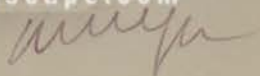


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02 07



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## UNDER 35



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02.07

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**Business**

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Making Them Pay**

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Check our Web site frequently for more multimedia content.



## online *extra*

After you read about pond maintenance service tips in this month's Business Opportunities installment, "Call in the Pondsitter," on page 40, you'll probably be compelled to read more. We've got your fix. Look for the Online Extra "Pond Maintenance: Equipment Clean Up Quick Tip" on [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com) to read about a way to help your pond maintenance operation run more smoothly.

**C**ustomers who don't pay for services rendered can create a dilemma for the contractor who performed the work. How do you get them to pay up? To find out how *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board participants deal with this predicament, turn to page 65 and check out this month's Best of the Web story, "Making Them Pay."

After you read the piece, let us know if you agree with the contractors in the article or if you have a method they left out. Share your ideas with us by visiting our Message Board at [www.lawnandlandscape.com/messageboard](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com/messageboard). While you're there be sure and peruse other posts or post a question of your own.

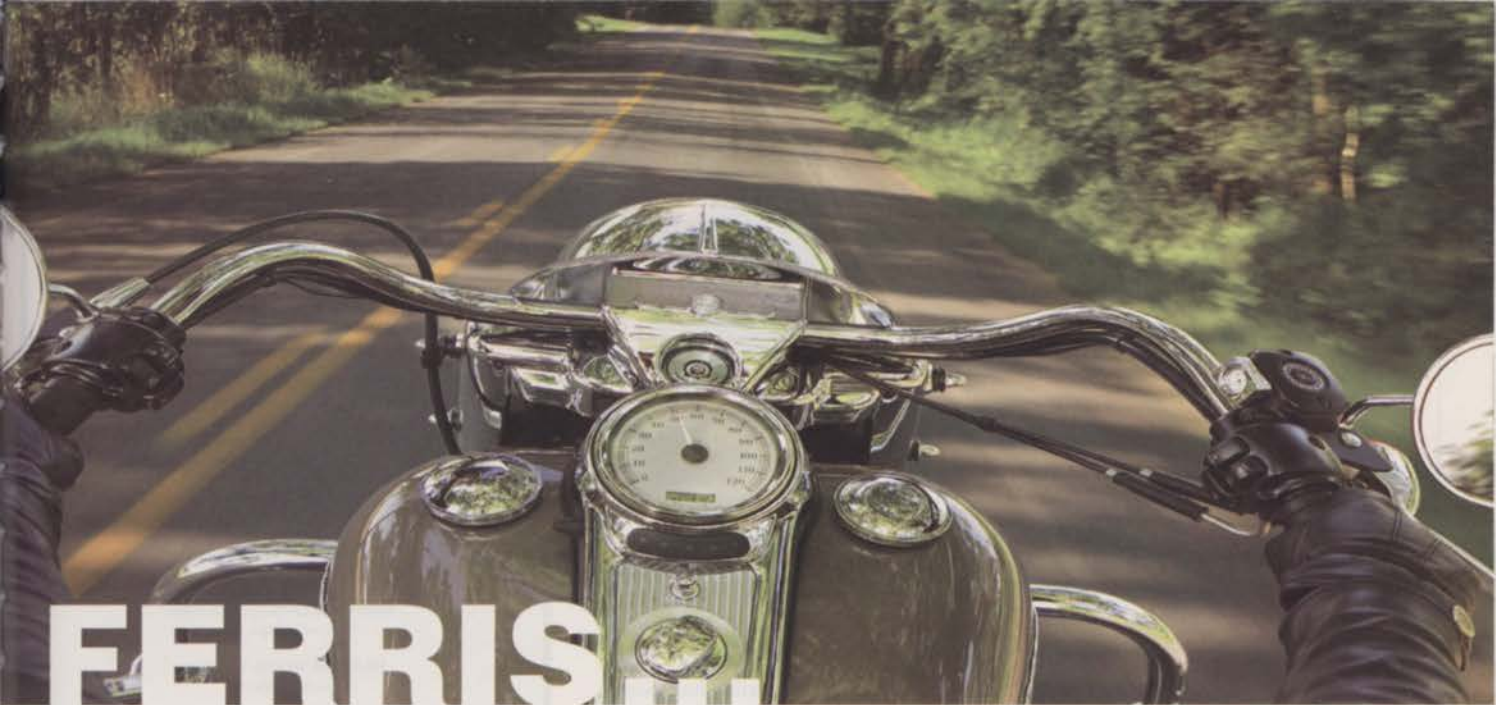
### online poll: customer feedback



This month's How We Do It, found on page 160, focuses on customer forums. Joseph Schill of Schill Landscaping and Lawn Care Services in Sheffield, Ohio, describes how he hosts customer forums to market his company and get feedback.

How does your company identify its strengths and weaknesses? Visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com/poll](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com/poll) the week of Feb. 12 and answer the question, "How do you solicit client feedback?" Then visit our Message Board and comment further.





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## In Search of Future Leaders

For nearly two decades, *Lawn & Landscape* magazine has been bringing its readers stories on the faces, companies and unique characteristics of the people who drive the professional lawn and landscape industry.

Through our in-depth cover profiles – totaling more than 150 different businesses – we've introduced you to firms representing every niche of the marketplace. You're familiar with them: Mom-and-pop shops, half-million dollar firms, million dollar and growing firms and the multi-million dollar businesses that make this dynamic industry as multi-faceted, unique and captivating as it is.

No doubt about it. People shape the industry. We annually spotlight contractor achievements in our Top 100 landscape company list. We provide benchmarking financial data and analysis so that you can compare your company to your peers across the country. Contractor roundtables hosted by *Lawn & Landscape* magazine reveal critical thinking on timely issues. Up-selling opportunities are illustrated monthly in our Business Opportunities column.


Quite simply, people drive the industry. People talk to people. People attract people. Attracting the best and the brightest individuals is top of mind for all businesses. It's not only a measure of an industry's vitality, it's also critical to a company's creative culture. Young people bring fresh approaches and a willingness to challenge the status quo.

Following this tradition, we've spent several months searching the industry for its young leaders. Whether business owners, crew leaders or employees, we sought to identify those individuals who are on a career path toward growth and success. These up-and-coming professionals represent the next generation of innovative thinkers. They affect change. They shape the future.

The outcome of our search is the basis of a new *Lawn & Landscape* feature. Through "35 Under 35" we've profiled the emerging leaders in the landscape profession.

True to the nature of the marketplace, a common thread throughout our profiles is a genuine love for the outdoors. And to no surprise, many started in the business as teenagers looking for a way to make an honest buck. Once they figured out they were earning good money and having fun, they made a career of it. Others inherited the passion and dynamics of a family business and have been actively involved since childhood.

While this industry's roots have evolved from those whose first love was the outdoors, the next leaders have a notion to advance the business side of landscaping. Technology, business training, the customer's need for immediacy all contribute to the enhanced business systems and models often found in today's up-and-coming businesses. Even subcontracting is playing a bigger role for some folks.

We had a lot of fun putting together our first "35 Under 35" feature through industry nominations and interviews. Their stories are both compelling and motivating. 

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## Two Salespeople, Two Approaches

In the past month, I closely observed two salespeople with two different approaches, and I believe we can learn a lot from both – good and bad.

The first salesman, Steve, is a development officer for a non-profit, and it's his job to sell his organization's mission to donors who will buy into his cause. As a step toward accomplishing this, Steve organized a golf outing with prospective donors so he could establish a rapport with them and solicit them for gifts.

The first mistake Steve made was arriving 30 minutes late, leaving us to make our own introductions and wonder if he's reserved the course for our game. Once he finally arrived, Steve chose to vent his frustrations about the traffic he was stuck in rather than apologize for being late. When he finally stopped talking about himself, he asked each of us where we were from, apparently having failed to learn anything about us before the meeting.

When we went to the golf course, Steve headed off with three of the men while I joined the other foursome, all of whom were relieved to be without Steve.

When we met up back at the clubhouse at the end of the day and tallied up our scores, guess who won? Steve. He clearly cared more about proving his prowess on the golf course than about whether his guests were having a good time. Not only did I leave the outing with a poor impression of Steve, but the organization he represents has fallen a bit in my eyes. Steve didn't close his "sale" to me nor anyone else present that day.

Now, consider Mike, a shoe salesman at the Nordstrom store in Chicago. Normally I can't find a single pair of shoes I like, but at this store I found so many I was overwhelmed by the options. Noticing my bewilderment, Mike came over, extended his hand, and said, "Hello, I'm Mike. You

look like you could use some help. Could I measure your feet to make sure you get the best fit?" Mike was impeccably dressed, his shoes shone, and his manner was courteous and professional. After measuring my feet, he looked at the shoes I was considering and told me what was good and bad about them, both for the structure of my feet and what I do for a living. Then he handed me a bottled water and told me to relax; he would be right back.

A few minutes later, Mike returned with all of the shoes I had picked out in my size, plus a couple of shoes I had not seen. I tried on each of them as Mike waited patiently and told me more about each shoe. He politely asked me where I was from and inquired more about what I do for a living, as well as what I do for fun. As I looked at the shoes, he addressed me by name, saying, "Mr. Grunder, if you get your feet wet a lot walking around in your clients' yards, you ought to consider the waterproof version. And I know it would be a lot, but if you bought two pairs of the same shoes, you could alternate from day to day and allow them to dry out in between wearings – that way they'll last much longer. But that's just a suggestion. Whatever you want to do is fine with me, Mr. Grunder."

I ended up buying three pairs of shoes that day. At the cash register, Mike shook my hand, thanked me for my business, and sent me on my way. When I got back to my hotel room and opened the boxes of shoes, I saw that Mike had included a pair of nice dress socks in each box, along with his card. And a week later, I received a handwritten thank-you note from Mike, inviting me to come see him the next time I'm in Chicago. You can bet I'll be buying more shoes from this superb salesman.

So, two salesmen, two very different approaches. Which one are you going to buy from? **LL**

marty grunder

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## Planning 'Good Things'

Philip Crosby, in his 1979 classic, *Quality is Free – The Art of Making Quality Certain*, hit pay dirt on page 66 where he states, "Good things only happen when planned; bad things happen on their own." Crosby understood the importance of planning, especially as it relates to quality and the bottom line. He also understood the importance of budgeting as a key planning document.

I once read in the *Wall Street Journal* that only 14 percent of small businesses use budgets. My experience tells me that the number of industry professionals who use budgets is far less than half of that number. Why? Part of the answer is due to ignorance. Industry professionals simply do not know how to budget. They also do not know how to use budgets effectively throughout the year. Here are some tips and benchmarks to help you make a budget simple and useful all year.

**The Process.** When preparing budgets, I suggest simple Microsoft Excel worksheets. Look at costs for 2006 and project them forward for 2007 with a minimum 10 percent net profit margin. Focus on four items—general and administrative (G&A) overhead (it should run between 20 to 25 percent of sales); labor burden for the field crews (it normally runs between 25 and 35 percent, meaning that for every \$10 of gross field payroll, you have to pay an additional \$2.50 to \$3.50); the number of billable labor hours for the upcoming year; and the sales projected for the upcoming year. If you are planning to do more than \$300,000 in sales in 2007, identify sales and billable labor hours per division (installation, maintenance, etc.).

Once you calculate these four items, fill in material, equipment, rental equipment, subcontractor costs and any other

costs you might incur. Now, you have a complete budget. Then, step back and compare various ratios in the budget to the industry as well as to your company's historical benchmarks. These would include G&A overhead percentages and per field-labor hour, sales per labor hour, labor burden percent, gross profit margins, etc.

By the way, the benchmark for G&A overhead per labor hour is \$6 to \$9 for maintenance work and \$9 to \$16-plus for installation work.

**Making Budgets Useful.** Few contractors have the time to track all of the budget items to actual costs throughout the year, so focus on a few important ones.

First, track sales budgeted to actual sales. This is what I call the "Big Picture." I recommend using another Excel worksheet to track sales (and billable labor hours sold). Call it the Bid Board. It should calculate sales, billable labor hours and backlog.

Second, calculate your bids and work using the budgeted labor burden and G&A overhead per labor hour. Call it the "Little Picture." Basically, you need to price and produce enough work correctly (the little picture) to meet your sales goal for the year (the big picture). If you do, you're almost guaranteed to be profitable.

Your 2007 budget should be simple to calculate and track. The Bid Board ties the Little Picture (individual jobs) to the Big Picture (annual sales goal), and it tells you where you are throughout the year. It's your daily "score board." Keep it simple. If you bid enough work accurately and produce it as you bid it, your primary concern should be to sell enough work to meet your budgeted sales. Good things can happen in 2007, if you plan accordingly.

E-mail me for free copies of the Excel worksheets I mentioned. ■

jim huston

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## Change Made Easy

I talk about the concept of “change” to people in the landscape industry all of the time. Whenever I bring it up, it seems the world becomes divided into two groups of people – those who cause change and those who must adapt to the effects of change. Owners of landscape businesses most certainly have all been in one or the other of these groups at some point in our lives.

Those who have traditionally held leadership or management positions are probably more used to causing change. If a good deal of your association with change has been on the “causing change” side of the ledger, here are some tips to help those who must adapt to changes get through the transition a little easier.

If you think about it, change really involves moving people from one situation in which they are very comfortable to a new and different situation in which we hope they will accept and become just as comfortable and accepting. Change can best be described as a process. Here are some definitions and helpful guidance:

- The starting point for a major change is helping the people going through the change to understand there is a real need for it. Define these needs in clear terms that people can understand. If possible, define the consequences for not making these changes.

- Don't criticize the old ways of doing things and, by implication, diminish the contributions of the people who were part of the “old way.” This is especially true if you are a manager at a major landscape firm that has recently bought a smaller business and inherited key staff.

- Spend time defining for people what the new way will look like and also how they will know when they have successfully made the necessary changes in order to get there. Share lots of information so

they can transition to change more easily instead of the “do it, or else” mantra.

- Look for ways to reinforce and reward the behavior of people who are making genuine efforts to change. Encourage others to do the same.

- Continue to communicate about the change by giving accurate and timely information about what's going on and who's doing what. Follow-up to ensure clear understanding.

- Expect and plan for negative reactions to the change. People will get angry and feel insecure during the process. Sometimes you may even witness this coming from people whom you thought had a clear understanding of the whole picture. Let them get it off of their chests – then move on.

- Look for ways to assign tasks and responsibilities to people so they feel involved and part of the change process. There is nothing better than to engage those who have thoughtful ideas and can serve as a catalyst for getting the right message out.

- If people need training to make the change, make sure it is scheduled, attended, and effective in terms of what it promised to deliver. Think through what the desired outcomes are instead of just sending your managers for “a heavy dose of training.”

- Be sensitive to the other needs of people who are going through change, especially things like new equipment, procedures, information and positive reinforcement.

- Demonstrate your own confidence and commitment to the new direction as well as your trust in those who are going through this adjustment period. Show a certain amount of empathy for the current situation, but outwardly display enthusiasm and confidence in the future.

Real change is never a “slam dunk.” It takes time, leadership, attention and concern for the different paces at which people accept and adapt to it. ■

**larry fish**

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USE READER SERVICE # 15





## Understanding Seed Labels

Turf seed labels are not as informative as those found on a pesticide package, but that doesn't make them any less critical. In fact, based on the importance of developing a healthy lawn to reduce weed, disease and insect pressures, seed labels includes factors critical to a landscape professional's planning process.

**JUST THE FACTS.** As with pesticide labels, which the Environmental Protection Agency requires, the law mandates all seed packaging carry explanatory labels.

Seed labels are approved by the government of the state in which the seed is grown, typically a state in the Pacific Northwest for seed grown in the United States. The state issues the label after extensive testing verifies all of the seller's claims. After a harvest, the seed is collected in various lots, and each lot is subjected to the same series of tests.

The label's most important data is:

- **Percent Purity** – This number tells how much of the seed bag's contents are comprised of each component based on weight. For example, a blend of three varieties of tall fescue may contain 35 percent of one variety, 34 percent of another variety and 29 percent of a third variety.
- **Percent Germination** – This number speaks volumes about seed quality because it reflects the percentage of tested seed that germinated into a turf plant when planted in test plots by the state. As with any crop seed, some individual seeds from each bag will not germinate.
- **Other Ingredients** – Harvesting turf seed from thousands of acres of crop field is a challenging process. And while the harvesting and cleaning process used by seed growers cleans the final product, material other than turf seed usually ends up in each bag. The pertinent question is what material and how much? Seed testing

identifies how much other crop seed, how much inert matter and how much weed seed finds its way into each bag. Monitor these numbers closely. After all, the last thing you want is to plant a lawn using seed that already contains weed seeds.

**BY THE NUMBERS.** The fact that purity and germination levels can vary within a bag illustrates the importance of carefully examining the seed. The most important metric for evaluating seed is not found on the label, but it can be figured using simple math. This helps buyers evaluate competing seed on an apples-to-apples basis.

Savvy seed shoppers determine the Pure Live Seed value for each bag. This number is calculated by multiplying the percent purity by the percent germination for each variety in a bag. That equation yields a PLS percentage for each variety. Add up the PLS percentages for each variety to reach the PLS value for the entire bag. That number reflects how much of the seed in the bag you should expect to germinate.

Using the sample percent purity figures identified above, if the label tells you that each of the three varieties germinates at 90 percent, then the 50-pound bag of seed actually contains 44.8 pounds of pure live seed. That's what you want to know before making any purchase.

Additional information can be found on each bag including a test date for the seed and the state where the seed was grown. Ideally, seed should be planted within 12 months of testing. But if the seed is stored in a cool, dry location, then it should perform according to label claims for up to three years after the test date.

Seeding a lawn properly demonstrates a commitment to the healthiest turf possible. Understanding seed label information ensures you achieve that result. **LL**

j.b. toorish and brian kelley

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



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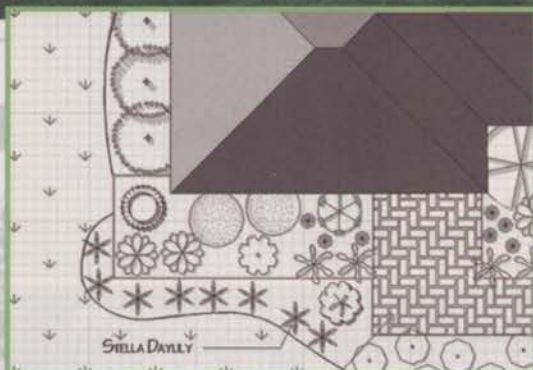
USE READER SERVICE # 16



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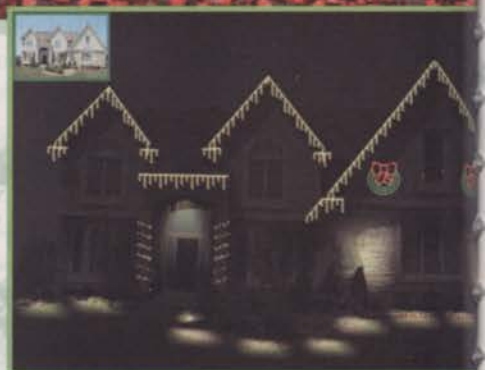
Quote

Customer Name: [Redacted]  
Address: [Redacted]  
City: [Redacted]

Customer Number: [Redacted]  
Sales Date: [Redacted]  
Estimate Date: [Redacted]  
Project Name: [Redacted]  
Project #: [Redacted]

Item	Qty	Description	Quantity	Unit	Price
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100002	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
100003	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
100004	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
100005	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
100006	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
100007	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
100008	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
100009	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
100010	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
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100094	1.00	Arborea Arise	1.00	EA	\$100.00
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Customer Proposals

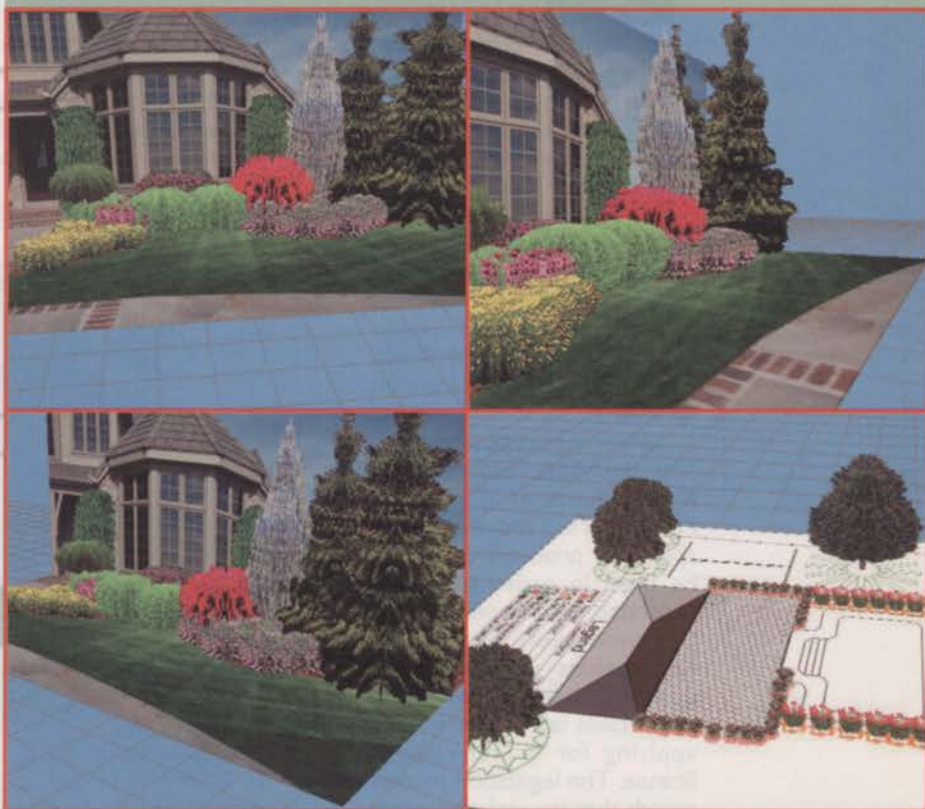


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Bill Harley

## Regulations on the Rise

### The Bane of Leaf Blower Bans

Last fall, communities across the U.S. made attempts to ban or regulate leaf blower usage.

For example, in September 2006, the Capitola, Calif., city council voted to increase restricted hours of use for leaf blowers in residential areas to 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. from the original 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. This resulted from a petition submitted that requested a complete ban on leaf blowers. Capitola is a neighbor to Palo Alto, Calif., which enacted a ban on gasoline-powered leaf blowers in July 2005.

In October 2006, in Westchester County, N.Y., County Executive Andrew Spano indicated he would submit a proposal that would require commercial landscape professionals and county employees to switch to "cleaner" models over a two-year period. Westchester County encompasses 16 towns.

Under the proposed legislation, the Westchester County Department of Consumer Protection will provide a list of approved products that must be used in order to renew contractor/landscaper licenses (renewed every two years). Landscapers will verify the quantity, make and model of all portable leaf blowers when applying for or renewing a license. The legislation recommends that any violation result in a \$1,000 fine or the denial or revocation of a license.

In Cambridge, Mass. in November 2006, City Manager Robert Healy created a task force to investigate the possibility of a citywide ban on leaf blowers. Resident complaints included noise, environmental damage and potential health risks. The task force contained residents, representatives from an equipment manufacturer, a landscaping firm, relevant

city departments, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

These are just a few examples of the regulations being enacted.

In the case of the Capitola action, a group of landscape professionals and citizens effectively argued that a ban on leaf blowers would increase costs of landscape maintenance and that the issue was one of courteous use – not the leaf blower itself. Taking these steps to educate the public can make a difference.

Take an active role in protecting your business. It is important that information on cleaner, quieter leaf blower technologies be communicated to city officials by landscape contractors and equipment dealers in

those communities considering leaf blower regulation. Under section 209 of the Federal Clean Air Act (FCAA), California is the only state given authority to regulate emissions for small engines less than 50 horsepower. The Bond Amendment to the FCAA prohibits other states from adopting California's emissions regulations. Therefore, under the Clean Air Act, no state or municipality can regulate any product's emissions (e.g. air pollution).

If you hear about a proposed leaf blower ban, you should:

- Contact the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) to keep them informed of the proposed legislation ([www.landcarenetwork.org](http://www.landcarenetwork.org), 800/395-2522).
- Talk to the community. Call the city department that is initiating the proposed regulation and set up a meeting to discuss facts about sound and usage. Be ready to discuss alternatives to bans.
- Meet with the city. Have accurate facts about leaf blowers to present to those at the meeting. Use the resources listed at the end of this article to support your case.
- Call the manufacturer of the equipment your company uses



Photo: Echo

continued on page 24



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USE READER SERVICE # 18



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and let your contact there know what is happening.

When operating your leaf blowers, remember to:

- Invest in the latest equipment. In some cases, due to engine re-design, new leaf blowers are 75 percent quieter than older versions. In addition, new models also reduce emissions that make the equipment more environmentally friendly.

- Make sure your equipment is well maintained. Equipment that is not maintained reduces the life of the product and creates unnecessary noise and emissions output.

- Reduce the sound of your leaf blower by lowering the throttle speed and by using special nozzle attachments designed to reduce noise even further.

- Practice safe and courteous use. Stop blowing if there are people in the area. Reduce noise in populated areas during early morning and early

evening hours as much as possible.

- Make sure your employees have read and understand the manual.

To help present the facts about leaf blowers, the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute has assembled these materials at [www.opei.org/commercial/index.asp](http://www.opei.org/commercial/index.asp):

- Flash presentation – Leaf Blowers: Concerns, Perceptions, Facts & Solutions

- Training Manual – Leaf Blowers: A Guide to Safe & Courteous Use

- OPEI Leaf Blower Fact Sheet

- OPEI Member Leaf Blower Manufacturers

Other online resources include:

- [www.landcarenetwork.org/cms/legislation/position/leafblowers.html](http://www.landcarenetwork.org/cms/legislation/position/leafblowers.html)

- [www.arb.ca.gov/msprog/mailouts/msc0005/msc0005.pdf](http://www.arb.ca.gov/msprog/mailouts/msc0005/msc0005.pdf)

- [www.valleyair.org/newsed/leafblowers/leafblower.pdf](http://www.valleyair.org/newsed/leafblowers/leafblower.pdf)

– *Bill Harley, president and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute*



## DID YOU KNOW

Thirty-four percent of landscape contractors purchased landscape lighting products in the past 12 months and 34.6 percent plan to purchase them in the next 12 months. The average landscape contractor spends \$10,196 annually on landscape lighting.

For a look at some of the latest landscape lighting products in the market, turn to page 122.



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Weed Man River Valley in Russellville, Ark., is the newest franchise to join the other 93 Weed Man dealers in the United States.

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Chronister's past work experience includes lawn and landscape maintenance. He is adding Weed

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Turf Holdings owns the rights to sell sub-franchises in the United States.

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## PGMS Honors Grounds Programs



Elon University in Elon, N.C., pictured here, took home a Grand Award in the Professional Grounds Management Society's 2006 Green Star Awards competition. PGMS recognized 26 grounds management programs – 14 with Grand Awards and 12 with Honor Awards – in a dozen categories. For a complete list of award winners, visit [www.pgms.org](http://www.pgms.org).

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USE READER SERVICE # 19



EYE ON THE ECONOMY

## Real Estate Expected to Flounder This Year

**A**lthough few experts predict that home values will fall dramatically this year, many economists say that prices won't improve for 12 to 18 months. And without the cushion of rising home equity – which softened the blow of high oil prices last year and kept consumers buying big-ticket items at a rapid clip – Americans may lose confidence in their finances, and the broader economy is likely to suffer.

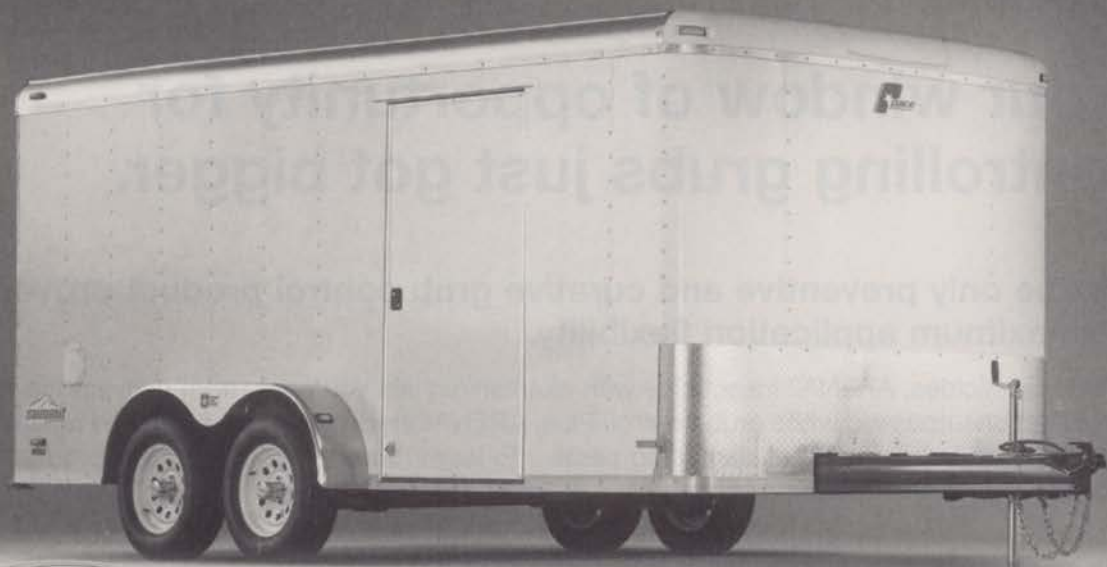
Ambitious building booms in many markets in the past half-decade, combined with mortgage interest rates that have increased about 1 percent in the past year, have resulted in residential real estate stagnation. The gridlock defies conventional wisdom, stubbornly remaining neither a buyer's nor a seller's market.

"We are currently experiencing the worst of the market freeze, which is being exacerbated by the gap between the buyer's desire for bargains and the seller's fantasy of what they once thought their homes would

*continued on page 28*



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continued from page 26

be worth," says Diane Swonk, chief economist for Chicago-based Mesirow Financial, who forecasts a rebound in early 2008. "The good news is that there are some signs of stabilization. The bad news is that a substantial backlog of unsold homes still exists."

Global forces and U.S. monetary policies play important roles in the housing slowdown, which already appears to be depressing the national economy.

The newest forecast by Moody's Economy.com, a private research firm, projects that the median sales price for an existing home will decline in 2007 by 3.6 percent – the first decline for an entire year in U.S. home prices since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Commerce Department reported last November that gross domestic product grew at a 2.2 percent annual rate in the third quarter, down from 2.6 percent in the second quarter. The residential construction falloff subtracted 1.2 percent from growth, the department states.

Peter Morici, business professor at the University of Maryland, says artificially low interest rates over the past half-decade encouraged China and other exporting nations to purchase 10-year bonds, which kept U.S. mortgage rates low and fueled the housing bubble – despite a gaping trade deficit that should have sapped investor confidence years ago.

"In order to play this Ponzi scheme, the value of the homes had to go up faster than the economy grew and faster than people could service their debt. We've reached that limit," Morici says. "The housing market sustained the economy at a time of very large trade deficits. It's been a false prosperity."

In addition to macroeconomic forces, regional U.S. housing markets face particular challenges. In expensive coastal cities, economists say, price appreciation hit a wall. San Francisco and Boston – where many investors enjoyed double-digit property

continued on page 30



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USE READER SERVICE # 22



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USE READER SERVICE # 23



continued from page 28

gains in the late 1990s and the first half of this decade – have simply become unaffordable.

The number of Californians who could comfortably pay the mortgage on an entry-level home fell to 24 percent in the third quarter – down from 44 percent in 2003, according to the California Association of Realtors. The median price statewide was \$563,190.

Housing prices in New England grew an average of 10 percent per year from 2000 to 2005, compared with 8.3 percent for the entire nation.

But a forecast released Nov. 14, 2006 by the New England Economic Partnership, a nonprofit forecast organization with members from private industry, government and academia, projects prices in New England will be flat through 2010, below the U.S. forecast of 2.1 percent growth per year. Housing prices in Massachusetts are expected to decline 9 percent through 2010.

"Areas along the coast of the nation and the large urban areas tend to see stronger price gains in housing upturns, and stronger declines in downturns," says Celia Chen, a housing economist with Moody's Economy.com in West Chester, Pa.

In Sun Belt havens such as San Diego, Las Vegas and Phoenix, overzealous construction resulted in a glut of new homes and condos. Real estate experts say sellers and developers there will struggle throughout 2007.

Florida will likely remain the toughest market. Building frenzies in Miami, Orlando and the Caribbean coast resulted in a plethora of for-sale signs. Developers desperate to unload inventory are offering a slew of incentives – even cars, vacations and mortgage payments for up to six months.

Meanwhile, insurance companies dramatically raised premiums after Hurricane Katrina.

Depending on where they live and their policies, Florida homeowners may pay as much as 10 times more for flood and wind insurance than last year; premiums can exceed \$30,000 per year on mansions. That's caused monthly costs to skyrocket, pinching current owners and making it all but impossible for renters to buy.

Not everyone is pessimistic – even in beleaguered Florida.

Long-term demographic shifts from the Midwest and New England bode well for the notoriously boom-and-bust state, said Dave Denslow, professor of economics at the University of Florida. Florida, which gained 430,000 new residents in the past year, is a popular destination for Latin American immigrants and retirees from northern states, Canada and western Europe.

People start thinking about buying a retirement home in their late 50s, and baby boomers are approaching that age," Denslow says. "The demand for residential housing here is only going to get stronger through 2020." – *The Financial Express*

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## SPANISH LESSONS

Considering that a growing number of 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 landscape and lawn care professionals in their communications, *Lawn & Landscape* will be running a few phrases each month in English and Spanish, including a pronunciation guide, courtesy of the book *The Lingo Guide For Landscapers* by E.G. White. To inquire about ordering the book, which costs \$14.95, visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com/store](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com/store) or contact the *Lawn & Landscape* Book Department at 800/456-0707.

If there is a phrase you are having trouble with, let us know at [nwisniewski@gie.net](mailto:nwisniewski@gie.net).

1. ENGLISH: How long have you been working with lawns/sod?  
SPANISH: Cuanto hace que trabaja con cesped/grama/pasto/tepe/terron?  
(KWAHN-toh AH-she keh trah-BAH-hah kohn SEHS-pehd/GRAH-mah/PAHS-toh/TEH-peh/teh-RRROHN?)
2. ENGLISH: I have been working with lawns/sod for \_\_\_\_ years.  
SPANISH: Hace \_\_\_\_ anos que trabajo con cesped/grama/pasto/tepe/terron.  
(AH-she \_\_\_\_ AH-neeohs keh trah-BAH-hoh kohn SEHS-pehd/GRAH-mah/PAHS-toh/TEH-peh/teh-RRROHN.)
3. ENGLISH: How long will it take you to complete this job?  
SPANISH: Cuanto le tomara completar este trabajo?  
(KWAHN-toh leh toh-mah-RAH kohm-pleh-TAHR EHS-teh trah-BAH-hoh?)
4. ENGLISH: Have you used a sod cutter before?  
SPANISH: Ha utilizado una cortadora de cesped/grama/pasto/tepe/terron anteriormente? (ah oo-tee-lee-SAH-doh OO-nah kohr-tah-DOH-rah deh SEHS-pehd/GRAH-mah-PAHS-toh/TEH-peh/teh-RRROHN ahn-teh-ree-ohr-MEHN-teh?) – *The Lingo Guide For Landscapers*

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USE READER SERVICE # 28



LOOKING AHEAD

## Small Business Experts See Hope for 2007

**T**he year 2006 started strong for small business owners, but sluggish economic growth took a toll on entrepreneurs toward the end of the year. This year promises to be better, but not by much, experts say.

In the second half of last year, small business owners spent less on capital equipment, inventory investment weakened and hiring fell flat, according to the National Federation of Independent Business.

"As goes the larger economy, so goes the small business sector," says Chad Moutray, chief economist for the office of advocacy of the Small Business Administration.

Moutray points to a sluggish housing market, high gas prices and a slump in employment for the downturn in the small business economy.

With hiring down slightly in the second half of the year, small businesses have gotten smaller on average, according to SurePayroll's Small Business Scorecard.

Meanwhile, small business salaries have been increasing. Year to date, small business salaries have jumped 7.4 percent to \$31,288 on average, SurePayroll reports.

That could be problematic for business owners, according to Michael Alter, president of SurePayroll, if they have to pay more to hire and keep talent and raise prices to stay even.

But there is still reason to stay positive, according to William Dunkelberg, chief economist at the NFIB.

"Profits were weaker but overall numbers were quite good," he says.

In fact, even as the economy slowed, small business owners remained fairly optimistic about economic growth into 2007.

Although, the NFIB's Index of Small Business Optimism fell one point to 99.7, it remains at historically high levels.

Although many expect a worsening economy in 2007, small

businesses may still prosper in the year ahead. Employment, however, will be key to what's in store.

If the labor market continues to tighten, then attracting and retaining qualified workers will remain a big challenge for small business owners who have always struggled to compete with larger businesses in terms of competitive salaries and benefits.

If, however, the move toward taking early retirement continues to gain momentum, then more people may leave the labor market and choose to become entrepreneurs, which could be a boon to the small business economy.

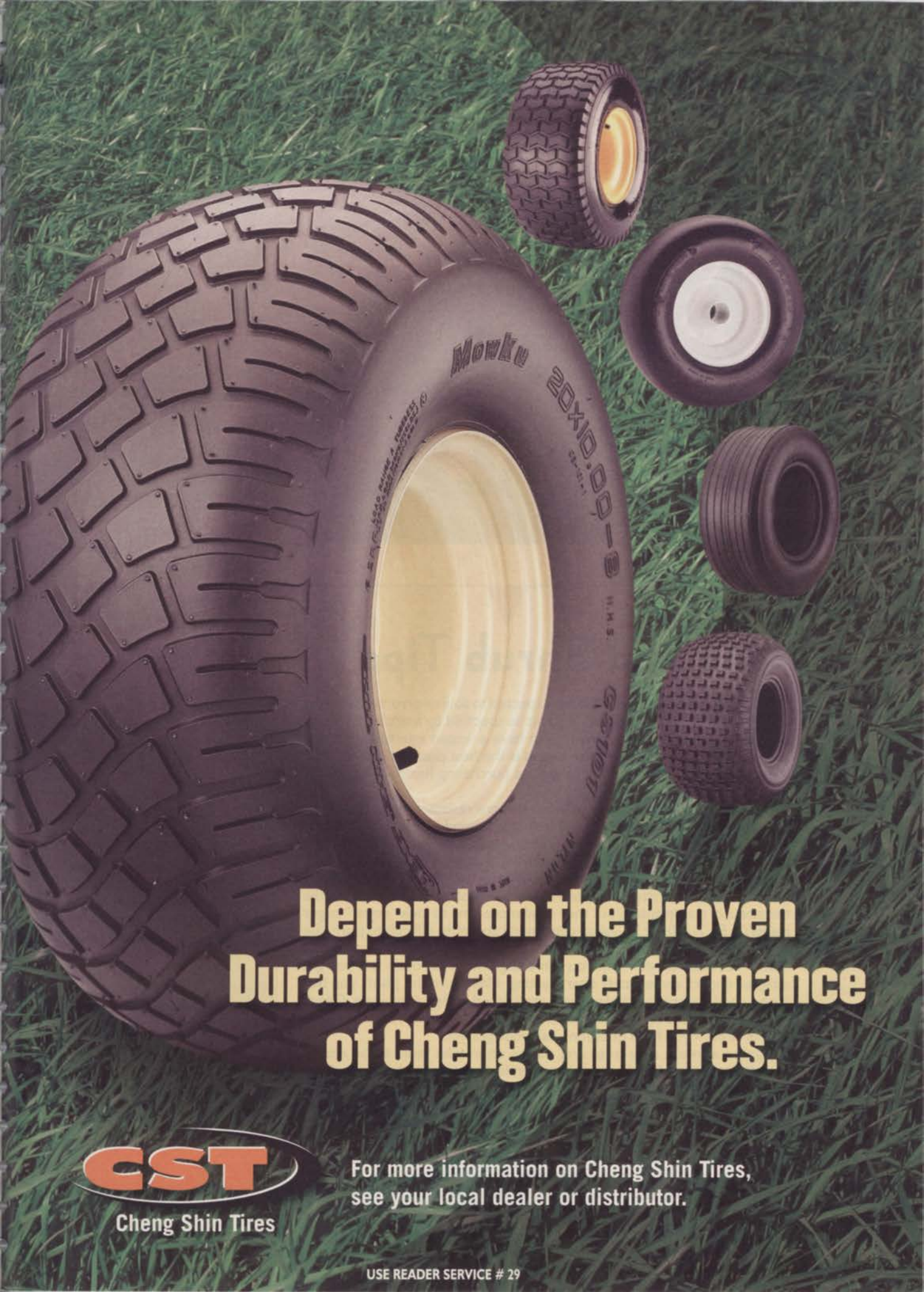
And for those entrepreneurs eager to start a business, 2007 is not a bad time to bite the bullet.

All things considered, while most experts agree that this year won't be exceptional, many contend that it will at least be decent for small business growth.

Dunkelberg, who predicts it will be a "ho-hum year," maintains that there are still opportunities out there for entrepreneurs. He says, "you should at least have a good year to get started, get your roots down." — *CNN Money*







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ON THE JOB

## Tree and Shrub Tips

**A**s a contractor, you're often expected to source ornamental trees, shrubs and other woody plants as specified by a landscape architect or designer. But you also have a vested interest in making sure what goes into a client's landscape is the best possible choice. That means understanding selection as well as purchasing healthy plants from your supplier.

Look for low-maintenance varieties that are resistant to pests and diseases; this reduces the need for immediate pesticide treatments and the possibility for application mistakes. Quick-to-establish varieties reduce the need for replacements and frequent watering. In terms of plant size, the best choice will depend on the particular requirements of the job: smaller plants (in quart- or gallon-sized pots) are easier to install and can better handle the stress of transplanting, but they need more time to look "done;" larger plants (in 5-, 7-, 10- or 20-gallon containers) are more difficult to plant due to the hole size required. They also take longer to establish because there's more root disturbance – but you can charge more for them and you get a bigger impact immediately after planting. Make sure the plants you buy have a good root system and are well-established in their containers. Check the hardiness zone recommendation to be sure the plants will overwinter in your area. If you have questions, ask your grower.

Unlike annuals, new trees and shrubs often take years to be readily available in the marketplace. It's common for a grower to have the plants in production for two or three years before they're ready to be sold. Still, here's a tip: Incorporate one new tree or shrub – something you haven't used before – into every project. One shrub won't present too much of a cost burden in the grand scheme of the project. It's also a way to try something new without committing to fill a large planting space with something you haven't tried. Over time, you'll understand what works best, and you'll benefit from giving each client something their neighbors certainly won't have. – *Jessie Atchison, Ball Horticultural Co.*

## how to spot a good plant

When it comes time to take delivery of your color annuals, or if you're in a pinch and have to stop at a garden center or landscape supply store to pick up extra plants on your way to a job, look for these signs of a healthy plant:

**GOOD ROOTS.** Look at the bottom of the plant as well as the top. If the roots are healthy, white and plentiful, then the rest of the plant is likely to be healthy, too. Pull a couple of plants out of their pots and make sure you know what you're getting.

**HEALTHY LEAVES.** Most leaves are green, of course, but leaves should exhibit good color no matter what the hue – be it burgundy, purple, chartreuse, variegated or even black.

**LOTS OF BUDS.** If it's a flowering plant, the ideal time to plant is when about 25 percent of the blooms are open, and there should be lots of buds to indicate more flowers are on the way. At this stage, plants can handle transplanting stress and can easily acclimate to the new soil, and they'll provide color quickly.

**NO DISEASE.** Even if you aren't an expert in plant pathology, you can usually tell if a plant looks "sick." Yellowing leaves, spots, wilting or even oddly-shaped flowers are all signs the plant isn't fit for the job.

Remember the "golden rule" of landscape plants: If you wouldn't plant it in your own yard, don't plant it in your client's yard.





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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 Heather Wood, Web editor, at [hwood@gie.net](mailto:hwood@gie.net).

**FEB. 13 – 14** Nevada Landscape Association Trade Show & Conference, Reno, Nev.  
Contact: [www.nevadanla.com](http://www.nevadanla.com), 800/645-9794

**FEB. 14 – 15** Ohio Landscape Association's WinterGreen Expo, Cleveland, Ohio.  
Contact: [www.ohiolandscapers.org](http://www.ohiolandscapers.org), 440/717-0002

**FEB. 14 – 16** The Mid-Atlantic Hardscaping Trade Show, Atlantic City, N.J.  
Contact: [www.mahts.com](http://www.mahts.com), 866/624-8707

**FEB. 19 – 21** Grandy & Associates' Basic Business Boot Camp, Minneapolis, Minn.  
Contact: [www.grandyassociates.com](http://www.grandyassociates.com)

**FEB. 22** Target Specialty Products Workshop, Pleasanton, Calif.  
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**FEB. 23 – 25** Peninsula Home & Garden Show, San Mateo, Calif.

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**MARCH** Grandy & Associates' Basic Boot Camp; March dates and locations include:

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Contact: [www.grandyassociates.com](http://www.grandyassociates.com)

**MARCH 5** New York State Turfgrass Association Western Regional Conference, Amherst, N.Y.

Contact: [www.nysta.org](http://www.nysta.org), 518/783-1229

**MARCH 5 – 8** Western Pennsylvania Turf Conference and Trade Show, Monroeville, Pa.

Contact: [www.paturf.org](http://www.paturf.org), 814/355-1912

**MARCH 5 – 11** The Association of Professional Landscape Designers' annual conference, Pasadena, Calif.

Contact: [www.apld.org](http://www.apld.org), 717/238-9780

**MARCH 6** Target Specialty Products Seminar, Mesa, Ariz. Contact: [www.target-specialty.com](http://www.target-specialty.com), 800/352-3870

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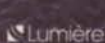


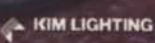
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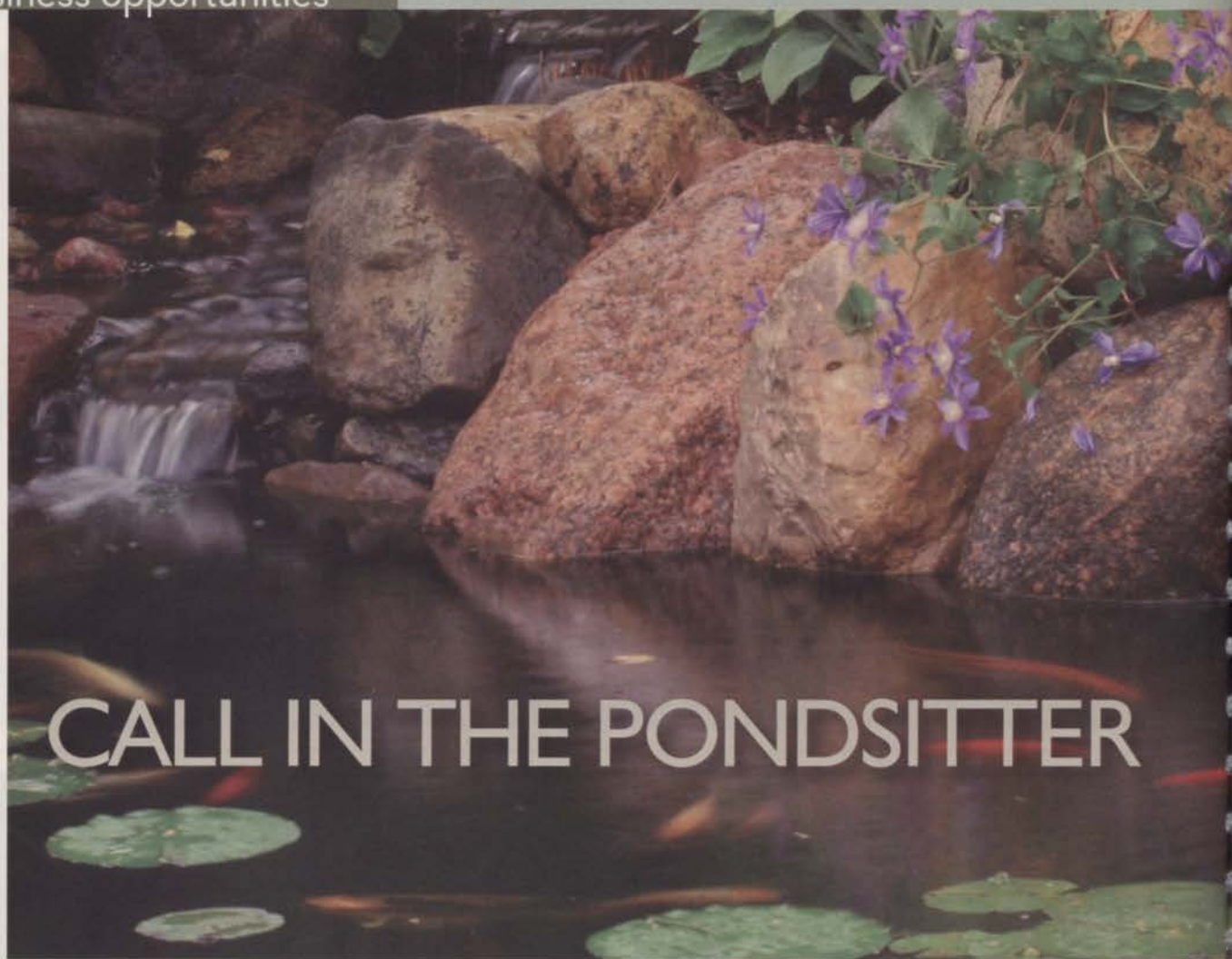


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USE READER SERVICE # 32





## CALL IN THE PONDSITTER

The popularity of water features leads to a potential service area - pond maintenance.



**Y**ou can almost hear the pre-vacation banter between husband and wife. "Honey, did you put a hold on our newspaper subscription?" "Sure did." "Ask the Joneses to pick up the mail, take Fluffy to the kennel and call the pondsitter?" "Yes, yes and - what?!"

As more homeowners add ponds, waterfalls and water gardens to their outdoor living spaces, opportunities will open up for contractors to care for these features. Pondsitting, or "vacation checkups," as St. Clair Shores, Mich.-based contractor Pondering Waters calls them, are just one of several water feature maintenance offerings contractors can provide their clients.

"Customers love the services that go along with their ponds," says Jeff Michaels, owner of Pondering Waters. "A lot of them are professionals. They love to enjoy their ponds, but they don't have time to do maintenance."

Aside from pondsitting, pond maintenance firms provide weekly or monthly pond maintenance.

by marisa palmieri | associate editor





Photos: Aquascape

nance, spring clean-outs and pond closings. These services can supplement cash flow when pond installations are down and serve as a marketing tool to build client rapport. "The more contact we can keep with our existing clients beyond installation leads to more referrals," says Cliff Raitz, president of TerraScapes, Costa Mesa, Calif.

Michaels agrees. "I'm finding service is everything in ponds – it's not just install and go," he says. "I've found out that a few of the jobs we've landed vs. other contractors is because we're more service-oriented."

**SERVICE OFFERINGS.** When it comes to water features, there are two types of customers, Raitz says. Some clients are water gardening enthusiasts who dote over their water lilies, treat their koi like pets and consider maintaining their pond a hobby. And then you have clients who want beautiful ponds without the "hassle."

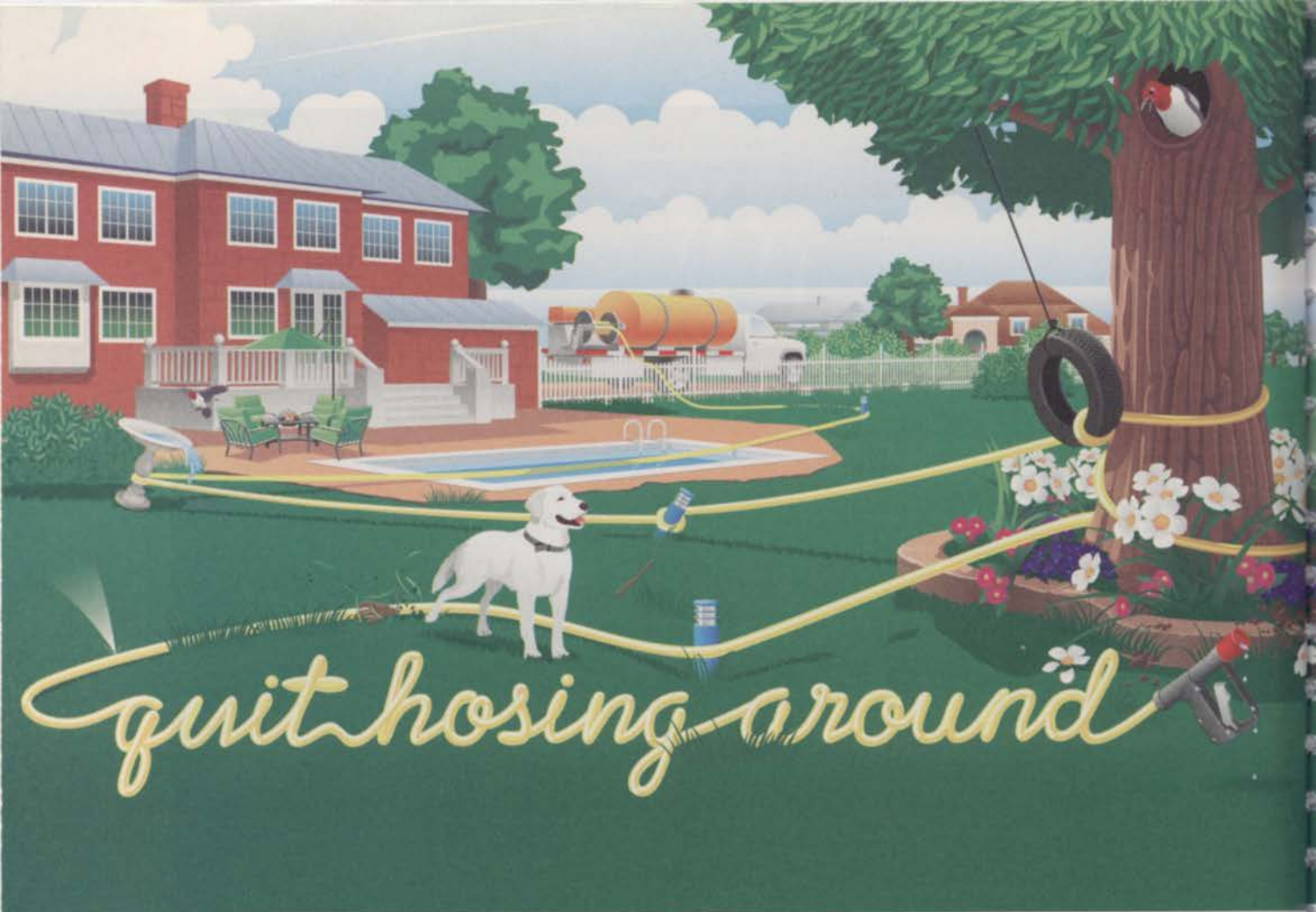
This second type of customer is the reason TerraScapes added pond clean-outs to its mix five years ago. While this service is usually performed starting in March in most parts of the country, TerraScapes

offers clean-outs anytime of year because it's located in Southern California, where customers keep their ponds open year-round.

Clean-outs involve draining some of the water; removing fish; removing, cleaning and dividing aquatic plants; power washing the pond, rocks and waterfall; and cleaning the filter and other components. The next step is to refill the pond, add de-chlorinator and any necessary beneficial bacteria or fertilizer and acclimate the fish before putting them back in the pond.

*continued on page 44*





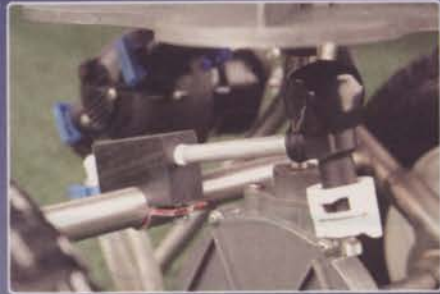
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continued from page 41

Another offering, especially important in colder climates, is closing ponds for the winter. Pond closing usually takes place during October, Michaels says. Winterizing a water feature entails removing pumps and fountains, cleaning them and storing them in a bucket of water in the homeowner's basement so the seals don't dry out and crack. The next step is bringing tropical plants inside or disposing of them (they can be treated as annuals and replaced the following year). Next, debris is removed and filter systems are taken out, rinsed and stored in a shed or garage. Finally, contractors add a pump to the skimmer box (at least 1,400 to 1,600 gallons per hour, Michaels says) with a discharge hose to maintain an opening in the ice for gases to escape because fish are generally left in the pond during the winter.

Routine maintenance is one more service contractors can offer. Some clients enjoy cleaning filters and trimming back plants; others don't. Contractors can offer to provide these services to their customers, in addition to fixing any minor repairs, testing water for pH levels and adding beneficial bacteria or fertilizer.

And as for a vacation checkup, it's as simple as sending someone to check on the pond periodically during a client's time out of town. "Some people are worried that they'll come back and something will have gone wrong," Michaels says, adding that general maintenance and potential leaks are clients' biggest concerns.

**ADDING IT ON.** To effectively add pond maintenance to a business, a thorough understanding of fish and aquatic plant health and an overall knowledge of a pond's ecosystem is necessary. Some manufacturers offer certification programs that include maintenance training, require continuing education and make available instructional DVDs and manuals.

Manufacturer-sponsored training is the route both Raitz and Michaels took. "I try to keep everybody going to classes at least four times a year to keep up with new techniques," Michaels says of pond installation and maintenance training for his employees. "Even if we've been to the classes before, we often go again. You never know when someone's going to ask a different question."

## pond maintenance: equipment/tool checklist

### GENERAL MAINTENANCE:

- Pair of long shears for trimming water lilies; pruners/scissors for other aquatic plants
- Additive products: beneficial bacteria, de-chlorinator, fertilizer
- Liner repair (patches, silicon, etc.)
- Water test kit

### SPRING CLEAN-OUTS AND POND CLOSINGS:

- Submersible pump with hose for extracting water
- Extension cords with GFI adaptor plug
- Pressure washer
- Quarantine tanks/live wells with the capacity of 50 to 100 gallons for fish storage
- Shade cloth or some other type of container covering – aquatic animals can be escape artists
- Aerator/bubbler for the tanks
- Fish nets or "koi socks" for removing fish
- Pair of waders
- Tarps for keeping the area clean while cleaning and separating aquatic plants



Being a pond installer also usually ensures you'll have most of the appropriate equipment for servicing water features (for a general list of what you'll need, see "Pond Maintenance: Equipment/Tool Checklist," above). "We pretty much had everything we needed thanks to our day-to-day operations doing installations," Raitz says.

Sales, scheduling and pricing, however, are often left up to trial and error.

Pond maintenance contractors agree you should present the service options at the initial installation consultation – this offering may be a client's reason for choosing your company over an installation-only firm.

Once Michaels sells an installation, he gives his clients a packet that includes information about their warranty, pond specifications and service options for regular maintenance, spring clean-outs, pond shutdowns and vacation check-ups. He sells each service separately rather than as a package, which allows his clients to remain flexible. Many customers don't mind routine maintenance but prefer to leave more in-depth jobs like clean-outs and shutdowns to the pros.

For regular maintenance and

vacation checkups, contractors typically charge flat rates. Michaels offers three levels of service – silver, gold and platinum. These range from \$60 per month (including filter cleaning, plant pruning and checking liners), to \$150 to \$200 per month for more detailed, bi-weekly maintenance.

For replacement parts, Michaels says most contractors charge the manufacturer's suggested retail prices, which is usually no less than a 50 percent markup.

Seasonal services can be tricky to price because the condition of the pond often depends on how well the homeowner cares for it and the last time the pond was cleaned out properly in the spring or shut down properly in the fall. To ensure profitability, Michaels has tracked the average amount of time it takes to perform clean-outs and shutdowns based on pond size (he says an 11-by-16-foot pond would take about two to three hours for a clean-out). Michaels' pricing for seasonal services includes a \$60 service charge plus \$50 per hour.

Michaels estimates his company nets a 30 to 40 percent profit margin on pond maintenance and says find-



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ing an appropriate price range is one ticket to success. Overcharging can drive customers to try to complete services on their own, he says, noting a small, bathtub size pond shouldn't cost \$200 to clean out. "A pond like that might take you less than an hour and if you charge them too much they'll do it themselves next time."

Scheduling proves to be one of the most difficult tasks in the business of pond maintenance, many contractors say. To service routine maintenance clients, Pondering Waters has a dedicated one-man crew who takes care of monthly maintenance customers and small repairs. It's the boom and bust of the seasonal services, however, that can

be a lot more challenging.

During the spring and fall, Pondering Waters' installation crews turn to maintenance. Two two-man crews complete about 150 clean-outs and shutdowns per season. "Having two crews in the spring really helps," Michaels says. "The quicker we have them done we can begin installations again."

To minimize scheduling conflicts, Michaels mails reminder notices about a month before the seasonal services begin, typically offering an incentive for customers who book early. For example, Michaels sends out shutdown information in September and takes \$10 per hour off the shutdown price for customers who schedule their service prior to a mid-October deadline.

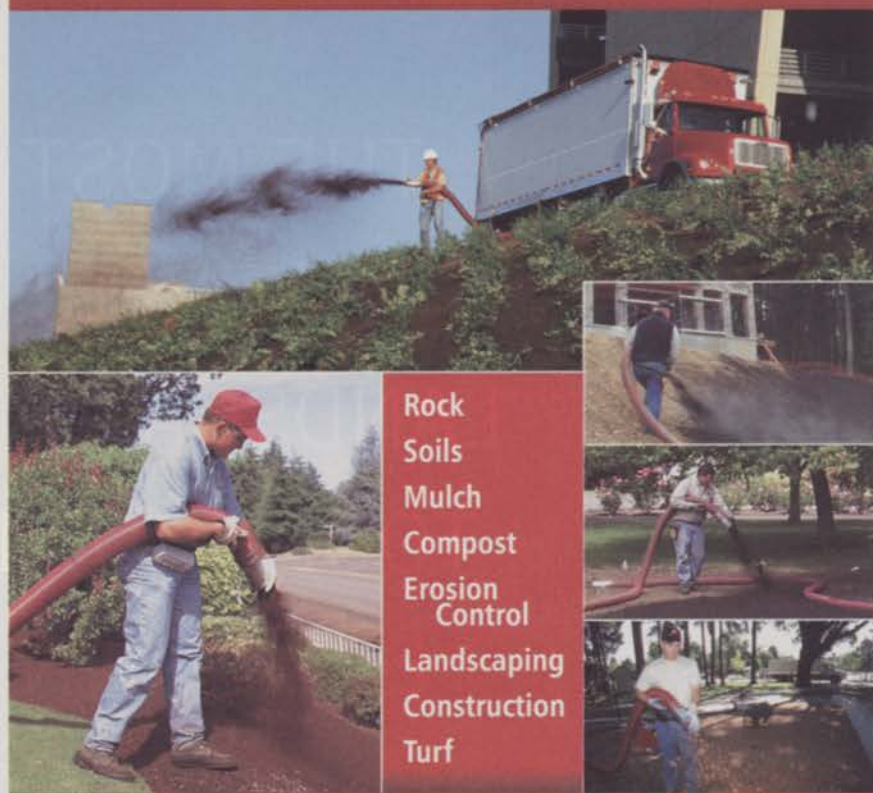
Michaels also uses these notices as an opportunity to up sell customers on pond products. He includes a list of products a customer might need for each season, and customers simply check off which ones they'd like delivered during their service call. Items on the springtime list include beneficial bacteria, fish nets, aquatic plants, etc. Winterization forms include bubblers, heaters, nets, etc. "That way, they can check off the products they need and we can bring it out to them," he says. "They don't have to worry about finding the time to pick up these products – it will all be done for them."

Overall, Raitz and Michaels agree that adding a pond maintenance component is beneficial to the business of a contractor who already installs water features. "Pond servicing can be profitable," Michaels says. "It's another service that can make you money." LL

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Visit the February issue online extras to find some quick tips on cleaning your equipment between pond maintenance jobs.

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**38:53**

Hours Bill Owen worked last week

**372:16**

Total hours: Irrigation

**238:49**

Total hours: Placing Sod

**611:05**

Total hours to date: Crestview



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WEEKLY TIMECARD

NAME: *Bill Owen* DATES: *12-16*

	START	LUNCH	END	JOB CODES	JOB SITE/PROJECT	HOURS
Mon.	7:00	1/2	3:30		Brentwood	8
Tues.			3:30			8
Wed.			4:00			8 1/2
Thurs.			4:00		Crestview	8 1/2
Fri.			4:00			8 1/2

SIGNATURE: *Bill Owen* TOTAL HOURS: *41 1/2*

**GUESSWORK****Employee Report****Owen, Bill**

Date Range: 2/12/2007 through 2/16/2007

Day	Date	Jobsite	Start	Stop	Cost Code	Hours	Total
Mon	2/12	Brentwood	7:08 AM	12:05 PM	Irrigation	4:57	
			12:41 PM	3:22 PM	Irrigation	2:41	7:38 hours
Tue	2/13	Brentwood	7:12 AM	12:07 PM	Irrigation	4:55	
			12:43 PM	3:23 PM	Irrigation	2:40	7:35 hours
Wed	2/14	Brentwood	7:12 AM	12:02 PM	Irrigation	4:50	
			12:46 PM	3:49 PM	Irrigation	3:03	7:53 hours
Thu	2/15	Crestview	7:17 AM	12:19 PM	Placing Sod	5:02	
			12:50 PM	3:46 PM	Placing Sod	2:56	7:58 hours
Fri	2/16	Crestview	7:13 AM	12:07 PM	Placing Sod	4:54	
			12:44 PM	3:39 PM	Placing Sod	2:55	7:49 hours

SIGNATURE: *Bill Owen*  
Signature Owen, Bill

**Total 38:53 hours****DEAD-ON**

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# THIRTY-FIVE UNDER 35



**Chris Angelo**

Financial controller, Stay Green, Santa Clarita, Calif.

**Age:** 33

**Years in industry:** Since childhood

**Why he's one to watch:** He is influencing the industry's management style into one of a more mature and compassionate leader.

As a teenager, Chris Angelo's days were spent working with the gardening, mowing, irrigation or enhancement crews of the company his father, Rich, started three years before he was born. Following high school, Angelo's father persuaded him to major in business administration. Through his influence, the business has reached \$12 million in annual revenue.

Angelo considers his passion for the industry an extension of the values his father taught him – respect, honesty, kindness and integrity. “With these core values, I look to inspire our families, communities, team members and business partners to share in a successful and gratifying life,” he says.

Angelo stresses that the right people are the best assets in business. Upon finding those people, understanding the individual drivers and needs of each employee is critical to create a dynamic team and culture, he insists.

His advice for other landscape business owners: “Always be yourself and manage your life experiences with people from the heart; don't change your natural style. Always begin with the end in mind, and keep your eye on your goals.” – Marisa Shoemaker

**Adan Arteaga**

Senior maintenance manager, Acres Group, Wauconda, Ill.

**Age:** 34

**Years in industry:** 20

**Why he's one to watch:** He proves that hard work pays off.

When Adan Arteaga started working for Acres Group, he wasn't working outside; his job was cleaning offices. “I wanted to be out in the field, but the company didn't have a spot for me,” he says. Eventually, Arteaga joined a crew and was quickly promoted to crew leader, then senior foreman, then manager and, finally, senior maintenance manager.

“Adan is the perfect example of hard work paying off,” points out Jeff Dumas, vice president of maintenance production, Acres Group. “Adan started sweeping floors at Acres and is now responsible for 42 crews and more than \$8 million in production revenue.”

What keeps Arteaga motivated? “I love that in this industry, you start at zero, where often the job looks terrible,” he says. “I love watching the properties grow and develop and seeing the difference. It's like night and day.”

Regarding his future, Arteaga says he plans to continue growing and learning within the Acres Group and the industry. “I don't think the current H-2B program is the answer,” he says, with respect to work force and immigration issues. “I think if we don't come up with a different solution for renewing permits and increasing the number of visas, a lot of companies will struggle.”

However, Arteaga is optimistic about industry obstacles, saying, “I think you can accomplish anything if you try hard enough.” – Marisa Shoemaker





## Kory Ballard

President, *Perficut Lawn & Landscape*,  
Des Moines, Iowa

**Age: 31; Years in the Industry: 17**

**Why he's one to watch:** He reminds us of the notion that team work and quality customer service are the tried-and-true standards to success.



Kory Ballard started his business in 1989 as a high school kid trying to make money on evenings and weekends. After realizing he was making more money than his friends while enjoying his love of the outdoors, Ballard became serious about making his after-school job a career. Since then, Perficut has doubled in size every year, topping \$8 million annually.

Ballard is most proud of his business image and reputation. "If we say we're going to do something, we do it – and then we follow up," he says.

When talking to Ballard about Perficut, it's difficult to get him to say the word "I." "I never try to take all of the credit," he says. "We have a great team of people and we all work very hard to meet our goals."

"I knew with the right people we could grow," he adds. "I just didn't expect to ever get where we are now." – *Emily Mullins*

## Brian Beeler

General manager, *Salmon Falls Landscape*,  
Berwick, Maine

**Age: 30; Years in industry: 10**

**Why he's one to watch:** He's taking the time to teach what he's learned.



Beeler graduated from the University of Maine on a Saturday in 1997 and began his career on the following Monday. With a degree in landscape horticulture and a plant science minor, he was hired as a residential landscape designer with Salmon Falls.

By 2000, Beeler became a design manager. By 2004, he took over more in-depth responsibility for day-to-day financials, as well as hiring, job scheduling and job costing for the company as a whole.

"What I'm most proud of is that from 1999 to 2004, our division grew from \$500,000 to more than \$1 million," he says. "I'm also proud of my evolution as a designer, as well as the fact that I have my hands in every aspect of the company."

Beeler is driven by his love of transformation. "I enjoy seeing a client's face light up after we've completely redone their yard," he says.

Looking forward, Beeler says the industry would be well advised to sharpen its business sense, noting that he's going back to school to get his MBA. "I want to talk to other business people and learn from them – not just landscapers who have businesses," he explains.

Additionally, Beeler reads books that delve into realms other than that of the green industry to further

his own business knowledge. "Good to Great is a good one, as well as anything on people or business," he shares.

Beeler is currently teaching adult education classes on landscaping basics and design. He also teaches seminars at the University of Maine on estimating and budgeting in the landscape industry. – *Marisa Shoemaker*

## John Biehler

Founder/co-owner, *Suburban Landscape Management*,  
Wichita, Kan.

**Age: 33; Years in industry: 14-plus**

**Why he's one to watch:** The ambition that piqued him to start his company is alive in him today. Will he reach his goal of creating a \$50-million company?



Fourteen years ago, John Biehler was a college freshman with a vision to transform his lawn mowing side job into a full-service landscape company. Today, he's co-owner of a \$9-million landscape firm and has made a steadfast commitment to growing his business to more than five times its current size.

And there's no reason to believe it can't be done. In 2000, the company was named Wichita's third fastest-growing privately held company by the *Wichita Business Journal*. In 2004, the same publication honored Biehler as one of the city's top 40 executives under the age of 40. In 2006, Biehler was accepted into the Young Presidents Organization, a global network of leaders who exchange ideas and information.

What, then, are this entrepreneur's recommendations for success? It comes down to delegation and fostering leaders. "I'm a big believer in, if you really want to start growing, you've got to be willing to let your managers make mistakes just like you did. And it may mean losing money. But you've got to be willing to do that." – *Marisa Palmieri*

## Kurt Bland

General manager, *Bland Landscaping*,  
Apex, N.C.

**Age: 31**

**Years in industry:** Since childhood

**Why he's one to watch:** He's progressive and committed to environmental and educational issues.



Kurt Bland's first green industry memory is highlighting plant symbols on landscape blueprints for his father, Tom, who founded Bland Landscaping in 1976. As a 4-year-old, Kurt learned how to do "take-offs." He didn't realize it at the time. "I was a shape finder with a magic marker," he jokes.

As a 15-year-old, Bland pulled weeds and graduated to mowing lawns, working his way up the ladder like everyone else. "People assume that a second-generation heir to a family business has it



easy," he says. "I challenge that."

Eventually, Bland attended North Carolina State University and headed to California with his horticulture and agricultural business degree to work for Del Conte's Landscaping. Two and a half years later, he returned to Apex, N.C., and the Bland family business, where he was a department manager.

Since returning to the business in 2002, Bland has infused in the company culture his passion for environmental stewardship, service and a triple-net bottom line—a buzzed-about concept among the Fortune 500 crowd that Bland takes to heart. "Whatever we do as a company must be socially, environmentally and fiscally responsible," he explains.

For example, Bland propelled the decision to replace diesel fuel with biodiesel. He insisted three years ago that wireless technology would eventually be mainstream and critical for business. Now, as general manager, Bland finds himself in a role where he can continue to animate the values his father and mother instilled through the choices he makes for the business.

"I drink this certain brand of iced tea," he says off-hand, digging around the cup holder of his vehicle to find a bottle cap he saved. Each has a message, and Bland buys the tea as much for the wisdom as the taste. "Optimism may sometimes make you look like a fool, but cynicism will always make you look cynical," he reads.

"If I could only be motivated by profitability and growth, I don't think I'd enjoy my job," he says, altruistically. "I like knowing we are doing the right thing—that we are not cutting corners or trying to benefit at the expense of others." — *Kristen Hampshire*



#### **Derek Blumberg**

*President, Quality Seasons, Savage, Minn.*

**Age: 35; Years in industry: 15**

**Why he's one to watch:** His company is 100-percent high-end residential—and subcontracts 100 percent of the work.

Derek Blumberg is wired to celebrate success—and move on. "What can we do next?" he constantly asks. This perennial question has sparked quite a bit of change since he founded Quality Seasons in 1992. Namely, a paradigm shift that redefined the way he does business.

Rather than running maintenance crews at full throttle—and wondering whether employees would report to work and deliver quality—he decided to model his company after that of a homebuilder. Why not delegate services to independent operators? With one out of every three green industry companies doing \$100,000 or less annually, Blumberg figured this was a dependable, untapped workforce. "How can I harness the energy of that guy?" he contemplated.

The answer was seemingly simple. Big snow companies subcontract every account, why couldn't Blumberg hire owners to work as partners? Today, his office staff is one person, Kris Gerold, who says "Derek has helped others create their own companies, so they could become contractors for us."

Blumberg delegates entire routes to owners, under the condition that they only work for Quality Seasons in that service area. He handles every capacity of the customer relationship—except for the labor. The decision has been lucrative—Blumberg's two-man business raked in more than \$1.1 million in revenue in 2006. "We'll have paid off more than a half-million in debt that came out of a lot of business mistakes we made before 2001," he says, quipping that "freedom is not owing anyone."

"And we've been able to keep our business simple," he adds. "I'm most proud of the fact that we have a quality company that runs really smooth." — *Kristen Hampshire*

#### **Jennifer Buck**

*Recruiting director, Chapel Valley Landscape Co., Woodbine, Md.*

**Age: 29; Years in industry: 6½**

**Why she's one to watch:** She's bringing new life to the industry by helping shape future landscape professionals.



Jennifer Buck got her first taste of the landscape industry as a young girl reluctantly tending to the azaleas in her father's nursery. "I helped out, but it never really interested me," she says. "I was always envious of my friends who got to do more girly things on the weekends." Based on that start, Buck never thought she would grow up to have, not to mention love, a career in the landscape industry recruiting young people for future landscape careers of their own.

Buck's career began in June 2000 as a personnel assistant at Chapel Valley Landscape Co. shortly after graduating from Virginia Tech. She currently serves as the company's recruiting director, where her ability to discover dedicated and talented individuals to join Chapel Valley's team has helped to triple company revenue to more than \$46 million since fall 2001.

In 2005, Buck accepted the role of chair of PLANET's Student Career Days, a position she will fill until 2010. She's an advisory board member for the landscape programs at the University of Maryland and Virginia Tech, and also served as an advisory board member of the Longwood Garden's graduate program this past summer. "If you ever have the opportunity to be involved in anything, take it," she says. "Once you get your foot in the door and industry professionals see you want to contribute, you can make a name for yourself."

One of Buck's favorite aspects of the landscape industry is that young people can be taken seriously, which isn't always the case for work force newcomers. "In this industry I've found that you can make a serious impact in just a few years, especially if you go the extra mile," she says. Through her work with landscape industry hopefuls, this is a realization Buck has the opportunity to pass along. — *Emily Mullins*



### Chris Burns

Operations manager, Clintar Groundskeeping,  
London, Ontario, Canada

**Age: 29; Years in industry: 8**

**Why he's one to watch:** His love of the flexible, yet demanding side of the industry.

Just short of the three-decade mark, Chris Burns has encountered myriad levels of employment in the industry. After earning a landscape technician degree from the Humber College of Applied Arts & Technology, he joined a small residential landscape company, where he shared in "all the problems that go along with a business when the owner is in over his head."

He began concurrently working with Clintar Groundskeeping, plowing sidewalks during the winter.

By 2001, Burns opted for full-time employment with Clintar, acting as crew leader in the landscape construction division, which led to being the manager of construction services – shoes he filled for three seasons before becoming operations manager two years ago. By June of this year, Burns will be heading up the recently purchased Ottawa-based Clintar franchise.

Burns cited his passion for the industry as the impetus for his upward movement. "I got into the industry because it's flexible, yet demanding," he says. "I love the winter side, where during the rush of a snowstorm, I'm dispatching crews and getting 90 properties handled in an eight- to nine-hour span."

Burns also notes the management of jobs, budgets and people as ingredients that keep him motivated. "Having long-time employees means you're doing something right and providing a rewarding atmosphere." – *Marisa Shoemaker*

### Maria Candler

President/CEO, James River Grounds Management, Glen Allen, Va.

**Age: 35; Years in industry: 14**

**Why she's one to watch:** She inspires quick decision making and active industry involvement.

"I'm very decisive – I never hesitate to make a decision," Maria Candler says. "It might not always be the best one or the right one, but it's a decision all the same."

Many could disagree that Candler makes bad decisions, as her career in the landscape industry has been filled with quite a few good ones. Her decision to postpone settling down with a "real job" after college landed her at James River Grounds Management where her primary responsibilities were "doing whatever." Her decision to stay there has led her to the role of president and CEO and the fulfillment of a good majority of

her career aspirations – all at the age of 35.

In addition, Candler has been active in PLANET legislative affairs and H-2B issues, involvement she feels is important for all industry professionals. "Everyone in the industry needs to recognize that they do have a voice and can be heard," she says. "We can't just leave it up to the national organizations – grassroots-level work can and does make a difference."

By working together, Candler believes that the green industry will become more professional each year. Her future plans include preparing James River's next generation of leaders as thoroughly as the previous generation prepared her, while staying involved with her family and her community – a decision that will surely benefit everyone involved. – *Emily Mullins*

### Orlando Cruz

Senior production manager, Piedmont Landscape, Chamblee, Ga.

**Age: 35; Years in industry: 14**

**Why he's one to watch:** His diligence and consistent performance.

"My whole life has been working outside," explains Orlando Cruz, who grew up in El Salvador, working on a farm with his father since the age of 7. At 17 he moved to California and in 1993 he made his way to Georgia and the landscape industry. Starting out as a laborer, Cruz worked his way up through several companies and today oversees Piedmont Landscape's construction division, which produces more than \$15 million in revenue.

Cruz manages a department of about 100 people. One of his greatest attributes, according to Piedmont Principal Phil Walters, is his low employee turnover rate. "He has the ability to grow people," Walters explains. Consequently, helping his employees succeed is one of Cruz's favorite aspects of his job. "I like to show and teach what I know – what I learned from my father," says Cruz, who – although it's no longer a part of daily duties – still enjoys getting on the machines, working with "the guys" and "putting trees in the ground" when he has the opportunity. "I've worked outside my whole life," Cruz reiterates. "And I still like it." – *Marisa Palmieri*

### Jason Cupp

President, Highland Outdoor, Olathe, Kan.

**Age: 34; Years in industry: 21**

**Why he's one to watch:** This progressive thinker – who happens to be president-elect of PLANET – is an industry ambassador, promoting the merits of certification, networking and education in his business and travels.

Jason Cupp has come a long way since founding a landscape company as a high school student in 1986. The energetic entrepreneur has quickly risen through the ranks of PLANET and, in 2008, is slated to become one of the organization's youngest presidents.





Cupp prides himself on being an ambassador for the industry that's allowed him to turn a passion for the outdoors into a career. As such, certification and boosting professionalism are front-of-mind for Cupp.

Both inside PLANET and out, Cupp thrives on information-sharing and networking, which led him to found Viridian Group, an operations, marketing and human resources consulting firm. "I want to continue to get people to talk about their businesses and share with each other the things we can do to make our businesses better," he says, offering his best advice for young contractors: "Ask questions."

"We are a very open industry," Cupp adds. "Get involved in some type of trade association. You can learn a lot from the people around you." — *Marisa Palmieri*



**Matt Davenport**

*Vice president and partner, Lasting Impressions Landscape, Foothill Ranch, Calif.*

**Age: 29; Years in industry: 8**

**Why he's one to watch:** He contributed to a company-wide culture shift toward service.

Matt Davenport is thankful life took him down a different path.

He graduated from the University of Wisconsin with aspirations of being an NFL place kicker. While he trained to pursue this dream, Davenport worked part-time in sales for Ruben Green, the owner of Lasting Impressions. Davenport soon realized that the NFL wasn't where his destiny was to be found, rather it was in the green industry.

At Lasting Impressions, Davenport has relentlessly pursued ways for his company to become a better service organization. He has helped energize a small, established yet stagnant maintenance company into becoming a fully operational service organization. "Inwardly driven and outwardly focused" is Davenport's mantra for cultural development at Lasting Impressions. "A lot of guys used to be very 'me' oriented," he says. "I've seen the change within our culture so that now it's about other people."

"When Ruben started the company in 1986 he planted this idea of culture," Davenport adds. "I've been able to help water, nurture and expose those tendencies for service and I've seen it increase and I've witnessed it grow."

The landscape industry holds many opportunities for young people who want to be part of a career and industry that produces tangible results for others, Davenport says. "The landscape industry affects us and everyone around us every day," he says. "You can get into landscaping and really find your niche. In this industry there are a vast array of opportunities within each opportunity." — *Mike Zawacki*

**Josh Denison**

*Operations/human resources, Denison Landscaping, Fort Washington, Md.*

**Age: 26; Years in industry: 21**

**Why he's one to watch:** He takes advantage of every opportunity—whether it's working on the job or implementing new business philosophies.



"I started in the business when I was 5 years old, riding in the truck with my dad to work," says Josh Denison. By the time he was 15, he was working with installation crews, learning how to handle a landscape job from beginning to end.

Upon Denison's college graduation, he entered the office realm of the business, working mainly in human resources. To date, he has implemented training and accountability programs and procedures for the company, showing a talent for recruiting strong individuals with a solid work ethic.

"Josh has worked in just about every division of Denison's, gaining the knowledge and experience that will someday allow him to manage our entire operation," adds Duane Denison, executive vice president of Denison Landscaping.

From the knowledge he has garnered, the 26-year-old advises other landscape contractors to "never stop learning. Take advantage of any opportunities you can, whether it's through classes, mentors or just on-the-job training."

In addition, he suggests contractors understand the obstacles brought by the uncertainties of immigration reform. "One of the most challenging problems of the near future will be finding, hiring and retaining a strong workforce with the correct work ethic."

— *Marisa Shoemaker*

**Chris DiSabatino**

*Founder/president, DiSabatino Landscaping, Wilmington, Del.*

**Age: 30**

**Years in the industry: 21**

**Why he's one to watch:** He brings his cache of business awards and resulting elevated professionalism to the industry with the hopes of making a difference.



With a single push mower in 1986, Chris DiSabatino began his career. By the age of 16, he had earned \$7,000, which he put toward his first pickup truck. In 1995, he hired his first full-time employee, making \$35,000 in revenue that year. Today, the \$5-million company now stands 50 strong.

"Chris is a go-getter," says Marty Grunder, president of Marty Grunder Inc., Miamisburg, Ohio. "He takes risks and supports his team well. He's very diversified."

Of his accomplishments, DiSabatino prides himself on a team that exceeds customers' expectations. "We call it the 'DiSabatino Experience,'" he explains.



In addition, DiSabatino and his company have been the recipients of the "Best of Delaware: Best Landscaper Award" in 2004, the "Young Entrepreneur Award" in 2005, as well as the Better Business Bureau's "Torch Award" for marketplace ethics in 2006.

In the future, DiSabatino aspires to continue raising the professionalism in the industry by promoting greater networking, even among competitors. He says: "If you do what you say you will and are proud to put your name on your work, you will be successful."  
— *Marisa Shoemaker*

### Tim Ehrhart

Director of sales, TruGreen ChemLawn, Memphis, Tenn.

**Age: 32; Years in industry: 10**

**Why he's one to watch:** He's a mover — and a changer.

"Career opportunity." This teaser attracted Tim Ehrhart to the green industry 10 years ago, when he interviewed for a position to be a residential sales representative at TruGreen ChemLawn in St. Louis. "I had no green industry experience before that," he admits. No big deal, his manager told him. "They said they would teach me everything I needed to know, and they did."

Ehrhart was hungry for the opportunity he saw in the organization — managers empowering hard-working associates, mentors moving fresh industry talent up the ladder. "To me, the best part about this job is having the opportunity to bring in someone who didn't know the industry and watch that person develop and become a manager themselves," he says, proud to have been on both ends of the promotional table by now. "When that person wins awards and furthers his or her career, you know you had an impact on making that happen."

In his time at TruGreen ChemLawn, Ehrhart moved to four different cities and advanced from a sales rep to branch manager to regional marketing director and, finally, to the lofty position he holds today: director of sales. Since the Do Not Call List handcuffed the company's telemarketing campaign — TruGreen today depends on it for 45 to 50 percent of sales — Ehrhart says a culture of change motivates him to help evolve the company's focus from customer acquisition to retention.

"I am proud to have been a part of a team of people who really changed the way a billion-dollar company works," he says. TruGreen's \$1-billion annual sales continue to grow, despite the telemarketing regulation. Only a company and management team willing to change could pull this off, he remarks.

"I've always embraced change," he says. "It provides new challenges and makes each day exciting."  
— *Kristen Hampshire*

### Benton Foret

President, Chackbay Nursery & Landscaping, Thibodaux, La.

**Age: 30; Years in industry: 18**

**Why he's one to watch:** His community spirit is building a positive image for the industry.

Benton Foret calls his entry into the green industry "an accidental situation," thanks to an 18-acre shopping center job he helped manage for a friend's father. Foret was just 12 years old then — and already bitten by the business bug. He fell in love with free enterprise. "That is what drives me," he confirms.

Ultimately, Foret developed a love for green industry business as his work continued to prove that landscaping makes a significant impact on the community and the environment. "I love the green industry because of what we do for society as a whole," he explains.

After growing a business called Benton Foret Land Co. in college, Foret was approached by the former owners of Chackbay Nursery & Landscaping in 2000 and purchased the company. Since then, his ambitious ideas for growth — namely penetrating the commercial market and assuming aggressive projects — and desire to give back to the community drive his efforts.

"I'm proud of taking an industry that, in our area, was not in the forefront, and making the local community realize what we are capable of doing with an outdoor environment that is designed and planted well," Foret says. "I've seen the change in attitude here. People realize what a landscape architect really offers."

Foret and his company also worked with Oprah Winfrey, the Angel Network and Habitat for Humanity on two projects to landscape home sites for displaced Hurricane Katrina victims. "It is rewarding to see the effect our work had on someone who lost their home or never had one," he says soberly.

"If you think about it, as landscapers we are custodians of the planet," he says. — *Kristen Hampshire*

### Scott Frith

Vice president of marketing and franchise development, Lawn Doctor, Holmdel, N.J.

**Age: 34**

**Years in industry: 17**

**Why he's one to watch:** He's willing to work harder to keep the landscape industry a step ahead of the rest.

While his high school friends spent their free time hanging out at the beach, Scott Frith was working in his father's manufacturing facility producing Lawn Doctor application equipment. Seventeen years later, Frith is the company's vice president of marketing and franchise development, and often reflects on the valuable experience of that first part-time job. "It definitely wasn't the most exciting thing to be doing at the time," he says. "But having sat in different seats has given me a better perspective from which to view the position I'm in now."





While working full-time, Frith earned his MBA from Fordham University and was named a certified franchise executive from the International Franchise Association. He likes to be good at what he does and is not afraid to work hard to excel. "I'm willing to prepare in order to be successful," he says. "I tend to seek out opportunities to change to increase efficiency or improve products."

Frith's future aspirations include growing Lawn Doctor to its highest potential while staying at the top of his game. — *Emily Mullins*

### **Edward Furner**

*Client representative, Mariani Landscape, Lake Bluff, Ill.*

**Age: 26; Years in industry: 12**

**Why he's one to watch:** His creativity sells and his service smarts earn him fans.

Edward Furner's creativity inspires clients to delve into new design projects. At Mariani Landscape, Furner works as a quarterback, connecting high-end residential homeowners with appropriate maintenance services and managing their accounts.

But Furner likes to get personal with clients. "I know clients on a different level," he says, thanking his rural roots growing up on a dairy farm in upstate New York for his friendly demeanor. "That allows clients to trust me, and they give me free reign on many of these jobs."

Because Furner's background is in landscape contracting and design, the innovative possibilities he notices on clients' properties provide an artistic outlet and opportunity to increase sales. Furner was awarded employee of the year at Mariani Landscape, which employs about 400 people during peak season. "Every year, I took on a more active role with the high-end clients, and this year I exceeded my sales goal by almost \$400,000," he shares, humbly.

"The passion, for me, is the design—the creativity of the job," he adds. "Being an artist, that is what intrigued me from the beginning."

Furner has been an acrylic painter, and he is a musician, playing soulful rock a la Van Morrison every Tuesday night at Vaughan's Pub in Chicago. "I think everyone has to have their release," he says, crediting his hobby for the reason he stays fresh on the job. Though the two intermingle sometimes, Furner distributed a five-song holiday CD called "A Pleasant Fiction" to his customers to "continue to build that above-and-beyond relationship."

Furner honed his skills by interning at top companies around the country: The Brickman Group in Colorado Springs, Colo.; Smallwood Design Group in Naples, Fla.; and his current employer, Mariani Landscape. "I was willing to go anywhere, which created opportunities for me," he says.

Today, Furner's active role in PLANET as a chair for the Emerging Leadership Network allows him to connect others with opportunities. He says: "The satisfaction I get is when I've mentored someone and they call me and say, 'thank you.'" — *Kristen Hampshire*

### **D.J. Gallagher**

*Oregon regional manager, Teufel Landscape, Portland, Ore.*

**Age: 35**

**Years in industry: 14**

**Why he's one to watch:** He always does the right thing.

D.J. Gallagher's first "grass roots" industry experience came when he was a volunteer in the Peace Corps, where he worked as an urban forestry consultant in Ecuador, South America.

"In the two years I was in Ecuador, I managed to learn a foreign language, learn a culture and make lifetime friends," he says. "The experience has helped me in every aspect of my career."

Upon his return, Gallagher joined a mid-sized construction and maintenance company as a maintenance account manager, then became a senior account manager. In 2005, Gallagher joined Teufel Nursery, where he quickly became the maintenance division manager. While he says the bottom line is a focus at Teufel, he feels the business differentiates itself because money doesn't come at the expense of reputation and quality.

Gallagher's drive stems from the desire to succeed in an industry that presents a different challenge every day, challenges that require him to stay ahead of the curve. While he has a genuine desire to achieve results, which he combines with a strong work ethic, he also feels timing has played a role. "Being in the right place at the right time has been 90 percent of the game; however, the remaining 10 percent is what you do with that opportunity."

As for his business philosophy, Gallagher advocates always doing the right thing. "So often in today's competitive landscape market, it can be easy to take shortcuts to get ahead—whether it's price slashing to gain volume business rapidly, cutting corners on a job to increase short-term profits or ignoring safety and training of employees to shave overhead costs," he says. "But at the end of the day, you not only hurt yourself, but the customer and the industry as a whole. Don't cheat, don't steal, work hard and have fun." — *Marisa Shoemaker*

### **Taylor Haught**

*Branch manager, The Groundskeeper, Albuquerque, N.M.*

**Age: 25**

**Years in industry: 7**

**Why he's one to watch:** He believes the industry offers the best in variety.

With on-the-job training from a family-owned landscape maintenance/installation company, Taylor Haught began working for The Groundskeeper, Gilbert, Ariz., in 2003. As a maintenance supervisor he worked diligently and was rewarded quickly with





high-profile accounts, such as Motorola and Boeing. Within a year of his employment with The Groundskeeper, Haught was managing \$110,000 in monthly accounts, as well as 25 production employees.

Because growth potential holds his focus, Haught decided to move to Albuquerque to be the branch manager for a new Groundskeeper operation. There he has grown a successful, profitable business to complement the other five company branches. "Taylor has grown the Albuquerque branch in 18 months from one employee to 16," points out The Groundskeeper CEO Anil Hiremath.

Haught's passion stems from an industry that rewards him with variety. "One day I can repair a mainline and the next day I can be negotiating a large contract with a client," says Haught, who also sits on the board for the New Mexico Business Water Task Force Committee. "There are so many skills that are needed to be successful in this industry. I feel like there is always something to be learned or taught. And we can step back and look at the tangible successes we have on a day-to-day basis."

Clearly his initiative propels him forward – and upward. For others to accomplish the same, Haught says, "Believe in your talents and abilities, and find a company who is willing to develop and invest in them." – *Marisa Shoemaker*

#### **Ted Hofer**

*Franchise start-up manager, Spring-Green Lawn Care Corp., Plainfield, Ill.*

**Age:** 31

**Years in industry:** Since childhood

**Why he's one to watch:** He's following in his father's footsteps to lead "America's neighborhood lawn care team."

"Depending on how you look at it, I've either had almost two years in the industry or 30," says Ted Hofer. While such a statement might seem strange to those who don't know Hofer, it's true. As the son of the president and founder of Spring-Green Lawn Care Corp., Hofer has been around the lawn care industry for most of his life.

Hofer officially joined Spring Green in June 2005 as franchise start-up manager, where he and his team focus on supporting all of the company's new franchises for their first three years. During his first year on board, Hofer helped the department reach all of its initial sales goals and half of its high-end goals – not bad, for the new guy. And the company, with a 2006 revenue of more than \$25 million, has plans for reaching \$100 million in about 15 years. "For me, lawn care is something I've been involved in since day one," he says. "I don't really know much else."

However, Hofer does know something else that proved to be a valuable asset to his current career. Prior to joining the Spring Green team, he tried a different career on for size as owner of a UPS franchise. His combination of lawn care and franchise backgrounds made him a natural for his current role.

"In the next few years, I plan to familiarize myself with all aspects of the business as preparation to even-

tually run the company some day," Hofer explains.

– *Emily Mullins*

#### **Rachel Kelly**

*Vice president, R.A.R. Outdoor Services, Baltimore, Md.*

**Age:** 32; **Years in industry:** 15

**Why she's one to watch:** She won't take "No" for an answer.

"I love to trim – love to weed-whack," professes Rachel Kelly. Not a poetic position for some people, but Kelly feels differently. She entered the industry as a 17-year-old when her boyfriend (now husband) started a landscape company in their hometown, Baltimore. "There is nothing sexier than straight lines," she jokes about trimming.

Kelly's gregarious sense of humor matches her urgent drive to prove that "career laddering" is a reality in the green industry. This strong combination might overwhelm someone not expecting blunt responses to questions like, what makes you different from others in the industry? "Drive. Sheer drive," she bursts.

Kelly isn't interested in second place. "I am highly competitive," she confirms. "What some people think is a goal for five years is a one-year goal for me."

One of those goals is to help grow R.A.R. Outdoor Services so it is the largest, profitable, privately owned landscape company. "One bite at a time," she adds, explaining how the \$8-million business will get there. Currently, she and her executive team are implementing lean management, and she says the gradual adoption of this program is paying off. "I am a zealot," she says of the efficiency-focused methodology. "The fact that improvements are happening organically means lean is starting to become culture, and I am proud of that."

Kelly is also proud of her role as a board member for PLANET. R.A.R.'s involvement with Student Career Days and the friendships that have evolved through the association are important to her. So is education, which Kelly pronounces as her passion.

Leaders in the industry, she says, are responsible for spreading this message and showing promising candidates that lawn and landscape is a viable, fulfilling career. That's a lot of responsibility, but Kelly says it's only fair. "If you are a leader, you have a responsibility and you either accept it or get out of the way and let someone else accept it," she says simply. – *Kristen Hampshire*

#### **Steven Keys**

*Owner/president, U.S. Lawns, Columbia, Lexington, Greenville, S.C.*

**Age:** 33; **Years in industry:** 14-plus

**Why he's one to watch:** He reminds us that we don't have to reinvent the wheel to be successful.

After working for a residential maintenance company in high school and several years as a spray





technician for a lawn care franchise, Steven Keys started Back Place Landscaping in 1996 with the help of mentor Bob Morris.

Reinventing the wheel is an often criticized blunder in business and Keys recognized early on that he may be doing just that. "After working in a lawn care franchise system I realized the benefits and support of a national company," he says. "I realized I could use some help from the business angle."

In October of 1998 Keys, who got his passion for plants and landscaping from his grandfather who worked in land clearing, converted his company to U.S. Lawns of Columbia, S.C., committing himself to the commercial maintenance market. It was a perfect match for Keys, who thrives on customer relationships. The franchise model allowed him to dedicate himself to this aspect of his company – while growing it methodically. Since its inception, Keys' U.S. Lawns business has grown steadily with revenue of about \$150,000 the first year to \$1.6 million in 2006. He added the Lexington, S.C., operation several years ago and just purchased the rights to Greenville, S.C., on Jan. 1. Keys – whose success already has landed him in the U.S. Lawns Hall of Fame – hopes to add two more territories.

Keys says his story is a lesson in "learning the business side" of the industry. He recommends young contractors "get involved more with the financial side – know how to read a profit and loss statement," he says. "Don't always just focus on cutting grass. Run it like a true business." – *Marisa Palmieri*

### Roscoe Klausing

Owner, The Klausing Group, Lexington, Ky.

Age: 30; Years in industry: 18

**Why he's one to watch:** He's a teacher and an ambitious change artist – business change, that is.

A 180-degree flip in service focus tested Roscoe Klausing's ability to devise a concise business strategy, execute the plan and fulfill ambitious growth goals. Klausing switched his company from residential maintenance to commercial in two years. "It's just about developing a methodology to achieve the goal," he says.

In 2000, after learning more about running a green industry business and not just a service, Klausing decided that the company needed more defined sales systems – a solid operations plan to facilitate the success he dreamed of since he started the business in 1992. Then, he was just 16 years old.

"I really set benchmarks based on what I observed of others at the time," Klausing says. "I did an enormous amount of networking, surrounded myself with folks who owned companies that were much larger than mine and had long since addressed many of the issues we faced, and I continue to use that same network of people today."

As Jason Cupp, CEO of Highland Outdoor in Olathe, Kan., explains, "Roscoe is never shy to ask questions and to constantly refine himself and his company."

Klausing earned his management degree by listening to others. Success followed. "In two years, we went from \$300,000 in residential maintenance sales to doing \$500,000 million in commercial – all contractual, all annual obligations," he reports proudly.

But business is more than numbers for Klausing. Equally important are peer development and pushing an agenda to administer the Certified Landscape Technician (CLT) exam in Kentucky. "What really drives me is my desire to bring the exam here so there is an establishment of standards," he says. The first CLT exam in Kentucky will be administered in September 2007.

Meanwhile, Klausing concentrates on finding ways to motivate other talented industry professionals. He serves on an informal board for mentees Renee and Brent Berkemeier of Berk's Landscaping in northern Kentucky. "It's flattering," Klausing says. "Any time I have an opportunity to give back in the form of teaching or educating, I also begin to understand the concepts at a greater depth." – *Krisen Hampshire*

### Andy Kurth

General manager, Weed Man, Madison, Wis.

Age: 25; Years in industry: 9

**Why he's one to watch:** He wants to make the green industry bigger and better while focusing on environmental consciousness.

Andy Kurth is excited about the future of the green industry. He's excited to help make it bigger and better while stressing the importance of environmental awareness. He's excited to give his company a new and improved image and, at the young age of 25, he's excited to get started right now.

"The potential for the lawn care industry and the green industry as a whole is phenomenal," he says. "I see it absolutely exploding in the next few years. There will be more qualified people available and our company will be stronger."

Kurth began his career at Weed Man, Madison, Wis., as a sales intern while attending the University of Wisconsin for a degree in soil sciences. After graduation, he joined the company as a full-time employee working in sales and franchise support. Within two years he became sales manager for the Madison area and is now general manager of the Madison, Milwaukee and Rockford branches.

One of Kurth's primary goals is to revamp the culture of Weed Man in a way that separates it from other lawn care companies. "We want to show that we are not about throwing pesticides around a client's lawn and leaving," he says. "By focusing on environmental enhancement, we feel we can be an A-player in the lawn care industry."

Most of Kurth's goals involve the environment in one way or another. A member of Black Earth Creek Watershed Association, River Alliance of Wisconsin and Trout Unlimited, Kurth hopes to dispel the per-





ception that the lawn care industry doesn't care about environmental safety. "I get excited when people tell me what we're doing is bad for the environment," he says. "It gives me the opportunity to educate them about it." — *Emily Mullins*

### Brett Lemcke

Vice president, R.M. Landscape,  
Hilton, N.Y.

Age: 26

Years in industry: 11-plus

**Why he's one to watch:** As vice president of a family firm and a member of PLANET leadership, Lemcke leverages his youth by dedicating himself to one of the industry's greatest challenges: recruitment.

Growing up in the business that his father and uncle founded in 1973, Brett Lemcke never faltered from the path to a career in the landscape industry. He began working in the family business regularly from age 15, received a bachelor's degree in

landscape development from SUNY Cobleskill, completed out-of-state internships in both residential and commercial landscape management and returned to R.M. Landscape as a designer/salesperson—eventually becoming vice president.

Lemcke was exposed to PLANET through Student Career Days and has since become entrenched in the organization. He's a member of the landscape management specialty group and serves as chair of the industry recruiting committee.

Lemcke, who also participates in region five of the New York State Nursery & Landscape Association, says association involvement has boosted his confidence in and enthusiasm for his company's future. "It's allowed us to expand our experiences and abilities," he says. "I want to make sure our company will be here for another 35 years so I can carry on my father's legacy."

Attracting new talent is what Lemcke considers one of the industry's greatest challenges and he thanks PLANET for the opportunity to promote the industry on a national level. "It's great to be involved with the first steps of PLANET's involvement with the Future Farmers of America and being on the stepping stones of promoting the industry to students," says the self-described "commercial for the industry."

"As the industry grows, I hope to grow with it," Lemcke says. — *Marisa Palmieri*



### Barry Morton Jr.

Vice president, Morton's Landscape Development,  
Columbia Station, Ohio

Age: 29; Years in industry: Since childhood

**Why he's one to watch:** He's a second generation landscaper with a big picture view of the green industry.

Barry Morton Jr. has gained his unique insight on the state of the green industry from nearly a lifetime of study that came from working at the family business, started by his father 29 years ago. "I started out in the field and then worked my way up the chain to become a \$1 million-plus salesman every year," he says.

Today, "I step back and, for the age that I am, I look at where I am and where I can be in 10 to 20 years from now," he adds. "Building on that potential excites me."

Morton wants his family's landscape company to be lean and mean. "Run lean and work smart," he says, reciting his professional mantra. "It is possible to do more with less people if you have the right people in place who are trained properly. One of the challenges this industry faces is that it all is boiling down to price. In order to be competitive, we're being forced to do the work at less cost without sacrificing quality."

Confronting this dilemma head on requires vigilance and persistence, he adds, saying, "Serving the client isn't just about taking on new jobs, going out and completing them. It's about being a partner with them and sharing with them in the process." — *Mike Zawacki*

### Todd Pugh

Owner, Enviroscapes, Louisville, Ohio

Age: 34; Years in industry: 20

**Why he's one to watch:** He's making the landscape industry more professional one employee at a time.

What Todd Pugh loves most about the landscape industry are the people — from the mentors who guided him to his crews he can rely on to industry newcomers seeking his advice. "Everyone is always willing to share information with each other and is very supportive," he says. "There were many people who helped me out at one point in my career and now we're in the position to help others, which is a good feeling."

Pugh advanced his career from a 14-year-old boy mowing lawns to the owner of Enviroscapes, operating out of a 14,000-square-foot facility. Revenue of the Louisville, Ohio-based company has reached almost \$6 million, but Pugh and his team aren't done yet. Their newest goal is to build three satellite offices in the next five years, along with continuing to improve the company's management and development teams. "My company is all about continual improvement and staying ahead of the curve with new ideas," Pugh says. "We're always looking to improve and are always willing to listen and learn."





Pugh invests a lot in his employees because he feels they're worth it. Through consultants and mandatory 52-week training programs, he spends more than \$50,000 a year on employee development alone. Says Pugh, "If you don't develop your people, who will do what you promised your clients you'd do?" — *Emily Mullins*



**Ross Pudenz**

*Owner, Pudenz Irrigation, Durand, Wis.*

**Age:** 29; **Years in industry:** 11

**Why he's one to watch:** He's a step ahead of the smart irrigation movement by thinking about keeping properties green with the least amount of water possible.

"There is no way you're ever going to get me behind a desk," Ross Pudenz says of his rewarding outdoor career. "It makes me proud of what I do, seeing kids playing on nice green grass instead of a patch of dirt."

Prior to starting Pudenz Irrigation, Pudenz was a golf course superintendent for several years. Yet he'd always hoped to pursue his own venture, one based on a clear distinction from other irrigation businesses. Pudenz and his wife moved forward with that plan, and four years later, "Here we are," he says.

In addition to making contacts with and garnering recommendations from local and national associations — contacts he says many businesses don't take the time to make — the young entrepreneur also differentiates himself with respectable presentation. "After all, the only way to get ahead of everyone else is to do your own thing and let the competition worry about you."

Of water conservation, Pudenz advises the industry to learn and teach proper watering practices. "From my end, in the irrigation field, we're using new technology like smart controllers and more subsurface drip irrigation and are designing more efficient systems. Without a properly designed and installed irrigation system, a landscape will never look as good as when it was first installed." — *Marisa Shoemaker*

**Rob Shauger**

*President, Advanced Applications Tree & Lawn Service, Utica, N.Y.*

**Age:** 33; **Years in industry:** 13

**Why he's one to watch:** With an understanding of how involvement can help build a business, Rob Shauger hopes to pass the message along to younger business owners.

With an associate's degree in turfgrass management from SUNY Cobleskill, Rob Shauger initially had his sights set on the golf industry. When he realized that climbing the ladder at a high-end golf club wasn't for him, Shauger joined New England-based Lawn Mark Lawn Care Service as a lawn care technician. Here he had a well-rounded experience, building a tree and shrub program, becoming an area manager



and selling residential services.

Eventually the company was acquired, and after a short time with the new owner, Shauger branched out on his own. In 1997, out of the back of a Ford Explorer, he started Advanced Applications Tree & Lawn Service. "I had nothing to lose, so off I went," Shauger recalls.

Ten years later, after building a solid business, Shauger spends his spare time involved in state and national associations so he can be a part of something "bigger and better" than himself and his business. "Whether it's a local, state or national organization — you don't have to reinvent the wheel," says Shauger, who is also a regular contributor to online landscape discussion boards. "Whatever you're doing, there are already others who have gone through it and have made the mistakes so you don't have to."

In addition to one day opening up a second location for his business, Shauger hopes to become more involved in helping other business people. "The things that keep me enthused are the camaraderie and also continuing to educate the public about who we are and what we do," Shauger says. — *Marisa Palmieri*

**Chip Sorblom**

*Turf and irrigation manager, D. Foley Landscape, South Walpole, Mass.*

**Age:** 30; **Years in industry:** 1½

**Why he's one to watch:** A golf industry transplant, Chip Sorblom comes to the landscape side of life armed with both the technical and management know-how to succeed.



There's little doubt Chip Sorblom has the technical knowledge to excel in the landscape industry. With a bachelor's degree in plant and soil sciences and an associate's degree in turfgrass management, he seems to perfectly fit the description as a turf and irrigation manager.

Add to that an attention to detail he sharpened during eight years as an assistant golf course superintendent, and you've got a landscape company's dream job applicant. "Chip is only 30 years old and already making a really impressive impact in our company and the industry," D. Foley President Dan Foley says.

The breadth of skills necessary to succeed in the golf industry has given Sorblom an invaluable base of knowledge for his current position. "When you prepare yourself to be a golf course superintendent, you have to wear a lot of hats," explains Sorblom, naming disease identification, irrigation repair, crew management and budgeting as just a few of skills he's transferred from the golf course.

Since joining D. Foley, Sorblom has wasted no time acclimating himself to the industry, attending educational events and accompanying Foley on visits to other contractors' businesses. "His can-do attitude is contagious and his desire to learn is invigorating," Foley says.

As such, Sorblom has championed or participated in various company initiatives, including training, safety,



bringing irrigation in-house and lean management. So far, he's learned that there's always more to learn. He advises: "Go to conferences, take classes, educate yourself and stay updated on what's new." — *Marisa Palmieri*

#### **Chad Stern**

*Owner, Mowing & More,  
Chevy Chase, Md.*

**Age:** 19

**Years in industry:** 3

**Why he's one to watch:** He may be a young entrepreneur, but he has the focus of a veteran businessman.

This past spring Chad Stern counted a birthday invitation as one of his great accomplishments as a landscape contractor.

One of Stern's drivers at his landscape company, Mowing & More, invited him to his birthday party.

As it turned out, Stern was the only person outside of the employee's family in attendance. Stern was touched. "He wanted me there to meet his family and to introduce me to them as 'his boss,'" he says. "That was special for me because it reinforced how important of a role I played and that I should never compromise my relationship with my employees."

Stern considers fostering stable relationships with his employees and providing quality service to clients as the two main tenets of his company's success and sage advice he would pass on to young landscape contractors starting out in the industry. Mowing & More tends 150 accounts, 99 percent of them residential. "Always make sure your work for the client is top notch and done well and make sure you take care of your employees because both can always go elsewhere," Stern says. "It may seem fairly obvious, but sometimes you need to hear it to reinforce and emphasize these needs." — *Mike Zawacki*

#### **Mike Ward**

*Estimating manager,  
landscape installation,  
Ruppert Nurseries, Atlanta*

**Age:** 35

**Years in industry:** 18

**Why he's one to watch:** In three years, he helped grow his company by \$11.3 million. Enough said.

Mike Ward enjoys the feeling of progress and growth that working in the green industry provides him. "It's exciting to see a big patch of dirt on a construction site turn back into a green space that people can again enjoy and to know that you were a

part of making that happen," he says.

On the business side, Ward was a part of the team responsible for the redevelopment of Ruppert Landscape in the Atlanta market. "Getting back into the landscape picture was challenging, but in three years we have taken our annual sales revenue from \$1.2 million in 2004 to \$12.5 million in 2006," he says.

Commitment to the client was a major factor in that growth, Ward says. Not to mention staying on top of industry advancements, such as technology, planting practices and company make-up. In fact, Ward predicts a rebirth of the small- to medium-size landscape contractor who has a knack for adapting well to these types of changes. "The companies that are going to succeed are not necessarily the ones that are the biggest or the cheapest," he says. "The companies that can keep pace with these changes provide excellent quality, a fair price and maintain outstanding customer service will be the ones that ultimately succeed and become industry leaders." — *Mike Zawacki*

#### **Kevin Wiebe**

*North County Lawn Care,  
Ferndale, Wash.*

**Age:** 22

**Years in industry:** 4

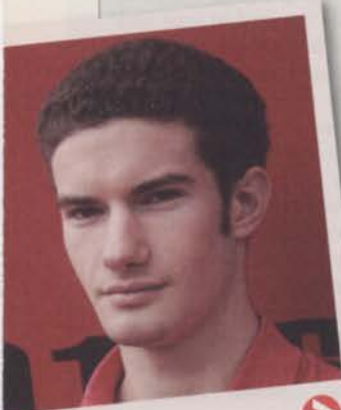
**Why he's one to watch:** He believes in improving efficiency and building supplier loyalty.

Beginning his business with a handful of properties, Kevin Wiebe currently manages more than 250 accounts as owner and founder of North County Lawn Care. His venture, which began in 2002, is an outlet for Wiebe's passion to improve the appearance of single-family homes, as well as small developments.

Wiebe speaks to the importance of the industry's future by following environmentally safe practices, such as using the correct materials for each job and limiting waste.

According to Josh Levien, sales manager, Carl's Mower & Saw, Ferndale, Wash., Wiebe's accomplishments include "rapidly growing a strong and highly profitable customer base and implementing his trucks to be very efficient," adding that Wiebe is "incredibly loyal to his suppliers."

"I see this industry continuing to grow as it has been," Wiebe says. "People want to spend more time with their families and friends, but they still desire a manicured lawn and yard." — *Marisa Shoemaker*







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Photo: Beata Suchenek/Dreamstime.com



# Making Them Pay

What do you do when a client refuses to pay?

*Lawn & Landscape* online message board participants share their war stories and debate ways to get what their clients agreed to pay for services rendered.

**Y**ou want to make your clients pay. Say it out loud and it sounds menacing. However, customers who don't pay for services rendered are just as evil and are a critical problem for contractors. A contractor mows a commercial property or applies a pesticide-fertilizer combination product on a residential lawn, but the client just won't pay up. It's akin to a dine-and-dash scenario in the restaurant industry. There's no way a contractor can "take back" the job or service that's been performed.

So what is a contractor's recourse to ensure he or she gets paid? This was a key question recently debated among *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board participants. Mike Kulp, owner of Grass Roots Landscaping in Broadway, Va., says he has a past client who owes him enough money that it's worthwhile for him to take action. Kulp had planned to file for a judgment,

*continued on page 68*

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continued from page 65

but had heard it doesn't guarantee payment. He also pursued filing a lien, but the client doesn't officially own the property (an investment company does, a member of which is another client).

"Is there a better alternative?" Kulp asks. "I don't want to burn any bridges, but I want my money."

Andrew Aksar, owner of Outdoor Finishes in Walkersville, Md., posts he researches the land records for each job he prices. If the property is deeded to "John Doe" then "John Doe" signs the contract. Or, if the property is deeded to "John and Helen Doe" then both of those individuals must sign the contract.

Kulp admits he did not have a signed contract, however he has had a five-year history with the client, who is a chronic late payer. "I know I should have had a contract," he says. "I was under the impression that a history of services rendered, and a

history of payment – however infrequently – for those services served as proof of acceptance. I know I should have dropped him long ago, but he's secured me other contracts, and he's always been good for payment after a reminder call."

In most cases, a contractor must provide exhibits proving the client agreed to use his services and that the client agreed to the costs and terms. "In other words, you'll need to provide signed documentation," Aksar says. "Otherwise, you're more or less out of luck."

All is not lost, though. A contractor, Aksar says, can simply speak to the client in person and, with a pleasant, non-confrontational attitude, ask what is delaying payment.

Another course of action is to turn the claim over to a collection agency.

"About 14 years ago we did a seeding job for someone without anything in writing," Aksar posts. "I found a

local collection company that was willing to take the account and about 60 days later I got my money."

Many contractors posted to the message board that laws regarding filing liens and judgments against a client, as well as what constitutes a valid contract, can differ from state to state, and even from county to county within a state. Contractors should check with their own legal counsel first before taking any measures on their own.

**DEALING WITH IT.** It's not unusual for a landscape contractor to engage in a payment dispute after the client receives his monthly bill and calls into question whether a service was actually performed.

Contractors posted complaints about customers who did not believe their grass was cut or a fertilizer or pesticide was applied or thought they were overcharged for a service.

## 5 tips to collecting on past-due accounts

**C**hasing after unpaid accounts is an agonizing duty for landscape contractors. Craig Davidson, president of Landry & Jacobs, a Phoenix-based commercial and consumer debt collection agency offers five keys to managing, controlling and collecting accounts receivable.

1. The most effective collectors are those who leave emotion out of the equation. Speak directly, courteously and remain accountable. Contacting the past-due client and administering new deadlines or ultimatums will do nothing to resolve the underlying debt.
2. When dealing with a corporation or an LLC, obtain a personal guarantor. Without it, if the company should go out of business or dissolve, you generally have no recourse or legally responsible party to pursue.
3. Any landscape contractor who does not have the capability to accept checks or credit cards by phone has one hand tied behind his back. If you reach a past-due customer and have his attention, you must have the ability to secure payment at that instant.
4. Faced with a Non-Sufficient Funds (NSF) check, one method of securing funds is a little known process called "cashing" where you may present the check to the account holder's bank and have it converted into a cashier's check. This will immediately secure the funds.
5. As a last resort, find a strong, effective and reliable collection agency that has no up-front fees, capability to report to credit bureaus, appropriate licensing and, possibly, expertise specific to the landscape industry.



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"They can't see the application that we put down (granular turf application) and therefore act like we have not done so," posts Greg Bashaw, chief executive officer of Fairway Landscape in Long Island, N.Y. "I spoke to a customer after I cleaned leaves from a certain part of his backyard, then he stated that it was never done. The kicker was that I personally did the work myself with my crew. He actually argued with me about this."

These sorts of disagreements happen all of the time, and some can be remedied while others sometimes end poorly, contractors post.

For example, Daniel Hanson, of SCLM Co. in Laverne, Calif., shared with the message board that the treasurer of one of the homeowner's association properties he maintains called into question what his firm charged to plant annual color, arguing the plants could be bought cheaper if purchased from the local big-box retail outlet. This client, a customer

for nearly a decade, also recently questioned the labor rates for irrigation repair. "The crowning blow was when this guy insisted I let him follow our irrigation technician next time he was out so he could watch him work and understand what he does when he is there," Hanson says.

Leaf removal was a sore spot with contractors, adding their greatest aggravation came from clients questioning if the service was performed after they saw new leaves on the ground. "Working on a windy day when leaves are falling can be a complete waste of time and your customer's money," posts Jamie Bush, president of Jamie's Lawn Service in Plano, Texas.

Regarding leaf removal, Bush adds client complaints don't bother him as much as the neighbors' complaints. For example, one client's neighbor ordered Bush to clean up his yard because he believed Bush's crew blew the leaves into his yard.

"I explained we didn't do any such

thing," Bush says. "He said I should clean them up anyway because they were from his neighbor's tree, not his. I told him calmly, 'Hey, if you want to pay, I'll clean them up.'"

"With leaf removal, I tell my crews to take pictures of the finished work as the yard may be covered with leaves in just a few hours," says Chad Stern, owner of Mowing & More in Chevy Chase, Md.

Contractor Bill Atwood says addressing client concerns about services performed is part of the business. In fact, he recently faced this issue with a client questioning whether he applied winterizer to her lawn.

"I told her it was OK to question why her grass was not green but not OK to question my integrity," Atwood says. "If I billed her for putting down winterizer, I damned sure put it down. I told her she needed to find someone else to take care of her lawn. If they don't trust me, I don't need the work." ■



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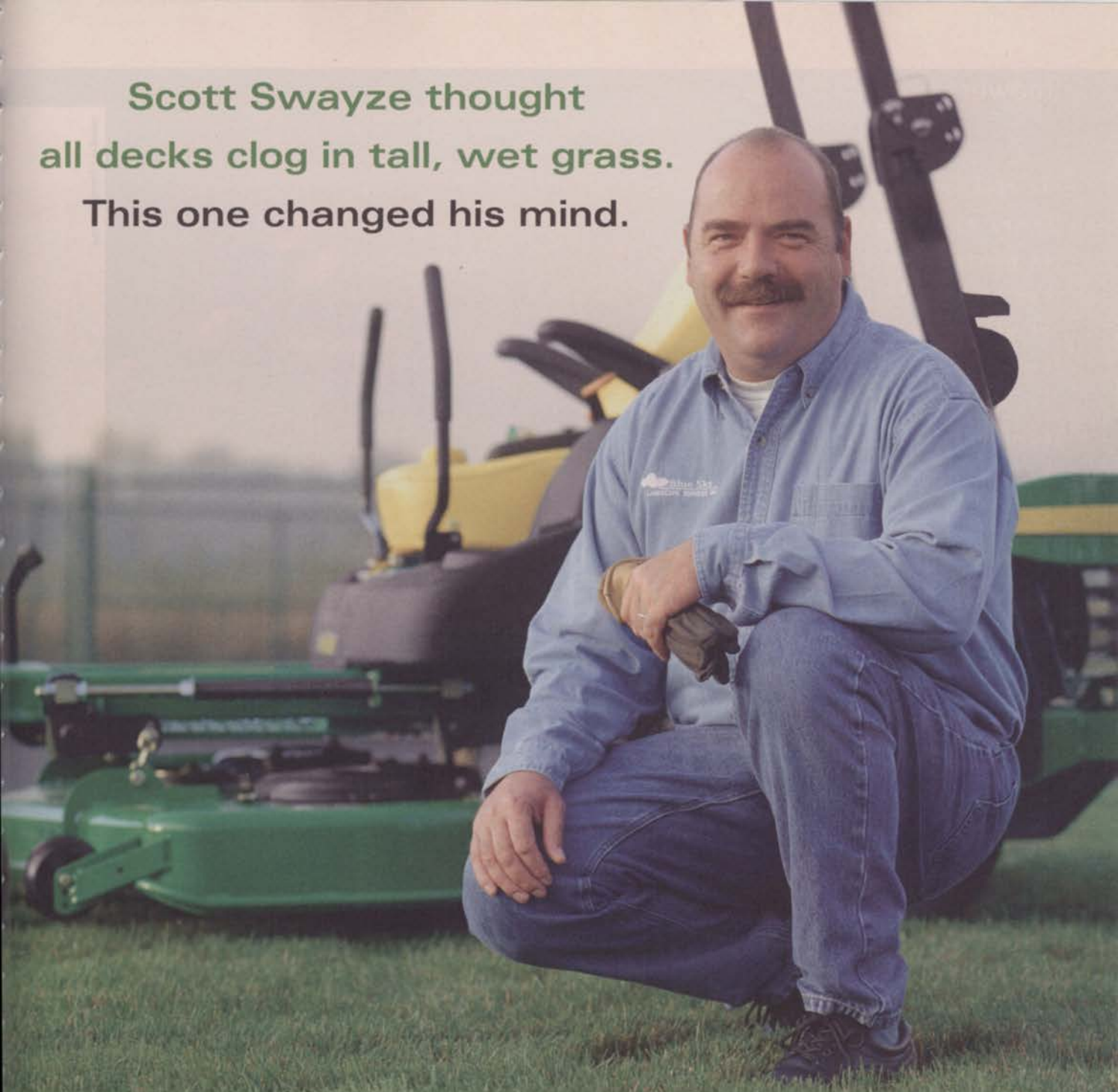
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To make mowing lawns as productive as possible, a combination of efficient equipment and crews is a contractor's best bet.

# Get the Most Out of Mowing

Photo: Massey Ferguson

**B**rian Elliot picked a good time to start his landscape business, Elliot's Lawn Service, as walk-behind mowers were hot new items on the market. "Walk-behind mowers were much more productive than the standard garden tractor – we thought we were in heaven," Elliot says. As his Warsaw, Ind.-based business started to pick up and many residents in Elliot's high-end neighborhood began utilizing his services, the company decided to try out a riding mower and were pleasantly surprised at how much more efficient the machine made his crew. "We realized we could mow two to three times as many properties," he explains.

Mowing lawns has long been the backbone of the landscape industry, but as the times have changed the equipment has changed, and there is currently a variety of machinery to choose from to make mowing lawns more efficient than ever before. Elliot's business currently has five zero-turn, four riding, one walk-behind and four or five push mowers, and insists a contractor needs all types of mowers for maximum productivity. In fact, most landscape contractors agree that, no matter how efficient

by emily mullins | assistant editor



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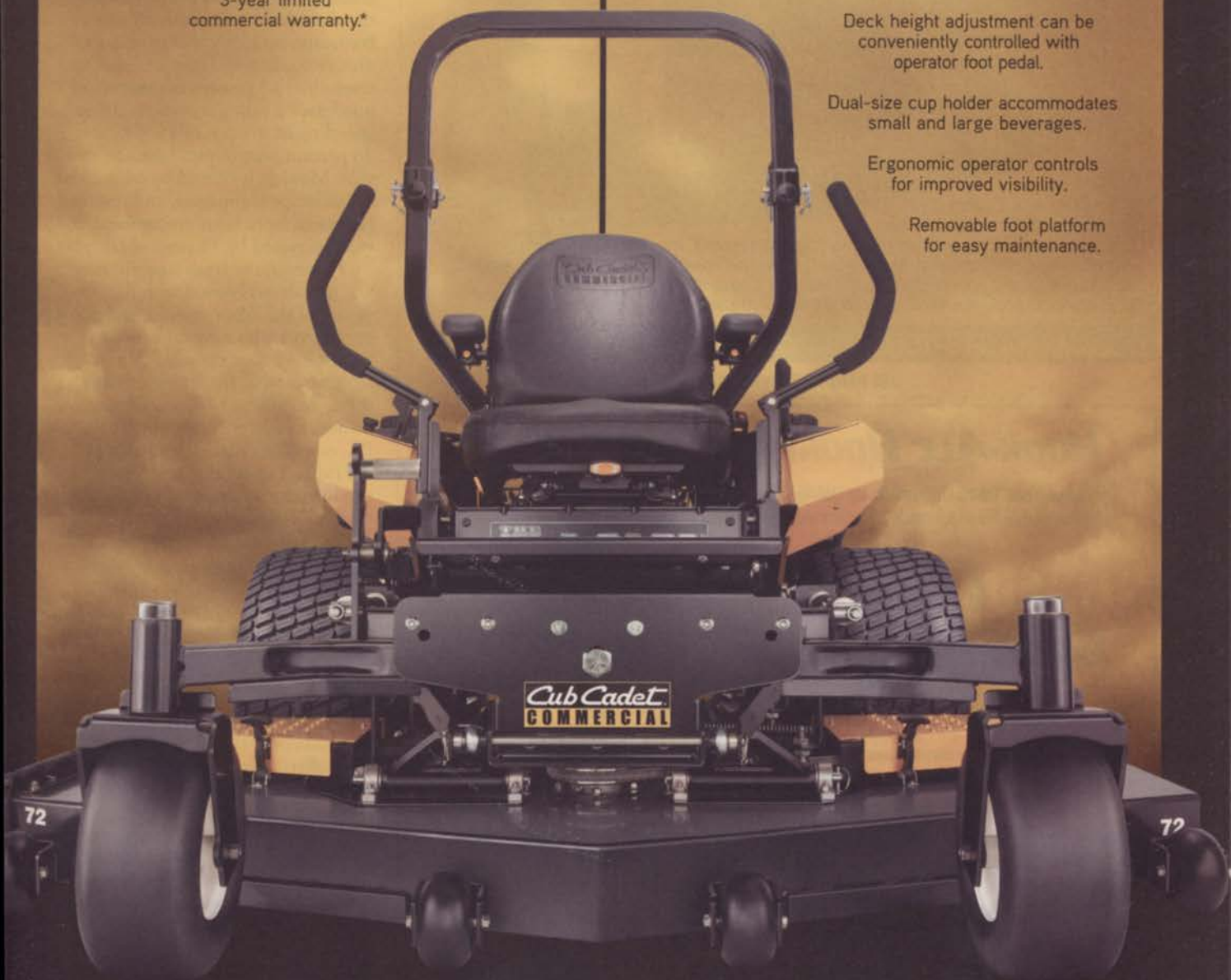
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riding mowers become, walk-behinds will always be necessary for businesses to be as productive as possible.

"It's the age-old dilemma of productivity vs. quality," Elliot says. "You have to use the machine that will give the best performance based on what your client wants."

**RIDING MOWERS.** The riding mower is an advancement that has made mowing lawns easier, faster and more productive for virtually every landscape company that invests in one. According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, 30.5 percent of contractors purchased a riding mower in 2006, spending an average of \$9,976, and 26 percent plan to purchase one this year. Mowing is offered by 68 percent of landscape companies, and revenue generated from lawn maintenance services increased by 15 percent last year.

However, the landscape industry was not always blessed with the efficiency of the riding mower, and many contractors who now can't imagine working without these machines remember what life was like before them. According to Kevin Greene, owner of Liberty Landscape, Paoli, Pa., one of the main advantages of the riding mower is that it boosts productivity by drastically decreasing operator fatigue.

"It's the difference between standing and sitting all day – you can obviously get more done," he explains. "With a riding mower, we can mow two lawns in less time than it took us to mow one lawn with a walk-behind mower, using the same amount of people."

Manufacturers continue to tweak the features of riding mowers each year, offering contractors more comfortable machines that operate even more efficiently.

According to Tim Cromley, marketing manager for Walker Manufacturing Co., Fort Collins, Colo., recent advancements have focused on engines, particularly the introduction of electronic fuel injection into compact engines. "Engine improvements have allowed for more power and speed, and also better fuel efficiency," he explains. This is an important and timely improvement, as contractors think increased fuel prices will have the largest effect on their businesses in 2007, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research.



## staying in shape

One thing contractors should consider when using riding mowers is the physical condition of their crews. Often times, the physical exercise crews receive from using walk-behind or push mowers is traded for the productivity of a riding mower.

"When we started using riding mowers we weren't in as good of shape as we were when using a walk-behind because we weren't walking as much," says Brian Elliot, owner of Elliot's Lawn Service, Warsaw, Ind. "But, in terms of productivity, purchasing riding mowers was something we had to do to keep our company going."

The lack of exercise was both good and bad for his company, Elliot says.

New members of Elliot's crew understand that their first responsibilities will be operating the riding mowers, as it's the easiest job to teach. "We find it more productive to put the new guys on riding mowers in open fields to give them the chance to learn how the equipment works," he explains.

The more experienced members of Elliot's crew are usually assigned to footwork duties that require a good deal of upper body strength and stamina, such as trimming, which Elliot feels is the bottle-neck of lawn maintenance. "Your company is only as good as your trimmer is," he explains. While the men operating riding mowers are certainly less tired at the end of the work day, they need to be in good physical shape to move up within the company, a task that is difficult to accomplish while sitting on a mower, Elliot says.

As the clients in Elliot's high-end neighborhood follow a trend of preferring to have their lawns push-mowed, more and more of his guys are being taken off the riding mowers and are walking once again. While some rejected the idea at first, others are finding it has some advantages, such as getting themselves in shape to take on other positions within the company, as well as other aspects of their lives. "Some of the guys hated resorting back to the walk-behind or push mowers because they got less tired riding all day," Elliot explains. "But some don't mind because they're at the point in their lives where they're looking for serious girlfriends and want to be in good shape to help them out in their search."



Photo: Dixie Chopper

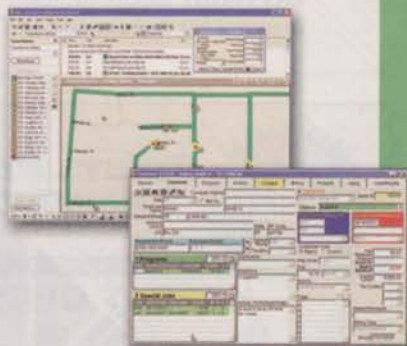
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Recent improvements in ergonomics have aimed to significantly improve operator comfort, which allows crews to work longer without feeling the effects. Frame-suspension seats with adjustable armrests allow operators to sit comfortably for longer periods of time, and the general layout of the machine has simplified, placing operational features within easy reach and making monitoring

Torrance, Calif. "Operator controls need to be easily accessible from the operator's seat, and the seat must be comfortable and include suspension for a more comfortable ride."

Sturdier tires are being added to riding mowers to make for a smoother ride, and the machines are being made heavier to act as a shock absorber when used on rough terrain. "We try not to make it a workout for

eight to 10 hours a day and we don't want them to feel like they've been in a train wreck."

Perhaps one of the most productive advancements in riding mowers is the creation of the zero-turn mower. Zero-turn mowers are run by hydrostatic drives, which run on hydraulic fluid, and are driven by two separate handles that control each tire motor independently, allowing the machine to turn on the spot. "Zero-turn mowers provide greater speed and maneuverability than typical riding mowers," Youdbulis says.

Purchasing a zero-turn mower was a decision that ultimately allowed Jim Thorpe's company, The "J" Boys Lawn Maintenance & Landscaping, Carneys Point, N.J., to stay in business. "By utilizing the new advancements in riding mowers, particularly the zero-turn mower, we've been able to increase our efficiency to a point that allows our customers to afford us," he explains. "Using the old,

**"With a riding mower, we can mow two lawns in less time than it takes us to mow one lawn with a walk-behind mower, using the same amount of people." - Kevin Greene**

displays self-explanatory. "Comfort and ergonomics go hand in hand," says Tamara Youdbulis, turf product manager for Kubota Tractor Corp.,

the operator," says Jeff Haltom, vice president and general manager of Dixie Chopper, Coatesville, Ind. "Guys can be on these machines sometimes



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standard steering-wheel machines, we would have to increase our prices by at least 40 percent to make the same amount of money per hour that we make now."

Thorpe would charge, on average, \$70 per lawn using a standard riding mower, and he can now charge \$25 per lawn using a zero-turn. "Using out dated equipment, it's hard to compete price-wise," he says. "In terms of pro-

ductivity, riding mowers, specifically zero-turn, are the way to go – there's just no way around it."

they're self-propelled and can cut taller grass."

Greene's company maintains multiple condominium properties and prefers to use its 36- and 52-inch walk-behinds for these particular jobs.

Elliot also finds his walk-behinds to be more productive on properties with a lot of curbs or obstacles, as they can be easier to maneuver. "Many times, ramps are necessary



Photo: Walker Mowers

ductivity, riding mowers, specifically zero-turn, are the way to go – there's just no way around it."

**WALK-BEHINDS.** Most contractors find walk-behinds to be ideal for cutting hard-to-reach areas, like around trees and under swing sets, and can also easily fit through gates in the average backyard. According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, 31 percent of contractors purchased a walk-behind mower in 2006, spending an average of \$4,549. This year, 23 percent of contractors plan to purchase a walk-behind mower.

A step-up from push mowers, landscape crews can be more productive with walk-behinds because of their power and speed. "Walk-behinds perform functions similar to that of push mowers, but with commercial ability," Greene says. "Walk-behinds are twice as wide as push mowers,

for riding mowers to get up and over things like curbs," he explains. "This is not necessary for walk-behinds."

From a quality standpoint, walk-behinds can cause less wear and tear to turf over time because of their lighter weight. "Riding mowers can offer more of a challenge because they are heavier and can cause more turf damage, even for experienced mowers," Elliot explains. "Walk-behinds are much lighter, making it easier to maintain the quality of the turf."

In fact, some of Elliot's clients specifically request their lawns to be mowed with walk-behinds or push mowers because he feels they see more value in it. "We have four or five customers who won't let us use anything but walk-behinds or push mowers on their properties," he explains. "Even though we're getting the same job done, I feel it's a perception people have that if they get their lawn

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## mowers

push-mowed they care more about what their lawn looks like. It costs the customer a bit more, but I think it's becoming a sign of status."

Like riding mowers, walk-behinds are also being made better over the years with advancements and improvements. According to Thomas Beeson, marketing product specialist for Massey Ferguson Commercial Equipment, Duluth, Ga., some of the technology from zero-turn mowers, such as hydrostatic engines, is going into walk-behinds, making the machines more powerful and fuel efficient.

Another improvement to the productivity of walk-behinds is attachable ride-behind devices, or sulkies. These help eliminate operator fatigue while still giving the performance of

"I have found that the productivity of a two-man crew stays at peak level. Adding a third person causes the productivity to decrease."  
- Jim Thorpe

a walk-behind mower. "Walk-behinds are currently being made better to last longer, but we believe the machines are only as productive as the guy walking behind it," Dixie Chopper's Haltom says.

### THE MAN BEHIND THE MACHINE.

Haltom makes a good point, as no matter how efficient a landscape business' equipment is, a reliable crew is necessary to get the jobs done and to get them done well. Most contractors conduct their businesses in such a way that downtime of both their machines and their men is limited.

Thorpe employs two-man crews, which he says are most efficient for his business. During his years in the business, he has found that a three-man crew can make \$80 an hour on a good day, while a two-man crew can consistently make \$70-plus.

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Photo: Walker Mowers

"I have found that the productivity of a two-man crew stays at peak level," he says. "Adding a third person really causes the productivity to decrease – the staff seems to stall more and there is less teamwork. A two-man crew just works better."

While on the road, each of Thorpe's crews covers a 30- to 35-mile radius. However, instead of completing an entire area all in one day, Thorpe will stagger jobs to leave opportunities to service unexpected or emergency calls.

"By staggering areas, we have been able to get to customers who call unexpectedly or call because of some special occasion, like a wedding or a party," he explains. "If they call from an area we were in two days ago, it's not such an inconvenience because the crew will most likely be near that area at some time during the day."

Greene has one two-man crew that handles mowing, trimming and other lawn maintenance, as well as property management. To make sure his guys get where they're going in the most efficient way possible, Greene tells them

what route to take instead of letting them plan their own route. Under the supervision of a crew leader who reports to Greene, the men establish a routine doing the same routes with the same machinery each week. "Once a crew gets into a routine, it becomes second nature to them," he explains. "By mid-season, you can throw in an extra yard or two when necessary, and the men can easily find a way to fit it into their daily schedule because they are so efficient at what they're doing."

Greene's employees are salaried, meaning they make the same amount of money no matter how long it takes them to get the job done. This is incentive for them to be as efficient as possible, because when the work is done, they can send themselves home. "By having salaried employees, they make their own incentive to be efficient," Greene says.

According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, mower operators earn an average of \$17,000 to \$22,500 a year depending on experience, and foremen earn an average of \$31,077 a year.

continued on page 82

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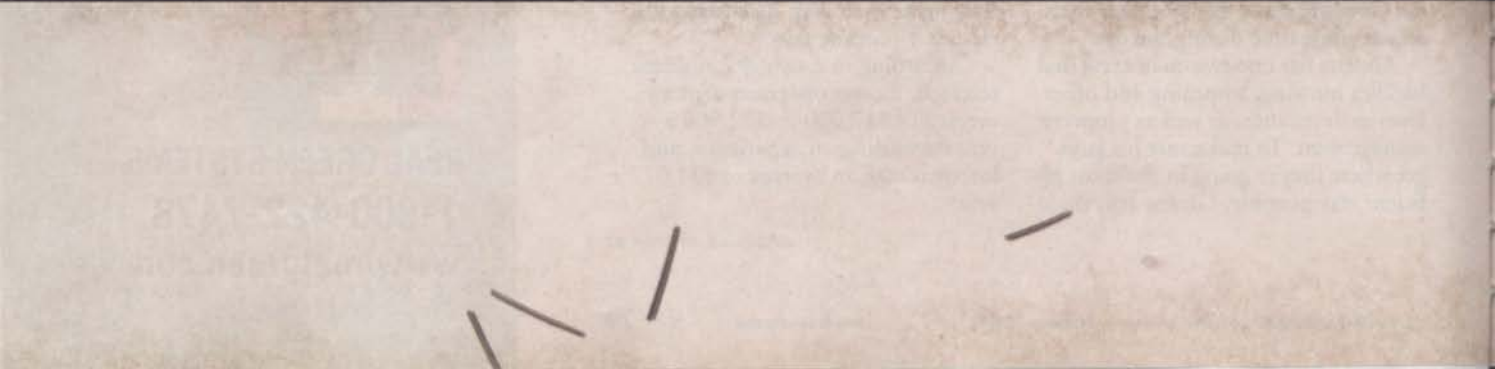
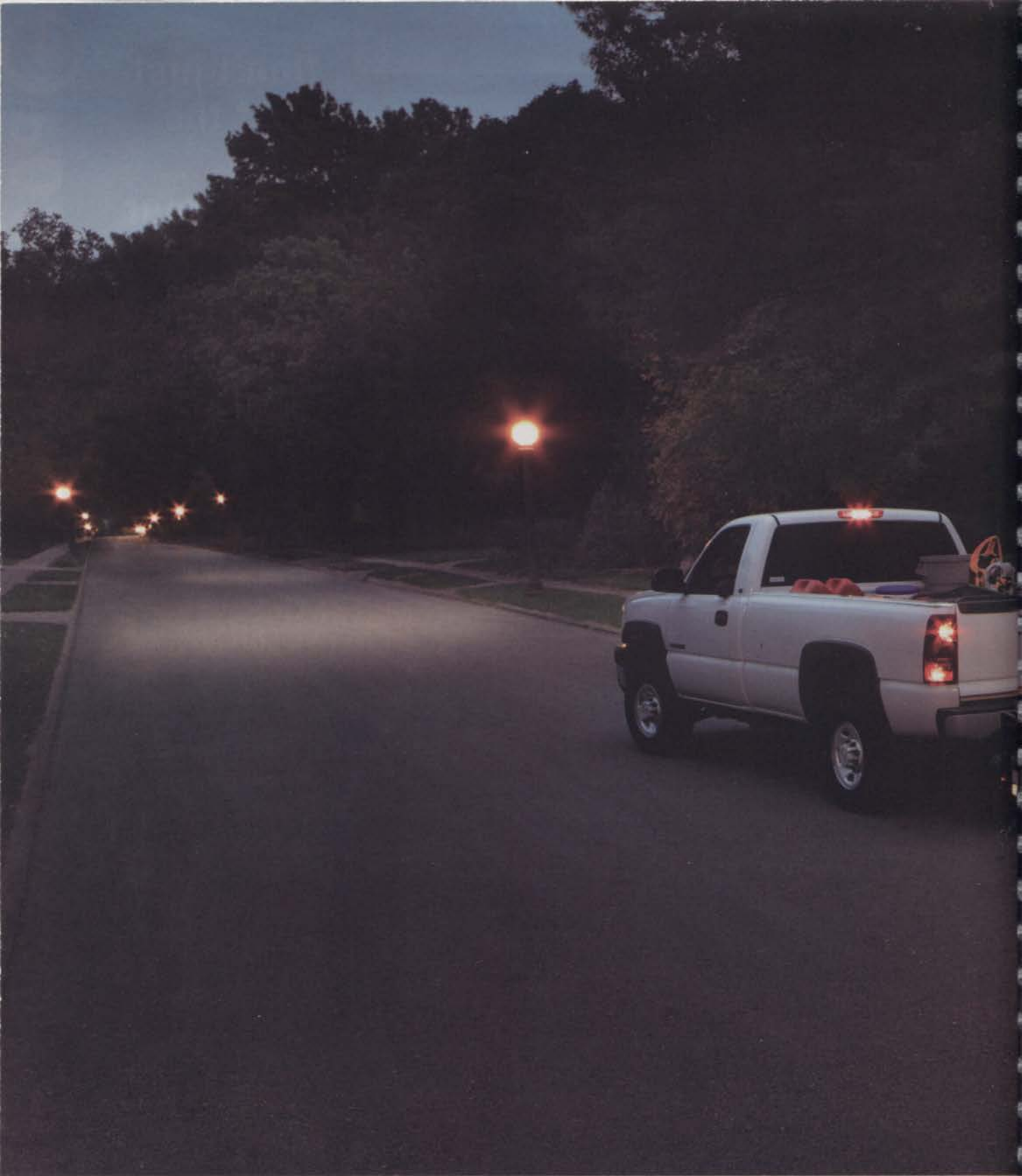
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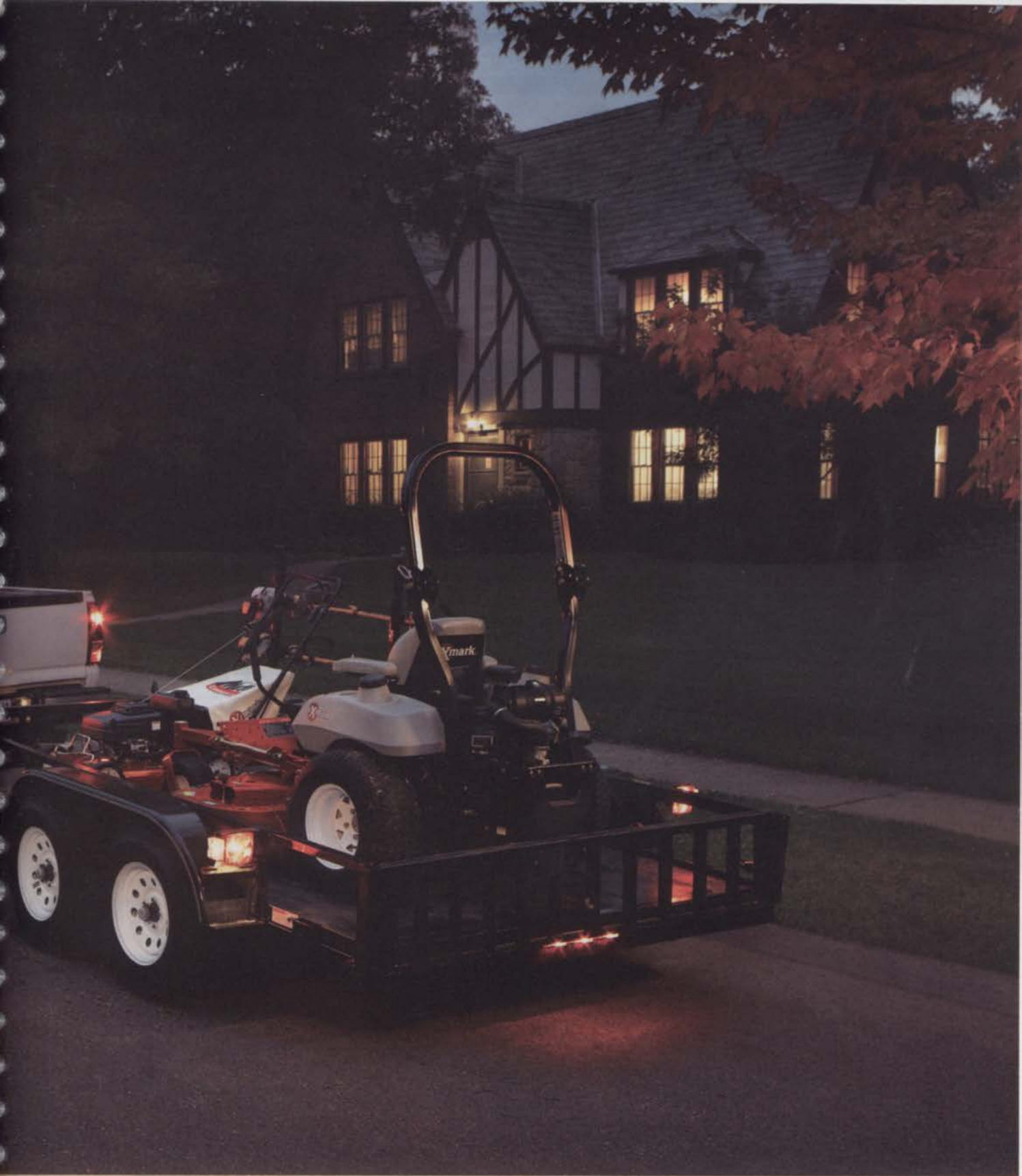
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continued from page 75

Elliot runs his business in a similar way, and trusts that his men will get the job done well without having to be micromanaged. His crews tend to 220 properties by keeping tight routes maintaining large clusters of lawns. Elliot's employees know what they are responsible for completing and has a flexible schedule to get it done.

"We have an environment where everyone knows what they need to get done," Elliot says. "The guys communicate with each other if someone is going to be late or if there's a problem – they employ a 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' mentality. It's a trust system that my guys won't take advantage of."

**DECREASE DOWNTIME.** Another way landscape contractors aim to decrease downtime and increase productivity is by keeping their trucks loaded with equipment at all times to avoid having to load and unload it each day. Thorpe houses his company's loaded trucks in garages, and Greene uses enclosed trailers to haul his equipment, which also protects it from the elements. Elliot's company drives what he calls a "vanscaper," a truck large enough to haul three riding mowers, tool boxes and handheld equipment like air compressors and trimmers all at one time.

"Our vanscaper is probably the most important thing we've ever purchased in terms of productivity because we always have everything we need when we need it," Elliot says.

Performing routine maintenance is another important component of a productive company. According to Dick Tegtmeier, owner and chairman of the board for Encore Power Equipment, Beatrice, Neb., contractors should make sure to keep their mowers' engines clean, oil and air filters changed and blades sharp. Doing this regularly makes these expensive pieces of equipment last longer and perform better.

According to Tegtmeier, the average mower engine is meant to last 2,000 to 2,500 hours. Without regular maintenance that time can be cut in half. "I've seen engines meant to last 2,000 hours fail earlier than 1,000 hours if not properly maintained," he explains. "As these mowers get more and more expensive, it behooves contractors to pay close attention to regular maintenance, particularly on the engine. Those who do it often will see a tremendous difference in the machine's productivity as well as its appearance."

Efficient machinery and reliable crews are both important aspects of a productive landscape business, but a combination of the two is vital for the business to be as productive as possible. As Tegtmeier says, "A 48-inch deck will mow 48 inches and the rest is up to the operator." **LE**

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Photo: Dow AgroSciences

Smart postemergent herbicide use is a cost-effective way lawn care operators can give their clients great looking, weed-free lawns.

# Easy Does It

If weeds are like rain, then postemergent herbicides are an umbrella. Although it's too late to prevent the weeds from sprouting, postemergents can provide a way to still maintain a weed-free lawn.

Postemergents are a critical component of almost all lawn care programs because they are most often necessary to eliminate weeds that penetrate preemergent barriers. While preemergent herbicides are great at combating weeds before germination, postemergents control weeds that break through despite a lawn care operator's (LCO's) best efforts to keep them away.

"If you need to take control of weeds that have already sprouted, using postemergent herbicides is the only way to do it," says Gary LaScalea, president of GroGreen, based in Plano, Texas. "Preemergents control many weeds before they grow, but postemergents treat all of the others."

Because postemergents are so important to lawn care, knowing how to use them properly is important for all LCOs and their crews. While the process may be second nature to some, emerging trends and advancements always leave something new to be learned.

by emily mullins | assistant editor



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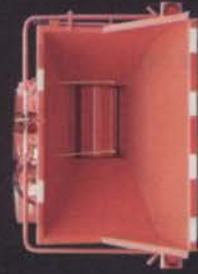
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**WHY APPLY?** "Weeds are invasive, and they compete with turf for water and nutrients," says Mark Urbanowski, senior marketing specialist for Dow AgroSciences, Indianapolis. "When weeds out-compete the desired turf species, they can have a harmful effect on humans, as many have thorns and pollen, which can

our No. 1 priority," LaScalea says. "If you can't keep weeds out of your clients' lawns, you can't keep customers happy."

Weed control is a significant service in the landscape industry, offered by 58 percent of LCOs, according to 2006 *Lawn & Landscape* research. Revenue generated from pesticide

services increased by 20 percent from 2005 to 2006. Based on the research, 53 percent of LCOs purchased postemergent herbicides in the past year, spending an average of

\$2,741. This year, approximately 7 percent of LCOs plan to offer weed control as a new service, and 47 percent plan to purchase postemergent herbicides.

When it comes to using postemer-

gents, Jeff Bowen, president of Images of Green, located in Stuart, Fla., has a relatively simple outlook. "The reality of it is, we can spray weeds quicker than we can pull them," he explains. "Time-wise, I don't think anyone could say any different."

Bowen's career in the lawn care industry began as teenager working for his father's landscape business in Chicago, Ill. The company controlled all of its customer's weeds manually, which was backbreaking and time-consuming work.

"We don't spend even as much as 1/100th of the time on weed control now as we did back then," Bowen says, crediting herbicides to the time savings. "These days, weed control is so efficient I rarely even have to think about that portion of my business."

Images of Green has offered postemergent weed control for the past 15 years, and the service comprises about 10 percent of the company's business. While Bowen considers it a profitable

**"If you need to take control of weeds that have already sprouted, using postemergent herbicides is the only way to do it."**

**- Gary LaScalea**

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service, it's not just postemergent applications that generate a profit – it's all of the services that make up a lawn care package as a whole that keep his company in business.

"Postemergent application is a profitable service, but it's only part of the big picture, which includes everything we do: mowing, fertilizing, trimming, insect control, monthly walkthroughs, and so on," Bowen says. "Weed control is part of that bundle so there is no doubt in my mind that the service is profitable."

Some pesticide treatments can be more profitable than others. For instance, according to John Lucas, owner of Lucas Lawns, Medina, Ohio, grub control can be equally profitable based on the product you use and depending on how you price the service. Tim Doppel, owner of Atwood LawnCare, Sterling Heights, Mich., says weed control in beds can be about 20 percent more profitable than turf applications because it's generally



Weed control is offered by 58 percent of lawn care operators in the industry, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research. Photo: Dow AgroSciences

sold as a premium service. (See "Bed Time" on page 94.)

**PICKING A PESTICIDE.** Before you can profit from a postemergent application, you first must have a product to work with. Many factors must be considered when deciding which postemergent herbicide is right for your business, and sometimes the most reliable way to figure it out is through old-fashioned trial and error.

"It wasn't easy to choose which herbicide to use," Lucas says. "The first year I was in the business I took advice from different suppliers and tried many different products."

When it came time to make a decision, Lucas considered three main factors: effectiveness, safety and price, in that order. "For me, price is way down the line," he explains. "You might initially

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save some money by purchasing an inexpensive herbicide, but you end up using more of it to control the weed and spending more money in the long run."

LaScalea agrees, as he compares the quality of his company to the quality of the products it uses. "From my experience, I've found that some

herbicide companies market totally on price and those products don't always produce the best results," he says.

On average, crabgrass postemergent costs about \$66 per gallon and broadleaf postemergent costs about \$10 per gallon, making them less expensive than their preemergent counterparts, which can cost \$195

per gallon, Doppel says. Liquid and granular are the most popular forms of postemergent herbicides and each have characteristics that differentiate it from the other.

Urbanowski suggests LCOs learn about the different products available and know exactly what they need their herbicide to do before making a final choice. "Being educated on the topic is important," he says. "It all depends on a lawn care operator's geography and the problematic weed species. Interacting with the basic manufacturers and local extension services will help a lawn care operator make the right decision about which postemergent is right for his business."

**SELLING YOUR SERVICE.** LCOs are beginning to take a new approach when it comes to selling their postemergent services. Straying away from

"If you don't have the application of an effective postemergent worked into your lawn care program, chances are your clients' lawns are full of weeds and you are not obliging the contracts you made with them."

- Scott Orndorff

selling individual applications, they are simply offering their clients beautiful, weed-free lawns, a practice they have found saves time and money because they can apply products on an as-needed basis.

"Many lawn care operators are beginning to sell whole lawn care maintenance programs vs. charging for each application," Urbanowski says. "This way, they can apply postemergent products as they are needed."

Bowen promises his clients a "weed-free appearance," which, in southern Florida, requires postemer-



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gent applications every two weeks in the spring, summer and fall, and every month in the winter.

"Anything less than that would not give a weed-free appearance," Bowen says. "The idea that weeds sprout overnight must have originated in Florida – weeds grow so fast here."

Bowen's crews apply liquid pos-

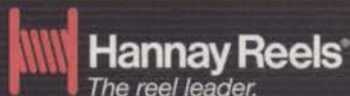
temergents using backpack sprayers. One of the company's main focuses is on weeds that sprout in the cracks of driveways and sidewalks, and around swimming pools and other hard-scapes. The company's promise of a weed-free appearance allows them to apply postemergents as needed, which mostly results in blanket applications

in the spring and summer and spot treatments in the fall and winter.

Lucas' Ohio-based business offers a full maintenance program that begins in early spring with a preemergent application, and lasts until late fall with postemergent applications. Lucas primarily uses liquid postemergents from mid-May through June to battle broadleaves that emerge until they become dormant in the fall.

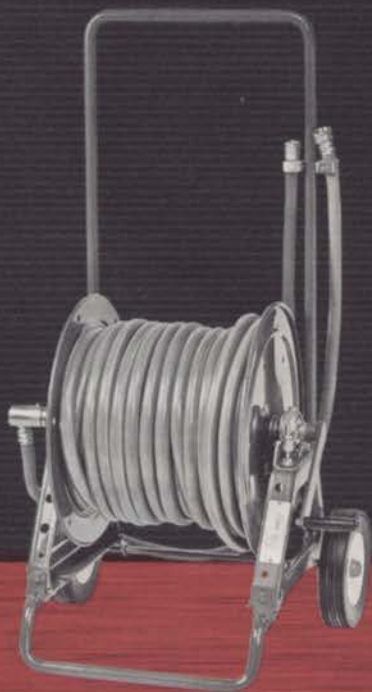
In Texas, LaScalea uses a mixture of a pre- and a postemergent in the springtime and uses a postemergent throughout the rest of the summer. "If you can time it right and treat a lawn with a pre- and a postemergent together, the products can work better and save time," he says. "It's kind of like a multivitamin that you would take to treat more than one ailment." In terms of pricing, many LCOs sell their weed control services per 1,000

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"Interacting with the basic manufacturers and local extension services will help a lawn care operator make the right decision about what postemergent is right for his business."

- Mark Urbanowski

square feet. According to Doppel, the average cost for lawn care services is about \$280 per year for four to six applications, averaging about \$45 to \$70 per visit.

"Clients pay to have a weed-free, green lawn," says Scott Orndorff, service center manager for LESCO, Upper Marlboro, Md. "If you don't have the application of an effective postemergent worked into your lawn care program, chances are your clients' lawns are full of weeds and you are not obliging the contracts you made with them."

USE READER SERVICE # 65



**SOMETHING NEW.** Manufacturers are always working on advancements in postemergents to make the products more efficient, and a lot of these new products are coming in twos. Urbanowski says recent advancements in postemergents include products with postemergent activity on young crabgrass and preemergent activity on other grassy and broadleaf weeds, as well as products that allow for better timing of simultaneous weed and grub control applications.

"Depending on the number of applications, these new products can either eliminate an individual application or provide larger windows of timing for other applications to be made," he says.

According to Jason Kuhlemeier, marketing specialist for Bayer Environmental Services, Research Triangle Park, N.C., additional advancements include longer lasting products that control larger weed spectrums and can be used on both warm- and cool-season lawns. These products aim to increase the speed of an herbicide's effectiveness and decrease the number of applications needed on each lawn. "Everybody is looking for a longer lasting product, as well as a product that can control a wider variety of weeds more effectively," Kuhlemeier says.

**SPRAYING SAFE.** Safety is critical when applying postemergents, especially in close proximity to residential homes, and the first steps to safe spraying are found on the product's label. "All technicians should read the label's directions before using a postemergent and then interact with their local extension agents and manufacturers for recommendations if they are unsure of a product and its use," Urbanowski says.

Along with reading the label, LCOs suggest requiring crews to attend regular safety-training meetings to keep everyone informed about new postemergent products and how to use them, as well as refresher courses on older products. Most brand name manufacturers offer support and training on the products they sell to ensure proper use.

"We have regular weekly training, and every time we introduce a new product we always review the label together in its entirety," LaScalea says. "We go over what safety equipment is

needed to perform the job, what the product does and doesn't do and then we have each member of the crew sign a paper that is kept in their personnel file documenting that they were trained on that specific item."

LaScalea even presents quizzes to his crews after the training to ensure the information is retained. The quizzes

vary depending on the topic being covered but usually consist of 20 to 25 questions. LaScalea requires crew members who perform poorly on the quizzes to review the information until they get it right. "The quizzes hold our guys accountable for the information we want them to know," he says. "It's probably one of the smartest



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moves we've made in awhile – if a technician makes a mistake out in the field, we have proof that they were taught how to do the job correctly.”

For those who regularly perform well, LaScalea offers small prizes as incentive for all of his guys to excel.

One of most important guidelines LaScalea believes technicians should follow is to only apply postemergents under the appropriate outdoor conditions. “Most postemergents shouldn't be used during stressful times of year, such as when it's really dry, windy or hot, particularly if the temperature is above 90 degrees,” LaScalea says.

Orndorff agrees and says that when the temperature is this hot, plants go dormant, and when a plant is not actively growing and taking in nutrients, the postemergent is not absorbed. Using postemergents in this weather could mean wasted product.

“It's not that my guys are lazy, but if it's 90 degrees outside and hasn't rained in awhile, it's not a good idea

“Most postemergents shouldn't be used if the temperature is above 90 degrees.”

– Gary LaScalea

to apply a postemergent,” Lucas says. “The herbicide might not even kill the weeds because weeds produce a waxy coating to protect themselves from extremely hot weather.”

It is difficult for a postemergent to take effect if applied in very dry conditions because the movement of water helps direct the herbicide to the weed's root where it can be absorbed. Similarly, in very windy conditions postemergents can be transported where they are not intended to go, creating potential to damage other plants. “You have to be careful how you spray postemergents – you can't just go around spraying them wherever you like,” Lucas says. “Safety always has to be in the mix somewhere.”

If used correctly, postemergents offer LCOs a relatively easy way to provide their clients with green, healthy lawns, which is what lawn care is all about. ■

As careful as lawn care operators (LCOs) must be when treating turf with postemergents, they must be even more careful when treating beds and ornamentals. Many LCOs save this job for their most experienced technicians.

“We definitely offer bed treatment as a service, but only certain technicians are allowed to perform it because it requires more expertise,” says Gary LaScalea, president of GroGreen, Plano, Texas. “We only want guys who have spent more time in the industry and can recognize things such as inappropriate weather conditions and ultra-sensitive plant types to work with pesticides that closely to a client's flower bed.”

One way bed treatment differs from turf treatment is that instead of applying the postemergent on top of the plant, you have to apply it around plants – plants that homeowners usually prize much more than their turf. “You have to be really careful where and how you spray a postemergent when you're working near someone's award-winning roses,” explains John Lucas, owner of Lucas Lawns, Medina, Ohio.

According to Lucas, the postemergents used to treat beds differ from those used to treat turf because they don't kill weeds as quickly, but they kill them more thoroughly. Because of the different potency, technicians have to be sure not to get bed postemergents on the lawn because it will kill the grass. “Using a regular postemergent won't kill the grass in a bed, but a bed postemergent will kill the grass in a lawn,” he explains. “When providing this service you have to be very safety conscious.”

Because there are roughly 10 main species of turfgrass and thousands of varieties of ornamentals, it is very difficult to test the safety of herbicides for beds, says Mark Urbanowski, senior marketing specialist for Dow AgroSciences, Indianapolis. Few postemergent products are currently available for bed application; however, more preemergent products exist. “Although some studies have been conducted to test herbicide safety for beds, more work needs to be done,” he says. “As of now, most manufacturers won't label herbicides specifically for beds.”

However, weed control in beds can be a profitable service. Most LCOs don't include it in their regular lawn care maintenance program, but consider it an add-on service.

The average cost of bed-specific herbicide ranges from \$3 to \$3.50 per 1,000 square feet of bed area, says Tim Doppel, owner of Atwood LawnCare, Sterling Heights, Mich. At Atwood LawnCare, treating a 500 square foot bed four times a season costs \$35 per application. To price the service, Urbanowski suggests considering how long the service takes, the size of the area treated, the amount of applicator needed, and an amount for callbacks (if the service is offered year-round). “This is a natural up-sell opportunity to make new revenue,” Urbanowski says. “It just makes sense for homeowners to pay to have their beds treated if they're paying to have their lawns treated.”



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# SMART SPENDING

The way your company purchases a skid-steer can be just as important as which skid-steer you purchase.

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According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, 11 percent of contractors purchased a skid-steer in 2006, spending an average of \$27,580. With 14 percent of contractors planning to purchase one this year, skid-steers are becoming leaders among today's most highly-used landscape equipment, as the skid-steer's versatility and productivity appeal to businesses looking to diversify their fleets or make better use of their time and man power. There are many ways to purchase a skid-steer, from renting-to-own to leasing to financing to buying outright, and each option should be taken into account to ensure landscape contractors are making the right decision for their businesses.

"Every business situation is unique, and contractors should explore all of the purchasing options available to them before making a choice," says Barb Hockey, Caterpillar Financial Services Manager for the Midwest region, Nashville, Tenn.

**REASONS TO RENT.** When investing in a skid-steer, many contractors worry about cash flow. Newer companies usually don't have the financial flexibility that

*continued on page 102, sidebar on page 100*

Photo: New Holland

by emily mullins | assistant editor



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## construction equipment

### buying basics

**B**eing aware of the four main methods of purchasing a skid-steer can help you decide which one is right for your business.

**RENT-TO-OWN:** Renting-to-own allows contractors to enjoy the productivity of a skid-steer without parting with a large amount of money at one time. A portion of the monthly payment goes toward ownership of the machine, which the contractor can purchase at the end of the rental duration. These contracts are usually made through equipment dealerships or rental houses. According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, 18 percent of contractors rent skid-steers on an as-needed basis and 36 percent choose the rent-to-own option.

**LEASE:** Leasing is an option similar to renting; however, contractors must agree to conditions for the use of the machine upon signing the lease. If the initial conditions are not met, additional charges could be added to compensate. Leasing provides some advantages not offered by other financing options, such as the opportunity to use the latest equipment while making payments based on a company's cash flow needs. It's also great for companies that don't have a daily use for the machine. At the end of a lease, contractors can purchase or return the equipment or extend the lease. Only 4 percent of contractors say they lease to return skid-steers.

**BUY OUTRIGHT:** This is when 100 percent of the purchase cost is paid upfront. While this eliminates the accrual of interest, investing such a significant amount of money at one time can negatively impact a company's ability to meet its ongoing business needs and pay for other necessities. Companies who buy equipment outright – 14 percent, according to the research – are those that have a critical need for the machine and are in the financial position to do so.

**FINANCE:** Financing is used by 29 percent of contractors, according to our survey. Most often, companies take out an installment loan through an equipment manufacturer's finance company or bank and make monthly payments based on the company's cash flow. By financing through a manufacturer, contractors can take advantage of support options, such as flexible equipment loans, parts and service credit card accounts and "skip payments."



Photo: Bobcat

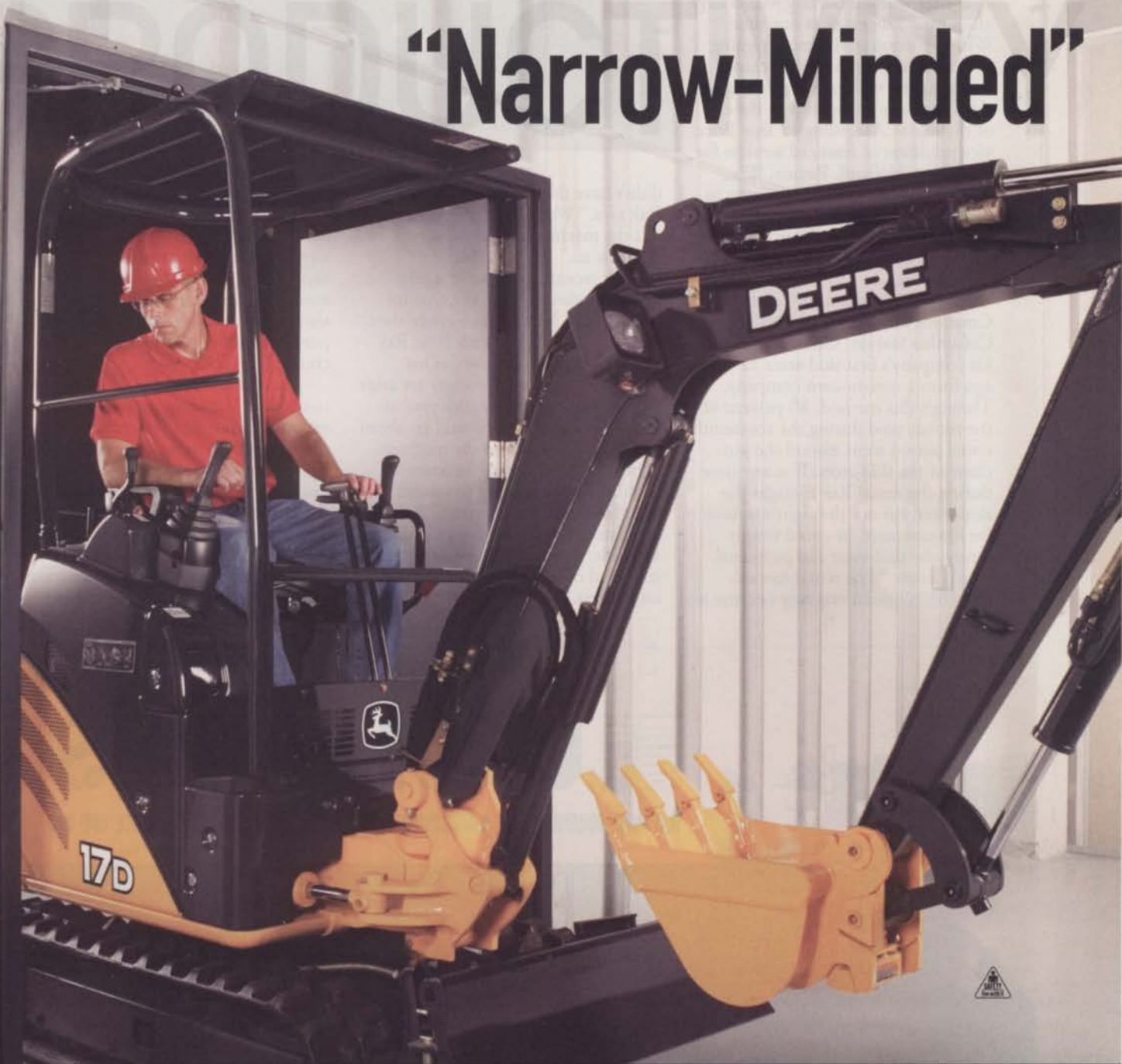


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established companies have, so renting-to-own is an option that allows them to gain the productivity of a skid-steer without parting with a large amount of money all at one time. With a portion of the money going toward ownership of the machine, the company will have something to show for their investment at the end of the rental. According to Troy Price, vice president of financial services for Case/New Holland, Racine, Wis., renting-to-own is a common way to purchase a skid-steer, followed closely by leasing. Most rentals are conducted through equipment dealerships or rental houses.

Jeff Rak, president of Land Creations Landscaping based in Columbia Station, Ohio, acquired his company's first skid-steer 12 years ago from a rent-to-own company. Through this method, 80 percent of the money paid during the six-month rental period went toward the purchase of the skid-steer. If at any time during the rental Rak thought the skid-steer was not the right machine for his company, he could simply return the skid-steer and payments would cease. "The rental-toward-ownership option was easy because we



Photo: New Holland

didn't have that drastic commitment," Rak says. "We had the ability to test out the machine and make sure it was right for us."

Rak recently purchased a mini-excavator also through the rent-to-own option. Now a more established company with better cash flow, Rak had set a goal that as soon as his company had enough money set aside to compensate for an entire year of rental payments, they would go ahead and officially purchase the machine. "Once we hit that goal we knew we couldn't justify making payments on it for the rest of the year," Rak explains. "If you have the income available, you might as well purchase it instead of renting and save money on interest."

Renting a skid-steer or renting with an option to buy is ideal for landscaping companies that don't have a regular use for the machine, Hockey says. "In general, if the customer's need is for less than 24 months, a short-term rental or rental-with-purchase option might be the best choice," she adds.

Also, contractors should be sure to match the renting terms to the expected usage requirements so they can avoid owing more than the equipment's value at the end of the usage term, and also to avoid being stuck using out-of-date machinery.

"Matching the terms of the rental agreement to the expected use is very important for landscape contractors in order to maximize revenue and cash



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flow," says Mark Almeter, vice president and regional manager of CitiCapital, the financing provider for Bobcat, West Fargo, N.D. "Downtime of older equipment means lost revenue, and renting over a longer term forces contractors to use equipment beyond its prime."

**LOOKING AT LEASING.** Leasing is an option similar to renting; however, landscape contractors should be aware of some important differences. Contractors who lease skid-steers must agree to conditions for the use of the machine, annual hours of use permitted and what condition the machine must be in when the lease is up and the machine is returned.

According to Larry Self, senior director of leasing, Case/New Holland, Racine, Wis., conditions of equipment leases can vary widely, from 12 to 60 months, and from 300 to 1,200 hours per year. If a lease's initial



Photo: John Deere

specifications are not met, additional charges and fees could be added to bring the machine into proper condition. Most manufacturers agree that if contractors work closely with the manufacturer, extra fees should be kept to a minimum. "When leasing, payments are usually custom-designed to match the customer's budget," Self explains. "By structuring the lease around the customer's cash flow, penalties and fees are minimized."

According to Price, leasing provides some advantages not offered by other

financing options, particularly for businesses that do not want more assets on their books. For example, leasing requires no down payment and minimal fees upfront. Leasing also provides the opportunity to use the latest equipment while making comparatively low payments, the ability to customize your payment schedule based on the cash flow needs of your business and, in some cases, tax deductions. Because leased machines aren't the property of the lessee, expenses related to equipment use are considered operating expenses and are 100 percent tax-deductible. Contractors should consult their tax advisors for advice on this topic.

Like the rent-to-own option, lessees have the option to purchase the equipment at the end of a lease, or they can return the machine to

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the manufacturer or extend the lease. "This flexibility allows contractors to better manage their expenditures and gives them the ability to keep newer equipment in their fleets, which may result in fewer maintenance expenses," says Bill Connolly, manager of product market development for John Deere Credit, Johnston, Iowa.

Anthony Vitari, area manager for Yardmaster, Painesville, Ohio, says his company used its first skid-steer when it was founded about 25 years ago, and now owns six machines. In the past, Yardmaster leased skid-steers under two-year agreements. The company used the machines primarily for snow removal in the winter and for

various jobs in the summer, but soon found their needs for the machine surpassed what the lease agreement permitted.

"While leasing a skid-steer, we realized we had a need for it on a routine, daily basis," Vitari says. "After the two years was up and we had to give it back we always hoped we hadn't caused too much damage or gone over on our usage hours. Also, it was odd to put money into the skid-steer and have nothing to show for it at the end," he says.

Vitari says that leasing is a smart option for small businesses that don't have a daily use for the machine. But regardless of the situation, researching the options prior to making a purchase is a must. "First make sure your company has a suitable backlog of work to justify owning a skid-steer," he suggests. "Then research the available machines and attachments — really do some shopping around."

**ALL OR NOTHING.** Purchasing a skid-steer outright can be a hassle-free method for companies in the financial position to do so, as 100 percent of the purchase cost is paid upfront, eliminating monthly payments. Also, paying the entire cost of the machine at once avoids the accrual of interest, which can be substantial if interest rates are high. However, this is not feasible or beneficial for all landscape companies.

"The businesses that buy equipment outright typically are the ones that have a strong need for equipment and, most importantly, the available cash," Price says.

Kathy Krubert, manager of M.J.B. Services, Elkhorn, Wis., says her company bought its first skid-steer about 15 years ago and now owns three, all of which were bought outright. "The owner of the company purchases all of our machines outright because he just doesn't prefer leasing them," Krubert says. "It's a personal preference about what works best for your business."

A main downfall to cash payments, Connolly says, is investing such a significant amount of money can impact a company's ability to meet its ongoing business needs and pay for necessities such as fuel, machine maintenance and parts, employee wages and other operational expenses. "While using cash will not create a long-term liability on a contractor's balance sheet, it may

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reduce the cash available to invest in other, more profitable, areas of the business," Connolly explains.

**FINANCING FIGURES.** The last, and perhaps the most traditional, method of purchasing a skid-steer is financing. The terms of acquiring a machine this way will vary depending on the strength of the contractor's credit and the financing company they work with. Often times, manufacturing company representatives work with contractors to help them determine which option best matches their needs. Financing options require a down payment as a starting point and then monthly payments from there.

"Most people don't have the ability to write a check for a piece of construction equipment and choose to finance it through some type of installment loan financed by the equipment manufacturer's finance company or by a local bank," Connolly says.

The opportunity to build equity

is one benefit of financing, and the shorter the term of the installment loan and the more money put toward each monthly payment, the quicker the company can build it. Equity helps improve a company's credit and can also be used as a down payment on future equipment purchases.

"Once the equipment is acquired, the contractor has the benefit of making monthly payments that generally better match cash flow while also building equity in the machine," Connolly explains.

By financing a skid-steer through a manufacturer, contractors can take advantage of the types of support offered to them, such as flexible equipment loans and protection plans, parts and service credit card accounts, a range of equipment insurance products and the flexibility of "skip payments." The skip payment feature was created to accommodate periods of slower cash flow due to the seasonal nature of the landscaping industry. "Selecting

the financing method that's right for your business can mean the difference between succeeding or failing as a business," Price says.

Rak's company purchased a skid-steer through a manufacturer's financing department and took advantage of the support offered to him. He was able to communicate his company's needs and financial situation before making a final purchase. "They really seemed to understand our situation," he says. "They know that we are a seasonal business and they're flexible and creative with the ways they can serve us."

According to Rak, another perk of working through a manufacturing company was the ability to demonstrate numerous machines to find the one that worked best for him. "Once we tried out different machines and really figured out why we wanted a skid-steer, we realized that we have a use for it every day," he explains. "The machine is really paying for itself." ■



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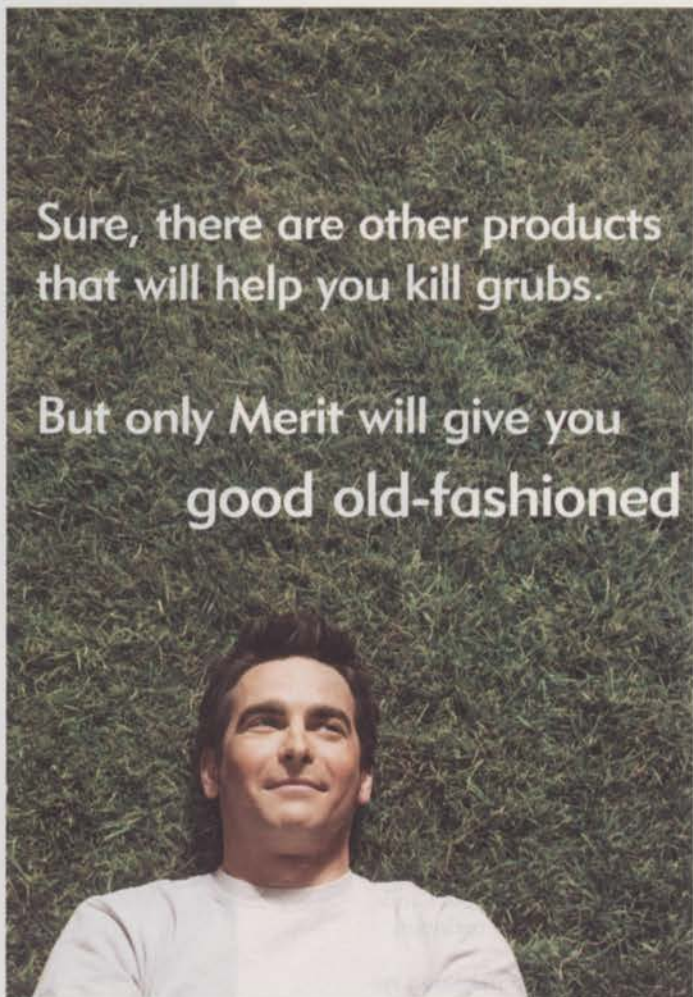


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# Spring START-UPS

A 10-point program ensures this service runs smoothly.

“Irrigation systems are lifetime investments if they’re installed and maintained properly,” says Lynn Francis, sprinkler service manager, for Olympic Landscape & Irrigation Co., Fife, Wash. “Just like cars – you have to maintain them.”

It’s with that mind-set that the crews at Olympic start up irrigation systems in March. Five to six fully stocked sprinkler vans with two-men per truck perform 600-plus irrigation start-ups over the course of eight to 10 weeks.

To ensure accuracy and customer satisfaction, the crews use a 10-point process and also look at the big picture, making recommendations for system upgrades.

“First of all, our purpose is to have each client’s system operating at its best potential,” Francis explains. “So we begin by employing our standards of observation – we always use a scanning eye.”

A surface-level screening may seem like an obvious part of the process, but it’s one thing a lot of contractors neglect to do when visiting their clients in the spring, says Kim Growcock, an irrigation foreman for Erickson Landscaping, Salt Lake City. “We start out trying to see if anything obvious happened in the area,” he explains, noting his firm primarily conducts irrigation start-ups for commercial clients. If there’s been any new construction on the property, that’s one clue that the system may have experienced some damage, like head wear and/or fence posts pounded through the pipe, he says.

After technicians scan the area for any potential problems, they begin the



Photos: Hunter

by marisa palmieri | associate editor







# sample start-up checklist

Irrigation technicians at Olympic Landscape & Irrigation Co., Fife, Wash., benefit from using a spring start-up checklist that's printed on the back of every work order. Use the 10 points to the right, courtesy of Olympic, to create a similar form of your own.



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### Spring Start-up Checklist

#	Action	Comments	Done by
1	Close any drains and bleeders on DCVA; tighten any solenoids on valves.		
2	Prepare backflow device; close test ports; open ball valves.		
3	Charge mainline to system and check for leaks.		
4	Access sprinkler controller.		
5	Test or replace back-up battery and check fuses.		
6	Program controller for required needs.		
7	Turn on station No. 1. If nothing happens, check rain switch or bypass switch on controller.		
8	Go through each station and flag heads that are too high, low, leaning over, too close to lawn edges or need nozzle adjustments. Cut grass from around heads in lawn. Check coverage.		
9	Make any necessary repairs or adjustments and re-check coverage.		
10	Place controller in proper on or off position, whichever homeowner wants. Initial each item when finished.		

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start-up process. Francis's crews follow a strict 10-point checklist, which is printed onto the backside of each irrigation start-up work order. "When the form prints, it prints all of the residence's information on the front and the checklist on the back," Francis says. "They have it with them on every single job – even the veterans."

(For a sample of the checklist, see "Sample Start-up Checklist" on page 112.)

Although Olympic's irrigation start-up customers are 90 percent residential, this checklist works for commercial, too, Francis says. "Commercial isn't a whole lot different," he says. "Just more zones, bigger pipes

and maybe a little more time."

The first of the 10 steps is to close any drains, hose bibs, bleeder valves and tighten solenoids on valves. "It's almost a reversal of what we've done in the fall," Francis says.

Next, they prepare the backflow device, closing test ports and opening ball valves. Step No. 3 is to charge the mainline – introducing water to the system slowly.

Steps four through six involve accessing the controller, testing the 9-volt battery (replacing if necessary) and checking fuses and programming the controller.

For checklist item No. 7, the technicians turn on zone one. If nothing happens, they check the rain switch or bypass switch on the controller to see if that's the problem.

Step eight: Go through each zone and flag problem areas. "We flag the breaks, crooked heads, heads that need to be raised or lowered and any bad nozzles," Francis says. Also, crews use utility knives to cut grass from around the heads and check for appropriate coverage.

The ninth item on the checklist is to make any necessary repairs or adjustments and recheck coverage. Finally, step 10 is to place the controller in the proper on/off position, which is dictated by the homeowner's wants and what time of the season the process is being conducted.

The key to irrigation service is an attention to detail, Francis says, explaining that accuracy is the checklist's main purpose. "I've told my guys that if you do something, I don't want to get a call from a customer saying 'This head isn't popping up,'" he says. "The biggest thing is having attention to detail." Assuming that all a customer wants is for the system to be turned on with "no breaks" is inadequate service, Francis says. "No breaks" can be a real easy mind-set to fall into when you have a lot of customers screaming to get their systems done. Our attitude is to be very thorough. If there are problems, you bring them up to the customer."

Olympic has the opportunity to improve systems this way because it services a lot of "as built" systems, which were not necessarily installed to Olympic's standards. But it doesn't have to stay that way. "We make suggestions to save water and make the system more effective," Francis says.



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"But I don't like to do a whole lot without talking to the customer and making sure they approve."

One helpful tip he offers is to allow customers to set "not to exceed" limits on routine irrigation services like start-ups and winterization. "A lot of our customers will say, 'If it's going to be more than \$150, let us know,'" Francis says.

Between \$100 and \$150 is the price range for a typical residential start-up, contractors say. Kevin Ash, president of Blue Sky Landscaping, Puyallup, Wash., says a six- to eight-zone job in this price range would take one to one and a half hours to start up.

To maintain profitability, Blue Sky prices by groups of zones, for which the company has predetermined production rates. Accurate estimating and pricing are two of the biggest challenges when contractors begin spring start-ups, Ash says. "It can be difficult to determine production rates when it's new," he says.

**"Our attitude is to be very thorough. If there are problems, you bring them up to the customer. We make suggestions to save water and make the system more effective."**

**- Lynn Francis**

Charging by the hour is one thing that can help contractors ensure profitability. Olympic, for example, charges \$74 for the first hour and \$66 per hour after that for a start-up. Generally, the company charges two times its cost for materials. Shutdowns, which take 15 to 20 minutes, cost \$62. These rates are for customers who have a sprinkler service mainte-

nance agreement with Olympic. This "contract" does not hold customers to any term, but ensures priority scheduling, slightly discounted pricing and no need to call in for an appointment. "They don't have to call us in the fall or the spring," Francis says. "We go ahead and take care of it for them because they're on our contract list."

With its 10-point program and contract format, Olympic is doing something right. It added 100 new irrigation maintenance customers in the last year and hopes to add an additional service van this spring.

"Servicing is important for the main purpose of keeping the system operating at its best potential," Francis says. "It's very important to the customers' interest and it's also just as important for our business. We're out there charging for it and at the same time we've got sprinkler vans driving around. Customers say, 'Oh, Olympic, I see them a lot.'" **LI**

sidebar on pages 118 and 120

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## Q&A: drip irrigation start-ups

**B**reaks, clogs and other problems are more difficult to detect on drip irrigation systems than spray systems because they don't result in easy-to-spot symptoms like geysers or lack of head pressure. To understand drip irrigation start-up best practices, *Lawn & Landscape* turned to Vista, Calif.-based DIG Corp.'s Customer/Technical Service Supervisor Stuart Spaulding, who is a certified landscape irrigation auditor.

**Q:** What steps should contractors take when starting up drip systems in the spring?

**A:** 1. Check all filters for foreign matter and clean them if necessary. It is a good idea to remove the screen or disc element from the filter body and give it a thorough visual inspection. It may not have been checked or cleaned at the end of the season last year, and/or some foreign material may not have been flushed out through the flush outlet. This material collects on the inside of screen elements, and on the outside of disc sets. If the screens or discs are damaged, they should be replaced. A filter of 155 mesh or finer is necessary on every drip system to prevent the small fittings and orifices from clogging.

2. Open up the line ends or flush caps at the ends of the 1/2-inch poly tubing one at a time and open the system valve and flush out the laterals for several minutes or until the water appears clear and clean. Drip/low-volume systems operate at lower pressures and water velocities than conventional sprinkler systems and need periodic flushing to keep the laterals clean and free of sediment and algae, etc. After the flushing turn off the system valve and check the line ends to verify that the valves close completely.

sidebar continued on page 120

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## Q&A: drip irrigation start-ups

sidebar continued from page 118

3. After flushing the laterals, close the ends and open the system valve and walk the entire system, checking for clogged emitters, leaking fittings, breaks or cuts in tubing, broken or clogged micro sprinklers, detached micro-tubing, etc. Make necessary repairs and let the system run for at least 10 minutes, which will give enough time for sub-surface problems to become visible. As the landscape matures, in some situations it may be beneficial to add more emitters or micro sprinklers.

4. Make sure the controller is turned on, programmed correctly and operates the solenoid valves, and verify that there are no leaks on the head assembly.

**Q:** What are some of the most commonly missed steps to starting up drip systems?

**A:** Not checking and cleaning filters, not flushing the laterals and not doing a thorough check of all the emission devices

**Q:** What equipment should a contractor have on hand?

**A:** A good high-quality punch, goof plugs, replacement emitters,

stakes, Teflon tape, 1/2- and 3/4-inch couplings, trenching shovel, channel locks, extra tubing and a pressure gauge.

**Q:** Do you have any other tips for contractors starting up drip systems?

**A:** Drip systems take longer to check than spray systems, so allow enough time to be thorough. If hydraulic issues exist, check the system's dynamic pressure by installing a pressure gauge at the end of the line and opening the system valve. Sometimes a pressure regulator is not installed but should be, or the installed pressure regulator may be malfunctioning.

For more information on irrigation topics, visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com) and search "irrigation."

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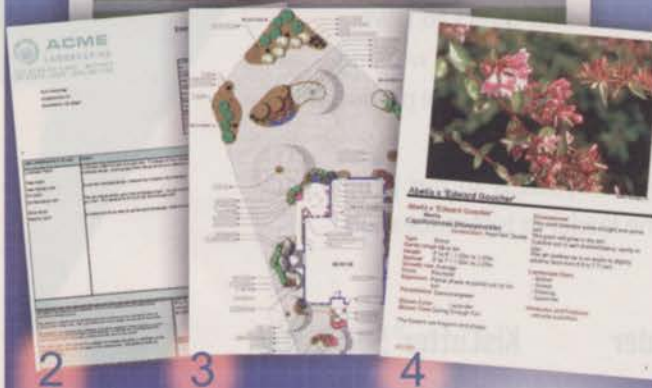
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USE READER SERVICE # 92

product spotlight



**Enlux LED Floodlights**

- Drop-in replacement for incandescent floodlights
- Available with both 120 and 220 volt options
- Warm, neutral and cool color tones available
- Four color tones available: red, green, blue and amber
- Has a life of 50,000 hours
- Enlux Lighting – 480/733-8065, [www.enluxled.com](http://www.enluxled.com)

Circle 206 on reader service card



**Focus Industries Copper Bell Path Light Fixtures**

- Constructed of heavy-duty spun copper
- Lamp is 18-watt, 1,200 hours average rating
- Wired with a black 3-foot 18/2 zip cord from base of fixture
- Features unfinished copper with optional acid treatments available
- Focus Industries – 888/882-1350, [www.focusindustries.com](http://www.focusindustries.com)

Circle 207 on reader service card

**Frog Lights LED Mini Spotlights**



- Feature a 1-inch-diameter stainless-steel case
- Waterproof
- Suitable for walkways, walls, driveways, ponds, mulch and decks
- Operating voltage of 12 Volts
- Approximate life of 11 years
- Frog Lights – 800/930-1670, [www.frog-lights.com](http://www.frog-lights.com)

Circle 208 on reader service card



February 4 - March 31, 2007

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23hp Briggs Vanguard Engine

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**Sale Price \$13,999**

**Sugg. Retail \$15,833**

Model STT61V-25KBD-SS



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\*Payment based on 8.8% Interest for 36 months. Note: all information subject to change. Programs and specials are subject to dealer participation. All loans subject to credit approval. New equipment only. Available to qualified buyers with rates dependent on credit records. Customer processing fees may be charged. Contact your local dealer for details.



### FX Luminaire Petto Risoluto Path Lights

- Features a copper finish as the standard option
- Other colors are available
- Includes a choice of 8-, 12-, or 18-inch risers
- Measures 14¼ inches tall by 3¾ inches wide
- FX Luminaire – [www.fxl.com](http://www.fxl.com)

Circle 209 on reader service card



### Hadco BL5016 Uplight

- 12-volt light
- Includes a 50-watt maximum MR16 lamp
- Made with die-cast marine-grade alloy aluminum
- Features a 360-degree fully adjustable swivel arm
- Includes a 10-degree angled lens for self-cleaning
- Lamp retention clip attached
- Available in five high-quality thermoset powder coat finishes
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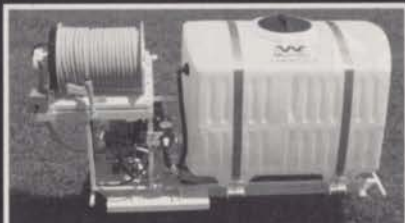


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### Hess SERA Light

- Feature a contemporary, European design
- Available in a range of pole and wall mounting options
- Suited for any outdoor application, including commercial, institutional, light industrial and municipal
- Can be tilted to 15 degrees in 5-degree increments
- Aluminum door latch fits flush to the luminaire housing to allow tool access to the optical compartment
- Available in two sizes: a model with mounting heights of 15 to 20 feet and a model with mounting heights of 20 to 35 feet
- HessAmerica – 864/487-3535, [www.hessamerica.com](http://www.hessamerica.com)

Circle 211 on reader service card





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hands make light work.**

**What they don't say is  
how much a bunch of  
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Fact is, hand-weeding can strangle your profits in no time. Maybe that's why so many nursery operators are opting for the proven, long-lasting weed control of Gallery® specialty herbicide. Gallery effectively controls 95 species of broadleaf weeds – including chickweed, spurge and oxalis – for up to eight months. And Gallery can be used on 440 field-grown and 230 container-grown ornamentals. Gallery can also be applied in an over-the-top application on more than 400 ornamentals. This year, take a hands-off approach to weed control with Gallery.

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### Dabmar FG132 Directional Spot Light

- Fiberglass casing includes a hood
- Includes clear, convex, heat-resistant tempered glass
- Pre-wired with UL-listed direct burial wire/cable
- Available in black or bronze
- Dabmar – 805/604-9090, [www.dabmar.com](http://www.dabmar.com)

Circle 212 on reader service card



### Hinkley Architectural Bronze Path Lighting

- Made of cast aluminum
- No. 912, 12-watt, wedge-base bulb included
- Features 180-degree light output
- Measures 18 7/8 inches long by 3 inches wide
- Hinkley Lighting – 216/671-3300, [www.hinkleylighting.com](http://www.hinkleylighting.com)

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### Kichler Hooded Adjustable Wide Flood Light

- Features die-cast brass construction
- Available in natural brass or bronzed brass finishes
- Heat-resistant flat glass lens is fully sealed for outdoor usage
- Adjustable hood protects from glare
- Also available in die-cast aluminum in two powder-coat finishes
- Kichler Lighting - 866/558-5706, [www.kichler.com](http://www.kichler.com)

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- 52 inch deck with 7-gauge construction
- Stand-on platform for operator comfort and improved performance
- Excellent visibility for trimming
- Great hillside traction
- Adjustable control heights

Model GSKW2352S or GSKH2352S



**Brutus** \$222 per mo.\*  
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- 61 inch deck with 7-gauge construction (52 inch is pictured)
- Improved longer life blade spindles
- Full-suspension seat with retractable seat belt
- Between-the-legs controls for easy on and off
- ROPS is standard

Model GBKW2561S or GBKH2761S



**Scamper Hydro** \$169 per mo.\*\*  
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- 17 hp engine, 48 inch deck
- Twin hydro transaxle drive systems
- Single hand operation
- Adjustable control heights

Model GLK1748S



**Chariot** \$167 per mo.\*  
as low as  
Priced at \$5,999 (does not include sales tax or doc fee)

- 48 inch deck with 7-gauge construction
- Improved longer life blade spindles
- Between-the-legs controls for easy on and off
- ROPS is standard

Model GCBV2348S

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*Carol Stream*  
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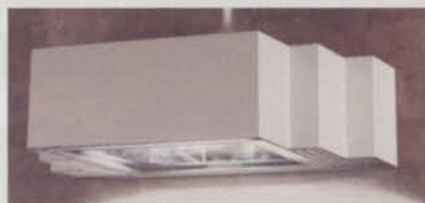
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- New, 12-volt solid brass uplight for use in outdoor applications
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- Oversized, non-corrosive ground stake included
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- Ruud Lighting – 800/236-7000, [www.ruudlighting.com](http://www.ruudlighting.com)

Circle 218 on reader service card



### Sea Gull Lighting Single-Light Outdoor Path Fixture

- Aluminum mushroom path light with hidden light source
- Features a black powdercoat finish
- Includes an etched borosilicate glass with a bayonet fitter
- Measures 10½ inches long by 6½ inches wide
- Includes a 18-watt maximum, 12-volt, wedge-base Xenon T5 light bulb
- Sea Gull Lighting – 800/347-5483, [www.seagulllighting.com](http://www.seagulllighting.com)

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### Vista Model 2166 Pathlight

- Petite brass and stainless steel path light
- Features "turn to lock" lamp base – no tools required
- Ideal along walkways or among flower beds and shrubs
- Includes 16½-inch brass stem and coupler and a 3½-inch stainless steel shade
- Is UL 1838 listed
- Vista Professional Outdoor Lighting – 888/766-8478, [www.vistapro.com](http://www.vistapro.com)

Circle 220 on reader service card



### RubberMount SuperStake

- Features a line of tough, flexible rubber with ½-inch NPT brass inserts
- Includes PVC tubes and ground stakes said to hold up in various types of weather and soil
- Any fixture or enclosure can be attached
- TouchStone Accent Lighting – 888/475-2112, [www.touchstonelights.com](http://www.touchstonelights.com)

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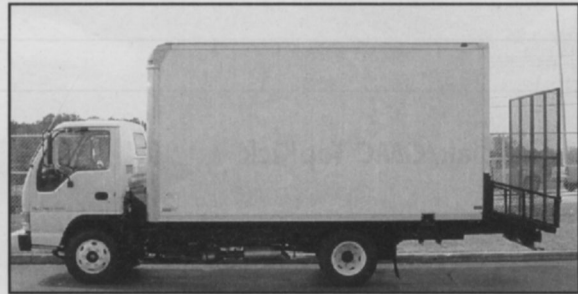
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48 MONTHS



**2006 ISUZU NPR Diesel**  
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USE READER SERVICE # 108



# Pulling Weight

Check out some new truck models that can hold their own in the field.

compiled by heather wood | web editor

## Chevy Kodiak/GMC TopKick

- Powered by a Vortec 8.1L V8 Gasoline or Duramax 6.6L V8 Diesel engine
- Includes standard Allison transmission and TranSynd synthetic transmission fluid
- 4x4 available on Crew Cab and Regular Cab models, providing ground clearance from the bumper to the ground
- Large windshield and sloped hood provide a field of forward vision starting as close as 13 feet from the front bumper
- Tight wheelcut of 53 degrees produces an ideal turning diameter
- Chevy – 800/862-4389, [www.chevy.com/mediumduty](http://www.chevy.com/mediumduty);  
GMC – 800/462-8782, [www.gmc.com/mediumduty](http://www.gmc.com/mediumduty)

Circle 222 on reader service card



## Dodge Ram 3500 Chassis Cab

- Features the choice of a 6.7-liter Cummins Turbo Diesel or a 330-horsepower Hemi V-8 engine
- All chassis components are below top of frame surface
- Chassis cab is upfit-friendly
- Features a single-rear-wheel gross vehicle weight rating of 10,200 pounds
- Features 121.7 cubic feet of interior cab room for Quad Cab models
- Dodge – 800/992-1997, [www.dodge.com](http://www.dodge.com)

Circle 223 on reader service card





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USE READER SERVICE # 106



## Ford F-Series Super Duty Trucks

- F-450 pickup joins the lineup
- 6.4-liter Power Stroke Diesel delivers quiet, clean power
- Integrated tailgate setup and stowable bed extender offer solutions for cargo-hauling flexibility
- Redefined chassis and suspension improve ride and handling
- Offered in regular cab, super cab and crew cab styles
- Ford – 800/392-3673, [www.ford.com](http://www.ford.com)

Circle 224 on reader service card



## Isuzu N-Series Diesel Truck

- Redesigned with a low-cab forward
- Features a tight-turning radius
- Includes three-across seating
- Tilt cab allows for easy engine access
- Isuzu Commercial Truck of America – 800/785-5445, [www.isuzucv.com](http://www.isuzucv.com)

Circle 225 on reader service card



## Mitsubishi Fuso FE Crew Cab

- Includes four doors and clutter-free floors
- Second bench seat ensures there is room for everyone
- Features a gross vehicle weight rating of 14,500 pounds
- Includes plenty of room behind the cab for equipment and payload
- Mitsubishi Fuso Truck of America – [www.mitfuso.com](http://www.mitfuso.com)

Circle 226 on reader service card





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Isuzu trucks have been America's #1 selling low cab forward truck for 19 straight years for a lot of reasons. With their panoramic visibility and incredible handling, they easily get you around the tightest traffic.

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Tilt/Telescoping Steering wheel

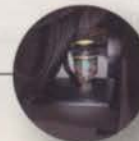
Tachometer Standard for Diesel Engines

Power Door Locks Standard

Power Windows Standard

Washer Fluid Refill in Dash

Air Filter Indicator



ISUZU  
TRUCK

USE READER SERVICE # 103



## Monroe MTE So-Low Suspension Package

- Front and rear suspension modification for the GMC TopKick/Chevrolet Kodiak C4500/5500
- Reduces the front body height by 2 inches and the rear body height by 4 inches
- Modification includes a rear axle air suspension for enhanced ride quality and maximum passenger comfort
- Reduces overall ride height
- Monroe Truck Equipment – 888/878-8777, [www.monroetruck.com](http://www.monroetruck.com)

Circle 227 on reader service card



## Nissan Titan

- Powered by a 5.6-liter V8 with 317 horsepower
- Pulls 385 pounds-feet of torque
- Utili-track Bed Channel System includes moveable tie-down cleats
- 4-wheel Limited Slip and switch-on-demand electronic locking rear differential
- Available as a king cab or a crew cab
- Nissan – 800/647-7261, [www.nissanusa.com](http://www.nissanusa.com)

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USE READER SERVICE # 105

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# INDUSTRY COVERAGE






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Cool Power® is a premium ester formulation that provides superior post-emergent control of hard-to-kill weeds and a wide range of other broadleaf weeds in cool weather conditions.

It combines the esters of Triclopyr, MCPA and Dicamba to provide maximum control in the early spring and fall, but can also be used for spot treatment throughout the season.

Cool Power® is a broad-spectrum herbicide that has proven fast and effective on weeds such as:



- Wild Violet
- Spurge
- Wild Onion
- Oxalis
- Clover
- Dandelions
- Chickweed
- Plantains

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- Offers fuel economy to help enhance the bottom line
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- Has more than 90 cubic feet of cab volume
- Dash-mounted gear shift allows for mobility inside the cab
- Sterling – 800/785-4357,  
[www.betterallaroundtruck.com](http://www.betterallaroundtruck.com)

Circle 229 on reader service card



## Super Lawn Truck

- Able to neatly store and transfer more than 30 landscape tools, power equipment and mowers
- Enclosed body style reduces the need for warehouse space
- Protects tools and provides billboard-sized advertising
- On-board fuel tanks improve productivity and eliminate gas cans
- Truck can be customized
- Super Lawn Truck – 866/923-0027,  
[www.superlawntruck.com](http://www.superlawntruck.com)

Circle 230 on reader service card



## Toyota Tundra

- Larger in every dimension than the model it replaces
- Available in 31 model configurations, encompassing three cab styles, wheelbases and bed lengths
- 10,800 pounds maximum towing capacity available
- V8 is the most powerful in Toyota's lineup
- All beds are 22.2 inches deep and are stamped to accept 2-by-8 foot lumber dividers
- Toyota – 800/331-4331,  
[www.toyota.com](http://www.toyota.com)

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# Trailblazing

Manufacturers answer the call for versatility with this range of trailer models.

compiled by heather wood | web editor

## American Roll-off High Dump Hook-All

- Features 25,000 and 30,000 pound capacity dual pivot units
- Both models dump like a true dump truck
- Models use dual lift cylinders and operate at 2,800 psi
- Hook-All is a quick change body system that allows the user to switch bodies and increase truck utilization and versatility
- American Roll-off – 609/588-5400, [www.americanrolloff.com](http://www.americanrolloff.com)

Circle 232 on reader service card



## EZ Dumper 6812LP

- Trailer is 6 feet, 8 inches wide and 12 feet long
- Holds 5.15 feet of cubic yards
- Features power up and power down
- Twin 3½-inch hydraulic cylinders give added power and stability
- EZ Dumper Products – 717/762-8432, [www.ez-dumper.com](http://www.ez-dumper.com)

Circle 233 on reader service card



## Haulmark Kodiak LS

- Features ATP shelves at the front of the trailer
- R-ring tie downs included
- Includes aluminum wheels
- Has a two-tone 0.030 smooth aluminum exterior
- Haulmark – 800/348-7530, [www.haulmark.com](http://www.haulmark.com)

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# ADD A LITTLE OCTANE™ TO ACCELERATE YOUR BROADLEAF WEED CONTROL

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Octane™ herbicide will add the necessary fuel to your current broadleaf weed control program to speed toward a more rapid kill. Today's lawn care consumers demand dead weeds *now*, and they don't want to wait weeks to see results. With new Octane herbicide in your tank-mix, you can now show your customers the results they want, when they want them. Visual herbicidal results are evident within 24 - 48 hours following an application of Octane herbicide.

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Herbicide



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### AmeriDeck SuperDeck III

- Addition to the line of lifts for pickup trucks
- Measures 58 inches wide
- Designed to load vehicles and equipment from ground to bed in less than a minute
- Features push-button operation
- AmeriDeck – 888/311-0867, [www.powerdecks.com](http://www.powerdecks.com)

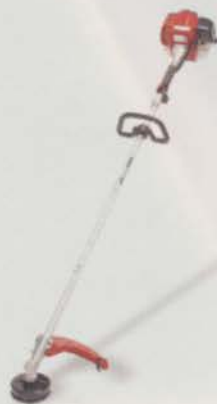
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### Wells Cargo Enclosed Landscape Trailer

- Features a 6-year warranty program
- LED stop, tail and turn lights are included
- 3/4-inch pressure-treated plywood flooring comes with 20-year warranty
- Includes flow-thru side vents
- Wide variety of customizing options
- Tool organizer packages are available
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innovation power  
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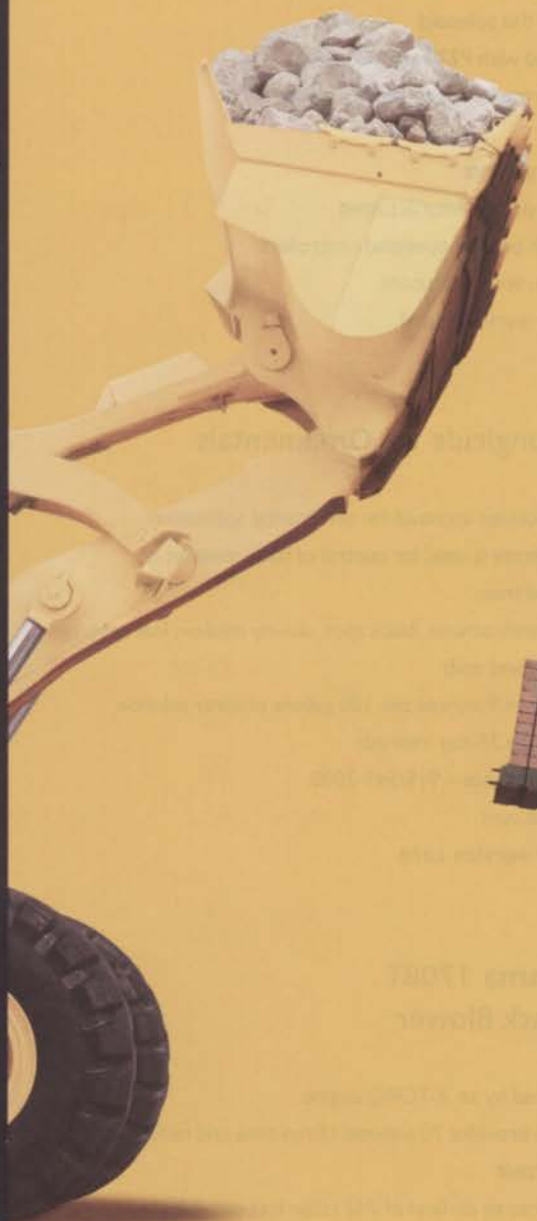
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- Can operate with no power once actuated
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- Toro – 800/348-2424, [www.toro.com](http://www.toro.com)

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**Bayer Armada Fungicide for Ornamentals**

- Fungicide recently received approval for ornamental application
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- May be applied at 14- to 28-day intervals
- Bayer Environmental Science – 919/549-2000, [www.bayerprocentral.com](http://www.bayerprocentral.com)

Circle 238 on reader service card



▶ **Husqvarna 170BT Backpack Blower**

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- Husqvarna – 800/448-7543, [www.usa.husqvarna.com](http://www.usa.husqvarna.com)

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- Sales Personnel
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The author is president of Schill Landscaping and Lawn Care Services, Sheffield Village, Ohio. Reach him at 440/949-6089 or [joeschill@schilllandscaping.com](mailto:joeschill@schilllandscaping.com).

## ■ Planning a Client Forum at Schill Landscaping

I had been struggling with the details of my marketing budget for the next year. Was I spending my marketing dollars wisely and were these efforts drawing in the caliber of client I was seeking to serve?

I remembered a past conversation with an industry consultant in which he had facilitated “client forums” for other companies. This concept involved gathering a select group of clients at the home of one of my clients for a dinner party to informally discuss my firm’s strengths and weaknesses.

Because Schill Landscaping and Lawn Care Services is a relationship-oriented firm, this seemed to answer my questions. Through this forum, our clients would help us improve our overall customer service, as well as provide us with marketing ideas for generating customer referrals. What a great way to find out what programs and services we are successful at and what we can improve upon. The event would also serve as a small token of our appreciation for

our client’s business. This would be a win-win situation.

First, I called the consultant to discuss the details of our client forum. He was enthusiastic and agreed to moderate the evening’s client feedback discussion.

Next, I considered which client would be most receptive to letting us hold the event at his or her home. I contacted Chris and Sandy Haas of Avon Lake, Ohio, and they were happy to serve as hosts. The Haas home is about a half-hour west of Cleveland, and located on Lake Erie. They have fabulous downtown views from their outdoor patio that we designed and installed in 2003. We coordinated a date and our first client forum was under way.

At the next staff meeting I informed my employees that they were going to play an important role in this event and why their participation was essential. That evening our employees would ask our clients probing questions about our business, mainly how we could improve services and gain referral business.

### Five Keys to a Successful Client Forum

- 1. Set goals.** Determine what you want to accomplish with the feedback you’re seeking from your forum.
- 2. Pick an impressive venue.** Ideally, a client will allow you to showcase your recent work by allowing you to host your event at their home.
- 3. Choose attendees wisely.** Pick a broad array of clients who are as diverse as the services you offer. Plus, know who will vocalize their feedback.
- 4. Make the event classy.** Whether it’s just drinks and appetizers or a full-course meal, don’t skimp. Remember, besides culling valuable feedback, this event is a token of your appreciation.
- 5. Follow up.** As soon as possible, review the event and discuss the feedback with your staff. Likewise, contact individual attendees to further discuss helpful ideas or concepts that didn’t get fully fleshed out during the event.





Schill Landscaping and Lawn Care Services contacted clients Chris and Sandy Haas of Avon Lake, Ohio, to serve as hosts for its client forum. Schill Landscape designed and installed the Haas' outdoor patio in 2003. Photos: Mike Zawacki

My brothers – Jerry, co-owner and vice president and Jim, co-owner and sales professional – and I began creating a list of clients we thought would attend this event. I needed input from customers that represented a cross section of residential and commercial properties and landscape and maintenance contracts. We started placing personal phone calls to these customers explaining what we intended to do and were surprised to hear they were excited to take part in the client forum.

My office staff began planning with the caterer to make sure all of the details were covered. The invitations were mailed and my employees finalized their questions for the discussion portion of the evening. The menu was chosen (three courses – salad, chicken or beef entrée and dessert) and the décor – simple and elegant with the company's colors as our theme – was finalized.

Lastly, we handed out a gift bag that included a thank-you note and a

candle as our clients left the event at the end of the evening.

The evening of the client forum, the Haas' home was filled with Schill Landscaping clients and employees. As guests arrived we introduced ourselves and everyone wore name tags. Everyone enjoyed cocktails and conversation and was encouraged to take a tour of the house prior to dinner. When it came time to sit down to dinner we made sure Schill Landscaping employees were spread out among the clients.

As dinner concluded and dessert served, our consultant began moderating the client discussion portion of the evening. We explained the reason for the evening's forum: Schill Landscaping wanted to thank all of them for taking time to attend a forum in which we hoped they would be honest with us as we asked them questions about how our services have lived up to their expectations. Each employee asked his or her questions and a free-flowing conversation

ensued. After about 45 minutes of discussion we had received an ample amount of candid client input.

During this discussion we learned that our clients were, in fact, very happy with our overall service. Likewise, they gave us suggestions on how to improve some aspects of our service that would encourage repeat business. We also learned their feelings on marketing and how they thought we could build our client base. They were also forthcoming about incentive programs that would encourage them to provide us with referral business.

A staff member took detailed notes of this discussion and we reviewed them together at our next staff meeting. The forum, in our opinion, was a success and we plan to organize similar events every year.

The total cost of our client forum was about \$4,500 for 26 clients and 12 employees. The client feedback Schill Landscaping received was invaluable. – **Joseph H. Schill** ■



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