

Lawn & Landscape

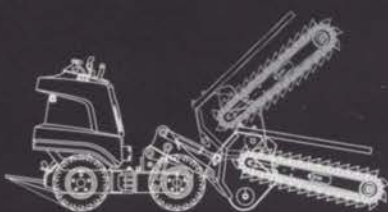
11 07

**“MY
EMPLOYEE
STOLE NEARLY
\$500,000”**

(AND IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU.)

page 42

Ross Fletcher,
Hemlocks Landscaping





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NOVEMBER 2007

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It Happened To Me

(And it could happen to you.) Learn from these contractors and prepare your business for worst-case scenarios.

Cover image: Judith Fishoery

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Pet waste removal services may be the right add on for some green industry businesses.



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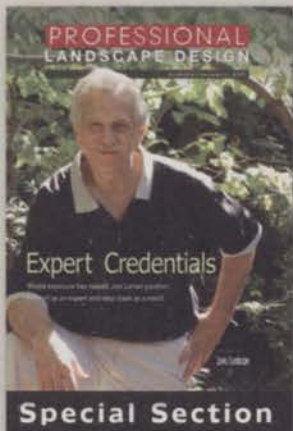
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Media exposure has helped Joel Lerner position himself as an expert and reap leads as a result.

P6 Lessons in CAD

Designers share their ups and downs in shopping for and using design software.

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Landscape contractors this year have worked harder to grow, relying on creativity, tenacity and prudent spending.

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IRRIGATION SHOW NEWS

Lawn & Landscape will report on the latest from the International Irrigation Show, Dec. 9-11, in San Diego. Catch up on the show details before the event and get a recap after the show ends at lawnandlandscape.com. See the Events section online for a complete calendar of industry events.

> VIEW THE WEBCAST

Watch Joe Kucik of Real Green Systems deliver his marketing message any time by logging onto the *Lawn & Landscape*-sponsored Webcast he recently held. Catch the replay by visiting lawnandlandscape.com and stay tuned for more business-boosting Webcasts, where you can watch it live and interact with the presenter.



> GIE+EXPO COVERAGE

Even if you weren't able to make it to the Green Industry and Equipment Exposition in Louisville, you'll feel like you were on the trade show floor when you log onto lawnandlandscape.com and read our extensive coverage from the education sessions, the show floor and the outdoor demo area. If you were at the show, log on to see what you missed and take away tips you can use in your business.

NEW TO THE L&L BOOKSTORE



Green Industry consultant Ed Laflamme's guide to management, "Green Side Up" is available in the *Lawn & Landscape* book store. Visit lawnandlandscape.com/bookstore to order a copy.



Kurt and Matt Bland
Bland Landscaping
Apex, NC

"Our most effective cost-cutting measure was buying 58 new blowers."

Sometimes you have to spend money to save money. That's what Bland Landscaping did by replacing their entire fleet of blowers with 58 new STIHL BR 550's. "Our philosophy is to always do the right thing," Kurt says, "and that includes environmentally. We heard the fuel efficiency claims of the BR 550 and we ran our own tests. They were 40 percent more efficient than our other machines and we calculated we'd

save enough on gas to pay for the new blowers in less than two years." Fuel efficiency, low emissions – any other benefits, Matt? "The entire line of blowers is really powerful. And, my crews can work longer before refueling. We're doing more work, saving money and we're doing it clean."

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USE READER SERVICE # 15

cindy code | editorial director



Benchmark for Financial Health

Just returning from the Green Industry & Equipment Expo, it seems the sky's the limit for what we can do in our businesses and for our industry.

The educational sessions at the conference showed us ways to differentiate our businesses from our competitors, how to improve profits and how to make our businesses lean. Additionally, we were exposed to new ideas on creating and maintaining order in our office systems, being a boss vs. a friend to our employees and removing barriers to communication with our workers.

If you didn't have time to attend this year's conference and show, visit our Web site www.lawnandlandscape.com for detailed show follow-up. Also, be sure and put the event on your calendar for next year. It will be held Oct. 23-25, 2008 in Louisville, Ky.

As we reengage in our businesses following a week's worth of learning, it's easy to fall back into the same old traps. Those pages of notes and dozens of business cards collected from the show are shoved into a drawer until there's more time. More time? There's never more time.

Sure, there's lots to do before the year is out. Fall clean-ups, fall fertilization, irrigation system winterization, winter overseeding, equipment maintenance, the list goes on. Not to mention budgeting for 2008.

When you find the time – in between quotes and customer follow-up – remember that business forecasting and budgeting are keys to both your short-term and long-term success.

In this issue of *Lawn & Landscape*, you'll find our fourth annual Benchmarking Your Business report. This report, sponsored by John Deere, underscores the importance of business finances for landscape contracting business. While it may sound like a no-brainer, business education is still the primary need of a large number of contracting businesses.

Our research shows that slightly more than 50 percent of contractors receive monthly financial income statements. Of those receiving financial statements, only a little more than 25 percent review them. It's not until a landscape firm reaches the \$1 million echelon that regular review of financial statements becomes routine.

With an understanding of a basic financial statement, contractors can and should benchmark their firm's numbers with other landscape businesses both regionally and nationally and within their revenue range and beyond.

Becoming familiar with what falls under overhead, what to pay both salary and hourly employees in various job positions, what's a standard work week and what company benefits are offered to your employees are all critical indicators that will help create a strong foundation for future growth.

A healthy business base also benefits the entire landscape industry as these companies generally spend time on marketing the benefits of landscape services, pricing their services properly and become more involved with their industry at a higher level, whether through industry associations, community development boards or mentoring programs.

As you look to next year, take the time to check the health of your operations and find ways to incorporate one or two new ideas into your business. Those ideas may pay dividends. ■

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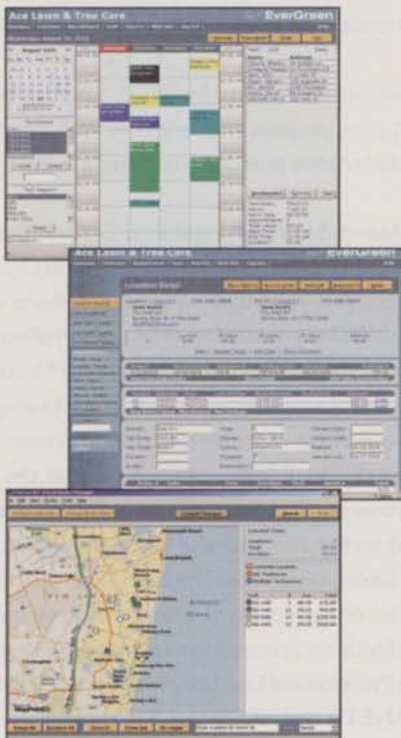


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Landscaping Gets Green Standards

Amid the growing notoriety for the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED rating system for green buildings, many landscape industry members have wondered why such a comprehensive program places little emphasis on a building's landscaping. Some LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) programs award points for landscape water reduction, for example, but no set of specifications focus exclusively on the landscape. Until now.

Enter the Sustainable Sites Initiative (SSI), a partnership of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center and the United States Botanic Garden in conjunction with other stakeholders. Much like LEED does for the building sector, SSI will measure the sustainability of designed landscapes. Though SSI is a standalone system, the USGBC is lending its support to the project and plans to adopt SSI metrics into the LEED system.

The group's preliminary report, designed to introduce SSI's investigations into soils, hydrology, vegetation, materials and human services, was scheduled to be made available for download at www.sustainablesites.org on Nov. 1 and will have a 45-day public comment period.

In addition to the rating system (set to be complete by 2011), SSI plans to roll out standards and guidelines by 2009, pilot projects that test how well the rating system applies to construction and maintenance practices (beginning in 2010) and a reference guide, due out in 2012.

ASLA's Vice President and CEO Nancy Somerville and Fritz Steiner, dean of the University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture, introduced SSI in October at the ASLA conference in San Francisco. Two years ago, two parallel efforts were taking shape – one in ASLA's Sustainable Design and Development Professional Practice Network and the other at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. In 2005, the two groups merged their efforts at a summit in Austin, Texas. During the summit, at which 10 stakeholder groups were represented, the sentiment was, "We really need something like this yesterday," Steiner says. Last year the U.S. Botanical Garden joined as a major partner and a product development committee was chosen to guide the initiative and earlier this year the USGBC agreed to incorporate the findings of the SSI into future versions of the LEED rating system.

While the design community focuses on new construction, landscape contractors have an excellent opportunity to focus on promoting sustainability in existing sites, says Jim Martin, president of the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). Sustainability was a hot topic at PLANET's annual Crystal Ball meeting, where industry leaders brainstorm opportunities for the future, Martin says. The green industry can expect PLANET programming on sustainable practices to expand in coming years. Potential features may include a sustainable section on its Web site, sustainable conference tracks and an awards category related to sustainability, Martin says. – *Marisa Palmieri*

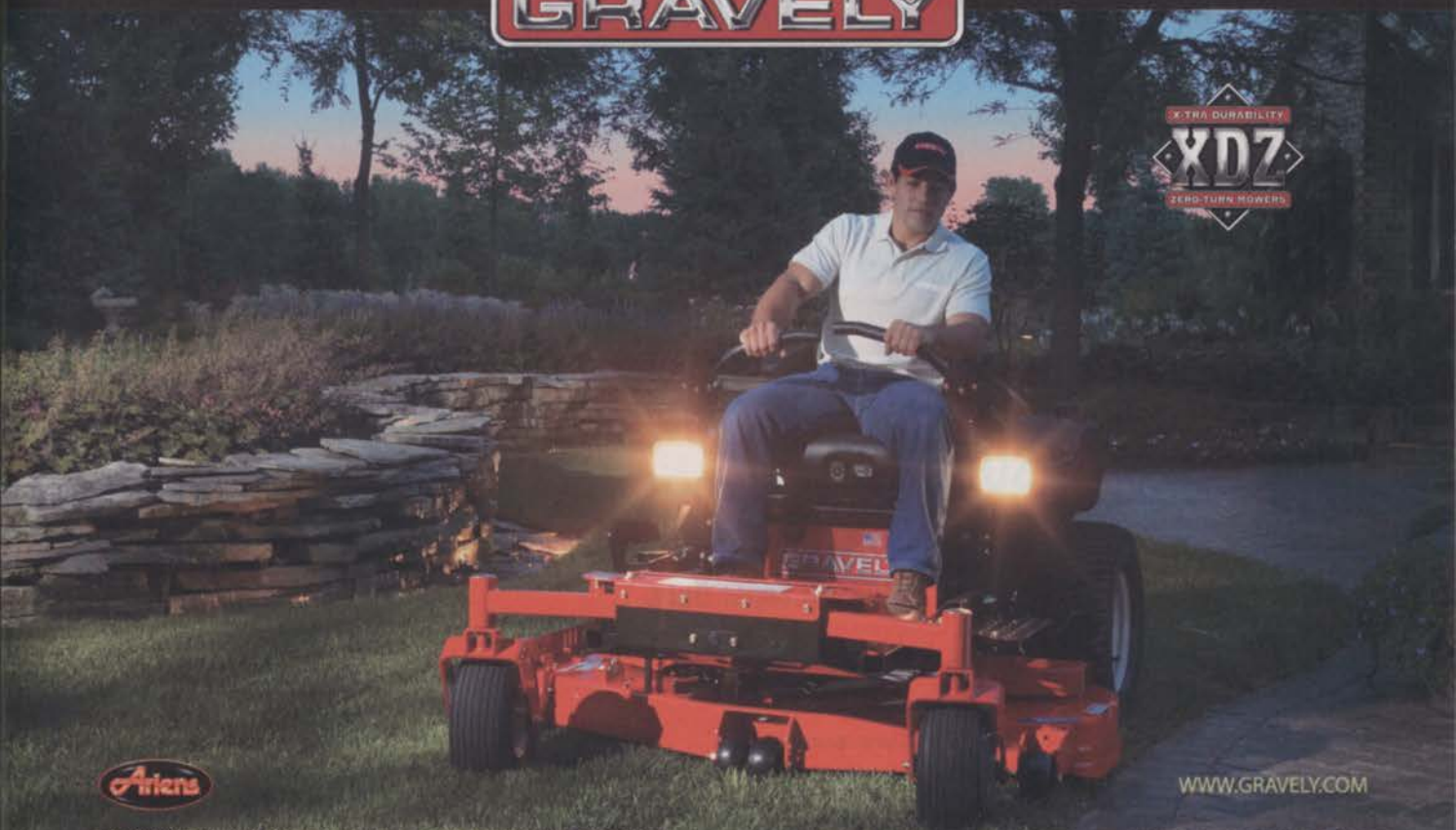
Inside Industry continues on page 16

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USE READER SERVICE # 17

A blue Ford Super Duty truck is shown from the front quarter view, parked in front of a large stack of cement bags. The bags are stacked in a grid pattern, filling the background. The truck's front grille, headlights, and bumper are visible. The text "Cement your reputation." is overlaid on the image in a white, sans-serif font.

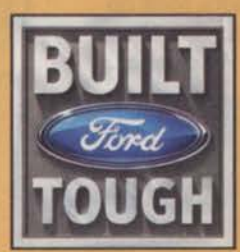
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continued from page 12

LABOR

No-Match Rule Relief

A federal judge issued a preliminary injunction blocking the Department of Homeland Security's "no-match" rule until the court has a chance to fully examine all of the issues.

The ruling, which extends a temporary order issued in September, comes after trade groups and labor unions filed a lawsuit in late August to stop DHS from using Social Security no-match letters for immigration enforcement. The rule requires employers to fire workers who can't resolve discrepancies in their Social Security numbers after 90 days. The plaintiffs, which include the American Nursery & Landscape Association and The Essential Worker Immigration Coalition, of which PLANET and the ANLA are members, opposed DHS's rule on various grounds, arguing that the government violated the Regulatory Flexibility Act, which seeks to protect small business from overly burdensome



regulation.

The injunction will remain until it's overturned on appeal or the judge makes a final ruling after trial, which could be months away, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said he would consider mounting a legal challenge or issuing a modified rule that addressed the judge's concerns, in addition to pursuing other forms of employer enforcement, like criminal prosecution, the newspaper reports. — Marisa Palmieri

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H-2B Cap Met for First Half of FY2008

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has received enough petitions to reach the H-2B cap for the first half of fiscal year 2008 (FY2008). The cap was met Sept. 27 for new H-2B worker petitions requesting employment start dates prior to April 1, 2008.

The program carries a cap of 33,000 workers each half of the fiscal year. As of press time, the amendment that exempts returning workers from counting against the cap, known as The Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act, had not passed in Congress. The exemption expired Sept. 30.

To throw in another wrench, labor union members are backing an amendment to the extension of the returning-worker exemption. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) introduced legislation Sept. 26, the Increasing American Wages and Benefits Act, which includes expanding the

recruitment process, requiring H-2B workers to be paid more than the prevailing wage and allowing the Legal Services Corp. to represent guest workers in litigation against employers.

Such requirements could be burdensome to H-2B users, says Tom Delaney, director of government affairs at the Professional Landcare Network.

Whether or not the cap exemption is passed, companies should continue to send in H-2B requests. The USCIS can retroactively apply exemptions to returning workers.

More information about the H-2B work program is available at www.uscis.gov or by calling the National Customer Service Center at 800/375-5283.

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Looking for the Events Calendar? Beginning with this issue, all industry-related events can be found in the Events section of the *Lawn & Landscape* Web site.

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USE READER SERVICE # 21

Contractors React to North Georgia's Watering Bans

Citing a drought of historic proportions, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division declared "level four" water restrictions for the northern third of the state, including metro Atlanta, banning nearly all types of landscape irrigation.

Local governments are required to enforce the ban, and, along with water utilities, may impose more stringent watering schedules.

Shortly after the ban was announced at the end of September, Kelly Tohill, owner of Tohill Landscape Management in Atlanta, had two aerating and reseeding cancellations. He expresses the frustration many property owners and green industry professionals feel: "Can somebody dial up Mother Nature and let her know we need rain?"

Tohill is right – the area needs rain. The water level at Lake Lanier, Atlanta's primary source of drinking water, is expected to hit a record low level by the end of the year, according to

the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The federal Climate Prediction Center's forecast for a drier than average winter in the Southeast adds to the worry.

There are a few exceptions to North Georgia's ban, and some contractors have seen a slight boost in their installation business due to the restrictions. Ben Elliott, owner of Oak Hill Landscape Group in the Atlanta area, says he's gained a few installation jobs because the restrictions exempt newly installed landscapes. Homeowners may irrigate "turf, ornamentals, annuals and containerized plants" for 30 days following installation. In addition, landscapes installed by licensed professional landscapers are exempt from watering bans for 30 days following installation and irrigation contractors are exempt during installation and maintenance.

"We have upsold a few projects by adding phases to spread it out by 30-day increments," Elliott says. "So [clients] get exempt every 30 days." – *Marisa Palmieri*



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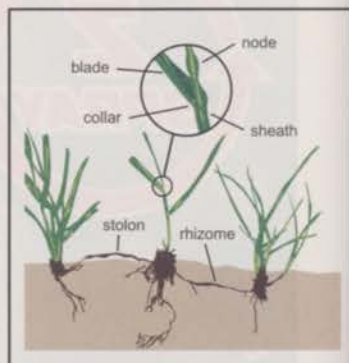


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ENGLISH TO SPANISH PHRASES

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* is publishing 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 mzawacki@gie.net.

1. ENGLISH: We need to plant flowers here.
SPANISH: Debemos plantar el helecho aquí.
(deh-BEH-mohs plahn-TAHR ehl roh-doh-DEHN-droh ah-KEY.)
2. ENGLISH: We need more plants.
SPANISH: Necesitamos más plantas.
(neh-she-see-TAH-mohs mahs PLAHN-tahs.)
3. ENGLISH: We need to clean up the job-site daily.
SPANISH: Debemos limpiar el área de trabajo a diario.
(deh-BEH-mohs leem-pee-AHR ehl AH-ree-ah deh trah-BAH-hoh ah dee-AH-reeoh.)
4. ENGLISH: We need an edge cut out along the bed line.
SPANISH: Necesitamos realizar un recorte preciso a lo largo del borde del cantero/arriate.
(neh-she-see-TAH-mohs rreh-ah-lee-SAHR oon rreh-KOHR-the ah loh LAHR-goh dehl BOHR-deh dehl kahn-TEH-roh/ah-rrree-AH the.)

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market watch

REPORT:

U.S. Economy Not in Recession, But Close



Economists at the University of California-Los Angeles says the U.S. economy is very near recessionary levels. The Anderson Forecast shows real growth in 2007 will be 1.8 percent, close to levels in 2002 when the economy was at near-recessionary levels of 1.6 percent. The economists say the growth rate will return to 3 percent by mid-2008 and that exports and investments will help pull the economy from the doldrums it was put into by the housing and credit crunch. A recession is defined as a period of general economic decline in the Gross Domestic Product for two or more consecutive quarters.

Source: *The Anderson Forecast*

GAS IS UP

Gas prices saw their first rise in two months in early September. Self-service regular went to an average \$2.81 per gallon, after rising 6.5 cents. The finger was pointed at crude oil prices, which rose more than 13 cents per gallon from Aug. 24 to Sept. 7. Prices

aren't expected to go down anytime soon, since OPEC isn't expected to increase production, which would bring down prices. U.S. gas inventories recently hit their lowest level since just after

Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The total days of gasoline stockpiles are 19.8, which is the lowest since the Energy Information Administration began tracking the data in 1991.

Sources: CNN, *The Wall Street Journal*

Honey I Shrunk the House

The credit crunch that has gripped the United States this summer is affecting housing in a different way. Home builders report putting up fewer over-size homes and are offering smaller floor plans. Experts say buyers are unable to justify such large homes and are ratcheting back their luxurious plans.

In the past 30 years, prosperity has ballooned the size of newly constructed single-family homes by nearly 45 percent. The Census Bureau reports the median size of newly built single family home is 2,248 square feet, up from 1,560 square feet in 1974. That increase in home size continued into the first quarter of 2007, to nearly 2,302 square feet. But by the second quarter, it slipped to 2,241 and may be a sign of things to come.

In July, new-home sales were running at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 870,000 units, down sharply from 1.3 million in 2005. Source: *The Wall Street Journal*

10

A California hotel recently offered free 10-week English classes for its employees. A total of 20 workers signed up for the courses, which were offered once a week. The hotel also paid for books and other materials. Vietnam native Albert Tran, the hotel's general manager and a major proponent of the training, is pleased by the ability of the workers to better interact with staff and guests in English. "Language is a major skill in life," he says. "It's not just to help themselves to do this work in this hotel – it's for their development for their future in life."

Source: *Marin (Calif.) Independent Journal*



PROFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE DESIGN

november/december 2007

Expert Credentials

Media exposure has helped Joel Lerner position himself as an expert and reap leads as a result.

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Photos: Sandra Leavitt Lerner

expert credentials

Media exposure has helped Joel Lerner position himself as an expert and reap leads as a result.

When Joel Lerner was studying psychology at Penn State, he realized a bachelor's degree in that field and 65 cents could get him a cup of coffee. He sought a more practical plan and opted to put his education on hold. So he needed a job – quick. With experience in landscaping from summer jobs, a mower and a pickup truck, he began a lawn maintenance operation.

Lerner soon found that his customers expected him to be a horticultural expert. "As soon as you do anything in the landscaping field, people think you're a designer," Lerner says. "They ask, 'Why did my tree die? What ideas do you have for my backyard?' And I would say 'Whoa – I mow lawns for a living.'"

After 12 years Lerner decided he wasn't going to just mow lawns and "wing it" anymore. He enrolled at the University of Maryland to become the expert his clients expected him to be, earning a bachelor's of science in horticulture and landscape design.

Shortly thereafter he founded Environmental Design, and sought to make a quick splash with his company and develop an unmatched list of credentials. A marketing consultant recommended he position himself as an expert in the field by writing a book. "He told me, if you want to put yourself on the map, write a book," Lerner says.

So "101 Townhouse Garden Designs" was born. "That is really where the business took off," Lerner says. "I started to get all kinds of phone calls to do interviews."

After his first book, Lerner was frequently contacted for other media appearances,

By Marisa Palmieri / Associate Editor

Joel Lerner
Founder/CEO
Environmental Design
Capital View Park, Md.

Education: BS in horticulture/landscape design, University of Maryland; studied psychology, Penn State

Client mix: 90 percent residential, 10 percent commercial

First step in the design process? "That's the checklist – I go over that with the homeowner."
 (See "Learning about LERNSCAPING" on page S5.)

The last step? "Actually, it continues during installation. I mark the plants, then move them around until they look better, move them around again until they look better than that. And probably move them around one more time. It's an on-going process. And I say it's a decade before a design becomes a work of art – we're constantly moving, removing, transplanting and redoing."

On breaking a creative block: "Designer's block is usually handled by calling in the reserves. I have just as much of a chance of having an agonizing, horrible time as if something just comes off the top of my head. I'll take a load of pictures and sometimes I'll sit and stare at them for two weeks. So I'll exchange ideas with the other designers in the office and ask what they think and try to get some synergy."

which produced more positive public relations opportunities and exposure for his business.

In addition to writing six more books, Lerner did a number of radio spots, one of which turned into his own show on Washington D.C.'s WWRC for five years. That experience led to a series of TV segments on Fox 5.

Next, Lerner's local TV appearances drew attention from an editor at the *Washington Post*. "He was looking for someone to do a garden column in the real estate section," Lerner says. "I said I'd write one column for him, and if he liked it he could run it. He did and I have not missed one week since October 1996.

"One thing led to another all the way to the *Washington Post* column," Lerner says. "It can be quite a strain, but it has developed one heck of a client base for me." Though he has never tracked or quantified exactly how many leads he's gotten from his "Green Scene" column, Lerner knows it's a good thing that his gardening and

landscaping advice reaches a potential 700,000 readers each week. "An awful lot of people contact me because of the *Washington Post*. I've gotten many clients and speaking engagements from that and the books I've written."

Other designers, too, can increase the perceived value of their services by building such a resume, Lerner says, noting he uses his bio sheet to help him close sales. It's a one-pager detailing the books he's written, his certification from the Association of Professional Landscape Designers and indirect third-party endorsements like his *Post* column and TV spots.

"When I give my clients my rates, they often say 'Let me get back to you,'" he says. "And I say, just let me fax you a single sheet that's often used by my publishers for publicity purposes. Then I generally hear back from them in fairly short order. That type of material on a bio is very impressive to a homeowner."

Lerner emphasizes a designer's need to value his or her own work so that cus-



tomers will better value design services and not balk at being charged consultation fees. Design and consultation fees are an essential part of making the designer-client relationship beneficial for both parties, Lerner says.

"That's the AIA biggest mistake designers make – not charging for their time."

Lerner lets clients know up front that he charges about \$200 an hour for his expertise. He finds some homeowners simply want him to walk their property for an hour and make recommendations. If the clients aren't interested in having him complete a formal design, there are no hard feelings because Lerner has been compensated. "So in the time we're together, they can stop me after an hour if they'd like," he says. "One way or another when I leave they have a body of information they can take wherever they want – whether they want to do it themselves or have me do a design for them. The goal is purely to achieve what the homeowners want for their property." **PLD**



A Joel Lerner design before and after. Lerner tells clients it will take three years for them to like their landscape and a decade for a designed landscape to become a work of art.



LEARNING ABOUT 'LERNSCAPING'

One major problem many landscape designers make is asking their clients what type of design they would like, says Joel Lerner. Quite often clients respond, "I don't know, that's why I hired you."

As a result, over the last 30 years Lerner has developed a system he calls LERN-SCAPING – a six-page copyrighted checklist he uses to "help the property owner get in touch with their property so it can reflect the essence of their personality."

The idea started as an 11-question checklist; today there are 80 points Lerner considers before completing a design for a client.

"It includes their favorite color, favorite seasons, if they plan to entertain," Lerner says. "All of that feedback is done in plain language, then I put that into the language of landscaping."



Many landscape designers seek CAD programs that allow them to increase productivity.

Photo: Dynascope

lessons in CAD

Designers share their ups and downs in shopping for and using design software.

By Marisa Palmieri / Associate Editor

ABOUT A DECADE AGO, landscape designer Jim Olson felt swamped and looked to increase his productivity. "My designs were taking too long for the amount of volume we had at the time," says the president of Olson Landscaping, Northbrook, Ill.

Convinced there was a faster way, Olson sought a computer-aided design (CAD) program to alleviate the lengthy design and revision processes.

Sound familiar? In today's world of ever-rising business costs and clients needing instant gratification, efficiency is the name of the game. Many designers are switching to landscape design software programs that allow them to make revisions without re-drawing an entire design and create plant lists with the click of a mouse.

But some designers are hesitant to make the switch. It can be intimidating for professionals to change their ways, especially those who don't consider themselves to be technologically savvy, says David Sloan, sales and marketing director for Drafix Software, manufacturers of PRO Landscape design software, Kansas City, Mo. "It's the fear of something new and not being comfortable with what they're doing" that holds some designers back, he says.

Another reason is some designers fear the software will stifle their creativity. "Drawing is something landscape designers and architects enjoy doing – being at the drafting table and having the design process as a tactile thing with paper and pencil," says Anne Behner, sales manager for Akron, Ohio-based Visual Impact Imaging, makers of Earthscapes Landscape Design Software.

The amount of time they'll have to invest to learn a new program is a concern, too. "For myself, one of the holdbacks was the learning curve and the ability to do my work while making the transition," says Susan Schlenger, owner of Susan Schlenger Landscape Design in Troy, Va. After doing drawings by hand for about five years, Schlenger made the decision to "move ahead with the times" five years ago. "After some research, I felt I could offer my clients the same kind of detail in the drawings, but the technology would make it a lot easier to make changes and save versions," she says.

Schlenger and other designers who use CAD recommend that designers considering digital drafting should simply figure out what works best for them. "What is best for an individual company is what is effective and efficient – just like with construction tools and

Whether a design program already has landscape-ready plant symbols is something designers consider. Image: Dynascape



BEYOND SITE PLANNING

Digital imaging and 3D modeling are functions commonly included in landscape design programs. These tools have grown popular – especially among residential designers – as they've sought ways to convey their visions to clients who can't conceptualize that a circle represents a Bigleaf Hydrangea and a rectangle is a hand-crafted pergola.

Jim Olson uses digital imaging and watches his clients' faces light up when they see a photograph of their own home and what it's going to look like when the landscape is installed. "They get really excited when they see the imaging," says the president of Jim Olson Landscaping, Northbrook, Ill. He typically includes the digital imaging with the cost of a landscape plan – he uses 18 by 24-inch media with the imaging on one side and the plan on the other.

Susan Schlenger prefers 3D modeling to digital imaging for its artistic, professional look. A few years ago she stumbled upon SketchUp, a program now owned by Google. Though she wasn't looking for a 3D modeling program, she was so intrigued by the program that she downloaded the free trial and then eventually purchased the professional version. Though Schlenger only uses SketchUp about 10 percent

of the time as an add-on service for clients who are having trouble visualizing specific components of their landscapes, she says it's valuable. "It's a good tool for both the client and me to get an idea of what something will look like when it's built," she says.

Andrew Garulay, owner of Yarmouth Port Design Group Landscape Architects in Yarmouth Port, Mass., understands the draw of these tools, but cautions designers not to dupe clients – and themselves – into thinking they can make planted and hardscape elements work when they're inappropriate for the environment. "As long as you've done the design in site-plan view, you know everything fits and you have the right skills, it can be a good tool for visualizing," he says. "But people who don't know what they're doing are using it and thinking it's their key to design. And they're going to run into trouble."

Whatever the method a designer decides to use – whether it's hand drawing, CAD, 3D or digital imaging, Garulay emphasizes there's no substitution for a professional's knowledge and ability to communicate it to his clients. "What makes a difference is your knowledge and your selling yourself," he says. "They're buying you, not your CAD program."

Susan Schlenger uses 3D modeling to help clients visualize their designs. Above is a concept she created in SketchUp; the final product is pictured at right. Photos: www.susanschlenger.com

methods," says Andrew Garulay, owner of Yarmouth Port Design Group Landscape Architects in Yarmouth Port, Mass. "You would not bring a track excavator to plant annuals and you would not bring a trowel to build a pond. It works the same with design tools and design staff."

SAVING TIME. Whatever direction a designer chooses, he or she can't ignore the efficiencies CAD programs create. "I'm much quicker now," Olson says. "I can produce a plan much faster and it's easier to make changes."

Schlenger touts the fact that she can offer clients several different options without redrawing the entire plan by hand.

Garulay points out the amount of time a designer can save by obtaining preexisting CAD files from surveyors and architects and using them as starting points for landscape plans. Especially on new construction, there's generally a CAD file in existence, says Garulay, who's a site planner for a civil engineering office by day and runs a residential landscape design firm on the side. "If a client has a landscape designer that wants a CAD file to start the landscape plan, as a professional courtesy, [architects and surveyors] will generally give it to the designer," Garulay says. "Often



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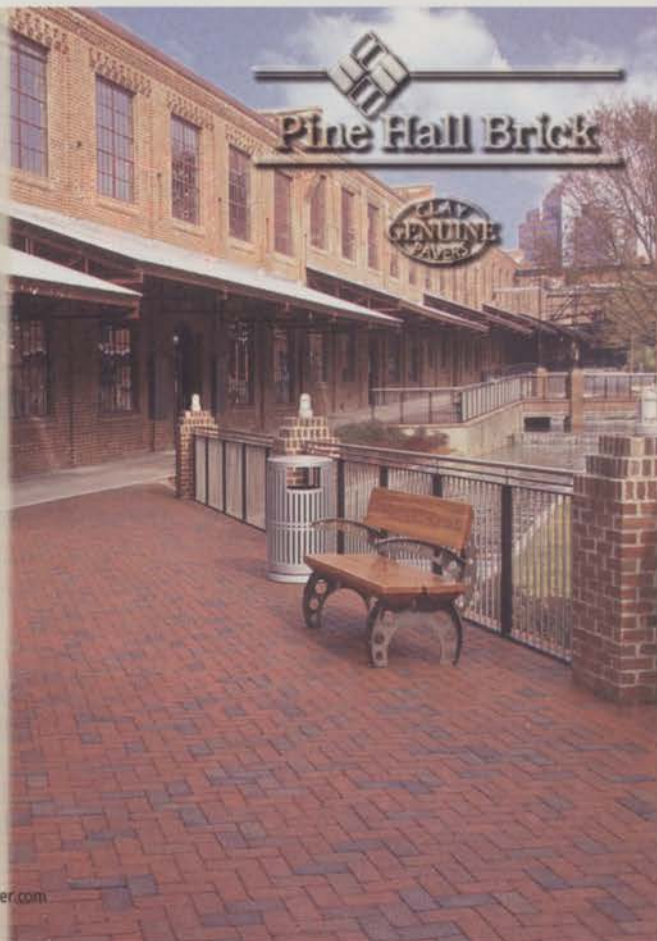
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it will include major trees, topography and it will have significant features on the site located. If you can get that file, that's all the more accurate your plan's going to be."

Dave Petrosky, a registered landscape architect with L. Robert Kimball & Associates, Ebensburg, Pa., says these time-saving elements allow designers to see returns on their software investments within the first several hours they employ the programs. And Petrosky would know - to make his own job easier he developed EZ-Plant, a landscape-oriented AutoCAD add-on, in the 1990s. Most CAD programs are able to create plant lists in a matter of seconds, Petrosky points out. "Some people bill themselves out for \$100 or more per hour and if you have to add up all the plants on a project by hand - that's a lot of time," he says. "You can save hours by just hitting one command."

Using CAD files adds a marketing benefit, too, Garulay says. "If you have the ability to work with CAD and you're able to help an engineer with the permitting process, you're getting on the job so early - before anybody's even planning to talk with a landscape designer," he says. One way to help developers with permitting would be to assist them with the restoration plantings or wetland mitigation they're so often required to conduct during development. The easier a landscape designer makes life for an architect, engineer or surveyor, the more likely these professionals will drive future work in their direction. "Obviously, everyone involved wants to streamline the permitting process, so having a hand-drawing designer or landscape architect in the permitting phase can be more of a burden than benefit," he says.

SHOPPING AROUND. Luckily for designers, there is a large selection of programs out there to choose from. But all of the choices may create confusion. Generally, design software programs serve a number of functions and may or may not include site planning, estimate/proposal generation, digital imaging and/or 3D modeling.

To narrow their choices, designers should ask themselves for what functions they need the software. "Once you've explored different software companies, you should make a list of what's important to

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you," Schlenger says. "For example, some do cost estimating. I don't need that, but someone who's involved in design/build may."

Both manufacturers and designers who use CAD encourage others to take advantage of the free trials most companies offer. Trade shows, too, are always good places to demo products.

Of course price is always a consideration – and there are generally three levels of programs on the market. There are the lower-end products (\$100 or less from retail electronics stores), which are more suitable for hobbyists and homeowners. The mid-tier products designed for professional users cost about \$1,000 to \$2,500 and generally feature at least three of the four functions mentioned above. They also typically incorporate landscape-specific content, like plant photos and symbols. The high-end products like AutoCAD can cost \$3,000 and up, are typically targeted for engineers/architects and may not include landscape-specific content unless you purchase add-on modules.

SUPPORT SYSTEM. Software manufacturers offer varied levels of training and support, which should be an important part in the decision-making process – especially for less-than-confident computer users.

Some type of training is typically included with the software purchase, usually in the form of Web-based tutorials. Olson says the tutorials are enough training for designers who are computer literate, though he recommends reviewing them several times to ensure they're retaining the detailed information. Community colleges also offer classes, usually based on AutoCAD, and software companies provide on-site, instructor-led training for several hundred dollars.

Complimentary telephone and e-mail support is usually part of the software purchase package, at least for the first year. Some manufacturers extend the offer through the life of the product; others require annual fees. "Particularly when you first get started support is important – I was calling them all the time," Schlenger says.

While many manufacturers say users can learn their programs in a few days, designers say it takes longer than that to feel really comfortable with a new program. It took Schlenger about five months until she was confident with the program she selected. "And it probably took a good year to get to know everything I could do," she adds. "Some people pick up things more slowly, but that doesn't mean you're not going to be as good in the long run. So don't expect to be up and running in a week's time."

The challenge for many designers is translating the artistic ability they have on paper to the computer screen. It can be done, but it takes patience and persistence, designers say. "It takes a while to understand drawing on a computer is no different than by hand," Garulay says. One major mistake he sees landscape designers make in CAD is the lack of line weights – something that's second nature when drawing with markers and pens. "When people start to use CAD they don't intuitively assign line weights," he points out. Another tip for getting comfortable while designing on screen is to do things consistently in terms colors and graphics. "Use the same symbol for the same plant every time until you get things like that down," Garulay says. "If you do things consistently, the more familiarity you can build into your drawing and the more comfortable you are in it." **PLD**

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USE READER SERVICE # 29



Photos: Botanical Visions

design dilemma

By Emily Mullins / Assistant Editor



William Reeve, president of Botanical Visions in Boca Raton, Fla., incorporates low-volume irrigation into his landscape designs to reduce water loss caused by high winds and to conserve water.

Irrigation systems are vital to maintain healthy landscapes, but they can create challenges for landscape designers.

An important part of a landscape designer's job is having the creativity needed to make a landscape more than just an arrangement of shrubs and trees. To truly please a client, designers often go the extra mile, incorporating individual styles and preferences to make a landscape an expression of who the client really is. And, whether they like it or not, most designers also have to incorporate irrigation systems – and their often unsightly components. Depending on the type of system and its location, this can make or break a designer's vision.

For most designers, particularly in the South and West, irrigation systems are inevitable additions to landscapes, and play crucial roles in keeping them green and healthy. So rather than letting the systems stifle their creativity, designers use them to their advantage. "In South Florida, it's basically a given that we'll have to work with an irrigation system in some way because we have two seasons: wet and dry," says William Reeve IV, president of Botanical Visions, Boca Raton, Fla. "We usually don't allow a system to dictate our plant or landscape design choices because we know the water has to be applied."

MINOR MODIFICATIONS. Reeve estimates that 70 percent of his company's jobs require working around existing systems vs. installing new ones, and he knows some degree of modification will be necessary to sustain the new landscape. Usually the changes are minor, like switching from rotors to emitters, changing head locations or adding heads to a zone, and can cost at little as \$500. Compared to the price of some elaborate landscapes, the cost is miniscule and clients rarely object. "When working on a project with an existing system, the updates and modifications are usually 10 percent or less of the job's final cost," he says. "The changes are a must to ensure proper irrigation of the new plant material."

But sometimes modifications create more problems than they solve. For example, many commercial properties go two or three years without properly updating their irrigation system, Reeve says. Once a system is updated and irrigating the landscape, the new water pressure can crack brittle pipes or break old glue bonds. "I'm not a big fan of placing too many band-aids on old systems," Reeve says. "The older the system, the more things need fixed."

In these situations, Reeve says it's important for designers to consider if it is more economical to repair an old system or install a new one by factoring in how old the system is, how much the repairs will cost and how well the current system works. "If the system is only working at 60 or 70 percent, you'll end up loosing 30 percent of the landscape," he says. If the repairs equal the cost of a new system, Reeve says it makes more sense to recommend a new install, adding today's thicker pipes and new technology make systems better than ever.

To prevent major problems, Reeve's company takes a proactive vs. reactive



"Most of the new technology is not marketed to the consumer – it's marketed to the contractor who then has to market it to his clients. It can be frustrating to have clients reject technology that can actually save them significant amounts of money." – William Reeve IV

approach when maintaining its properties' irrigation systems. The company's designated irrigation technician inspects its largest jobs about every two weeks. Conducting what Reeve calls "wet tests," the technician turns on all of a system's zones and walks the property checking for leaks and other potential problems.

"This helps find little leaks before they're gushing breaks," Reeve says. Because the technician can address minor repairs as they're needed, the inspections save Reeve the effort and expense of subbing out major repair jobs to an irrigation company.

To overcome the potential limitations of designing around irrigation systems, Reeve utilizes the flexibility of drip irrigation, most often in beds. South Florida is now under tight irrigation restrictions when it comes to traditional irrigation. The South Florida Water Management District limits landscape irrigation to a maximum of four hours per day, one day per week in some areas. But since drip irrigation is con-

sidered low-volume and can be 30 percent more efficient than traditional irrigation, it is exempt from any imposed restrictions. However, the SFWMD does request that contractors avoid watering between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. to limit evaporation and moisture loss during these hours.

CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES.

There are a few situations when an irrigation system should dictate a landscape's design, Reeve says. The most notable is when there is no irrigation system. While rare in South Florida, Reeve has had clients who were sticklers for hand-watering. "We have had clients who refuse to install an irrigation system, and their choice severely regulated what we could and couldn't do," he says.

In these situations, Reeve uses container-grown plant material rather than field production material. "I try to use plants that will slowly but surely establish themselves, rather than expect a plant recently transplanted from the wild

to survive in a new environment," he says. He also installs landscapes with monochromatic, native material, he says.

On properties prone to flooding, Reeve says excess water creates pathogen and disease problems for plant material. Designers need to think about how water is collected on a site, and determine what type of irrigation, if any, would be best for plant survival, Reeve says.

STARTING ANEW. For a landscape designer, installing a new system allows the designer to call the shots and ensure all the areas of a landscape receive the appropriate amount of water. For example, Reeve likes to water turfgrass and plant beds on separate zones. But because this is a recent trend, most systems installed in the 1970s and 1980s are not designed this way. "When an irrigation system is gutted, that's the best case scenario," he says. "You can design or install a system that meets the needs of the design created."

Working with a new system also gives designers the opportunity to utilize the technology older systems lack. Features like automatic shutoff, check valves, pressure regulators and smart controllers not only save water, but also save clients money. It can be a challenge to convince clients to embrace new technology, Reeve says, but once they do, most are amazed at the savings. "Most of the new technology is not marketed to the consumer – it's marketed to the contractor who then has to market it to his clients," Reeve says. "It can be frustrating to have clients reject technology that can actually save them significant amounts of money."

Whether an irrigation system is old or new, landscape designers should look at it as a necessity rather than a hindrance. "Designers should never let irrigation prevent them from doing something creative with a landscape," Reeve says. "It's necessary to keep all of their chosen plants alive." **PLD**

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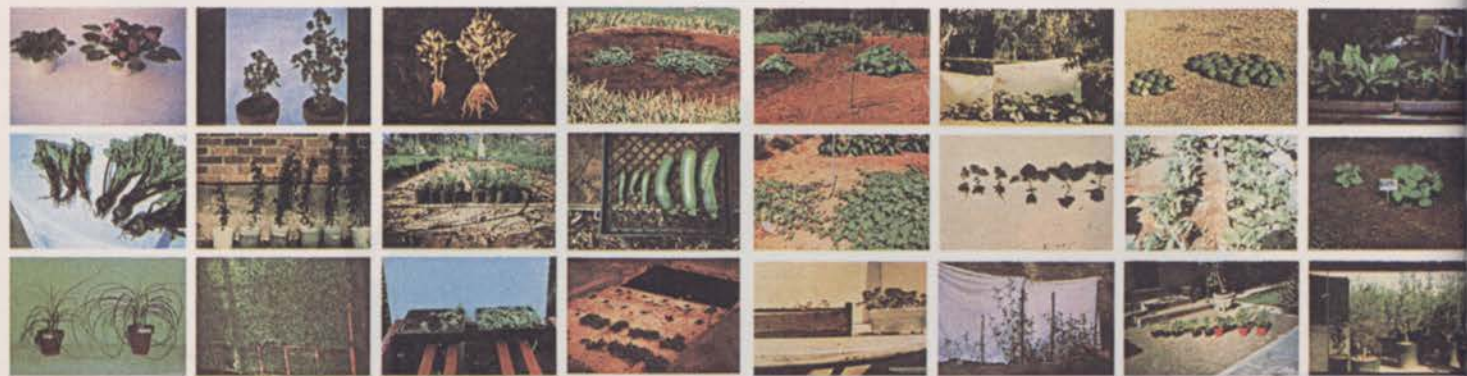
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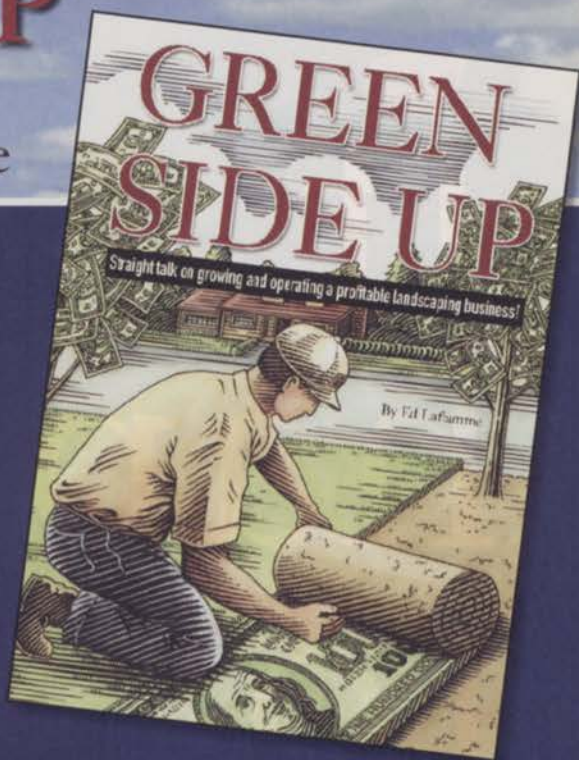
Straight talk on growing and operating a profitable landscape business.
 by Ed Laflamme



ED LAFLAMME, CLP, was founder of Laflamme Services, Inc. a full-service landscaping company in Bridgeport, CT. Starting out in 1971 with two mowers purchased with \$700 borrowed from his mother, he built an award-winning company to revenues of \$7 million and sold it in 1999. A much sought after keynote speaker, author, consultant, business coach and mentor, he serves landscape business owners nationwide.

Had someone handed me *Green Side Up* at the beginning of my business career my learning curve would have been shortened by decades. Ed has captured years of knowledge and is sharing strategies in an easy-to-read format. This book is a tremendous resource for all levels of business people!

Mike Rorie, GroundMasters



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Ross Fletcher, page 43



Ed Laflamme, page 46



John Bannon, page 50

“It happened to me.”

[And it could happen to you.]

In business, like in life, people often hear troubling stories and think “It won’t happen to me.” So they go about their routines, getting by the way they always have, failing to plan as best as they can for situations that could put them out of business.

The reality is shot-in-the-dark circumstances do happen to lawn care and landscape business operators every day. The stories that follow are three real-life examples of what happens when a brazen employee embezzles, a worker is killed on the job and the IRS comes knocking. Contractors Ross Fletcher, Ed Laflamme and John Bannon likely thought “it” wouldn’t happen to them, either. But it did. They share their experiences with *Lawn & Landscape* Associate Editor Marisa Palmieri.

Some of these business owners were well prepared; others admit they could have done more to protect their businesses. Are you prepared for the worst?



**"My office manager
embezzled nearly
\$500,000."**

Photo: Judith Pashney

By Ross Fletcher

As Ross Fletcher learned, simple fraud-prevention measures can thwart expensive lessons.

Hemlocks Landscaping

OWNER: Ross Fletcher
HEADQUARTERS:
Jasper, Ga.
FOUNDED: 1993 (formerly
Landmark Landscaping)
EMPLOYEES: 20

Like a lot of landscape business owners, I had a college degree in horticulture, but I didn't take any business, accounting or finance courses. And so I was really lacking in that aspect of business management.

In 1999 or 2000 I had to spend more time taking care of my elderly parents. I spent all my time with the company doing design work and sales and relied more on my office manager to handle the office duties. I was not checking on the things I should have been.

Through the years we were growing a lot and making a pretty good amount of profit, but procedures weren't as good as they could have been. I was dealing with some personal issues with my folks; it was a perfect storm to allow the opportunity for the office manager to start embezzling.

It started in 2000 or 2001. The office manager got behind on some personal bills, started taking money out of the company and it just snowballed. For a two-and-a-half-year period she had embezzled about a half million dollars.

During that time I knew we were in trouble – we were having issues making payroll and keeping our vendors paid. And all I thought I could do was continue to work harder and sell more, sell for better profit and keep our clients happy. I thought things would work out.

It turns out we were making really good money. She was just taking the majority of it out the back door.

Then my parents both passed away. After my father's death, I came back to work and really

started taking a hard look at where we were – we had been on the verge of bankruptcy for at least a year or two. I said I've got to figure out what the heck is going on.

FINDING OUT. I called a friend of mine who was a CPA and offered her a job. She had just taken a new job, but she said she would love to take a look at our books.

So I gathered some basic QuickBooks reports and a few months of bank statements and dropped it off to her one morning. About two hours later she called and says, "You need to come and see me."

I dropped what I was doing and went over there. She had laid out on a table about 30 checks that she suspected were fraudulent. Lo and behold they were – they were written to people I didn't have accounts with. There were checks to GMAC for her husband's Corvette and there were checks to her mortgage company.

I was devastated. She was an employee but also a friend. I really relied on her as all owners do to help me judge the health of the company, to be my eyes and ears. She had basically taken advantage of a horrible personal

download the hard drive to my CPA's laptop. A day or two before we did that she got tipped off. She had erased the hard drive and put a new operating system on the computer. She said her mother had a heart attack and had to leave immediately. But all of her personal items were gone, so we knew she had bolted.

Within a few days the sheriff's department arrested her.

The worst part was I didn't know the IRS was within days of padlocking our office and seizing our assets. For two and a half years she had been filling out the tax forms, printing the checks and bringing them to me to sign, but she would never send them in. At the height of it, we owed a quarter of a million dollars in back taxes.

Meanwhile, she had posted bond and went out and got a job with an interior design firm. She worked for them for six months and got them for about \$65,000.

I had filed a civil suit against her, as did the interior design firm. Their suit was heard first, so when mine came to be we got her on racketeering charges as well, so the damages were tripled. We received a judgment from our civil case that was over a million

been sending me notices and intent to lien and I never knew about it because I never opened the mail.

No. 2 is open bank statements. Don't look at the statements after they've been opened, you need to open them and review every check for your signature. My office manager was pretty darn good at signing my name.

The third thing is have a good relationship with your bank and track very judiciously who has access to your accounts. Make sure the bank understands you're looking for fraud – it will help keep them on their toes.

Another thing is ensuring your tax payments are filled out correctly and that they're actually mailed.

Have a checks-and-balances system. My company has four separate entities look at our books – me, our office manager, our CPA who found the embezzlement issue and our business consultant who also is a CPA. Every month we all sit down, go through the previous month's numbers, the profit/loss and we try to foresee issues before they become problems.

If you do the right things, you can catch fraud. The second office manager we had after the embezzlement worked for about three months, got behind on her bills and wrote herself two extra paychecks. She backdated them about four months so they would be buried back in QuickBooks. The bank statement came about three weeks later and I was scanning the canceled checks and there was a signature that wasn't mine. She had added two extra paychecks and didn't think anybody would notice. Again, I was amazed. She knew the story – everybody that comes here knows the story. I did not prosecute her and of course we fired her, and she paid us back.

After talking to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and attorneys who handle fraud, I would be willing to say 15 to 25 percent of small businesses are getting defrauded somehow.

Small businesses, especially landscapers, generally work on pretty tight margins. Fraud can be really devastating and it adds up quickly. It's very crucial that owners and managers really watch out for the people you least expect. A lot of times they are the ones you have to watch the closest. Thieves don't have any scruples when it comes to running your business into the ground. The only person who can truly look out for fraud is you.

"Looking back, in a strange way, it was probably one of the best things that ever happened. It forced me to become a much better owner and manager."

– Ross Fletcher

situation for me and had been robbing us blind while my attention was elsewhere.

I stood there looking at the checks and it all sunk in. Everything started making sense. I knew the company was in trouble. We owed over \$100,000 to our vendors. I never missed payroll, but was very close.

I called my attorneys and the local sheriff's department and for two or three weeks we tried to gather as much information as we could without raising her suspicions. Instead of arresting her immediately we were trying to find out as much information as we could to build our case.

The key thing was our QuickBooks file on the office manager's main computer. We had planned to

dollars. That was good, but of course we haven't seen a dime and probably never will. The criminal trial still hasn't occurred and this was almost five years ago. We're hopeful it will go to trial late this year or in the spring.

Looking back, in a strange way, it was probably one of the best things that ever happened. It forced me to become a much better owner and manager. I got the education I needed as far as the financial aspects of running a business, and we run things very differently today.

PREVENTING FRAUD. I would offer the following bullets for fraud prevention from an owner's perspective: One thing is get your mail out of the mailbox and open it. The IRS had

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372:16
238:49

Total hours: Irrigation
Total hours: Placing Sod

38:53

Hours Bill Owen
worked last week

611:05

Total hours to date:
Crestview

WEEKLY TIMECARD

NAME: Bill Owen DATES: 10-14

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

SIGNATURE: Bill Owen TOTAL HOURS: 41 1/2

GUESSWORK

Employee Report

Owen, Bill

Date Range: 12/10/2007 through 12/14/2007

Day	Date	Jobsite	Start	Stop	Cost Code	Hours	Total
Mon	12/10	Brentwood	7:08 AM	12:05 PM	Irrigation	4:57	
			12:41 PM	3:22 PM	Irrigation	2:41	7:38 hours
Tue	12/11	Brentwood	7:12 AM	12:07 PM	Irrigation	4:55	
			12:43 PM	3:23 PM	Irrigation	2:40	7:35 hours
Wed	12/12	Brentwood	7:12 AM	12:02 PM	Irrigation	4:50	
			12:46 PM	3:49 PM	Irrigation	3:03	7:53 hours
Thu	12/13	Crestview	7:17 AM	12:19 PM	Placing Sod	5:02	
			12:50 PM	3:46 PM	Placing Sod	2:56	7:58 hours
Fri	12/14	Crestview	7:13 AM	12:07 PM	Placing Sod	4:54	
			12:44 PM	3:39 PM	Placing Sod	2:55	7:49 hours

Signature: Bill Owen
Owen, Bill

Total 38:53 hours

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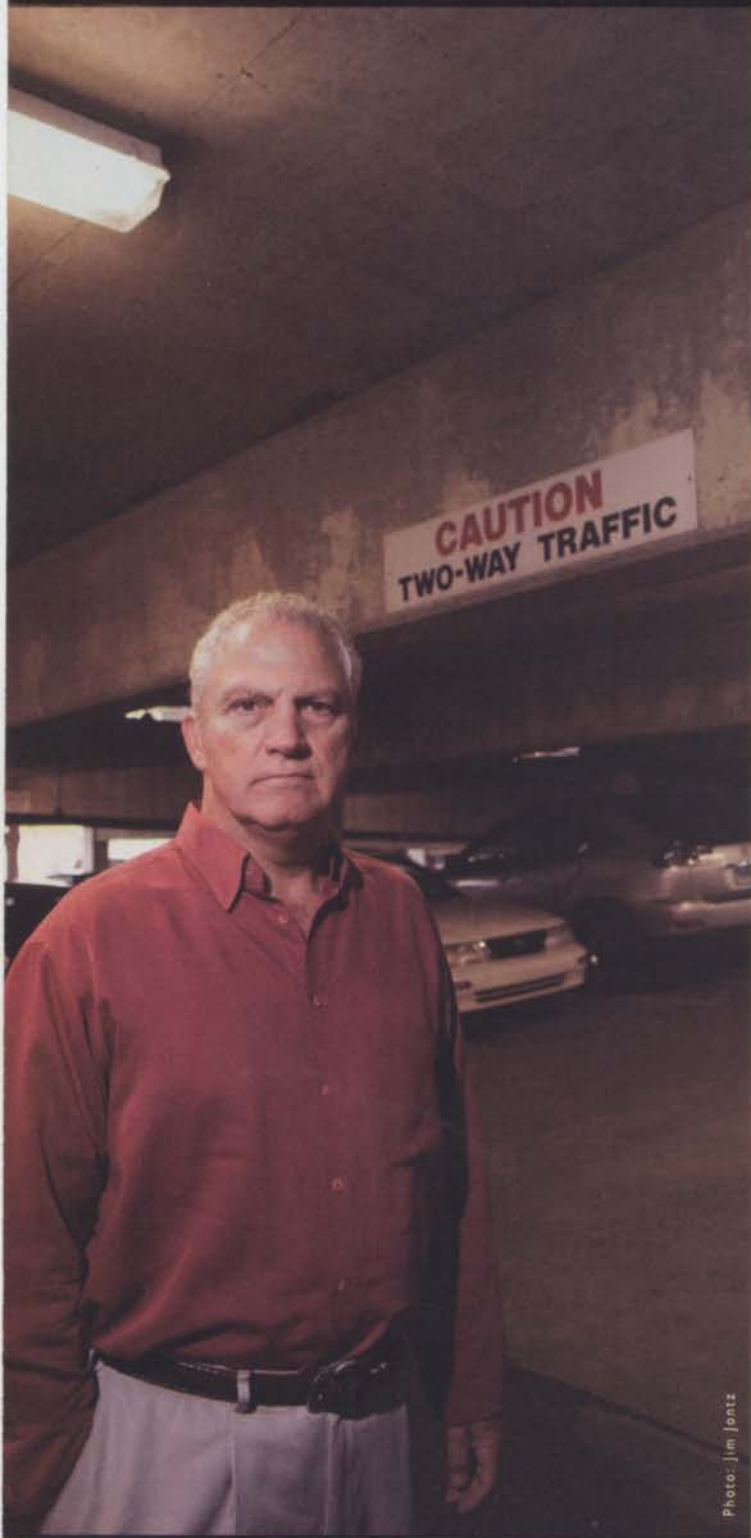


Photo: Jim Jontz

Laflamme Services (Sold to LandCare USA in 1999)

OWNER: Ed Laflamme, now of Grass Roots Consulting
HEADQUARTERS: Bridgeport, Conn.
FOUNDED: 1971
EMPLOYEES: 125 (at peak)

“My employee was killed on the job.”

Accidents happen — even at safety-conscious companies. Being proactive minimizes the impact of such a tragedy.

By Ed Laflamme

When I owned my landscape business, a foreman and crewmember were delivering flats of flowers to a parking garage in Bridgeport, Conn. They drove into the garage to deliver the flowers, which were going to be stored in a side room. They parked, got out and the customer asked them to pull up a bit more.

The driver got in the truck — it was a rack truck — and the crewmember jumped on in the space between the rack and the front of the truck, facing backwards. As the driver moved forward at 4 miles an hour, the crewmember’s head got caught on the low ceiling. It snapped his neck and he died.

I remember I was inspecting a property with an account manager about 20 minutes away. The call came in from my office; they said “You’ve got to get down to the Hilton parking garage right away; there’s been a serious accident.”

When I got there it was a mob scene. OSHA was there; there were ambulances and police cars and newspapers. The police chief was a friend of mine — he took me aside and told me what happened. They held my driver and questioned him for quite some time. I remember he was shaking. It was so traumatic.

BEING PROACTIVE. Needless to say I had OSHA all over me. This happened only a few blocks from the local OSHA office. They investigated for two days. Then they came to my office and fine-tooth combed everything — the office, our trucks.

Before that I never had any really serious accidents. We were a very safety-conscious company. We had regular safety meetings on all kinds of topics.

About six months before I had called CONN-OSHA [the Connecticut Department of Labor’s Division of Occupational Safety and Health]. You can call them up and request a free visit

YOU WON'T USE MY BEST TOOL UNTIL QUITTING TIME.

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where they'll come to your business and provide safety consultation services. They filled out a formal report and gave me 60 days to fix the hazards they found, which were mostly electrical things and some container labeling issues.

Then this happened. If I hadn't requested the CONN-OSHA site visit, I think I would have literally been put out of business due to fines. Because I showed them their own report, I could prove I hadn't been negligent.

OSHA fined me \$5,000 for small things they found during the investigation after the accident. The worker's family sued us and we found ourselves in court several years later. We settled out of court and the family was granted \$250,000, which my insurance company paid. I was exonerated from any liability and the insurance company's lawyer said we got off easy with that settlement.

Can you imagine if there was any negligence on our part? Can you imagine what the fines would have been?

"If I hadn't requested the CONN-OSHA site visit, I think I would have literally been put out of business due to fines."

- Ed Laflamme

What would have happened to my business?

I'm so glad I took the proactive stand in safety and called OSHA in. Along the same lines, I called the fire marshal in on an annual basis so they knew what chemicals we stored and if there was ever a fire, liability would not fall on us because we were proactive, and of course they would know exactly what type of materials they might be dealing with.

FOLLOW UP. Right after the incident, we held another safety meeting explaining that you're never supposed to be standing on the back of a truck if it's moving. After that it was a really firm company policy that no one ever gets on the back of a moving truck. When I travel I always see landscapers with three, four guys riding in the back of a truck. That's crazy. A very good friend of mine was killed sitting in the back of a panel truck during an accident on the interstate.

The real point is to take a proactive stand to protect your business. I think every state has the OSHA program where you can get the free inspection.

There was nothing on that particular job we could have done differently other than if we had had safety training on that one aspect – not to be on the back of a moving truck especially in a parking garage. It was an unusual situation; we never drove in parking garages. It happened to us in 1995, but it could happen tomorrow. There are many of these same type trucks used in our industry. It could happen to anyone.

Safety doesn't happen by accident. Create meaningful safety programs, be proactive, work hard and try to eliminate all accidents in the workplace.

take advantage of free safety consultations

To take a proactive stance on safety like Laflamme Services did, contractors can request free on-site safety consultations from their state governments. This service is targeted at small businesses and provides professional advice and assistance on correcting workplace hazards and establishing or improving employee safety and health programs. As the services are completely separate from OSHA inspections, the consultations are confidential and no citations are issued or penalties proposed during the visits.

To receive a voluntary consultation, businesses must make a request by calling or writing to their state safety agency. Locate your state's appropriate contact by visiting, www.osha.gov/dcsp/small-business/consult_directory.html.

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By John Bannon

"I was audited."

John Bannon and his accountant joked that he didn't make enough money to get audited. This August, he got a letter from the IRS.

The fifth or six year I was in business, I acquired another company. It just so happens I also bought a truck that year. I did \$160,000 worth of business, but because I had purchased a company and truck, I only claimed \$14,000 profit because I had so many major capital expenses when I began to grow. So that's what caused a red flag, the IRS said.

In August they sent me a letter saying I'd been selected for examination and that there were three years they wanted to look at. In my case it was 2004, 2005 and 2006.

THE PROCESS. The IRS set up an appointment, they sent me all kinds of legal mumbo jumbo saying what my rights were and then they sent a list of all the things they wanted.

My accountant and I met with the IRS agent and gave them just about everything we had. They wanted to see some of the receipts from my customers, my business's bank statements and my personal statements. Because I'm an LLC on a cash basis they wanted to make sure I wasn't hiding any money in my personal accounts.

There were some things I didn't have – I had to go back and get more records. It was about a 40-hour job over six or eight weeks. I had to track

Blackstone Valley Lawn Care/Coastal Care

OWNER: John Bannon
HEADQUARTERS: Pawtucket, R.I.
FOUNDED: 1998
EMPLOYEES: 2 to 4

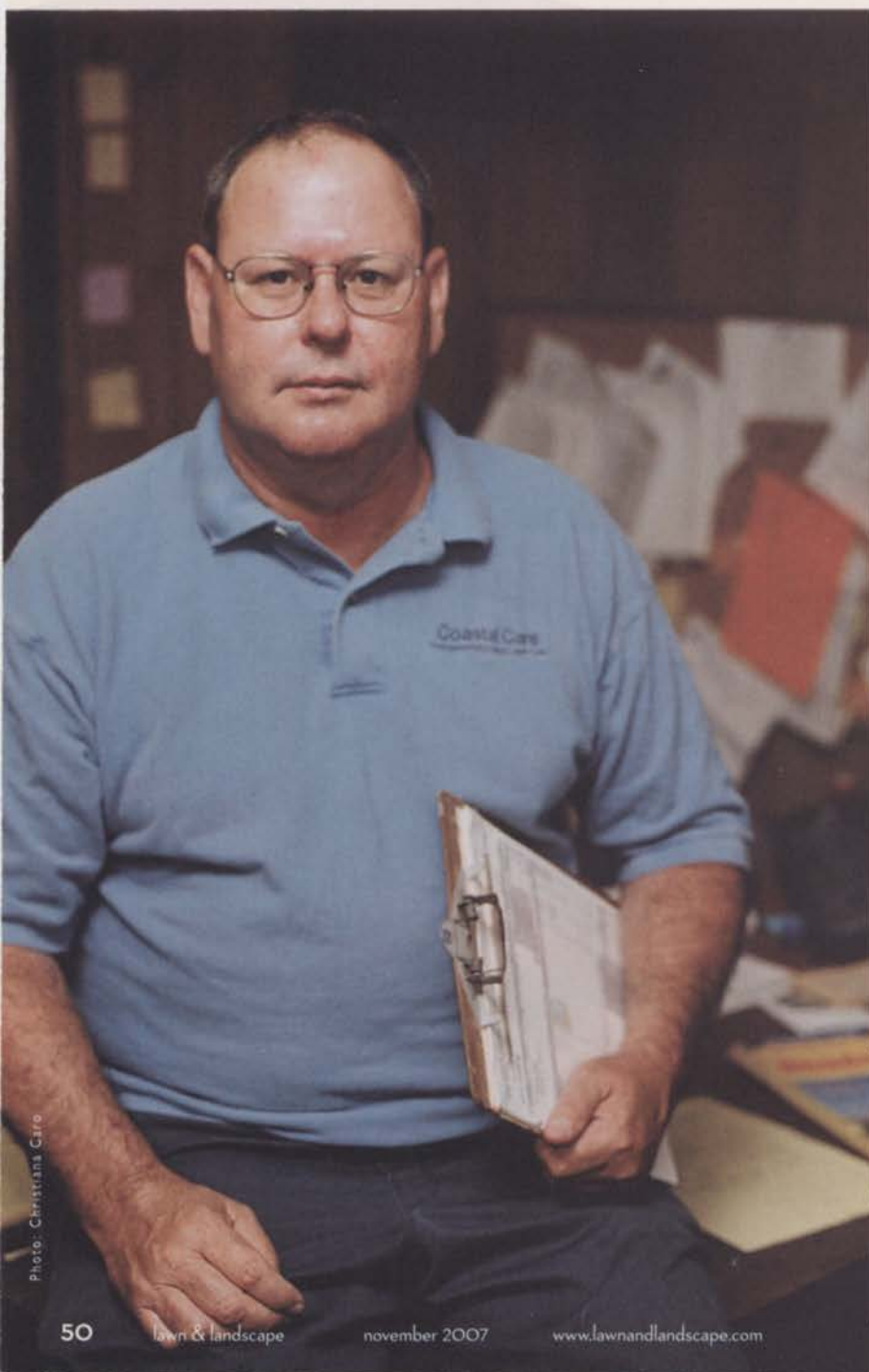


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down the documentation. I had to call my bank and get my personal statements for three years and I had to go to a couple of my suppliers and get a whole year's worth of records – and those things just don't pop up. Some are computerized; some are not. I also had to go back to the person I bought a business from and reproduce a bill of sale. I had to prove I sold equipment and I paid taxes on it.

So I gave them everything, and then they did what was called sampling, where they went through every single check and pulled some out. And if they find one for cash, for example, they ask you a series of questions – they actually have a three-page questionnaire and you provide them with all of the information they want. A lot of it is they pull something out and they ask you to explain it.

It's a huge inconvenience and it's very stressful during the interviews. My accountant and I were both mentally exhausted after the interviews. It's like giving you a ton of homework. I took time out of my job and spent numerous hours reproducing documentation.

The other difficult thing was gathering all of the documentation I already had. We literally had file cabinets of records to give them and they also wanted us to make copies of everything. I would have spent 40 hours at a copy machine, so I just gave them the original records. When they go to audit a bigger company, they have somebody at the copy machine just mak-

ing copies of everything. I didn't have the time or the energy to do that and run my business, so I just gave them the originals. It's definitely a learning experience. If you get audited, you will learn that you don't want to get audited again.

LESSONS LEARNED. If you're not organized, you're in a lot of trouble. I was pretty organized. There were things we couldn't produce, but we came up with logical answers for them. You really have to be able to honestly answer the questions or give them a reasonable answer if you don't have documentation. But there were some things I just had to tell them, "It was two years ago and I just really don't remember." If I get penalized, I get penalized.

My advice for people is to get a CPA or really know how to keep your books. I couldn't possibly keep track of all this stuff. My CPA has all the records, he does all my profit and loss statements and he does all the accounts payable stuff. I do accounts receivable. If I get a bill he pays it and keeps the receipt. He keeps really good records every month and asks me: "You wrote a check, what was it for? Where's the receipt?"

Also keep your receipts and document everything. You may not need it, but if you do get audited, it's good to have.

In the future I'm going to be more stringent. If an employee purchases anything for the business, I need the receipt. If not, he bought it and he paid for it because you have to document everything and keep good records to protect your business. As long as I'm in business, that's going to be a policy with no bending the rules.

Also, I wouldn't give cash bonuses – because it's taxable income. If you give cash to employees and you don't tax it, the IRS comes after you. What I'm going to do now is instead of giving a cash bonus to one of my employees, I'm going to give him health benefits through the winter. There's no tax on that because we didn't exchange money. In the past, I've given people money and even though I claimed I gave them a bonus, the IRS says you're supposed to tax them or they'll tax you. It's hard for them to track your employees – it's easier for them to track you.

In the past, I just thought those things were OK and now I know it's not.

WHAT HAPPENED? I got lucky, they only examined me for one year. After looking at one year they said "That's it" because my records were pretty good and they didn't find anything criminal, illegal or way out of line. It's like my accountant says, they give it the "sniff test." If it doesn't smell right, they keep looking.

They did make me go back and give 1099 forms to a few of the people that worked for me that were self contractors. So I had to do that, but it was no big deal.

It's not over yet, I haven't gotten the bill. It looks like it will be less than \$2,000. It could have been a lot worse, but there might be some late fees and penalties because there were a few things that categorized wrong or I couldn't come up with a receipt for a purchase. And they do give you the chance to appeal, but I'm not going to do that. I want this process done as fast as possible.

My CPA and I always said I wouldn't get audited – there wasn't enough money to worry about. But I did. And now we know. Some people think they're never going to get caught and never going to get in trouble. I would just be aware – I think they're targeting small businesses. ■

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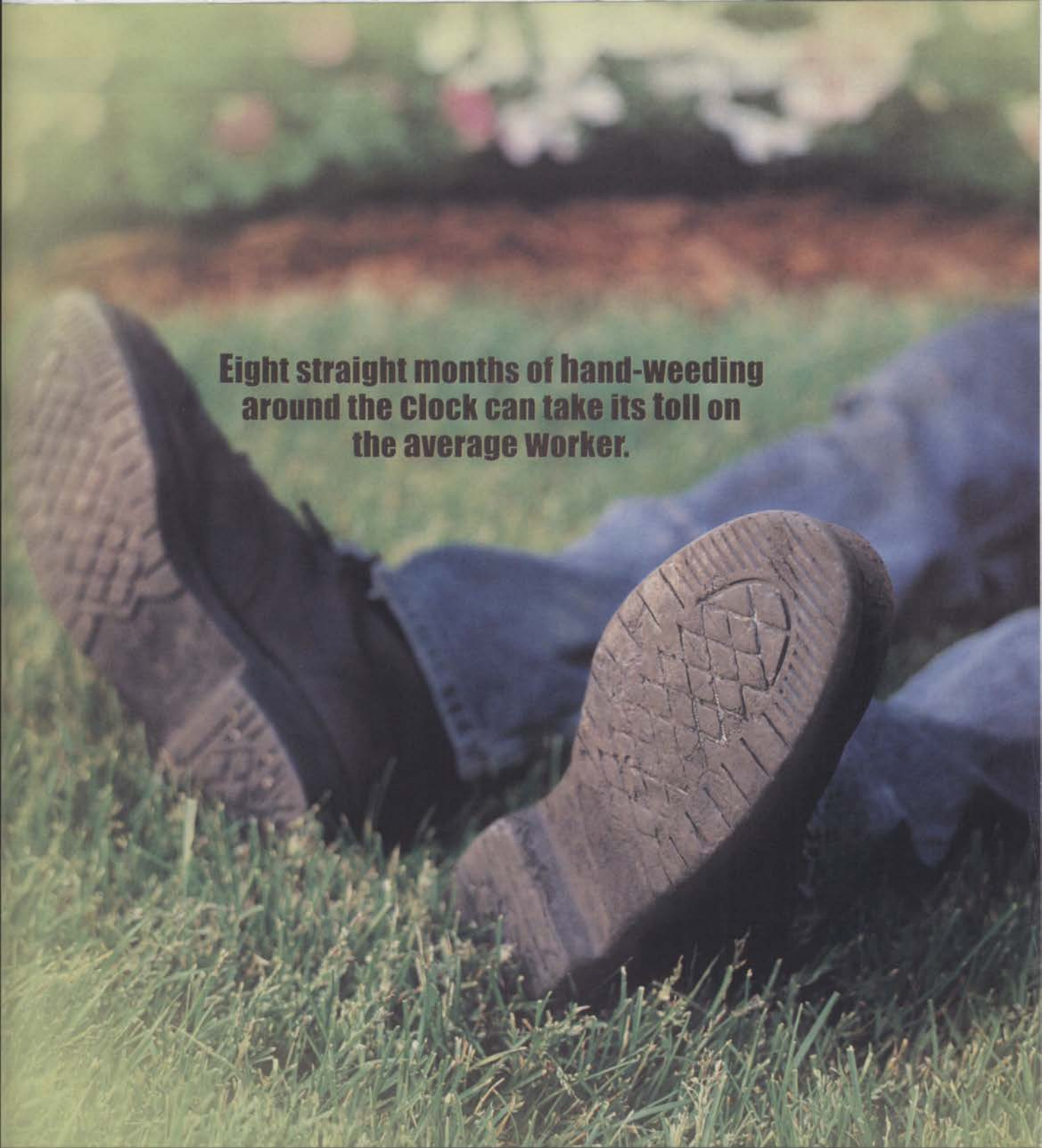
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Americans spent \$41 billion on their pets last year. Some landscape firms want a piece of that pie.

Scooping Up Business

There was a time when everyone except the very wealthy tended to their own yards and cleaned their own homes. But today, in the age of do-it-for-me consumerism, both landscaping and residential cleaning are multi-billion dollar industries.

What will be the next boom in residential services? Some companies, including landscape firms, are betting on pooper scooper services, considering 63 percent of households in the U.S. have pets and Americans spent \$41 billion on their pets last year, according to DoodyCalls, a Palmyra, Va.-based pet waste removal franchise. And as the demand on consumers' free time continues to increase, they'll be less interested in picking up pet waste and more interested in hiring a firm to do it for them.

"It's becoming a better-known service," says Alex West, owner of Total Lawn Care Solutions/The Poolice, Independence, Mo. West, who operates a year-old one-man firm and hopes to expand in 2008, estimates there are now five pooper scooper businesses in the Kansas City Metro area.

DoodyCalls founder Jacob D'Aniello sees pet waste removal as a natural extension of the services green industry companies already offer their customers. For one, messy pet waste is a nuisance to landscape contractors, and, contrary to many homeowners' beliefs, dog poop is not a good fertilizer – it may contain roundworm, hookworm, tapeworm, whipworm and giardia, which can be harmful to pets and people.

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In addition, pet waste removal businesses have reverse seasonality, which allows contractors to retain key staff members during the winter. "Our busiest time of year is when landscaping slows down - late fall through early spring. People call us more when the task is less pleasant, when it's nasty, rainy and snowy," D'Aniello says.

Not to mention, landscape companies already have the clientele who are the typical pet waste removal customers, folks D'Aniello describes as middle- to upper-class "Starbucks drinkers." Growing pooper scooper services beyond contractors' current client base shouldn't be challenging, either, as the operations, marketing tactics and skills needed to manage mobile work forces are similar.

Additionally, offering pet waste removal services can breed lawn care clients, West says. "One of the selling points we use is most people with dogs have some pretty rough lawns

because they haven't been picking up the waste," he says. "There's nitrogen burn on the lawn, brown spots from uric acid. So we're able to provide the service of rehabbing that lawn."

PROCESSES AND PRICING. The beauty of adding pet waste removal is it's such a simple service, D'Aniello says. "It's pretty low tech."

One difference between a pet waste operation and a typical landscape crew is employees are generally working independently, D'Aniello says. "Everyone needs to be able to do a great job not working under direct supervision" he adds. Other than that, the process is straightforward. Essentially, a pet waste removal employee, often called the "scooper," walks through a clients' yard in a grid-like pattern, sweeping the waste into a dustpan as he or she goes.


The only equipment needed outside of a vehicle is a lobby dustpan (available for about \$20 from any

janitorial supply source), a rake, garbage bags and a sprayer, used for disinfecting the tools with a bleach solution in between jobs.

In addition to cleaning the equipment, West cautions that scoopers need to disinfect their shoes and use a different bag at each location. "You don't want to contaminate someone else lawn if one dog is sick," he says. "Worms are an obvious problem, and there are some other ones that are that serious but can still be troublesome."

On the administrative end, there is some work that needs to be done up-front before a scooper shows up at a client's home. First, pet waste removal firms need to consider municipalities' disposal rules. Some cities consider pet waste to be a biohazard but others allow you to simply throw bagged waste into the garbage, West says. Typically, local governments make their municipal codes available on their Web sites.

continued on page 60




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USE READER SERVICE # 95

beyond the backyard

Pet waste removal services don't stop with doggy doo-doo. Many of them provide litter box cleaning, too.

Companies interested in adding pet waste removal should note that cleaning up after cats can be more logistically challenging than picking up dog waste, as litter boxes are typically located inside clients' homes.

"If we're going in multiple times a week, we obviously need access to the house," says Alex West, owner of Total Lawn Care Solutions/The Poolice, Independence, Mo. In this case, like residential cleaning firms do, the pet waste professional would need to arrange access with clients – usually they provide keys or garage codes. More commonly though, West's clients leave litter boxes on their porches. He purchases an extra pan and lid, and during the visit he "swaps out" the dirty box for a sanitized one filled with new litter.

West visits clients as frequently as they request, charging \$10 per visit plus 20 percent per additional cat.



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continued from page 57

Another administrative tip: "Ask a lot of questions," D'Aniello says. When a client calls DoodyCalls to sign up for the service, a sales representative runs through a list of questions about the clients, their yards and their pets to ensure exceptional customer service. This information is passed along to the scoopers before

they show up on site. Questions include the names and breeds of the animals, if there's a doggie door, if the dogs have allergies, property size and property accessibility issues (including gate combinations, if necessary).

Pooper scooper professionals acknowledge that dealing with aggressive pets is something to consider.

"You should make sure you have something in writing that says the owners must have the dogs under control when you go in the yard," West advises. "Most dogs I meet are fairly well behaved and like to get to know you, but there's always a danger of a territorial dog that doesn't want you in their yard."

Properly pricing the service can be challenging, too. "Obviously two St. Bernards is different than one Yorkshire terrier," D'Aniello says. He offers some guidelines: "Pricing is a combination of the number of

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One major difference between pet waste removal services and landscaping is that scoopers usually work by themselves, rather than in crews.

dogs, frequency and yard size." His company charges clients' credit cards monthly, but a per-visit price comes out to between \$15 to \$23 per visit. The \$15 price is typically for clients with one dog who receive weekly service. DoodyCalls charges more – in the \$23 range – for clients with several dogs who receive service less than once a week, because there's more waste to pick up each visit.

West charges a \$35 initial cleanup fee and then \$15 per visit for clients with one dog. He adds 20 percent for each additional dog. West waives the initial clean-up fee if the client signs a 3-, 6-, 9- or 12-month contract and also offers discounts between 10 to 40 percent for clients who are under contract. Most clients opt for once-a-week service, West says, but "some want it three times a week; some just want it before the weekend." ■

USE READER SERVICE # 36

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IRRIGATION:



2007 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT

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Water may seem to be the most abundant resource available on earth. But the reality is that 97% of all water is saltwater, 2% is held in snow and icebergs and only 1% is fresh water. The world's population is growing at such a rate that by 2025, the United Nations predicts that more than 2.7 billion people will face severe shortages of fresh water.

Rain Bird has a philosophy we call The Intelligent Use of Water.™ Offering the most water-efficient irrigation products is, of course, a core component. But our commitment goes beyond our products. The Intelligent Use of Water is also about educating on the need to use water wisely, partnering with organizations to promote water conservation and playing a leadership role in the area of outdoor water conservation.

As a member of both the Alliance for Water Efficiency and the steering committee advising the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on its WaterSense labeling program, Rain Bird has partnered with like-minded organizations to help promote water-saving technologies and behaviors. But, we've also encouraged individuals to partner with us to help conserve the earth's most precious resource. Two new initiatives in particular seek to draw attention to the general public's innovations and accomplishments in the area of water conservation.

Through **The Intelligent Use of Water Film Competition**, Rain Bird has encouraged everyone from landscape contractors to aspiring filmmakers to showcase their cinematic talents and shine the light on water conservation. Short films were submitted that explored approaches and ideas to intelligently utilize water. Finalists' films were screened at an October event at the Los Angeles County Arboretum & Botanic Garden, and a panel of distinguished judges with environmental, academic and film backgrounds awarded cash prizes.

A second initiative, **The Intelligent Use of Water Award**, honors those persons or organizations whose innovation, leadership, ingenuity and overall commitment to improved landscape water efficiency has raised the standard for outdoor water conservation. In addition to receiving a cash award, the winner of this year's award will also participate as a panelist at Rain Bird's 8th Intelligent Use of Water Summit in Pasadena, California on December 31st.

There has never been a greater need to conserve water. We at Rain Bird want to do more, and with your help we can. We encourage you to partner with us to help shape attitudes and change behaviors on water conservation.



LEADERSHIP



EDUCATION



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by katie morris | contributing editor



Photo: Rain Bird

AN EVER FLUID INDUSTRY

To increase market share, irrigation contractors look to education to build success.

In an industry where the economy, weather and technology are constantly changing, education will play a more critical role with irrigation contractors.

The average irrigation contractor expects his gross revenue to increase 11.4 percent in 2008, according to *Lawn & Landscape's* State of the Irrigation Industry research. Education is critical to maintain this growth, says Andy Smith, director of state and affiliate relations for the Irrigation Association.

"Many of the sprinklers, sensors and control devices that are common today did not exist 10 years ago," he says.

The number of contractors affected by water restrictions and regulations has increased 2 percent from previous years, the data says. While a modest increase, contractors are turn-

ing to new irrigation practices, such as drip irrigation and evapotranspiration-based (ET) controllers to conserve water. Eight percent of irrigation contractors believe community-based water bans and restrictions will have a positive affect on their business.

Anthony Paola's biggest challenge is educating clients on smart watering systems. "We spent a lot of time at meetings with cities, towns and the state introducing them to ET con-

trollers and water rebate programs," says the owner of Anthony Paola Lawnsprinkler Co./Eclipse Design in Lincoln, R.I. "Finally, a few towns and state offices have implemented rebate programs for customers and are having us install ET controllers on new and existing systems."

More consumer-oriented education will weed out the inexperienced companies looking to make a fast buck. "Inexperienced contractors don't

think about spacing and uniformity so there's a lot of bad systems going in that are wasting a lot of water and are making things difficult for the legitimate contractors until we have standards and licensing," says Paul Baker, owner of Oasis Irrigation in Brunswick, Ga. "The EPA WaterSense program is going to help." ■

THE AVERAGE LANDSCAPE IRRIGATION COMPANY

Irrigation-dedicated employees	18.82
Part-time employees	18.86
Years in business	14.80
Years providing irrigation services	11.11
2006 gross revenue	\$789,720
2007 gross revenue	\$1.2 million
Increase expected in 2008	11.14%

Source: Lawn & Landscape research



Photo: Rain Bird

GOING WITH THE FLOW

Water restrictions continue to influence irrigation contractors and their business practices.

As more U.S. cities require rain and freeze sensors on irrigation systems, Phil Sheppard, irrigation trainer, Irrigation Systems Solutions, Coppell, Texas, believes it is more important for contractors to design systems with high uniformity to save water. "Irrigation continues to thrive and the quality professional irrigators continue to get plenty of work," he says. "However, the industry and profession is changing with water conservation issues as they continue to grow."

New water restrictions and regulations this year have affected nearly half (46 percent) of the irrigation contractors surveyed, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research. The number of contractors who have seen new water restrictions implemented in their areas has increased 2 percent from 2006 and this year 4 percent of contractors say their local governments have banned water use in landscaping.

While not a dramatic spike, the numbers reflect an upward trend. "In our area water restrictions were very rarely

heard of," says Anthony Paola, owner of Anthony Paola Lawnsprinkler Co./Eclipse Design in Lincoln, R.I. "Now they're as common as the weekly trash pickup."

While 42 percent claim water use restrictions have not influenced their businesses, the research shows those who do business in water-restricted regions are installing 15 percent more drip irrigation systems and 12 percent more smart products.

The increase in water use regulations and restrictions also has affected contractor sales for residential system up-

grades, replacements and new installations. The data shows 12 percent of these upgrades have been in response to increased regulations in 2007, a 3 percent increase from the previous year. With regard to commercial system upgrades in 2007, 9 percent of sales have been in response to increased regulations and restrictions, a rate remaining steady from the previous year, the data says. ■

Water Practices

What impact has new water restrictions and regulations had on your irrigation practices?

IMPACT	% OF CONTRACTORS
We install more irrigation systems	8.76%
We install fewer irrigation systems	4.61%
We install more drip irrigation	15.21%
We install more automatic shut-off devices	5.09%
We install more self-adjusting or smart products	12.44%
It has not affected our business practices	42.40%
Other	10.60%

Source: *Lawn & Landscape* research

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Photo: Rain Bird

Irrigation contractors struggle to attract, hire and retain a quality team.

Many contractors consider a solid labor force the foundation to a successful irrigation operation. And to attract and retain these quality employees, irrigation contractors must offer higher wages and more educational opportunities.

It's difficult to compete against irrigation contractors who employ cheap, illegal foreign laborers, says Paul Baker, owner of Oasis Irrigation in Brunswick, Ga. "They are paying those workers \$8 an hour and they don't expect to retain them," he says. "The problem is they're putting in irrigation systems and yet they can't read the plan and half of them can't speak English."

The only way to gain a competitive advantage in this situation is to increase wages, Baker adds. Irrigation contractors are increasing wages, according to *Lawn & Landscape* irrigation research. Entry-level irrigation technicians with less than three years of experience make an average of \$11.66 an hour, a slight increase from last year, and an irrigation technician with more than three years experience makes an average of \$15.81 an hour, the data says. On average, an irrigation foreman earns \$30,970.

However, a competitive salary is only part

of keeping employees, says Paul Love, owner of Love Irrigation in Ridgeland, Miss. Contractors view education as a way to get employees more involved in the business. Greater quality education with an emphasis on water conservation is more effective in attracting quality irrigation professionals, says Phil Sheppard, irrigation trainer, Irrigation Systems Solutions in Coppell, Texas.

Irrigation contractors are using various methods to educate and train their workers. More than 87 percent of contractors use on-site learning and in-the-field observation as their main training technique, the data says. The research also shows more than 43 percent of contractors use instruction manuals and nearly 40 percent use professional training or certification classes. ■

Teaching Techniques

How do you train your employees on irrigation maintenance and installation?

TRAINING METHOD	% OF CONTRACTORS
Learn on the job, observing others	87.10%
Professional training and/or certification classes	39.17%
Instruction manuals	43.32%
Online services	11.06%
Other	5.07%

Source: *Lawn & Landscape* research



SPENDING ON AN UPWARD SLOPE

As business grows, contractors are spending more on irrigation equipment and parts.

Your Shopping List

What percentage of your irrigation equipment and parts in 2007 came from the following items?

SYSTEM COMPONENT	% OF PURCHASES
Pipe	17.85%
Rotors	18.36%
Spray Heads	20.17%
Controllers	11.82%
Valves	11.87%
Drip Systems/Components	8.29%
Other	5.40%
Rain Moisture Sensors	3.60%
Pumps	2.64%

Source: Lawn & Landscape research

When it comes to purchasing components and parts for irrigation systems, contractors are steadily spending more from year to year. In fact, contractors' annual expenditures for 2007 increased 13.5 percent from 2006, according to research conducted by *Lawn & Landscape*. Contractor's annual expenditures averaged about \$39,800 for 2007 compared to \$26,300 in 2006. Irrigation companies expect spending to increase again in 2008 and project their annual expenditures for irrigation systems and components to be around \$47,500, the data says.

The spending trend is seen across the nation. For example, irrigation contractor Tom Fochtman is still investing in components and parts for basic irrigation installation and maintenance. This year the co-owner of Denver-based CoCal Landscape spent about 10 percent more on irrigation equipment such as pipes, rotors, spray heads, controllers and valves. "We brought more irrigation systems and components this year due to our internal growth and the corresponding growth in our irrigation revenue," he says.

Anthony Paola, owner of Anthony Paola Lawnsprinkler Co. and Eclipse Design in Lincoln, R.I., purchased 5 percent more this year in products and components for basic irrigation installation and maintenance. He attributes the increase to projects carried over from last fall from people who were building additions or installing pools. "This is work you cannot predict from one year to the next," he says. "But the increase was due to people who are still spending money on home improvements."

JD's Sprinkler Systems in Bozeman, Mont., also purchased more irrigation supplies as a result of more installations and services, says owner Shawn Cole. "We purchased 11 percent more in dollars, some of which is higher prices and the rest more volume," he says. **LL**

PRICING



PRICING DETAILS	RESIDENTIAL SITE (1/3 ACRE)	COMMERCIAL SITE (1 ACRE)
Average price for complete design and installation of an irrigation system (including labor, materials and markup)	\$4,011.76	\$10,940.43
Average cost per hour for service calls or maintenance	\$51.27	\$55.71

Source: Lawn & Landscape research

"If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water."

— Loren Eiseley




An intriguing thought, and one that motivated us to author *Irrigation for a Growing World*, which discusses causes for the global water crisis and offers potential solutions. Everything Rain Bird does revolves around water. Along with developing irrigation products and technologies that manage this resource wisely, we also provide educational and training programs that encourage The Intelligent Use of Water.™ We want to do even more, so let's partner together. Visit www.rainbird.com/IUOW.

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USE READER SERVICE # 38



My employee, my competitor

What do you do when a trusted worker sets off on his own? Lawn & Landscape Message Board participants struggle with this conundrum and debate the best way to keep key talent from becoming a chief competitor.

One day an employee is earning a paycheck and the next he's low-balling a job estimate and nudging his former employer out of the market.

It's not an unusual scenario, according to landscape contractors frequenting the *Lawn & Landscape Message Board*. One of the greatest risks contractors, or any entrepreneur for that matter, take in cultivating new workers is having skilled and talented people strike out on their own. Often this comes into conflict and in direct competition with his or her former employer.

Janice Waterman, the owner of Friendship Garden Landscaping & Lawn Service in Fairhope, Ala., recently hired a worker who after five months took an active interest in business procedures and how a landscape company functions.

Waterman questioned the employee's motives behind his queries, to which the employee swore up and down that he was not planning to strike

out on his own. Waterman didn't learn until after the employee left that he had already opened his own landscape company.

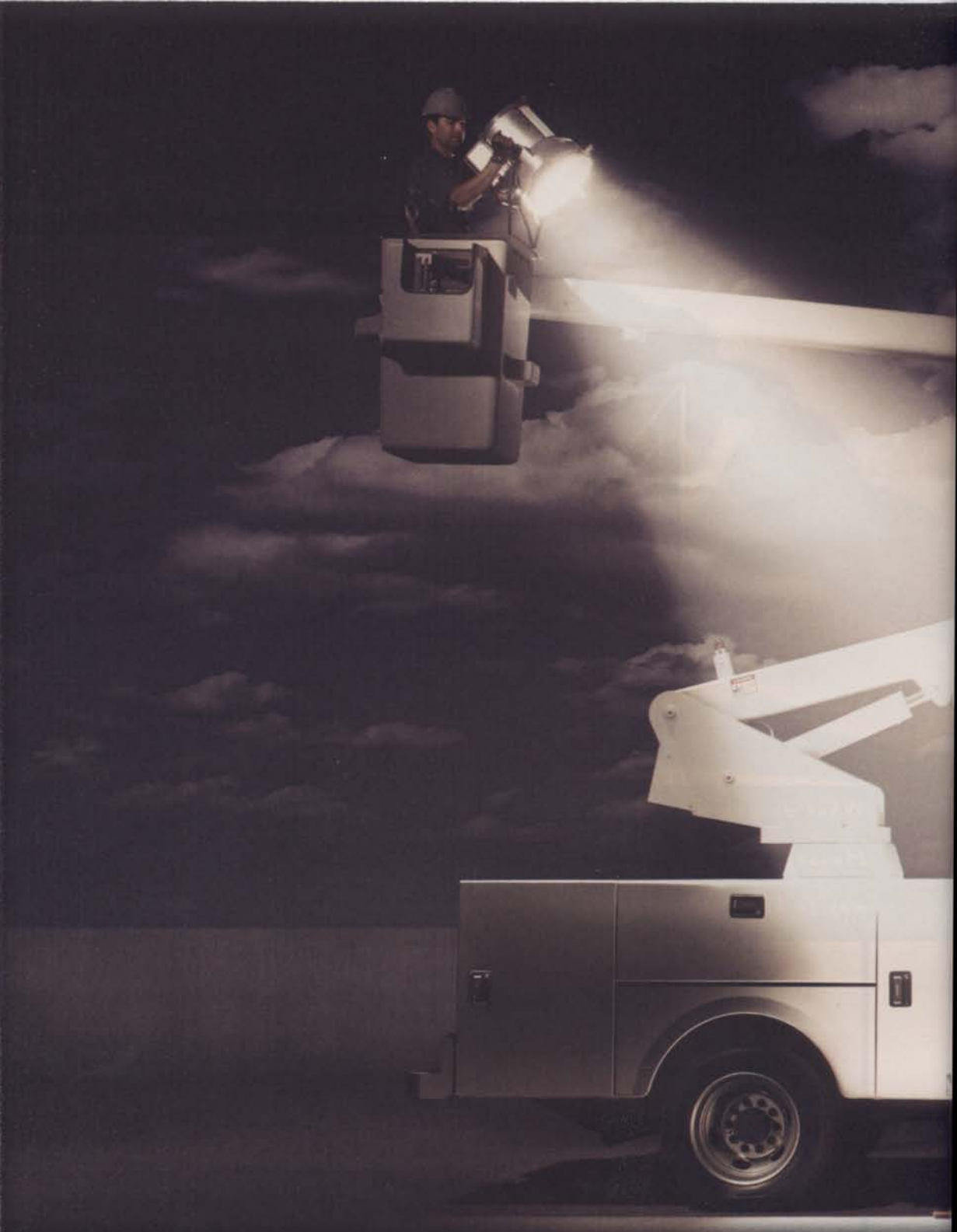
"Now he's putting out flyers that state between him and his partner they have 10 years of experience working for other landscape companies," Waterman says of the new competition. "I'm wondering if he is telling people to go look at the jobs I designed and installed."

Waterman questions whether future employees should sign non-compete agreements (see *Protecting Yourself*, page 72).

Many contractors post to the message board that they have all new employees sign non-compete forms, and they suggest consulting an attorney if they believe a former employee has breached this agreement. It's also a good practice to consult an attorney when drawing up non-compete agreements, contractors post, because many states have varying right-to-work laws that dictate the

continued on page 72

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continued from page 69

limitations a non-compete agreement between employer and employee.

George Iannaccone suggests landscape contractors keep the agreements basic and to the point.

"For example, for management and sales people, don't touch customers for six months to a year, don't touch prospects for three to six months and stay away from employees for six months," says the director for operations at Innovative Designs & Maintenance in Syosset, N.Y. "For production employees, I wouldn't even bother. Let's be real. If your biggest problem is maintenance foreman Mike stealing your customers, then something is terribly wrong."

Some contractors post they regularly open their books or post the company's monthly expenses for employees to see. While they won't post income or profits, it's important for workers to gain an appreciation for the cost in running a landscape business.

Other contractors believe non-compete agreements do very little to curb competition from former employees in the landscape market.

"A non-compete isn't going to stop people," says Andrew Aksar, president of Outdoor Finishes, Walkersville, Md. "It would cost tens of thousands of dollars to pursue this in court. And even if the judgment is in your favor, that doesn't mean you'll get anything."

Non-compete agreements inform new workers that they cannot chase their own business pursuits behind an employer's back or steal his or her customers, posts Chad Stern, owner of Mowing & More in Chevy Chase, Md. Just the threat of legal action may be enough to extinguish an employee's entrepreneurial ambitions, he says.

"Having a non-compete is good but it is probably not worth trying to enforce," Stern says. "It is better to specify a geographic area where employees cannot compete. If you say they can not compete anywhere, you are denying them the right to earn a living. So you might want to say they cannot compete within so many miles from your shop."

Of the four former employees that left his business to start their own landscape companies, only two are still active and doing well, says Bill Smallwood, owner of W. I. Smallwood Landscaping in Salem, N.H. Entrepreneurs emerging at the

protecting yourself

There's a good chance a contractor's key employees know intimate and business-sensitive details about his landscape operations. Also, that contractor may have made significant investments in both time and money to cultivate key personnel's professional development.

Contractors are vulnerable in scenarios where their chief people become their top competitors. Non-compete agreements set parameters for what employees can and cannot do once they leave their employer. The National Federation of Independent Business outlines the key aspects of a non-compete agreement.

REASONS. Explain why the non-compete agreement is necessary. For example, the employee may have access to sensitive competitive information, or considerable expense was involved in training and/or receiving specialized certification.

FUTURE EMPLOYMENT. Clearly detail the length of time during which an employee, after leaving, cannot work for another landscape company. Two years is standard. Include a list of local companies and/or types of related industries for which the non-compete agreement applies.

FUTURE BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY. Outline the specific amount of time that must pass before an employee can start his or her own competing landscape company.

expense of their former employers is not unusual in the landscape industry, or in other industries for that matter, he posts.

"You are always training your competition," Smallwood says. "Train them to bid properly and you can compete on quality and ability. Train them to be deceptive and that is what you will be bidding against."

Chasing after former employees who are now competitors is a waste of time, revenue and resources, posts Rick Brauneis, owner of Vision Designs in Orlando, Fla.

"If they grab an install or two then let it be," Brauneis says. "If they took a customer or three from you, then those customers really weren't keeping you around for your services."

Other landscape contractors adopt a "they'll get what's coming to them" philosophy when former employees become competitors.

For example, Dave Reynolds, the owner of Alpine Sprinklers and Landscaping in Kalispell, Mont., posts these individuals will eventually make mistakes and show their inexperience.

"I would send out a letter to my customers and explain to them what's going on," Reynolds says. "If they were bidding against our company on a project, I would make sure that the people involved understood clearly how long they really have been in business."

Nicholas Esposito, the owner of Mohegan Country Gardens in Mohegan Lakes, N.Y., believes many of these former laborers turned landscape business owners are, for the most part, short-lived operators.

"What kind of equipment, uniforms, trucks or money do they have? How professional are they?" Esposito says. "Sounds like a short-term thing to me." ■



by mark phillips | associate editor

comfortable surroundings

The interior of a skid-steer cab has never been so inviting.



With features like quick-detach couplers and attachments that perform a host of tasks, there's little excuse to get out of a skid-steer's operator's seat.

Photo: Caterpillar

Overhead instrument panels, ergonomically designed armrests and sculpted seats. Throw in an efficient heater, defroster and air conditioning and you have a wonderful vehicle for a cross-country drive. But how about planting trees, pushing snow and backfilling holes?

Skid-steers have come a long way since their inception in the late 1950s, and many of the creature comforts found in today's luxury vehicles are found in these landscape powerhouses. Many of these creature comforts have come about because skid-steer operators are spending more time in their cabs.

"For a long time, people said, 'I pay my operator to do their job,' and the comfort of the operator wasn't as important," says Mike Tomlinson, senior marketing product manager for Peoria, Ill.-based Caterpillar. "Now companies are realizing their people need to be comfortable because it's hard to find good operators. A comfortable operator is a productive operator."

With features like quick-detach couplers and attachments that perform a host of tasks, there's little reason for an operator to leave his seat. So with operators literally in the hot seat for hours at a time, operator comfort is paramount. Comfortable landscape contractors will want to come to work each day, owners say. "Preference is important to me as well as the operator being comfortable and wanting to come to work every day," says Patrick Healy, owner of Architerra, Boulder, Colo.

About 11 percent of contractors bought a skid-steer in 2006, spending, on average, more than \$27,000 on each unit, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research, and about 14 percent expect to purchase one this year.

While there are plenty of ancillary features, some are deemed crucial. Heaters are priceless, says Richard Arlington, owner of Arlington Lawncare, Erie, Pa., and each of his skid-steers has one. "Every piece of equipment we use during the summer is also used for snow removal," he says. "Heat is invaluable."

In addition to heat, Arlington needs his machines equipped with an ample number of auxiliary power outlets to run the radios, strobe lights and spotlights used in snow fighting. He negotiates the power outlets into the purchase deal, he says.

Along with keeping contractors warm, manufacturers are offering landscape contractors sealed and pressurized cabs. The result is a cleaner, quieter internal environment that allows the operator to concentrate on the task at hand.

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P R O V E N S O L U T I O N S

says Kent Pellegrini, a Caterpillar skid-steer specialist. One dealer told Pellegrini he's offering satellite radio at the request of some landscape contractors. But some owners won't succumb to in-cab entertainment. "I won't buy a skid-steer with a radio and I won't add one to it," Arlington says. "I want my operators paying attention when they're in the cab, not rocking out to tunes."

Features such as seat-mounted joysticks allow operators to adjust controls to their individual preferences and allow work to be done with less effort, Pellegrini says. Overhead displays have recently added a more high-tech appearance to cabs. Things like speed, attachment settings and temperature can be monitored through the displays.

Controls that move with the seat make an operator's life much easier, Tomlinson says. Previous to this advancement, the seat moved independently of the controls. Now, the controls follow the operator. "If you lean forward in your seat, you won't have to reach backward for the controls," he says. "If you sit in there

for eight to 10 hours, you feel a lot better at the end of the day."

Joystick controls are light years ahead of their manual brethren, says Brad Lemke, director of new product development at ASV, Grand Rapids, Minn. "Joysticks do the same work, there's just no effort needed," he says. "On an older machine, you'd feel the force coming back in the levers. You literally have to use your muscles to push and if you have foot controls, you have to do the same thing with your feet. Most manufacturers have gotten away from that since people want the lower effort and comfort."

Add-ons, such as cab sound insulation, can make an operator even more comfortable, Lemke says. "Fifty percent of our machines we sell go out with that," he says. "It's operator preference. Some people are more sensitive to sound than others and prefer to have sound insulation."

A skid-steer option many contractors debate is hand vs. foot controls to operate the bucket. "It's just a personal preference," Arlington says.

While skid-steers make contractors more productive, the machines are getting faster. The advent of two-speed allows the operator to move materials from point to point at twice the normal speed. For example, if a machine's top speed is 10 mph, it can be doubled to 20 mph with the feature. "People are becoming more aware of it, but it's something that hasn't really come to fruition," Lemke says. "But once you have it, you can't give it up. If you have two-speed, you can literally cut your transfer time down by half."

Anthony Vitari, area manager for Yardmaster, Painesville, Ohio, appreciates machines that accommodate tall and short workers. An adjustable seat and hand and foot controls are crucial. "If I have a very tall person operating a skid-steer and then I have to use an employee who is much shorter, the skid-steer has to accommodate him as well," he says.

While less a comfort issue and

more of a productivity issue, non-inflation tires lessen worries of a productivity-killing flat. Similar to run-flat tires on automobiles, these are hard-rubber tires with holes drilled into their structure. Arlington bought them for his company's three skid-steers because his machines were routinely getting flats on construction sites. "You still have the comfort of an air tire," he says, "but you never have to worry about getting a flat."

Hoses on skid-steers have gotten better over the years, too, Arlington says. In the past, it wasn't uncommon to blow a hose at a job site which would shut down the machine for the day. "They've come up with some different ways to route the hoses to help alleviate that problem," he says.

Skid-steers have gotten considerably easier to maintain. Manufacturers now are placing vital and often-serviced areas, such as critical engine and service components, within reach. "My 9-year-old skid-steer is certainly more difficult to work on compared with the new ones," Arlington says. "Manufacturers have made it so you don't have to take apart one part of the engine to get to the other part."

TRY BEFORE YOU BUY. Testing a skid-steer through a demo is the best way to fully experience a machine's capabilities. Many times, dealers or distributors will let a contractor demo a machine for two days or a week or more. "Any dealer is going to love to give you a demo," Healy says. "What's interesting is when you get all the machines lined up next to each other."

Preconceived notions about a particular machine are dispelled or reinforced after it's been tested. "I had two guys who thought one particular machine would be awesome," Healy says. "But then they tried another machine and agreed that one was the better one for the job. You get 20 guys in a room and they all have different ideas about what they like. A lot of us get set in our ways. I let my operators make the final decision. I tell them to try out all the machines and tell us which one they like."

Healy's company sets a lot of boulders, so the skid-steer is the workhorse of his operation. Selecting the right machine for this job is a top priority. "Lifting capacity is very important to us," he says. "We're always looking to maximize that."



Renting a skid-steer prior to purchasing gives a contractor the most realistic test of the machine's capabilities and how it can fit into his overall landscape operation. Photo: New Holland

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Contractors considering new services benefit the most from a skid-steer demo or rental. For example, a contractor thinking of adding tree planting might demo or rent a tree spade attachment to determine if the work is profitable. "It's absolutely the way to go," Healy says. "It's important to demo equipment doing a task that you do often, so the exercise isn't a waste of time."

Operators testing skid-steers and attachments should know what to expect with the machine. "My operations manager firmly believes that our dealer should let us demo a skid-steer at least for a week before we agree to buy one," Arlington says.

Renting provides the most realistic test of a machine, Lemke says. "When you rent a machine, you can see how well it's held up being a rental," he says. "Rental machines are beat up pretty badly. So you can rent some-

thing with 1,000 hours on it and see if it's held up or fallen apart." Renting at \$250 a day is cheap compared to buying a \$50,000 machine, he adds.

The best way to choose a skid-steer for purchase is to concentrate on the intended job, Healy says. "The contractors need to understand what part of their machine gives them their bread and butter and concentrate on that," he says.

When taking on additional work, Arlington advocates renting. "We use a lot of rented skid-steers during the winter," he says. "As we take on more work, we rent more skid-steers and hire more people. When the work slows, we just hand the machines back to the dealer." ■

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For more insight on skid-steers, visit the online message board.

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Skid-steer attachments enhance the machine's versatility and make a contractor's life a whole lot easier on a job site.

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A skid-steer ranges from \$150 to \$200 a day to rent, or about \$1,500 to \$2,000 per month. The more complex an attachment, the more costly it is to rent. Whatever the cost, says Patrick Healy, owner of Architerra, Boulder, Colo., the cost is worth it and beats manual labor any day. "It's better living through hydraulics," he says. "It saves us on chiropractic bills."

According to equipment dealers, here are some examples of attachments and approximate rental charges:

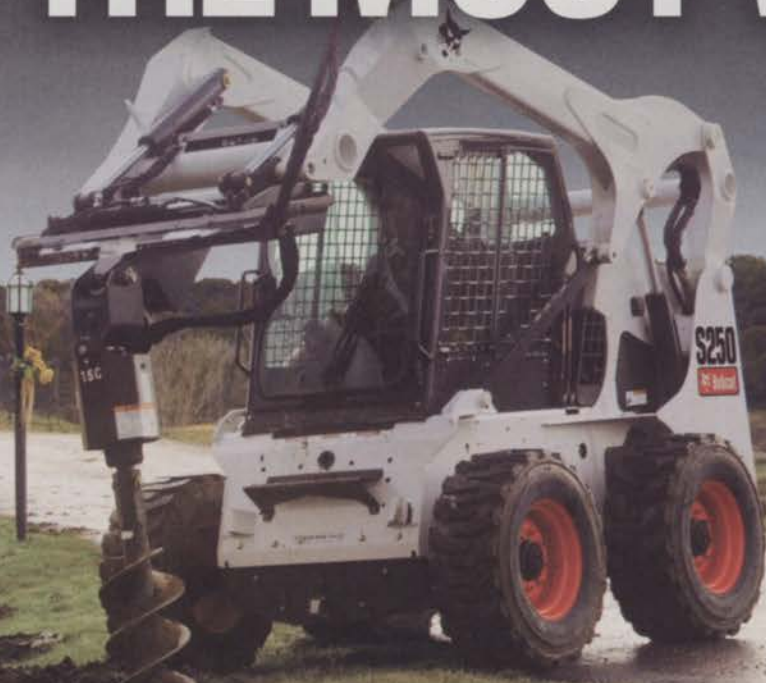
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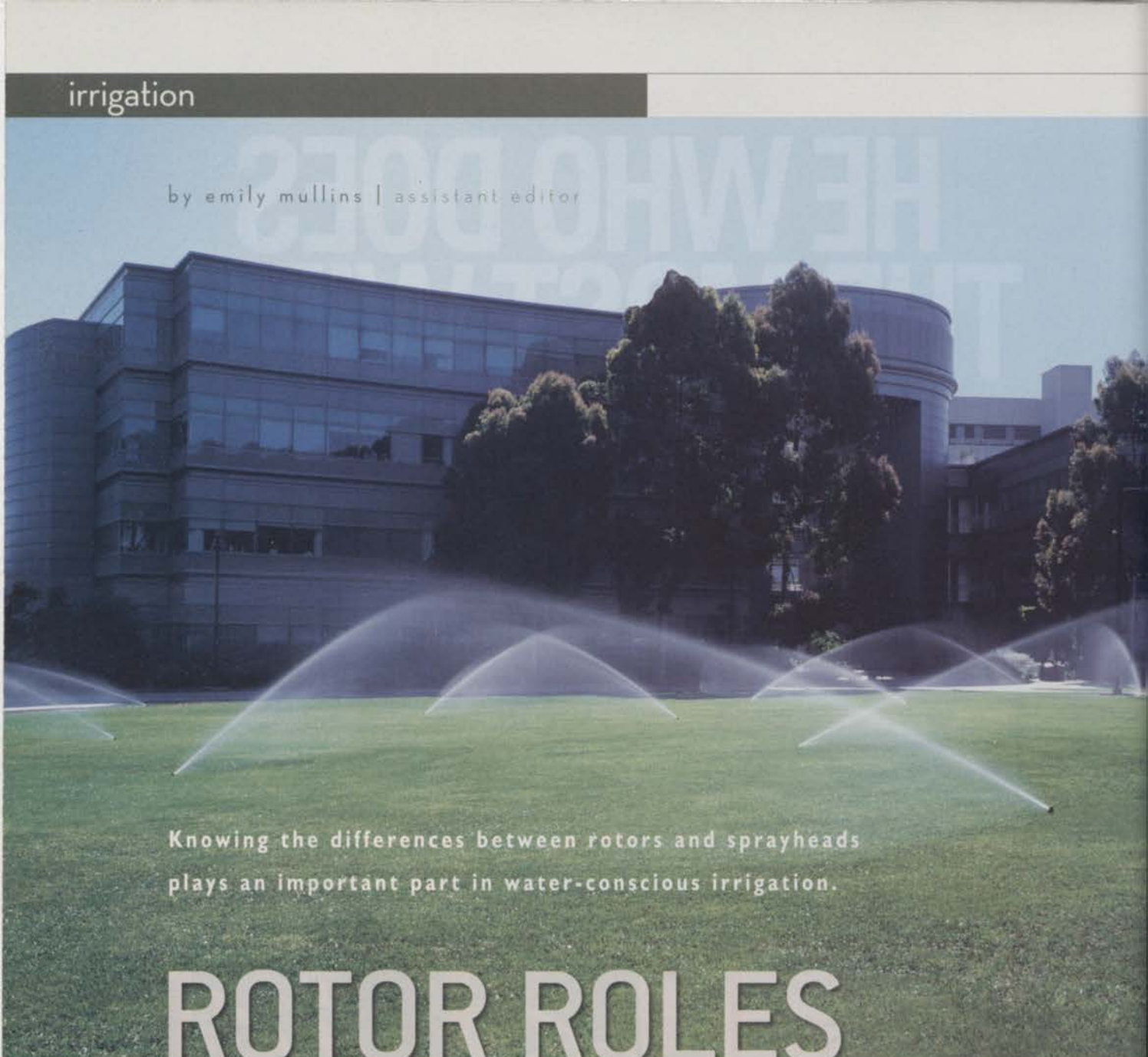
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by emily mullins | assistant editor



Knowing the differences between rotors and sprayheads plays an important part in water-conscious irrigation.

ROTOR ROLES

Photo: Hunter

Sprayheads and rotors may look similar, but they play very different roles in proper irrigation. With water conservation one of the top issues in the industry, it is imperative irrigation contractors are well versed on the proper use and placement of various components. "There is a real awareness to 'go green' to the point where the average person can make a difference," says Don Fisher, product and marketing manager with The Toro Co.'s irrigation division, Riverside, Calif. "A lot of thought is going into making irrigation systems do what they're supposed to do without wasting precious resources."

While identifying the basic differences between rotors and sprayheads is the first step, contractors need to recognize the emerging trends and advancements that aim to take efficiency one step further. And to get the most out of an irrigation system, contractors must first know the size and type of property they're irrigating to decide whether a sprayhead or rotor would be the best option. "Each type of sprinkler is intended for different applications," says Martin Thomas, owner of Hydroscares, West Carrollton, Ohio. "But virtually all projects will require both types."

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? The difference comes down to distance. Rotors are ideal for areas 15 feet and larger, while sprayheads are best for areas 15 feet and smaller, says Gene Smith, sprayhead product manager for Hunter Industries, San Diego. Rotors can be classi-

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fied even further as short-range, made for areas 15 to 30 feet, mid-range, for areas 25 to 40 feet and long-range, for areas 40 to 100 feet.

A sprayhead's emission is static, while a rotor, well, rotates. Rotors move in full and partial circular patterns. Sprayheads are often used to water ornamental beds and small areas, like patches of grass between walkways, Thomas says, adding a rotor's spray strength will knock the blooms off annuals and perennials. Sprayheads usually run at 30 psi, while rotors run from 45 to 55 psi, with precipitation rates of 1.5 inches per hour and 0.5 inches per hour, respectively. As a result, rotors are intended to water large patches of turf.

Because of their tendency to put down too much water too quickly, sprayheads have gained the reputation of being the more inefficient way to irrigate. Manufacturers agree a sprayhead can only run for a short amount of time before run-off occurs, particularly in nonabsorbent areas with thick, clay-like soil. Rotors are known

to have a lower precipitation rate, and can be 25 percent more efficient than sprayheads by using less water in the same amount of time with higher uniformity, Smith says.

It's common to put down too much water too fast with a sprayhead, says Heather Kraus, product manager for commercial rotors, Rain Bird, Glendora, Calif. Rotors give turf a chance to absorb the water that would instead form a puddle, she says.

While rotors are more efficient, the popularity of the two products varies not only based on the size of the area being irrigated, but also according to the region, Smith says. Rotors are more popular in the North and Northeast where lawns are larger, while sprayheads are more common in the South and Southwest where lawns tend to be smaller, he says.

Thomas has a 3-to-1 ratio of rotors vs. sprayheads for installations. "The majority of our jobs here in Ohio are on half-acre lots or larger, which is probably a much bigger area than the lawns you'd find in the

South," he says. "If we would try to complete our jobs with sprayheads instead of rotors, we'd have to use four times as many parts."

EXTRA OPTIONS. Size and type of job determine if a rotor or sprayhead is the best choice. Whether contractors use sprayheads or rotors, Fisher says many tend to choose one product and use it for all of their jobs, regardless of differences in landscapes.

This stick-with-what-works mentality is influenced by past experiences or by a manufacturer's low prices. "Contractors have a tendency to choose one product, stick with it and use it for all of their jobs," Fisher says. "They should look at the vast array of product offerings that could allow them to differentiate themselves from other contractors." Contractors who use various sprinkler advancements can use that as a marketing tool and outbid the competition.

For example, a rotor and a sprayhead hybrid, technically known as a multi-stream, multi-trajectory rotat-



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ing sprinkler, or a "sprotor" for short, offers the flexibility of watering 4- to 30-foot areas, which can't be achieved by a rotor or a sprayhead. "A hybrid takes on the benefits of rotors and sprayheads and combines them into one product line," Smith says.

Pressure regulation is a relatively new rotor advancement, although this feature has been available in sprayheads for some time, Kraus says. A pressure regulator, a small valve located in the pop-up stem, prevents misting and fogging by allowing a rotor to run at an optimal 45 psi, rather than typical city water pressure of 50 to 60 psi. "The water pressure may be too high coming in, but a pressure regulator breaks up the stream into a nice, even distribution," Kraus says.

Another advancement in the rotor market is the shift toward taller pop-up heights, a response to taller turf heights, Kraus says. Rotors made 10 years ago reached heights of 3 to 4 inches, while today's standard is 5 to

6 inches. This height is tall enough to spray over turf and shrubs.

Sprayheads come in heights of 2 to 12 inches, Smith says, adding shorter pop-up heights are used in the Southwest where shorter mow heights and less workable soils are prevalent. "The variety of heights allows the sprinklers to pop over shrubs that would otherwise be in the way," he says. "Pop-up sprinklers help manufacturers provide equipment that is as transparent in the landscape as possible."

Check valves also contribute to water savings by preventing excess water from draining out of a system's lateral lines once a system shuts off. This not only saves water, but it also avoids a consistently wet, muddy area in a client's lawn. Some cities require check valves, so most sprinklers either come with this feature or provide the option as an upgrade. However, check valves are not necessary on every zone, Thomas says, adding he only installs them in elevated or hilly areas. "Most

of the sprinklers we install have check valves, but not 100 percent of them," he says. "There's really no need to install them on flat, level areas."

Check valves can extend the life of a rotor by a few years by preventing excessive air hammer when the system starts, Smith says. When the system starts back up, it has to extract that air, which weakens a sprinkler's parts over time. "Most rotors will last 10 years or more," he says. "But eliminating unnecessary start-up impact by using check valves and running the system at the appropriate psi can extend that life to 12 or 15 years."

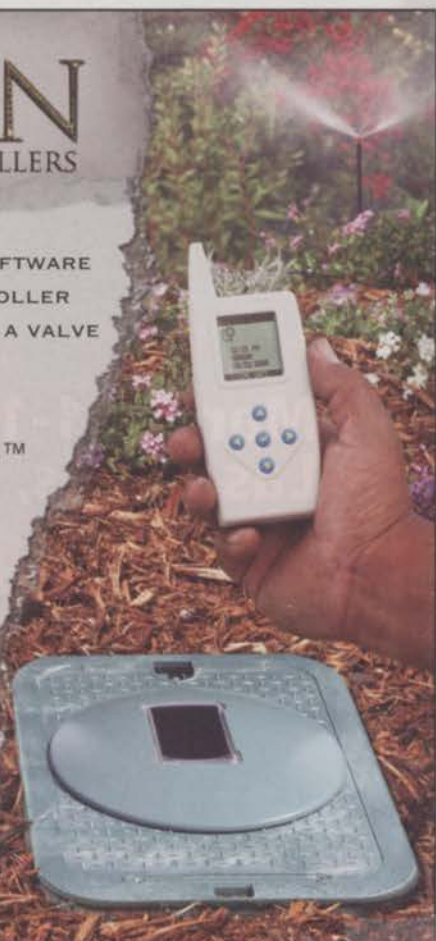
Flow stop is growing in popularity, particularly when it comes to maintenance needs, Fisher says. This feature enables contractors to turn off one sprinkler while others are still running, allowing them to work on the system without getting wet or interrupt a lawn's watering schedule. Some rotors come with a trajectory feature that allows contractors to



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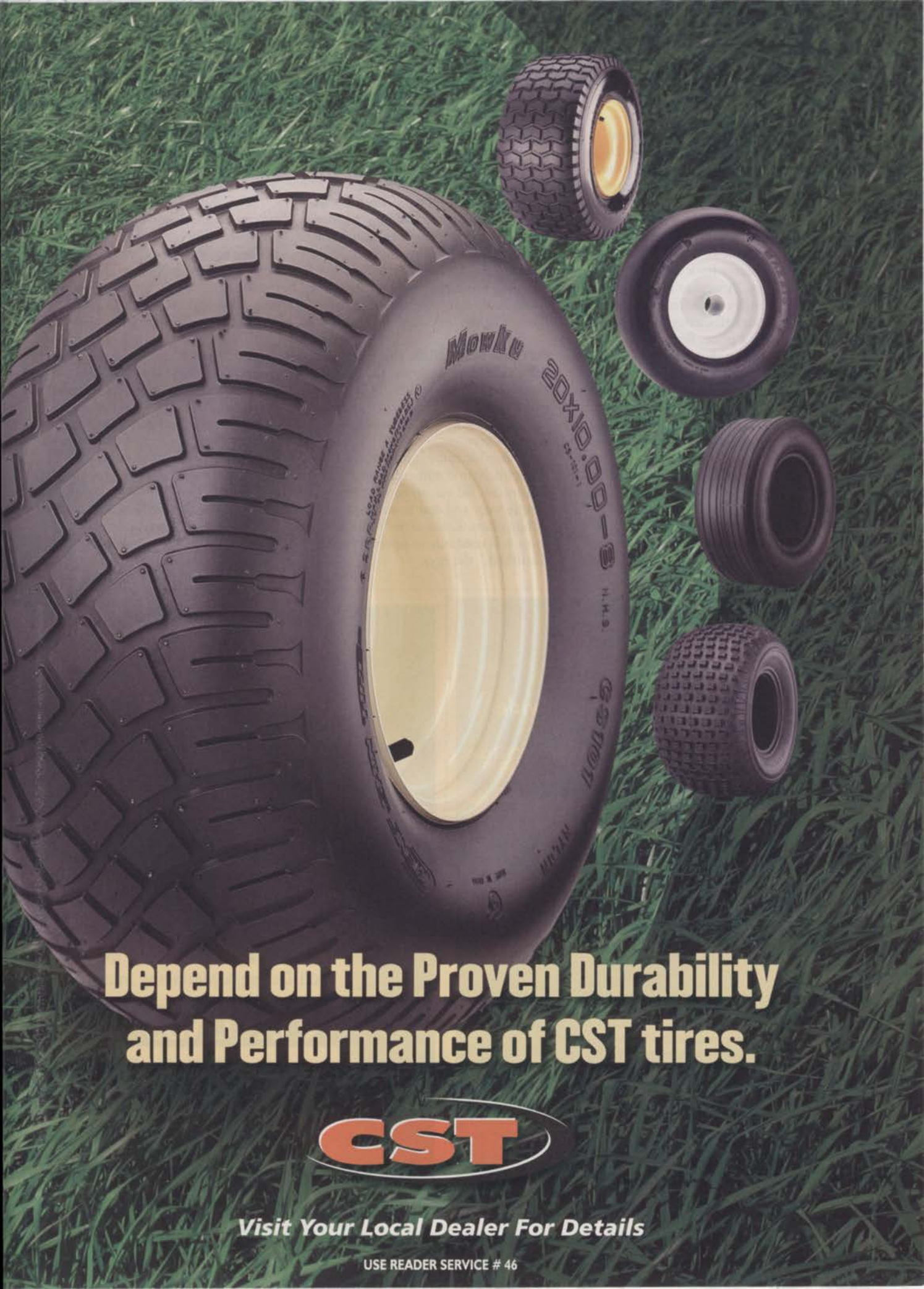
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change the angle of a spray. Most standard nozzles emit water at 24- and 28-degree angles, Fisher says, which can create problems in high-wind. Angles ranging from 7 to 13 degrees more effectively fight wind, he says. "If you're in a windy situation, spraying at too high an angle will result in a lot of blow back and lost water," Fisher says. "A weaker radius will fight strong winds more effectively."

The extra efficiency of a rotor does come with a price. Rotors cost five to six times more than sprayheads, Fisher says, but with various discounts and manufacturer relationships, contractors may only pay three to four times more. A single-stream rotor costs \$15 to \$20, Smith says, while sprayheads usually go for \$3 or \$4. Pop-up sprinklers cost \$3 to \$10 depending on height, and "sprtors" cost from \$4 to \$8. Check valves can add \$2 to \$3 to both sprayheads and rotors, he adds. "Most rotors have their pros and cons," Smith says. "Which one a

contractor chooses will largely depend on price, features and manufacturer relationships."

Contractors should choose sprinklers based on factors other than price. Fisher suggests making a broad comparison of different products side by side before deciding on one. "By utilizing the advancements available or trying something new, a contractor could really start to make a name for himself in the industry," he says.

FUTURE FEATURES. Rotors have drastically improved over the years, particularly in durability. "They're easier to work with and they are even more durable now than before," Thomas says.

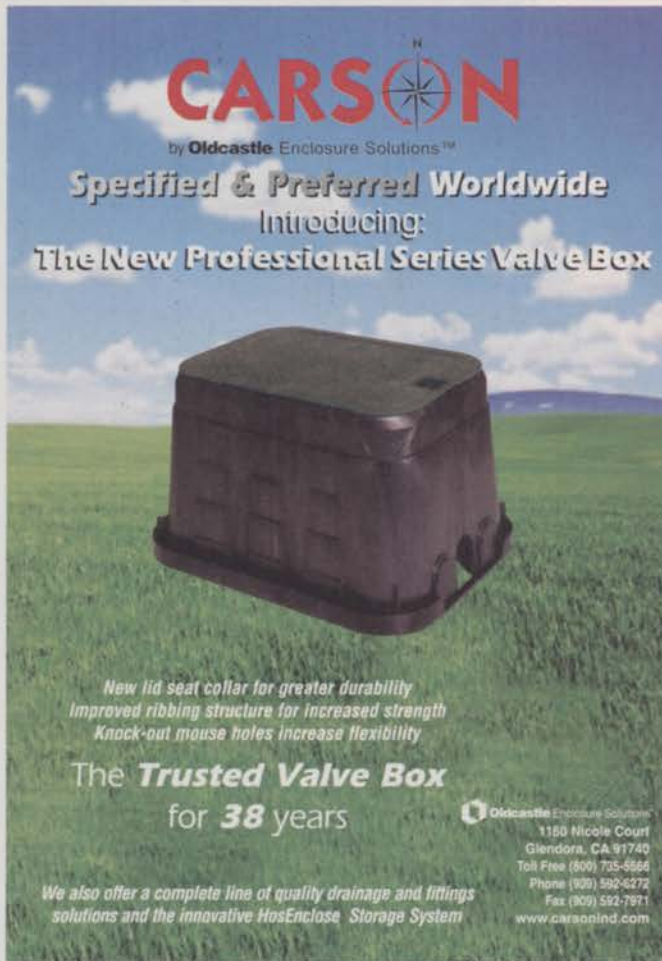
A durable rotor is important, particularly in commercial settings. Rotors can fall victim to vandalism or simple wear and tear from being in a public place, Kraus says. "A durable rotor will continue to operate even if disturbed," she says.

Nozzle performance to apply water as uniformly as possible is another area manufacturers are striving to improve, Smith says.

With the recent focus on water conservation, contractors seek improved matched precipitation rates in both rotors and sprayheads, Kraus says. "Matched precipitation rates are getting better all the time," Thomas says. "But options that help avoid overwatering could be improved." Lastly, contractors want rotors that work well and come at a great value, Smith says. "Most irrigation sprinklers are designed to be easy to install and work with," he says. "For the most part, if they're used within a manufacturer's guidelines, they should remain durable and perform as expected." **LL**

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Equipment makers are fitting more capability into smaller tools.

compiled by heather wood | web editor

Echo SRM-265-T Trimmer

- Features 50 percent more cutting torque than the SRM-260 and 261 trimmers
- Powered by a 2-stroke, 25.4-cc, Power Boost Vortex engine and i-30 technology helps reduce the starting effort
- Engine vibration reduction systems with padded handles increase operator comfort
- Equipped with a harness ring located on the shaft
- Echo – 800/432-3246, www.echo-usa.com

Circle 200 on reader service card



Efco 8250 IC ERGO Trimmer

- Powered by a 1.2-horsepower, 25.4-cc engine
- Easy to control with a balanced weight design and ergonomically designed handle
- Features a heavy-duty, three-piece crankshaft and forged connecting rod
- Solid-steel drive shaft mounted on five internal self-lubricating bushings prevents impact stress and vibration
- Primer bulb and lift starter provide effortless starting
- Efco – 800/800-4420, www.efcopower.com

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John Deere BP65LE Backpack Blower

- Powered by a 64.7-cc Kawasaki two-cycle engine
- Features a low-emission, more fuel-efficient engine
- Provides a 190-mile-per-hour maximum air velocity at the tube
- Maximum air volume is 630 cubic feet per minute
- Large muffler allows for quieter operation
- Pistol-type throttle is tube-mounted for easy operation
- Weighs 21.4 pounds
- John Deere – www.johndeere.com

Circle 202 on reader service card



Honda HHT35S Trimmer

- Features Honda's 360-degree inclinable GX35 mini four-stroke engine
- Provides the advantages of a four-stroke engine with a weight similar to a two-stroke engine model
- Available with the traditional loop handle or with a U-shaped, bicycle-style handle for increased leverage
- Includes Honda's Flex Shaft system for strong torsional strength and the ability to absorb shock
- Debris deflector shield lends to increased operator visibility
- Soft loop handle helps with operator comfort
- Honda Power Equipment – www.hondapowerequipment.com

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Husqvarna 450 Chainsaw

- Powered by X-TORQ engine technology
- Features a 50-cc, 3.2-horsepower engine
- Reduces fuel consumption by as much as 20 percent and emissions by as much as 60 percent
- Includes the one-touch, always-on choke/stop control
- LowVib technology is standard
- Husqvarna – 704/597-5000, www.usa.husqvarna.com

Circle 204 on reader service card



Kawasaki Blade-Capable Trimmer

- Powered by a 26.30-cc engine
- Weighs 10.8 pounds
- Produces low noise and vibration
- Features an ergonomic design
- Includes a convenient control location
- 16.9-ounce fuel tank capacity
- CARB Tier III approved
- Includes a lifetime electronic ignition module warranty
- Kawasaki Power Products – www.kawpowr.com

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USE READER SERVICE # 53

permagreen Gives Back

We're raising \$150,000 to help orphans in a small East African village so they can have food, water, clothing, medicine and education. PermaGreen is pledging \$75,000, plus we will add 50¢ to every dollar you donate. Together, we can make a huge impact! Donate online at permagreen.com or CaringPlaceMinistries.org or by phone.

*up to the \$150,000 goal



Aaron T. Jessen, Director of Marketing & Sales at PermaGreen, and his wife, Kendra, have founded a grassroots, 501(c)(3) non-profit, Christian organization called CaringPlace Ministries International to help HIV/AIDS affected and infected orphans in Bugonzi Village, near Masaka Town in the East African country of Uganda. CaringPlace absorbed a struggling orphanage in this poor village, which serves as a home and drop-in facility for 75 children.

Aaron & Kendra have already raised enough money to conduct HIV testing, install a 10,000-Liter fresh water tank, build a more adequate latrine and expand the children's diet to include meat and more fruits and vegetables. But the need is still great!

The children currently sleep 3 or 4 to a bed, and the only means for cooking is an open fire, which is difficult to maintain during Uganda's 9-month-long rainy season. The facilities have no electricity and there is no transportation to the nearby town. And there are hundreds of children in the area who still need a home and the chance for a bright future. CaringPlace needs your help to provide these children with the basics of survival!

Robert Luwalira, the native Ugandan that founded the orphanage, is the Director of Operations in Bugonzi. He provides proper management over the activities on the ground and ensures that every dollar is spent for the benefit of the children.

We need your donations to make this project a success!

\$50 provides a child with food, water, medicine, education and housing for a month

\$100 can buy chickens or goats and pay for mattresses and mosquito nets

\$500 can pay a teacher's salary for an entire year

\$1,000 helps with operating costs for a month or can go toward building dormitories, buying a vehicle, building a kitchen, installing electricity or many other major improvements

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CaringPlace is a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit. All contributions are tax-deductable.



visit permagreen.com/caringplace or CaringPlaceMinistries.org or call 800.346.2001 for more information

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USE READER SERVICE # 54

Maruyama HT2300DR Hedge Trimmer

- Powered by a 22.5-cc Maruyama LE commercial engine
- Weighs 10.9 pounds
- Features a rotating handle
- Includes a 24-inch double-sided blade
- Induction-hardened chrome steel blades are polish ground sharpened on all three cutting surfaces
- Maruyama – www.maruyama-us.com



Circle 206 on reader service card

RedMax EBZ3000RH Backpack Blower

- Operates with a 30-cc, Strato-Charged engine
- Provides 463 cubic feet per minute
- Maximum air speed is 131 miles per hour
- Weighs 13 pounds
- Enhanced fuel capacity promotes longer use
- RedMax Zenoah America – 800/291-8251, www.redmax.com

Circle 207 on reader service card



Shindaiwa EB8520 Backpack Blower

- Powered by a C4 technology, 79.7-cc, 4.5-horsepower engine
- Pushes air at 224 miles per hour and 762 cubic feet per minute
- Features a two-thumbscrew filter cover and a heavy-duty sealed air filter system
- Includes a 4-bolt, chrome-plated cylinder and a two-ring piston
- Newly designed intake cover minimizes the risk of overheating from leaf blockage
- One-piece throttle cable included
- New style frame and backpack system is designed for greater operator comfort
- Shindaiwa – 503/692-3070, www.shindaiwa.com

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Solo 129HS Hedge Trimmer

- Features an adjustable cutting blade
- Powered by a Solo 29-cc displacement 2-cycle gas engine
- Adjusting gear offers a 135-degree operating range
- Includes a 21-inch-long cutting blade
- Weighs less than 14 pounds
- Solo – 757/245-4228, www.solousa.com

Circle 209 on reader service card



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- Ideal for light landscaping
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- Includes an integrated throttle control with an on/off switch
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- STIHL – www.stihlusa.com

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- Features a 23-fluid-ounce, see-through fuel tank
- Includes a padded D handle
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- Can accept optional two- and three-foot extensions
- Weighs 11.4 pounds
- Nikko Tanaka USA – www.tanakapowerequipment.com

Circle 211 on reader service card





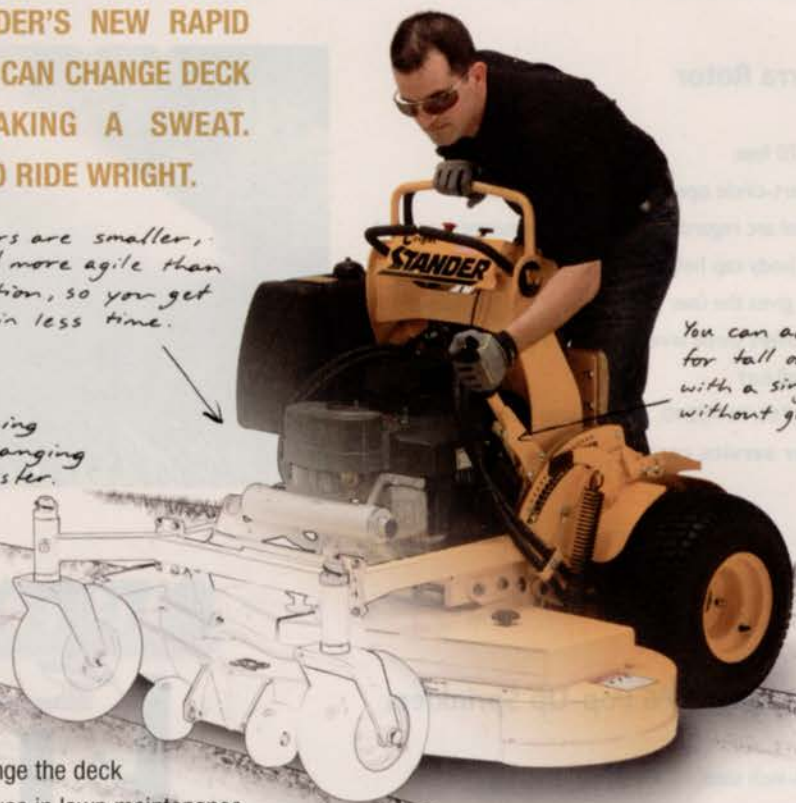
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compiled by heather wood | web editor

Hunter I-35 Sierra Rotor

- Waters from 47 to 70 feet
- Features full- and part-circle operation in a single rotor
- Returns to its original arc regardless of where the turret is turned
- Co-molded rubber body cap helps to prevent injury
- FloStop technology gives the user control
- Three-port nozzle offers three levels of watering precision
- 6-inch rider clears tall turf
- Hunter Industries – 760/744-5240, www.hunterindustries.com

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- Available in 4- and 6-inch sizes
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- Multi-stream, rotating nozzle fits the needs of smaller yards and landscapes
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- Aesthetic appeal makes it an attractive option for homeowners
- Rain Bird – 800/724-6247
www.rainbird.com

Circle 214 on reader service card

Underhill M-160 Sports Turf Rotor

- Features a 164-foot throwing radius
- Includes a piston-driven water cannon
- Provides full- or part-circle operation
- Measures 23.6 inches high
- Has an above-grade pop-up height of 2 3/4 inches
- Arc coverage can be adjusted from 30 to 360 degrees
- Underhill – www.underhill.us

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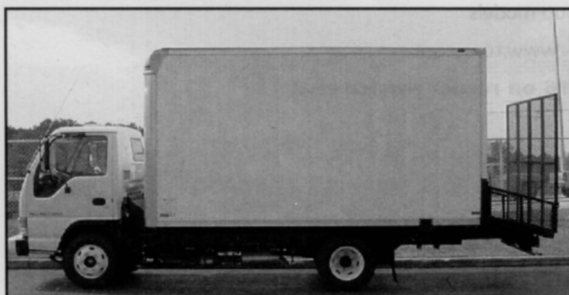
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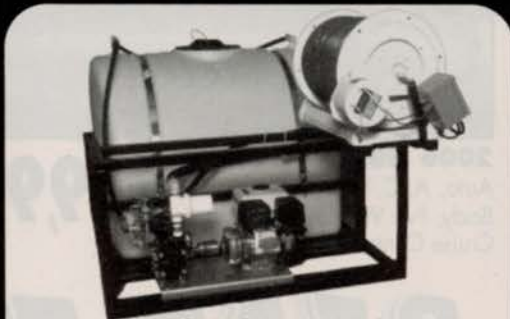


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compiled by heather wood | web editor

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- Features 6-inch diameter capacity
- Includes a self-propelled Caterpillar track undercarriage
- 12-inch chipper opening and powerful single feed pulls and crushes forked and crotched materials
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JP Carlton Wood Chippers

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Morbark Typhoon 20 Chipper

- Unit features a 20-inch capacity
- Drum and feed wheel are 28½ inches wide
- Six knife pockets allow three full cuts per revolution, increasing efficiency
- Available in 250- or 325-horsepower options
- Equipped with a 4-by-8-inch center beam and a 66½-by-40½-inch infeed chute
- Morbark – 800/831-0042, www.morbark.com

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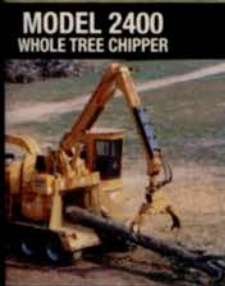


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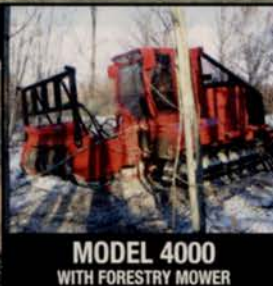
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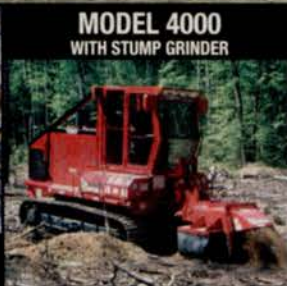
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- 8-inch top discharge chute rotates 360 degrees
- Available with optional self-contained hydraulics for tractors with high hydraulic flow
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Circle 220 on reader service card



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- Includes smart features designed to maximize productivity
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- Powered by a 140-horsepower Caterpillar diesel engine
- Includes fuel saver technology and a hydraulic clutch that engages with the push of a button
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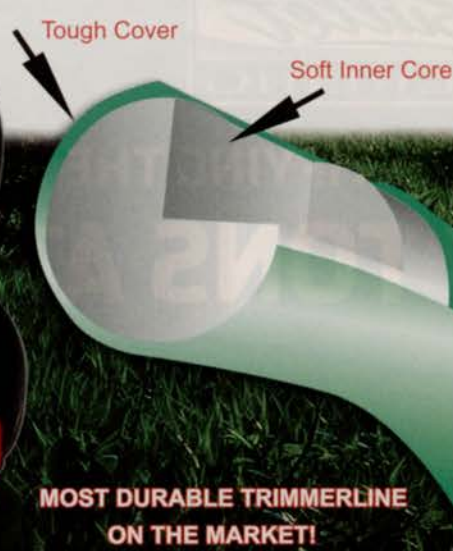
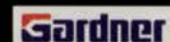
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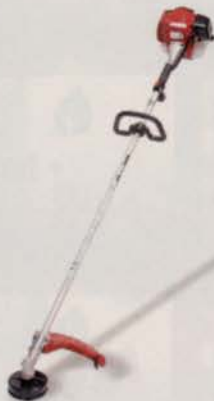
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USE READER SERVICE # 76





Follow Your Heart

America truly is the land of opportunity, and for proof we need only to look as far as lawn care professional James Duffy.

I met Duffy a short time back when I was addressing an industry group in South Carolina. I'd like to share his story with you because I'm confident you'll learn from it as much as I did.

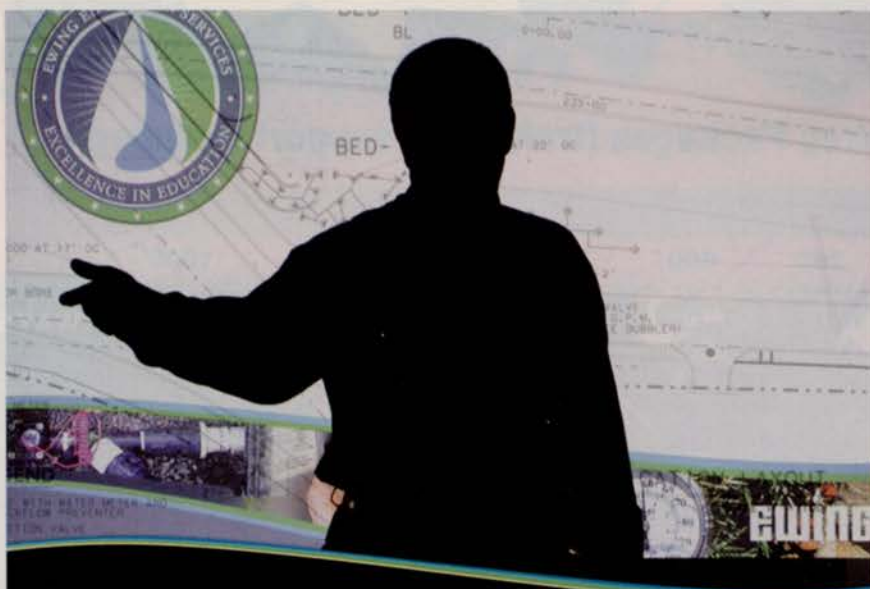
Some years ago, Duffy found himself working in sales for an upstate New York metal company where he enjoyed a good terri-

tory, a nice paycheck and a company car. His wife, Dorothy, was happy and their four children – Bryan, Timothy, Scott and Amanda – lived comfortably and were doing well. But for Duffy something was missing. He wanted to be his own boss, run his own business and spend more time outdoors. His present job was okay, but at 48 years old he didn't want to spend the rest of his working life doing it.

Faced with a similar situation, many people assume they are trapped. If the pay is

marty grunder

is a speaker, consultant and author, as well as owner of Grunder Landscaping Co., Miamisburg, Ohio. Reach him at 866/478-6337, landscapesales@gie.net or via www.martygrunder.com.



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USE READER SERVICE # 79

good and the work steady, many think it's too much of a risk to give up their jobs just to try their hands at something else. Many consider career satisfaction as expendable — work is work, and while we may not like it, we still have to do it.

This is a terrible way to go through life, for the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth.

But unlike so many of us, Duffy used his rut as a launching pad for change. Unwilling

purchased the Lawn Doctor franchise for the Fort Meyers/North Naples-Bonita Springs region. After extensive training at the company's New Jersey headquarters, Duffy drove off in his first service van to his new home in Florida. Every time he stopped for gas, he looked at the logo on the van and thought, "What have I done? I don't even have a client yet."

Well, the rest, as they say, is history. This year, after only four years in business, Duffy posted more than \$400,000 in sales and he has a

strategic plan in place to get his operation to \$3 million. His sons are involved in the business and Duffy plans to hand it off to them when he retires in eight years at the age of 60. And for the first

time in a long time, Duffy is happy and fulfilled in his work.

So no matter where you are in life and no matter how unhappy you may be, know there is always a way out. Discover your passion and follow your heart. James Duffy's heart wasn't in the metal business; it was in the green industry. He had the courage to follow it and we're all better for it. **LL**

"This is a terrible way to go through life, for the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth."

to remain unhappy, Duffy researched businesses he could own and run and quickly came upon Lawn Doctor, one of the country's largest lawn care franchises. Excited by the prospect, he studied the company and the lawn care industry more closely. Around this same time, Duffy happened to visit Fort Meyers, Fla., and fell in love with the city.

You can see where this is heading. Duffy



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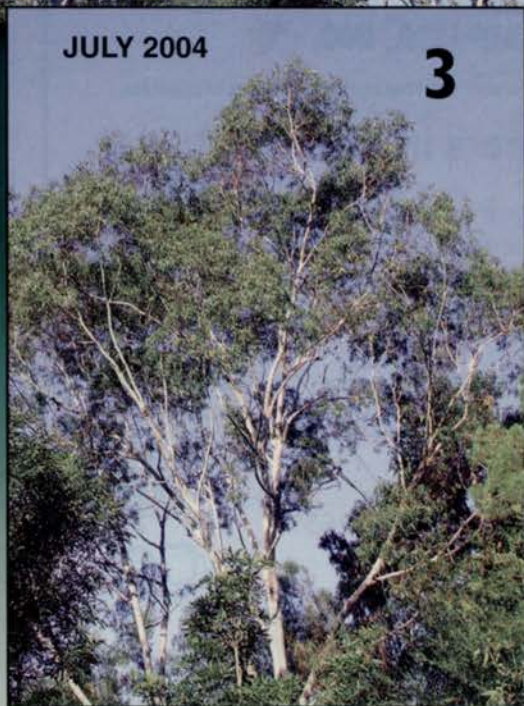
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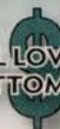
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USE READER SERVICE # 81



Duel Overhead Recovery

The fourth of the six estimating methods used in the green industry that we want to identify and benchmark is the dual overhead recovery system or DORS. It calculates general and administrative (G&A) overhead in a bid or service price by multiplying two predetermined percentages by the material and labor costs. A complex formula – that I will not explain – utilizing an overhead weighting factor (OWF) is used to calculate the two percentages. Company-owned equipment costs are included in the G&A overhead.

THE SCENARIO. I'll use the two jobs from the October issue as examples as to why the DORS method is inaccurate for pricing your jobs or services.

THE SAMPLE COMPANY. G&A overhead cost is \$10,000 per month, \$120,000 per year. Entire field labor force with burden is \$13,000 per month, \$156,000 per year. The goal for net profit is a 10 percent markup. I've calculated the markups on material and labor to be .332 and .85, respectively.

jim huston

is president of J.R. Huston Enterprises, a Denver-based green industry consulting firm. Reach him at 800/451-5588, benchmarking@gie.net or www.jrhuston.biz.

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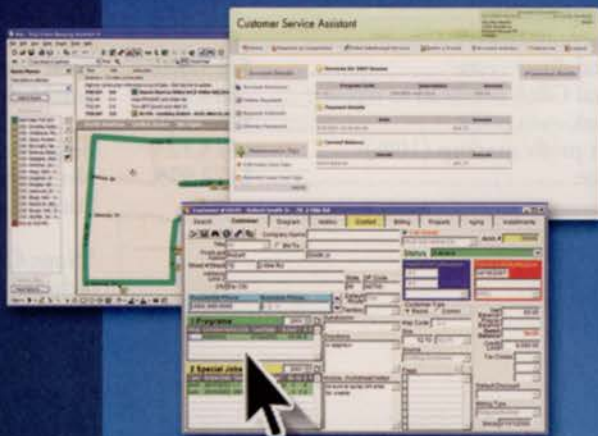
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Job A (material-intense, one month)

Materials:	\$33,200
Labor with labor burden:	\$11,050
Equipment*:	0
Subcontractors:	0
Total direct costs:	\$113,000
Total G&A overhead to recover:	\$44,250
Break-even point:	\$157,250
Net profit markup (10%):	\$15,725
Price:	\$172,975

Job B (labor-intense, four months)

Materials:	\$13,280
Labor with labor burden:	\$44,200
Equipment*:	0
Subcontractors:	0
Total direct costs:	\$92,000
Total G&A overhead to recover on job:	\$57,480
Break-even point:	\$149,480
Net profit markup (10%):	\$14,948
Price:	\$164,428

*Note: Company owned equipment is included in the G&A overhead recovery percentages.

WHY DORS DOESN'T WORK. Job A is a one month job. It requires the entire field labor force for one month. Therefore, its price should include one month of G&A overhead cost or \$10,000. However, the DORS method adds \$44,250 to the bid for G&A overhead. It overstates G&A overhead costs by over \$34,000.

Now look at Job B, a four-month job. It requires the entire field labor force for four months. The G&A overhead costs for job B should total \$40,000 but DORS adds \$57,480 to the bid to cover G&A overhead costs. It overstates G&A overhead costs by over \$17,000.

ANALYSIS. I could show you a third job where the DORS markups on material (.332) and labor (.85) costs accurately calculate G&A overhead costs.

Batting .333 might be good in baseball but it isn't in estimating a landscape job or a design build project. You need to be accurate 100 percent of the time, no exceptions. The problem, though, isn't with these specific markup decimals. It is with the DORS method that attempts to tie G&A overhead allocation to bids by means of multiplying two components of direct job costs (materials, field labor with burden, equipment and subcontractor costs) by percentages (or decimals). This is the same mistake made by factoring and the SORS (single overhead recovery system) methods I've covered in this column over the last few months.

In my next column I will critique the multiple overhead recovery system (MORS) method and its numerous mathematical mistakes. **LL**

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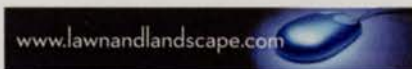
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people smarts



Can Turkeys Fly?

Many of my fondest memories in life surround the Thanksgiving holiday and my nine years living in Southwest Ohio in the late 70s and early 80s. It was a great time in my career, I met a lovely woman from Tipp City who defied logic and chose me to marry (she stands firm by that decision after 28 years). I always credit my marriage's success to my wife's good judge of character.

How many business owners know the reasons why so many managers and supervisors just don't seem to fit once they enter the workplace? When choosing new employees, are the owners good judges of character? And what about those employees who seem to start off on a very positive note only to transform overnight into a Class A turkey of a landscape worker?

As with any problem solving analysis, examine the reasons for a bad hiring decision and identify the errors in the selection process. The following points may help you avoid this vicious circle of ongoing replacement hiring.

DEFINE THE ROLE. A business owner must develop a specific profile of what they expect from the position they want to fill. Invest the time to:

1. DEVELOP JOB SPECIFICATIONS

— such as certifications, background and the experience desired;

2. DEVELOP A JOB DESCRIPTION

— include the job's primary duties and responsibilities;

3. DEVELOP CRITICAL SUCCESS

FACTORS — those inherent behavioral characteristics a candidate must possess to be successful.

ACHIEVE CONSENSUS. Make sure the other managers who will work with the candidate are on the same page with regard to job specifications, description and critical success factors. It's not uncommon for the hiring principals to differ on these key elements, often resulting in confusion. By conducting an

internal "double-check," a greater degree of consensus is achieved prior to the recruiting and selection process.


ESTABLISH AN INTERVIEW PLAN.

Sounds simple, but how often does this phase of the process have any real organization or flow? Make sure the most appropriate internal decision makers are talking to the candidates. This requires sufficient time for the interview and discussion about job expectations, company philosophy, etc. Make note of the characteristics each candidate displays during their interviews. It helps to supply each interviewer with a rating sheet to complete immediately after the interview. The team would then use these notes to gauge the next steps toward a selection decision.

CHECK REFERENCES.

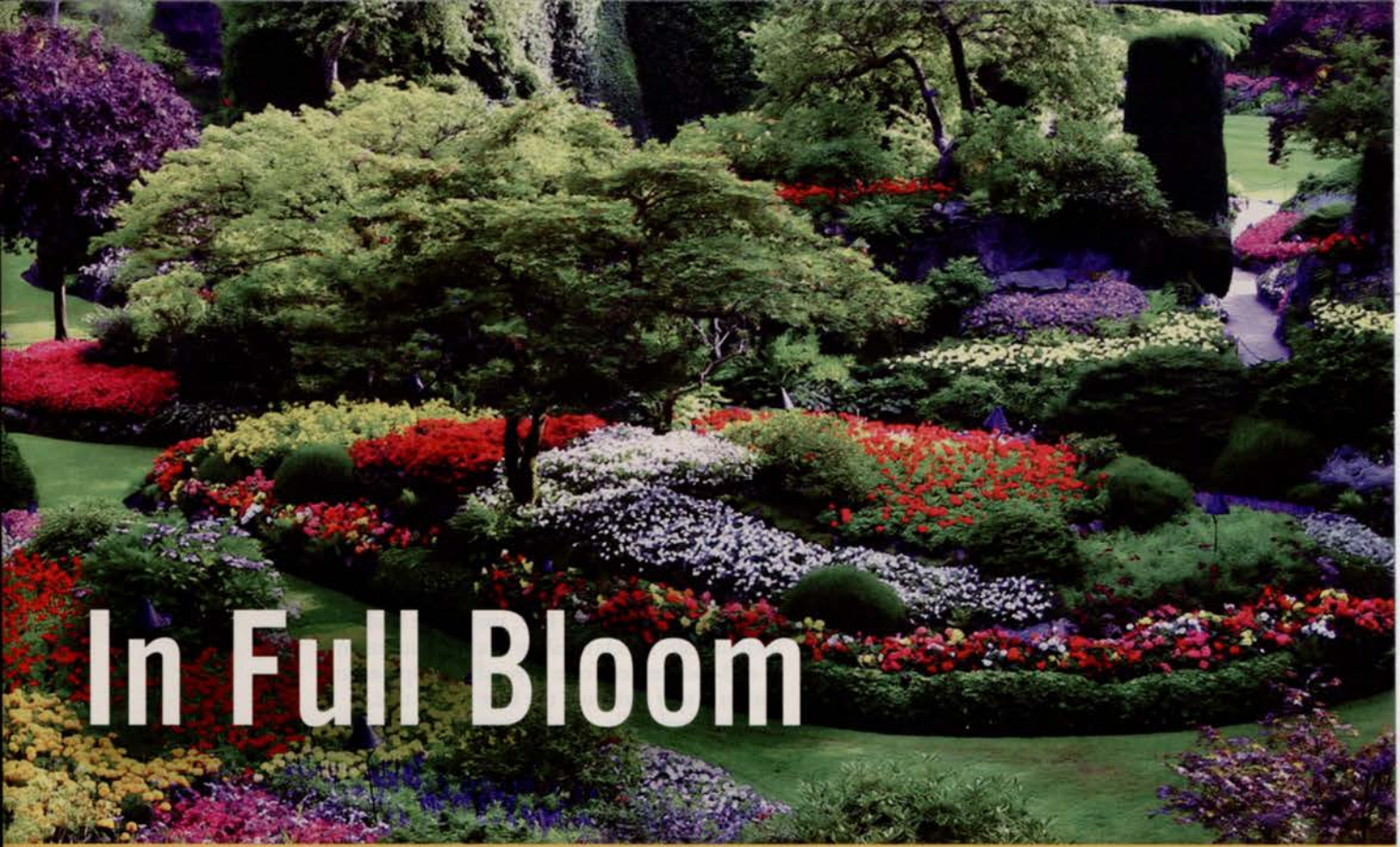
I cannot stress enough the value in performing reference checks. Contact a candidate's past supervisors who can comment on his work quality and job performance. This insight is invaluable. Do not be dissuaded from performing this step because you believe a former employer won't be up front and honest with you about a candidate's prior performance. This is not true in most situations, especially if you are well networked and respected in your industry, are known to check references and have mastered this technique. Also, verify a job candidate's educational achievements, salary history and industry certification credentials. These are the most common work history details a candidate will purposely exaggerate.

Finally, if you do not have a sufficient amount of time, or are unqualified to adequately hire new employees, you can contract with any number of third-party companies that specialize in job placement services.

Committing the necessary time and determination to this process will ensure better hiring practices and will save the turkeys for Thanksgiving. 

Larry Fish

is president of GreenSearch, a human resource consulting organization. He can be reached at 888/375-7787, peoplesmarts@gie.net or via www.greensearch.com. PeopleSmarts® is a registered trademark of GreenSearch.



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Root-Zone Feeding for Trees and Shrubs

Fall is an ideal time to prepare customers' trees and ornamental shrubs for the next spring. Like turfgrass, trees and shrubs need all of the essentials – light, water, oxygen and nutrients – to survive the rigors of winter and prepare them for a sold head start come spring.

Trees and shrubs need to feed to remain healthy. Although surface applications may provide adequate fertilization, root-zone feeding allows the plant to immediately absorb the nutrients. This allows the trees and shrubs to

continue growing and absorbing nutrients long after the leaves have fallen. Root-zone feeding is the best way to keep your customers' trees and shrubs healthy.

STRETCHING OUT. Since a tree's feeder roots extend beyond its drip line, root-zone feeding hydraulically injects fertilizer in a grid pattern on 2- or 3-foot centers from beyond the drip line to within 4 to 5 feet from the base of the tree.

This hydraulic process creates a soil cav-

j.b. toorish and brian kelley

are part of LESCO/John Deere Landscapes. They can be reached at fromthefield@gie.net or at 800/321-5325 ext. 6150 to answer technical questions.

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ity and deposits the fertilizer into the cavity. Through this process oxygen is increased into the soil profile, bringing the feeder roots into these areas. The closer you get to the trunk of the tree, the larger the roots are. Transporting material into the main cambium system in the trunk is their main function.

However, in heavy clays the roots will be closer to the surface, due to the lack of oxygen in tight soils. Clay soils are very dense, which means they have very tiny pores in which oxygen and water are located. Trees growing in clay soils will have very shallow root systems. This presents challenges to the trees in their ability to pull essential materials into their systems to ensure good health.

Equipment costs are based on a contractor's needs. For example, a 200-gallon space saver tank will cost a contractor about \$3,500 and a tree root injector typically runs about \$215. Of course, these costs will vary with the size and scope of the operation. Material cost varies based on the type of fertilizer, and there are many products available on the market.

AMPLE FEEDING. Water soluble fertilizers work best when trying to feed the root zone.

Use a product with a balanced 3:1:1 ratio, low burn potential and a bonding characteristic that keeps the fertilizer in the root zone for an extended period of time with little leaching. Because of the low-burn potential, this type of fertilizer can be used at a 2-year rate and can be used by the contractor at any time of the growing season.

The slow release allows the plant to take in nutrients as needed, which provides the plant with an even growth pattern. Not producing flush growth results in a reduction in insect and disease activity and requires less pruning. Root-zone feeding allows feeder roots to absorb nutrients, water and oxygen. Once injected, the feeder roots will expand into these areas and absorb the fertilizer into their systems. The more feeder roots a plant has the better its ability to support itself through normal functions and new growth.

The best time to engage in root-zone feeding is fall and spring when root systems are actively growing. However, doing this in the fall allows the tree to pull materials in and synthesis them into carbohydrates and proteins to prepare for next spring's new growth. Spring feeding replenishes their energy reserves for normal maintenance, growth and the stresses that will occur during the summer. **LL**

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what's the deal?



THIS MONTH'S QUESTION: "Are zero-interest rates a good deal? Are they enough to make a sale happen?"

THE CONTRACTOR:

Richard A. Cafaro, Owner, LMS Greenhouse and Nursery, Allison Park, Pa.

How much does cash cost? For a number of years it's been free! Other than a recent purchase of a used truck, I can't remember the last truck, tractor, or equipment purchase that didn't come with zero-percent financing. There are periods where zero-percent financing is not available, so I wait. I really don't care whose money it is – a bank, a manufacturer, as long as it's available. Zero-percent has become the norm and something I expect. I can't see it going away anytime soon. There is more competition for our money and so many choices of quality equipment.

Whomever first offered zero-percent financing to win business probably didn't fully consider the monster it created in the consumer and me. It's firmly planted in my mind that I'll never pay to rent money on new equipment.



THE DEALER:

Brian McQuern, Owner, Outdoor Power Unlimited, Frankfurt, Ind.

We do quite a bit of zero-percent financing for our customers. It all really depends on the equipment being financed. After the 12 months, you still have to finance it anyway, unless you pay it off in full, which a lot of people don't do.

Whether a contractor chooses to use zero-percent depends on if it's a \$5,000 machine or a \$10,000 machine. There's a fee for the dealer involved, usually \$500, which figures into the equation. That cost gets passed on to the customer and is divided up into the payments each month.

If you're a car salesman and can swing it, zero-percent works great for them. But I'm a pretty straightforward guy. I see the zero-percent financing as more of a sales gimmick and rely on my relationship with the contractor to sell equipment than an interest rate. There is no such thing as a free lunch. The majority of zero-percent is used by residential customers, who buy commercial equipment, because of the cost.

say what's on your mind

If you'd like to share your thoughts for future issues, please call or e-mail Mark Phillips at 216-925-5008 or mphillips@gie.net.



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 4. Ornamental Shrub & Tree Service
 5. Irrigation Contractor
 6. Landscape Architect
 7. Other Contract Services (please describe) _____

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

7. What percentage of growth do you anticipate? _____

12. Which of the following types of products and/or services are you considering adding/upgrading in the next 12 months? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

1. Construction Equipment (attachments, skid steers, loaders, tractors, etc)
 2. Mowers
 3. Chemical Equipment (pumps, tanks, hoses, reels)
 4. Hand Held Equipment (trimmers, edgers, blowers, chain saws)
 5. Engines
 6. Tree Equipment
 7. Chippers / Shredders
 8. Fertilizers
 9. Chemicals (insecticides, herbicides, fungicides)
 10. Grass Seed
 11. Nursery / Flowers
 12. Irrigation Equipment
 13. Financial Services (insurance, payroll, finance)
 14. Uniforms (including hats and gloves)
 15. Business Software / Hardware
 16. Design Software
 17. H2B Services
 18. Renovation Equipment (seeds, aerators, dethatchers, spreaders, hydroseeders)

Pesticide Application

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

8. What year was your business founded? _____

9. What is your business mix? (%)
 Residential _____ Commercial _____ Other _____

10. Is this a Headquarters or Branch location?
 1. Headquarters 2. Branch 3. Single Office

11. What best describes your title?

1. Owner 11. Argonomist
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 15. Trade Association, Library
 Others (please describe) _____

3. What is the service mix %?
 Mowing/Maint _____ Design/Build _____
 Chemical Application _____

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

5. Is Chemical Application work
 1. Outsourced 2. Done by own employees

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

1. Less than \$50,000
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 5. \$300,000 to \$499,999
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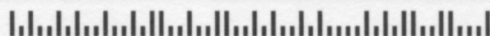


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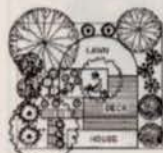
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Bruce Allentuck is President of Allentuck Landscaping Co. in Clarksburg, Md., and can be reached at brucea@allentucklandscaping.com or 303/515-1900.

Allentuck Landscaping Contributes To Its Community.

The desire to share our success by giving back to the community we serve has always been an important part of the culture at Allentuck Landscaping Co.

For about 15 years, Allentuck Landscaping has set aside a day of service in October called "Company Day," which benefits a local nonprofit organization. Company Day involves a major volunteer project, such as planting gardens at a hospice or cleaning up gardens and planting trees and shrubs at a school. The day is augmented with breakfast, a picnic lunch, a company soccer game and a family evening celebration.

These shared activities have enabled us to develop solid relationships with each other while helping those in our Montgomery County, Md., community.

This year though, to commemorate Allentuck Landscaping's 20th anniversary, we have taken on a truly awesome project with Giving Tree 2007 – Doing 20 Good Things for our Community.

Initially we decided on several types of projects of interest. Because we have worked with many nonprofit organizations over the years, we had some insight as to which organizations we would like to focus on. We also received suggestions from the Corporate Volunteer Council of Montgomery County with which we have been involved for many years.

Although we wanted to do some landscaping, we wanted to experience volunteerism in other ways, too. We outlined projects that we definitely wanted to do and other potential ideas that we would consider. We budgeted for each project as well as allowed reasonable time for completion. After all, we still had to make sure the business was profitable and that our customers were well serviced.

While we don't convene a formal committee to organize volunteer projects,



To commemorate its 20th anniversary, Allentuck Landscaping focused on a number of volunteer projects. Photos: Allentuck Landscaping



To date, Allentuck Landscaping's 31 employees have volunteered for 16 nonprofit organizations in its community.

we did make sure the projects are understood and of interest to everyone within the company. Inclusion and participation in a volunteer project is open to all of our crews, and all project details are explained in English and in Spanish.

Volunteer projects take place during business hours, so employees are paid for their time. We consider these costs an investment in our company and in our staff. Employee morale improves with every project we complete. Not only do we get to do some new things, but we also get to see the smiles on the faces of those we help.

To date, our 31 employees have volunteered for 16 nonprofit organizations in our community. Some examples of projects have included landscape mowing, cleanups and plantings, donations of new books

to school libraries, soup donations to elderly residents displaced by flooding, donations of bingo prizes to a nursing home and a major food collection.

Even though it presented a challenge to organize, the food collection has been the most rewarding project because we invited our maintenance customers to partner with us. Commercial customers were given flyers to hand out and boxes to fill. We also delivered packets containing a letter of explanation, a bag of microwave popcorn and plastic collection bags to 71 residential clients. A week later, crews picked up an amazing amount of food. Employees also generously donated a great variety of food.

It is very important to communicate with our employees, as well as with our customers, to make this

project, and any other volunteer project we undertake, such a big success. The enthusiasm among both staff and customers has been tremendous and has been great for our company image, as well as for our morale.

Although Allentuck Landscaping does not actively seek out recognition for its volunteer program, recently we were honored with the small business 2007 Corporate Community Service Award from the Corporate Volunteer Council of Montgomery County.

As we complete our year of giving, we are grateful to our staff for willingly making these projects a success and for the support our company receives from the community in which we live and work. We have learned much about the needs of our neighbors and are fortunate to be in a position to help make a difference. **L**

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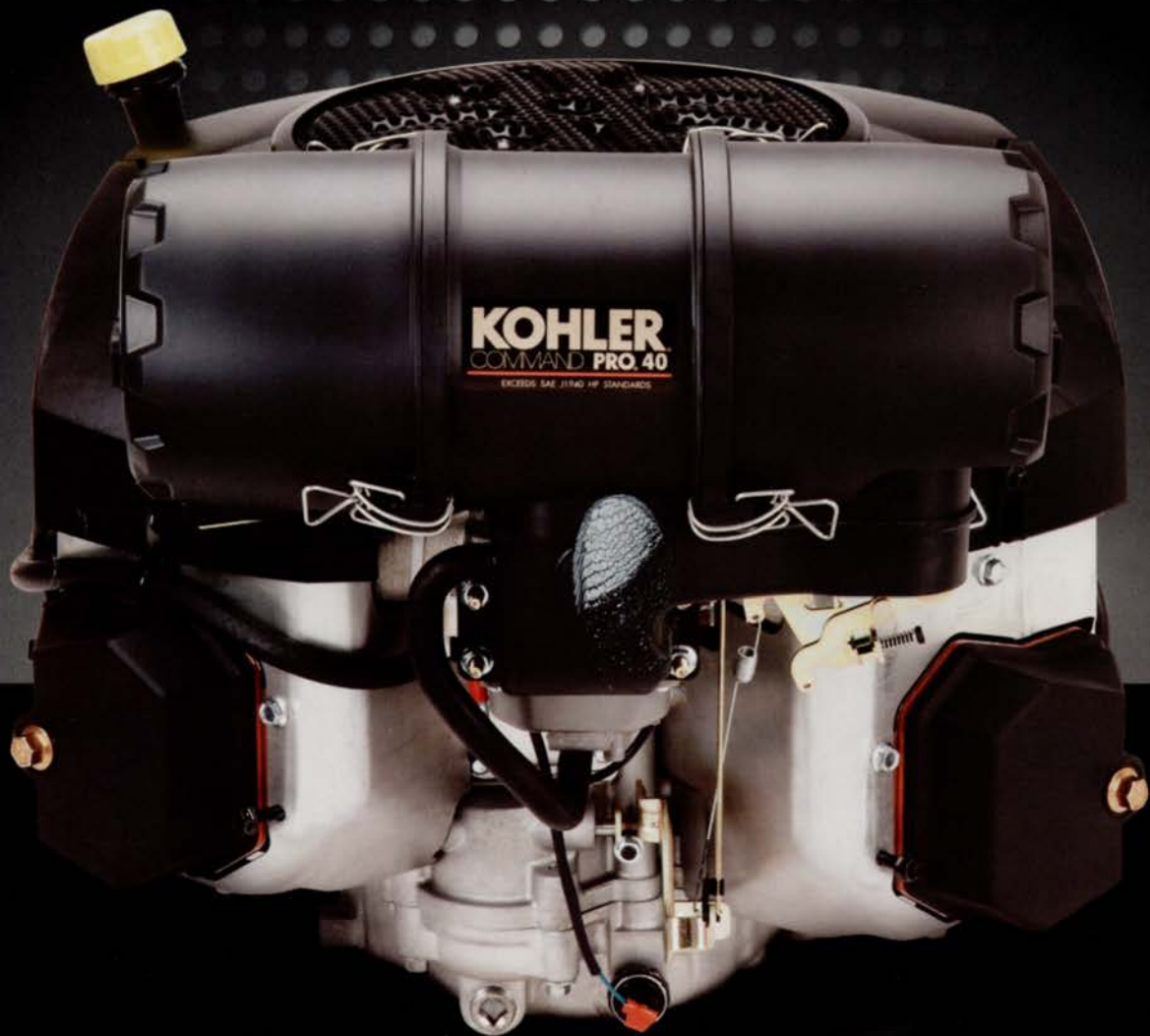
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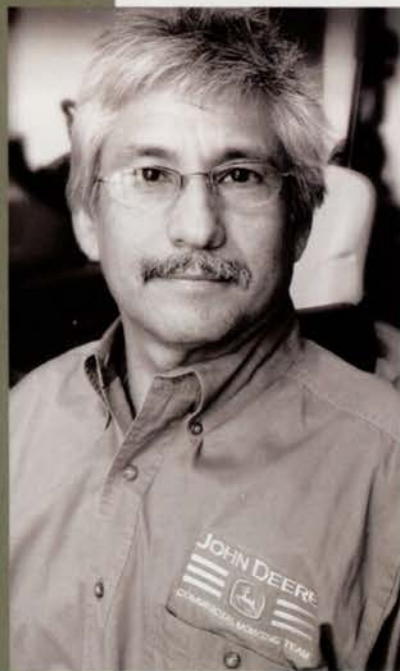
We appreciate what you do every day to beautify the land we live, work and play on. That's why we are proud, once again, to be the sponsor of your 2007 Benchmarking Your Business Report. It is our expectation that each business owner reading this material will be able to utilize some of the research findings to strengthen his/her business operations.

When we consider the tough economic and weather conditions under which you had to run your business in 2007, we realize that this past cycle has not been an easy one to get through. At John Deere Company, we continue to search for ways to help you become more successful even in the tough times. This is why, for the second year in a row, we were the Green Industry Conference (GIC) Platinum Sponsor for PLANET and the Gold Sponsor for PGMS. The classes offered at the GIC helped you with industry certification as well as helped you find solutions to a multitude of business operation challenges. This year we also signed a National Account Contract with PLANET. The contract will allow PLANET members easy access to competitively set prices on commercial equipment ranging from Z-Trak mowers to tractors, to utility vehicles and much more.

You will be glad to know after John Deere Company acquired LESCO, we spoke to a variety of landscape contractors over a variety of major markets and asked them what their expectations were of a full-service supplier to the landscape contractor market. These customers identified areas for us to work on that are critical to their success. We have begun to work on an extensive project list to integrate LESCO under the existing John Deere Landscapes organization. We hope the work we do in 2008 and beyond will move us closer toward becoming your preferred destination in your search for total solutions to help you succeed in your business.

Even after 170 years, our business is not much different from yours. We are continuously changing, adapting and implementing new processes in order to build a better business for all of our customers. We look forward to seeing you soon, whether at an industry event, or even at one of our facilities. Have a great 2008!

J Gilbert Peña
Strategy Manager, B2B Segment
John Deere



"Our business is not that much different from yours. We are continuously changing and adapting to build a better business."

- Gilbert Peña

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gilbert Peña". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light background.

2007



Photo: dreamstime.com

Tightening the Belt

Landscape contractors this year have worked harder to grow relying on creativity, tenacity and prudent spending.

An unforgiving economy forces all business owners to take stock of their operations and focus on ways to tighten expenses and clean up sloppy systems, whether that's efficiency on the job or the way sales personnel follows leads. Rather than running rampant in the field, landscape contractors must stop and ask, "What's going on at home?"

What do the numbers actually look like?

"I find that a lot of landscape contractors curdle up during hard times," says Jim Huston, president of J.R. Huston Enterprises in Englewood, Colo. "They retreat within themselves and that's why they don't grow."

They tighten the belt around their neck rather than squeezing the waste. They cut prices, reduce marketing efforts and rush to do more work faster, sacrificing quality. They focus on cash flow rather than long-term profitability. And in doing so, they unintentionally give their businesses a double handicap: They're operating out of a hole in a stagnant economy.

"When you're in a down economy, you have to do everything better," Huston emphasizes.

In tough times, the tough try harder. And some find that business is even better for it. Across the board, landscape contractors are working harder this year to maintain sales and cover rising costs of health insurance, fuel and supplies. Still, based on results from *Lawn & Landscape's* 2007 Benchmarking Your Business study, 66.6 percent of respondents project a revenue increase from 2006 to 2007.

Growing businesses have not landed in that position by accident.

"You have to go from intuition to an analytical approach," Huston says of managing in a down economy. "You have to ask, 'What is this getting me in return?' So, you have to measure performance."

In this fourth annual report, landscape contractors discuss where to cut back and how to build muscle to maintain their businesses in a challenging market. For the most part, the secret is simply



having the knowledge to answer that question, "How are things at home?"

THE BIG PICTURE. The housing market is a dark cloud threatening businesses that rely on new development and contracts with condo and homeowners' associations in a number of markets. "Forty percent of the houses for sale in Broward County are in foreclosure," says Jim Ziesler, partner, Greensleeves in Miami, Fla.

There's a condo boom, but Ziesler sees 40- and 50-story buildings that are mostly unoccupied. "A lot of us here joke around that it is good that they are empty because if they were full, how would we drive around?" he comments.

Ziesler knows that some of these condo associations can't afford to pay service bills for landscape maintenance. How can they when there are so few

Huston says that the slow housing market has inspired workers out of construction jobs to start up mow-and-blow operations that skew pricing. At the same time, landscape contractors who once focused on installation jobs for new housing developments are now bidding on other municipal contracts.

"I was talking to a client last week in Reno, Nev., who does municipal parks and athletic fields," Huston relates. "He used to see two other bidders on a project and he would win 50 to 70 percent of the contracts. Now, he sees 10 other bidders."

Still, Huston says the vacation home market where high-end customers demand installation projects is strong. "Any place where you have a second-home market - resorts, places where people have that dream home - those markets are resilient," he observes. People with money are still spending it.

Another macro factor in the economic pressure

landscape contractors are feeling is good, old-fashioned inflation. Kenny Krenshaw, president of Herbi-Systems in Bartlett, Tenn., suspects companies will raise prices the typical 3 to 5 percent looking forward to 2008. "I don't know that we will," he quickly adds.

In comparison to the "misery index" of the 1970s where an average 10- to 15-percent inflation rate accompanied a 10-plus percent unem-

ployment rate and interest rates that neared 20 percent, we've got it easy, Krenshaw says. "The economy is in good shape here, at least in my opinion," he states. "It's just not on fire." Then again, Krenshaw also notices that the Memphis, Tenn., area is historically stable because of industry diversity - a healthy mix of rail, river, agriculture, health care and corporations like FedEx. While the housing market suffers the same "mortgage mess"

INDUSTRY GROSS SALES REVENUE HIGHLIGHTS

How do you project your gross sales revenue to change from 2005 to 2006?			
Increase	Increase Change		
55%	Mean: 25.4%		
	Increase Change by Region		
	South/Southeast	Northeast/Midwest	West/Southwest
	24.7%	21.3%	33.6%
Decrease	Decrease Change		
17.1%	Mean: 15.6%		
	Decrease Change by Region		
	South/Southeast	Northeast/Midwest	West/Southwest
	17.6%	14.8%	14.2%
No Change			
16.3%			

Source: *Lawn & Landscape* research

tenants paying condo fees? "I've been cautious about who I work for," he says. "I weaned myself out of the developer market."

Greensleeves installs plants for some of the high-rises in town and provides garden maintenance services, but no mowing. "We moved ourselves out of that market several years ago because there was too much competition for too little money."

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Do you employ a mechanic?



Of those saying yes, 8.6 employ a full-time mechanic, while 9.9 employ a part-time mechanic.

Source: *Lawn & Landscape* research

as the rest of the country, Krenshaw doesn't service that struggling population base, for the most part. "My collections are no different this year than any other year," he notes.

In Michigan, the picture is different. "Oh, boy," remarks D.J. Vander Slik, president of D.J.'s Lawn Service in Grand Rapids, Mich. The automotive industry rules this state, and he has noticed more amateurs entering the landscape industry with their \$30,000 buyout packages as startup capital, which inundates the maintenance sector with price wars that aren't worth fighting.

Also, the state legislature passed a new law to tax services, and landscaping is one of them. That 6-percent tax will not please customers, Vander Slik says. "If I want to add a 3-percent increase for cost of living, that's a total 9 percent."

Meanwhile, weather put the kibosh on phone calls in spring and late summer at Estate Gardeners in Elkhorn, Neb. Michael Becker, president, said "sales are way off" this year. But he doesn't blame the economy. "I'm under the impression that people are sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Becker credits the 24/7 culture, political burnout and anxiety about the future for why customers can't seem to make a decision to sign a contract.

"They're taking their time and not making any

chases. "It really shakes up your intuition," he says.

REACTING TO CHANGE. The way landscape contractors measure performance and respond by making spending choices ultimately determines their success. This is especially the case in a competitive market.

Not knowing the numbers is the biggest mistake a business owner can make. "We run off our intuition, and in good times, the assumption is that everything is going to keep getting better, so maybe you buy a piece of equipment and you can keep it busy and billable," Huston says. "The problem is, you get into bad times and this won't necessarily work."

Rather than buying a new zero-turn mower because business "feels" busy enough to support it, an owner must do the math. Same goes for hiring employees, investing in technology and purchasing trucks, trailers and even work boots for staff. "You have the big picture and the little picture," Huston explains.

The big picture includes measuring whether there are enough jobs lined up to meet the annual budget. Is the firm on track to meet sales goals?

Next, owners must address efficiency on those indi-

Average Net Profit after overhead and taxes	Region		
	S/SE	NE/MW	W/SW
10.7%	11%	10.5%	10.8%

Source: *Lawn & Landscape* research

big spending decisions," Becker says of clients in the greater Omaha, Neb., area. The sales cycle is much slower, he thinks, because people are shopping around. "We used to get a contract within 30 days and now it takes two to three months for people to decide."

Huston notices that a high-pressure economy also causes landscape contractors to second guess their gut reactions to issues from pricing to equipment pur-

vidual jobs. "If you bid out six hours, you want to make sure that job comes in on budget," Huston says. "That is your biggest variable – hours bid to actual hours on the job.

"You have to price it right, bid it right and produce it right," Huston adds.

The problem is, some contractors focus on cash flow rather than long-term profitability. Huston describes a case in which a landscape contractor's suppliers called constantly to collect. The contractor couldn't pay. His wife wondered when he would bring home a paycheck, but his business was in no position to make a salary withdrawal. When the contractor bid on a maintenance contract for a fraternity house, Huston assisted with the numbers and estimated that \$96,000 would cover the costs and provide about \$10,000 in profit – a healthy 10-percent margin.

"This guy was in dire straits for cash flow," Huston describes. "He was hemorrhaging and everyone was screaming at him for money."

The general contractor knew this contractor was in debt, so he said, "Do the job for \$76,000 and I'll give you a check for that amount today."

"This is an unfair scenario," Huston continues. "The contractor thinks, 'I will have that \$76,000 in my hand and I can get these suppliers off my back and take home a paycheck.' I told him he would dig himself in a deeper hole tomorrow.

"This happens all the time in a down economy," Huston relates. "People are concerned about bringing cash in the front door regardless of what the job costs and how profitable it might be."

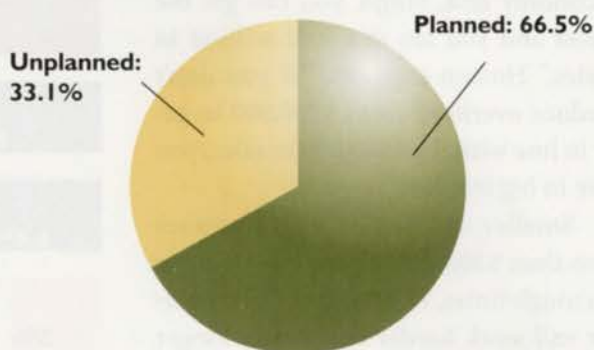
Slashing prices is no way to react to change.

However, carefully trimming overhead costs that are not in balance with sales numbers will help owners reel in expenses. That way, the work produced feeds the business rather than chipping away at hard-earned profit and sinking the company into debt.

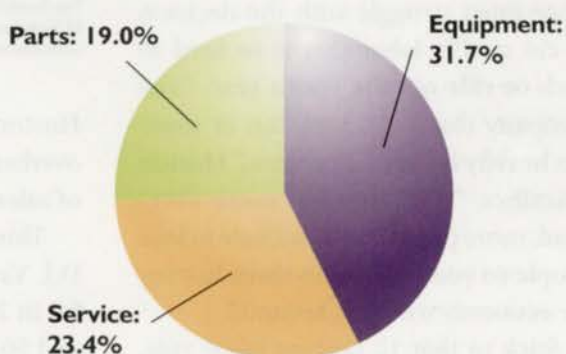
Huston offers this formula: Overhead = 25 percent of sales. Labor = 50 percent of overhead. So, a company that does \$1 million in sales should average \$250,000 in overhead expenses. This includes

A Snapshot of Equipment, Parts, Service and Labor in the Contractor Marketplace

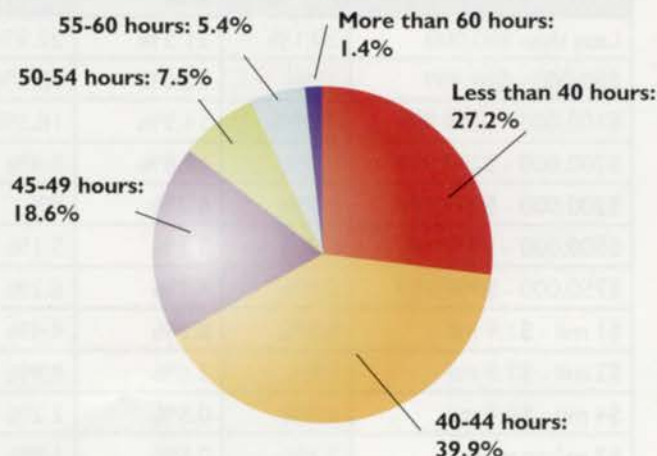
Equipment Purchases:



How Equipment Expenditures Break Out:



How many hours per week, on average, do your hourly workers work during the season?





rent, computers, salaries, etc. Of this, \$125,000 pays for labor. This includes executive management, salaried labor and part-time staff. Everyone.

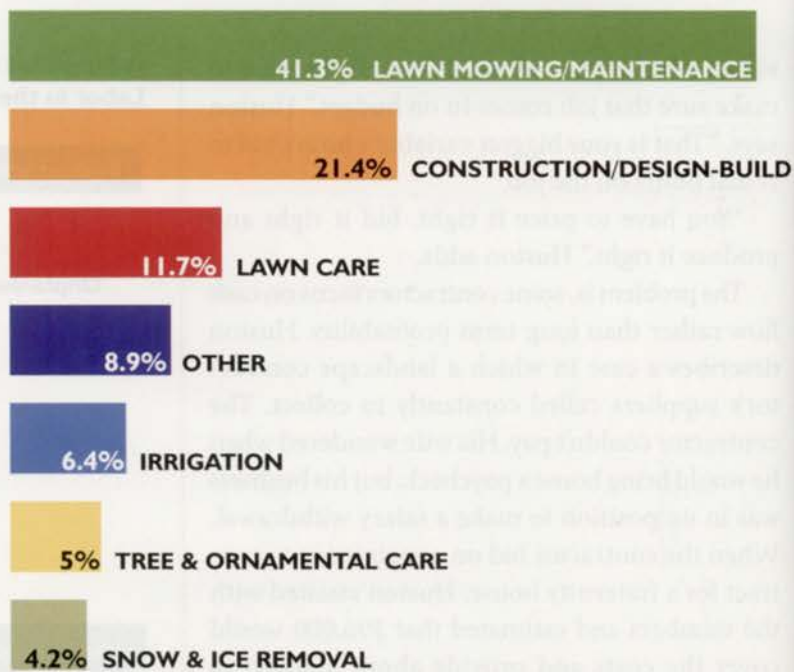
“Now, let’s say you get into this tough economy and, bingo, you can get the sales and you are at a half-million in sales,” Huston suggests. “If you don’t reduce overhead from \$250,000 to get it in line with the \$500,000 in sales, you are in big trouble.”

Smaller companies with revenues less than \$200,000 are the most nimble in tough times, Huston says. “The owner will work harder and put in longer hours. He’ll probably grow in a down economy.”

But companies with more layers of labor must struggle with the decision to cut quality labor that is so hard to find, or ride out the rough year. “The company that is \$1.5 million or more has heavily invested in a team,” Huston describes. “This firm has more overhead, more people, and you hate to lose people so you hold on to them hoping the economy will turn around.”

Stick to that 12 percent labor rule,

SERVICE MIX: PERCENTAGE OF ANNUAL SALES



The South/Southeast region reported lawn mowing/maintenance as the boon of its annual sales at 48.5 percent. Irrigation services are strongest in the West/Southwest (11.5 percent of annual sales). Construction/design-build was evenly split across all three regions.

Huston emphasizes. Be sure that paychecks are half of overhead expenses, and that overhead is just 25 percent of sales.

This formula worked for D.J.’s Lawn Service. Owner D.J. Vander Slik increased revenues by 25 percent so far in 2007, with 10 percent growth in summer work and 50 percent in snow.

REVENUES ACROSS REGIONS

In what range do you predict your company’s annual revenue to be in 2007?				
Revenue	Total	S/SE	NE/MW	W/SW
Less than \$50,000	20.1%	21.5%	22.9%	12.9%
\$50,000 - \$99,999	19%	22.6%	18.2%	15.7%
\$100,000 - \$199,999	16.4%	14.9%	18.5%	15%
\$200,000 - \$299,999	9.8%	11.8%	8.4%	9.3%
\$300,000 - \$499,999	8.7%	6.7%	8%	11.4%
\$500,000 - 749,999	5.9%	5.1%	5.1%	9.3%
\$750,000 - \$999,999	5.6%	4.1%	6.2%	6.4%
\$1 mil - \$1.9 mil	5.9%	8.7%	4.4%	5.7%
\$2 mil - \$3.9 mil	5%	3.6%	4.4%	8.6%
\$4 mil - \$6.9 mil	1.4%	0.5%	2.2%	1.4%
\$7 mil or more	2.1%	0.5%	1.8%	4.3%

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“We were able to keep our controllable expenses at the same percentage of sales (as last year),” Vander Slik explains. He budgeted overhead based on last year’s revenues and despite growth, he maintained this conservative spending so he could increase profit.

Salary increases were conservative across the board, according to the survey. An average 21.5 percent of companies increased salaries for executive management, and 24.8 percent hiked pay for salaried labor.

Ziesler is the extreme in this scenario. The first thing to go in his budget was his own paycheck. “I haven’t been getting one and neither does my partner, Debra,” he says. He’d rather give more to his employees.

TIGHTEN RIGHT. “We have absolutely tightened the belt this year,” Becker says, remarking that he found

than selling maintenance to design/build customers, he sells enhancement projects to existing maintenance clients.

“We never pursued [garden] maintenance as much as we did design/build, and we are thinking that was a mistake,” Becker says. Besides, the sales cycle for design/build projects is longer. And because he refuses to cut prices or offer design services for free as many companies in his area do, Becker needed to find a more predictable way to maintain revenues.

Meanwhile, Becker reduced expenses thanks to natural labor attrition and the elimination of some middle-management positions. He takes good care of equipment, so replacements weren’t necessary this year. His mindful spending approach modeled that of survey respondents, who for the most part were not

monthly check-ups

Landscape contractors who regularly track their performance can adjust expenses according to actual sales. The problem is, nearly half of survey respondents – 47.7 percent – do not receive monthly financials.

In the \$1 million-plus revenue category, 90.7 percent do receive financials, and of those, 96.6 percent review them carefully. The likelihood of running monthly numbers decreases along with annual revenue: 58 percent of companies \$300,000 to \$999,000 receive monthly statements, followed by 48.1 percent in the \$100,000 to \$299,000 category and only 36.6 percent that earn \$100,000 or less.

making significant equipment purchases. Vander Slik shopped around for better phone and business insurance rates this year. “We are aggressive with safety to keep our [workman’s comp] prices down,” he adds.

Also, he increased his automobile deductibles and decided not to upgrade certain technology in the office. Vander Slik saved on phone bills by switching providers. As for health insurance, he got creative with a “self-insur-

more slack than he expected. By cutting in the right places, he preserved his profit and plans to grow.

“This economy has forced us to really look at the efficiency,” Becker says. “We cut waste out of sheer necessity, but our feeling now is that we are primed. We are in a position to improve profitability because we have done a lot of work addressing inefficiencies.”

In fact, the type of jobs Estate Gardeners pursues has changed since Becker noticed that the commitment of garden maintenance contracts is a more secure way to boost sales. Essentially, he flip-flopped his approach to ushering clients into new services. Rather

ance” program. He opted for a health reimbursement account (HRA) so his company only pays for coverage that employees use.

Payroll is Vander Slik’s greatest expense, so he examined ways to improve efficiency and the costs associated with labor. “We saw our fuel costs jump from 2 percent of sales five years ago to 5 percent of sales in 2007,” he notes. “Obviously, fuel is not something I can say, ‘We won’t buy it this week.’ Instead, we can tighten routes and take a methodical approach.”

During weekly staff meetings, Vander Slik says he “hammers on expenses.” His employees understand

streamline overhead

Before cutting benefits, marketing and equipment purchases – three categories landscape contractors should probably not eliminate from their expense records – evaluate sales. Jim Huston, president of J.R. Huston Enterprises in Englewood, Colo., suggests referring to this key benchmark.

Overhead = 25 percent of sales

Labor = half of overhead, or 12 percent of sales

The most practical area to cut is labor. "Consider letting go of employees who aren't producing billable hours on the field," Huston suggests.

how costs add up to less profit for the business. Ultimately, this affects compensation.

Krenshaw recognizes the importance of retaining quality labor in a market where big companies dole out cushy benefits. He could quickly lose one of his good guys to the competition. "If you don't offer health insurance, you are not going to compete for employees," he says simply.

Herbi-Systems covers employees' premiums, which is \$150 per month per person. "We've got to be good to people who have been here a long time," Krenshaw says. Some years, he raises the co-pay or deductible. "Other years, we might look at our insurance package and say, 'We can do more (for employees) without raising the cost too much,'" he says.

But only 23.9 percent of survey respondents provide health care insurance for management; 18.6 include the benefit for salaried labor. There is a disparity in health insurance offering across revenue categories. For example, 3.7 percent of firms in the \$100,000 or less group offer health insurance, while 82.7 percent of firms \$1 million-plus provide the benefit.

"We are big enough now that we get someone's

attention when we shop (health insurance), but a guy with less than 10 employees is in a tough position – and you're still in a bad position if you have less than 20 employees," Krenshaw notes.

There are other ways to cut expenses. Ziesler is taking advantage of the housing

market. His company purchased a "green" building with heavy insulation, energy-efficient lighting and top-of-the-line air conditioning. He no longer pays rent and significantly cut utilities expenses.

"I just got my first electric bill and it was less than \$400," Ziesler says. "I jumped. My air conditioning cools 3,000 square feet." Green is a great investment.

But Huston stresses that landscape contractors must revisit the No. 1 overhead cost – labor – and assess their true needs based on actual sales. While owners can trim and clip away dollars here and there, managing labor costs is critical. The first employees to go should be the bureaucrats, he says.

Sometimes, those managers and office personnel are family, which makes the cut session even more painful, he acknowledges. "Maybe it's your spouse or your brother-in-law," Huston says. "Giving them the pink slip is a real emotional grinder. But you have to be tough about it and say, 'The reality is, we don't have the work to support this staff.'"

Also consider cutting part-time workers or reducing salaries until the market improves. The fact is, you can't cut your rent or gas bills. But if your people aren't

WHAT IS YOUR COMPANY'S STANDARD WORK WEEK?

	TOTAL	S/SE	NE/MW	W/SW
less than 4 days	10.3%	12.2%	11.7%	5.9%
4 days	9.5%	14.9%	6.8%	6.6%
5 days	58.7%	50%	60.9%	65.4%
5 days but plan to move to 4 days	5.5%	6.9%	4.9%	5.1%
other	16%	16.0%	15.8%	16.9%

Source: Lawn & Landscape research



busy, neither is their assigned equipment. You're paying their workman's compensation, salary (or hourly wage), benefits in some cases and a slew of other costs that add up.

"Say you have three crews," Huston says, assuming that three people comprise one crew. "That's nine people in the field. Reduce the number of crews and keep efficient employees."

Krenshaw can make up the loss he bears from increasing health insurance costs by squeezing more productivity from fewer employees.

"If you've got a technician that's 50 percent more efficient than your competitor, for every three technicians he has, you only have two in the field," Krenshaw explains. "So the way to save on health insurance (and other expenses) is not to have as many technicians. And the way to hire fewer is to be sure they are efficient. Hire quality people, pay them well and keep them."

STAY STRONG. While contractors must scrutinize labor as a "versatile" overhead expense during tough times, there are certain expenses that successful companies should not cut. Think twice before you nix the marketing budget.

Instead, focus on targeting quality clients. Bill Lillie, co-owner of Sprigs & Twigs Landscapes in Gales Ferry, Conn., has improved the way he

IN A DAY'S WORK...

How many paid days off does your company provide?

HOURLY/SEASONAL LABOR

- Paid vacation – 3 days
- Paid personal days – .7 days
- Paid sick days – .7 days
- Paid holidays off – 2.4 days

SALARIED LABOR

- Paid vacation – 5.5 days
- Paid personal days – 1.7 days
- Paid sick days – 1.9 days
- Paid holidays off – 3.7 days

EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM

- Paid vacation – 8.6 days
- Paid personal days – 2.1 days
- Paid sick days – 3.9 days
- Paid holidays off – 3.6 days

HOW MUCH ON AVERAGE, DO YOUR COMPANY'S EMPLOYEES EARN IN EACH POSITION?

ANNUAL SALARY (Figures are projected, assuming full-time, year-round; president/CEO/owner figures are actual.)

		TOTAL	REGION			REVENUE			
		RESPONDENTS	S/SE	NE/MW	W/SW	Less than \$100k	\$100-\$299k	\$300-\$999k	\$1 million+
Entry-level mower operator	Mean	\$17,855	\$17,730	\$18,294	\$17,149	\$18,019	\$17,574	\$18,179	\$17,572
Senior mower operator	Mean	\$23,607	\$22,443	\$24,466	\$23,377	\$23,097	\$23,580	\$24,850	\$22,696
Entry-level spray technician	Mean	\$20,521	\$20,136	\$21,813	\$19,136	\$19,075	\$20,806	\$20,182	\$21,470
Senior spray technician	Mean	\$28,492	\$25,732	\$29,208	\$29,689	\$26,300	\$27,268	\$30,333	\$29,035
Entry-level irrigation	Mean	\$19,323	\$17,778	\$19,792	\$20,155	\$18,267	\$17,952	\$20,744	\$18,847
Senior-level irrigation	Mean	\$28,673	\$24,292	\$28,208	\$31,894	\$24,800	\$25,132	\$32,238	\$27,847
Entry-level laborer	Mean	\$17,586	\$17,455	\$18,102	\$16,833	\$16,956	\$17,371	\$18,341	\$17,502
Senior laborer	Mean	\$24,214	\$22,797	\$24,998	\$24,577	\$24,921	\$23,816	\$24,481	\$23,637
Crew foreman/supervisor	Mean	\$32,352	\$28,753	\$30,790	\$38,564	\$39,250	\$28,923	\$33,019	\$31,196
Field supervisor/account	Mean	\$34,427	\$32,019	\$36,826	\$34,712	\$31,875	\$36,767	\$32,048	\$36,848
Equipment mechanic	Mean	\$34,013	\$31,000	\$36,667	\$32,087	\$32,111	\$40,250	\$33,476	\$33,462
Landscaper	Mean	\$60,435	\$64,300	\$51,269	\$77,538	\$59,667	\$62,585	\$66,176	\$48,000
Salesperson	Mean	\$35,482	\$36,800	\$32,857	\$39,795	\$30,000	\$31,818	\$34,143	\$42,134
Operations manager/vp	Mean	\$51,529	\$52,000	\$51,143	\$51,438	N/A	\$62,667	\$44,000	\$60,577
President/CEO/owner*	Mean	\$74,202	\$77,399	\$63,160	\$82,375	\$57,806	\$57,805	\$67,713	\$105,025

Source: Lawn & Landscape research

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BENEFITS DOES YOUR COMPANY PROVIDE TO SALARIED LABOR?

	TOTAL	REGION			REVENUE			
	RESPONDENTS	S/SE	NE/MW	W/SW	Less than \$100k	\$100-\$299k	\$300-\$999k	\$1 million +
Paid vacation	28.5%	44.4%	26.8%	21.1%	2.5%	38.2%	41.8%	61.5%
Paid personal days	14.5%	26.5%	10.4%	13.4%	2.5%	30.2%	16.4%	11.5%
Paid sick days	16.8%	26.3%	13.6%	15.9%	0%	32.4%	20.2%	26.8%
Paid holidays off	27.6%	49.2%	26.6%	15.7%	2.5%	42.2%	30.5%	69.1%
Health insurance	22.7%	35.2%	24.2%	12.9%	2.5%	27.8%	26.9%	69.1%
Dental insurance	7.6%	2.1%	11.6%	5.1%	0%	12.0%	2.4%	34.6%
Vision insurance	6.8%	0%	10.7%	5.1%	0%	12.0%	2.4%	26.8%
Life insurance	5.0%	0%	5.1%	7.8%	0%	0%	8.2%	26.8%
Disability insurance	5.3%	2.4%	6.7%	5.1%	0%	8.0%	4.3%	19.0%
401(k) plan	10.5%	8.4%	16.5%	2.7%	0%	8.0%	13.0%	46.8%
Profit sharing	4.2%	0%	8.6%	0%	0%	4.0%	7.2%	11.8%
Company-supplied uniforms	29.9%	22.4%	33.2%	29.4%	0%	32.9%	60.1%	53.9%
Use of company car	10.8%	33.1%	7.0%	2.7%	0%	22.0%	15.7%	7.7%
Use of company cell phone	21.9%	20.3%	26.6%	15.9%	0%	26.5%	35.5%	54.0%
Raise/salary increase in 2005	34.9%	47.1%	39.0%	21.1%	2.5%	50.2%	57.6%	53.8%
Performance bonus	15.5%	32.9%	16.9%	2.5%	0%	26.0%	20.1%	30.9%
Year-end holiday bonus	31.5%	45.0%	38.3%	13.0%	2.5%	39.8%	59%	46.0%

Source: *Lawn & Landscape* research

targets and qualifies customers. "We're reaching the right customers with the right product."

His company has a presence at local home and garden shows, but he doesn't pursue relationships with every interested person who wants an elaborate landscape. "We are getting better at saying 'no,'" he says. He immediately learns whether the homeowner has set a budget, and if not, this is a red flag.

Sprigs & Twigs advertises in high-end coastal magazines that reach his target market, and he steers them to the Web site to learn more about services. "Each year, we've seen a doubling of the number of serious hits on the site," Lillie says. "That's a 24/7 marketing program without us doing anything."

Sales are up 30 percent this year, and Lillie expects to finish 2007 with more than \$400,000 in revenue. "Word of mouth advertising just continues to grow as our reputation continues to grow," he says. "This is our tenth year in business, so we are relatively young, but it feels like we have hit the tipping point because people are becoming aware of us."

Reputation is never more important than in a rough economy, Huston says. Landscape contractors must work to maintain a positive image so they can retain customers and show homeowners why they must pay fair prices for services.

"In this economy, your reputation is worth its

weight in gold," he remarks. "Contractors with bad reputations aren't getting referrals."

Control quality and be sure that equipment can handle the job. While landscape contractors may be tempted to skimp on repairs or put off equipment purchases for another year, doing so could hinder productivity and project results, Huston notes.

"If they turn over equipment every three to five years, it saves tremendous repair costs and downtime," Huston says.

He returns to the motto business owners should adopt in challenging times: under-promise and over-deliver. Those willing to work harder will surface from hard times without missing profit or tarnishing their reputation with customers.

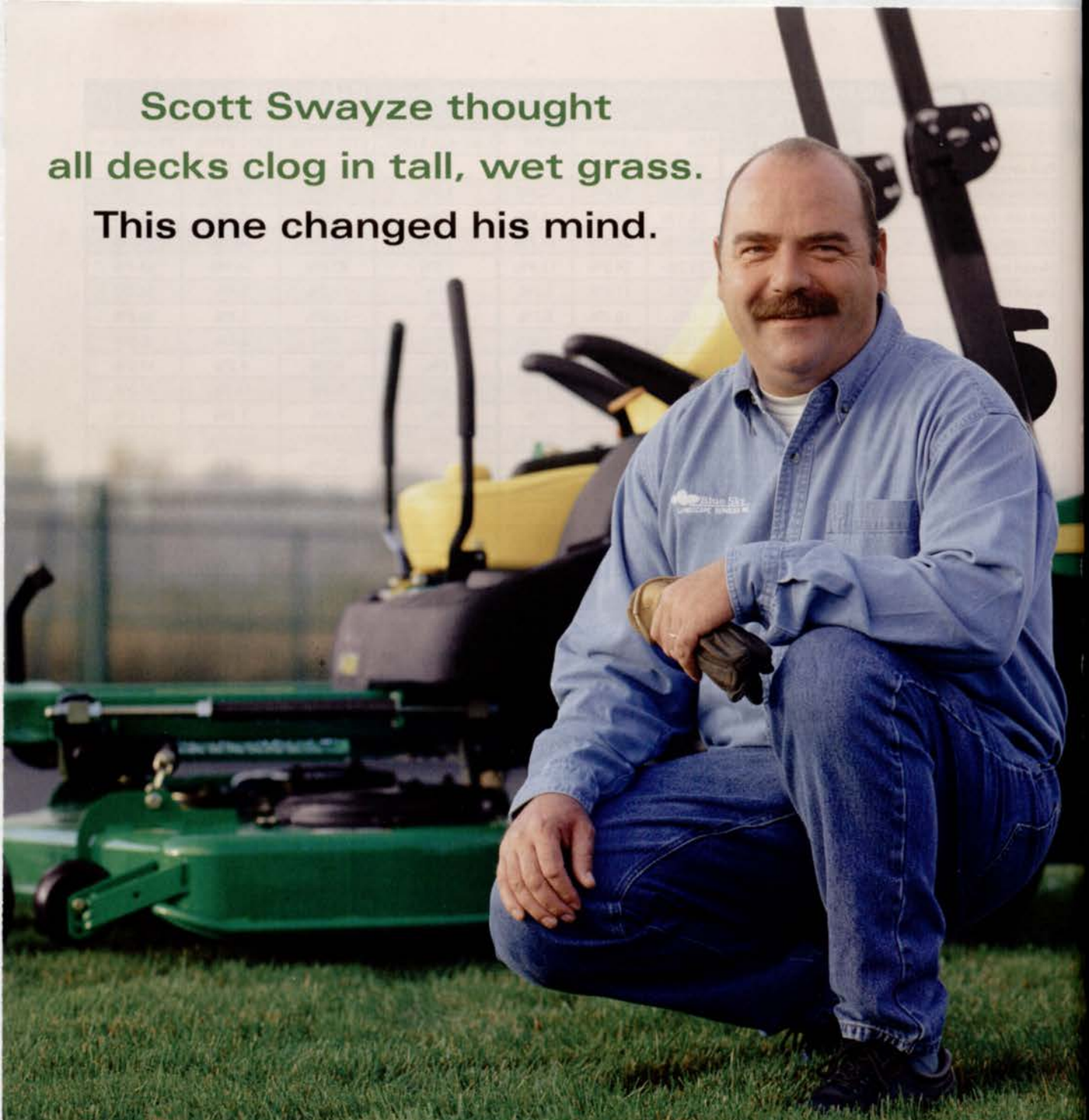
"We've had to work harder to get the customers we have," Lillie acknowledges. "But we've had a good year. The customers are out there."

Jim Huston is a monthly columnist in *Lawn & Landscape* addressing key benchmarking parameters for the professional landscape contractor. See his column on page 118.

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