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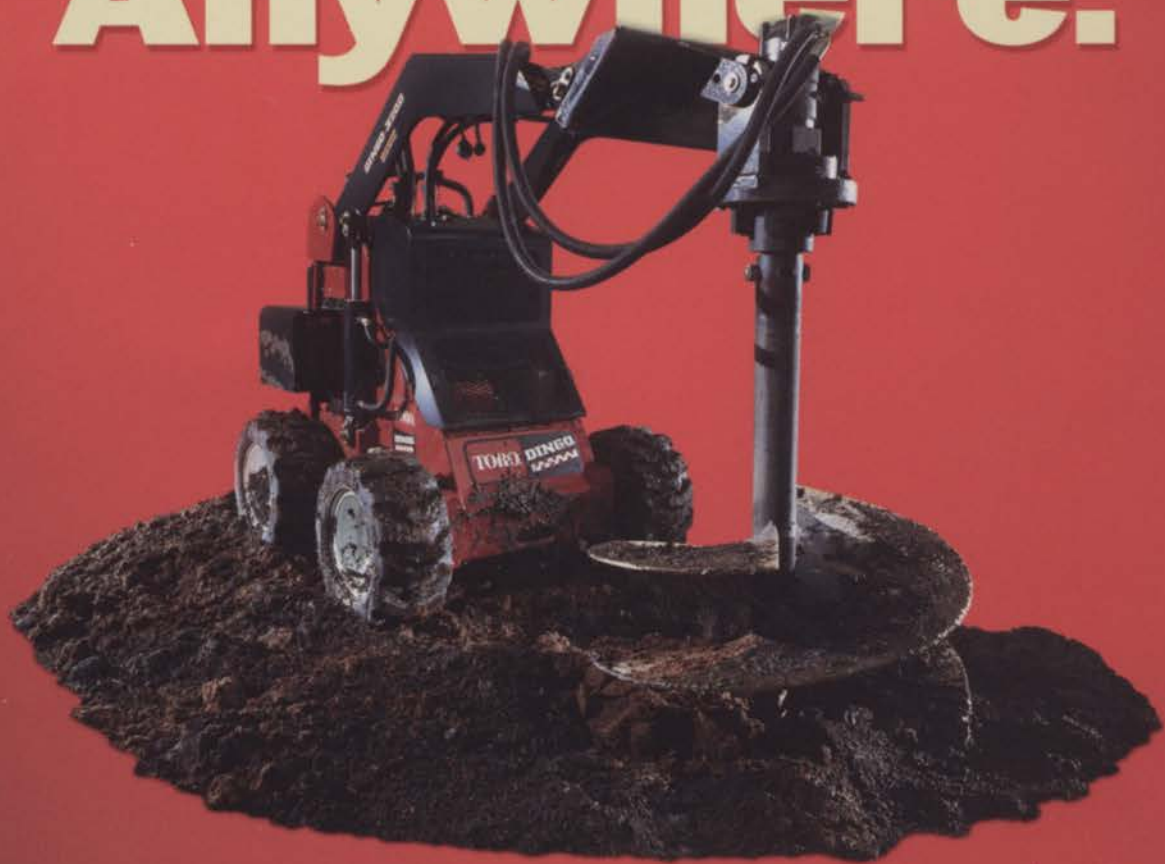
LEAN & MEAN

Refine your business systems with simple improvements – ask Platinum Landscape how it's done.

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Turn Receivables Into Cash
Waterfall Windfall
Riding Mower Advancements
Multi-Task With Skid-Steers

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USE READER SERVICE # 11



**Cover Story –
Lean & Mean**

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Refine your business systems with simple improvements – ask Platinum Landscape how it's done.

Cover Image by Steve Smith

05.06

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There's not much on a landscape job site that a skid-steer loader and the right attachment can't tackle.

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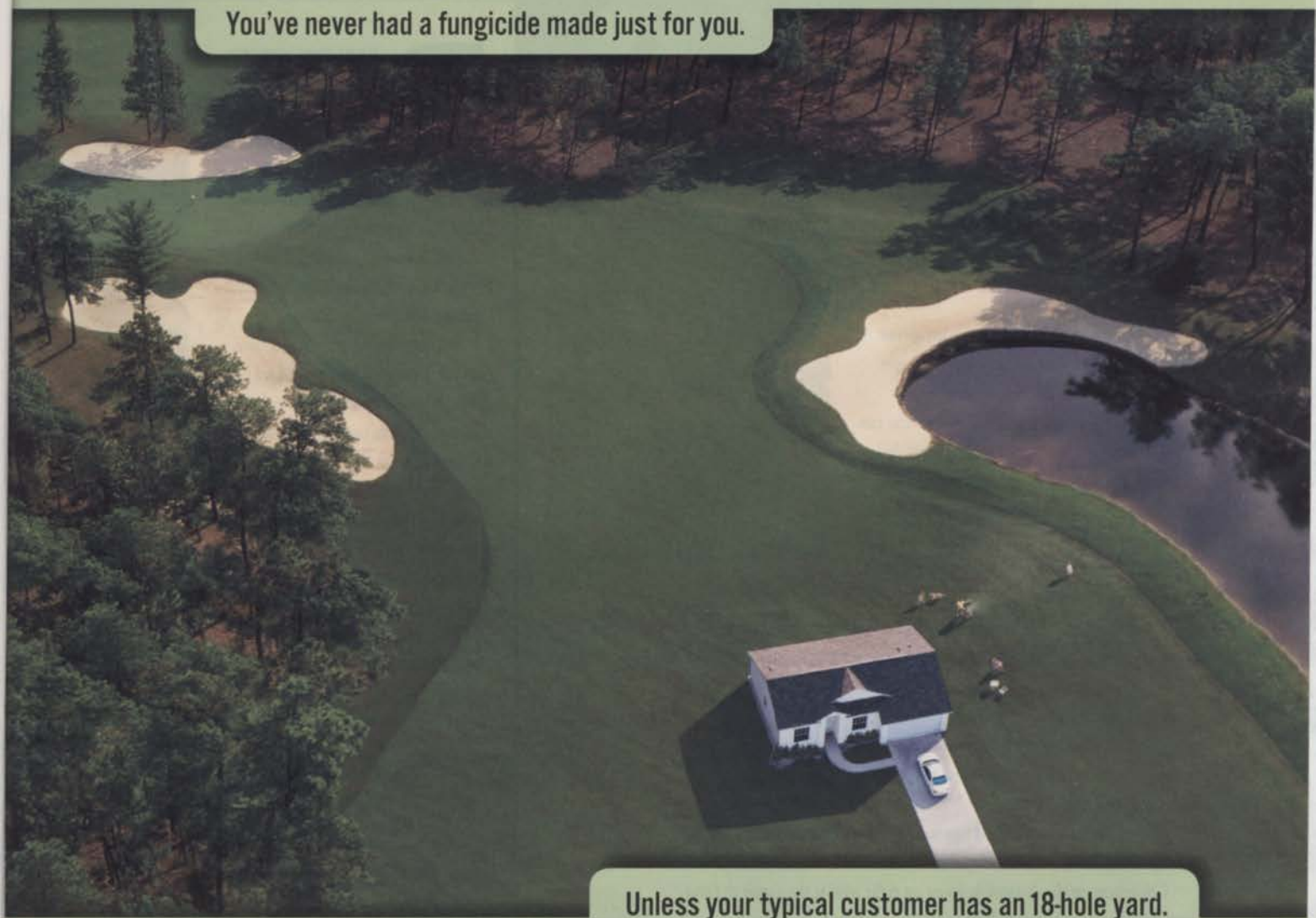
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An aerial photograph of a golf course. In the foreground, a clubhouse with a white roof and a white car on a path leading to it are visible. The rest of the image shows a lush green golf course with several sand traps and a large pond. The background is a dense forest of tall trees.

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best of the web

Do you cover your grass seed?

Many landscape contractors swear by some sort of protective covering to ensure proper grass seed germination. Others say it's a costly waste of resources and that, if properly applied, Mother Nature is all it takes to help the grass seed transform into lush turf.

Always primed for a good debate, *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board participants recently picked up the debate and discussed the topic themselves. Read about their viewpoints and tips for dealing with correctly preparing and protecting a grass seedbed in this month's "Best of the Web" feature on page 78.

If you have a topic, question or insight to share about the green industry, be sure to visit the *Lawn & Landscape* Online Message Board to post your thoughts. See you on the Web!



Best In Show

Some home and garden shows are a great way for landscape contractors to exercise their creative abilities. Where else can a contractor display their design potential to a wide array of potential customers? However, while helpful in generating new business, these displays may present unrealistic expectations compared to what you would install in a client's own setting.



Kevin O'Brien, a landscape designer at Lifestyle Landscaping in Grafton, Ohio, provides some helpful tips in presenting display gardens and creating spaces unique to clients' needs, as well as additional photos of the firm's trade show displays.

To access the *Lawn & Landscape* Online Extras section, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com, choose the Magazine menu and click on Current Issue Online Extras.

Do you have any additional tips to contribute? Perhaps you have a question or two?

Contribute to the discussion going on right now at the *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board at www.lawnandlandscape.com/messageboard.

online poll

Broken equipment, whether it's a zero-turn mower or a pick-up truck, can be devastating to a contractor. A good way to combat this is to stick to regularly scheduled maintenance. Let us know if you follow this approach in the May 8 *Lawn & Landscape* Online Poll where we ask, "Do you follow an equipment and fleet maintenance program?" The poll will run from May 8 to May 14. Look for results of this and every weekly online poll in the *Lawn & Landscape* e-Newsletter.



chemical knowledge

As you engage in your spring fertilization and pest control services, you'll need access to the information that will keep you on track for the effective and safe use of the chemicals you and your technicians are handling.

Check out *Lawn & Landscape's* online MSDS/Label Database. The MSDS/Label database has been compiled from data provided by pest control industry manufacturers, formulators and distributors. You can browse a variety of categories, such as product name, pest species, chemical name, usable locations, states permitted, manufacturers and chemical application type, to name a few.

To access the database, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com, choose the Resources menu and click "MSDS/Labels."



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Why is it So Hard to Win?

Hiring new employees isn't on anyone's list of most favorite things to do. But hiring the right people is one of three critical ingredients needed to manage your business to win. The other two elements are developing the right focus and creating the right environment.

With the spring season in full swing, it's important to keep your eye on the specific goals you have set for your company this year. Your goals may include growing 10 percent, upselling your current clientele with one or more services, cutting down on work-related injuries and downtime, improving profitability and increasing employee training.

While your business can't get off the ground without hiring the right people, it also takes more than hiring bodies to jump-start your strategy. You must also have a concrete plan in place to ensure their success from day one. Having focus and creating the right environment are crucial to your overall game plan.

"You can't be successful by just hiring people. That's what makes it so tough," says Michael Canic, Ph.D with Edge Consulting Services. Canic and Bernadine Grenier presented their Managing to Win program recently at the annual PLANET Executive Forum.

Why is it so hard to win? Because leaders fail to develop the right focus, to get the right people and to create the right environment, Canic says.

So, what does winning look like? Before you can answer this, you must assess your business. Attack your assumptions – those that you have about your organization and the market you compete in.


"Things change. The more successful you are, the more imperative it is that you do this," Canic says.

Without an edge, you are more than likely to fail. How often do things fail? "Of all the quality initiatives that we've heard and read about, two-thirds of them failed," he says.

Rather than wasting your time and money spinning your wheels, it's imperative that you take a few steps to keep your company running on the right track.

1. Assess who and what is influencing your business.
2. Position your company internally and externally with a targeted, succinct mission statement.
3. Plan your course of action with tangible strategies and objectives, as well as concrete forms of measurement.
4. Implement your plan with buy-in from your employees. Don't send mixed messages and don't say one thing and do another.

The right focus is compelling, clear and concise. This is only possible when you attack your assumptions, know where your business is weak, know why you have to change as a business and recognize whether your mission statement uses real words that your employees can repeat.

By creating a winning environment and getting buy-in from your employees, you win. And winning results in satisfied employees and clients, as well as overall business success. 

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Dear Editor,

I just received the January issue of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and I have to tell you that it was so well written that it read like *TIME* magazine – I could hardly put it down. It was full of new ideas from new companies, and many of the company owners discussed typical problems we face each day. I was so impressed with the new look and the writing that I just wanted to let you know.

Enekan Akpan
Adamma Landscape Group
Woodstock, Ga.

Dear Editor,

I wanted to thank you for all of the valuable information your publication has given me in the past six months. As a new owner of a small landscaping company, I have found your publication to be the source that I use most for guidance. I was hoping in the near future your magazine would feature articles that would help us who are "green" in the green industry make sure we have solid foundations in our beginning years – a "dos and don'ts" type of feature, for instance. My first six months in business were an exercise in profit and loss, I learned a lot to build off of. Hopefully with your help and many years of experience, we rookies will stay afloat for the next six months.

Much thanks,
Thomas Korpel
Korpel Landscaping and Design
Richmond, Va.



letters

Lawn & Landscape magazine welcomes letters from its readers. We feel that your honest feedback about our publication – whether it's positive or negative – is crucial to our future success. We take your comments very seriously and are always willing to respond or answer any questions you might have. To submit a Letter to the Editor, please send the letter via mail to Nicole Wisniewski's attention at 4012 Bridge Ave., Cleveland, Ohio 44113, or e-mail it to her at nwisniewski@gie.net. You can also call her at 800/456-0707.



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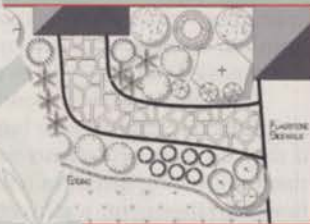
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USE READER SERVICE # 17



100-Percent Success

The Pareto Principle, derived from the observations of Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, states 20 percent of your efforts dictate 80 percent of your results. Applied to business, the Pareto Principle would have 20 percent of your clients generating 80 percent of your sales – and in my 21 years in landscaping, I've seen this hold true. But what I haven't seen is many contractors manage their time accordingly. If 80 percent of your business stems from only 20 percent of your customer base, wouldn't your business be best served if you devoted 80 percent of your time to them?

Now before you groan at the thought of completing rearranging your priorities, remember, it's your top clients who are the most likely to buy from you again and again, and it's far easier to sell jobs to existing customers than to begin from scratch with a new prospect. Why? Because your existing clients trust you. If they didn't, they would not have chosen your company in the first place. Assuming you fulfilled their expectations and delivered a superb job to them, you have already established a good relationship with them. You have a proven track record, so don't give them any reason to take a risk with an unproven competitor. Here are two solid marketing tactics:

1. Identify the top 20 percent. List the names and addresses of those who generate 80 percent of your revenues. Then make sure your team knows who they are and where their properties are located. Direct your staff to provide them with special attention. Mark the files of your top customers with the designation "Must Speak With." This way your administrative staff knows to contact the appropriate salesperson whenever a top client calls. Your top clients must feel important – for they are important to


the success of your business.

2. Create a "Regular Call" list. Indicate the actions you plan to undertake with regard to each in the next year. A good rule of thumb is to make contact with these clients, in one form or another, at least once a quarter.

Given the seasonal nature of landscaping, I find it works better to do a compressed version of this schedule and concentrate my efforts on the spring and summer months, with a wrap-up in the fall. As long as you approach it the right way, a client will rarely say, "Hey, I'm hearing from you too often." If they ask you to stop calling, reconsider your approach. The goal is to single them out as clients deserving superior service. Ask what you can do for them, not what they can buy from you.

By identifying your top clients and then communicating regularly with them, you will gain their respect and admiration.

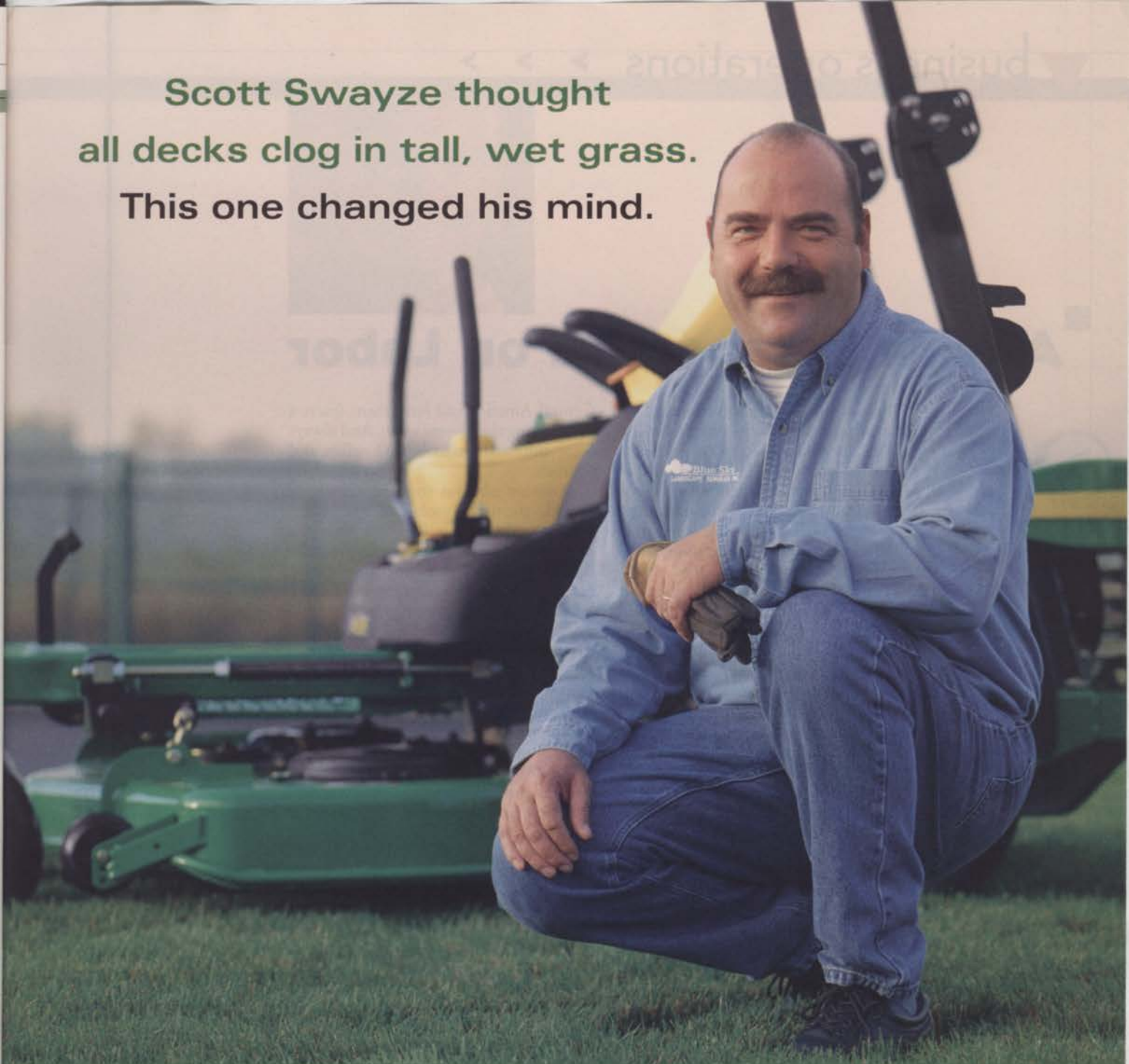
You should also encourage your top clients to recommend your company to their friends and family. But how do you do this without seeming overbearing? Try this approach: "Mr. Palmer, it's been a pleasure to do business with you. We are always looking for more great clients like you. If you have a friend, family member or neighbor whom you think could benefit from our services, we'd sure appreciate it if you passed our name on to them."

You'd be amazed by how much this simple tactic can grow your business. And if they do refer new clients to you, send them something special in return – like a flower arrangement, a gift certificate for dinner from a nice restaurant or even a tree or a discount on the next job they do with you – to show your appreciation. And try to customize your gift. If you know they're baseball fans, then treat them to a day at the ballpark. 

marty grunder

is a speaker, consultant and author, as well as owner of Grunder Landscaping Co., Miamisburg, Ohio. He can be reached at 866/478-6337 and via www.martygrunder.com.

Scott Swayze thought
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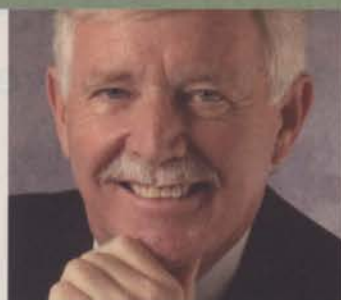
"Here in Washington, we have to cut in wet conditions all the time," says Scott. "So we can't afford to clog. And with the new 7-Iron II deck, we didn't have to slow down, not even once." With a higher blade tip speed, the 7-Iron II makes short work of even the tallest grasses.

Scott Swayze, Blue Sky Landscape Services, Inc., Puyallup, Washington

7IRONII™ See more of what Scott Swayze has to say at www.mowpro.com



JOHN DEERE



A New Perspective on Labor

There is one consistent focus area I see in all successful landscape companies. And it's one you should pay attention to in your organization. This focus is man-hours. You have heard it hear before but we address it again because of its importance. To be successful in this business everyone in the organization needs to understand man-hours and their importance.

The cardinal rule is you never instruct anyone to perform work in your field organization without giving them the budgeted man-hours to perform the task. The crews now have an established goal that enables us to create a performance score card. This tracks actual hours spent and compares it to the budget. This information should be regularly shared with the field crews, preferably once a week.

"Budgeted vs. Actual Man-Hours" is the single most important report in your office. You can develop an Excel spread sheet whereby the office inputs the actual hours spent on a specific job, by crew. Formulate the cells to calculate the deficiency. In addition, calculate the percentage of efficiency. For example, if you are under the budgeted hours you are 100-plus percent efficient and if you are over the hours you are less than 100-percent efficient. You can obtain the program on my Web site (see address below).

Field crew support is another important item to focus on during the year. Support starts with administration. Let's be sure we do what we say we will do. Do you have an orientation program for new employees? Do you provide them with information that might be found in an employee handbook? Do you ask them, "What can we do for you?" Do they have a designated area where they can fill out time sheets, look at schedule boards, etc. Is it as clean and neat as your other offices? If you employ Hispanic workers, a nice touch is to hang a map of Mexico and

Central America and have them insert a pin locating their home town. And always print information in both English and Spanish.

Another obvious support item is to provide them the tools and equipment needed to do the job. Purchase what you need and do whatever it takes to give them decent equipment. Problem equipment is a big morale breaker and costs you money.

Likewise, hold everyone accountable for the proper care and maintenance of the tools and equipment. I recommend assigning each tool to a foreman who then signs that he/she is accountable for the equipment. If a tool is lost or abused the foreman authorizes you to deduct the value of the item from their paycheck.

The owner must hold people accountable and provide an environment whereby the employees feel comfortable holding the owner accountable. This is not easy and it takes time. Understand that a pleasant working environment with good morale starts when everyone is held accountable. We always feel we are working hard and we are not happy when we see someone else who is not being held accountable.

Try this next time you instruct someone to do something for you. Ask them, "When will you have that completed?" You are asking them to commit to you as opposed to you telling them. When someone commits to you they are much more likely to meet the date as they are the ones who set the date. Now you can hold them accountable much easier. If they mention a date that is not acceptable, you can now discuss the matter and settle on a more mutually acceptable date.

In summary, support your field employees, give them what they need to perform the job, advise them of their performance relative to man-hours and hold them accountable.

And don't forget to have fun! ☺

jack mattingly

is a green industry consultant with Mattingly Consulting. He can be reached via e-mail at jkmattingly@comcast.net, through his Web site www.mattinglyconsulting.com or at 770/517-9476.



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Gold Medal Coaching

The 2006 Winter Olympics are over and all that remains are vivid memories and impressions about how sports really mirror life. I watched every night of the speed skating events and how Chad Hedrick performed on his way to winning multiple medals in what is one of the most grueling and training-intensive sports.

After months and years of preparation, Hedrick still needed event-by-event advice from his coach who was sitting in the stands near the ice. There they were, communicating back and forth and making the necessary corrections in his techniques and approaches.

Coaching is a regular and natural method to improve performance in the world of sports and athletics. Owners of exterior and interior landscape companies can learn from these principles and become more effective coaches as well as help employees improve their performance.

Becoming a good coach in our industry is a process composed of some thoughtful, well-defined steps.

- **Define what an unsatisfactory performance is.** If you are not getting the desired results you want because of the fact that someone is performing unsatisfactorily, then you need to define what that person should do differently so that he/she is able to achieve the desired result. This holds most true for operations and sales performers.

- **Expend your coaching time wisely.** Stay focused on the main events of performance. Don't become side tracked into spending time on isolated incidents or incidents over you which you have no control and, in the final analysis, have little to do with improving performance.

- **Determine whether people know their performance is not what it should be.** Your employees should have some measure of what is expected of them so

they can see how they are performing against that standard.

- **Determine legitimate reasons why an employee cannot do what is expected.** Sometimes, when we take the time to see the job as an employee sees it, we realize there are obstacles that prevent a person from performing well. These obstacles may be beyond the control of the employee. A good coach removes these obstacles.

- **Ensure people have adequate job training.** This sounds obvious, but in many cases we assume people either know their jobs well or they have received the necessary training to perform well.

- **Do not set the reward for high performance as more negative than positive.** Sound familiar? A good example of this is rewarding your top operations worker with more work because he or she finished their assigned tasks before everyone else. Once they see this happen a few times, how do you think they will adjust their performance?

- **Are you rewarding employees who don't perform very well?** Sometimes we overuse our good employees by continually assigning very important tasks to them that we need done correctly and quickly. Meanwhile, their co-workers whom we do not view as being as competent are sitting back with far less to do than they should. These non-performers get their raises and keep their jobs just as if they were carrying their fair share of the load. Does this scenario sound really familiar?

- **Do you really believe this person could perform the job if he/she really wanted to do it?** It's judgment time. If the answer is, "No," then you have a decision to make about the future of this employee in your company.

The resulting action can become a real "gut-check," but that is what coaching is all about. **ll**

larry fish

is president of GreenSearch, a human resource consulting organization. He can be reached at 888/375-7787, larry@greensearch.com, or via www.greensearch.com.

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USE READER SERVICE # 19



A Sticky Subject?

You spend a lot of money just to send your lawn care technicians out on their routes. Trucks, salaries, benefits, insurance, sales materials, fuel and products, just to name a few expenses. And, like any savvy business manager, you continually evaluate these costs to find opportunities for savings, right?

We all recognize the costs associated with putting products on your lawn care technicians' trucks. Whether it's fertilizer, herbicides, insecticides or fungicides, you understand the need to purchase quality products that deliver customer-pleasing results. Maybe there should be another product on those trucks, particularly for liquid applications, to make them even more profitable.

MAX IMPACT. Profit is about minimizing the expenses necessary to generate maximum revenue. One of the most costly, not to mention frustrating, costs for lawn care jobs is callbacks. A single callback can eliminate the profit generated by two or three visits to a property.

That's where products called surfactants, also known as spreader/stickers, can be valuable assets. Unfortunately, many companies miss the opportunity to enhance application performance as well as customer satisfaction because they don't understand these products. Here's what you need to know.

Surfactants improve spray applications' effectiveness by providing more uniform coverage of the spray on the plant to maximize the amount of the application in contact with the plant surface. The plant takes up more of the application and absorbs the active ingredient more quickly, thereby increasing performance and delivering maximum results.

What happens when you include a surfactant or spreader/sticker in your tank

mixture is that a drop of the spray solution has less tension with the plant leaf, so it spreads out, covers and penetrates more of the leaf. More contact with the plant surface translates into improved control, less wasted product and fewer callbacks.

NOW WHAT? Lawn care companies have a tremendous range of products they can purchase, and some sound more impressive than they probably are. Data backs up the value of surfactants. In fact, a 2001 University of Florida study showed an application of an acephate product with a soil surfactant increased control of mole crickets from 87 to nearly 100 percent, compared to a straight acephate application. A soil surfactant helps a product move through a thatch layer and into the soil, thereby increasing effectiveness for some applications.

Clearly, the argument for using surfactants is strong. That's not to say, however, that they make sense in all applications. Some jobs are ideal candidates, and they include:

- Sensitive herbicide applications requiring excellent coverage
- Insecticide treatments where enhanced spray coverage increases the likelihood of contact with a mobile target pest
- Fungicide applications on hard-to-wet surfaces that require complete coverage

Plus, surfactants don't add much to your cost of application. Consider that most are available for less than \$50 for a half gallon, which is usually enough for 200 gallons of spray application and will cover most lawn care technicians for an entire day. The cost of the surfactant is minimal enough on a per-lawn basis that it can often be passed along to the customer.

As the old adage tells us, sometimes you have to spend money to make money. **ll**

j.b. toorish and brian kelley

are part of LESCO's Tech Services Department. They can be reached at techguys@lesco.com or at 800/321-5325 ext. 3150 to answer technical questions.



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USE READER SERVICE # 20

weather forecast

NOAA Announces U.S. Spring Outlook

The National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) says spring 2006 should remain dry and warm.

Also, NOAA, in partnership with the National Interagency Fire Center, announced that despite periodic precipitation, the spring outlook supports the potential for a significant wildfire season in the Southwest and central and southern Plains.

"Recent storms have eased the drought situation in many areas of the country, but the rain and snow arrived too late to offset the impacts from months of record dry weather across the Southwest, resulting in the continuing potential for a dangerous fire season," says David Johnson, director, NOAA National Weather Service.

Weak La Niña conditions, which developed this winter, contributed to significant drought concerns in the Southwest, central and southern Plains. "April through June is typically dry in the Southwest, so drought will likely persist or even worsen until the thunderstorm season

arrives this summer," says Ed O'Lenic, chief, forecast operations branch, NOAA Climate Prediction Center. "NOAA's outlook also indicates a continued drought concern for the southern and central Plains."

Rich Ochoa of the National Interagency Fire Center's fire weather program says the program's forecast calls for an above-normal fire potential in Southern California, the Southwest, Southern Plains to Florida and a below-normal potential in the Northeastern U.S.

As of mid-March, dry weather, unseasonably high temperatures and gusty winds have already contributed to more than 13,000 wildfires, scorching in excess of 930,000 acres nationally since Jan. 1, mainly in Texas and Oklahoma. This is well above the five-year average of 6,363 wildfires and 98,476 acres burned.

Currently, severe to extreme drought extends across the Southwest into the southern Plains and

northward into Kansas. The U.S. Drought Monitor gives its highest drought rating, D4 (exceptional), to portions of southern Texas and eastern Oklahoma. Heavy rains including severe thunderstorms have eased short-term drought in Illinois, Iowa and southward into Arkansas, but ongoing drought concerns may linger. The recent heavy rains and flooding ended dryness concerns in Hawaii.

The U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook calls for dry conditions persisting through June in the Southwest and the southern and central Plains, despite temporary improvement in some areas. Also, drought is expected to expand in Kansas and eastern Colorado. Some drought improvement is predicted for areas in the northern Rockies and northern Plains, as well as the Mississippi Valley and eastern Plains. Drought is expected to continue in North Carolina and possibly expand into portions of the mid-Atlantic and Southeast.

For the nation as a whole, the U.S. Spring Outlook for May and June indicates below-normal precipitation for

much of the central and southern Plains, as well as the Southeast and Gulf Coast. Above normal precipitation is favored across the northern Plains and Great Lakes region as well as Hawaii. The remainder of the country, including Alaska, has equal chances of above, near or below normal precipitation.

Meanwhile, above normal temperatures are indicated for the Southwest eastward into the Southeast and the northwest islands of Hawaii; below normal temperatures are likely for the northern Plains, northern Rockies and Washington State. Western Alaska and the panhandle may see above-normal temperatures. The remainder of the country has equal chances of above, near or below normal temperature. An equal chance, either for temperature or precipitation, is predicted when there are no reliable and skillful signals on which to base the seasonal outlook.



One Warm Winter

To the dismay of U.S. snow contractors – and the delight of many lawn and landscape professionals – the winter of 2005/2006 will be remembered as one of the warmest on record.

Based on preliminary data, the average temperature in the U.S. between December 2005 and February 2006 was 36.3 degrees, making it the fifth warmest winter on record, according to the NOAA National Climatic Data Center in Asheville, N.C.

The winter temperature in 41 states was above or much above average, reports the NOAA, with only seven states near average and none cooler than the long-term mean.

Snowpack across the western United States reflected the general distribution of precipitation with parts of the Northwest at more than 150 percent of normal, while much of the Southwest had far less than 50 percent of normal winter snowpack at the end of February. Both Arizona and New Mexico have seen a nearly unprecedented lack of snowfall this season. In Flagstaff, Ariz., as of Feb. 28, only 1.6 inches of snow had fallen since autumn began. This contrasts with a normal snow total of 72.5 inches for the period.

Several significant snow storms impacted the nation during the winter, including a powerful storm that hit the East Coast on Feb. 11-12. Areas of New Jersey, New York and Connecticut received more than 20 inches of snow during the event, which was classified as a Category 3 ("major") snow storm by the new Northeast Snowfall Impact Scale. – Mike Zawacki



INSECT WATCH

Mosquito Boom Expected in Hurricane Region

A recent report from Reuters noted that the Louisiana Gulf Coast is likely to see a boom in the mosquito population this spring and summer as a result of the damage and flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina.

The American Mosquito Control Association (AMCA) says it's not just pools and ponds creating breeding grounds for these pests. "During hurricanes, a number of things happen," says Joe Conlon, technical advisor for AMCA. "First, all the larvae and adults in the area are destroyed when the hurricane hits. But when waters recede, there are huge amounts of new breeding habitats created. With all the debris that's there, they'll be breeding in new areas like tree holes, broken branches, trash left out, old tires and more."

Conlon says the expected mosquito influx could be significant. "It only takes about seven

days for mosquitoes to go from egg to adult and the hatching will actually depend on the first rains that come in – you'll get a huge bloom of mosquitoes at that point," he explains. "We're also expecting Florida to get nasty this year."

Conlon says that fogging for mosquitoes during the early morning hours and at dusk can be helpful and will be managed by Louisiana and Florida's mosquito abatement districts. Meanwhile, for lawn care operators working in the area who need mosquito repellent, he recommends cream repellents containing DEET.

Scott Zide of Mosquito Squad, a mosquito misting franchise operation, notes that misting could be a new revenue stream for lawn care operators. According to a recent *Lawn & Landscape Online* Poll, 8 percent of industry professionals are most likely to add mosquito control to their service menus this year.



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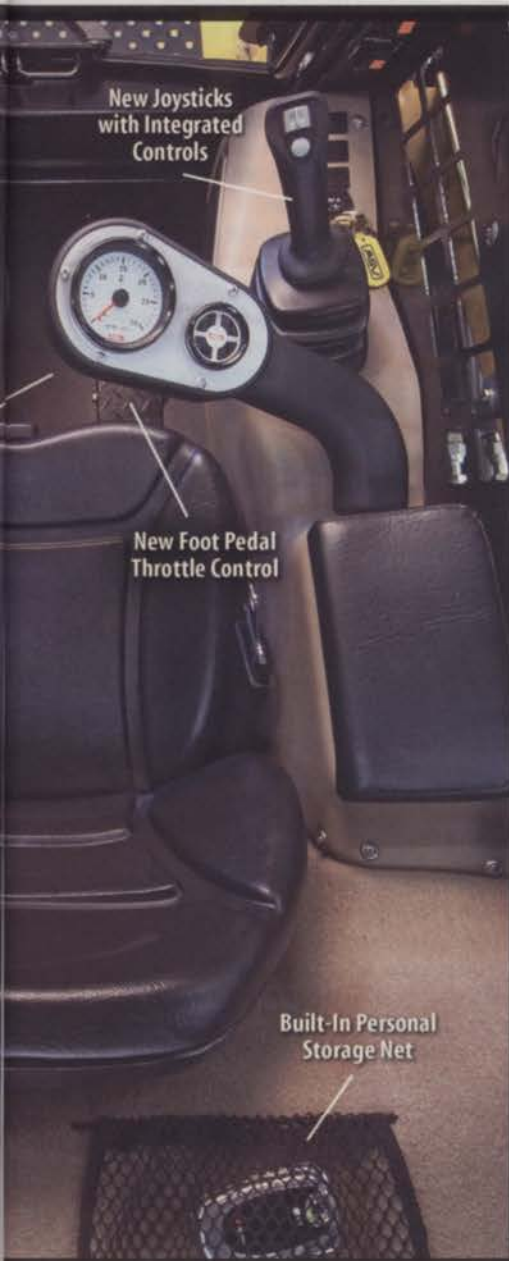
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H-2B Fly-In Draws More Attendees than Expected

It was a busy day in Washington, D.C. for dozens of landscape contractors and small business owners from several other industries joining the fight to keep H-2B as a viable option for seasonal labor. About 100 small business representatives met up in Washington on March 15 for the H-2B Fly-In announced by the Professional Landcare Network and Save Small Business just two weeks prior. As many people were unable to attend the event due to the short notice, the turnout was a pleasant surprise for event organizers.

As with last year's fly-in, attendees concerned themselves with the Save Our Small & Seasonal Businesses Act, which passed with an overwhelming majority vote when attached to a supplemental appropriations bill in May 2005. Among other things, the bill allowed H-2B workers who had successfully used the program in any of the previous three years to receive an H-2B visa without counting against the restrictive 66,000-visa cap. This year, the Save Our Small & Seasonal Businesses Act of 2006 contains identical language as the current legislation, but extends

its provisions through 2009 – another temporary, but needed H-2B fix in the midst of congressional debate over comprehensive immigration reform.

PUSHING FOR CONTINUED SUCCESS.

Proving that H-2B impacts companies of all sizes, many representatives from companies on *Lawn & Landscape's* Top 100 List were in Washington for the Fly-In, as well as smaller companies from around the country. "Ten percent of our labor force nationwide comes from H-2B," says Berenice Campos of ValleyCrest, Calabasas, Calif. Twenty of ValleyCrest's several dozen branch offices utilize the H-2B program. "We generally bring in about 900 workers on H-2B visas and when the cap was

reached in December, that sent us scrambling. Thankfully, because of the legislation passed last year, 600 of our workers returned, so they were exempt from the cap, but some of our branches weren't so lucky."

ValleyCrest was No. 2 on the 2005 Top 100 List. Also in attendance were representatives from Acres Group, Wauconda, Ill. (No. 22); GroundMasters, Cincinnati, Ohio, (No. 46); and Moore Landscapes, Northbrook, Ill., all of whom also attended last year to lobby their Congress members. Representatives from many smaller landscape companies also made the trip to D.C., including Chuck Twist, TNT Lawn & Landscape, Stillwater, Okla.; Chad Stern, Mowing & More, Chevy Chase, Md.; Vince Del Vacchio, Del Vacchio Landscapes, Edgemont, Pa.; and Tony Sposato, Sposato Landscape, Milton, Del.

In addition to Campos, many other businesses in attendance said the Save Our Small & Seasonal Businesses Act of 2005 had an important positive impact on their companies in 2005. "The provisions from last year's legislation let us use the H-2B program with 100 percent success," says Twist. "Without last year's bill, there wouldn't have been a chance."

GARNERING SUPPORT. Overall, it was a mixed day for attendees on Capitol Hill. Chris Hayes of GroundMasters said his delegation's meeting with Representative Anne Northup (R-Ky.) went well and that the congresswoman agreed to sign on as a cosponsor of the bill.

Meanwhile, Twist's meeting with a legislative assistant from Senator James Inhofe's (R-Okla.) office was productive, though slightly less impactful in terms of gaining co-sponsors for the bill. Inhofe is one of only four senators to oppose the bill's passage last year. He currently is postponing any support for the Save our Small & Seasonal Businesses Act of 2006 until a bill on comprehensive immigration reform is finalized. That bill is currently being marked-up by the Senate Judiciary Committee, though organizers of the Fly-In encouraged attendees to push their legislators to view the H-2B issue as separate from the immigration bill.

"You'll hear a lot of members say they're waiting to see what will happen with the comprehensive immigration reform bill before making any decisions about H-2B, but that's really just an excuse to wait," says Erin Corcoran of Sen. Barbara Mikulski's office. Like last year, Mikulski is sponsoring the H-2B legislation. "The senate is working on marking up this bill, but even if it passes right away, there's no indication of when it will actually go into effect. It's important to make sure your senators and representatives understand that the H-2B bill represents part of a two-track approach to immigration reform that will allow comprehensive reform to take shape without taking away employers' ability to use H-2B."

Organizers of the Fly-In encouraged attendees to continue contacting their Congress members about H-2B issues.

As the Save Our Small & Seasonal Businesses Act of 2006 continues to gain support, Mikulski's office is looking at opportunities to ensure its passage. The bill (S. 2284 and H.R. 4740) will likely be attached to another piece of legislation for a vote. Visit *Lawn & Landscape Online* for updates. — Lauren Spiers Hunter



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USE READER SERVICE # 22



IN THE NEWS

Career Fairs Aren't Just for Job-Seekers

While it's the competitive events that make the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET) Student Career Days (SCD) unique, at the core of the event is the day-long career fair, which all students are encouraged – if not required – to attend. But while the career fair serves as a launch pad for many students in the landscape profession, the benefits to exhibiting companies and the industry overall can be just as powerful.

"This is a great chance for our industry to show students how much we're growing and how many opportunities there are for them to succeed in all different kinds of positions," says Todd Ferguson of Initial Tropical Plants, Riverwoods, Ill. "We've been coming to Student Career Days for 20 years and it gets better every year. Our company continues to grow as well, and it's wonderful to see the interest coming from the students."

Tegwyn Ellingson, also of Initial Tropical Plants, agrees and remembers when he participated in Student Career Days as a Brigham Young University student not long ago. "This is really the best day of the year," he says. "What we see a lot is groups of students with traditional exterior landscape experience, many of whom don't realize that part of our industry also serves the interior market. I used

to be part of that group and when I learned about interior landscaping and took an interior plant and design class I realized there was a whole new career path available to me."

Opening students' eyes to the wide array of professions within the green industry is a great benefit of the career fair, many exhibiting companies say. Ellingson and Ferguson say Initial Tropical Plants has a number of sales, service, leadership and "concierge" positions available and will be able to leverage new studies on the importance of plants in the workplace to engage and educate students on the interiorscaping industry.

Meanwhile, some career fair exhibitors enlisted the help of young staff members in their SCD recruiting efforts. Casey Ridd, a Penn State student who graduates in May and has worked for AAA Landscape, Tucson, Ariz., for the past two years will continue working for them after college. Rather than scouring the career



The 2006 PLANET Student Career Days was held in Provo, Utah, amidst the back drop of snowcapped mountains (above right). Students compete in a plant installation category (above) to test their landscape skills. A Mariani Landscape employee educates a student about the company (right) at the career fair portion of the event. Photos: Lawn & Landscape



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USE READER SERVICE # 23

fair for interview opportunities, Ridd manned the AAA booth and answered questions for potential future coworkers. She's on track to become a landscape maintenance foreman for the company and is a prime example of a young employee who found a new career path through SCD. "I had been studying landscape design, but when I met and started working with AAA, I saw a lot of opportunity in the maintenance side," she says. "I knew I wanted to work in the Southwest, I really felt like I fit in with the company, and I'm looking forward to my new role. I think students who are at Student Career Days really have to have the heart to prove themselves once they find a job and start working, but they shouldn't limit themselves to a certain type of job."

Ridd adds that she's happy to help AAA Landscape recruit new employees.



Representatives at Initial Tropical Plants' career fair booth educate students about the company and give on-the-spot interviews. Photo: Lawn & Landscape

In addition to AAA, Initial and other companies that have brought in new talent from SCD for years, the 30th annual event welcomed a number of new companies to the career fair this year. "I didn't have anything like this 20 years ago when I was looking for a job," says Manuel DeSouza,

ND Landscaping, Topsfield, Mass. "There's a really powerful energy here and it's a great chance to show these students who are coming into the industry what we have to offer."

DeSouza believes that the green industry has a better attitude than "Corporate America" and hopes to use such differences to help ND Landscaping build its staff. "As the company increased in size, we knew we needed to go after some new recruiting opportunities," the company's representatives say. "Last year, we sent our production manager down to the University of Maryland to check out how Student Career Days worked and we determined it would be a really valuable event for us. So far, we've had a great deal of interest from the students - we're very glad we came."

Another company relatively new to the world of SCD is Outside Unlimited,

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Hampstead, Md. Though 2006 is only the second year that the company has been involved, public relations representative Stephanie Machrone says they've jumped in with both feet. "We chose to be a bronze sponsor of Student Career Days because we feel anything we can do to get our company name in front of the students is worthwhile," she says.

An SCD bronze sponsorship includes a monetary commitment toward the event, but Machrone says it's worth it. "You have to spend the money," she says, noting that Outside Unlimited participates in as many career fairs as possible for recruiting. "We're growing quickly and the market is competitive. We want to make impressions with as many students as we can to show them they can help us grow our business." Outside Unlimited picked up several interns at last year's event and doesn't intend to turn away talented students, Machrone says.



A University of Georgia student competes in the paver installation category. Photo: Lawn & Landscape

With students at all levels – from college freshmen to graduate students and even adult continuing education students – attending the Student Career Days, employers participating in the SCD career fair have many options when it comes to hiring. While most older students try to secure full-time employment for after

graduation, many attendees are aiming for internships to gain experience. This type of short-term employment gives employers the extra hands they need during the spring and summer, and also provides an opportunity to educate young workers on their company culture, giving them a better idea of the industry's professionalism and potentially enticing them to stay on as full-time staff members later on.

This year, nearly 100 companies participated in the career fair, which got rave reviews. For more information on how to participate in Career Fair 2007 during Student Career Days at Michigan State University, Lansing, Mich., contact PLANET at www.landcarenetwork.org, www.studentcareerdays.com, or 800-395-2522. – Lauren Spiers Hunter

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A GMC pickup truck is shown at a construction site. The truck is silver and has a ladder and two large pipes mounted on its bed. In the background, there is a building under construction with scaffolding. The GMC logo is visible on the front of the truck.

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PEOPLE



Nufarm's Mark Phipps Dies From Cancer

BURR RIDGE, Ill. – Nufarm Americas sadly announced the passing of Mark Phipps on March 25. Phipps had battled pancreatic cancer for the past 16 months, but succumbed to the disease in the presence of his loved ones at his home in Sellersville, Penn. He was 46.

Phipps had been the Northeast regional sales manager for the past 6½ years for the Turf & Specialty division of Nufarm Americas. Previously, he had worked for Moyer & Son of Souderton, Penn., in both sales and management capacities. Phipps expanded his industry role as he became involved in many national associations and various legislative efforts during his career.

He was a lifelong resident of eastern Pennsylvania, earning a bachelor of science degree from Delaware Valley College of Science and Agriculture in 1982. Phipps was known as a passionate participant in local politics, community and church activities as well.

"Mark had a generous, giving spirit and cared deeply for his family, friends and work colleagues," says Sean Casey, Nufarm's vice president of sales, turf & ornamental and one of Phipps' closest friends. "We will miss the warmth, character and enthusiasm he brought to everything he did and are extremely grateful for the time we were allowed to have him as a member of our Nufarm family."

Phipps' family requests that any contributions be made to the "John Hancock Freedom 529" c/o Seitz, Leatherman and Kolb, 595 Bethlehem Pike, Suite 204, Montgomeryville, Penn. 18936 for the Phipps Children's Education Fund.



SPANISH LESSONS



Considering that more and more landscape contractors are employing Hispanic or H-2B workers, improving communication is becoming more crucial to ensure quality work done right the first time.

In an effort to aid lawn care professionals in their communication efforts, *Lawn & Landscape* will be running a few phrases each month in English and Spanish, including a pronunciation guide, courtesy of the book *Spanish Phrases for Landscape Professionals* by Jason Holben and Dominic Arbini. To inquire about ordering the book, which costs \$23.99, contact Stock Pot Publishing, Attn: Order Desk, P.O. Box 18343, Denver, Colo. 80218-0343.

1. ENGLISH: If you don't understand, ask for help.
SPANISH: Si no comprendes, pide ayuda. (See no coh-m-pren-dehs, p-day l-you-dah.)
2. ENGLISH: Put the tools away when you are done.
SPANISH: Cuando termines con las herramientas guardalas.
(Kwan-doe tehr-me-nehs cone lahs ai-rah-me-n-tahs gwar-dah-lahs.)
3. ENGLISH: Wear safety glasses when doing this.
SPANISH: Usas tus lentes de seguridad cuando estes hacienda esto aquello.
(Ooh-sahs toose lehn-tehs day she-goo-re-dahd kwan-tho s-tays ah-c-n-tho s-toe ah-kway-yoh.)
4. ENGLISH: We have to have this done before the end of the day.
SPANISH: Nosotros tenemos que tener esto terminado antes de que el dia finalize.
(Noh-soh-trohs the-neh-mohs K the-nair s-toe tehr-mee-nah-doh ahn-tays day K L dee-ah fee-nahl-e-say.)

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USE READER SERVICE # 25

Word-of-Mouth Marketing Still on Top

A majority of business owners surveyed in the latest Wells Fargo/Gallup Small Business Index cite word-of-mouth and local publications as the top two most effective forms of advertising. The study found that of the 55 percent of business owners surveyed who spent money on advertising in 2005, 67 percent did so in their local newspaper or magazine. Results also confirm that more than half of small business owners surveyed believe that customer recommendations are more effective than paid advertising.

"Small businesses traditionally have a very strong community focus, and it is clear from these results that this extends to how they prefer to advertise their businesses," says Rebecca Macieira-Kaufmann, executive vice president and head of the small business segment for Wells Fargo. "A small business owner is more likely to talk to their hairdresser, their plumber or their neighbors about their business, rather than spending their hard-earned capital on advertising. Those who do advertise clearly prefer their local community newspaper or business journal."

Many small business owners are also turning to the Internet for their information needs. Advertising on the Web allows small business owners the ability to combine their paid advertising dollars with their preference for word-of-mouth advertising. According to the study, 49 percent of business owners surveyed have paid to advertise on the Internet over the past two years, and when asked if they anticipate spending on Internet advertising over the next two years, this number increases to 57 percent.

Advertising is not the preferred option for all small businesses. Forty-five percent of small business owners surveyed did not advertise in the past year, and, of that group, 62 percent chose not to advertise because they felt it wasn't appropriate for their businesses. Additionally, 16 percent said they didn't advertise because it was too costly.

Since the third quarter of 2003, the Wells Fargo/Gallup Small Business Index has surveyed small business owners on a quarterly basis on their perception of current conditions and future expectations relating to financial situation, revenues, cash flow, capital spending, number of jobs and credit availability. This fourth quarter 2005 Index showed a one-point increase over the third quarter, bringing the total to 107, indicating that small business owner optimism was essentially unchanged and remained steady for 2005. The higher the Index score, the more positive and optimistic small business owners feel.



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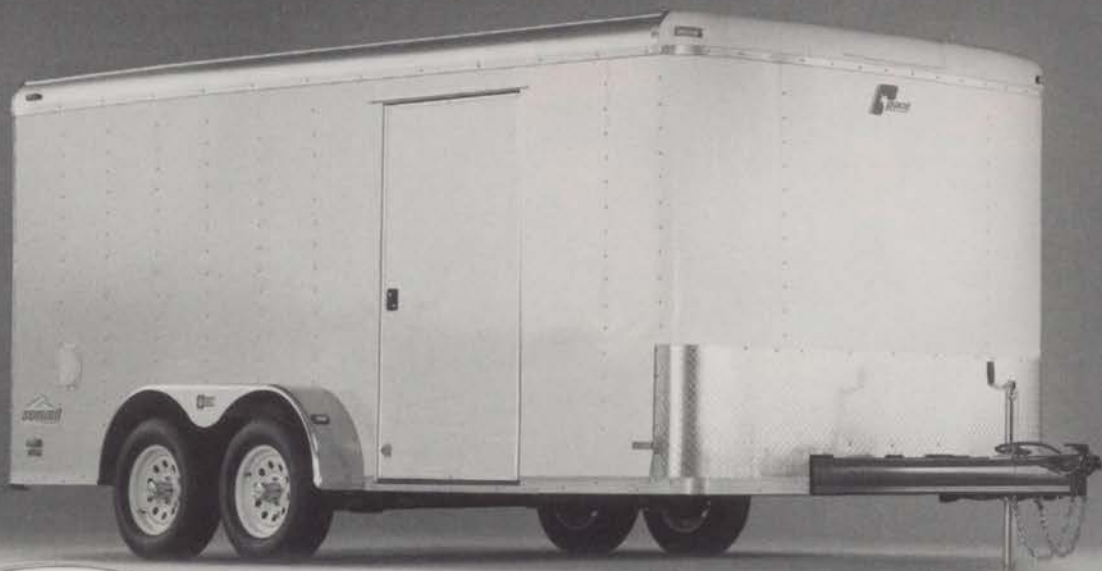
LABOR SOLUTIONS

Turn Around Turnover: How to Keep the Best Employees

Here is a fact that many employers don't realize: There are only 44 million members of Generation X and Y (ages 13 to 31) compared to 78 million Baby Boomers. The scary truth is that in the future, you, as an employer, will not be able to match your job requirements to the qualifications of the people available. If there are less workers, that automatically means that there will be fewer qualified ones. As the competition for the same workers heats up, preventing turnover will become your biggest priority. Just what are some of the real motivating factors that determine employee loyalty? More importantly, what can you do as owners to stop the revolving door? Let's examine five of the most important motivating factors.

DIGNITY AND RESPECT. We can't expect our employees to treat our customers in a warm friendly manner and with respect if we don't treat our employees in that manner. Customer relations will always mirror employee relations. Using abusive or obscene language, shouting, verbal put-downs, insults and telling lies can only result in low morale, high absenteeism and turnover. Give your people some slack. Don't micromanage or hover over them. Today's workforce is much more

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USE READER SERVICE # 28

How to Keep the Best Employees

independent. Many want to be empowered. Let them know what they can and cannot do through training and communication. When they make a wrong decision, don't slam them for it. Instead, make it a teachable moment.

INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION. Get your employees involved in as much of your decision making as possible. It gives them a sense of belonging and partnership. Frequently ask their opinions and suggestions, and brainstorm for solutions to problems. People want to be involved in decisions that ultimately affect them. Involvement and participation breed responsibility and enthusiasm. Employees gain a sense of ownership.

PAY ABOVE THE INDUSTRY AVERAGE. If you want to hire and keep the best people, then you must be willing to pay for the best. Conversely, the people who feel they are best will seek out employers that pay the best. If you have higher-paid, better people, who are more productive with higher quality and less errors, then these people will make you more money. You'll have more satisfied customers, greater repeat business, and gain free word-of-mouth advertising. What you pay out in extra

salaries will be less than what your cost is in turnover. It makes good business sense to pay them more.

SHOWCASE SUPERIOR WORKERS. Make exceptional employees highly visible by putting their photos on bulletin boards, display cases or company newsletters. Display letters to employees from satisfied customers or, even better, display a letter from the company owner or president. Give certificates, plaques, lapel pins, etc. for superior service, sales or teamwork at special events or dinners. Awarding employee or department of the month or quarter, although not a new concept, is extremely effective.

SHOW SUPPORT. Support your staff when they have difficult personal decisions and family problems. Just knowing you realize certain situations are taking place at home and are behind them can go a long way toward having a loyal workforce. Turning around turnover is achieved by developing the strategies that will create a positive, motivating atmosphere. — Bob Losyk

The author is a business consultant with 20 years of management expertise and can be reached via www.boblosyk.com.

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CALENDAR

Calendar Note

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.

MAY 17 Turfgrass & Nursery Field Day at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Okla.
Contact: www.okstate.edu, 405/744-5404

MAY 17 Alabama Turfgrass Association Turfgrass Seminar, Huntsville, Ala.
Contact: mailbox@alaturfgrass.org, www.alaturfgrass.org, 866/246-4203

MAY 28 – JUNE 1 LIGHTFAIR 2006: The Annual Architectural & Commercial Lighting Trade Show & Conference, Las Vegas, Nev. Contact: www.lightfair.com

JUNE 7 – 10 The Super Floral Show 2006, Salt Lake City, Utah.
Contact: info@superfloralshow.com, www.superfloralshow.com, 617/812-5536

JUNE 8 – 11 Oregon Seed Trade Association Annual Meeting, Sunriver, Ore.
Contact: www.oregonseed.org, 503/226-2758

JUNE 9 – 11 Niagara Flower & Garden Show 2006, Niagara, Ontario.
Contact: info@niagaraflowerandgardenshow.com, www.niagaraflowerandgardenshow.com

JUNE 13 – 14 National Lawn & Garden Show, Rosemont, Ill.
Contact: www.nlgshow.com, 888/316-0226

JUNE 13 – 17 Snow & Ice Management Association Symposium 2006, Hartford, Conn.
Contact: www.sima.org

JUNE 15 – 18 2006 Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association Annual Convention, St. Petersburg, Fla. Contact: jschaaf@fn gla.org, www.fn gla.org, 407/295-7994

JUNE 21 – 25 American Nursery & Landscape Association 2006 Retail Roadshow, New England. Contact: www.anla.org, 202/789-2900

JUNE 22 – 23 Independent Turf & Ornamental Distributors Association Distributors Management Forum, Long Branch, N.J. Contact: www.itoda.org, 814/238-1573

JUNE 22 – 24 Outdoor Power Equipment Institute Annual Meeting, Carlsbad, Calif.
Contact: www.opei.org, 703/549-7600

JULY 8 – 11 The Ohio State Florist Association Short Course, Columbus, Ohio.
Contact: ofa@ofa.org, www.ofa.org, 614/487-1117

JULY 8 – 12 123rd American Seed Trade Association Annual Convention, Chicago, Ill.
Contact: www.amseed.org, 703/837-9365



JULY 12 – 16 American Nursery & Landscape Association Legislative Conference & Annual Meeting, Vail, Colo.
Contact: www.anla.org, 202/789-2900

JULY 16 – 22 Association of Professional Landscape Designers Annual Conference, Philadelphia, PA.
Contact: www.apld.org, 717/238-9780

JULY 16 – 22 Perennial Plant Symposium & Trade Show, Montreal, Quebec.
Contact: www.perennialplant.org, 416/231-2495

JULY 17 – 20 Turfgrass Producers International 2006 Summer Convention & Field Days, Memphis, Tenn.
Contact: www.turfgrassod.org, 800/405-8873

JULY 18 – 20 Pennsylvania Green Expo, Harrisburg, Pa.
Contact: sales@pagreenexpo.com, www.pagreenexpo.com, 800-789-5068

JULY 23 – 25 Professional Landcare Network Legislative Day on the Hill, Washington, D.C.
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USE READER SERVICE # 31



Photos: Turfco, Bluebird International (page 51)

> Poking Around

Cliff Drezek shares why aeration aids lawns and his landscape business.

Each year, Cliff Drezek and his staff convince a growing number of customers that the practice of punching holes in their lawns is a good thing. In exchange, these customers contribute to the company's revenue, says Drezek, manager of lawn care company Green Lawns Plus in Marlboro, Mass.

The holes he favors are those caused by aeration, the practice of poking several holes into a lawn to get air into the root system, helping to eliminate thatch and promote healthy growth.

But that's just one plus, Drezek says. While the practice is beneficial for a landscape company's customers' lawns, aeration also can promote healthy growth for a landscape business during the spring and fall seasons.

CORE BELIEFS. There are several types and brands of aerators. Drezek's crews use tractor-pulled units for the majority of their jobs, which are made up of about 70 percent residential and 30 percent commercial customers. The average size lawn is 9,500 square feet, but the crews have lawns on the route that are 30,000 to 80,000 square feet. For the smaller lawns, there are walk-behind models. For either type of aerator, a variety of tine styles are available. These puncture the lawn in different ways.

Drezek uses hollow, closed tines, but open-spoon tines are used for coring on some models. The tines are normally designed to be either pushed down in a

by heather wood



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business opportunities > > >

vertical motion or rolled on a rotating, barrel-shaped piece of equipment. There are also aerators that get the job done with a slicing motion. But despite all of the varieties available, the goal is the same: get air to the turf's root system by creating several holes in the lawn.

In the Northeast, lawns are some-

crucial in all soils to allow oxygen to get into the root zone," Drezek says, adding that in his region it is especially helpful in clay soils, which don't let in much oxygen when compacted. "Every region will have different types of soil, but each soil type benefits from aeration," he says.

As an added bonus, aeration can

pose this old, dead tissue that lurks in some lawns. Aeration also gets the roots and rhizomes growing in the soil rather than the in thatch, he adds.

HOLE HOW-TO. Drezek's crews aerate from late April to June. This is an optimal time because cool-season grasses respond well to the treatment.

The further into summer it gets, the less tolerant turf can be because it contends with conditions including drought and heat stress.

The crews use a hollow tine aerator that pulls 2- to 3½-inch plugs, or cores, from the soil. "We have a tractor-drawn unit that we can use in 95 percent of the lawn areas," he says. "The tractor increases the amount

of work we can do in a day and obviously decreases operator fatigue."

Drezek's aeration crews are separate

"In the Northeast, lawns are sometimes aerated to break up clay in the soil. The clay build-up doesn't allow the proper amount of air in." - Cliff Drezek

times aerated to break up clay in the soil. The clay build-up doesn't allow the proper amount of air in. "It's

help control thatch, he says. Although it isn't meant to be a replacement for dethatching, aeration helps decom-

from the maintenance crew and one or two operators are on each crew. This is where new employees usually start. "It's a good way for them to get their feet wet as far as getting into lawn care," he says, pointing out that what's required to aerate is a general knowledge of the process – certification is not necessary before doing the job.

This general knowledge includes keeping all bases covered during the job to prevent problems, Drezek says. Be aware of rocks, tree roots or other hindrances that could damage equipment or surrounding buildings. In addition, ask the client if there are any underground hazards that could get in the way, including sprinkler heads and invisible dog fences that have buried cables, he points out.

continued on page 50



Through aeration, contractors remove 3-inch plugs of soil and thatch. Afterward, plugs are left on the lawn as added top dressing. The plugs dry up after two to three mowings and melt back into the soil. Though customers rarely ask that these plugs be removed because they understand their benefit, some customers insist on a plug cleanup service, and contractors increase their prices for this add-on. Photo: Four Seasons Aeration & Thatch

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continued from page 47

Slice aerators can be especially troublesome to underground obstacles, Drezek says. His crews mark each obstruction and have a repair kit on hand in case of any accidents.

HOLE SALE. Green Lawns Plus wants homeowners to know they find aeration essential for a healthy lawn, so they market it in several ways. "We sell it by way of a newsletter we hand out with each service," Drezek says, adding that he recommends aeration in follow-up visit comments that he leaves on customers' doors. The company also sends out annual information pieces about aeration.

Green Lawns Plus has been offering aeration to clients 12 of their 18 seasons in business. The crews started with a walk-behind aerator, which was sufficient for the then-small workload,

"Although it isn't meant to be a replacement for dethatching, aeration helps decompose this old, dead tissue that lurks in some lawns. Aeration also gets the roots and rhizomes growing in the soil rather than the thatch."

- Cliff Drezek

Drezek says. It took a few seasons to grow an aeration client base because many weren't yet familiar with the concept and the benefits. But that changed, and quickly. Within three years, the company found the need to switch to a tractor-drawn aerator because they needed to be more efficient to tackle their growing aeration customer list.

Drezek is happy with the fact that 35 to 45 percent of his usual client

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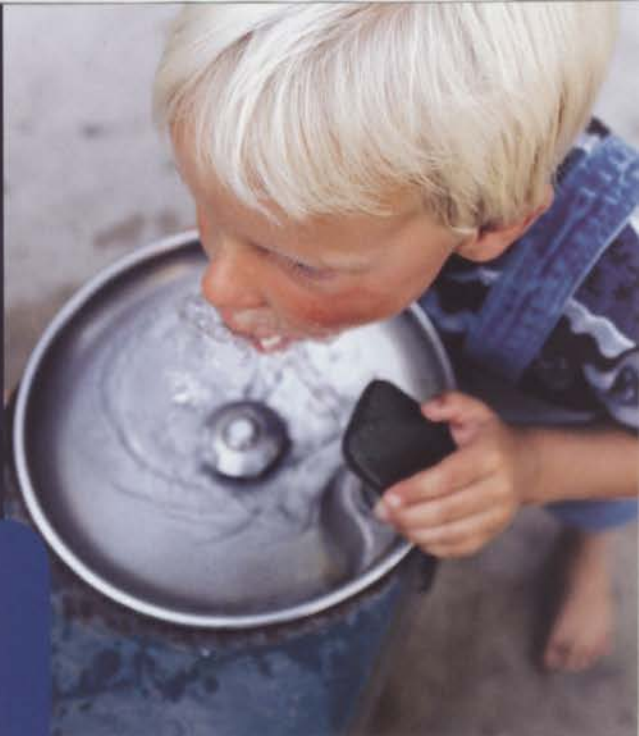
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ESP-MC. Eight to 40 station units for commercial use; water-conserving features include Water Budget, Rain Delay, Cycle+Soak and ET Manager compatibility.

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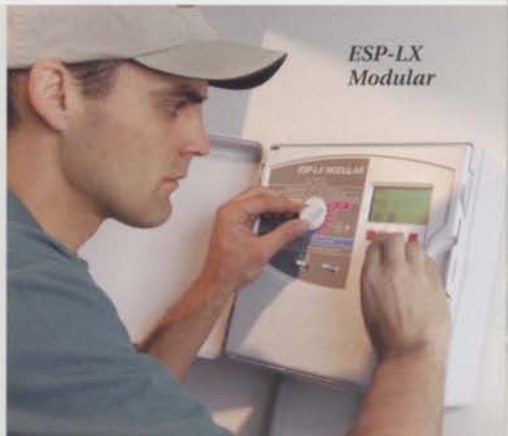
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U-Series Nozzles. Water use can be reduced by up to 30% with dual-orifice nozzles that provide uniform coverage—even close-in around the head.

Pressure-Regulating Stems. Water loss due to misting and fogging caused by high pressure is eliminated by maintaining a constant outlet pressure of 30 psi for spray heads and 45 psi for 5000-PRS rotors.



Rain Curtain
Nozzles



U-Series Nozzles



MPR Nozzles





Rain Bird Spray Heads

More contractors choose Rain Bird 1800® Series Spray Heads and Nozzles than all other brands combined to optimize water use. Available water-conserving technologies include: U-Series Nozzles, MPR Nozzles and built-in Pressure-Regulating Stems.

Rain Bird Rotors

Only Rain Bird rotors feature advanced Rain Curtain™ Nozzle Technology for more uniform distribution throughout the radius range to optimize efficiency and water use. 5000-PRS Series are now available with pressure-regulating stems.

Rotary Nozzles

Rotating streams uniformly deliver water at a low precipitation rate to significantly reduce run-off and erosion and provide efficient water distribution from 13 to 24 feet; designed to fit on Rain Bird spray heads.

Accessories

In-Stem Seal-A-Matic™ Check Valve. Eliminates water loss due to puddling or run-off by preventing water from draining out of the irrigation system at the lowest head.

Pressure-Regulating Swing Joints. Optimize water use by equalizing pressure at each rotor; eliminate misting and conserves water by regulating droplet size.

Rotary Nozzle

Pressure-Regulating Swing Joint



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Rain Bird actively partners with organizations to promote water conservation and educate others about how to be responsible stewards of the environment.

Irrigation Association

Smart Water Application Technologies™ (SWAT™)

U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC)

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®)

American Public Gardens Association (APGA)
formerly American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta

Landscape Architecture Foundation

California Urban Water Conservation Council (CUWCC)

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Taking a
Leadership
Role to Advance
The Intelligent
Use of Water.™

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Rain Bird authored the
comprehensive report,
*Irrigation for a Growing
World*, which discusses
causes and potential
solutions to the global
water crisis. We also
sponsor an annual
summit on outdoor
water conservation.

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Rain Bird low-volume drip irrigation systems are innovative by nature in the way water is responsibly distributed to any non-turf areas, including trees and plants in flower beds, street medians, vegetable gardens and hanging baskets.

Efficient Distribution. Landscape drip systems allow you to tailor the amount of water to each plant's specific watering needs. This minimizes water waste caused by over-watering and results in healthier plants.

Direct-to-Root Delivery.
Precise amounts of water are slowly and uniformly applied at or near plant root zones. This efficient method places the right amount of water where it's needed, which eliminates run-off and overspray onto walls, walkways and streets.

*Pressure-Regulating
Filter Control Zone Kit*





Educating
Others About
The Intelligent
Use of Water.™

Rain Bird provides a series of public service announcements in partnership with the American Public Gardens Association, featuring HGTV's "The Gardener Guy", Paul James.

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Landscape Dripline



Root Watering System (RWS)

System Components

Control Zone Kits with Pressure-Regulating Filters.

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Landscape Dripline. Optimizes water use as it slowly and precisely delivers the right amount of moisture at or near plant root zones.

Emitters. These delivery devices apply water at a specific rate and pressure to minimize waste.

Accessories

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tools that create holes

Getting the right type of aerator and making it last are keys to having a successful add-on service. Cliff Drezek, manager at Green Lawns Plus in Marlboro, Mass., has used different equipment and found what he feels best completes the work, boosting the company's revenue.

When Green Lawns Plus started, the crews used walk-behind units. The workload was relatively small at the time, and the walk-behinds worked well for the crews. These units can cost \$3,000 to \$4,000, Drezek says.

Drezek's crews perform anywhere from 800 to 1,000 aeration jobs annually. To increase efficiency and tackle the clients' yards, which average 9,500 square feet, Drezek's operators now use tractor-pulled units, which can cost about \$2,000 to \$5,000 each.

Obviously, those contractors who decide on the aerator that is pulled will need a tractor. Drezek's crews use 24-horsepower tractors because of the volume and size of the work they do, but he says landscape contractors could use a 16 or 18 horsepower just as well if their workload



isn't too overwhelming.

Consider the makeup of the clients' yards before buying an aerator, Drezek suggests. While efficiency is important, having an aerator that can travel to any job site is even more essential. "Be sure it's still small enough to get into a gate 36 inches wide," he says. "If you have a big tractor and you can't get into the backyard, what's the point?"

After a landscape contractor has the optimum aerator for the job, properly maintaining it will help extend its life, Drezek advises. "You'll want to take time to clean and lubricate it at the end of the day to get more mileage out of it," he says.

The tines on Drezek's aerators are replaced annually, but companies with a lighter workload may not have to replace the tines on their equipment until two or three years have passed, he says. The rest of the machine has a longer life. Drezek's tractor-pulled aerators last about seven years.

base requests the aeration service regularly. He rarely gets aeration requests from homeowners who aren't Green Lawns Plus customers. In a good year he sees 5 percent growth in aeration but usually it stays level from year to year. But the revenue from aeration is a base the company can count on each year, Drezek points out.

AER-RATES. Aeration is an add-on service for Green Lawns Plus. The crews that seed and spread lime treatments have the additional task of aerating.

Drezek's charge for the service is based on every 1,000 square feet of turf. He estimates that an average 8,000 square-foot lawn would cost \$125 to aerate. "There are a lot of variables that go into price," he says. That includes obstacles, such as bur-

ied sprinkler heads, and hills. A fee of \$75 to \$100 is charged if the obstacles aren't marked ahead of time and Drezek's crews have to mark them. "It can take upwards of a half-hour to mark the obstacles," he says.

Consider any obstacles that may hinder access to the lawn, Drezek advises. Even the contractors who mostly service large lawns should consider having a walk-behind aerator in their equipment fleet in case of smaller lawns or lawns that can only be accessed with a smaller piece of equipment, Drezek says.

Early on, Drezek had concerns about whether he was pricing properly. Through trial and error, he arrived at what he felt was a fair rate. He gives technicians a range of feasible prices so they can assess the difficulty of the layout and the time the job will take

to properly charge the customer.

Drezek finds aeration is always profitable because the tractor-drawn aerators are efficient, allowing the crews to quickly move from job to job. In addition, the technicians charge the customers for any extra time spent on a job because of obstacles. Drezek doesn't know exactly how much profit is made from an aeration job but says, "It's a very good add-on service. We make an appreciable amount."

Ultimately, he says, being prepared and using the right aeration equipment are the keys to keeping the lawns and the business at their best. "Once you have aeration as an established part of your optional services and people are aware of the advantages, you get a pretty steady income coming in." □




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by nicole wisniewski

LEAN & MEAN

Refine your business systems with simple improvements – ask Platinum Landscape how it's done.

When Rick Meinzer studies other businesses, including their staff size, profitability projections and per-head revenue, he often wonders how some of these ventures are making any money.

Meinzer, owner of Cedar Hills, Utah-based Platinum Landscape & Design, believes these companies are crowded with excess corporate layers and overhead, and that this is ultimately driving their profits down.

As a result “I have no office staff, no secretary, no accounts receivable person and no payroll person – I outsource accounting and payroll to a CPA,” Meinzer says. “I answer my own phone calls – all



*Dan Reilley and Rick Meinzer,
Platinum Landscape & Design*

Photo: Steve Smith

ads and signage have my cell phone number on them. We do all of our own sales calls, bids, billing, collections and change orders. We have deliberately de-layered our corporate structure so the owners are touching the customers. We save money where we can by continually scrutinizing our costs."

This lean approach enables Platinum to "keep our business under the \$2-million mark and make significantly more than others who are doing \$2-million plus," he says. "After all, I would rather make 30 percent on a \$1-million business than 15 percent on more than \$2 million in sales – the numbers work out the same, don't they?"

What gives Meinzer the right to be able to judge other businesses and dissect his own to maximize results? His master's degree in business administration and 10 years working for the infamous Utah-based Covey Leadership Center, better known today as FranklinCovey, for starters. There

his job was to make other companies better via leadership development and business consulting.

The corporate structure and politics eventually grew tiresome, and Meinzer wanted to feel the same passion his clients felt in doing something they loved to do. Returning to his teenage roots, where he spent four years running a small landscape business in the San Francisco Bay area, he started Platinum Landscape & Design as a side business in Utah, a market his research revealed was booming. Three years later, this \$500,000 to \$700,000 side job became his full-time venture. Today, Meinzer runs a more than \$1-million business with just seven employees and a focus on scrutinizing costs to maximize profits and systemizing procedures to boost efficiency.

LEAN MACHINE. Platinum Landscape's trick to staying lean is not spending money on unnecessary things, investigating costs and making

a choice that best fits the business yet keeps overhead down.

For instance, instead of buying or renting a fancy office that the employees never spend time in since they are out in the field all day, the company rents a ½-acre yard for \$100 per month. "Purchasing the land would cost us \$350,000, which is \$3,500 to \$4,500 a month in payments to own – not to mention we'd also have to build a building on it," Meinzer says.

While Meinzer realizes real estate is an investment, he also believes in listening to his gut. "If we spend the money on the office building and find ourselves strapped for cash, the stress just isn't worth it," he says. "Sure, we'd love to have 2 to 3 acres and do a water feature display on it, but we're at a point where we don't need it – it's not hurting our business not to have this unnecessary overhead. The yard is perfect for our storage needs, and I run our office out of my home."

Equipment is another area where

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platinum landscape & design

OWNER/PRESIDENT: Rick Meinzer

GENERAL MANAGER: Dan Reilley

HEADQUARTERS: Cedar Hills, Utah

FOUNDED: 1998

EMPLOYEES: 2 year-round, 5 seasonal;
72 percent Hispanic

GREATEST LABOR CHALLENGE:

Cultural differences and language barriers.

SERVICE MIX: 100 percent landscape installation (40 percent is design/build and 60 percent is installation based on a landscape plan). 100 percent of the landscape installation work includes irrigation.

CLIENT MIX: 55 percent residential, 35 percent commercial (office parks, hospitals, educational facilities, etc.), 5 percent commercial-residential (condominiums, apartment buildings, etc.) and 5 percent government/municipal.

REVENUE BREAKOUT:

2006 Expected Revenue: ...\$1.75 million

2005 Revenue:\$1.05 million

2004 Revenue:\$620,000

2003 Revenue:\$580,000

2002 Revenue:\$505,000

THREE CHALLENGES FACING BUSINESS TODAY:

1. Competition that does not understand their business and the impact of increasing costs.
2. Managing costs and improving profits.
3. The ability to get better – better design, better customer service, better employees, better growth, better margins, more efficient.

CONTACT INFO:

9649 N. Royal Red Road, Cedar Hills, Utah 84062

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WEB: www.platinumlandscape.com

E-MAIL: rick@platinumlandscape.com

Meinzer realized he could maintain a lean routine. When he started Platinum Landscape eight years ago, he rented equipment for each job and built the expenses into the job cost. "All I had was a truck payment and I paid for my trailer in cash," he says.

But as the business grew, the need for equipment beyond rentals did too. After utilizing a variety of brands, trying to teach his Hispanic employees how to operate them all and learning that employees were avoiding certain machines because they were more challenging to use, Meinzer decided to standardize his equipment – focusing on one brand in each category. This cuts down on training time and achieved what Meinzer calls strategic partnerships. "By investing in one brand, all of the machines operate the same way and are maintained the same way, saving us time," he explains.

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categories, the company also benefits from manufacturer representatives sharing in maintenance and safe machine operation training, efficiency evaluations and extended product warranties for customers at no additional charge.

And instead of hiring an in-house mechanic to repair and maintain equipment, Meinzer outsources the work to a mobile mechanic, who fits their work in on Saturdays and after-hours on weekdays to decrease downtime – another strategic partnership.

In addition to equipment, Meinzer also found a way to save money on plant material. He used to pick up his trees, shrubs and plants from a local nursery, and spent 20 percent more to do so. Four years ago, he started ordering his plant material from wholesale growers in Oregon. “They dig it, put it in a refrigerated semi trailer and ship it right to my job site,” Meinzer says. The extra 20 percent he used to spend for the same material now goes

straight to the company’s bottom line, and “this is also better for the plant material because it’s only touched twice compared to in a nursery where material is repeatedly handled, creating more tender roots,” Meinzer adds.

Despite the many advantages, the wholesale nursery agreement does involve more coordination, Meinzer admits. Once a plant list is approved by the client, he works with a broker to shop and price the material, as well as plan its delivery. The plants typically arrive at the site in seven to 10 days.

Other strategic partnerships also save Platinum Landscape money. Instead of hiring an office manager to do payroll, Meinzer hires his accountant to conduct twice monthly payroll and employee filings. “It costs me \$75 a month to have my CPA do payroll and run the reports,” he says. “To hire someone to do that same work in-house, which is twice a month, three hours or so at a time, would cost \$90 to \$105 (six to seven hours each time

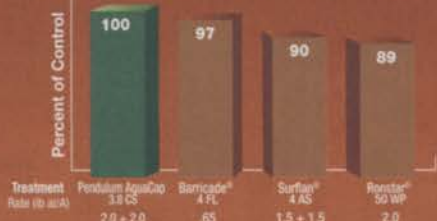
at \$15 an hour). Plus, I know our CPA knows what he’s doing and won’t mess up.”

Despite the fact that Platinum Landscape & Design is a 40 percent design/build and 60 percent installation company, it does not employ an in-house designer either. Meinzer outsources the work to several local landscape architects when these services are required.

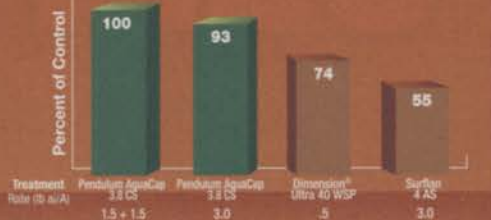
But even with a two-dimensional design in hand, Meinzer says clients like to see the proposed landscape plan translated onto the three-dimensional environment. “We present them with the ideas and then take the can of spray paint and start drawing out where the beds and water feature will go,” he explains. “Most of the time, we hand over the paint can to the customer and let them show us what they are envisioning. When there is involvement, there is ownership. This helps sell the work and, in some cases, is all that is necessary. A



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Crabgrass Control In Tall Fescue²



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1. Oklahoma State University, 2004. Evaluated 168 days after first application in March. Partial Data Shown.
2. North Carolina State University, 2003. Evaluated 145 days after first application in March. Partial Data Shown.

formal design isn't always required."

This also increases efficiency by decreasing sales time. "When you work solely with a two-dimensional drawing, it can take four to six weeks to get a design approved and accepted by the client because they have a hard time envisioning what's on paper, but if we paint the design on the landscape, it can cut that time down to one week."

Maintaining relationships with these strategic partners can be challenging since they don't work for Platinum in-house and, as a result, aren't available at a moment's notice. But Meinzer says vigorously communicating with these partners, providing them with referrals, paying bills on time, and keeping rush jobs to a minimum helps to secure these working relationships.

Meinzer's belief that the best salespeople for a company are its owners is another lean concept at Platinum Landscape & Design. Meinzer came

to this realization after one year of utilizing a salesperson to sell landscape work three years ago. The salesperson misbid several jobs and misrepresented the company's work during the sales process. "A lot of owners disconnect and delegate through layers of management and get stuck in the office, so they don't have a finger on the pulse of their companies," Meinzer says, explaining his owner-as-a-salesperson concept. "They don't know what the customer is saying, what the trends are, what the competition is saying or how the customer compares them to the competition. For a salesperson, this is just another job – for me, this is my life. Messages about the product aren't lost in translation when the owners sell the work."

"Besides, every customer loves to do business with the owner," adds Dan Reilley, Platinum Landscape's general manager. Meinzer and Reilley handle sales for the company – each with a 2006 sales goal of \$850,000.

The company's niche client base is high-end residential work for customers with an average home price of between \$450,000 and \$1.5 million. "We strive for a 47-percent profit margin in this type of work," Meinzer says, adding that his average job is between \$50,000 to \$60,000.

THE POWER OF SYSTEMS. In addition to running a lean operation, Platinum Landscape & Design continues to grow while using the same number of employees by creating systems that maximize efficiencies.

What Meinzer learned when working as a business consultant for Covey Leadership Center was that you have to look at the cause of why employees or customers act a certain way – something he calls linear thinking. For example, one day Meinzer watched one of his workers use a shovel to try and move a large rock. "He should have been using a pry bar, but instead he broke five shovels in a

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USE READER SERVICE # 40

row before I stopped him. I didn't yell – instead, I imposed a fine. Anytime a tool is broken, the person who breaks it has to replace it. Since then, I haven't had any broken shovels. The best part is that I didn't have to reprimand or overly train my workers to get this result – I just had to change the system. A lot of people spend time

trying to change a person's behavior, but you can't. You have to change the system to change the results.”

Employees who continually asked for raises – whether they were deserved or not – also inspired Meinzer to enlist Reiley to develop a Competency Based Compensation Plan. Reiley, a long-time friend of Meinzer's,

worked in the corporate environment in Human Resources before he joined Platinum Landscape. He used his HR background to set up detailed job descriptions, including essential duties and skills, for foremen, crew leaders and other company positions. Each level has a pay range. To advance to the next level, employees have to meet the requirements of that level, such as learning to drive a tractor or build a retaining wall.

“We do annual reviews and salary increases,” he says. “An employee can max out, but if he wants to progress he needs to learn the skills to take him to the next level. During employee reviews, we discuss their current skill sets compared to what they knew last year. We were getting tired of them asking for raises and not having the knowledge right there at our fingertips to know whether we were paying them too much or too little. So we created this system to encourage them on their own to develop the skills to be worth more to us and grow with us. My employees are now the ones who drive their skill and competency improvement – not management. We simply support them. This took the burden from us and put it on their shoulders. The results are amazing.”

Efficiencies can also happen with clients. Platinum Landscape had developed a problem related to change orders two years ago. As crews were installing the landscape, the client would critique the work, asking for more mulch or soil here or extra plants, trees or rocks there – all the time not realizing this would result in a change order and extra fee at job completion. As a result, an exciting final walkthrough and client meeting turned into an uncomfortable experience with customers feeling as if they spent too much extra money, Meinzer says. Since those who sell the work receive a 2 percent higher level of commission on upsells or change order sales than on regular sales, Meinzer imposed a rule – “no commission on upsells or change orders if you don't have a signed change order form at the time it was requested.” Foremen were made aware of the rule and told that if clients ask for any extras, they should contact the salesperson so he can handle the request. The salesperson then informs the client that their request can be met

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USE READER SERVICE # 41

continued on page 64, sidebar on page 62



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Before Platinum Landscape secured its visible-from-the-freeway, fenced in, locked ½-acre yard to store equipment and plant material, Owner Rick Meinzer says he rented an even less expensive piece of land a few years earlier that was in a more secluded space behind a few buildings.

The space worked well until winter three years ago when a \$5,000 trailer was removed from a truck and stolen, in addition to the tools and equipment from another 20-foot enclosed trailer – a total loss of \$10,000.

"We realized at that point we needed a fenced-in yard with locks and barbed wire that was out in an open area to secure our equipment investment," Meinzer says.

Another eye opener was insurance. The company got back only half the value of the trailer because of depreciation, but the policy wasn't written to allow the company to recoup the costs of the contents of the 20-foot trailer. To better protect himself against future theft, Meinzer took out a more comprehensive policy that included all of his trailers and their contents. Every year, he also meets with his agent to conduct an insurance audit, going over what's covered, adding new items to the policy and deleting old items. "This one hour meeting each year saves us some serious money in terms of insurance coverage and also our premiums," Meinzer says. "We get discounts now because we've been in business for awhile and the agent is willing to work with us each year."

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continued from page 60

as long as they understand that the extra landscape element is going to cost a certain amount and they have to sign this change order authorizing Platinum to make the modification. "When you leave the agreement open, some customers learn to quickly take advantage of the situation," Meinzer says. "Our new rule got rid of a lot of problems – since we implemented it two years ago we haven't had one fight with a customer about a change order and no problems with collecting their final payments."

In addition to a strict change order policy, Meinzer also believes in a ruthless collections strategy, minimizing outstanding accounts receivables and thereby improving overall cash flow. This starts with the bid, then the contract and is carried out through the project. "I've talked to other landscape contractors before who are trying to collect \$60,000 or \$100,000 after three months of trying to get paid," he says. "But you're not leveraged after

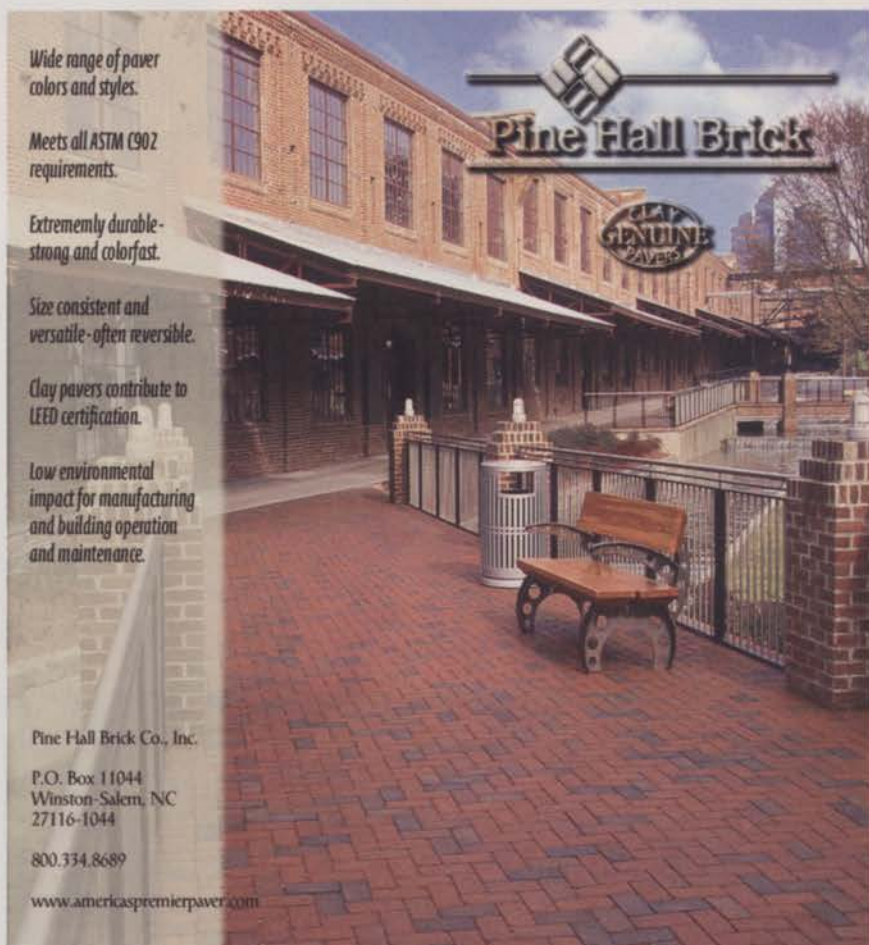
three months – you're leveraged after you're done with the job."

At Platinum Landscape, jobs typically require a 50-percent down payment to commit to the work, then another 25 percent before trees and plants are installed and the last 25 percent at job completion. This last portion is due five days after the date of "significant" job completion. "We changed this language in our contract recently because if a sprinkler head needed adjusting or a tree started to die, customers would arbitrarily retain a certain portion of their payment until the matter was fixed, saying the job wasn't finished. These people were telling us what they thought our terms were. By adding the words 'significant completion' vs. just 'completion,' we cleared up any confusion. We define significant completion when we read through contracts with customers before they sign them so they understand our warranty, job completion dates and payment terms.

We do not discuss fines for late payments in our contracts. I feel that if we do, we're giving customers an out. The payment is due five days after significant completion and that's it.

"With regards to change orders, collections or any communication with a customer, my belief is that frustration or satisfaction is simply a function of expectations," Meinzer continues. "If a customer is satisfied, someone met their expectations and if they are frustrated, someone didn't."

GROWTH AHEAD. Provo and Salt Lake City are two of the major Utah cities closest to Cedar Hills, where Platinum Landscape & Design is based. Provo is about 15 miles away, while Salt Lake City is 35 miles away. Salt Lake City is continuing to improve its status as one of the best places to do business in America, based on *Inc.* magazine's annual report. The city moved from No. 35 on 2004's "Best Large Places" list to No.



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13 in 2005. On the magazine's 2005 list of cities with the "Most Balanced Growth," Salt Lake City came in at No. 11. Also, Provo came in at No. 15 on *Forbes'* 2005 list of "Best Places for Business and Careers." These figures only reinforce Meinzer's belief that Platinum Landscape will experience continued growth in the marketplace.

Meinzer expects 75-percent growth this year, taking his business from just more than \$1 million to \$1.75 million – an increase from his normal 10- to 15-percent growth. He recognizes that this is ambitious and wants to see how the year progresses before making any further growth plans. "We have deliberately controlled growth so we wouldn't grow ourselves out of business," he explains. "But now I feel that we have the systems in place to enable us to do this. I want to see what it feels like at the end of this year. If we are stressed out by the increase, then we'll reconsider such an aggressive growth strategy."

"The trick is to make sure we don't grow too fast so that we lose our efficiencies, which is when we're increasing capital expenditures like equipment and trucks and hiring new employees too quickly to be able to handle the work – that's where profits evaporate," Reilly adds. "It only takes a couple of inefficient and less profitable jobs to wipe out what we did during the year on good jobs."

This is where Platinum Landscape struggles with the decision between having a smaller company that is more profitable or a larger company that is not. "The extra amount of work, resources, overhead and headache required to manage a company at more than \$2 million in revenue makes the smaller operation so much more appealing," Meinzer says. "But I think if you have the systems to enable you to grow without sacrificing efficiency, then this is possible."

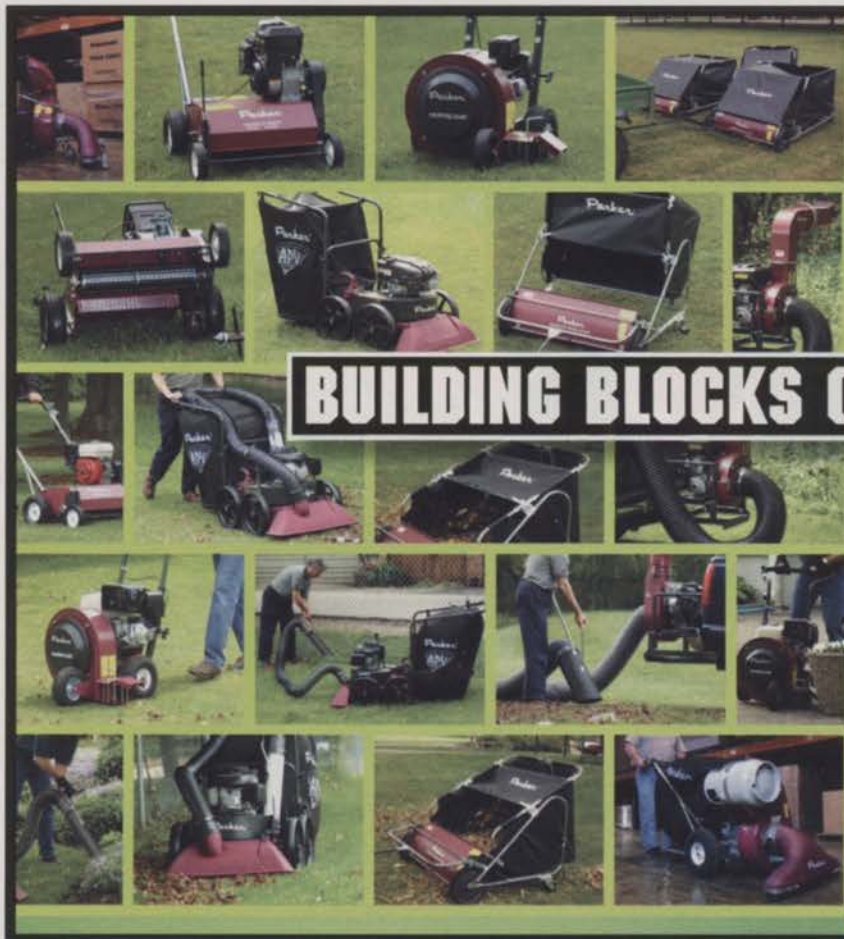
The company's next step is to hire a part-time office manager to job cost

the company's current projects early in the process so "we can see what we are making on jobs in the beginning rather than after the fact to maximize profit," Meinzer says.

In addition to a continued focus on profit, Meinzer truly believes that Platinum Landscape is "only as good as its last job," meaning that he intends to continue focusing on daily systems, structure and productivity improvements. "We provide our customers with better results every time we make an improvement," he says. "We are better and getting better all of the time. But I feel that there is always something you can do to be better. And I think that focus will continue to drive our success." 

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Check out the May Online Extras section to learn about Platinum Landscape's marketing methods and how the company protects itself against legal action from customers.



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An invoice form is shown at an angle, with a yellow ruler placed across it. A large red stamp with the words "PAST DUE" is stamped diagonally across the right side of the invoice. The invoice has columns for "QUAN.", "CASH", "C.O.D.", "CHARGE ON A", and "DESCRIPTION". The word "PAST DUE" is written in a bold, red, sans-serif font. The ruler is yellow with black markings. The background is a light-colored surface with some faint, illegible text.

Turn Receivables Into Cash

Photo: Scott Rothstein/Dreamstime.com

Are you letting customers pay invoices 30, 60 or even 90 days past due? Then you're missing out on cash flow that's rightfully yours. Getting customers to pay on time takes implementing firm policies and constant communication.

If your collection procedure consists of making out invoices, mailing them and waiting to get paid, consider this: Each account receivable represents your money, and it's up to you to turn it into cash.

Landscape businesses have a particular challenge – during busy seasons it's difficult to take the time to change policies, and when it's slow, there is a concern about customer retention. Still, supplies, plants, vehicle maintenance and employees have to be paid, and one of the ways to do that is to make sure you collect on all outstanding invoices.

Credit is a privilege, not a right, and if customers expect you to carry them on the books there is something wrong, even if they have been your customers for a long time. One of the best ways to ensure cash flow is to get your customers to pay you on time.

INVOICE INSIGHT. Hopefully, you established some type of payment policies and shared them with your customers when you started doing business together. Now it's your job to reinforce those policies. Here are some suggestions that can be quickly implemented.

1. Invoices should be mailed so they arrive on or before the first day of the month. Even better than mail is if you can personally deliver or drop off the invoice at the customer's location. If you don't use invoice forms, make sure it is clear to the customer that the correspondence is an invoice. In many instances, this can be as easy as using "INVOICE" as a heading.

by michael linn



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2. Invoices should be dated and have a code or number that makes it easy for you and your customer to identify. In that way you can quickly track payments and identify the month of an outstanding invoice. Invoices may be numbered consecutively, or use any other method you find helpful. The first three letters of

the customer's name followed by the date might be a useful system.
3. Address invoices to the person in charge of getting the invoice paid. Hopefully, you acquired that person's name, title and telephone number when you set up the account. Invoices sent to the wrong person may take some time to trace, but if you have

complete information, you will find it easier to follow up on late payments.
4. Each invoice should include the name and title of the person who authorized the work, exactly what was done and when, the total cost of supplies and materials, and your payment terms, such as "Due Upon Receipt." You may also want to add a line somewhere on invoices that addresses the majority of your customers, such as, "Thank you for your business."

5. Sometimes it helps to give customers an incentive to pay on time. One way to do that is to include a small discount for payments made within 10 days. You could also establish penalties for late payments (i.e. 1.5 percent of the unpaid balance charged each month that the payment is late). If this isn't your standard pro-

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"Credit is a privilege, not a right, and if customers expect you to carry them on the books there is something wrong, even if they have been your customers for a long time."

- Michael Linn

cedure, notify customers in advance by stating those terms at the bottom of invoices before you issue the charges for the first time.

GET ORGANIZED. Small businesses often fail to track invoices in a timely fashion. But to ensure on-time payments, setting up a system that shows you each month who has paid, who hasn't, who paid on time and who didn't is crucial.

You can also rate your customers according to their payment patterns. The system should be easy to understand, such as grading them on a scale of one to five, with credit limits set for

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each level of account.

When you set up the system, also include specific methods for following up on invoices that are unpaid. Be firm about following the procedures and remember, a slow pay customer is not necessarily a no pay customer, so keep your communications friendly,

types of collection letters to be used later: one for accounts that are 15 to 25 days overdue, and the second for accounts 35 to 45 days late. If possible, the letters should be hand delivered. The first letter should contain all pertinent details contained in the invoice, point out that the account is

mention the failure to respond, and include that if payment is not received by a specific date the matter will be turned over for collection. If you are uncomfortable writing the letters, you may want to consult a lawyer or an accountant with that type of expertise.

“Small businesses often fail to track invoices in a timely fashion. But to ensure on-time payments, setting up a system that shows you each month who has paid, who hasn't, who paid on time and who didn't is crucial.” – Michael Linn

FOLLOW UP: How you follow up on receivables can make the difference between getting paid or not getting paid.

Within two days or so of your first reminder letter, call or visit the customer with the assumption there has been a snafu which can be easily remedied. Make sure

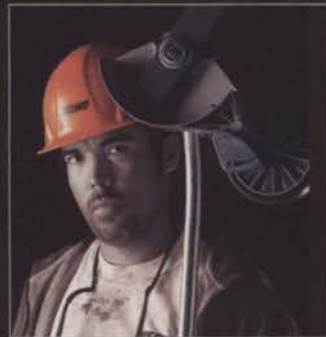
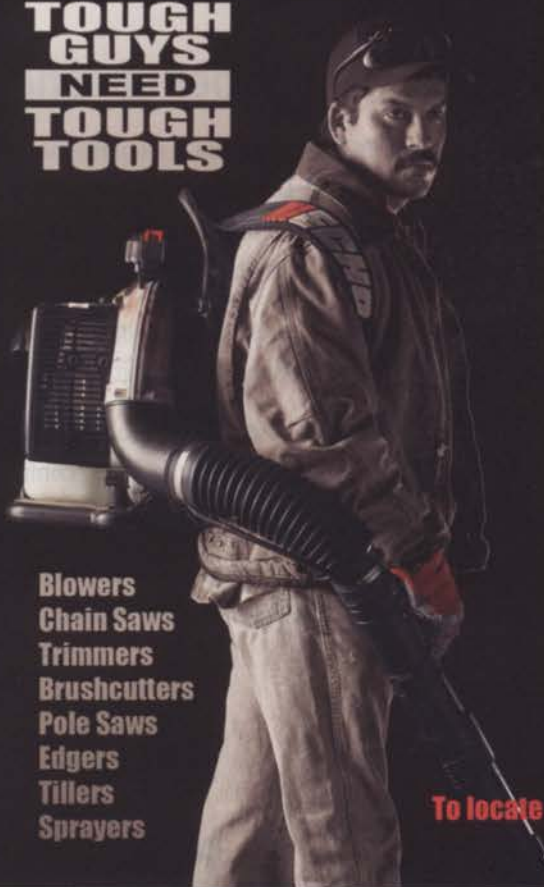
courteous and focused on facts.

Unfortunately, there will sometimes be customers who won't pay or who will have to be encouraged to pay, so get ready for those instances beforehand by writing two different

overdue and state that you appreciate the fact that they will address the situation immediately. The second letter is a final notice. That letter should itemize the number of times you attempted to collect on the account,

the invoice was received and is in the hands of the right person. Sometimes getting paid is as simple as getting the bill to the right department and the right individual. For example, if they are a small company, they may not

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have an accounts receivable department and the person who handles payables has other responsibilities, or the customer may have changed their procedures or changed staff.

Get a date when the payment will be made. There is nothing impolite in asking for that information. If you find out the customer is hav-

ing money problems that will soon be resolved, you may be able to set up payment terms that are mutually agreeable. Remember, when you issue credit to a customer you become, in a way, their business partner and it is up to you to make that partnership work to your advantage. Be firm about your payment expectations. If special

arrangements are necessary, make sure you are speaking with the person who is authorized to make those promises. Then stay in close touch until full payment is made.

Isolate line item disputes from payment problems. Encourage partial payment if there is a line item dispute.

If the customer is a "we pay when we get paid" type, and you are going along with that, make sure you get the details of when and from whom they expect payment. Let them realize you are their "partner" in the deal and, as such, you are entitled to that information. Remember, if you are not getting paid, it is likely the customer is not paying other vendors. Further, if the customer has limited cash flow, they will tend to pay the creditor most aggressively pursuing payment first (the squeaky wheel theory).

If you feel frustrated in getting payment, it usually means it is time to consider sending the account to an outside agent or attorney. It may still take several months to collect payment of some type, and if the outstanding amount is significant your cash flow can be impaired, so it's important to follow your instincts.

If you find yourself with numerous past-due accounts, you should consider consulting with an attorney or accountant. Most collection professionals charge by receiving a percentage of any amounts recovered.

REVIEW YOUR POLICIES. Once you have collected on your overdue accounts, take a close look at where you can make changes and prevent or limit future problems and losses.

Credit applications. If appropriate, take a credit application, even if you know your customer very well. The application should include the authority of the person seeking credit, the names of persons authorized to direct your services, Federal Tax ID or sales tax exemption status, payment contact, and amount of credit sought. Also get the name of the bank, and credit and industry references. Be meticulous about the process and check credit references.

Create a game plan. Establish a credit plan with firm rules that you share with customers when you set up the account. These rules should include: the size of credit lines; any limitations on products or services sold; and interest or service charges for late payments. It seems obvious,

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but those rules apply to everyone, even the customers you know very well. Determine realistic parameters such as, "How late is late?" In other words, when is a payment late and when is it becoming a problem?

Track receivables. Keep information current and review that information on a regular basis so you know when customers have exceeded their credit limits, or when you need to cut off additional sales to a problem customer. If you are not the person who handles receivables, set up a system that automatically flags aged receivables and handles discount provisions for prompt payment, automatic interest or service charges for late payments, and provisions for returned goods.

You or your employees should also be watching for early warning

invoices and how far in advance those invoices have to be received in order to be paid that month.

Focus on the positives. Credit extension should be considered a positive that is an integral part of what allows you to do business. A customer who is approved for credit should be made to feel privileged to join the

ranks of your other credit customers because he or she has qualified to be your business "partner."¹¹

The author is a partner at Javitch, Block & Rathbone, which specializes in collections and business litigation. JBC&R has offices in Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati and Indianapolis.

"Be firm about following the procedures and remember, a slow pay customer is not necessarily a no pay customer, so keep your communications friendly, courteous and focused on facts."

- Michael Linn

signals such as: changes in ownership; changes in philosophy, location or personnel; a sudden increase or decrease in services requested; and if publicly traded, a dramatic change in the company's stock price.

Encourage prompt payment. If a customer is slow to pay and it is a company, learn about the company's payment procedures, then look for places in the system that produce your check so you can head off problems before they begin. This may be as easy as finding out when they process



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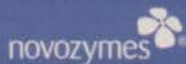
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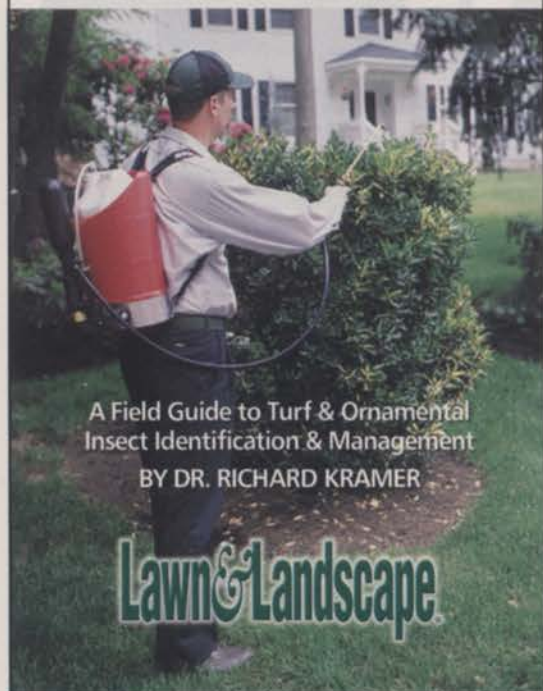


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In Search of the Perfect New Lawn

Is it necessary for a landscape contractor to apply a protective covering of material over newly sown grass seed? *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board users share their tips and insights for how to handle a newly seeded landscape.

To cover or not to cover? *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board participants recently debated whether newly sown grass seed needs to be protected in order to produce a great lawn for the client. Or is the use of a seed-bed cover just a waste of resources?

In fact, landscape contractor Andrew Aksar, owner, Outdoor Finishes, Walkersville, Md., recently questioned visitors to the *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board as to whether he should distribute a layer of straw over the seed he'd spread on nearly one-half acre. Aksar added that the seed bed in question was screened topsoil on sloped ground.

Contractors weighed in with a variety

of suggestions regarding this topic. However, a number of individuals posted to the Message Board that many times the action depends on the condition and slope of the surface being seeded. Landscape contractors, such as message board participant Kelly Tohill advised straw and regular watering.

"But don't overwater," Tohill cautions. "That causes the seed to move as well. A little water everyday to get it wet is all you need to get it to germinate."

Message Board participant Matthew Schattner, owner of Mat'z Snow & Lawn, Kansasville, Wis., believes straw helps to moderate the soil temperature as the seed attempts to germinate. "There have

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been studies done and time and time again good old-fashioned straw, when properly applied, still out-performs all the newfangled ideas when used as a cover for grass seed," he explains.

BEYOND STRAW. Many other participants posted to the Message Board that they frown upon using straw with new grass seed because of the amount of cleanup involved, and many added alternative techniques they've come to rely on over the years.

"In 39 years, I have never once used straw on a seeded lawn and have installed hundreds of lawns," says Sal Mortilla, owner, Landscapes Unlimited, Long Island, N.Y. "I have used jute if we had to deal with deep slopes, but can only think of three times when that was done."

Mortilla followed up this post by saying that when dealing with an extremely large sloped area, he generally will subcontract out the job to a landscape contractor equipped with a hydroseeder. Otherwise, Mortilla says

he completely avoids straw. "I would think after germination the straw would have to be removed causing damage to the new grass, not to mention the extra labor," he says. "I never used it and I never had a problem."

Michigan-based landscape contractor Jeff Patterson weighed in that as

a sound method to follow. "I used it on some areas I seeded and, as long as you don't overapply it, it doesn't need to be removed," he says. "It is organic material that breaks down and works its way into the soil. At least that has been my experience with it."

Mortilla, however, questioned why,

"There have been studies done, and good old-fashioned straw, when properly applied, still out-performs all the newfangled ideas when used as a cover for grass seed." - Matthew Schattner

long as a limited amount of straw was used, he didn't believe additional post-germination work was required to remove the material. Therefore, it was

other than on a hill, would a landscape contractor cover a newly seeded area with any type of substance. "At

continued on page 84, sidebar on page 82

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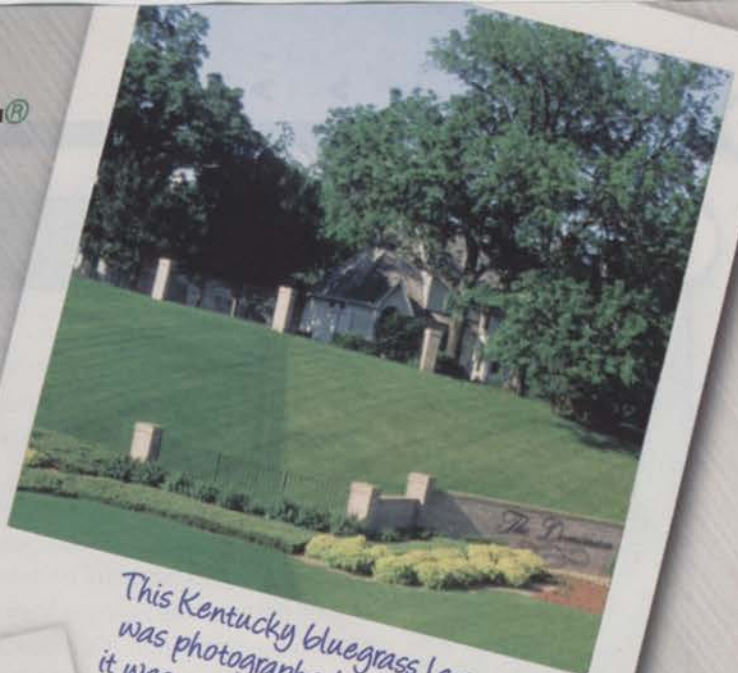
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green magic



Contractors often find themselves sowing grass seed to renovate the damage done by heavy-duty landscape equipment to clients' lawns.

However, how can a contractor seamlessly repair the grass without leaving their clients with beautiful parallel strips of lime green grass running from the curb to the work area? It's a question posed and debated recently to the *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board.

Landscape contractor Andrew Aksar throws down a fescue blend and instructs the client to water and nurture the seeded area until the new grass has an opportunity to germinate and establish itself.

"Our clients are given the option of sodding and almost all of them decline and just have us seed it," says the owner of Walkersville, Md.-based Outdoor Finishes. "If the client waters and nurtures

the seed you'll never know it's been redone. If they neglect it or allow the push mower to get too close and blow the seed away, it'll look like crap."

However, John Palasek, owner of JonKar Design Group, Yaphank, N.Y., offers an inventive solution to this common problem.

If he knows he'll be driving back and forth over a client's lawn with landscape machinery for a few days, Palasek says he'll first rent a sodcutter and carve an 8-foot wide path. He then places the removed sod on a pallet and makes sure to water it daily.

"No lime green strips," Palasek says. "No different grass. It's their turf, the same as what was there before. Sure, it doesn't look perfect when it goes back in, but usually in about a week or so, it greens up. And in another week or two, you'd never know that we were there."



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continued from page 80

best, I would think it's old-school horticulture," Mortilla posts to the Message Board. "When I say old-school horticulture, I mean methods that no longer need to be applied due to the advances in science. If you use the proper top soil and properly sow in the seed, nature will take it from there as soon as the seed touches the soil and is watered."

Straw, posts Todd McCabe, president of McCabe Landscape Group, Wrightsville Beach, N.C., helps hold moisture while also preventing rain or sprinkler water from washing away the seed.

"Even when it is in a flat area the seed will move around a bit when watered," McCabe says.

Steve Cissel, founder and chief executive officer of the online green industry directory GIYP.com, added that the cover traps water vapor, which assists in seed germination. "We are experimenting with cover crops that will give us the equivalent of a strawed/mulched seed bed."

Message Board participant Aaron Smith posts that he prefers to use a biodegradable pellet-based product, impregnated with a fertilizer that expands when watered and protects grass seed, eliminating weed seeds and straw clean up. "I like that stuff," Smith says. "It works well, and if sold correctly, the customers do not seem to have any problem paying the little bit extra for it."

"I don't use straw as a rule," Smith continues, "And the big no-no – even though tons do this in Vermont – is to use hay. It results in weed seeds galore."

Message Board participants questioned Smith about the use of expanding pellet products. "A thin layer can be applied using a spreader on a large opening setting," Smith says. "Go in one direction, then 90 degrees in the other for best coverage. No need to go too heavy."

Mike Kulp, owner of Grass Roots Landscaping, Broadway, Va., uses mulch on every lawn because it grants better results with less mess.

Many landscape contractors concluded that, overall, some sort of top dressing is beneficial to the newly sown grass seed because it helps retain moisture needed for germination, provides stability for the seed and dis-

courages animals, such as birds, from feasting on the seed.

However, message board participants post, economically, straw is the cheaper choice.

Chad Stern, the owner of Chevy Chase, Md.-based Mowing & More, says peat moss would also serve as a suitable protective material.

Mortilla agrees. "If I had a choice and I need to use anything, I would use the peat, which we do use on the rejuvenation of some lawns," he says. "On small areas where a quick germination is a must – for example,



if there is a party planned, or such, in a few weeks – we cover the area with burlap tarps after watering. It's also a common practice for us on slopes to presoak the seed for a few days prior to the install."

However, Rick Brauneis, owner of Vision Designs, Orlando, Fla., may have made the definitive posting to end the debate on this issue. "Sod is best," Brauneis says. "But only when applied green side up." LL

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Visit the *Lawn & Landscape* Online Message Board to continue this discussion. While you're there, be sure to weigh in on other discussion threads or create your own.

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When Rick Leal broadened his construction business to include landscape maintenance seven years ago, he was given sound business advice concerning the type of mowers he should use – walk-behind or riding. “The folks we brought in to run the maintenance division had experience and felt riding mowers should be part of most crews,” says Leal, vice president of Vila & Son Landscaping in Miami, Fla. “Even at smaller sites, they said a rider is the best option in most cases.”

by heather wood



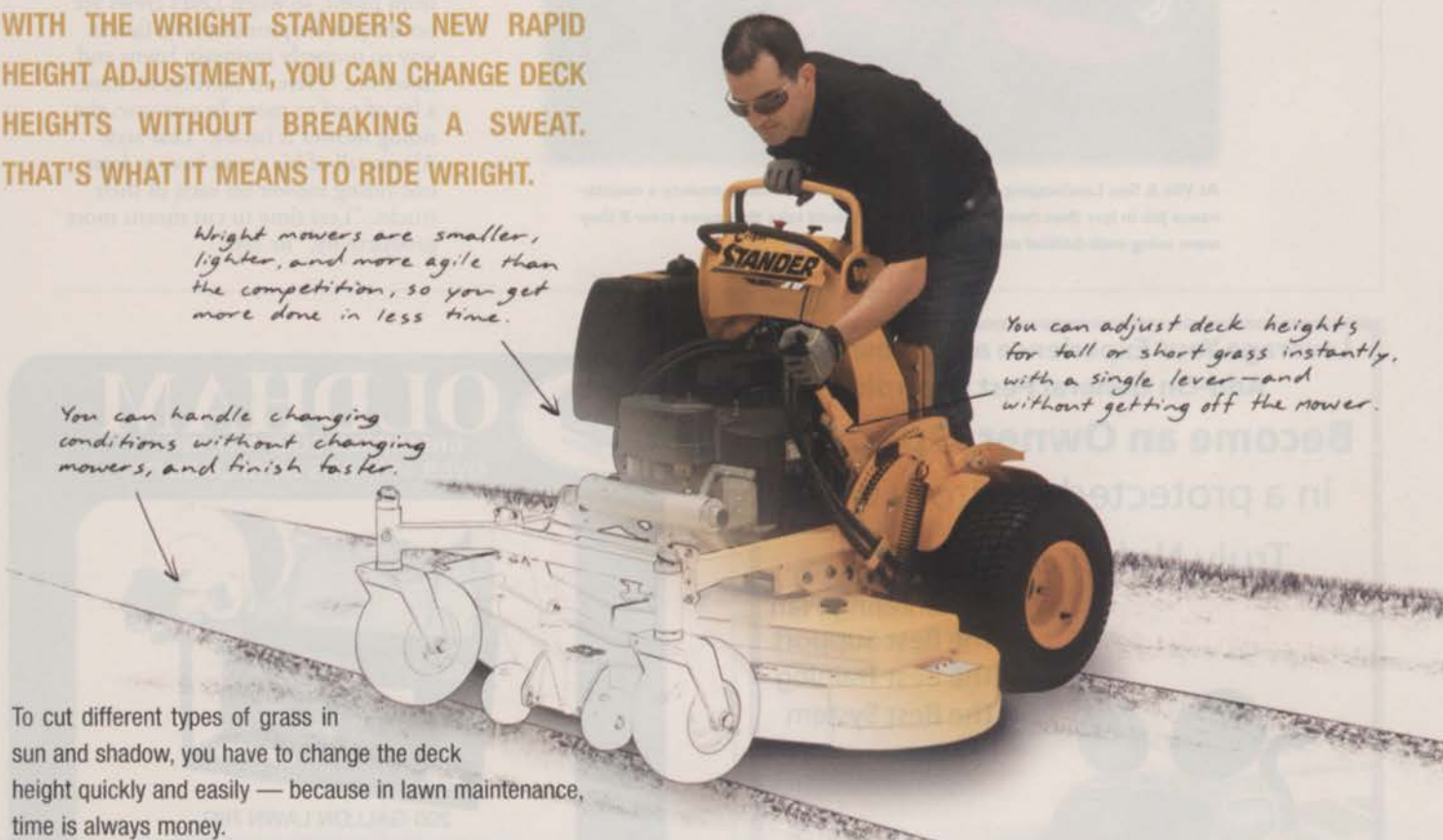
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At Vila & Son Landscaping, crews using riding mowers can complete a maintenance job in less than two-thirds the time it would take that same crew if they were using walk-behind mowers. Photo: Yazoo/Kees

With both commercial and residential jobs and an average job size of 5 acres, Vila's crews have their work cut out for them. But today's riding mowers enable them to complete the tasks at hand in less than two-thirds the time it would take with a walk-behind, meaning they can complete more jobs in a day. Like Vila, many contractors are experiencing increased profits by using riding mowers, and recent innovations are making these machines even more efficient.

DOWN WITH DOWNTIME. Drive time and other downtime takes away from profit, so when Leal's crews are on the job, he promotes the fastest way to properly maintain lawns and move on. "Here in Florida, we have a lot of turf to mow. In our case, the riding mower is better," Leal says. Almost all of his crews have at least one riding mower on each of their trucks. "Less time to cut means more productivity," he says.

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Even in the San Diego area, where large sections of turf are rare, Tom Heaviland keeps two riding mowers in his fleet. Heaviland, owner of Heaviland Enterprises in Vista, Calif., says some of the company's jobs consist of more than an acre of turf each and riding mowers are most efficient for those types of landscapes.

Heaviland has never measured the productivity of a riding mower vs. a walk-behind mower, but says the riding mowers have larger decks than the walk-behinds, which means they can cover more surface area and get the job done quicker. Plus, riders cut down on operator fatigue, he adds, saying, "If we can ride on an area of

turf vs. walk, we'll do it."

And, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research, other contractors feel the same way. Approximately 70 percent of contractors said they offer mowing services. And while 32.1 percent plan to purchase riding mowers this year, only 28.2 percent plan to purchase walk-behind mowers.

The main reason contractors prefer riding mowers is because they can cover more ground in a shorter amount of time than walk-behinds, according to Sean Dwyer, associate product manager, Husqvarna Turf Care Co., Charlotte, N.C. Walk behind mowers average 6.5 miles per hour, while zero-turn riding mowers typically average between 9 and 10

"There has to be a balance between quality and ground speed. Don't get lured into mind-blistering speed when buying riding mowers. When speed hits 15 miles per hour, the mower is past the point of productivity."

- Sean Dwyer

miles per hour, he points out.

However, there is such a thing as a mower that moves too fast, Dwyer says. They result in a sub-par job which often needs to be re-cut, making the job last longer than it needs to be. "There has to be a balance between quality and ground speed," Dwyer says. "Don't get lured into mind-blistering speed. When speeds hit 15 miles per hour, the mower is past the point of productivity."

What contributes to this increased speed is more power. Some newer models of mowers are equipped with up to 33 horsepower vs. just 14 horse-



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riding into the future



Considering the heavy use of riding mowers, the future of walk-behinds comes into question. But walk-behinds still have their place, says Sean Dwyer, associate product manager, Husqvarna Turf Care Co., Charlotte, N.C. Most contractors still have at least one on each truck for smaller jobs or slopes, he says.

Yet not all walk-behinds are expected to survive, Dwyer predicts. Therefore, he says, some of the smallest zero-turn riders are 36 inches wide, which is the width of an average walk-behind. Some of the bigger walk-behinds may disappear with the rise in smaller riding mowers.

As a result, there will always be the drive to improve the riding mower. Jef-

frey Ratliff, product marketing specialist, Massey Ferguson, Duluth, Ga., sees more improvements to controls and more focus on hydrostatic transmission and subcompact tractors as likely developments in the next five to 10 years.

While rotary riding mowers aren't predicted to go anywhere, manufacturers are beginning to look at alternative ways to mow a lawn, Dwyer says. "Essentially, the rotary mower as we know it has been in existence forever," he says. "People start to think, 'Is there better way to cut grass?' The next question is, 'How do we get away from rotary?' Some companies have even begun experimenting with lasers as a way to cut grass."

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power, which was the standard 20 years ago.

Despite rising speed and power, some factors can influence cut and cause downtime. Damp grass, for instance, can often result in downtime because it's difficult to mow properly. But some newer riding mowers can make it possible for early morning mowing in dew-covered grass or turf wet from irrigation. The feature making this possible is the deep tunnel deck.

"The deck has a very deep tunnel that can allow better processing of grass in wet conditions," Dwyer explains, adding that the deck can be tailored to an area's specific needs by adding or removing baffles. "This is also ideal for areas of thick grass or heavy-duty jobs."

New innovations that disperse



Some newer riding mowers are incorporating features that ease operator fatigue, such as cruise control and hydrostatic transmission where a foot pedal is used to switch gears. Photos: Massey Ferguson (above and pages 94, 95), Exmark (page 92)

grass clippings better are also saving contractors time, Dwyer says. For instance, an operator has to go over an area more times to cut sufficiently if the clippings haven't been dispersed evenly, especially in thick turf.

COMFORT AND SIMPLICITY.

Landscape contractors also turn to riding mowers because they are easier

on operators' bodies and contractors know that excessive fatigue means less will be accomplished in a day. "These cutters are on the machines eight hours per day," says Cathy Scott, sales manager, Rich Manufacturing, Thorntown, Ind. "They want to be more comfortable."

Ruthanne Stucky, vice president of sales and marketing, The Grasshopper Co., Moundridge, Kan., says comfort is a necessity if a business is to succeed. "A zero-turn rider has all of the maneuverability and trimming capability of a walk-behind mower without the fatigue," she says. "It provides a competitive edge over those who are still using walk-behinds because the operator can work longer stretches without

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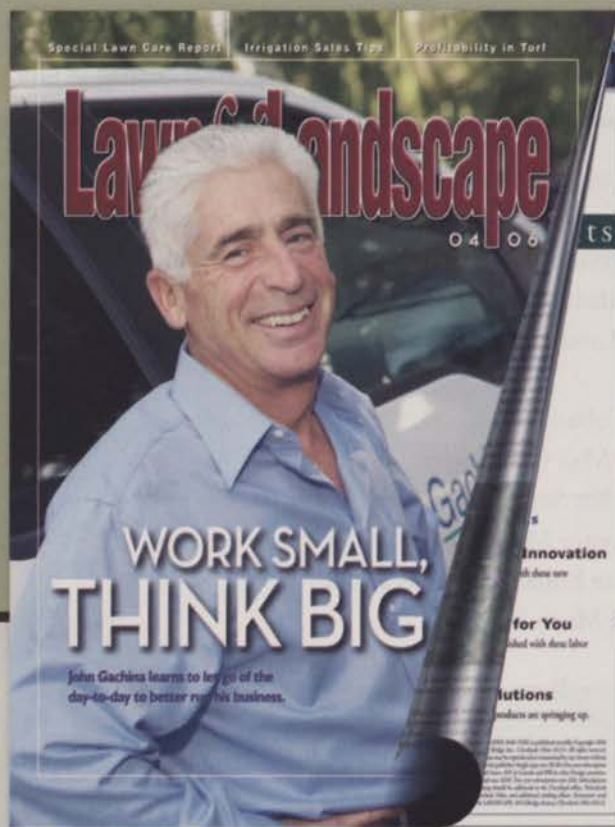
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Rick Leal, vice president, Vila & Son Landscaping, Miami, Fla., has tricks to cut downtime on the job as much as possible. Giving the employees their schedules ahead of time is one way he does this. "Every employee has to know the weekly schedule of jobs by Monday so they arrive to work with a purpose and get out before the traffic," he says. The first of the crews leaves at 6:30 a.m. and they're all on the road by 6:45 a.m.

Leal limits their service area to places where they feel they can complete more jobs in a day. He has multiple branches so the crews can be closer to the jobs. His Orlando branch has the



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largest service area, with a 100-mile radius. He hopes to cut down by adding another satellite office.

The client can't be too far away because the distance would prevent crews from traveling there often enough to keep the customer satisfied, Leal says. It also helps when they have several jobs in the same area that they can tackle in a single day. Staying in one area helps to cut down on windshield time.

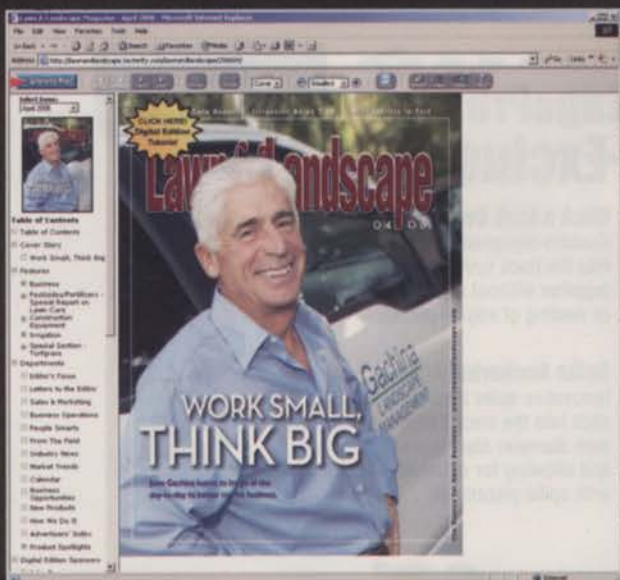
He admits, though, that some of the job locations are spread out, which means more travel time. "That's probably something we can do a better job at," he says, adding that a better routing system would help with productivity.

It's essential for landscape contractors to keep in mind that productivity goes hand in hand with quality, says Tom Heaviland, owner of Heaviland Enterprises, Vista, Calif. He has supervisors visit sites to inspect each job. The supervisor, landscape contractor and customer all judge the job. If the supervisor grades the job with at least 85 out of a possible 100 points, the employee is rewarded with a gift card or other incentive.



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needing a break and be fresh enough to take on more jobs in the same amount of time."

Because of an operator's need for comfort, improved ergonomics are becoming an increasingly common feature on riding mowers. For instance, vibration control and more user-friendly steering levers enable operators to work longer and experience less fatigue, Dwyer says. "When hands go onto levers, sometimes there are cocked wrists," he explains. "That can play into fatigue over the course of a day. Ergonomic controls fix that."

Not just for the road anymore, cruise control is another newer feature on riding mowers that helps with productivity because it's convenient, says Jeffrey Ratliff, product marketing specialist at Massey Ferguson, Duluth, Ga. Hydrostatic transmission also helps overworked operators because instead of having to shift gears, they only have to push a foot pedal to switch from forward to reverse, he says.

The focus on ergonomics is only a recent development, Ratliff points out. "I don't think 10 years ago people put much thought into where they placed controls," he says, pointing out that mower manufacturers are now more conscious of where controls go, and some even color-code the



Manufacturers are continually making improvements to riding mower operator controls to increase their ease of use. Photo: Dixie Chopper

controls to simplify operation.

Simplicity in controls also means there are fewer instructions to read and landscape contractors don't have to worry about whether their diverse workforce is able to read the instructions before operating equipment, Scott says.

SHOP AROUND. When shopping for riding mowers, contractors should first figure out the tasks they will be used for, Ratliff says. For example, contractors should think about whether they will be juggling multiple tasks that would warrant an attachment-capable model.

Next, pay attention to how the product has been made and compare apples to apples, Scott says. For instance, be aware that there are two types of zero-turn riding mower



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issue focus - riding mowers >

decks – front-mounted and mid-mounted, Stucky says. “The front-mount machines have a three- or four-wheel power unit design with the cutting deck mounted forward of both the engine and operator’s seat position,” she explains. “The unit usually has single or dual tail wheels located in the rear. Mid-mount units, on the other hand, have a four-wheel design with the cutting deck mounted under the operator’s seating position and in front of the engine.”

The quality of a mower’s more expensive components, including hydraulic pumps and the spindles that run the blades, should also be considered during the buying process, says Matt Land, national sales manager, Dixie Chopper, Coatesville, Ind. A mower should also be easy to maintain and have replaceable parts that are easy to find, Land says. “If you buy cheap you’re going to get cheap,” he warns.

Be aware of what the warranty covers, Ratliff adds, pointing out that one of the most important considerations is the quality of the dealer and whether the dealer will be able to provide the parts or support needed down the road.

Dwyer agrees. “Realistically, there are very good products in the zero-turn commercial industry,” he says. “But at end of day, for the landscaper, a network is important. You’re only as good as the backup you’ve got.”

mowers, productivity and employees

Photo: Exmark



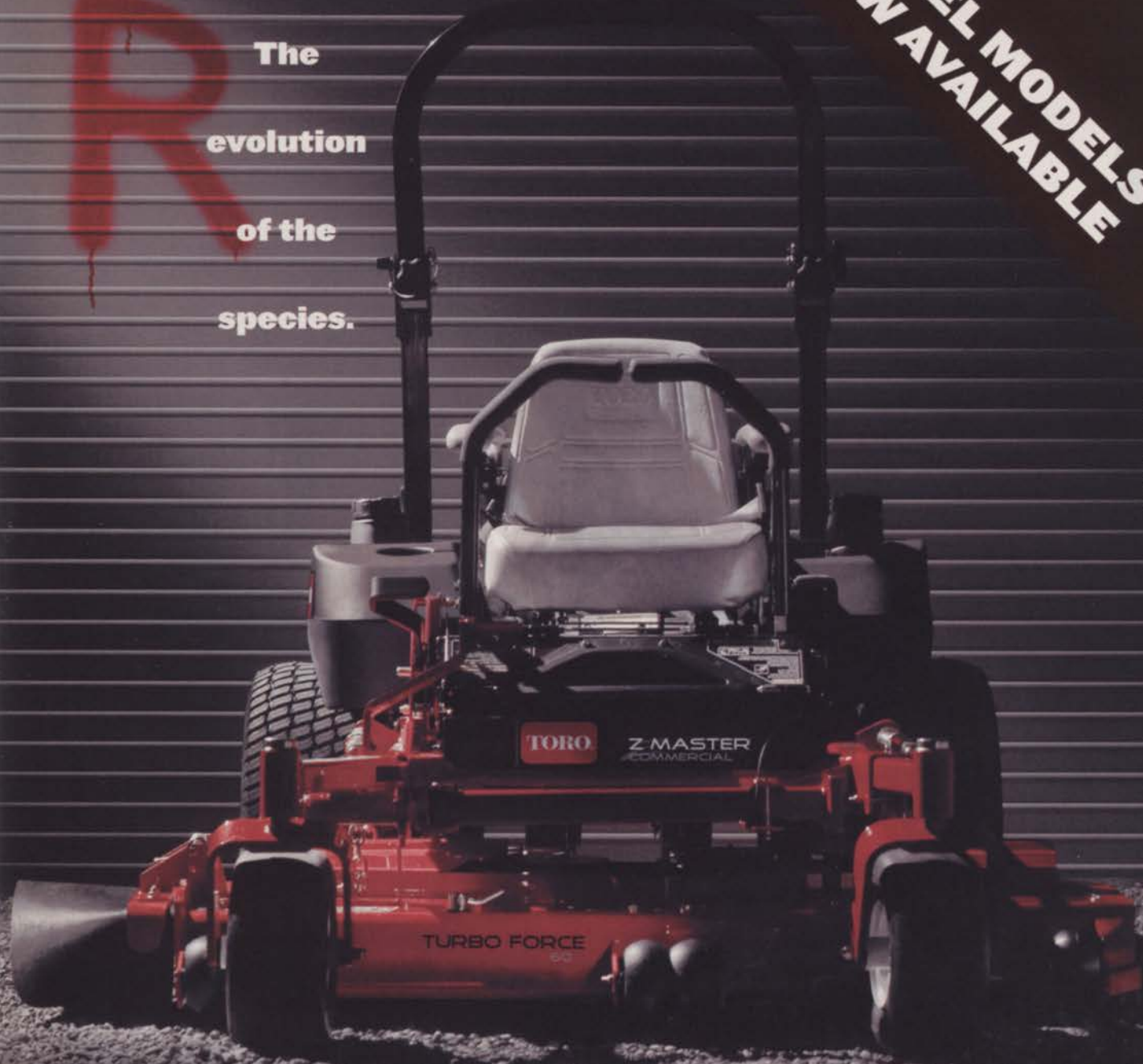
Having the most updated equipment is one thing, but if the operators don’t know how to properly use it, the likelihood of productivity shrinks. Training the crews on each piece of equipment is important, says Rick Leal, vice president, Vila & Son Landscaping, Miami, Fla., adding that equipment maintenance is also important.

At Vila & Son, mower fueling and maintenance is performed in the afternoons after the landscape contractors finish the day’s jobs and return to the home base. They are then ready to perform again the next day. The crews load up their machines in the morning before they leave for the day’s tasks. There are multiple supervisors at Vila & Son making sure the crews are staying on task and making the most of the work day.

Tom Heaviland, owner of Heaviland Enterprises in Vista, Calif., says his crews also load the trucks in the morning to prevent theft during the night. To save time during the work day, Heaviland keeps backup pieces of equipment that can be run out to a job site if there is ever a malfunction.

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There's not much on a landscape job site that a skid-steer loader and the right attachment can't tackle.

George Stiscak Jr. couldn't be a successful landscape contractor without one. "I just couldn't do the jobs I do as a landscape contractor without my skid-steer loaders," says the owner of Horses Landscaping, based in Valparaiso, Ind., who utilizes three of the tracked, multi-tasking motorized machines. "From grading for a lawn to moving a variety of material to digging holes, whatever job you can contemplate needing done when working in the landscape industry, you can do with a skid-steer loader.

"They're nice and maneuverable in most conditions on the job site – even snow and ice," Stiscak says. "This allows you to use them year round, which is nice because these machines are not cheap. The benefits really are endless."

Seeing a skid-steer loader cruising about a job site is a common sight today as more and more contractors realize and utilize the benefits these machines bring in increasing efficiency and productivity. With a seemingly unlimited array of attachments, landscape

by mike zawacki





Photos: Caterpillar, JCB (page 100)

Tasker

contractors can do in a single day with one machine what would take an entire crew a week to accomplish by hand.

"Skid-steer loaders allow landscape contractors to complete a task more quickly than they could with manual labor," says Kent Pellegrini, sales support consultant, skid-steer and multi-terrain loaders, for Peoria, Ill.-based Caterpillar.

Versatility, maneuverability and adaptability are the hallmarks of a skid-steer's potential on the job site and the main reasons why landscape contractors so readily label this machine as an essential tool and worthwhile investment, says Dan Rafferty, product marketing manager at JCB,

based in Savannah, Ga.

"The skid-steer really is the perfect machine for the landscape contractor," Rafferty says. "Whatever a landscape contractor needs done on a job site – from leveling and grading to bulk land clearing – the skid-steer is the prime mover for those tasks."

THE EUREKA MOMENT. Generally, contractors add a skid-steer to their landscape operations in order to troubleshoot a particularly labor-intensive task. Or, another scenario is they've grown their business to the point where the investment into this type of heavy-duty machine – on average between \$18,000 to \$55,000, depending on the machine's size and

power potential – will allow them to increase their scope of applications and services offered to clients.

It's a eureka moment for the landscape contractor, the point when he realizes that in order to increase business or beef-up his competitiveness he needs the advantages a skid-steer brings to the job site, Pellegrini says.

"It's not unusual for a landscape contractor to rent a skid-steer and various attachments prior to making a purchase," Pellegrini says. "But many will then purchase a machine and the work tools they use the most, but then continue to rent other attachments for particular jobs."

And there's a lot for landscape contractors to like about the current

generation of skid-steers available on the market. Relatively recent improvements and innovations include variable hydraulic controls, which allow the operators to modulate the amount of hydraulic power – measured in gallons per minute – reaching an attachment, says Brad Lemke, director of product development at Grand

Rapids, Minn.-based ASV.

“This allows the landscape operator to use the attachment slower and with more finesse,” Lemke says. “For example, this is nice when you’re using a four-in-one bucket to grab something. Modulating the amount of hydraulic power allows you to grab it and pick it up rather than just

smash into it at full power.”

In addition, many skid-steers on the market feature ergonomically comfortable cabs, with arm bar support, heat and air conditioning, removable side windows and suspension seating.

“The trend is definitely headed towards less cramped space in the cage

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Skid-steers allow contractors to complete tasks in one day what may take a work crew a week to accomplish by hand. Photo: Bobcat

and finger-tip style controls,” Lemke says. “The cabs are getting nicer with an almost automobile-like feel to them.”

With increased attention to more logical and ease-of-use elements, manufacturers have simplified controls and increased maneuverability by adding pilot-style joystick controls for one-handed operation.

“You really don't need to constantly use two hands anymore,” Stiscak says. “You can scratch your nose as you drive a skid-steer across gravel.”

Likewise, more skid-steers are available with hydraulic quick attach mechanisms to allow the operator to change tools without leaving the cab.

“You can change the attachment without getting out of the machine,” Lemke says. “You simply hit a button and can hook and unhook the attachment. This increases efficiency as well as safety.”

Coupled with other safety and creature comforts, skid-steers improve the way landscape contractors get tasks done on the job site.

“We have air conditioning now in our skid-steer cabs,” Stiscak says. “Don't tell anyone, but it has made life real easy.”

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And while skid-steers improve job site efficiency and productivity, it's a common misconception that these machines allow a contractor to cut his workforce by two, three or more laborers. Such a notion is a quick, short-term solution that doesn't take into account the long-term advantages and potential growth opportunities

the skid-steer provides the average landscape contractor, Rafferty says. "Cutting your workforce is a short-sighted approach to the benefits adding a skid-steer can bring to a landscape operation," Rafferty says. "A more comprehensive approach is that the skid-steer now frees up two or three workers to attend to other

> **learning curve**

These days, with increased hydraulics, more user-friendly cabs and improved pilot controls, the learning curve associated with effectively operating a skid-steer and its attachments are relatively small. After an hour or so an operator begins to get a good feel for the machine, most landscapers agree, and by the end of the day they're being productive.

However, operating a skid-steer efficiently is the bigger challenge for the landscape contractor.

"The first step should always be to read the machine's operations and maintenance manual for safety guidelines and recommended pre-operation checks," says Kent Pellegrini, sales support consultant, skid-steer and multi-terrain loaders, for Peoria, Ill.-based Caterpillar. "Once the operator is familiar with the recommended 'pre-flight' routine, actual operation of the skid-steer is really a matter of becoming familiar with the controls and getting a feel for the machine's response and movement."

It should not be forgotten that there are always venues for landscape contractors and their workers to hone their skid-steer operation skills, Pellegrini says.

"Many equipment dealers offer operator training both for the owner of the machine and for their crews," he explains.

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tasks. And with an even greater outlook, instead of getting rid of those workers, those workers are freed up so you can add or rent one or two additional skid-steers and go out and double your business."

However, for all of their positive attributes, skid-steers aren't entirely perfect. Size – too much or lack thereof – can be an issue for a contractor. Certain landscape duties still require a larger machine, such as large stone projects that may require the power-lifting attributes of a wheel loader or telehandler. Or maneuvering through a small residential job site or needing to access a fenced-in backyard may require the troubleshooting services of a mini-skid steer or compact utility loader.



Attachments are the key to a skid-steer's versatility, and there are an endless array of these tools available on the market. Photo: Bobcat

skid-steer's reputation as a versatile landscape tool," Rafferty says. "Today, it seems there is an attachment out there on the market as specialized as the job you need done."

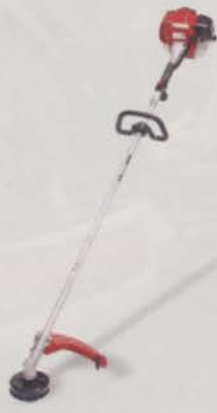
As most contractors would imagine, the bucket, specifically the four-in-one bucket, but may also include dedicated dirt and snow buckets, remains the most popular attachment for the landscape market, according to manufacturers.

"When it comes down to it, it's the multi-purpose functions of these buckets that make them so popular with landscape contractors," Lemke says.

After bucket attachments, landscape contractors rely heavily on pallet fork and grapple fork attachments to move and carry bulky materials and heavy loads at the job site and around their staging yards. Next, contractors can't seem to do without some sort of

CONNECTING WITH ATTACHMENTS. Name a chore on the job site and most likely there's a skid-steer attachment that can efficiently and effectively complete the task.

"It's the attachments that have played the biggest part at building the



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a grading attachment, specifically a power box rake for preparing seedbeds or an excavating rake for leveling and grading turf. "A grading attachment, such as a power rake, is essential for the landscape contractor," Lemke says. "Once a contractor has that attachment for their skid-steer, they can't seem to get along without it."

Auger and trencher attachments are also considered essential to increase digging efficiency. "You can dig a 45-foot trench in an hour," Rafferty says. "How long would it take a crew of guys to dig that same trench? A day? Maybe longer?"

And there are also lesser used, but no less helpful, attachments available

to landscape contractors. For example, plow blades and snow blowers can be utilized for snow removal duties; sod rollers for lawn installation and backhoes for excavation work.

Lastly, tool rental is a smart course of action for a landscape contractor uncertain about whether the purchase of a particular attachment will, over the long term, be cost effective.

"Renting attachments can be helpful to keep your operating costs down if you cannot justify the continuous use of the attachment," Pellegrini says.

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> **top 5 attachments**

The right attachments unlock not only a skid-steer's potential, but also a landscape contractor's ability to offer clients a diverse array of services.

Some of the most popular attachments, according to manufacturers, that can be found on a landscape contractor's skid-steer include:

- 1. Multi-Purpose Bucket:** Good all-purpose tool, the standard attachment for most landscape contractors.
- 2. Forks:** Invaluable for loading and unloading materials both at the job site and in the yard, as well as maneuvering items such as trees and rocks.
- 3. Rakes:** Highly efficient tool for grading and seed bed preparation.
- 4. Auger:** Time saver for post hole digging and tree planting.
- 5. Trencher:** Like the auger attachment, speeds up trenching duties for irrigation installation.



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tachments may make all the difference for the landscape contractor, it's important to select a host machine capable of handling the variety of tasks you expect to perform.

Skid-steers represent a sizeable, yet smart, investment, and one of the biggest mistakes a landscape contractor can make is an uneducated purchase.

"With skid-steers, bigger is not always better," Rafferty says. "Don't be sold solely on horsepower and hydraulic power."

For example, the bigger, more powerful units come equipped with a high rate of hydraulic flow to the attachment, upwards to 30 to 34 gpm, compared to 20 to 22 gpm in a

regular-sized machine, he says.

"Easily, 80 to 90 percent of what contractors do doesn't warrant that high rate of hydraulic flow," he says. "And machines with that extra power can burn out some attachments."

Contractors need to keep in mind the scope of the service offerings in order to evaluate the correct size of the skid-steer that's right for them, their workers and their operations.

"If what you do is less than 1,500 pounds than you don't need a 3,000 pound skid-steer," Rafferty says. "Know yourself and what you're getting into."

However, landscape contractors need to keep in mind that they may be operating in a different load range on a daily basis, Pellegrini says.

"Choosing a machine that just

"I couldn't do the jobs I do as a landscape contractor without my skid-steer loaders. From grading for a lawn to moving material to digging holes, whatever job you can contemplate needing done when working in the landscape industry, you can do with a skid-steer."

- George Stiscak Jr.

meets your lifting range can limit your applications," Pellegrini says. "Know where your operating load range is when purchasing a skid-steer, then select a machine that meets your demands. Shorting yourself within a load range will lead to increased labor cost or additional workers needed on the job site."

"You need to compile a short list of what you need this machine to do for you," Rafferty says. "If you get a skid-steer that can do what you need it to do with less horsepower, than



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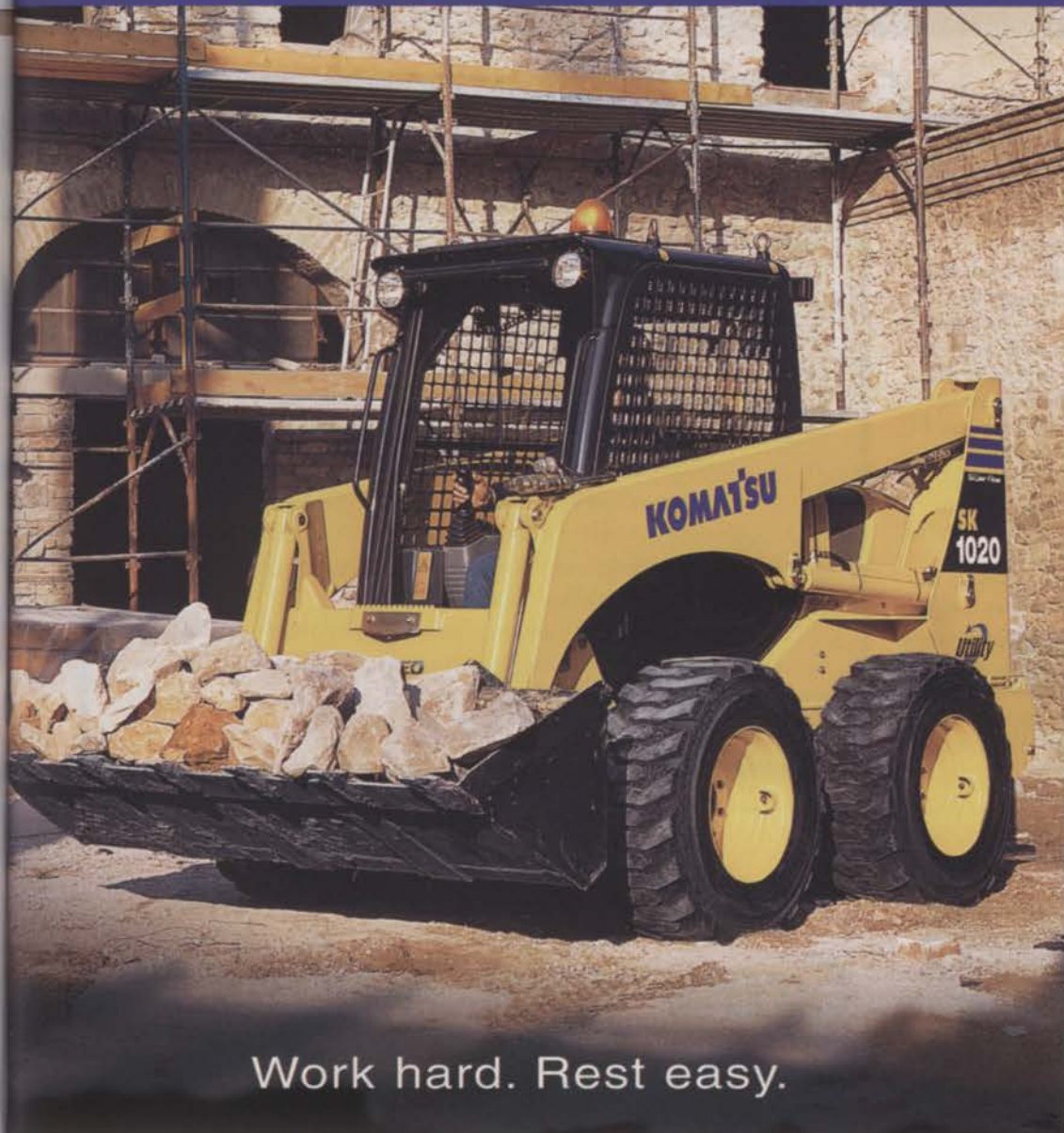
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And there are other issues, Lemke says. "The landscape contractor buys the big machine and then doesn't realize until later that their truck and trailer is no longer big enough to transport it to the job site," he says. "Consider purchasing a skid-steer just under the size and weight of the machine you can handle because once you throw an attachment on it you'll probably be at your weight limit."

Serviceability of the machine is another area of consideration. Contractors should look at whether service points are easy to access. Likewise, does the unit's boom have to be in the up or down position to service it.

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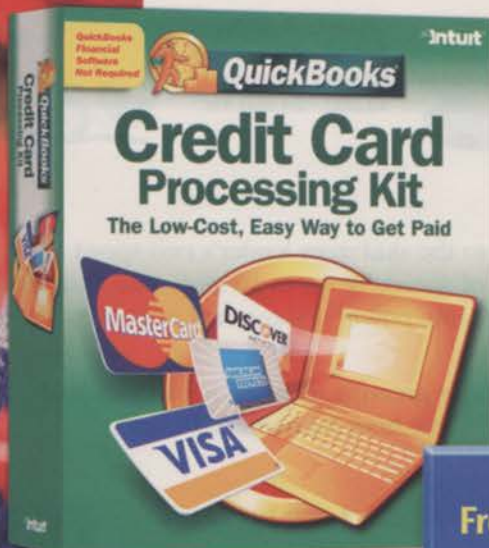
There's a lot of crossover between landscaping and snow removal professionals, says Kent Pellegrini, sales support consultant, skid-steer and multi-terrain loaders, for Peoria, Ill.-based Caterpillar, and contractors with expertise in both of these areas can choose models with enclosed and heated cabs for winter use. Likewise, skid-steer track treads can be changed to increase maneuverability in snow and ice conditions.

Manufacturers market a variety of snowplow, snow blower and ice-breaker skid-steer attachments, as well as equip cabs with heaters for year-round use, says Dan Rafferty, product marketing manager for Savannah, Ga.-based JCB.

"If a contractor is tending to a small supermarket or condominium parking lot, or even a medium-sized shopping center, a skid-steer has more than enough power to push snow," Rafferty says.

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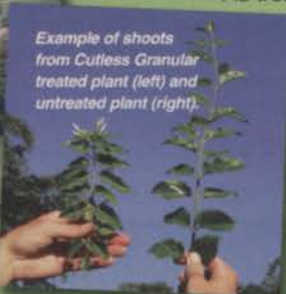
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Example of shoots from Cutless Granular treated plant (left) and untreated plant (right).



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USE READER SERVICE # 94



Japanese beetle adults. Photo: Joy Fera/Dreamstime.com

Insect Control Strategies

This spring brings a host of pests to trees and turf. Researchers and pesticide manufacturers provide some predictions while lawn care operators plan for profit in this service segment.

With the arrival of spring comes the blooming of flowers, the greening of lawns and the budding of insects. This season promises to offer lawn care operators (LCOs) a wide array of problem pests in their clients' turf, trees and ornamentals. What should LCOs be especially on the look out for in 2006? Researchers and pesticide manufacturers give their predictions, and lawn care operators share their insights into how they make these services profitable.

RESEARCHERS' PREDICTIONS. Rick Brandenburg, a turfgrass entomologist at North Carolina State University,

Raleigh, N.C., says that fire ants will continue to be a problem for all segments of the green industry – from golf courses to parks and residential lawns. “We continue to see increases in the distribution and spread of fire ants throughout the Southeast,” he says, “and in areas where they are established, the severity has increased. They are moving further north and west and this is simply a problem that’s never going to go away. They are well-established and challenging to manage.”

Brandenburg believes that although operators can suppress fire ant popula-

by kristin van veen-hincke

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BODY FEATURES



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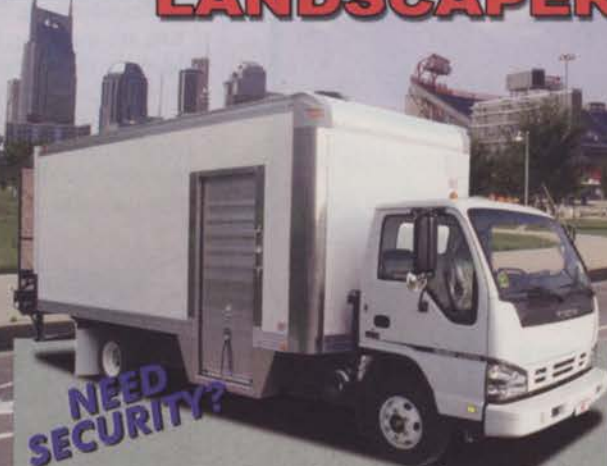


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USE READER SERVICE # 96

pesticides/fertilizers > > >

tions with various products, these pests may never be eradicated.

So, how should the LCO manage fire ants? "Most people like to use bait products because they are cost effective, quick, easy to apply and relatively inexpensive," Brandenburg says. "But baits take a long time to work. Some of the newer broadcast application products on the market are providing better control."

But "these pests are challenging to manage so it takes a combination of products to keep them at bay," Brandenburg advises.

In addition to fire ants, Brandenburg believes that chinch bugs will continue to be a problem in St. Augustinegrass, which is popular in the Gulf Coast region. "Multiple treatments are required to manage these pests," he states. "They keep coming back again and again during the summer." To fight this pest, Brandenburg recommends using pesticides labeled for chinch bug control.

White grubs will also be a problem in various U.S. regions this year, including the Southeast, according to Brandenburg. "Lawn care operators are spending more time trying to identify the different species of grubs so they can obtain better control," he says. "This pest is an important one to eliminate in clients' lawns because not only do they cause turf damage, but they also attract other pests, such

as skunks and rabbits, that can cause even worse damage digging for the grubs," he says.

Since the turf roots are the main source of food for grubs, keeping them buried in the soil, control with insecticides can be challenging. "The most successful outcomes occur when insecticides are applied to immature grubs early in their life cycles," Brandenburg stresses. "Larger grubs are more difficult to control and may require more than one treatment."

MANUFACTURER VIEWPOINTS.

Chris Wooley with Dow AgroSciences in Indianapolis, Ind., agrees with Brandenburg on at least one point – grubs will be a problem this season.

Wooley, the product marketing manager for insecticides and fungicides in Dow AgroSciences' turf, ornamental and technical products division, stresses that operators should use products that do not have to be watered in immediately. "It helps a lot of the LCOs because their clientele may not have irrigation available, for example, in your lower income and your medium income neighborhoods. From the standpoint that the operator doesn't have to be right on top of that client all of the time, he or she can just wait for the normal rain patterns or whenever that client does their irrigation and the product will be fine. This will help the LCO relax

> grub alert

Lawns at Higher Risk of Having Grubs:

1. Established for three to five years
2. Recent history of grub damage
3. Higher maintenance, especially irrigation
4. Sunny areas
5. Heavy thatch layers (¾-inch or more)

Lawns at Risk of Having a Treatment Failure:

1. Thick thatch layers present (more than ½-inch)
2. Liquid applications and no irrigation
3. Lawns irrigated on a daily basis, especially when not necessary – David Shetlar

The author is associate professor of entomology at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.



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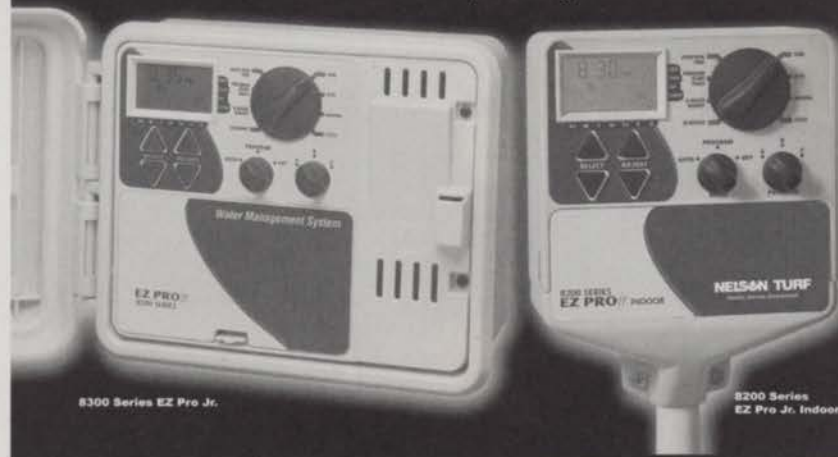
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somewhat when it comes to making sure the product is going to be advantageous."

Wooley sees several new trends in the insecticide marketplace, but the continued development of post-patent or generic products is one that stands out for him.

"In the future, we should be seeing a lot more competition in the preventive grub marketplace in terms of products," he says.

Kathie Kalmowitz, market development specialist for BASF in Raleigh, N.C., provides product development and technical services for the sales team in the southern and the western parts of the United States. She sees the main advancement in insect control as the advancements of products that are targeted to a single pest and, therefore, are better able to control that pest. "Many of the older chemistries have gone out of favor with the Environmental Protection Agency, and we have

"The key thing about products that take care of more than one type of insect is that some of them are not just pre-mixes of two existing products. Significant work is being done to optimize the formulation ratios and, as a result, synergy is actually being found in research trials."

- Bryan Gooch

lost many of their turf and ornamental uses," she explains. "So, what you have are new insecticides that have come through the pipeline that are much more specific to target pests vs. a broad spectrum of pests."

This trend may increase costs for the LCOs because they have to buy more products to control each insect, according to Kalmowitz. "I think what will happen is that instead of having one product that can be used on everything from mites to grubs, you may have three products because each one is going to be very specific

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to one class of insects," she predicts. "That could mean the operators have to keep more than one product in their portfolio."

On the other hand, there are

trend. Gooch says these types of products will only benefit the busy LCO who wants to rid their clients' lawns of more than one insect quickly. "The key thing about these types of prod-

That's one of the important things to establish. Outside of getting all of the insects, these types of products give LCOs operational efficiency. What would sometimes take two applications previously is now combined into one application."

Despite whether an LCO using an insect-specific treatment or one that manages more than one pest, there will continue to be a trend toward combining these products with others, such as fertilizer, to save time on the job. "LCOs are combining more of their insecticides with fertilizer

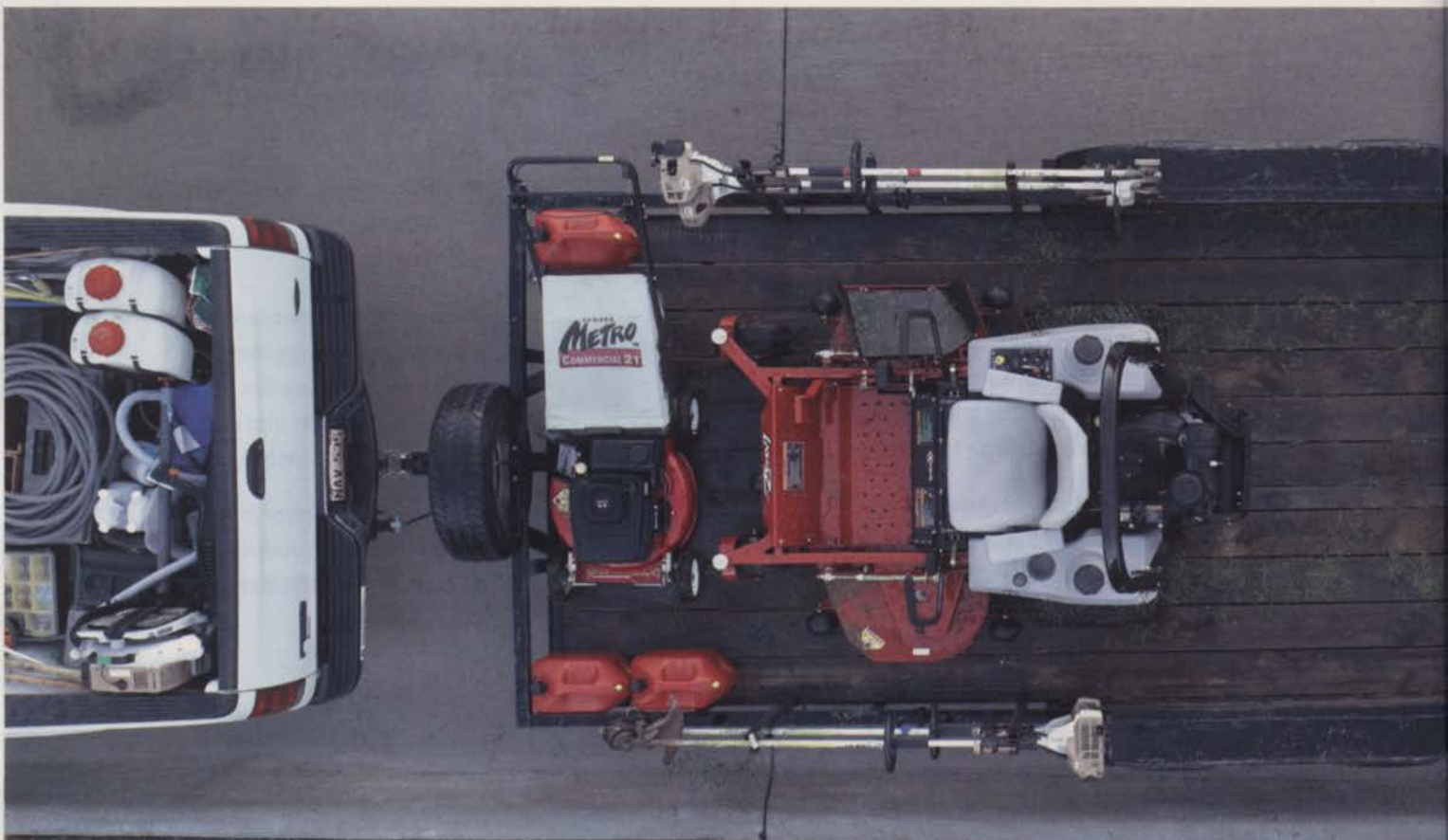
to take care of two things at once," Kalmowitz says.

Gooch agrees, saying that he sees the combination of insecticides with fertilizers as current and future tools lawn care operators will continue

"Better products allow quarterly services that significantly reduce labor costs and improve homeowner perception. The future holds some new chemistry for sure, but tailoring existing active ingredients into products that fit the needs of the LCO and his customers is likely to have the most impact." - Nick Hamon

manufacturers still focusing on trying to control more insects with one product, which Bryan Gooch, business manager for insecticides, Bayer Environmental Sciences, Research Triangle Park, N.C., cites as a growing

ucts is that some of them are not just pre-mixes of two existing products," he comments. "Significant work is being done to optimize the formulation ratios and, as a result, synergy is actually being found in research trials.



to use. "We're really expecting lawn care professionals to embrace these products in particular because now by adding the fertilizer you are really combining two and three things into one. For obvious reasons, this is going to increase productivity and reduce man-hours and energy costs and everything else that operators keep track of."

According to Gooch, the cost of some of these new technologies is less than if the LCO used two products separately, particularly if the fertilizer is purchased separately from the insecticide. "The other thing that gives the turf manager a lot of leeway is there is a very broad use rate range that they can pick from," he explains. "In some cases, they may have just minor insect pressure, and they can choose a very low rate which is very cost effective or in other cases such as with chinch bugs in Florida, if it's a very severe outbreak and they are worried about losing turf, then they



Fire ants are continuing to challenge LCOs in the transition zone and Southern states. Photo: Scott Bauer, USDA Agricultural Research Service

can pick a rate that is more in the mid to high range to control the pest. The situation dictates the rate they use."

Nick Hamon, director of development and technical services for Bayer Environmental Science, Research Triangle Park, N.C., recommends that lawn care operators cooperate with customers in order to build premium

programs for different landscapes. He says this will help operators realize improved profit and productivity. "Better products allow quarterly services outside the home that significantly reduce labor costs and improve homeowner perception," Hamon remarks. The future holds "some new chemistry for sure, but tailoring existing active ingredients into products that fit the needs of the LCO and his customers is likely to have the most impact."

LAWN CARE OPERATORS SPEAK OUT.

Insect control services in turf and trees have been important to Baltimore, Md.-based ProLawnPlus' business since its inception in 1978. The company provides a tree and shrub program for the maintenance of ornamental insects as well as a lawn program, which includes control for grubs as well as a fleas and ticks. Grub control and crabgrass prevention have

continued on page 124, sidebar on page 122



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USE READER SERVICE # 101

an eye on tree care

The tree care market is continuing to grow with 1,500 key members of the industry responsible for 85 percent of services, according to FMC Corp., adding that the growth in this market has been substantial with homeowners spending \$1.5 billion on tree care services in 1993 and \$4.2 billion in 2003.

Two pests in particular are of concern to the tree care market this year. Here are some details on each one.

Emerald Ash Borer (EAB)

- An exotic beetle discovered in southeastern Michigan in the summer of 2002.
- Only attacks ash trees.
- Estimated to have arrived from Asia on wood packing material.
- Adult beetles nibble on foliage, but cause minimal damage.
- Larvae feed on inner bark disturbing the transportation of nutrients and water through the tree. (See photo showing this, above. Photo: Brian Sullivan, USDA APHIS PPQ)
- Also established in Windsor, Ontario. Believed to have been brought to Ohio in 2003 and Indiana in 2004.
- Estimated that as many as 10 million trees have been killed in Michigan, Ohio and Indiana.
- Quarantine in parts of these states has affected firewood, nursery stock, logs, lumber and mulch.
- Since the discovery of EAB, more than eight million ash trees have been killed. Most damage has been found in Michigan.
- Estimates of the cost of the damage range into the tens of millions of dollars.
- Researchers are currently looking at ways to control the larvae, understand the life cycle of this pest and to control this infestation.
- State and local officials in the U.S. and Canada have managed to isolate the problem and prevented small infestations from growing.

– **Emerald Ash Borer Information Site** (<http://www.emeraldashborer.info/>)



Southern Pine Beetle

- Found from Pennsylvania to Texas and from New Mexico and Arizona.
- In the spring, female beetles bore through the bark and produce pheromones, naturally occurring chemicals that send out a subconscious scent that attracts other beetles who then attack the tree.
- As the infestation grows, adjacent trees are prone to attack.
- The beetles most often attack mature pine trees; however, trees as young as 5 years old have been killed. (See an adult beetle, above. Photo: Texas Agricultural Extension Service Archives, Texas A&M University)
- Infestations can spread rapidly attacking both pure pine and mixed pine-hardwood trees covering hundreds of acres and killing or damaging thousands of trees.
- The thinning out or pruning of trees keeps them healthy and less susceptible to infestations.
- Aerial surveillance is an important tool to fighting this pest. Problem areas should be plotted on a map and followed up with a ground crew.
- An entire group of trees may need to be cut down as well as surrounding unaffected trees in order to control the infestation. The size of the buffer zone is dependent on the magnitude of the infestation.
- Tree felling is another control form in which infested trees and the buffer zone are cut down toward the center of the group. The increased light and air lessens the existence of pheromones causing the beetles to disperse.
- The southern pine beetle is the most serious pest of coniferous forests in the southern United States.



– **USDA Forest Service – Virginia Cooperative Extension** (<http://www.ento.vt.edu/~salom/SPBiology/soupibee.html>)

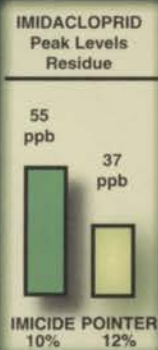
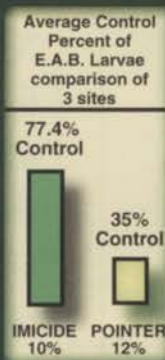
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USE READER SERVICE # 103

pesticides/fertilizers > > >

continued from page 121

been staples for this LCO; however, the flea and tick program and the tree and shrub programs developed out of demand. "Our customers were calling asking if we did something that controls the fleas and ticks because they had problems pulling them off of their dogs," recalls Kevin Nickle, the company's operations manager. "So we added it because of the phone calls. Our tree and shrub program evolved when we found someone right for the position. There was always a demand for it, but it was just a matter of finding the right employee. It wasn't a service that just

"Customers expect that because they have a lawn service they shouldn't have any insect problems. But a basic program is for fertility and weed management. So until the customer bumps up their program, they are going to have an insect problem."

- Kevin Nickle

anyone could do; we needed someone who was knowledgeable about plant materials and insects."

Working to increase business in lawn and tree care is a constant effort for this operator. "Every winter we send out our renewal letters," Nickle explains. "Grubs have been a problem over the last three or four years in our area, so we do have a brochure that we send with our renewal letters to try and actively upgrade their programs with grub control. Also, when we do a lawn application, if we know they have a pet we may leave them a brochure about our flea and tick program."

Nickle also believes that the high level of customer service helps

ProLawnPlus maintain their customer base. "We are probably about 80/20 residential vs. commercial," he says. "We do a lot of extras with our services. For instance, a lot of our customers want to be prenotified by phone about their service schedule. We also take extra time to adequately blow off our customers' driveways and sidewalks. We try to back up our costs with service - that's what I think sets us apart."

Though insect control is the company's most profitable service overall, Nickle believes that the company's turf insect control service is a lot less profitable than the tree and shrub insect program based on the chemical costs involved. "I think to be honest with you insect control is probably one of our most profitable treatments overall," Nickle adds. "The cost of product per cost of service is small so our profitability is high. Our tree and shrub insect service is probably our most profitable based on the fact that you use very little product to do the job."

Another reason tree and shrub pest control is more profitable for the company is because "you can sell a tree and shrub program to anyone," Nickle comments. "The nice thing about it is you can actively see problems and you can actually see the insects doing damage, so it's an easy sell. A lot of times it's not as easy to sell a lawn program to someone if they've never had a grub problem. You are trying to sell them on the fact that it's an insurance type policy where they are pretty much assured they won't get grubs if they take the preventive treatment."

"In the last four years of us promoting preventive grub treatments and people neglecting to take them, we will get some people calling in and they are being wiped out with grubs, and they are very upset," Nickle explains. "They forget that back in January we mentioned this in our renewal letter. It's just like anybody would be when they see damage to their lawn and they have a lawn service. They expect that because they have a lawn service that there shouldn't be any problems, but a lot of these programs are basic programs for fertility and weed management more so than insect management so until the customer bumps up their program, they'll have an insect problem periodically." □



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W a t e

W i n



Water features are making a big splash with landscape contractors.

Ever since his youth, Christopher Bell has witnessed concrete and asphalt taking over his native San Francisco Bay area. This saddened him, so he took inspiration from the backpacking trips he used to take to bring that scenery back to the city. The result – the addition of water feature installation and maintenance to his service mix six years ago. “I thought it would be great for people to have some nature in their backyards,” says the owner of Alliance Land and Water-scapes in Prunedale, Calif.

Bell enjoys the fact that he can bring ponds and waterfalls to customers’ backyards and that no two are exactly alike. He, like many other contractors, has discovered an add-on service that stretches his imagination and his bottom line.

OVERFLOWING INDUSTRY. Small beginnings have become huge for some waterscape contractors and the industry as a whole. “It’s a wide-open business,” Bell says. “In the late 1990s, there was a surge of contractors jumping into water features, and I think there are now 60,000 to 70,000 water garden installers in North America.”

by heather wood

red f tea a 2 loo b



d f a l l

In fact, 30.3 percent of contractors offer waterscape services, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research. And while 24.3 percent of contractors said they purchased water feature products in the past 12 months, 27.5 percent said they plan to purchase them in the next 12 months – a 3.2 percent increase.

Bell has been in the landscape industry 26 years but started designing, servicing and repairing water features six years ago. For the first five years he was pushing “a water garden in every home, business and institution,” he says. “My mantra is that everyone deserves a waterfall. It’s just natural that people love the sound.” A customer favorite is a waterfall with a stream, he adds.



Finished water features, like the one above (Photo: Alliance Land and Waterscapes) and left (Photo: The Pond Gnome), create backyard landscape elements that appeal to clients’ senses of sight and sound. Below left and on page 134, The Pond Gnome’s crew installs a residential water feature.

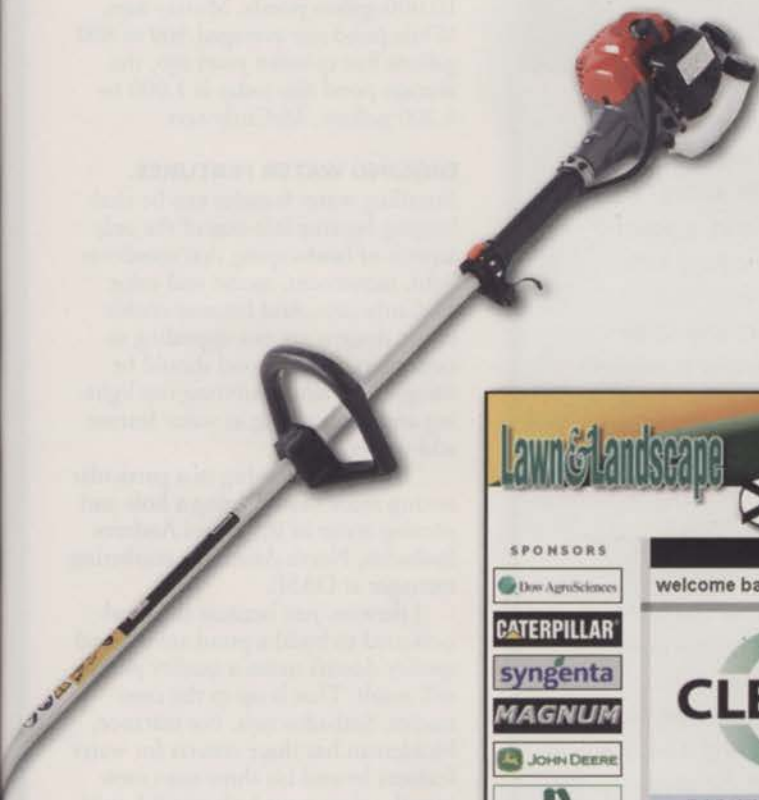
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Like Bell, Paul Holdeman, owner of The Pond Gnome in Peoria, Ariz., started installing and maintaining water gardens six years ago after he met a professional in the business who got him excited about the craft.

The first few years were slow because nobody knew about the product or had faith in it. "People feared that ponds would be high-maintenance," Holdeman says. "But once we got some in the ground and had our annual pond tour, that changed things."

He is referring to his annual Parade of Ponds, held every April, where prospective customers tour established ponds to get a water feature education. This helps to ease customers' maintenance fears and often convinces them to let The Pond Gnome build ponds in their yards, he says.

Holdeman says the service is going well. He made \$250,000 last year with the four-man crew. This year he has seven employees dedicated to water features and they plan on making

\$500,000. In March, he was already booked with installation appointments for the following four months.

Residential water features have been around for as long as 40 years, says Sean Murray, national consumer sales manager of Little Giant Pumps, Oklahoma City, Okla. But the industry has only started to really take off in the past decade, adds Kevin McCurly, sales manager at OASE, Corona, Calif.

As the water feature business booms, so does pond size. It's not uncommon today to see 5,000- to 10,000-gallon ponds, Murray says. While pond size averaged 500 to 800 gallons five to seven years ago, the average pond size today is 1,000 to 1,200 gallons, McCurly says.

10 best-selling plants

Plants are an integral part of a water feature-centered ecosystem, says Kevin McCurly, sales manager at OASE, Corona, Calif., adding they help to bring balance along with added beauty. Plants best suitable for ponds vary by availability and region, he adds. Generally, water lilies are the most popular variety, with sweetflag coming in close at No. 3.

But as with other landscape areas, some plants should be avoided, McCurly says. For instance, water hyacinth is invasive in a pond ecosystem, he warns.

Growing and selling plants for water features can be a profitable add-on service for those who want extra revenue, he says. Floating plants such as lily pads can be stored in tubs of water. Small children's swimming pools work well, he says, adding that lily pads should be stored in at least 18 inches of water. Shelf plants will do well if the bottom of the plant is immersed in water, he says. Raised benches with rubber liners 6 to 8 inches deep are ideal for these plants.

McCurly recommends contractors who grow their own plants only sell them to their installation customers. Starting a separate plant business can be costly and time consuming, he says.

DIGGING WATER FEATURES.

Installing water features can be challenging because it is one of the only aspects of landscaping that combines light, movement, sound and color, McCurly says. And because cookie cutter designs are not appealing to customers, "every pond should be unique," he adds, pointing out lighting and landscaping as water feature add-on services.

"It's about adapting to a particular setting more than digging a hole and putting water in it," agrees Andreas Szabados, North American marketing manager at OASE.

Likewise, just because the products used to build a pond are of good quality doesn't mean a quality pond will result. That is up to the contractor, Szabados says. For instance, Holdeman has three criteria for water features he and his three-man crew install – they must be beautiful, profitable and low-maintenance.

The tools used to build ponds vary from company to company. Holdeman prefers picks and shovels vs. backhoes and other large machinery. As a result, the crew can start jobs earlier in the morning because they don't have to worry about loud machinery waking the neighbors. The crew can also fit their tools through tight spaces, such as 36-inch gates, which are ubiquitous with their residential client base, he says.

The only machinery Holdeman's crew uses is a crane to set boulders that range in size up to 1 ton for waterfalls. Other necessities include wheelbarrows, dirt, rocks, a rubber

THE TOP 10

1. Waterlilies – hardy and tropical
2. Pickerel Rush
3. Dwarf Japanese and Variegated Sweetflag
4. Yellow Flag
5. Arrowhead
6. Lizard's Tail
7. Lotus
8. Iris Louisiana Hybrids
9. Horsetail
10. Water Mint

Source: OASE

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The most popular fish for ponds are koi, goldfish and shubunkins, says Kevin McCurley, sales manager at OASE, Corona, Calif. For some, fish are a prized part of the pond. Koi can range from \$20 to \$20,000, he says. Offering fish as part of the service takes work and knowledge. Overstocking and freezing conditions are real threats that should be addressed with the customer.

Cold climates result in freezing water, which can threaten fish habitats if not treated properly. In most clients' ponds, fish generally are OK in 18 to 24 inches of water, which is the depth of the average pre-formed liner, McCurley says. And with ponds that reach a 30-inch depth, fish have a place to hide from predators like raccoons. Even an 18-inch-deep pond can provide solace, as long as there are rocks for the fish to hide under, says Paul Holdeman, owner of The Garden Gnome, Peoria, Ariz. Another solution is a wide pond that doesn't allow raccoons to reach the middle, where fish can take solace.

During the cold months, keep an area ice-free for fish with a floating heater, McCurley says. "There needs to be an area for bad gas to escape and good gas to get in," he explains. Be careful with waterfalls too, warns Christopher Bell of Alliance Land and Waterscapes in Prunedale, Calif. Waterfalls that are frozen solid divert water from the fish, giving them less than they need to survive, he says.

Overstocking of fish is another common mistake that can lead to bad water quality. "People tend to add fish in a quite dramatic fashion," says Andreas Szabados, North American marketing manager for OASE. Keeping too many fish can cause stress on the pond. "The general rule is 1 inch of fish length for every 7 to 10 gallons of water," McCurley says. "Also, remember that fish are going to breed and they're going to grow." A maximum of 20 to 25 small fish are considered ideal for a 1,000 gallon pond, he says.

Once it is realized that there are too many fish in a client's pond, McCurley suggests contractors use the situation to their advantage. For instance, as part of a maintenance call, they could offer to take some of the fish from the pond and, in turn, make a deal with the customer. The contractor can then sell the fish to other clients starting a pond. Be sure the fish are healthy first, McCurley warns.

Overall, healthy fish can be a benefit to the pond ecosystem, McCurley says. They keep the water moving, which deters mosquitoes. And if mosquito larvae end up on the surface of the water, the fish will eat them.

membrane and a filter system. With a four-man crew, they can dig a 10-foot hole in one-half day. It takes about five days to complete a project.

Bell rents equipment as needed. One of the best tools is the 24-inch box dolly, he says, adding that he also has rented skid-steer loaders and excavators for water feature installations. In 2005, he spent roughly \$10,000 on rental equipment. He uses the equipment for larger features that involve lifting a half-ton or heavier boulders. The customer picks up the cost when rentals are used on the job. It takes Bell's crew anywhere from one to four days to build a water garden.

RETENTION SUGGESTIONS.

While some waterscape contractors market directly to homeowners, others get business from colleagues whose services stop short of ponds. "Some landscape contractors realize it's not their forte and contract the work to someone who specializes in waterscapes," Bell says. "About 15 percent of my business comes from other landscape contractors."

No matter where they get the work, contractors should strive for less maintenance-prone issues and build for longevity, Szabados suggests. "Every pump failure is a callback for a company," he says, adding callbacks deplete profit because of the additional labor cost required to fix problems.

Other failures occur when a swimming pool pump has been installed, Holdeman says, adding they are not ideal for ponds because they are too expensive to be running around the clock, which is how long a pond pump should run. Holdeman is sometimes called upon to fix jobs other waterscape contractors left behind, which include concrete ponds that aren't balanced and those that leave rocks rolling to the middle of the pond. "There are more bad ponds going around than good," he says, adding that the problem usually isn't the materials, but the way it was installed. Last year, half of Holdeman's business was rebuilds.

And the installation or rebuild is just the start. "It's by no means the end of the relationship with the client," Holdeman says, pointing to pond maintenance as an add-on service opportunity.

But for contractors not ready to offer maintenance or for clients who don't want it, providing customers



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with basic pond care tips is crucial for a happy customer and long-lasting pond. To communicate with its clients, The Pond Gnome sends out a newsletter that addresses the changing seasons and pond care. "If you install water features you have got to stick with the client to make it work," Holdeman says.

Give customers more information than just the cost of labor and installing the equipment, Szabados agrees. "Customers feel a contractor should be able to give information about the care of the water feature," he explains. "I've seen many cases where the contractor builds something only to have the customer call later and ask why the pond is filled with algae."

In fact, before adding water features to their service menus, contractors need to "know a little background on pond biology and why certain things happen," Szabados advises.

Contractors can even become certified waterscapers. No states require certification to install and maintain water features, but some waterscape product manufacturers offer courses and certification, Murray says.

All in all, the ultimate formula for a successful waterscape contractor is

1/3 background, 1/3 installation and 1/3 business savvy, Szabados says.

PONDERING COST. To stay in the business of water feature installation, Holdeman recommends keeping profit margins up. "People price ponds too low," he explains. "People think \$1,000 for a pond is enough but not if you want to be around for that customer in two years." With 50-percent profit margins, Holdeman's jobs average \$8,000 to \$10,000 each.

Similarly, Bell's clients typically pay about \$8,000 for a pond that takes one day to complete. The price grows exponentially for each additional day of work. In 2004, he installed 90 water features and the average cost was \$6,580. Most of the jobs took one day each. Last year,

his crew completed 55 water features, with the average job costing \$12,500. While the jobs took longer to complete, which decreased the number of ponds they were able to install, the sizes and prices of the ponds allowed Bell to bring in more money.

Bell starts planning in March for jobs that run November through February. He frequently has renovations scheduled during this time. During April through August, he's consistently booked up to six weeks in advance with new installations.

When setting prices, contractors should not focus on competitors' prices. Instead, they should focus on making a profit, Szabados says.

And getting your feet wet with smaller jobs at first is best, Holdeman advises. "Don't feel like you've got to handle a \$25,000 job right out of the gate," he says. "Those can put you out of business."

The most important key to a booming business is continued customer service and education, Holdeman says. "If you want good word of mouth, you've got to stick with people after the pond is installed." ■



maintenance matters

Christopher Bell, owner of Alliance Land and Waterscapes in Prunedale, Calif., bumped his part-time service technician position up to a full-time job because of all the business he gets in the maintenance of water features. Once a pond is established, pond maintenance can bring a quick profit and become a solid add-on service.

Bell services 900 water features in the San Francisco Bay area and says that number is growing daily. He is known around the industry for his innovative approach to service, he says.

Bell recommends maintenance to water features annually or every six months. The company sets up regular service visits that cost customers \$75 plus supplies. The average service appointment is 20 minutes, during which the technician follows a 25-point checklist. The service technician also performs annual flushings, which cost \$400 to \$600.

Service technicians also clean the bottoms of ponds for debris, says Andreas Szabados, North American marketing manager for OASE, Corona, Calif. He recommends technicians carry maintenance tools, including shears, a water test kit, a moderate chemical regimen and a squeegee, to clean live algae.

Knowledge is essential as well. "The best tool is common sense," Szabados says. "The main concern, as in all maintenance, is to maintain the ecosystem."

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Check out the May issue online for more photos of water feature designs.



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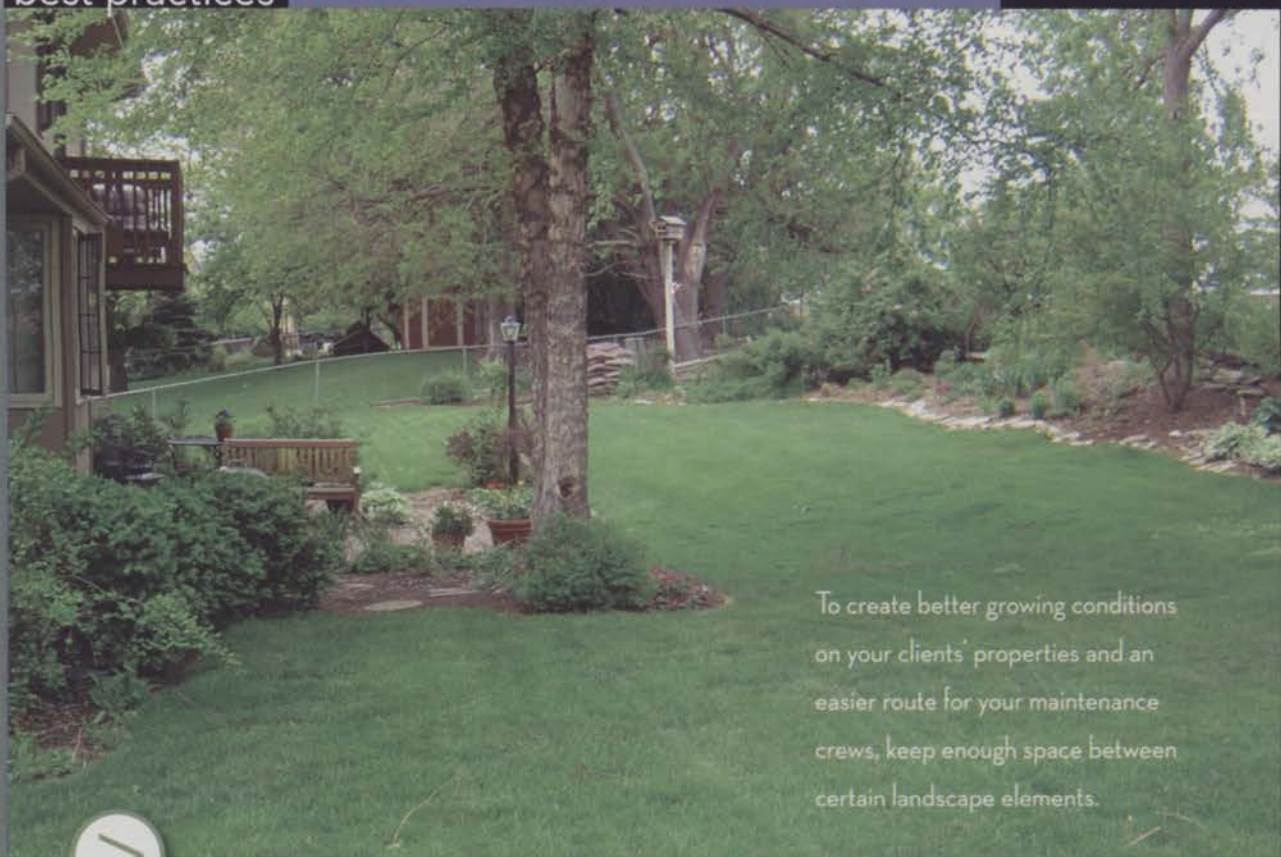
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To create better growing conditions on your clients' properties and an easier route for your maintenance crews, keep enough space between certain landscape elements.

Photos: John Fech

Separate Trees From Turf

As you reflect on the composition of your customers' landscapes, are there trees growing right in the middle of the lawns? Do you swear under your breath every time you mow, having to trim around them and practice some fancy footwork trying to maneuver the mower around the trunks? If so, perhaps it's time to sell landscape renovation, focusing on separating the grass from the other plants. If you are working with a client on a property with little or no landscaping, you can avoid this maintenance nightmare by simply thinking of turf as a part of the landscape unto itself. It should be uninterrupted by "stuff" in the middle.

by john fech

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FIRST THING'S FIRST. Initially, do site analyses on your clients' properties to determine if there are tree-turf conflicts. Walk the property making notes about the locations of specific plants and hardscape elements, documenting the condition of the plants. For example, during the first pass through the landscape, simply jot down that the front yard contains a driveway and a light post, as well as a large silver maple, four lilacs and a taxus hedge growing amongst the turf, and the side and backyard landscape spaces are similar, but with a different mix of woody plants, all of which seem to be struggling.

After you've inventoried the locations and conditions of the landscape elements, make marginal notes about your initial diagnosis for the cause of each of these problematic areas. In the front yard situation above, the lilacs and maple create heavy shade, creating an unsuitable growing environment for the turf. The root competi-

tion from the trees and shrubs further reduce the vigor of the lawn grasses. Further analysis reveals that some turf areas are infected with powdery mildew, facilitated by the shady conditions. Realize that if the trees and turf were separated, the mildew would be less severe or nonexistent. Once you're finished, charge the customer an hourly rate for the site analysis.

CONVINCING THE CLIENT.

There are three basic points of rationale to communicate to your customer when it comes to separating trees from turf.

1. Turf and ornamentals have different growing requirements. Lawns require much more fertilizer and water than flowers, trees, shrubs and groundcovers – generally about twice as much. Ornamental plants require much less mowing than the lawn does. Growing them together

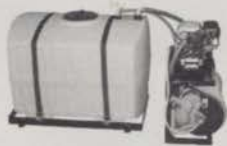
compromises one set of plants for the other. If you fertilize and water the lawn at an appropriate level of input, the ornamentals growing among the grass plants will receive the same input, leading to their demise.

2. When turf and ornamentals are



Here, the flowers and trees are grouped for their collective beauty and growing requirements, and are separated from the turf, which has different needs.

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separated, a powerful landscape technique is utilized, providing a solid mass of each component. Called mass/void, the flowers, shrubs, groundcovers and trees become the mass, or collective beauty, while the lawn is the void, as it takes on the appearance of a big expanse of green with the same color, texture and growing height. This combination is quite attractive. In most situations, the void serves as visual relief, focusing the customer's attention on the ornamentals.

3. Maintenance becomes easier. It's easier to mow the lawn without having to trim around trees and shrubs. It's easier on the trees and shrubs, as the mower tends to run into them less frequently. It's much easier to mulch around shrubs and flowers and to water them with drip irrigation when mass/void is utilized. Point out these

efficiencies as you pitch the idea of a landscape renovation.

ALTERNATIVE PLANTS UNDER TREES.

Once the customer realizes the need to renovate for separation, present them with three choices:

1. Keep the trees and install adapted plants under their canopy.
2. Keep the lawn; remove the trees.
3. Both; retain masses of turf next to groupings of ornamental plants.

If the preferred choice is "keep the trees," or "both," draw up a sketch to incorporate some alternative plants which are adapted to the level of shade and root competition that the woody plants create in the landscape.

WATER ZONES. Create zones of plants with like water needs. To do this, review plants' maintenance and sunlight demands. Each zone should be designed to be watered and fertilized differently from each other. Just as the separation of turf and ornamen-

tals is wise, so is the further separation of ornamentals, i.e. shade-loving groundcovers should be separated from drought-tolerant wildflowers.

Once the zones are in place, choose the best irrigation equipment for each. For instance, using turf irrigation heads for rose beds or wildflower areas can lead to failure of the installation. In general, drip systems work well for shrubs and medium and tall perennials, while fixed spray heads tend to work best for short perennials and groundcovers. After the landscape has been installed, run the system several times to observe its performance. Make adjustments as necessary.

All in all, separating turf and ornamentals is a concept that will make a big improvement in the health and vigor of your customers' landscapes. **LL**

The author is a horticulturist and certified arborist at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Neb., and can be reached at jftech@unlnotes.unl.edu.

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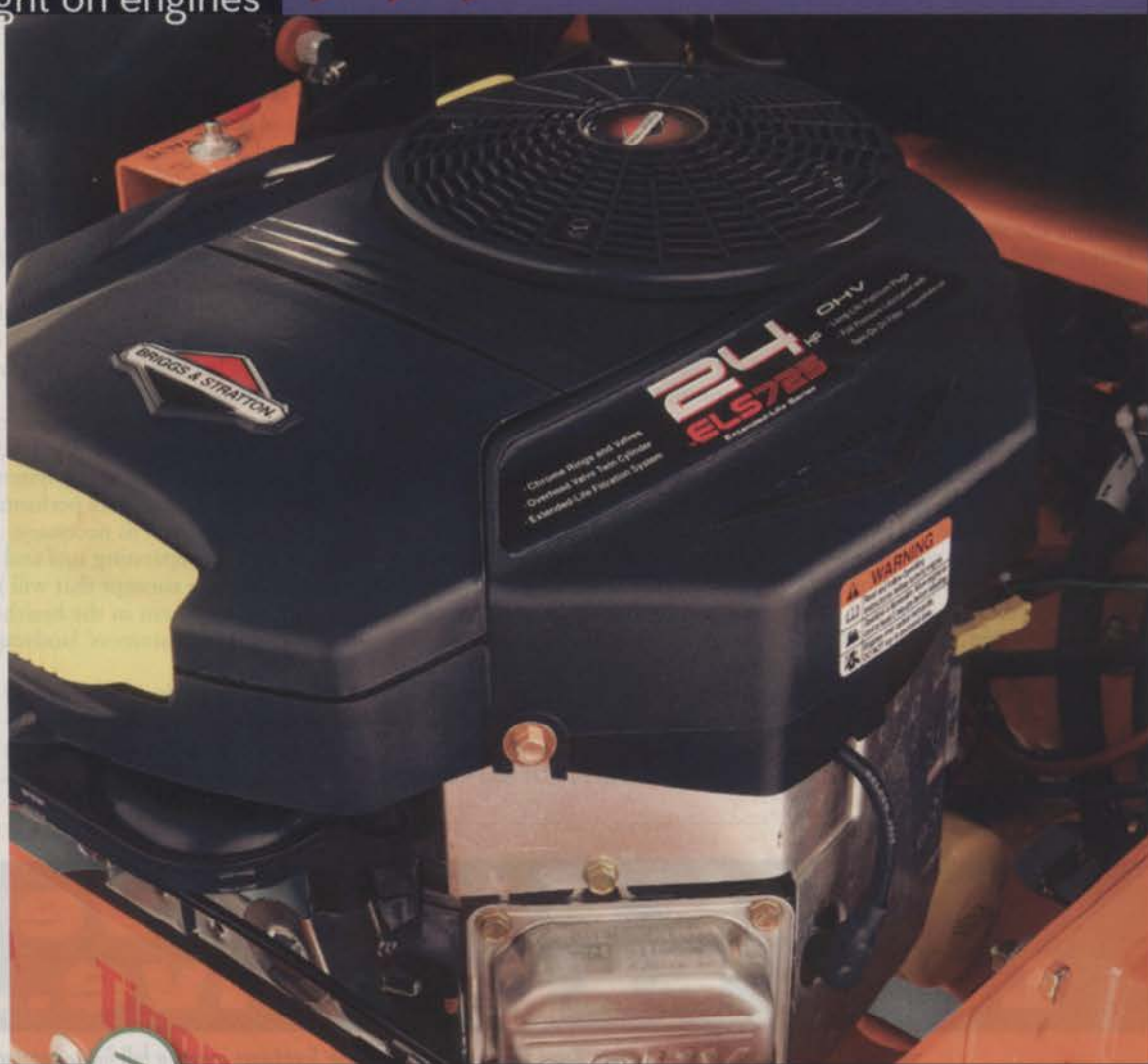


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Equipment in the lawn care industry has come a long way. "It used to be that a guy would buy mowers, and to an extent, that would be his lawn care business," says Bruce Farrar, manager of off-highway communications at Cummins, Columbus, Indiana. "Now landscape contractors are buying skid-steer loaders and other equipment, so the field is getting more diverse."

Even the mower industry is getting more diverse. And to fit the different types of mowers and the operators' expectations of the equipment, engines are becoming more diverse and advanced.

by heather wood

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MORE HORSEPOWER. Power in mower engines now reaches 33 to 36 horsepower, says Cam Litt, product manager of twin cylinder engines for Kohler, Kohler, Wis. When riding mowers became common among contractors about 20 years ago, the typical engine had 12 to 14 horsepower, Litt says, adding that the high end of horsepower has gradually increased since then. Engines are still made as low as 14 horsepower, adds Ron Weber, product manager of commercial engines at Briggs & Stratton, Milwaukee, Wis., but many of today's mowers demand more power.

The increasing mower deck is one advancement driving the rise in horsepower, Litt says. "Cutters are running bigger decks, so they need more power to run them." Higher horsepower also aids in the powering of mowers with attachments, he adds.

Power boosts productivity, which is important to landscape contractors and manufacturers alike, Weber adds. "Outdoor equipment manufacturers are telling us that with the cost of the machines, they need to cut as

FUEL UP. Engine companies may tout the newest technology on their products, but sometimes all that is lost on the end user. "From the operator's point of view, with smaller equipment like mowers the concern is whether they'll be able to get through the work day on a tank of fuel," Farrar says. As a result, engine makers take that into account when they consider fuel-efficient engine designs.

Higher fuel efficiency is achieved by changing an engine's configuration, Weber says. Internally, steps are taken to reduce friction. And, externally, letting the engine breathe as much as possible helps save fuel. "All outdoor equipment manufacturers expect us to have a smoother running engine," he says. "It allows them to run more efficiently."

Another potential fuel saver is electronic fuel injection (EFI), Litt says. The feature eliminates the engine's carburetor because fuel is injected right into the cylinder. Engines with EFI cost about \$1,000 more than engines without the feature, but this can save the contractor \$400 to \$500

The type of fuel an engine uses can also save contractors money. Gasoline and diesel engines burn fuel in different ways – the main difference being the fuel, Litt says. Gas engines are convenient to some contractors because the fuel is readily available. But some operators like diesel engines because they have several in their fleets, making it convenient to fill them all at once, Litt points out. Diesel engines can be more efficient, but the fuel is more expensive, he adds.


LIQUID/AIR DEBATE. Most engines used in the landscape industry are air-cooled, Weber says. But these aren't the only option. Liquid-cooled engines, which are more common in large construction equipment, are sometimes found in smaller machines, such as mowers.

Liquid-cooled engines are perceived to be quieter and have a longer life, Litt says, adding they can retail at \$300 to \$500 more than air-cooled engines. Another benefit of liquid-cooled engines is that the technology can allow a quieter engine than some air-cooled models.

There are tradeoffs, though, Litt says. Liquid-cooled engines have more parts than their air-cooled counterparts, including a radiator, fans and belts, which means they require more maintenance.

The most ideal engine for a mower is determined by the application, Weber says, adding that liquid-cooled engines are often preferred by contractors in warm, southern states because they are thought to cool better and last longer than air-cooled motors.

But the life of the engine depends on the operator, Litt says. "If you take care of any engine, you will get a decent life out of it – no matter which one you use."

Ultimately, the operator only thinks about whether the engine is going to be reliable and up to the task, Farrar adds. "They need the product to run when they need it to run," he says, adding that the operator wants a low total cost of ownership. "At the end of the day, what people really look for is low initial cost, low maintenance cost and high reliability." 

"The landscape contractor needs the product to run when he needs it to run. At the end of the day, what people really look for is low initial cost, low maintenance and high reliability."

– Bruce Farrar

much grass as possible in the shortest amount of time to maximize the investment," he says.

And horsepower should not be judged by the package in which it's contained, Farrar says. Some engines have increased horsepower without increasing in size, giving the contractor a mower with more power that isn't bigger or heavier. Because of the smaller engine the manufacturer may have room to include noise or vibration control in the mower, Farrar adds.

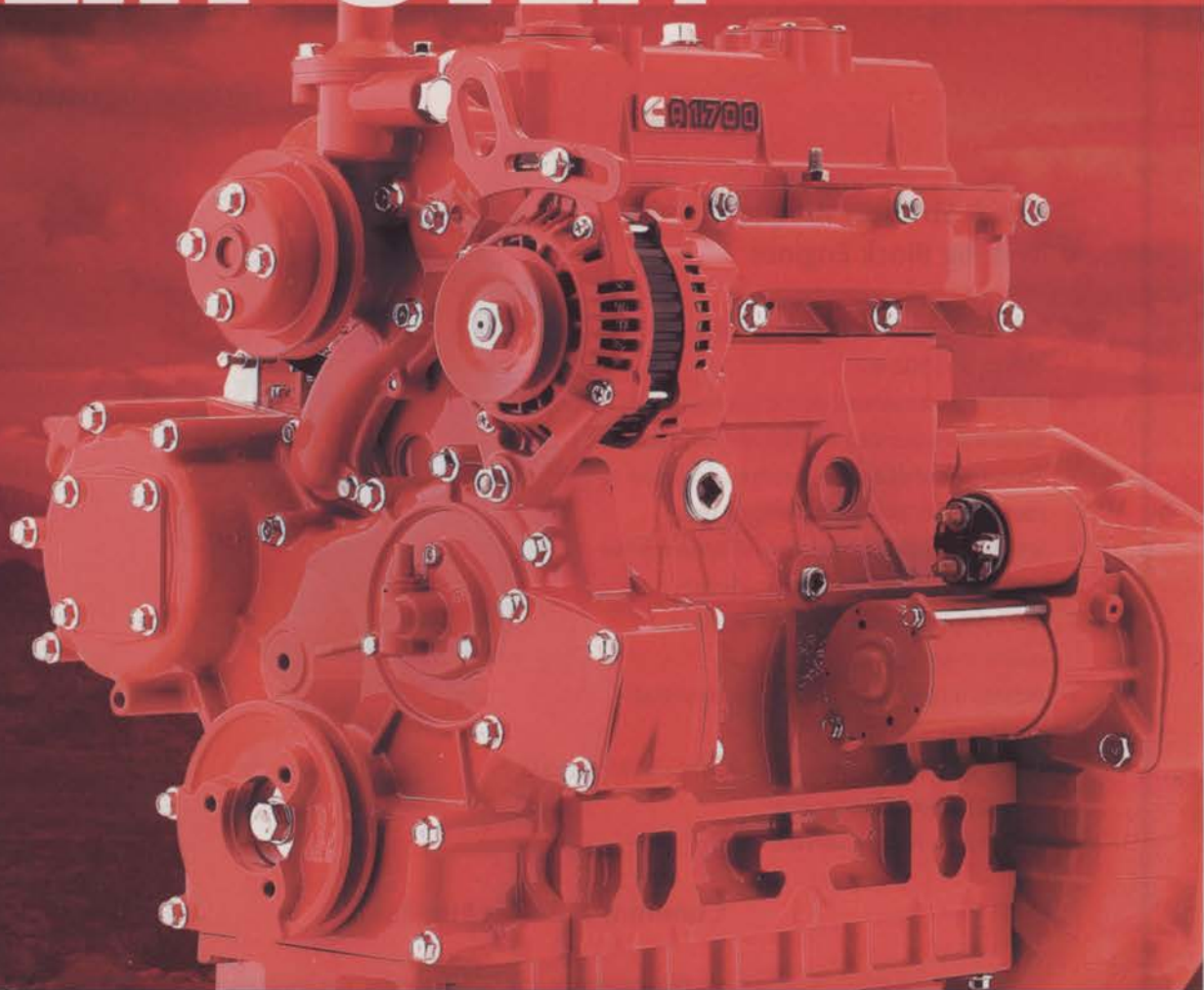
Other engines that up the power quotient include the twin-cylinder variety, which are common in mowers. Those who want more power generally opt for twin-cylinder engines because they have the capability for more horsepower than single-cylinder engines, Litt says.

in fuel per engine in one season over a carbureted engine, Litt says.

"Contractors who have a fleet of equipment with EFI see the biggest benefit at the gas station," Litt says. "If a small operator has only one unit, there will still be a gas savings but he's not going to notice it as much."

Another advantage of EFI is that the engine is easier to start in all weather conditions and offers more powerful acceleration, Litt says. "Once you step on the throttle, you get a faster response," he says, adding that starting an EFI engine is similar to starting a car in the sense that there is no learning curve. "With a non-EFI engine, you have to choke the engine and move the throttle a certain way," he says. "Here you can get on, start it up and drive away like a car."

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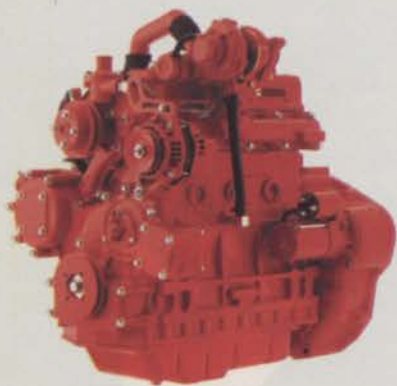
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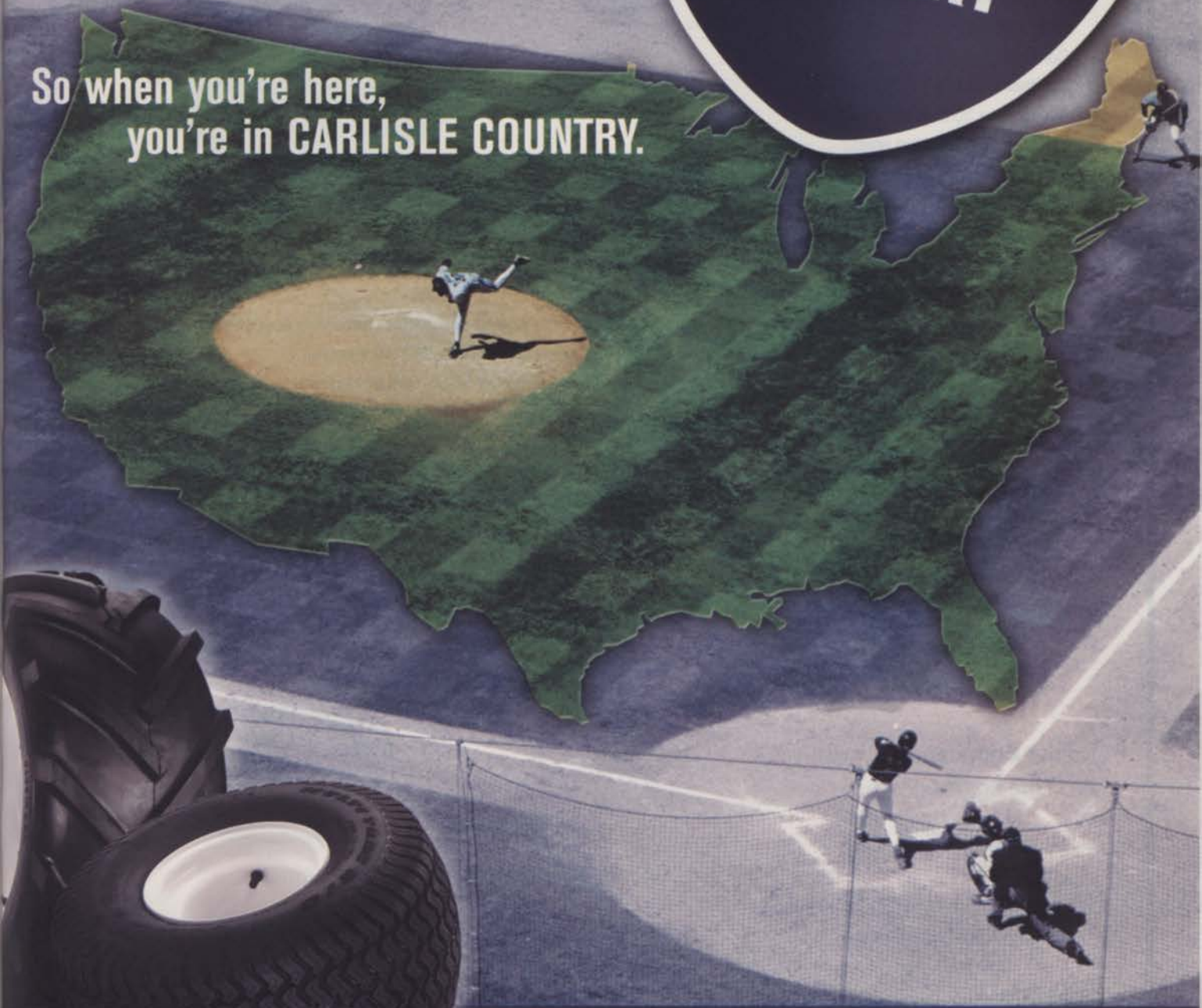


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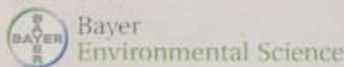
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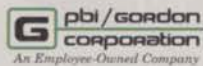
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Circle 234 on reader service card

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- Can process wood up to 15 inches in diameter
- Powered by a 122 horsepower CAT 3054 DITA engine
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- Vermeer – 888/837-6337, www.vermeer.com

Circle 235 on reader service card



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- Reemay – 800/321-6271 www.typarlandscape.com

Circle 236 on reader service card

Scag Sabre Tooth Tiger Zero Turn Riding Mower

- Features 3-cylinder, liquid-cooled, 31 horsepower Vanguard turbo diesel engine; includes 61- or 72-inch cutter deck
- 22cc hydraulic pumps and 22ci wheel motors standard
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Circle 237 on reader service card

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I. What is your primary business at this location? (choose only one)

- I. CONTRACTOR or SERVICES
 1. Landscape Contractor
 2. Chemical Lawn Care Company (excluding mowing maintenance service)
 3. Lawn Maintenance Contractor
 4. Ornamental Shrub & Tree Service
 5. Irrigation Contractor
 6. Landscape Architect
 7. Other Contract Services (please describe) _____

II. IN-HOUSE LAWN/CARE MAINTENANCE

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 10. Distributor
 11. Formulator
 12. Manufacturer

IV. OTHERS ALLIED TO THE FIELD:

13. Extension Agent (Federal, State, County, City, Regulatory Agency)
 14. School, College, University
 15. Trade Association, Library
 Others (please describe) _____

2. What services does your business offer?

1. Landscape Design Landscape Installation
 2. Seeding or Sodding
 3. Turf & Ornamental Installation
 4. Bedding Plants & Color Installation
 5. Irrigation Installation
 6. Landscape Lighting
 7. Hardscape Installation
 8. Water Features

Landscape Maintenance

9. Landscape Renovation
 10. Turf Fertilization
 11. Turf Aeration
 12. Tree & Ornamental Care
 13. Tree & Stump Removal
 14. Irrigation Maintenance
 15. Erosion Control

Pesticide Application

16. Turf Disease Control
 17. Turf Insect Control
 18. Turf Weed Control
 19. Tree & Ornamental Pesticide Application

Other

20. Mowing
 21. Hydroseeding
 22. Snow Removal
 23. Interior Landscape Services
 24. Structural Pest Control
 25. Holiday Lighting
 26. Other

3. What is the service mix %?

Mowing/Maint _____ Design/Build _____
 Chemical Application _____

4. How many full-time (year-round) employees do you employ?

5. Is Chemical Application work

1. Outsourced 2. Done by own employees

6. What are your company's approximate annual gross revenues?

- ___ 1. Less than \$50,000
 ___ 2. \$50,000 to \$99,999
 ___ 3. \$100,000 to \$199,999
 ___ 4. \$200,000 to \$299,999
 ___ 5. \$300,000 to \$499,999
 ___ 6. \$500,000 to \$699,999
 ___ 7. \$700,000 to \$999,999
 ___ 8. \$1,000,000 to \$1,999,999
 ___ 9. \$2,000,000 to \$3,999,999
 ___ 10. \$4,000,000 to \$6,999,999
 ___ 11. \$7,000,000 or more

7. What percentage of growth do you anticipate?

8. What year was your business founded?

9. What is your business mix? (%)

Residential _____ Commercial _____ Other _____

10. Is this a Headquarters or Branch location?

1. Headquarters 2. Branch 3. Single Office

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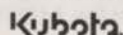
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The author is a landscape designer for Lifestyle Landscaping, Grafton, Ohio, and can be reached at 440/748-4848.

Garden Show Success at Lifestyle Landscaping

When most of your business comes from landscape installation, a lot of your time is spent generating new work. At LifeStyle Landscaping, Grafton, Ohio, one tried-and-true way we've found to attract new customers is exhibiting at our local home and garden show. Since 1976, our company has participated in at least one home and garden show annually, the most recent of which has been the Cleveland Home & Garden Show, where we've exhibited for the last 15 years. These shows have been an integral part of our sales and marketing strategy; we invest significant resources in them.

While our garden designs change year after year, one thing that remains the same is the necessity to plan in the months leading up to an event. Some of the planning is determined by the show's producers; things like the event's theme, show floor layout and garden sizes are outlined by the event coordinators. From there, what happens inside our garden is entirely up to the Lifestyle Landscaping staff.

Knowing that the Cleveland Home & Garden Show generally takes place

in early February, with input from many members of the company and our design staff, we generate a proposed garden design for the event producers' approval by July the year prior. From there, with an approved proposal, our staff generates a final design that must be submitted by October. The producers will often ask for a plant list and overall design layout to make sure the concept we've run with reflects the overall theme and flavor of the event.

With a few months between submitting our proposal and the dates of the show, the entire Lifestyle Landscaping staff bands together to make the design a reality. Beyond serving as a marketing tool, participating in home and garden shows in the winter allows us to keep our staff busy during the slow season.

Ultimately, event organizers provide about four days of on-site installation time before the first weekend of the event. However, a lot of work goes into the project before that time. Generally, our team creates a garden anywhere from 1,200 to 1,500 square feet – a large space to fill, and one that requires a lot of hands. Right away, our plant

5 Keys to Great Home & Garden Shows

1. Plan your display garden well in advance of the home and garden show event. This will also give you plenty of time to force plant material, if necessary, and design any special structures.
2. Involve staff members from all parts of the company to maximize creative input and keep employees busy during slower winter months.
3. Ensure that one or two staff members are on hand during the event to meet and greet potential clients, answer questions and begin the sales process.
4. Avoid committing to a garden size or style that you may not be comfortable installing for a potential client.
5. Participate in home and garden shows as regularly as possible. Attending the same show year after year shows consistency in your company and lets potential clients follow the progress of your work over time.



For this year's Cleveland Home & Garden Show, Lifestyle Landscaping incorporated stone steps, a creative fence design, hyacinths and thistle to include a variety of textures in the landscape. Photos: Lawn & Landscape

experts will get started on forcing perennial plant material to be ready to bloom during the show.

Meanwhile, the rest of our staff members take on other tasks. Some staff members are responsible for collecting the stone and hardscaping materials we'll use. Also, we may have arbors, fences, water features and other special focal points to build. Much of this development process takes place at our own facility where we'll build the structures and then determine the best way to disassemble them so we can quickly re-assemble them on-site during our four-day setup period.

Come setup time, we generally have four to six staff members on-site at the convention center to erect the special features we've built at the shop. As it gets closer to the day of the show we may have as many as eight or 10 staff members on hand to help install the plant material. To make sure our presence is felt during the event, we have one staff member on hand at the display during the week days and two

people during the weekend days.

Overall, Lifestyle Landscaping spends \$30,000 to \$50,000 annually on the design and implementation of our display gardens. While some participants may use stipends offered by the event organizers as the budgets for their gardens (sometimes up to \$12,000), we choose to invest more because we want to put our best foot forward in this marketing effort. While the cost might seem excessive, it's important to remember that in order to create the established-landscape look, more plant material is necessary than what you would normally use for a landscape installation. For the 2006 Cleveland Home & Garden Show, Lifestyle Landscaping planned for 1,000 perennials, 50 to 60 shrubs, five flowering trees and seven cut trees for our large garden. Additionally, while much of our plant material may be sold to the public at the end of the show, we retain the stone, pavers and other hardscape materials in the design for use in future landscape jobs.

Also offsetting the cost of the show is the return on investment (ROI) we receive in terms of generating new work. Admittedly, sales can vary widely from year to year based on the show's attendance, the economy, etc. While one year you may earn one new client that turns into a \$300,000 job, another year you may make 30 new sales of \$10,000 or \$15,000 each. Overall, the volume of work we can traditionally generate from a home and garden show ranges from \$200,000 to \$500,000.

Beyond that, there also can be a great residual effect – new clients that call in July to say they saw our work at the February show and are now in a position to make an investment in their landscapes. – Kevin O'Brien LL

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Visit the May Online Extras section for additional photos of Lifestyle Landscaping's trade show display as well as more tips.



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