

May 2008

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Lawn & Landscape

THE SOUTH BUSINESS

Pray For Rain

A little drought was always good for Ed Mutio's irrigation sales, but dire conditions over the past year forced him to evaluate his business strategy.

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Cover Photo: Charles Gupton



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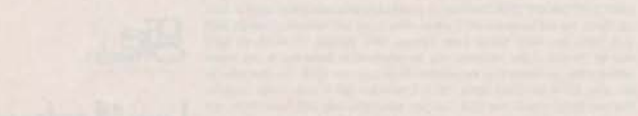
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industry buzz

Get the Buzz

Log on each Monday to learn from industry professionals how successful companies stay on top. You'll take away business tips from executives or industry status reports from people in the know at the associations that represent your companies.

TOP FIVE WEB STORIES

- 1. INDUSTRY BUZZ: Celebrate National Lawn Care Month**
Share the benefits of a healthy lawn with clients.
- 2. Unemployment Rate Jumps to 5.1 percent**
The job market shrunk as 80,000 nonfarm payroll jobs were cut.
- 3. ValleyCrest Acquires Florida-Based Landscape Company**
The landscape firm continues its growth in the Southeast with the acquisition of Concepts in Greenery in Stuart, Fla.
- 4. Tree Heartwood Extracts Thwart Sudden Oak Death Microbe**
An Agricultural Research Service plant physiologist found that extracts from tree heartwood can limit the growth of *Phytophthora ramorum*, the microbial agent that causes the disease.
- 5. Drought Tolerant Grass Meets Green Building Standards**
UltimateFlora Zoysia, developed by the University of Florida, is approved by the Florida Green Building Coalition for use on home lawns.

RECENT POLL: FUEL COST

Q: How will the high price of fuel affect your spring contracts?

- I'll raise prices in other areas because of fuel: 52%
- I'll add a new fuel surcharge: 23%
- I'll step up fuel conservation measures: 16%
- I won't do anything differently: 6%
- I'll increase the existing fuel surcharge: 3%

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\$600

will get you a few plants and a cleanup. No one is going to waste a rebate check on something so small. And if they do, after labor and materials, is it worth it for any landscape company to do it?"

- Benjamin Elliott, of Oak Hill Landscape Group in Kennesaw, Ga., on the economic stimulus checks that are being sent out starting this month. Put in your two cents at lawnandlandscape.com/messageboard, the green industry's award-winning interactive community.

The Month Ahead | lawnandlandscape.com

ORGANICS EXTRA

After you read about organic lawn care in this issue, get more information online under "current issue" at the bottom of the home page.

PUTTING GREENS

After you read about adding putting green installation to your service offerings, learn how to market the service in the Online Extras section.

E-NEWSLETTER

Visit lawnandlandscape.com/newsletter to sign up to receive the latest news and product information in your inbox weekly.



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.

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Water Smarts

Water conservation is one of the most important issues facing the United States and the landscape industry. Water concerns range from region to region based on availability and current need. However, whether the need is today or tomorrow, the time for full-fledged water use education is now.

The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer recently ran a series of articles on the Great Lakes titled, "Who Owns Our Water?" It discussed how growing worldwide water concerns have reached the United States, and is again spurring talk of large-scale diversions of water from the Great Lakes to the Southeast or the Southwest.

The issue is complicated, pitting regions and businesses against one another in a fight to obtain as much fresh water as quickly as possible.

Closer to home, the landscape industry has yet to fully understand the impact of the hottest and driest summer on record for much of the Southeast. Contractors report that it crippled many businesses in our industry because of watering restrictions, the increased cost of growing plant materials, the inability to reseed and sod as well as reduced recurring mowing opportunities.

Stories are also plentiful throughout the U.S. of municipalities and states paying residents to replace turf and plant materials with hardscapes or synthetic alternatives, as well as restricting the ability to install new landscapes and parks surrounding new housing and office developments. There thought is, if the landscapes aren't installed, then water is not needed to maintain them, right?

This month's cover story (see page 32) details how one irrigation contractor has had to remodel his business based on a lack of rain. At one time, dry weather was a good impetus for irrigation system sales, but Ed Mutio, owner of Water Works Unlimited, Wake Forest, N.C., discovered that he had to reinvent his business to survive last summer's drought and increasing water mandates.

While drought is an easy opportunity to bring the issue of water scarcity to light, it's certainly not the only reason to discuss the future of our country's water supply. Water conservation and smart use of this resource should be a concern of each and every one of us no matter the size, scope and location of our businesses.

Last year's grassroots Smart Irrigation Month effort, plus the debut of the Environmental Protection Agency's WaterSense program pushed water-wise messages into the forefront. Additionally, irrigation certification programs provide increased credibility for those interacting with the public on water-related subjects.

The education process doesn't stop there. Lawn and landscape professionals continually need to coach their customers – residential and commercial alike – on the efficiencies and effectiveness of smart irrigation use and its long-term impact on our environment. The issue is not whether to water, it's how to water smart. **LL**

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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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Pesticide Alternatives

I'm disappointed that your discussions of turf management only address the use of harmful chemical treatments, and list no organic control options.

As I see it, any responsible article concerning pest/weed control should always have a balance of the two options. If we cannot rely on our published professionals to provide healthy alternatives to landscape professionals, we will continue to be an industry doing more harm to the environment than good.

Daniel Gerdes
Enhancements Supervisor
Christy Webber Landscapes
Chicago



Kudos

I just wanted to drop you a quick note to tell you how much I enjoy your magazine. Your February issue was especially interesting to me. Thanks for covering the H2B issue so well and for all the good work you do on this and other industry issues.

Sandy Munley
Executive Director
Ohio Landscape Association
Broadview Heights, Ohio



Software Demos

I like the way your magazine does first-hand articles by people who actually do the work and use the products. I would like to see an article that compares the leading landscape design software packages. Most of the landscape software vendors do not have demo CD's and require purchase of the package with a limited return time. I would like to read what others think before making a financial commitment.

George Winstead
MasterScapes
Gainesville, Ga.

Editor's note: Thank you for your suggestion. As a trade magazine for the landscape industry, it's our responsibility to report on the marketplace and share information on the products available to our readers. While we run charts detailing product characteristics, we do not run product comparisons. We suggest posting your question to our message board (www.lawnandlandscape.com/messageboard) where contractors from across the country can provide real-world feedback on various products. Good luck.

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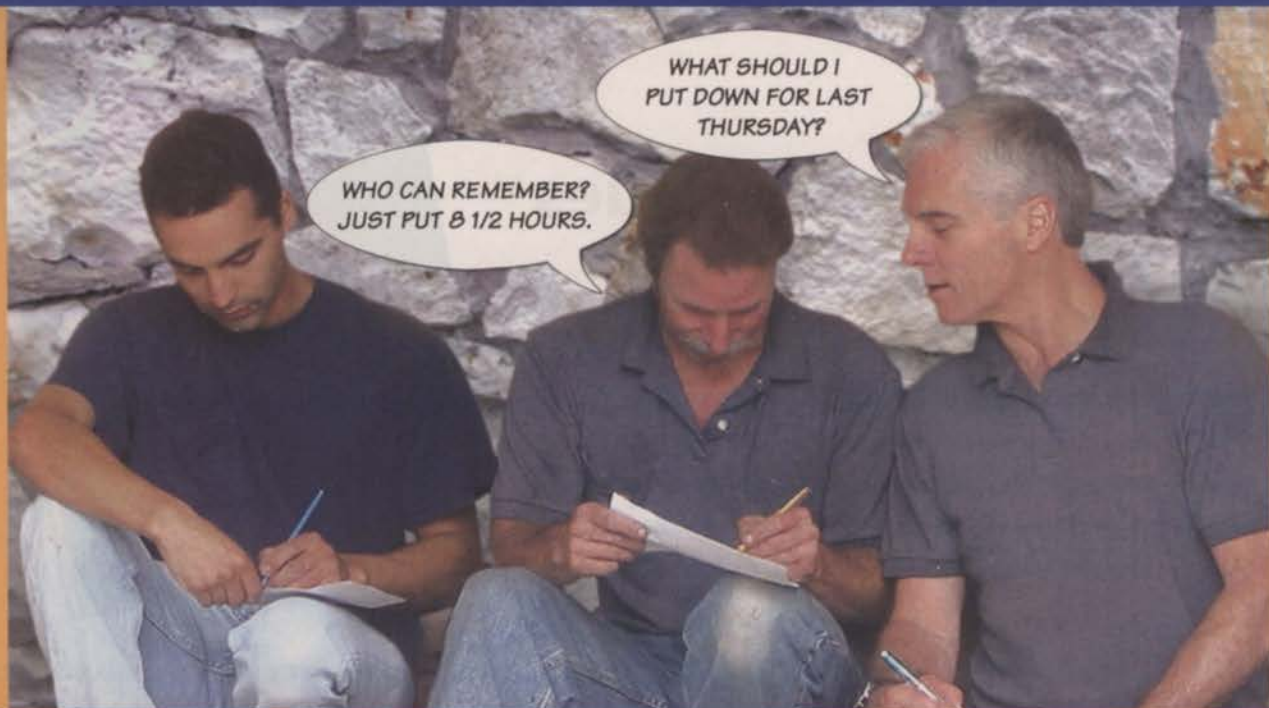
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Name: DAVID B. Date: 9-13

Day:	Start:	Lunch:	End:	Jobsite:	Activity:	Hours:
Monday	7	1/2	3:30	Brentwood	Gen	8
Tuesday	7	1/2	3:30	"	"	8
Wednesday	7	1/2	4	"	"	8 1/2
Thursday	7	1/2	4	Crestview	"	8 1/2
Friday	7	1/2	4	"	"	8 1/2

Employee Signature: *David B.* Total Hours: 41 1/2

WHEN YOU CAN HAVE THIS.

Employee Time Card

Displays the total time worked by each employee

Mountain View Landscape

David Burns

Time card for: Monday, June 9, 2008 - Sunday, June 15, 2008

Jobsite Name	Cost Code	6/9	6/10	6/11	6/12	6/13	6/14	6/15	Total
Brentwood Job	Irrigation	7:38	7:35	3:31					18:44
Crestview Job	Planting			4:22	7:58	7:49			20:09
		7:38	7:35	7:53	7:58	7:49			38:53

David Burns

Total Regular Hours: 38:53
 Total Overtime Hours: -0-
 Total Double Time Hours: -0-

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ASSOCIATION NEWS

Economy, Labor Issues on PLANET's Radar

Jason Cupp, president of Highland Outdoor in Olathe, Kan., took the reins as the president of the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) at the association's Student Career Days event in late March. *Lawn & Landscape* recently spoke with him about his outlook for both the association and the industry as a whole.



Q: WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR PLANET DURING YOUR YEAR-LONG TERM?

A: I find two goals at the top of my list. No. 1, I hope to focus on PLANET's new governance – to educate members about it so we can deliver value quicker in a more strategic way.

Also, members consistently tell us that networking is why they're members and why they come to our events. I'm going to continue to make that a strong emphasis. I'm a people guy, and I hope to foster and facilitate opportunities for people to build lifelong industry and personal relationships.

Q: TELL US ABOUT PLANET'S NEW GOVERNANCE AND WHAT THAT MEANS FOR THE ASSOCIATION'S MEMBERS.

A: The industry is getting larger and becoming more complex with legislation and regulations. Businesses are having to change along with it, and PLANET will have to change, too. It used to be that the board members did a lot of the work. They were not only trying to set the association's direction, but they were also in the trenches. We decided to move to a strategic board that looks at the big picture and positions PLANET to deliver on the needs of the members. The number of board members has gone down from 23 to 15. That will allow us to

WORK FORCE

STUDENT CAREER DAYS DRAWS RECORD CROWD

North Metro Technical College took first place. Photo: PLANET



The 32nd annual PLANET Student Career Days

drew a record 950 students from 65 universities, who participated in 25 individual and team competitions. Hosted by North Metro Technical College, the event took place March 27-30 in Atlanta.

Students competed in a number of events, including plant identification, estimating, equipment operating and installation, as individuals as well as in teams. The individual winners, or "Superstars," were, in first place, Matthew Early of North Metro Technical College (Acworth, Ga.); second place, Ken Kwait of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Champaign, Ill.); and, in third place, Ken Beasley of Hinds Community College (Jackson, Miss.).



make decisions quicker and be able to focus more on strategy than operations. Operationally, it will come down to committees combined with our staff, who have the ability and skills to be more involved. Overall, it will allow us to be more nimble and deliver better value to our members quicker.

Q: WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU EXPECT THE INDUSTRY TO FACE THIS YEAR AND HOW WILL PLANET HELP TACKLE THOSE?

A: The issues include difficult housing and credit markets. Across the board it will be a tough year, but the companies who do business in construction, starter homes or smaller projects will really feel it.

Immigration and H-2B continue to be top issues. I don't think that headline is going to go away. As the industry is growing by leaps and bounds, management and labor will continue to be at a premium.

I don't know if anybody has the answer to the economic problems, but as an industry we need to continue to develop the future workforce. At Student Career Days we had nearly 1,000 students this year. We need to continue to partner with the FFA, 4-H and AFA organizations to attract the students

interested in agriculture and horticulture early on.

Q: HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE SUCCESS OF THE ALCA/PLCAA MERGER AFTER TWO YEARS?

A: I think we're PLANET now. Some will disagree, but I believe if you talk to members from the legacy associations, they will call themselves PLANET members. For a while, we had to rebrand ourselves, but a lot of those transition issues are over with. The hardest part is for somebody who's been around either association for a long time; it's hard to not feel like that identity is different, even though I feel it's been great for the industry. But I think we're past it.

Q: ARE THERE ANY NEW INITIATIVES FOR THE UPCOMING YEAR?

A: In fact, we feel so strongly about focusing on the new governance structure, there aren't any major new initiatives for 2008. Of course we'll react to issues in terms of legislation and things like that, but there's nothing significant that's not business as usual. – *Marisa Palmieri*

North Metro Technical College took first place in the overall competitive events, unseating last year's winner, Brigham Young University – Idaho. BYU – Idaho took second place, and BYU's Provo campus took third.


North Metro Tech student Matthew Early was just as excited about his team's win as his individual first-place finish. "We just wanted to place in the top 10," Early said. "We thought that if the whole team came together we might be able to pull it off."

In addition to the competitions, students also had the opportunity to win scholarships and other award money. PLANET distributed more than \$70,000 in scholarships through its PLANET Academic Excellence Foundation.

The SCD Career Fair gave students the opportunity to interview with green industry firms for jobs and internships. Many students received job offers on site. "Seeing the level of talent coming into the field made me really proud to be a part of this industry," said Ross Fletcher, president and owner of Hemlocks Landscaping, Jasper, Ga. "We had 150 kids who were interested in interviewing with us and wanted more information about our company. You can't do better than that."

Lawn & Landscape magazine was the media sponsor for the 32nd annual event.

For a complete list of winners, visit www.student-careerdays.org. – *Emily Mullins*

A close-up, front-quarter view of a red Ford Super Duty truck. The truck is positioned on a rugged, rocky terrain. The focus is on the front grille, which features the Ford logo in the center and the words "SUPER DUTY" in a silver, embossed font across the top. The truck's headlights and bumper are also visible. The background consists of a steep, rocky hillside.

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ECONOMY

No Boost Expected from Stimulus Checks

Despite water-cooler buzz that reflects taxpayers are eager to receive their economic stimulus checks, a recent study shows business owners don't necessarily harbor the same excitement.

Sixty-three percent of business owners expect "little or no benefit" from the tax rebate checks, according to PNC's Economic Outlook Survey, released last month. The survey is the result of interviews conducted with 500 U.S. owners and senior executives of companies with annual revenues between \$100,000 and \$250 million.

The stimulus checks, which the government will begin mailing this month, dole out \$600 to individual taxpayers who earn less than \$75,000. Married couples who earn less than \$150,000 combined and who file jointly will receive \$1,200. The package also includes \$300-per-child rebates.

Out of the 30 percent of business owners who expect to see some benefit from the checks, the expectation is higher among wholesale and retail firms compared to manufacturing and service companies.

Landscape and lawn care company owners are among the unenthusiastic service sector professionals. "It won't make a



lick of a difference in our sales," says Andrew Aksar, president of Outdoor Finishes, Walkersville, Md. "Six hundred to \$1,200 doesn't go very far in this industry."

James Binns, president of Earthworks Landscape Gardening, Fayetteville, Ark., agrees. "People will take that money and buy more crap from China," he says. "For \$600 in the green industry, my company can prune, pull weeds and do two mowings on one small lawn – for one month."

PNC's survey reflects a decrease in general economic confidence among small and mid-sized business owners, too. Only 6 percent of respondents said they're optimistic about the U.S. economy over the next six months – a record low in the 5-year-old survey. Additionally, 19 percent of respondents said they expect their profits to decrease in the near term. Their top concerns were the possibility of recession (36 percent) and higher energy prices (30 percent). –*Marisa Palmieri*

info

For more on the stimulus plan's small business tax incentives, see "Taxing Decisions" on page 88.

WEATHER

Prepare Now for Hurricane Season

The Atlantic hurricane season looms on the horizon. Before the season officially starts June 1, contractors in storm-prone areas have a chance to make sure they're prepared for whatever comes their way.

National Hurricane Preparedness Week runs May 25 to 31. Those who reside or work in areas that have historically been in a hurricane's path can learn what their vulnerabilities are and what actions they should take. Preparing before the storm hits is important, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) says.

The association outlines pre-hurricane precautions, including trimming dead or overhanging branches from trees around homes. Also, it recommends that companies make a list of items that should be brought inside during a hurricane watch.

Check with manufacturers for tips on dealing with extreme weather. For example, Husqvarna sends crews with chainsaws and generators to storm-hit areas to help with the cleanup.

Visit www.noaa.gov for more information about hurricanes, including historical hurricane tracks and the different types of hurricane hazards. –*Heather Wood*



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TRENDS

Boomers Continue to Spend on Their Landscapes

Despite the uncertain economy, baby boomers haven't stopped spending on their landscapes.

People age 45 and older now account for 64 percent of the retail gardening market, the National Gardening Association reports. The impact of this changing demographic is evident in garden centers and distribution outlets nationwide.

It also signals opportunity for professional lawn and landscape contractors, as homeowners are also spending money on labor-saving tools and new installations such as drip irrigation systems and products and services to manage weeds, among other things.

While gardening may be a favorite pastime among Americans, they still don't want to do all of the work themselves. Thirty percent of all households nationwide, or an estimated 34.5 million households, currently hire at least one lawn and landscape service. And the market for residential lawn and landscape services has increased by about 10 percent each year over the last five years.

Don't get bummed out over the headlines. Go after those residential customers with money to spend. — *Cindy Code*



GIE+EXPO

Grunder, Other Experts to Present Preview Workshops at GIE+EXPO

The Green Industry Expo (GIE) Workshops at the 2008 GIE+EXPO, which takes place Oct. 22-25 in Louisville, Ky., provide a "preview" to the Professional Landscape Network's four-day Green Industry Conference (GIC). The \$50 sessions are open to all trade show attendees.



GIE+EXPO
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Workshops include:

THURSDAY, OCT. 23, SESSION A, 8:30 – 10:30 a.m.

Pricing and Profitability, Kevin Kehoe, Kehoe & Co.

"Real world" strategies used by successful contractors to increase sales and profits.

FRIDAY, OCT. 24, SESSION B, 8:30 – 10:30 a.m.

Building Leadership Through Personal Power, Chuck Zamora, Zamora Training Inc.

Explore the three major components of personal power: communication, attitude and self-image, followed by goal setting.

SATURDAY, OCT. 25, SESSION C, 8:30 – 10:30 a.m.

Make Friends, Make Sales, The Art of Relationship Selling, Marty Grunder, Marty Grunder! Inc.

Improve your selling efforts immediately by learning how to make friends and influence people, making money in the process.

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USE READER SERVICE # 13

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inside the industry



CRIME WATCH

Fax Fraud Scheme Targets Contractors

Contractors should beware of a criminal identity fraud scheme targeting companies in the landscape and lawn care industry, according to alerts issued by several national and state trade associations.

Industry members have received faxes indicating the U.S. Department of Transportation would like to qualify them as a prospective project contractor. These notices, which request that contractors submit "a financial release form," are not actually from the U.S. Department of Transportation, the alerts say.

Firms that may have suffered a loss from this scheme should contact their local police departments, according to the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET).

In addition, the Secret Service, which investigates financial crimes, advises caution in financial disclosure and recommends the following business practices:

- Keep a close eye on all bank accounts;
- Inform your bank to view any additional lines of credit or wire transactions with suspicion. Request that these be directly cleared with you or an official representative at your company; and
- Never provide information that would give access to your bank accounts without fully confirming who's receiving that information.

— Marisa Palmieri

Image: Dreamstime.com

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USE READER SERVICE # 15

CONTRACTOR NEWS

Ruppert Builds on Green Movement

Ruppert Nurseries is constructing a new campus in Laytonsville, Md., to house its more earth-friendly headquarters. Upon the completion of the 16-acre site, the company hopes to achieve a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. There are six buildings on the site including: two office buildings (one for corporate operations including Ruppert Properties, which develops light industrial warehouse space), one repair facility to support local branches and one historic residence to be remodeled as a corporate office and two storage buildings. Surrounding the campus are 160 acres of Ruppert's 500-acre tree farm.

"Going green is something that most of America wants to feel part of," says Craig Ruppert, CEO of Ruppert Nurseries. "Our

people are no exception. They will take more pride in the company because the company is moving in this direction."

The buildings, scheduled to be finished by late summer, will bring the company other benefits on a practical level, Ruppert adds. A cleaner, brighter, and more comfortable working environment leads to happier employees, which is the primary goal. In addition, it will take less fuel to heat, and the buildings will use less electricity across the board, which add up to cost savings. Energy-saving measures include motion detectors, low-E windows and doors, efficient light bulbs, and high-efficiency HVAC systems. —Heather Wood



Photo: Ruppert Nurseries

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Insect Outbreaks

There is a lot of uncertainty for the 2008 season as researchers have yet to fully understand the impact of the hottest and driest summer on record for much of the Southeast. Researchers and contractors across the country report they are learning that insects such as fire ants, mole crickets, white grubs, southern chinch bugs and others are amazingly well adapted to cope with a range of environmental extremes. Service providers in the South need to be prepared for earlier than normal pest outbreaks because of the warm winter and mild and wet spring.

Other areas of the country are running behind with soil temperatures beginning to warm in mid-April. The Eastern region of the country may see the emergence of a brood of periodical cicadas.

Seasonal weather patterns and sufficient rainfall in the West indicate a relatively normal year.

Invasive pest species continue to be a concern for many areas of the country as contractors and municipalities work to stay ahead of Emerald Ash Borer and other pests that threaten to devastate trees.

GRUBS: The winter in the Southeast was almost nonexistent so the temperatures certainly weren't detrimental to insects such as fire ants. Despite the drought, grub populations were high (higher than normal in some locations) defying logic about traditional white grub biology and ecology. As a result, it's difficult to predict the severity of the white grub populations. Likewise, because so much of the country was dry in 2007, it's difficult to predict grub outbreaks.



FIRE ANTS: Recent rains throughout the South have somewhat eased the impact of the drought and fire ants are popping up in quite a few locations. Activity will continue until the real heat of summer.

Fire ants continue their march north in transition zone states as well as west and north along the coast.



SOUTHERN CHINCH BUGS/MOLE CRICKETS:

Even if the rains arrive this summer, these pests should be prevalent in St. Augustinegrass because populations were very high last year and the winter was so mild and dry. With a warm spring and plenty of moisture, look for mole crickets a little bit earlier than normal.



ARMYWORMS/CUTWORMS:

Spring overseeding is more prevalent this spring in dry regions because it couldn't be successfully completed last fall. Watch for the presence of armyworms and cutworms in these areas as they are not used to getting such treats in the spring in the Southeast.



CICADAS: Eastern regions can expect the emergence of a brood of periodical cicadas. Periodical cicadas are found in eastern North America. There are seven species – four with 13-year life cycles (including one new species described in 2000), and three with 17-year cycles. The three 17-year species are generally northern in distribution, while the 13-year species are generally southern and midwestern. When they do emerge after their long juvenile periods, they do so in huge numbers, forming much denser aggregations than those usually achieved by cicadas. Many people know periodical cicadas by the name "17-year locusts" or "13-year locusts", but they are not true locusts, which are a type of grasshopper.

Photos (clockwise from top left): Grub courtesy of Alton N. Sparks, Jr., University of Georgia, Bugwood.org; Fire ant courtesy of University of Agriculture, Bugwood.org; Southern chinch bug courtesy of Frank Peairs, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org; Cicada courtesy of Lacey L. Hyche, Auburn University, Bugwood.org; Mole cricket courtesy of J. Jarmy N. Dell, Bugwood.org; Armyworm/cutworm courtesy of University of California, Bugwood.org



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USE READER SERVICE # 19



Business:

77%



Percent of small business owners who feel that economic conditions in the U.S. are getting worse.

Source: Skillsoft

QUOTABLE:

"The financial market crisis that erupted in August 2007 has developed into the largest financial shock since the Great Depression."

- International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook report (April 2008)

49 percent

Workers who believe it is inappropriate to talk politics at work.

Source: Beyond.com



57%

In anticipation of the federal rebate check, the percent of Americans who indicated they will spend the money on basic needs, such as groceries, gas and paying down debt.

Source: Access America



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Cover It Up



BEFORE CHOOSING a groundcover, Joe Walton asks himself a few key questions. Is the landscape sunny or shady? Are there any erosion issues? Am I trying to cover the ground or just fill a space? "There is a wide variety of groundcovers available in all shapes, sizes, textures and colors," says the general manager of HPK Property Maintenance, East Norriton, Pa. "But finding one that fits your need shouldn't be difficult if you evaluate your site properly."

Groundcovers, like ferns, can be used for a variety of reasons – from erosion control to protecting delicate ornamen-

tals' roots. Contractors should know what they're dealing with, as some groundcovers have invasive tendencies. "Some groundcovers spread through their root systems, creating more plants," Walton says. "These tend to be more invasive and can choke out other plants." Some groundcovers grow in clumps, meaning the plant grows larger but doesn't take root. "These plants are great to fill in areas of a landscape where you want to contain the groundcover and provide diversity in the garden design," Walton says.

Above are four ferns contractors can use to suit their groundcover needs. **LL**

1. NORTHEAST

- Name:** Hayscented
Genus: *Dennstaedtia punctilobula*
USDA Zones: 3 to 8
Plant Type: Deciduous fern
- Grows 15 to 30 inches high
 - Grows best sun to partial shade
 - Plant on 24-inch centers
 - Has yellow-green, fine-textured leaves
 - Invasive in small gardens

2. NORTHWEST

- Name:** Japanese Beech
Genus: *Thelypteris decursive-pinnata*
USDA Zones: 4 to 10
Plant Type: Deciduous fern
- Grows 12 to 24 inches high
 - Grows best in medium sun to partial shade
 - Plant on 18-inch centers
 - Has light green, upright leaves
 - Colonizes thickly in shaded areas

3. SOUTHEAST

- Name:** Marsh
Genus: *Thelypteris palustris*
USDA Zones: 2 to 10
Plant Type: Deciduous fern
- Grows 18 to 30 inches high
 - Grows best in partial shade to full sun, depending on moisture availability
 - Plant on 24-inch centers
 - Has light green leaves
 - Can be invasive in protected gardens

4. SOUTHWEST

- Name:** Southern River
Genus: *Thelypteris kunthii*
USDA Zones: 8 to 10
Plant Type: Deciduous fern
- Grows 24 to 40 inches high
 - Grows best in shade, can grow in full sun if kept wet. Can survive droughts of up to nine months when dormant
 - Plant on 24-inch center
 - Leaf color varies from light to medium green
 - Is a fast grower

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Water restrictions parched many of the once lush landscapes of irrigation contractor Ed Mutio's clients and dried up much of his seasonal maintenance business.

Photo: Charles Gupton

BY MIKE ZAWACKI/MANAGING EDITOR

Pray for Rain

A little drought was always good for Ed Mutio's irrigation sales, but dire conditions over the past year forced him to evaluate his business strategy.

A nagging dry spell was always the perfect catalyst to convince Ed Mutio's residential customers that their parched landscapes were best served by a new irrigation system. In fact, the owner of Wake Forest-based Water Works Unlimited prided himself on his single-day installation sales mantra, which had built him a portfolio of about 3,500 irrigation customers and placed him on track to realize more than \$1 million in annual revenue.

That's why it was unusual to find Mutio this past summer and fall scanning the heavens; his eyes squinting at a pale blue North Carolina sky that yielded ample amounts of sunshine but very little precipitation.

"I've always been a big believer that the lack of rain was good for my business,"



OWNER/PRESIDENT: Ed Mutio

GENERAL MANAGER: Carol Mutio

OPERATIONS MANAGER: Alvaro Martell

MAINTENANCE MANAGER:

German Sampayo

INSTALLATION MANAGER:

Bruno Martell

FOUNDED: 1996

EMPLOYEES: 6 year-round, 16 seasonal

% H-2B WORKERS: 80%

SERVICE BREAKDOWN:

70% Irrigation design and installation

30% Irrigation services

CLIENT BREAKDOWN:

95% Residential

5% Commercial

REVENUE:

2008.....\$1 million (projected)

2007.....\$800,000

2006.....\$950,000

2005.....\$1.05 million

EQUIPMENT BREAKDOWN:

Trucks: 4

Trailers: 3

Vibratory pipe pulling machines: 3

cover story

Mutio says. "But then it got really bad and it started to really hurt our industry. That's when I started praying for rain."

The drought, coupled with water restrictions, made business difficult for the entire green industry, but more so for Mutio, whose business model is based strictly on residential irrigation installation. To survive Mutio has had to make some tough decisions. He's examined his business model and instituted changes he hopes will position him to persevere, now and into the future.

PARCHED. It's raining now, making April 2008 a stark departure from the last 18 months. For much of 2007, the American Southeast was gripped by historic prolonged drought conditions. According to reports, 2007 was the driest year on record in Alabama and

sion in many parts of the region.

But in the past, drought meant business for Mutio, whose irrigation firm caters to residential clients. In fact, the drought of 2002 resulted in one of the best years to date for Mutio, amplifying his sales from \$720,000 the previous year to more than \$1.2 million and the first time the company broke the \$1-million mark since its 1996 inception.

"At that time municipalities didn't turn to harsh water restrictions," he says. "Some adopted odd- and even-day watering while others adopted watering schedules. For the most part it affected us positively because now people had to think about scheduling their watering."

Despite lingering problems regarding rainfall for the last three seasons, in spring 2007 the overall mood was

"After the municipalities said no more watering, well that business just dried up. The phones weren't ringing for service calls."

— Ed Mutio, Water Works Unlimited

the second driest for the Atlanta area. Nearly 90 percent of North Carolina experienced severe or extreme drought conditions.

The National Climatic Data Center in Asheville, N.C., forecasts a general improvement in drought conditions throughout the Southeast this spring and into the summer. Nevertheless, in early April, concerns on the levels of local water supplies and water restrictions continued to be a topic of discus-

optimistic. "When you come out of the winter there's a lot of talk about the local lakes being low and municipalities begin wondering about watering, but that's typical every year," he says. "Having people conscious about water conservation issues actually helps us, so I was anticipating growth."

Entering the 2007 season Mutio was poised for 15 percent growth, which he believed was an attainable goal. The Water Works Unlimited

business model is based on one-day installation, which Mutio accomplishes utilizing a six-man installation crew employing trenchless technology. This team can install a six- to eight-zone irrigation system during the course of a single day. On average, Mutio charges \$3,500 per installation, of which he realizes a 15 percent profit. A separate service team performs repair work and seasonal maintenance.

"Customers are excited by the fact that we can be in and out in a day," he says. "Plus, with the trenchless technology, we don't tear up the yard. You barely know that we're there."

Water Works Unlimited targets Greater Raleigh's upper-middle class, those who have homes valued between \$250,000 and \$400,000. "The typical client has been

in his home for three to four years and now wants an irrigation system to make his life easier," he says.

While he retains a 90-percent client-retention rate, Mutio depends almost entirely on word-of-mouth referrals and the decals on the sides of his work trucks for marketing. "It's really bare bones," he says. "I spend maybe \$250 a year on yard signs and business cards."

DIRE CONDITIONS. By September drought conditions had worsened. Mutio reviewed the books and discovered business was down 20 percent from where he anticipated it should be for the season. "We were way behind and we had a lot of making up to do," he says.

Typically, business spikes twice

continued on page 39



LONG-TERM GROWTH STRATEGY:

To open up in other markets and offer business licenses following the Water Works Unlimited business model. There's also some thought toward offering a line of irrigation products to do-it-yourself homeowners.

GREATEST BUSINESS

CHALLENGE:

The word "recession." While an actual economic recession would mean a slowing down of consumer spending, the hint of such an economic downturn could lead clients toward severe belt-tightening measures.

GREATEST LABOR CHALLENGE:

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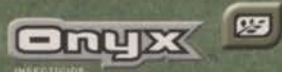
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continued from page 35

during the year, during April, May and June and again in September and October. "The recurring revenue that we count on and anticipate comes from our annual service contracts," Mutio says. "That's when we either turn on everyone's system or shut those systems down and do any repairs that need to be done. After the municipalities said no more watering, well that business just dried up. The phones weren't ringing for service calls."

Looking to troubleshoot this problem, Mutio turned to cost-cutting. "I started restructuring and reorganizing the business to trim as much as I could from the overhead just to survive," he says.

Layoffs were Mutio's first course of action to control costs. While service calls were nearly nonexistent, he kept his four service technicians and cut his

years, Mutio tinkered with new service options to augment his irrigation business. Similar to his philosophy behind selling irrigation systems, Mutio wanted to offer services that made client's lives easier.

Mutio put into play a concept he calls "free maintenance," a service that involves creating beds, 2 to 3 feet deep, that follow the contours of the existing landscape. "There are areas around the foundation of a client's house where it just doesn't make sense to put irrigation heads," he says. "Instead, I sell them on the idea of extending their existing mulch beds and wrapping them around the house."

Mutio charges \$2 per linear foot to create the beds and estimates his average client's home has between 80 and 160 linear feet of potential "free maintenance" bed space. He also sells

"I started restructuring and reorganizing the business to trim as much as I could from the overhead just to survive."

— Ed Mutio, Water Works Unlimited

six-member installation crew. "My service guys were my most experienced folks and they know the customer really well," he says. "They know how to install, too, and I wanted to keep them in anticipation that we were going to be doing service." At the time, Mutio also let go his two in-house customer service reps.

Despite the cuts, Mutio still needed to figure out a way to make up for the lost revenue.

NEW AVENUES. For the past few

clients three levels of mulch, from pine straw to a high-quality, long-lasting designer mulch.

"Client see the value in this service because now they don't have to tend or trim those areas," he says. "And it doesn't take us any extra time to put down six yards of mulch and to edge the beds with an edger. It only costs me an extra hour, but I'm well within my window of getting the system done in a day."

To date, about one third of Mutio's clients have bought the "free mainte-

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nance" service.

Landscape lighting is another service venue that Mutio targeted during the downturn. While he dabbled in it in the past, low-voltage lighting installation was another way his crews

could work and he could remain in front of clients.

While lighting is not as popular with clients as "free maintenance," the drought forced him to place a greater emphasis on the service. To do this,

Mutio offered lighting installation specials on his service tickets.

On average, Mutio charges \$1,800 for a low-voltage lighting package of 8 to 12 fixtures and a 300-watt transformer. "And I offer different pricing schemes to sell them on additional landscape lighting and additional transformers," he says.

Besides these two new service points, irrigation installation was still a viable offering. Mutio, though, needed to hone his sales approach.

"Over the last few years water conservation has always been a big issue here," he says. "I try to make that a priority with the client and sell the fact that we might not be able to water here now, but eventually you will have a need to water and you're going to need the system."

To add value, Mutio used the drought in his favor, encouraging the client to purchase an installation now while his crew wasn't busy. "The value in this was to get this service while we weren't booked," he says.

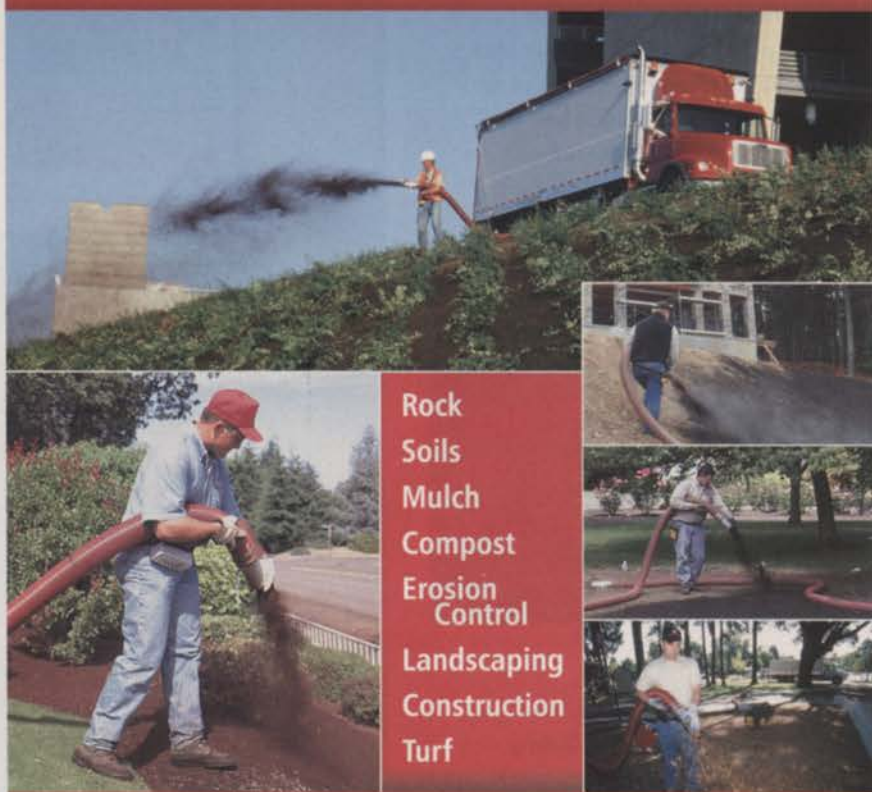
Meanwhile, Mutio says his competitors were doing whatever they could - including dropping their prices - to line up work. Mutio, worried about the long-term ramifications, resisted the urge to meet low-ball pricing.

"I was very leery for the simple reason that the last thing I wanted to do was drop my price and lose money on a job," he says. "At that point, I'd rather stay home. But there were people who would do anything to get the work. They don't realize that this will only hurt them over the long run."

SELLING PAIN. To successfully sell irrigation systems in a drought, Mutio focuses on diagnosing problems.

"Typically, customers put their guard up when you go out to sell them irrigation," he says. "Why? Because I'm a sales guy. My approach is

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Spring rains have begun to green parched landscapes and will very likely jumpstart Ed Mutio's irrigation business in 2008.

to bring that guard down."

Mutio calls it "selling the client pain" and bases it on a quasi doctor-patient philosophy of diagnosing the client's problems and offering solutions. "Hopefully another guy has given them another bid and tells the client how great he is compared to me," Mutio says. "I, on the other hand, have told them how I'm going to solve their problems. My solution is what relieves their pain. I'm assessing their problems: How long has this been going on? What have you done to try and fix this? By the time I leave the client I've evaluated their situation and I've offered them a solution to their problems."

Did this technique retain and attract irrigation clients over the last year? Absolutely, he says.

"I want the customers to make the decision themselves," he says. "When they evaluate their contract with me, I want them to make their decision to choose me because I point out the areas that made them sick and they

were confident I'm the guy to go with and who will make it better."

DELUGE. With the rain in late March and early April, Mutio is fearful about the return of business.

As of early April, only 400 of his 3,500 clients had prepaid for their spring maintenance service. He suspects most have taken a wait-and-see approach to whether or not the drought truly lifts this spring.

"I fear we're going to get a flood of calls when the municipalities eventually lighten up on the watering restrictions," he says. "We're going to get slammed with calls."

His contingency plan is to rent additional trucks for two to three weeks to cover the influx of business he anticipates will flood his customer service lines.

But Mutio says he'll weather this drought like he's weathered all of the other obstacles he encountered over the last 15 years. He says he's not going to sweat it because despite the

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Enlightened Upsell

A message board user found a way to make the most out of the bad housing situation.

Contractors who derive a portion of their business from newly built homes might find themselves with fewer jobs as talk of a failing housing market abounds. But as one *Lawn & Landscape* online message board participant recently shared, there are ways to use the situation as an upsell opportunity.

Benjamin Elliott, president of Oak Hill Landscape Group in Kennesaw, Ga., had customers who could attest to the shaky state of the housing market. He works with custom home builders who have been struggling with new home sales. So Elliott offered to install landscape

lighting at one of the sites and the builder doesn't have to pay for the job until the house sells.

"It was a basic system: a few uplights and wash lights and it took one guy to install it in 3½ hours," Elliott posts on the message board. The customer still had to pay for the other services Elliott performed on the lot, including grading, plants, sod and irrigation.

"It was really easy because we were already there working on the rest of the install, so it saved us a few hours in installation because everything was already exposed for us to lay the wire and take it through sleeves,

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etc.," he posts.

While he knows it might take a year or two to sell the house, Elliott thinks the deal will pay off.

"I felt it would make our install look great, separate it from other new homes and be a nice bonus for us whenever it gets sold," he says. "We did charge a little bit more than we regularly would, so it would be worth sitting on it for a while if we had to."

Not only does the lighting installation make the company's landscaping install look better, but if

all goes well, the deal will lead to more business with the builder.

"The more houses they sell, the more houses will be built for us to install," Elliott says.

NIGHT BUYS. Some message board participants wonder if anyone will even see the work that is intended to accent the home's key features and make it attractive to potential buyers.

"Ever go shopping for a house at night? Well, neither has anyone else," posts Andrew Garulay, owner of Yarmouthport Design Group in Yarmouthport, Mass.

Elliott disagrees. "Many people shop at night and people are encouraged to," he says, adding he has seen realtor brochures that recommend it. "Why? Because people want to see what is happening on their future street like parties, lots of traffic and the way the house looks at night."

Home shoppers would rather see how a house looks in the daylight, says Andrew Aksar, president of Outdoor Finishes in Walkersville, Md.

"I don't believe that many people are concerned about how a house looks at night, as they usually look the same in the day," Aksar says. "But, with a well-executed lighting design, that property will look entirely different. Although, if no one knows it's lit, they won't know to look."

For those who might see the house at night, the quality of the lighting display, like the landscaping, can make the difference when it comes to the curb appeal, Aksar adds. Keep in mind factors including the facade of the house, the shape of the roof, the presence of trees and the use of shadows, he says.

"Sure, you can plop a few path lights in here and there, and you can

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add a tree or two, but really, that's not going to achieve much of a "wow" from anyone," he posts.

The equipment needed to create that type of "wow" can be costly and not worth the investment, he adds.

UPS AND DOWNS. Whether or not the lighting will sell the house is not the point, says Todd McCabe, president of McCabe Landscape Group in Wrightsville Beach, N.C.

"He isn't the one selling the hous-

Looking at it from this view and not from the home seller's view, message board posters then offered their opinions on the effectiveness of Elliott's upsell idea.

The thought of not charging a fee until the house is sold was too risky of a proposition for Steve Wise of Scapes in Jamestown, Ohio.

"I guess it may help you, but do you really want to wait on your money?" Wise posts to the message board. "If they only custom-build houses, that's

"I felt it would make our install look great, separate it from other new homes and be a nice bonus for us whenever it gets sold." — Benjamin Elliott, Oak Hill Landscape Group



es," McCabe says. "Benjamin was just sharing a way to increase revenue and make some quick, easy money, even though he knows he may have to wait a while for it."

not very many in a season."

Wise is wary of doing business with builders, he says, explaining that some of them try to pay the landscape contractor less than what the job is worth.



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And with the housing market in the state it is, the deal could become even more of a risk, Garulay adds.

"They are going to have lots of people waiting for cash when one of those houses sell if they have gotten

behind," Garulay says. "A lot of those people are critical to their being able to continue to work, making them much more important to pay than the guy who put the outdoor lighting on the house that was not going to have

any in the first place."

There is a subdivision being built in Wise's area and he says he will consider selling them his services only when the homes are finished. He will then try to sell decks, fencing, landscaping and other work and request to be paid up front for the services.

"All I am saying is think about what you are doing before you go selling too many lighting jobs," Wise posts. "There are better ways to market."

Elliott says the company doesn't complete many homes per year and adds he would not have made the deal with the builders if he didn't have such a solid relationship with the company.

"They pay within 10 days of everything, they give us a good budget to work on, and have been responsible for giving us a lot of work through a contract they gave us that has led us to work with a commercial construction firm on some big projects," Elliott says. "Plus, we are holding less than \$1,200 worth of material."

The cost of labor for the lighting install was \$40, not including the work Elliott did, with about \$850 worth of materials used.

"It's not like I gave them a fireplace in the backyard with a patio and have \$10,000 sitting unpaid," he says.

The investment could pay off before the house is sold. The builders allowed Elliott to place his company's sign in the yard and he already has received a lead from a homeowner in that neighborhood who's interested in a lighting install.

"These are \$700,000 houses and they have \$700,000 neighbors," Elliott posts to the message board. LL

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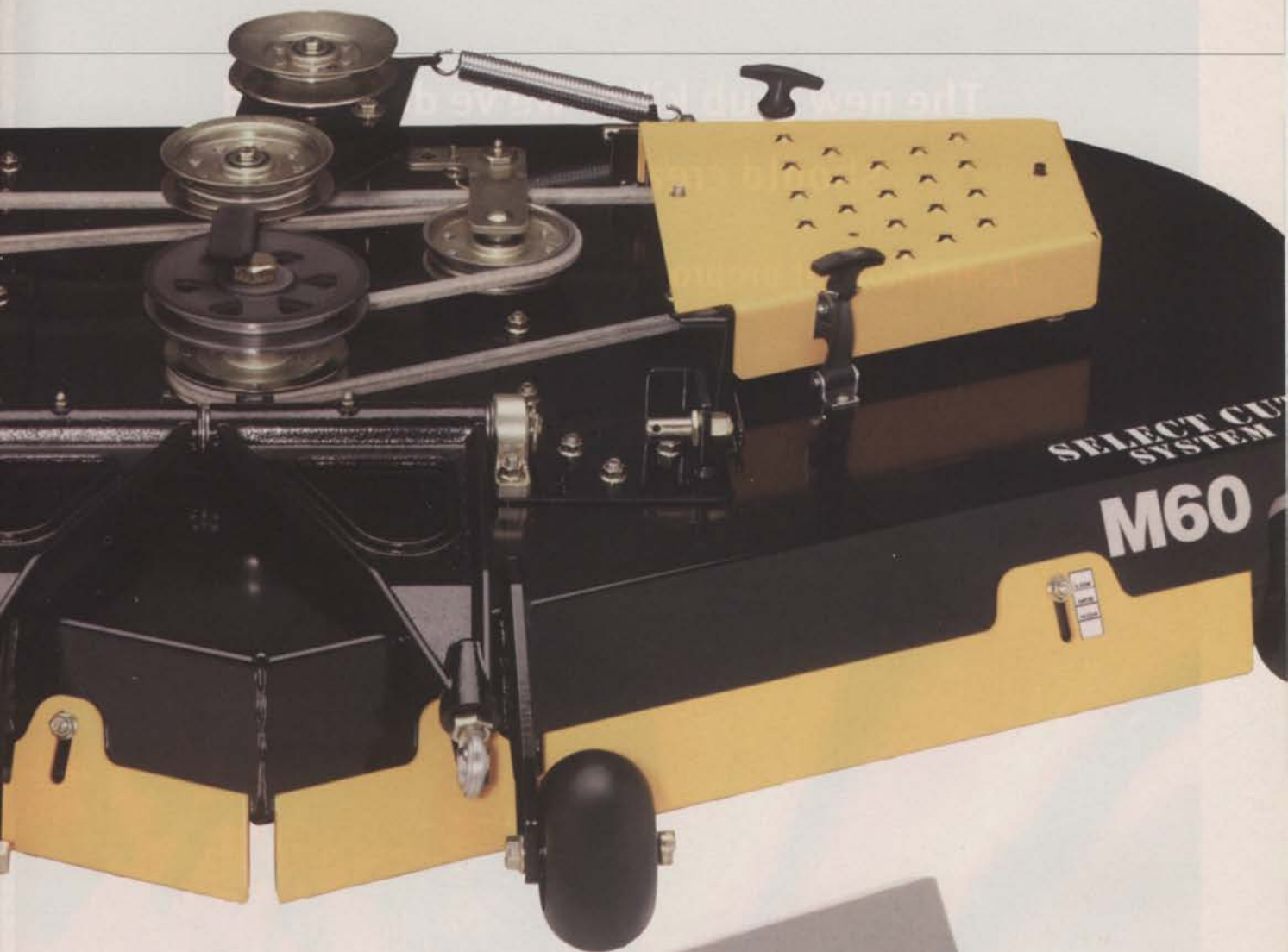
equipment



On deck

The deck plays a pivotal role in the quality of a mower's cut and is a feature contractors shouldn't overlook.

BY EMILY MULLINS/ASSOCIATE EDITOR



When Kyle Stevens purchases a mower, deck design is a very important feature. After all, a mower's deck plays a pivotal role in the quality of the cut. "Most mowers out there ride about the same, are powered about the same and have the same basic controls," says the president of Stonewood and Waters Landscape Craftsmen, Honeoye Falls, N.Y. "However, they all cut very differently."

Mowers are one of a landscape contractor's most important pieces of equipment. Thirty-six percent of contractors purchased a riding mower in 2007 spending an average of \$12,034, and 30 percent plan to purchase one in 2008, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research. With 40 percent of contractors offering mowing and maintenance services, these machines are used day in and day out, so contractors need to pay close attention to a mower's various features, including the deck.

The deck's main function is to keep the mower's blades suspended and rotating, and an efficiently designed mower deck is more apt to produce a quality cut. Many of the decks on today's mower models have the ability to perform side discharge, collection or mulching functions, and have the power to increase a contractor's productivity and efficiency, says Ruthanne Stucky, marketing director for The

continued on page 54

Photos: Cub Cadet Commercial and Grasshopper

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USE READER SERVICE # 106

equipment

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Grasshopper Co., Moundridge, Kan. "The bottom line of a lawn mower is to cut the grass," she says. "But some important design features can make the mowing process efficient and the results pleasing."

PIECES AND PARTS. A mower deck is composed of four main parts: a deck shell, belts, spindles and blades. The deck shell contains and supports all of the moving parts and confines cutting action within the chamber. Most deck shells are designed for three primary functions – discharge, mulch and vacuum collection. "A deck shell should be strong and nimble, not heavy and cumbersome, with strength built into impact zones," Stucky says.



MOWER DECKS AND STANDARDS

Standards in mower deck designs are mandated by organizations like the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). The ANSI's mission is to enhance both the global competitiveness of U.S. business and the U.S. quality of life by promoting and facilitating voluntary consensus standards and conformity assessment systems, and safeguarding their integrity.

The ISO, the world's largest developer and publisher of international standards, aims to ensure desirable characteristics of products and services such as quality, environmental friendliness, safety, reliability, efficiency and interchangeability at an economical cost.

Both are pivotal in deck construction on commercial-grade mowers. According to Ruthanne Stucky, marketing director for The Grasshopper Co., Moundridge, Kan., an example of an ANSI-compliant mower deck has a flexible discharge deflector that returns to the operation position after it has been raised and de-forms to allow passing through a narrow opening without being removed. The operator can continue to mow safely and not worry about forgetting to lower or replace the shield, while also protecting themselves from the dangers of thrown objects.

ISO regulations focus on issues like vibration. This had led to advancements like isolation of the operator station from vibration generated by not only the mower deck, but also from the engine, creating a smoother, less tiresome and more comfortable ride for the operator.

**"The bottom line of a lawn mower is to cut the grass.
But some important design features can make
the mowing process efficient and the results pleasing."**

— Ruthanne Stucky, The Grasshopper Co.

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Since deck shells house the mower's blades, they need to come equipped with safety features to protect the operator from flying debris, says Nick Cashier, general manager, Cub Cadet Commercial, Cleveland.

Most deck shells are reinforced with steel plates or other durable materials that can be replaced when needed during the life of the mower. "Deck shells are reinforced in places they experience the most wear, like where

the blades and spindles are mounted," Cashier says.

Mower belts transfer the reciprocal power from the engine to the rotational power of the spindles, and different mowers have belts of varying strengths. Spindles transfer motion to a rotating blade and must be strong and durable. A large-shielded shaft should have wide, thick flanges securely bolted to the deck to form a multi-layered spindle plane that supports and keeps the rotating blades level throughout the mowing process, Stucky says.

Blades make contact with the grass, and are arguably a mower's most important components. "Blades are the heart of the action and must be kept sharp to produce a fine cut and preserve a healthy turf," Stucky says. "They must also be balanced to maintain smooth, high-speed rotation."

For the most efficient mowers, contractors should sharpen the blades after every eight hours of use, or at least every day, Stucky says. "A good practice for producing a high-quality cut is for contractors to carry sharp blades with them on the job and replace blades at noon, or when moving each new property," she says. "Mowing with dull blades not only tears and damages the grass, but it uses more fuel and creates more wear and tear on the mower."

Because clean, sharp blades are so important to each job, Stevens examines the mower deck for its blade-mounting configuration when considering a new purchase. "If blades are easy to get to and easy to remove, they will get changed, sharpened and cleaned more frequently," he says.

CUSTOMER DEMAND. When it comes to mower decks, contractors look to achieve the greatest efficiency in the least amount of time while still produc-



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other departments to make certain every mower built lives up to his standards. Yep, his standards. One of his responsibilities is to look at a new mower through the eyes of the technician. You can bet if it's not easy to maintain, it won't make the cut. It's part quality control and part pursuit of perfection. During the off-season, he's on the road conducting service schools

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ing a quality cut. But, according to Stevens, it really comes down to three primary functions. "Anyone who has ever spent a day on a mower will say it all comes down to vacuum, the ability of the mower to suck the grass into

the blades; baffling, what keeps the cut grass suspended after cutting; and discharge, how the mower disperses the clippings after they've left the deck," Stevens says. "If the deck is not able to create vacuum, the grass will

not stand back up to be cut after the wheels and deck push it down. If the baffling is too restrictive, the grass clippings will clog the deck, inhibiting the vacuum. With discharge, you are looking to throw the clippings in a broad fashion - not too close but not too far."

Versatility is also important for contractors in different regions working on different terrains to achieve the same cut quality.

"Contractors working with rocky soil in Maine and sandy soil in Florida both want a mower that's efficient and productive," Cashier says, adding adjustable skirt designs provide contractors with this flexibility.

Stucky agrees, adding that contractors need to purchase mowers that meet their individual needs. Interchangeable deck sizes allow a mower to grow along with a contractor's business. "It's important to have a mower that will be effective in a wide variety of conditions," she says.

WHAT'S TO COME. Cashier compares the future of mower decks to current advancements in the automobile industry. "We're working to lessen the weight of the machine by using plastics and other alternative materials," he says. "We're also trying to decrease fuel requirements to lower contractors' operating costs."

Advancements in electric and hydraulic drive systems are also on the horizon.

"Manufacturers are testing this new technology as it evolves to see how it can be incorporated into mower units," Cashier says. "Durability is key." LL



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BY MARISA PALMIERI/SENIOR EDITOR

A Growing Interest in Organics

What defines “organic” lawn care, is it right for your firm and will your clients ante up? *Lawn & Landscape* takes a look.

“Organic” is everywhere. Like its sister words “green,” “eco-friendly” and “natural,” it’s a trendy topic these days considering the public’s renewed environmental awakening.

The lawn care industry isn’t exempt from this trend. “It’s a reflection of interest in all things ‘green’ today,” says Bruce Butterfield, the National Gardening Association’s research director, pointing to the public’s increased interest in climate change, health foods and conservation issues.

Though no figures are available on the size and growth rate of the organic and natural professional lawn care market, Butterfield expects the NGA’s updated and expanded organic market research report, due out this summer, to show a significant number of homeowners interested in using organic or natural lawn care services.

Not surprisingly, businesses have recognized they can capitalize on the popularity of the “green” market, also known as the LOHAS, or “lifestyles of health and sustainability” market, which is estimated to be a \$209 billion industry in the U.S. In addition, marketers expect the LOHAS market to grow as headlines give consumers reasons to be wary of many products and services they’ve always understood to be safe. Consider last year’s pet food scare and multiple toy recalls, says John Harrison, marketing manager for Millville, N.J.-based The Espoma Co., a manufacturer of natural and organic pesticides and fertilizers. “These stories, though specialized in their scope, make a tremendous splash,” he says. “People start asking questions about everything they use in and around their homes. That spills over to ‘What’s the guy taking care of my lawn using?’”

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INDUSTRY EFFORTS. Both independent and national green industry firms are offering – or investigating how to offer – organic or natural alternatives to traditional, synthetic-chemical based lawn care programs.

Some companies feel they don't have a choice. "If we're going to remain a viable business, we were going to have to move that way," says Randy Mock, vice president of production and sales for Washington Tree Service

in Shoreline, Wash., which has offered natural lawn and tree programs for two years. "Everything people see and read is anti-pesticide. We're forced into making a move into organics, whether it's right or wrong."

Some firms, like the national Spring-Green franchise, which is debuting a systemwide organic-based program this year, simply want to offer a choice. "We don't expect any organic explosion," says CEO Tom Hofer. He's anticipating this service to make up less than 5 percent of companywide sales for 2008. "It's just an option we can easily offer to a segment of the market it appeals to."

Others don't see a need at this point. Allen Smith, president of Delaware, Ohio-based Smith's Lawn Services, offered a program with natural organic fertilizers several years ago, but has since dropped it and isn't hurting. "Out of all the calls I got last year, probably around 300, I only turned away one customer because he wanted organic," Smith says.

On the other hand, some professionals are adding these options because they're required to seek organic/natural alternatives. Consider lawn care companies in Canada, where close to 140 municipalities have pesticide-restricting laws. The Weed Man franchise's Canadian operation sells a menu of organic/natural services through its Nature's Touch offerings. There is no "organic program" per se, says Chris Lemcke, national technical coordinator, but clients choose which options work best based on their preferences and their municipalities' restrictions.

Though pesticide restrictions can be difficult to navigate at times, Lemcke sees a business opportunity with the rise of organic/natural lawn care. "With organics, most homeowners

continued on page 64, sidebar page 63

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USE READER SERVICE # 41

The Organic-Synthetic Lawn Care Spectrum

ORGANIC PROGRAM

Holistic approach that "feeds the soil."

Fertilizer: Natural organic (derived from plant/animal wastes and natural minerals) Soil biology is a vital component and may include compost or compost teas to introduce microbes to the soil.

Weed control: Corn gluten is used as a preemergent. After weeds are established, hand-picking, burning or application of an organic herbicide (i.e., acetic acid, clove oil or citric acid).

Insect control: May include the use of microbial products, insecticidal soaps and botanical insecticides like neem oil.

Disease control: Cultural methods including topdressing with compost to enhance soil biology, watering appropriately, overseeding and others to prevent/minimize diseases.

HYBRID PROGRAM

Combines natural organic materials and modern chemistry and IPM; aka "organic-based" or "natural-based."

Fertilizer: Natural organics may be used, but "bridge" fertilizers are common. These offer synthetic nutrients for quick green-up while providing organic matter that slowly release nutrients into the soil.

Weed control: May include minimal synthetic herbicide use or controls listed at left under Organic Program.

Insect control: May include use of biological/biorational controls (i.e. neem oil, insecticidal soaps). May include synthetics (avoids the use of non-specific insecticides)

Disease control: Prevent/combat disease with cultural practices like proper irrigation, aeration and overseeding.

TRADITIONAL PROGRAM

Approach that "feeds the plant" and generally uses a combination of synthetic chemicals and IPM.

Fertilizer: Synthetic fertilizers, typically highly water-soluble, which allow for quick absorption by plants resulting in quick green-up.

Weed control: Typical programs include preemergent and postemergent synthetic herbicide applications, in addition to cultural methods designed to build healthy turf and prevent weed growth.

Insect control: Use of synthetic insecticides to control insect pests.

Disease control: Includes a mix of cultural practices (proper irrigation, aeration, overseeding) and the use of synthetic fungicides to control diseases.

Sources: The NOFA Organic Lawn and Turf Handbook, staff reports.



Professional mowing demands **durability.**

00-2812

USE READER SERVICE # 42



continued from page 62

ers don't understand or have the time to figure out what works and what doesn't," he says. This segment may provide the opportunity for professionals to truly highlight their turfgrass expertise, he says, adding it eliminates the "competition" from consumer weed-and-feed products. "If customers don't have the choice to go to the store and buy the traditional quick-fix products off the shelf, our industry should have no problem keeping and gaining new customers."

CAUSING CONFUSION? While terms like "organic" and "natural" are attention-grabbing and may be a boon for business, they're also nebulous and potentially problematic in markets like

Is Price the Problem?

Though many consumers say they want organic alternatives, price plays a role in their purchasing, a March 2006 study of 1,275 consumers revealed. The survey was conducted by an independent researcher for Project EverGreen, a non-profit organization representing green industry service providers, associations and suppliers.

Sixty percent of respondents said that professional lawn and landscape companies should offer organic products and 40 percent said they'd be willing to pay extra for organic options. But consumers balked when asked just how much they'd be willing to ante up: 35 percent agreed they'd be willing to pay a 10 percent premium for organic products (50 percent disagreed and 15 percent said "no opinion"). When asked about a 50-percent increase, only 15 percent agreed they'd pay the premium (85 percent disagreed).

the lawn care industry where they're somewhat unregulated.

From a products standpoint, government agencies do restrict

which pesticides and fertilizers may be labeled organic. (For more information, see "Product Labeling Basics" on page 70.) There is not, however,

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USE READER SERVICE # 43

a body that officially regulates what firms that provide organic/natural lawn care may call their services. The result is a confusing mix of lawn care programs with names that include "safe," "organic," "natural," "green" and "organic-based."

At Washington Tree Service, the

"This area hasn't really been defined. Some companies are claiming they're doing natural or organic, but they're using products containing urea."

Industry members suspect it's only a matter of time until the government begins to regulate these terms in the lawn care industry. Despite the U.S.

Trade Commission. "They control marketing, advertising and what you can and can't say," he says.

IN PRACTICE. In the meantime, the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) is one group that's working to promote organic lawn care

"If customers don't have the choice to go to the store and buy the traditional quick-fix products off the shelf, our industry should have no problem keeping and gaining new customers." — Chris Lemcke, Weed Man's Canadian operations

staff carefully developed its natural lawn care program using only products approved by the state department of agriculture for organic food production. "We use these standards so if someone questions what we're using, we have some legitimacy," Mock says.

Department of Agriculture's oversight of such terms for food production and the EPA's hand in regulating pesticides, Phil Catron, president of Frederick, Md.-based NaturaLawn of America, speculates such restrictions would come down from the Federal

practices based on the tenets of the organic agriculture movement. Over the last decade, the group has accredited 406 professionals through its Organic Land Care Program. The program's popularity is rising, notes the Connecticut chapter's Executive Director



Professional mowing demands productivity.

08-2812

USE READER SERVICE # 44

pesticides and fertilizers

Bill Duesing. Nearly 200 professionals earned accreditation in early 2008 alone.

The group's definitions of "organic" are clear: One of its primary goals is eliminating the use of synthetic pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. However, its standards don't prohibit accredited members from offering both organic and traditional services (as long as chemical applications aren't made out of trucks labeled "organic"). Also, the standards permit "emergency" applications of synthetic chemicals.

Some firms practice organic lawn care in this strict sense, but many have gone the menu or hybrid route, which may include using "bridge" fertilizers - which have elements of both organic

and synthetic materials - or periodic synthetic herbicide applications. (See sidebar "The Organic-Synthetic Spectrum" on page 63.)

Todd Harrington, founder of Safe Lawns & Landscapes, Bloomfield, Conn., is an organic lawn care practitioner in the NOFA mold. A 30-year veteran of the green industry, Harrington entered the organics segment when he founded his own company 20 years ago with an interest in focusing on the chemistry and biology of soils and long-term plant management. In addition, Harrington wanted to develop a high-end niche. No other firms were taking the truly organic approach, which he says typically costs 30 to 50 percent more than traditional lawn

care, and he felt - and still does - that organics was the way of the future. (Harrington has recently joined with activist Paul Tukey, founder of the anti-pesticide SafeLawns organization, to franchise his business.)

Other firms struggle to provide organic lawn care because of cost, timing and efficacy concerns. Some lawn care professionals, like Smith, say they struggle to charge their clients twice as much for programs that don't entirely eradicate weeds or take as many as three seasons to achieve an acceptable quality level. When he offered an organic program several seasons ago, it was unsuccessful because the natural organic fertilizer did not work quickly enough and there was no

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affordable weed control option. "It comes down to results, and the bottom line is if you're dealing with high-end homeowners, if the lawn isn't thick and green, you're fired," Smith says.

Smith doesn't think not offering an organic program will hurt his business. He's confident in the safety of the products he uses and in the fact that he's a responsible operator who operates with an IPM approach that builds healthy turf, which doesn't require excessive use of pesticides. "It's always been my approach to defend what [lawn care professionals] do because I believe that what we do, if we do it responsibly, is good for the environment."

The NaturaLawn franchise, with \$33 million in sales in 2007, bridges the totally organic and traditional pro-

Use of the word organic, especially as it relates to fertilizers, can be somewhat confusing and controversial. When the general public talks about "organic," they're likely thinking of Webster's definition 3a(1): "of, relating to, or derived from living organisms," rather than definition 3b(1), which is "of, relating to, or containing carbon compounds," lawn care industry professionals say.

However, the Association of American Plant Food Control Officers (AAPFCO), the officials who register fertilizers in each state, defines "organic fertilizer" as "a material containing carbon and one or more elements other than hydrogen and oxygen essential for plant growth."

When a consumer refers to organic fertilizer, he or she is more likely thinking of a material that would fit AAPFCO's "natural organic" fertilizer definition. "Natural organics" are "materials derived from either plant or animal products" and are not "mixed with synthetic materials or changed in any physical or chemical manner from their initial state except by manipulations such as drying, cooking, chopping, grinding, shredding, hydrolysis or pelleting."

Lawn care and landscape professionals, especially those considering offering organic/natural services, should understand these definitions so they know what they're purchasing and selling to their clients.

grams with a service it calls "organic-based." "To be successful in this area, you have to give customers results and be price competitive," Catron says. To achieve this balance while reducing the number of synthetic chemicals introduced into the environment, Catron - a former ChemLawn regional manager - developed an approach that's heavy on IPM, biological components (like milky spore and nematodes) and biorational products (like neem oil and insecticidal soaps). NaturaLawn does,

on occasion, spot treat with synthetic herbicides. The NaturaLawn approach reduces the number of control products used by 80 to 90 percent, Catron says. He also touts the company's cancellation and service call rates, which are less than 15 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

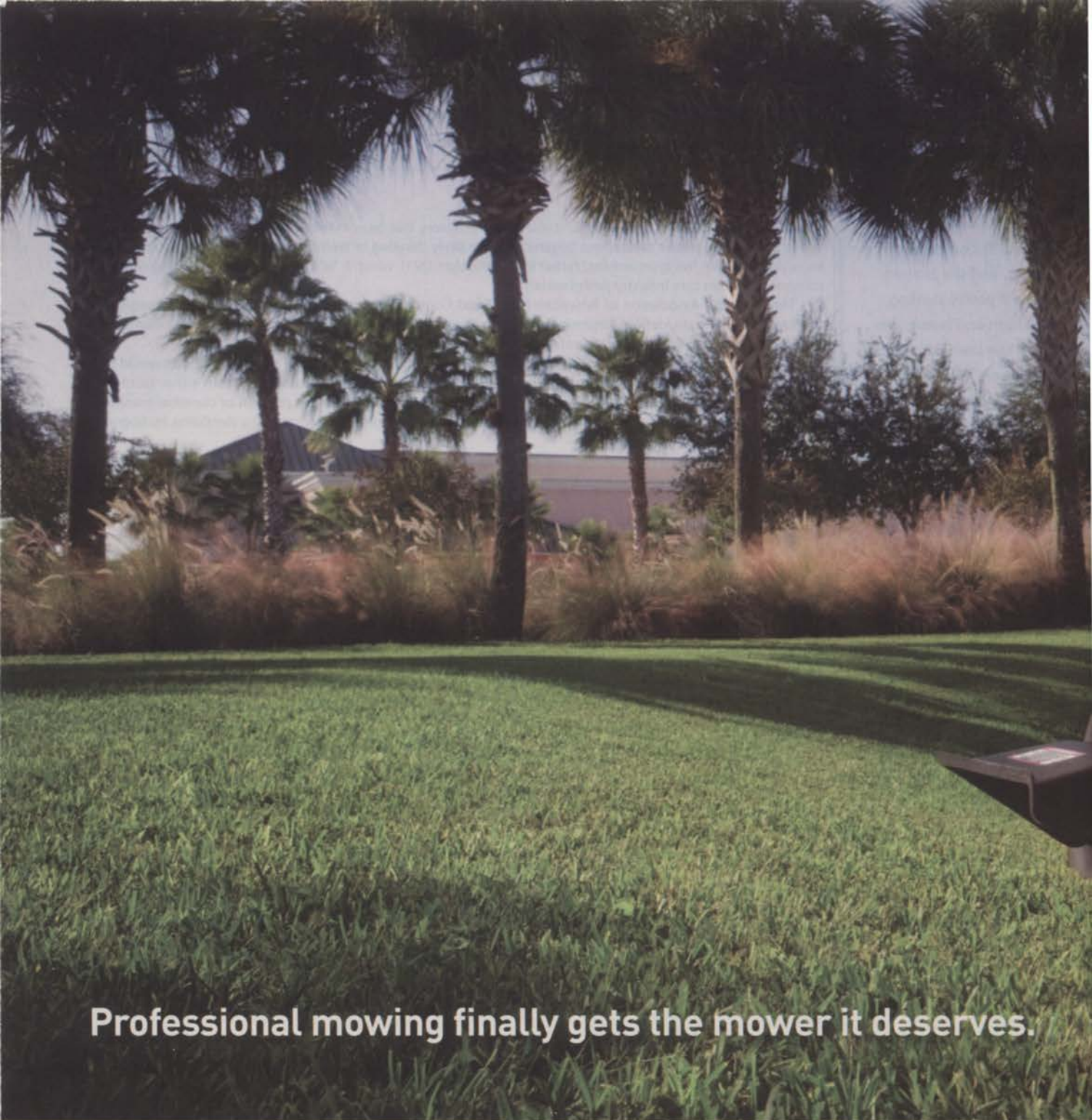
Lawn Doctor, the Holmdel, N.J.-based lawn care franchise system, has offered a "natural" lawn care program for 20 years. Only about 2 percent of

continued on page 70

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USE READER SERVICE # 48

pesticides and fertilizers

continued from page 67

Lawn Doctor customers opt for the Natural Program, which uses an all natural fertilizer and does not include weed or insect controls as part of the program, though the company will treat with synthetics at a customer's request, says John Buechner, director of technical services. He says this segment of Lawn Doctor's clientele remains small because the results are not equivalent to the traditional program, which is 40 to 50 percent less expensive. "I believe the average

they want to do."

At any rate, professionals agree consumers want to have a product or service they can "feel good" about, which is a moving target as this segment of the industry evolves. Some customers may truly want to eliminate synthetic fertilizer and pesticide use and pay the price; others may opt for hybrid approaches with bridge fertilizers or spot synthetic herbicide applications. Other customers will remain concerned with the quick

**“I believe the average person
who's looking to buy lawn care
is still looking to buy results.
They measure that in terms of
green and weed-free.”**

— John Buechner, Lawn Doctor

person who's looking to buy lawn care is still looking to buy results," Buechner says. "They measure that in terms of green and weed-free."

Harrington doesn't dispute the challenges of the organic method, but he emphasizes a cumulative, long-term approach. And, he adds, it may not be right for all firms or all customers. "You can't just say - and this is what many of the chemical companies say, 'Organics might not work, it'll cost twice as much, but we'll give you what you want,'" he says. "You have to be upfront and committed to the holistic approach. We educate and explain the several-season transition so [customers] can decide if this is something

green-up, weed-free appearance and the economical price that traditional programs offer, Harrington says. "I think there is a middle ground a lot of consumers may find themselves in." **LL**



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Organic Product Labeling Basics

Pesticide labeling is regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and fertilizer labeling is regulated by the states. The Association of American Plant Food Control Officials (AAPFCO), the state officials who register fertilizer products, use a definition of the word "organic" that has more to do with organic chemistry than with practices consumers consider to be "organic." For example, the word "organic" is allowed on fertilizers that may contain urea and sewage sludge, which are not considered organic by the general public. Only three labels likely meet the standards that lawn care customers expect when they ask for "organic." After that it's a matter of explaining what you are doing and why it's right for them.

CERTIFICATION SEALS

USDA Organic (National Organic Program)

Went into effect in 2002. In reality, this standard applies only to food production (and not even fish, at that) though it is slowly being extended to other areas. It does not include lawn and landscape products and services, but it's the gold standard with consumers.

OMRI (Organic Materials Review Institute)

The National Organic Program regulates ingredients and materials, not specific products containing those ingredients. OMRI, on the other hand, certifies specific brands and products, and while its label is less well known among the public, it also represents the highest level of acceptability to consumers looking for organic purity.

Independent and State Certifiers

The USDA does not certify products or providers itself; it accredits certifiers. Some of these are independent businesses, but many are state-sponsored or state-branded organizations, and they have their own labels. If they are USDA accredited, their seal is equivalent to the USDA label.

NO SEAL?

In the absence of a certifying seal, the best way to gauge the "greenness" of a given product is to look at the ingredients.

Pesticides

Most of the pesticides used in organic programs fall into one of four categories: botanicals, soaps, oils, and microbials. Microbials are recognizable from the fact that the "ingredients" have a standard genus-species name and may actually use the word "species." Oils will say what they are, and most soaps will either say "soap" or be described as "salts of fatty acids." Botanicals are made from plants, and they are sometimes more acutely toxic than the mildest synthetics. They are still pesticides and label instructions should be followed.

Fertilizers

Organic fertilizers are manufactured from both mineral and biological materials. Examples of the first are phosphate rock and greensand, while the most common sources of the second are manures and food processing wastes. N-P-K listings on organic fertilizers can be misleading, because the regulations require that only readily available macronutrients can be counted, and organic fertilizers have relatively low levels of availability.

While phosphorus is being phased out of many fertilizer products – even non-organic ones – it provides the best example of the difference. Super-phosphate, value is made by treating ground phosphate rock with acid to make it more soluble, which makes it more readily available, and thus raises its P rating. Organic fertilizers just use the ground phosphate rock itself and allow it to be broken down gradually by acids released by microbial life in the soil. While the "rating" may be lower, the long term effect may in fact be greater. What this means in practice is that organic fertilizers and inoculants work hand-in-hand, even truer of the food byproduct fertilizers, which serve as a direct food supply for the microbial populations.

The author, a veteran of the organic agriculture and horticulture industries, is a contributor to gardening magazines and frequently speaks about organic gardening and turf management. He is a consultant to ICT Organics in Columbia, Md.

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USE READER SERVICE # 50



Advancements in skid-steer controls have reduced operator fatigue while increasing productivity.

Is making the switch right for you?

total Control

BY MIKE ZAWACKI/MANAGING EDITOR

Andy Novelli could be considered a bit “old school.”

When it comes to operating skid-steers, Novelli prefers the old mechanical stick controls and foot pedals when tooling around a job site, transporting materials and prepping surfaces for finishing work.

“It’s what I’m most efficient at operating,” says the owner of Four Seasons Landscape Management and Design based in Washington, Pa. “I have used the joystick controls in the past on machines that we have rented and I really do like them, it’s just the learning curve that gets in the way. In a tight

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USE READER SERVICE # 51

equipment

spot, I would much rather have the old-style controls for peace-of-mind."

With many contractors the type of skid-steer controls they choose comes down to a matter of preference. However, contractors should be aware of the comfort advantages newer styles of skid-steer controls offer that can actually improve operator performance.

HANDS ON. The greatest advantages the newer joystick-style pilot controls offer contractors is the reduced effort it takes to perform skid-steer tasks, says Jim Hughes, brand market manager for skid-steers and compact track loaders at Case Construction Equipment in Racine, Wis. "Twenty five years ago you threw an operator into a machine and said, 'Get to it,'" he says. "The effort

was really high and if you had a guy working in the machine all day long he came out pretty tired at day's end."

The manual effort required the operator to muscle through the mechanical controls to move the machine around a job site. "With mechanical controls you're using your shoulders to do the work," Hughes says. "With low-effort servo controls, you're really only using your arms, which is a lot less fatiguing for the operator, which makes him a lot more productive during the day."

Many contractors swear by the manual stick and pedal controls because they feel they receive more feedback from the skid-steer, says Bryan Zent, marketing manager for Bobcat in West Fargo, N.D. "Some guys like

gravitate toward the joystick controls, Zent says, because they most resemble popular video game controls.

"The younger generation of guys have grown up playing video games," he says. "So they're comfortable with the feel of a joystick and they're more comfortable with the way that controls the skid-steer. It reduces the learning curve for a new operator."

But it's more than fun and games. Many skid-steer manufacturers are able to incorporate other skid-steer functions into the joystick control. For example, an attachment may require a boost in hydraulic flow to manage a more taxing job. The operator can deliver that boost via a button located on the joystick.

In addition, a number of skid-steer

"The fingertip controls are just so much more fluid and simple. I use the skid-steer for lawn installation applications and I don't like to over compact the soil before I seed it. Now I'm able to do what I need to do quickly and nicely."

— Chris Haddock, CBH Landscape Contractors

Photo: Bobcat



having to put some muscle and effort into operating the machine because they believe they can feel when the machine is straining," he says.

As a young landscape contractor Chris Haddock cut his teeth using skid-steers with manual controls. He became a convert, though, five years ago when he rented a newer model machine. "I just loved it," says the owner of Laconia, N.H.-based CBH Landscape Contractors. "This thing is like operating a video game. The controls are 10-times easier to operate than the older controls."

Newer skid-steer operators tend to

models equipped with joystick pilot controls allow the operator to program different control settings. This makes the skid-steer favorable to a number of workers with varying preferences, thus catering to more people who can comfortably utilize the machine.

However, Haddock most appreciates the agility and finesse the high-tech controls offer him when he's maneuvering through a tight workspace or a crowded job site. "The fingertip controls are just so much more fluid and simple," he says. "I use the skid-steer for lawn installation applications

continued on page 80, sidebar on page 78



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The Inside Scoop

Controls aren't the only areas where skid-steers have benefited from recent retooling. Improving conditions inside the machine's cockpit, manufacturers increase operator comfort, which improves productivity and efficiency.

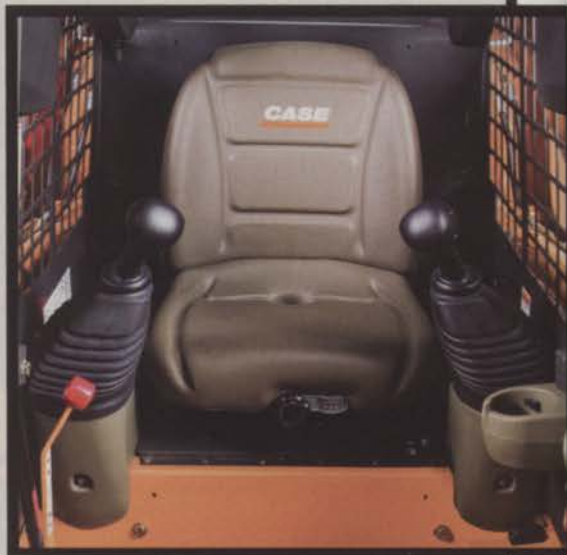
Here are some recent advances now available in a variety of skid-steers used by the landscape industry:

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USE READER SERVICE # 53

equipment

continued from page 76

and I don't like to over compact the soil before I seed it. Now I'm able to do what I need to do quickly and nicely."

The added dexterity in pilot controls stems from the ease in the execution of what the operator wants to do

"For some guys that means directing the skid-steer with your hands and operating the bucket with your feet, and they're really good at that," Zent says. "And for some of the younger guys, the joystick controls give them

ences in the effort required to run the machine.

Landscape contractor Aaron Smith prefers the manual controls, but he has used the other, more modern controls and sees the advantages they

"Twenty five years ago you threw an operator into a machine and said, 'Get to it.' The effort was really high and if you had a guy working in the machine all day long he came out pretty tired at day's end." — Jim Hughes, Case Construction Equipment

with the machine, Hughes says. "It's very low effort and an extremely short throw to get the machine to function," Hughes says. "And it's very intuitive, especially with the younger guys."

WHAT WORKS. Choosing the correct controls depends on skill, comfort level and personal preference.

the ability to do more with the machine on the job site. The truth is, with a bit of practice time you can teach yourself the different cues to operate a skid-steer with both manual stick controls and joystick controls."

Hughes recommends contractors demo skid-steers equipped with varying controls to experience the differ-

offer. Really, though, it comes down to comfort and adaptability, he adds.

"I like to be able to operate anything that comes my way so I don't favor one over the other," says the owner of S&D Lawn Service in Essex Junction, Vt. "But I am a better operator with my hands and feet since I have the most hours there." **LL**



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Expanding into tree care is a service addition that will establish deep roots with your customers.

It made perfect sense when Dick Bare decided to add tree care services to his successful lawn care business.

Customers increasingly want comprehensive, one-stop-shop service, he reasoned, and wedding tree care with lawn care seemed a smart, lucrative and strategic business move.

"It looked like a similar business, and we felt like we already had the technical know-how," says Bare, president of Arbornomics in Norcross, Ga. "But when you start these ancillary businesses, it's completely new. Just because you're a good dentist doesn't mean you will be a good foot doctor. That's how different they are."

Instead of a model of financial success, Arbornomics serves as a cautionary tale for lawn care

and landscape businesses pondering growth into the tree care realm.

Not long after starting the tree care division, an accident meant facial/cranial surgery for an Arbornomics crewmember, combined claims of \$1.5 million and the need for a significantly more expensive insurance risk category for the tree care division and the lawn care division. Arbornomics would have been pushed out of business; instead, Bare sold the tree care division at a loss.

So are lawn care and landscape businesses seeking to expand into tree care doomed to fail? Not so fast. Arbornomics' story is one possibility of what can happen when companies expand in this way; many others have found success. To be a success story, companies must know why expanding is

smart. They need to fully understand the intricacies of the industry segment into which they're entering: the particulars on specific tree care tasks, what customers are looking for, insurances and licensing issues, expenses and education needs.

"It's very risky getting into ancillaries," Bare says. "You have to remember that just because you're successful at lawn care, it doesn't always translate to being successful in tree care. I learned the hard way."

A BUSINESS PROPOSITION. Why consider expansion into tree pruning, transplantation/removal and chemical

treatment? For some, it comes down to the idea of full service, and giving customers what they want.

"Customers value it, and they expect it," says Maurice Dowell, president of Dowco Enterprises in St. Louis. Founded in 1978, the company added tree care services in 1993. "If companies are going to tout themselves as full service, they have to have that tree specialization in their arsenal. Then customers can be secure the company can provide for all their needs."

Expanding into tree care also seems a sure way for a solid, ongoing work cycle. Owners often believe that diversifying will protect them during

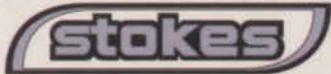
slow periods. Some companies also think that tree care as part of their offerings will give them a leg up on the competition.

The most compelling reason for adding tree care services may be the rich profit opportunities. Owners attest to that truth.


"I can say especially for the herbicide and insecticide end, it's worth going into the business," Dowell says. "Sales wise it will add to the revenue stream. The biggest part is it will add tremendously to your bottom line."

WHAT IT TAKES. Ken Celmer, senior vice president at The Davey Tree


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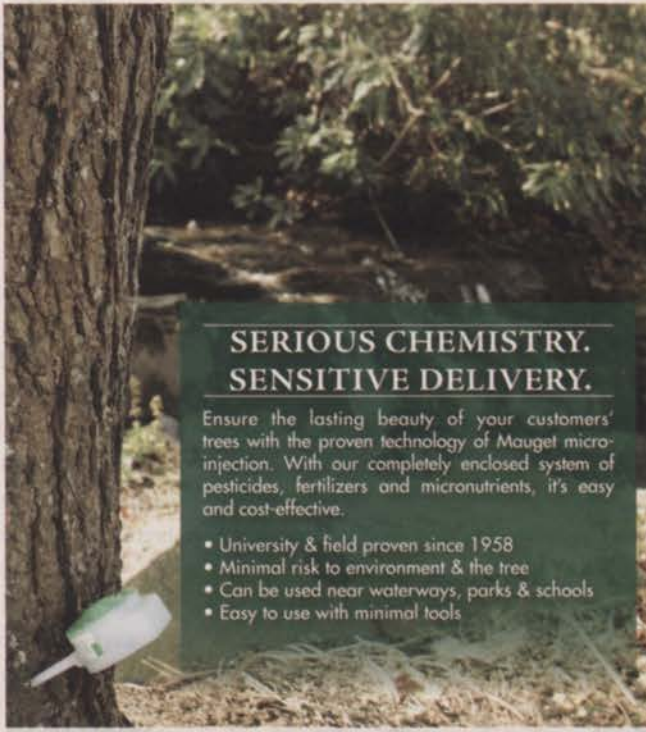
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Expert Co. based in Kent, Ohio, says a tree care division typically offers ornamental pruning, shaping and thinning, as well as routine trimming. Stump grinding is another potential offering. In these areas customers seek beauty, curb appeal and safety. They're looking for expertise and creative ideas to help their property retain the highest value it can and they feel they've received value from companies with arborists or individuals with horticultural backgrounds on staff.

In addition, tree care services



may include fertilization and pesticide application, requiring knowledge of plant health care, entomology, physiology, pest control and more. Besides a background in these disciplines, workers will need ongoing training in these areas. Tree transplanting and removal is another service area. This is a specialized skill set, one for which Davey Tree offers extensive training in a classroom environment.

When it comes to insurance and workman's compensation, be prepared to pay much more than for a lawn care or landscaping company. Services offered on the ground are relatively reasonable to cover, but once workers get into the air, danger rises and so do costs.

Initial expenses for starting a tree care division revolve around increased insurance costs and equipment. Potential investments include vehicles, a wood chipper, chainsaws, trimmers, tree sprayers, aerial carts and more. Besides equipment, other expenses will include initial and ongoing marketing, hiring skilled and trustworthy labor and instituting a training and education program. Starting small

Assumption No. 1: Lawn care/landscaping and tree care are essentially different sides of the same business. As Arbornomics learned firsthand, eager companies can expand into tree care believing a knowledge of chemicals, lawns and landscaping is sufficient preparation and meet with poor results. "You're dealing with a different personality between tree care and lawn care," Bare says. "Lawn care is a commodity. For tree care you need climbers, this rare person with a rare ability. They're really opposing businesses."

Companies providing plant health care services also need employees adept in diagnostics, like arborists certified through the International Society of Arboriculture. "If you're going to do it, do it right," says Jones. "Hire qualified people, and make sure they receive proper training."

Assumption No. 2: Tree care, like lawn care and landscaping, is a repeat business. Sure, with services like pruning, a company will have a few repeat customers. But by and large, tree care is a one-time or occasional deal. This means marketing becomes even more

"If companies are going to tout themselves as full service, then they have to have that tree specialization."

— Maurice Dowell, Dowco Enterprises

could conceivably be done for around \$100,000, not including insurance, workman's comp, certification and licensing, says Dennis Jones, of Mariposa Horticultural Services, headquartered in Irwindale, Calif.

THE DANGER OF MISTAKES. Companies considering tree care services as a business expansion often make several assumptions about the business. Unfortunately, many are wrong.

important, and is an ongoing expense.

Assumption No. 3: You can start for cheap and ease in. Cutting corners, even on uniforms and logos, may hurt. When Arbornomics embarked on tree care, Bare bought used equipment and opted to get uniforms and official logos later. But clients balked. This wasn't the level of service they were used to. Eventually Bare spent more than \$150,000 on new equipment and uniforms for an operation he mistaken-

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ly thought would be cheap and quick to add.

OTHER OPTIONS. Considering the risks and costs of adding tree care, it's no wonder many companies shy away from the idea. But companies do have alternate routes to follow to offer

or partially to specialized companies. "When a tree care project requires us to get higher than 15 feet, or a customer needs a major tree removal, we call in another company," Dowell says. "We've avoided the big issues by employing subcontractors. We've developed reciprocal relationships

For companies that are still keen on offering their own tree care, Dowell offers further advice.

"Do your homework," he says. "Know what your customers want, and be able to place that beside what you can realistically provide. Keep in mind that the expertise you'll need will cost

"You're dealing with a different personality between tree care and lawn care." — Dick Bare, *Arbormomics*

complete services, including tree care, to their customers.

Some firms leave the expertise to the experts, subcontracting their customers' tree care needs completely

with many companies in the business, meaning more for all of us."

Acquiring a tree care company is another common way landscape and lawn care firms enter this business.

you. It's a formidable challenge, but if you can consistently provide quality service to clients, it will place your company in the top echelon of lawn care and landscaping providers." **LL**

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Taxing Decisions

Do the tax provisions in the 2008 Economic Stimulus Act make sense as a growth catalyst for your landscape business?

BY MIKE ZAWACKI/MANAGING EDITOR

Grant Embree has yet to feel the chill of an impending economic recession. His company, Eco Landscapes, is headquartered in the North Dallas/Fort Worth area of Flower Mound, Texas, where Embree says the economy is still strong and his landscape business is prospering.

"Though I live in the No. 1 county for foreclosures in Texas there's no sign of slowing growth," he says. "Housing is still booming. If anything, I'd say, to date, this year my company has nearly doubled last year's numbers."

And while growth is planned for the remainder of 2008, Embree doesn't expect any large-scale equipment purchases to take advantage of tax benefits built into the 2008 Economic Stimulus Act. But he's thankful for the tax breaks, nonetheless, adding a smart business owner always looks to reduce his taxable income. "As

a small company, I look for as many ways to keep money in my pocket rather than giving it to Uncle Sam," Embree says.

Rick Pierce agrees, though he plans to take full advantage of the tax breaks. "We're looking to increase the size of our truck fleet by two vehicles," says the president of Planting & Irrigation Solutions in Fairhope, Ala. "And I hope to purchase a new zero-turn mower and other maintenance equipment this year."

A straw poll of *Lawn & Landscape* readers, though, indicated many contractors are un-



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aware of the full extent of the stimulus package. While most knew about the \$600 (\$1,200 for married couples plus \$300 for each qualifying child) tax returns they should be receiving soon in the mail, many were unaware of the additional components intended to stimulate spending and growth.

And while they're meant to jumpstart the overall U.S. economy, the recent changes to the tax law, for a limited time, provide attractive spending incentives to contractors and may even have a positive ripple effect on the rest of the green industry.

"The incentives have two impacts," says Bill Rys, tax counsel at the National Federation of Independent Business in Washington D.C. "First, they are a valuable tool because they encourage

tor's cost to invest in new equipment.

One provision expands expensing for business owners. An owner, according to the provision, who purchases less than \$800,000 in capital assets in 2008 can expense the first \$250,000 of that investment. Previously the limit was \$128,000.

So what does that mean to a landscape contractor? Essentially, if the contractor sees an opportunity to grow or feels a need to upgrade his equipment to remain competitive, in 2008 he can deduct the total cost of a truck, mowers, skid-steer or other equipment up to \$250,000. It's important to note that the equipment must come into service in 2008 to take the deduction.

"For a landscape contractor that could be really nice because it sub-



"The incentives have two impacts. First, they are a valuable tool because they encourage business owners to make new investments in their businesses through increased deductions – basically putting money back in the pockets of the businesses. In addition, the businesses that sell the equipment will also see the benefit of selling more goods."

– Bill Rys, National Federation of Independent Business

Photo: Lawn & Landscape archives

business owners to make new investments in their businesses through increased deductions – basically putting money back in the pockets of the businesses. In addition, the businesses that sell the equipment will also see the benefit of selling more goods."

WHAT'S AVAILABLE? The economic stimulus package includes a pair of business-related tax incentives designed to lower a landscape contrac-

stantially reduces his taxable income in 2008," says Tom Ochenschlager, vice president of taxation at the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants in Washington.

The provision may also include certain leased equipment, Ochenschlager says, though it depends on the way the lease is structured.

"There are some leases where the actual owner of the property gets the deduction from the lease," Ochsen-



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schlager says. "The IRS takes the position that, in many cases, a lease is a way of financing the acquisition of the property. In many cases, when it's a finance lease, the small business owner can take the deduction for the property. When it's a rental lease, then you couldn't take the deduction."

The other tax provision in the stimulus package that may interest landscape contractors is the 50 percent expensing allowance. This bonus depreciation provision – an increase of 30 percent – is for new tangible property and software with a recovery period of 20 years or less. Most equipment used by a landscape contractor fully depreciates in less than 20 years, Ochsenschlager says, and those that depreciate in excess of 20 years include only very large industrial items.

"This provision is not meant for

landscape contractor can save money up front," Ochsenschlager says.

Landscape contractors need to make sure that their investments are qualified investments, Rys says, otherwise they cannot take the deduction. "The category of investments is pretty broad," he says. "It includes most equipment while excluding investments in land and most changes to buildings. There are also some special rules dealing with the purchase of vehicles, especially SUVs and trucks."

Some of the rules governing what can be deducted are complicated and it's important for a landscape contractor to consult with a qualified tax professional, Ochsenschlager says.

"If your business is landscaping then you should be focused on that, not trying to read volumes of the Internal Revenue Code," Ochsenschlager

regardless of the tax incentive, says Doug Austreim, president of Austreim Landscaping in Brookings, S.D. "You can not justify the expenditure unless it has a profitable purpose," he says.

David Katz agrees, adding his company, Elite Landscaping in Wappingers Falls, N.Y., is considering equipment purchases and staff increases, but not because of the stimulus package. Prudence is a solid business practice in a questionable economy, he says. "Even though you have tax incentives you still need to manage the cash flow," he says. "You need to have the money to spend it. Of course, if I have the money and can take advantage of the tax benefits, then all the better."

Chad Stern, president of Mowing & More in Chevy Chase, Md., says the uncertainty surrounding work force issues, like the H-2B visa program,

"Even though you have tax incentives you still need to manage the cash flow. You need to have the money to spend it. Of course, if I have the money and can take advantage of the tax benefits, then all the better."

– David Katz, Elite Landscaping

General Motors," he says. "It's meant for a small business owner like a landscape contractor."

So how does this benefit the average landscape company? Let's say a contractor purchases a pair of pick-up trucks and landscape trailers and a pair of zero-turn mowers that total \$100,000. He can then apply the first-year bonus depreciation of \$50,000 (50 percent) of that purchase, with the remainder depreciating under regular depreciation rules (most likely over five years). "It's another way a

says. "The laws change all of the time. It's a good idea to have an accountant in on this from the get-go."

WHY NOT? Though attractive, the economic stimulus provisions haven't entirely convinced some landscape contractors that they're the most prudent tools for growth.

Some contractors refuse to spend money for spending's sake. A landscape contractor must have a profitable need for the new equipment to justify the expense and investment,

makes him cautious about plunging his company into growth mode. "I wouldn't feel too comfortable making \$250,000 in capital expenditures when I am unsure I will be able to hire people who are legally permitted to drive the trucks and use the equipment," he says.

There's nothing wrong with a wait-and-see approach towards this issue, Rys says. "Keep in mind, though, that the incentives expire after Dec. 31, 2008, so you don't want to wait too long." **LL**



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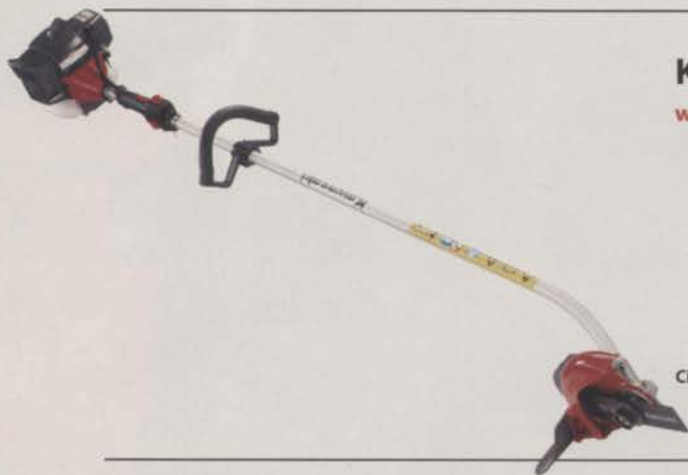
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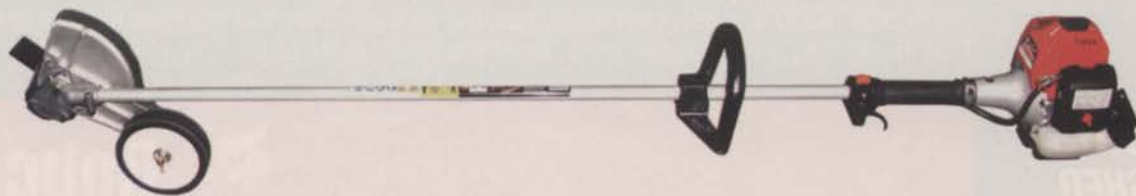
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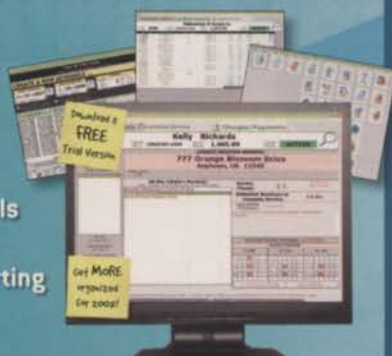


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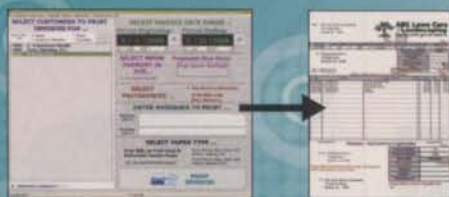
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- Shapes planting beds and provides trenching to prepare for the installation of plastic or metal bed edging
- CableLayer option lays cable for pet fencing or low-voltage landscape lighting
- Paver blade option allows the edger to dig a shallow, flat trench 4 inches wide

to accommodate paver bricks or landscape ties

- Common platform and interchangeable blades and shields (available in optional kits) allow the user to quickly switch between functions
- Removable shield provides easy access for tool-free maintenance and cleaning
- Powered by a 5.5-horsepower Honda GX engine with a centrifugal clutch
- Bluebird – 800/808-2473

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Brown Bed Edger

www.brownmfgcorp.com

- Powered by an 8-horsepower Honda engine
- Includes interchangeable rotors for versatility
- Reaches 2 to 7 inches deep
- Designed to pile excavated dirt in a pile next to the trench
- Positive steering mechanism promotes appealing, smooth curves
- Brown Mfg. – 800/633-8909

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www.coronaclipper.com

- Ergonomic design reduces wrist fatigue and creates better balance
- Includes contoured handles and nonslip grips
- Designed for maximum cutting capacity with the least amount of handle opening
- Made of forged high-carbon steel
- Corona Clipper – 800/847-7863

Circle 213 on reader service card

Fiskars Telescoping Pruning Stick

www.fiskars.com

- Extends to 12 feet
- Integrated saw attachment allows users to tackle larger branches
- Features a rotating cutting head
- Has a 1¼ -inch cutting capacity
- Weighs less than 5 pounds
- Fiskars – 800/500-4849



Circle 214 on reader service card



Leatherman Genus Pruner

www.leatherman.com

- Features a rotating handle that stores a set of professional tools
- Includes a knife, Phillips screwdriver, sprinkler head adjustment tool/flat screwdriver, bottle opener and saw
- Heat-treated, anodized aluminum body provides durability and corrosion resistance
- Includes a nylon sheath
- Diamond-coated file included for pruner sharpening
- Covered under the company's 25-year warranty
- Leatherman – 800/847-8665

Circle 215 on reader service card

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- Is almost 8 inches long and weighs 4.3 ounces
- A.M. Leonard – 800/543-8955

Circle 216 on reader service card



Forestry Suppliers Fanno Curved Pruning Saw

www.forestry-suppliers.com

- Available with either a contoured laminated hardwood handle or a plastic pistol grip handle
- Curved blade is 13 inches long
- Produces a clean, fast cut
- Forestry Suppliers – 800/360-7788

Circle 217 on reader service card



Florian Tools RP-701 Hand Pruner

www.floriantools.com

- Weighs 4 ounces
- Can prune anything from flower stems to limbs ¾ inches in diameter
- Ratchet-cut mechanism increases cutter's strength up to 700 percent
- Nylon body is reinforced with fiberglass and has a Teflon coating
- Blade is made of high-carbon steel
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- Offers wireless technology, eliminating wire runs
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Hunter Pro Adjustable Nozzles

www.hunterindustries.com

- Redesigned to overcome previous challenges
- Features a thicker flange that makes adjustments easier
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- Features well-defined edges to the spray pattern
- Throws water longer to eliminate short trailing edges
- Maintains a matched precipitation rate
- Five 8-, 10-, 12-, 15- and 17-inch nozzles are color coded by radius
- Hunter Industries – 760/744-5240

Circle 220 on reader service card



Hydro-Rain Blu-Lock Nitro Saddle Tee

www.hydrorain.com

- Irrigation sprinkler saddle
- Features a Swiss-engineered Schenkel clamp
- Provides an ergonomic grip
- Open-clamp design
- Installs in fewer than 5 seconds
- Pushes 18 gpm at 40 psi
- Hydro-Rain – 888/493-7672

Circle 221 on reader service card

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.

2008: No time to wear gloves.

WE UNDERSTAND

Hunter[®]

www.hunterindustries.com



K-Rain RPS 75 Rotor

www.krain.com

- Designed for basic residential and light commercial applications
- Provides the same features as the Hunter PGP, including the reversing mechanism
- Has a 3/4-inch inlet
- K-Rain – 561/844-1002

Circle 222 on reader service card



King Innovation Universal SnapTap Saddle

www.kinginnovation.com

- Designed to fit 3/4-, 1- and 1 1/4- poly pipe
- Universal side latch provides a visible, secure connection
- Ergonomic handle provides comfortable, quick rotations
- Equipped with a cutting tip
- Provides a tight seal
- Short thread allows for quick installation
- King Innovation – 800/633-0232

Circle 223 on reader service card

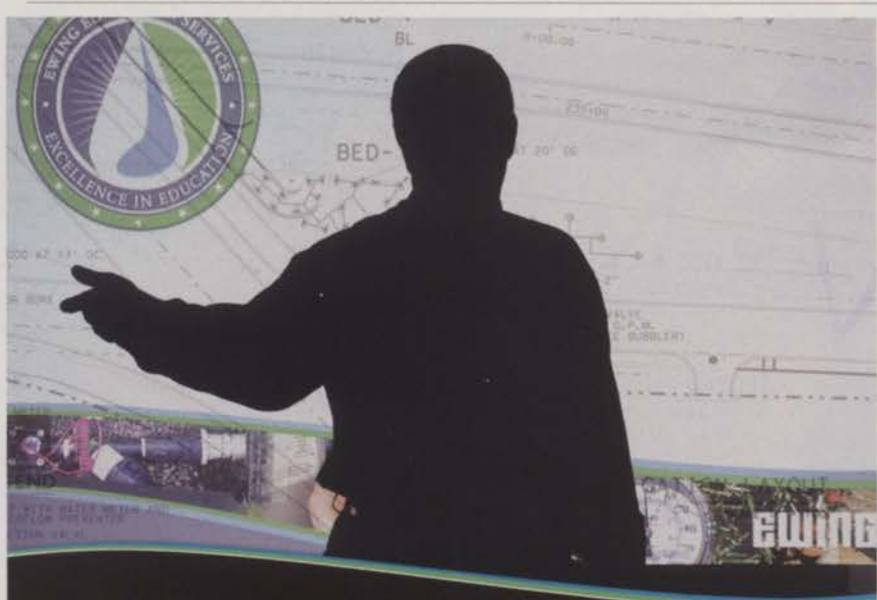


Little Tuffy Pop-Up Sprinkler Heads

www.valvettesystems.com

- Allows for adjusting 15-inch nozzles down to 4 inches
- Pop-up stems don't retract until the water is shut off
- Eliminates pressure-regulating stems, pressure-compensating screens and PCDs
- Works with all rotary nozzles
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- Available in four-, six- and nine-zone indoor mount models
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Circle 225 on reader service card

RainMaster Oasis Central Irrigation Management

www.rainmaster.com



- Uses Windows drop-down menus, visual positioning and graphical presentation
- VP mapping tools provide a way to locate and program infield controllers (DX2), weather stations or other devices using "zoom" features
- Provides the same consistency and "backwards compatibility" with previous releases of DX2 hardware
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- Uses real-time weather data and transmits it to each controller in the network
- Remotely monitors sites from one location or an infinite number of locations
- Programs and site data are stored in personal and secure accounts
- Signature Control Systems – 866/474-4628

Circle 227 on reader service card

Toro Matched Precipitation Rate Nozzles

www.toro.com

- Three nozzle trees are available: 25-, 30- or 25-foot radius
- Color-coded by radius for easy identification
- Four standard arcs – ¼, ⅓, ½ and full – are indicated in large letters
- All nozzles of a given radius apply water at about the same precipitation rate
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Circle 228 on reader service card

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MODULAR PRO-SERIES CONTROLLER
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Cyber-Rain XCI Smart Control System

www.cyber-rain.com

- Works through the user's personal computer to adjust the amount of watering based on weather and seasonal conditions

- Features easy-to-understand software
- Keeps track of how much water the irrigation system is using
- Controller and the PC speak to each other using their own network included in the system
- Includes flexible watering strategies and the ability to default to the local weather index
- Zone management lets the user design a watering system
- Saves water and money that would be spent for plant replacements
- Cyber Rain – 877/888-1452

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Irrigation systems operate most efficiently when water pressure is reduced to below 50psi. In fact, many sprinkler head manufacturers recommend 25 psi as being optimum for proper operation.

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USE READER SERVICE # 79



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www.underhill.us

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- 115-foot throwing radius
- 8-inch pop-up height
- Sod cup is 4 inches deep and holds a 9-inch-wide section of grass
- Available as a valve-in-head or block model
- Virtually disappears when not in use
- Underhill International – 866/863-3744

Circle 230 on reader service card



Irrrometer Watermark Electronic Module

www.irrometer.com

- Provides soil moisture automation for 24 VAC irrigation controllers
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- Package dimensions are 6-by-2-by-10 inches
- Addresses the need for accurate pouring and secure storage and transportation
- BASF – 800/545-9525

Circle 233 on reader service card



Cordyline Festival Grass

www.tesselaar.com

- High-impact exotic plant
- Features a "fountain" of arching strappy leaves
- Displays a shiny, mahogany/burgundy color
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Circle 234 on reader service card

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www.felling.com

- Carries a 9,980-pound gross vehicle weight rating
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- Features 65-inch slide-out ramps with storage under the rear of the trailer
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Circle 235 on reader service card



* The contact information for this product was incorrectly listed in the April issue.

Ecolawn Self Propelled Top Dresser/Compost Spreader

www.ecolawnapplicator.com

- Multi-purpose, motorized applicator
- Ideal for multiple soil mixes, including topsoil, compost, organic fertilizers, lime and sand
- 34 inches wide
- Powered by a 5.5-horsepower Honda engine
- Includes a polyethylene hopper with an 11.5-cubic-foot capacity
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- Ecolawn – 819/820-9300

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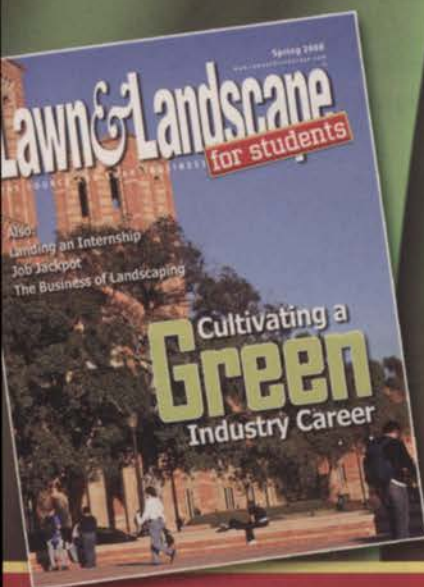
NDS Atrium Grate

www.ndspro.com

- Installed with a catch basin
- Domed to prevent clogging from debris and mulch
- Ideal for applications where there is no traffic
- Requires less maintenance and handle more runoff than a flat grate
- NDS – 800/726-1994

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- Qualcomm – 858/587-1121

Circle 238 on reader service card

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www.csturfequip.com

- Includes plug-in attachments
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- Can plug-in to an existing spreader or a 100-pound capacity spreader plug-in is available
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Circle 239 on reader service card



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www.lineward.com

- Available with a 23-horsepower Kohler Command engine
- Rubber tracks provide traction while reducing lawn damage
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- Weighs 850 pounds
- Optional boring attachment available
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Circle 240 on reader service card

Stens Turf Rollers

www.stensturf.com

- Front and rear rollers are available in grooved and smooth styles
- Front rollers help minimize the effects of scalping when mowing at low cutting heights
- Rear rollers create the striping effect commonly seen on golf-greens and baseball fields
- Fit John Deere, Toro Greensmaster, and Jacobsen Greensking style cutting units
- Stens – 800/457-7444

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Tough Times? Know Your Margins

Bad news pours in from various segments of the economy. Fuel prices continue to rise. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke says the U.S. economy may be in recession and is unlikely to grow much, if at all, in the first half of 2008.

The unemployment rate rose sharply higher to 5.1 percent. The U.S. auto market continued to slump in March. New home sales slid 1.8 percent in February to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 590,000 – the lowest in 13 years. The commerce department reported the demand for expensive goods, such

as autos and aircraft, fell 1.7 percent in February while capital spending fell 2.6 percent.

In his best-seller *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes the character traits of level-five leaders – the best of the best. One trait they share is they face the brutal facts. They don't shy away from bad news, rather they face it head-on. And they are adamant about measuring what's important. In uncertain economic times, one benchmark is particularly useful for measuring what is happening in the economy. It's gross profit margin (GPM).

WHY GPM? GPM reflects supply and demand curves. As demand grows for a fixed amount of goods and/or services, prices and GPM go up. Both trend down as demand falls for the same amount of goods and services. GPM is the best indicator of what is happening in your particular market.

During an economic downturn, GPM can fall sharply as prices decrease. It can also rise dramatically with prices during periods of "irrational exuberance," a phrase coined by former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan.

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GPM is calculated by subtracting the direct costs from sales. Sales minus materials, direct labor, labor burden and equipment (to include rental equipment) gives you GPM. You should include any miscellaneous job costs such as portable toilets, permits, fees and Dumpsters in direct costs. What's left is GPM. It is comprised of the general and administrative (G&A) overhead plus net profit margin.

Once you know how to calculate GPM, you should monitor it on a regu-

Recessionary GPM		
Product or Service	Normal GPM	Recessionary GPM
Residential installation *	30 to 40%	20 to 30%
Commercial installation *	20 to 30%	15 to 25%
Irrigation service	45 to 55%	Same
Lawn care / chemical applications	55 to 65%	Same
Lawn maintenance	30 to 40%	25 to 35%
Margins applied to subcontractors	10 to 20%	0 to 10%
* Landscape and irrigation installation		

lar basis. As a result, if you monitor the GPM on your bids, you can see trends and bid work much tighter.

While margins on service and maintenance work do vary somewhat in a downturn, they are much more resilient

than installation margins. Installation work is also the first type of work to dry up in a recession. Diversify the products and services that you offer to your clients. And remember, it's never too late to start diversifying. Next, measure things. Particularly measure the GPM on your jobs and service pricing. If you haven't done so in the past then start!

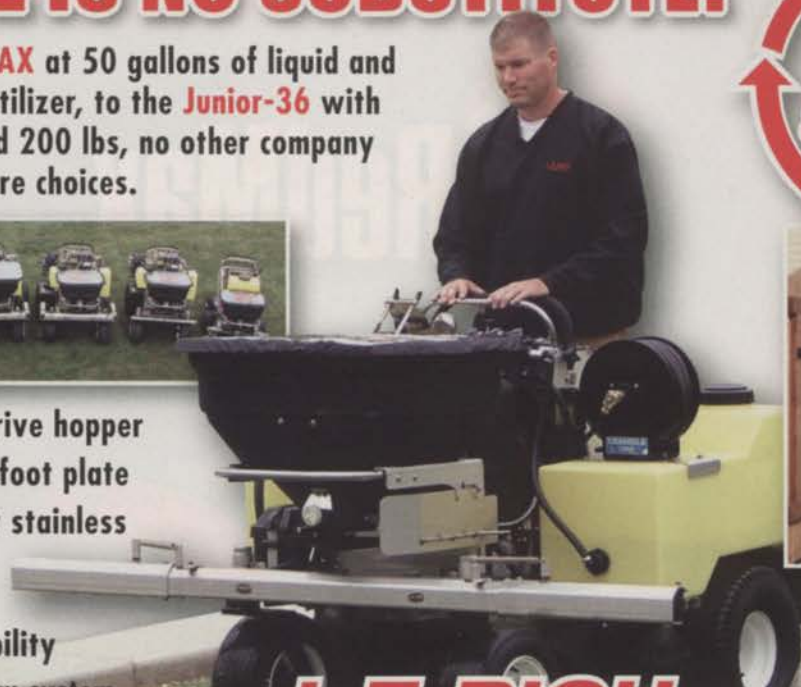
You'll observe some interesting trends and be able to bid your work smarter and tighter. Contractors who know their numbers get through tough times. Those who don't, well, they don't. **LL**

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And the Answer Is...

Landscape contractors tell me they have a hard time getting prospects to return their calls, no matter how much enthusiasm and interest the prospects initially showed. Have I experienced this? You bet. Is there a way to increase your odds of getting answers from your prospects? You bet, again.

Let's say you have a prospect - the Nelsons - who call your office after seeing the work you've done for their neighbor. You speak with them, learn about their landscaping objectives and decide they would make great clients. You meet in person the next day and the three of you develop a good rapport. Two days

later, you have a plan in hand that you believe delivers exactly what the Nelsons want and you arrive at an estimate that's well within their budget.

So you present your plan to the Nelsons. They love it and will get back to you by the weekend. Awesome, you think, if only every prospect was this easy! You put the job on the schedule board and, even though you don't have a signed contract, you order materials. Coincidentally, the Russo family calls to see if you can do a small job for them. You apologize and explain you won't be able to get to them until you complete this larger commitment.

The weekend comes and goes and no call from the Nelsons. That's no big deal. You call on Monday. No one is home and you leave a message. A few days later you do this again and yet again the following week. Still no response. You e-mail them. Nothing.

In the meantime, you drive by the Russos and see another contractor doing the job you delayed for the Nelsons. Now you feel bad. Not only have you not secured the Nelson job, but now the Russos, great people whom you've worked with in the past, have taken their business elsewhere. What's gone wrong and how can you avoid this same mess again?

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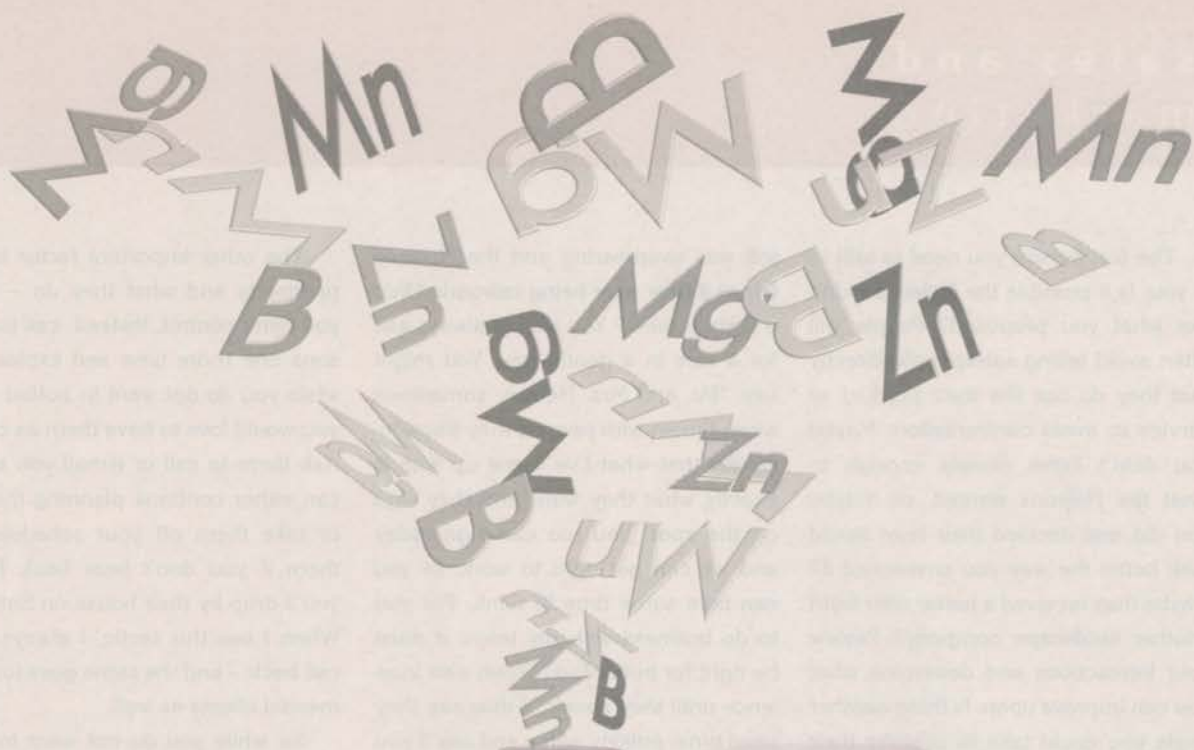
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The first person you need to talk to is you. Is it possible the Nelsons didn't like what you proposed? People will often avoid telling salespeople directly that they do not like their product or service to avoid confrontation. Maybe you didn't listen closely enough to what the Nelsons wanted, or maybe you did and decided their lawn would look better the way you envisioned it? Maybe they received a better offer from another landscape company? Review your interactions and determine what you can improve upon. Is there another angle you could take to re-stoke their interest? Should you send them a new quote and drawing? Perhaps offer them more affordable terms?

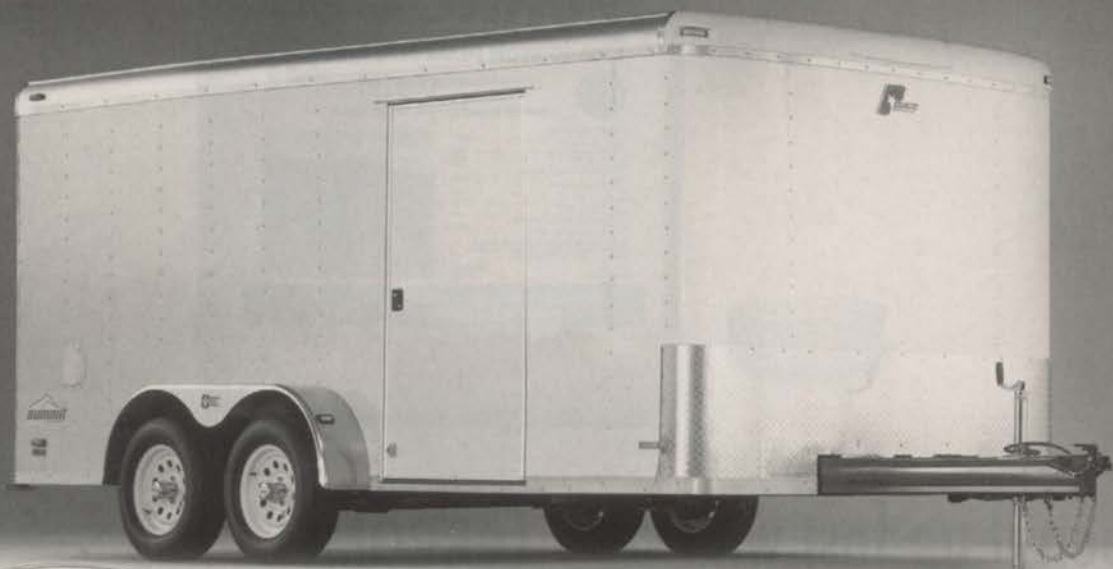
Is it possible your enthusiasm for the

job was overbearing and the Nelsons felt as if they were being railroaded into a commitment? You should always ask for a sale in a gentle way. You might say, "Mr. and Mrs. Nelson, sometimes when I meet with people, they know instantly that what I've come up with is exactly what they want and they sign on the spot. You too can sign today and we can get right to work, or you can take some time to think. For you to do business with my team, it must be right for both of us." Then wait in silence until they speak. If they say they need time, politely agree and ask if you can schedule a follow-up appointment. Get it on the calendar up front and you won't find yourself waiting later for a call that never comes.

The other important factor is your prospects and what they do - which you can't control. Instead, call the Nelsons one more time and explain that while you do not want to bother them, you would love to have them as clients. Ask them to call or e-mail you so you can either continue planning their job or take them off your schedule. Tell them if you don't hear back Friday, you'll drop by their house on Saturday. When I use this tactic, I always get a call back - and the same goes for commercial clients as well.

So while you do not want to pressure your prospects, you do deserve an answer and it's your job to try, in a professional and courteous manner, to get your prospects to give you one. **LL**

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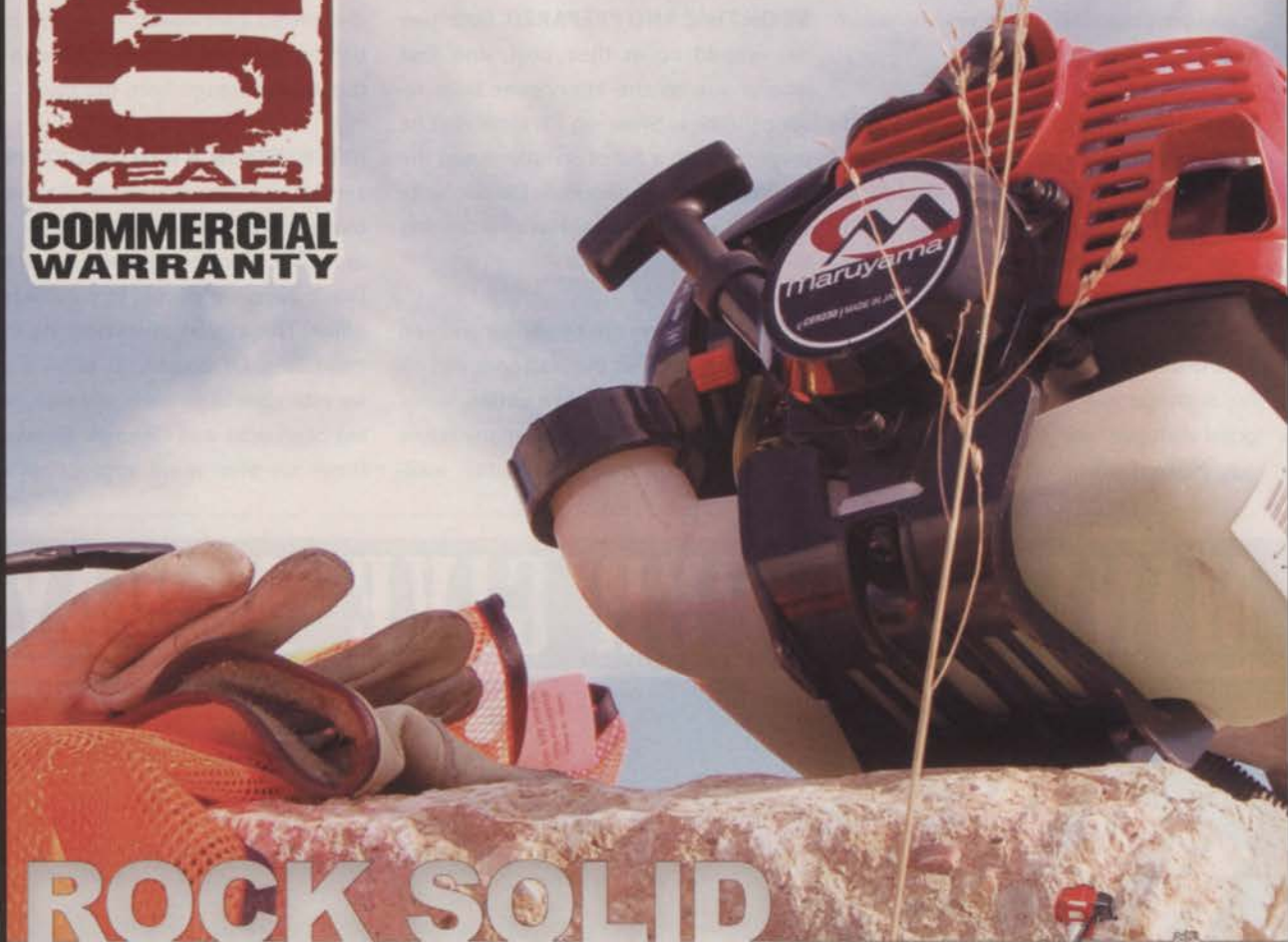
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Interviewing The Right Way

Conducting an effective interview ranks as one of the most critical recruiting practices an owner or manager possesses. Let's review some of the key ingredients.

LOCATION. Always verify location and address with the individual. Some landscape company facilities are located in pretty unique areas and people need clear directions on how to get there. Swap cell phone numbers just in case.

THE RIGHT TIME. Set a time that's good for both parties and allows for some good dialogue, say 45 minutes on average. Make it a time when there are mini-

mum interruptions and less chance of a fire needing to be put out.

BE ON TIME AND PREPARED. Both parties should be at their best, and that means you as the interviewer have responsibilities. Show up on time and be prepared with a list of questions and the resume or job application. Do not write on an original resume. Have something to write notes on.

WELCOME. Greet the candidate and see if there is a need for the restroom and offer something to drink like coffee, water or soda. I can't tell you how many times I have encountered candidates wait-

ing around either in front of the office, in their car or just looking lost and unwelcome. They are waiting for the late disheveled interviewer. These are potentially your future team members so send the right message from the start.

INTERVIEW IN A NEUTRAL ZONE. Reserve a conference room to eliminate interruptions. I prefer to hold it at the office or facility where this person would work. Don't interview people in your personal office. This can be overwhelming for the candidate. Of course, in today's world we interview in all sorts of areas including Starbucks and Denny's. Sometimes these are even more appropriate espe-

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cially if the candidate does not wish to be seen by others and placed in a compromising position.

MINIMIZE INTERRUPTIONS. Phones, texting, computers and people - I'm sure you can think of several more. Very few things are more annoying than interruptions during the interview.

THE INTERVIEW. Do not ask or deal with non job-related subjects, such as age, race and religion. Stick to questions that are job related. If in doubt, review this with your human resources folks and get it right. Ask questions about specific skills, goals, duties and

responsibilities and drill down on answers with EAR: Examples, Actions, Results. At a minimum, find out:

- How did they hear about you?
- Are they employed? The reasons for "why not" could be a caution signal.
- Why are they leaving?
- Are they interviewing elsewhere? If they are close with someone else why are they here?
- What do they do and is it similar to the position you're filling?
- Do they have a valid driver's license, certificates, training and education?
- Where do they live? Make sure they live within a realistic proximity to you.
- Have they interviewed with you be-

fore? If so, find out why they weren't hired at that time.

- Do they know anyone you know? Those individuals could be reference checks later on.

- Ask about salary expectations. If the candidate seems like a possible fit, find out if you're in the same ballpark.

FOLLOW-UP. Let them know what the next steps will be. If they are a great candidate then let him or her know and get a sense of where he or she stands.

And always follow-up in writing. Even if you know they would never be a fit for your organization, treat all candidates with respect. **LL**

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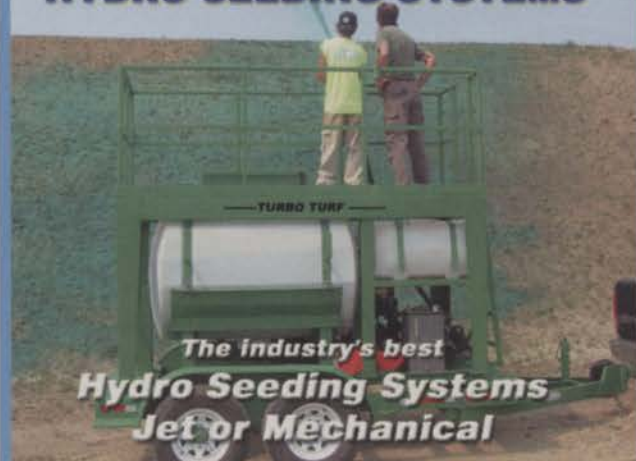
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Legal Aid

Establishing a relationship with legal counsel helps landscape contractors navigate through many small business obstacles.

Establishing a close working relationship with legal counsel not only assists landscape contractors to resolve litigious problems, but it also helps prevent many of the common everyday problems business owners face.

"Lawyers are important not only to help on specific issues but also to prevent specific issues from arising," says Richik Sarkar, a partner at Ulmer & Berne in Cleveland.

For example, anytime a contractor uses standard documents – such as contracts, billing statements, and subcontractor agreements – an attorney should be consulted on the front end to ensure the documents comply with the law and do not open the business to liability, Sarkar says. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," he adds.

Counsel is also indicative of an owner with a clear business plan, says Michael Tarullo, a partner at Columbus, Ohio-based Schottenstein, Zox & Dunn.

"Often financial institutions are

interested in what counsel has been selected by a landscape contractor as they view this as an indicator of planning and of a thoughtful approach to business," Tarullo says.

So how does a contractor go about finding an attorney who fits his particular business operation? Advertisements of law firms can be found just about anywhere, from local late-night television commercials to the sides of public transportation to a good chunk of the local Yellow Pages. However, the key to finding the right legal counsel is in the information-gathering process. Just like purchasing a skid-steer or a zero-turn mower, it's important to gather as much information as possible about the attorney or law firm and their areas of expertise.

"Referrals are a great source for information," Sarkar says. "Other good sources are local business organizations and your local bar association."

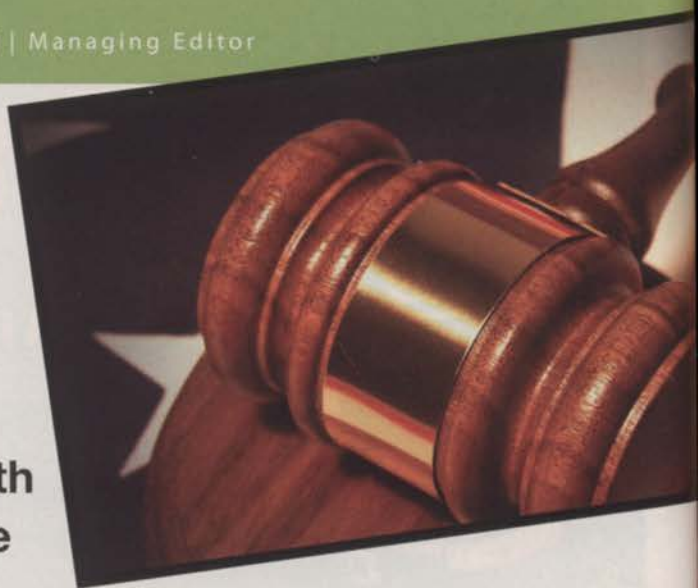
Consult with local landscape associations for law firm recommendations, Tarullo says. "You will want

someone knowledgeable not only in the contracting business, but someone with contacts in the industry, as well," he says.

Contractors should avoid attorneys who demand large retainer fees up front but don't explain why, Tarullo says. Instead, a combination of fee arrangements is more favorable. "These arrangements could include a retainer fee for which hourly charges are billed, or just a straight hourly rate billed for services rendered," he says. "In most litigation matters, the client will pay an hourly fee, but should obtain from counsel an outline of expected fees broken down by tasks so that expectations are properly aligned."

For a business owner, a lawyer serves the dual purpose of legal advisor and business consultant, so an important trait to seek is a willingness to work together on key business issues.

"Look for an attorney who takes an interest in how your landscape business operates and not just in the business that you're bringing in the door," Sarkar says. "Feeling comfortable with the attorney is key. An important red flag is when an attorney fails to try to learn about your business and only focuses on a single issue." **LL**



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USE READER SERVICE # 101

Putting Pros

High-end clientele and 50- to 70-percent profit margins attract contractors to synthetic putting green installation.

As members of the baby boomer generation approach retirement and seek to improve their outdoor living spaces while maintaining an active lifestyle, landscape contractors should consider offering an amenity this group may seek: synthetic putting greens.

During the mid-1990s, Ted Greiner was looking for a specialty service to differentiate his company in an increasingly competitive landscaping climate. "We chose putting greens and water gardens because there was no competition back then," says the president of TJB in Hamden, Conn. "It has since changed, but it's still a wonderful market to be in," says Greiner of synthetic putting green installation, a service that he says yields profit margins in the 50- to 70-percent range.

At the request of a customer about six years ago, Jay McMullen, president of All State Landscape/Southwest Greens of The San Fernando Valley in Mission Hills, Calif., began offering synthetic putting greens. "We felt that a synthetic turf and putting green business would be a good addition to the services we provide," he says of his full-service firm. "It tends to appeal to the customers who love golf - the baby boomers looking for something fun in their



yard or families with kids who golf and are looking to sharpen their game." Today, synthetic putting green and turf installation adds about \$300,000 to the company's top line. McMullen expects the service to grow 10 to 15 percent this year.

GOOD TO KNOW. Contractors looking to get into the synthetic putting green installation business should understand the differences between the two main types of turf on the market – polypropylene and nylon, Greiner says. Polypropylene, which costs about \$2 to \$3 per square foot, is cheaper from a raw materials standpoint, but takes longer to install because it requires the installation of infill, which is sand, slag or silica sand that's swept into the surface of the green to control ball speed. Nylon is more expensive from a raw materials standpoint – \$5 to \$6 per square foot – but doesn't require as much labor because it's not necessary to sand the greens.

Which material is "better" comes down to personal preference, says Greiner, who installs both

polypropylene and nylon greens for \$18 per square foot plus \$100 per hole. He is able to charge the same rate for both types of greens because the difference in material costs and installation times offset each other for a sufficient profit margin.

The pricing standard for synthetic putting greens is to charge by the square foot, Greiner says, because "customers don't want you to tell them it's going to cost between X and X – they want to know exactly." He emphasizes the competitive pricing in this area of business. "In some parts of the South, installers are lucky if they can get \$8 to \$10 per square foot. It just depends on the market."

In the Los Angeles area where McMullen installs polypropylene greens, synthetic putting greens go for \$11 to \$17 per square foot. He adds there's a wide range of product quality and manufacturer service in this sector, and encourages contractors to do their research.

The first few years McMullen offered putting greens, he struggled with supplier relationships.



McMullen had difficulties with product orders and deliveries. One time, the materials he ordered took three months to be delivered; another time, the manufacturer sent him turf that had been punctured by a forklift during shipping.

"We also had quality problems with turf that was supposed to be all the same height, but the heights were inconsistent, which made it a non usable product," he says. At the time his company was only installing "a handful" of putting greens per year, but these supplier issues nearly cost him a few of those jobs and his reputation in the market.

Two years ago, with four years of putting green experience under his

belt, McMullen decided his business would be best served by purchasing a putting green/synthetic turf installation franchise. There is a number of such franchise systems available, with initial investments ranging from \$50,000 to \$150,000.

Though many landscape contractors find success in tackling this service independently, McMullen believed the support of a franchise with its manufacturer-guaranteed products was the right answer to his numerous supplier problems.

INSTALLATION INSIDER. Today, McMullen's firm installs two to four putting greens per month. The key to success, he says, is a skilled

crew that's experienced in properly compacting soil, carefully cutting the fringe and installing the turf so there are no gaps that interfere with the way balls roll on the green. In addition, polypropylene turf requires "brooming" in the infill material. Adding infill is optional for nylon greens. "Installation that lacks attention to detail can create very unhappy customers," McMullen says. His crews receive training through the franchise system's headquarters.

Greiner, who never had formal training but learned through trial and error over the last 17 years, agrees that impeccable installation is necessary for customer satisfaction. He emphasizes the importance of

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high-quality seaming, or the process of joining two pieces of synthetic material together, much like in carpet installation. "The contractor can do the seams himself, but I highly recommend subbing it out to someone who installs carpet," he says. When Greiner first started installing putting greens, he paid a carpet installer \$7 a running foot to do seaming; today, he has an ex-carpet installer on staff. "It sounds like a lot until you realize how important it is and if the customer isn't satisfied with the seams once you're done with the installation, there's not much you can do about it then."

Installation, depending on the material, crew size and site challenges, ranges from several hours to several

days. An experienced TJB crew can install a 12- by 24-foot green in three hours. "That's where you can be after 17 years of experience," Greiner says.

Some contractors compare putting greens to paver installation and cross-train their crews in both services because base preparation and some of the required equipment is similar. "Installing the base is a lot like doing walkways and patios, but it's easier because you don't have to be so concerned about the grade," Greiner says. "The bumps make it more challenging for the golfer."

From an equipment-purchasing standpoint, McMullen says a lot of hand tools and small equipment are required, including shovels, special-

ized brooms, cutting materials and leveling devices. Most of these items are available through synthetic turf suppliers, he says. The larger equipment, which some landscape firms already have, includes sod rollers and compactors. Depending on the type of machines a contractor chooses to purchase, the equipment-related up-start costs range between \$10,000 and \$25,000, McMullen estimates.

SALES OPPORTUNITIES. The high-end nature of putting green installation is one reason it's an attractive service for many contractors. Offering putting greens pairs well with water features,

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Display gardens are "a must" for putting greens, says Ted Greiner. Photo: Ted Greiner

which is why Greiner constructed a display garden that showcases both products. "The wife looks at the water garden and the husband looks at the putting green and he says 'Honey, let's make a deal,'" Greiner says. People like to touch what they're buy-

ing, especially when they're spending thousands of dollars, he says. The majority of backyard putting greens TJB installs are either 12-by 24-foot or 15-by 30-foot, which places the price tags around \$5,000 to \$8,000. In addition, Putting green contractors can add sales by offering maintenance services. Though synthetic turf is frequently marketed as "maintenance-free," that's not necessarily the case with synthetic putting greens if clients want to keep them in tip-top shape. Polypropylene putting green installers recommend resanding the greens to ensure the ball rolls cor-

rectly. "It's required every one or two years, depending on the customer," McMullen says. McMullen's company offers service calls each year on a time and materials basis. "We call to check in after a year to make sure they're enjoying their putting green and see if they need service," he says. The visit takes two to four hours depending on the size of the green, he says.

In the Northeast, moss, mildew, algae and mold can be a problem, especially on greens installed in shady areas. To combat these issues, TJB will treat its customers' greens with an algacide/fungicide product on a time and materials basis. There are several products available for this type of

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business opportunities



treatment, Greiner says. He encourages contractors to check with the manufacturer and/or test for colorfastness for up to six months in "real life" conditions before applying any such products on their customers' greens.

Another maintenance offering is a

sort of "spring cleanup." TJB crews visit several clients each spring to reset, clean or replace cups; touch-up bunkers, eliminating weeds if necessary; recompact the green and add more infill material if the client requests a "faster" green. TJB also performs this service on a time and material basis.

Selling specialty services like synthetic putting greens also offers the opportunity for contractors to get creative with their marketing campaigns. One of the most successful ones Greiner conducted – which has sold about 150 jobs over the years – was to collaborate with the

golf pro at a local golf course. "Tell him you'll give him a 10 to 20 percent kickback for every green he sells for you and let him recommend you to his golfers." Greiner says. "Or better yet, see if you can install a display outside the pro shop and put up a sign that says 'Free putting courtesy of XYZ Landscape – see the pro shop for details.'

Greiner adds, "Just make sure that green is perfect." LL



For more marketing ideas, see "Putting Green Promotions" in May's Online Extras section at www.lawnandlandscape.com

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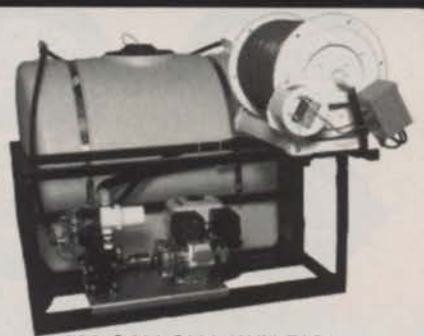


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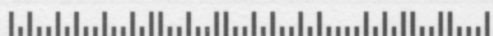


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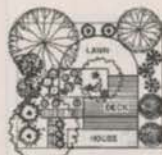
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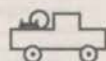
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PlanetGreenSpot.com	www.planetgreenspot.com	84	56
PLNA	www.plna.org	127*	89*
Power Trac	www.power-trac.com	103	71
Progressive Commercial Auto Insurance	www.progressivecommercial.com	79	53
Project EverGreen	www.projectevergreen.com	127*	90*
Quali-Pro	www.quali-pro.com	55	35
Rain Bird	www.rainbird.com	71, 155	49, 111
RedMax Power Equipment	www.redmax.com	125	87
RND Signs	www.rndsigns.com	145	
Roots	www.rootsinc.com	102	70
Scotts Professional Seed	www.scottsproseed.com	143	107
SePRO Corp.	www.sepro.com	97	64
Stens	www.stensturf.com	35	22
Syngenta	www.syngentaprofessionalproducts.com	27	19
Taradel		145	
Tree Tech Microinjection Systems	www.treetech.net	87	58
Turbo Technologies	www.turboturf.com	134, 145	98
Tygar Mfg.	www.tygarimg.com	62	41
U.S. Lawns	www.uslawns.com	46, 145	30
Underhill International	www.underhill.us	112	75
Vermeer Mfg.	www.vermeer.com	93, 128	62, 91
Vista Professional Outdoor Lighting	www.vistapro.com	56	36
Weed Man	www.weedmanusa.com	24	16
Wright Mfg.	www.wrightmfg.com	105	72
Zurn Wilkins	www.zurn.com	116	79

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— Dennis Hoffman, Grasshopper Irrigation, Inc.

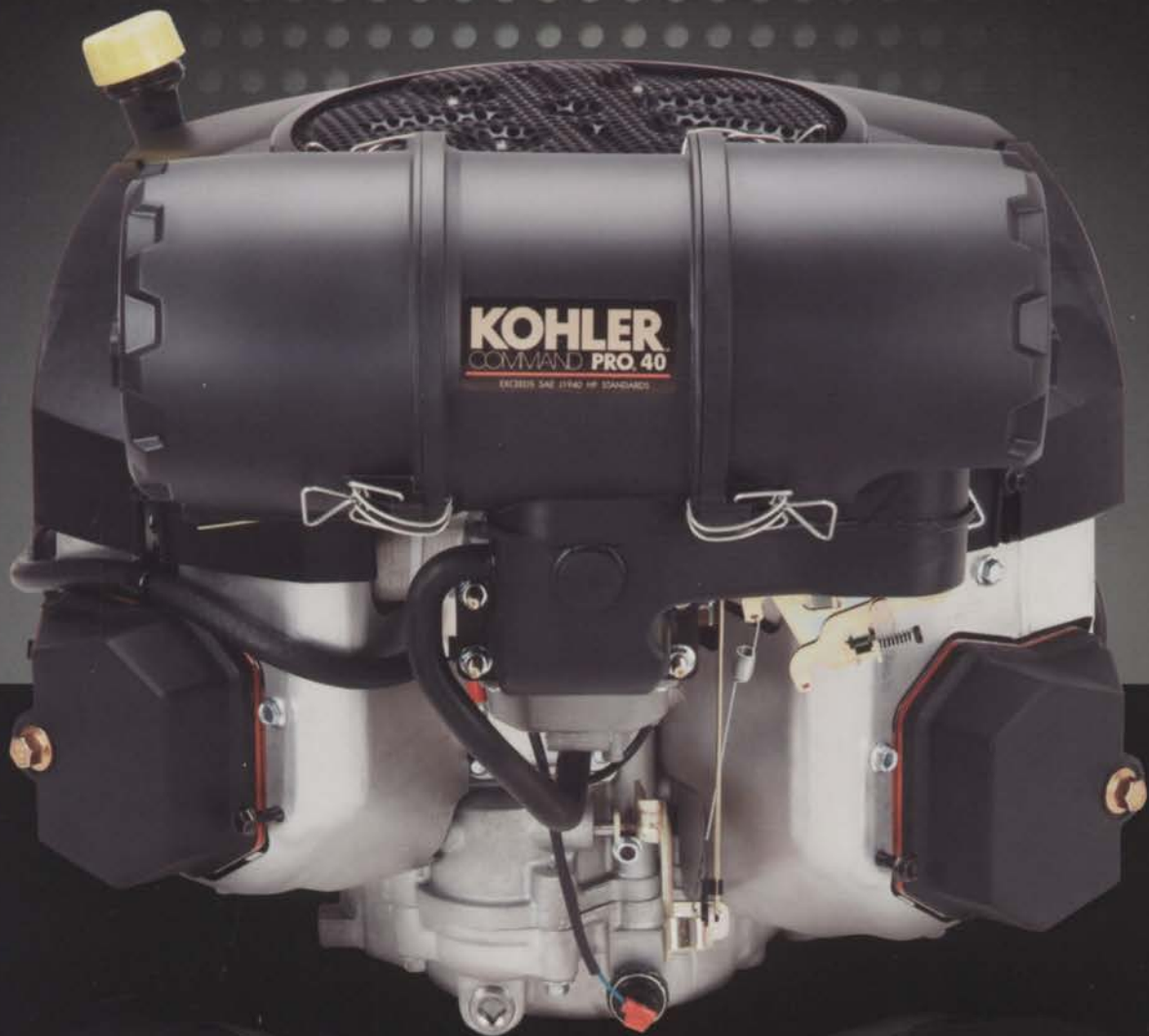
The next best thing to a steady soak compliments of Mother Nature? Rain Bird's Rain Curtain nozzle technology. It's what allows the 5000 Series rotors to deliver larger water droplets for greater wind resistance, uniform distribution that eliminates brown spots and superior close-in watering without washing away new seed or bending grass. Visit www.rainbird.com/5000 today for a dramatic demonstration — you'll see why Rain Bird 5000 Series rotors are the natural choice.

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