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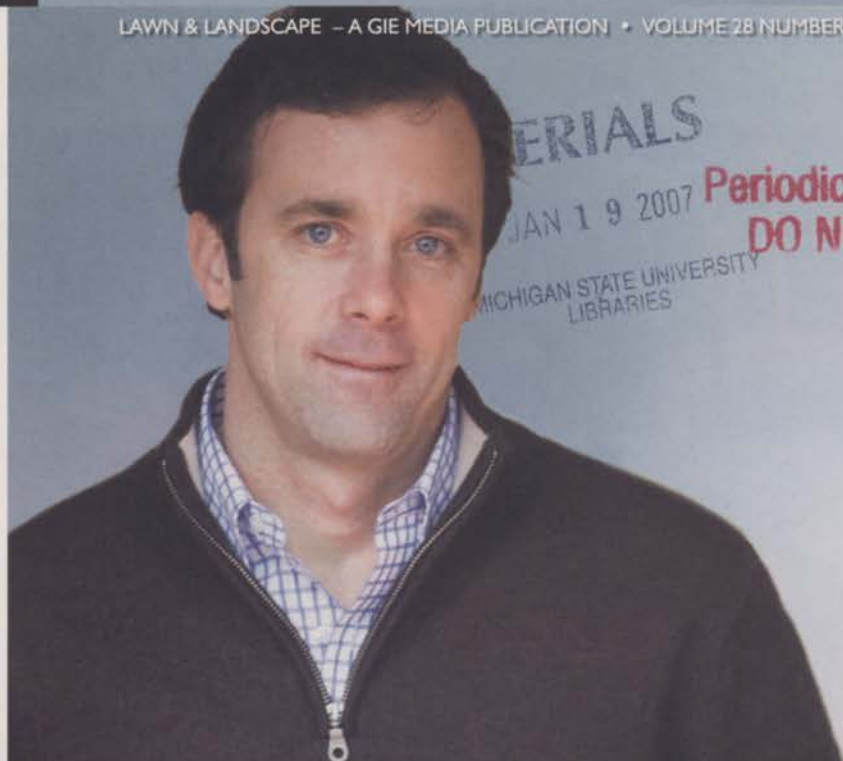
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Periodical Reading Room!
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Shayne Newman uses a no-nonsense approach to prompt peak employee performance at YardAps.

Cover image: Denise Cregier

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The DVD is available at the online bookstore. Find this and other resources from respected industry veterans by visiting www.lawnandlandscape.com/store.



more *design* online

In this issue, *Lawn & Landscape* is introducing *Professional Landscape Design*, a bi-monthly supplement that goes in-depth into the world of landscape architecture and design to further the scope of *Lawn & Landscape's* award-winning coverage. It starts on page S1. While you'll find pages of useful information on the aesthetics and ecology of architecture, as well as practical details on designing for homes, commercial properties, parks, public spaces and other areas, we can't fit all the information into the supplement. You can log onto www.lawnandlandscape.com to find even more information about architecture and design with articles featured in our Online Extras section. Log on and start learning today!

Check out this month's Best of the Web story, "Good Growth," on page 96 to see what readers say is the best way to grow a business. Some business owners prefer to grow organically, using only the company's profits and no help from outside investors. While some say this method is more manageable, others say the outside help is necessary to keep up with the rate at which the rest of the market grows.

Organic or outside? Chime in with your idea of the best way to grow on our Message Board at www.lawnandlandscape.com/messageboard.



online poll: equipment spending

Lawn & Landscape is helping you figure out the trends that will dictate the marketplace in the coming year with our "Business Forecast" section, starting on page 68. After you read "Cautiously Optimistic," starting on page 84, log on to the *Lawn & Landscape* Web site the week of Jan. 15 and answer our poll question, "Do you plan to increase spending on any types of equipment in 2007?" You can elaborate or give your forecast for the industry on our Message Board.

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cindy code | editorial director



Green Industry Resolutions

With the holidays behind us and the 2007 season fast approaching, New Year's resolutions are top of mind. And, if you're like the average person, resolutions are made to be broken.

Good luck with the new exercise equipment or club membership that you received. And, if this is the year that you're going to put down the smokes, scale back the gambling or postpone happy hour until the weekend, I sincerely hope that you're successful.

While these personal goals might not make it past Jan. 15, I'd like to suggest we work together on an attainable goal for the industry: Raising the level of professionalism in the work that we do and in the way that we promote our services.

For years, contractors have complained about fly-by-nighters, low-ball competitors, inability to attract and retain workers and difficulties in raising prices. These issues existed throughout the 80s and 90s and persist into the early 21st century.

But this standard doesn't have to prevail. If you have some down time or an off-season, make a list of things you can change immediately. For instance, how about your employees? Do they wear uniforms? Are they presentable representatives of your company? What about your trucks? Are they clean? Are they well-maintained? Do they carry your company's name, image and brief marketing message?

How about training? Employees should be well-trained before operating equipment, preparing an estimate or laying a shovel to dirt. Additionally, communication skills are essential areas of training for your employees. Don't assume that just because they're familiar with the tools of the trade that they can effectively and accurately convey your company's message to clients and prospects.

Teach your employees to share their pride for our industry and the many attributes our services and our work bring to the environment, our neighborhoods, shopping centers, hotels, office parks, university campuses, parks, sports fields and more.

With the spring season right around the corner, the annual denouncement of basic industry tools will headline local newspapers calling for bans on pesticides, severe restrictions on the use of blowers and trimmers and the elimination of grass and ornamentals that require water.

Let's stand up together as an industry to tell our customers that they can be proud of their investment in their landscapes. That the decks, patios, retaining walls, ponds, lighting, trees, gardens and more adds value to their homes and creates a verdant environment to entertain family and friends.

Whether your specialty is lawn care, irrigation, tree care, sports turf, mowing or design/build, your industry needs you to promote the benefits of your services. The message starts at the top – with you. Business owners bear the responsibility of teaching their employees to communicate the positive messages of our industry. In turn, our customers will stop viewing us as a commodity business and help us promote the benefits of our services to the public. Have a great year. **L**

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"A man with a watch knows what time it is. A man with two watches is never sure." – Segal's Law



Put Time on Your Side

If you're at all like me, you often find yourself juggling competing demands on your time. There's the work you want to be doing and then there's the seemingly endless stream of phone calls, e-mails, paperwork, team meetings and other distractions that lead you miles away from how you want to spend your days. You find yourself with two (or three or four or five) watches when you only want one, you lose track of time and priorities, and you stay at the office long after the day is done. So let's tackle this problem head on and discuss a few simple ways to minimize your burdens and maximize your minutes.

1. Embrace technology. You can benefit from the ease and speed that computers and other electronic devices make possible, but you have to be able to use these tools effectively. If you are an inefficient typist, take some lessons to help save you time. Or maybe you bought a PDA loaded with time-saving features, but never found the time to learn how to use it. If so, set aside a few hours this weekend to sit down with the manual and learn how to make your PDA work for you. If your office team is still taking phone messages on paper, tell them to cease and desist immediately. Purchase a contact management software package like GoldMine that will enable you to manage all of your contact information, phone calls, e-mails and client profiles in one place. And if you have a cell phone, use it wisely – keep in touch with clients, call back prospects and communicate with your staff. Your cell phone should be reserved for business and emergencies only during the day.

2. Be a student of time management. Peter Drucker, the late great management guru, once said, "You can't manage anything until you learn how to manage time." If you feel as if there's never enough time to accomplish everything you need to do,

go to the library or your local bookstore and find some books devoted to the subject of time management or spend a couple of hours with someone you know who manages his or her time well and witness firsthand how it's done. One of the tactics that has proven effective for me is to sit down before I leave my office for the day and write up all of the tasks I want to complete the next day in order of importance. This way I wake up every morning with a clear list of goals and can go about my day without the distraction of uncertainty.

You might also try keeping a time diary in which you write down what you are doing every 15 minutes. You'll likely discover that all of those little personal phone calls and paperwork add up to a big loss of time. Read back over your week-long diary and find where you can make effective changes in your schedule. I used to spend upwards of 70 hours a week at my office, but by reorganizing my day, embracing technology and learning how to delegate effectively, I have reclaimed 10 hours of my week while remaining just as productive. The big payoff is that now I get to spend 10 more hours a week with my family.

3. Find a cure for your superman or superwoman complex. As a business owner, you do not have to do everything for it to be done right. Maybe someone on your team will not perform a task exactly the way you would, but it will get done. Remember, you probably weren't an ace at everything on your first try either. Give your team the time and leeway to learn and prove themselves. Show them you trust and value them and they will put forth their best effort and may even exceed your expectations.

Nobody said earning a living was easy, but it can at least be made easier. One watch, not two. This way, at the end of your life, you'll be able to say, "I'm sure glad I spent less time at the office." ■

marty grunder

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Follow Your Gut

Benchmarks are normally calculated in objective, quantifiable terms and reduced to numbers. But I'd argue that the most important "benchmarks" are not quantifiable. These "benchmarks" are intuitive. They actually guide and drive the objective, analytical ones. Unfortunately, most contractors pay no attention to them and it is to their detriment.

INTUITIVE BENCHMARKS. You go into a doctor's office and what's the first thing that he asks? "How are you feeling today?" That's intuitive. Then what does he do? He starts to measure things: temperature, blood pressure, heart rate, cholesterol levels, etc. But doctors usually start with intuitive things. Good doctors don't just look at the facts – they are interested in the whole person. They understand the progression of going from the intuitive to the analytical back to the intuitive.

Here are a few of the many intuitive benchmarks that green industry professionals should pay attention to.

Individual benchmarks:

1. Do you enjoy your work?
2. Are you thriving or are you flat, bored and unchallenged?
3. How is your stress level?
4. Do you feel overwhelmed?
5. Do you feel in or out of control?
6. Does your team require minimal supervision?
7. Do you have an optimistic outlook?

Team/Company benchmarks:

1. Is your company an "exciting" place to work?
2. Do your staff members, clients and jobs "fit" the company's culture?
3. Does professionalism permeate your business?
4. Are your team members thriving or

- are they bored and being stifled?
5. Do your staff members like their jobs, their boss, you?
6. Is there an exciting "chemistry" in the company between staff and clients?
7. What is the job satisfaction rating?
8. Do staff members feel "empowered?"

BUILDING GREAT TEAMS. Great entrepreneurs create great corporate culture and great companies emanate from great corporate culture. This culture combined with objective, quantifiable benchmarks provides the "railroad tracks" for your business to run on. Then you add the right team members who fit your organization. An entrepreneur cannot merely be a "technician" and create a great company. They also have to pay attention to the intangibles in the business. Facts, data and products do not create great companies – people do.

It's the "soft" intuitive benchmarks that determine the "hard" analytical ones. But you have to have both or you lose balance, perspective and, ultimately, competitiveness. If your business is out of balance, you should sense it in your gut. It's at this point that you really need to start measuring things and comparing your company's performance to acceptable, objective industry benchmarks. Once you get things back on track, you then need to consistently monitor your "gut" feel for what's going on with the hard cold measurable facts. Often, it requires getting an outside perspective from a qualified "corporate doctor" in order to diagnose the problems correctly. Unfortunately, I've seen lots of entrepreneurs who were too proud to ask for an outside perspective. They insisted on self-diagnosing. People who want to be their own doctor often have a fool for a patient. Be smart – get an outside perspective if you need it. ■

jim huston

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How Independent Are You?

With the announcement of a few blockbuster deals in the last half of 2006, the acquisition frenzy seems to have picked up slightly, but the lingering question of whether a successful business owner should consider selling the business to an acquiring company remains.

To put this industry trend in perspective, let's look at some facts. For every landscape company that is acquired, almost 1,000 companies continue to remain independent. What this means is that the large acquirers represent less than 5 percent of the market, while approximately 95 percent of the remaining players are independents. The high level of fragmentation in our industry, as well as the huge diversity of revenue volumes and market segments, makes the landscape industry a very difficult market to successfully consolidate. There will always be niches into which a larger company will neither have the inclination nor the ability to penetrate. That is good news for the quality, service-driven regional/local company. Much like the banking industry in recent years, local community banks have emerged and are thriving.

In speaking with some landscape contractors recently, I was interested in the thoughts a number of them had and their decisions to remain independent despite the fact their companies' prior history of success made them prime targets for an acquisition. Here are some of the reasons:

- I am deeply involved in my business and don't want to work in a different culture.
- Right now it's not part of my agenda to turn over control of my life's work.
- I do not want to join someone who will set the agenda for me.
- I discussed it with my kids, who will be taking over the business from me, and left the decision to them.

- The way Wall Street or one of these private equity firms runs a business is different from my agenda.

- We can do better on our own.

Another curiosity I dealt with was the impact recent consolidations have had on their markets and here's what they had to say:

- We see a real advantage in local ownership. The customer likes to be able to talk to the owner.

- We can change direction quicker.

- We have done pretty well competing against companies that were bought.

- We see people leaving acquired companies because they were close to the previous owner who is no longer there. Obviously, these people need to work in another company and we might be their choice.

I also inquired about the relative strengths of being independent and their strategies for surviving. They said:

- Independents are able to build strong, close-to-the-market relationships.

- We have vested interests in our communities.

- We are able to create strong, successful cultures in our companies.

- We can develop alliances with other independent companies.

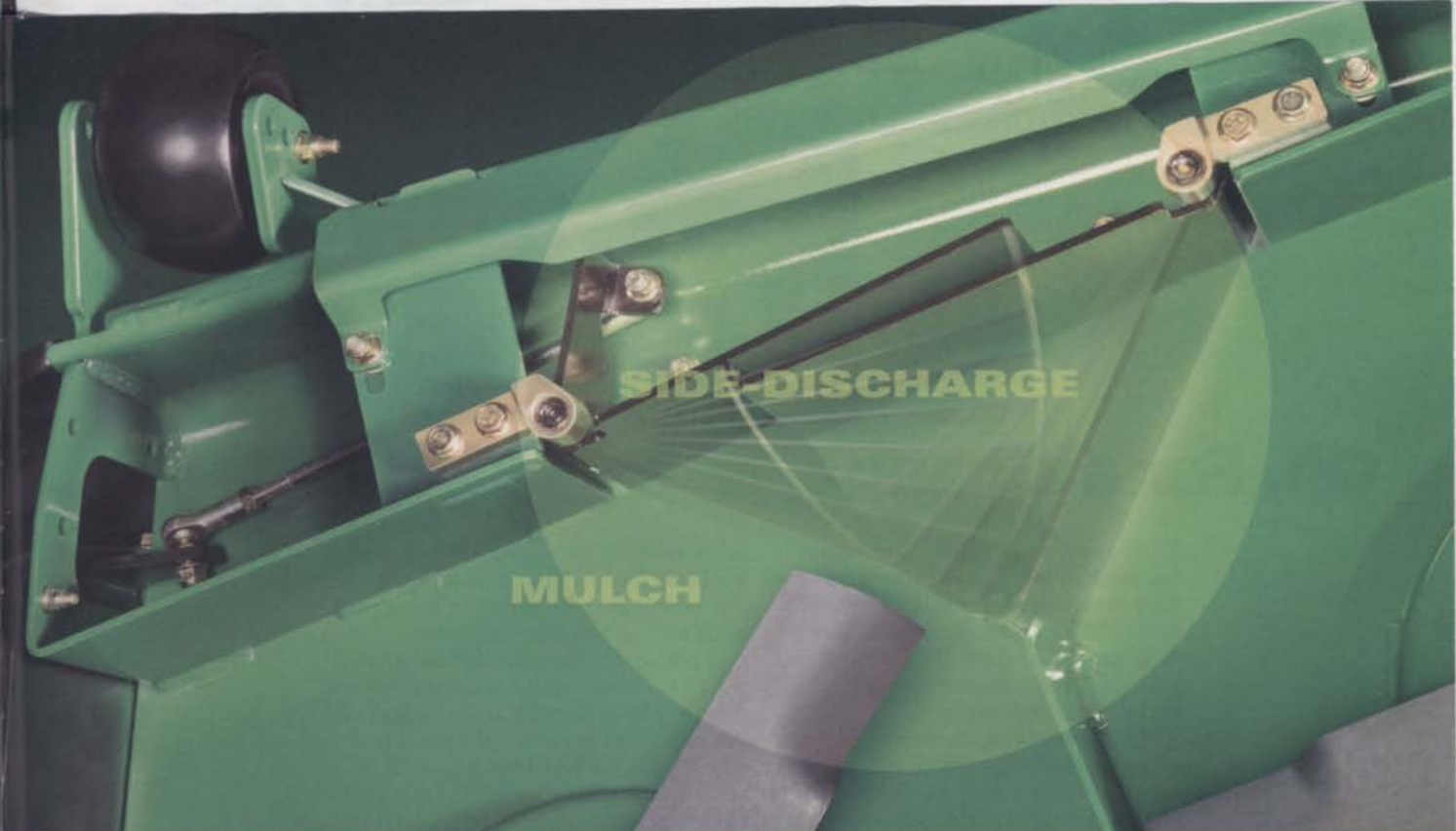
- We can position ourselves as alternatives to "brand" names.

Well, there you have it. Each one of them has a slightly different reason for wanting to remain an independent. Each was supremely confident they could continue to compete successfully based on the strengths of their current practices.

Our industry's sales volume was estimated to be near \$90 billion in 2006. If 95 percent of that volume was produced by independent companies, there appears to be a bright future for organizations that are well managed, focused and constantly improving what they do. ■

larry fish

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Mike Dykstra, Dykstra Landscape Services Inc., Grand Haven, Michigan

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See more of what Mike Dykstra has to say at www.mowpro.com



JOHN DEERE

USE READER SERVICE # 18



Oil, For a Change

Lawn care professionals rarely claim that insect infestations on ornamentals are their most common nuisance. But that does not diminish the significance of these problems, given the financial and emotional value customers often attach to their trees and shrubs.

Insect control on ornamentals presents a host of challenges, chief among them being product selection. While many insecticides carry a label for ornamental application, truly effective control tends to be limited to select insects, and there's always the fear of damaging the plant with the application.

All of this points to the value of incorporating horticultural oils as part of your arsenal for combating the insects attacking your ornamental plants.

Horticultural oils are simpler products than most insecticides. This simplicity extends to their mode of action as well. Whereas other insecticides attack an insect's central nervous system or chemically inhibit its ability to molt and grow, an application of a horticultural oil simply covers any insect on the plant at the time of application and suffocates it. Horticultural oils' lack of induced chemical reaction on target pests even earns the products classification as a "soft pesticide" when compared to traditional synthetic products.

Control occurs within 24 hours, end of story. Of course, applying any control product is never that simple. Decisions still have to be made and variables weighed.

As with any insecticide, the decision making starts with selecting the right horticultural oil. These products are simply highly refined petroleum oil, and the key when selecting an oil is finding one that is clearly a horticultural or summer oil and that offers an unsulfonated residue (USR) content of at least 92. This number speaks to the product's

sulfur content, and higher USR contents are better because excessive sulfur levels can inhibit the oil's ability to enter into solution in a tank mix with water.

Because the oils suffocate their targets, product labels are rarely limited to different pests or plants. But that doesn't mean all oils control all ornamental pests. Horticultural oils are best used against mites, scale, aphids and some caterpillar eggs. And while applications used to be for dormant plants only, improvements in the refining process for horticultural oils now makes them suitable for applications to actively growing plants as well.

Horticultural oils work well on a variety of plants from woody ornamentals to flowers, yet certain plants do not react well to these applications, and the list includes hickories, maples, black walnut, ferns, cryptomeria, smoketree, azaleas, beech, Japanese holly, redbud, savin junipers, spruce, Douglas-fir, blue-hued conifers and any plant suffering from drought.

Also, avoid applications when temperatures fall below freezing, which can result in oil deposits forming on the plant, or climb above 85 F, as phytotoxicity can occur.

Another key to using horticultural oils effectively is understanding their limitations. The oils are essentially contact insecticides – they will control whatever they hit, but they do not offer residual control. The oil needs to coat the insect to suffocate it, so insects arriving on the plant after the application will not be affected. That's why horticultural oils are very targeted applications. They should be used immediately upon identifying a problematic infestation, but they should never be viewed as preventive products.

Though horticultural oils should not be viewed as silver bullets, they can be a valuable addition to your insect control effort on ornamental plants. **LL**

j.b. toorish and brian kelley

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

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Details

- Orders must be placed between November 1, 2006 and January 31, 2007.
- Orders must be placed by December 15, if customer requires delivery by December 31, 2006.
- Discounts and terms apply to all LESCO products – with the exception of ice melt products.
- Minimum order of \$2,500 required.
- Must take delivery by March 31, 2007.

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Critical Issues - Politics

Changing Congress Should Spur Increased Industry Advocacy

The changing of the guard in the House and Senate should signal to the green industry that it's time for advocacy, says Tom Delaney, director of government affairs, Professional Landcare Network.

The Democrats earned control of both arms of Congress as the result of last November's mid-term election, and past experiences have shown Democrats to vote against the interests of the green industry, Delaney says.

He explains that during previous periods of Democratic power, there were more hearings, government accounting reports and inquiry into agency work. "I think that's still going to happen, but not as much as it did last time because older Democrats were in leadership positions then, and there are different Democrats in many of the positions now," he explains. "Industry advocates may have a little better time communicating with them than in the past."

Still, Delaney has a few concerns about what Democratic rule will mean for business and the green industry as a whole. He looks at past experience as an indicator.

PESTICIDE REGULATIONS. Delaney says there is speculation within the Environmental Protection Agency that more of the agents will be called upon and questioned more now regarding the decisions they make.

Having occurrences like the pesticide hearings that took place in 1989 and 1990 won't be out of the question, he says. In addition, many pesticide regulations are

due for a sunset review, and politicians will likely try to upgrade or change older laws that are on the books.

Delaney says the EPA has an initiative to look at regulations on testing, licensing and supervising those who use pesticides. The EPA may require more people to be licensed and have additional training. There is also talk about creating a requirement for supervision of lawn care operators who use pesticides on the job.

Anti-pesticide and environmental groups will find more friendly ears with Democratic chairpersons in

committees, Delaney says. "They will have an easier time getting their agendas pushed," he explains.



BUSINESS CONCERNS. The shift in legislative power will likely raise costs for the average business owner, Delaney predicts. Whenever new requirements are put in place, there is usually a cost to the business owner to integrate those requirements, Delaney says. Those business owners have little other choice than to pass the cost onto the customer. "You can only raise the cost of taking care of a lawn so much," he says. "When you get to certain price, people might start balking at paying money to

continue a service that used to be reasonable."

It's all relative to the economy, he points out. If the economy does well, it may not be much of a problem.

Delaney is also watching the minimum wage debate. He says if the minimum wage is raised, which is a desire of many Democrats, it may cause problems for small businesses.

While many businesses are already paying above minimum wage, a raise in that wage level will cause those who are already being paid more to feel that their hourly rate should increase as well.

The shift in power isn't all doom and gloom for the green industry. Many of the members of Congress who supported the H-2B legislation that was passed at the end of September have retained their seats through the election. In addition, the administration seems to be on board with immigration, as evidenced by President George W. Bush's proposal for work visas. Chairmen of the judiciary and other committees may be favorable as well, Delaney adds.

But few Republicans seem to favor work visas, despite their generally pro-business stance, Delaney says, pointing out that he thinks they chose their actions carefully because of the election.

CALL TO ACTION. For the most part, when it comes to rallying Congress, the vacation is over. "Numbers are increasing at Day at the Hill (the annual advocacy event PLANET sponsors), but not at a fast enough pace," Delaney says. "We've had a good number of new people, and I think some of the people who have come before should see the need to come again. When things are considered rosy and going your way, people don't feel the need to participate. It takes a crisis or change before people feel as if they have to get involved again. Visits to Capitol Hill, lobbying and associations are going to be critical with this new Congress more now than these actions were the last few years."

Lobbyists and others in the industry need to make friends with the newly elected legislators to help them understand the industry and its needs, he says, adding those who do this are more likely to be asked opinions when there are decisions to be made regarding legislation. These representatives will then have more to think about when they go to make a decision on the floor.

The same should apply in state governments, Delaney says. Governor elections caused shifts in power in several states, New York being one of them. "We've got almost an enemy of the green and manufacturing industries in Attorney General (Eliot) Spitzer as governor," he says.

People are going to have to be more vigilant about what goes on in the state and local governments, he says. "Things happen quickly on the local level, and we really have to watch for initiatives that are put out there that might affect landscape businesses." — Heather Wood

First H-2B Cap Met

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced that it received a sufficient number of petitions by Nov. 28, 2006 to reach the congressionally mandated H-2B cap for the first six months of Fiscal Year 2007.

"Reaching the semi-annual cap of 33,000 in November underscores the need for a permanent solution," stresses John Farner, American Nursery and Landscape Association's director of legislative relations. "With the cap being reached earlier each year, it is evident that employers are in need of seasonal temporary employees; these are jobs Americans simply won't do."

For all petitions that are subject to the cap and were received on Nov. 28, USCIS will apply a computer-generated random selection process to select the number of petitions needed to meet the cap. USCIS will reject all cap-subject petitions not randomly selected. USCIS also will reject petitions for new H-2B workers seeking employment start dates prior to April 1 that arrived after Nov. 28. USCIS will continue to accept petitions for new H-2B workers seeking employment start dates on or after April 1 that arrive after the "final receipt date" only if they are supported by a valid temporary labor certification.

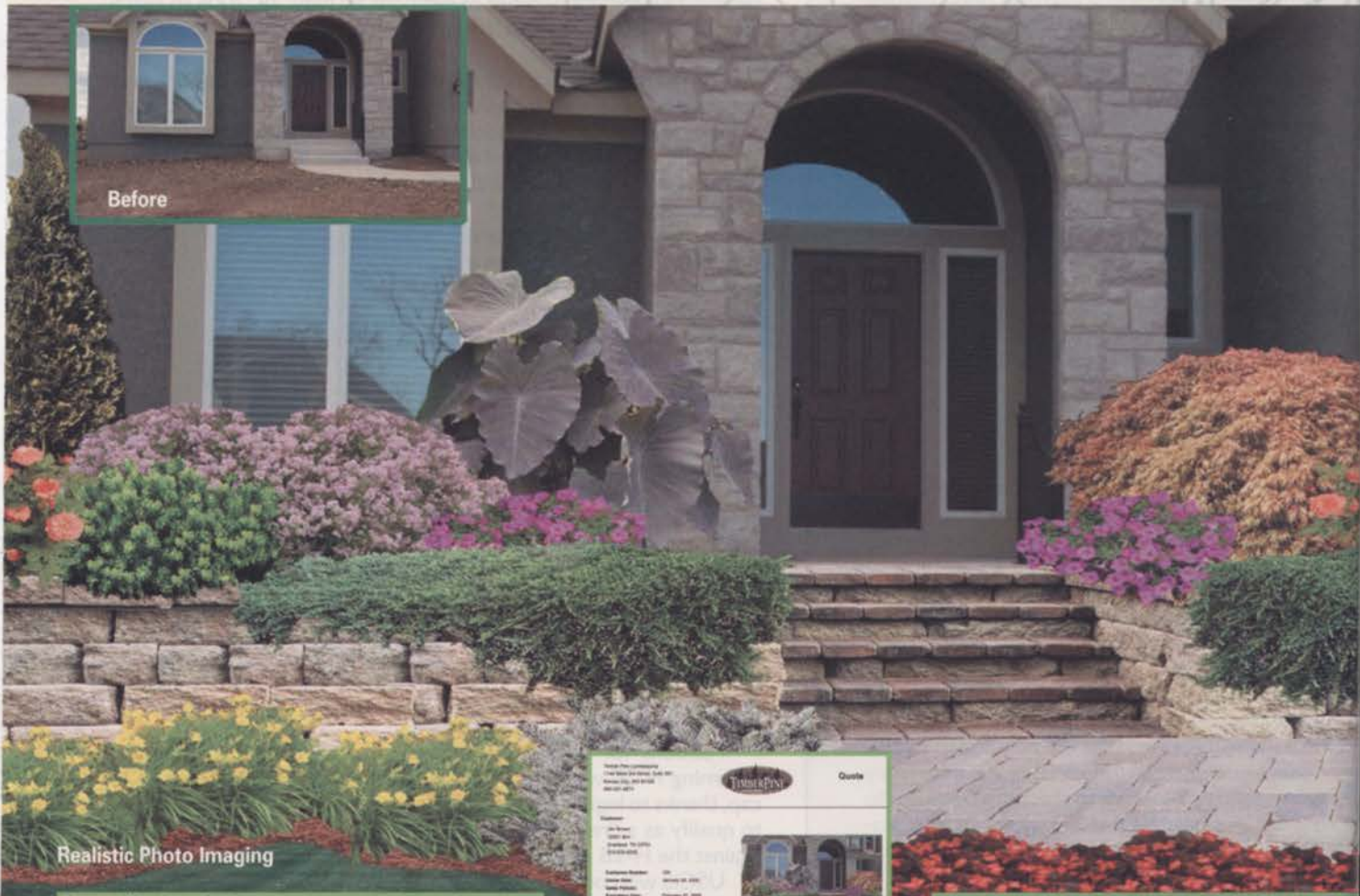
Petitions for workers who are currently in H-2B status and returning H-2B workers do not count toward the bi-annual H-2B cap, thanks to legislation Congress enacted earlier this year. In order to qualify as a "returning worker," the worker must have counted against the H-2B cap between Oct. 1, 2003, and Sept. 30, 2006.

USCIS will continue to process petitions filed to extend the stay of current H-2B workers in the U.S., change the terms of employment for current H-2B workers and extend their stay, allow current H-2B workers to change or add employers and extend their stay, or request eligible H-2B "returning workers."

Because the cap was hit so early this year, Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for the Professional Landcare Network, says the second 33,000 cap is expected to be reached in early April due to the high number of contractors who will now be re-filing for the second half to try and beat those who file later in the year. "Landscape contractors should be used to this by now," Delaney says. "This is why it is so important to get legislation to make the returning worker exception permanent. This is something that can be fixed if everyone steps up and does their part to contact their members of Congress and push for a change." — Marisa Palmieri & Nicole Wisniewski

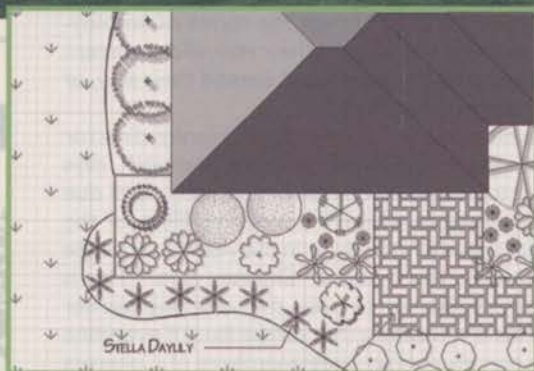


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Quote

Customer Information
 Client Name: Joe Smith, 1234 Main St.
 Address: 1234 Main St., Anytown, IL 60000
 Phone: 555-1234

Project Information
 Project Name: Landscape for 1234 Main St.
 Project Number: 12345
 Project Start: 01/01/2024
 Project End: 03/31/2024
 Project Status: Planning
 Project Manager: John Doe
 Project Location: 1234 Main St., Anytown, IL 60000

Item	Qty	Description	Quantity	Unit Price	Extended Price
001000-01	1	1" x 6" x 12' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$450.00	\$450.00
002000-01	1	2" x 4" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$300.00	\$300.00
003000-01	1	4" x 4" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$500.00	\$500.00
004000-01	1	6" x 6" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$700.00	\$700.00
005000-01	1	8" x 8" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$900.00	\$900.00
006000-01	1	10" x 10" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$1100.00	\$1100.00
007000-01	1	12" x 12" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$1300.00	\$1300.00
008000-01	1	14" x 14" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$1500.00	\$1500.00
009000-01	1	16" x 16" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$1700.00	\$1700.00
010000-01	1	18" x 18" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$1900.00	\$1900.00
011000-01	1	20" x 20" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$2100.00	\$2100.00
012000-01	1	22" x 22" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$2300.00	\$2300.00
013000-01	1	24" x 24" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$2500.00	\$2500.00
014000-01	1	26" x 26" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$2700.00	\$2700.00
015000-01	1	28" x 28" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$2900.00	\$2900.00
016000-01	1	30" x 30" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$3100.00	\$3100.00
017000-01	1	32" x 32" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$3300.00	\$3300.00
018000-01	1	34" x 34" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$3500.00	\$3500.00
019000-01	1	36" x 36" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$3700.00	\$3700.00
020000-01	1	38" x 38" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$3900.00	\$3900.00
021000-01	1	40" x 40" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$4100.00	\$4100.00
022000-01	1	42" x 42" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$4300.00	\$4300.00
023000-01	1	44" x 44" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$4500.00	\$4500.00
024000-01	1	46" x 46" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$4700.00	\$4700.00
025000-01	1	48" x 48" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$4900.00	\$4900.00
026000-01	1	50" x 50" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$5100.00	\$5100.00
027000-01	1	52" x 52" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$5300.00	\$5300.00
028000-01	1	54" x 54" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$5500.00	\$5500.00
029000-01	1	56" x 56" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$5700.00	\$5700.00
030000-01	1	58" x 58" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$5900.00	\$5900.00
031000-01	1	60" x 60" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$6100.00	\$6100.00
032000-01	1	62" x 62" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$6300.00	\$6300.00
033000-01	1	64" x 64" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$6500.00	\$6500.00
034000-01	1	66" x 66" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$6700.00	\$6700.00
035000-01	1	68" x 68" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$6900.00	\$6900.00
036000-01	1	70" x 70" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$7100.00	\$7100.00
037000-01	1	72" x 72" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$7300.00	\$7300.00
038000-01	1	74" x 74" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$7500.00	\$7500.00
039000-01	1	76" x 76" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$7700.00	\$7700.00
040000-01	1	78" x 78" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$7900.00	\$7900.00
041000-01	1	80" x 80" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$8100.00	\$8100.00
042000-01	1	82" x 82" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$8300.00	\$8300.00
043000-01	1	84" x 84" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$8500.00	\$8500.00
044000-01	1	86" x 86" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$8700.00	\$8700.00
045000-01	1	88" x 88" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$8900.00	\$8900.00
046000-01	1	90" x 90" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$9100.00	\$9100.00
047000-01	1	92" x 92" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$9300.00	\$9300.00
048000-01	1	94" x 94" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$9500.00	\$9500.00
049000-01	1	96" x 96" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$9700.00	\$9700.00
050000-01	1	98" x 98" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$9900.00	\$9900.00
051000-01	1	100" x 100" x 8' Pressure Treated Lumber	1.00	\$10100.00	\$10100.00

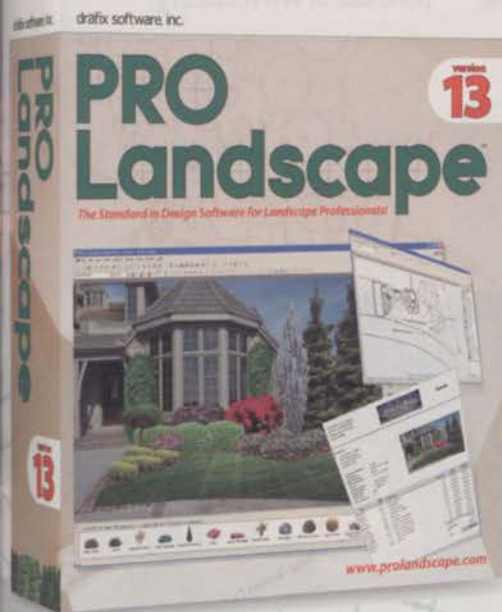
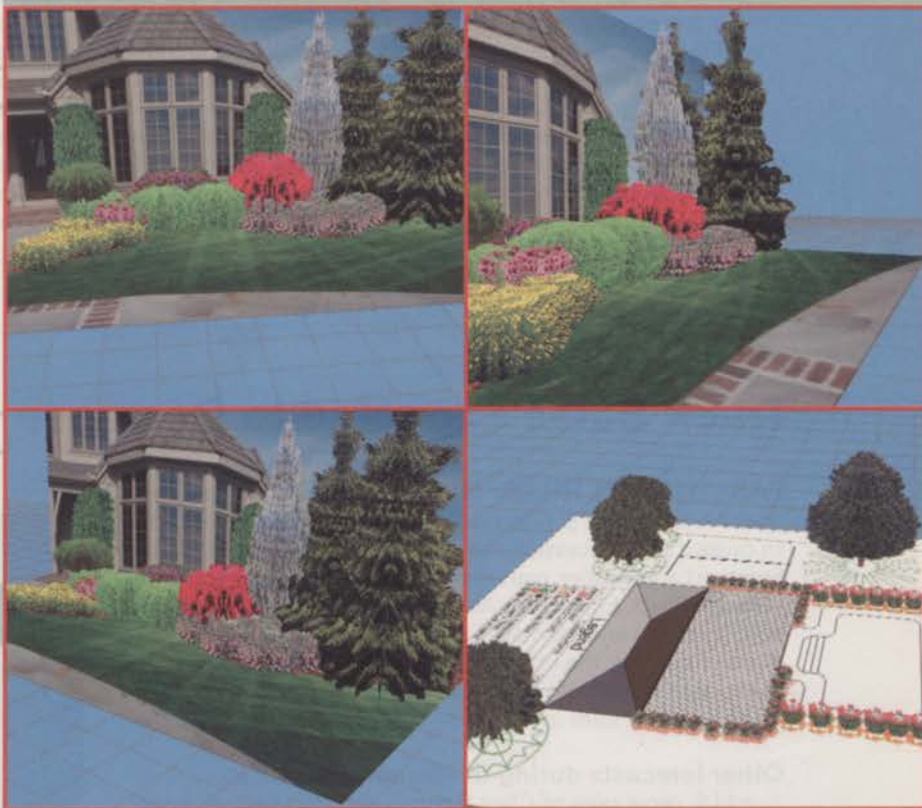
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WAGE REPORT

Landscape Architect Salaries Up By 20 Percent

The average total compensation for landscape architects is \$89,700 – an increase of 20.2 percent over the \$74,600 reported in 2004, says the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) 2006 National Salary and Business Indicators Survey.

Average salaries rose steadily by years of experience in the 2006 survey. It peaked for those with 36 to 40 years of experience with an average salary of \$154,600 that was above any other group. The Pacific region was the top-earning region by salary in the 2006 survey, with an average salary of \$91,200. This region was also the top-earning region in 2004 and 1998.

The percentage of female respondents took a big jump in the 2006 survey. In the 1998 survey their share was 25 percent. There was a very slight

increase, to 26 percent, in 2004, and a larger jump up to 30 percent in the 2006 survey. Further demographics of the survey include: 91 percent white; 3 percent African-American; 3 percent Asian-American; 1.4 percent Hispanic; and 1.9 percent "other."

The 2006 ASLA Business Indicators Survey reveals there are not enough landscape architects to meet the demand for services, which is expected to continue to grow in the next decade. While 62 percent of respondents indicated there was a good supply of landscape architecture graduates, 38 percent thought there were too few. No respondent thought that there was a surplus of new graduates in the field. Almost half of the respondents (47 percent) expect to hire landscape architects in the coming 12 months.

Residential work continues to dominate the landscape architecture market as it did in all previous surveys. Most of that work (38 percent) consisted of single-family homes, with apartments and condos comprising 9 percent of residential work and retirement communities at 3 percent.

"Both surveys confirm what we've been hearing from our members: that it's a very good time to be a landscape architect," says Nancy Somerville, executive vice president/CEO of ASLA. "With only 30,000 landscape architects in the U.S. and the sustained growth in demand for landscape architecture services, there is significant opportunity for young people considering entering the profession."

The full survey is available for purchase at www.asla.org.

EQUIPMENT SPENDING

Truck Sales Expected to Decrease

FARMINGTON HILLS, Mich. – For the work truck and trailer industry, the pre-buy that happened in 2006 is predicted to cause a short recession this year with an upturn in 2008, said Stephen Latin-Kasper, market data and research director for the National Truck Equipment Association during the association's 2007 Business and Market Planning Summit. Latin-Kasper also pointed out that the utility industries in the United States and some abroad will remain good markets for work truck and trailer industry sales in 2007.

Other forecasts during the Summit included:

- U.S. retail sales of Class 8 trucks and tractors will range between 187,000 to 205,000 this year (the range was between 283,000 to 360,000 in 2006).
- The state and local government end-use markets will do well due to increased tax revenues and funds for internal service that will lead to more truck purchases from state fleets.
- Truck and truck equipment companies that sell to highway and street contractors should have a good year, while demand for trucks from most other end-use markets will be down.
- U.S. gross domestic product will vary from 2.2 to 2.9 percent this year (the range was between 3.3 to 3.4 percent in 2006).



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MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS


BRICKMAN
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Brickman Buys Ohio-Based GroundMasters

Brickman hopes to increase its presence in southern Ohio with the acquisition of Cincinnati-based GroundMasters.

Brickman, which serves commercial clients in 23 states with maintenance, landscape architecture and construction services, acquired GroundMasters, the Ohio Valley's largest provider of commercial landscape installation, maintenance and irrigation services, with seven locations throughout the tri-state region. GroundMasters Owner Mike Rorie will remain with the company as a vice president, as will the existing management team.

"I first met Mike Rorie 10 to 12 years ago at an ALCA (Associated Landscape Contractors of America) event," said Brickman President and CEO Scott Brickman. "We ended up golfing together and had seen each other over the years and kept in touch. We decided our two organizations can do a lot together as opposed to competing."

Rorie and his leadership team, including Chris Hayes and Gary Kuykendall, will continue to oversee the Cincinnati, Dayton and Louisville markets. Their branches will be known at first as GroundMasters, a division of Brickman with a transition into the Brickman name taking place in the next year or two.

"Having developed GroundMas-

ters into a regional leader in the Ohio Valley and Kentucky over the past 27 years, I'm always focused on the future of our organization," Rorie explained. "The opportunity to continue growing our business has just taken a quantum leap by joining Brickman. The values and cultures of our two organizations are parallel."

Brickman said the company doesn't perform many acquisitions, but echoed Rorie's comment that the two companies' cultures are similar, which will help create a smooth transition. "For both of us, our primary focus is on landscape maintenance management, long-term customer relationships and we have highly tenured employees," he said. "We see things very similarly."

— Heather Wood



ON THE MARKET?

ServiceMaster Exploring Sales Options



Katrina Helmkamp

Shares of ServiceMaster Co. soared more than 10 percent Nov. 28, 2006 after the lawn care service and pest control provider said it is considering selling itself.

ServiceMaster said its board has hired investment banks Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs to explore the possible sale of the company, along with other options. It also hired the law firm Sidley Austin as its legal adviser to facilitate the process.

The company, which announced plans last month to move its corporate headquar-

ters to Memphis, Tenn., said it doesn't plan to release additional information about the status of its review until it completes the process.

Its stock climbed \$1.21, or 10.1 percent, to \$13.11 in afternoon trading on the New York Stock Exchange, at the high end of a 52-week range of \$9.66 to \$13.62.

"Our board is open-minded with respect to our future path and committed to maximizing value for our shareholders," said J. Patrick Spainhour, chairman and CEO. "If the exploration of strategic alternatives creates the probability of a transaction that would deliver value to shareholders that is superior to what the

company could achieve with its updated business plan, then the board will pursue that transaction."

Spainhour also said the company expects revenue to increase in the mid to high single-digit percentages and earnings-per-share growth in the low double digits in 2007. Its target by 2009 is high-single-digit revenue growth and earnings per share progressively increasing to the mid-teen level.

In other news, Katrina Helmkamp was named group president for ServiceMaster with responsibility for the TruGreen ChemLawn, TruGreen LandCare and Terminix business units. She previously serviced as president of Terminix.

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USE READER SERVICE # 22



IN THE NEWS

Home Depot Earnings Miss Estimates

Home Depot reported flat third-quarter 2006 profit that missed Wall Street estimates and sharply cut its forecast for 2006 earnings and sales growth as the U.S. housing slowdown crimps spending.

Earnings came to \$1.5 billion, or 73 cents a share, in the third quarter that ended Oct. 29, 2006, compared with \$1.5 billion, or 72 cents, a year earlier. Analysts, on average, expected profit of 75 cents, according to Reuters Estimates. Total sales rose 11.3 percent to \$23.1 billion, falling short of analysts' average estimate of \$23.3 billion. Sales at stores open at least a year, an important retail measure, fell 5.1 percent.

In a statement, Home Depot said a slowing U.S. economy, declining home sales and prices, and fewer refinancings had hurt its retail division, where total sales rose just 1.1 percent to \$19.7 billion.

In the Home Depot Supply segment that caters

to homebuilders and other contractors, sales more than doubled to \$3.5 billion, helped by acquisitions.

Atlanta-based Home Depot and rival Lowe's cut their 2006 outlooks as higher borrowing costs and weaker U.S. home sales led consumers to limit big-ticket purchases.

Home Depot sharply pared its growth forecast, saying it plans to report a 4 to 5 percent rise in per-share profit and a 12 percent sales increase for the 2006 fiscal year. In August 2006, Home Depot had said full-year results would come in at the low end of projections of 10- to 14-percent increase in per-share earnings and a rise of 14 to 17 percent in sales.

Home Depot's stock fell about 11 percent as of November 2006, while Lowe's was off 13 percent.

Adding to the negative retail sentiment were November 2006 reports by Wal-Mart, Target and Staples lowering their fourth-quarter forecasts.



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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 communication efforts, *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 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 wnisniewski@gie.net.

1. ENGLISH: How are you today? How is your family?
SPANISH: Como esta usted hoy/Como le va? Como esta su familia?
(KOH-moh ehs-TAH oos-TEHD ohEE/KOH-moh leh vah? KOH-moh ehs-TAH soo fah-ME-leeah?)
2. ENGLISH: Did you have a good weekend?
SPANISH: Paso un buen fin de semana?
(pah-SOH oon bwehn feen deh she-MAH-nah?)
3. ENGLISH: You have a good crew of men.
SPANISH: Si, pase un muy buen fin de samana.
(See, pah-SHE oon mooEE bwehn feen deh she-MAH-nah.)
4. ENGLISH: Your work looks good.
SPANISH: Su trabajo se ve bien. (Soo trah-BAH-hoh she beh beEHN.)
5. ENGLISH: Do you want to take a lunch break?
SPANISH: Quiere tomar un descanso para almorzar?
(KeeEH-reh toh-MAHR oon dehs-KAHN-soh PAH-rah ahl-more-SAHR?)

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SMART BUSINESS

Doing 'The Never' and Other Marketing Hints

When it comes to marketing, landscape contractors should "do 'The Never,'" says Joe Morrison, who spoke about "Alternative Marketing for Landscape Contractors" Nov. 2-4, 2006 at the Green Industry Conference in Columbus, Ohio.

No, it's not a new dance craze. It's what contractors need to do to identify and communicate their unique value proposition to their target clientele. "If you can find a way to do what your competition never does, you're going to have a lot of business," says Morrison, a Flemington,

N.J.-based business coach and former landscape company owner.

In addition to the concept of "doing 'The Never,'" which Morrison says he borrows from one of his favorite business Web sites (www.gazelles.com), he explains that the crux of marketing – which is not merely a synonym for print advertising, he emphasizes – is a clear, consistent communication of your message to your target clients. For example, Nike hits the nail on the head with "Just Do It," a slogan that resonates with its competitive-minded customers. Landscape contractors should communicate similarly emotionally charged sentences within their clients' frames of reference, Morrison says.



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Often, design/build contractors can create or identify these types of differences in their sales processes, Morrison says. For example, if your competitors meet clients at their properties, then be different by meeting clients at your office. Another way business owners can identify their unique value propositions (UVP) is to ask themselves the following questions: What excites me? What comes easily to me? What do I do that no one else does?

After a company understands its UVP, it can put a marketing plan in place. In terms of effective marketing tactics, Morrison recommends analyzing who your best clients are and where it's likely they'll look for you. "If you're doing high-end design/build, then you probably shouldn't be marketing with a display ad in the Yellow Pages," he says, noting that Web sites are essential and an upscale regional magazine may

be a more appropriate place to spend print advertising dollars.

- "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" – Covey
- "The One-Minute Manager" – Spencer/Johnson
- "The E-Myth" – Gerber
- "Good to Great" – Collins/Porras
- "Built to Last" – Collins

be a more appropriate place to spend print advertising dollars.

All companies should practice public relations, he says, referring to sending press releases to news organizations and participating in volunteer efforts as a free way to get your name out in the community.

"There is no more powerful tool than having your company written about in the newspaper," Morrison says. Positioning yourself as a local gardening expert may allow you to take this tool to the next level and land a regular column or "tip of the week" gig with the paper. Third-party endorsements from

the media are as good as referrals, he explains. For those not experienced in media relations, Morrison recommends the Web site www.WorkInPR.com. "It lays out everything you need to know

about writing press releases, who to send it to and how to get them to actually print it," he says, noting the key is to ensure what you send the news outlet is actually newsworthy.

Another idea Morrison advocates is "buzz marketing," or simply getting people to talk about your company. This concept permeates every aspect of a business, from employee and vendor relations to whether or not you send thank-you notes, he explains, adding that honoring customers with plaques when their project wins awards is one way to appeal to clients. "Make it easy for people to talk about you," Morrison says. — Marisa Palmieri

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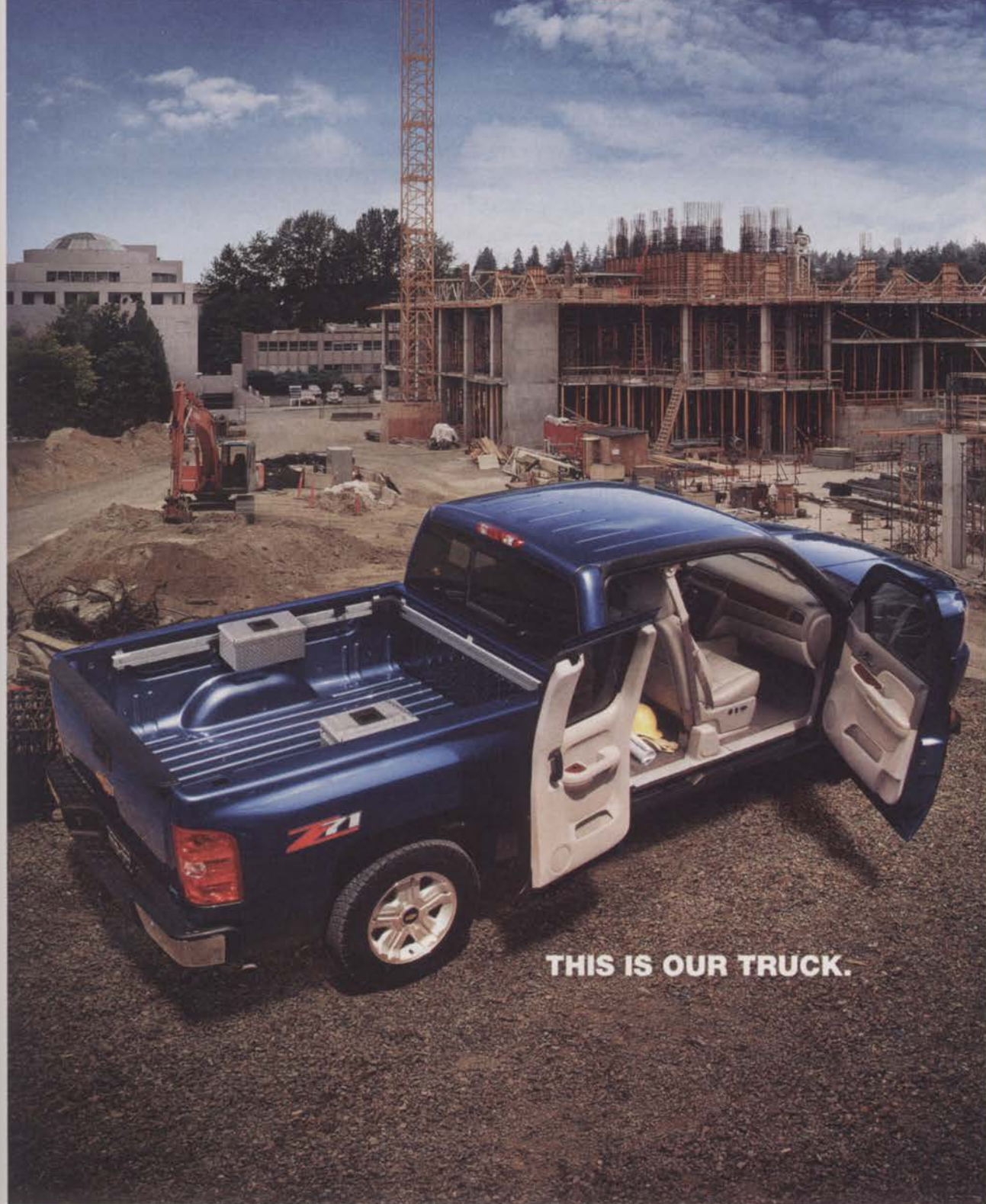
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JAN. 9 – 11 Congress/Fencecraft 2007: Canada's International Horticultural Lawn and Garden Trade Show and Conference, Toronto. Contact: www.locongress.com, 800/265-5656

JAN. 9 – 11 Eastern Pennsylvania Turf Conference and Trade Show, King of Prussia, Pa. Contact: www.paturf.org, 814/355-1912

JAN. 17 – 19 Idaho Nursery & Landscape Association Horticulture Expo, Boise, Idaho. Contact: www.inlagrow.org

JAN. 17 – 19 Mid-America Horticultural Trade Show, Chicago. Contact: www.midam.org



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JAN. 31 American Nursery & Landscape Association Management Clinic, Louisville.
Contact: www.anla.org, 202/789-2900

FEB. 3 – 11 64th Annual National City Home & Garden Show, Cleveland, Ohio.
Contact: www.homeandflower.com, 800/600-0307

FEB. 6 – 8 New England Grows Exposition, Boston, Mass. Contact: www.negrows.org, 508/653-3009

FEB. 6 – 8 Pennsylvania Landscape & Nursery Conference, State College, Pa. Contact: www.plna.org, 800/898-3411

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FROM PESTS TO Profits

Lawn care operators find perimeter pest control is an easily managed low-cost add-on service that keeps clients happy and bug-free in the summer months.

Les Wilshusen is glad he followed his friend's business advice. Seven years ago, Wilshusen's buddy, a lawn care operator in Omaha, Neb., convinced him to begin offering his clients perimeter pest control services. It was a tempting notion because, on paper, perimeter pest control was a low-cost service that didn't require additional certification in his state or a steep investment in


materials or new application equipment, yet had the potential to yield attractive profits. Encouraged by the potential, Wilshusen began offering his clients the outdoor, anti-bug service.

"Today, it's the fastest growing part of my business and it has become very profitable," says Wilshusen, the manager of Mike's Lawn Service in Storm Lake, Iowa. "In fact, I told a contractor friend of mine in Norfolk, Neb., about perimeter pest control and now that's the fastest growing part of his business, too."

by mike zawacki | managing editor

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Since Mike's Lawn Service first began offering perimeter pest control, the service has grown by 67 percent, Wilshusen says.

Customer need also convinced Dan Setlak, president of Heartland Lawns in Omaha, Neb., to begin offering his lawn care clients perimeter

ting inside of their houses," he says. Setlak conducted some research on his own and then consulted with colleagues at other local lawn care companies already offering perimeter pest control services. Based on their experiences, they gave Setlak a crash course on the ins and outs of offering the service to clients. "Their success convinced me that I could begin offering the service, too," he says. "When we first introduced the service it received tremendous amounts of interest from our clients. Since then we've had steady — not huge — growth, but it helps to supplement our overall income."

Since Heartland Lawns began offering the service three years ago, Setlak has grown his perimeter pest control business by about 30 percent. Setlak adds he maintains a 95 percent customer retention rate for perimeter pest control services. "As my business grows I pick up more clients who want the perimeter pest control service

continued on page 46



Perimeter pest control is a low-cost service that doesn't require a steep investment in materials or new application equipment, yet has the potential to yield attractive profits. For many contractors, the service is the fastest growing part of their businesses.

pest control services. "I kept getting calls from clients who said they were looking for a way to keep pests, particularly box elder bugs, which are a real nuisance around here, from get-

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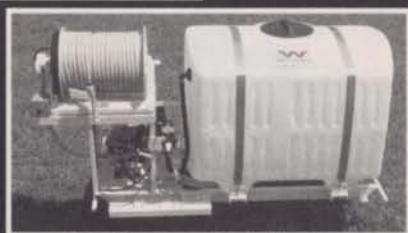


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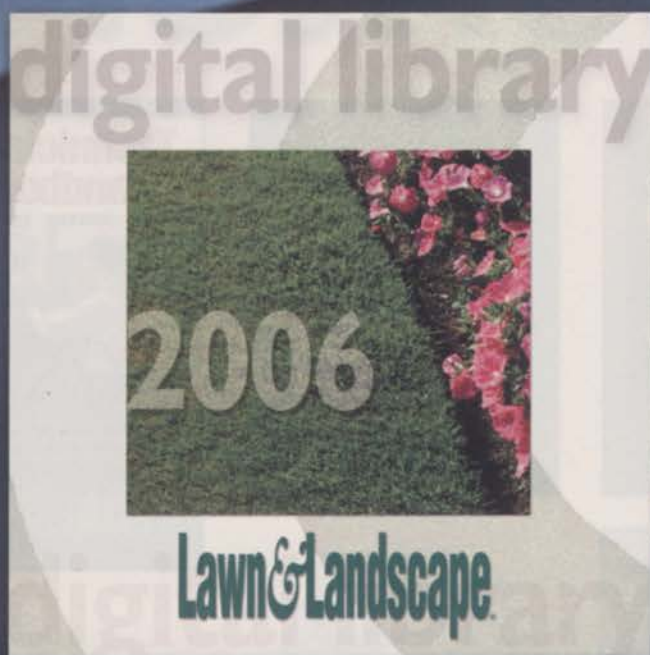
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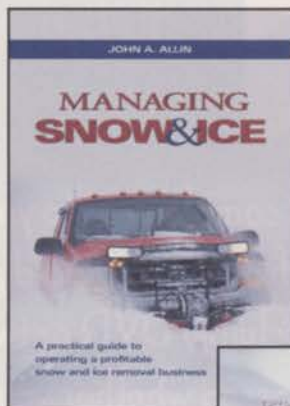
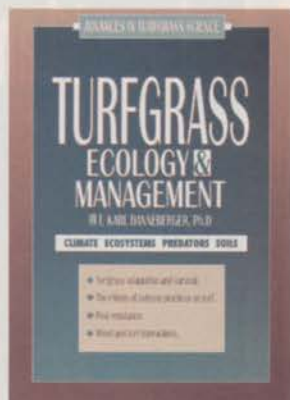
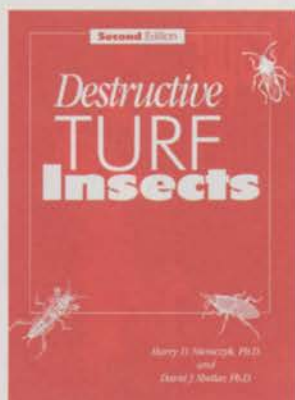


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continued from page 42

along with their lawn service," he says.

Lawn care operators like Wilshusen and Setlak are discovering that perimeter pest control can be a profitable addition to their client service menu. And customers are proving to contractors that they will pay for the additional service in order to eradicate common outdoor pests, such as ants,

spiders, millipedes, crickets, box elder bugs and even Asian lady bugs, and deter them from taking up summer residence in yards, decks, patios and inside homes.

EASY ADD-ON. For an experienced LCO, offering perimeter pest control to clients is a fairly simple undertak-

ing, most contractors say. With a minimal investment in equipment, materials and manpower, in addition to some savvy scheduling and strategic marketing, most contractors can begin offering the service and collecting the profits. In fact, some contractors say it takes 2 gallons of pest control material per 1,000 square feet, which includes up into the eaves, up the side of the house 3 feet and out from the house 6 feet, and 10 gallons of pest control material can cost only \$1.50.

"Perimeter pest control was a natural extension of the services we were already offering our clients," says Kevin Johnson, All-American Turf Beauty in Van Meter, Iowa. "We had

"Not only is it a great add-on service for the client, but it's also a great fill-in task in between lawn applications. With perimeter pest control, I don't have my guys just standing during the weeks in between lawn services."

- Pat Clayton

the existing accounts and the spray equipment to do it, and it didn't require any additional specialized certification or expertise on our part."

Wilshusen, like many LCOs considering any new offering, was apprehensive at first about adding perimeter pest control to his service menu. He didn't want to incur the expense of hiring an additional technician, or have to take one of his five technicians away from their lawn application duties.

To fit in the new service, Wilshusen timed the perimeter pest spraying for the weeks in between lawn fertilizer and pesticide spraying.

Most LCOs say their programs offer three sprayings per season and as many as six to eight in warmer year-round climates, typically allowing for a 45- to 60 day window in between applications.

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choose one application and are happy with it, while there are others who actually request more applications than what our program is designed to do," Johnson says. "You have to price those accordingly."

For seasonal applications, the initial spraying takes place during the first two weeks of May, followed by

the second in late June or early July and the final in early September, right around Labor Day.

"Those are the times of year that spiders and ants are the most noticeable," Wilshusen says. "The last application before fall gets them when they're looking for a warm place to stay for the winter."

"That schedule worked out until the service really took off with clients," he says. "Then I had to eventually hire an additional technician to handle the amount of perimeter pest control business I was doing."

While Wilshusen eventually found the need to add an additional member to his team, for most LCOs, this is not the case. Perimeter pest control services can be managed using the existing team of technicians when applied during the weeks in between routine lawn care applications.

"Not only is it a great add-on service for the client, but it's also a great fill-in task in between lawn applications," says Pat Clayton, owner of Lawn Co. Lawn Service in Norfolk, Neb. "With perimeter pest control, I don't have my guys just standing around during the weeks in between lawn services."

Likewise, technicians don't seem to mind the added workload, Setlak says.

"Unlike walking an entire lawn, perimeter pest control is a relatively quick process for the technician," Setlak says. "The guys don't mind doing it because it is so quick. Most of the time, all it requires is one application around the house and the technician is finished."

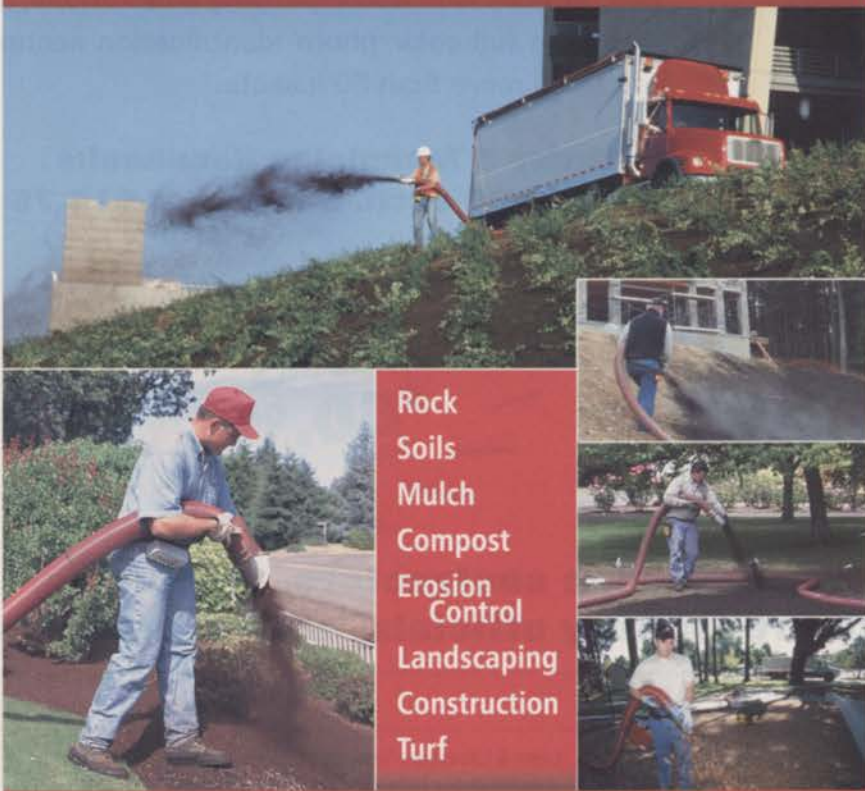
PRICING FOR PESTS. When pricing perimeter pest control, LCOs prefer to offer it to clients as a multiple-application program rather than as a single-spray service.

In fact, LCOs should encourage clients to avoid one-time service, Setlak says, because the costs associated with a single spray may outweigh the profit. Likewise, such sporadic treatments are most often ineffective, he says. "Some clients believe they can get a spray in June and that it'll remain active in August," he explains. "That's not the case and they become disappointed and believe the service doesn't work."

Contractors should offer perimeter pest control as a program and educate the consumer about the benefits of receiving regular sprayings throughout the summer season, Setlak says.

For the average-sized residential property, LCOs charge between \$30 and \$50 per application. A more exact price for residential applications can be determined by factoring in labor and materials costs with the size of the area to be sprayed, Clayton says.

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Of courses, larger-sized residential properties will require the LCO recalibrate his pricing method to account for the extra square footage, materials and time to ensure a more favorable profit margin, Clayton says.

"As with any add-on service, it has to be a high-profit service to make sense," Clayton says, adding that LCOs should aim for a 40 percent profit margin from their perimeter pest control services. In addition, Wilshusen suggests LCOs figure in the price for perimeter pest control when they calculate pre-season lawn care estimates.

"Break down all the costs on the estimate sheet – including perimeter pest control," he says. "When you're talking lawn care with the client you'll already have perimeter pest control in front of them. I've found clients appreciate this because it proves to them that you're looking out for their best interests. Plus, they like the fact that they won't have to deal with an outside company for the service."

While LCOs should offer perimeter pest control services as a fixed, per-property price to residential clients, when providing applications to commercial clients, such as apartment/condo complexes and business campuses, LCOs should consider a different pricing equation.

"To make a profit, commercial properties should be priced by the square foot," Clayton says. "In addition, factor in the additional time involved for the application (in comparison to a residential property) as well as how many times you may have to move your truck to treat the entire area."

TREATMENT TACTICS. With perimeter pest control, LCOs treat outside the client's property to prevent unwanted insects from getting inside the home.

For effective applications, LCOs say they typically employ a wide-spectrum insecticide that they apply with a tank and hand-held spray gun 2 to 4 feet up and 3 to 5 feet out from the building's foundation. Some LCOs say they may spray as high as 5 feet up the foundations of commercial properties. In addition to the foundation, LCOs



should spray doors, window wells and, if possible, roof lines and eaves.

In addition, LCOs can spray around a property's wood line and around dense vegetation, such as an ivy patch. LCOs can include detached structures such as fences and sheds.

To increase the level of pest control and to reduce the amount of callbacks for additional applications, Wilshusen applies 2.5 gallons of pesticide per 1,000 square feet of space.

"In the past, when I've used less product my rate of callbacks were much higher," Wilshusen says.

COMMON MISTAKES. While perimeter pest control may seem like an easy add-on service to begin offering clients, there are some common errors LCOs make that can shrink their profit margins.

First and foremost, disregarding common sense is one of the biggest mistakes an LCO can make when providing perimeter pest control services to his clients.

"You don't want to spray these pest control products in 40- or 50-mile-per-hour winds," Setlak says. "Not only is it a waste, but you don't want to be wearing the product. And take the time to read all the labeling and make sure you're up to speed on how the product should be applied correctly."

Besides proper training and pesticide education, technicians need to be outfitted with the proper application gear.

"Don't forget to wear the proper boots, long pants and a long-sleeved shirt," Setlak says. "You want take the proper precautions to not get this stuff

For effective applications, LCOs typically employ a wide-spectrum insecticide that they apply 3 to 5 feet out from the building's foundation. In addition to the foundation, LCOs should spray doors, window wells and, if possible, roof lines and eaves.

on you when you apply it."

Another common error is disregarding environmental conditions during application periods. Contractors must mind local weather reports prior to their scheduled perimeter pest control spraying. Overlooking the five-day forecast can result additional follow-up applications and lost profits.

"You don't want to spray before it's forecasted to rain," Setlak says. "If it rains right away it'll wash the service away. I typically like to apply it 24 hours before it rains or before the lawn is scheduled to be watered."

Setlak, like many contractors, says he will return to spray a property a second time, at no additional charge, if the pesticide application is weakened or rendered useless by a sudden rain or accident sprinkling.

Failing to treat building overhangs is another common mistake.

"Often guys forget to look up when they're spraying," Wilshusen says. "Forgetting to spray overhangs weakens the treatment's effectiveness to repel pests."

Clayton agrees, adding a common application error is focusing solely on the ground.

"Any time you look up around you and see webs, you got to nail them," Clayton says. ■



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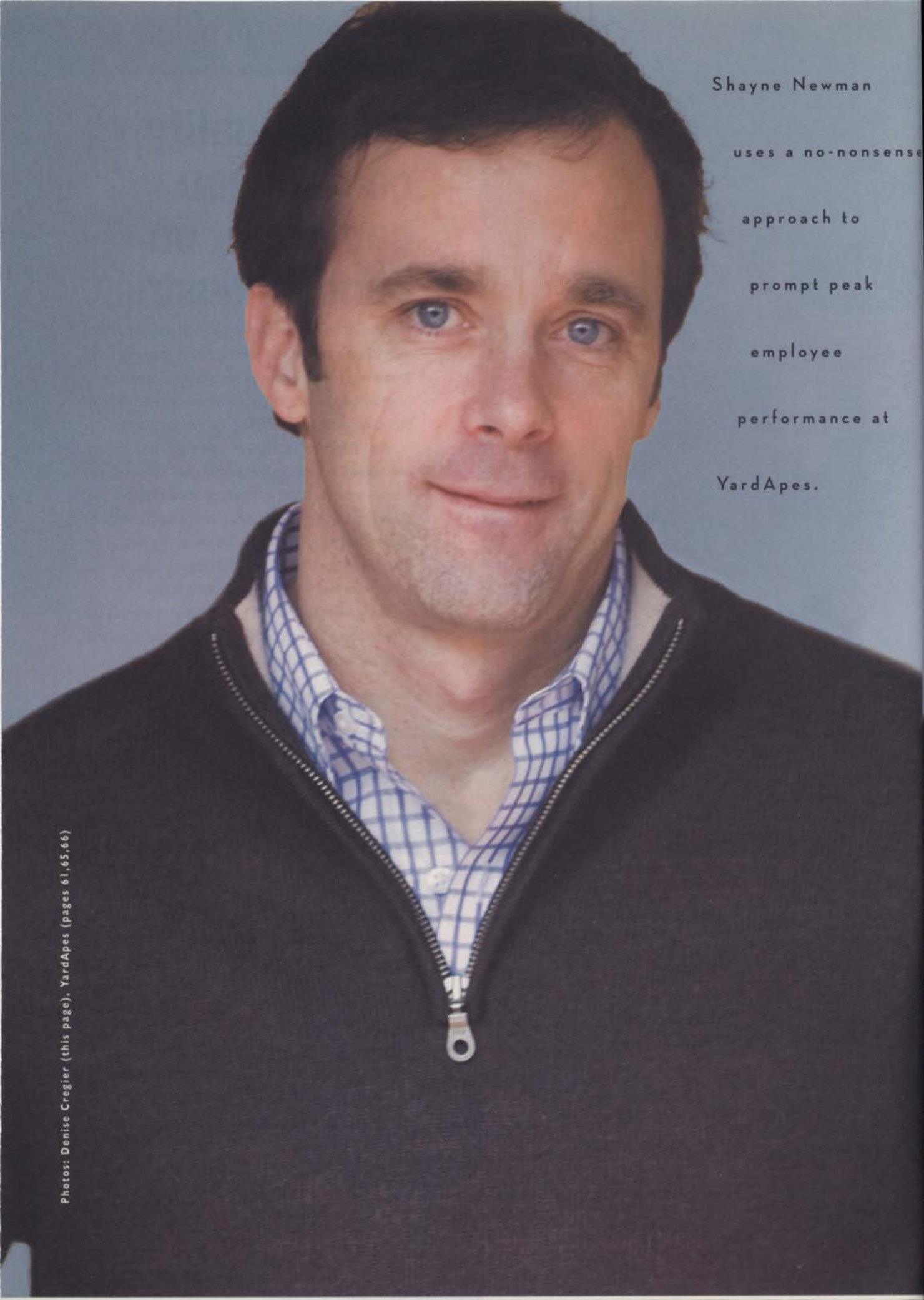


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USE READER SERVICE # 45

A close-up portrait of a man with dark hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark zip-up sweater over a blue and white checkered shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a plain, light blue-grey color.

Shayne Newman

uses a no-nonsense

approach to

prompt peak

employee

performance at

YardApes.



no monkey business

Creating an environment in which employees want to toil in the landscape industry is not easy. The work is hard. The hours are long. The conditions aren't always the best.

So what does it take to get employees to want to show up on time each day? What makes them eager to strive for quality while doing repetitive tasks quickly? What sort of programs or benefits can addict them to a company?

Shayne Newman thinks he may have it figured out. The president of YardApes, New Milford, Conn., has established a relaxed and professional atmosphere. He's taken a fun company name and created a logo employees are proud of and even clients want to wear. Playing on this name, he set up simple systems for training, recognition and advancement that employees are responding to. He's built a management team and is focusing on how to strategically grow the company in order to build a business large enough to offer careers to college graduates. And despite this focus on strategic growth, he forces himself to make time to get out in the field to coach managers or dig a trench with employees. The result is an impressive employee retention rate that's increased each year – from 85 percent in 2004 to 87 percent in 2005 to 94 percent in 2006.

"In the service industry there are so many people we put on the frontline with customers," Newman says. "And I think keeping them educated, happy and efficient helps me present the best face forward for my business."

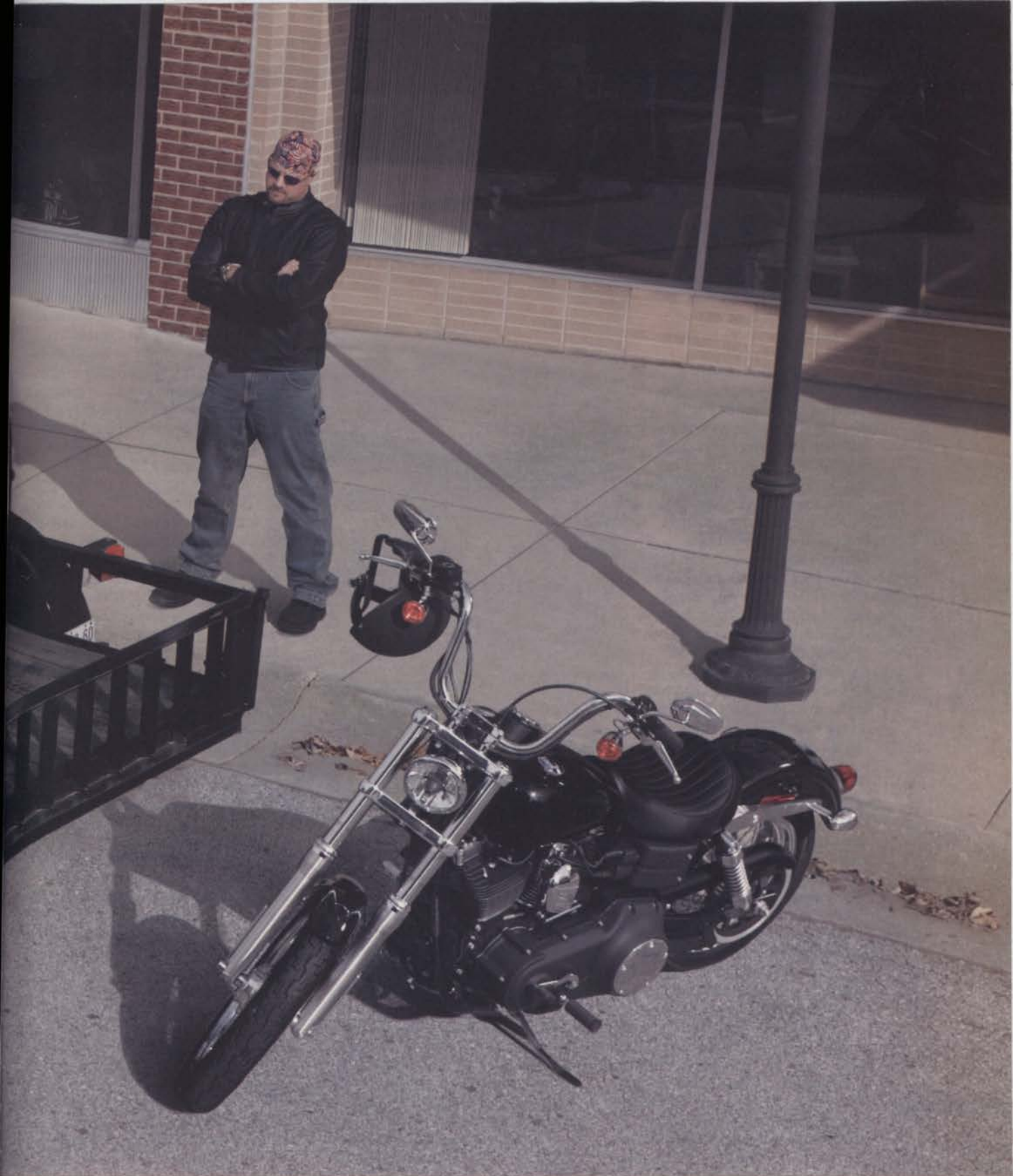
Still think creating a landscape company on which employees are hooked is impossible? Steal some of Newman's systems and see how they work in your business.

START WITH TRAINING. In 2002, YardApes was a \$500,000 business offering high-end residential customers full-service maintenance. Much like today, the company's customers consisted of homeowners with dwellings in

continued on page 56

by nicole wisniewski | deputy editor





There's some truth to the idea, "your ride is a status symbol."

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USE READER SERVICE # 46

continued from page 53

the \$500,000-plus range who have more acreage (½ to 5 acres) and spend anywhere from \$400 to \$1,500 a month for a variety of maintenance services – the basic package includes mowing and spring and fall cleanups, while the full-service package includes fertilization, weekly weeding, pruning and integrated pest management services to scout and treat insect problems.

Newman had retained a core group of college students who returned every summer to work. But when these few potential full-time employees graduated in 2002, Newman realized he couldn't offer them jobs because the business wasn't ready. "I just didn't have positions for them," he says. "I didn't even have defined roles for managers. I realized that if I was going to be able to offer career opportunities, I had to grow."

YardApes got to a size (\$500,000 to \$700,000 in revenue) at which Newman felt he had to have a better map for the future, one he couldn't create on his own. "Owners think they can do everything themselves, but you can really only go so far yourself," he says. "I felt like I was pretty good at motivating field level employees but when it came to motivating and compensating managers, I didn't know how to do that fairly."

Newman decided to hire a consultant (see *The Consultant Advantage* on page 65) to help him strategize a business plan, while he focused on his strength – perfecting internal training so he could continue nurturing field-level employees.

He had a standard training program in place, but it got tested severely in 2005 when the H-2B program reached its cap before Newman got his workers, losing him 80 percent of his labor force, approximately six workers. Since many of them were returning workers, they did eventually arrive, but not until July, much later than the original requested start date of March 15. As a result, Newman hired the few local employees he could find and stopped taking on new work, while managers worked in the field to fill gaps.

The experience helped him set up Ape Achievements, the company's more structured training and rewards

PRESIDENT: Shayne Newman

FOUNDED: 1990

EMPLOYEES: 7 year-round, 9 seasonal; 73 percent are Hispanic or H-2B workers

GREATEST LABOR CHALLENGE: Survival of the H-2B program, finding managerial level employees and training employees at every level.

SERVICE BREAKOUT: 54 percent maintenance, 20 percent tree and ornamental service, 10 percent snow and ice service, 6 percent design/build, 5 percent chemical lawn care and 5 percent installation only.

CLIENT BREAKOUT: 80 percent residential, 15 percent commercial residential (condominiums, apartment buildings, etc.) and 5 percent commercial.

REVENUE BREAKOUT:

2007 Revenue\$1.5 million (projected)
2006 Revenue\$1 million
2005 Revenue\$785,000
2004 Revenue\$758,000
2003 Revenue\$613,000
2002 Revenue\$548,000
2001 Revenue\$512,000
2000 Revenue\$410,000

THREE GREATEST CHALLENGES:

1. Planning and managing growth
2. Coaching employees at all levels of the company
3. Survival of the H-2B program

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WEB: www.yardapes.org
E-MAIL: shayne@yardapes.org

program, in early 2006.

Initially, to create a training program that could be tracked and tested, Newman started crafting his own exams, realizing early on that this was too challenging and time consuming for an owner to accomplish. "Instead, I noticed I could just use our state's Certified Landscape Technician (CLT) testing that is already in place and encourage employees with raises as they pass the various modules of the exam so it doesn't seem like too big of a task but rather a goal they can work toward," he says.

YardApes encourages employees who have been with the company for six months to become CLTs. YardApes pays for the first test fee, which costs approximately \$400. Tests in the New Milford, Conn. area are usually scheduled in April and October. Employees are given two years to pass the test. Those who do not complete the test in this time frame or leave the company for any reason before completing certi-

fication must refund YardApes the original test fee amount. Employees also must pay for retests, which can cost up to \$75, and a \$35 training manual.

CLT testing makes up 75 percent of the Ape Achievements program, with other internal company tests, such as becoming bilingual and obtaining a driver's license, making up the rest.

As each employee learns and increases their experience in the landscape industry while pursuing Ape Achievements, they are rewarded designated pay increases. The tasks and their increases include: passing a CLT module – 10 cents each per hour, obtaining CLT certification – \$1 per hour, obtaining a pesticide applicators license – 5 cents per hour, obtaining a supervisory applicators license – \$1 per hour, becoming bi-lingual – \$1 per hour, obtaining a driver's license and completing safe vehicle operation training – \$1 per hour, and becoming a crew foreman – 75 cents per hour.

So far, four YardApes employees have passed the full CLT exam and many others are well on their way. Newman says the most challenging module for maintenance crewmembers is plant ID and the most demanding section for all YardApes employees is irrigation because the company

doesn't currently offer the service. But since CLT testing encourages cross-training, Newman thinks this is beneficial for his employees' future. To train for the various modules, Newman encourages workers to attend the Connecticut Grounds Keepers Association's annual six-week long course that covers the various CLT testing modules for approximately \$45 per person.

"The goal is for everyone to pass all the modules and get their CLTs," Newman says, adding that the company can also use this as a marketing advantage.

Newman admits that he's still polishing some of the internal Ape Achievement tests. He's working on the written and oral bilingual test early this year to have in place by spring since some of his Hispanic employees have been improving and are getting close to being able to pass such an exam. To learn English, Newman encourages Hispanic employees to attend a continuing education



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TUE			3:30			8
WED			4:00	↓		8 1/2
THU			4:00	Crestv.		8 1/2
FRI	↓	↓	4:00	↓		8 1/2

Employee Signature: Bill Kemp TOTAL HOURS: 41 1/2



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Employee Report

Kemp, 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	Planting	5:02	
			12:50 PM	3:46 PM	Planting	2:56	7:58 hours
Fri	2/16	Crestview	7:13 AM	12:07 PM	Planting	4:54	
			12:44 PM	3:39 PM	Planting	2:55	7:49 hours
Total						38:53 hours	

Signature: Bill Kemp Kemp, Bill



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course at the local high school in the summer months, which offers free Tuesday night English classes for local residents. Newman also employs a part-time Spanish-English teacher to convert company documents into Spanish and help with communication (see *Language Tutor* on page 61).

With Ape Achievements, New-

man says he doesn't have to worry about employees coming up to him throughout the year asking for raises when they aren't warranted. "This system has measurable and quantifiable goals that make it easy to track an employee's progress," Newman shares, adding that the cost of implementing this system was really just the time to

put it together, in addition to budgeting for test training and fees.

To promote the program in the company and create internal buzz, Newman has a board posted in the crew room showing how many apes each employee has. "Sure, it's about the money," he says, "but it's also about pride."

Of course, change doesn't come without resistance. Newman admits his workers didn't fully embrace the Ape Achievements program right away, particularly the CLT testing, when he first introduced it. "They were scared," he says. "But as soon as they understood there was a dollar figure attached to it they made an effort. Some of them really surprised me and are doing better than I thought they would at taking the tests – some even proved to have skills I didn't know they had."

JUST REWARDS. In addition to training, encouraging employees to put this experience to work in the field is essential to keeping them motivated, according to Newman.

"Honestly, in the landscape industry, how much can a field employee make?" Newman asks. "You can't pay top dollar to an employee at entry level. That's why recognition is a huge motivator."

The "Ape Way" starts with Ape Etiquette, a list of rules all employees must follow each day, including maintaining a neat appearance, wearing a uniform, being on time, not smoking on the job, memorizing the company mission statement, maintaining a clean driving record, assuming full responsibility for one's actions, understanding and following the employee training manual, and being professional in employee and customer interactions.

Another challenge for YardApes field technicians is that they have to visit up to 15 to 20 residential clients a day – all of whom have specific requirements for their landscape maintenance. As a result, Newman says employees can be constantly bombarded with nagging reminders. "If Mrs. Jones calls and says we whacked her flowers and then another client says we left her gate open, you feel like you are constantly telling your workers what went wrong," he explains, adding that to encourage employees he posts positive customer letters, calls and notes in the crew room – the company averages two to

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To further improve this situation, ensuring foremen have up-to-date job specifications is vital, in addition to rewarding positive performance, such as coming in below budgeted hours, garnering client kudos or finding a problem on a client's site that results in an additional service request, etc.

The first step is bidding hours correctly and then rewarding field technicians for coming in under budget. During the once-a-week operations meeting, managers monitor hours and address issues, such as a crew that consistently comes in over the budgeted hours. The employee reward for beating budgeted hours is time and pay. If a crew is budgeted for 40 hours and completes the work in 35 hours, they are still paid for 40 so their reward is five free hours. The remaining five hours are typically filled with other work, such as equipment maintenance or crew support. So employees do work a minimum of 40 total hours

but if they come in under budget by five hours, for example, then they are technically getting paid for 45 total hours. Though this program is challenging to track, Newman says it's necessary to improve efficiency. "I honestly think the extra pay encourages them to be more productive – they are happier," he explains. "If I didn't do this, I think they might lollygag a little bit more and then I'd be paying them extra anyway in overtime to get the work done."

Though Newman has used this program for six years and he feels it worked very well for YardApes when it had only two crews, he admits the tracking required to do this correctly is becoming more complicated as the company grows and more crews are added. Today, YardApes has four two-man mowing crews, one one-man fertilization crew, one two-man construction crew and one two-man enhancement crew. As a result, he's considering changing the program

this year to a year-end bonus based on a percentage of gross profit instead of a weekly bonus based on beating budgeted hours. Each employee level would be assigned a set number of points and then a percentage of gross profit would be divvied up among the employees based on these points. For instance, if a manager was at a 10-point level and a field laborer was at a 1-point level and the company was able to pay out \$500 per point, field laborers would get a \$500 year-end bonus and managers would receive a \$5,000 year-end bonus. Gross profit would improve based on increased efficiency, so employees can help control how much they receive by continuing to meet or exceed budgeted hours.

In addition to improving productivity on the job, YardApes rewards field technicians for excelling in their daily work with Ape Dinero – special company cash that can be used to purchase YardApes-branded apparel,

continued on page 64



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language tutor

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"We bring him in only two to three hours each week," says Newman, president of New Milford, Conn.-based YardApes, adding that this type of work costs approximately \$40 a week. "Last year we had one-hour English classes Fridays at 3:30 for our Spanish-speaking workers and this year we are having one-hour Spanish classes at the same time for our English-speaking workers. Though he comes in for one hour we end up paying for a couple of hours because of the homework he gives to the workers and the time he needs to grade that work."

Newman found this teacher because he applied for a job working summers at YardApes. "Because he worked in the field, he understands what sort of phrases the workers need to learn and that helps him focus his classes," he says. "Not only does he help with communication but he also helps improve our internal respect for each other since the different cultures here see that everyone is making an effort to learn."



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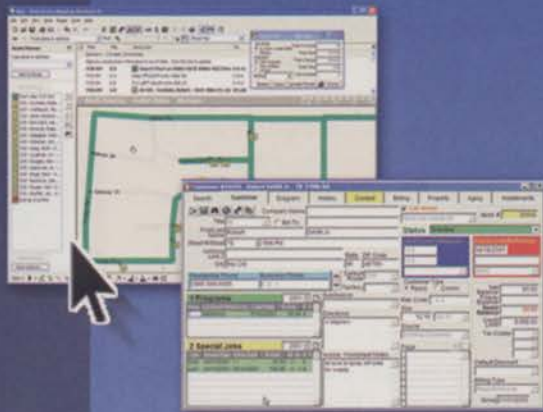
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continued from page 61

earn gift certificates to local stores and augment an employee's bonus at year's end (for the employee awarded the most Ape Dinero for doing the most good deeds, which is typically an extra \$200 for the year). Job accomplishments that result in Ape Dinero include performing a good deed to assist a fellow employee or going above and

beyond what's expected without being told. These tasks can garner anywhere from \$2 to \$5 in Ape Dinero at the discretion of management, depending on what is done. For instance, a field technician who scouts insect or disease problems at a customer's property can get him or her \$2 for a situation that requires no treatment, \$5 for a prob-

lem that requires treatment (nothing is given for any misdiagnosis).

YardApes also can award Ape Dinero for improved communication. Each week, Newman posts a phrase of the week in the crew room – it's typically a simple phrase that Spanish-speaking employees need to say in English. Then throughout that week, employees can voluntarily approach Newman or a YardApes manager and attempt to say the phrase. The first employee to attempt the phrase and succeed receives \$3 in Ape Dinero. Any other successful attempts can garner \$2 each and an honest attempt that comes up short can get \$1.

A popular way employees earned Ape Dinero this past year was by making an extra effort to incorporate mowing patterns into a customer's lawn without being instructed by YardApes management or customers to do so, creating positive buzz among YardApes' clients. When customers call and say they like the pattern, an employee can earn \$5 Ape Dinero.

Most employees can also use their earned Ape Dinero to win more Ape Dinero. All they do is add their Ape Dinero (with their name written on the back) to the Ape Dinero mailbox and Newman pulls one every other Friday. The winner receives all of the Ape Dinero that has been put in the box over the past two weeks. Typically, \$1 Ape Dinero is worth \$1.

Newman budgets approximately \$50 in Ape Dinero per employee each year, though he says it varies greatly from employee to employee – some don't earn much while others focus on earning more. To encourage employees to earn Ape Dinero and, more importantly, perfect their daily performance, Newman hands out informational material to remind employees of ways they can improve and win Ape Dinero. For example, to promote scouting for turf and ornamental insects and diseases, Newman attaches educational handouts showing insects that are prevalent at a certain time of year and what damage to look for in the lawn (such as grubs in turf during the spring) and posts them in the crew room in English and Spanish and attaches them to crew clipboards.

Earned Ape Dinero is also something that can be taken into consideration when nominating Ape of the Month or Ape of the Year – two other YardApes recognition programs.

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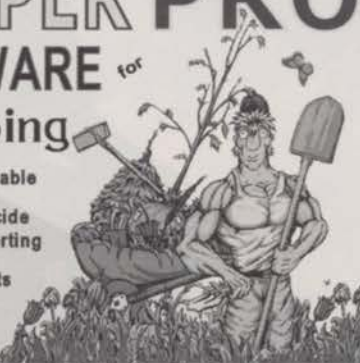
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the consultant advantage

When Shayne Newman, president of YardApes, New Milford, Conn., was looking to hire a business consultant, he wanted someone who would come in more than once or twice a year – someone who could be his “boss” in a way that would push him to focus on the big picture.

He found what he was looking for. “The landscape industry consultant we use actually titles himself the chief financial officer of our company,” Newman says, adding that this consultant also has systems that he encourages the company to work with. “He visits the company once a month and we talk on the phone one or two times a week. That’s good for us, but that’s also more expensive.”

Newman budgets \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year for consulting fees and expenses, adding that most consultants usually charge in the \$100- to \$150-an-hour range.

To Newman this cost is worth it because “it seemed like the business was growing so fast that it was getting away from me even though I know it wasn’t,” he says, adding that in 2006 the sales system set-up the consultant worked on alone helped boost sales 30 percent and gross profit 10 percent. “I used to be responsible for 90 percent of the sales here and now I’m only responsible for about 50 percent with two other managers helping me. The consultant got us motivated as a sales team and helped us set up a sales commission program to boost competition and better track sales. It’s nice to have someone I can talk to about things and get ideas from instead of always being the final authority on everything.”



to recognize an employee who his/her coworkers feel has done an outstanding job for the previous calendar month. All employees who worked that month are eligible. Ballot boxes are available the first three days of each month – ballots are secret and no one can vote for themselves. The company announces the winner on the seventh day of each month, and the announcement is posted in the crew room and featured on the company Web site. The winner receives a \$50 gift certificate to a local department store and a copy of the announcement.

Ape of the Year is a system used to recognize a field technician who his/her coworkers and the customers feel has done an outstanding job for the entire work year. This is also the technician’s opportunity to be rewarded for building valued customer relationships. Employees who have been with YardApes for at least six months are eligible. A ballot box is used once again and is available the last week of November for employees to cast their

anonymous votes. YardApes also mails ballots listing eligible employees to all its customers during the second week of October so they can also weigh in. Newman says approximately 50 percent of customers typically respond to the request, especially since he started including employee photos in addition to their names on ballots to make it easier for customers to recognize and vote for them. The company awards the winner with an Ape of the Year trophy (an ape-shaped bronze statue Newman found online) and a round-trip airplane ticket worth up to \$500 during the year-end holiday dinner. An announcement is also sent to the local newspapers and Apes of the Year are featured on the company’s Web site.

These programs started (Ape of the Month in 2002 and Ape of the Year in 2003) as formal ways for recognizing people for doing good work because Newman feels “a little recognition is important to motivate employees.” The key to making these recognition events successful, he insists, is “making

them a really big deal. This boosts that positive, competitive spirit and creates a buzz in the company over them.”

Typically, YardApes budgets 1 percent of its total sales for recruiting and retention expenses, which includes things like Ape Dinero, Ape of the Year and Month and company outings.

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Now that Newman has his training and recognition programs in place, he says his current challenge is helping his employees understand that the company wins and loses as a team.

One way he promotes teamwork is with a Crew of the Month award for mowing/maintenance crews. This award is given based on quality assessments. YardApes’ maintenance manager conducts quality evaluations on every job each month, giving rankings of one (poor quality) to five (high quality) on a variety of areas, such as mowing patterns, string trimming, etc. At the end of each month, the crew with the highest average score wins.



In addition to motivated, efficient employees, equipment is essential to complete daily work. Consequently, experiencing equipment damages as a landscape business owner with crews that work eight-plus hours each day in the field is not unexpected. Unfortunately, neither is standing in front of silent workers when trying to figure out what happened and who's responsible.

Newman is familiar with this situation. "A backpack blower costs \$400 but if you don't put in the right mix of gas and oil and it blows up the engine, I have to buy a new one," he explains. And those costs add up, Newman says, estimating \$5,000 to \$6,000 in total equipment damages each year. Also, damages affect a company's gross profit because equipment costs fall into costs of good sold on a profit and loss statement. "So, for instance, if I budgeted for 10 new blowers that year and a crew breaks one, I now have to spend \$400 beyond the budget for a new blower," Newman explains, adding that these equipment damage costs are deducted from employees' bonuses at year's end. And, in 2006, with bonus money that totaled \$20,000, a \$7,000 total equipment damage deduction cuts out a big chunk employees could have enjoyed.

To encourage ownership of equipment problems, Newman holds employees accountable as a team instead of individually. "I count the whole crew responsible usually when no one will admit what they did and I deduct the cost from their bonuses — so for the \$400 blower, each member of a two-man crew would get a \$200 deduction in their bonus," he says, adding that all employees will be held responsible for damages once he switches to a new bonus program based off of a percentage of gross profit. Then, the total damage costs will be deducted from the bonus money before it's divvied up. "This way they will be more honest about what happens in the field with equipment and will use equipment more carefully and make sure others are doing the same knowing it'll negatively affect them if something happens."

HAND ON THE PULSE. Though the goal for owners is to work on their businesses rather than in them, "I think you always have to work in your business to some extent," Newman insists. "If you can't be involved, you can

eventually lose a sense of what is really happening out there in the field with your employees and your customers."

As a self-described detail-oriented person, Newman says "worrying about the little stuff" is still something that's hard for him to ignore, even as the business grows, breaking \$1 million in revenue last year and on track to reach \$1.5 million this year. "I'm constantly trying to balance having an outlook on the big picture with managing the small stuff," he says. "If I didn't spend the time worrying about things like employee recognition and recruitment, I think I might lose more employees each year, not to mention losing track of customer concerns and risking job quality. If you don't have a pulse on your customers or employees, how quickly will you find out that your retention rate is slipping or employees start quitting

a lasting affect. "I use my judgment on how often I get out there — sometimes it's a couple times a week and sometimes it's once every two weeks."

In addition to the training programs, employee rewards and field help, communication remains essential for employee growth and retention, especially with H-2B employees who leave each winter for three months. Newman conducts 30-minute "exit interviews" with H-2B employees before they return to Mexico or Ecuador each winter to keep tabs on their ambitions. "During these interviews, I learn that these little things people tell me I worry about too much are really important," Newman says, adding that these meetings also help him learn about employees' five-year goals, such as saving money to buy a house in Mexico, wanting to learn more about a differ-



on you? It's usually too late. I'd rather stay ahead of this so I can sense if something is coming and fix it before it becomes a problem."

Using a consultant keeps Newman on track, helping him balance these short- and long-term business issues and enabling him to get out in the field occasionally to check on employees, managers and customers. "I never want to ask my employees to do something I wouldn't be willing to do," he says, adding that this type of interaction doesn't have to occur everyday because the motivational drive that results from getting involved has

ent service area or aspiring to advance in the company. "Employees tell me they appreciate what I do for them. That's really important to me. Instead of acting like I'm smarter than my employees and demotivating them, I hope that I empower them with these programs. And I do it all because I'm smart enough to understand that this business would be nowhere without the employees." ■

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For more YardApes' system secrets and forms, check out the January issue online.

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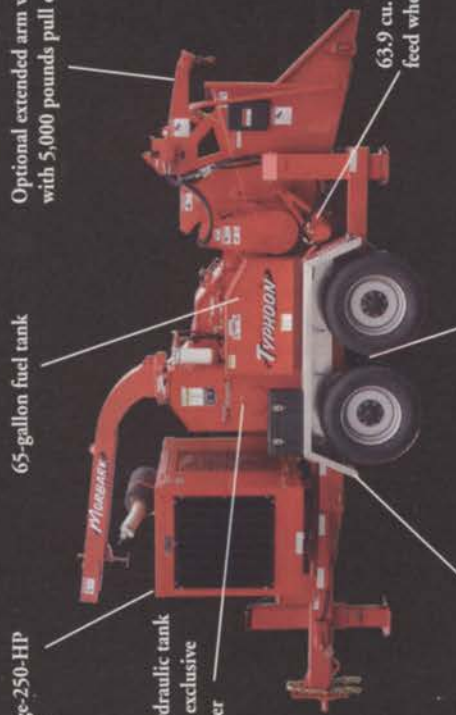
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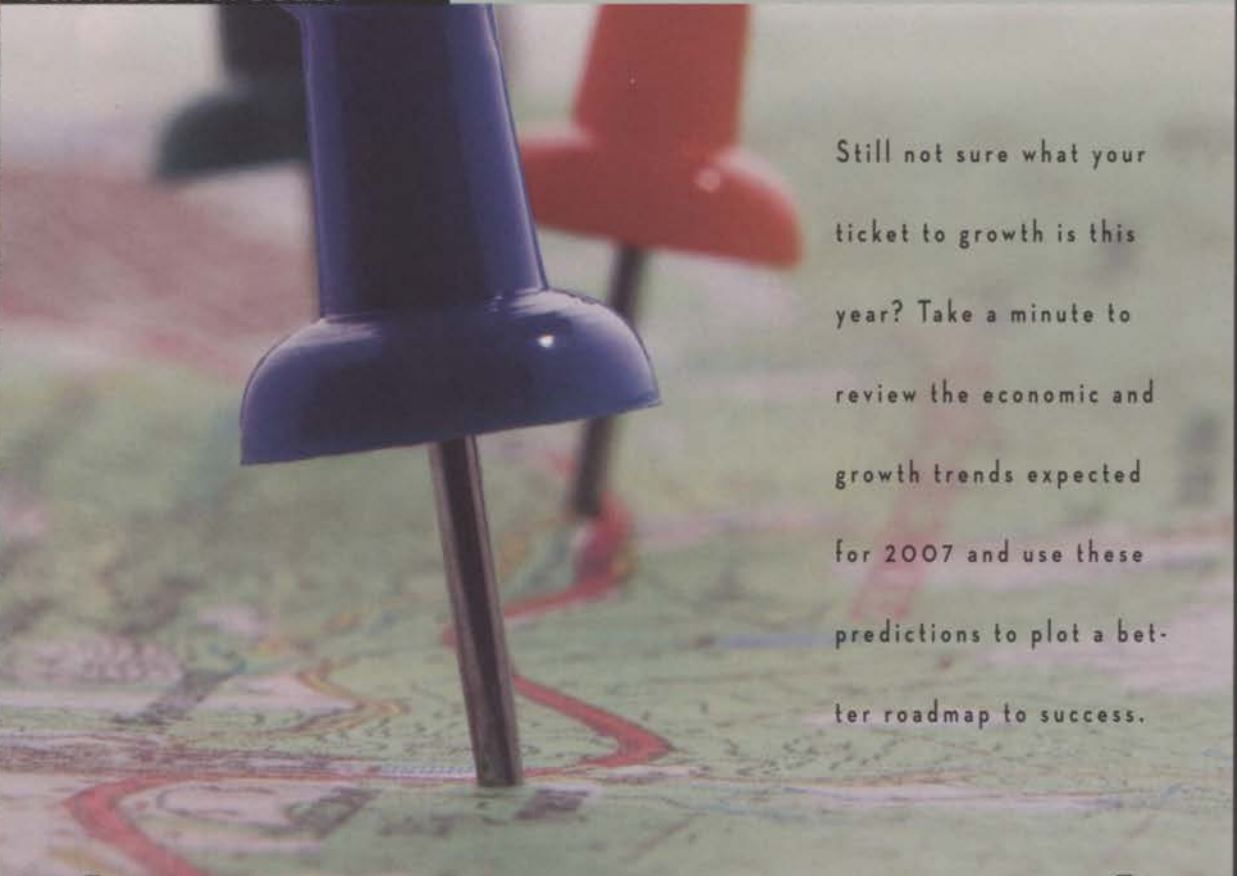
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Still not sure what your ticket to growth is this year? Take a minute to review the economic and growth trends expected for 2007 and use these predictions to plot a better roadmap to success.

charting growth

Photo: Dreamstime.com

Feeling overworked? Feeling stressed? You're not alone. Each year, *Lawn & Landscape* asks landscape contractors to rank their top concerns for the coming year. And each year the number of contractors who give overworked/stressed a higher vote increases. In fact, this owner concern has increased from No. 5 on the list for 2005 to No. 3 on the list for 2007, rising above labor shortages and increasing health insurance costs.

Why are industry business principals so overwhelmed? Because they worry too much about the things they cannot control, according to industry consultant Judy Guido of Guido & Associates, Moorpark, Calif. "A contractor can't control the price of gasoline, rising interest rates or housing booms or busts," she says. "But what he can control is how he understands those market dynamics and how he reacts to them as a business owner – whether he has strategies in place to be able to deal with them or seizes the opportunities they create."

To reduce your stress, study these economic conditions and growth forecasts and then see what consultants and contractors suggest as the top four growth strategies in 2007.

by nicole wisniewski | deputy editor

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ECONOMIC INSIGHT. Despite the majority of contractors ranking stress as one of their top three industry woes this year, it shouldn't limit average business growth, according to Ed Laflamme, president, Grass Roots Consulting, Wilton, Conn., who predicts an average 10 percent increase for landscape companies. Guido concurs, forecasting an 8 to 10 percent average increase across the board, with some service categories pulling in more or less – maintenance being on the lower end, irrigation expecting to garner 9 to 12 percent growth and water feature and lighting installation services anticipating 17 to 18 percent increases.

Though different U.S. regions experience different market dynamics, how well a landscape company does this year might depend on how well it adapts to the 2007 economic influencers – namely housing and consumer spending trends.

Many contractors are concerned with the housing market, with some contractors reporting housing slowdowns in their regions already and others predicting delays this year. Timothy Kilgallon, owner of CSI Landscaping, Scarsdale, N.Y., worries specifically about changes in client spending. "The clients we target are



Sixty economists predict that the median expectation is for the Fed to cut benchmark rates to 5.0 percent by mid-2007 even though the housing slowdown may be nearing a trough. Photo: Shootalot/Dreamstime.com

spending less," he says. "People are price shopping more and making buying decisions slowly."

But the problem might not be as bad as contractors think. David Seiders, chief economist for the National Association of Home Builders, reports a 7.4 percent decline in total housing starts in 2006 and forecasts some

further erosion in 2007, but says the residential remodeling market is doing well and projects modest to real growth this year. And, according to Dallas Federal Reserve President Richard Fisher, lower oil prices and a forecasted U.S. commercial property boom may help offset the problem of a cooling home market.



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As far as interest rates are concerned, the Federal Reserve halted a two-year campaign of tightening credit costs in August 2006 and has kept rates on hold amid a slowing housing market, which had fueled rapid consumer spending, according to CNN. A Reuters poll of 60 economists in late November 2006 found the median expectation was for the Fed to cut benchmark rates to 5.0 percent by mid-2007, even though the housing slowdown may be nearing a trough. Fisher says the Fed was also trying to gauge how long it would take for past interest rate rises to fully impact the economy.

Seiders predicts interest rate stability in 2007. Guido agrees, forecasting that the rate may increase or decrease a quarter point here or there but



If a contractor doesn't know what his sales are supposed to be, how does he know if he's ever making any money? Creating a budget and growth plan for the year can solve this problem. Photo: Batman2000/Dreamstime.com

that the industry shouldn't see any major 2 or 3 percent changes.

While inflation/rising interest rates ranked No. 2 on landscape contractors' top 2007 concerns, Seiders adds that "the worst of the housing contraction appears to be behind us, and the overall economy should strengthen in 2007 - steering clear of recession."

However, Turfgrass Producers International President Arthur Milberger observes that even top economists are torn as to their predictions for 2007 housing. "In October 2006, *USA Today* reported that 55 percent of economists thought home prices would not decline in 2007, while 45 percent predicted a nationwide price drop," he says. "Three-quarters of the economists expected inflation to fall in the next six months; the rest disagreed. Two-thirds

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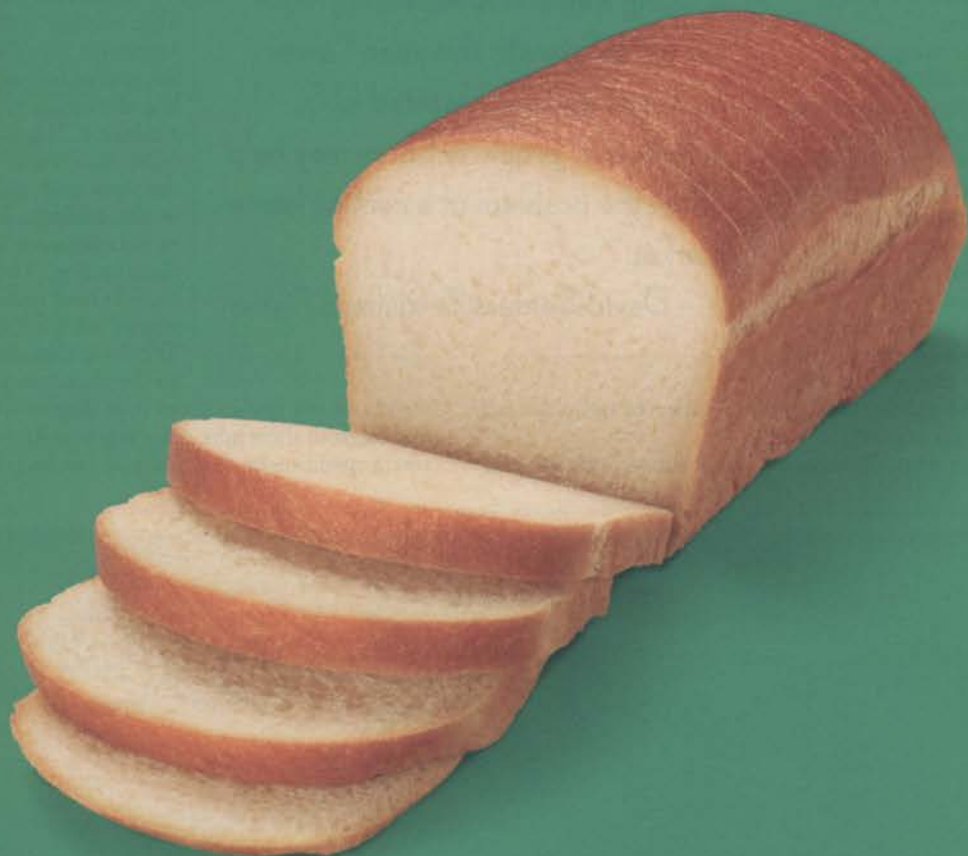
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thought interest rates were 'just right,' and the remaining third were evenly split between saying rates were too high or too low. The reality is you make your best projection based on available information, historic trends and your own knowledge and experience."

Another rising cost contractors are worried about in 2007 is health insurance, which ranked No. 4 on contractors' top concerns list and has remained in that spot for the past three years. Here, Guido says consolidation in the health care industry should limit huge 30- to 40-percent swings, but the industry should expect 5- to 15-percent changes. In terms of labor, the unemployment rate is expected to hold steady at around 4.6 percent.

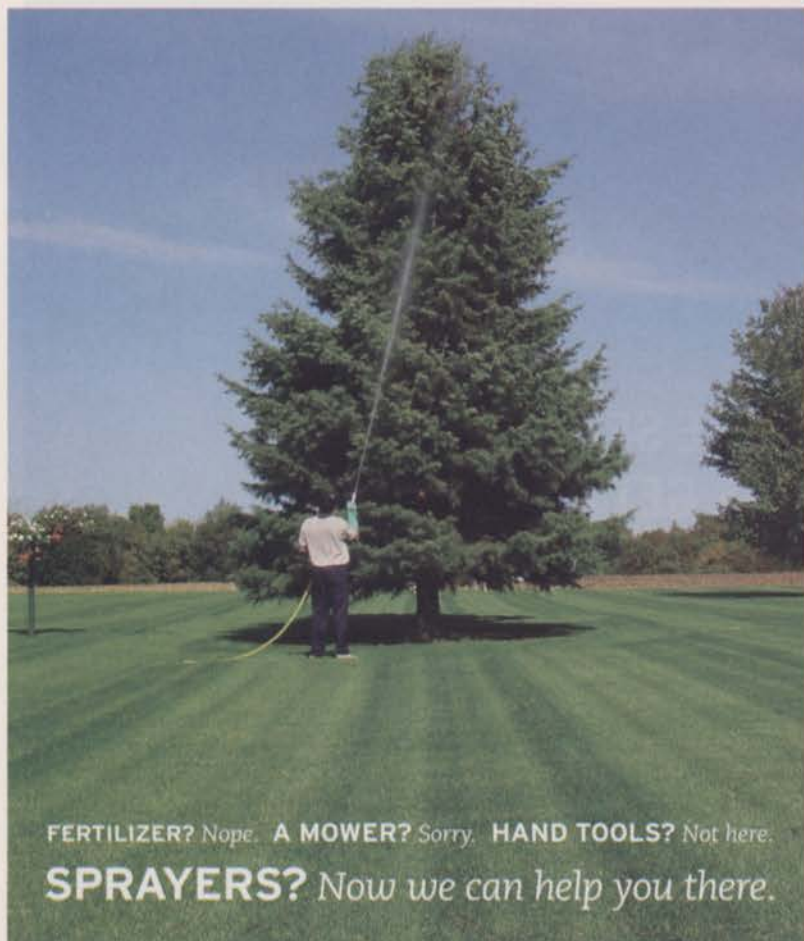
And fuel costs, contractors' No. 1 concern for the past

"There should be a 7.4 percent decline in total housing starts in 2006 and some further erosion in 2007, but the residential remodeling market is doing well and is expecting modest to real growth this year. Lower oil prices and a forecasted U.S. commercial property boom may help offset the problem of a cooling home market."

- David Seiders & Richard Fisher

three years, are also expected to stabilize. Though Guido predicts contractors won't see prices as low as \$1.50 per gallon of gas again, she says fuel prices should be similar to those in 2006 with 10 to 15 cent increases and/or decreases throughout the year.

When fuel prices are this high, the key is controlling costs, Laflamme says. "The problem isn't the cost of fuel as much as controlling the use of it," he says, offering a solution. "Figure out the actual miles each truck uses throughout the week and multiply that by four weeks, adding a 2 percent additional allowance in case of traffic or construction. Then give your crews a credit card that only has enough money on it for gas for the month. Tell them that they have to stick to the maintenance schedule and route and not deviate from it or they won't have enough fuel to go to their jobs. This way you know up front what you're spending on fuel and you can keep a cap on it."



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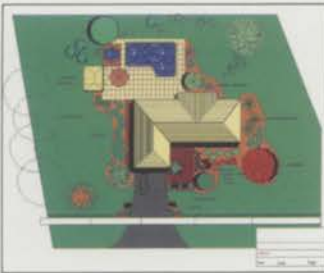
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Plant	1	10.00	5 Gal	5.00	10.00
Plant	1	10.00	5 Gal	2.50	10.00
Plant	1	200.00	10 Gal	14.70	200.00
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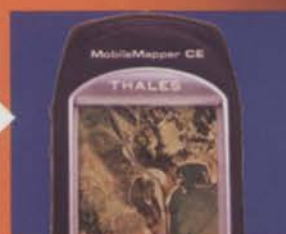


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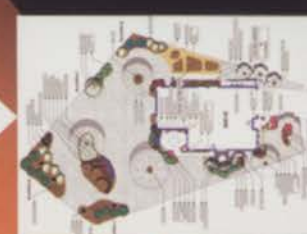
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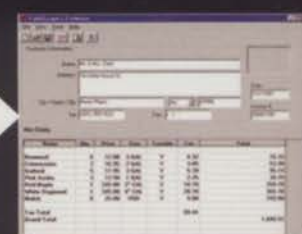
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Project EverGreen -2007 Report to Stakeholders

Join Us in Telling Millions of Americans about the Benefits of Green Spaces



By Den Gardner

It's critical for our industry to educate Americans about the value of your company and the benefits you provide.

As the green industry equivalent of the "Got Milk?" campaign, Project EverGreen's very existence is based on a mission to raise awareness among consumers. The message is simple: the promotion of the environmental, economic and lifestyle benefits of green spaces.

Project EverGreen was founded two years ago by an alliance of large and small companies, associations, contractors and others who provide services and products for green spaces and the people who work in them. Our purpose is to promote the significance of those who preserve and enhance green spaces at home, work and



play and to bring an alternative voice from those criticizing these areas. By doing so, we support the thousands of American landscapers, lawn care operators, sod producers, arborists, nursery and greenhouse growers, golf course superintendents, sports turf managers, irrigation contractors, professional grounds managers and others.

But we don't lobby or represent any one segment or product category. Project EverGreen encompasses all the people, products and services used for green spaces and the benefits of maintaining them.

Project EverGreen Tells the Green Industry Story

Midway through 2006, we had already touched more than 115 million Americans through exposure in the news media.

We have told your story in hundreds of newspapers and radio stations, from the weekly paper in the Parkersville, W. Va. *Sentinel* to *New York Newsday*. Here is a small sampling of the national media that have covered Project EverGreen nationwide:

- *New York Newsday*
- *The Tennessean*
- *The Cincinnati Enquirer*
- *The Daily Oklahoman*
- *The Denver Post*
- *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*
- *Detroit News*

Partnering with Like-Minded People

We've created partnerships with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and America in Bloom that give us a solid story to tell consumers, while simultaneously working directly with the public.



ALL RIGHT AMERICA: Show Us Your Green Spaces

In 2006, Project EverGreen went in search of the best photos of well-maintained green spaces with a contest awarding publication in our *Because Green Matters* Calendar.

The photography contest was inspired by our *Because Green Matters* Award, which recognized the University of Akron (Ohio) and Southern Land Company (Tennessee) for their efforts to develop green spaces.

Your Support is Crucial

As a non-profit organization, Project EverGreen relies on contributions to relay our message to consumers and your help is needed! Volunteer, contribute and get involved! Sign up online at www.projectevergreen.com. Or call toll-free at 1-877-758-4835.

(Editor's Note: Den Gardner serves as executive director of Project EverGreen and helped found its current mission and strategies just two years ago.)

Do the Right Thing

Our highest profile campaign to date is GreenCare for Troops. This public service initiative provides free lawn care for families of armed forces personnel serving in the Middle East.

How does that help the green industry? GreenCare for Troops' slogan is "Serving You While You Serve Us." It puts a face on the green industry, and identifies us as people who care, by matching affected families with local lawn and landscape contractors who have volunteered their services. Are you a volunteer yet?



Project EverGreen enlisted former Marine Gunnery Sergeant, R. Lee "Gunny" Ermey, as its spokesperson. Well-known for his roles on screen and TV, Gunny supports the program because, "The lawn and landscape industry recognizes the financial and emotional sacrifices being made by our men and women serving overseas."

Word about GreenCare for Troops spread like wildfire through the international military community by our media relations. We give daily interviews about the program, and connect the media with local contractors and families for a truly personal perspective. A soldier in Iraq even asked that we send a Project EverGreen banner to him. It is now displayed in Saddam Hussein's former palace.



GROWTH GOAL NO. 1 – EFFICIENCY IS KING. When clients seem nervous to spend and housing seems shaky, being more productive is the top way landscape contractors find they can shave costs and increase profits.

Joe Markell, president, Sunrise Lawn & Landscaping Services,

Herndon, Va., says though his business growth isn't "breaking records," he's "steadily working," which gives him a chance to refine his business systems. "Any way we can be more efficient – that's what we're looking at going forward into 2007."

Mike Russo, president, Russo Lawn & Landscape, Windsor Locks, Conn.,

is also eyeing efficiency more closely. "We've got everything under the sun in terms of systems and processes, but it's a matter of sticking to the plan," he points out. "In 2007, I'd like our company utilizing more of the systems we have in place."

Tom Del Conte, president, Del Conte's Landscaping, Fremont, Calif., also sees a trend toward improved productivity. "It's hit virtually every other industry up the food chain, including the automotive industry where manufacturers and suppliers have to compete and look as productive as possible – they look for every angle they can find to become more productive," he says, pointing out that his company experienced 10 percent growth last year, bringing it to \$9 million in revenue, and he's hoping for the same in 2007. "That's going to be the key to success in this industry – shaving a few cents here and there on our production costs."

More focused schedule management is also a trend contractors pointed to as a means of controlling growth and improving efficiency. "We manage our schedule and monitor our backlog very closely," Williams says. "We track our backlog every month and identify the holes in our work, filling these holes but not overflowing them. As a rule, we don't take on more jobs than we can handle."


GROWTH GOAL NO. 2 – UNDERSTAND YOUR CUSTOMER.

Looking at how the average contractor obtains a customer, Guido says owners spend a good chunk of time visiting clients who they don't qualify first, thereby wasting money and time on initial sales calls that don't result in jobs sold. In fact, Guido says the average contractor only qualifies 25 percent of their clients. "Stop the madness right now," she insists. "You should have a very fine-tuned qualification process where when you go on a sales call you have an 80 percent or greater chance of opening a relationship with a commercial or consumer customer."

To do this, contractors must first understand who their customers are, addressing who in their region qualifies to buy their services, how they buy and how that may change in the future.

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can allow yourself to look at your market dynamics in a new way," Guido suggests. "What are your customers buying – what do they need? Ask yourself, 'What are products and services that my commercial and consumer clients need and what smart partnerships with other service businesses can I create to meet these needs?' Stop thinking like a technician. Start looking at the big picture and the huge business of exterior living."

Guido points specifically to two markets that show the most potential moving forward – women over the age of 45 and Baby Boomers. "These two groups make up the wealthiest people in the world today, meaning they have the highest expendable income," she explains. "You have to ask yourself, 'How am I specifically going after these groups of people as potential customers?'"

Once you know who your customers are, take advan-

"Women over the age of 45 and Baby Boomers make up the wealthiest people in the world today, meaning they have the highest expendable income. You have to ask yourself, 'How am I specifically going after these groups of people as potential customers?'"

– Judy Guido

tage of these relationships, Laflamme says. "Most companies spend very little time and effort marketing to their existing client base," he shares. "Maximize these opportunities. Ask for referrals and send them thank-you notes or gift certificates to restaurants for referrals that result in sales. It's a small price to pay to grow your business."

GROWTH GOAL NO. 3 – SMART MARKETING. Now that you know who your current and target customers are, marketing to them should become easier. The average contractor should be spending 2 to 3 percent of their revenue on marketing, Laflamme points out. In terms of time, Laflamme says an owner only needs to spend one hour each week specifically working on his or her marketing plan, creating a calendar for the year that addresses services, clients, the best time to market the services, the best way to reach the clients and timing.

Contractors should use this marketing budget and calendar to be creative and target their marketing to their niche

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clients, Guido says. "If you do the same *Yellow Pages* ads as every other landscape company in your area, then what makes you different besides your logo, Web site and phone number?" she asks. "If you all advertise in the same place and use the same verbage and the same pictures, then you don't stand out. You have to get out of your comfort zone and do something different."

First, look at your service menu and redefine it as something the customer can understand and see potential in. For instance, "you're not working on properties anymore," Guido says, "you're working on outdoor rooms. Think of your business as bigger than what it is to plan for the future and give yourself opportunities for growth."

Then, Guido says contractors should pretend they are sitting in front of their customers when they create their marketing and Web site verbage and ask themselves if the client truly cares about what they are promoting. "If you say you have a big fleet of trucks and a mechanic on site, who cares?" Guido says. "You have to prove it to the customer and tell them how it benefits them. If you say you have a huge fleet of trucks and a mechanic on board so that appointments never have to be rescheduled and you guarantee you can be at their house the same day each week or something along those lines, now you've hit a nerve and the client can see how it can be a benefit to them."

Industry Consultant Marty Grunder agrees, adding that contractors need to do what makes sense when it comes to marketing. "For commercial customers, it doesn't make sense to be doing mass advertising – the best form of marketing in commercial work is cold calling. Drive by potential accounts. Use a script and call them. Figure out your closing ratio and if you close 15 percent of the calls you place, do the math backwards and figure out how many people you need to call to get the number of new accounts you want."

For residential, Grunder says job signs around a neighborhood are still the best method for attracting new customers. "It's what I call the 'taking over the neighborhood' concept," he says.

GROWTH GOAL NO. 4 – BUDGETING. Contractors who don't have budgets or growth plans for the upcoming year are "driving without a map," Laflamme says. "They really don't

know what their sales are supposed to be. They may never get anywhere – they could just be doing the same thing every year. They could be driving in circles."

And it's not just small businesses who are neglecting this essential business task – "I know landscape contractors with revenues from \$2 million to more than \$10 million who aren't budgeting," Laflamme says, adding that

some contractors actually wait until they receive their profit-and-loss statement after they do their taxes to find out if they made any money – four months into the new year. "Spend the money on a computer system where you can plan and track your costs. It costs money to create and track a budget but it's worth it to know where you are, where you're going, if you're off and what you need to do to get back on track throughout the year." **LL**

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cautiously optimistic

While negative economic factors still prevail, manufacturers and suppliers are rethinking their original conservative outlook for contractor spending in 2007.

Crystal balls. Rolling the bones. Reading tea leaves. Certainly there is a better way to get a handle on contractor spending trends in the coming year?

In fact, the majority of suppliers and manufacturers serving the landscape industry take contractor spending very seriously. Instead of simply rolling the dice, they closely monitor their respective markets, conducting extensive research to gain insight on what the coming year has in store for them and the overall industry.

With an impotent economy, fluctuating fuel costs, nontraditional weather patterns and a cooling of a once red-hot new-housing market as factors, manufacturers and suppliers initially feared an economic domino effect.

For example, one scenario, many inside the industry anticipated, foretold homeowners, burdened by economic pressures, cutting costs and curbing spending on outdoor convenience services, such as lawn mowing and maintenance, and putting off building projects, such as a new backyard patio or outdoor lighting. This has not necessarily been the case, according to industry insiders.

by mike zawacki | managing editor

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USE READER SERVICE # 68

It's a trend the industry started to see develop the year before. Reacting to this plausible market scenario, many landscape equipment manufacturers and suppliers tailored back production in 2006. As such, power equipment manufacturers trimmed their shipments of handheld equipment between 4 and 6 percent, according to research conducted by the Alexandria, Va.-based Outdoor Power Equipment Institute. Level reductions were also seen in walk-behind and riding mower production, where manufacturers reduced their ship-

are getting nervous about the coming year because they're no longer seeing significant growth in this area," says Jonathan Kuylers, landscape segment manager at Pella, Iowa-based Vermeer. "This could have an impact on equipment spending."

However, projections for 2007 have been rethought and manufacturers and suppliers now feel "cautiously optimistic" about the state of the landscape industry and the mind-set of the North American landscape contractor. Indeed, consumers are proving they will continue to invest in

ences in Indianapolis. "We look across our portfolio and we anticipate growth."

And if landscape contractors can continue to sell projects and services into 2007, they will continue to generate the capital and confidence necessary to invest and spend, manufacturers say.

HANDHELD PRODUCTS. In regards to contractor equipment spending, handheld equipment sales trends traditionally differ from those associated with big-ticket items, such as skid-steers and excavators.

Historically, handheld equipment spending flies under the economic radar, says Joe Fahey, vice president of marketing for Echo, headquartered in Lake Zurich, Ill. It's been a good position because in a soft market contractors continue to purchase commercial-grade handheld equipment, he says.

However, contractor spending patterns over the last year have deviated away from this long-held economic trend, Fahey says.

"Sales in the handheld market were spotty last year," Fahey says. "The 2006 year was kind of a curious one for handheld equipment sales, and as we look at 2007 we expect similar conditions to what we saw over the last year."

However, according to recent *Lawn & Landscape* research, contractors are optimistic about handheld equipment spending in 2007. A third of contractors say they plan to purchase backpack/handheld blowers, and more than 30 percent will purchase trimmers/edgers, according to the research.

Unseasonable weather and a decline in new-housing starts both contribute to this curious nature in contractor spending, Fahey says.

"Weather is just a huge part of this business and it drives a lot of these spending trends," Fahey says.

For example, a warm winter can have devastating effects on a landscape contractor who supplements his off-season income with snow removal services. A lack of snow and ice events reduces the level of ready cash in this contractor's pocket as spring approaches and curbs the amount of equipment he's capable of purchasing for the approaching season.

"If weather conditions are not suitable, it doesn't matter what the overall

software sales outlook

Last year was an average year for business software and high-tech hardware sales in the landscape industry, and 2007 will most likely see a repeat of soft sales.

"We're predicting that spending will be flat again," says Glenn Zior, vice president of Clip Software, based in Washington, D.C.

While not anticipating a dramatic growth surge, Zior says software sales to contractors will remain steady because the industry is so fluid.

"The industry is in a constant state of flux with new contractors coming in each year and almost the same number leaving the industry," he says. "We can see this in our mailing list, with new names being added and old names dropping off."

According to recent *Lawn & Landscape* research, contractors seem committed to technology investments. In the coming year, more than 30 percent of contractors plan to purchase computers and business software, the research says, and 21 percent are committed to purchasing design software.

Potential contractor spending, Zior says, exists in offering software products that optimize wireless and palm-based technology, as well as programs that are compatible with global positioning technology.

Lawn & Landscape research, however, points that, at least for the coming year, contractors continue to remain leery about global positioning systems and related software. Only 13 percent indicated they planned to purchase GPS technology in 2007, the data says.

ments by 2 to 3 percent, according to OPEI's data.

Likewise, many within the industry feared the continued reduction in new-housing starts on a national level would further impact landscape contractors' overall spending habits.

"With housing slowing down a little bit, lots of landscape contractors

contractor services, such as mowing and chemical lawn care applications. Likewise, the trend towards additional home improvement has not wavered.

"The landscape industry is still growing as a total industry," says Mark Urbanowski, senior marketing specialist for turf, ornamental and technical products at Dow AgroSci-

economy is like," Fahey says. "We're certainly optimistic about 2007 but conditions are soft right now. Spending is off, but not that off."

MOWERS. For the commercial mower market, so much related to contractor spending depends on overall weather trends that it is challenging to accurately forecast what spending will be like in the coming year.

Wetter-than-normal conditions on the East Coast and drought conditions in the western part of the country all contribute to irregular growth and mowing patterns, manufacturers say, and result in varying contractor spending habits. Even snowfall patterns impact mowing sales.

"No snow will mean contractors won't have the funds from winter snow removal work available at the start of the landscape season to spend on new equipment, and that's not good," says Dan Dorn, product sales manager with Beatrice, Neb.-based Exmark Manufacturing.

Contractor spending on mowers during Fall 2006 was steady, Dorn says, but not spectacular.

"With winter shaping up to be warm and on the dry side, our predictions have gone soft. We remain optimistic, but cautious," he says.

In reaction to economic and seasonal pressures, landscape contractors have been doing more with the mowers they already own.

"What we've been seeing in the industry over the last few years is that contractors are trying to run longer on the equipment that they have," Dorn says. "They're extending the replacement interval and they're stretching an extra two or three years out of their equipment beyond what they can go with them."

"However, we can also interpret this to mean that they're not in a good position to commit to some spending in finally replacing that equipment," Dorn says.

More than a quarter (26 percent) of landscape contractors indicate they plan to purchase riding mowers in 2007, and nearly a quarter (23 percent) plan to buy walk-behind mowers in the coming year, according to *Lawn & Landscape* data.

Another mild January, February and March will prime contractors to attack the landscape season earlier than normal, which includes new

equipment purchases. "It's all weather dependent," Dorn says.

LANDSCAPE EQUIPMENT. According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, contractor spending on landscape equipment, both large and compact, may be soft in 2007.

Only about 15 percent of landscape contractors indicated they planned to purchase skid-steers or skid-steer attachments in 2007,

without having to add labor," Kuyers says. "They'll be looking at purchasing equipment that will allow them not to replace, but augment, their existing labor."

Large-equipment sales, however, may become stagnant in 2007, Kuyers says. "While homeowners are not spending as much on big outdoor projects contractors will be taking on smaller jobs," he says. "With these scaled-down jobs contractors won't



Lack of snow and ice events reduces the cash in the pockets of northern landscape contractors who push snow during the winter. As spring approaches, this lack of funds curbs the amount of landscape equipment and materials contractors purchase for the approaching season. Photo: Blizzard

and only 11 percent of contractors planned to invest in a mini skid-steer in the coming year.

Likewise, contractors indicated flat spending projections for equipment such as trenchers (7 percent), excavators (6 percent) chippers/grinders (5 percent) and hydroseeders (4 percent).

Vermeer's Kuyers says they are more optimistic about this market segment because, in an effort to reduce labor costs, contractors are more open to investing in landscape equipment such as mini skid-steers, landscape attachments and trenchers.

"Landscape contractors are looking for more ways to become productive

need such big equipment and will continue to generate the need for compact equipment.

Likewise, if contractors become conservative about new equipment purchases, Kuyers predicts the rental market could see a boost.

"Contractors will rent what they need to complete jobs on a project-by-project basis," he says. "And they'll also be more apt to rent equipment before making a future purchasing decision."

SPECIALTY CHEMICALS. Pesticide and fertilizer manufacturers, too, are "cautiously optimistic" about 2007.

While new housing starts may be cooling, Urbanowski says Dow's research indicates demand still exists for maintenance services in 2007, a definite opportunity for contractors and lawn care operators.

"We see the need for additional maintenance services in 2007, much better than we saw in 2006" Urbanowski says. "Having the homeowner continue to see a need to have this service is a key driver to contractor success in the coming year."

Reduced new housing starts or a cooling economy shouldn't dissuade contractor spending on chemical products, says Jim Fetter, director of marketing at Bayer Environmental Science in Columbus, Ohio.

"There has been some talk recently about the market declining," Fetter says. "But that's not necessarily bad. When people aren't selling their homes and moving around, they're staying home and maintaining their homes a little better."

Outside economic factors, though, will weigh heavily on contractor spending in this market segment.

"As we look across our portfolio we do anticipate growth, but we also anticipate LCOs will have some difficult decisions to make on what products they'll be using in 2007," Urbanowski says. "Will they go with a premium product, or will they go generic to save some money?"

Recent *Lawn & Landscape* research also reflects this spending outlook. Nearly 60 percent of contractors planned to purchase fertilizer products in the coming year, according to the data. Likewise, between 40 and 50 percent planned to purchase preemergent, postemergent or nonselective herbicides in 2007, according to the research.

More than 30 percent of contractors planned to purchase fungicides and fertilizer/pesticide combination products in the coming year, and nearly 37 percent indicated they planned to purchase insecticides, according to *Lawn & Landscape* data.

Likewise, more than 20 percent of contractors plan to purchase chemical sprayers and spreaders in the coming year, according to the research.

Over recent years, LCOs have sought to lower their costs, boost profits and remain competitive, perhaps to their own detriment.

"These folks have shaved back their rates to the absolute minimum and got bitten in the end," Urbanowski says. "Going into 2007 we're going to see contractors and LCOs re-evaluate what they're doing in their

crabgrass in recent history, Urbanowski says. As such, clients haven't forgot this and will be demanding that their LCOs prevent crabgrass' repeat performance in 2007.

"You can almost guarantee pre-emergent demand will be up," he says. "We're going to see some different dynamics because of last year's crabgrass problems."

spending trends

When asked, some landscape contractors indicated they planned to not alter their traditional equipment spending patterns heading into 2007.

Tom Del Conte, owner of Del Conte's Landscaping in Fremont, Calif., says his equipment spending levels stay "steady" from year to year. And the purchases he does make must impact his productivity.

Todd Williams, vice president and regional director at American Civil Constructors, Littleton, Colo., expects his firm's equipment spending levels to remain consistent in 2007.

"We generally have been trying to do more work with less equipment for a while now," he explains. "Our business strategy in landscape construction lends itself to using rental equipment a fair amount of the time as well."

Other landscape contractors report that they plan to spend more than they did in 2006 based on their 2007 growth expectations and specific customer demands. For example, Chris Davitt, president of Ruppert Nurseries in Latonsville, Md., says his firm's spending is based on its rate of growth. "We've aggressively purchased to keep consistent with our growth," he says.

programs as contractors continue to juggle their costs of doing business."

Contractors were less enthusiastic about purchasing plant growth regulators and perimeter pest control products (15 percent), as well as chemical tree care products (14 percent), according to the data.

So what may encourage some of this spending?

Last year was a challenging one for fungicides because of lower-than-normal disease rates across most of the country. Urbanowski anticipates a return to a normal disease pattern in 2007, which gives LCOs the opportunity to provide clients with fungicide treatments as an add-on service.

Likewise, the lawn care industry remembers 2006 as having the worst

In addition, Urbanowski says landscape contractors could tap ornamental care as an additional add-on service for 2007.

"If you're there to treat the lawn you can also be there to treat the client's ornamentals as well," he says. "It's a natural add on."

SNOW AND ICE REMOVAL. Suppliers and manufacturers serving the snow removal industry are in as much of a quandary about the coming year as their contractor clients.

The bulk of contractor spending on big-ticket items, such as snowplows spreaders and snow removal attachments, takes place between October and the first week of December, manufacturers say.

However, insiders within the chemical industry that manufacture anti-ice and ice-melt products say Winter 2005-06 was a dismal year for their industry. As such, chemical suppliers were left with a lot of unused inventory.

If this snow season ends up as another lackluster winter, suppliers will likely start cutting attractive deals to

able to sign the contracts they want, they will pay attention to purchasing better-quality equipment.

And if snow and ice removal services remain flat in 2007, contractors will begin asking themselves the tough questions, says Mark Hall, director of marketing and sales for Warren, Mich.-based TrynEx International, a maker of deicing spreaders.

optimism. According to landscape contractors who push snow and offer ice melting services, less than 15 percent plan to purchase snow plows or salt spreaders in 2007. Nearly a quarter of contractors, roughly 21 percent, plan to purchase anti/deicing products, according to the research.

PRIMING SPENDING. So how can manufacturers stimulate contractor spending in 2007? In the past, sales incentives have captured contractor business, but retooling the sales approach may not be enough. Across market segments, manufacturers recognize that contractors want products that reduce costs and increase efficiencies.

"What can't the contractor live without," Kuyers says, playing to the contractor's desire to troubleshoot labor problems and to do more with less. "That's one way to approach them as customers."

Bringing new products to market can jump start spending, as well. Contractors committed to spending dollars in 2007 will be looking first at companies with new models in their product lines.

If winter proves to be warm and sales soft, Paonessa says manufacturers and suppliers will be forced to consider incentives to motivate contractor spending, but these may not necessarily be financial lures.

"Poor sales should motivate us to see what types of incentives we can offer contractors," Paonessa says. "And that may not mean financial incentives, but rather innovations."

"If you're just holding your ground, others in this market will drive right past you," Exmark's Dorn says. "Those not invested in innovation have nothing to offer the contractor and they'll lose out."

"New product offerings can often bring contractors out of their shell and get them to stimulate the marketplace," Echo's Fahey says. "Contractors are looking for increased durability and efficiency, not cosmetic changes. For new products to stimulate spending, they have to bring real value to the industry."

And if contractors believe in a product, they are less likely to switch brands, Paonessa says. "Innovation builds loyalty and comfort levels with contractors," he says. "Once they have that, they're less likely to change." ■



Photo: Randy McKown/Dreamstime.com

move this over abundance of product, insiders say.

Going into 2007, the disappointment of the previous year still lingers not only in the minds of North American snow contractors, but also with their clients and prospects, says Isaac Paonessa, regional sales manager at Ledex Industries in Oakville, Ontario, Canada, which manufactures the Avalanche brand snowplow.

Lack of snow for more than one consecutive season causes clients to delay making snow removal decisions or dissuade them from getting locked into long-term deals, Paonessa says.

"The industry – both for contractors and for suppliers – needs for it to snow hard early on in the season," Paonessa says. "If contractors are then

"Contractors will begin asking themselves if their equipment, which should have been replaced this year and wasn't, can in fact go one more year," Hall says.

However, Hall remains positive about contractor spending in the snow removal market.

"The bottom line is, regardless of the weather predictions, there's going to be snow and there's going to be ice," Hall says. "All of this will be good for sales because contractors then will begin spending. Even in a recession, a guy with a pickup will see that there is some snow and ice and will run out and buy a plow and a spreader to make some money."

Recent *Lawn & Landscape* research, though, does not reflect Hall's

service outlook

Service add-ons or expansions can boost business. Analyze your service mix based on these expectations and plan accordingly.

The services a landscape company provides and to whom they provide them can weigh heavily on how a firm will fare in any one year. Advancements in technology, economic conditions, regulations and Mother Nature all will play a role in whether or not a contractor surges ahead, holds steady or loses ground in 2007.

For an outlook on service trends in the coming year, *Lawn & Landscape* talked with a sampling of suppliers, contractors and consultants. Here's what they had to say about the different segments of the green industry.

SERVICE NO. 1 - MAINTENANCE. Considering the slow down in the real estate market, maintenance is the business to be in this year, according to Ed Laflamme, president of Grass Roots Consulting, Wilton, Conn. "If you're not offering maintenance, you should be," he says, explaining that it's one of the industry services that's best positioned for growth during a possible downturn. Laflamme also says a trend toward full-service firms will continue through 2007, as companies that are primarily design/build may move more into maintenance to insulate themselves when new home build-

by marisa palmieri | associate editor

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ding slows. "Companies will realize they don't have as much construction work, so they will do more work for the customers they have," he says.

It's not a surprising prediction, considering the average cost of acquiring a new client is \$257, according to industry consultant Judy Guido of Guido & Associates, Moorpark, Calif.

In addition to becoming more costly to acquire, customers are becoming more particular, says Tom Heaviland, president of Heaviland Enterprises, Vista, Calif. "Customers are becoming more demanding and their expectations are higher," he says. "On the commercial side, they have a lot of choices and they know they can get pretty consistent quality, so they can demand it. We saw that quite a bit last year and expect it will continue this year."

Heaviland also sees partnering to provide other services as an opportunity that contractors soon will have to seize. "They are looking for you

to help broker other services or be more of a concierge," he says. "Maybe you don't do parking lot sweeping for them, but you line that up. Not all of them are going to be expecting it, but as contractors we can start to take the lead and do our part."

Contractors in commercial maintenance also must keep an eye on consolidations among firms that provide property management and real estate services, Heaviland says, pointing to commercial real estate services giant CB Richard Ellis's agreement to acquire Trammell Crow Co. for an estimated \$2.2 billion late last year. "If you do a lot of commercial work, you could lose a big chunk of your portfolio if it gets gobbled up," he says.

Those types of transactions also can affect contractors in the commercial snow business. Snow contractors with residential customers or per-push agreements face another unknown in 2007 and every year: the weather. "If it doesn't snow it doesn't matter how

many customers you have," says Roger Meyers of American Beauty Landscape, Boardman, Ohio.

SERVICE NO. 2 – LAWN CARE. Like maintenance companies, lawn care firms are analyzing the cost to acquire a client and will continue to focus on retention and add-ons in 2007, says Jim Fetter, lawn and landscape regional manager for Bayer Environmental Science, Research Triangle Park, N.C.

"We're seeing more emphasis on retention rather than on trying to grab new customers," Fetter says. "The industry is taking a harder look at the lifetime value of a good customer."

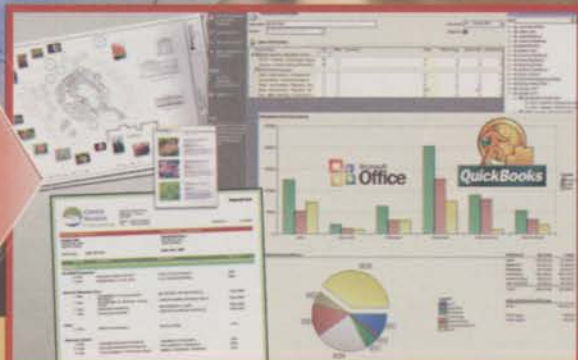
This year, public health issues also will give LCOs the opportunity to increase their sales of value-added services and to position themselves as more than just companies that take care of peoples' lawns.

"We're at a crossroads of positioning the industry and individual businesses in a positive light," Fetter

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says. Consumers are facing a number of high-profile, "emotional" pest problems right now – with fire ants a perennial problem in the South, the emerald ash borer invading states across the North and mosquito-related concerns like West Nile virus nationwide. These are the services that will create opportunities for LCOs, Fetter says.

The residential market continues to be a higher margin one for lawn care firms, Fetter says, noting commercial property managers' tight budgets won't go away any time soon.

SERVICE NO. 3 – LANDSCAPE

DESIGN/BUILD. Encouraged by Home & Garden Television, makeover television shows and a robust economy in recent years, the "outdoor living" trend is alive and well – a good sign for the landscape design/build segment despite the fact that the housing cool down is expected to trickle down to landscape construction.

A home design trends study conducted in 2006 by the American Institute of Architects indicated that two-thirds of residential architects saw an increase in outdoor living spaces, including decks, patios and outdoor kitchens – a 17 percent boost over 2005. Likewise, 56 percent of architects reported a rise in upscale landscaping and 5 percent saw an increase in formal lot boundaries. One factor driving this trend is smaller lot sizes, according to the AIA's Chief Economist Kermit Baker. "It makes sense that with a smaller lot you need to use it differently and improve it better than if you have a big property. That's why we're seeing an increase in formal lot boundaries and upscale landscaping," he says, noting the trend should continue through 2007. "In terms of '07 and beyond, it's hard to think these trends are going to turn on a dime."

But what about the real estate slow down? "I don't think the outdoor living trend will be greatly affected," Baker says. "You may not see as many \$40,000 or \$50,000 outdoor kitchens, as those are probably discretionary items that were made possible by the hot real estate market, but the general focus on people improving their properties will not be hit hard by the cool down."

Piggy-backing on the success of

the design/build segment and the outdoor living trend are specialty services like outdoor lighting and water features. "Consumers are definitely becoming more aware of lighting as every year goes by from a lot of the trends in outdoor living," says Mike Southard, director of landscape lighting sales for Kichler Lighting, Cleveland. "As you spend more money on the outside, it becomes more important to light it."

Lighting, water features and outdoor kitchens are several of the boom areas Guido forecasts for the next three to five years, particularly in terms of landscape renovation, often completed in phases, in middle- and upper-middle-class America. She po-

ints to the "exterior living" phenomenon as evidence – and even encourages contractors to start using the language that represents this trend. "Stop saying 'properties' or 'yards' and start saying exterior spaces and rooms," she says. Guido also foresees a trend toward consumers requesting outdoor furniture and accessories from their landscape designers, and she advises contractors to start considering "strategic partnerships" with such suppliers.

SERVICE NO. 4 – IRRIGATION.

Irrigation contractors are likely to see a lively year, as water conservation continues to be an important issue and several national initiatives drive home the point. Of course, external forces

service starts

What new services does your company plan to offer in 2007 that you do not currently offer?

SERVICE % OF CONTRACTORS

Irrigation 12.4

Waterscapes 11.2

Design/Build 10.4

Mowing/
Maintenance 7.5

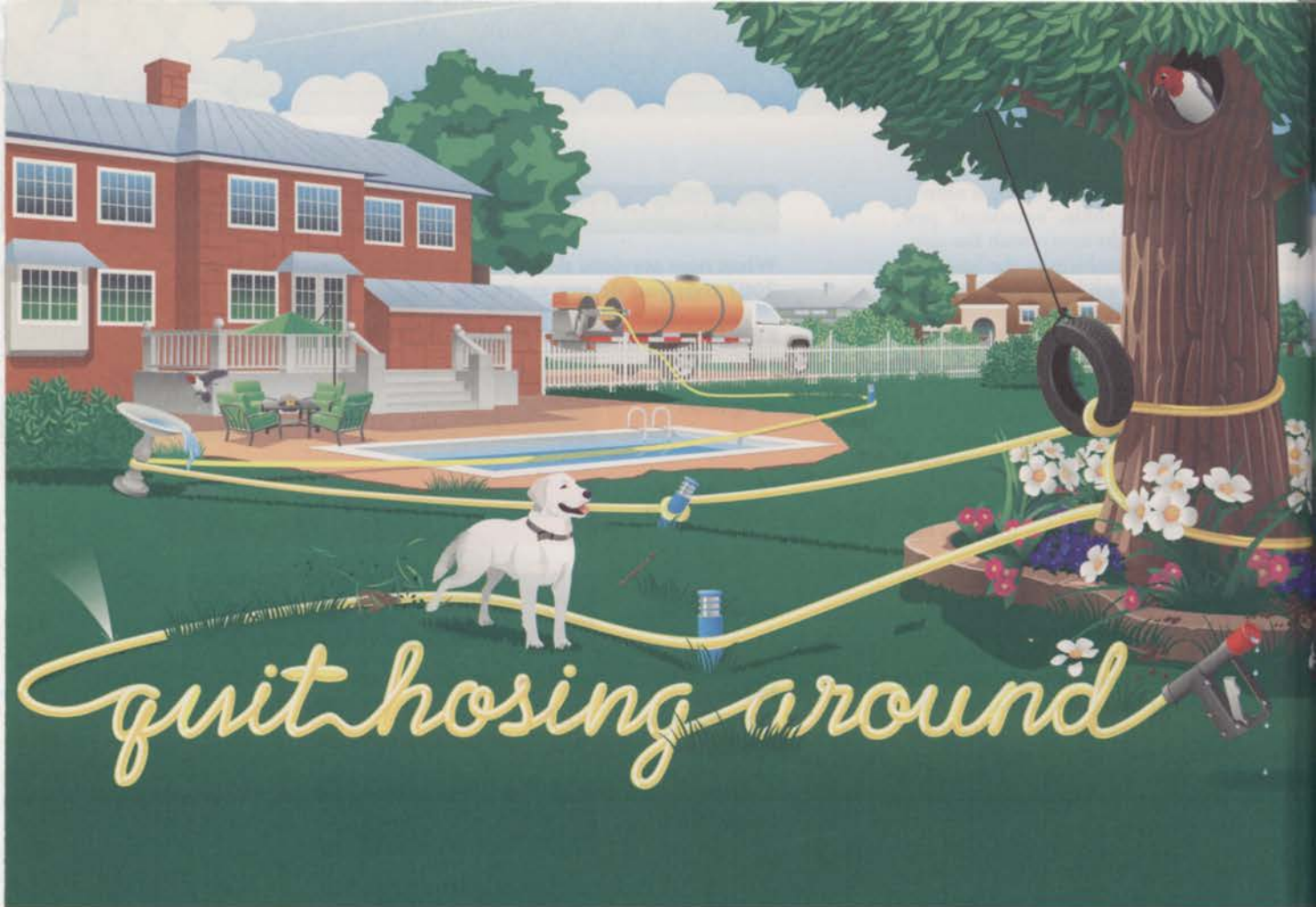
Pesticides 7.1

Trees &
Ornamental 5.7

Snow Removal 4.2

Other 7.3

Source: Lawn & Landscape State of the Industry Research



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play a big role in irrigation. "If it's a year of a lot of water restrictions and drought it will obviously affect the industry," says Dave Johnson, director of corporate marketing for Rain Bird, Tucson, Ariz.

On the residential side, the Environmental Protection Agency's WaterSense program is underway.

WaterSense, a consumer labeling initiative, will help homeowners select water-efficient products and services. The EPA signed partnerships with the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) and the Irrigation Association for certification programs last fall and hopes to roll out the product labeling effort for controllers in 2007 and drip

irrigation products in 2008.

"I think the EPA's and other agencies' work on water conservation reflects people's greater awareness of water issues," Johnson says. "Contractors are going to start addressing that in how they deal with customers."

In commercial applications, awareness of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standard, set by the U.S. Green Building Council to encourage environmental consciousness in the building industry, will contribute to the growth of irrigation systems being installed and upgraded nationwide. Five out of the 69 points that help determine whether a new building is deemed LEED-compliant relate to irrigation. Evidence that the green building concept is taking root: The effort's associated trade show, Greenbuild, was named one of *Tradeshow Week's* fastest growing shows in the U.S. and Canada.

One economic indicator that the irrigation segment, like most others, monitors carefully is new home starts, which are expected to plummet in 2007. However, it might not be a bad thing for irrigation contractors, Johnson notes. "People may look to upgrade the home they're staying in or look at installing a new system in their current home," he says. This outcome would boost the need for system auditing on the residential level, Johnson notes. "It may become a bigger service as people get interested in how much their current system uses and how they can upgrade."

A growing focus on "smart" ET-based or weather-based controllers comes thanks to technological advancements that make them more affordable, support from water agencies and grassroots industry efforts, like the IA dubbing July as Smart Irrigation Month. "The focus on climate-based controllers is getting to be more of a hot topic to address residential systems," Johnson says. Drip irrigation, too, is becoming more prevalent. "More contractors outside the traditional drip areas are trying to get into it and understand what it means," he says. "Some contractors may be intimidated because parts and pieces are different from what they're used to, but once they get in there and they recognize the water savings for their customers, they're usually into it." ■

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What's the smartest way to grow a landscape company? *Lawn & Landscape Message Board* users debate the merits of growing organically vs. obtaining outside dollars to fund that next growth spurt.

Good Growth

Photo: Beata Suchenek/Dreamstime.com

All growth is good. However, is one method of increasing the size of a landscape business a more solid, advantageous or strategic decision than others? It's an interesting dilemma for landscape contractors as they grow their businesses and strengthen their strategic positions in their respective marketplaces. *Lawn & Landscape Message Board* participant Chad Stern posed a similar question recently about growth to his online colleagues.

Stern, owner of Mowing & More based in Chevy Chase, Md., says he wants to grow his company 100 percent organically, or increase its size and scope solely through his own profits and without outside investment.

"A service company that is very labor and employee intensive requires a very solid framework and infrastructure as it grows," Stern posts. "I personally think that organic growth is the best way to ensure that my company does not grow at a rate faster than my ability to manage that growth."

Stern acknowledged organic growth will grow his company at a much slower rate than it would through an infusion of outside cash, and that he doubts his company will reach the \$100 million milestone during his lifetime. However, Stern was still curious as to whether the

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infusion of capital from an outside investor created a growth rate that was unmanageable, both for the owner and for the company's existing infrastructure.

Message board participant Steve Cissel, founder and chief executive officer of the online green industry directory GIYP.com, posts that he believes an organic approach is too slow

show the loan officer at the bank and I established a line of credit. I used it to its full extent early in the year and paid it off by year's end.

"Recently, I doubled (my company's credit line) to expand my operation," he explains. "The plan was to pay it down half (of the loan) the first year, then use (the loan) to its max the second year and then pay it all off in

Cissel doesn't necessarily agree with securing outside funding for intangibles, such as marketing and sales. Instead, Cissel suggests only financing big-ticket items, such as trucks and real estate.

"If I was to wait until I had enough cash to pay for trucks or a shop I would grow too slowly," Cissel says. "Sometimes you can borrow money for trucks for almost nothing, so it does not make sense to pay in cash."

Secondly, Cissel believes a young landscape company should be committing 7 to 10 percent of its income to marketing,

whereas a mature company should be investing 4 to 7 percent.

"Leveraging cash to throw at marketing would scare the (heck) out of me," Cissel says. "So much of marketing is brand building/name building and does not turn into revenue."

Wiggins, however, posts, that in his particular case, this sage advice is easier said than done. As a lawn maintenance and landscaping contractor, Wiggins posts his profits are not large enough to grow organically. Likewise, he has the equipment to take on additional work, but not the clients.

"That's my problem, I need a heck of a lot more mowing customers," Wiggins says, adding he'd want to be at 400 accounts within the next two years. "Should I ask a rich friend if they would lend/invest money so I can target my marketing strategy better and get the work and grow the way I want to?"

Cissel recommends examining the firm's marketing plan and choosing items – such as building word-of-mouth referrals from existing clients – that can fit within the company's current budget allowance.

"You've got to be creative and figure out a way to get it done," Cissel posts.

Some participants weighed in that, ultimately, a landscape contractor needs to carefully consider what they're willing to sacrifice – such as control over of a portion of their company – for the financial ability to grow at a more aggressive rate. ■

"Trying to grow a business without utilizing borrowing power will not grow the business fast enough to profit from the opportunities in the marketplace." – Steve Cissel



and that the rest of the marketplace evolves at a much faster rate.

"Trying to grow a business without utilizing borrowing power will not grow the business fast enough to profit from the opportunities in the marketplace," Cissel says.

Investor-oriented growth, however, provides the financial means to grow a landscape business at a much more rapid, and steady, rate, he says, adding there are a couple of routes a contractor could pursue for funding.

For example, a venture capitalist (VC) is an investor who wants equity – ownership – in the business, Cissel posts. However, the VC may want to be a part of the decision making process at the landscape firm. Likewise, a major drawback with obtaining VC money is that the investor expects large returns from the business and wants to see aggressive growth rates – upwards to 100 percent, Cissel says.

Another type of investor, Cissel posts to the online message board, is an individual who wants to loan cash in order to receive a financial return but without owning any part of the business. This type of investor could be a bank, family member, wealthy individual, etc. Cissel adds he's used this type of investor since 1987 to grow his company.

"Early on it was a loan from my grandparents that was structured as interest-only for the first 5 years, then principle and interest for the next 5 years until the note was paid off," Cissel says. "Then I had a track record to

full the third year. Then it should be available again."

Many seasoned contractors offered that many banks, especially those with small business lending programs, will offer contractors modest – typically less than \$25,000 – lines of credit. For larger sums of money, a bank will demand a more aggressive background check of the borrower's financial history.

WHAT TO BORROW FOR. During a previous online post involving investing and growth, landscape contractor Keith Wiggins queried the online message board participants as to whether obtaining investment money to support a marketing initiative was a sound business decision for a landscape contractor.

"I know that with my marketing plan I can drive my company to its next level and double or triple the investment in a year or two," Wiggins posts. "My question is should I consider finding an investor? I want my company to grow and I keep hearing, 'You've got to spend money to make money.'"

Kelly Tohill, owner of Atlanta-based Tohill Landscape Management, posts there are cheaper alternatives to growth. And reaching the "next level" requires more selling than anything else, he says

"Go pound on some doors and network," Tohill posts. "Going and talking to people doesn't cost a lot of money."

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By Marisa Palmieri / Associate Editor

Mariani Landscape's design manager shares tips for merging design tastes.



DESIGNER TRADE SECRETS

W

hen Carrie Woleben-Meade conceptualizes a landscape, she hits the books. Whether they're garden books from the aisles of Borders or portfolios of past installations completed by Mariani Landscape, Woleben-Meade makes sure to use photographs for presentations.

"Clients might say they'd like a French garden, but do they know what they mean?" says the design manager for Lake Bluff, Ill.-based Mariani. "We find that clients throw out terms but have a different determination than we do of what they mean." It's the designer's job not to leave room for confusion, Woleben-Meade says.

That's just one trade secret she's picked up in her 15-plus years at Mariani, where the Michigan State University graduate started working as a designer soon after she earned her bachelor's degree in landscape architecture. Today she manages a design department of about 20 people and also is director of marketing.

One of Woleben-Meade's favorite parts of her current job is serving as lead designer for Mariani Landscape's home and garden show exhibits. "The shows encourage us to put ourselves out there and take risks – they keep everyone on their toes," she says.

This year's Garden in a City urban horticulture show in Chicago is a perfect example of her risk-taking and ability to merge the aesthetic with the practical. She designed a small backyard lot that incorporated unusually large plant material for a dramatic effect and included a conservation-conscious water feature that converted runoff water into a backyard rain garden. The exhibit's outstanding use of the elements deemed important by judges – water, air, land, energy and recycling – won Mariani Landscape one of three awards given at the event.

Photos: Linda Oyama Bryan

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USE READER SERVICE # 78

professional profile

Awards are a nice perk, but Woleben-Meade says one of the best things about working for a design/build firm is taking a project from A to Z. "I get to come up with ideas and see how they're executed," she says. In particular, she enjoys the detail-oriented nature of residential projects. "I like working one-on-one with a client vs. dealing with a board in a commercial project," she says. "In residential, we're not just looking at plant selection, but other things like the hardscape elements that lead people from inside their homes to the outdoors."

During the design process, Woleben-Meade analyzes a new client's home. "I look at how they decorate their house, how they keep their home and if they have children." Being perceptive of these elements allows her to discern a client's taste and the level of maintenance they'll tolerate. "I also look at the type of house they bought. Is it modern or Victorian or another style? I use that to design their landscape because obviously it's a style they like since they purchased the home."

"I try to bring something new to every project," Woleben-Meade adds. "I try to make it unique, like a piece of art vs. thinking, 'Oh they just need a new front walk.'"

And what do her residential clients want now? "Designs are clean and modern right now," Woleben-Meade says. "The big rush of English gardens and lots of color and perennials is over - I think people realized they were high maintenance. We're using a lot of larger quantities of the same variety. People want much more peaceful and relaxing looks." **PLD**

GARDEN STYLE SECRETS

Conventional wisdom says a home's architectural elements should dictate its garden style, according to Carrie Woleben-Meade, landscape architect and design manager for Lake Bluff, Ill.-based Mariani Landscape. But the rules don't always have to be so rigid. What if a client with a Victorian home wants a Japanese garden or a woodlands look? Here are Woleben-Meade's tips for merging an array of tastes.



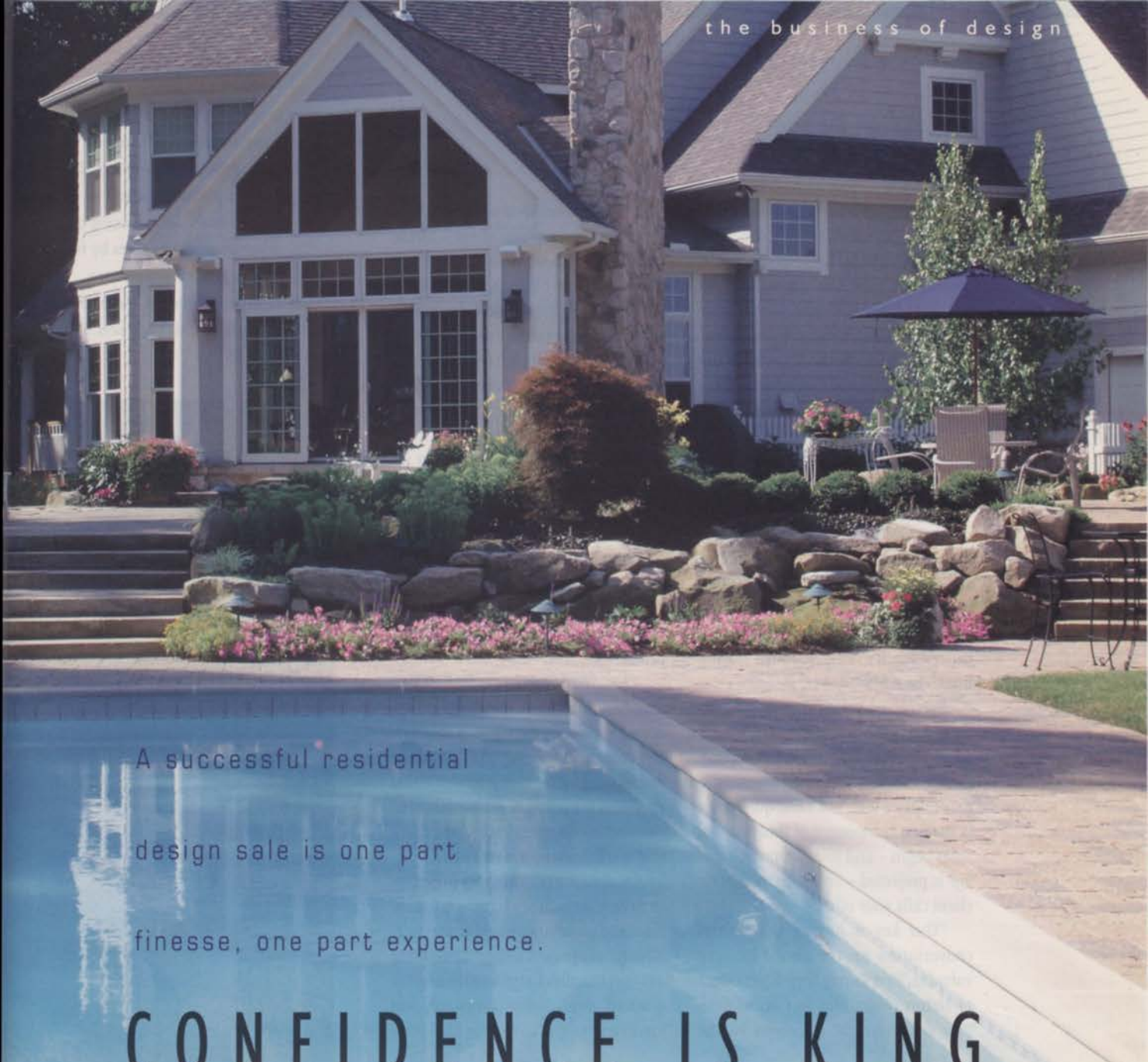
1. Complement the architectural period of the house in the front yard. Save diversity for the back yard.

2. Separate the property into specific rooms defined with hedging for different garden styles.

3. Ensure circulation patterns create logical connections to the home, no matter what styles you're mixing.

4. Be bold! Mix up the plant palette and the garden layout. Experiment with native herbaceous plants within a formal hedge structure.

5. On small properties, stay with one style for the garden, but introduce containers featuring unusual plants. Another rule of thumb for a client with a variety of interests: Keep the formal elements close to the house and let the landscape loosen up as it gets closer to the perimeter.



A successful residential
design sale is one part
finesse, one part experience.

CONFIDENCE IS KING

Charging new clients design fees and sticking to budget are lessons many landscape design firms have learned along the way. As it turns out, some people can get away with breaking rules; others need to stick closely to the status quo. For example, during the late 1990s, a client approached Lake Bluff, Ill.-based Mariani Landscape with a \$100,000 budget for a Japanese garden, Frank Mariani told a crowded room of contractors at an Ohio Landscape Association event last fall.

The project required extensive research, as the firm had never designed a Japanese retreat of this scale. The design team delved into the design process, reviewing books on the subject, studying hydrology and consulting with a Japanese garden specialist to critique minute matters like stone placement. It took Mariani's team two months to produce the original concepts – for which they did not charge the client. When it came time to present the proposal, there was just one problem – the budget. "It was just a minor change," Mariani explains. "I told the client, you're going to have to add an extra zero."

By Marisa Palmieri / Associate Editor

Mariani sold the million-dollar job (see photo on page S8) – but concedes he broke every rule in the book. Not all contractors have the reputation and finesse to take such risks. But no matter the size of the company or scope of a project, everyone can learn from the dedication Mariani's company practices and the confidence he exudes.

"Confidence is a look at sales from more of a psychological point of view," says Pat Lynch, residential design and sales for Peabody Landscape Group, Columbus, Ohio. It can be cultivated with the right mix of professionalism and sales experience, Lynch says. "When you talk about confidence, you're talking about image, knowledge and experience. It's not using slick closing lines," he adds.

Portraying your company as professional is the first step to residential sales success. When your company places a value on its design work, the marketplace will, too. Lead qualifying is the first component of this process. Sales begin – and your company's image is projected – from the moment a client calls your office.

"Our key is having that initial conversation on the phone be very valuable," says Randy Sorrell, president of NatureWorks Plus in Carmel, Ind. "We ask the right questions so the

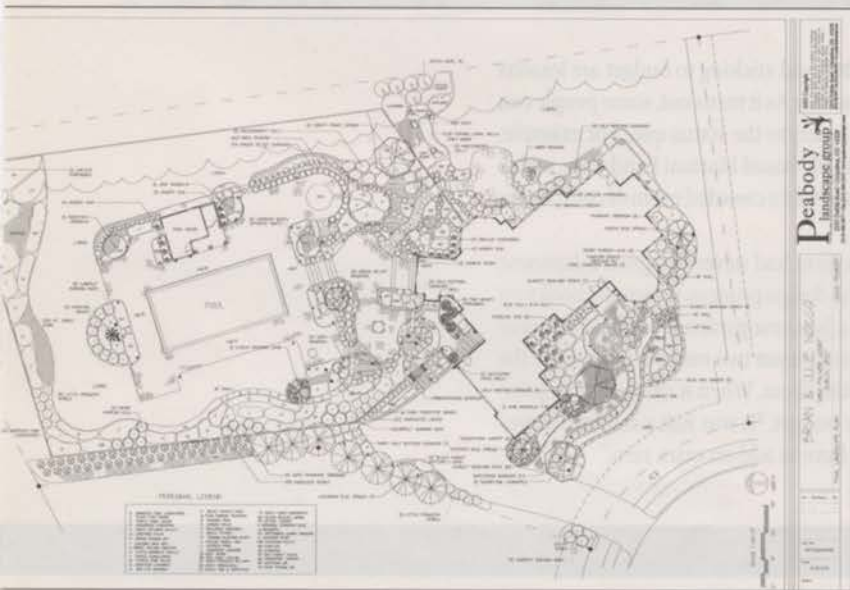
client appreciates that we're not every other landscaper out there." These questions include: Who referred you to our company? What's your budget? Where do you live? What's the project scope? Do you plan to implement it in phases or accomplish it immediately?

"If we believe it's a worthwhile opportunity, we'll offer an initial complimentary consultation and we let them know in the initial phone call that we charge for design work," Sorrell says. "We find that if folks don't want to pay for a design, we're not likely to get their business. We'll lose a few opportunities here and there, but we feel strongly that we're degreed, educated professionals and need to be compensated for our professionalism."

Charging design fees is the best lead qualifying method there is, designers say, noting it ensures the client is committed, prepared to pay for quality and not just looking for the lowest bidder. It also promotes the industry as a professional one and instills confidence in the client that you'll deliver a job well done.

Design fee structures vary from firm to firm – sometimes based on hourly rates and sometimes based on the overall scope of a project. Design/build firms say they usually charge \$300 and up for a set of plans. Some companies will credit part of that cost to the final price

Peabody Landscape's Pat Lynch calls in experts for client meetings on complicated residential projects like the one pictured here. He likes to have pool, fencing or other specialty experts by his side to give clients a sense of security. Photos: Peabody Landscape (this page and page S5)



you know they're serious."

Once firms have ensured their customers are a good fit, it's time for the initial consultation. Design and sales professionals emphasize the importance of tuning in to your customers during this phase. "One of the biggest mistakes salespeople make is they talk too much and don't listen enough," says Bob Kinnucan, president of Kinnucan, a full-service landscape company in Lake Bluff, Ill. In addition to gathering basic information like type of project, time frame and budget (which may already have been collected on the telephone), designers should probe deeper. "Ask who has done work for them before, what they like about that work and why they're changing contractors," Kinnucan says. "Most people have had good and bad experiences with landscape contractors, just like all other professions."

By letting the customer do all the talking at first, designers can narrow their sales presentations to include only the information relevant to a client's wants and needs. This way, you don't confuse the client with too much information, Lynch says, explaining one major sales mistake is giving people too many options. Getting as much feedback as possible from clients is essential to creating designs they'll like. "The easiest person to sell is a self-made person," Lynch says. "If you can position it so it's their idea, then they'll buy it."

Rich De Palma uses the same tactic. During the first site visit with a client, while walking the property, he takes the opportunity to get to know the client. "Feel them out; get an idea of what their interests may be," says De Palma, president of landscape architecture for Landscape Development, Ventura, Calif. He takes some cues by coming right out and asking and others by observing. Do the clients have kids? Do they entertain frequently? What are they wearing? What kind of cars do they drive? Obtaining information like this is De Palma's way of ensuring he produces a unique landscape for every client, not a cookie-cutter design.

After his firm receives a design fee from a client (which is typically \$1,500 to \$2,000 for jobs \$200,000 and up), De Palma may begin designing on the spot, making recommendations and possibly doing thumbnail sketches, to get buy in from his clients. "They feel like they're becoming involved in the design," he says.

Lynch says he rarely draws sketches for clients during initial meetings. "When people get something for free they don't put a lot of value on it," he says. "And there's a chance they can take those ideas somewhere else." If a client asks for ideas upon first meeting, he tells them, "I want you to know that you have my best, well thought out ideas for this job - I can't really come up with those in a few minutes."

On the other hand, for single-faceted projects less than \$5,000 (a 150 square-foot brick patio, for example), Sorrell gives clients the option of a "quick sketch," for which he charges \$100. This option includes an on-site sketch, consultation and pricing. "Less than 10 percent of clients ask for these, but if it's a small brick patio or something simple and basic, it's a good strategy to sketch and price on site," he says. "We have to be diligent about how we use



of the finished project. Landscape designers generally do not charge repeat or existing customers for designs, as they're much more likely to secure the business and don't anticipate a bidding situation. "Existing clients usually get special consideration," Lynch says. "If they decide they don't want to do anything with us, I'll charge them a certain amount to recoup design work."

Another way to qualify leads is by the time of day you set up appointments, as Peabody Landscape does. "We set appointments between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.," Lynch says. "A lot of our clients are professionals who work all day. If they'll take the time out to meet with you, then

our time. It's tough to charge a homeowner the appropriate design fee if you spend all your time driving back and forth."

Another way to help secure a sale is to set the second appointment before you leave the first one. "Don't just say 'I'll get back to you,'" Lynch says. "Before you leave one appointment, make sure you have another one set." Peabody Landscape also incorporates technology into its first meeting with a client by equipping designers with laptop computers and a custom DVD, which tells the company's story and includes a portfolio of photographs.

PROPOSAL PRESENTATION.

Some firms use the second meeting, when the presentation of the proposal typically takes place, to leverage their company image by bringing clients to their offices. This technique can potentially "wow" customers, assuming the facility is in good shape.

Peabody's headquarters, for example, is not a typical landscape facility. The prop-



Mariani Landscape's Frank Mariani admits to breaking some residential sales rules when creating this Japanese garden. Photo: Mariani Landscape



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erty was originally a turn-of-the-century working farm, elements of which have been restored or recreated to house offices and equipment. The second part of Peabody's residential sales process involves showing off the charming grounds to clients. "We want them to know we have the infrastructure and manpower to do whatever job they need," Lynch says. "It sets us apart from that one-truck guy."

In addition, Peabody has strategically placed awards plaques in the hallway guests walk through to get to the conference room. "We often tell clients that quite possibly their job can be one of these plaques on the wall," Lynch says. "People love hearing that."

Sorrell's firm, NatureWorks Plus, sees bringing clients into the office as a way to set itself apart from the competition, however the company has had some difficulty executing the idea due to lack of parking and office structure. "We moved into a new location and outfitted our office with the intent to bring clients in," he says. "We have done it successfully, but haphazardly." The company hopes to set up a conference room where designers will deliver their presentations by connecting their laptops to a large flat-screen TV.

During the proposal phase graphics and knowledge are power, sales and design professionals say. "We always forget that most clients don't understand blueprints and they really don't know plant material," Kinnucan says, explaining why landscape plans alone aren't effective. "They want to know what it's going to look like."

His firm uses a digital imaging program to augment residential property photos with aspects of the design proposal – including plants and hardscape elements. "The digital imaging design program is probably the most powerful tool we have," he says.

Other companies' proposals take different shapes. For example, over the past year Peabody Landscape created an internal design Web site (see image, top right) to simplify the proposal process. The site is a photo library of landscape elements, including plant material, sidewalks, benches, fireplaces – anything that might be specified in a design. During a proposal meeting, if a client has a question about the way an aspect of a project will look, the designer can easily locate an example image and project it onto a screen for the

client to see.

While presentation plays a role, it all comes down to how confident a client is in the company's ability to execute. Designers must either know their products and capabilities inside and out or bring along an expert to give clients a sense of security, Lynch says. "If I'm doing a pool and I don't know everything about that pool, I've got the pool expert right there with me," he says. This technique ensures customers that you'll finish the job as promised. "The client thinks, 'They may be more expensive, but they're going to get the job done right,'" Lynch says. "I don't usually get jobs done because I'm less expensive; I get them because clients know I can get the job done."

Finally, don't forget follow-up. It's one simple thing all design and sales profes-

sionals can do to secure a sale. "Sometimes you get a job just by calling people back and asking for their business," Lynch says.

Landscape Development often follows up with a gift. "We may send them something we've learned they like," De Palma says. "If I've found out they like the Lakers, I may send

them Lakers tickets. That's establishing the relationship," he says, noting that budgeting for small gifts is a good approach for firms of any size. "Whether your clients are spending \$5,000 or \$1 million – they need to feel like they're millionaires. You can at the very least send a post card saying, 'Hey, it was great to meet you.' Keep your name in front of them; get to know them. You want them to recommend you to their neighbors. The only way to do that is to make that client a raving fan." PLD



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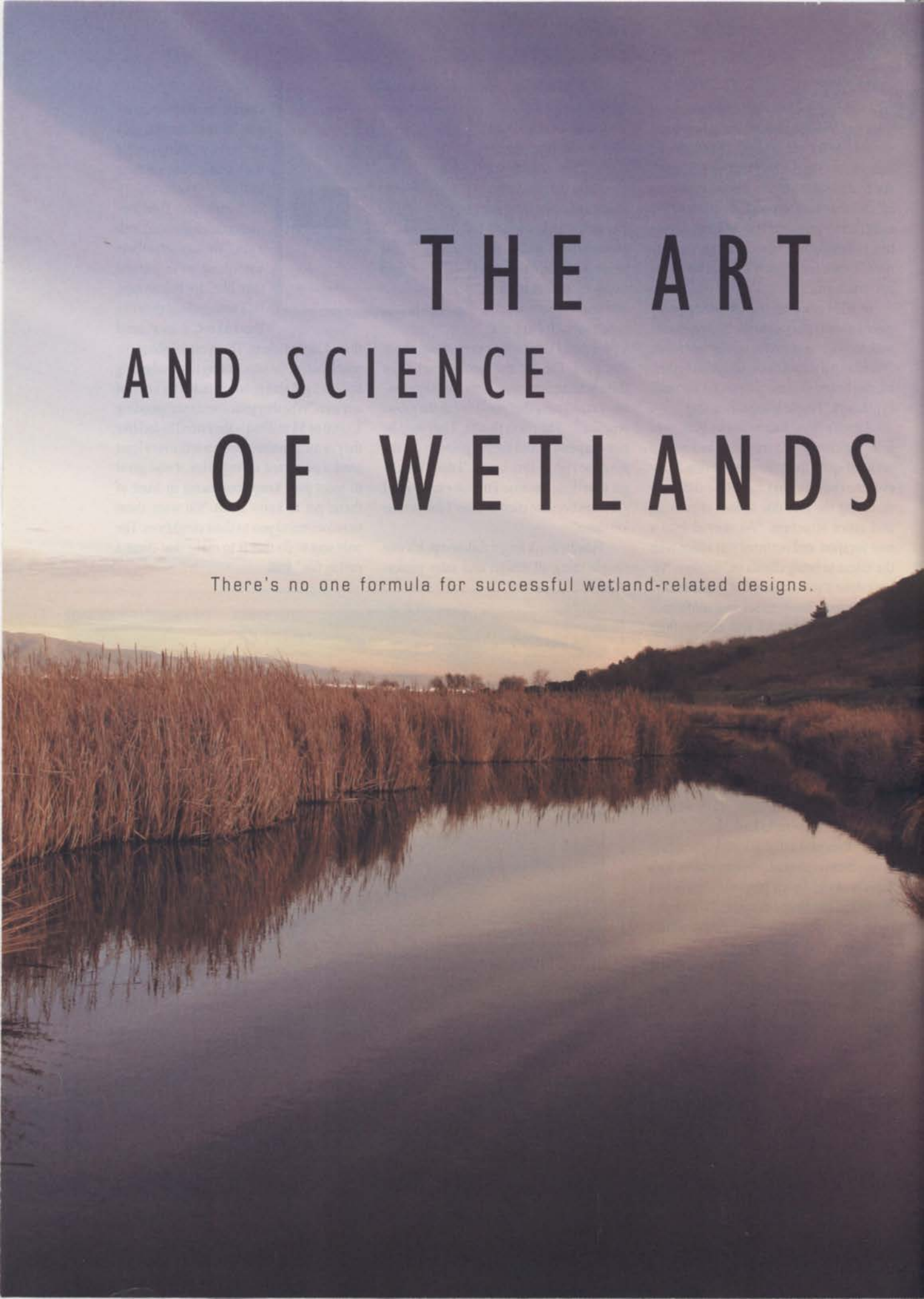
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THE ART AND SCIENCE OF WETLANDS

There's no one formula for successful wetland-related designs.

By Marisa Palmieri / Associate Editor

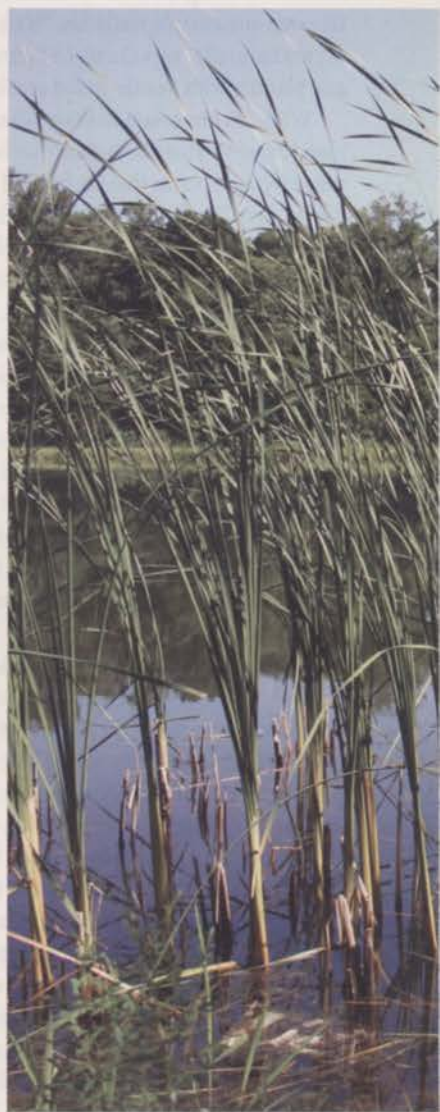
Cattails sway in the wind. Butterflies flit about. A frog croaks; a songbird coos. Welcome to the "nursery of life." Welcome to a wetland. These unique ecosystems, whether they are marshes, swamps, bogs or fens, provide habitats for thousands of plants and animals. They also hold and slow floodwaters, reducing danger and damage, and absorb and filter nutrients, sediment and other pollutants before they contaminate bodies of water. Wetlands' aesthetic and recreational advantages are the most apparent to the public – they provide a paradise for birdwatchers, hikers, photographers and nature-lovers of all kinds.

While the planning, design, management and construction of wetlands is far from a new process, as Jon Bryan Burley, associate professor of landscape architecture at Michigan State University's School of Planning, Design and Construction, points out, scientific involvement in the process has increased in recent years. In addition, federal, state and local regulations have evolved over the last three decades, due in part to the Clean Water Act (see *Wetland Regulations* on page 12). Unfortunately, even with the awareness created by President George H.W. Bush's 1989 declaration to sustain "no net loss" of wetlands, the United States still loses about 60,000 acres of wetlands per year due to pollution, hydrologic alterations from land development and vegetation damage including the introduction of nonnative plants, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The EPA estimates that 75 percent of all wetlands are privately owned. As public perception of the importance of conservation and sustainable landscapes rises, aided by federal funding for restoration and approval of compensatory mitigation projects, wetland-related projects will continue to present themselves to landscape architects and designers.

When designing landscapes adjacent to wetlands or restoring wetlands themselves, Burley emphasizes that no "cookbook" solutions exist. "It's not like doing a math problem with a discrete answer," Burley says. "There are a variety of variables and approaches that need to be carefully examined and considered," he says. The first step in working with wetlands is to engage the proper experts. Depending on scope, a wetland-related project could require the involvement of landscape architects, wetland scientists, environmental planners and other ecological experts.

A buffer zone, or an adjacent area of upland, is one essential element that affects design – and it's often required and regulated by state or local agencies. Essentially, a buffer functions as an extension of the wetland – filtering sediment, removing nutrients and providing and protecting wildlife habitats. Buffers, which can range from 50 feet to several hundred meters (depending on local and state regulations), are also important in preventing the erosion of upland areas – one particular concern of anti-development activists, says Laurie Broccolo, president of Broccolo Tree and Lawn Care, a Rochester, N.Y.-based firm that provides environmental planning services to site developers, engineering firms and land owners. Creating a buffer, which also protects the wetland from human activities that could affect wildlife, is one vital part of developing a design that minimizes any disturbance to the existing site.



To transition from a mowed turf area to a wetland, Broccolo recommends the following order:

- High-maintenance turf;
- Low-maintenance turf and/or un-mowed meadow grass;
- An almost-no-maintenance area of wildflowers and un-mowed meadow grass; and
- The wetland.

Plant selection in the buffer zone and wetland itself is a vital element of design, as the introduction of non-native species can threaten sustainable wetlands. "It's all about modeling after what occurs naturally," says Curtis La Pierre, a senior landscape architect and planner with Seattle-based architecture firm Otak.

While it's important to know what to plant in any particular region, knowing what not to plant may be a greater concern. "There are many wetland plants that are banned in many areas of the country," Burley says. "Be familiar with what is not allowed in your region." The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service offers an online tool for selecting native plants for wetlands at <http://plants.usda.gov/wetland.html>. The Wetland Indicator Status allows users to search by region, growth habit and duration.

Also remember to match vegetation with the appropriate water regime (high, low or normal water levels) and fetch (the distance of open water to the shoreline), Burley says.

Designing with diversity in mind is a good approach, La Pierre notes. "We use a lot of different plant species – it's taking the shotgun approach," he says. "If some don't make it, others might. It's a survivability approach." Another tip from La Pierre: "We use small plants rather than traditional-sized landscape plants," he says. "They have a lower mortality rate."

In addition to a broad plant palette, attracting various species of animals and insects will add to the aesthetic value and longevity of a wetland. "We usually try to include some wildlife features in our wetland plans," La Pierre says. These additions may include brush piles for rodents and small mammals, rock piles for amphibians and reptiles or a "snag," a large log that's planted upright. "You include those so you can get insects moving in and eventually have cavity-nesting birds occupy the logs. It's all to help draw other wildlife."

Finally, wetland monitoring is often the most important part of the process. When La Pierre's firm prepares wetland plans it also includes a long-term maintenance proposal. While the goal for most wetlands is to become self-sustaining, the maintenance period after a wetland restoration project is typically five years.

"A big part of maintenance is weed control," La Pierre adds, noting mechanical measures are preferable to chemical applications, due to wetlands' close proximity in the watershed to streams and other bodies of water. As a preventive measure, he recommends installing a 3-inch layer of wood-chip mulch, which keeps the ground moist and suppresses the weeds. "It gives the wetland plants a chance to get growing," he says.

Buffer zone maintenance is essential, too. Areas of wildflowers and un-mowed meadow grass should be mowed down every three years, Broccolo says. This practice should take place in three sections on a rotating schedule – not all at once, to ensure preservation of the wildlife habitat.

Experience and application, too, play a role in long-term success.

"Knowing everything in a book about wetlands may still not generate a good plan or design," Burley notes. "It's the combination of scientific knowledge with the art of planning and design that generates sound solutions." **PLD**

WETLAND REGULATIONS

Regulation	Description	Agency
Federal Clean Water Act Section 404	Requires a permit for placement of all dredge and fill materials, and covers all the waters of the United States, including most wetlands.	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Federal Clean Water Act Section 401	Requires certification from the state that any materials discharged into a wetland under a federal permit meet state water quality standards.	State jurisdiction
Federal River and Harbor Act Section 10	Requires a permit for all construction activities in navigable waters, including wetlands within those waters.	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)	Requires full disclosure of the potential effects of proposed federal action; applies to all wetlands.	Usually federal agency issuing permit.
Federal Coastal Zone Management Act	Requires a notice of consistency with the state coastal zone management plan as a condition of federal support of local activities; covers Washington's 15 coastal counties and the wetlands within them.	State jurisdiction
Flood Plain Management Program	Regulates construction and other activities that might increase flood flow; covers wetlands incidentally.	State/local jurisdiction
State/local Regulations	May require permits for various activities. May identify specific wetlands or performance standards. May vary widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.	State/local jurisdiction

Source: Washington State Department of Ecology's Wetland Regulations

PHOTOS: BALL HORTICULTURAL CO.

FOLIAGE FOCUS

By Jessie Atchison / Contributing Editor

Incorporating the right color to complement woody plant materials can be the differentiating factor in your landscape designs.

Today's landscape architect must look at a variety of things when designing an outdoor plan, from water features and outdoor lighting to decks and patios. All of these items are meant to make outdoor spaces more beautiful and enjoyable, and they all revolve around what are arguably the most important components of any landscape: the plants.

The plants you choose for landscapes can make or break the entire project, which is why choosing varieties wisely is so important. You most likely do a lot of the variety selection when it comes to trees, shrubs and other more “permanent” plant features, but do you give the same attention to your choices for annual flowers and foliage – or “color” – to complement those woody plants?

Even within one species, the traits of different cultivars (or “varieties”) can vary greatly; one plant isn't always as good as the next, and using the best varieties available means the best opportunity for success. By the same token, using the same plants over and over again not only makes plantings stale, but can actually affect plant performance – and customer satisfaction – over time. Staying on top of what's new and different in plant material helps you keep your business fresh and current and positions your company as a leader in your area. Landscape color done right also can have a major impact on a contractor's bottom line – satisfied clients tend to offer repeat and referral business.

THE BASICS – DECIDING WHAT YOU NEED. There's more to a successful planting than just installing an attractive bed of flowers. Savvy designers will take a number of factors into consideration before deciding which plants will provide the best results for their clients. Start with the client; some have more definite ideas than others about what they want in their landscape plantings, but at least discuss factors such as preferred colors or colors to avoid, how much maintenance is to be handled by the client vs. the maintenance company, and if there's an overall look or feel that's desired.

Next, do a site analysis. If you're working with a repeat client, you may already have a good idea of the light levels of the planting area (whether it gets mostly sun or mostly shade or combination of the two, and how the light levels vary by season), but if it's a new site you'll have to start from scratch. Pay attention to any structures (like buildings



or large trees) that affect the amount of sunlight the site receives. Note the color scheme of surrounding buildings or existing trees and shrubs so you'll know which colors will work best in the new annuals you're planning to install. Evaluate how windy the location is. If the site tends to have a lot of wind whipping around corners, it may be best to focus on lower-growing plants that are less susceptible to wind damage. Depending on where you live and work and the time of year, plants may need to tolerate cool temperatures or high heat and be drought-tolerant or moisture-loving. And of course you need to measure the planting area so you'll be able to determine how many plants you'll have to install to fill the space.

Consider any existing plantings into which the new plants will be incorporated. Pay attention to things like size, shape, color and texture. Think about how any new plant will complement the existing landscape. For example, if most of the surrounding shrubs have large, bold foliage, decide if you want the new plants to blend in (by adding more boldly-textured varieties) or contrast (by choosing more finely-textured varieties). If there is a lot of space to fill, a more vigorous variety may be in order, such as fast-

growing plants like Wave petunias. If the space is smaller, a more compact plant like a pansy or vinca could be the best choice. In any case, be aware of the cost of the installation; annual plantings give contractors great opportunities for repeat business even within one year due to seasonal change-outs of the same bed, but the best potential for profit comes from using varieties that fill the space most effectively and offer the most ease of installation.

LEARNING ABOUT NEW PLANTS.

Even if you've found certain annuals you know provide reliable results, resist the urge to settle for what you've always done. Hundreds of new annual varieties, both flowers and foliage, are introduced every single year, and what's new in the market today often includes varieties that offer much better performance, greater benefits and more interesting and unique colors than other varieties that may only be a few years old. But how do you wade through all the information about new plants to figure out what will work best for you?

1. Start with your grower. Your grower can be your best source of information about what's new in the market. Oftentimes growers have already trialed many new varieties prior to their introduction and can provide excellent feedback about how they compare to what's already available.

2. Visit trials. Many universities, particularly state institutions, have summer field trials where they put new plants to the test. Some also offer fall and spring trials as well. Getting out and visiting trials (even though it takes time during your busiest season) can be the best way to get an up close and personal look at how new plants perform in your specific region.

3. Visit trade shows. You can learn about new plants and find a supplier all in one place. Check with your local horticulture trade associations for a list of shows in your area.

4. Check out garden centers. Most garden centers, particularly independently-owned stores, have avid "plant people" on staff who can tell you about new varieties. It also gives you a great opportunity to see what consumers are buying.

5. Read magazines. In addition to trade magazines, pick up titles like *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Garden Design* and *Southern Living* at the newsstand. Consumer writers often have an advance look at new plants; besides, your clients, whether they're commercial or residential, are probably reading these and other consumer-oriented magazines, too.

6. Check online. Most plant breeders have Web sites where you can research new plants, and many also have landscape sections of their sites where the best "in-ground" performers are highlighted. Just typing "annuals for the landscape" into a search engine will yield useful information.

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ahead. In addition, because many annuals take only a few months for growers to produce, ordering in advance lets you request specific, "first choice" varieties and colors and still have time to grow them. If possible, meet with clients at the end of the season to talk about the next; it's a great way to secure the business and plan ahead. Talk about what worked well and what needs improvement and get the commitment for the following year's business.

Decide on quantity by looking at the "plants per square foot" recommendations for the plants you choose. Your grower can help you with this if the information isn't readily available. Including your grower in the planning process means you may have an easier time getting what you want when the planting season starts.

The conditions of the planting site, as determined in your site analysis, play a big role in your plant selection. So does color, and the choices are almost limitless in annuals. You can find just about whatever you want for wherever you want, so pick a color palette and begin designs early. Make sure your grower has all this information as well; knowing that you generally need a red flower for sunny, dry conditions, for example, saves you and your grower a lot of time and energy when it comes to deciding on specific varieties.

Some growers require more lead time than others, so check with yours to be sure you know the schedule. A general recommendation for annuals is to order four to six months prior to the installation, if possible (for example, order spring bedding plants in the fall or winter), but it can easily vary depending on the grower and the plants. Give your grower time to provide consultation and source

the particular varieties you want in the quantities you need.

Container size and type also plays a role in plant selection. Smaller plants (in traditional flats or 4-inch pots) will be easier to install with less root damage, and they also tend to be more economical. But if you need big color very quickly, talk with your grower about starting with a larger container size. In addition, there are options aside from traditional plastic, including biodegradable pots that can be directly planted into the ground, that can drastically reduce planting time as well as labor and cleanup costs.

Your grower supplier needs to know basic information, including the variety you want, the size of plant you want, and the delivery or pickup plans for the plants. Discuss your budget with your grower and, whenever possible, take advantage of the economies of consolidating orders. A strong relationship with your grower is often the best way to ensure the best plant material that's available when you need it.

BE BRAVE: TRY NEW THINGS. Trying new things doesn't only have to mean trying brand-new varieties. It could be as simple as trying something you've never used before. For example, in the Southeast, mums and pansies are landscape kings around the month of October. But there are so many choices for cool-season color now that it's easy to augment those mums and pansies with some really unique, yet still reliable, plants. Plants like *erysimum*, *linaria* and *diascia* offer a totally new look. Look for award-winning varieties. New and different plants may make contractors uneasy at first, but remember that plant breeders have to be diligent about thoroughly trialing varieties before they're introduced.

Wherever you put color in the landscape, it automatically becomes the focal point. Use that to your advantage to highlight entryways or pathways, particularly interesting architecture or compelling landscape features like fountains or uniquely colorful trees or shrubs. Remember, it's the first place viewers' eyes will go when they take in the planting – that's why it's so important to choose the right plants for the job. **PLD**

The author is industry communications manager, Ball Horticultural Co., West Chicago, Ill. She can be reached at 630-231-3600, jatchison@ballhort.com or via www.balllandscape.com.

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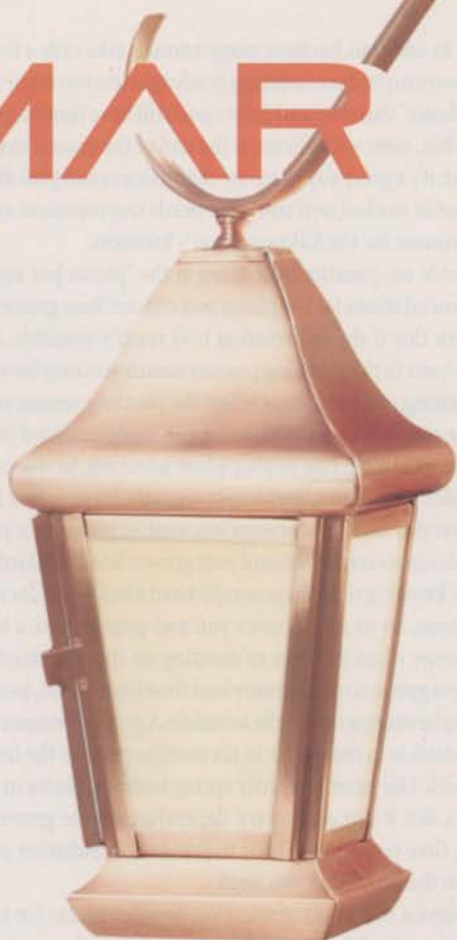
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USE READER SERVICE # 82



Contractors demand the best out of their zero-turn riding and walk-behind mowers. *Lawn & Landscape* looks at some of the advancements on-tap for 2007.

Blade runners

Riding mowers, especially zero-turns, are beginning to sound like computer processors – they're getting smaller, faster and more efficient. For 2007, this trend continues, with many contractors setting aside walk-behind mowers and embracing quick and nimble zero-turns. But while zero-turns are gaining in popularity, the walk-behind certainly hasn't been given its Last Rites.

"Right now, zero-turn riding mowers are the standard," says Greg Lewis, owner, Lewis Lawn Service, Sumter, S.C., who has owned his company for six years and been in the industry for 16. "Zero-turn riders give us a better opportunity to bag clippings when needed. We also have some very large areas to mow where operator fatigue would be an issue if we didn't use riding mowers."

Not only do landscapers like zero-turn riding mowers, property owners do as well. "The new mowers are more maneuverable," says

by mark phillips | associate editor

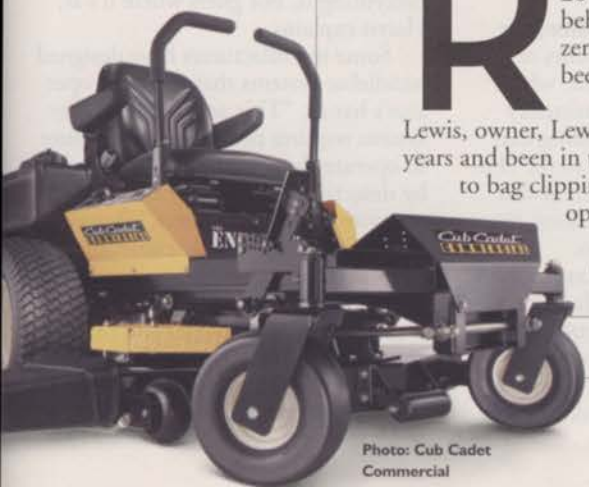


Photo: Cub Cadet Commercial

Hall White, vice president of sales and marketing for Frederick, Md.-based Wright Manufacturing. "They are lighter, placing less weight on residential yards. Homeowners prefer this."

Companies such as Toro, of Bloomington, Minn., sell about five times as many commercial zero-turns as walk-behinds, says Randy Harris, senior marketing manager for Toro's landscape contractor equipment division. "We sell more zero-turn riders because they are less fatiguing to the operator, and they're considerably more productive than a walk-behind or tractor delivering much faster ground speed, larger deck sizes and, oftentimes, improved trimability."

With contractors spending an average of about \$10,000 for zero-turn riding mowers and \$4,500 for walk-behinds in the last 12 months, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research, it's important for these machines to last. And contractors are demanding that they stand up to the challenge.

"Durability is the price of admission," Harris says. "Machines have to stand up to the daily rigors of commercial mowing and be reliable enough to perform for hours, day after day, in a variety of conditions."

The best-cutting mowers won't make contractors more productive if they need constant servicing. "Prod-



continues to be a major part of the equation. You cannot make money when the mower is down."

COMFORT & ERGONOMICS

ARE KEY. Because comfort and ergonomics come into play after eight hours each day on a riding mower, features that enhance this are paramount. Manufacturers have improved mower suspension to increase comfort. "It can absorb the bumps and vibrations that cause operator fatigue, increasing operator comfort and productivity," Bower says. "If it allows the operator to maintain cutting speed he doesn't need to slow down to compensate for rough terrain."

With improved suspension, the deck follows the movements of the wheels and flow of terrain, which increases the quality consistency of a cut, Bowers says, adding that reducing the shock load to the chassis extends mower life. All of this results in the operator cutting more acres per hour, Bowers says.

Beatrice, Neb.-based Exmark is also working closely with landscape contractors to reduce fatigue. "As the quality and performance of commercial mowers has improved over the years, our customers are asking more

for features that make our equipment more comfortable to operate – especially over long days of operation," says Luke Prussa, Exmark's senior marketing manager.

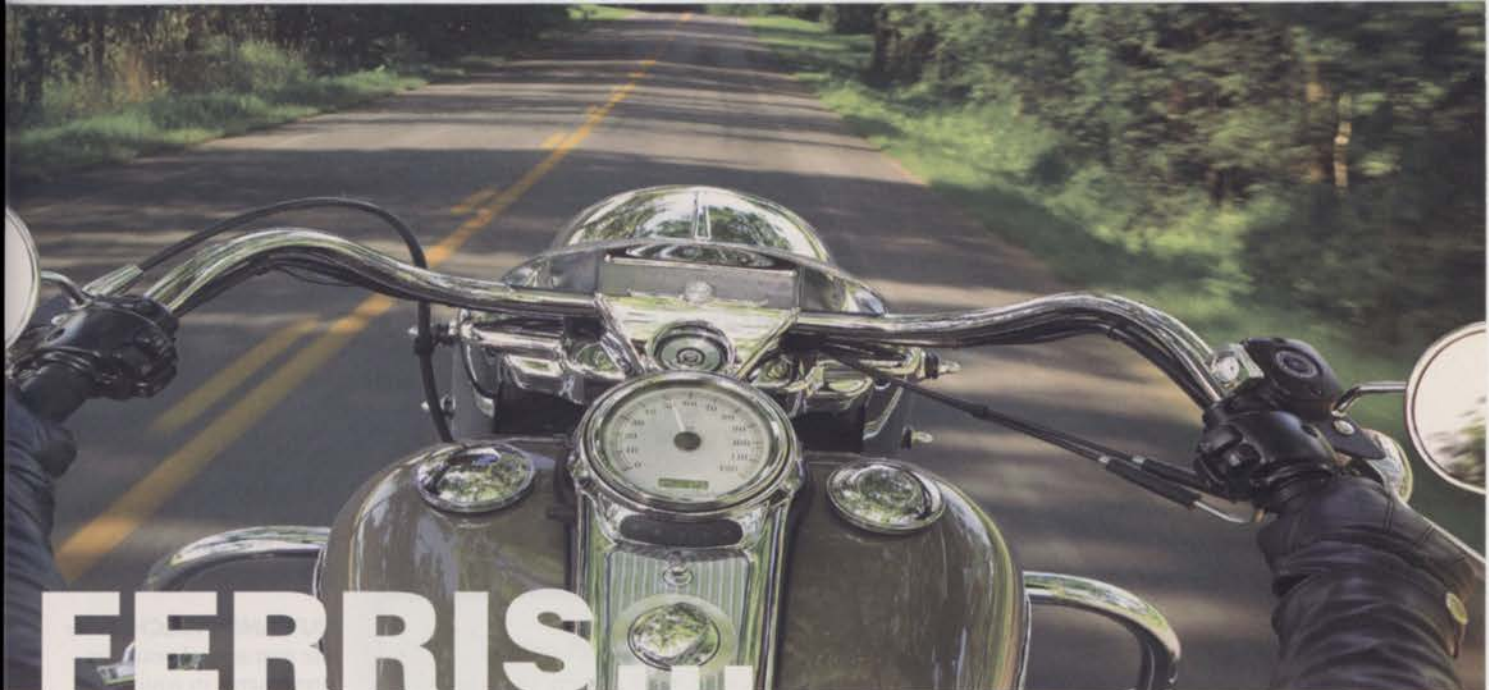
"When contractors are as comfortable as possible, they can be as productive as possible – from sun up to sun down," Harris says.

To make controls more accessible, some manufacturers have placed all levers – including the choke, throttle and ignition – on the left-hand side of zero-turn mowers. Clustering takes the guesswork out of finding the right control, thereby increasing efficiency. "When the operator is sitting in his seat, he wants to remember where everything is, not guess where it's at," Harris explains.

Some manufacturers have designed handlebar systems that sense the operator's hands. "This anti-fatigue safety system requires no additional pressure to operate the mower because it works by detecting the hands of the operator, with or without gloves," Bower says. "Operator-friendly controls are key to enhancing the maneuverability of today's larger commercial walk-behinds. As units get bigger and heavier, smoother and easier-to-use control systems are required so they operate to their full potentials."

"I have many high-end customers who obviously demand that the yard be spotless when we leave. So, the better the bagging unit and its capacity to remove the leaves from the ground – wet or not – is my biggest concern right now." – Greg Lewis

ucts that increase productivity and have a low cost to own and operate are key for landscape contractors," says Bill Bower, director of marketing for Ferris Industries, Munnsville, N.Y. "It's all about being able to cut more acres per hour. Of course, reliability



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THE MOVE TOWARD DIESEL.

Just as Americans have been slow to accept diesel engines in automobiles, diesels in mowers have met similar resistance. But they are gaining more acceptance because they offer greater fuel efficiency than gasoline engines. "Diesels also offer greater engine life than gas engines," Harris says. "Typi-

pared to gasoline, diesel fuel burns slower and produces more power from a given amount of fuel."

SIZES MAKES THE DIFFERENCE.

With landscape contractors working in ever-increasingly tight spaces, it's imperative to squeeze as much productivity out of sometimes small

pearance," he explains.

Mower agility is something Lewis has been mindful of. "We have a military contract for 370 yards with very small gates," he says. Among his crews' equipment are two 60-inch riding mowers; two 52-inch riding mowers and a 34-inch riding mower. It's the smallest of the three, which fits this "agility of a walk-behind, efficiency of a rider" model, that is useful for the military contract work, he says.

CUT AND MULCH.

Over the past several years, improvements in equipment have resulted in mowers with ever-faster ground speeds. "But what has been communicated loud and clear by the professional in the field is that productivity still depends on the machine's ability to deliver a great cut at those higher speeds," Prussa says.

So, beyond speed, contractors are seeking additional clippings management options to please their picky clients. For Lewis, the most important new feature in his arsenal is the bagging and mulching system. "I've got many high-end customers who obviously demand that the yard be spotless when we leave," he says, "and the better the bagging unit and its capacity to remove the leaves from the ground – whether they are wet or not – is my biggest concern right now."

Lewis would like to see continued improvements with bagging and mulching systems. "We've had some problems with bagging systems and the amount of debris that is discharged that we have to chase around," he says.

Manufacturers have turned their sights on mulching systems, some introducing decks that allow operators to switch from mulching to side-discharge without leaving the seat. "This feature is important to landscape contractors because some customers may want their lawns mulched, while some may want it to be bagged or side-discharged," says Sean Sund-

kick the tires...seriously

With a dizzying array of advancements and offerings in both walk-behind and riding mowers, it's important more than ever to do research. Here are some things contractors should be mindful of when purchasing mowers.

- Contractors should ensure they use any mower they are considering purchasing. Don't just drive it in the parking lot, says Randy Harris, senior marketing manager for Toro, Bloomington, Minn. "The machines all look good on the showroom floor, and they all seem fast and maneuverable in the parking lot," he says. "But how do they handle the hillsides their crews need to mow, and what do their lawns look like after they've been mowed at 6 to 10 mph?" Will the mower run without problems after a demanding day on the job? A demo reveals this.
- Consider the total cost of ownership, including purchase price, maintenance costs, parts/repairs not covered by warranty, loss revenue/profitability due to downtime. Going by just the initial purchase price can be deceiving.
- Check the warranty and find out what is and what isn't covered.
- What service and support is available? Inquire about the availability of parts. Quiz the dealership's mechanics about which mowers they repair and their successes and problems.
- Check to see if the zero-turn riding mowers feature rollover protection as an option. Weight the other safety features between the various models?

cally, a diesel engine delivers four to five times greater engine life than a gasoline engine. As a result, we are seeing more diesel mower models being introduced."

Diesels provide more torque for taxing mowing conditions, Harris adds. The torque curve of diesel engines is also flatter than gasoline-powered engines. "Even in the face of aggressive conditions – like hilly terrain, long or dense grass or when bagging – these diesel mowers are up to the challenge," Harris says. "Com-

pared to gasoline, diesel fuel burns slower and produces more power from a given amount of fuel."

machines. Some manufacturers, for example, are releasing a series of sub-compact riding mowers offering a "gateway solution" that improves both property accessibility and mowing efficiency, Harris says. The machines are small enough to fit through standard 36- and 42-inch gates, yet large enough to deliver significant productivity gains over walk-behinds, he adds. "This can allow operators to ride instead of walk – reducing fatigue while attaining a superb after-cut ap-

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mowers

berg of the commercial division of Cary, N.C.-based John Deere. "If the landscape contractor is mowing around parking lots, near sidewalks or around buildings, they can now easily switch to mulch mode to ensure they don't damage property or injure pedestrians."

But don't think speed is completely out of the picture. Features such as adjustable baffles can increase the size of the discharge opening to achieve faster mowing speeds, Harris says. "In less demanding conditions, a closed baffle setting yields micro-sized particles and maximum discharge velocity," he points out. These decks "achieve peak productivity regardless of the mowing conditions because they can be modified to suit the unique turf demands of any region."

FOR THE FUTURE. Innovation will continue into alternative-fuel engines, such as propane, Bower says. "Trends will include riders with smaller deck sizes for tackling tight spaces," he says. "Bigger engines on larger riders will also continue to be a trend."

Harris expects improved emissions, driven by the Environmental Protection Agency. "Some trends we see are the increasing demand for increased fuel efficiency, be it diesel, propane or options that are better than car-rated engines," he says.

Some manufacturers have also unveiled zero-turns with transmissions that direct power straight to the wheels. The design means there are no belts and there is less vibration from the engine. "This is a major development in zero-turn evolution," says Ray Garvey, spokesman for Grasshopper, Moundridge, Kan. "For the end-user, you're eliminating all issues related to belts and pulleys. You're making a very efficient use of the drive system."

Other manufacturers are aiming to bring new blood into the industry this year with lineups aimed at small- and mid-sized business owners who might not be able to afford a full-fledged commercial mower in the \$10,000 range. These new commercial units are priced at closer to \$5,000, points out Jack Drobny Jr., project manager for zero-turns, Cub Cadet Commercial, Cleveland, Ohio.

Looking to the future, Drobny says hybrid technology will take a larger share of the market. "Cities and states are putting strict rules in place," he says, adding new engineering will be needed to meet more stringent requirements. **LL**

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Preemergent Potential

Using preemergent herbicides correctly the first time around can eliminate client callbacks as well as crabgrass.

A

lthough winter is still well underway, pesky spring weeds will soon sprout. To prevent a lawn from being overtaken by a sea of crabgrass upon spring thaw, many lawn care operators (LCOs) rely on preemergent herbicides to help control outbreaks before they start.

"If you don't apply a preemergent, you're asking for trouble and you're not safeguarding yourself for the upcoming season at all," says Scott Orndorff, service center manager for LESCO, Upper Marlboro, M.D.

Preemergent herbicides are designed to stop weed growth before it begins. They are primarily used to control annual grassy weeds like crabgrass, but some forms of preemergents do control certain types of broadleaf weeds as well. Applying preemergents is a prominent service in the landscape industry, offered by 57.3 percent of LCOs, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research. In fact, 53.1 percent of LCOs purchased preemergent herbicides last year, spending an average

by emily mullins | assistant editor



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of \$3,573 each. About 47 percent of LCOs plan to purchase preemergent herbicides in the next 12 months, and 7.1 percent plan to add preemergent weed control as a new service this year.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING. According to Mark Urbanowski, senior product manager for Dow AgroSciences, Indianapolis, Ind., preemergents are most effective when applied before soil temperatures reach 55 degrees Fahrenheit, when crabgrass germinates. Application time varies throughout the country, as weeds have longer and earlier germination times in areas that stay warmer during winter months, like in the South and West. Because of this, LCOs in colder areas can get away with applying a preemergent in the early spring upon first thaw, while those located in warmer areas may feel that a fall application is better in order to stop weed growth before it starts, points out Jason Kuhlemeier, marketing specialist for Bayer Environmental Science, Research Triangle Park, N.C.

And some climates are so finicky they require split applications, or half of the herbicide in the winter or early spring and half in the late summer or early fall, to garner the best control. According to Steve Stansell, lawn care market manager for Syngenta, Greensboro, N.C., this is effective in warm-season climates that have longer growing seasons and earlier crabgrass germination. "In areas south of Atlanta, lawn care operators have to apply preemergents in January and then again in late spring or early summer for them to be effective through August," he explains. "In the Midwest, the ground doesn't thaw out until March or early April so they can wait until after the snow clears for the first application and then may only need to do it once."

Regardless of where you are located, experts advise applying a preemergent as close to weed germination time as possible to get the best control, and say timing can be determined by knowing your region and by staying in touch with universities and other organizations that focus on plant growth. After all, doing the job well the first time around can decrease client callbacks and the need for additional applications. "Timing is so important," Orndorff says. "If you don't get the preemergent down at the right time of year, you're going to

Weeds can sprout up anywhere, including in a client's flower bed, and a preemergent could be just the thing to keep this problem under control. However, applying preemergents to beds can be a bit trickier than one may think. "In beds, weeds have a better chance to grow because they don't have as much competition as they do in a patch of turf," says Jason Kuhlemeier, marketing specialist, Bayer Environmental Science, Research Triangle Park, N.C. "Herbicides can be more necessary in a bed."

Though many studies regarding the effects of preemergents in beds have been done, manufacturers say there is still much progress to be made in this area. One of the reasons is because there are thousands of varieties of ornamentals compared to roughly 10 varieties of turf, making it harder to test the safety and efficacy of preemergents on ornamentals, explains Mark Urbanowski, senior product manager, Dow AgroSciences, Indianapolis, Ind. Because of this, most manufacturers won't label a preemergent specifically for beds, although a few do exist.

Applying a preemergent in a bed also requires compact equipment, such as a backpack sprayer, to treat tighter spaces, says Steve Stansell, lawn care market manager, Syngenta, Greensboro, N.C. "You can't spread the product through a bed very easily, but you don't want to spray flowers and shrubs with a liquid application either," he says. "It's a little more of an art than treating turf."

Other challenges include having to apply the herbicide underneath mulch, rocks or other material spread throughout a bed, and making sure not to apply the product on desired plant material.

"However, beds offer a wider window of application, so timeliness is not as important of an issue as it is with turfgrass applications," says Tim Doppel, owner, Atwood Lawncare, Sterling Heights, Mich., pointing out a positive.

And, if done correctly, treating beds with preemergents can be a profitable service for a lawn care company to offer. "We have found the service to be about 20 percent more profitable than our others, primarily because it's a premium service," Doppel says. "Our customers who get it love it because bed weeds are one less thing they have to worry about."

Doppel sells this service as an add-on. "If a technician is out doing routine lawn care and sees some weeds in the client's flower beds, he will inform the customer and let them know it's a problem we can fix," he says.

To price such a service, Urbanowski suggests considering ornamental varieties, square footage, product quantity (bed preemergents average \$3 to \$3.50 per 1,000 square feet, according to Doppel), application timing and callback insurance (if your company guarantees weed control for the entire year). The final amount should then be tacked on to a typical turfgrass application. "It's a very natural add-on opportunity," he explains. "It just makes sense for homeowners to pay to get their beds treated if they're paying to get their lawn treated."

battle certain weeds all year."

According to Urbanowski, applying a preemergent too early allows time for weeds to germinate and grow after the herbicide has worn off, while applying too late counteracts the purpose of using a preemergent in the first place by missing the optimal application window.

PICKING PREEMERGENTS. Depending on the type of product you use, preemergents can last anywhere from 30 to 45 days to three to five months after application. There are preemergents for cool- and warm-season turfs that specialize in killing different species of weeds that come in liquid or granular forms. With the variety of options available, knowing exactly what you want your preemergent herbicide to accomplish before choosing one for application is important.

In terms of which preemergent to purchase, many LCOs consider price and efficacy, and have found that saving money by purchasing inexpensive products is not always the best way to go. "It's always a balancing act between cost and effectiveness," says Tim Doppel, owner of Atwood Lawncare based in Sterling Heights, Mich., pointing out that the average cost of preemergents is around \$195 a gallon, compared to \$66 per gallon for a grassy-weed postemergent and \$10 per gallon for a broadleaf weed postemergent. "You just try to get the most bang for your buck."

LCOs also choose a preemergent based on the types of equipment (spreaders or sprayers) they are comfortable handling, the number of applications their specific region calls for and, most of all, their personal preference.

EMERGING TRENDS. As trends in preemergents arise, LCOs will have even more factors to consider when choosing a product. One such trend is the arrival of generic preemergents. While they may cost less, industry experts suggest that LCOs do their homework before investing in any product. Similar to machinery, many manufacturers of brand-name products offer continued support and training sessions on how to use herbicides, a luxury they say may not always come with generic brands.

Other new products on the horizon will combine existing preemer-

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gents in an effort to provide a larger weed-control spectrum, Stansell says.

Another trend in the preemergent market is the shift from solvent-based products to water-based products. According to Urbanowski, some of the solvent-based products currently on the market have eye or skin irritants and strong odors that require warnings, or "signal words," that can draw negative attention to the products. Water-based solutions have milder ingredients and odors, which require less need for these warnings.

"Most homeowners like the fact



that their lawns don't smell strongly of chemicals after an application of a water-based product," he says. "Also, manufacturers are finding that water-based formulas are easier for lawn care operators to work with, because they are easier to mix, shake and pour."

While treating a lawn with a mixture of an herbicide and a fertilizer at one time is not a new concept, new combinations including three substances, such as a preemergent, a fertilizer and a broadleaf postemergent, is. This idea aims to further reduce the number of times LCOs need to visit a lawn, saving time and money.

SELLING YOUR SERVICE. Most lawn care companies sell their herbicide services based on thousands of square feet. Some base their lawn care packages on a certain number of applications per year, on average about five or six, while others feel it's more efficient to promote a "weed-

free" lawn regardless of the number of applications necessary. According to Doppel, on average, LCOs charge approximately \$280 per year for their lawn care service providing between four and six applications, averaging \$45 to \$70 per visit.

The benefit of promoting a weed-free lawn over individual applications is that the LCO has the discretion to treat the lawn, with both pre- and post-emergent herbicides, on an as-needed basis. Some LCOs have found that when clients are promised a certain number of individual applications, they will expect them whether they are needed or not. "If a lawn is green and healthy, you certainly don't have to apply an herbicide five or six times a year," Urbanowski says.

In addition, when a lawn is treated with a preemergent year after year, the weed seed population gradually decreases, resulting in fewer weeds each year, according to Urbanowski. "The annual use of preemergents reduces the weed pressure year by year," he explains. "It is when a preemergent is not used that weeds grow and spread their seeds, which only perpetuates the weed problem."

Doppel's Michigan-based lawn care company has offered weed control services since it was founded in 1970. He sells his services by the square foot, but sells his company by promising his clients beautiful, healthy lawns.

Along with its unmatched control of crabgrass, a fairly serious problem in Michigan, Doppel uses preemergent herbicides because of the reassurance it gives his crew and his clients. "The use of preemergents gives a high degree of confidence, which you can relay to your customers and your technicians, who feel they are applying a useful, important product," he says. "Also, if you do have crabgrass, you will have minimal problems when it's time for it to emerge."

Because of Michigan's colder winter climate and later crabgrass germination time, Doppel applies the first application in the early spring. About 60 percent of his clients receive a liquid herbicide while the rest receive granular. "Most of my clients request one or the other, whichever one they perceive as better," he explains. "However, from a weed control standpoint, I have found that the effectiveness of liquid herbicides is better."

SPRAYING RIGHT. Whether you choose a liquid or a granular herbicide, or are located in the North or the South, proper training is important for effective herbicide application. LCOs suggest teaching your crews how to safely apply both pre- and postemergents in liquid and granular forms for a professional and productive business.

"If a preemergent is not applied evenly, you'll have problems such as weed outbreaks in areas not covered completely," Doppel says. "It's an easy skill to teach, but you still have to be sure to teach it."

Doppel requires members of his crews who have no experience in herbicide application to practice by spraying water in a parking lot accompanied by an experienced technician or manager for several days. This allows them to visualize the spray pattern they want to achieve. "It's hands-on training that is important," he says. "They practice this way until they have a good grasp on the correct technique."

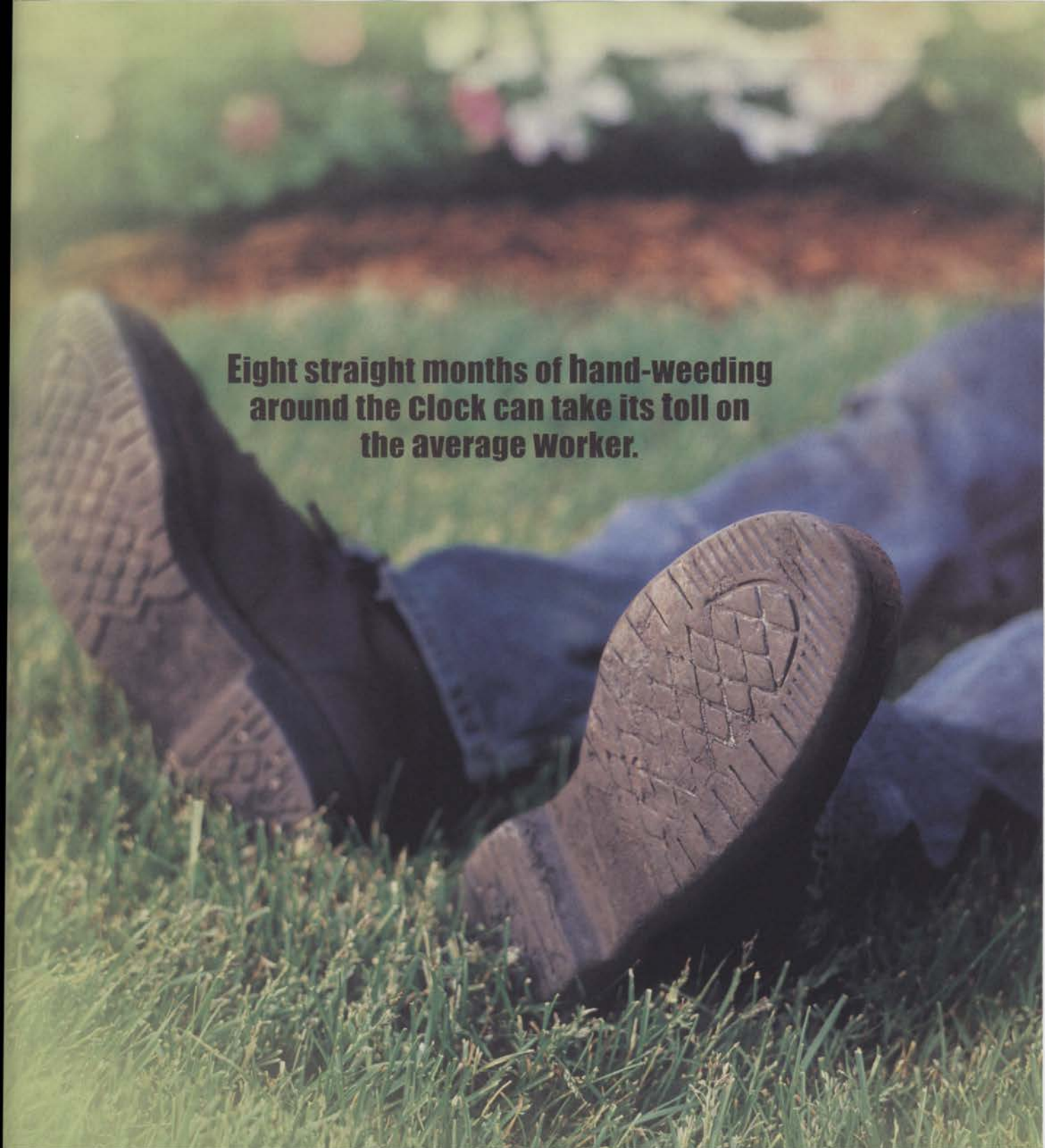
LCOs should also teach their clients how to help keep their lawns weed-free by informing them of the appropriate watering habits, mowing heights and other general maintenance they can perform between applications.

"Have the customer get in the material watering as soon as possible so the herbicide works as effectively as it can," Doppel says. "However, there is a small optimal window of timing, so this is not always possible."

Doppel stresses the importance of watering a lawn after an herbicide application because the chemical has to get down into the soil for it to take effect. He and his crew use multiple methods to get this message across to their clients including informational fliers, hand-written notes, telephone calls and face-to-face conversations.

A main goal of using preemergent herbicides is to control weeds in a way that results in fewer callbacks and happier customers. Although methods of preemergent application will vary from region to region, all businesses can benefit by using effective products correctly, informing their clients to do their part and utilizing product advancements.

"Retention is key," says Urbanowski. "Every time you lose one customer, you spend three times the effort finding a new one. The goal is to keep customers happy." ■



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by emily mullins | assistant editor

The many perks of a skid-steer make purchasing one a smart decision for many landscape contractors.

When it comes to skid-steers, a general consensus is that most contractors can't remember how their business functioned prior to owning one. The machine's versatility, affordability and productivity have made it a popular piece of equipment in the landscape industry today.

"I can't imagine not having one now after having one for so long," says Tony Catanzaro, who purchased his first skid-steer more than 10 years ago. "We use our machine for every single one of our jobs."

Catanzaro, owner of Millington, N.J.-based Regency Landscape, is not alone. *Lawn & Landscape* research says 10.6 percent of contractors have purchased a skid-steer within the past 12 months, and 14 percent plan to purchase one in the next 12 months. According to Uniform Commercial Code filings, of all skid-steers leased in the U.S., one in three is leased specifically for the landscape industry, a trend that has been consistent for many years, says Jorge de Hoyos, platform marketing manager for New Holland, Carol Stream, Ill. Most skid-steer owners have a daily use for their machines, and many even use them year-round for snow removal services (see *Snowy Weather* on page 133).

With their wide range of attachments, there isn't much skid-steers can't do. Contractors can plant trees using an auger, irrigate lawns with a trencher, lay seed with a soil conditioner and transport thousands of pounds of sod or bricks with a pallet fork. They can also clear city streets and jobsites with a sweeper, loosen soil with a tiller, install a pond with a backhoe and place boulders with a grapple, just to name a few examples.

"What many landscape contractors aren't aware of are all of the attachments that can be used to complete as many jobs as possible," says Rob Otterson, market seg-



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continued from page 129

mentation manager for Bobcat, West Fargo, N.D. "The contractor who researches and is aware of all of the options will be presented with more opportunities to grow his business."

VERY VERSATILE. While versatility has no doubt contributed to the machine's popularity, other factors within the economic market as a whole have increased the benefits of owning a skid-steer. One such factor is the recent trend of low interest rates, which, according to Gregg Zupancic, product marketing manager for John Deere, Moline, Ill., spur building growth, particularly of small to medium-sized commercial buildings and housing developments. The concern of labor shortages is another reason many contractors turn to the skid-steer.

"Today, it is harder to find enough good labor," Zupancic says. "Many contractors would rather purchase a skid-steer than hire four or five guys

with shovels."

Contractors agree that, although the purchase of a skid-steer is not an investment to be taken lightly, the machine can often be more reliable and productive than a crew. Typically, the amount of work normally performed by three or four men can be performed by one man and a skid-steer. "Skid-steers are certainly big investments but, from a business point, you can either spend your money on employees or machinery," says Kathy Krubert, manager, M.J.B. Services, Elkhorn, Wis. "With regular preventive maintenance, machinery can last longer and be more efficient."

However, another take on the skid-steer is that it is not exactly a labor replacement, but rather a labor enhancement. "It doesn't matter how strong the person is or how many diggers you have, the human body will not generate 6,000 pounds of breakout force when digging with a large

shovel," de Hoyos says. "The skid steer does, but you still need that operator to run the machine and run it well."

According to skid-steer manufacturers, operating a skid-steer is relatively easy – another one of the machine's more attractive assets, as it increases productivity and decreases downtime. "It is fairly simple to teach someone how to operate a skid-steer," explains Mark Rasevic of Rasevic Landscaping Co., Bethesda, Md. "It's nowhere near as complicated as teaching someone to use a bull dozer."

And owning a skid-steer is not nearly as costly either. According to Otterson, skid-steers are among the most affordable pieces of landscape equipment, with average costs ranging from about \$16,000 to \$36,000, depending on brand and amenities. According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, landscape contractors polled spent an average of \$27,580 on skid-steers in the past year.

assessing attachments

According to Jorge de Hoyos, platform marketing manager for New Holland, Carol Stream, Ill., the average cost of skid-steer attachments ranges from \$1,000 for basic pieces like buckets and forks to \$5,000 for more specialty pieces like high-flow trenchers and soil preparers. Based on *Lawn & Landscape* research, 10.1 percent of landscape contractors polled purchased one or more skid-steer attachments in the past 12 months, spending an average of \$6,880, and 15.1 percent plan to invest in attachments in the next 12 months. The countless abilities of skid-steer attachments have allowed some contractors to diversify their businesses in ways they never imagined.

"Having a skid-steer has really diversified my fleet," says Catanzaro. "Some of the attachments are key to doing a job efficiently." Currently, Catanzaro owns a bucket and a pallet fork, but has rented other attachments when needed for a specific job, which is quite common among landscape contractors.

According to Otterson, renting attachments is a great option for contractors who receive requests for jobs they don't typically do. The average cost of renting attachments is about \$50 per day and \$500 per month for basic pieces like buckets and forks, to between \$75 to \$100 per day and \$1,000 per month for more complicated pieces like a backhoe or a trencher.

"Renting attachments provides a landscape contractor with the option of exploring new services and determining whether they fit his business with only a minor investment," Otterson says.

LITTLE LUXURIES. Amenities that can up the price of a skid-steer include anything from the various attachments to more hydraulic power to simply a bigger machine. However the additions that most contractors are splurging for these days are those that increase operator comfort. Luxuries such as heat and air conditioning, adjustable seating, interior dome lights and noise reduction features have drastically improved conditions within the cab. Some skid-steers even come equipped with cellular phone and laptop computer hook-ups, and manufacturing representatives say that additional features will be added to skid-steers in the near future.

"Other than making them easier to get in and out of, and maybe adding a CD player, I can't really think of any other ways to improve the skid-steer," Catanzaro says. "They have really come a long way."

According to Kent Pellegrini, skid-steer loader and multi-terrain loader industry manager for Caterpillar, Peoria, Ill., contractors should expect to see skid-steers with increased power and versatility, as well as additional comfort and safety features, this year.

"Skid-steer developments should increase the machines' versatility and help contractors save time and work more effectively," Pellegrini says. "The increased comfort and safety aim to help contractors meet the challenges

they face in building their businesses and assure them that their workers go home safe at the end of the day."

One of Catanzaro's favorite skid-steer features is the automatic detach, which allows operators to switch attachments with the press of a button. "It is a huge time-saver and is also a safer way to switch attachments to perform a different task," he says.

Other features contractors view as important when purchasing a skid-steer are accessibility of the controls, maneuverability, visibility from the cab, hydraulic power, interchangeable parts and serviceability. Others feel that the ability to purchase the machine locally is another huge advantage because it allows them to easily establish a relationship with their dealer, which comes in handy for emergency maintenance and additional training, as well as future purchases.

"Local product support is key for contractors," says de Hoyos. "Building a habitual relationship with a dealer, no matter what brand, is ideal."

This relationship between the dealer and the customer often begins before a purchase even takes place, as most manufacturing companies provide an opportunity for contractors to test a particular machine before buying it. These "demos" allow the contractor to ensure they are purchasing the right machine for their needs and gives them a chance to learn how to operate the equipment under the guidance of a professional.

"Trying out the machine to see if it performs the appropriate functions prior to purchasing it is a good way to avoid problems down the road," Zupancic says. "The demos are free, come with little obligation and are pretty common among most big-name manufacturers."

REASONS TO RENT. For reasons such as financial restrictions or lack of necessity, purchasing a skid-steer is not always a viable option for every company. So many contractors rent the machines on an as-needed basis until they feel that owning one would be a better investment. According to Zupancic, 50 percent of all skid-steers rented are used in the landscape industry, with prices varying based on region, machine size and rental duration. According to Zupancic, the cost of renting a skid-steer ranges from between \$150 to \$200 per day

snowy weather

Skid-steers are commonly used for snow removal during the seasons when regular landscape jobs dry up, says Gregg Zupancic, product marketing manager for John Deere, Moline, Ill. "They work well because of their higher ground-pressure and faster speeds," he says.

One way to decrease the downtime of a skid-steer and to generate extra revenue during the off-season months is to use the machine for snow removal and other snow-related tasks, which is a service many landscape contractors opt to offer.

Mark Rasevic, owner of Rasevic Landscaping Co. and co-owner of Rasevic Snow Services, both based in Bethesda, Md., agrees that his decision to start his snow removal business in the mid-1990s with his brother, Paul, was a great way to utilize the skid-steers and other landscape equipment he already owned.

When using their skid-steers for snow removal, Rasevic and his crew primarily utilize a snow pusher to clear and pile snow, and a bucket to scoop and relocate it, as well as to haul salt. According to Rasevic, other contractors also use snow plow blades and snow blowers, although he has found these hydraulic attachments can be pretty costly.

"The hydraulic snow removal attachments can be more costly than regular skid-steer attachments," Rasevic says. "But they are more efficient when trying to eat through 2 feet, rather than, say, 4 inches, of snow." On average, hydraulic attachments for snow removal can cost anywhere from 3 to 7 percent more than basic skid-steer attachments.

A scraper attachment is another tool that is ideal for clearing large amounts of hard-packed snow and ice. According to Rob Otterson, market segmentation manager for Bobcat, West Fargo, N.D., the tool has a self-sharpening edge that can slide underneath snow and ice and onto the pavement to create a smooth surface. Additional skid-steer attachments that can come in handy during the winter months are angle brooms and whisker-push brooms, which can sweep snow off of sidewalks, parking lots and driveways. A V-blade is another versatile attachment that can be configured into five different tools to make snow removal a snap: a straight blade, a V-cut blade, a scoop blade and a 30-degree left or right angle blade.

According to David Daniels, brand marketing manager for New Holland, Carol Stream, Ill., the prices of snow-specific skid-steer attachments can range from \$1,000 for buckets, to \$3,000 for blades, to \$4,000 for pushers to \$6,700 for snow blowers.

Snow attachments can also be rented for about \$400 per month for buckets, \$400 to \$500 per month for blades and pushers and about \$750 per month for blowers, Daniels says.



to \$1,500 to \$2,000 per month.

"We rented skid-steers for a few years before purchasing one, and we still rent bigger or different machines when needed," Catanzaro says. "For example, we have been renting track skid-steers pretty often lately."

Tracked skid-steers, which run on rubber tracks instead of wheels, are popular among contractors because of their ability to perform well in wet or soggy conditions without causing much turf damage. Tracked machines can be more costly than their wheeled counterparts, with prices ranging from \$35,000 to \$55,000. Costs of renting a tracked skid-steer range from \$200 to \$250 per day to \$2,000 to \$2,500 per month. Regardless, de Hoyos predicts consistent growth in the track loader industry within the next five years.

Rasevic says his tracked skid-steer is particularly helpful when working on already established landscapes, as its "soft footprint" leaves little evidence that his crew was ever there.



Photo: John Deere

"Both wheeled and tracked machines can be better depending on if you're working with wet or dry soil," he says. "Like any construction job, you need different tools for different tasks."

PURCHASING PRECAUTIONS.

Versatile, efficient, affordable, easy to use, even comfortable – are there any drawbacks to purchasing a skid-steer?

A seemingly common-sense, but nonetheless important, suggestion is to make sure your company has a significant need for a skid-steer before making the purchase. "You have to be sure your business is big enough and has enough work to justify owning a skid-steer," Catanzaro says. "If the machine will have a lot of downtime, it's really not worth the investment."

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Another thing contractors stress is that, when it comes to skid-steers, size does matter. Be sure to purchase a skid-steer that is big enough to perform the necessary jobs, but small enough to haul and fit where needed.

"A common mistake made when purchasing a skid-steer is buying one too small that it underperforms or too large that it can't fit in your truck or in the average backyard," Zupanic says. "If your truck is not large enough, you or a member of your crew might be required to get a commercial driver's license, which is an unforeseen cost and requires additional training."

Along this same line that bigger is not always better, manufacturers also advise not purchasing a skid-steer based solely on horsepower. "Engine horsepower alone is not a good indicator of performance and has little to do with a machine's rated operating capacity and breakout or lift forces," Pellegrini says. "Other factors like hydraulic systems, machine weight,


"Many contractors would rather purchase a skid-steer, which is one of the more low-cost landscaping machines, then hire four guys with shovels."

- Gregg Zupanic

wheelbase, machine balance and axle torque could have significantly more impact on a machine's performance over horsepower. Manufacturers often increase machine horsepower in order to overcome inefficiencies such as weight, balance or inefficient drive

pumps or motors."

According to Pellegrini, other mechanical aspects to be aware of when purchasing a skid-steer are the radial and vertical lifting arrangements. Radial lifts move in an arc or radius fashion, and have more strength and durability at mid-lift. Vertical lifts maintain a more vertical lift-path and can generally reach higher heights. Depending on your needs, a radial or vertical lift may be more functional.

The abilities of the skid-steer have come a long way. "I have never seen a company that truly needed a skid-steer regret their decision to purchase one," points out Dan Walsh, a sales representative for John Deere, San Diego, Calif. And, with more improvements and developments to come, it is likely that the skid-steer will continue to grow in the landscape industry. "Manufacturers have really seemed to work out all of the kinks in the last decade or so," Rasevic says. "These machines run like bullets." 



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“Smart irrigation occurs when you can practice water efficiency just by using a certain product or practice,” says Greg Natvig, marketing manager of Rain Bird, located in Tucson, Ariz. “The efficiency is built-in. There is little human intervention. It just happens.”

It sounds easy enough. And, surprisingly, it is. “Getting smart,” as some irrigation specialists like to call it, can be as simple as buying the right piece of equipment and learning how to use it. But, first, contractors should know what water conservation or efficiency is, why it is important and how it can benefit both you and your clients.

CONSERVATION 101. According to Tom Ash, director of conservation for HydroPoint Data Systems, Newport Beach, Calif., water conservation in landscape irrigation is applying the right amount of water to a landscape based on the landscape’s needs. These needs are determined by knowing the landscape inside and out, including factors such as the soil type, the plant materials that require irrigation, whether the land is flat or sloped, what percentage of the landscape will be in the sun vs. the shade and the region’s weather. “There is actually a scientific equation that can be used to determine an area’s water budget, or how much water should go on a particular landscape,” Ash says. “Unfortunately, it is rarely used by irrigation installers.”

According to Ash, this “water budget” equation can be solved by multiplying the evapotranspiration (ET) times the plant water need (Kc) times the landscape area (square footage). The entire equation is then divided by the irrigation system’s efficiency. Kc stands for “crop coefficient” and serves as a way to put a number to how much water plants need. The number

by emily mullins | assistant editor

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Photos: Rain Bird (above), DIG Irrigation Products (page 140)

is determined by a university or government agency based on the best available science. Because it considers a region's local ET, the Kc will be different depending on where in the county you are. Any local extension office in the U.S. will have Kc estimates for turf, Ash says. For more information about water budgets, visit the Irrigation Association's Web site (www.irrigation.org).

For example, in Colorado, a water budget could be determined by multiplying 30 inches of evapotranspiration times .80 or 80 percent plant water needs times 1 acre of irrigated landscape to equal 24 inches of water per year (or 4 inches per month or 1 inch per week) for 1 acre of Kentucky bluegrass.

"It's obvious that the equation will differ because factors like weather are different in every area," Ash says. "But the ultimate goal of efficient irrigation is the same."

The factors not only differ in every area, but they can differ everyday. When the weather and seasons change, a sprinkler valve breaks, a tree dies or a new one is planted, the amount of water needed to efficiently sustain a landscape also changes.

"It's really tough for landscape industry professionals to determine water efficiency because there are so many variables," Ash says. "But water agencies are starting to demand that you get efficient."

From a contractor perspective, the water conservation movement is inspiring. "We're not worried about water conservation, we're excited about it," says Jerry Budnick, president of Alternative Maintenance Services, a Los Angeles-based landscaping company that uses "smart" irrigation. "We have an amazing opportunity to make a difference by applying smart irrigation technology as well as educating the general public about water conservation. We all need to do our part to conserve our natural resources for future generations."

SMART START. So, what exactly makes an irrigation system "smart?" A smart irrigation system uses environmental factors such as soil moisture, rain, wind and plant

severe shortages

Like the saying goes, "waste not, want not." Landscape contractors who install inefficient irrigation systems are facing the brunt of water shortages all over the country in the forms of regulations, restrictions and repercussions. However, because water waste is difficult to detect and monitor, especially on a national level, most of these regulations are made locally based on the region's need and the severity of the water shortage. These restrictions are different in each area of the country and often change during different times of the year, so it's important for contractors to be up-to-date on their region's current conditions.

"It's critical for landscape contractors to be aware of local regulations and to communicate them to their clients," says Chris Wright, regional sales manager for the Walla Walla Sprinkler Co., located in Walla Walla, Wash.

For example, the San Antonio Water System imposes year-round water restrictions and a three-stage alert system invoked in times of emergency. Year-round restrictions also prohibit water-waste, which is defined as the run-off of water into a gutter, ditch or drain or failing to repair a controllable leak. Also, landscape watering with an irrigation system or sprinkler is allowed only between 8 p.m. and 10 a.m. Drip irrigation and hand-held watering with a hose is allowed any time, although hoses should be used with an automatic shut-off nozzle to save water.

The Southern Nevada Water Authority's fall water restrictions limit sprinkler watering and drip irrigation to three days per week between 7 p.m. and 11 a.m. Mist systems at commercial businesses

cannot be used from September to May, and new turf is prohibited at commercial properties and new residential front yards.

State governments are beginning to interfere in places where water shortages are a huge issue. For example, California State Law, Assembly Bill 1881 states that all irrigation controllers sold in California will have to be considered "smart" based on results from the Irrigation Association's Smart Water Application Technology test by the year 2012. Nevada also imposes statewide restrictions.

Repercussions for violating these restrictions include tickets, fines and temporary loss of water service, as well as pollution, high water-use and energy costs and, ultimately, the need for additional, stricter regulations. State governments, competing industries, environmental groups and other organizations are making it necessary for green industry professionals to change their ways.

"Water conservation is such a big issue and regulations already have significant impacts on irrigation businesses," says Greg Natvig, marketing manager for Tucson, Ariz.-based Rain Bird. "It's difficult to predict the future, but we think more water conservation mandates will come from government agencies and purveyors."

One way landscape contractors can contribute to lessening existing water regulations is to provide and encourage the use of smart irrigation systems in their businesses. By educating their clients on the benefits of smart irrigation, individuals can become more aware of ways they can lessen their daily impact. The less water wasted, the fewer regulations will be necessary.

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evapotranspiration rates, to determine how much water a site needs and when it needs it. This process drastically eliminates overwatering, which not only wastes water, but also drowns and rots roots, inhibits nutrient absorption, causes premature plant death, invites fungal disease and attracts insect infestations. Overwatering is also known to erode landscapes and stain and crack sidewalks and other paved areas.

"Overwatering accounts for more than 80 percent of landscape damage," Budnick says. "Alarmingly, most landscapes are overwatered by anywhere from 30 to 300 percent."

Currently, one of the "smartest" irrigation components is a controller, which enables the user to easily adjust the system's watering schedule to adapt to the particular landscape and



the region's weather.

The intelligence of a controller is measured by the results of the Smart Water Application Technology, or SWAT, test issued by the Irrigation Association. Any manufacturer of a weather-based controller can submit their product for testing. To conduct the test, a controller is programmed to irrigate a virtual landscape subjected to a representative climate. After the controller is programmed, it is left to function without human intervention for the duration of the test. Its performance is then rated based on whether or not the end moisture levels are within the acceptable range.

The SWAT test is a critical component to California State Law Assembly Bill 1881, which states that all irrigation controllers sold in California will have to be "smart" controllers by the year 2012, Budnick says. Passing the SWAT test is required to determine which controllers are "smart."

"This technology is the way of the future and 'smart' irrigation will soon be required rather than simply encouraged," Budnick says. "It has been a win-win situation for our clients, our business and the environment." However, according to Ash, although many irrigation controller manufacturers claim their controllers are "smart," only four products to date have passed the SWAT test with grades of 100 percent adequacy, meaning the right amount of water is applied to the test landscapes with zero percent excess, meaning the system applies water so there is no runoff or water-waste.

"Most controllers are not as 'smart'

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USE READER SERVICE # 95

as a landscape contractor might wish they were," Ash says. "You need to be sure to avoid marketing schemes and get a piece that actually works."

PIECES AND PARTS. According to Chris Wright, regional sales manager for the Walla Walla Sprinkler Co., based in Walla Walla, Wash., many manufacturers are also conducting research to develop other "smart" irrigation system components, with some such products already available or currently in production.

"Manufacturers are always looking for ways to enhance existing products," Wright says. "And all of these developments are made in an effort to save water."

Other components of a "smart" irrigation system include pressure regulation devices, check valve devices, high-efficiency nozzles, drip irrigation devices, automatic shut-off devices, multi-stream rotating sprinklers, and centralized control systems.

Pressure regulation devices maintain optimal water pressure to prevent wasteful misting or fogging and, according to Rain Bird statistics, can reduce water usage by 6 to 8 percent for every 5 psi above optimal water pressure. Check valve devices prevent water from draining out of the system at the lowest sprinkler, eliminating erosion and run-off. High-efficiency nozzles provide a more uniform distribution of water and can reduce overspray and improve watering efficiency by 30 percent. Drip irrigation delivers the water where the plant needs it most, resulting in an average water-savings of 30 to 50 percent. Automatic shut-off devices turn controllers off when it's raining or when the landscape has been sufficiently watered. Multi-stream rotating sprinklers attach to any sprinkler head to uniformly apply water to a landscape using matched precipitation and centralized control systems allow users to monitor multiple controllers,

sensors and other irrigation devices at the same time, resulting in water-savings of 25 to 30 percent, according to Rain Bird.

"If contractors can install and operate smart irrigation systems, they can practice water-efficiency," Natvig says. "The products that can provide water efficiency every single day they are out there."

DIRECT DRIP. Drip irrigation, a veteran in the world of smart irrigation, has been on the market for more than 25 years, and was first used to irrigate orchards and fields in drought-prone areas like California and Israel. During drip irrigation, water is distributed exactly where it is needed most — the plant roots. This eliminates evaporation and runoff, using 30 to 50 percent less water than conventional water methods, according to Leanne Pyle, marketing specialist for DIG Irrigation Products, Vista, Calif.

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"More important than the reduction of water applied is the efficiency of how the water is absorbed by the plants," Pyle says. "Because drip irrigation releases water in small amounts over time directly where it is needed, the amount of water available to the plant is increased."

According to Pyle, drip irrigation is between 75 and 90 percent efficient at allowing plants to use the water applied, unlike sprinkler systems that are between 65 and 75 percent efficient.

Although it's been around for a while, drip irrigation is currently increasing in popularity as more and more restrictions on irrigation practices emerge, Pyle says. "Local governments are cracking down on excessive irrigation, sometimes going so far as to restrict all overhead sprinklers during daylight hours," she explains. "This is particularly difficult on the plants that can become stressed through the heat of the day. Drip irrigation can give these plants a needed break."

INTELLIGENCE IN ACTION. Bob Dobson of Middletown Sprinkler Co. based in Port Monmouth, N.J., first presented the idea of smart irrigation to a few select customers about a year ago. The company then began offering smart controllers in lieu of regular controllers to all of its customers. According to Dobson, it was relatively easy to demonstrate to clients the advantages of efficient irrigation.

"We hold at least two meetings with each client where we survey the landscape and explain the operating system before making any final decisions about installation," Dobson says. "After making them aware of smart irrigation, many are willing to invest a little more money in a system that will be trouble-free, as well as save water, down the road."

Dobson compares adjusting an irrigation controller to adjusting a thermostat and suggests that his customers think about one when doing the other. He finds this method also helps to put a dollar amount on the water and energy needed to run an irrigation system by connecting it to the energy needed to heat a home.

"We try to guide our clients along their irrigation schedules," Dobson says. "We give them guidelines based on the seasons, and the new generation of controllers allows them to

adjust the units themselves."

However, Dobson and his crew make sure to provide continued maintenance to all of their clients by offering a variety of service plans. Along with an annual checkup and the "winterizing" of each system, Middletown Sprinkler Co. also offers clients their choice of weekly or biweekly visits. In addition, the company keeps its employees up-to-date on new advancements by having them partake in manufacturer-sponsored training sessions and other in-house training.

"Staying educated is part of the obligation of the industry as a whole to promote water conservation," Dobson says. "You can have the best product and best design available, but if it's not managed properly, it can still waste enormous amounts of water."

SMART STATS. As the population increases, so does the demand for water. Although 75 percent of the earth

"We're not worried about water conservation, we're excited about it."

- Jerry Budnick

is covered in water, only 1 percent of that water is available for human use, as the rest is contained in oceans and glacier ice. Global warming contributes to hotter, dryer conditions resulting in lengthy droughts that also impact the water supply. With more than 7 billion gallons of water used for landscape irrigation each day, government agencies and water service providers around the country are enforcing water regulations, many of which affect the green industry (see "Severe Shortages" on page 138 for more information).

"Agencies have the ability to ban irrigation all together, and strict regulations have already been enforced in many parts of country," says Wright. "These regulations will continue to become commonplace if we don't get

more efficient."

However, not all irrigation water-saving techniques are new. For example, drip irrigation has been around for quite some time, and Dobson has included automatic shut-off devices on every irrigation system his company has installed since 1968. However, what many contractors and manufacturers are noticing is how the perception, rather than the definition, of water conservation has changed within the industry over the years.

"The definition of water conservation has not changed, but our ability to achieve higher efficiency has gotten better over time," Natvig says.

Irrigation experts agree that advances in technology have enabled the creation of water-efficient products and, as the products become available, they should be used.

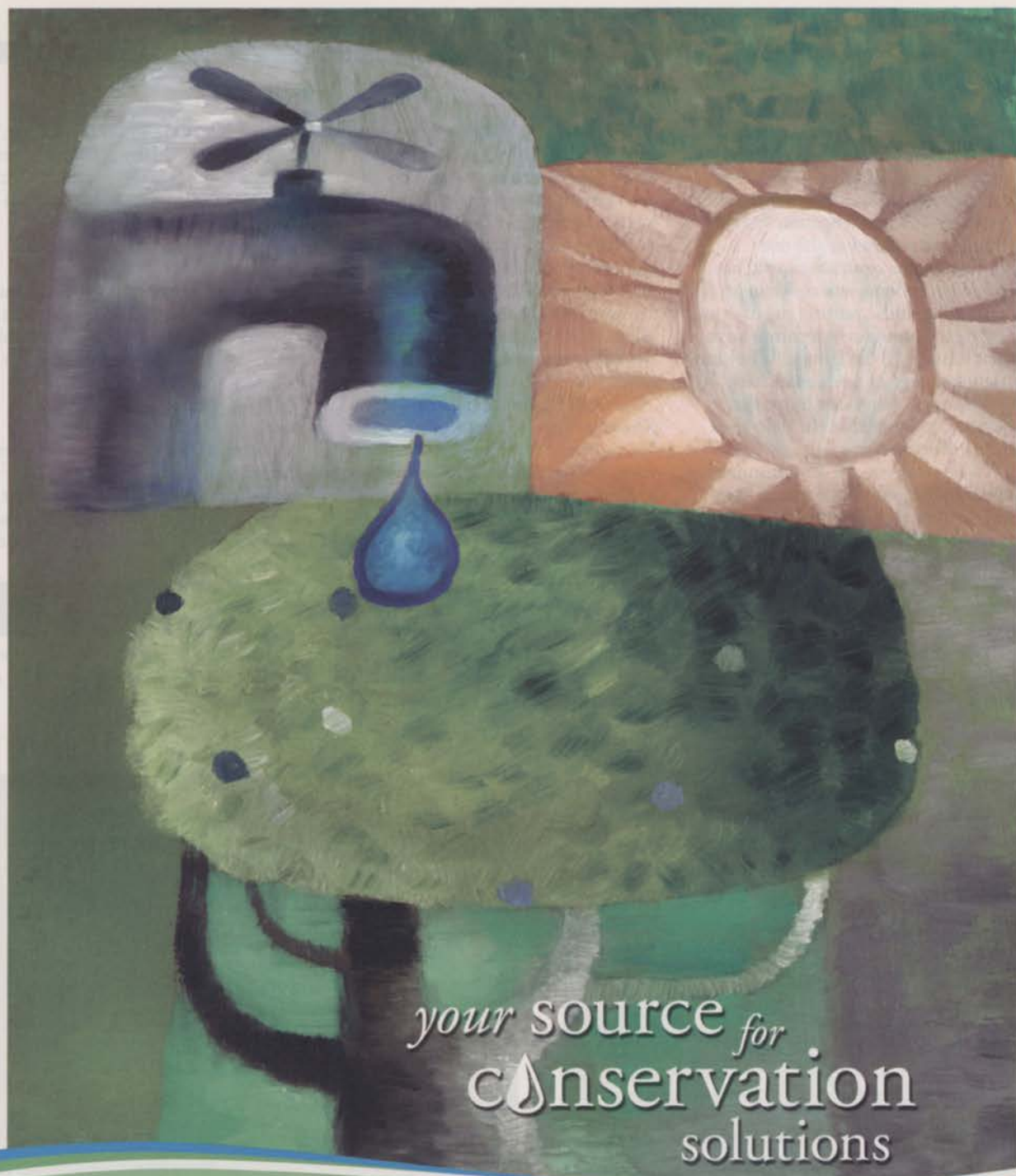
"As a proactive approach to the conservation objective, professionals are thinking of conservation as based on efficiency, or achieving the desired effects without waste," says Wright. "As manufacturers are creating irrigation products that operate without waste, officials are encouraging the installation of these products."

STAYING AWARE. Awareness about water-efficient irrigation products and their benefits is necessary for the landscaping industry's client base to embrace them. Irrigation experts say that everyone in the industry is responsible for the promotion of "smart" irrigation and the products that enable it.

"A synergistic approach needs to be taken by manufacturers, distributors, purveyors and contractors to be aware of the products that exist," Wright says. "Contractors need to be open-minded and willing to learn the new techniques to effectively apply and sell them to customers."

The Irrigation Association provides educational programs to contractors interested in learning about smart irrigation, and most manufacturers provide training and continued support to contractors who purchase their products.

Landscape contractors can also become certified in six different segments of the irrigation industry including irrigation contractors, irrigation designers, agricultural irrigation specialists, golf irrigation auditors, landscape irrigation auditors and landscape irrigation manag-



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ers. According to Natvig, as water conservation becomes a bigger and bigger issue within the landscaping industry, contractors who support and use water-efficient irrigation systems will be a step ahead of the rest.

"Landscape contractors who use inefficient systems will continue to fall behind the times, putting themselves and their businesses at a competitive disadvantage," Natvig says. "They can take advantage of a real marketing opportunity if they can prove their systems are more efficient than their competitors' systems."

When it comes to the consumer, stressing the amount of money they will save on their monthly water and energy bills can be a profitable marketing strategy to promote water-efficient irrigation. For example, an Austin, Tex., commercial property pays a local rate of \$5 per every 1,000 gallons of water used. The property had an inefficient irrigation system that flowed to one zone at 150 gal-

lons-per-minute. After converting that zone to multi-stream rotating sprinklers, the system's flow was reduced to less than 50 gallons per minute, covering the same area.

"In terms of water consumption and energy waste, it can be hard to put a dollar amount on the precise savings," Wright says. "But if you extrapolate it out over an entire season, the dollar amounts can be significant."

One of Budnick's clients, a private school located in West Los Angeles, has experienced a 33 percent annual water savings since the installation of a smart controller three years ago. The school qualified for a pilot program conducted by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and was able to receive the installation of their smart irrigation system free-of-charge.

"I would urge contractors to contact their local water agencies to see what rebates or programs are available to cover or offset the cost of purchas-

ing and installing smart controllers," Budnick says. "Many agencies either subsidize or cover the complete cost of upgrading to a weather-based irrigation controller."

In addition to installing smart irrigation systems, educating your clients about water conservation and offering them continued system maintenance can help create and establish the image that the green industry is an industry that cares.

"We should all, as an industry, take a leadership role in providing, encouraging and using water-efficient irrigation systems," Natvig says. "If we are looked upon as an industry that is genuinely concerned about and practices water efficiency, it will be better for all of us." **LL**

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Visit the January Online Extras section for more irrigation resources and information about weather stations and droughts.

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chip off the old block

Chipping services can be profitable if contractors can keep their machines well fed.

To chip or not to chip, often that's the question landscape contractors ask themselves when in search of a new service options to generate additional revenue.

Chipping, along with grinding and shredding, seem like a natural addition to a service menu. And in many ways, they make a lot of sense. First, chipping is a smart and economic way to dispose of brush and wood waste. Likewise, if further reduced and converted into mulch through grinding and shredding, a landscape contractor can offer the material back at an additional fee.

And even if the client declines the chipped or mulched material, the chipper reduces the refuse' bulk and allows the contractor to haul more material in his truck or trailer than he could otherwise handle, as well as limit the number of trips to the local dump to get rid of the waste.

by mike zawacki | managing editor

smart decisions

Purchasing a chipper can be a major financial investment. Contractors need to examine what type of work they wish to perform before making any purchasing decisions, says Mark Rieckhoff, environmental segment manager for Pella, Iowa-based Vermeer.

To make smart purchasing decisions, Rieckhoff suggests landscape contractors answer the following questions:

What size of material do I wish to chip/process? This will dictate the overall capacity of the machine. If you offer services to your customer base that involve processing up to 12-inch material, a 6-inch chipper will fall short of your needs. On the other hand, if all you wish to do is chip tree trimmings, shrubbery and small

diameter material, a 6-inch chipper should do an adequate job while a 12-inch machine may be more power than you need.

What do I need to achieve for productivity?

Even though you only expect to process 4-inch or smaller material, if you know you are going to have a consistent demand, a chipper of greater capacity – one with more horsepower (80 to 100-horsepower engines) and higher performance potential – might be the smart choice to handle large material volume.

What do I wish to do with the material once it has been processed? If you have an outlet for brush chipper chips, great. If not, then an entry-level grinder might be the preferred machine. With a grinding drum and screen setup, the machine produces a much smaller mulch-type product.

Finally, while on both residential and commercial job sites, contractors and crews come across enough fallen limbs and brush debris that investing in the necessary equipment may seem to make a lot of sense. Likewise, if it proves profitable, it can serve as a gateway to full-service tree maintenance and take-down work.

There's a lot for contractors to think about, says Shawn Cressman,

not have the clientele or the business strategy to back it up," Cressman says.

GETTING EQUIPPED. Chipping equipment is expensive, both in the initial investment and in the maintenance, say most landscape contractors and equipment manufacturers.

When differentiating between various models, safety, capacity and size are the three features contractors should consider.

A good rule of thumb is to start small. Typically, a smaller-sized chipper sufficiently processes brush and very small-diameter limbs, contractors say. These units come equipped with 25- to 35-horsepower engines and cost between \$13,000 and \$19,000.

Larger units can handle limbs up to 14 inches in diameter, are equipped with engines between 80 and 100 horsepower and cost as much as \$40,000. However, contractors looking to chip everything – including limbs in excess of 18 inches in diameter – can choose models with 200- to 250-horsepower engines and run around \$100,000.

"Typically, a landscape contractor is looking for a smaller brush chipper unless they are expanding into the tree care industry," says Mark Rieckhoff,

environmental segment manager for Pella, Iowa-based Vermeer. "In that case, a large-capacity chipper might be needed, depending on the services they wish to provide."

Capacity is another important feature to consider. Many contractors confuse a chipper's capacity with its normal ability to process materials. Consider this analogy: just because a car's speedometer goes to 110 mph doesn't mean it should be driven at that speed all of the time, Rieckhoff says. When choosing a chipper, landscape contractors should remember the "rule of thirds," says Rob Faber, commercial sales specialist at Morbark, headquartered in Winn, Mich.

"Take the maximum the machine can handle and reduce that by one third," Faber says. "For example, if a contractor intends to process mostly 5- to 6-inch diameter pieces all day, then they should have a machine capable of 8-inch diameter."

Regarding safety, Rieckhoff suggests contractors consider models featuring strategically placed feed-stop bars. These mechanisms make allow the operator's leg to strike the bar and shut off the feed in an emergency situation. Likewise, shielding and distance guarding should be other safety areas an inexperienced contractor should consider, Rieckhoff says.

"Through shielding, the operator is protected from rotating parts



Job site chipping reduces the bulk of woody waste and allows the contractor to haul the material much more efficiently. Photo: Vermeer

president of Cressman's Lawn & Tree Care in Hellertown, Pa., who has been chipping for the last 30 years.

"One of the biggest mistakes you see a contractor getting into the service make is to buy too much or to big of a machine too fast and then

such as bearings and belts, as well as protecting the components from job-site hazards and debris," Rieckoff says. "Distance guarding is the distance set between the operator and given hazards. For example, consider the distance between the end of the in-feed table and the feed rollers."

These machines don't differentiate between wood and flesh "There are a lot of safety labels on these machines and people need to be cognizant of their power," Faber says.

Contractors wondering if chipping is a viable service offering will want to rent the equipment before investing in their own machines.

"This is an excellent way to determine if a particular machine works best for your operations," Rieckoff says. "If it doesn't, then take it back and try a different machine, possibly making changes in horsepower and capacity. Once you determine the best machine to fit your needs, then evaluate the utilization and see if it is best to rent or own."

MAINTENANCE. Like with any heavy machinery, chipper engine maintenance must be attended to on a regular basis. Sticking to the recommended maintenance intervals printed in the owner's manual increases performance.

Beyond engine maintenance, knife and shear bar upkeep impacts performance.

"Just like any type of knife, when it becomes dull, cutting performance drops significantly," Rieckoff says. "On a chipper, this also relates to increased wear and tear on the rest of the machine."

Knives/cutters should be routinely inspected and replaced, Faber says. "They're the lifeblood of these machines," he says.

"Whether you can get 25 hours, 50 hours or one hour of life out of these blades depends on the type of materials you're feeding into the machine. When chipping, it's not unusual for foreign matter to get mixed up with the debris."

Blades and cutters should be professionally sharpened to maintain the correct cutting angles, he says.

PRICING AND PROFIT. Job site chipping and shredding reduces

the bulk of woody waste and allows the contractor to haul the material much more efficiently. However, selling chipping and shredding/mulching service to clients is another option.

How much, or how little, to charge, though, depends upon the season, say landscape contractors. But the key to turning a profit, contractors say, is to keep the machine chipping.

"If I'm not using it three days out of the week then it's not paying for itself," Cressman says. "They're expensive buggers, but if you're not running them consistently then they're not going to pay for themselves."

Cressman suggests landscape

contractors form a dedicated chipping crew, but this can be an expensive endeavor. For example, a truck, chip box and chipper can run a contractor \$70,000. To support this, the crew should be busy at least five days a week, he says.

Contractors should consider billing this work at an hourly rate. After labor, fuel and equipment costs are taken into account with demand and time of year, Cressman charges between \$60 and \$90 an hour.

Peak points come during spring and fall storm seasons, Cressman says, with demand waning around the Fourth of July. However, there is nearly year-round demand for disposing of tree limbs and woody brush.

"Winter usually is pretty busy for us," Cressman says. "However, we don't make a lot because everyone else is out there trying to get that business, too."

However, Vince Winkler, owner of Winkler's Tree & Landscaping in Lagrange Park, Ill., says chipping is not necessarily the smart move for the average landscape contractor.

"When you consider the cost for the machine as well as the cost to equip a dedicated crew with a truck, which you need to do to do this correctly, it becomes an expensive service to add on," Winkler says. "And if you're not using it a certain number of times throughout the year to pay for it, it may be cheaper to rent or subcontract the work when it's necessary."

For a landscape contractor to best leverage his equipment to make money, utilization is the name of the game.

"The more the machines can be utilized, the faster the return on the investment," Rieckhoff says. "Making sure the machine will be used on a consistent basis and creating value to the contractor and his customer are the main areas of concern." ■

oh, christmas tree

Landscape contractors eager to drum up business for their expensive chippers may find easy work at the end of the holiday season chewing away on Christmas tree overstock.

But Vince Winkler, owner of Winkler's Tree & Landscaping in Lagrange Park, Ill., says while this may seem like easy money, landscape contractors should be warned: Some Christmas tree vendors are more naughty than nice.

"Often we'll get calls to grind trees left over on Christmas tree lots," Winkler says. "But I've heard too many stories about receiving bad checks and not getting paid at all."

Since many Christmas tree businesses are short-term ventures, Winkler says it can be difficult to collect chipping fees from the owners of seasonal businesses operating out of corner lots.

"Unfortunately, not many landscape contractors are willing to take the time to track these guys down for \$400," he adds.

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For more information on how to advertise chipping services, check out the January Online Extras section.

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compiled by heather wood | web editor

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compiled by heather wood | web editor

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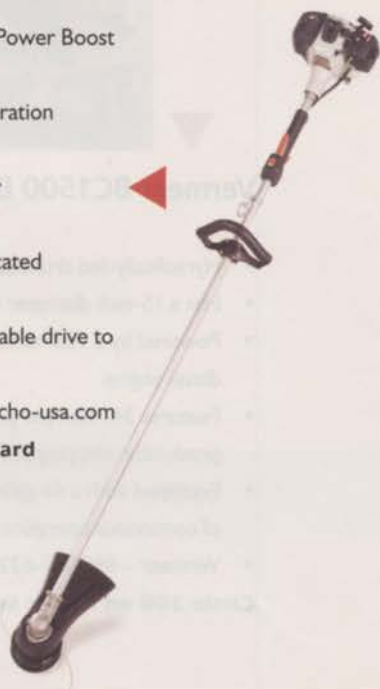
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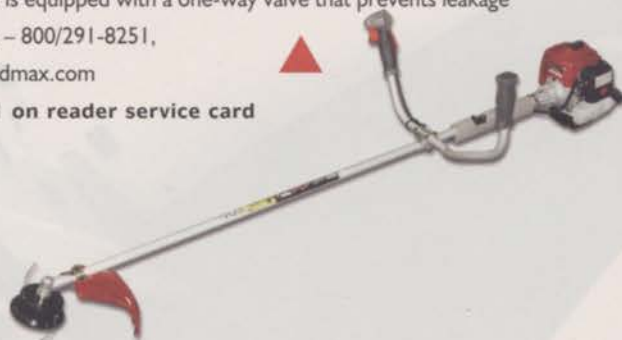
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12
18
19
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31

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7
18
19

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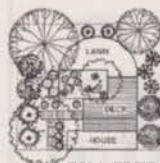


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Pricing Snow Removal For Profit

At some point, contractors struggle with whether they are deriving fair compensation for their snow removal services, a question with an answer that ultimately results in fiscal success or failure.

From my experience, the "Golden Rule" of pricing is having an excellent working knowledge of my costs. Knowing my costs is the bottom line in all aspects of pricing out snow removal. Knowing my costs allows me to be a competitive and profitable contractor. Combining those two aspects with accurately estimating my time to complete a job tells me how my job margins are performing.

THE NUMBERS I NEED. Let's say, for this example, the average two-car driveway (cars in the garage) takes me 10 minutes to plow (including back dragging and clearing the wind row in front of the garage doors) and another 10 minutes to clear the sidewalks and path to the front door. I know I'll be on this job site for 20 minutes.

I take my hourly rate, which I have

predetermined based on what is competitive in my market. This should be a figure I'm comfortable with and covers all of my overhead expenses, i.e. insurance, fuel, truck costs and time.

For this purpose, I'll use an hourly rate of \$65 and divide it by 60 minutes then multiply it by the amount of time I'm on site. This provides me with my base price for the job. This formula gives me a basis to start with and I can adjust this to reflect a level of difficulty, to include a deicing product or other customer service, such as snow removal from cars, decks, roofs, etc.

PRICING STRUCTURE. There are a variety of methods and formulas I use for pricing. I can invoice by the push, which means I charge each time I go to a site and provide a service.

I can invoice per event, which means my invoice reflects the total inches of snowfall for a particular storm.

I can even invoice on an incremental level where my pricing reflects increments of snowfall with associated pricing. For example, 2 inches to



Have an excellent working knowledge of your costs. Knowing all costs allows a contractor to be competitive and profitable. Combine those two aspects with accurately estimating the time to complete a job, and you can determine how your margins are performing.



Diversity is good. Don't put all of your pricing eggs in one basket. By using different contract structures, you can secure some form of cash flow, even during a slow winter. Photos: Ken Pagurek

3.99 inches is a set price, as is 4 inches to 7.99 inches or however I choose to set up the contract.

When using this pricing structure there are a number of different ways to determine my price breaks. For example, if I determine my 2- to 3.99-inch pricing should be \$30, the rest of my prices will be based on this number and a multiplier scale where prices in each category reflect the increased level of difficulty.

Please note the multipliers I use here are no reflection of industry standards, but merely examples. Play with the numbers and multipliers until you find a combination that keeps you competitive.

SEASONAL CONTRACTS. Another billing method is seasonal contracts, which offer benefits to both me and my clients and are typically entered into for a minimum of three years.

2" – 3.99"	\$30	Base price
4" – 7.99"	\$45	Using a multiplier of 1.5%
8" – 11.99"	\$75	Using a multiplier of 2.5%

The biggest benefits of seasonal contracts are they give my customer a fixed number for budgeting their snow removal expenses and the ability to defer this cost over a predetermined period of time.


For this example, consider a contract worth \$47,000 per year for three years with six payments due to me between November 1 and April 15. The monthly payments received are added into my operating budget, which provides me cash flow to offset expenses in slower snow seasons.

Be aware, I research my seasonal snowfall totals over the course of several years when I'm pricing. The end result should be a contract that one year my client may do better, one year I may do better and one year things

will even out for both of us.

OLD RELIABLE. There is the old-reliable method of time and materials operation (T&M) where I bill hourly for each laborer and piece of machinery on site.

I, personally, would rather not bid hourly/(time and materials) jobs as I see little benefit for the customer or incentive for me to finish the job in a reasonable time frame. I may enter into a T&M when I'm asked to remove and take snow off site or reposition piles. I may also build T&M pricing into my contract so if a snowfall event were to exceed a predetermined amount, the job would switch over to a T&M rate.

Whichever method I choose, diversity is good – I don't like to have all of my pricing eggs in one basket. By using different contract structures I can secure some form of cash flow even during a slow winter. – Ken Pagurek 

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