left), Bobcat (below)



Super Spades

Here's a riddle: What gets bigger the more you take away from it? No...keep guessing. Wrong again. Stumped? The answer might make you roll your eyes.

A hole!

Anyone who has performed the back-breaking work of digging holes for landscape purposes knows that there must be an easier way to get plants into the ground. Most contractors turn to skid-steer attachments like augers or even use backhoes for such situations. For some though, tree spades are also effective excavators, making room for Mrs. Smith's new Japanese maple without much trouble.

Though tree spades are best known for their function in the nursery trade, landscape contractors are giving them more attention. Numerous sizes and mountings can make tree spades valuable assets in a landscape company, cutting down on labor and opening businesses to arbor services.

DIGGING IN. "Where [contractors] used to come in and clear everything out and come back in later to replant or restructure the landscape, today they don't want to do that," expressed Paul Anderson, attachment products marketing manager, Bobcat, West Fargo, N.D. By bringing tree spades into their operations, contractors don't have to sacrifice material.

"With tree spades, there will be a situation

where the contractor will dig and move the trees to another part of the lot, build the structure and replace the trees in the landscape scheme," Anderson explained. Specifically as attachments to skid-steer loaders, tree spades make transplanting a viable option where discarding and buying new trees used to be the best solution.

Moreover, smaller tree spades are often easy enough for one crewmember to handle. Not only do the machines eliminate the need to buy new trees in some situations, but they also limit the man hours required to complete transplanting tasks. For larger jobs, contractors may find themselves employing dozens of crewmembers digging around the tree's root system and using a crane to hoist the tree onto a trailer for transport. Larger-capacity tree spades make this job significantly easier.

"If you're digging up big trees, it takes a lot of manpower and man-hours," noted Stephen Choate, sales and service representative, Big John Tree Transplanting, Heber Springs, Ark. "With a tree spade, two people can do a really good job with a bigger tree. Two people vs. 20? There's no comparison."

In terms of sales, many manufacturers are noticing an increase in the number of

Contractors use tree spades to make easy work of transplanting jobs.



TREE SPADES

tree spades sold to contractors. "The most popular attachments are augers, breakers, trenchers and things like that, which are more popular in terms of number of units sold," Anderson noted. "But we're seeing more that the use of tree spades by people other than nursery workers is growing."

"Every year we're selling more of them," agreed Ron Peters, products specialist, CE Attachments, Cedarburg, Wis. "The main reason [for their popularity] is that more people see the attachments being used and realize they're a lot cheaper than a dedicated truck or machine and you can get into a tighter spot [with a skid steer]," he compared. When it comes to moving smaller trees in landscape settings, this maneuverability can be a plus.

In comparison with large truck- or trailer-mounted tree spades, purchasing an attachment can be helpful and economical for contractors who do a fair amount of arbor business. However, some contractors

FOR RENT

A tree spade is a great tool for landscape contractors to use, especially when demolition or building construction is part of a project. "[Contractors] used to come in and clear everything out and come back in later to replant or restructure the landscaping," noted Paul Anderson, attachment products marketing manager, Bobcat, West Fargo, N.D. Clearing out often meant doing away with trees already in the landscape and purchasing new ones to replace them.

Tree spades, however, lessen the need to discard trees by giving contractors the option of transplanting usable trees to a safe area of the lot, away from the construction site. Once the work is complete, operators can use the spade to bring trees back to their original spots. Sounds like a great option, but what if a landscaping company performs infrequent tree work and doesn't have a tree spade in their fleet? Rentals to the rescue.

"During the spring, dealers start putting [tree spades] in their rental fleets so people can take them out when they need them," remarked Ron Peters, products specialist, CE Attachments, Cedarburg, Wis.

Larry Coon, sales representative, Bobcat, Minneapolis/St. Paul agreed. "A lot of landscapers come in when they need tree spades for special projects," he said. "Renting can be a cost effective option for those jobs." At Coon's dealership, rental equipment can be taken out at costs of \$300 per day, \$800 per week and \$1,700 per month.

"The idea of being able to rent a tree spade is becoming more popular," Andrews suggested. "A person building a house is really only going to use the spade a couple of times. Instead of having it sit there for months while the house is built, they can go out and rent the unit." Renting for projects like this means more money in the contractor's pocket and well-established trees already in the landscape. — Lauren Spiers



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may not work with trees enough to make a smaller-scale purchase worthwhile. For companies that only have sporadic need of tree spades, commercial dealers often make the attachments available to rent.

"During the spring, dealers start putting them in their rental fleets so people can take them out when they need them," Peters acknowledged. "If [contractors] are just going to use the spade for one week, renting is a good option." Because many tree spade attachments have universal quick-attach capabilities, several brands of tree spades are available to contractors who already have a skid-steer loader.

SPADE SPECS. When a contractor prepares to purchase a tree spade, the depth of the work they plan to do should be the first consideration. "Your choice is determined by what you're doing, how many trees you're planning on moving, and what size those trees are," Choate outlined.

Spade choices run from multiple-blade, hydraulic models to non-hydraulic, single-blade models made of molded steel. Furthermore, while the non-hydraulic products are made specifically to mount onto skid steers, hydraulic models are available for skid steers, loaders, trucks or trailers, depending on the size of the job or the company. Truck and trailer models come with a high price tag though. "Are you financially able to buy a truck or would you rather have a trailer that you can hold in the side yard and use on the weekends?" Choate wondered. After all, contractors must recoup equipment costs by performing work, so having sufficient work to cover the investment is essential.

Beyond the type of tree spade to purchase, contractors also must consider spade size, and bigger isn't always better. "You want to make sure that the tree spade is sized properly for the skid steer," Peters advised. "If you have a 1,300-pound skid

steer, you don't want to put a 48-inch tree spade on it because the weight of the dirt and tree will overload the machine."

Moreover, the spade size should be proportionate to the size of the tree a contractor transplants. "A quick rule of thumb is a 10-to-1-inch ratio," Anderson offered. "Multiply the measurement of the trunk diameter by 10 inches and that gives you the correct size tree spade needed." This measurement is important for ensuring that the correct size root ball is unearthed to sustain the tree, especially if contractors will store it for any length of time.

Tree spade measurements can range from 24 inches to 5 feet or more, depending on the machine's function and the size of the job. The most popular sizes for skid-steer mounted spades are 36, 42, 44 and 48 inches, useful for trees up to about 3 to 5 inches in diameter. But, as Peters mentioned, the larger the spade, the larger the skid steer necessary to hold it. For projects

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TREE SPADES

requiring tree spades greater than 48 inches, truck and trailer models work better. "In the Texas area, anywhere from 65 to 90 inches is popular," Choate observed. "If you get up into the northern states, anywhere from 90 inches and up is popular."

Companies big into the big tree business often go much larger than that. At Environmental Designs, Tomball, Texas, Owner Tom Cox uses the world's largest tree spade—a 14-foot monster—for transplanting giant trees.

Surprisingly, even a spade this size is only capable of handling trees not much larger than 18 inches in diameter.

Considering the wide variety of sizes and styles, tree spade prices are all over the board. Smaller, non-hydraulic models can run \$900 to \$1,100. By comparison, skid steer-mounted hydraulic units, depending on size, can range from \$8,000 to \$15,000. Finally, truck-mounted models are the biggest investment, priced more than \$100,000 for some models. Like any other equipment purchase, tree spades can pay for themselves with enough work, but contractors must consider cost when choosing machines.

Contractors must figure the type of tree moving work they do before purchasing tree spades. For instance, skid-steer versions offer the added benefit of accessing tight spaces. Photo: Bobcat



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Check the April issue online for spade maintenance tips.

TREE SPADE USE TIPS. Before digging a tree, manufacturers insisted that contractors call city offices to determine where and how deep power, gas and water lines, etc., go. Also, skid steers should be equipped with rear stabilizers and/or over-tire tracks to brace the machine and provide traction. Taking care of business items like these makes transplanting trees safer and easier.

If the investment is appropriate, tree spades can lower the man-hours normally necessary for transplanting jobs and help add to contractors' bottom lines. **LL**

The author is Assistant Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine, and she can be reached at lsapiers@lawnandlandscape.com.

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USE READER SERVICE #71

BY DAVID SHETLAR

European pine sawflies are often seen in pairs on individual pine needles. Photo: E. Bradford Walker, Vermont Department of Forestry

The European pine sawfly, which was accidentally introduced to the United States, is the most common sawfly infesting landscape pines. Sawfly larvae look like caterpillars but are actually the larvae of primitive wasp-like insects that are common from southwestern Ontario through New England and west to Iowa.

In the landscape, this pest prefers mugho and tabletop pines but readily attacks Scotch, red, Jack and Japanese pines. It will rarely feed on white, Austrian, Ponderosa, shortleaf and pitch pines, especially if these are intermixed with the preferred hosts.

FEEDING FACTS. The first instar larvae (the ones hatching from the egg) can only eat the needle surface, which causes the needles to turn brown and wilt, appearing straw-like. As the larvae grow, they feed from the tip of a needle to the base, starting with older foliage and moving from branch to branch as they strip the needles. Trees that are entirely defoliated are severely stunted, but since pine sawflies rarely attack new growth, the trees will survive.

Larvae will often migrate to new trees once the needles on the current host are devoured, and heavily infested trees end up with a bottlebrush effect – all the old needles are missing except the current year's needles.



Usually only one generation occurs. In the winter, sawflies insert eggs along needle edges. The eggs hatch during April and through mid-May, and the larvae feed until mid-June. The caterpillar-like larvae are grayish-green and have a light stripe down the back, as well as two more light stripes followed by dark green stripes along each side. Full-grown larvae are 1-inch long.

Larvae feed in groups or colonies, often with three or four feeding together on a single needle, and disturbed larvae raise their heads and tails in a threatening manner. More than one larva also may pupate on a tree.

Mature larvae drop to the ground and spin tough, brown cocoons. The adults emerge in late August through September to mate and lay eggs. Each female lays six to eight eggs in a single needle using 10 to 12 needles. Lawn care operators (LCOs) can locate these eggs after a hard frost turns the egg-laying scar yellow.

MANAGEMENT METHODS. LCOs can best control European pine sawflies when the larvae are still small, so they should look for the straw-

Battling the pine sawfly takes learning the pest's common traits and control options.

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PINE PESTS



European pine sawfly adults lay their eggs in slits in pine needles during the fall months. Photo: E. Bradford Walker, Vermont Department of Forestry

like needles left behind by the young larvae in late April and early May. LCOs also can see the egg laying scars by inspecting the needles in late winter. **LL**

The author is entomology professor, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, and he can be reached at shetlar.1@osu.edu.

SAWFLY CONTROL STRATEGIES

There are several control strategies for the pine sawfly.

- Natural control – Parasites have been known to control this pest and native birds feed on the larvae. Also, rodents often eat the pupae in the soil. These agents are usually not adequate in urban settings, however.

- Mechanical control, egg removal – If LCOs find the needles containing overwintered eggs before they hatch, they can pull them off plants and destroy them. Remember, don't simply throw eggs on the ground since they can still hatch.

- Mechanical control – Clip off infested branches to easily remove larvae colonies. Place these branches in a plastic bag and destroy. LCOs also can knock off colonies by sharply striking infested branches, then crushing the larvae or knocking them into pails of soapy water. If few colonies are present, LCOs can control them using these methods, but large infestations are better managed with general spraying.

- Biorational insecticide sprays – Several horticultural oils and insecticidal soaps are labeled for control of sawflies on ornamentals. These usually work well when the sawfly larvae are small and LCOs can achieve thorough coverage of the colony.

- Spot spraying insecticides.

- General insecticide spraying – This sawfly rarely infests large acreages unless controls haven't been used for several seasons. LCOs may warrant using general sprays if European pine sawflies have infested more than 25 percent of a landscape's trees. – David Shetlar

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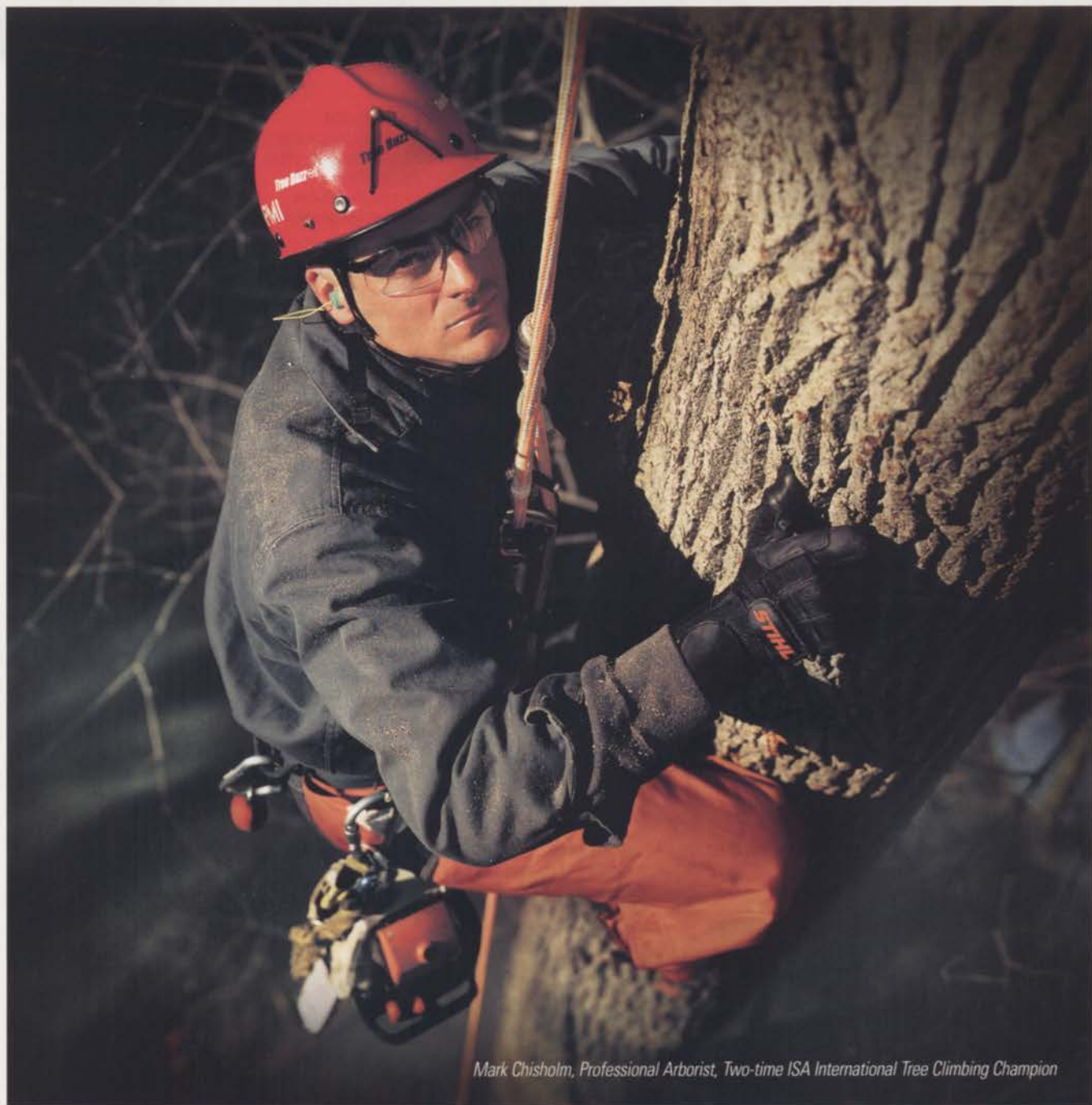


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Crabgrass Control

(continued from page 72)

and summer months. Specifically, crabgrass seeds germinate in mid-spring when soil temperatures top 55 to 60F for seven to 10 consecutive days. During the summer, seeds will continue germinating up to temperatures of 95 F.

As days shorten in late summer, crabgrass goes into its prolific reproductive phase when finger-like purple seed heads form until frost kills them. A single crabgrass plant can produce more than 150,000 seeds during the growing season, which amounts to about 10,000 to 20,000 seeds per square foot. Making matters worse, these seeds can stay viable in the soil for 30 years. Now you can see why crabgrass control is so difficult.

WEED IDENTIFICATION. Crabgrass resembles goosegrass, barnyard grass, fox-tail, orchard grass and quack grass, making it challenging to pick out among other weeds.

Two types or species of crabgrass are common in turf – large or hairy crabgrass (*Digitaria sanguinalis*) and small or smooth crabgrass (*Digitaria*

ischaemum). Both of these types have a prostrate growth habit and have many branches that grow upright. Large crabgrass has a mat-like growth pattern with purple stems that can grow up to 3 feet tall, while smooth crabgrass will grow to a height of about 12 to 15 inches.

Large crabgrass leaves are usually 2 to 6 inches long, pale green and hairy on both sides with sometimes rough margin ledges. By comparison, smooth crabgrass leaves are 1 to 4 inches long and have dull green leaves with purple tinges.

Large crabgrass is the most common type and its seed head has three to nine branched "fingers," giving the plant a bird's foot appearance. Each finger can produce 100 seeds.

CULTURAL CONTROL. Quality turf can compete well with weeds and LCOs can best achieve it by properly preparing planting soils, planting turfgrasses suitable for the given situation and using standard cultural practices (mowing, watering, fer-

tilizing and cultivating). LCOs who practice and encourage clients to follow proper cultural practices can help crowd out crabgrass seedlings.

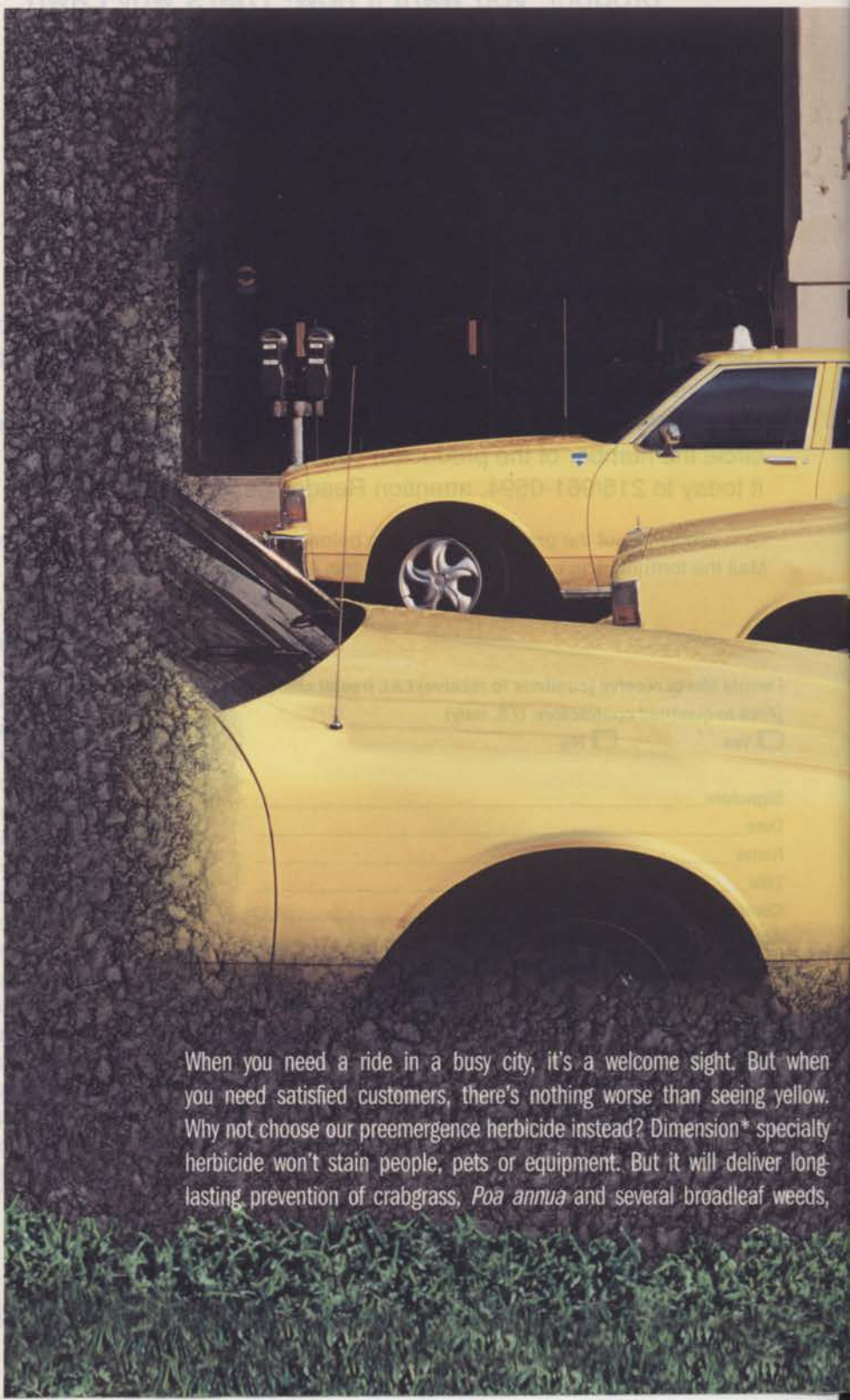
Proper mowing is critical to turfgrass health and appearance. Turfgrasses mowed too short become open – inviting weed invasion. Mow grass at 2½ to 3 inches, and

mow frequently so as not to remove more than one-third of the leaf blade at one time. Inform clients that this may mean mowing twice a week in the spring and once a week during the summer. After mowing a site infested with crabgrass, rinse the mower and any other equipment used to remove seeds to avoid transferring them to a new job.



Crabgrass sticks out in well-manicured turf.

Photo: University of Illinois



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In addition to proper mowing, adequate irrigation is vital to healthy, weed-free turf. Proper irrigation means watering deeply and infrequently to wet the soil to the depth of rooting. Most grasses need 1 to 1½ inches of water per week. When irrigated lightly and frequently, weed seeds (especially those of annual weeds) can germinate and readily

develop into mature weeds because the soil surface never completely dries out.

Another cultural control step that improves turf vigor is fertilization. Fertilizers maintain turfgrass density and color. Inadequate nitrogen fertilization leads to open turf that can be readily invaded by weeds. Inadequate amounts of other minerals in the

soil, especially potassium, phosphorus, iron and sulfur, can also reduce turf color, disease resistance and stress tolerance. Conduct soil tests and supply these elements as recommended by test results. But remember not to supply excessive amounts of phosphorus to established turf because doing so at the soil surface can encourage the development of germinating weed seeds.

Crabgrass likes to invade bare soil or areas where the turf is thin. So, avoid practices that damage turfgrass stands in late spring or summer. If possible, delay turf establishment or renovation work until fall to avoid crabgrass problems. This also holds true for practices such as dethatching. Remember, crabgrass infestations are a symptom of poor turf, not a cause of poor turf.

PRE OR POSTEMERGENCE. Preemergence herbicides do not prevent weed seeds from germinating, but they do kill newly sprouted seedlings. They are applied in the spring in many areas and provide excellent crabgrass control if timed properly.

Late April to early May is typically the ideal time to apply this form of control, but LCOs also can time applications based on local flora habits. For instance, many view the sign of forsythia blooming as the time to apply preemergence herbicides, but forsythia flower petal drop is probably a better indicator. Unfortunately, this occurrence can vary greatly from year to year based on weather, so reevaluate applications each spring to avoid poor timing and ineffective crabgrass control.

Many preemergence herbicides also need rain or LCOs must water them in to activate them. If the turf does not receive rain or irrigation after an application, reduced control is the result.

With a preemergent you will have to treat the entire lawn, even when sections of the turf may not need it. Another issue with preemergence herbicides is that lawn seeding will be delayed because the preemergence product will slow down the germinating grass seedlings. Preemergence weed control compounds usually provide protection for four to six weeks, but a follow-up application four to six weeks after the first application helps control many warm-season grasses, such as goosegrass.

(continued on page 94)



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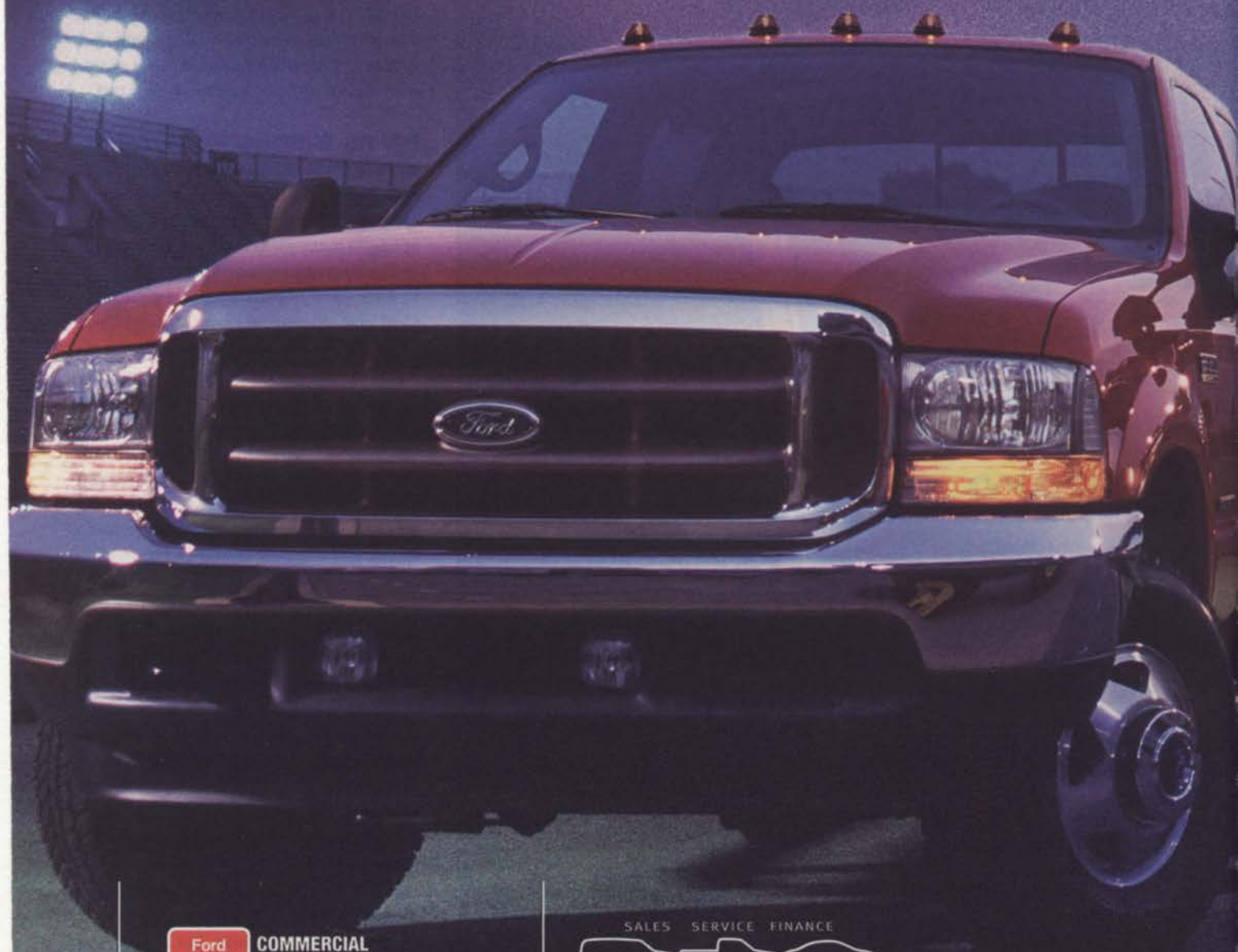
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Crabgrass Control

(continued from page 91)

Postemergence herbicides also work. For adequate control, apply the product before the crabgrass plant sends out tillers or side shoots. A postemergence herbicide is more effective at the two- to four-leaf stage of early growth. As crabgrass matures, it becomes much harder to control.

Crabgrass must be actively growing for the postemergence herbicide to be highly effective, and don't apply herbicides when the plants are under stress, such as drought.

LCOs should warn clients not to mow turf scheduled for a postemergence herbicide treatment a few days before and after the application. Also, try to schedule the application so as to allow for one rain-free day after the application to ensure maximum uptake of the herbicides by the leaves.

There are a number of effective preemergence and postemergence herbicides available. Certain postemergence herbicides may injure turf, so remember to always read, understand and follow

pesticide label directions for the safest and most effective control method.

NATURAL NOTES. Some consider corn gluten meal as a natural preemergent for crabgrass control.

Corn gluten meal is a by-product of processing corn for animal feed. The meal is 60 percent protein and 10 percent nitrogen, so it is also a source of nitrogen fertilizer and must be applied before crabgrass germination. An application is made in the spring, followed by a second application in late summer. During the first few seasons of application corn gluten does not usually provide crabgrass control that is acceptable as most synthetic herbicides. Subsequent use each season may provide improved control.

A philosopher once said, "Work is the crabgrass of life." For many LCOs that is so true, but with numerous controls available, the battle with crabgrass can be won. **LL**



Crabgrass typically likes to invade thin or bare areas. Fully mature and near death, this crabgrass infestation has taken over the weak turf. Photo: University of Illinois

The author is extension educator, Urban Horticulture & Environment, University of Illinois Extension, Chicago, Ill., and can be reached at 773/233-0476 or rwolford@extension.uiuc.edu. For additional information about crabgrass, check out the lawn care section of the University of Illinois' Hort Center Web site at www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/hort.

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Irrigation Software

by Nicole Wisniewski

Reduce estimating errors by trading the clipboard for an irrigation software-based system.

Many employees still carry clipboards on the job – noting times, dates, schedules, costs, repairs, problems, solutions and other critical data.

This limitless supply of paper represents increased potential for error and delay as each piece makes it through the day and back to the office for filing or entry into a computer system.

Industries like appliance repair and package delivery have already taken steps into this millennium by implementing software into their processes. It's time for irrigation contractors to take that leap as well, said Scott Fay, president, Treasure Coast Irrigation, Hobe Sound, Fla. "I think irrigation is a step behind in our industry," he said. "Take landscape maintenance, for instance. They have the same recurring routes – every Monday is the same. With irrigation, there are some recurring jobs, but typically each job is different – there will never be another Monday quite like this Monday. So, for software to help in the irrigation business, it needs to keep up with a variety of changing daily tasks."

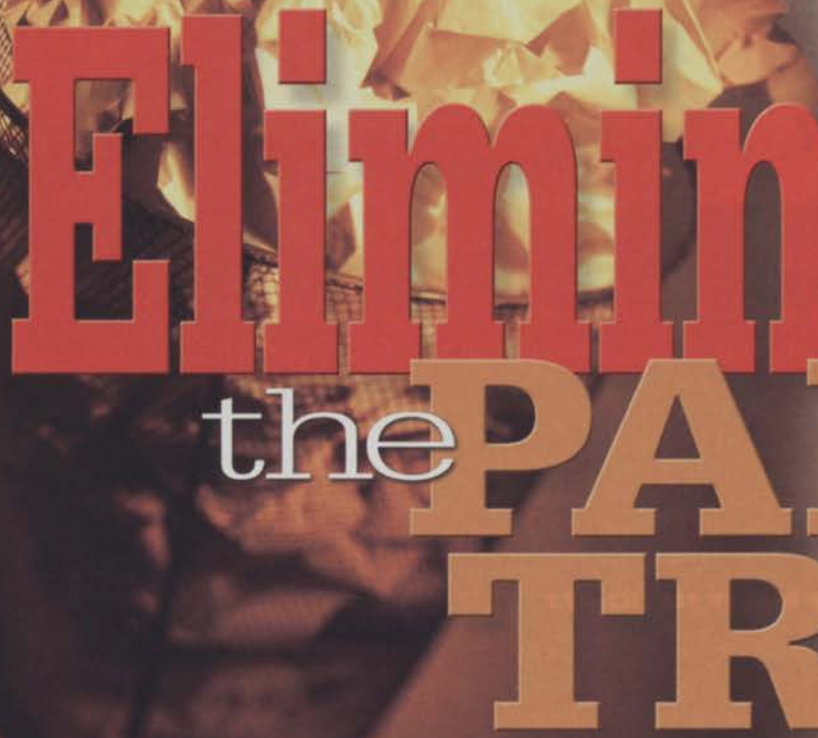
However, "business management software for the irrigation contractor is just starting to come into its own," pointed out David Tucker, chief executive officer, CLIP Software, Ijamsville, Md.

"Other people have tried to adapt to the specific niche, but it is only of late that there is a real, concerted effort to fulfill the needs of the irrigation contractor. Two forces are converging to allow this to happen at this time. First, more contractors are becoming knowledgeable of the benefits of software and as it becomes more accepted it is easier for a software developer to serve the needs of this group.

Second, as software improves, it makes the case more compelling for the contractor to purchase and use it."

Simplifying the irrigation estimating, job costing and scheduling process by incorporating software can eliminate some of the paperwork and, ultimately, a lot of errors, increasing productivity and profitability.

(continued on page 98)



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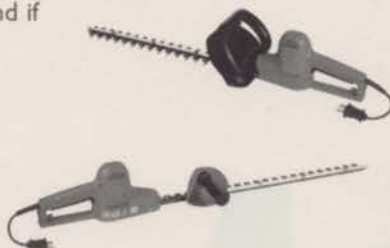
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USE READER SERVICE #80

Irrigation Software

(continued from page 96)

MAKING IT EASIER. Tools now exist to facilitate the irrigation pricing process. Where once upon a time the task of costing and estimating involved the job-by-job tedium of finding and tallying installation components; then with a pencil, paper and calculator "taking off" the cost of each and every item; figuring in labor and other miscellaneous variables; and finally establishing a profitable markup, some software packages have arrived to take the bite out of the job, according to Karen Shields, marketing manager, CompuScapes, Suwanee, Ga.

With pricing software, she said, a user can plug in and record costs per part, setting markups, labor expenses, time, overhead and, when customized to include such fields, even delivery fees and taxables. Able to produce initial proposal reports, inventory logs, time sheets and work orders once a job is accepted, software can later compare actual job costs with initial estimates to gauge profit and loss and pinpoint where in a job efficiencies were not met.

"This helps contractors to know what areas of their pricing are profitable or where they're losing their shirt," Shields said. "They can then revise [pricing] for future jobs."

Still, she advised, while software can greatly help in a successful pricing strategy, it can't do the necessary footwork for a company. "You can't just sit down and start punching numbers," Shields cautioned. "You really have to know your business and what costs you are experiencing. Are you incurring more labor expenses? Are you paying more now for sprinkler heads?" Contractors should research and refresh answers to those questions to ensure software offers continued accuracy in the costing/estimating phase.

And, in some instances, software can actually help contractors better understand their



Today, irrigation technicians are utilizing irrigation software to ease their job costing and scheduling process. Photo: Rain Bird

Irrigation Software

costs. After implementing irrigation software into his business, David Crary, president, LMS Irrigation, St. Paul, Minn., discovered that his technicians were spending a total of 600 hours of nonbillable time picking up parts at the warehouse. "My season is 1,200 hours per service technician per year, so we were wasting one half of one technician's year on parts pickup," he said. "I knew for years they were going there to pick up parts and chat, but I never quantified how much time they spent there."

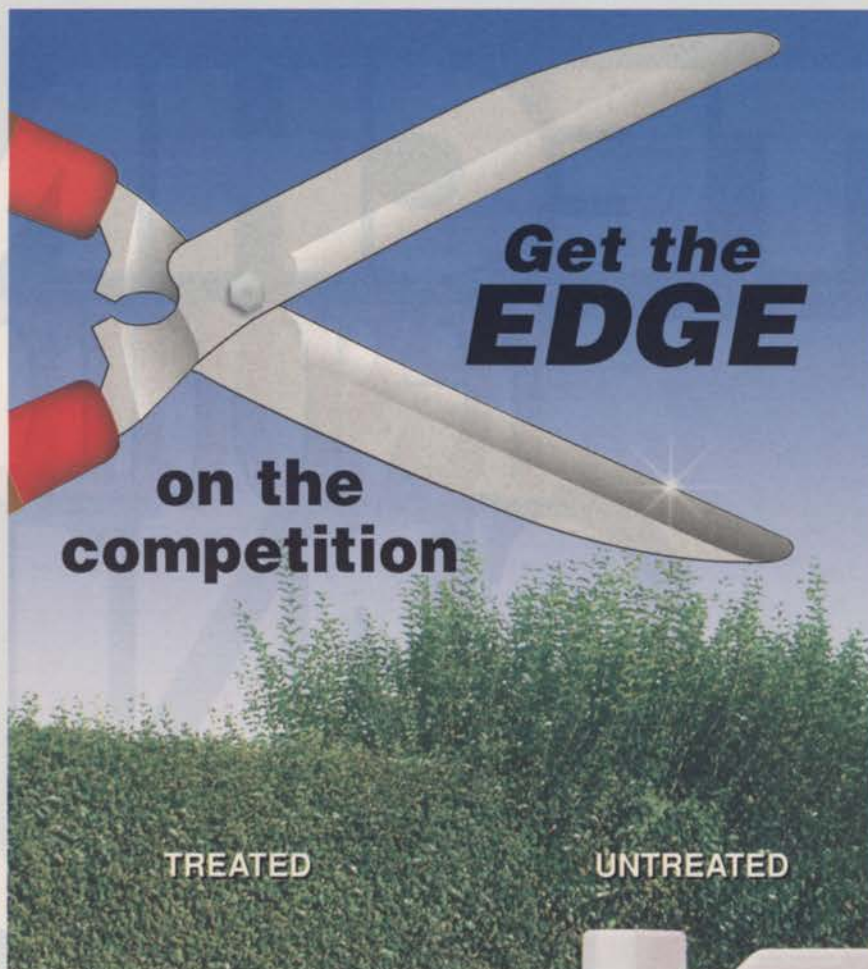
By utilizing software that logged exact minutes in and out for each technician, he was able to calculate this information. LMS' technicians no longer have the leeway to pick up parts whenever they want – Crary reduced those hours to less than 200 annually.

He also noticed timesavings in hours calculations with software use. When a technician uses pencil and paper, he or she will write down 8 a.m. even if they show up at 8:10 a.m. and then write down 9 a.m. even if they leave the job at 9:30 – that's one hour and 20 minutes, not just one hour. "I'm using software that ties the timecard to the work order and the Palm Pilot they clock in on acts as a cell phone, recording the accurate time [whenever] it's turned on," Crary said. "So, when they clock in at a specific time, I am billing for every minute they are on that property instead of losing minutes because employees' watches were off or they were lazy writing down times in and out."

CHANGE FOR THE BETTER. Many contractors worry that their employees won't welcome new technology. Fay worried about this, but he was happy to discover that as his employees test various software options, they embrace the idea. "They think it's cool," he said. "They are a little resistant to change, but not significantly. There's a little mumbling, but they pick it up fast and I think they really like trading in the clipboards and pens and forms for Palm Pilots."

Manufacturers find that employees, particularly Hispanic workers, like the idea of using software. "They get self satisfaction out of being able to use technology – it makes them feel more professional," Tucker explained. "Using this as the 'bait,' then the employee's life and work become easier. At that point, they are converted for life."

(continued on page 102)



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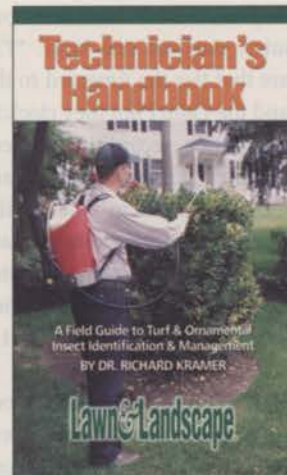
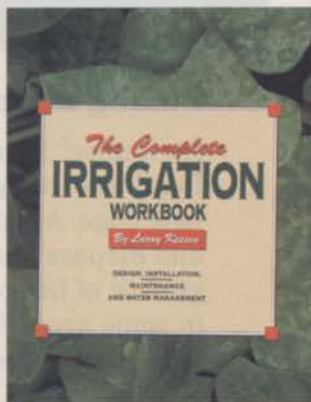
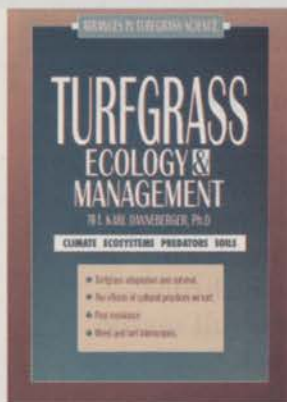
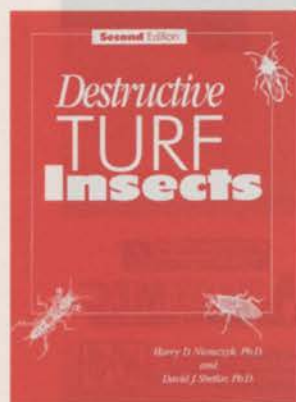
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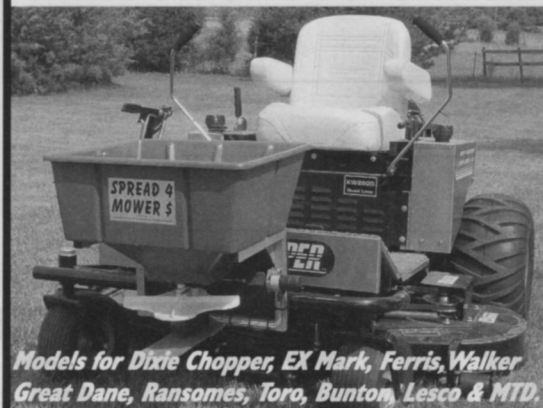
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USE READER SERVICE #84

Irrigation Software

(continued from page 99)

For instance, Rick Walker, a Treasure Coast service technician, became excited about eliminating the extra paperwork, particularly with irrigation maintenance and troubleshooting clients, by switching to software. Many of Walker's clients want to pay for a repair immediately after he's finished with it. This takes some time for him to fill out a regular work order, then fill out a second one as a receipt for the client to pay the bill. Plus, mathematical errors can enter into the equation because of the rush billing process. With recent software tests,

"Business management

software for the irrigation

contractor is just starting

to come into its own. Other

people have tried to adapt

to the specific niche, but it is

only of late that there is a

real, concerted effort to

fulfill the needs of the

irrigation contractor."

David Tucker

Walker noticed he can bill jobs more accurately with software and, with a printer in his truck, he can produce invoices more quickly. "Instead of handing clients a scribbled work order, I hand them a professional-looking, printed invoice with our logo at the top of the page," he explained. "I think clients like that much better."

Contractors have to get employees over the fear factor and build their confidence levels, Cray advised. Training is one way to do this.

For technicians to get up to speed using irrigation software, Fay estimated three or four days of side-by-side training with an instructor and then two months in the field before they could leave the paper behind.

While use of irrigation estimating and scheduling/routing software is just now in-

(continued on page 149)



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Creative Lighting

by Ali Anderson

Spend piles of cash on something you can only use during the daylight hours. Not such a wise investment, right?

Well, that's the scenario numerous homeowners face when they fork out thousands of dollars for landscape services – only to watch the sun set on their costly purchases. Each evening when darkness creeps across the land, it's as if their meticulously sculpted properties have been erased from existence. "Most people are only getting a 50-percent return on their landscape investments," noted Chris Johnson, owner, Johnson Landscape Lighting, Jacksonville, Fla. "They put big bucks into their yards and then can't see them when they come home at night."

But homeowners don't have to surrender their lavish landscapes to the dark side. There is a fix for this disappearing act: night lighting. "It brings a property to life – or to light," mused Ron Fallon, owner, Landscape Lighting by Ron, Mobile, Ala.

In recent years, Fallon and other lighting professionals have observed a noticeable gravitation of consumers toward outdoor lighting. "Night lighting is definitely something people are starting to want more," he emphasized. "In the last 10 years or so, it has increased in popularity – despite the unpredictable economy."

In a 2002 online poll conducted by *Lawn & Landscape*, more than 60 percent of contractors surveyed said they install lighting or were considering it as a new service. Nearly 65 percent of those who said they offer lighting viewed it as a growing part of their businesses.

"Our lighting sales made up 15 percent of our business in 2002 – that's an increase from 10 percent in 2001," agreed Joe Lendo, owner, Elite Lawn Irrigation, Rochester Hills, Mich. And Lendo anticipates more lighting contracts in the near future.

Indeed, there is growing interest in outdoor lighting, explained Mike Southard, national sales man-

(continued on page 106)

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USE READER SERVICE #87

Creative Lighting

(continued from page 104)

ager, Kichler Lighting, Cleveland, Ohio. "In general, [people] seem to be spending more time outside enjoying their property," Southard observed. "They are staying home at night more for a variety of reasons—and they want to maximize the use of their landscapes."

ENLIGHTENING FACTORS. Landscape lighting means more than extending a homeowner's outdoor enjoyment hours. In reality, lighting is a sound investment for at least four reasons: safety, security, aesthetic appeal and increased property value, explained Eric Borden, director, Ambiance Lighting Systems, Riverside, N.J.

Safety. Landscape lighting translates into added safety for a property, Borden noted. Often, property owners stumble over landscape elements hidden in darkness—sometimes sustaining injuries. Specifically, navigating around tricky corners and across winding pathways can be a concern in the dark.

"But adding adequate illumination is im-

portant so the property owner won't be tripping over something the kids left in a pathway," Borden shared.

TECHNIQUE 1 – Path Lighting: This may be as simple as a few lights placed at corners, or it may involve a combination of lighting techniques that illuminate paths and walkways from high above and down low. Path lighting should illuminate an area clearly, avoiding glare.

TECHNIQUE 2 – Downlighting: This soft, diffused technique simulates the effect of moonlight. Place several fixtures high in trees or on buildings to create a soft downlight and cast attractive patterns through branches and leaves.

TECHNIQUE 3 – Shadowing: Shining a light directly on an object can create interesting shadows on the vertical surface behind it. Place the light fixture in front of and below the object. By changing the intensity of the light and the distance from the object, you can vary the size and the shape of the shadows.

TECHNIQUE 4 – Silhouetting: Create a silhouette of a dramatically shaped tree or object by reflecting light off of a vertical surface behind it. Conceal the light source behind and below the object. In silhouetting, the object is seen standing out from a lighted background.

Landscape Lighting Tips

portant so the property owner won't be tripping over something the kids left in a pathway," Borden shared.

Installing landscape lighting can create a safe outdoor environment, agreed Kevin Lasko,

co-owner, Lasko & Ohio Lawn Irrigation's Creative Outdoor Lighting, Mentor, Ohio.

And, Lasko added, customers are more likely to enjoy their properties in the evening hours if they feel comfortable maneuvering

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TECHNIQUE 5 – Cross Lighting: This lighting variation uses two or more light sources from above or below to illuminate an object from different directions. The result is a tree, large plant or object that is more three-dimensionally revealed than when illuminated from only one direction.

TECHNIQUE 6 – Spread Lighting: Spread lighting creates points of interest on ground cover and low shrubbery. Usually set fairly close to the ground, spread lighting will highlight the variety of textures and shapes that are found in a client's garden or define the edge of ground cover where it meets the lawn.

TECHNIQUE 7 – Uplighting: Although this light does not normally occur in nature, it can provide dramatic effects when used sparingly. Surface mount or recess the fixture in the ground and angle it up to display a tree or other structure.

TECHNIQUE 8 – Spot lighting: Spot lighting is an effective technique for drawing attention to an object of architectural interest. Statues, trees and entranceways can all be focal points through the use of spot lighting. Be selective.

TECHNIQUE 9 – Grazing: Position light to shine across a textured surface, such as a brick wall or a natural surface like tree bark. The light will catch the high points of the surface while creating shadows in the low points.

TECHNIQUE 10 – Accenting: Accent well lights shed focused illumination to highlight trees, shrubbery or exterior walls. Accent step lights add safety and security to stairways, paths and patio areas. – Kichler Lighting

through them at night – with the help of light.

Security. A blackened property invites vandals and prowlers, but adding light to a landscape can guard against trespassers, Borden asserted.

Since well-lit homes repel criminals, some homeowners view lighting as an essential security device, Johnson agreed. "The two things criminals hate most are dogs and lights," he expounded. "Outdoor lighting is

Creative Lighting

an increased deterrent of criminals. They choose to stay under the cover of darkness."

Aesthetic appeal. Beautification is generally the foremost aim of those seeking landscape lighting, Borden explained.

"Most are in it for home improvement," Johnson pointed out. "They want to add nighttime interest to the properties they've already invested quite heavily in."

But, while outdoor lighting can highlight artistic features on a property, it is also considered a stand-alone service. "We can help give them artful gardens, dramatic trees and enchanting water fixtures," Lasko commented. "Overall, we are responsible for creating a new visual excitement at twilight with our accent lighting systems."

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Creative Lighting

Thus, Borden said, many customers delve into night lighting to boost property value. They want their homes to look more expensive than their neighbors' down the street, he expressed.

"Lighting enhances a property's value by creating a new drama and beauty in a garden year-round," Lasko added.

LIGHT SALES. As with many landscape-related services, selling lighting requires showing customers the plethora of lighting possibilities through visual representations. Often, contractors use photos to display the lighting services their company can offer.

Fallon uses high-quality photographs to introduce his lighting services to potential

customers. "I use two postcards that have a picture of my work on the front," he relayed. "They are very well done – to the point that people are so impressed, they hang on to the postcards for months. They save the postcard for when they will want lighting services."

However, preparing such photos for direct mailings is not a painless – or a cheap – process, Fallon noted. Since the subject matter is light, a photographer must snap pictures within a tight timeframe to achieve the desired effect.

"I pay a photographer \$125 per hour for photos that can only be shot within a 30-minute window at dusk – when the landscape lights are visible and the sun is still fading," Fallon revealed.

However, photographs are not the only selling tools for lighting services. On-site demonstrations also work.

"When clients are able to see their own property lit up, they are better able to make a decision," Lasko articulated. "We put up a few lights, usually on about half of the property, to give our clients the real effect of what lighting can do to enhance the beauty of their property."

During a free on-site demonstration, which can last an hour or more, Lasko does not bury the wires or do a complete installation; his crews simply do a short presentation to make the final sale.

Some contractors, like Lendo, allow customers to experiment with lighting fixtures on their own for a few days to discover the effects that are most comfortable for them.

"We provide a demo kit with six or seven different lights that we can hook up temporarily at the customer's home, leave it there and let them play with it – moving the lights around to see the different effects and different fixture coverages," Lendo explained.

His company also gives potential customers a list of addresses of previous installation locations so they can drive by and view the possibilities in person.

BRIGHT IDEAS. Contractors who wish to add lighting services to their landscape businesses can learn from the insights of experienced minds in the industry. And while there are various tricks of the trade, lighting contractors often have to learn lighting basics through hands-on experimentation.

(continued on page 110)



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Creative Lighting

(continued from page 108)

Through testing various lighting methods and tinkering with fixtures, Johnson got a grasp on many of the dos and don'ts of night lighting. And other industry veterans, through their experience, have come to recognize essential lighting tips as well.

One key to a successful lighting project is listening to the customer, Fallon observed. "Some people want very little lighting and some people want a nice, even spread of light," he reminded. "You have to listen and learn what the wants are of your customers and then design a system that meets the type of lighting they would like."

Customers have varying priorities in terms of their properties, Borden acknowledged. And a lighting contractor should understand those in order to create desired effects that match those priorities. For instance, a property owner who wants his children to have safe use of the backyard trampoline at night would place emphasis on adequate lighting in that area.

There are also some fundamental design tips to consider, Borden expressed. Contractors must select which objects and areas to light, decide how to light them and determine what to light them with. Addressing those three subjects will help the contractor complete a successful lighting system.

Use lighting to create a focus – or a series of focal

points, Borden noted. Light should emphasize unique landscape features with the appropriate fixtures.

Potential focal points include social areas, circulation areas (such as pathways, driveways and walkways) and viewing areas (such as patios and decks). Statues, prominent trees and water features are other possible spotlights.

Generally, a property will offer a handful of lighting subjects. That is where communication with the homeowner comes in. Through discussing the property's evening role, a contractor can determine which landscape elements should be lit to meet the customer's needs.

Knowing how much of a property to light is essential as well. According to Borden, less is more. "It does not take much light to allow a homeowner to see and enjoy the nighttime environment," he stated. "A little light goes a long way. You don't have to flood the entire yard with lights."

Specifically, a plain house with no landscaping does not require a lot of lights, Johnson explained. "But if you have dramatic landscaping and unique features on your house, you need more light to emphasize those elements at night."

Also, contractors must understand what effects various lighting elements can achieve. For example, Borden explained, illuminate steps on every tread to give an outdoor staircase a feeling of consistency – and make it a safe walkway.

Trees can be downlit to achieve the illusion of moonlight. Also, contractors can shadow or silhouette shrubbery to create a dramatic outline. Illuminate statues more than plant mate-

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rial to create contrast and keep the property interesting, Borden noted.

Choosing appropriate fixtures is another significant key to lighting success.

Michelle Charles, owner, Garden Light, Miami, Fla., suggested contractors separate themselves from amateurs by researching before selecting products. "One of the most important factors to consider is the quality of the product you are going to be putting your name and reputation behind," she urged.

Another tip from Charles: contractors should verify warranties. "There are literally hundreds of products in the marketplace with warranties ranging from one year to a lifetime," she said. "Like everything else, you get what you pay for. Products and fixtures with manufacturer warranties less than five years will likely provide you with a dose of disappointment."

THE PRICE IS LIGHT. How do you put a price tag on landscape lighting?

"Many people price per light," Lendo explained. "We price cost of material, plus labor, plus overhead, plus profit."

While budgets matter for most customers, those who add lighting to their properties usually have the finances to put a chunk of cash toward lighting, Fallon asserted.

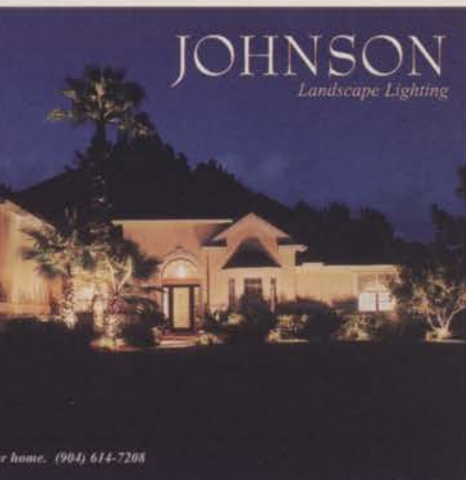
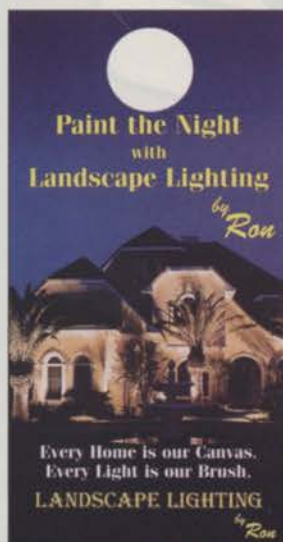
And although pricing varies among contractors and suppliers, many charge per light.

"Most landscape lighting systems range between \$150 and \$200 per light installed," Johnson revealed. "That's pretty standard throughout the industry."


And the more lights installed, the lower the cost is per light. On average, Johnson installs about 15 lights at a given property. However, every house and every landscape is different.

"When I go out to a job, I act like it's my own house," Johnson said, noting that he tries to prevent finances from stifling any design. "I ask myself: 'If I lived here, what landscape lighting would I want?' Then I present those ideas to the customer."

The author is Assistant Editor – Internet for Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at aanderson@lawnandlandscape.com.



Contractors can use high-quality photographs and artistic door hangers to sell their lighting services. Images: Landscape Lighting by Ron and Johnson Landscape Lighting



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USE READER SERVICE #96

Design to Maintenance

by Kristen Hampshire

I

Mark Fowlkes knew his design-to-maintenance transition was smooth for his clients – regimented but slick. For years, he ushered design clients into the maintenance division like a game of hot potato, passing accounts from one supervisor to the next, moving customers from design to maintenance, one after the next. But a customer survey taught Fowlkes he was sidelining a priceless part of the departmental hand-off: the relationship.

Customers were happy, they just didn't feel special.

Service was high-quality, it just wasn't personal.

"You can get your business so well organized that you run like a stopwatch but, unfortunately, that process may not be that friendly to the client," realized the president of Fowlkes, Norman & Associates, Fort Worth, Texas.

Knowing who's who was never so important. "It was interesting the number of responses on the survey that were in respect to communication," he noted. "They said, 'I talked to so many of you that I don't now who to call when I have a problem. Who do I call? Why can't I just call Angie?'"

Fowlkes didn't lose any clients, but he recognized a common frustration. His systematic approach to handing off a finished design to the maintenance department focused on just that – handing off the responsibility. Now, he subscribes to "organized chaos," and the employee who clicks with the customer – whether that be the designer, the foreman or the maintenance supervisor – is the point person for the account.

And like many contractors who pair design and maintenance, he found the transition requires education, clear communication and a method to tie together the services. "Each division in our company operates somewhat independently, but they also work in support of each other," he described. "So, it's really critical that when we take on a new client that we move things through our entire company."

SALES APPEAL. Don't let customers guess what's next once their installation is complete. Part of gliding from design to maintenance involves

(continued on page 114)

Fix up your design clients with some post-project care by filtering them into your maintenance schedule. The services pair nicely as long as contractors communicate with their customers.

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Design to Maintenance

(continued from page 112)

selling a package deal before clients settle for another service provider.

"When you design something, it is on a three- to five-year growth plan, so it's important for us to make that come to life for the client," described Fred Parks, landscape service manager, Glen Gate, Wilton, Conn.

"Designers explain [to clients] upfront that we are a design/build and maintenance firm."

Bundling the two services ensures properties will retain the design intent after plants mature, Parks said.

But most importantly, Parks talks maintenance early, offering his designers a 2- to

Quick TIP

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Dan Kjeldbjerg partners education and awareness by providing clients with property-specific information and industry news. In the final walk-through with customers, he gives them a maintenance packet that outlines watering, pruning, weed control and fertilization needs. In addition, quarterly newsletters keep them informed on seasonal conditions.

10-percent sales commission incentive for selling the service.

"It gets them out there promoting our department and our services, then we can come in later on in the progression of the job and clients are already familiar with the service and they know we will come out to see them," Parks said. "Designers have the relationship with clients and they endorse our maintenance department. It is a collaborative sale." And a rather successful one, as Glen Gate generally transfers half of its design customers to maintenance.

Combining design and maintenance services into one sale appeals to customers at Clarence Davids & Co. in Matteson, Ill., pointed out owner Bill Davids. Account managers handle both services, so offering clients a package deal is top of mind. "Right in the beginning we talk about what kind of design the customers are looking for and who is going to maintain the properties," he said.

Since this point person oversees the account, he or she then can introduce maintenance before the installation is complete so customers can swiftly shift gears from construction to care. "A well-designed landscape doesn't survive without maintenance, and vice versa," Davids said simply.

And sometimes, the selling rounds full-circle. Josh Keller added design services to his maintenance business five years ago, figuring the high profit margin on installation sales would bolster his bottom line. More than half of his maintenance customers take advantage of design services, and Keller often sells design upgrades years later. "I am familiar with the properties and I know the plant material, the soil conditions and the microenvironments," said the owner of the Independence, Mo.-based company. Since the

(continued on page 116)

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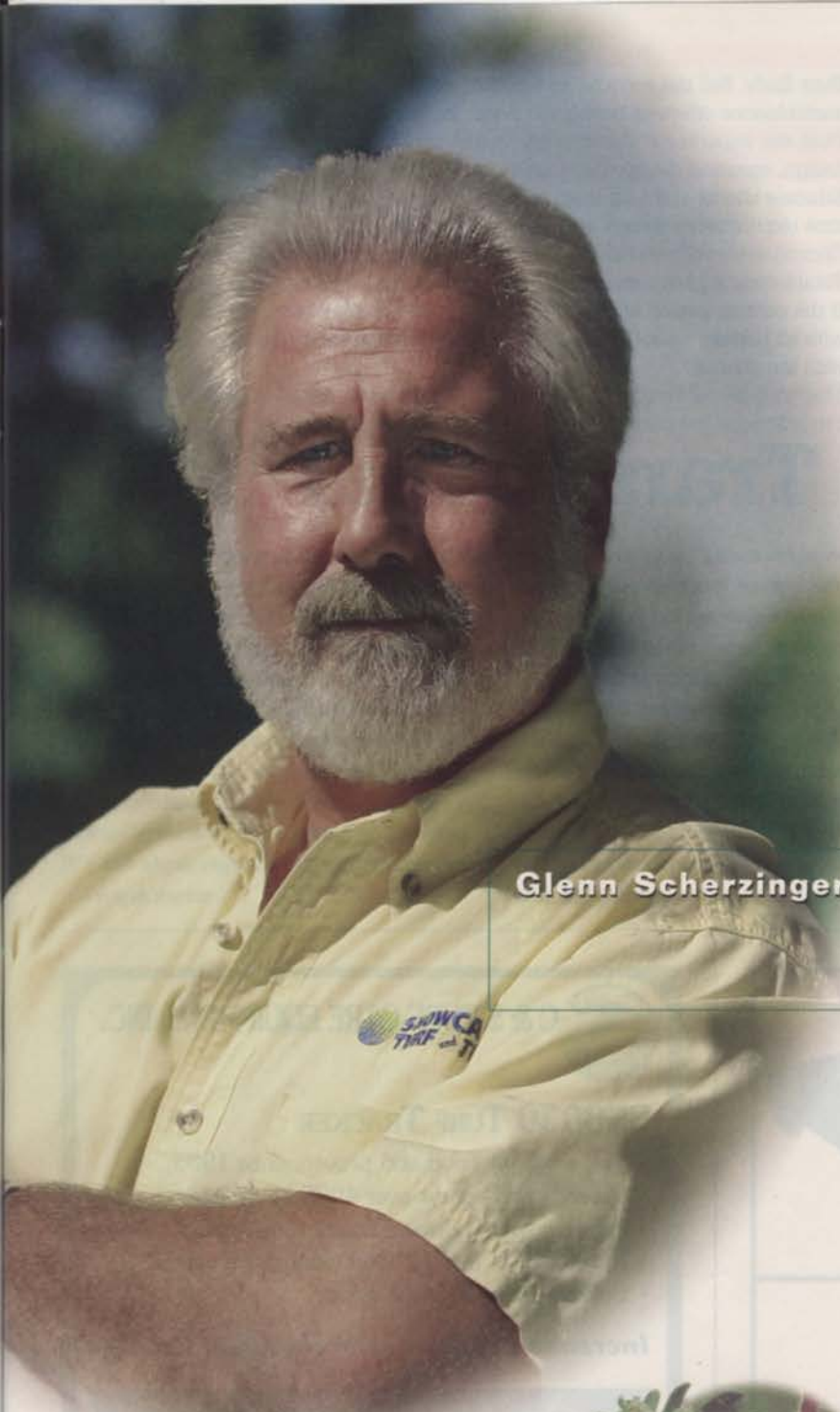
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Design to Maintenance

(continued from page 114)

operation is small, he sells and designs, and if customers decide to bridge the services, he passes information to his father, who manages maintenance. The goal: to keep customers coming back.

"A landscape is only as good as the person maintaining it," Keller emphasized. "If you have someone who doesn't understand the concept of how it should look eight years down the road, then it will go to another person's style."

This also explains why Fowlkes sells with an all-in-one focus. "We market ourselves on the front end as a horticultural site manager," Fowlkes said. "Throughout the design process, we try to educate about the critical aspects of being able to stay involved long-term on the project to see that the design reaches maturity, that it is still well represented and that the customer gets what they paid for."

HOLDING HANDS. Part of ensuring customers' happiness falls on internal structure.

1. Start Early. Sell the services as a package or introduce design clients to your maintenance offerings before you begin installation.
2. Push the importance of continuity. A maintenance contract is an extension of the design, ensuring the property stays true to its intent years later.
3. Educate clients and help them understand their properties' needs and the different time requirements design and maintenance demand.
4. Communicate with clients and tell them who they should contact with concerns. Establishing a go-to person right off the bat will ease their nerves during the transition.
5. If the contact person is different for design and maintenance, set up a meeting with all parties, walk the property together and make sure the client is comfortable with the change.
6. Maintain careful records through the design and maintenance process so anyone can reference the customer file and provide top-notch service.

6 Transitional Tips

While "overprocessing" a process and removing the human touch alienates clients, not sticking to a system risks relationships.

"You need to have a paper trail – no one can keep all the information in their head," said Dan Kjeldberg, president, Poul's Landscaping & Nursery, Long Grove, Ill. "You don't want to call up a customer four or five times and say, 'What style of pruning did you like again?' You want to have it down."

Kjeldberg once relied on memory and verbal communication as his account Rolodex.

Then he fine-tuned the procedure and designers wrote reports on each client and stored these documents in a file, passing requests to maintenance account managers. Now, Kjeldberg's goal is a seamless connection, and walking through the property with clients and maintenance supervisors eases the transition from one department to the next.

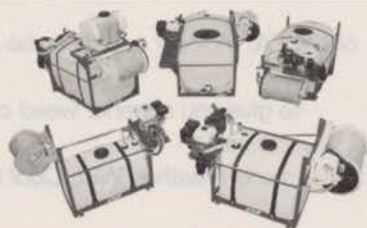
Careful notes keep the maintenance supervisor on target with customers' needs, important since this manager might visit 150

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Design to Maintenance

(continued from page 116)

accounts rather than the 10 works-in-progress designers oversee. "There is more involved with maintenance – there might be spray technicians, a mowing foreman," Kjeldbjerg listed. "There are more pieces to the puzzle."

Parks organizes everything in a service notebook, which contains information including the design intent, maintenance needs, property size, site specifics and client background information like children's names. "Service is about building a relationship with the client so they feel they are hiring on a friend who understands their lifestyle and their needs," he stressed.

A service center is the core of Parks' operation, functioning as a central point of contact for all customers, design and maintenance. Designers sell installation and maintenance since they develop the initial relationship with clients, but all questions and requests filter through the service center hub.

"Clients can feel really lost because they've had a relationship with the designer and the

project manager for nine months and then, all of a sudden, they are not sure who to talk to about their issues," Parks noted, adding the service center is staffed with maintenance personnel, who find answers to all questions, from pool issues to pruning queries.

Keller turns information management over to his computer system. Each client file contains a tab titled "profile" with the property description, including specifics like "house faces north, lawn is heavily shaded," he described. A separate area titled "notes" is an "endless piece of paper," where maintenance crew members can report conversations and issues. "We might type, 'Had a conversation on Jan. 23; client showed great concern about this and that.' So, if a customer calls and we haven't talked to them recently, we can pop up the computer file and get a quick overview."

Similar to Parks' service center, the computer system offers Keller and his father a communication point in case they don't have a

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chance to touch base about concerns that clients express during site visits.

Fowlkes relies on the contact person for each account to share information at weekly company meetings, updating maintenance and design teams on project status. This employee accountability ensures open communication, he explained. And since the person who develops a connection with the client serves as the contact person, there is a mutual concern for the property.

"Relationships cut both ways, and it is very seldom that something gets dropped because remembering a conversation and following up with people who you work with over the long term is not that difficult to do," Fowlkes reasoned.

(continued on page 120)



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Design to Maintenance

(continued from page 118)

CAN WE TALK? Design consumes a window of time while maintenance spans over years. Because the two services vary deeply in this respect, education is imperative to paint realistic expectations for clients, Parks said.

"Keep them in the loop," he advised. Door hangers, phone calls and plant health

care reports keep customers informed between maintenance calls, and Parks outlines tasks the crew will complete during visits.

"[Clients] see a dead branch and while we know we'll get it next week, they don't know that," he pointed out. "They think, 'Why am I hiring them if they didn't even

notice that.' So, we let them know what we did on the property and that next week we'll tackle the dead branch."

While communication needs for design and maintenance are quite different, so are demands from commercial and residential clients when it comes to a consistent contact person. Fowlkes' commercial clients don't mind the "hand-off" from design to maintenance as much as his residential clients, who click with one person and feel ignored if their contact changes. "With commercial accounts, people are more used to compartmentalized, professional relationships, so when you turn them over to the landscape manager, the commercial side can accept that easily," he noticed.

But both customer types appreciate attentiveness, and securing a communicative relationship can ensure service renewal despite other companies' price-cutting offers, Fowlkes noted. "When the relationship comes in, customers don't have a desire to change," he explained. "Usually the reason people want to move to a different company is because they were unhappy with the service or they don't feel like their needs are being met, but these are actually emotional triggers."

This is why addressing client requests, portraying a professional image and initiating timely follow-up reigns in importance, Fowlkes added. Considering these components when transitioning clients from design to maintenance will cut down on communication breakdowns.

"We are a service industry and, especially in bad economic times, it is much easier for people to sever a relationship," he remarked.

Fowlkes revisits the "chaos" that he prefers over his first, systematic method to transitioning from design to maintenance. "I know there are a lot of organizational people who think [my process] is nuts," he admitted. "But we try to make the organization client-based. As companies grow, that is where they are most challenged – how their growth is perceived by the client base and how they can expand and grow and still remain customer oriented."

After all, the key to moving from design to maintenance lies in sincere efforts that concentrate on "who's who" – the customer. **LL**

The author is a Contributing Editor to *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and can be reached at khampshire@lawnandlandscape.com.

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Customer Service

by Nicole Wisniewski

Customer service is more than a smile – it's a way to retain clients and ensure future business.

Service with a smile? Sure, maybe 10 years ago a wink, a nod and a friendly attitude were enough to keep a client grinning. But today, that tactic is passé. Now, as time is judged in minutes and seconds instead of weeks and days and the pressure to produce mounts, service has changed.

"Things are very different now in our world," maintained Donna Vignocchi, vice president of sales and marketing, ILT Vignocchi, Wauconda, Ill. "With advancements like the Internet and cable, things move faster and people are finding better ways to compete. But human-to-human contact will always prevail and clients need more now than they did 30 years ago to remain loyal."

When offering service today, contractors have to provide enough contact so clients don't feel ignored, but at the same time they can't overstep service boundaries and overdo client interaction. They have to make sure their employees spread the right company message, reward long-term customers to make them feel special, generate continued referrals and build client bases all while providing top-notch horticultural services.

"Achieving [good customer service] takes the coordination of good marketing, good hiring practices, good orientation and training programs," Vignocchi pointed out, "and the consistency of management to continually communicate what is important and why."

CUSTOMER SERVICE DESK. Contractors can have the greatest equipment, horticultural knowledge and employees in the world, but if they don't

YardSmart
uses
newsletters
(right) to keep
clients
informed of
company
happenings
and also
treats them
with pens and
letter openers
(below).
Images:
YardSmart



have great customer service as well, they won't have any business. So, initially, improving service means enhancing internal operations.

Ten years ago, Precision Landscape relied on sales managers to not only sell jobs but also to handle customer service. As the company's customer base grew, dealing with these two tasks simultaneously became more challenging. "We felt we weren't giving our customers the attention they needed and wanted," explained Sue Leatherman, the St. Paul, Minn.-based business' customer service manager. "We wanted to create an environment that was more proactive to their needs and wants vs. reactive, as well as a system where we could respond promptly to problems or concerns."

As a result, the 75- to 80-employee company (during the peak season) created a customer service manager position, which Leatherman has held for eight years. The customer service manager not only handles client calls but also assists in human resources and production operations.

Having someone focus solely on this business aspect meant improvement ideas flowed. Three years ago, Prescription Landscape implemented standards for each service in each client segment. Service calls are prioritized in this policy book. For example, running water at a sprinkler head for an irrigation client or icy sidewalks at a snow and ice removal client's property is more urgent than addressing mowing patterns or adding.

(continued on page 124)

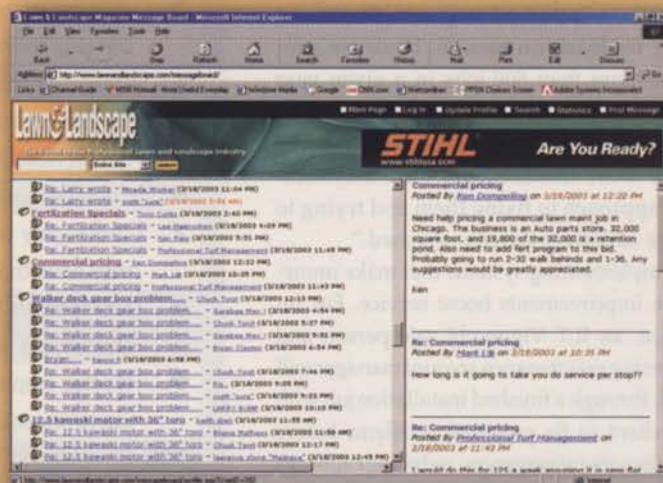


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Fuel Surcharge?

Posted By Mark & Terry Herrin

My question is this: we are putting our terms and conditions together (I know I need to find and attorney & working on it). I read in a recent post about adding a fuel surcharge. We are in a suburb outside of Detroit & prices are averaging \$1.70/gal. What would you suggest as a "just in case." I don't like thinking like that, but I know a couple of our customers are thinking "what if," too. - Terry

Re: Fuel Surcharge?

Posted By Andrew Hardscape

Terry,

I believe you can do this without paying an attorney. As far as the fuel surcharge, I would work it:

In the event fuel/gasoline prices reach and/or exceed \$1.75 at the pump a "fuel surcharge" of \$2.00 will be applied to each mowing/visit/monthly billing statement, and you get the picture.

Posted By Sammy

How much more gasoline cost per customer will you be using?

If you can mow four 10,000-sq.ft. yards with a gallon of gas at \$2.00, that is an increase of only 7.5 cents per yard. Now, why would you expect a customer to pay 2 extra bucks?

Posted By Andrew Hardscape

Not sure how you operate there Sammy, but most mowing companies must transport the equipment to the property via truck. And they also must pick up mower parts and other related objects via car and truck! Which in turn means that gasoline/fuel is used.

It all adds up!

Customer Service

(continued from page 122)

tions in an annual garden. "I have listed the most possible scenarios with specified time standards to address client concerns," Leatherman said. "This was created based on calls we received from our clients and their feedback on service. Since we produce more than 800 jobs in a given year with more than 70,000 direct hours of labor, we are going to make mistakes. We track those mistakes and have a systematic approach to fixing them and trying to make sure they are not repeated."

Implementing systems that make immediate improvements boost service. For instance, an ILT Vignocchi salesperson and incoming maintenance account manager will walk through a finished installation job with the client to fix potential problems before they become annoyances, reducing callbacks after jobs.

Also, last November, the company created a post-construction client handbook.

(continued on page 126)

Here, St. Paul, Minn.-based Prescription Landscape highlights vital service solutions from its Customer Service Manager Sue Leatherman.

1. Listen to customers.
2. Provide a quality product in a timely manner.
3. Address customer requests, problems or concerns in a timely fashion. Develop service standards.
4. Make a point to visit or touch base with customers regularly.
5. Provide customers with informational material or guidelines for all of the services you offer.
6. Create a work environment dedicated to customer care.
7. Thoroughly teach and train employees on service hows, whats and whys so they have the resources and knowledge to meet customer expectations.
8. Establish written expectations and responsibilities for your employees and reward them for outstanding work achievements.
9. Involve employees in problem-solving and production changes or improvements.
10. Be open and willing to try new ideas, changes and processes to maintain customer satisfaction.

10 Service Tips

"See why all the top designers are switching to..."



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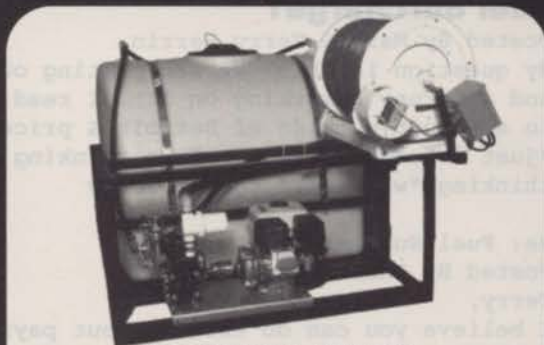
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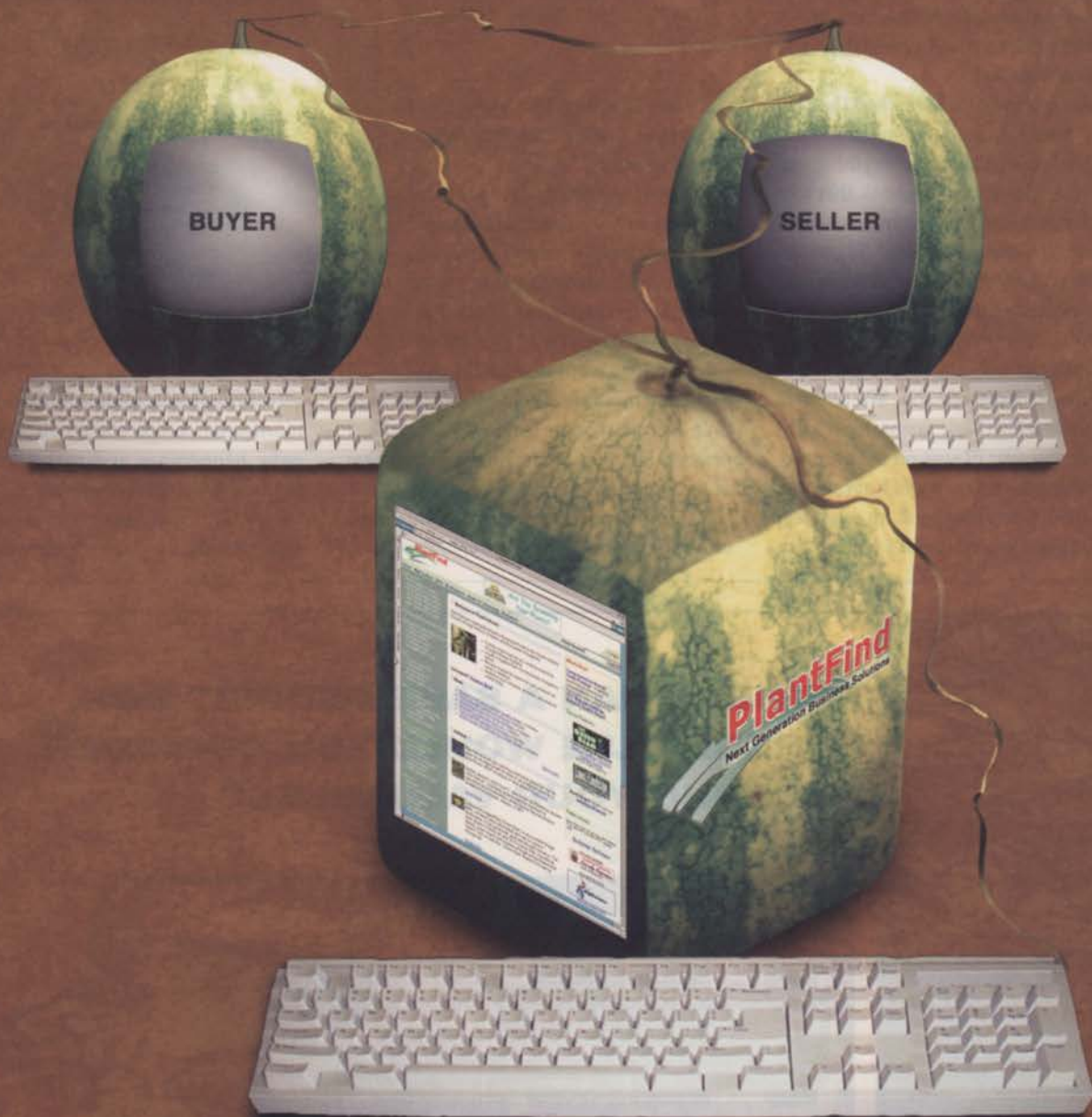
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USE READER SERVICE #111

Customer Service

(continued from page 124)

This manual, which is customized for each customer, familiarizes clients with common care practices and indicators of potential plant and turf health threats. The book contains company contact information, landscape design plans, plant material photos and horticultural tips.

"I was inspired by the idea when I bought my first home and the inspector went through the house, checking everything and then gave me this enormous book that told the ins and outs of home maintenance and who to call if I had problems," Vignocchi said. "Every product comes with a manual, so why not have a manual for new landscapes. We don't want clients to use this as a way to learn the minutia of caring for specific species – that's our job. We want to provide them with a basic manual so it's like having another pair of eyes on the property who is looking for yellowing of leaves or can be comforted when they look up what leaf drop means and realize that it's not because

To thank clients for their business, YardSmart held a customer appreciation day at the office, drawing more than 200 clients and their families.

Invite: YardSmart

the plant is dying. This gives them something tangible that they can go to as a resource."

Most importantly, this provides the company with another means of enriching their warranty program. "So far, with ideas like this, we've been able to cut warranty plant replacements down by 10 percent every year – we want to limit the callbacks and these ideas help," Vignocchi said. "We feel as though leaving them with a presentation style binder increases the value of the product."

In addition to providing care manuals, other companies educate clients about ser-



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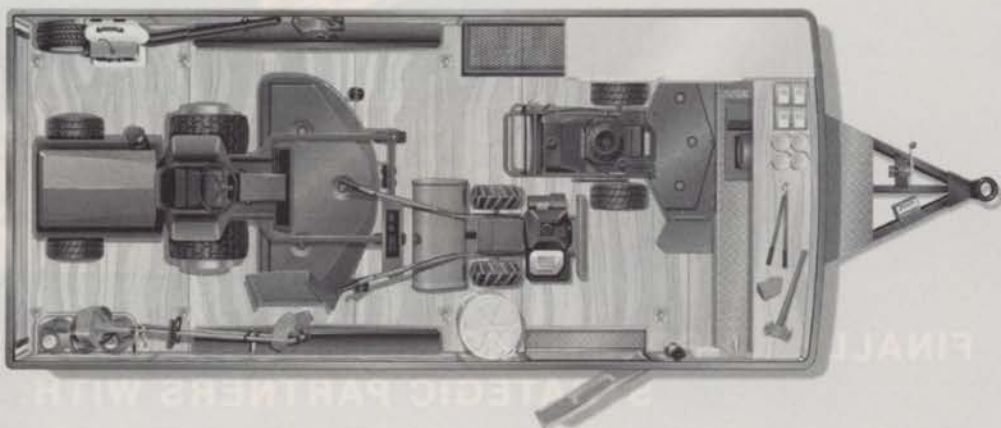
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vice through newsletters. This form of communication keeps clients abreast of company happenings and makes them more familiar with a company's team and philosophies. Yard Smart's four-color, two-sided, 8½-by-14, quarterly newsletter folds



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USE READER SERVICE #112

so that one of the panels acts as a mailing label, saving the company postage costs. If Olmsted Falls, Ohio-based Yard Smart prints 1,500, four-color, two-sided, legal-sized newsletters, the cost is 65 cents plus 37 cents in postage each. Current clients and potential customers also can download the newsletter from the company's Web site, pointed out Marketing Director Colleen Stone.

When newsletters and manuals don't help clients recognize good service, superior site cleanup or extra efforts can make all the difference and help contractors stand out from their competition. Clients who left their properties clean when leaving for work don't want to come home to messy sites. Simple service techniques like cleaning up after maintenance or design/build services can be big service boosters and cost only a few moments of time. "If we are on a residential site and it is garbage day, we will bring up the receptacle

for you," Vignocchi commented. "If you haven't picked up your paper yet, we'll bring it to the door for you. Service is going the extra mile. We also make sure we leave the site spotless when we are done - sweeping, rolling up hoses, etc."

EMPLOYEE BUY IN. Encouraging employees to buy into new customer service procedures can be tricky, but contractors should rest easy knowing it can be done.

Developing an entire philosophy built around customer service can inspire employees to be mindful of this No. 1 job responsibility daily. For instance, Yard Smart's internal organizational chart has the client up at the top of the triangle - not the company president. "There is only one boss - the customer," pointed out Co-owner Bob Smart. "He or she can fire everyone in the company - from the owner down - by spending money elsewhere."

The company also hung a 4-foot tall, 8-

foot wide sign in its shop that reads, "If we don't take care of the client, someone else will." This constant visual keeps employees thinking of clients at least once a day.

A little motivation never hurts either. ILT Vignocchi had a situation where some miscommunication and a little negativity resulted in an account manager team that lacked motivation. To initiate some needed customer service education and discussion, Vignocchi bought the company's 10 account managers the \$15 book titled, "Customer Service is Worthless, Customer Loyalty is Priceless." While the book teaches invaluable client communication techniques, it also offers interesting and funny tidbits throughout as not to bore even those who aren't avid readers, Vignocchi pointed out. Then over the course of a season, Vignocchi would photocopy a page out of this book weekly and the account managers would get together for 15 minutes to discuss a service topic. "I

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Customer Service

would hand it out and ask them some questions about it, finding out if we were all on the same chapter and making sure I inspired some discussion," she said. "This kept them reading and motivated them on the service side of things for very little cost and time."

Great customer service starts at the home office, where attitude is everything. While this motivational trick worked for Vignocchi, she said it also can red flag potential employee problems, such as service managers with bad attitudes who aren't willing to change. "You can't have a constant sourpuss in your service team," she explained. "You have to have positive meetings and eliminate the bad attitudes. You can't bring personal problems into these meetings or else everyone will feel the tension and stress. It's like raising a kid at home – if you want your children to say please and thank you out in the world, you make that culture important at home. It's the same with work. If you invest in your employees and treat them with professionalism and familiarity and respect, that translates to the clients."

Rewarding employees who continue improving their service solutions might also encourage others who are more slowly motivated. For instance, if a customer calls in to complement an employee, Smart pays that employee \$5. If a customer writes a letter of appreciation about an employee, he or she receives \$10.

Prizes don't always have to include cash and they don't always have to be given for the same tasks every time, however. YardSmart believes that rotating surprises and providing unexpected employee treats to reward service is better than having employees work solely to receive an award or gift. For instance, Smart has been known to give an employee up to \$100 if he or she can just recite the company mission statement, which highlights customer service, to him when he asks for it. "And I won't do this only at a company meeting or in the morning on the way out the door," Smart said. "Sometimes, I'll drive to a job site where guys are working and ask one of them what the company mission statement is."

Training employees in various areas also can boost their service performance. John Chiarella, owner, Ultimate Service, Wolcott, Conn., spends upwards of \$25,000 annually

Customer Service

on continued education for eight senior foremen. He was paying so much sending them to a local college that he started a program three years ago where he works with local professors to come to his organization and teach 25 to 30 of his employees four nights a week on various topics. He calls it Ultimate University, and he said not only are employees buying into the program, but his clients notice a difference. "I have got a few letters from clients just complementing us on the fact that we are putting money into our employees and the organization," he said. "It makes them feel good about having us as their landscape service provider."

There are many ways to stir up service excitement in an organization. Finding the right methods may take a little time, but will be worthwhile in the long run. As Vignocchi pointed out, "Ideal customer service is being able to sleep at night because you are confident that you and everyone on your team did their best and did so professionally and graciously with sincere smiles on their faces."

EASY EXTRAS. For contractors who've mastered service basics and have an enthusiastic team trained and motivated, customer service isn't over. The process is ongoing. Once contractors master the fundamentals, they can explore some more unique service perks and perfect the art.

In addition to rewarding long-term clients with treats every once in awhile, such as flowers on Valentine's Day or a surprise in the middle of the season with a box of candy from Cleveland-based Groovy Candy Co., which offers themed candy from the

"Achieving good customer service

takes the coordination of good marketing,

good hiring practices, good orienta-

tion and training programs, and the

consistency of management to continually

communicate what is important and

why." — Donna Vignocchi

1960s, 1970s and 1980s, YardSmart decided to hold a client appreciation day.

"We invited clients to our offices, offering food and entertainment, door prizes and rides on or pictures with our equipment for their kids," Stone explained, adding that for a period of six or seven hours, the company had upwards of 200 clients enjoy the celebration of YardSmart's 15th anniversary.

SURVEY SAYS. Concerning customer surveys, contractors have mixed views on whether or not they help improve service. Yard Smart has tried everything to get clients to respond to its surveys, including offering clients \$1 or a free cup of coffee for a completed survey to making sure the return envelopes were prestamped to



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


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Customer Service

offering a \$25 service gift certificate to the winning client a drawing after the surveys were returned. "The problem for us is the only ones we get back are from the people who already love us – we can't get more response from the rest of our clients, so we're not sure the results are truly representative of our customer base," Stone said.

After having an office assistant take on surveys as a part of her job, ILT Vignocchi feels more confident about its customer survey approach. "You have to pick the right person to be in charge of it – someone who doesn't have a stake in it," Vignocchi suggested. "And you have to keep surveys away from the invoices. You can't ask a client who owes you \$50,000 how he feels about your company at that moment when he is looking at his bill. You have to send surveys separately so clients will answer you truthfully and won't be influenced by the invoice. We've also improved the questions we ask so that we can really

 Have we earned your loyalty? (LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT Progress Report)

CUSTOMER NAME _____

Was your Spring Clean Up done in a timely fashion?

_____ Yes _____ No

If your property was fertilized, was the occurrence clearly marked with flags?

_____ Yes _____ No

How many times approximately have you seen / heard from your account manager since the beginning?

Has your account manager recommended any improvements for your property?

_____ Yes _____ No

If you had a question, problem or concern, how effective were we at responding?

Please rate the following:

Courtesy of Crews	Poor	Average	Excellent
Crew Member's Skills	Poor	Average	Excellent
Responsiveness of Acct Mgr	Poor	Average	Excellent
Timeliness of Extra work performed	Poor	Average	Excellent
Appearance of property after weekly visit	Poor	Average	Excellent
Annual flower planting (if appl.)	Poor	Average	Excellent
Perennial maintenance	Poor	Average	Excellent
Spray Crews	Poor	Average	Excellent
Timeliness of getting a quotation	Poor	Average	Excellent

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quantify results. [For instance, asking questions that reveal a numerical answer or giving specific multiple choice answers to make tallying the results easier.] It's taken us many years – last year was our most consistent year in doing surveys regularly, which was a couple of times during an eight-month maintenance season and after each installation job."

ILT Vignocchi uses customer survey responses to improve service areas based on client requests. Survey: ILT Vignocchi

Customer service takes a lot of work – it can't be perfected overnight, but any organization can continue improving its techniques. The end result will always be the same – happier, long-term clients and a smoother, less stressful working environment. "Customer service is the ability to provide a client with a quality product in an efficient manner and for a reasonable price," Leatherman maintained. "In our industry, as others, many factors can play a role in the success of good customer service. It's not just one person in our organization – it's all of our employees together that make great customer service." **LL**

The author is Managing Editor of Lawn & Landscape, and she can be reached at nwolsniewski@lawnandlandscape.com.

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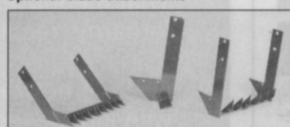
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USE READER SERVICE #116

by Kevin Kehoe

Planning Production HOURS

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"I was making 15 percent net profit margins at \$800,000 in sales. Now I am generating more than \$1.5 million and making only 4 percent. I was having a lot more fun back at \$800,000."

This is a complaint often voiced by landscape entrepreneurs.

A business owner or company manager must take increased control of the marketing, organization and financial factors that enhance or destroy their organization's profits. However, contractors frequently forget that equipment and production hours also are vital financial control elements.

Sales growth does not automatically generate increased profit margins. In fact, growth – particularly, uncontrolled growth – will more likely *decrease* profit margins. The single biggest reason for this is a culprit called excess capacity. Excess capacity is a profit killer in any business, and a particularly silent one in the landscape business because capacity costs money and doesn't show up clearly on the standard profit and loss report. And since growth requires increased capacity, the more a business grows, the quicker excess capacity creeps up and destroys profit margins.

IT TAKES TWO. There are two primary sources of capacity in a landscape contracting business – equipment and production hours. Both create the capacity to do work and generate revenues. Both, of course, cost money. Both need to be monitored and managed to maximize the return by minimizing the amounts of each required to generate a given level of revenues.

A simple example highlights this fact. Referring to the \$800,000 company in TABLE #1: Capacity Analysis (page 132), companies A and B both record annual revenues of \$800,000. Yet company A has a profit margin of 12 percent while company B has a profit margin of 8 percent. What's the cause? An analysis of the situation points to excess capacity. Company B uses just

Elevating equipment costs and production hours can wreak havoc on a contractor's growth plan. Consequently, controlling these costs can maximize profitability.
Photo: U.S. Lawns

Gauging Growth

10 percent more equipment assets (total cost of just \$12,000 more per year in added depreciation and R&M Costs), and company B uses just 10 percent more labor hours (roughly equivalent to the number of hours for one full-time person). Total damage to the bottom line is nearly \$36,000.

	COMPANY A	COMPANY B
Sales	\$ 800,000	\$ 800,000
Assets	\$ 275,000	\$ 302,500
Labor Hours	20,000	22,000
Depreciation Rate	5	5
R&M Cost	10%	10%
Hourly Wage (Burdened)	\$ 12.00	\$ 12.00
Sales / Asset Ratio	2.91	2.64
Realize Rate	\$ 40.00	\$ 36.36
Equipment Cost	\$ 115,500	\$ 127,050
Labor Cost	\$ 240,000	\$ 264,000
Net Profit	\$ 96,000	\$ 60,450
Profit Margin	12%	8%

TABLE #1: Capacity Analysis

There is good news from the analysis, however. You can create two measurement indicators to monitor capacity – the sales/asset ratio and the realize rate (see TABLE #2: Detailed Definitions, right). The sales/asset ratio and the realize rate correlate closely with net profit margin. In other words, when these measurements increase, net profit margins increase. In fact, these two measurements are called leading indicators and they forecast profit performance.

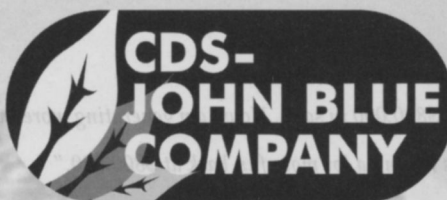
Referring to TABLE #1: Capacity Analysis (left), seeing that company A has better measurements for both these indicators is easy. This is a primary reason profits are better.

SALES / ASSET RATIO:

Company A's sales of \$800,000 divided by its assets of \$275,000 equals 2.91. This means that \$1 of assets generates \$2.91 of revenue or sales. **NOTE:** Assets are net of real estate assets. This ratio is somewhat dependent on local conditions, but we know from industry surveys that high profit companies turn in ratios around 4.0.

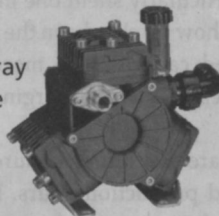
REALIZE RATE: Company A's sales of \$800,000 divided by its labor hours of 20,000 equals \$40 per hour. This means that one hour of labor generates \$40 of revenue or sales. **NOTE:** Labor hours measured includes foremen and crew technician hours paid only. This ratio is completely dependent on local conditions, and may range from \$20 to \$45 across the country for maintenance work.

TABLE #2: Detailed Definitions



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Run this same analysis and compare a higher profit year to a lower profit year. Locate the total asset number on your balance sheet along with your total hours paid – then do the math.

The first way to use these indicators is as management tools to identify profit-destroying problems, like in the previous example. The second way to use them is as planning tools to control capacity before growth.

	MAINTENANCE	DESIGN / BUILD
Sales	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000
Direct Cost	50%	60%
Gross Profit	50%	40%
Indirect Cost	13%	10%
Overhead Cost	27%	18%
Net Profit	10%	12%

Note: Material Cost 2% 25%

TABLE #3: Profit & Loss Statement

	MAINTENANCE		DESIGN / BUILD	
Sales	\$1,100,000		\$1,100,000	
Direct Cost	\$550,000	50%	\$660,000	60%
Gross Profit	\$550,000	50%	\$440,000	40%
Indirect Cost	\$143,000	13%	\$110,000	10%
Overhead Cost	\$297,000	27%	\$198,000	18%
Net Profit	\$110,000	10%	\$132,000	12%

TABLE #4A: Growth Plan

PRODUCTION PLANNING. Here, I will highlight examples of a landscape design/build company and a lawn maintenance operation to illustrate the production hour planning process and the necessary calculations.

Step one. Two companies have sales of \$1 million – one primarily in maintenance, the other mostly performing design/build work. Refer to TABLE #3: Profit & Loss Statement (left). The per-

centages represent the costs and profit percentages for each business and reflect the industry experience for higher profit companies.

Step two. Plan for sales growth of 10 percent for both businesses. TABLE #4A:

Growth Plan (left) represents the profit and loss forecast based on the same expected cost and profit margin performance. Use the forecasted profit and loss statement to

	MAINTENANCE		DESIGN / BUILD	
Sales	\$1,100,000		\$756,250	
Direct Cost	\$550,000	50%	\$385,000	51%
Gross Profit	\$550,000	50%	\$371,250	49%
Indirect Cost	\$143,000	13%	\$110,000	15%
Overhead Cost	\$297,000	27%	\$198,000	26%
Net Profit	\$110,000	10%	\$63,250	8%

TABLE #4B: Growth Plan (net materials)



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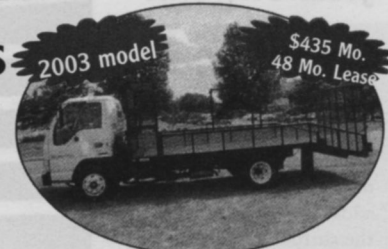
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Gauging Growth

determine the labor production hour budget. But first make an adjustment in the design/build business to back out the materials revenue and costs to reflect only true revenues generated by the labor force. From **TABLE #3: Profit & Loss Statement** (see page 133), we assume that materials cost 25 percent of sales and bids were marked up from their landed cost at 25 percent. The results are shown in **TABLE #4B: Growth Plan (net materials)**, where revenue from labor net of materials is determined to be \$756,250, and costs are \$385,000. (For chart, see bottom of page 133).

Step three. Let's determine the production hour budget by first calculating the realize rate using **TABLE #5: Realize Rate** (right) as the example. The realize rate is based on an average wage cost plus the cost recovery and profit markups necessary to achieve the budgeted profit.

Begin with the average wage rate. Easily calculate this by summing up your labor

costs for foremen and technicians from last year, then dividing this dollar amount by the total number of labor hours from your payroll report paid last year. In our example, we use \$10 per hour for maintenance and \$12 per hour for design/build.

The next step is to mark up the average wage for the following: (1) payroll burden (payroll taxes, SUTA, FUTA, FICA), (2) indirect costs (supervision payroll, equipment, depreciation, licenses, permits, shop wages and uniforms), and (3) overhead costs (general office/sales payroll, rent, communications, marketing, insurance, workers compensation, supplies and marketing).

We first mark up the direct payroll burden 12 percent to yield a payroll wage of \$11.20 and \$13.44, respectively. We then mark it up again using a utilization rate to compensate for non-billable downtime. The

	MAINTENANCE	DESIGN / BUILD
Average Wage	\$10.00	\$12.00
Payroll Burden	12%	12%
Payroll Wage	\$11.20	\$13.44
Utilization Rate	90%	0.8
True Wage	\$12.44	\$16.80
Recovery Costs	\$440,000	\$308,000
Labor Cost	\$550,000	\$385,000
Recovery Rate	80%	80%
Full Cost Wage	\$22.40	\$30.24
Profit Goal	10%	12%
Realize Rate	\$24.89	\$34.36

TABLE #5: Realize Rate

utilization rates of 90 percent and 80 percent reflect the time actually dedicated to work on a job. Determine your utilization rate by comparing actual hours billed to jobs vs. total hours paid in payroll. Construction businesses usually have lower utilization rates. This reflects differences in variables like timing, scheduling and weather. The result is true cost wages of \$12.44 and \$16.80.

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Gauging Growth

The next markup is recovery of indirect and overhead costs. Together these two costs total \$440,000 for the landscape maintenance business, and \$308,000 for the design/build company. Dividing these numbers by their total labor costs yields (just coincidentally) the same 80 percent cost-recovery percentage for each business. In applying this percentage to the true cost average wage, we achieve breakeven realize rates of \$22.40 and

\$30.24. The last calculation calls for a markup for the budgeted profit. The final realize rate (see TABLE #5: Realize Rate) represents the budgeted revenue per hour required for each hour of labor paid.

Step four. Determine the labor production hour budget by completing the example using TABLE #6: Production Hour Budget (below). Start with the forecasted sales budget and divide this number by the realize rate calculated. In the example, this yields production hour estimates of 44,196 and 22,007 for each of the businesses. Conduct a further forecast by applying an hour per Production Full Time Equivalent (PFTE) rate to determine staffing

requirements. The hour per PFTE rate is the number of hours that a full-time production person will work in a year. This number will range from 1,540 hours per year

(due to a shorter season) in the northern United States to 2,080 hours for full-season regions like Southern California. By dividing production hours by the hours/PFTE, we arrive at 21.25 staff required in the field for the maintenance company, and 10.58 required for the design/build business.

In summary, each company now has a growth plan for production labor that can help it control the hours allowable for a given revenue level. Departing from the budget by increasing the hours for that given revenue level creates excess capacity and destroys profits. The numbers don't lie, and successful contractors – ones that grow profitably – stick to their budgets and find that the work can get done with the number of people budgeted.

Hopefully by using these tools, you will be able to say, "I am making better margins now at \$1,500,00 than I did at \$800,000 and having a lot more fun than I did then."

The author is a business consultant with KehoeGuido Consulting, Laguna Niguel, Calif., and can be reached at 949/715-3804 or kkehoe@earthlink.net.

Sales growth does not automatically **generate increased profit margins**. In fact, **growth** – particularly, **uncontrolled growth** – will more likely **decrease profit margins**.

Sales	\$1,100,000	\$756,250
Production Hours	44,196	22,007
PFTE's	21.25	10.58

TABLE #6: Production Hour Budget.

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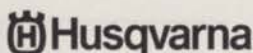
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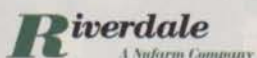
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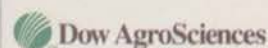
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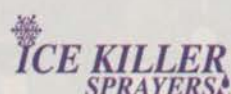
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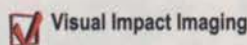
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By Bob West

SCHOOL Out!

The seventh annual Lawn & Landscape School of Management featured more products, sessions and numerous learning opportunities.

(Right) Echo illustrated the power of its newest backpack blower by demonstrating its air flow capacity in an easy-to-see manner. Photo: Kevin Sipe



(Left) School of Management attendees took advantage of the opportunity to test out a broad range of equipment, including mowers, trimmers, chain saws, pesticide sprayers and trucks. Photo: Kevin Sipe

S

(Right) Attendees used the breaks, meals and receptions as an opportunity to visit with School of Management sponsors, such as Drafix. Photo: Kevin Sipe



(Left) New on the schedule this year at the School of Management were six "How We Do It" seminars that let attendees learn how to tackle various issues. Topics covered included using the H2B program, selling holiday lighting, installing retaining walls. Here, Water Garden Systems' Trevor Stevens discusses pond installation. Photo: Kevin Sipe



(Right) Bringing more than 300 attendees and 30 industry suppliers together meant there were plenty of opportunities for everyone to get some business taken care of during the three-day-long School of Management. Photo: Kevin Sipe



(Left) Brett Nutting of JLM Landscapes told attendees about the ins and outs of making money with hardscapes in his jam-packed session. Photo: Kevin Sipe

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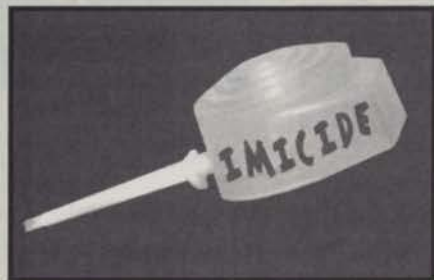
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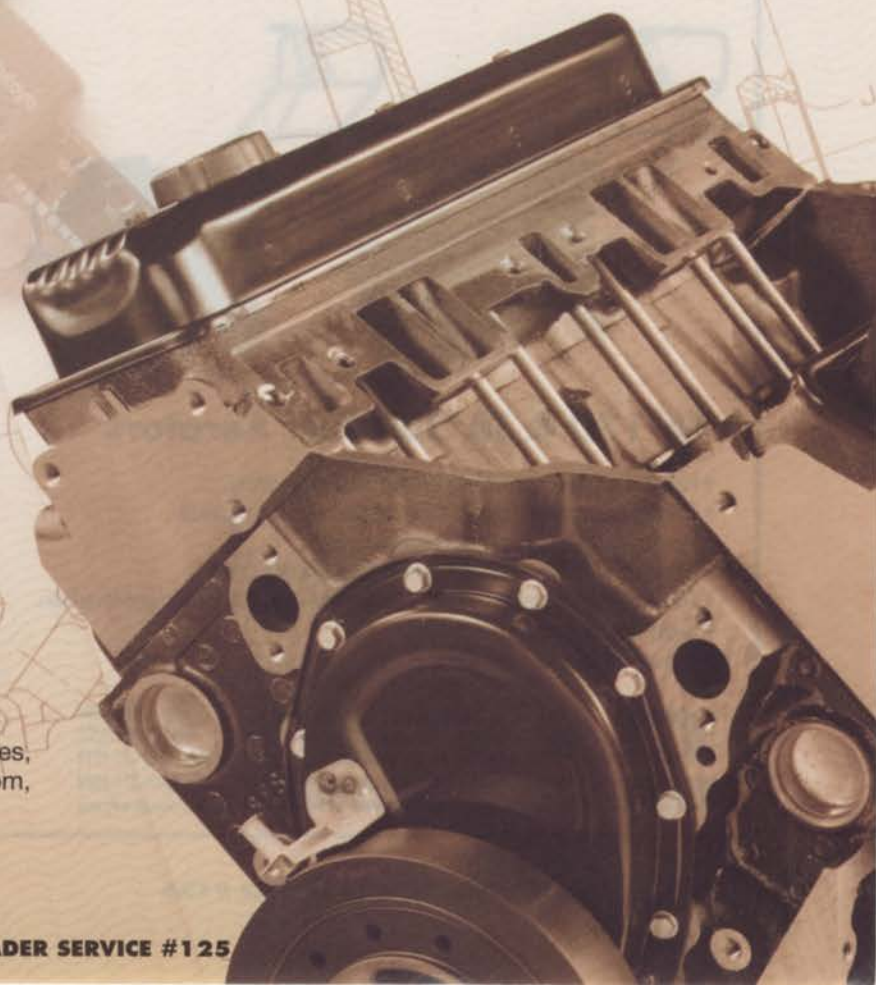
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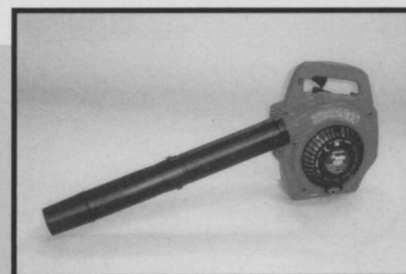
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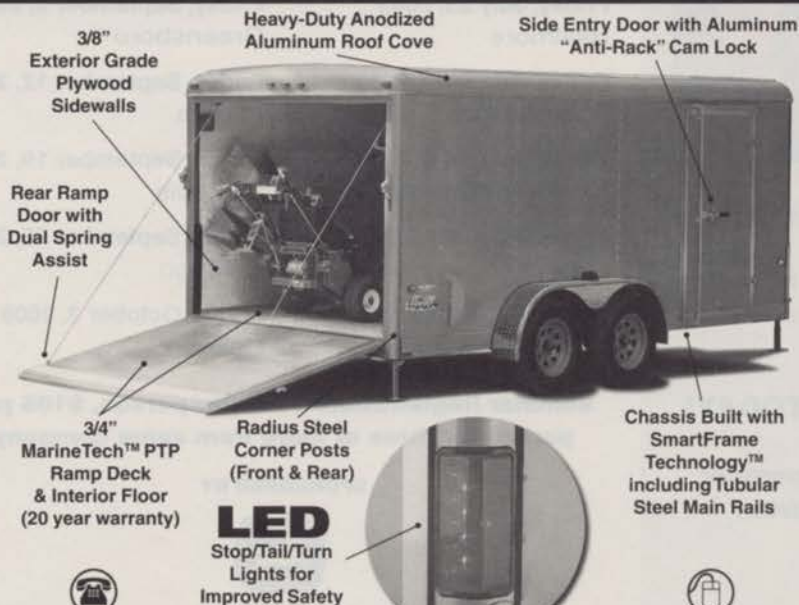
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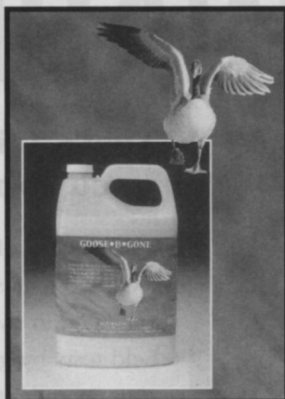
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Irritrol's KwikStart Remote Control System kit

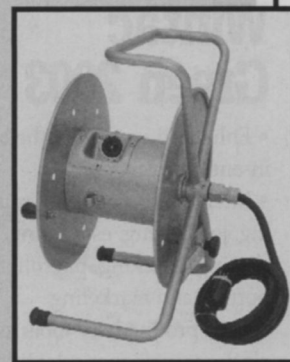
- Designed specifically for KwikDial Series controllers
- Includes everything required for remote operation of the KwikDial
- Convenient accessory for performing system troubleshooting and maintenance without direct access to the controller
- Allows remote station start, station advance, pause, resume and shut off of individual valves
- Operating range of approximately 160 to 300 feet
- Multiple address-code capability means a single transmitter can be used to individually communicate to many different KwikStart receivers

Circle 217 on reader service form

Portable Cord Reel

- Heavy-duty steel construction
- Metallic silver finish
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- Adjustable friction brake
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Swisher's Zero-Turn Radius Mower

- Three models: 14-hp engine with 36-inch mowing deck; 17.5-hp engine with 42-inch mowing deck; 20-hp engine with 50-inch mowing deck
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engines

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Contoured Van Ramp

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Circle 221 on reader service form

(continued from page 102)

creasing in the business, manufacturers are already planning for future advancements to better meet client needs.

In the future, irrigation software may incorporate mapping or global positioning system functions to improve routing and drive time, pointed out Jeff Tuel, new business development product manager, commercial division, Rain Bird, Tucson, Ariz. "When a technician downloads calls for the day, mapped directions will come with each job to help facilitate his day," he predicted.

Another improvement area may be inventory tracking. "By pointing and clicking on parts used for jobs and feeding this info back into an accounting system for inventory management, we can come up with a way where the distributor would be tied into this for full supply chain management," Tuel suggested.

Fay agreed that this would be a great resource. "With irrigation, each truck is like a shop on wheels - we have to carry a store of parts at all times," he said. "A few wrong

ordering decisions and you could have more money tied up in inventory than you need. It would be nice to use a database to identify spikes and holes and cracks so I could manage inventory better."

The key to purchasing the right irrigation software is being able to fit it to a company's specific needs. "There needs to be depth in the software so that each company can customize it to the way they want/need it to run," Tucker said.

PRICE POINTS. Incorporating software into a business can range in cost based on specific needs.

According to Tuel, seasonal businesses that rent software can pay \$200 to \$500 monthly, \$2,200 to \$3,500 annually, based on business size, or up to \$10,000 to \$15,000 to own software for their business.

Tucker pointed out that purchasing irrigation software can range from \$795 to \$5,000, depending on a variety of contractor

needs. "Do you want to spend all day using a pick and shovel to find that pipe or do you want to spend a little bit of money, learn a little technology and purchase a pipe locator and only dig once?" he questioned. "Information and its management is key."

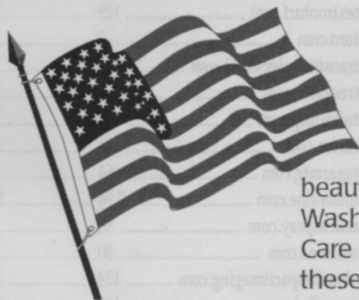
Contractors who want to incorporate Palm Pilots into their businesses can spend \$125 to \$150 each and contractors who want to set up one truck with a printer may pay from \$350 to \$500 each, Crary estimated.

Many contractors today, whether they currently are using irrigation software or are investigating programs so they can one day implement it into their businesses, just want to simplify their processes and improve their operations. Fay maintained, "Our goal is to eliminate the paper trail."

The author is Managing Editor of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and can be reached at nwisniewski@lawnandlandscape.com. Enloe Wilson also contributed to this story.

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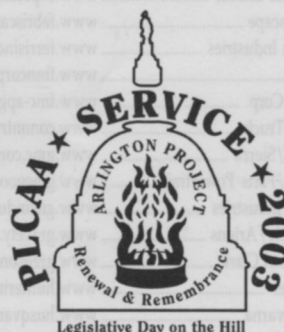
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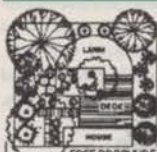
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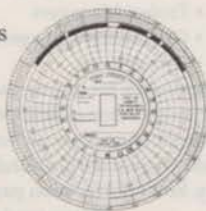
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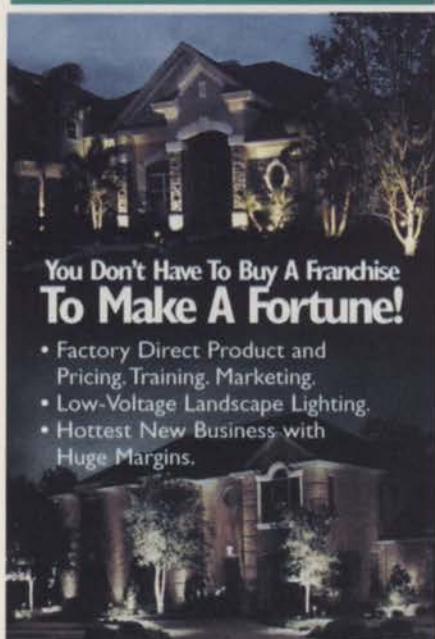
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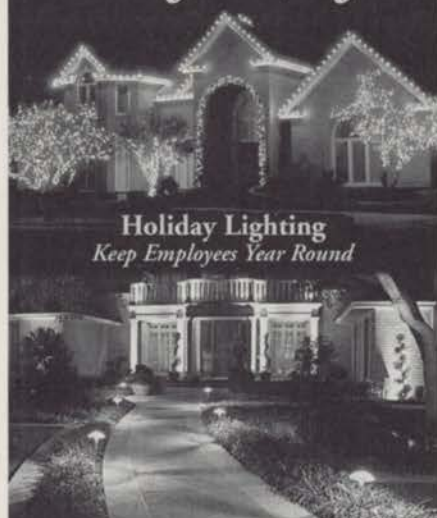
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Cover Story

(continued from page 51)

One of Bowen's key goals with this program is to regain control of his daily schedule by sharing responsibilities. Presently, his work includes all invoicing, work order paperwork, sales, marketing, customer relationships and even on-the-job training one morning a week, which he refuses to quit doing. "I doubt I will ever stop training because I enjoy it," he noted, adding that helping out crews in the field like this also helps him lead by example. "I'm all about the team and being the first person to get his hands dirty."

Still, he knows that the company needs him to hand off some of the duties that fill his typically 60- to 70-hour workweeks. "I don't want to think about everything that I do because it's a little scary," he admitted. Implementing a new operations structure this winter will hopefully help accelerate this transition. The new structure looks like this:

- Operational manager – "He's the one who's in charge when I'm not here," Bowen pointed out. "He's my No. 1 guy. He knows that and he's willing to take that responsibility so I can take some of these hats off."
- Operations supervisors – "We have two of these, and they're each responsible for about \$1 million worth of work, so they spend a lot of time in the field."
- Senior foremen – "That's your go-to guy," Bowen explained, adding that he has four of them. "He can do just about everything on the job, and he's bilingual."
- Foremen – "He's bilingual and has completed our own in-field and on-paper testing to demonstrate competency," Bowen noted. "We have four foremen, and they're responsible for their own crew each day."
- Laborers

Bowen's goal for this year is one many landscape company owners share: "Get me out of the field more and get me more into planning where the company is going," he offered, pointing to the need for a strategic plan as well as a marketing plan as two key items that need his attention. "It's time for me to work less in the business and more on the business, even though you hear that said all the time. But until this year, I didn't see how I was going to do that. Now I do." ■

The author is Editor/Publisher of Lawn & Landscape magazine, and he can be reached at bwest@lawnandlandscape.com.

Pricing Mowing Services

(continued from page 70)

loading and unloading trailers are common mistakes. Job sequencing is another issue. "When the crew shows up on the job, how do they get the job done?" Cooper asked. "Do they start at point A and end up at point Z or are they backtracking? Do they have the small mower in front of the large mower so that the small mower is covering something the large mower is able to get? Are they staging their debris so it's easy to come by and pick up or are they continually dragging it across the lot?" Cooper maintained that performing each part of a job in the right order increases efficiency.

Of course, every contractor understands that they must make occasional sacrifices to keep a business up and running. "There are times when sales aren't looking the way you hoped and you'll price a job just to get the business," Mitchell admitted. "You've got a certain number of people to keep busy and a certain amount of equipment that you have to get a return on, so you make foolish decisions, but it's out of necessity."

Ensuring that money is coming into the company at the right time can help alleviate this kind of problem. "When you think about the cash flow, you're billing out a \$12,000 contract, with 12 payments [one per month] at \$1,000 per payment," Russo said. "In April and May, you're dishing out a lot of hours and material for work and you're getting the same amount of money that you get in July." In warm-weather states like Florida where maintenance continues year-round, this set-up may not be a problem. But for northern parts of the country, dividing payments into eight or 10 months is advisable, so costs are recouped when they're spent, rather than in the off-season.

But whatever the method and wherever the company, an overarching theme for developing a pricing plan is understanding costs. Contractors must price their services based on what the market will bear, but more importantly, based on what it costs them to perform the job in the first place. Without establishing rates to recover direct and overhead costs, a landscape company is no better off than the teenager with his push mower down the street. ■

The author is Assistant Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine, and can be reached at lsapiers@lawnandlandscape.com

Developing a Mission Statement at AAA Landscape

Every company considers growth and profitability primary goals, yet many firms experience difficulty in upholding certain standards as they pass development milestones. Setting in place a mission statement can help maintain focus on the trek from ambitious start-up to grounded industry leader.

As AAA Landscape, Tucson, Ariz., met its \$10-million mark five years ago, we began to experience growing pains. That environment prompted us to reassess our place, our strategy, our identity in the field, and we began with establishing our stated mission.

We realized hashing out a mission statement would be an involved undertaking. To avoid the distractions of emergency client phone calls, paperwork demands, etc., we decided to remove 35 key employees from the office environment to clear their heads for a weekend. The group, identified based on their capacities as communicators, exceptional workers, leaders and prime representatives of their departments, ventured out – with their significant others – to a resort in the Northern Arizona Red Hills for a three-day retreat.

On the first day, a corporate psychologist/consultant led members in a discussion of ethics, values and principals. The group exchanged ideas; defined, compared and contrasted differences; and identified recurring themes before moving on to draft their own personal mission statements. Later, they reconvened to share those statements and identify the 20 most-shared principals.

The second day brought a narrowing down of the 20

principles – first to 10, then to five – followed by the drafting of a raw group credo. Once the document proved satisfactory, five members were assigned to rework a lean, down-to-earth passage.

Our retreat commenced with a third day dedicated to reviewing our final statement, pondering its implications and brainstorming ways to celebrate it.

Back in Tucson, we circulated the product of our work to all employees and awaited their response. Of course, many loved it, a few hated it, and most fell somewhere in-between. Over the next six months and with the help of our consultant, we massaged the statement, discussing it at company meetings and adjusting language to address our broad base of sensibilities and challenge us to new accomplishments. Eventually, we arrived at a mission statement we felt captured our collective personality and cause: "AAA Landscape is an employee-owned company dedicated to excellence. An industry leader committed to our employees, community and the environment. Guided by spiritual and moral values, we provide responsive, profitable, professional landscape services with integrity."

We immediately began referring to the mission statement whenever we introduced corporate policies and large-scale projects.

To bolster visibility and pride in our mission, we've included it on business cards, paperwork and signs around the home office. We also offer incentives to memorize the statement – like a paid day off to employees who can recite it by heart at corporate meetings.

We budgeted \$20,000 to the entire project, including \$12,000 to \$15,000 for retreat-related expenses, \$500 per day for our onsite corporate psychologist and other costs related to giving visibility to our mission statement via in-house signage, business collateral, etc.

Our expense was not insignificant, but we believe solid investment in fortifying the very character of our firm was of primary importance – and we've seen results in heightened output, improved quality, corporate morale and client appreciation of our standards.

When adopted as a living creed and a working reference, a mission statement is what helps you navigate a sometimes stormy market environment. It is your true north. – Richard Underwood

The author is vice president, Southern Arizona manager, for AAA Landscape, Tucson, Ariz., and can be reached at 520/696-3223.

5 KEYS TO *Developing a Mission Statement*

1. Compose a committee of employees selected for merits most important to your company.
2. Move the committee from the work environment to one more thought-productive.
3. Synthesize a mission statement based on common productive and community-building values and goals.
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CHOOSE ONE FREE TRIAL. MAIL THIS

(One ounce makes 500 cups or gallons. 1/4 teaspoonful per gallon, 3 ounces per 100 gallons, (or, constantly, a drop a gallon, 1 ounce per 500 gallons.)

- ☐ FREE \$6.20 2-ounce bottle, with 16-ounce \$29.40 size purchase. (RETURN pint for full REFUND if not delighted with 2-ounce bottle effects.)
- ☐ FREE \$9.98 4-ounce bottle, with 32-ounce \$51.60 purchase. (RETURN quart for full REFUND if not happy with free 4-ounce bottle new life.)
- ☐ FREE \$1.69 1/10-ounce sample Dropac™—Send 55¢ stamped, addressed envelope.
- ☐ 128-ounce \$148.75 size, (refundable, therefore FREE only to established business or public agency, if, after using 4200 to 64,000 gallons from gallon, you wish you had not bought it.)

- ☐ DEALER resale trial, FREE bottle with each dozen: DEDUCT 40% IN CHECK FOR DOZEN(S)

_____ dozen 1/2-ounce \$3.30 sellers; _____ dozen 1-ounce \$4.65 sellers;
_____ dozen 2-ounce \$6.20 sellers; _____ dozen 2-ounce \$9.98 sellers;

Firm Name _____

Phone _____

Delivery Address for UPS _____

ENCLOSED CHECK \$ _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

Your Name (Print, please) _____

Position _____

If your distributors already have SUPERthrive™ for you, buy trial **gallon** and **dozen(s)**, etc. from them. Same offers. Send copy of invoice or date and number for "baker's dozen" and other free bottles, direct. OTHERWISE,

MAIL TO

VITAMIN INSTITUTE • 12610 Saticoy St. South, North Hollywood, CA 91605, U.S.A.

Phone (800) 441-VITA FAX (818) 766-VITA (8482)

www.superthrive.com

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