

April 2008

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Builderscape, Columbus, Ohio

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of the industry, but the industry's

workforce is facing a number of

challenges.

LANDSCAPE LIGHTING

As energy prices rise, the industry

is looking for ways to reduce

energy consumption and

improve efficiency.

FACE

As the industry

looks for ways to

improve efficiency

and reduce energy

consumption, the

industry is looking

for ways to

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and reduce energy

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TECHNOLOGY

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Low The Line

As the industry

looks for ways to

improve efficiency

and reduce energy

consumption, the

industry is looking


for ways to

improve efficiency

and reduce energy

consumption.

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# Online

April 2008

The Daily Resource for Landscape Contractors | [lawnandlandscape.com](http://lawnandlandscape.com)

## TOP 100 COMPANIES

*Lawn & Landscape* seeks the top revenue earners in the green industry. If you think your company qualifies, log on to our Web site to enter your information. From the "magazine" drop-down menu on the homepage, click on "Top 100."

## TOP FIVE WEB STORIES

### 1. H-2B Hope Resurges

Washington Fly-In held in wake of House talks on H-2B.

### 2. INDUSTRY BUZZ: Project EverGreen's Program Kicks Off in Akron, Ohio

is the organization's first stop in a 20-city consumer education program.

### 3. Consultant to Help Industry Professionals Reach "The Winners Summit"

Marty Grunder's first two workshops will be held in Orlando, Fla., in April and Atlanta in May.

### 4. International Irrigation Show Organizers Gauge Participants' Experience

More than 600 attendees and exhibitors responded to separate IA surveys sent following the show, saying largely that they valued the event they attended in December 2007.

### 5. NTEA Installs President

Dennis Jones, vice president of sales & marketing for Auto Truck Group (Bensenville, Ill.), is the 44th President of the National Truck Equipment Association.

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## COMPLETE MSDS RESOURCE

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## The Month Ahead | [lawnandlandscape.com](http://lawnandlandscape.com)

### INDUSTRY BUZZ

Log on each Monday to get insight for your business from green industry associations or successful companies.

### ONLINE EXTRA

Read more about family businesses in the companion article to this issue's cover story. Find it at the bottom of the home-page, under "current issue."

### E-NEWSLETTER

To receive the latest news and product information in your inbox weekly, visit [lawnandlandscape.com/newsletter](http://lawnandlandscape.com/newsletter) and sign up.

## Podcasts

Watch for a year-long series of podcasts – sponsored by **Syngenta Professional Products** – on ways to grow your lawn and landscape business. We'll also feature a turf plant health podcast sponsored by **Roots**. Be sure to watch for more information on specific topics and launch dates for these podcasts in our weekly **Lawn & Landscape** e-newsletter.



## Are you . . .

- ✓ A single - or multi-branch company with 20 or more employees?
- ✓ Generating most of your revenue from lawn care or landscape maintenance services.
- ✓ Looking for a way to improve your customers' experiences, reduce churn and increase revenues and profits?



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4020 Kinross Lakes Parkway - Suite 201  
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## Creating Customer Experiences

Across the country, lawn and landscape professionals are trying to get a handle on what this season will bring. Every day, news headlines signal an imminent recession, more layoffs, the deepening credit crunch and the floundering housing market. Add the uncertainty surrounding the November presidential election and it's a wonder any business decisions are being made with authority.

Despite the doom and gloom, seasoned contractors are remarkably upbeat – although wisely cautious – about the upcoming season. Some contractors have experienced the cyclical nature of the industry. They know they can't plan and budget based on the unknown. The best design staff, installation crew and maintenance team can plan and implement remarkable and thriving landscapes; yet, they can't control the economy and they certainly can't will Mother Nature to sustain newly planted turf and ornamentals.

What contractors can do is budget their businesses based on experience, instincts and diversification. Likewise, branch out and expand services to provide customers with the experiences they desire. Work with customers on a monthly budget and bundle their services with your company. Making one monthly payment, rather than several to various companies, is an easy decision to make and it enables a contracting business to spread the work out over time rather than cramming mulching, pruning and grub applications into a small window of opportunity.

Be flexible. Take the time to understand your customers' personal situations and provide solutions to meet those circumstances. If they're putting off selling their home until the housing market rebounds, provide them with a plan – perhaps in multiple stages – to invest in their landscape so their property stands out when they place it on the market. Sell the long-term value of your services to your clients. Share with them the real estate value of a home with a quality landscape and the intrinsic social significance of a well-maintained property vs. mediocre or rundown. Communicate the green merit of a well thought out and maintained landscape plan.

No matter how you choose to create a positive customer experience, make sure the customer knows you'll go the extra mile for them. Creating systems that monitor calls, ensure follow-up visits and gauge customer satisfaction will make your customers feel as if they're the top priority.

A down economy also presents opportunities. Take the Economic Stimulus Act of 2008 which includes significant business related tax incentives that may lower your cost of investing in new equipment. Companies that purchase less than \$800,000 of capital assets in a year now can expense the first \$250,000 of capital investment effective for purchases made in 2008.

By all accounts, this year will be challenging, but it doesn't have to be dreadful. Look for opportunities to succeed – areas you can control – buckle down and take care of your business. Most importantly, create incredible experiences your customers won't soon forget. **LL**

### EDITORIAL

**CINDY CODE** Editorial Director  
ccode@gie.net

**NICOLE WISNIEWSKI** Deputy Editor  
nwisniewski@gie.net

**MIKE ZAWACKI** Managing Editor  
mzawacki@gie.net

**MARISA PALMIERI** Senior Editor  
mpalmieri@gie.net

**EMILY MULLINS** Associate Editor  
emullins@gie.net

**HEATHER WOOD** Web Editor  
hwood@gie.net

### CREATIVE

**MARK ROOK** Creative Director  
mrook@gie.net

**ANDREA VAGAS** Managing Art Director  
avagas@gie.net

### COLUMNISTS

**BILL ARMAN**  
The Harvest Group  
people@gie.net

**MARTY GRUNDER**  
Grunder Landscaping Co.  
landscapesales@gie.net


**JIM HUSTON**  
J.R. Huston Enterprises  
benchmarking@gie.net

### EDITORIAL MISSION STATEMENT

Through its business management content, *Lawn & Landscape* provides its readers with pertinent, practical information on how to become more productive, efficient and profitable in your businesses.



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USE READER SERVICE # 12



## MORS Estimating Debate

I am writing in response to a column written by Jim Huston in your January issue in regard to the estimating system of MORS, developed by Charles Vander Kooi. I own a \$7 million landscape design/build company located in northern New Jersey, and if it were not for the MORS system I would not be where I am today. The system that Huston was so critical of covers all aspects of recovering overhead in a landscape estimate. By recovering overhead through labor, material, equipment and subs, you can't lose.

Additionally, in his February column, he suggested that we only recover overhead on labor hours. Why would I do this if I could spread it out over four items in total?

I assume since OPPH (overhead and profit per hour) was the last method of estimating that Jim mentioned in his series of estimating columns, that this must be his preferred way of estimating. In Jim's method of estimating, he is putting all his weight of recovering overhead on hours. What happens when I go into an estimate with low hours on labor and high hours on equipment? Jim is suggesting that I only recover overhead on hours, but what about all the equipment? I will not be recovering enough overhead on this type of job because all my recovery is based on hours. Result, my estimate will be too "cheap" because I did not think about my equipment to recover overhead.

*Mark C. Borst  
President  
Borst Landscape & Design, Allendale, N.J.*

I am disappointed that you ran the column by Jim Huston in your January issue. That was one of the most one-sided, non-informational columns that I have ever read. He's directing it to Charles Vander Kooi and it's very insulting to him and me and I'm sure the thousands of contractors who also read your magazine and use the MORS system.

I met Vander Kooi in 1992 and I was almost out of business. In one short year he got me back on track, and after 16 years of successfully implementing the MORS overhead recovery system I have consistently had double-digit net profit. I have heard Vander Kooi speak at conferences and he always told the audience that no one system is perfect, but make sure you use a system that recovers your overhead. Let's face it, we all have to put up with the local landscape contractors undercutting each other, do we have to see an industry consultant do this so underhandedly. Maybe Jim should focus on his own system and try to gain clients that way instead of bad mouthing the competition to gain business. Word to Jim, this never works.

*Joe Pallmeno  
President/Landscape Designer  
Ledden Palimeno Landscape Co., Sewell, N.J.*



What were your intentions when you printed the column, "Don't Be Fooled By MORS" in the January 2008 issue? It appears the purpose of that column was to criticize and invalidate the MORS principles of estimating. If it was your intention to invalidate the MORS principles, then you need to present additional information regarding the MORS system, more than a few paragraphs and two charts.

Readers should not be offended by columns solely because they offer a different opinion, but readers should be offended by columns that offer weak and insufficient research. It is unfortunate that you presented a column in such a way when there are so many new contractors who rely on your magazine for reliable information.

I guess that the MORS estimating system, as well as other estimating systems, can be applied successfully by various contractors in various scenarios as long as the contractor understands the underlying philosophy of the system.

*Chuck Monico  
CM's Custom Lawn & Landscape  
Omaha, Neb.*

*Jim Huston replies on page 14*

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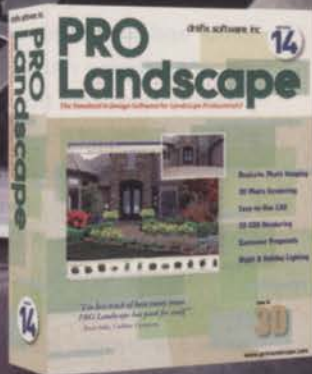
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### Jim Huston Replies

The primary objective of an estimating system is to calculate costs accurately. Science is about objective, analytical data. It is not about personalities. Either the standard for the human body temperature is 98.6 degrees or it is not. A theory, or estimating system, must stand on its own merits and be verified by the data. Every number and formula used in an estimating system must be objectively and analytically validated. Otherwise, the system is not based on science, it is based on faith.

The MORS estimating system is bad science as is any system that uses percentages multiplied against the direct costs (materials, field labor, equipment and subcontractor costs) in a job in order to calculate and allocate general and administrative (G&A) overhead costs to a bid or service being priced. The five systems that I have critiqued in my column, including MORS, are fraught with mathematical errors and false mathematical assumptions.

MORS uses four different percentages multiplied against direct costs to calculate the G&A overhead to allocate to a job or service being priced. Normally, material costs are multiplied by 10 percent, equipment costs are multiplied by 25 percent, subcontractor costs are multiplied by 5 percent. Labor and burden are multiplied by a percent (ranging roughly from 25 to 95 percent) calculated from a complex formula and derived from a firm's annual budget and the three other percentages.

The issue in my January column, "Don't be Fooled by MORS," and the previous four columns on the other green industry estimating systems was the bad arithmetic contained in those systems. The 10 percent, 25 percent and 5 percent MORS markups nor-

mally applied to material, equipment and subcontractor costs, respectively, have absolutely no mathematical justification whatsoever. Because the percent markup on field labor and burden are derived from the annual budget and the other three markups, it is also without any mathematical justification. The two examples that I used in the limited space of my column demonstrated one error of the MORS system. There are many more.

To argue that my system puts all G&A overhead costs on labor hours misses the point entirely. The issue, once again, is that no one has ever scientifically verified the MORS G&A overhead estimating system. Proponents claim it is scientific without submitting to the scientific process. I have done so over and over again. My calculations and data are also open to public scrutiny and the peer review process. The proponents of MORS or any estimating system need to respond in kind.

My detractors did not show where the arithmetic used in my column was wrong. They could not because they have no mathematics to support the MORS system and the three percentages mentioned. The arithmetic was not on their side. They argue "no one system is perfect" and you should "use a system that recovers your overhead". I agree, but use a system that calculates G&A overhead accurately - MORS does not. Using their logic, why not use a broken clock to tell time. It may not be perfect but it's right twice a day.

The green industry needs to have an open debate on this subject. I am willing to debate the merits of my system in a national setting with any recognized and published proponent of any estimating system.

*James R. Huston*  
President  
*J.R. Huston Consulting*

### SALES

**JOE DIFRANCO** Group Publisher  
[jdifranco@gie.net](mailto:jdifranco@gie.net)

**DAVID BLASKO** National Sales Manager  
[dblasko@gie.net](mailto:dblasko@gie.net)

**DAVE ANDERSON** Account Manager  
[danderson@gie.net](mailto:danderson@gie.net)

**DREW BREEDEN** Account Manager  
[dbreedeen@gie.net](mailto:dbreedeen@gie.net)

**MIKE ZAVERL** Account Manager  
[mzaverl@gie.net](mailto:mzaverl@gie.net)

**CHRISTINE ZERNICK** Account Manager  
[czernick@gie.net](mailto:czernick@gie.net)

**AMEE ROBBINS** Account Manager  
616 Marine Ave., Manhattan Beach, Calif. 90266  
PH: 310/465-6060 FX: 866/857-5442  
[arobbins@gie.net](mailto:arobbins@gie.net)

**TARYN O'FLAHERTY** Account Manager  
644 29th St., Manhattan Beach, Calif. 90266  
PH: 310/545-1567 FX: 866/802-0549  
[toflaherty@gie.net](mailto:toflaherty@gie.net)

**BONNIE VELIKONYA**  
Classified Advertising Sales  
[bvelikonya@gie.net](mailto:bvelikonya@gie.net)

**JANET MARIONEUX**  
Marketing Coordinator  
[jmarioneaux@gie.net](mailto:jmarioneaux@gie.net)

### PRODUCTION

**HELEN DUERR** Director, Production  
[hduerr@gie.net](mailto:hduerr@gie.net)

**SAMANTHA GILBRIDE**  
Advertising Production Coordinator  
[sgilbride@gie.net](mailto:sgilbride@gie.net)

**CHRISTINA HACKEL**  
Internet Production Coordinator  
[chackel@gie.net](mailto:chackel@gie.net)

### CONFERENCES

**MARIA MILLER** Conference Manager  
[mmiller@gie.net](mailto:mmiller@gie.net)

### CORPORATE

**RICHARD J. W. FOSTER** CEO

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WEEKLY TIMECARD

NAME: Bill Owen DATES: 14-18

	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

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Mountain View Landscape

**Bill Owen**

Time card for: Monday, April 14, 2008 - Sunday, April 20, 2008

Jobsite Name	Cost Code	4/14	4/15	4/16	4/17	4/18	4/19	4/20	Total
Brentwood Job	Irrigation	7:38	7:35	3:31					18:44
Crestview Job	Placing Sod			4:22	7:58	7:49			20:09
		7:38	7:35	7:53	7:58	7:49			38:53

Bill Owen  
Bill Owen

Total Regular Hours   
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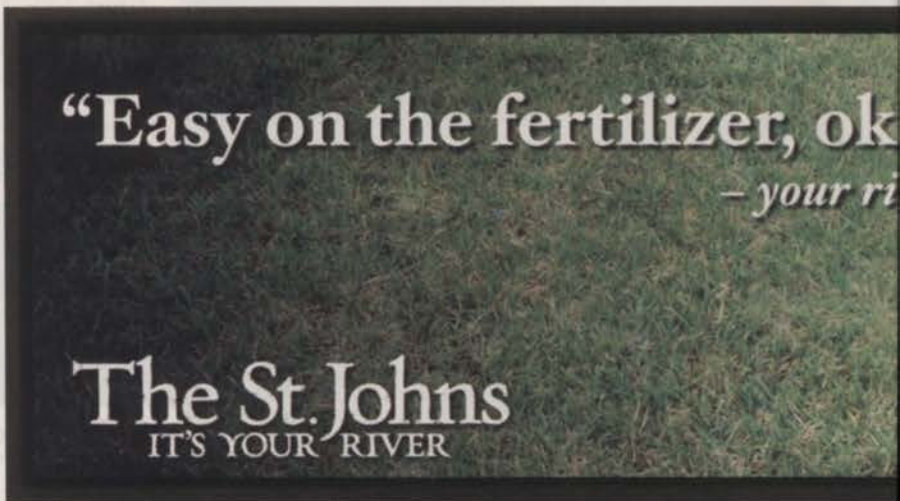


FERTILIZERS

## FLORIDA GREEN INDUSTRY FACES UNFAVORABLE BILLBOARDS

**Green industry firms in Florida might have** noticed an increase in fertilizer-reduction messages over the last year – at least two billboard campaigns have encouraged Floridians to reduce fertilizer use. The groups behind these billboards assert that nitrogen runoff from landscape fertilizers creates damaging algal blooms in water ways.

One billboard says “Ouch! Fertilizer can hurt. Fertilize sparingly.” It rotates among different sites in Marion County every 60 days. The billboard was launched in early 2007 as part of the county’s Storm Water Assessment Program, created in 2002 in response to a new federal mandate requiring local government to address storm water runoff and its impact on waterways. Part of that includes public education, says Andrea Nelson, public education



and outreach project manager for Marion County’s storm water division. The outreach also includes educational materials directed at green industry professionals. Last year the county sent 150 “best management practices” cards to lawn care

professionals. A similar billboard appeared last summer in the St. John’s Water Management District.

Lawn care professionals say messages like these give consumers the false impression that fertilizers are

### TRADE SHOW NEWS

## NEW ENGLAND GROWS DEBUTS NEW FORMAT

**Landscape professionals looking for a little bit of everything** could find it at New England Grows. With a new format, new features and a new variety of educational sessions, the show, held Feb. 6 to 8 in Boston, offered something for everyone.

“The demographic of attendees has definitely changed over the years,” says Jocelyn Dawson Deneen, territory manager, The Scotts Co., Hubbardston, Mass. “It’s kind of surprising the show is still put on by the New England Nursery & Landscape Asso-

ciation because it’s definitely more of a landscape show these days.”

More than 14,000 green industry professionals attended the show. Its new format offered a series of “Master Classes,” aimed at experienced professionals, as well as the event’s first-ever keynote address, presented by Chris Zane, owner of Zane’s Cycles in Branford, Conn. His





inherently unsafe and bad for the environment.

Though studies show many factors contribute to the nitrogen and phosphorous increases that damage Florida's waterways, Adam Jones, vice president and director of quality assurance for Massey Services in Maitland, Fla., says fertilization is one of the biggest targets. "It's the low-hanging fruit theory," he says. "If you're on a local governing body and you're being

of Florida studies that say properly applied nutrients do not move through the soil profile, "The message should be 'use fertilizer wisely,' not 'use fertilizer sparingly,'" says the regional technical manager for TruGreen, Orlando, Fla.

Jones is concerned about the negative impact on the industry. "The reality is, if you don't fertilize properly, you can have more of a negative impact on the environment," he says. "Thick, healthy turf is the greatest way in which you can protect a water source from non-point source pollution."

Jones challenges LCOs to educate clients about healthy turf's storm-water filtering benefits, the industry's applicator licensing requirements and that professionals have the knowledge to apply the right rate at the right time for the best results. He also encourages LCOs to educate consumers on the importance of preventing organic debris from being blown into the roads where it can be washed into storm sewers and water ways. Finally, he urges professionals to get involved and create a dialogue with local policy makers. —*Marisa Palmieri*



Image: St. John's Water Management District

lobbied to do something to protect the environment, we're an easy target. But our industry is not a group that's consistently and intentionally causing harm through the use of our products."

Erica Santella agrees, citing University

#### FERTILIZER APPLICATION TIPS

- Properly calibrate spreaders
- Use deflector shields
- Maintain a 3-foot untreated buffer zone around bodies of water
- Sweep any fertilizer that lands on driveways and sidewalks back onto turf

Sources: Massey Services' Adam Jones and TruGreen's Erica Santella

talk, titled "Whatever it Takes: The Secrets to Creating Lifetime Customers," focused on the importance of customer retention and how it can add to a company's bottom line.

The threat of heavy snow had some exhibitors and attendees worried Thursday's attendance would be low. "A lot of these guys will probably be out plowing snow at this time tomorrow," says Michael Horgan, president of professional cleaning, maintenance and landscaping firm Horgan Enterprises, Brookline, Mass., during a first-day session.

As predicted, Donald Bishop, owner and president of Gardens Are..., Marlborough, Mass., began his second-day morning session, "Ahead of the Curve: Mastering Organic Lawn Care," saying, "I've been plowing snow all morning."

Despite the weather, most exhibitors agreed the second day offered the heaviest foot traffic. "We've already made quite a few sales," says a Ball Horticulture representative. "This

is always one of our best shows."

Sustainability and eco-friendly landscaping were prevalent on the trade show floor as well as in the assortment of educational sessions.

"We've had many people stop by our booth wanting to know more," says Catherine Rooney, member of the Ecological Landscaping Association, Concord, Mass. "It's very exciting to know our hard work is paying off."

Despite all the new and improved features, the No. 1 reason most green industry professionals attend trade shows is to network and connect with colleagues, and New England Grows is no different.

"It's nice to see our regular customers and get to talk to them face to face," said Norman Gray, founder of Transit Seeding, Medfield, Mass. "It's that kind of interaction that helps keep business going." —*Emily Mullins*

Photos: Lawn & Landscape

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 Ford logo are visible. The text "Cement your reputation." is overlaid on the image in a white, sans-serif font.

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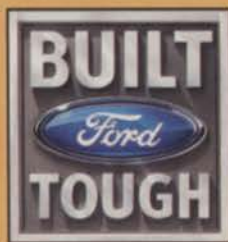
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PREEMERGENT HERBICIDES

## DROUGHT CREATES APPLICATION TIMING CONCERNS

**PERSISTING DROUGHT CONDITIONS AND SEVERE WATER RESTRICTIONS** in the Southeast may pose concerns for lawn care operators (LCOs) who've had to postpone overseeding tall fescue lawns from last fall until winter or early spring.

This timing is close to the early spring preemergent herbicide application window. Applying an herbicide too early can damage the seedlings, says Scott Eicher a senior sales specialist with Dow AgroSciences in Charlotte, N.C., adding that this application is still important because experts expect weed pressure to be high in the Carolinas and parts of Georgia, Tennessee and Kentucky this year due to the drought.

Though many companies did not overseed at all and are mak-

ing do with fertility and weed control, a good portion of LCOs aerated and overseeded in late February and early March and need to be careful when timing their preemergent applications, Eicher says. "The key thing is to make sure folks are thinking through the process." He offers the following recommendations:

- Let the seedlings grow until they have developed a good root system and a uniform stand.
- Wait until at least two mowings (sometimes as many as four, depending on the label) before the first application.

— Marisa Palmieri



Photo: Dow AgroSciences





## WATER RESTRICTIONS

# WATER-USE CHALLENGES CONTINUE IN SOUTHEAST

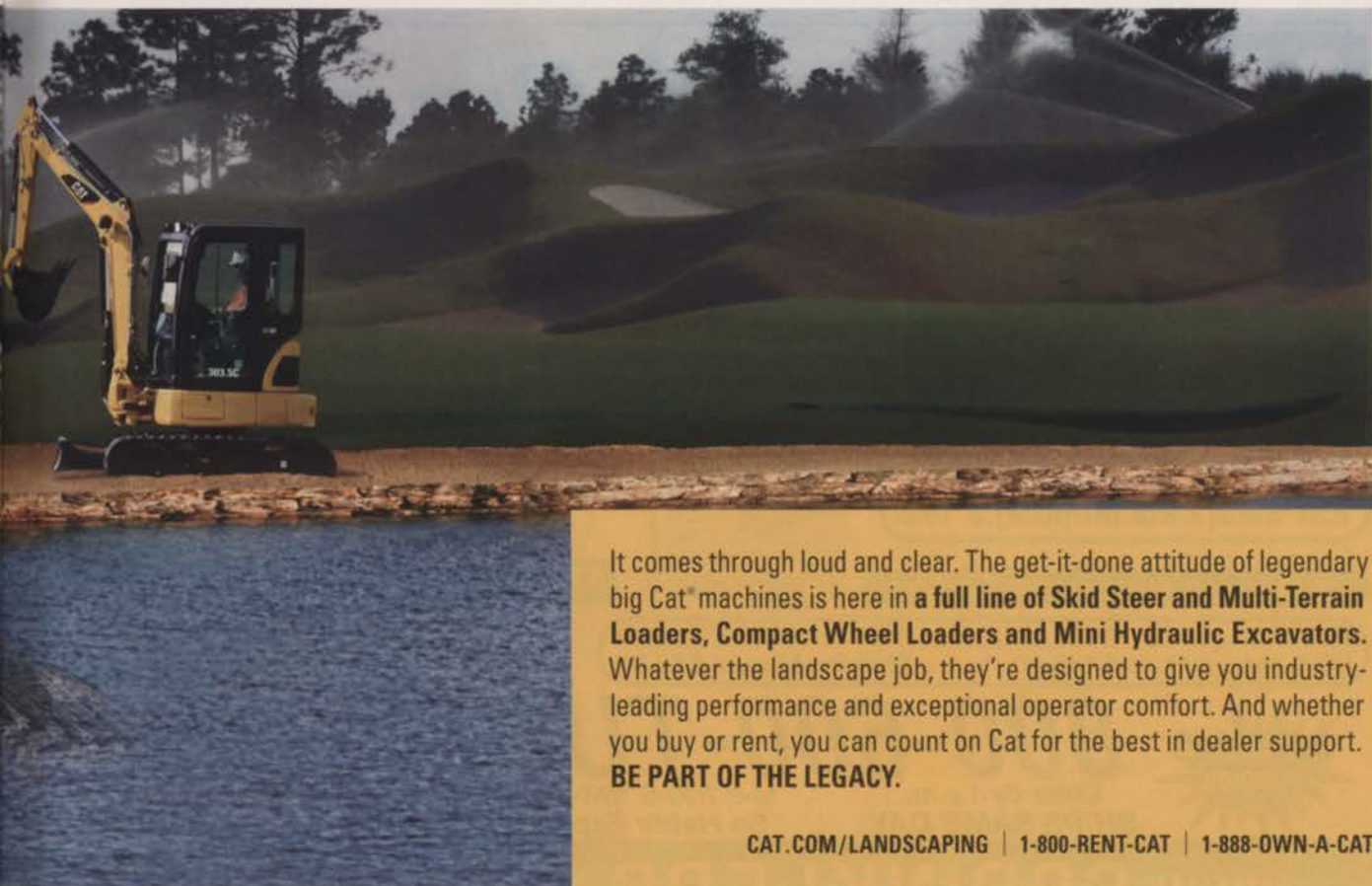
**WATER USE CONTINUES TO BE A HOT TOPIC**, particularly in the Southeast. However, a few counties have seen some relief as a result of recent rainfall. On Feb. 29, Alabama's Cullman County traded Phase III water restrictions for Phase II, which still implements a 10-percent reduction of water consumption, but removes the surcharge associated with overuse.

Georgia's House of Representatives approved March 4 a bill that would require cities and counties to adopt the state's relaxed outdoor watering restrictions or get permission to impose rules tougher than the state's. The bill now awaits approval from the Senate. Georgia's Environmental Protection Division is easing up on drought water conservation mandates, and allowing homeowners to hand water their landscapes be-

tween midnight and 10 a.m. on designated days, based on odd and even-numbered addresses, for 25 minutes. The water use exemptions must have local approval to go into affect.

Burlington, N.C., residents who get city water can now wash their cars and water their lawns after city council eased mandatory water restrictions March 4. Residents are still asked to voluntarily conserve water. City council members in Wilmington, N.C., were presented a proposal of relaxed water restrictions which would allow lawn watering during the county's stage-two drought. A decision is expected early this month.

Other areas have not been quite so lucky, and with what is predicted to be a hot, dry spring on the way, will likely not see relief any time soon. — Emily Mullins



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Photo: Jose Antonio Nicol - Dreamstime.com

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

**IMMIGRANT-OWNED COMPANIES GROW**

**MOST OF THE 36 MILLION IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES** came here for economic opportunity, and more and more of them are finding this opportunity by starting small businesses. According to the recent Intuit's Future of Small Business Report, immigrants are one of the fastest-growing segments of small business owners in the U.S. In fact, the report shows immigrant women and men are starting businesses at rates of 41 and 25 percent higher than native-born women and men, respectively. Immigrants start their own businesses for a variety of reasons, the study says. One is to avoid barriers that come with traditional American jobs. Another is because an immigrant's skills often do not translate well into corporate America. Immigrants also have advantages in the global mar-

ketplace. For example, bilingual skills and relationships in other countries help them find suppliers and customers.

What does this mean for the landscape industry? Judy Guido, green industry consultant and principal of Guido & Associates, Moorpark, Calif., says this shouldn't come as a surprise. "The Hispanic workforce has contributed significantly to the green industry over the past few decades," she said. "Most landscape business owners would agree their companies are as successful as they are today because of their Hispanic labor force."

Hispanic workers take advantage of more and more products and services offered in both English and Spanish, and continue to move up the ladder from field personnel to management, Guido says. — Emily Mullins

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USE READER SERVICE # 18

## inside the industry

### CREDIT CRUNCH

## WOULD-BE BUSINESS OWNERS HESITATE DURING DOWNTURN

In the midst of the current credit crunch and economic downturn, potential entrepreneurs are hesitant to start their own businesses, according to a branch of SCORE, the nonprofit, small-business counseling service. Interest in the organization's programs for aspiring business owners has plummeted since last year in Atlantic, Cape May and Cumberland (N.J.) counties. Despite workshop and seminar price decreases, inquiries dropped from around 100 in January 2007 to about five in January 2008.

"People are afraid to take that risk of starting a business right now," says Trina Byrd, chairwoman of Tri-County Score. "They don't want to extend their credit or take money out of their savings."

Anyone holding off on starting a small business should use this time to get a business plan in place and establish a line of credit, Byrd says. This is also a good time to correct any credit problems. "If you don't have the money right now, at least get the business plan done so when things improve, you're in a position to move forward quickly," she says.

Andrew Garulay, owner of Yarmouth Port Design Group in Yarmouth Port, Mass., says landscape contractors are vulnerable during economic hard times, particularly the current housing slump, and should be aware of the situation. "When houses change hands, landscapers thrive -

when they remain under constant ownership, we don't," he says. "If contractors think they won't be impacted by a slow down in home sales in some way, they're wrong. If they think the rise in interest rates is not seriously stifling the housing market, they're not paying attention. And if they think they are in a niche where others



don't work, they may find some new friends in the business very soon."

Tri-County Score offers tips to help small businesses weather an economic downturn.

- Make sure you have good relations with your creditors and renegotiate terms if needed.
- Keep a close watch on receivables.
- Review your operations and expenses on a regular basis.
- Step up your marketing outreach.
- Maintain good customer relations. - Emily Mullins

Photo: Dreamstime.com





## INSECT CONTROL

# NORTH CAROLINA EXPANDS FIRE ANT QUARANTINE

IN LATE FEBRUARY THE NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES expanded a state quarantine for the imported fire ant to four more counties. The quarantine now affects 63 counties in continuing efforts to monitor and address the pest.

Residents and business owners in all quarantined counties must obtain a permit from the Plant Protection Section of the NCDA&CS before moving sod, soil, hay, straw, nursery plant material, logs or pulpwood with soil, and soil-moving equipment through non-infested areas. Movement of infested materials could result in the establishment and secondary spread of the pest to non-infested areas.

"Failure to obtain the needed inspections and certifications may result in the issuance of a stop-sale notice and rejection or destruction of the regulated article," says Gene Cross, director, NCDA&CS Plant Industry Division. "It is critical we continue proactive efforts to keep the fire ant from moving into non-regulated areas of the state," he said. — Emily Mullins

## TIPS FOR FIRE ANT PRODUCT SELECTION

In addition to heeding any quarantines, green industry firms should consider the following tips for effective control of the red imported fire ant.

- The most important factors to consider when selecting a product for imported fire ant control include speed of action, duration of control, ease of application, environmental concerns and cost. Select the best type of product to use, bait or granular or liquid contact insecticide, based on the specific needs at time of treatment.
- Choose a broadcast treatment in the spring when fire ant colonies are forming and populations are growing. Broadcast applications will provide the most cost-effective treatment as substantially less time will be required to complete an application. Broadcast applications are desirable for large areas. It is possible to control smaller mounds that are harder to detect, thereby reducing callbacks and extending the interval between treatments.
- Baits have the ability to control more than one colony and have lower rates of active ingredients, which introduces fewer chemicals into the environment. Apply bait when the soil surface temperature is above 60 F and air temperatures are between 75 and 90 F.

Source: Charles Silcox, green industry global product development manager, Dupont Professional Products

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GOLF



LAWN



NURSERY



ORNAMENTAL



## STATE RESTRICTIONS

# TEN STATES PROPOSE MAJORITY OF PESTICIDE LEGISLATION

### STATE LEGISLATION AFFECTING THE LAWN CARE

industry is increasingly becoming a reality nationwide.

As of March, more than two-thirds of the 300 state bills containing pesticide provisions come from 10 state legislatures, according to the Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE).

New York leads with 68

bills, followed by Washington with 23, Maine with 18, Massachusetts and Tennessee with 16 each, California and Illinois with 15 each, Hawaii with 14, and New Hampshire and Minnesota with 11 each.

Bills include language supporting management of aquatic and invasive weeds; increasing mosquito control resources; increasing applicator, business and product

registration fees; requiring notification of application, and restricting the use or choice of certain products.

Legislation regulating fertilizer use have been introduced in Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Tennessee, Virginia and Washington. One area of concern for RISE is HB 1267 in Florida, which creates the Protection of

Urban and Residential Environments and Water Act and requires local governments to adopt the Florida Friendly Fertilizer Use on Urban Landscapes model ordinance. If passed, commercial fertilizer applicators will have to be trained and certified.

In addition, phosphorus restrictions on turf have been proposed in some state legislatures. —Heather Wood

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USE READER SERVICE # 20



Photo: Bart Norris



## CALL FOR TOP 100 ENTRIES

**LAWN & LANDSCAPE IS SOLICITING** submissions for its annual Top 100 list, which will be published in the June issue.

Each year *Lawn & Landscape* conducts a survey to identify the largest 100 industry companies based on revenue. We encourage firms that didn't make the list in previous years to submit data, as we're considering expanding this year's list based on the number of qualifying submissions. Plus, the staff likes to learn about companies of all sizes for the many feature stories we write throughout the year.

To apply, visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com), click on the magazine tab and select "Top 100." Or, contact Senior Editor Marisa Palmieri at [mpalmieri@gie.net](mailto:mpalmieri@gie.net).

## PERSONNEL NEWS

### TREE CARE LEADER JOINS NATIONAL SAFETY BOARD

**THE CARE OF TREES PRESIDENT AND CEO SCOTT JAMIESON WAS ELECTED** to a two-year term on the board of the National Safety Council. He is the first and only tree care professional to join the council's board. Drawing on his safety experience, Jamieson will be part of the board's development and strategic planning committee. Under his leadership, The Care of Trees became the first tree care company to join the ranks of NASA, DaimlerChrysler, Johnson & Johnson and others in conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the company's safety leadership practices. "We have a vision of safety at The Care of Trees: 'No one in our family gets hurt,'" says Jamieson. "It's what we strive for." —*Marisa Palmieri*

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USE READER SERVICE #24

inside the industry

## IMMIGRANT WORKERS

# CUSTOMERS STEP UP ILLEGAL-HIRING VIGILANCE

**IN DECEMBER, A YEAR AFTER INITIALLY BEING EXPOSED** for hiring a landscape company that employs illegal immigrants, the *Boston Globe* exposed Mitt Romney, former Massachusetts governor and ex-presidential candidate, for continuing to patronize that firm.

Romney took a political blow for the flap, and such a high-profile case has only fueled the nation's fire over the illegal immigration situation.

For some landscape clients, that situation highlights why they're increas-

ingly vigilant about who their service providers hire. Some are investigating firms through online databases like We-HireAliens.com, which publishes reports alleging more than 4,000 companies nationwide hire illegal immigrants. The site, a project of anti-illegal immigrant group Federal Immigration Reform & Enforcement Coalition, lists firms in a variety of industries in 49 states - including several hundred landscape companies. The site's organizers encourage the public to report alleged employers of illegal

aliens, search for those who have been reported and "make sure they know you will tell everyone you know NOT to patronize their businesses." Pre-written e-mails allow site users to contact the alleged violators and alert the FBI, ICE and the Social Security Administration.

In the past, contractors have become accustomed to being asked whether they're licensed, insured and bonded, but now homeowners and commercial property managers alike are increasingly inquiring about the

legal status of contractors' employees.

Marianne Davies is one of those homeowners. "In addition to asking for proof of workers' comp, I'll ask them to insert a clause in their contract that says they've used E-Verify," says Davies, vice chair of the anti-illegal immigration group You Don't Speak for Me, which identifies itself on its Web site as a group

of concerned Americans of Hispanic/Latino heritage. "If a contractor scoffs that I included that, I won't do business with them."

On the commercial property management side, landscape clients are often concerned about liability and public relations ramifications of working with firms that hire illegal workers. "Contractors probably don't think of it this way, but [by hiring illegal immigrants] they may be putting their customers at risk," Davies says. -Marisa Palmieri



of concerned Americans of Hispanic/Latino heritage. "If a contractor scoffs that I included that, I won't do business with them."





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# Beware of Insects

**Geographic-related pest conditions are the norm** for lawn and landscape professionals. That doesn't make it easy to conduct business or tell your customers why their weed control didn't work or why their newly planted landscape is looking scorched. Continued watering and seeding restrictions will result in little relief. Based on mild conditions across many areas of the country, contractors will see large populations of over-wintering insects such as chinch bug, sod webworm, armyworm and crane fly.

Snow mold damage from both grey and pink molds will be evident in cool-season northern lawns as well as in the Midwest where it was fairly warm in the early winter

followed by heavy snowfall in some areas. Pink snow mold damage will be evident in the Great Lakes region (for more on disease control methods, see page 78).

Japanese knotweed is an invasive species contractors need to learn to identify. It looks like bamboo, but it has a more fleshy stalk. It's already appeared in 35 states in mainly wet areas and quickly returns if simply hacked back.

John Buechner, director of technical services for Lawn Doctor, Holmdel, N.J., and Harold Enger, assistant director of franchise support for Spring-Green, Plainfield, Ill., provided an overview of expected infestations.

**NORTHEAST:** A lot of turf never lost color this year as it was mild through much of the East and the transition zone. Over-wintering will lead to more surface-feeding insect problems such as sod webworms, chinch bugs, crane flies (pictured) and army worms.

Adult crane flies are evident but don't cause as much damage as larvae feeding on roots, which cause large patches to die out. Gypsy moth populations are anticipated to be heavy in many Eastern states.



**MIDWEST:** Sod webworms are beginning to rear their green heads. Bagworms (pictured) are appearing on blue spruces, which is atypical. They're becoming more prevalent; often the result of being carried in on trucks. Emerald Ash Borer has caused isolated damage but it's still a concern because it's unknown how far it will spread. Snow mold isn't too much of a problem because Midwestern ground froze before the snow fell. Salt damage is a big problem. Expect ornamental damage from rabbits eating lilacs, burning bushes, junipers, contorted hazelnut and the bark of winter roses.



**SOUTHWEST:** Stressed and weakened plants in Texas and Oklahoma are showing signs of damage. Even if they made it through the winter, some are likely to die rapidly this spring from root problems due to wet or dry conditions.



**NORTHWEST:** It's been a nice spring in the Pacific Northwest with an average amount of rain and no heavy flooding. Some red thread may appear as trees bud out. The European crane fly (pictured) – the grub of the Northwest – is evident. Moss applications are currently under way.



**SOUTHEAST:** A tremendous amount of broadleaf weeds are appearing in the Southeast due to drought conditions last summer and fall. Lingering water restrictions will make spring seeding in drought restricted areas more difficult. Contractors are facing an inordinate amount of turf repair this spring. Thin lawns will also lead to more crabgrass (pictured). Spring rainfall – or lack thereof – will have an impact on the entire season.

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USE READER SERVICE # 26



# Business: 80%

Workers who believe they would be more satisfied with their jobs if they were given additional training.

Source: Skillssoft

# \$111

Historic high for a barrel of oil set in mid March. Some estimates have gasoline prices at \$3.50 per gallon by Memorial Day.

## QUOTABLE:

*"I would say, by any commonsense definition, we are in a recession."*

—Warren Buffett, billionaire and chairman and CEO of Omaha-based Berkshire Hathaway



**56 percent** Individuals who incorrectly believe filing an income tax return electronically may result in an audit.

Source: Internal Revenue Service



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# Adding On



1



2



3



4

**JOE BURNS** has made a career out of enhancing landscapes. While the turf and shrubs are a landscape's "backbone," enhancements are the creative, unique touches that can change season after season, says the president of Grayson, Ga.-based Color Burst. "We do color, which we feel is the heart of any landscape," Burns says.

Most of Burns' clients ask for something "different and bright." His crews then search for plant material complementary in texture, height and color. Annuals are best for seasonal color, Burns

says, although perennials are sometimes added for a little extra pizzazz.

One of Burns' favorite annuals is the begonia because it's hardy, adaptable and blooms often. Foliage plants like acaulis are also good additions to beds because they're still attractive even when not in bloom. "We may not have an endless palette of plant material to choose from, but the ways we can combine and arrange them are limitless," he says.

Above are four plants contractors can use to enhance beds in any region of the country. **LL**

## 1. NORTHEAST

**Name:** Oops-A-Daisy 'Banana Split'

**Genus:** *Osteospermum*

**Cold hardiness as a tender**

**perennial:** Zone 11

**Plant Type:** annual

- Grows 12 inches tall, spreads 16 inches wide
- Performs best in full sun
- Requires regular fertilization
- Trim back in heat of summer to revive plants for late summer/fall bloom

## 2. NORTHWEST

**Name:** Gumdrop 'Cherry Blossom'

**Genus:** *Begonia*

**Cold hardiness as a tender**

**perennial:** Zone 11

**Plant Type:** annual

- Grows 12 inches tall, spreads 18 inches wide
- Performs best in sun to partial shade
- Thrives in potting soil fertilized once a month
- A double-flowered wax begonia with soft, light pink flowers

## 3. SOUTHEAST

**Name:** Sweet Caroline 'Bronze'

**Genus:** *Ipomoea*

**Cold hardiness as a tender**

**perennial:** Zone 11

**Plant Type:** annual

- Grows eight inches tall, spreads 24 inches wide
- Performs best in sun to partial shade
- Thrives in heat and humidity
- Works great in landscapes, containers and hanging baskets

## 4. SOUTHWEST

**Name:** Arcelia 'White'

**Genus:** *Angelonia*

**Cold hardiness as a tender**

**perennial:** Zone 11

**Plant Type:** annual

- Grows 12 inches tall, spreads 18 inches wide
- Performs best in full sun
- Thrives in hot conditions
- Flowers all summer long

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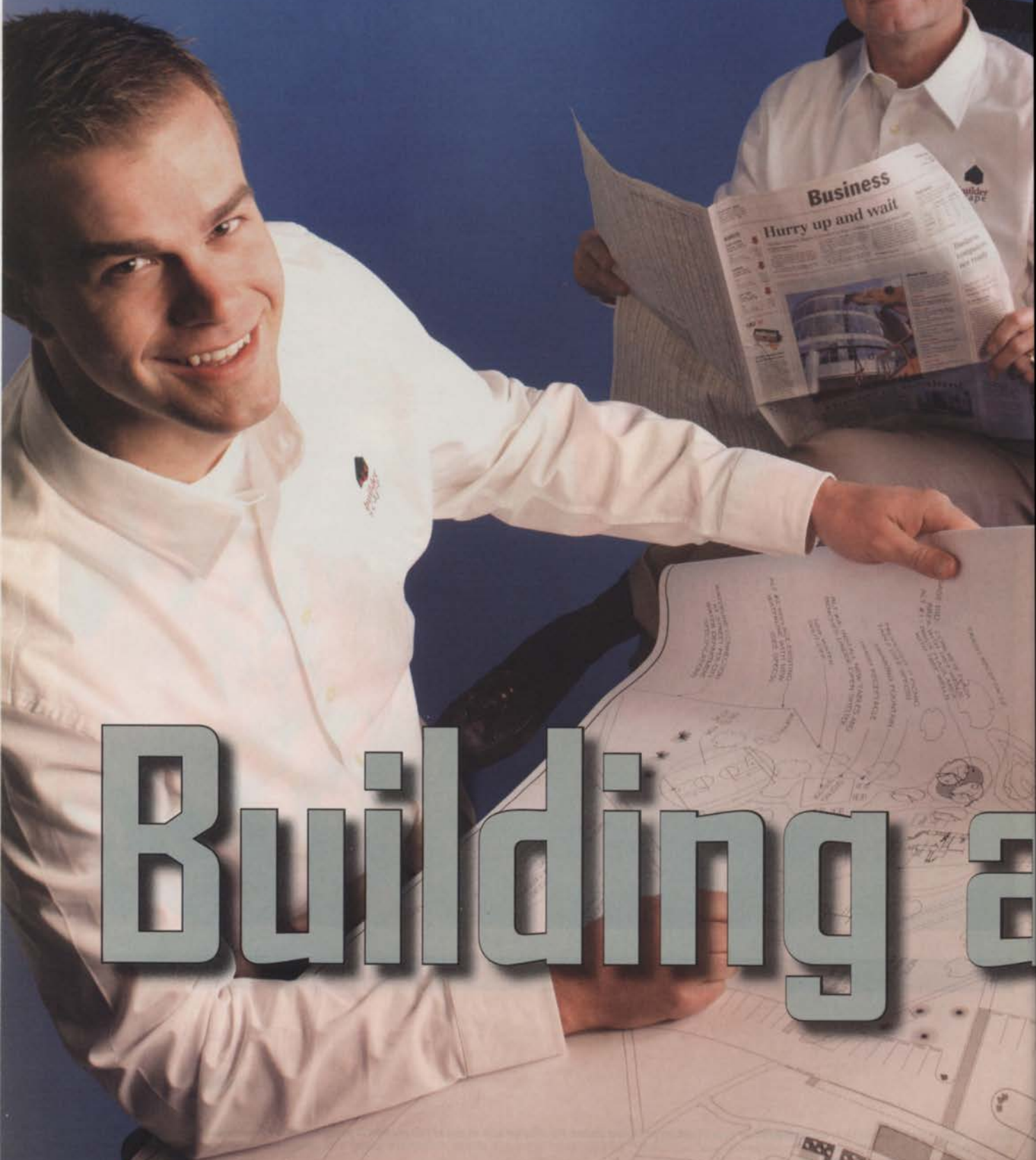


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USE READER SERVICE # 28

cover story: builderscape



# Building a



## A father and son merge their talents to grow Builderscape.

**L**ike so many others in the green industry, Chris Matthews can't pin down the time he started working in his father's business.

He always has, starting with riding shotgun on Saturdays in his dad's pickup as a little boy. Into his teenage years, he worked in the field and gradually took on more responsibilities.

After Chris Matthews graduated from Columbus (Ohio) State University with an associate's degree in construction management, he thought he was ready for a full-time position at Builderscape, his father's Plain City, Ohio-based company, about 20 miles outside Columbus. "He came to me and said, 'I'm done with school now, I'm ready,'" Ron Matthews recalls. "I said 'Oh no you're not, now you need to get your business degree at night and work during the day. He said, 'That'll be tough,' but I said, that's what it's all about. It's tough," Ron Matthews says.

When Chris Matthews graduated with his bachelor's degree in business, Ron Matthews made him vice president. "Before that I didn't cut him any slack - he worked in the field just like everyone else. I knew if he went through that he'd be a tremendous manager because he'd have the

# Business

Chris and Ron Matthews  
Builderscape  
Photo: George C. Anderson



**OWNER/PRESIDENT:** Ron Matthews  
**VICE PRESIDENT:** Chris Matthews  
**FOUNDED:** 2004  
**EMPLOYEES:** 6 year-round, 15 seasonal

**SERVICE BREAKDOWN:**

- 20% Maintenance/mowing
- 20% Design/build
- 20% Installation only
- 20% Construction services
- 10% Irrigation
- 5% Chemical lawn care
- 5% Snow/ice removal

**CLIENT BREAKDOWN:**

- 50% Commercial
- 40% Residential
- 10% Commercial residential

**REVENUE:**

- 2007....\$1.5 million
- 2006.....\$1.3 million
- 2005.....\$1.06 million
- 2004.....\$640,000

**CONTACT INFO:**

7500 Industrial Parkway  
 Plain City, Ohio 43064  
 PHONE: 614/889-2533  
 FAX: 614/873-3633  
 E-MAIL: [chris@builderscape.com](mailto:chris@builderscape.com)  
 WEB: [www.builderscape.com](http://www.builderscape.com)

experience. I wanted him to take on more responsibility, but I wanted him to have the credentials so if he met with a supplier or customer they knew he had the knowledge and authority to make a competent decision. It was my gift to him," Ron Matthews says.

Today, father and son work like partners in the business. Chris Matthews handles all of the operations, and Ron Matthews oversees sales, marketing and administration. "When Chris got involved, my life got easier," Ron Matthews says. "Two people pulling the load is a lot easier than one."

**TAKING OFF THE WHEELS.** Despite the defined roles the Matthews have today, handing over the reigns to the second generation isn't exactly easy, Ron Matthews acknowledges. "Myself and a lot of fathers and managers in this

more competitive, make more money and have more fun."

A look at some of Builderscape's key systems shows that Ron Matthews has adapted. Despite the conventional operating methods he grew comfortable with since he starting in the landscape industry 33 years ago, Builderscape has embraced some second-generation ideas that have helped it evolve and more than double in revenue since 2004, when Ron Matthews reorganized several smaller companies into one entity now known as Builderscape.

**KEEPING COSTS DOWN.** Equipment management is one area that's evolved since Chris Matthews' responsibilities have grown.

"Keeping up with newer equipment is one thing you can do to keep your

**"Myself and a lot of fathers and managers in this industry have difficulty letting go. Sometimes you just have to take [the training wheels] off."**

— Ron Matthews, Builderscape

industry have difficulty letting go," he says. He likens it to the training wheels on a bike. "Sometimes you just have to take them off.

"Another challenge is accepting change with time," Ron Matthews says. "With your son in the business, it's important to accept change early. The landscape and pool industries take a lot of energy – it's a young person's game. If we combine our generations' experiences with their energy, we'll be

costs down," Chris Matthews says. "My dad's generation bought old trucks and rebuilt them. Today, we buy new – we have to for fuel efficiency and warranty and safety features."

Builderscape created a vehicle replacement schedule and no-idling policy to keep its fleet in tip-top condition. "Years ago we'd hang on to trucks and only replace them when we could afford it," Ron Matthews says.

*continued on page 46*

## Sweet Spot

A company can “only be so big” before it outgrows its market and profit margins plummet, Ron Matthews says. While he can’t pin down the revenue level where companies typically top out because it depends on local conditions, a common range may be between \$2 million and \$3 million, he says.

“There’s is a happy medium,” says the president of \$1.5 million Builderscape. “Once you hit that, you need to [expand to] another location. Some companies get too large and fragmented and employees feel lost,” he says. “Plus, when you get above a certain size, you may be making more sales, but you’re probably not making enough money.”

Opening a new branch in another market is something Ron Matthews would consider for Builderscape in a few years – depending on the economy at the time and if he has trained several key managers.

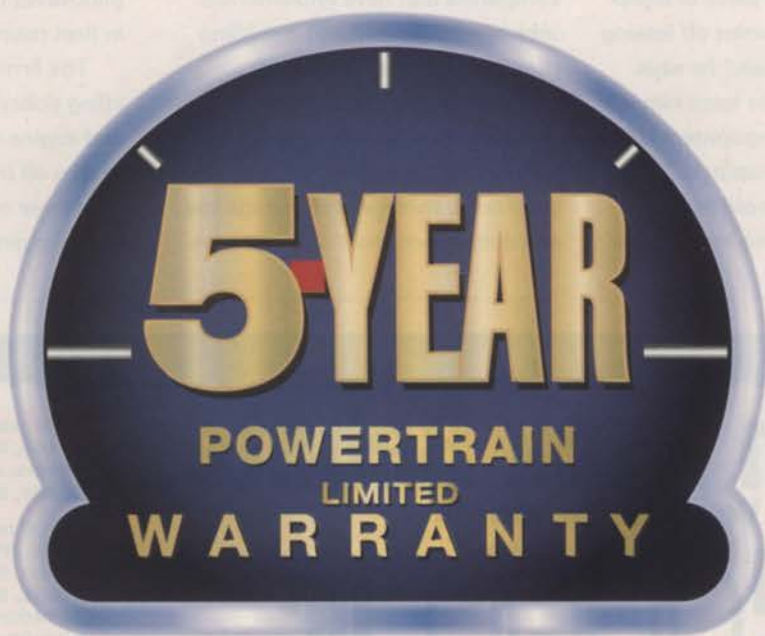
“A good manager will know when he’s there. If one year you’re making 10 to 12 percent and the next you’re making 2 percent, you need to look at the economies of your area and your balance sheet and think about what has changed. Maybe your equipment and employee utilization is low and going to another area will help strengthen the bottom line.”

Pools, sunrooms and playgrounds contribute to the “builder” aspect of the firm’s brand. These construction-type jobs make up 20 percent of the business. Photos: (on pages 42, 43 and 48) Builderscape





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THE RIGHT TRUCK FOR THE JOB

continued from page 43

"It's old-habit thinking, but after you just paid off a truck, it's hard to sell it. I also think people my age tend to keep the older stuff around 'just in case we need it.'"

Chris Matthews manages equipment differently – by selling old equipment that's not being used and buying new later if it's needed. "If you can lease an under-utilized piece of equipment locally, you are better off leasing and managing your cash," he says.

Ron Matthews has to force himself to think: "Less newer equipment is better than more older equipment."

Builderscape's year-old fleet replacement schedule also keeps costs

down and better the firm's chances of securing government contracts, Chris Matthews says. Builderscape completes three to five government-contracted parks or construction jobs per year. "The government wants to know that you're putting newer, less-polluting vehicles on the road," he says. Government agencies give credits to companies that have implemented vehicle replacement and anti-idling policies, Chris Matthews says.

Builderscape crafted its fleet replacement schedule by looking at its history and considering trucks' current conditions, mileage and average use, and determined most of its vehicles

have nine-year life spans. It developed a schedule as a guideline for replacing each of the company's seven trucks – about one or two per year. Though the company only relies on government bidding for 20 percent of its installation work, "It's a no-brainer to implement this stuff," Chris Matthews says of the fleet policies. He estimates this plan saves the firm \$12,000 per year in fleet maintenance costs.

The firm also instituted an anti-idling policy, which reduces fuel use and engine wear. It requires employees to turn off trucks when waiting more than three minutes, not allow two-stroke engines to idle more than one

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minute, obey local speed limits, maintain proper tire pressure, anticipate approaching stoppages and forbids leaving vehicles idling only for the use of heat and air conditioning, except for five minute breaks during extreme heat or cold. Chris Matthews estimates

the policy saves at least \$100 per truck per year in fuel.

Savings also have come from fueling at the yard rather than driving to gas stations. "[The crews used to] go into the store, get their coffee, take their time. Plus you're paying retail price [for fuel],"

Chris Matthews says.

Adding on-site fuel tanks saves Builderscape 10 to 15 cents per gallon and about 15 minutes per day per crewmember; plus, trucks accrue several fewer miles. "You just have

more control over the whole process," he says, estimating the total savings is about \$200 per week.

He acknowledges it might not be the right move for every company, citing a \$1,200 to \$1,500 initial investment to source tanks or set up appropriate containment areas. "Many suppliers will furnish a tank if the utilization of fuel is large enough," Chris Matthews says. Such is the case with Builderscape, which used 1,500 to 2,000 gallons of fuel per month during peak season.

**MARKETING REVAMP.** Builderscape's approach to marketing, too, is under-



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going a transformation from the “old way” to the “new way.”

When Ron Matthews formed Builderscape in 2004 by bringing together several businesses he operated with a brother-in-law who passed away, branding became very important. He previously operated as Matthews & Associates – a name that didn’t represent the services he provided. Builderscape touches on the elements of the full-service landscape company and the fact that it also provides construction services like room additions and in-ground pools. In addition to consistently branding Builderscape across various platforms – trucks, apparel and brochures – the Matthews are making one major change to the way they promote their business: They’re investing heavily in the Web.

Chris Matthews calls Builderscape’s current site “Generation 1.” “But now we’re going to go into Gen 2 – it’ll be new and improved,” he says of the

## Communication as a Selling Point

One change at Builderscape that didn’t take too much convincing from one generation to the next was an upgraded communications plan. Ron Matthews has had some sort of mobile communication device since 1978 or 1979 when he bought his first cell phone. “It was like a briefcase and I think it cost 75 cents a minute,” he says, laughing. “Then we went to two-way radios and eventually regular cell phones.” Today, Chris and Ron Matthews and three of their managers carry smartphones.

“The managers of the companies we work for don’t have any more time than we do,” Ron Matthews says, adding it’s vital to be as accessible to them as possible.

Chris Matthews, who frequently works in the field where it’s difficult to have a phone conversation, says he’s accessible by e-mail all day. “I may not be able to talk, but I can send an e-mail,” he says. “I tell them I’ll respond within 30 minutes. They like that.”

Residential customers, too, are becoming increasingly Web savvy and prefer the option to communicate electronically, Chris Matthews says. “Communications is a big selling point for us,” he says. “Anybody can put shrubs in the ground. We’re selling a service – communication and organization.”

**“Communications is a big selling point for us,” he says. “Anybody can put shrubs in the ground. We’re selling a service – communication and organization.”**

— Chris Matthews, Builderscape



firm’s site-in-progress, which should be live this spring. One goal of the new site is an improved Google rating – to be on the first page for the search terms “Central Ohio landscaper.”

Chris Matthews expects 90 percent of the firm’s marketing budget to be devoted to revamping the Web site this year with the remainder going to smaller-ticket items like brochure printing costs. The company has budgeted for the new site by nixing its Yellow

Pages advertising and Columbus Home & Garden Show appearances.

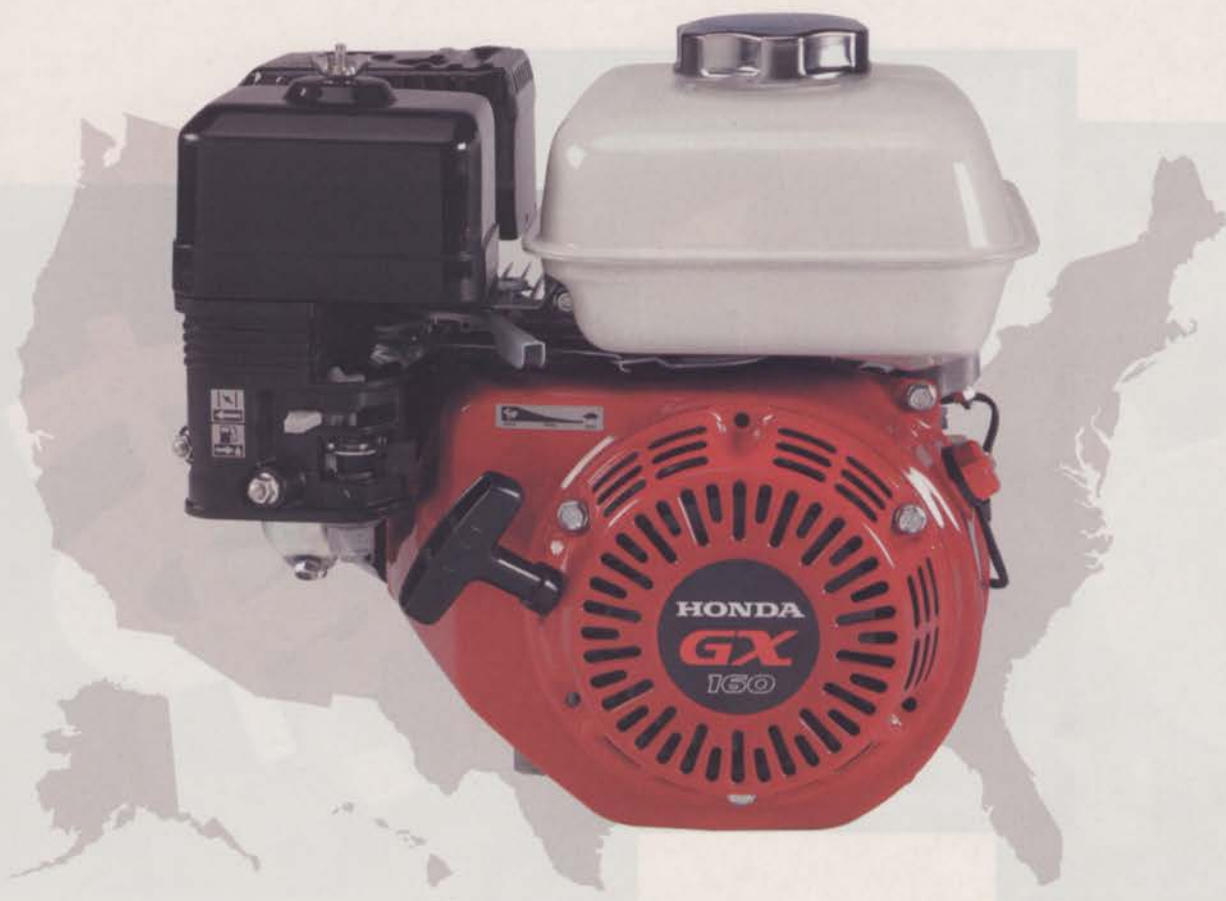
The Yellow Pages are costly, difficult to track and yield low-quality leads, he says. And the Columbus home show doesn’t generate the leads Builderscape hopes for, either. “Last year we had five good leads out of hundreds of people. One person bought from that. All of my time and effort spent there wasn’t worth the effort. The serious customers who are

looking to spend are searching the Internet at night for ideas and contractors,” Chris Matthews says.

“We used to run big ads in the Yellow Pages,” Ron Matthews says. “Today, your big ad should be your Web site.” **LL**



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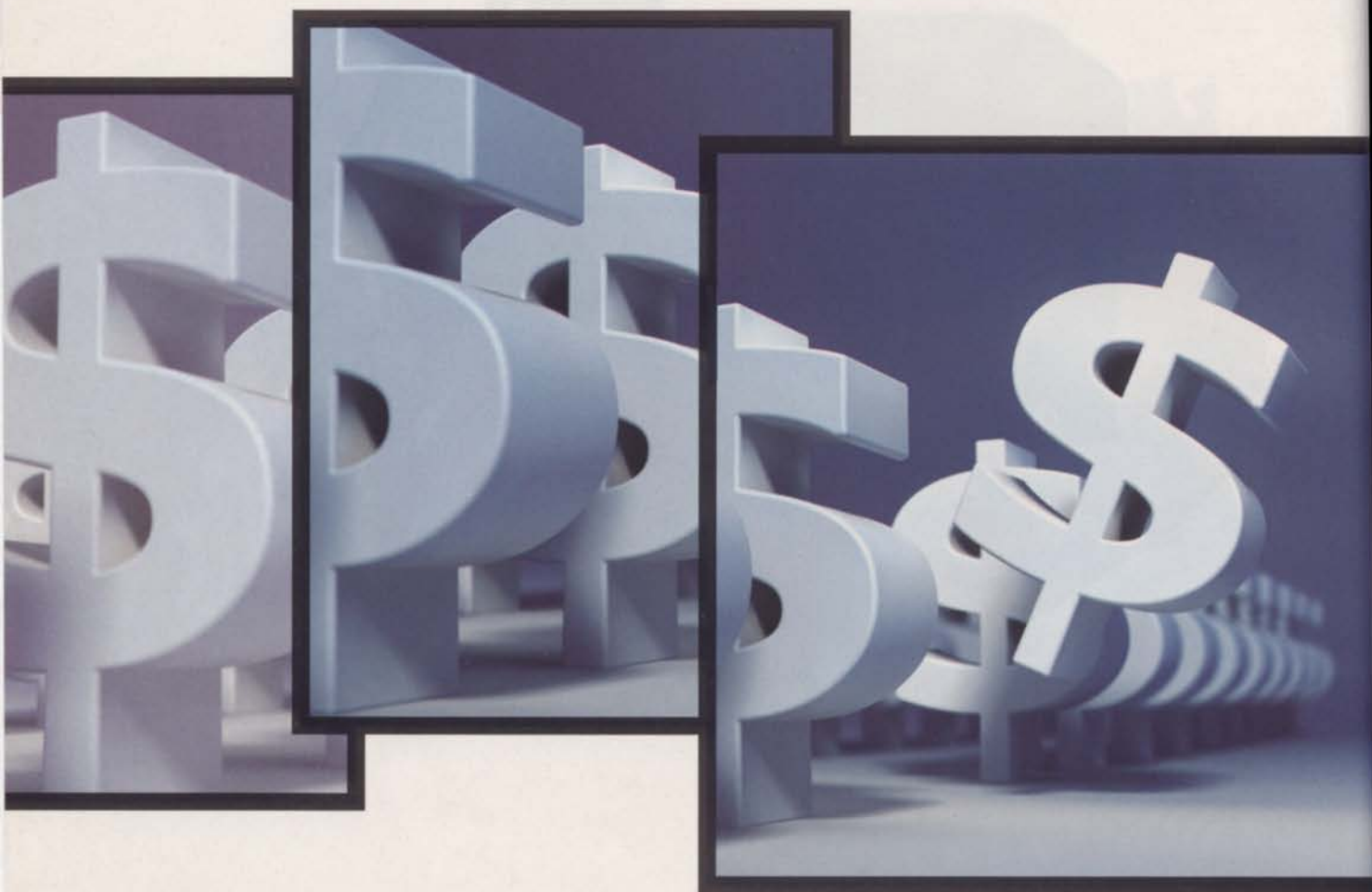
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# Over the Line

**Message board participants debate what action should be taken if a job is overbid.**

**Suppose you bid on a project and you weren't the lowest bidder.**

Then suppose you were awarded the contract anyway. What if that project ended up requiring less time and/or fewer resources than originally planned? Should the customer get some money back?

Todd Patton, president of Patton Property Maintenance in Haymarket, Va., ran into a situation like this with a maintenance contract. When it came time to renew the contract, he didn't raise the price because two of the recurring services on the contract had been overbid. He decided to pose this dilemma on the *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board without initially divulging all the details. Should

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money be refunded if the contract was overbid? The question was met with mixed reactions.

**OVER/UNDER.** Some say overbidding is just a part of the business and everything evens out in the end. "Unless it was pure robbery, I would not worry about it," posts Joy Ceballos, owner of Color Concepts Landscaping in Lake Worth, Fla. "How many times has the proposal been less than it should have been?"

Patton acknowledges that if the situation was reversed and he bid the cost of a job at a price less than what it turned out to be, he doesn't know if he'd recover that lost amount. "I sure wouldn't ask for more money on a job I underestimated unless there was something clearly not explained at the start," he says.

While some participants subscribe to this "you win some, you lose some" mentality, others take a different stance. It's a matter of good ethical

practice to give back the amount the contract was overbid by, some message board participants say.

"I think that if you overbid it to the point that you feel guilty about how much money you made off the people you should credit some of the money back to the customer," says Todd McCabe, president of McCabe Landscape Group in Wrightsville Beach, N.C.

**CASE BY CASE.** It was also suggested that refunding money for overbidding depends on the type of client that's involved.

"Let's say you have a \$700 cleanup for little old Mrs. Jones and it only takes you 45 minutes to complete," posts McCabe. "I would call that gouging and that is where ethics comes to play. If you are doing a job for a big bad general contractor and you have to bid the job for 2,000 hours and you come in at 1,500 then that is where the win some/lose some deal comes into play."

Other posters don't put a divide between the two types of clients. In this situation, each client should be treated equally, Ceballos posts.

"For some reason you rationalize that it is OK to rip off the general contractor (for thousands, no less) because they are a big company and not Mrs. Jones because she is on her own and is on a limited income," she says.

"What if Mrs. Jones works for the general contractor and can't get the money she deserves because they are always getting ripped off by other contractors and there is no money for raises in the budget?"

Look at each situation in relative terms, says Chad Stern, owner of Mowing and More in Chevy Chase, Md. For example, he says, if a company charges \$100 for cleanup and \$600 for labor and charges \$50 an hour, the company should spend 12 hours on the job. But if it only takes the company .75 hours, the estimate was over

"If you overbid it to the point that you feel guilty about how much money you made you should credit some of the money back to the customer."<sup>55</sup> — Todd McCabe, McCabe Landscape Group



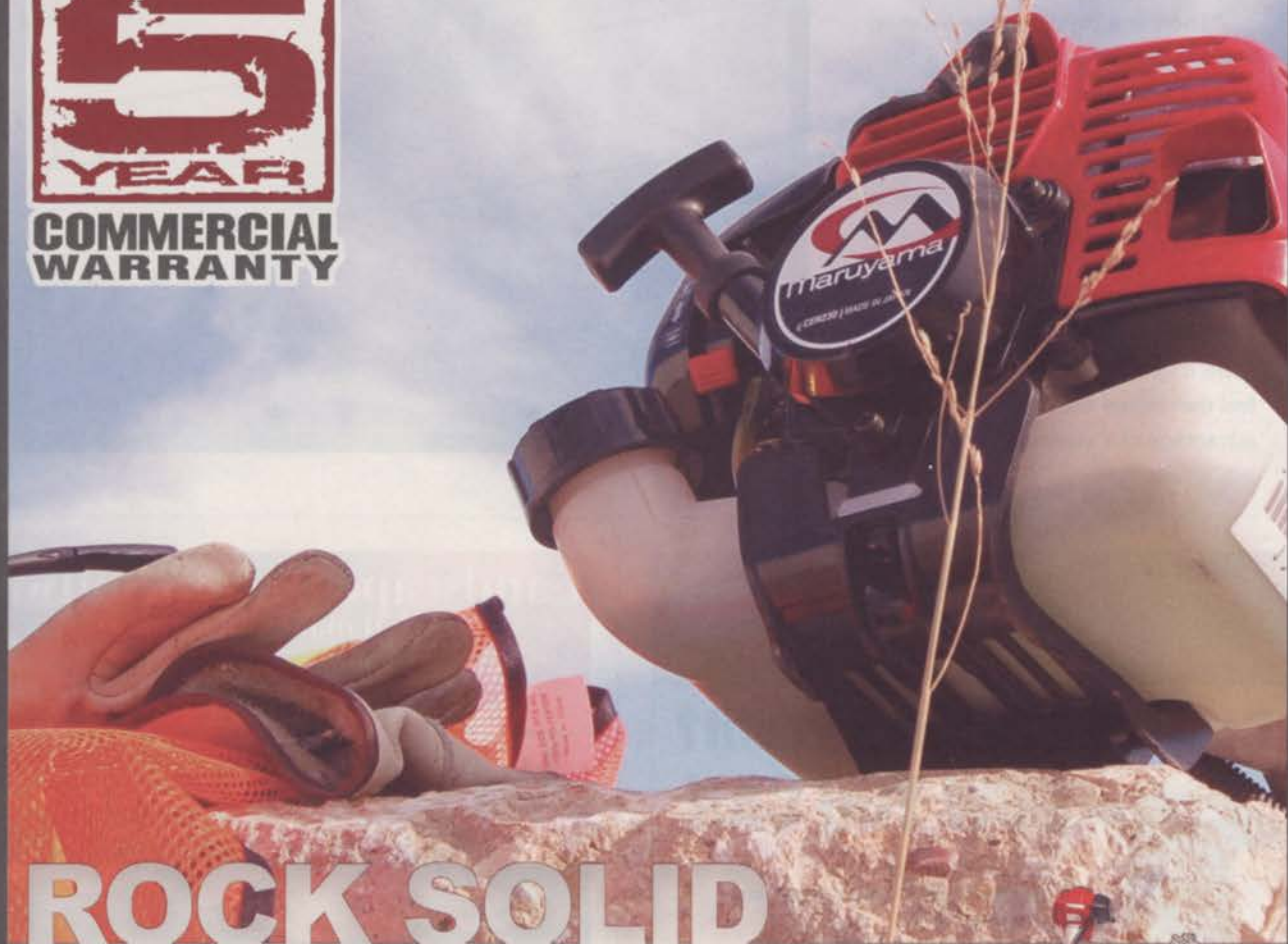
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by 1,500 percent.

On the other hand, if the bid with the general contractor project is 2,000 hours and it only takes 1,500 hours to complete, the project was overbid by 33 percent.

"There is a big difference between a 1,500 percent premium and a 33 percent premium," he says, adding if a customer finds out he or she had to pay 1,500 percent more than the job should have cost, that business will be lost.


**CUSTOMER CONCERNS.** Some posters consider what others' perception of them might be after the job. "If you feel that others would think you took advantage of a customer or situation



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I would revise the invoice," says Ryan Holt, owner of Driftwood Lawn Care and Landscape in Rising Sun, Md. "I have done that in the past."

Other participants consider refunding some money if the customer

estimate if the project goes over the amount bid.

"That ends the conversation right there and I get my contract price which both sides have agreed to, with no arm twisting," says the owner

has lowered prices for recurring services in the past if they were overbid by a large amount.

"If we overprice something one year, then we adjust for it the next year." **LL**

**"If you do feel that others would think you took advantage of a customer or situation I would revise the invoice."** — Ryan Holt, Driftwood Lawn Care and Landscape

requests it. If one of Dale Wiley's customers asks ahead of time if he will reduce the bill if the job is overbid, he agrees, provided the customer also agrees to pay more than the original

of Landscape Specialty Services in Forest Grove, Ore. "It helps me sleep better at night."

There is something to be learned from the experience, Stern says. He



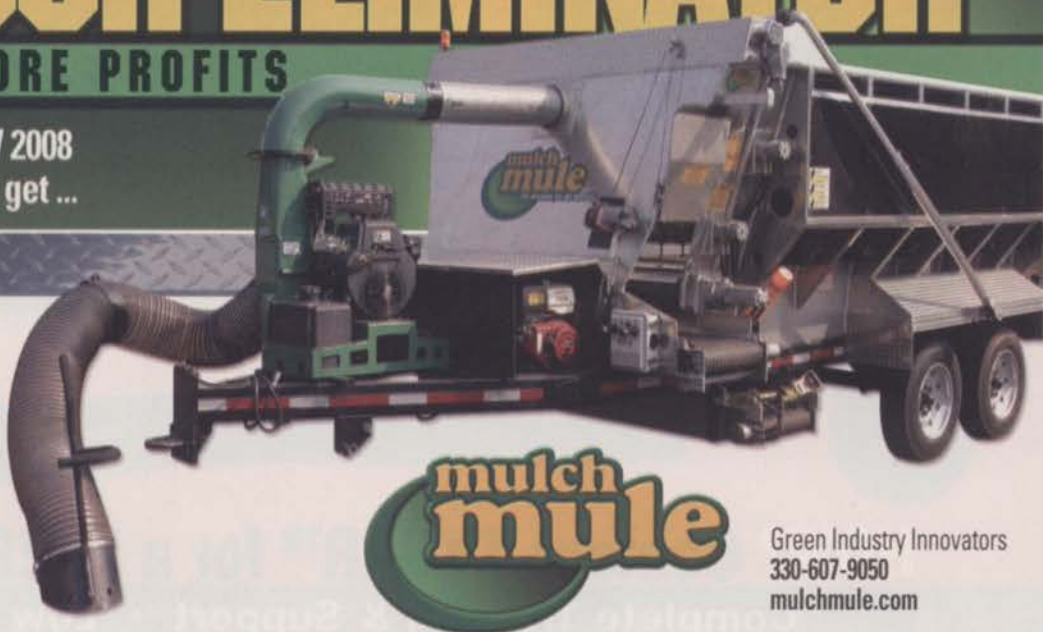
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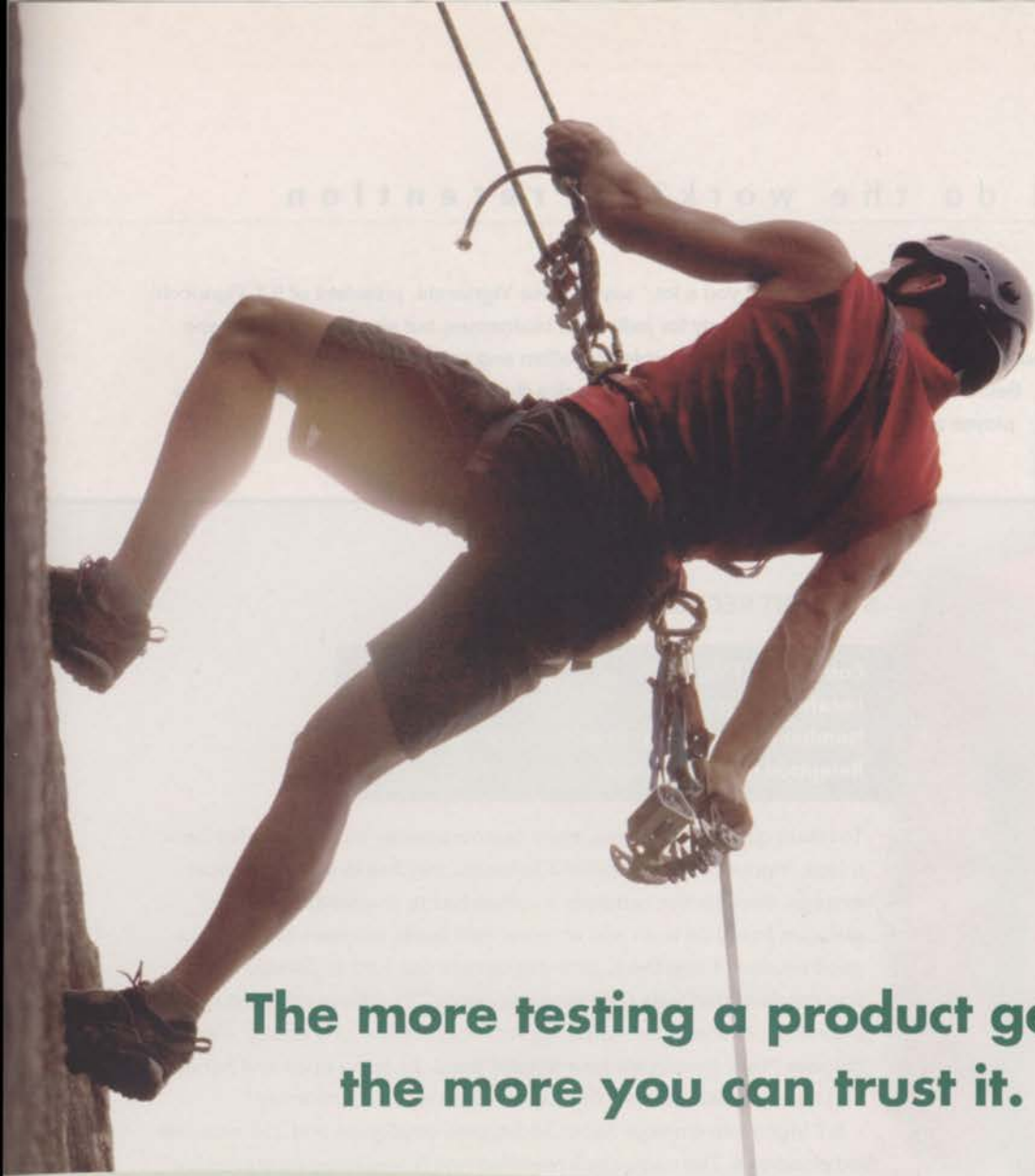
# Keep 'Em Coming

Employee retention is the backbone of a successful landscape company and a professional green industry.

BY EMILY MULLINS/ASSOCIATE EDITOR

**Employees are the backbone of any business.** And no one knows better than those in the landscape industry that quality people can be hard to come by. So once you've got a great crew in place, how do you keep them coming back day after day – or, better yet, year after year?

In a seasonal industry where the hours are long, the work is tough and the elements uncooperative, sometimes employers have to offer a little extra something to motivate their staffs to show up and get the job done. Most company owners agree a qualified staff of dedicated individuals who know the operations inside and out is worth its weight in gold, and they will invest significant time and money for that stability. "It's very expensive to train and recruit people, so



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a lack of employee retention can cost you a lot," says Donna Vignocchi, president of ILT Vignocchi, Wauconda, Ill. "Retention is great not only for individual businesses, but also for the landscape industry as a whole because it creates professionalism and validity."

Below are examples of four landscape companies that recognize the importance of employee retention and know how to do it right.

### STUDENT RECRUITMENT

**Company:** ILT Vignocchi

**Location:** Wauconda, Ill.

**Number of Employees:** 30 full-time, 150 seasonal

**Retention Rate:** 98 percent

To retain quality employees, every business owner must offer a few basic things, Vignocchi says. First and foremost, pay has to be fair or above average. Second, the company's culture has to revolve around open dialogue based on truth and honesty. And lastly, you have to provide a good product. From there, business owners can further develop a retention program that suits their business needs. "Employee retention really boils down to doing the right thing for the company as a whole," Vignocchi says. "Your people are your biggest asset, so being open and honest and taking additional time to invest in them is really important."

ILT Vignocchi employs about 30 full-time employees and 150 seasonal field personnel. The company's retention rate is measured on a monthly basis and was last reported at 98 percent. Vignocchi estimates spending anywhere from \$10,000 to \$20,000 on recruitment and retention every year, a good portion of which is spent on the company's summer internship program.

The program began eight years ago with eight applicants. Recent years have generated 50 or more applications from students all over the United States. The internships are paid and housing is provided by ILT Vignocchi. The company strives to attract students in landscape-related degree programs who demonstrate exceptional skills, like landscape architecture students who are graphically inclined or horticulture students who are passionate about the environment. "We've been really successful at drawing superior candidates," Vignocchi says.

To recruit students, ILT team members attend trade shows, career fairs and industry events like PLANET's Student Career Days. The company also donates to PLANET's Academic Excellence Foundation, formed to award scholarships and fund educational activities for the landscape industry, and makes an effort to market itself to applicable schools throughout the country. "Many schools don't provide the level of career placement services you hope they would," Vignocchi says. "One of the most important things we do is spend the time and money to reach these organizations so we can bring in the right kind of people."

who will do the work) — retention

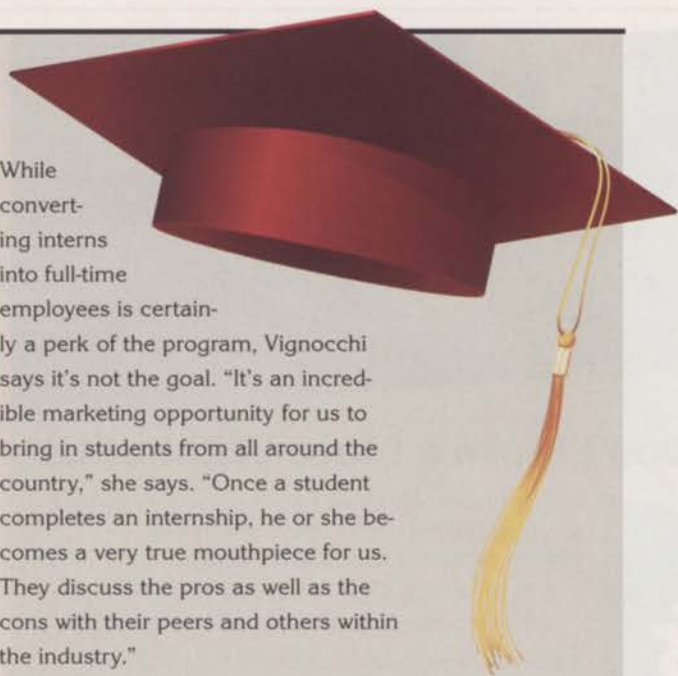
**“Employee retention really boils down to doing the right thing for the company as a whole.”**

— Donna Vignocchi, ILT Vignocchi

Students begin their internships in positions based on their credentials so they can perform at high levels as soon as they walk in the door. But throughout the three months, each intern will spend time in each sector of the full-service company. One day he or she may shadow the accounting department, and the next day ride along with a landscape designer to observe job sites. “We offer them experiences they might not get elsewhere,” Vignocchi says. “Once they leave, they’ve had a glimpse of everything we do.”

Over the years, the company has hired seven of its summer interns, and two of them are still with the company.

While converting interns into full-time employees is certainly a perk of the program, Vignocchi says it’s not the goal. “It’s an incredible marketing opportunity for us to bring in students from all around the country,” she says. “Once a student completes an internship, he or she becomes a very true mouthpiece for us. They discuss the pros as well as the cons with their peers and others within the industry.”



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## MONETARY MOTIVATION

**Company:** Russo Lawn & Landscapes  
**Location:** Windsor Locks, Conn.  
**Number of Employees:** 43 at peak season  
**Retention Rate:** 90 percent

Most business owners agree money is a motivating factor. Mark Stupcenski, director of operations at Russo Lawn & Landscapes, Windsor Locks, Conn., agrees and says the company's bonus distribution program definitely contributes to its 90-percent annual retention rate. Based on performance, the program gives the company's 43 crew members something to strive for and rewards them for a job well done. "The bonuses keep our guys in the loop

of how the company is performing, and give them a little something extra beyond their normal paychecks," Stupcenski says.

Russo Lawn & Landscapes' bonus program is divided into three parts: individual, team and overall company performance. It began a few years ago with monthly distribution, but employees voiced their preference to instead receive a larger check at the end of the year. To track performance, a white board lists each employee's weekly schedule and budgeted hours. At the end of each day, crew members write their actual hours on the board in red ink if they came in under budgeted hours and green ink if they surpassed budgeted hours. If they're under, they get a bonus.

Individual bonuses are based on weekly budgeted goals vs. actual hours and amount to 3 percent of each employee's weekly base wage. For example, an employee who works 40 hours a week making \$12 an hour could earn a bonus of \$604.80 after 42 weeks. Amounts earned by each employee vary, as hourly wages range from \$10 to \$16 based on tenure and position.

The second part of the program "keeps everyone working together," Stupcenski says, and focuses on each crew's yearly performance of the company's six primary services: spring cleanup, weekly maintenance, pruning, mulching, seasonal color and fall cleanup. For each service in which crews beat the annual budget, including material usage, each member receives a \$60 bonus.

The company-wide bonus is based

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on annual gross profit. If revenue minus direct costs is better than 50 percent, each employee earns 2 percent of his base wage for production year to date. For example, an employee making \$480 per week for 42 weeks can earn another \$403.20 at the end of the year. Overall, the average employee can earn an additional \$1,368 at the end of the year through the company's

a job just to beat their budgeted time and get the bonus," Stupcenski says. "They still have to follow through with details and maintain the quality our clients expect."

The company's relaxed atmosphere encourages open dialogue between management and crew members, who are encouraged to discuss any concerns they may have, includ-



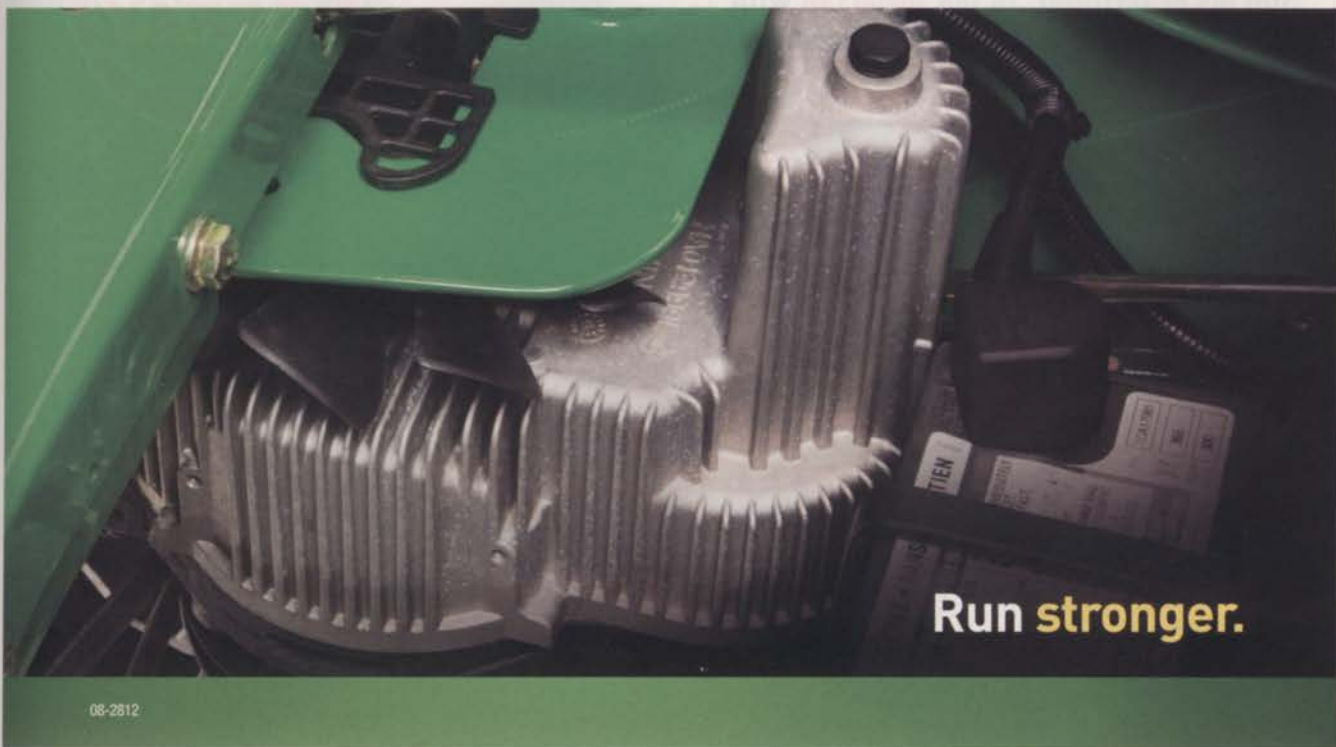
**"The bonuses keep our guys in the loop of how the company is performing and gives them a little something extra beyond their normal paychecks."** — Mark Stupcenski, Russo Lawn & Landscapes

bonus program.

With a system that awards bonuses based on speed, quality checks are necessary. The company employs three quality control supervisors who accompany crews in the field to make sure satisfactory work is being performed. "Our guys can't hack through

ing bonus distribution or wage issues.

Company meetings are kept casual and no topic is off limits. "We have a really relaxed atmosphere," Stupcenski says. "Members of the management staff are just another couple of guys in the company. No one feels they have to walk on eggshells."



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**CULTURE CLUB**

**Company:** Moore Landscapes

**Location:** Northbrook, Ill.

**Number of Employees:** 275 at peak season

**Retention Rate:** 90-plus percent

Like many landscape companies, Moore Landscapes in Northbrook, Ill., relies on its primarily Hispanic workforce to keep things running day in and day out. To keep the company's retention rate in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile, the management makes an effort to tap into the employees' culture, says COO Brian Stanley. "Recognizing our employees' Hispanic culture and interests is a synergistic approach to connect as a company," he says.

For example, the company purchases season tickets to Chicago's major league soccer team, the Chicago Fire, and gives them to employees as rewards for exceptional work. Last year's annual company picnic centered on a soccer tournament, where employees created teams and competed

for trophies and prizes – including a 1981 El Camino. "Soccer is a big draw for them," Stanley says. "Everyone had a really good time and the event proved hugely successful."

Another way Moore Landscapes keeps employees coming back is by making sure they're well aware of their daily responsibilities. This clear communication is even more crucial when language or cultural barriers are an issue. "Employees like to know where they stand," Stanley says. "If they're doing a good job, let them know. If they're not, let them know. But above all, make sure they understand what they're accountable for."

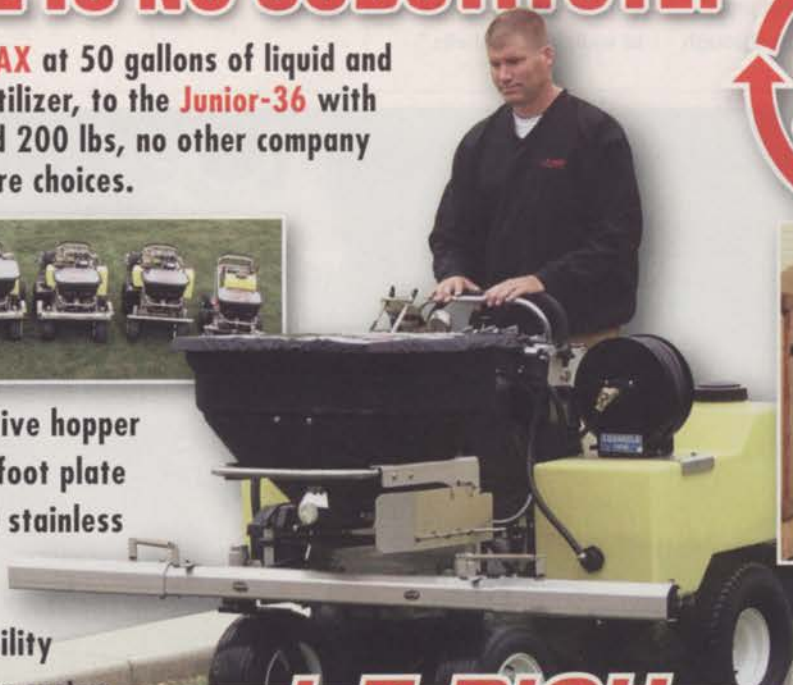
To keep everyone on the same page, it is a prerequisite that all of Moore Landscape's 50 crew leaders are bilingual and conduct weekly tailgate meetings in both English and Spanish. "If you can't communicate with your employees in their language, that's a problem," Stanley says. "When leaders and their crews have the same ethnic background, that common element helps keep things running smoothly."

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## YEAR-ROUND PEACE OF MIND

**Company:** Kujawa Enterprises, Inc.

**Location:** Oak Creek, Wis.

**Number of Employees:** 100 full-time, 50 seasonal

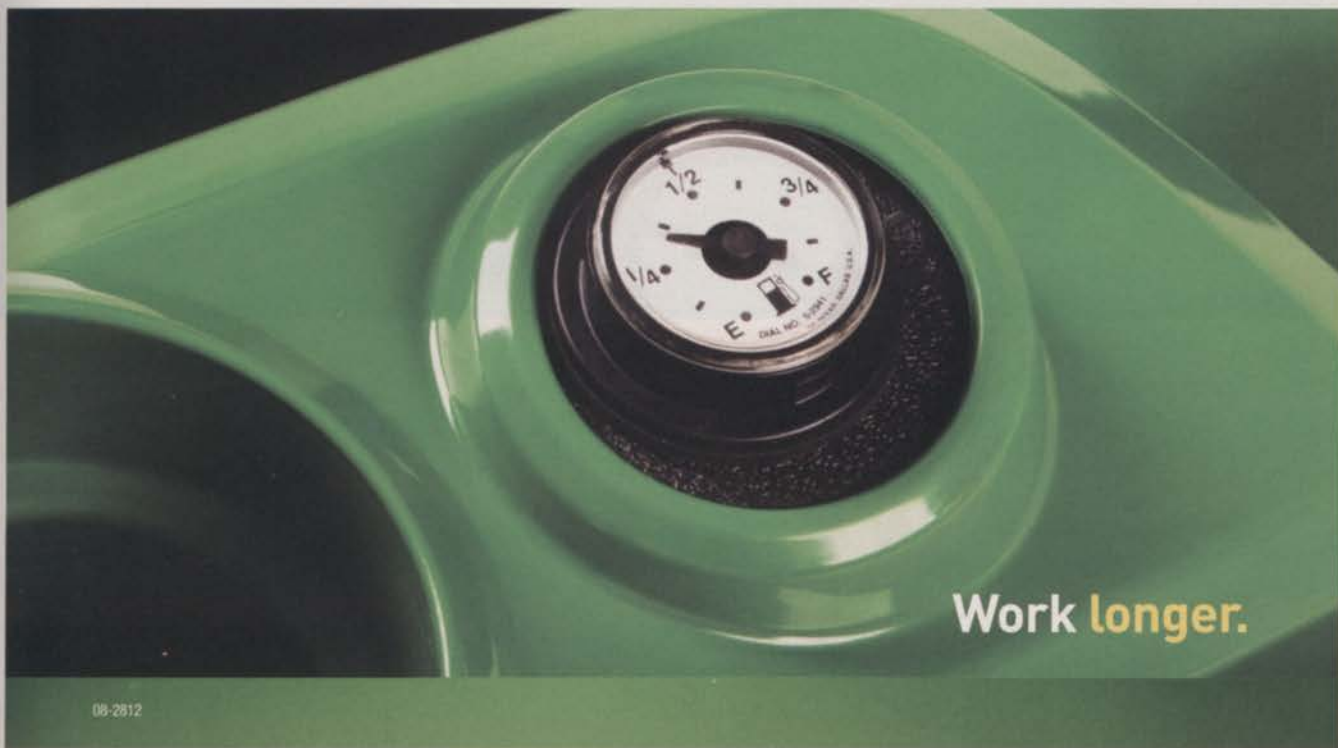
**Retention Rate:** 90 to 95 percent

Kujawa Enterprises' employee retention strategy may seem simple, but it plays a pivotal role in the company's 90- to 95-percent retention rate. The Oak Creek, Wis.-based company keeps many of its 100 full-time employees busy year round. If there's no work, management creates work, and whoever isn't busy takes part in on-the-clock education and training. In a seasonal industry like landscaping, this kind of job security can be hard to come by, and KEI's employees recognize – and appreciate – it. "Our employees know they'll have money coming in all year even though this is a seasonal business," says Todd Hasler, chief training officer. "They know they won't have to go on unemployment just because the typical landscape season is over."

The company's snow removal and interior divisions keep many of its employees busy throughout the winter months. Some transfer to the in-house service center to get equipment ready for the spring season. Others are cross-trained to make them valuable in multiple sectors of the company. Construction crews spend time in the company's warehouse-like facility where they have room for design/build and installation training.

Off-season education is also important, Hasler says, particularly for its chemical applicators. Some of the certified technicians will teach technicians undergoing training what they need to know for their upcoming Certified Landscape Technician exams. "We invest considerable time and money to bring them in and teach them more about the work they do," he says. "We think that demonstrates our level of commitment and our desire to retain them."

On top of continuous, year-round employment, Hasler says respect is another important aspect of KEI's culture. He abides by what he calls a "mirror approach" – where he first says to himself what he plans to say to an employee to see how it sounds. If it's said in a way Hasler himself wouldn't mind hearing, he knows it's an acceptable way to approach the issue with the employee. "No one likes negativity," he says. "There's no quicker way to put a wall between a manager and an employee. Treat them the way you'd want to be treated." LL



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BY MIKE ZAWACKI/MANAGING EDITOR

# the magic number

**Two, three or more? How many guys make up the best mowing crew? Maintenance contractors share their insights on what works for them and why.**

**There's no doubt mowing and maintenance is an attractive service offering.** Often it's the turn-key service for many contractors entering the landscape market.

Nearly 70 percent of contractors offer mowing and maintenance services, according to recent *Lawn & Landscape* research. On average, 40 percent of landscape contractors annual revenue stems from mowing and maintenance services, the data says. In addition, gross revenue for lawn mowing and maintenance services increased 15 percent from 2006 to 2007.

When assembling mowing crews, though, flexibility is the name of the game. "Having different size crews is important because you want to be able to handle any type of account that you may get hired for," says Sage Holbrook, owner of Sage Landscape Maintenance in Olympia, Wash. "If you are not flexible, then the work will end up suffering in the long run."

Photo: Kubota

As contractors strive to expedite what it takes to do a quality job, the equation for efficiency and profitability comes down to the combination of workers manning a mowing crew. Too few people and the crew spends too much time on a job site. Too many people and there is not enough work to keep everyone busy. The conundrum is finding a happy medium that works for an individual landscape outfit.

**TWO TO TANGO.** By far, the two-man crew is the most popular setup among maintenance contractors.

Shayne Newman is an efficiency guy, and he prefers two-man mowing crews for this reason. "We ruled out

equipped with a riding mower, walk-behind mower and a pair of string trimmers and backpack blowers can get on and off the average job site (about 40,000 square feet) in 45 minutes.

Regardless of whether it's a commercial or residential mowing job, Jim Thorpe, president of The "J" Boys, in Pennsauken, N.J. is most efficient running a two-man mowing crew outfitted with a pair of zero-turn mowers, two walk-behinds, a trio of string trimmers, a pair of blowers and a stick edger.

"Our company uses a two-person team with most mowing jobs budgeted under six-man hours," Thorpe says. "If the job is going to take more than a half-day, then we'll send two, two-man



**"Over the years we found out that three guys on a mowing crew just wasn't enough and five guys was just too many. For us, four people per crew is the best and easiest solution because we're able to pair up workers – two with mowing and two with the other work."**

— David Gantt, Springdale Outdoor Service

three-man crews early on because they eventually lead to too many job site inefficiencies," says the president of YardApes Landscaping & Lawn Care in New Milford, Conn. "The one-man crew may be fine for the small job sites, but we've found that many guys prefer not to work alone."

Depending on the time of year, a two-man mowing crew can obtain anywhere between 70 to 85 percent efficiency, Newman says, meaning he can bill out 70 to 85 percent of the hours that crew logs that day. Downtime and drive time are the most common factors contributing to lost time, he says.

Newman estimates a two-man crew

crews to complete the job."

Two-man mowing crews have worked well for Mike Russo over the last nine years, with each crew logging between 16 and 20 man hours per day. "We have found that accountability dramatically increases with just two workers on a crew," says the owner of Russo Lawn & Landscape in Winsor Locks, Conn.

However, factors such as bad weather or an early leaf season can create a backlog that overwhelms a two-man crew, says Mike Neese, president of Grayson South in Fort Mill, S.C. "In some instances we'll run a crew of three men or a solo route, if



Mowing crews can be an unlikely place to find future company leaders. Check out April Online Extras to find out how some landscape contractors cultivate skilled employees for foreman and supervisory positions.

Photo: Dixie Chopper



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## CONTINUING EDUCATION

Training and communication critical for mowing crew efficiency, says Mike Neese, president of Grayson South in Fort Mill, S.C. Neese convenes a short meeting every morning to review key issues, discuss safety topics and brief his crews on any customer issues that had developed over the last 24 hours.

"This meeting helps to reinforce safety, training and company systems," he says.

In addition to regular in-house training, employees are encouraged to seek educational opportunities outside the company, Neese says.

"We're then able to bring that outside training back into the company and apply it at the crew level," he says.

needed," Neese says. "In addition, we have several 'floaters' from our design/build crew who can help out the maintenance crews during bad weather or during specific seasonal situations."

With regard to crew structure, in a two-man setup most contractors say the individual who operates the riding mower is the crew leader and the individual responsible for the bulk of the maintenance duties is the subordinate.

Newman, though, is experimenting with reversing this crew hierarchy.

"The traditional thinking is that the crew leader is the guy working the riding mower, that you earn the right to use the riding mower," he says. "But shouldn't it be the other way around? The new guys should get a mentor who begins training them on the proper way to mow a property and run a crew. Most guys, if they mow under a foreman for a season, are ready to move up and be a foreman of their own crew come next season."

**THREE'S COMPANY.** The standard mowing setup at Perfect Lawns and LandWorks of Austin in Austin, Texas is a three-man crew, says Randy Martin, the company's assistant sales and marketing manager. This trio is relegated to mowing, edging, blowing and bed weeding. The three-member system is used to tend to both commercial and residential accounts, he says.

As the company grew and gained larger residential and commercial accounts, the three-man crew made the most sense, Martin says, because the workload was too taxing for a two-man crew. "We developed this system through trial and error," he says. "Flexibility is what we gain by using this system. Sometimes we run two-member crews in residential subdivisions that contain smaller homes on small lots, but our larger properties are quite a

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bit more challenging for members of a two-man crew. Three members can handle a large number of properties and can work hard all day. And on extremely large properties we will send out multiple crews."

David Gantt, owner of Springdale Outdoor Service in Blythewood, S.C., prefers a four-man set up to his mowing crew - two mowing while two do detail and trim work. "Over the years we found that three guys on a mowing crew just wasn't enough and five guys was just too many," he says. "For us, four people per crew is the best and easiest solution because we're able to pair up workers - two with mowing and two with the other work."

While he prefers two-man crews, Thorpe will assemble a three-man crew when a property requires a large number of man hours. "These larger teams are used for some of our tighter routes where the ride time is not an issue or when the jobs are budgeted for more than 16 man hours," he says. "We benefit from larger crews when we get the bigger mowing jobs, but the weakness for us has been getting strong leaders to oversee these crews."

Holbrook believes an ideal mowing setup is to have two, four-man crews and a single, two-man crew with a floating supervisor that oversees each crew and makes sure everything runs smoothly and efficiently.

Crew size, though, is many times an individual decision that each owner needs to make based on the requirements of their particular market

"Depending on the size of the account, sometimes it does not financially pan out for more than two employees on a mowing crew," Holbrook says. "Some owners think that having more employees on a mowing crew cuts downtime. However, in the long run it doesn't." LL

## REDUCING WINDSHIELD TIME

On a job site, individual downtime - or "windshield time" - is an efficiency killer. An employee waiting in the truck is getting paid to be unproductive.

Regardless of size, Shayne Newman, president of YardApes Landscaping & Lawn Care in New Milford, Conn., offers some tasks to keep crew members busy while idle and waiting for the mowing guy to finish his work.

- Make sure all of the equipment is gassed up and ready for the next job site.
- Inspect all of the equipment for potential damage.
- Scrape the mower deck.
- Clean up any visible clumps of grass.
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Kawasaki® FX Series V-Twin .....	27-HP

#### OPTIONS

2-Post Folding Rollover Protection Structure (ROPS) with Seat Belt; Tire – Knobby 23 x 10.50 – 12 (2 required); ZT200 48", 52"/54" or 61" Deck Striping Kit; 48", 54" or 61" Mulch Baffle Kit; Kit 61" Widetrack (widens track on 61" units); Kit – Mulching 51"/52" or 61" Deck; Kit – ECO Plate 32" – 54" or 61"; Kit – Suspension Seat ZT200; Electric Deck Lift Kit ZT200; ZT Hitch Kit; BOSS-Vac™ PRO Collection System

### BOB-CAT® Classic Gear Drive Walk-Behind Mower

#### ENGINES

Briggs & Stratton .....	15-HP
Kohler.....	15-HP

#### OPTIONS

GC Poly 3.75 or 5 bushel dump; 36" or 48" Mulch baffle kit with eliminator blades; Jumbo grass catcher, Kit – ECO plate, 36" – 48"

### BOB-CAT® Predator-Pro Zero Turn Mowers

#### ENGINES

Generac® V-twin .....	26-HP
Generac® V-twin .....	33-HP
Kawasaki® twin Liquid Cooled .....	26-HP
Kawasaki® .....	37-HP

#### OPTIONS

2-post rollover-protection structure (ROPS) with seat belt; Tire – knobby 23 x 10.50 – 12 (2 required); 52" / 54" or 61" Deck striping kit; 52" or 61" Mulch baffle kit; Kit – 61" Widetrack (widens drive wheel tack on 61" units); Kit – ECO plate 52" or 61"; Electric deck lift kit; ZT Hitch kit; BOSS-VAC PRO™ Collection System

### BOB-CAT® FastCat Zero Turn Mowers

#### ENGINES

Kawasaki® KAI V-Twin .....	17-HP
Briggs & Stratton® Intek .....	21-HP
Kawasaki® KAI V-Twin .....	19-HP

#### OPTIONS

Deluxe suspension seat, 3.75 or 5-Bushel Dump Grass Catcher, 2 Bag Spindle Driven BOSS-VAC™ Collection System, 2-post Roll Over Protection Structure (ROPS) with seat belt, 36", 48" or 52" Mulch Baffle Kit, 36" – 52" ECO Plate Kit, ZT Hitch Kit

BY MARISA PALMIERI/SENIOR EDITOR

# 1. combating diseases



Diagnosis and prevention are key when forming a disease control strategy.

There are a number of phone calls lawn care professionals don't like to receive. One of them sounds like this: "I know your technician was just here the other day, but today I noticed some strange patches in my front lawn."

Like most lawn care operators (LCOs), Dick Bare, the president of Arbornomics has heard that one before. In Norcross, Ga., where he operates, the diagnosis may be brown patch on fescue, dollar spot on Bermudagrass or pythium blight on either.

Because diseases prevail when the host (the type of turf), pathogen (the organism that causes the disease) and environment are just right, some parts of the country expect disease outbreaks during the hot summer months of July and August.

Developing a good understanding for diseases, why they happen and how to prevent them from

taking places is the best thing a lawn care professional can do when creating an effective disease control strategy, says Joe Rimelspach of The Ohio State University's Department of Plant Pathology.

"Customers want answers for brown grass, and it's so easy to say 'It's a disease, let's spray something.' But if you don't really know what you're working with, you won't be able to get rid of the problem and have a happy customer," he says.

First and foremost, LCOs should educate themselves on diseases that afflict turfgrass varieties in their regions in addition to working with their extension offices for proper diagnosis (see the "Common Turf Diseases and Control Methods" chart on pages 80-81 for more information).

*continued on page 82, chart on pages 80-81*



## Solutions that fit any lawn disease problem.



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# COMMON TURF DISEASES AND CONTROL METHODS

DISEASE NAME		DESCRIPTION/SIGNS
<b>BROWN PATCH</b>		Summer disease; circular patches range from a few inches to several feet in diameter. In early morning on dew-covered turf, white mycelium of the causal fungus is often visible; grass within the patch is often killed or thinned, creating a sunken effect. <small>Photo: Lane Tredway, North Carolina State University</small>
<b>DOLLAR SPOT</b>		White or tan spots of dead turf about the size of a silver dollar up to 4 inches in diameter. Spots may run together, producing large areas of dead turf. Leaves initially show yellow-green blotches, which progress to a light straw color with reddish-brown margins. <small>Photo: Lawn King</small>
<b>FAIRY RINGS</b>		Typically appear as rings of dark green and fast-growing turf; may also appear as rings of slow-growing or killed turf. The bands of affected turf range from 4 inches to a foot in width, forming more or less continuing rings ranging from 3 to 200 feet across. <small>Photo: Lane Tredway, North Carolina State University</small>
<b>GRAY SNOW MOLD</b>		Usually noticed as the snow melts in the spring. Commonly found in turf areas with the greatest snow accumulation, such as along driveways. Notable symptoms include white crusted areas of grass in which blades are dead, bleached and matted together. <small>Photo: Lawn King</small>
<b>NECROTIC RING SPOT</b>		Caused by root pathogens in cool season turfs. Symptoms include circular, ring-shaped or serpentine patches of dead or dying turf. Affected areas may be a few inches to a foot or more in diameter. Seldom occurs in newly planted turf, but can appear on recently sodded turf. <small>Photo: Lawn King</small>
<b>PINK SNOW MOLD/ MICRODOCHIUM PATCH</b>		Develops under snow cover. Gets its name from the accumulation of pink fungal spores that pile up on the leaves of infected grass plants, producing a pink cast on circular patches of matted grass. <small>Photo: Lawn King</small>
<b>POWDERY MILDEW</b>		First appears as isolated wefts of fine, gray-white powdery growth on the upper surface of the grass leaf; it becomes rapidly more dense and may cover the entire leaf, giving it a gray-white appearance. <small>Photo: Lawn &amp; Landscape archive</small>
<b>PYTHIUM BLIGHT</b>		Also known as grease spot and cottony blight, it can be highly destructive, especially on bentgrasses and ryegrasses. First appears as small, irregularly shaped spots ranging from 1/2 inch to 4 inches in diameter. Leaves appear water-soaked in appearance, then shriveled. Patches fade to a light brown or gray color; groups of spots may join together. <small>Photo: Lane Tredway, North Carolina State University</small>
<b>RUST DISEASES</b>		A number of rust diseases affect turf; they generally appear as a light yellow flecking of the leaves. As flecks enlarge, they may become longer than broad and when numerous, they are arranged in rows parallel with the veins of the leaves. Severe outbreaks may appear similar to rusty iron. <small>Photo: Lawn King</small>
<b>SLIME MOLDS</b>		Unlike most other turf pathogens, they don't directly infect the plant. They feed on microorganisms and decaying organic debris. During warm, wet weather, slime molds migrate onto the surfaces of turfgrass leaves where they produce a white, gray or blue patch. Affected areas may be from a few inches to many feet in rings, streaks or patches. <small>Photo: Lawn King</small>
<b>SUMMER PATCH</b>		Sometimes called Poa patch, occurs on Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescues on lawns. Symptoms appear identical to necrotic ring spot; seek expert diagnostic assistance. <small>Photo: Lawn King</small>



For a comprehensive, searchable database of fungicides, MSDS and product labels visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com/msds](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com/msds)  
 This guide is not intended to be a complete list.

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT	RESISTANT SPECIES/CULTIVARS	FUNGICIDES
Avoid excess nitrogen and irrigation in summer.	Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescues are the most resistant species.	Azoxystrobin, Chlorothalonil, Fenarimol, Fludioxonil, Flutolanil, Iprodione, Mancozeb, Myclobutanil, Polyoxin D, Propiconazole, Pyraclostrobin, Thiophanate methyl, Thiram, Triadimefon, Trifloxystrobin, Vinclozolin
Avoid nitrogen deficiency, drought stress and night watering. Remove dew in early morning.	Tall fescue. Some creeping bentgrass and Kentucky bluegrass cultivars are somewhat resistant.	Boscalid, Chlorothalonil, Fenarimol, Iprodione, Mancozeb, Myclobutanil, Propiconazole, Thiophanate methyl, Thiram, Triadimefon, Vinclozolin
Mask symptoms by fertilizing with nitrogen and/or iron. Thoroughly water rings to avoid drought. Core aeration and application of wetting agents may help wetting of affected soils.	None available.	Azoxystrobin, Flutolanil, Polyoxin D, Pyraclostrobin, Triadimefon
Avoid piling snow in sensitive turf areas. Remove tree leaves from turf before snow cover. Rake disease-damaged areas in spring to break up matted grass.	Kentucky bluegrass, fine fescues.	Azoxystrobin, Chloroneb, Chlorothalonil, Cyproconazole, Ethazole, Fenarimol, Flutolanil, Iprodione, Propiconazole, Triadimefon, Thiram, Vinclozolin
Use cultural practices that reduce turf stress, such as irrigation; raise mowing heights to 2 inches or more.	Perennial ryegrass, tall fescue.	Azoxystrobin, Fenarimol, Iprodione, Myclobutanil, Propiconazole, Thiophanate methyl
Avoid piling snow in sensitive turf areas. Continue mowing turf in fall until growth ceases. Do not apply excessive amounts of nitrogen in mid-fall.	Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescues are less susceptible than creeping bentgrass or perennial ryegrass.	Azoxystrobin, Chlorothalonil, Fenarimol, Fludioxonil, Iprodione, Mancozeb, Myclobutanil, Propiconazole, Pyraclostrobin, Thiophanate methyl, Thiram, Triadimefon, Trifloxystrobin, Vinclozolin
Don't grow Kentucky bluegrass in shaded areas. Prune trees to allow more light to reach turf.	Fine fescues; use shade-tolerant ground covers in shaded areas.	Fenarimol, Myclobutanil, Propiconazole, Triadimefon
Avoid excessive nitrogen and irrigation in hot, humid weather. Improve drainage and air circulation in areas where the disease is a problem.	Kentucky bluegrass is less susceptible than perennial ryegrass and creeping bentgrass.	Azoxystrobin, Chloroneb, Ethazole, Fosetyl-Aluminum Mefnoxam, Metalaxyl, Potassium phosphate, Propamocarb, Pyraclostrobin
Avoid nitrogen deficiencies and moisture stress in late summer/early fall. Applications of nitrogen fertilizer and irrigation at the first sign of infection will help reduce disease severity.	Fine fescues and tall fescue are quite resistant to most foliar rust diseases.	Azoxystrobin, Chlorothalonil, Cyproconazole, Fenarimol, Mancozeb, Myclobutanil, Propiconazole, Pyraclostrobin, Triadimefon, Trifloxystrobin
Remove spores by mowing, brushing, raking or irrigating the turf.	None available.	Fungicides not required.
Use cultural practices that promote root growth. Increase aeration and improve drainage.	Perennial ryegrass, tall fescue and creeping bentgrass.	Azoxystrobin, Fenarimol, Myclobutanil, Propiconazole, Thiophanate methyl, Triadimefon, Trifloxystrobin

Source: Managing Turfgrass Diseases, Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences

## pesticides and fertilizers

**DIFFERENT APPROACHES.** Once a lawn care company is confident in its diagnosis abilities, it needs to define its approach to disease control.

"The name of the game is prevention," says Rimelspach, adding that once a disease appears there is no cure, only suppression. "If you're already seeing gray leaf spot, it's too late. You can treat it, but you can't actually cure it. If a customer has a history of a disease, that's where you can capitalize on the preventive services."

Many lawn care companies sell preventive fungicide programs, Rimelspach says. These are most successful if the region is prone to a certain disease or if clients' lawns have experienced diseases before.

TruGreen, for example, offers a preventive fungicide program in parts of the Southeast and in Texas where brown patch is "inevitable," says Bobby Joyner, director of technical services. It includes a few fungicide applications that start in late May.

Other firms prefer a cultural approach to preventive disease control. "We like to grow healthy grass, not just control pest problems," says Chris Brown, owner and director of franchise development for Teed & Brown, a lawn care company in Norwalk, Conn., noting this approach includes building a lawn with the right fertility, pH level and disease-resistant turf types.

At Teed & Brown, after diagnosing a disease, the technician typically will

recommend that a customer "rides out the summer." Often, the problem is too much thatch, an improper pH level and a disease-susceptible turf variety. To prevent the disease from returning the following year, Teed & Brown will aerate, topdress and overseed the lawn with a more resistant seed variety. "That same disease problem will almost never come back," he says.

Still, some clients won't stand for any disease in their lawns and prefer fungicide treatments. *Lawn & Landscape* numbers show fungicide applications are growing. About 28 percent of firms offered them in 2007 - up from 25 percent in 2006. And product expenditures grew, too, with the average firm spending \$2,361 on

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## pesticides and fertilizers

fungicides in 2007 – up 46 percent from the previous year.

Arbornomics' Bare knows many of his clients can be meticulous – they want to know that no issue in their lawn has been overlooked and many of them will consider mid-season fungicide applications. As such, if his technicians identify brown patch, for example, they call their clients on the spot and offer to make an application right then and there. Bare says treating on the spot is preferable to making a return visit – less windshield time equals more profit. Such applications, depending size and product, hover in the \$75 range. That price can be a lot to swallow, even for high-end clients who need to be reminded that disease

control isn't covered by their current program.

When clients are unhappy they have to pay for disease control and other "extras," Bare compares his firm's service to the dentist. "If you need a filling because you have a cavity, the dentist don't just give that away, does he?" Bare says. "No, you have to pay for it."

Bare sets his fungicide prices by keeping chemical costs at 20 percent of the price and "back figuring" it from there. "It can be profitable, but it just depends on the account," he says.

Managing customers' expectations and reminding them what their program covers is one of the most difficult aspects of disease control, Joyner

says. "They assumed that signing up for a lawn service will eliminate any problems they have," he says. "You need to make sure up front you can deliver what they expect." He recommends leaving notes about practices that will discourage disease growth.

"It's pretty critical you do this on a preventive basis," Joyner says. "Once diseases are there you may stop them from spreading, but the customer isn't going to be satisfied with that. You have to be able to predict and prevent it from happening." LL



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USE READER SERVICE # 56

# Take A Load Off



## 10 skid-steer attachments that increase productivity by lightening the workload.

Alan Mumford appreciated the value in saving man hours his first year in business. Jobs like planting trees and hauling heavy loads simply took too long and demanded too much from his crews. So the owner of Landscape Images in Jefferson, La., invested in his first skid-steer attachment, an auger, which quickly reduced man hours by 35 percent. "There's nothing like being able to do something quicker and easier than you did it before," Mumford says. "Labor is the most expensive part of any landscape business, so anything that cuts down on that cost is a great investment."

The issue of quality labor vexes the landscape industry – businesses can't operate without it and it's becoming increasingly difficult to find. To offset these labor needs, many contractors invest in skid-steer attachments. Attachments not only lighten the workload, but also expand a skid-steer's capabilities and help contractors get the most out of their machines. "Skid-steers are the power sources for all attachments," says Douglas Laufenberg, product marketing manager for attachments and compact wheel loaders,

"Depending on the types of jobs you do most often, most attachments will pay for themselves pretty quickly," Mumford says. "I would be amazed if a contractor invested in an attachment for one job and never used it again."

With much of the green industry buzzing about lean management, Mumford predicts skid-steer attachments will continue to retain their popularity with contractors. "Everything is determined by labor, and lean management is the direction in which many companies are moving,"

Mumford's bucket played a key role in loading and moving debris, and is still used daily for moving dirt and mulch.

**2. Pallet Fork** – Primarily used to load and unload materials, this attachment also comes in handy when moving unloaded materials around a job site. The price of a pallet fork can range from \$750 to \$1,370, Laufenberg says, depending on if the machine is hydraulic.

With his pallet fork, Mumford can load and unload material in half the



Photos: John Deere and Bobcat

John Deere Construction and Forestry Division, Moline, Ill. "The variety of attachments available helps contractors get the most out of their skid-steers."

**ON THE RISE.** The variety of attachments and their functions run the gamut, and include tried-and-true staples as well as new innovations. To make an economical investment, contractors must understand their contracts and determine which attachments will provide continued value in the future.

he says. "Attachments are going to become more in demand for every company, regardless of its size."

Here are 10 skid-steer attachments popular with landscape contractors and their time-saving attributes.

**1. Bucket** – Most skid-steers come with a bucket, so this is a useful tool that doesn't require an extra investment. A bucket's most basic use is hauling and dumping material from one place to another. After Hurricane Katrina,

time it took him prior to owning the machine. "We use our pallet forks to move everything from pallets to pots to bagged mulch," he says.

**3. Auger** – Augers are ideal for any jobs that require a round hole, including planting trees and shrubs, driving posts and installing fences. "An auger can drill holes considerably faster than anyone can do by hand," Laufenberg says. "A 36-inch hole that could take an hour to dig by hand could be done

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Auger prices range from \$1,500 to \$2,600, Laufenberg says, depending on motor and bit size. There are two main types of augers: planetary and chain driven. Planetary augers operate with a hydraulic motor and gear box and are more costly, while chain-driven augers operate with a hydraulic motor and sprockets and cost less. Most contractors opt for planetary augers because they have more torque, Laufenberg says.

**4. Multipurpose bucket** – These attachments really live up to their name. "A combination bucket may be the only attachment a contractor needs to get a start in the landscape industry," says Justin Odegaard, attachment product representative, Bobcat Co., West Fargo, N.D. The multipurpose bucket instantly increases a contractor's versatility by allowing him to perform five functions – doze, dig, dump, grapple and grade – with one attachment and one machine."

Multipurpose buckets have been

widely used in the Southeast and Southwest for the past few years, and are beginning to gain popularity in the Midwest, Laufenberg says. "These attachments are becoming more popular as guys figure out what all they can do with them." Prices for multipurpose buckets range from \$2,450 to \$3,750, depending on the bucket's width.

**5. Broom** – Brooms, both angle and pickup, are mainly used for sweeping debris. Long a skid-steer staple among landscape contractors, new regulations have increased the tool's popularity. "Local and state regulations require contractors to keep dust levels down and streets clean, so brooms have come more into play," Laufenberg says.

Pickup brooms cost anywhere from \$3,800 to \$5,950 and angle brooms cost from \$5,500 to \$5,900, depending on broom width.

**6. Landscape rake** – Similar to tillers, power rakes are used to refurbish yards or fields. These machines work

## TRIAL RUN

Many contractors rent attachments on an as-needed basis prior to purchasing them to determine if the demand is truly there. Often when contractors have 50 percent of the attachment's cost tied up in rental fees, that's when they decide it is best to buy, says Douglas Laufenberg, product marketing manager for attachments and compact wheel loaders, John Deere Construction and Forestry Division, Moline, Ill.

"Most owners of established companies know their jobs and know what tools will be needed," he says, adding his average client owns three to five attachments. "But most new guys will purchase attachments as the demand arises and then figure out how to make the most of their investment."





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## equipment

the ground's top layer of soil, removing rock and debris, and leave a prepared bed for seed or sod. "Power rakes replace crews with rakes," Laufenberg says, adding the machines cost from \$7,150 to \$8,975. "With machine power behind them, these jobs can be done in half the time."

**7. Grapple** – This attachment is designed to pick up bulky materials that a bucket just can't handle. A grapple attachment helps landscape contractors with general job site cleanup and disposal of demolition materials, and are also useful to transport rock, stone and other hardscape materials. Grapples range in price from \$3,300 to \$4,200, Laufenberg says.

**8. Bale handler** – This tool is designed to efficiently handle both wrapped and unwrapped square and round bales, such as trees and shrubs. Mumford uses his bale handler on a regular

basis to load and unload balled and burlap trees from his Mississippi-based field growing operation. "My bale handler is worth its weight in gold for taking care of our trees," he says, adding the part cost him between \$2,000 and \$2,500. "It also saves us the labor of having to handle such heavy items."

**9. Trencher** – A must-have attachment for many irrigation contractors, trenchers are useful for installing water lines and drain tile, Odegaard says. Mumford combines his trencher with boring rods to install irrigation lines under walks and driveways. Depending on its features, a trencher attachment can cost between \$2,800 and \$8,500.

**10. Hydraulic breakers and hammers** – These heavy-hitting machines are most often used to break up concrete when removing or replacing it. Replacing the need for a jackhammer, these attachments save man hours

and the hydraulic action gets the job done much quicker, Laufenberg says. Hydraulic breakers and hammers cost \$5,600 to \$11,000, depending on the hammer's strength.

Like the list of functions they can perform, the variety of skid-steer attachments available to landscape contractors is great. "Stump grinders, rotary cutters, sod layers, soil conditioners, snow removal attachments and many others can quickly and easily increase a contractor's productivity," Odegaard says.

Investing in a skid-steer attachment is easy. Deciding which type of tool is most beneficial takes a little more time and effort. "In terms of time savings, investing in attachments is a no-brainer," Mumford says. **LL**

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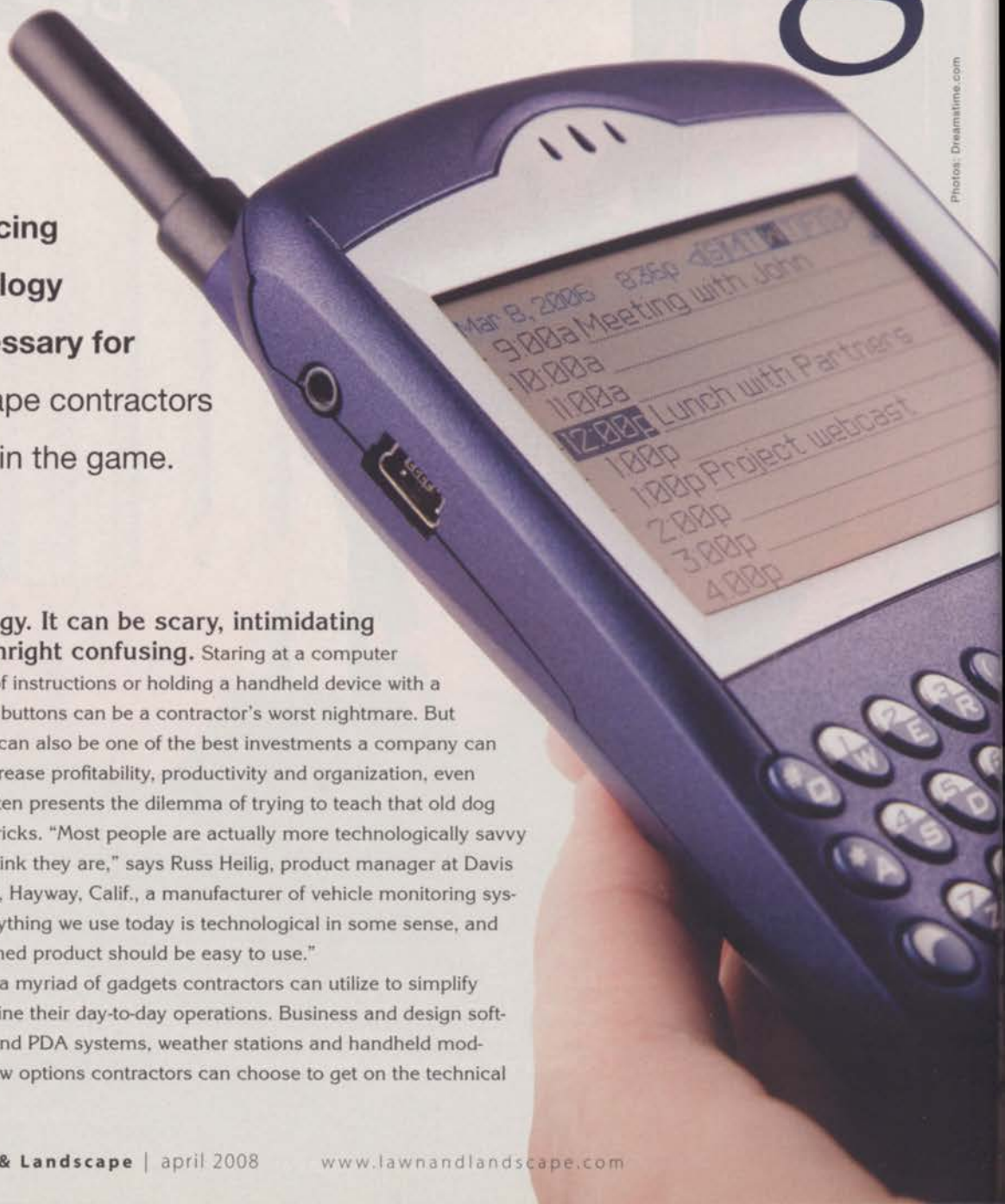
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# technically speaking

**Embracing technology is necessary for landscape contractors to stay in the game.**

**Technology. It can be scary, intimidating and downright confusing.** Staring at a computer screen full of instructions or holding a handheld device with a million little buttons can be a contractor's worst nightmare. But technology can also be one of the best investments a company can make to increase profitability, productivity and organization, even though it often presents the dilemma of trying to teach that old dog some new tricks. "Most people are actually more technologically savvy than they think they are," says Russ Heilig, product manager at Davis Instruments, Hayway, Calif., a manufacturer of vehicle monitoring systems. "Everything we use today is technological in some sense, and a well-designed product should be easy to use."

There is a myriad of gadgets contractors can utilize to simplify and streamline their day-to-day operations. Business and design software, GPS and PDA systems, weather stations and handheld modules are a few options contractors can choose to get on the technical

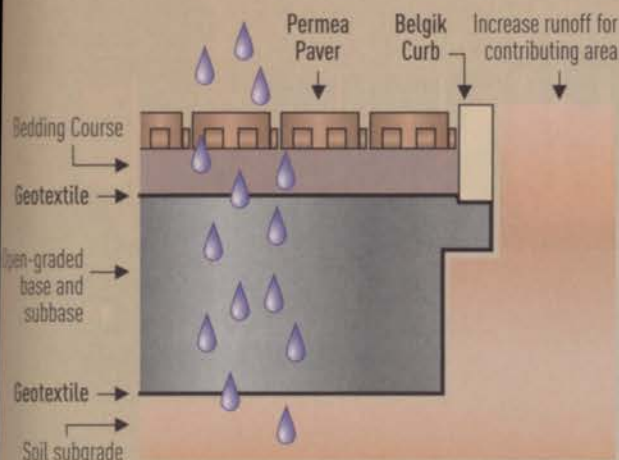


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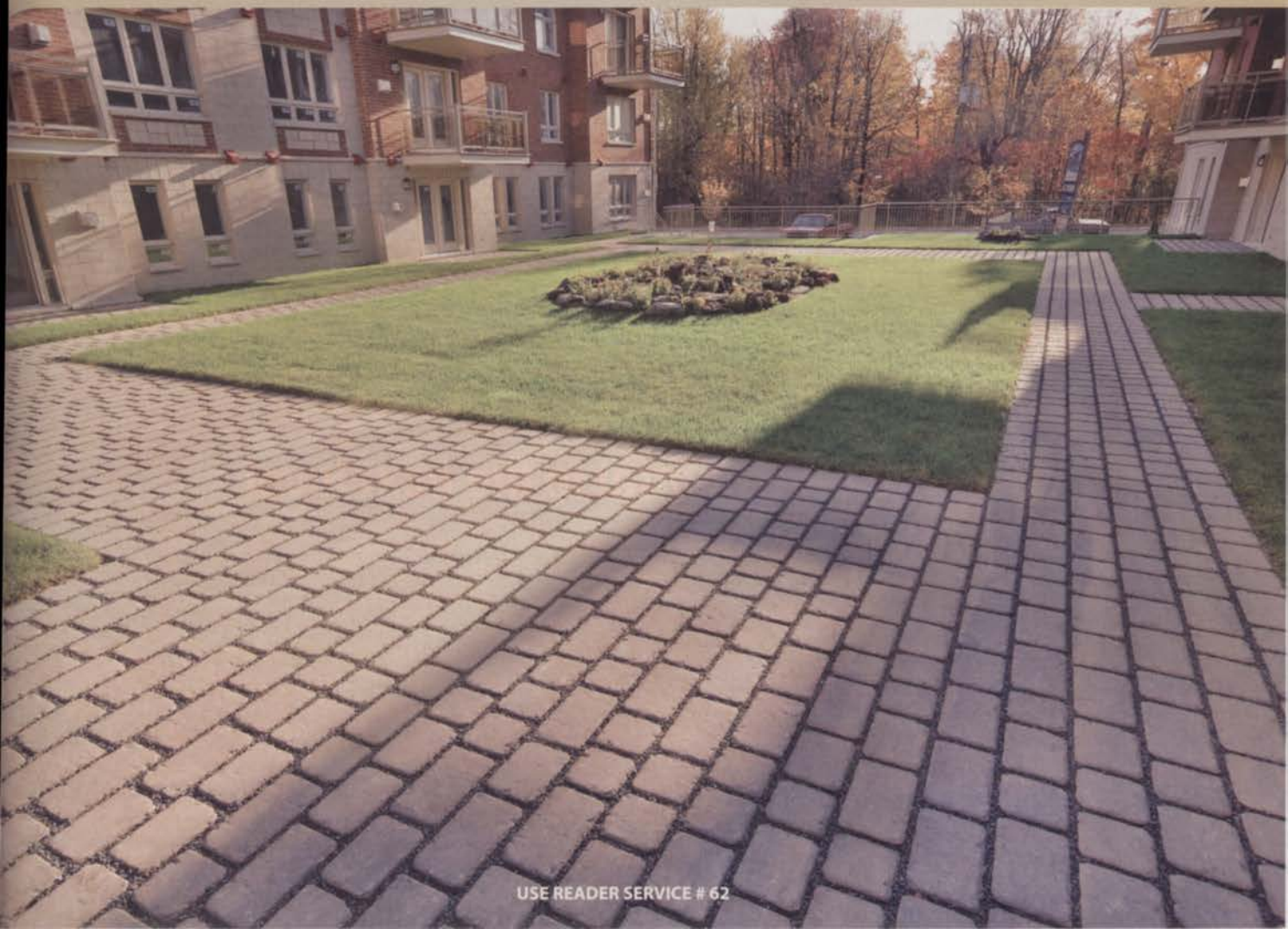
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USE READER SERVICE # 63

## technology

track. It's not always possible to learn a new piece of technology overnight, so a little research goes a long way in helping contractors purchase the right devices for their businesses. With the right attitude, contractors can be on their way to a more productive business in no time. "Most contractors will encounter a learning curve," says Paul Mandragouras, vice president of sales for software maker Insight Direct, Boston. "How difficult it will be to overcome depends on the personality of the business owner."

**WHAT'S THE POINT?** Adjusting to change is one of the biggest obstacles contractors face when adding new technology. Depending on how tech savvy the company and its employees are, manufacturers agree it can be

software in a year. They also spent 9 percent more on GPS systems since 2006. Manufacturers say much of this increase is due to a new generation of business owners stepping up to the plate. "Many owners of landscape companies are passing down their knowledge to the next generation, which has grown up on computers and isn't afraid of the technology available," Heilig says. "These newcomers are aware of the ways technology can help a business, and it's fun to watch them grow because of it."

It's important for contractors to understand the benefits that come from embracing technology and its capabilities, Wellbaum says, adding manufacturers are constantly trying to "push the technology envelope" of products used both in the office

**"Many owners of landscape companies are passing down their knowledge to the next generation, which has grown up on computers and isn't afraid of the technology available."** — Russ Heilig, Davis Instruments

a simple transition or a slow, painful process. "Change is always difficult for people," says Dan Wellbaum, sales manager for Real Green Systems, a Walled Lake, Mich.-based software manufacturer. "Every company has its own rhythm and systems, so when you start throwing new things at them it can be a challenge."

But technology is making great strides within the landscape industry. According to 2007 *Lawn & Landscape* research, contractors spent 25 percent more on business software and 12 percent more on design

and in the field. The primary goal of business technology is to organize and streamline every-day operations, which increases efficiency and benefits the bottom line.

For example, a purely paper-based company that invests in business software can expect a 70- to 80-percent increase in efficiency, Mandragouras says, adding a company that uses a "hodgepodge" of various technologies and switches to an end-to-end solution software package can expect to be 40 percent more efficient. This can result in a company finding the time to add

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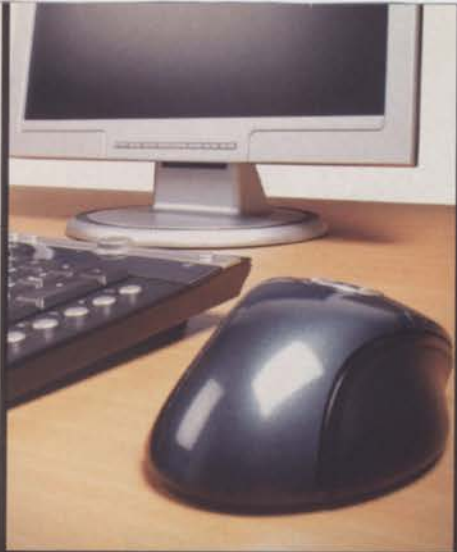
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## technology



**“Every company has its own rhythm and systems, so when you start throwing new things at them it can be a challenge.”** — Dan Wellbaum, Real Green Systems

one to two additional jobs a day using the same crews for a 5- to 15-percent increase in annual revenue. “Scheduling more effectively, making fewer errors and pairing the right employees with the right jobs can have a huge impact,” Mandragouras says.

Knowledge of technological tools also can enhance a contractor’s marketability, Heilig says, particularly in the irrigation field. “Contractors who embrace irrigation technology can help their clients get the most out of their landscapes using the least amount of water,” he says.

Jim Austin, cofounder of A&H Lawn Service, Saline, Mich., has spent the past five years researching the benefits of weather stations. He was able to present this knowledge to a water-conscious customer who wanted to redo his condominium complex’s irrigation system in the most efficient way possible. “We took the steps necessary to educate our customers that weather-station technology can reduce the amount of water they use and save them money,” Austin says, adding his weather-station clients have since experienced a 15- to 20-percent reduction in their water bills.

When investing in any technology,

manufacturers remind contractors that most of the time they get what they pay for. Price represents not just the product itself, but also its accuracy, reliability and durability – all factors that are important to technological equipment. “Contractors need to think about how long a piece of equipment will last and any problems that can arise while it’s in place,” Heilig says.

**INITIAL INVESTMENT.** Depending on the technology, the initial investment can vary drastically, and a company’s size is a good indicator of how large the investment should be, Mandragouras says. For example, a \$200,000 company should initially expect to spend about 2 percent of its annual revenue on a business software package, and this percentage should grow as the company’s needs grow.

In the landscape industry, \$5,000 is the average cost of a business software setup, including installation, training and service fees, he says. “The beauty of today’s technology is most of it does not require a humongous investment,” he says. “The larger a company gets, the more the price will increase.”

*continued on page 100*

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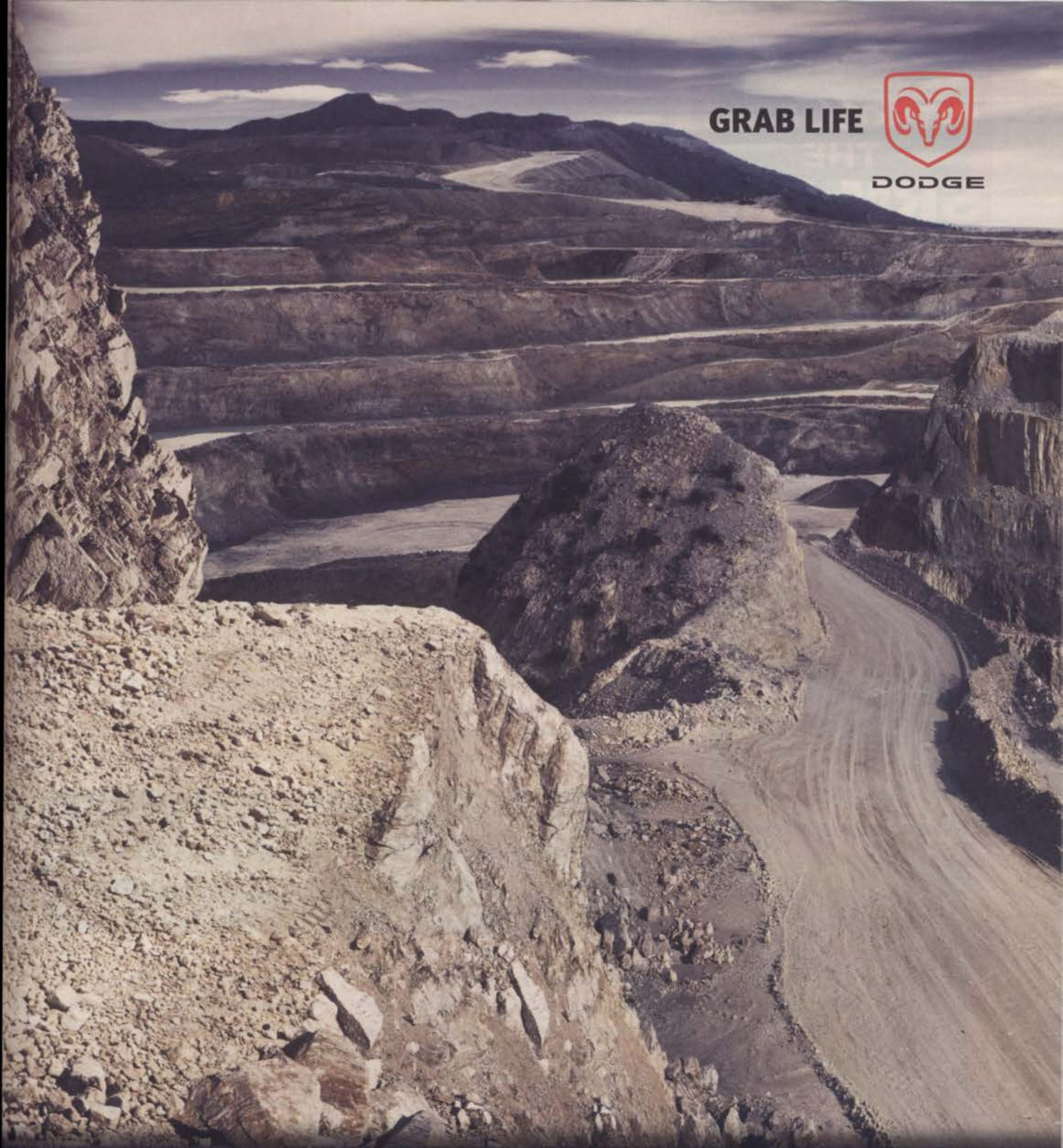
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USE READER SERVICE # 68

## t e c h n o l o g y

*continued from page 97*

Most software packages come with the option of a maintenance agreement. Some are billed per year, some per month and others on an as-needed basis, Mandragouras says. The cost will vary by manufacturer, but most contractors can expect to pay 10 to 15 percent of their initial investment, or about \$600 per year, he adds. A general maintenance agreement should give a contractor unlimited technical support and free software downloads and updates. Some packages also include discounts to manufacturer-sponsored technical seminars.

While some customers choose to pay for support services as problems arise, most manufacturers stress the benefits of investing in a maintenance plan. "We always recommend customers invest in support service, and most take us up on that offer," Wellbaum says. "We would hate for

end units offer a lot of monitoring capabilities that some contractors find unnecessary because they're not interested in every last stop."

The price of weather stations can range from \$500 to \$1,200, and landscape contractors tend to purchase higher-end units, Heilig says. "We find that contractors want more automated control and more sensors, so they invest their money in a quality system."

**CUSTOMER APPROVAL.** Richard Churchill, owner of The Groundskeeper, Ashland, Mass., invested in his current business software system last year, after his previous system failed to meet his needs for reports and customer management.

To find a system that fit his business, Churchill searched the Internet and was drawn to a manufacturer's Web site that features videos of how its

**"Before choosing a software package, contractors should do their research."**

— Richard Churchill, The Groundskeeper

a customer to invest in a system and then not use it because it's not working properly. Just call us." Most manufacturers will offer some sort of warranty or replacement policy should major problems arise, he adds.

The initial cost for GPS systems can range in price from about \$120 for basic units to \$450 for more complex, wireless units, Heilig says. Monthly fees may apply, too. The needs of some contractors can be met with lower-end units costing between \$160 and \$200, he adds. "If a contractor purchases GPS simply to ensure their crews drive safely, then a basic unit should suffice," he explains. "Higher-

software works. These online demonstrations show software functions that were missing from other company's systems, he says.

For example, Churchill's previous software was a single-user system and he was interested in a system that could be used by more than one employee at the same time. He was also looking for a system with flexible reporting capabilities so he could customize reports to include specific information.

"Before choosing a software package, contractors should do their research," Churchill says. "They should really look at the different options and

make sure it fits their needs."

Churchill's invested \$2,000 in the software, and he chose to forego the monthly service fee. In the past year he's called the manufacturer twice with technical questions, but says neither were serious issues. He continues to take advantage of the manufacturer's free online demonstrations whenever he has questions.

The Web site also offers daily, live demonstrations that customers can tune into like a conference call, he says. The demonstrations last less than an hour and offer time for questions at the end. Different subjects are discussed each day, and the site includes a calendar with dates, times and topics so interested customers

can plan ahead.

Training employees to use the software was relatively easy, he says, even though he is currently the only person who uses it. He acknowledges his employees are "pretty computer savvy," which helped them catch on quickly. While he doesn't think the system saves his employees much time, he says it gives him a better picture of what goes on inside his business. His favorite aspects of the program are its abilities to produce work orders, manage and assign crews and write production reports.

The software also tracks daily activity, like how many hours each employee works and how many and what materials are used for each job. It also

has a billing feature which helps keep Churchill – and his clients – up to date on payments. "One problem many landscape contractors seem to have is getting work billed out quickly," he says. "This program does that well."

Manufacturers expect more and more landscape contractors to begin looking for technology to incorporate into their businesses as the industry becomes more advanced.

"For any landscape contractor who's in it for the long term, technology is not an option, it's a necessity," Mandragouras says. "Nowadays it surprises me when companies don't already have it, because you can only grow so much without it." LL

*sidebar on page 102*

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USE READER SERVICE # 69

## Here to Help

Even tech-savvy contractors will have to dedicate some time to learn the ins and outs of their new equipment. Fortunately in today's world, resources abound to help those who want to learn more about technology and its uses. "Like any other tool, if you don't know how to use the technology, it won't work," says Dan Wellbaum, sales manager for Real Green Systems, a Walled Lake, Mich.-based software manufacturer.

For those in need of help, there are many people interested in keeping up with new trends who are more than willing to share their knowledge with others. Many manufacturer and tech-related Web

sites have online forums which are great places to ask questions and get feedback from people familiar with the equipment. Basic Internet searches also provide additional information and product reviews.

Many manufacturers sponsor free seminars around the country that offer product information and tips on using technology to grow a business. Taking advantage of these events because forming relationships with technology providers can benefit contractors in the long run. Contractors should choose a manufacturer that has been around for awhile and has a proven track record of quality and timely technical support.

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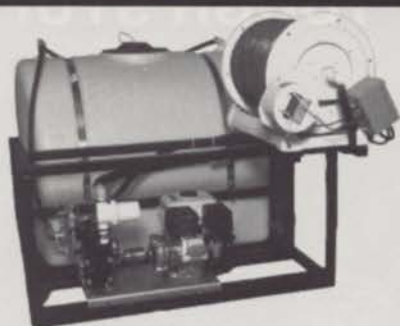


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RENTALS

# the rent-buy balance

Professionals share their when to rent vs. when to buy scenarios.

BY CRAIG GAINES/CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**Versatility is crucial to the growth of a landscape company.** Starting out with a niche in residential lawn maintenance is a good way to establish a company in a specific market. But after establishing an initial customer base, many firms grow by offering more services, which requires more hardware.

But resist the urge to buy every tool and piece of equipment you need for a job, and investigate

the rental market instead. Landscape contractors who smartly negotiate the rent-vs.-buy decision-making process can cut down on costs, test various pieces of equipment and purchase equipment when it makes solid business sense. Success is based on understanding the benefits to renting vs. owning, knowing what types of hardware to rent, establishing beneficial relationships with suppliers and having a plan for making the shift from renting to buying (For





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USE READER SERVICE # 73

## e q u i p m e n t

more information, see "When to Buy" on page 108).

**RENTAL PROS.** Renting gives landscape contractors more options than buying a piece of equipment. "Renting allows customers to control their own inventory," says Johnny Campos, corporate trade press relations with Caterpillar's Rental Group, Peoria, Ill. "Rental companies hold the construction equipment assets rather than the contractor. Second, there is less down time. If a piece of equipment fails, rental companies replace the equipment so the customer is continuing their work instead of waiting for their equipment to be fixed."

Knowing when to rent and what to rent requires having an intimate knowledge of your business. What kind of jobs will you do on a regular basis (providing regular cash flow and necessitating constant access to equipment) and what jobs will you do only a few times a season (resulting in irregular revenue and occasional use of hardware)? Buy the hardware you

use on a regular basis, and rent the equipment you use sporadically.

Hurbert Roberts, president of Lawn Keepers in Tallahassee, Fla., is as familiar with his business as a father would be with his own child. "We consider ourselves a full-service lawn care and landscape company," he says. "We may have five jobs a year where we're going to prune some tall trees. For big jobs like that, the equipment is going to sit around 90 percent of the year [if we buy it]."

Aerators, root grinders, heavy tillers and cherry pickers are examples of rental options for Roberts. "The heavy tiller would only come in handy when we have the big jobs," he says.

But as your company grows and you offer more services, it's important to stay on top of your equipment inventory and shift from renting to buying when the time is right. When Roberts heard from his employees that customers' home exteriors and patios could use a scrubbing, he leapt into action. Lawn Keepers distributed a newsletter to clients pointing out

contractors looking to rent more versatile pieces of equipment. "If you have a more versatile tool, you can use different attachments," he says, which offers contractors more utility over a rental period.

That said, contractors might want to look at the versatility within their own inventories before renting, Roberts says. If he figures he can adapt one of his edgers and use it as an auger, he'll do that rather than rent an auger. "Take an inventory of the tools you have on hand," he says.

**EQUIPMENT OVERLOAD.** The most common mistake Stephen Hillenmeyer has seen landscape contractors make is to buy too much equipment. "We're all iron jockeys," says the president of Hillenmeyer Landscape Services in Lexington, Ky. "We like to have lots of equipment. We like to say, 'Yeah, I have that one up in the shed.'"

But there is such a thing as over-renting, when, after a little investigation, you might find it's a better idea to buy. "It's more convenient to rent

**"Renting allows customers to control their own inventory." — Johnny Campos, Caterpillar**

that new-home construction and rainy Florida winters left a lot of crud caking their walls.

"It generated enough business," Roberts says. "We rented pressure washers for three months, and then bought them. Now, coming out of the winter, everybody wants a cleaning."

Jon Kuyers, utility products segment manager for Vermeer, Pella, Iowa, says he's noticed landscape

something when you need it against planning out whether you can buy it," says Todd Dilley, president of Outdoor Environments in Savage, Minn.

This happens often when renting smaller pieces of equipment that seem like innocuous expenses on their own. "You rent it by the week, and maybe the rental cost is a third of the value of the machine," Dilley says. "Then it lies around for a few days, you keep it



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another week, do the same thing, and pretty soon renting it costs more than buying it."

Hillenmeyer had this happen during a job that entailed rearranging plant material in the company's yard. The company rented a skid-steer loader for the project, even though it already owned a front-end loader that would have been sufficient. After the yard reorganization was complete, Hillenmeyer's employees had gotten used to operating the skid-steer. "And next thing you know the loader that we owned was sitting there and the skid-steer was being used," he says.

Like Dille, Hillenmeyer advises having a policy of using rental equipment for its intended job and then returning it the moment you don't need it anymore. "If you're renting something specifically for a job, that's a lot less risk."

**FEEL IT OUT.** There are two schools of thought about judging rental dealers: going on relationship and going on price. If you value flexibility from your dealer, find one who will work with you and understand the unpredictable nature of the landscape business. If you have your eye on the bottom line, find the dealer who will offer you the best rates.

Hillenmeyer looks for that flexibility. "Look not at the paperwork but at the people you're dealing with," he says. "We've worked very hard to establish a network of suppliers."

If inclement weather prevents you from using a piece of equipment you've rented for the day, a flexible dealer will understand and may charge you a reduced or no fee. When Hillenmeyer has to hold on to a piece of equipment longer than he originally planned because weather knocks

him off schedule, his dealer will often charge him based on how many hours he uses the equipment, and not how long he has it in his possession. "You have to have communication with the rental people," he says. "Tell them what you're doing and why. It won't work every time, but there are certain times and situations [when it will]."

Roberts will rent from local dealers when he can, but he shops around. "Familiarity [with a dealer] starts me off and price is the deal breaker," he says. "If I can save 80 bucks on a root grinder ... from Home Depot, I'll go to them in a heartbeat."

Dille has another piece of advice: Know the terms before you rent. "We might need it for a day, but might keep it for two," he says. "If we keep it for a few days, it might be more expensive than a weekly rental. I always negotiate that up front." LL



### When to Buy

Making the decision to buy a piece of equipment requires having a clear vision of what lies ahead for your company. If you can confidently say you'll either offer a new service in the next year or will increase volume for a particular service, then it might be time to buy.

Todd Dille, president of Outdoor Environments in Savage, Minn., says his company has a clear philosophy. He evaluates every piece of equipment and considers making a purchase if the firm will use it for 50 percent of the year or more. The company has another criterion for smaller tools: "How many jobs would it take us to pay for it vs. rent it? If we can pay for it in a year, we buy it."

Jon Kuyers, utility products segment manager for Vermeer, Pella, Iowa, says contractors need to judge how much revenue a particular tool represents. "If they're seeing the payback in a short period of time, you really ought to look at buying that tool," he says. "Have a clear financial plan. Too often contractors will buy on an impulse."



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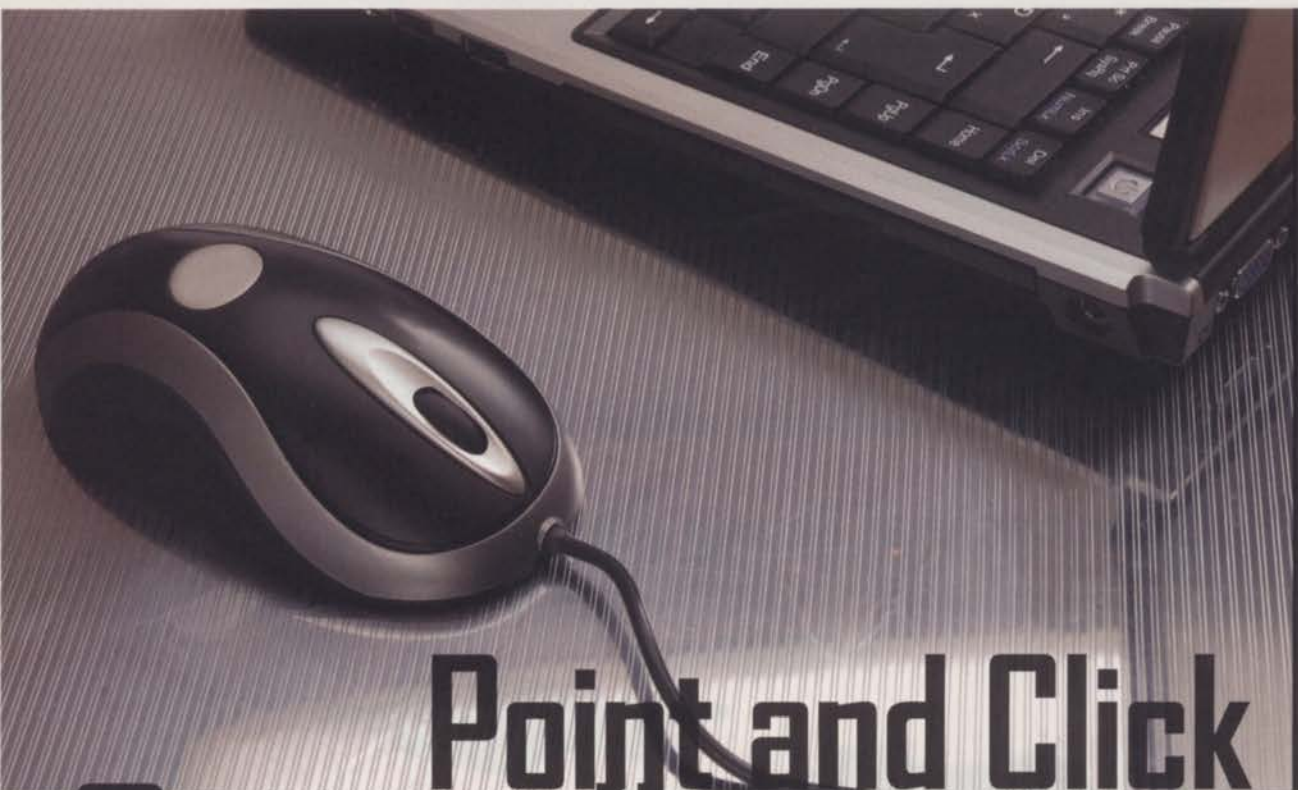
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Today, manufacturers have made such capabilities cost effective for smaller commercial sites and even residential applications. In addition to helping residential and “light” commercial contractors reduce operating costs, PC-controlled irrigation sys-



2008: No time to wear gloves.

1993: Mrs. Jackson's valve manifold crushed by moving van.

1989: Cleaning out another impact sprinkler filled with grass.

1997: Buried glass bottle left by previous installers.

2008: No idea how this happened.

2000: A hacksaw blade is still laughing at this one.

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tems encourage a movement toward the "water manager" concept. This approach promotes water conservation, which is good for the environment and consumers' water bills, says Doug Callison, central control product manager for Rain Bird, Tucson, Ariz.

"This isn't a new business model; it has existed in the high-end commercial sector for a long time," he says. "It's just new to the residential/light commercial market."

**RESIDENTIAL USE.** On the residential side, manufacturers have released products that allow homeowners to control their irrigation systems from their home computers. It's the irrigation industry's foray into the "smart home" market, says Keith Shepersky, senior product marketing manager -

software package that's uploaded on the customer's computer.

Dan Wolfe owner of Landmark Irrigation in Fountain City, Wis., has installed 11 systems in the last year. "One big area is our 'techy' customers," he says. "It's suited for someone who likes to play with things. I haven't installed one for a customer who wants us to hook it up and never touch it."

Wolfe, a 30-year veteran of the irrigation industry, also sees this product - its novelty and its ability to save water - as a unique selling point. "It's a way to differentiate from my competitors. And if you look at the water conservation aspect, that's obviously great for the industry."

Though the residential-caliber PC-controlled systems aren't based on evapotranspiration (ET) rates (they

**"This isn't a new business model; it has existed in the high-end commercial sector for a long time. It's just new to the residential/light commercial market."** — Doug Callison, Rain Bird

controllers for Irritrol, Riverside, Calif. "Sooner or later, people would like to be able to control all aspects of their home from their computer," he says.

Dave Shoup agrees. "It is just easier for many consumers to issue a few simple commands from their PC than fumble with unfamiliar equipment out in the garage," says the central systems product manager for Hunter Industries, San Marcos, Calif.

These systems, which cost less than \$500, generally consist of a controller that's wired to valves like any typical controller, a remote that connects to the customer's PC and a

don't use site data to determine irrigation schedules), they do retrieve local weather data like temperature, humidity and precipitation forecasts from the Internet, which is an improvement over conventional controllers. Manufacturers say PC-control systems may use ET-based information in the future, but for now the benefits of not using ET are simplicity and lack of monthly fees. "You probably capture at least 80 percent of the water savings an ET controller would allow in a much simpler matter," says Greg Nagy, director of operations for Cyber-Rain in Agoura Hills, Calif.





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## irrigation

While one benefit of the residential PC-controlled system is that a homeowner can easily control irrigation himself, many contractors recognize that a business opportunity also has surfaced. Homeowners may like to have access to their irrigation system from their computer, but still are not comfortable setting schedules or making changes, says Doug Gardner, owner of Sprinkler Systems by Doug, Williamstown, N.J. In response, he's offering a monthly monitoring service for customers with PC-based systems.

It's difficult for a contractor to make money on a service call "the old way," Gardner says. "If I have to put a technician in a truck to drive 40 minutes to make a 10-minute adjustment, I'm paying \$3.20 per gallon and paying the



**"It is just easier for many consumers to issue a few simple commands from their PC than fumble with unfamiliar equipment out in the garage."** — *Dave Shoup, Hunter Industries*

tech \$20-something an hour. I have to charge \$80 and I'm not making very much money." Now, for customers with PC-based systems, Gardner offers a monitoring service. For about \$14 per month, customers receive unlimited schedule adjustments, which Gardner makes from his office via a computer remote access system similar to the one many IT departments or technical assistance lines use. Gardner bases his monitoring service price on the cost of approximately two service calls per year and what home security

system firms charge for their monitoring fees. "It's like an insurance policy," he adds.

**COMMERCIAL APPLICATIONS.** Manufacturers have made the residential PC-controlled systems capable of handling small-scale (12-zone) commercial accounts, but advancements in technology have allowed them to offer mid-range central control systems, too.

A few things have contributed to this segment's improved affordability, says Steve Springer, senior market-

## Audit Before Installation

Irrigation professionals emphasize that PC and central control systems need to be installed with a "holistic" approach to water management to be effective.

"Slapping a computerized controller won't address all the water waste issues," says Doug Callison, central control product manager for Rain Bird, Tucson, Ariz. "You need to have a good understanding of how efficiently you're applying water in the first place."

Manufacturers encourage contractors to seek certifications in landscape irrigation auditing (CLIA) from the Irrigation Association.

Chris Le Conte, a certified irrigation contractor and landscape irrigation auditor, conducts audits for all new clients. "When we set up a new site, we're not just going in and putting a controller on the wall," says Le Conte, president of SMART Watering Systems in Toronto. "It includes doing an audit and making recommendations for irrigation system inefficiencies."

Toronto doesn't face a water scarcity issue, Le Conte says; it's an infrastructure problem exacerbated by population growth. "It not a lack of water, it's the cost of water and the social aspect, too," he says. "A lot of people think it's crazy that we irrigate with drinking water. If we're going to do that, we might as well do it efficiently."

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## irrigation

ing manager for Simi Valley, Calif.-based RainMaster: 1) A significant drop in PC hardware costs over the last three years; and 2) End users' increased perception of value for all types of software. Manufacturers say the mid-range systems can be two to four times cheaper than conventional central control systems.

Several mid-range options exist (in the \$1,000 range), including systems

that operate on Web-based platforms (these typically require a controller with a wireless communications card plus a monthly service plan); others are modular control systems, which have many of the benefits of central control systems (like controlling a system remotely), but they make some of the advanced features optional, driving down costs.

Chris Le Conte, president of

SMART Watering Systems in Toronto, uses a mid-range modular control system, which is more price-appropriate for most of his customers than a full-scale central control system would be. Le Conte has determined his commercial clients typically require a three-year return on investment, which prices some conventional central control systems out of the market. But by using a modular system, Le Conte

**"If there's a water restriction put in place you don't need to send your trucks out to a couple hundred sites – you do it all from your office."** — Chris Le Conte, SMART Watering Systems

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can take advantage of the technology that allows him to control his clients' systems remotely without the cost of a conventional central control system. "Things like automatic ET adjustment and flow monitoring are typically expensive and sometimes never used," Le Conte says. "If a customer

does want those features they will be available at an additional cost."

**BEATING THE COMPETITION.**

The commercial market is where contractors who install computerized control systems can beat the competition on customer satisfaction and price, irrigation professionals say. "A customer requesting a change – perhaps wanting irrigation suspended for a special event on a certain day – can be instantly responded to with a simple command," says Hunter's Shoup.

Le Conte appreciates these operational efficiencies. "If there's a water restriction put in place, you don't need to send your trucks out to a couple hundred sites – you do it all from your office," he says. "Just think of the carbon emissions, fuel and time saved."

This is also how tech-savvy contractors can be more price competitive without sacrificing profits, RainMaster's Springer says. "A contractor who's not using a centrally based system has to plug a lot more into their price – the wear and tear on the vehicle, fuel, the technician's time," he says. "By using a centrally controlled system, you should be able to reduce the customer's bill by 3 to 5 percent from what the competitor is offering." **LL**

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## HYDROSEEDING

# gone wrong

Take measures to correct problems before they happen.

Five sure signs you've hydroseeded incorrectly.

BY MIKE ZAWACKI/MANAGING EDITOR

### Please, don't give hydroseeding a bad name.

A blemished reputation is a major concern when contractors come across a poor attempt at hydroseeding. Often they're witness to subpar seedings because they've been called in to correct another contractor's folly.

"Hydroseeding is not a problem if it is done correctly," says Chris Haddock, owner of CBH Landscape Contractor in Laconia, N.H. "A lot of what happens when a job goes bad has nothing to do with hydroseeding, rather it's because the contractor didn't prep the site properly or follow procedures correctly."

On the surface, hydroseeding seems relatively simple for a single operator to incorporate into a business, says Ken Hirzel, owner of Dogwood Hollow Landscapes in Mountain Home, Ark.. Many novice contractors simply see adding hydroseeding to their service menu as buying a machine for a few thousand dollars, loading it with seed, mulch and tackifier, spraying the seed mixture on the ground and cashing the client's check. Some contractors, though, fail to properly assess their costs and drastically underbid their competitors, Hirzel says. In-



Photo: Finn Corp.



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**“A lot of what happens when a job goes bad has nothing to do with hydroseeding, rather it’s because the contractor didn’t prep the site properly or follow procedures correctly.”** — *Chris Haddock, CBH Landscape Contractor*

rectly bidding a job is the first domino to fall in a chain reaction the leaves the client dissatisfied and disheartened with hydroseeding.

“They bid their hydroseeding jobs too cheap to get the work,” Hirzel says. “Then they realize what they’ve gotten themselves into so they try to do the job while cutting back on materials,

especially the mulch. And there is the start of a bad hydroseeding job.”

A general lack of knowledge is one of the biggest contributors to poor hydroseeding practices, contractors say.

**1. UNEVEN GERMINATION.** Contractors looking to cut costs will often skimp on the seed mulch used during

the hydroseeding process. The result is inconsistent coverage and little islands, or pockets, of soil.

A solid hydroseeding job is incumbent upon proper coverage and equipment calibration, says Pat Holubetz, vice president of North American sales at Fairfield, Ohio-based Finn Corp. “What I see a lot of guys doing is mixing a load and then spraying double the recommended area with it,” Holubetz says. “Often they’re not doing a proper coverage calculation and calibrating the equipment accordingly for that coverage. Really, they’re just guessing, like throwing a dart at a dart board.”

Inconsistent coverage can also stem from poor application practices. “Try to get application from a couple of different angles to avoid a shadowing effect,” Holubetz says. This shadowing comes from uneven soil from tire tracks, footprints or even channels in the soil from a recent rainfall.

Lastly, failing to mix the slurry of material throughout the process allows the mixture to settle, Holubetz says. The results is too much materials being applied at the beginning or the end of the process, which increases the chances of uneven distribution of seed and/or mulch. “Proper agitation keeps everything in suspension and ensures even coverage,” he says. “It’ll keep the mixture the same at the end as it was in the beginning of the process.”

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**2. DARK GREEN SURFACE.** A cost-conscious homeowner may offer to handle the site preparation to reduce his costs. Part of that prep work involves breaking up compacted loam, or surface soil, to create an inviting seed bed for the germinating turf. However, if the loam remains compacted, the slurry of seed, mulch and tackifier may appear dark green, whereas it would appear as a lighter green on a properly prepared surface.

"You'll spray on the seed and you won't penetrate to the proper depth," Haddock says. "Instead, it just sits on the surface. The seed will grow, but it

won't do well because it'll never properly germinate."

**3. UNDESIRED VEGETATION.** It's a major disappointment when a motley mix of native plants and grasses spring up in a client's yard instead of the lush green blanket of ryegrass and fescue they were expecting. It's important for a contractor to flush his hydroseeder's tanks in between jobs, Haddock says.

"It might not make too big of a difference going from a lawn job to an erosion control job," he says. "But the other way around and the client won't

seeds in it," he says. "With hydroseeding, you're creating an environment – mulch, fertilizer, water – that's perfect to wake up these weed seeds and get them to germinate."

**4. NATIVE GRASSES FAIL** Hydroseeding is commonly employed as an erosion control method to reduce soil loss in a given area, typically sloped geography.

Erosion control seed mixes quite often include wildflowers or native grasses specific to the geographic area, says James McEntire, president of McEntire Landscaping in Redding, Calif. Evolution has ensured that these native flora will not only take to the soil in a variety of conditions, but also thrive and hold the ground in place. However, using native grass seeds at the right time of year is critical to success, he says, especially if irrigation is not available and germination is dependent upon seasonal rain cycles.

"Hydroseeding too late or too early in the season can greatly reduce the likelihood of success," McEntire says.

Not addressing the proper slope in an erosion-control spraying could impact germination, Holubetz says. Drastic inclines require a more powerful tackifier to hold the seed in place.

**5. DEAD GRASS.** The grass may start out strong, but within a week or two the tender blades are weak, wilted or even dead.

More often than not the customer is the culprit for this dire condition. Most likely they took the process for granted and failed to water regularly or at all. Some contractors report instances where clients went on vacation and turned off their irrigation systems on their recently hydroseeded lawns, only to come home to a brownscape instead of a lush greenscape. **LL**



## Too Much Of A Good Thing

Some hydroseeding contractors may decide to err on the side of caution and over apply material to the surface they're covering. Very rarely will this result in a poor outcome, says Pat Holubetz, vice president of North American sales at Fairfield, Ohio-based Finn Corp.

It will, though, have a negative effect on the contractor's wallet.

"It may produce good results, but the contractor will be wasting money because he's using more materials than he really needs to use to do the job," Holubetz says. "That's why a contractor must make sure he's using the proper ratio of materials to the amount of space he plans to cover."

be too happy to have wild flowers coming up in his front yard."

However, Holubetz warns that while hydroseeding is an efficient way to install a lush lawn, weeds and undesired plants are an inevitable and unintended side effect of the process.

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USE READER SERVICE # 87



BY EMILY MULLINS/ASSOCIATE EDITOR

# Year-Round Routine



**Pre, mid and postseason maintenance is vital** to the long life of any trencher.

**Harrison Gilkeson** understands the importance of year-round trencher maintenance if for no other reason than the machines can't be useful when out of commission.

"A trencher needs to go out and do the job during the day," says the in-house mechanic for Hoerr Nursery, a full-service nursery and landscape company based in Peoria, Ill. "Companies can see a big loss in labor dollars if they're not able to do that."

The price of walk-behind trenchers ranges from \$10,000 to \$15,000, and trencher attachments cost from \$4,500 to \$6,000. The machines are generally specific to underground applica-

tions, like burying electrical wires and down spouts, installing drains and drain tile, digging footings and edgings around landscape beds. Because they're fairly specialized, few contractors have a machine that can step up if their trenchers break down. This makes year-round maintenance vital to a trencher's long-term productivity. "Trenchers have a lot of moving parts and are very high-maintenance machines," Gilkeson says. "When they go down, there aren't a lot of machines that can back them up."

Every landscape company has its own way of maintaining its equipment. It's a solid business practice because it prevents problems

Trencher photo: The Toro Co.

Seasonal photos: Dreamstime



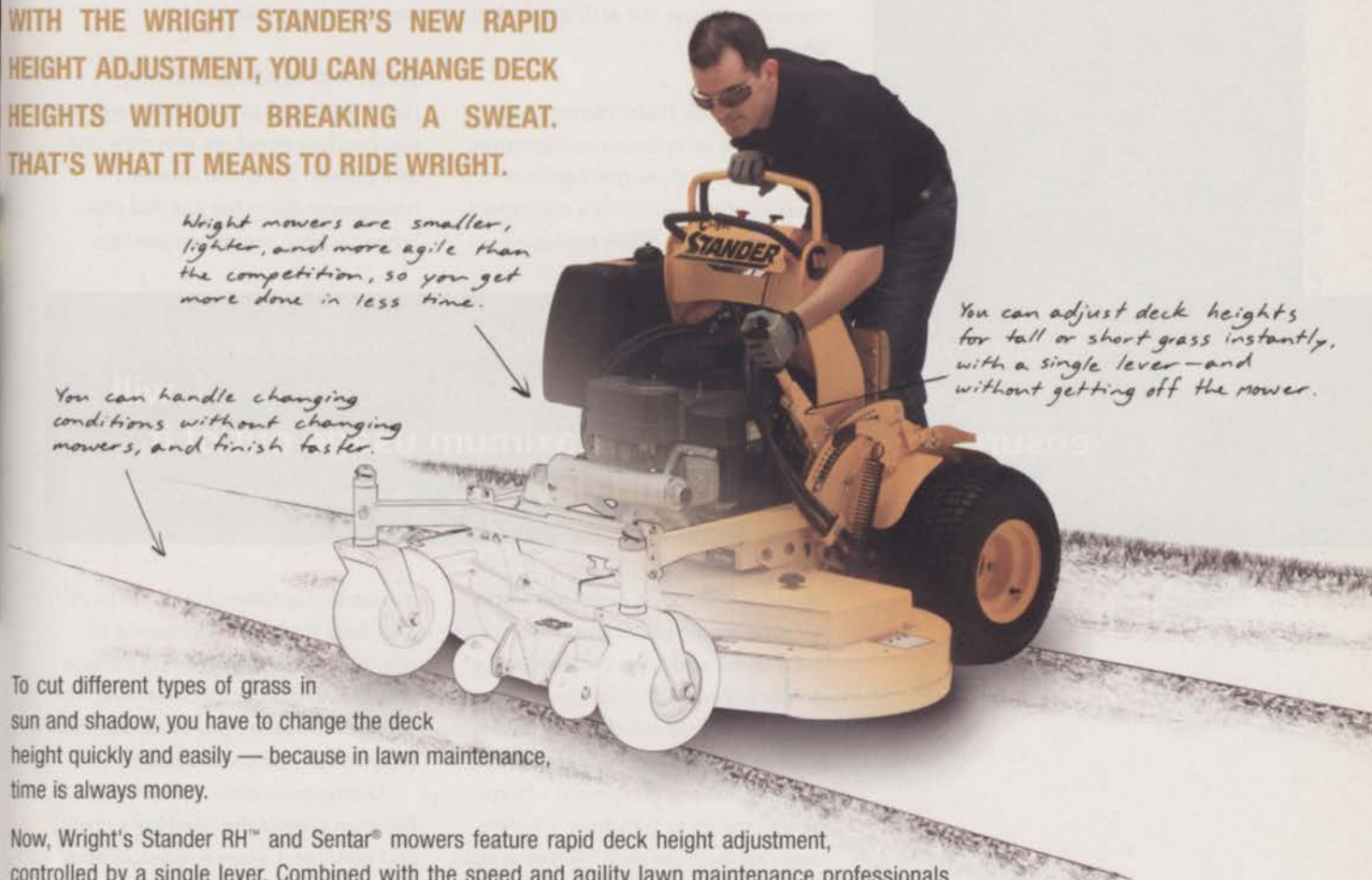
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Photo: The Toro Co.

before they start. "It's important for contractors to keep a trencher in good working condition by following the manufacturer's recommended operating guidelines and maintenance routines," says Greg Lawrence, product marketing manager for The Toro Co., Bloomington, Minn. "Keeping the trencher serviced and in shape, as well as operating it as it's designed to be used, will ensure operators get the maximum usage out of it, day in and day out."

**IN THE HOUSE.** Hoerr Nursery has always had an in-house maintenance crew of two to three mechanics to keep all of the company's equipment in working order. While having an in-

house maintenance crew isn't viable for every company, Gilkeson says if outsourced equipment maintenance dollars exceed \$30,000 a year, company owners should consider having a staff on hand. "Our company has such a large profile of equipment - from pickup trucks to trenchers - it mandates an in-house staff," Gilkeson says. "We can't be held hostage waiting in line at a dealership when something goes wrong."

house maintenance crew isn't viable for every company, Gilkeson says if outsourced equipment maintenance dollars exceed \$30,000 a year, company owners should consider having a staff on hand. "Our company has such a large profile of equipment - from pickup trucks to trenchers - it mandates an in-house staff," Gilkeson says. "We can't be held hostage waiting in line at a dealership when something goes wrong."

Planned Environments, in Concord, Calif., also has an in-house maintenance crew to service its equipment, including its two trenchers. "In California, our trenchers are used all year, so it's just most cost effective to have a mechanical crew on staff," says David

Wolkenhauer, president. Tools needed for trencher maintenance include general handheld tools like open-ended and angled wrenches, as well as a basic set of automotive tools. A flow meter, used for checking a trencher's hydraulic pumps, is one of Gilkeson's "luxury" tools, which cost about \$700. Wolkenhauer also makes sure to have a grease gun, wrenches and a socket set on hand for daily trencher maintenance.

**SEASON BY SEASON.** Currently, Hoerr Nursery has four 35-horsepower combination trenchers with pipe and wire pullers, and a few smaller 11-horsepower units that just pull pipe. When tackling preseason trencher

maintenance, Gilkeson's motto is, "If it shakes, it breaks." Tightening all of a trencher's many moving parts is essential to get the machine ready for spring. In addition, pay close attention to hydraulic pumps and hoses.

During preseason maintenance Gilkeson checks the machine's chain and replaces it when needed. In addition, he checks the tires and fills them with foam instead of air, which adds more weight to the machine, improves pulling capabilities and prevents flats, he says. He changes the oil, inspects the fuel line and tests the battery and alternator. Every two years, Gilkeson and his crew disassemble each machine to inspect every part. "If we do a good job with preseason trencher

**"Keeping the trencher serviced and in shape, as well as operating it as it's designed to be used, will ensure operators get the maximum usage out of it, day in and day out."** — Greg Lawrence, The Toro Co.



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## equipment

maintenance we can make it two years without having much trouble," Gilkeson says. "We usually see the machine once or twice during the season after they start up."

Midseason maintenance includes one or two oil changes, hose inspections, tightening movable parts and replacement of what Gilkeson calls "consumables" – parts like blades and chain teeth. The depth of this maintenance depends on the season's workload and weather conditions. "Drier times of year are harder on trenchers than wetter seasons, because more pressure is required of the machine to get the job done," Gilkeson says, adding July is Peoria's driest time of year.

The landscape maintenance crews play an important role in midseason

equipment upkeep. They're primarily responsible for greasing the trenchers daily and – most importantly – reporting any problems that come up to the mechanical staff. If they're able, crew members also conduct minor maintenance like blade replacement or chain realignment while on the job site.

To wrap up the season, landscape crew members fill out a form indicating any problems or potential problems mechanics should tend to before the start of next season. At this time, preseason maintenance starts over again. Gilkeson spends from \$500 to \$1,000 a year to maintain each trencher. Most of the company's trenchers are used about 15 hours a week, primarily for irrigation services and installing downspouts.

**DAY IN, DAY OUT.** California's lack of seasons means Wolkenhauer's trenchers need to be in working order every day. Used for irrigation 90 percent of the time and drainage the other 10 percent, the machines are particularly vital at the start of each project. "Our trencher use varies drastically depending on the job," he says. "They might be used full-time for a few weeks at the start of a project and then might sit for a few weeks."

Daily maintenance includes greasing and tightening all moving parts. Crews are required to check the chain tension and teeth, the oil and filters and tire air pressure. All other maintenance needs are determined by the trencher's hour meter, which comes standard on most machines, Wolkenhauer says. Once the meter reaches 100 operation hours, he and his crews know it's time to change the oil and the oil and air filters.

Wolkenhauer estimates spending \$2,500 to \$3,000 per year maintaining his company's two trenchers, and agrees a preventive maintenance program gets the most out of each machine. In the 10 years Planned Environments has been in business, he's only had to replace one trencher.

Most of the trenchers at Hoerr Nursery are at least 15 years old and in great working condition. Like Wolkenhauer, Gilkeson credits the company's preventive, comprehensive maintenance program. His reputation for such a program precedes him when trading in equipment at his local commercial equipment dealer, and he's almost always guaranteed a 20 to 25 percent return on his investment.

"A good maintenance routine absolutely contributes to a long life for these tough machines," Gilkeson says. "They should be around long after I'm gone." LL



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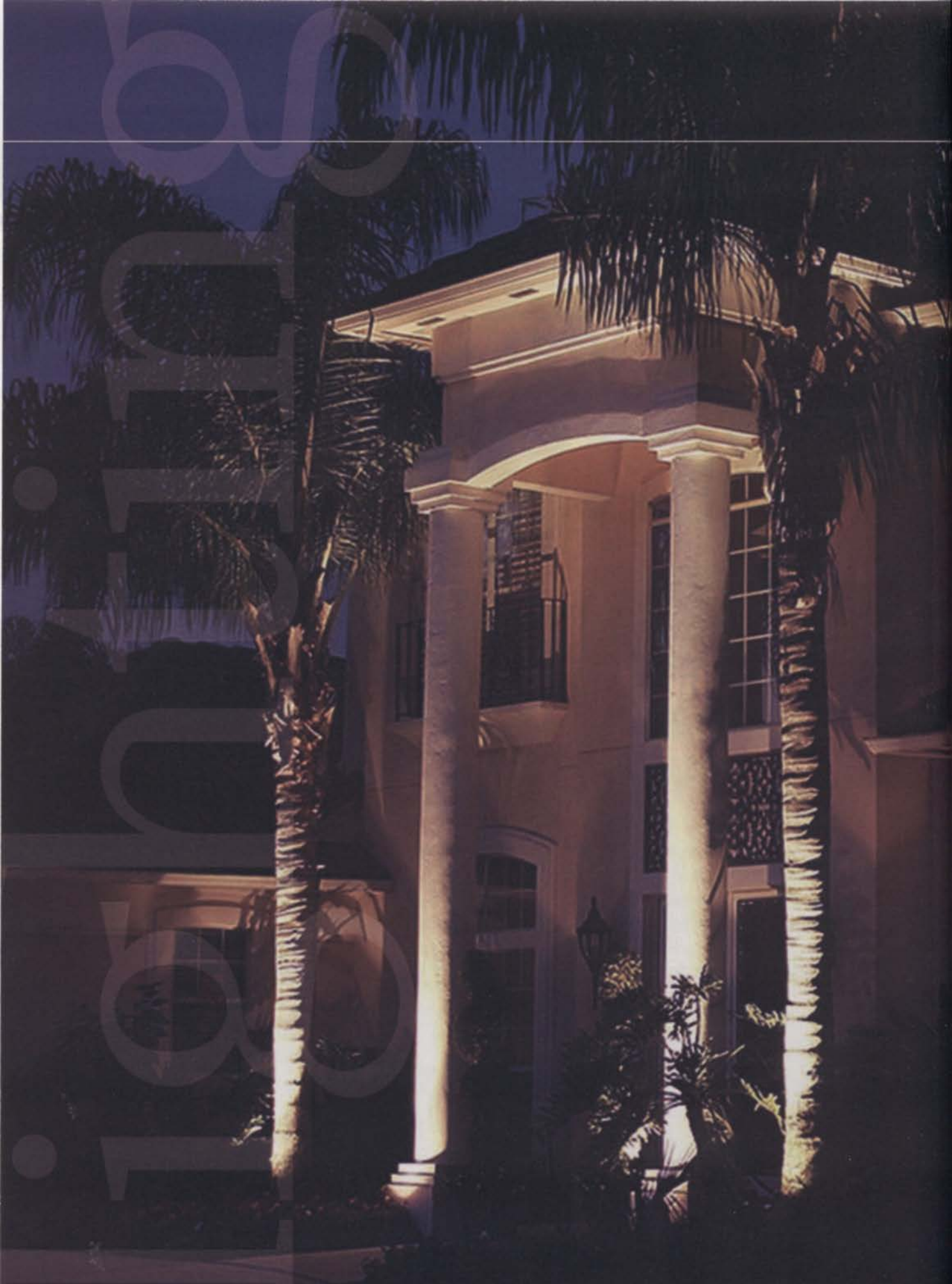
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# to the rescue

Roger Maurice can't wait to offer low-voltage LED landscape lighting for the first time this spring. After the success of his LED holiday lighting services, he's sure this new niche will be a hit. "I'm excited about it," says the owner of Maurice's Lawn, Landscape & Lighting Services in Menomonee Falls, Wis. "My LED holiday lighting services increased 30 percent last year, and I expect my LED landscape lighting services to do the same this year."

LEDs, or light emitting diodes, are expected to be the next big thing in low-voltage landscape lighting. Growing in popularity as a result of the recent green movement, LEDs use less energy while emitting quality lighting homeowners have come to expect. Because they last longer than standard incandescent or halogen bulbs, less maintenance is required to keep LED systems up and running, saving contractors time and homeowners money.

**As energy becomes a  
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BY EMILY MULLINS/ASSOCIATE EDITOR

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## landscape lighting

While LED landscape lighting is on the rise, many agree all of the kinks have yet to be worked out. In addition, a surge in recent advancements has left many obsolete components on the market, so contractors should do their homework before jumping into the service. "The LED market has changed so much in the past few years, and many manufacturing companies jumped on the bandwagon too soon," says Bruce Dennis, division president and director of sales and marketing, Advantage Light Source, Chatsworth, Calif. "All of the obsolete products on the market could easily give LED a bad name. At this point, it's really buyer beware."

**MARKET WATCH.** Low-voltage products have come in vogue as the green movement gains momentum and legislation mandates more efficient electricity use. In fact, the market for packaged high-brightness LEDs is set to grow 12 percent this year to exceed \$11 billion, according to a report presented at the 2008 Strategies in Light conference in Santa Clara, Calif. Last winter, LEDs gained national attention as the Christmas lights of choice for New York City's Rockefeller Center as well as the White House. "We haven't seen this kind of paradigm shift in a long time," Dennis says. "LEDs took hold really overnight."

**OFFERING LEDs.** Maurice started working with LED holiday lighting about five years ago, and last year 80 percent of his Christmas light installations were LEDs. They use 50 to 75 percent less energy than standard lights and last three to five times longer - information he makes sure to pass along to his clients. After being introduced to LED landscape lighting at a recent trade show, Maurice was hooked.

Twenty percent of his lighting inventory for 2008 will be LED products.

Maurice predicts his first LED landscape lighting clients will be those familiar with the benefits of LED holiday lights and clients who have eight- to 10-year-old landscape lighting systems and are sensitive to escalating energy costs.

"People love their night lighting systems and don't want to give them up just because they're more expensive to run," he says. "If they can operate them for the same amount of time for less money, they're going to jump on that chance."

The transition to LED landscape lighting is smooth since installation and maintenance are similar to that of standard systems, Maurice says. However, he plans to take advantage of additional training and education offered by manufacturers and distributors as it becomes available.

"Once manufacturers have their distributors trained, that education is just going to go down the chain of command to the contractors," he says.

**SYSTEM SAVINGS.** To kick start his LED services this spring, Maurice mailed a letter to his existing lighting clients advertising the availability of LED and explaining its benefits. While the cost savings is the biggest selling point, the letter also highlighted price comparisons of a traditional low-voltage system vs. an LED system. While LED bulbs are about three times more expensive than incandescents, customers will find savings in the smaller transformer (150 watts vs. 600 to 900 watts), smaller cable (16-2 vs. 12-10), system longevity and reduced energy use. "By the third or fourth year, an LED system will pay for itself," he says.

A Kichler Lighting study showed

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## BED EDGER

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## landscape lighting

the electricity requirements of a lighting system for a 2,200-square-foot home decreased from 340 watts of incandescent lighting to 82 watts of LED lighting, for a savings in excess of \$2,200 over the system's lifespan

(based on no change in the average cost of electricity). "It's important for contractors to sell the life cost of the installation," says Jeffery Dross, product manager, Kichler Lighting, Cleveland. "Always balance the more

expensive cost of the fixtures with the need for smaller transformers, smaller wire, less maintenance and virtually no fixture replacements."

**LED DIFFICULTIES.** One disputed aspect of LEDs is how long the bulbs actually last. "LEDs last longer than incandescent bulbs, but manufacturer promises vary," Dross says. In a controlled lab environment, LEDs have been known to last up to 100,000 hours. But the outdoor environment presents challenges like heat variations, moisture and physical abuse that can put sensitive electronic components at risk, significantly reducing this lifespan.

LEDs are also prone to lumen degradation. Unlike incandescent bulbs which maintain fairly uniform brightness until they burn out, LED's brightness gradually diminishes as they age. This gradual brightness degradation may present challenges for lighting contractors, as their systems' designs and functions may be compromised as light levels drop, says Steve Parrot, media and marketing director, CAST Lighting, Hawthorne, N.J. Homeowners will also face the challenge of determining when to replace LED fixtures. "When one LED fixture in a project is replaced it will be considerably brighter than the others," Parrot says. "This is an adverse effect that will certainly be noticed."

Like with other segments of the landscape industry, manufacturers and contractors agree increased environmental consciousness and product improvements will determine the success of LEDs down the road. "LED has a bright future," Dross says. "Performance continues to increase with no real end in sight. All of this indicates that LED is going to change the way we light our living environments over the next decade." LL



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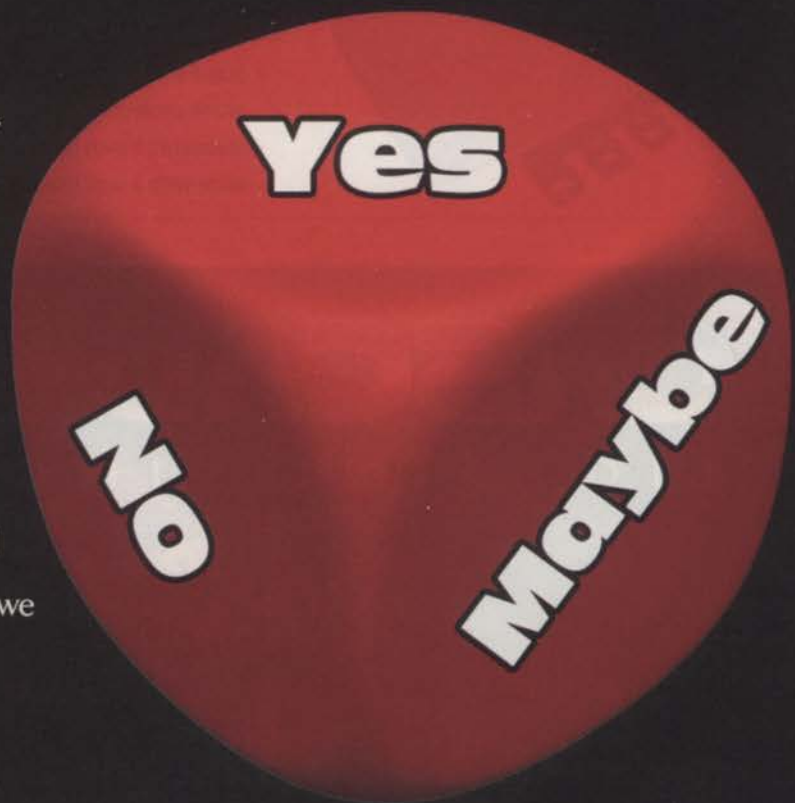
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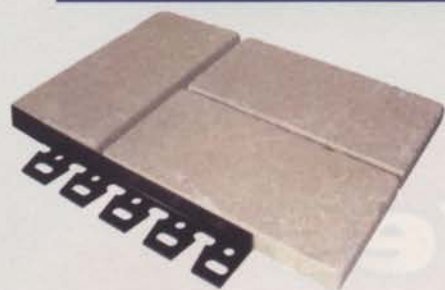


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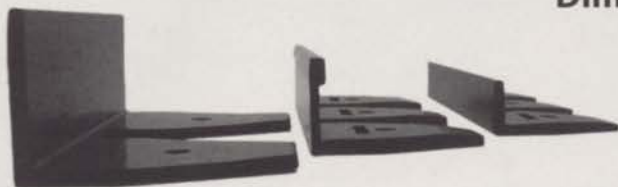
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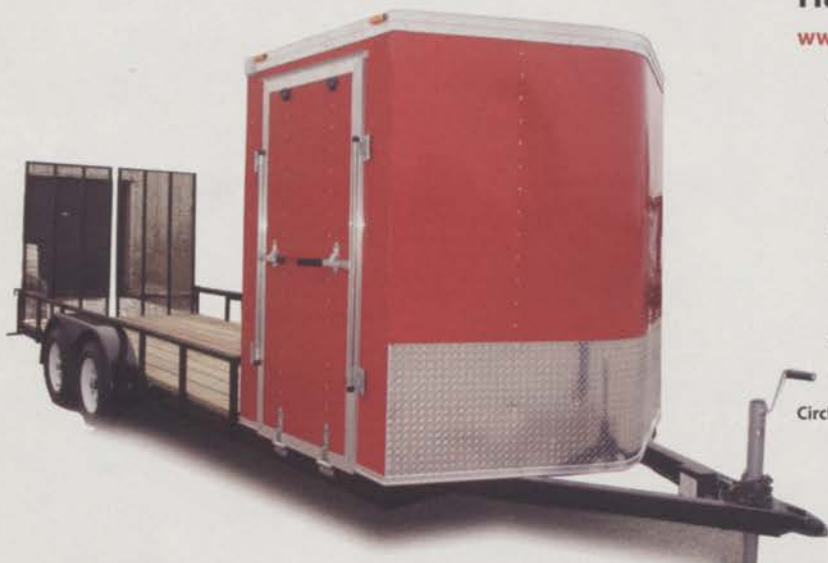
  
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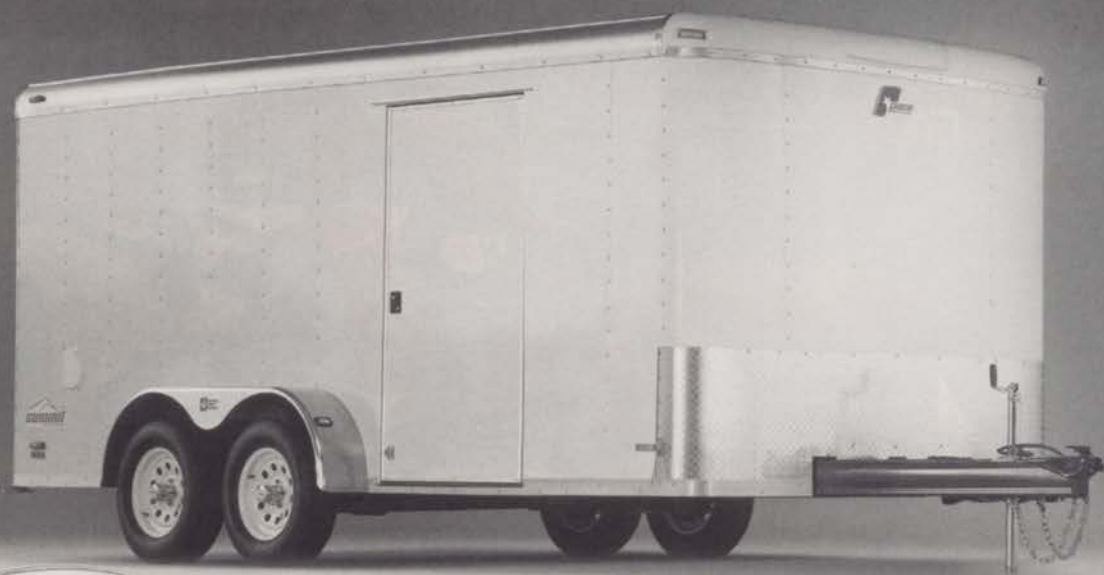
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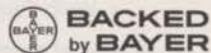
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## Observations from the Trenches

**H**ave you ever noticed how some green industry companies perform consistently well over the long haul? Regardless of the adversity, something in their makeup drives them to a higher level. Keep this in mind as we discuss the state of the economy.

As we start the 2008 season, uncertainty exists. Landscape firms are asking, "Where is the economy heading? Will my sales go up or down this year? Should I plan for growth and hire expensive supervisory personnel and equipment? Or should I plan for flat or negative growth? What about the price of fuel?"

Some markets are doing very well. Others are in the toilet. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the new home market is in total chaos right now. And a solid recovery seems 12 to 24 months away. The ripple effect from this is significant.

He's seen jobs that would normally go for \$270,000 go for \$170,000. My client, a former rodeo bull rider, has been around for a long time. He'll survive. In fact, he'll thrive. He knows how.

A client in the Carolinas just called me. He's in the residential and commercial home production lot landscaping market. It's terrible. He's young and he's never seen it like this. Fortunately, this young man's father has. Their family has been in the home building business for decades. And guess what? This young man is planning to expand his business into new areas. I bet he makes it. It's in his DNA.

A landscape installation and maintenance client in Northern New Jersey is coming off a mediocre 2007 season. It was a tough year regarding personnel and market conditions. This year isn't looking much better. Economically it looks worse. However, he's established

this market - some for more than 30 years.

Yes, I have clients who are in a real struggle. Some have seen their sales slip by 20 percent and more. But they will survive because they not only know the business side of what they are doing, but also because they have proven character. They have heart.

Like it or not, you and I do not have the luxury of blaming the economy. Certainly luck and circumstances play a part. However, our destiny is primarily in our own hands and in the hands of the teams and systems that we build around us.

Going back to the questions about the economy - perhaps the question shouldn't be, "Will fuel hit \$4 per gallon?" but "When will fuel hit \$4 per gallon this year and how will I cover the increase?" Oil that was \$10 a barrel 10 years ago has broken the \$100 per

**"Like it or not, you and I do not have the luxury of blaming the economy... Our destiny is primarily in our own hands and in the hands of the teams and systems that we build around us." — Jim Huston**

A commercial installation company in Nevada tells me that he used to bid against two to three other landscape firms when bidding municipal parks and athletic fields. He negotiated most of his work. Now it's not uncommon to see a dozen bidders pricing a job. The contractors who used to landscape and irrigate production home lots exclusively have no work. They're desperate and have jumped into his market.

an amazing anti-cyclical winter snow business. He and his wife will do well. Why? They planned it that way.

I have landscape clients in the second (and third and fourth) home market all over the country. From Lake Winnepesaukee, N.H., to Jackson Hole, Wyo., to the Hamptons on Long Island to Napa Valley - this market is extremely robust. And my clients are even "robust." They've been preparing for

barrel ceiling. Let me tell you what my clients and I are seeing. These are not the results from a scientific analysis of the economy, just observations from the trenches.

Most of my clients pretty much ignore the gloom and doom of the nightly news and the economic "experts." They realize that the state of their economy is not just in their hands, it's mostly in their heads - and hearts. **LL**



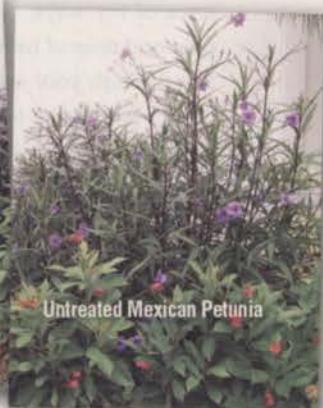
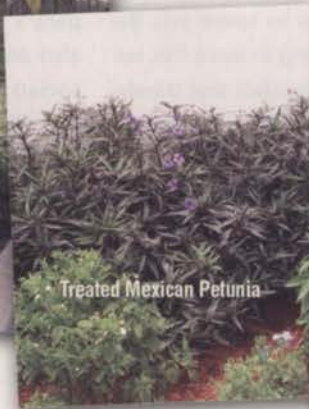
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USE READER SERVICE # 122



## Dearth of Salesmen?

One of my biggest mistakes while growing my landscaping company was not hiring a salesperson soon enough. I thought I had to do all the selling myself, but now that I have a talented sales team in place, I see the error of my ways. So to spare you the pain and time of having to learn this lesson through your own trials and tribulations, I would like to share with you the best ways to find, hire and train a new salesperson.

First and foremost, find good candidates. Become familiar with area schools that offer programs in landscape architecture or design. Arrange to speak to

the students about the landscaping field and give them a glimpse into the opportunities available to them. Take them to lunch and give them a company hat and your card - you want to leave a positive impression and make certain your company's name is top of mind. You should also arrange to speak at your state association's annual trade show and seminar. Over time your name will become well known and potential hires will be more likely to seek you out. I also recommend participating in the recruiting dinner PLANET organizes every year in conjunction with their Green Industry Conference; go to their Web site (www.

landcarenetwork.org) to learn more. Also consider taking on a student intern. An internship provides real-world experience that he or she will need to get started after school. It also allows you to evaluate what kind of employee he or she will be before committing to a permanent hire.

I have had great luck finding talented sales people by advertising positions in this magazine, on Monster.com and in the local newspapers. I've also mailed our company's newsletter to area students, along with a note encouraging them to give me a call sometime.

In all of these instances though,

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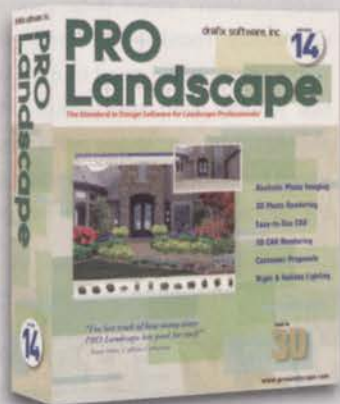
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you'll want to make an initial overture and then step back and wait to see who contacts you. If they're not willing to grab their own careers by the reins and sell themselves, then it's quite unlikely they'll be able to sell for you. Successful salespeople do not wait for the phone to ring, and you shouldn't waste your time hiring someone who conducts his or her life that way.

Once you've lined up some solid prospects for your sales team, you need to learn about their motivations. Obviously most of us seek employment because we need to earn a living, but money isn't everything. My best salespeople are those who are motivated by both money and their passion for landscaping. I once interviewed a

guy who bragged that he could sell ice to an Eskimo. To me that's a guy who will sell anything to anyone so long as he gets his commission check, which is exactly the type of guy I don't want working for me. I've built my company with integrity, and I'm in this business for the long haul. I want my clients to trust me and know that my company is not going to cajole them into buying products or services that are not appropriate to their needs. I want my clients to buy the best for themselves and not feel like they were sold something less.

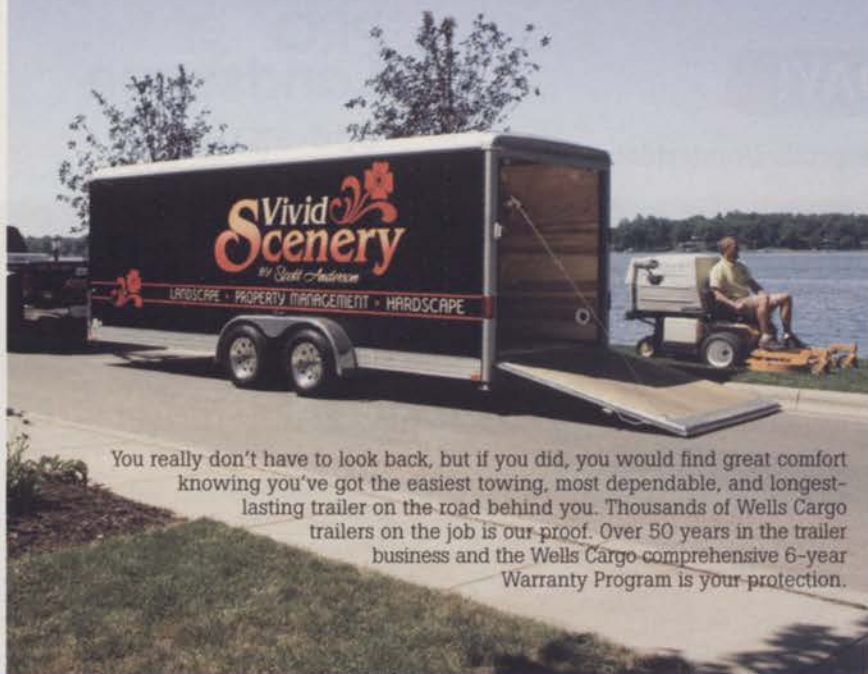
Ideally, in our industry you want to put together a sales team of professionals who can both design and sell, which is admittedly difficult to do. The two skills often seem to be at odds with

each other. The best designers may never have taken a single sales or business class in school. This is not to say that a designer can't make a terrific salesperson - he or she can. You just have to understand where they're coming from and figure out a way to translate their passion into actual sales.

Lastly, I find there's a very simple but extraordinarily telling litmus test I apply before I hire anyone to sell for my landscape company.

I ask myself: Would I buy from him or her? If the answer is yes, I extend an offer. But if the answer is no, then no matter what other skills he or she brings to the table, I say thank you for your time, walk away and begin my search anew. **LL**

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USE READER SERVICE # 124

# Upfit for Efficiency

As arguably their most important tool, many contractors customize their trucks for maximum efficiency.

**One of the most important pieces of equipment a landscape contractor has is his truck,**

says John Lackey, director of national account sales, Knapheide Co., Quincy, Ill. "After all, this vehicle gets him to and from the job site, along with the materials and equipment needed to get the job done," Lackey says.

Many contractors invest ample amounts of time and money to customize their pickup trucks to be as functional as possible. From equipment racks to tool boxes to vinyl logos, a professional, organized vehicle will place contractors ahead of their competition and in front of prospective new clients.

In addition, a properly designed body can improve a contractor's efficiency and provide a greater professional image to the customer, Lackey says.

Aaron Smith, co-founder of S&D Lawn Service, Essex, Vt., maximizes his trucks' functionality by organizing every piece of landscape equipment in a systemized way.

"Everything in my trucks has a specific place and it's placed there every single time we reload," he says. "I can see at a glance what we have and what we need."

**ADDING UP ADD-ONS.** The sky is the limit with regard to custom alterations. Small additions like wheel lockers are important to keep wheeled equipment in place, Smith says. Costing \$130 to \$150 a set, these prevent equipment damage that can occur during bumpy rides. Equipment racks, which vary in price from \$50 for a blower rack to \$150 for a trimmer rack, keep tools off the floor, maximizing space and preventing damage.

With truck bodies, costs vary depending on a truck's tasks and hauling requirements, Lackey

says. A non-dumping flatbed starts at about \$2,000, while a drop-side dump body with maximum toolbox storage runs as high as \$10,000, Lackey says. Contractors may pay \$5,000 to \$6,000 for a basic 2- to 3-yard dump body, and a landscape body with 40-inch high sides equipped with a dump hoist and large cross box will cost \$9,000 to \$10,000.

**SIGN UP.** Trucks act as mobile advertisements, so it pays to keep them looking professional.

"A contractor's truck is a traveling billboard," Lackey says. "A well-equipped, well-maintained, clean truck will project a successful image to customers."

Smith's trucks feature his company's logo, name, phone number and Web site. While there are different application methods, Smith says vinyl lettering is the way to go.

"The lettering looks professional, and vinyl is easy to scrape off, which ups the resale value down the road," Smith says. However, magnetic letters can be a smart investment if the truck is also driven for personal use, Smith says, adding the price of lettering varies based on application method and intricacy. **LL**

Photo: Chrysler





## Sustaining Your Funnel

**R**ecruiting is very similar to the sales and marketing process. You should be looking for talent all the time. You need to build a funnel of possible candidates and keep the funnel active and alive.

It is very challenging to just start from scratch each time a need arises. Keep a funnel of possible candidates. Keep them warm if you don't have an immediate opening or heat them up if you have an immediate need.

I generally keep a file with active possible candidates at the ready and check in periodically just to "take a temperature reading." Create and sustain an active up to date funnel.

**HAVE A PROCESS.** This is what I've observed lately: have an emergency need, panic, hire too quickly, throw the new person into the system and wonder why you keep having recruiting issues? OK, I know this isn't how your company deals with recruiting, but you may have heard about companies like this, right?

So what does a solid process look like? Here's an example: Have a list of telephone screening questions. Once you screen a candidate, schedule an interview. Designate a quiet place to do the interview and arm yourself with a new list of questions. The next phase is a site/field visit. Prepare the manager you plan to have the interviewee meet

with, gather feedback from your team and follow up with a phone call or an e-mail if he or she passes; then agree on an offer. Prepare an offer letter and then follow up to that offer letter. The point here is to make this a smooth, timely and professional process.

Note: When candidates are not a match, make certain you decline professionally in writing. You never know when and where candidates appear again - like as customers or competitors.

**LISTEN AND LEARN.** Just like with a successful sales presentation, being a good listener is usually your best way to find out the most about the candidate. If you

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are talking more than 20 to 30 percent, then you are talking too much. Listen to what they are saying and how they say it. Are they good communicators, do they bad mouth their former employers, can they articulate and present themselves in a positive manner? While you have them there you might learn a little about how other companies operate through good questions and listening. Don't ask for proprietary information, but do learn how things get done in other companies.

**HIRE THE BEST.** During my 30 years of active recruiting I learned that every once in a while the recruiting gods

would test me and place a near perfect candidate in front of me to test me out. I quickly learned that when these rare opportunities present themselves – and they will – you need to have the mindset to receive this gift. Keep this option in mind when near-perfect interviewees appear and figure out a way to take advantage. Consider making an upgrade with existing staff, identifying a special project that you would have otherwise delegated to a consultant or opportunities for expansion. When the best appear, hire them.

**TAG AND RELEASE.** When you find that great candidate but can't figure

how to bring him or her in as part of your team immediately, try the tag-and-release process. Let the prospective employee know your level of interest and make certain it is mutual. Now start the tag and release process. Try to make regular contact after work hours and occasionally meet face-to-face to keep the relationship intact. Tag these candidates with your interest, release them to pursue their endeavors, but keep them close with regular, positive contact. This is a long-range way of keeping your funnel full of good candidates. Then, when the circumstances are right, you will not be starting from scratch for your search. **LL**

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USE READER SERVICE # 127



# Troubleshooting Difficult Customers

**A**re there really difficult customers or have we failed to make our customers happy? At Allentuck Landscaping Co. we work hard to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding with our customers, but when a customer is unhappy there are questions we need to reflect on: Did we do enough to prevent his dissatisfaction? Did we listen to his needs and communicate adequately? Were we up front with him about what we could accomplish? Did we provide our staff enough information and direction and did our staff understand his expectations?

Of course, as a professional landscape company we strive to do these things but did this customer's needs fall through the cracks?

So even though the difficult customer may seem unreasonable, nasty or just plain wrong, it is imperative to appease him and even attempt to turn him into an enthusiastic supporter. To do so, we look carefully to see how we could have prevented his unhappiness. Is the customer always right? Maybe, maybe not, but he will always believe he is so we accept his feelings and look for ways to help him keep his dignity while our company keeps its self-respect.

Prevent customer dissatisfaction before it starts so it doesn't fester. From initial contact through finishing touches, ensure that each customer is warmly greeted,

carefully listened to, responded to in a timely manner and given all suitable information. We believe that good communication is the key to a successful marriage between staff and clients.

Each employee is expected to do everything possible to enhance our reputation with clients. Always be polite. Never argue with a customer. Listen to customers carefully so you fully understand their needs.

Even with the best service intentions things can go very wrong. Weather, equipment failure and unavailable materials can all cause even the mildest person to develop into a difficult customer. Before classifying a customer as "difficult," it is important to make sure the fault does not lie with us. In most situations the fault is two sided and performing a self critique before things get out of hand staves off trouble.

The most important first step needs to be a clear understanding of what the customer wants and his expectations. At contract time the customer needs to know specifically, what will be done, when it will be done, how it will be done and what it will cost. It is imperative that all information be in writing that is in layman English as opposed to landscape jargon.

Good listening, good communication and attention to detail show professionalism and allows the customer to feel secure that he is dealing with a reputable, responsible landscape company. **LL**

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

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- 8. In-House Maintenance including: Educational Facilities, Health Care Facilities, Government Grounds, Parks & Military Installations, Condominium Complexes, Housing Developments, Private Estates, Commercial & Industrial Parks

**III. DISTRIBUTOR/MANUFACTURER**

- 9. Dealer  11. Formulator
- 10. Distributor  12. Manufacturer

**IV. OTHERS ALLIED TO THE FIELD:**

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

**2. What services does your business offer?**

- 1. Landscape Design

**Landscape Installation**

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

**Landscape Maintenance**

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

**Pesticide Application**

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

**Other**

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

**3. What is the service mix %?**

Mowing/Maint \_\_\_\_\_  
Design/Build \_\_\_\_\_  
Chemical Application \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

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

**7. What percentage of growth do you anticipate?**

**8. What year was your business founded?**

**9. What is your business mix? (%)**

Residential \_\_\_\_\_ Commercial \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Is this a Headquarters or Branch location?**

- 1. Headquarters  2. Branch  3. Single Office

**11. What best describes your title?**

- 1. Owner  11. Argonomist
- 2. President  12. Entomologist
- 3. Vice-President  13. Horticulturist
- 4. Corporate Officer  14. Plant Pathologist
- 5. Partner  15. Consultant
- 6. Managers  16. Technician
- 7. Director  17. Serviceman
- 8. Superintendents  18. Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_
- 9. Foreman
- 10. Specialist

**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, edges, 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. Hardscape Products (lighting, pavers, water features)
- 19. Renovation Equipment (seeders, aerators, dethatchers, spreaders, hydroseeders)

**13. Which of the following subjects would you be interested in learning more about? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)**

**BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

- 1. Technology solutions for your business
- 2. Employee recruitment/retention
- 3. Ergonomics
- 4. How to set up a safety program
- 5. Immigration/H2B
- 6. Major growth areas for contractors: Up and coming add on services
- 7. Alternative fuel/keeping fuel costs down

**MOWING MAINTENANCE**

- 8. Mowing — labor savers
- 9. Quoting jobs/services
- 10. How to add an enhancement crew/division

**PESTICIDES & CHEMICALS**

- 11. Generating revenue by adding lawn care services
- 12. Best practices: chemical applications
- 13. Hydroseeding versus turf
- 14. Fertilization
- 15. Organic/eco-friendly lawn care options
- 16. Chemical lawn care as add on services

**CONSTRUCTION & INSTALLATION & DESIGN**

- 17. Simplifying installation jobs
- 18. Installing pave stone
- 19. Software solutions for design projects—designing with technology
- 20. Design "how to's": Best practices for proper installation
- 21. Design/build/install as add on service
- 22. Water features
- 23. Tips on selling design/build projects to home owners

**IRRIGATION**

- 24. Basics of irrigation installation & maintenance
- 25. Weather — based controllers
- 26. Dealing with water restrictions
- 27. How to become a WaterSense Partner
- 28. Irrigation as add on service

**HORTICULTURE**

- 29. Best practices for dealing with drought
- 30. Soil treatments for best plants
- 31. PGR's
- 32. Software for planning
- 33. Seasonal planting guidelines
- 34. Bedding & installation

**OTHER**

- 35. None of the above
- 36. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
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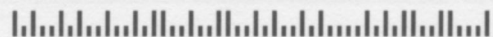
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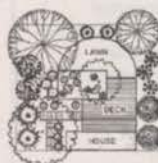
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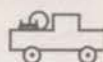
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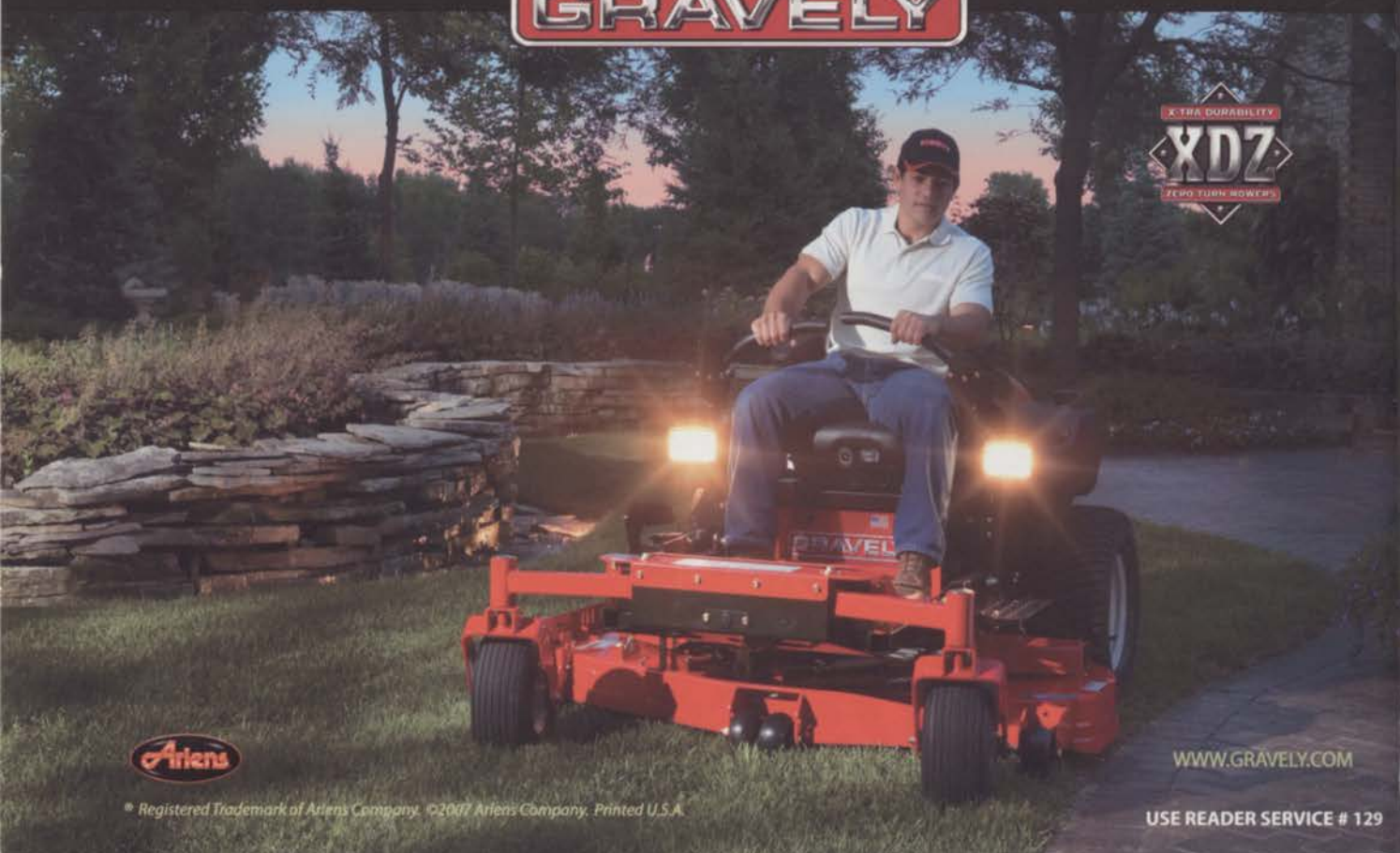
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