

MWVPR

JULY 2014

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# Lawn & Landscape®

Leading business media for landscape contractors

## *The Water Issue*

Whether you have too much of it or not enough,  
water is the most important question on the horizon for landscapers.  
Look inside to learn how you can come up with the answers.

Sprayers and spreaders, pg. 52 • New construction, pg. 56 • Design software, pg. 86

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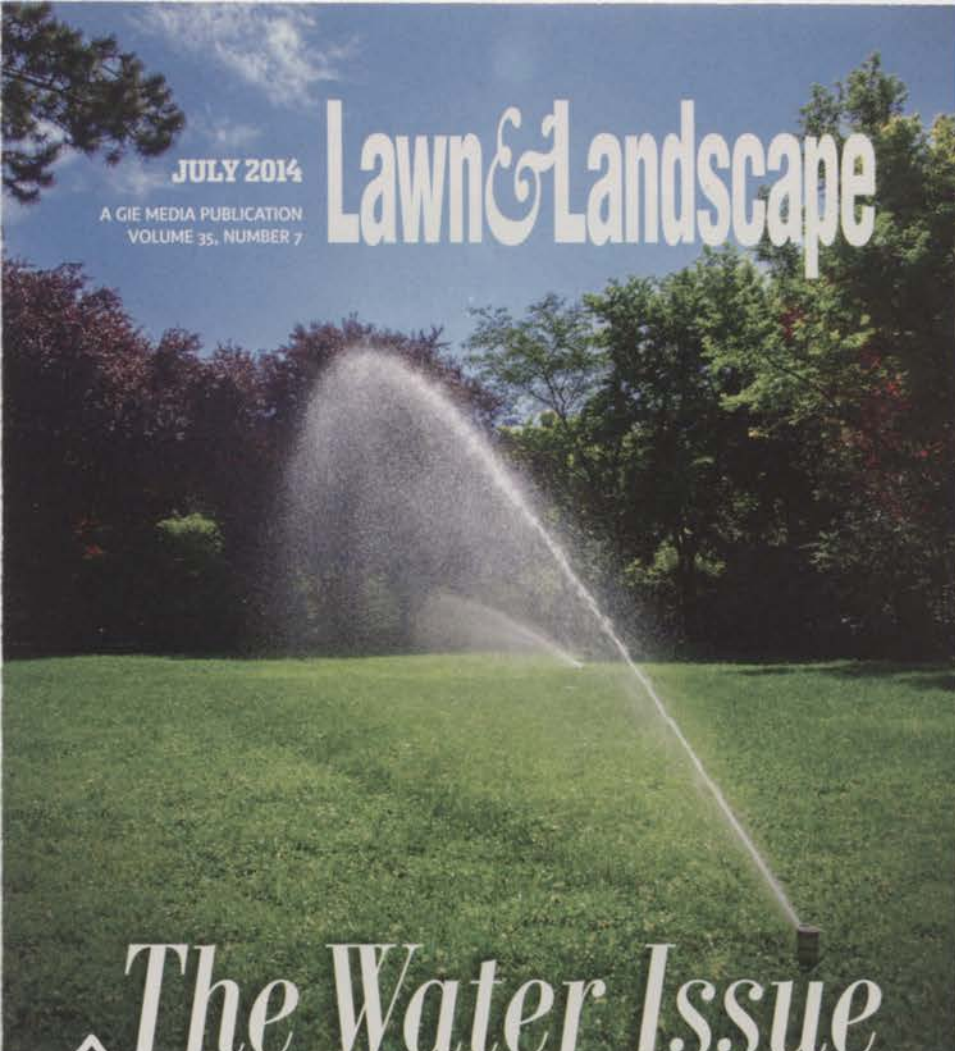
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JULY 2014

A GIE MEDIA PUBLICATION  
VOLUME 35, NUMBER 7

# Lawn & Landscape



## The Water Issue

### 64 Making it rain, one drop at a time

Mike Garcia has found more gold in California thanks to a shift to drip irrigation.

### 66 Catch and release

A Texas design/build company takes the lead with rainwater harvesting systems.

### 68 A liquid foundation

Gardenworks has built a solid business on its management of water.

### 70 Under control

When it comes to intelligent watering, these products have you covered.

### 72 Cut and dry

Turfgrass that stands up to drought conditions gives landscape contractors a mindful solution.

### 76 Hot, but not bothered

Ten tree species that beat the historic heat.

### 78 The water puzzle

As water concerns rise, industry professionals need to work together.

### 80 Where's your water coming from?

Desalination makes sense as an alternative supply source – to a point.

## Features

### 86 Design from a distance

Hiring freelance designers is a way to limit your overhead and free up your time to sell.



### 92 Decorative introduction

Holiday lighting is another way to get on a potential customer's property, and make them a full-time client.

### 96 Talking water

Alan Harris gives a friendly voice to water management as an advocate, educator and writer covering irrigation innovation.

## Departments

- 6 Online Contents
- 8 Editor's Insight
- 10 Insider
- 20 Columns
- 98 New Products
- 100 Classifieds
- 104 Ad Index
- 106 Tips from the Top: Brian DuMont, CEO, Yard-Nique



### MAINTENANCE

#### 27 The A Team

Andre Landscape Service focuses on understanding the "client paradigm" to differentiate the firm in a competitive market.

#### 30 Beyond blades

Mowers can be used in many different ways with the right attachments.



### IRRIGATION

#### 33 Up to the challenge

Give it the tough projects because that's what E-Landscape Specialty Solutions knows best.



### DESIGN/BUILD

#### 39 The kitchen is closed

After deciding the catering world wasn't for her, Lise Goedewaagen started her own landscaping business and has been smiling ever since.

#### 42 Versatility on the job

These two types of equipment will make life on the job a lot easier.

#### 44 Don't get too attached

These compact equipment attachments can help with any landscaping job.



### LAWN CARE

#### 47 Time-tested

DeVisser Landscape Services enhanced its established reputation with the proven systems of a Weed Man franchise.

#### 52 Spray it or spread it?

If you're trying to figure out whether you should be using a sprayer, a spreader or a combination of the two, consider these pros' purchasing, training and maintenance tips.

### FORMULAS FOR SUCCESS

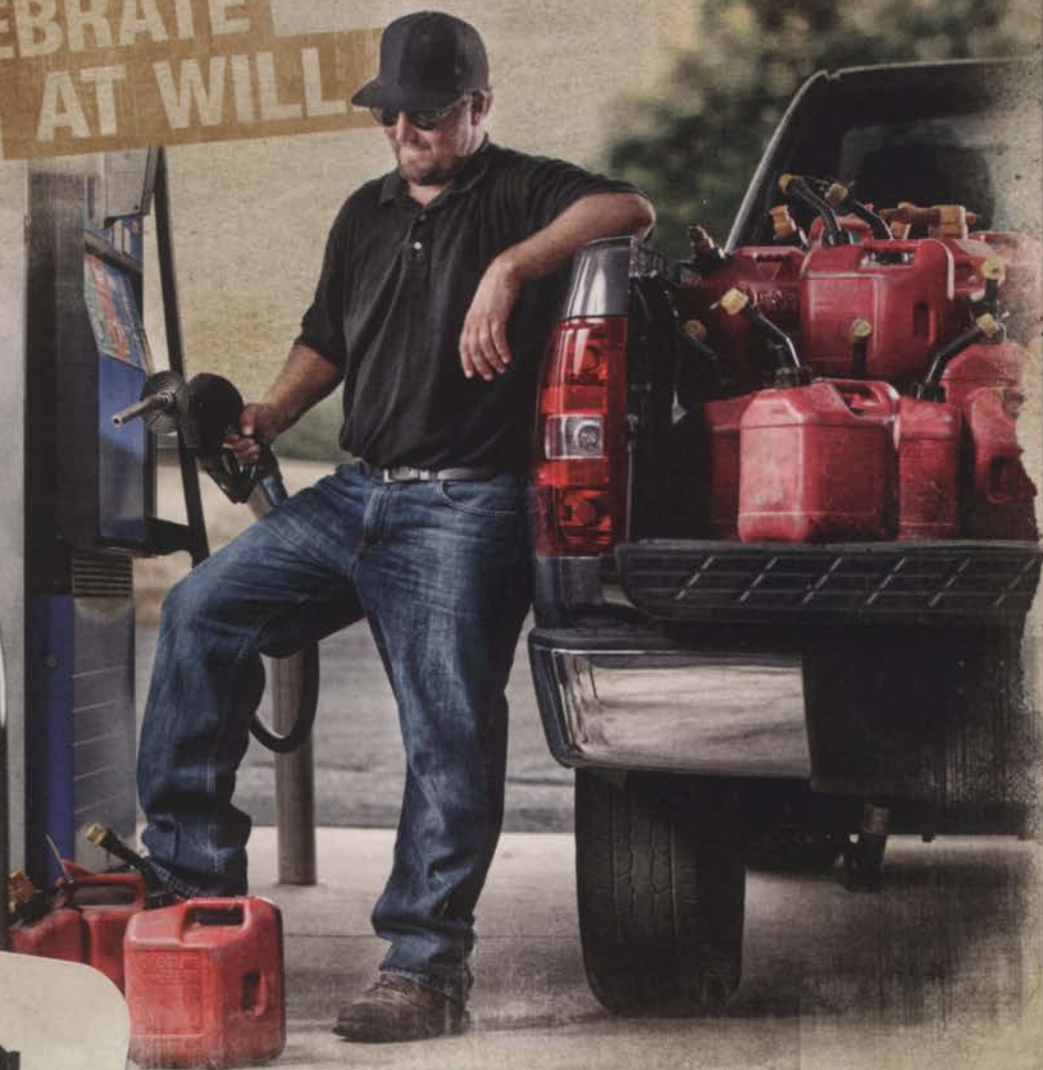
#### 56 Home again

Landscape leaders share how they stayed in the new home construction game.

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# ONLINE CONTENTS

Check out what's new online from **Lawn & Landscape**.



## GET BEHIND THE SCENES WITH TOP 100 COMPANIES

**L**awn & Landscape readers have the opportunity to get an exclusive insider's tour of four Top 100 companies this year.

Starting in June and running throughout the rest of the year, *L&L* will host a series of free webinars with some of the best companies in the industry. Four principals at companies on our 2014 Top 100 list will open their doors for landscapers across the country and share key insights on their operations. Visit [bit.ly/top100webinar](http://bit.ly/top100webinar) to register for the webinars. Our first ones happened in late June with Larry Ryan of Ryan Lawn & Tree Care in Overland Park, Kan. Here's a list of the remaining three.

**AUG. 19** – Dean Murphy, Terracare Associates, Littleton, Colo.

**OCT. 15** – Jerry Maldonado, Maldonado Nursery and Landscaping, San Antonio, Texas

**DEC. 16** – Steve Glennon, Cagwin & Dorward, Novato, Calif.

## EAB TREATMENTS AND MORE

**W**e've uploaded new podcasts to our Lawn Care Radio Network. The new podcasts featured lessons on different ways to attack EAB, how to work with subcontractors and why price and cost shouldn't be confused. To listen to these podcasts and more on the network, visit [bit.ly/lcrnweb](http://bit.ly/lcrnweb)

### TREATING EAB

Dr. Daniel Herms, a professor at The Ohio State University, discusses what LCOs should think about when treating for EAB.

[bit.ly/llabtreat](http://bit.ly/llabtreat)

### DON'T COMPETE ON PRICE

Ed Kiley, director of sales and marketing with The Perennial Farm, discusses cost and price.

[bit.ly/llcompete](http://bit.ly/llcompete)

### PASSING THE BATON

Diana Grunden only works with subcontractors for her installs. Find out what that's like and what you should keep in mind next time you serve as a sub.

[bit.ly/llbaton](http://bit.ly/llbaton)



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## FROM THE VAULT: HIRING 5 YEARS LATER

**O**ur July 2009 cover story detailed the influx of applicants landscaping companies experienced in the middle of the Great Recession.

Below is an excerpt. Read the full article at [bit.ly/llwidernet](http://bit.ly/llwidernet) to find out if you think much has changed in 2014.

*Despite the influx of applicants, business owners face considerable challenges when it comes to hiring. One of the biggest problems: a shortage of qualified help.*

*"A lot of people think they can just jump into our industry because there are low barriers," says Andrew Blanchford, president of Blanchford Landscape Contractors, a design-build firm in Bozeman, Mont. "But as long as there are people in the pool who know something, we probably aren't going to spend any time talking to the people who don't."*

*Sometimes, however, it's hard to determine who has the experience and who doesn't. Rob Schmidt owns Bob's Lawn Care, a small, mostly residential mowing*



*and trimming service in Forest Hill, Md. This spring, he spent three weeks trying to find a new hire. In the process, Schmidt worked with a number of local organizations, including a small business development center, and posted the job opening on the state labor department workforce exchange website and Craigslist.*

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# The water question

**J**ust like corn, capital and cars, the water question is really one of imbalance. There's too much of it in the Midwest and not enough in California. Most of the accessible water is too salty to use (at least for now), and the five vast reserves of freshwater that sit just north of my home state of Ohio



are under constant threat of being trucked or sucked west. Water flows to slow (or not at all) from Colorado River headwaters, and too fast off roofs and parking lots in Virginia, overwhelming the storm sewers and the Chesapeake Bay.

This month, I asked some of the smartest water people I know to take a crack at what water means for the landscape industry now and in the future. I got so much good stuff that I couldn't fit it all in the magazine.

No matter your business, water matters to you. You can't cut grass if it's not growing, or if your city has convinced your customers to take a payday and tear out their turf. You can't maintain the 300 million trees that have been turned to kindling in Texas. And hardscapers, you're not off the hook, either: In Maryland, citizens are required to pay a rain tax for the impervious surfaces they install on their property. It's an attempt to control stormwater runoff into the Chesapeake Bay and therefore reduce the amount of chemicals in the water.

Which takes us to the Clean Water Act. EPA wants to increase its legal authority to include streams, ditches and ponds. This would mean increased permitting responsibility and

requirements for the thousands of contractors who build, spray and otherwise maintain landscapes near these sometimes-temporary bodies of water. The agency just last month agreed to extend the comment period on the rule change, which means you have a deadline extension to make yourself heard.

I don't have an answer for how to balance our nation's reserves of quality water for use in the landscape, just as I don't have ready answers for how to feed all our country's hungry people, how to ensure everyone has enough money to send their kids to college or how to fix traffic jams on my way home from the office. I don't have the answer, but I've put together a lot of good ideas in this issue that will help you find the opportunity and the answer to the water question.

.....

I also want to take just a paragraph here and congratulate the Toro Company on its birthday. This month, the folks at Big Red will celebrate 100 years. It takes a lot of hard work and smart people for a company to reach this point. The team in Minnesota has contributed a lot across all facets of the industry to help a lot of people. Here's to another 100 great years, guys. — *Chuck Bowen*

**Lawn & Landscape**

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4012 Bridge Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44113

Phone: 800-456-0707 Editorial Fax: 216-651-0830 Subscriptions & Classifieds: 800-456-0707

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**EDITORIAL**

CHUCK BOWEN EDITOR AND ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER cbowen@gie.net  
BRIAN HORN MANAGING EDITOR bhorn@gie.net  
KATIE TUTTLE ASSOCIATE EDITOR ktuttle@gie.net  
KATE SPIRGEN DIGITAL CONTENT MANAGER kspirgen@gie.net  
MARTY GRUNDER MARTY GRUNDER, INC. mgrunder@giemedia.com  
JIM HUSTON J. R. HUSTON ENTERPRISES jhuston@giemedia.com  
BROOKE BATES CONTRIBUTING EDITOR  
LINDSEY GETZ CONTRIBUTING EDITOR  
KRISTEN HAMPSHIRE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**CREATIVE**

JUSTIN ARMBURGER GRAPHIC DESIGNER  
KATELYN BOYDEN GRAPHIC DESIGNER

**ADVERTISING/PRODUCTION INQUIRIES**

JODI SHIPLEY jshipley@gie.net

**SALES**

PAT JONES PUBLISHER pjones@gie.net  
DAVID SZY NATIONAL SALES MANAGER AND ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER dszy@gie.net  
DAN HEBERLEIN ACCOUNT MANAGER dheberlein@gie.net  
TRACI MUELLER ACCOUNT MANAGER tmuller@gie.net  
TED SCHULD ACCOUNT MANAGER tschuld@gie.net  
RUSS WARNER ACCOUNT MANAGER rwarner@gie.net  
BONNIE VELIKONYA CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING SALES bvelikonya@gie.net

**CORPORATE**

RICHARD FOSTER CHAIRMAN  
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COLUMBUS, OHIO – Before April's United States versus Mexico World Cup soccer qualifier in Arizona, the Columbus Crew did some work of its own with a green industry company.

The Major League Soccer franchise teamed with Davey Tree's Columbus East CLS branch to rehab a garden part of the Greater Linden Garden Community. The food members grow help feed low income families.

Bob Klein, branch manager, said there was an ambitious scope of work that needed to be done, so Davey came in and started working days prior to the scheduled day of service, which also involved many of the Columbus Crew's corporate partners.

"All of the work that needed to be done with heavy machinery was done in those days prior to ensure the safety of the other volunteers on the day of service," he says.

Davey erected a fence, brought in a skid-steer to ready the area, built an arbor, planted trees, perennials and various vegetables, constructed a brick paver patio and donated woodchips to be used for mulch. Davey brought eight employees donating 10 hours each on the day of service, with about 75 hours prior to the day of service for preparation reasons as well, Klein said. There was one large community garden with different areas within. The entire garden was completed in one day.

Arica Kress, senior director of marketing and promotions with the Columbus Crew, said the team chose Linden Community Garden because the Linden neighborhood is adjacent to Columbus Crew Stadium and, "We feel it is important to give back and participate in the communities around the stadium," she says.

"We partnered with Davey Tree last year. They provided expertise, staff, equipment and product to make this project come to life. Without their support and assistance it would not have been possible."

Kress says the partnership worked out well, and if you are interested in similar projects, a sports team might be an organization to contact.

"If you are passionate about giving back to your community, many sports teams are also passionate about being good community partners," she says. "One of the pillars of our Dare to Care communities initiatives here with the Columbus Crew is Keep Columbus Beautiful. This project fit in perfectly with one of our focus areas. It was vital to have a partnership with experts to make the vision come to life."

**At left:** Davey Tree members build a fence as part of volunteer work the workers did at the Greater Linden Garden Community in Columbus, Ohio.

## COMMUNITY GOALS

The Columbus Crew and Davey Tree teamed up to rehab a local garden.

By Brian Horn



Have you completed a charity project you are proud of or helped out your community in another way? Email Managing Editor Brian Horn at [bhorn@gie.net](mailto:bhorn@gie.net) to be considered for coverage in a future issue of *Lawn & Landscape*.

## ASK THE EXPERTS



**NO MORE  
STEALING**

**ASK THE EXPERTS** is presented in partnership with PLANET's Trailblazers On Call program. Trailblazers are industry leaders who volunteer their time and expertise to give back to the industry.

### **Q: How should I prevent employee theft in the office and out in the field?**

**A:** Anyone that is in business has struggled with the employee theft issue. There are so many different ways an employee can steal from you, from time all the way to actual money. Here are some tips and pointers I have learned over the years.

**BE BLUNT AND RIGHT TO THE POINT.** Be proactive and make your policy on theft very clear to all employees. Create a precise and clear document that states what your company considers theft. Also make it clear to all employees that you do not tolerate theft and that the company will prosecute.

Most people don't realize that something as little as office supplies and as big as embezzlement will affect the bottom line of the company. It is a good idea in today's technology-based world to put in writing that things such as personal cell phone use, unauthorized Internet use and even checking personal email are considered theft,

especially when done on company time.

**INVENTORY CONTROL.** Using a sign-in/sign-out sheet for supplies that are being used helps to hold employees accountable. We use sheets not only for office supplies, but also for tools, chemicals, equipment and just about anything that has any type of value. Let's face it: Theft is still possible unless you have another avenue to check what is being signed for. That brings me to my next topic.

**CAMERAS.** Even though cameras do not stop a thief, they can help you catch one. If you decide to use cameras, you must provide or put up a notice that lets employees know they are being recorded. Cameras can be very expensive and time consuming because you have to review the tapes. A cheaper option would be to use fake cameras, but it is vital to tell no one they are fake. Doing so would defeat the purpose of scaring off a potential robber.

**INSURANCE – IS IT WORTH THE COST?** If you don't already have business insurance, be sure to purchase it. Make sure you are clear to your agent what you need insured. It is never a good idea to get the minimum level of coverage. Depending on your location, be sure to cover all types of theft. Just

because something gets stolen or even vandalized does not mean it is covered.

Also, forgery or embezzlement sometimes is not covered, so be sure to do your homework and have everything covered. Catastrophic events should be considered and discussed to be included in your policy. Again, be sure to ask the right questions and have everything in writing. There is an old saying, "You get what you pay for," so if the price on the insurance policy seems too good to be true, it might be. Be sure to research and ask more than one agency for quotes. Most importantly, read the fine print of any policy and purchase the right one for you.

**TO BE OR NOT TO BE.** Do not become friends with your staff. It is okay to have acquaintances because it is much easier to reprimand or terminate an acquaintance than a good friend. Again, acquaintances are good in the workplace, but friends can cause turmoil and emotions and they may even think they can get away with stealing.

**STRUCTURE AND DISCIPLINE.** It is good to have structure within your organization, but most of us have a daily routine. Many of us even know what our co-workers' schedules are. We are creatures of habit. If, as a business owner, you become spontaneous and unpredictable, this will cause people that are stealing to look over their shoulder and think twice about stealing.

We may never be able to stop theft, but these tips may help with restructuring some of the current ideas you use. Follow the procedures you have in place and be consistent with everyone. By no means put up with theft of any kind and protect your assets.

Have a question for the experts? Send it to [llexperts@gie.net](mailto:llexperts@gie.net)



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# A CENTURY OF

1914



The Toro Motor Company is founded to build engines for The Bull Tractor Company. In 1919, Toro introduces its first Toro branded product, a new farm tractor.

1930s



Toro develops an independent power equipment dealership network and introduces its first walk reel mower for homeowners.

1950s



Toro opens an expansive R&D facility and is the industry's first to advertise on TV. Product introductions include Toro's first homeowner snowthrower and riding mower.

1970s

1920s



Toro signs its first equipment distributor agreement and introduces the 30" Park Special walk behind reel mower.

1940s



Toro ceases domestic production in 1942 to build materials for the war effort. In the late 40s, Toro acquires Whirlwind, Inc., and introduces self-propel drive on homeowner lawnmowers.

1960s



Toro acquires irrigation equipment manufacturer Moist 'O Matic. The Snow Pup compact snowthrower and the Key-Lectric start walk power mower are introduced.

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# INNOVATION

1980s  
Toro expands its homeowner offering with new electric trimmers, chain saws and more. Toro also enters the two-stage snowthrower business and unveils a new lawn tractor line.

1990s



Toro introduces the Recycler® walk power mower that virtually eliminates the need to bag grass clippings, as well as the Toro® Personal Pace® self-propel drive system on walk mowers.

2003



The Toro® Power Max® advances snowthrower design with a clog-reducing auger system and Quick Stick® chute control. Toro's new Toro® Ultra Blower sells 1 million units in one year.

2008



Toro introduces the first Toro® GrandStand® stand-on mower, and the latest Z Master® commercial rider line.

1980s

Toro's snowthrower innovations include the 12" electric Power Shovel™ and CCR 2000 (Chuted Curved Rotar) technology. A premium rear-engine rider line is also added.



2001



Toro refocuses its homeowner riding products line with the TimeCutter® zero turn mower.

2004



Toro develops exclusive TURBO FORCE® cutting technology, featuring an ultra-durable deck shell, high-strength cutting blades and the industry's toughest spindle assemblies.

2012



New TurfMaster® 30-inch commercial mowers combine a highly productive, larger deck with a conventional walk-behind mower design.



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# RESEARCH



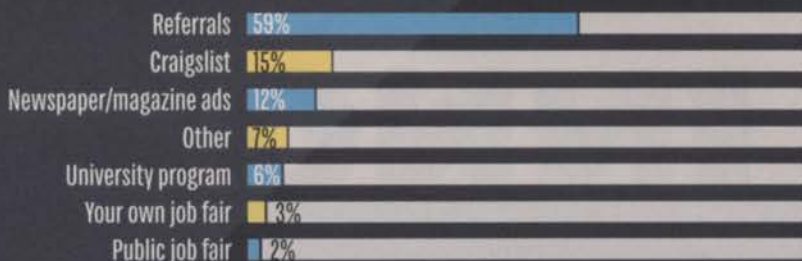
## A LOOK INSIDE STAFFING

**W**e surveyed between 500 and 600 contractors about hiring and found referrals are still king when finding employees, and the second most popular, Craigslist, wasn't even close. The numbers also show the industry isn't utilizing nearby colleges or job fairs enough.

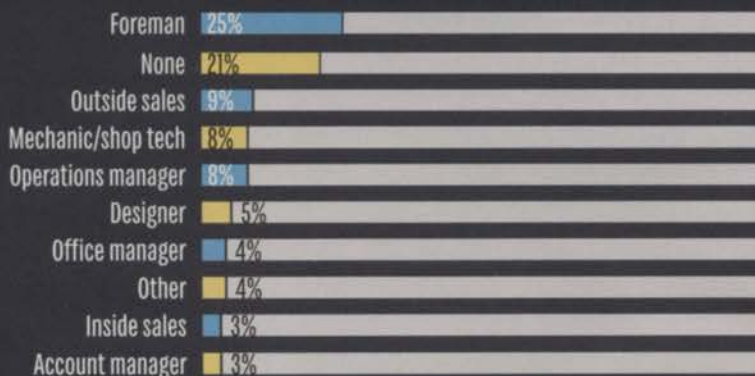
When they are looking for non-production employees, foreman topped the list. More than 20 percent said they weren't having trouble finding any non-production-level position.



**Q:** Where do you find the best candidates for open positions (production and non-production employees)? (multiple answers)



**Q:** What non-production-level position is the most difficult for you to fill? (Ed. note: Bottom three answers not listed here.)



Source: Lawn & Landscape research

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Aaron Hobbs and Karen Reardon of RISE attended the opening of the Bayer Bee Care Center.

## Bayer opens North American Bee Care Center

By Dan Moreland

RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK, N.C. — In April, Bayer CropScience opened its North American Bee Care Center in Research Triangle Park, N.C. The 6,000-square-foot, \$2.4-million center will support scientific research, product stewardship and sustainable agriculture to protect and improve honey bee health, as well as educate stakeholders and the general public about the beneficial insects.

The center has a laboratory with a teaching and research apiary, a honey extraction and hive maintenance space, an interactive learning center, meeting and training facilities for beekeepers, farmers and educators, office space for staff and graduate students, on-

site honey bee colonies, pollinator-friendly gardens and a screened hive observation area.

The North American Bee Care Center, part of the company's \$12 million corporate-wide investment in bee health in 2014, brings together experts in agriculture and apiology to develop comprehensive solutions for bee health, including entomologists and apiarists, graduate researchers and more.

The facility complements Bayer's Eastern Bee Care Technology Station, a 1,200-square-foot field station that opened in November in nearby Clayton, N.C. Bayer's first Bee Care Center opened in 2012 at the company's global headquarters in Monheim, Germany.

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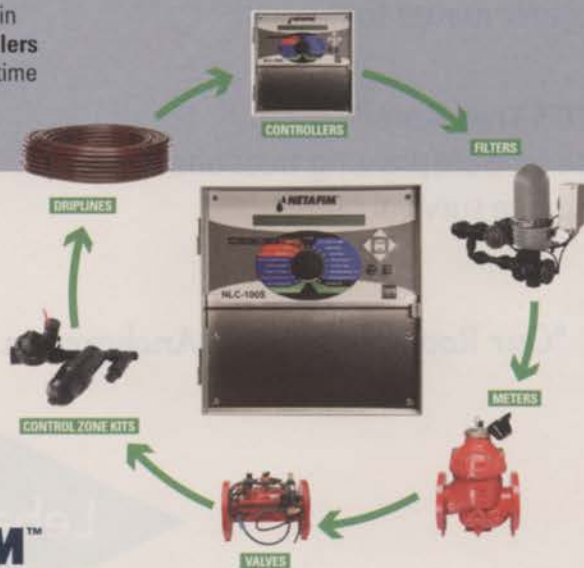
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# Tried & true

John Deere gave contractors the chance to bounce around ideas at a recent event. **By Katie Tuttle**

RALEIGH, N.C. – At a John Deere event in mid-June, contractors said communication was one of the biggest challenges they were facing while operating their businesses.

A contractor from Cleveland said workers would wait two weeks to tell him they needed string for their string trimmers.

One of the solutions presented for his problem during a roundtable discussion, which was part of John Deere's 2014 Qual-



The John Deere Ride & Drive event, held at the company's offices and factory in North Carolina, gave attendees the opportunity to try out equipment, including a chance to see who could put a softball in a bucket the quickest. Go to [bit.ly/RideNDrive](http://bit.ly/RideNDrive) for a full recap of the event.

ity FIRST Factory Tour, was to have one person check the vehicles before roll call every morning.

A New Jersey-based contractor had one employee come in at 4 a.m. and make sure all the trucks were fueled up and stocked for the day. For example, if one crew was weed

whacking, he had to make sure they had the equipment they would need for the day.

He said having one person in charge of it all made it easier to keep track of everything, and basically eliminated the chance a crew would get out to a site and realize they needed something. **L&L**

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# The long and short of it



**T**he Pareto Principle is named after the Italian economist and mathematician, Vilfredo Pareto, who found in 1906 that 80 percent of the land in Italy was owned by 20 percent of the population.

Today the Pareto Principle is also known as the 80-20 rule and I like to translate it as it relates to us landscapers: 80 percent of our business comes from 20 percent of our clients. I think if more of us understood and believed in this principle, we could improve our businesses.

I have taught the value of the Pareto Principle for more than 15 years at my conferences and seminars. Recently, one of my best clients called to tell me the findings of the analysis of his clients and how much they spend with him. He told me of the \$5 million in sales the company made, 79 percent of that revenue came from 21 percent of his clients. He was shocked how close the principle he heard me teach was for his business.

However, after this revelation was another one he had and that's the lesson I'd like to share this month.

He went on to dig into the numbers more and found that 52 percent of the bills that went out for his company generated 2 percent of the business. About \$98,000 in billing came from 52 percent of the invoices! We talked about this and the administrative time that goes into billing and the other readiness factors, as most of them were irrigation start-ups and other small things.

I told him to think about what he could use that time for. I asked if he felt the 21 percent of his clients that were bringing in 79 percent of his revenue were well taken care of. I asked if he thought it would make sense to tell the 52 percent that they needed to sign up for more services for him to continue to do the small jobs.

**Analyze the numbers.** Now I may have lost you a little bit with all the back and forth, but there's a great lesson here. In our shop, above the board we use to share our financial progress with the whole team, are the words, "What gets measured, can be improved." That was given to us by Seth, one of our young sales professionals that does an awesome job for us.

I liked it so much, we had a sign made with those words. So, the lesson this month is, "measure things." See how you are doing against the industry. Have a scoreboard and, by all means, keep it simple.

We can get so caught up in the day to day that we don't take time to see if the results we are getting are in alignment with our strategy. We are growing Grunder Landscaping Co. To grow the correct way we need to know very clearly who our ideal client is and our ideal client is not a transactional client, it's a relational one.

A transactional client is one who calls us here and there, is always looking for the best price. They have no loyalty and treat landscaping, or anything that relates to the landscape, as a necessary to-do list item. A relational client is one who values quality, wants to know you, is loyal, isn't always looking for the best price, but is looking for trust.

The latter is where we make money. We charge a \$100 consultation fee to go meet with someone and share our expertise, and we have a minimum job with a new client of \$1,500.

About two or three times a year, out of about 1,000 calls, we have someone hang up on us or tell us we don't know what we're doing. If you told my salespeople we were going to start doing free estimates, they would start a riot of epic proportions.

They know who our ideal client is; they know

where 80 percent of our revenue comes from and they want to be working with people who have the potential to become an ideal client.

**A clear message.** For the first 15 years of my business, I went out and saw just about everyone and my sales, profits and frustrations reflected that. For the last 15 years, I have focused on the type of people that bring in 80 percent of our business and it works for many reasons. For one, it brings clarity to my sales team as to what type of people we want to do business with.

My whole sales team recently went through some pretty extensive sales training and one of the points the instructor made was that you should close 100 percent of all the calls you go on. When I heard that, I said, "What kind of a sales trainer thinks you can close 100 percent of the calls you go on?"

After I finished up the training and we refined our approach some, I had to agree with his assessment.

If you know who your ideal client is, if you know the type of clients that bring you 80 percent of your revenue, you screen prospects so you see that they could be great clients. We'll talk more about screening clients next month.

For now, go find out where you are making the most money; identify the clients that bring you in the most money; identify the ones you like working with and look at the ones that cause trouble all the time.

Then, have your accountant or bookkeeper tell you where your revenue came from the last couple of years, list the top 50 clients and make sure you are taking care of them and think about how you might attract more of them.

The Pareto Principle is a great philosophy ... if you use it! **L&L**



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# Fits the profile

In today's competitive labor market, employers need to take advantage of every possible tool they can find to give them a leg up in the hiring process. Here's one that my clients find useful.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has been profiling for decades. Essentially, the crime scene investigator analyzes the scene of the crime, gathers pertinent data and works backward to the perpetrator of the crime.

Turning this process around, if you want to hire an irrigation service technician, you would first identify the personality and behavioral traits that are desired in such a person. You would want them to be organized, a problem solver, methodical and thorough. Interestingly, irrigation service technicians fit a profile fairly well. Let me give you a specific example.

**The process.** A number of years ago, Mike Warden, president and CEO of Gardenshop Nursery and Landscape in Sparks, Nev., had more commercial installation business than he could handle. He told me he could double his production volume overnight if he had five more crew leaders. He was thinking of utilizing some of his irrigation service technicians as crew leaders.

As I reflected on conversations with many other CEOs and their experiences in similar situations, I realized that placing a good irrigation service technician into a crew leader position would probably not work long term. That's what I told Mike.

He'd be putting a square peg in a round hole. For a short period, it might work. However, long term, no one would be happy and his converted technicians would probably eventually quit and move on.

The profile of a good irrigation service technician is very different than that of a crew leader. Service technicians need to be meticulous. They also need to enjoy figuring out a technical problem and implementing a solution. Needless



to say, this person must be thorough and analysis-driven. The challenge of racing against the clock or a deadline does not turn their crank, so to speak.

On the other hand, good commercial installation crew leaders are thorough but deadline-driven. They're like a quarterback running the two-minute drill in a tied ball game.

Production is their main emphasis as they race against the clock. The service technician is more like a place kicker, lining up the ball, checking the wind, etc. He has all the time he needs to make one kick but he has to get it right – the first time.

Think of it this way: Would you want your bookkeeper to be your primary sales person or marketing manager? Probably not. Nor would you normally want someone who is good at sales or marketing to do your bookkeeping.

If your company is doing more than \$3.5 million in sales, you probably need a controller. Because I've worked with more than a hundred such companies, I already know what the successful person in that position looks like. This position is usually filled by a woman who is very neat, organized and thorough.

She also loves working with numbers, is financially responsible, punctual, has excellent written and verbal communication skills and maintains a schedule. She is also very good managing four to

five people, probably has an accounting degree, presents herself well, is loyal and is more a manager than an entrepreneur.

While in the U.S. Marine Corps, I worked with snipers. They make for a strange group. You might describe them more by what they are not instead of what they are. Individuals fitting the classic sniper profile are not the life of the party, over-the-top spontaneous, impulsive, garrulous, chain-smokers, stand-up comedians, etc.

Mark Wahlberg's character, Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant Bob Lee Swagger, in the 2007 film "Shooter" is an excellent example of someone who fits this profile. Master Gunnery Sergeant Thomas Beckett, portrayed by Tom Berenger in the 1993 film "Sniper," is another excellent example of the classic sniper profile.

**The big picture.** An accurate profile for a particular job position doesn't give you all of the small details about that person or position. Rather, it provides a larger, more general framework for consideration. It's the big picture, the 50,000-foot view. It's not foolproof and, of course, some individuals who are successful at a particular position will break the mold.

**The takeaway.** Using a profiling technique can help you hire square pegs for square holes and round ones for round ones. Unfortunately, it's an undeveloped area for the green industry. Profiles for the various green industry positions are not readily available.

I've included a profile section in my new book, "Job Descriptions for Green Industry Professionals" to be available this fall. Profiling doesn't guarantee that the FBI catches their man every time. Nor will it prove 100 percent accurate for you in your hiring methods.

However, it should help improve your odds of finding the right people and building a strong team. And in today's competitive labor market, any improvement is a welcome one. **L&L**

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By Margie Holly

## Hire Power



Hire Power is a monthly column designed to help you recruit, hire and retain the best talent for your company. We've got a rotating panel of columnists ready to give you practical, tactical advice on solving your labor problems. Email Chuck Bowen at [cbowen@gie.net](mailto:cbowen@gie.net) with topic ideas.

# Hire right the first time

**M**any small businesses have survived the economic downturn by reducing overhead and maximizing operational efficiency. As the economy improves, some companies are experiencing turnover as employees jump ship for what they perceive as a better position elsewhere. Are these good employees gone bad? Or were they just bad hires in disguise?

The Harvard Business Review reports that up to 80 percent of employee turnover can be traced back to bad hires, suggesting that perhaps the final frontier of small business belt-tightening is refining the hiring process.

Careerbuilder reports bad hires cost an average of \$25,000. This doesn't even include intangible costs such as lost productivity, damaged morale or loss of company reputation among customers.

Here are a few suggestions to help you minimize the chance of a bad hire:

**Build a bench.** A well-developed succession plan will tell you who you will need and when, whether you have the talent in house, or if you'll have to go outside to get it. Say you have one good field supervisor who could become a great branch manager in 24 months, but your growth plan calls for opening two new branches in the next year. Those gaps in your succession plan will help you plan and budget for meeting your hiring needs.

**Know what you need.** To hire successfully, you have to manage your talent assets like you run your jobs. A successful maintenance contract starts with a clear scope of service. Likewise, a successful hire starts with a detailed job description.

Your job description should list the main responsibilities of the position, the skills required for success and the core competencies of the ideal candidate. It should also provide a brief context for how the role contributes to the overall success of the organization.

Solicit input from stakeholders who really know what it takes to do the job. If you're the business owner and you haven't worked in the field for years, don't rely on your memory of how you

used to run a crew. Go ask the people who run your crews now what skills and characteristics they need in a successful candidate.

Identify the traits and skills of your top performers already in the job and use them to benchmark the ideal candidate. This will save time in screening and interviewing, and can also help predict how an individual will perform in the job by comparing their past behavior with your ideal.

**Hire for fit, train for skills.** The top reason people leave an organization is conflict with a team member or supervisor, so it's better to hire someone with potential to learn the skills you need, who you know will be a great team player.

To check for fit, have the finalists meet with several members of your team and even with managers in other departments. Take the candidate to lunch for a more casual test of how the person interacts in a team setting.

**Gut check.** If you don't have in-house recruiting staff, you may want to work with a contract recruiter who specializes in the green industry. They can screen applicants to cull the best candidates and perform valuable skills and behavioral assessments that will streamline the selection process.

If it comes down to two or three equally good candidates, it may be time to do a gut check. Here is where your emotional intelligence should come into play. If you are drawn to one candidate more than another, ask yourself why. Be honest. Is it because they are more like you? Do you need someone like you in this position? Or would it be better to have someone not like you to complement the team dynamics?

Regardless of what your gut says, be sure to practice due diligence with background and reference checks.

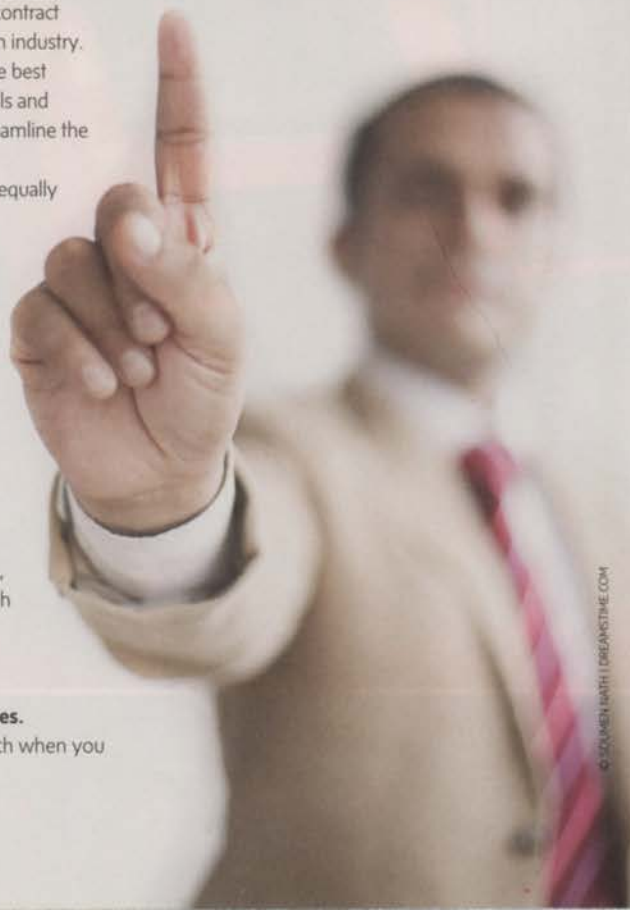
**Hedge your bets and cut your losses.** Sometimes it's hard to build a bench when you

just need a body in the seat. A growing trend among employers is to offer temp-to-permanent or contract-to-hire assignments to their top candidates. This is a short work period (30-90 days) that allows the company and the candidate to decide if the potential hire will be a match long-term.

During the trial period, evaluate the employee on quality of work, working well with others, attitude, attendance, customer interaction and how they meet deadlines. These critical criteria will reveal a bad hire early on so you can cut your losses and get back to growing your company.

No matter how quickly you identify a bad hire, you're still going to waste money by having to replace them. The key is to waste the least amount of time and money by applying the same discipline to your hiring process as you do to your production processes. **L&L**

The author is an independent communications consultant in Glenwood, Md.





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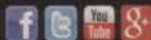


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## A few 'vital' success factors

**1. Managing quality.** Layers of quality control keep the team on target with company goals. One aspect is Vital Factors Team (VFT) manager meetings that occur on a monthly basis. Equally important is quality control in the field.

Quarterly internal voluntary quality control inspections are conducted in three steps: 1) the owner reviews all properties; 2) the vice president of operations makes rounds; and 3) branch managers perform quality control checkups, using a report developed by the company.

**2. Apprenticing for growth.**

When Jeremy Andre, president and CEO, considers expanding the business, he embeds himself in the discipline.

"He would donate his labor to professional tree care companies to learn from certified arborists how to do jobs correctly," says Michelle Andre, vice president of marketing. Then, he started an arbor care division. The same pattern followed for commercial landscape maintenance. This approach goes back to the core of Andre Landscape's business: building relationships.

**3. Encouraging certification.**

All Andre branch managers are certified arborists. "Our clients get a lot of value out of that because when a branch manager goes on a job, he or she can recognize any issues and be proactive for the property," Michelle says.



# THE A TEAM

Andre Landscape Service focuses on understanding the "client paradigm" to differentiate the firm in a competitive market.

**W**alk alongside clients; feel their pain; be the problem solver. A sympathetic mindset is ingrained in management at Andre Landscape Service in Azusa, Calif. In a market saturated with national conglomerates, where the bidding is tight and homeowners associations (HOAs), like any economically stressed client, feel budgetary pressure, Andre Landscape works to really relate.

The Andre team calls this understanding the client paradigm. And they've got the overworked, stretched HOA property manager profile down.

"They are professionals, mostly women, who are juggling this career, often a family life, and they have the HOA they manage and are dealing with evening board meetings and slews of homeowners' calls that come in for this repair and that liability — they are really busy," says Michelle Andre, vice president of marketing.

For HOA managers to take a chance on a landscape firm they don't know is "huge," she adds.

This is the barrier Andre Landscape faced when

Michelle and her husband, Jeremy, started the business 20 years ago.

Today, 80 percent of the business is maintenance — most of that work is HOA. The remaining 15 percent of operations focuses on tree care and five percent is design/build.

But in the early days, the company consisted of a few residential gardening routes. The Andres, with lead-lists, pounded the pavement and got their hands dirty in landscape beds.

"Just building relationships is key," Andre says. The Andres were newlyweds when they started the firm. They left fulltime ministry positions to begin this company and make a better living, she says.

The first day, Jeremy hit the ground running and returned home with the first 12 residential customers.

The "client paradigm" concept was not solidified at that point, but the idea of getting in at ground level with people and just "getting it" — their needs, their goals — has always been a strength of Jeremy.

"By nature, he is such a people person, and he



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is very down to earth and humble, so he is received very well," Michelle says.

As the firm has grown, the Andres have not lost sight of the understanding and ability to

relate that has earned them valuable clients. When the company began branching into commercial 15 years ago, it applied the same approach in spite of the competitive market.

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"Our goal was always to break into commercial, so we just kept learning and growing and building relationships," Andre says, noting that early introductions to HOAs happened while volunteering in the professional organizations that property managers join. "You've got to prove yourself to earn their business when you have no name, no brand, no recognition. We have to really understand our clients' paradigm."

**GOALS AND CONTROLS.** Layered management is the key to executing on that client paradigm. It's one thing to understand how clients feel, and another to do something about it. Andre Landscape doesn't stop at the feeling. Working alongside and ahead of clients is the key to maintaining HOA business in tough times, Michelle says.

"Property managers have a tremendous workload," she says. "They might have 1,200 homeowners and only one assistant property manager. They're fielding calls and problem solving, so we focus on being proactive. We don't want to be the sub on the job that they have to constantly communicate with."

This is possible because of the structure at Andre Landscape, ongoing performance reviews, and the low turnover in management. The internal structure looks like this: owner, vice president of operations, branch manager and account manager. Andre Landscape has four locations throughout Southern California. All leadership is part of the Vital Factors Team (VFT) at Andre Landscape.

Every month, managers gather for a monthly VFT meeting to discuss "goals and controls." The company has adopted MAP management practices.

Andre Landscape sets monthly goals — managers sit around a conference table and "map" these out together. Those goals tie into productivity, relationship building, quality control, communication and responsiveness,



which are the company's core values. "As managers, we know each other's strengths and weaknesses, so we create goals based on developing each person's area of struggle," Michelle says.

When the VFT reconvenes the next month, each manager shares a progress report, and a percentage (of completion) is assigned to every goal. It's an accountability tool and a motivator. Andre Landscape has been conducting these VFT meetings for the last 10 years.

Perhaps the most significant take away from these meetings is how progress is accomplished when everyone collaborates and works toward shared goals. Also, there's the idea that "two heads are better than one," Michelle says. Bringing together managers of different divisions in one room provides a range of perspectives and experience.

While Andre Landscape's structure is "dedicated but integrated," in the respect that employees do not cross over divisions, this ability to connect through VFT meetings brings together the company's disciplines so they can share ideas and learn from each other.

**CREATING A TALENT PIPELINE.** Relationship building goes beyond winning and keeping clients. Andre Landscape's recruiting efforts are focused on ushering in talent over the long term. This is one of Jeremy's areas of focus as owner, and he "is always building relationships with people from other companies in the industry," Michelle says. That's not because he's hiring, per se, rather, he's planting a seed, helping others to get to know Andre Landscape.

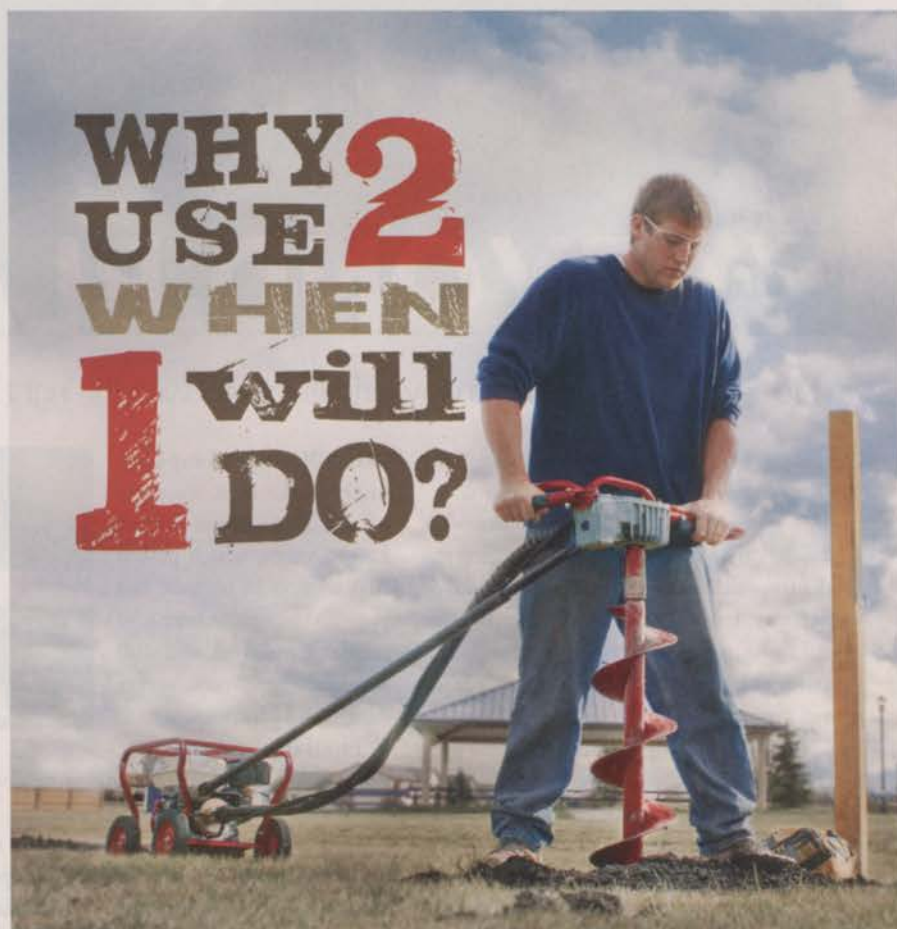
For years, Jeremy might meet periodically with another industry peer to talk about business, life or family – just to get to know the person better. "He establishes a relationship with them," Michelle says. "Then, at the point when we need a key person, that is the person we hire, and that is the person who wants to come work for us because we have built a relationship with them for five, 10 years."

Meanwhile, low turnover among managers and employees in the field helps secure client relationships. When HOA property managers can continue building a relationship with the

same workers rather than starting from scratch every year or two, that's better for business.

"Our clients tell us they appreciate that we do not have a high turnover," Michelle says.

"That translates to less work for our clients because our people are familiar with their property, their wants and needs, and they know how to work together well." **L&L**



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# BEYOND BLADES

Mowers can be used in many different ways with the right attachments. **By Hilary Daninhirsch**

**B**J Brownlee gets the most out of his fleet of 12-15 commercial walk-behinds and zero-turn mowers thanks to attachments. During the fall, Brownlee, owner of the 15-employee Archway Lawncare and Landscaping in St. Louis, uses a bagger attachment with a vacuum on the side of the company's zero-turn mowers.

"It cuts our manpower by about 40 percent as opposed to raking and blowing," Brownlee says. Also in the fall, the company, which projects revenue of \$850,000 this year, employs a leaf blade attachment on walk-behind mowers, which Brownlee says functions like a snow blower.

"A lot of customers have curbside leaf pick up. We just have to push it to the curb and the city picks it up. It saves a ton of time from raking it, tarping it and putting it to the curb," he says.

In the fall and spring, Archway uses mulching blades when serving its customer base — 80 percent residential and 20 percent commercial. In the fall, the company uses them to mulch up leaves, and in the winter the blades mulch up dead winter debris putting nutrients back into the ground. He says it helps the environment rather than taking the clippings back to the landfill.

**GREEN ON GREEN.** Steve Daehnert is the fleet manager of the Texas-based Native Land Design, which posted \$10 million in revenue last year. The company, with 130 regular employees and 200 seasonal employees, serves Austin and Houston.

The lawn mower fleet number is more than 100, including about 40 percent zero-turn mowers.

"On our zero-turn mowers, we use mulching kits to recycle clippings, and provide a margin of safety for our customers, employees and bystanders from discharging debris, rocks, etc.," Daehnert says.

The company uses the GHS (Grass Handling System) to cut, vacuum and bag in one pass. "This is a more time efficient approach to bagging that saves our customers money and us time," he says.

**FOUR SEASONS.** The 22 employees of the Derry, N.H.-based North Point Outdoors make regular use of lawn mower attachments in its 12-mower fleet.

David Fairburn, president of the company, whose customer base is 60 percent commercial and 40 percent residential,

estimates revenue this year of \$2.4 million.

The mower attachments Fairburn utilizes revolve around the seasons. In the spring, North Point breaks out its dethatching attachments, which Fairburn says, "exposes the soil to nutrients, air and water and it removes dead and not yet decaying grass to open the lawn for new growth."

In the midst of the high season, the company switches over to an edging attachment, used for cutting new edges into existing planting beds to prepare for mulch installation. "That reduces the hand labor required to shovel out the edges," Fairburn says.

The favorite attachment for North Point, though, is the leaf plow, as it is a huge time saver. "During the fall leaf clean up, the crews will collect the grass into large piles or rows and utilize the leaf plow to move mass amounts of leaves across the properties to a wood line or to a dump truck for removal," he says.

Fairburn added that this task, which would take five guys an hour using backpack blowers, would take one guy only 10 minutes with a leaf plow.

"Attachments give you the ability to get the value out of the lawn mower in more ways than cutting grass," Fairburn says. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Pittsburgh.



Brownlee



Daehnert

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## Turn to technology

**M**anaging water is big business in an environment where municipalities and watchful organizations have a greater concern over the quality of water running off of our properties.

"We are doing a tremendous amount of rainwater harvesting now, including subsurface rain tanks," says Eric Drenner, president and partner of E-Landscape Specialty Solutions.

Staying on the leading edge of technologies that solve complex water management and other landscape concerns is a focus for the company. In fact, the company blogs about some of the latest tools and products they use to keep customers in the know.

Here are a few technologies Drenner's excited about.

**Silva cells.** A modular building block that contains unlimited amounts of healthy soil below paving. "This solution provides uncompacted pathways for root systems to extend downward through the soil to get the nutrients and moisture they need," he says.

**Live roof trays.** Basically pre-grown green roof in modular components, typically 2 by 4 feet in size. "When they are put together, you can instantly get a green roof without a lot of on-site construction and labor," Drenner says.

**Permeable pavers.** Homeowners in the Chesapeake Bay area have to pay great attention to pervious surface requirements. "A lot of times, people are forced to have a gravel driveway," Drenner says. Permeable pavers provide an alternative that abides by storm water management regulations.



Along with irrigation jobs, E-Landscape Specialty Solutions' project portfolio ranges from luxury high-rise complexes to affordable housing developments and health care campuses.

## Up to the challenge

Give it the tough projects because that's what E-Landscape Specialty Solutions knows best.

**C**omplex environments require specialty skills to navigate the landscape and design a solution. Even seemingly basic scenarios – installing plantings, building a wall, dealing with drainage – can be addressed creatively to provide clients with a thoughtful, sustainable solution. The easy way out is not the "best practice" at E-Landscape Specialty Solutions.

"When we started E-Landscape Specialty Solutions, we were not going to be just another landscaping contractor," says Eric Drenner, partner and president of the Davidsonville, Md.-based firm, which he started with partner/CEO Richard "Rook" Rogers in spring 2007.

"We want to not just be the guy who is putting in trees and shrubs, but the guy who is helping to understand the total integration of the site," Drenner says. This includes handling a construction or existing site's subsurface draining, piping and downspout connections to rain gardens or stormwater management ponds. It also includes managing the fine grading, installing impervious paver walls and planting landscapes using specialty soils.

E-Landscape Specialty Solutions is engaged by general contractors to bring its expertise to sites. Sometimes, the firm brings on subcontractors that focus on driveways or specialty concrete stamping.

Its project portfolio includes projects ranging from luxury high-rise complexes to affordable housing developments and healthcare campuses.

Even during the recession when the company launched, there was a demand for the niche services E-Landscape offers, Drenner says. "We looked at the market, and it was starving for competitive, competent people who could bring solutions," he says.

"There was a need in the market for us. People were looking for qualified professionals, so marrying



our expertise and experience was a perfect storm for us and how we built the business.”

Growth from zero in 2007 to more than \$6.5 million today proves what Drenner says is true – the market was calling for specialty solutions. Here, he shares some of the challenging projects and innovative solutions E-Landscape brought to clients.

**RAIN RUNOFF. Challenge:** Managing water run-off at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Washington, D.C.

**Solution:** Installing subsurface rain collection systems that collect and filter water run-off, and eventually redirect the water so it leaves the system clean and free of potentially harmful pollutants.

**Execution:** Pressure to manage and filtrate water runoff in the Mid-Atlantic

region is great, with municipalities and businesses facing pressure to decrease their environmental impact.

E-Landscape has experience working with advanced rainwater collection systems and designing water management elements, such as rain gardens or subsurface rain tanks.

At St. Elizabeth Hospital, E-Landscape installed a half-million dollars worth of subsurface rain tank construction where surface water was collected into a series of underground modular tanks that expand up to 30,000 square feet.

This system of modular tanks is wrapped with a filtration bag. Water enters the system, then slowly releases into bioretention soil before reaching a subsurface pipe.

“When it gets to that pipe, it has been (cleaned) and goes from muddy murky

water that you would see on the curb and gutters to crystal clear water because of the natural filtration of the bioretention soil,” Drenner says.

E-Landscape sources the latest technology to manage complex water issues, and it calls on professionals including structural engineers to provide solutions for its clients. “Our success is attributed to our people,— who they are and how they work,” he says.

**WONDER WALLS. Challenge:** A specified precast concrete wall broke the project budget, but a cheaper modular wall solution required an 8-foot geograde that blew past the property line.

**Solution:** An Anchorplex retaining wall that reduced the horizontal geograde and kept the structure within properly limits.

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**Execution:** The project called for a cast-concrete wall about 12 feet tall, but that element was throwing off the budget in a big way. The contractor approached E-Landscape with this dilemma.

"Based on the cost, they were not going to be able to move forward," Drenner says.

The wall was critical because it separates the property from a parking lot – blocking the lot was the goal. A traditional modular wall would be much cheaper, but those require a geograde that is typically 80 percent of the wall height. For this project, that meant an 8-foot horizontal geograde that went over the property line.

"We talked to our structural engineers and came up with the Anchorplex wall solution," Drenner says. "We are using the same modular wall with a pervious concrete mix

that allows us to reduce the distance of the horizontal geograde to bring it back inside the property line."

The Anchorplex wall was a compromise between a lowest-cost modular wall and a budget-busting cast-concrete wall. "This allowed the savings so that the project could move forward," Drenner says.

**FOOT TRAFFIC. Challenge:** Pedestrian traffic was wearing on the landscape of an affordable housing community.

**Solution:** Thoughtful plant picks and placement reduced pedestrian impact and improved long-term maintenance costs.

**Execution:** "When this affordable housing project was built, it was really more about function – making sure people had adequate housing and that land use was

maximized," Drenner says. Pedestrian flow generally was not part of 1950s planning – especially in the affordable housing environment.

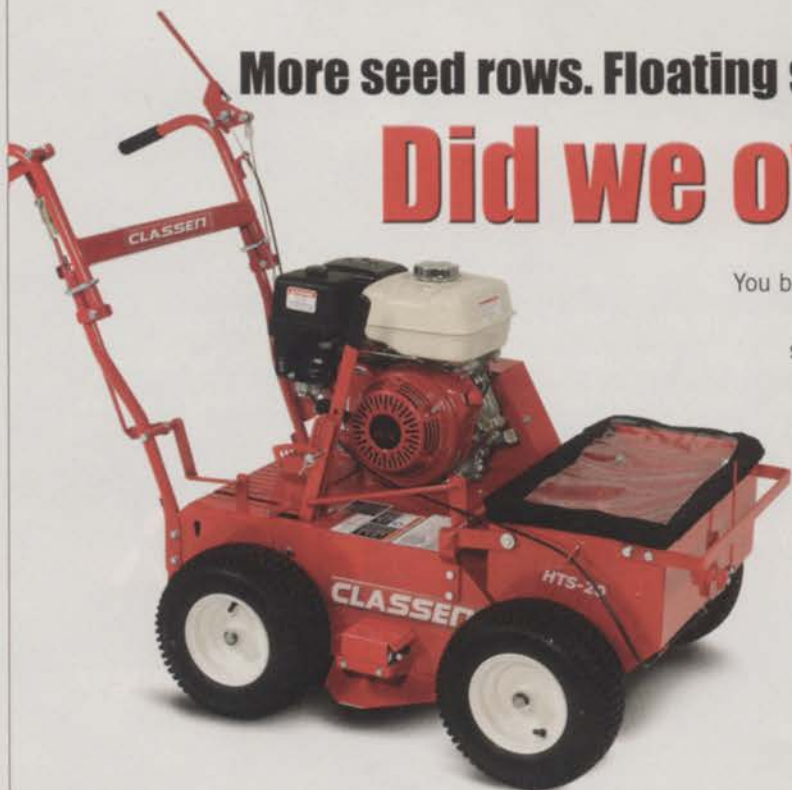
"We take a look at the project's unique challenges, as far as how pedestrians use the land, and determine what we can do to reduce the impact of their use by directing them or moving them through the project," Drenner says.

This means redirecting sidewalks or strategically installing landscape that encourages or discourages the use of areas. "That landscape has to be affordable and functional – there may be physical deterrents we use, such as a plant with a prickly foliage or evergreen to discourage where people move," he says.

The result is a longer-lasting landscape and reduced maintenance expenses. **L&L**

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## Launched with hindsight

**A**fter running a successful catering business in New Milford, Conn., called Food For Thought, Lise Goedewaagen hung up her apron and picked up a garden trowel. Going into business for the second time by opening Outdoor Environments in nearby Gaylordsville, she brought with her some entrepreneurial lessons learned.

- **STAY ORGANIZED.** "I developed these habits of list-making and scheduling and planning as I am working toward a goal," Goedewaagen says. "Whether planning a menu for a party or a landscape installation, everything has to click along at just the right moment."
- **PASS THE BUCK.** "I try to delegate as much as I can to my crews so they feel they are really a part of what is happening," she says. "That way, they feel like they have something invested in the company, and it just helps me to get jobs done better."
- **CATER TO CLIENTS.** Goedewaagen looks for ways to bring more value to clients' properties and to deepen relationships. "I'm always looking for ways to offer more services to my customers – I want them to trust me to the point where they would give me the keys to their homes to watch over things," she says, relating that she has started to get into a bit of caretaking since many of the properties she cares for are vacation homes.
- **KNOW YOUR NICHE.** "I just wanted to do gardens," Goedewaagen says of her business plan. And as for the retail shop, "I'm not trying to be a big garden center. I have no desire to do that."



The company offers design/build services, along with a retail component and other services.

## The kitchen is closed

After deciding the catering world wasn't for her, Lise Goedewaagen started her own landscaping business and has been smiling ever since.

**T**he purpose and process of gardening and cooking run parallel. There's the concept of creating a finished product – an indulgence, an impression, a sensory delight. There are tools to complete the job and a timeline to follow.

Both occupations deal with perishables. So when Lise Goedewaagen, a Culinary Institute of America graduate who had been working as a career chef for more than two decades, sold off her catering business and decided to enter a Master Gardener program, the segue was surely a shift – but not a complete departure from her kitchen roots.

After cutting her teeth at a local landscaping firm, Goedewaagen started Outdoor Environments in 1998. "Catering is a lot like doing a landscaping job," she says. Her Dutch father gardened, and she remembers first being exposed to the intricacies of plants while spending time with family in England when she was about 10 years old. "The Secret Garden is still one of her all-time favorite books. "You set up a menu, you find out what the clients like and you put together your ideas. Then you go back and collect the tools you need and you get prepared, you do the job, clean up and go home," she says.

The materials are different, but the intentions, for the most part, are the same – to deliver pleasing results tailored to clients' tastes, on schedule.

The fresh start suited Goedewaagen, who has grown her Gaylordsville, Conn., business

from a tiny seed to a busy, multi-faceted business that includes a design/build service, a retail component, flower arrangements and wreaths, fresh vegetables and a growing maintenance service – though her property care does not involve mowers.

**SOWING A PASSION.** Goedewaagen had simply burned out in the kitchen. She was raising a family at the time and the grueling hours caused conflict – working nights, weekends. You're on duty when others are celebrating holidays. "I had been my own boss for a long time, and I had people working for me – I'm used to being in charge," Goedewaagen says of her decision to eventually launch another business in a new industry. "I thought, OK, now what do I do? I have always loved gardening and I love being outdoors."

After completing the Master Gardener program, she landed a job at a large landscaping company near New Milford, Conn. A friend of hers was performing some drainage work at her house. Goedewaagen told him about her career change and he offered her a job on the spot. "I didn't have a clue what was going on," she says. "I was totally out of my league there. But I learned as much as I could and I worked really hard."

At the same time, Goedewaagen began a two-year landscape design program at the Institute of Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook, N.Y. After a few years, she felt prepared to strike out on her own again. "I just jumped in and went for it," she says. The first few years, she only provided gardening services.

"My customers trusted me and my business grew. I started doing small installations

and I needed help, so I hired one person and that turned into two and three," she says.

Hers is a family business of sorts, with two Ecuadorian brothers and one's father-in-law, along with her own son. Her boyfriend, Brian, helps out, and her daughter also helped before moving away. Not just anyone can perform the work gardening requires: clean-up, edging, mulching, pruning and fertilizing, along with installations and minding the health of plants.

"I am observant and I really stress this with my crews, to really look at the plants and see how they change and if there is anything going on ... if you see an insect or disease issue, it's really crucial to recognize it and address that right away," she says.

Her team members have a natural knack for living things. "They just seem to get it."







**CULTIVATING NICHE OFFERINGS.** Four years ago, Outdoor Environments expanded to the point that Goedewaagen could no longer run the business out of her home. She rented a commercial building on Route 7, a couple of miles from her house and a main artery through town. "I realized I've got this spot. Let's do something with it," she says.

She began setting plants out in front of the building – specimens she had grown, extras from jobs, a hodge-podge. "People started coming in and it kind of took off," she says.

Just 10 percent of the overall business is retail, but the shop offers a venue for local artisans who sell their wares there – gifts, art, soaps and more.

A thriving floral business is based at the shop and a demand for holiday wreaths from Outdoor Environments has escalated

to where that four-week push at year-end mimics the catering party hustle.

The container planting business has also really taken off. "People love it, and it's fun for me," she says. "It's easy for people to have a little container garden for themselves as a way to garden on a small scale." This offering has evolved into a niche for the company.

With the 40-plus client gardens Goedewaagen's team maintains, most customers also get containers. She has also begun offering floral design and centerpieces for parties.

Meanwhile, Goedewaagen nurtures a love of organic vegetable gardening, keeping a garden at home, one on the property with her shop/office and another in town nearby. She sells the bounty at a roadside stand by her shop.

If she could, she would quit everything

and farm organic foods – "It would be hard to make a living selling tomatoes," she says. "But that is what I love to do."

To be sure, Goedewaagen's business is diverse – sprouting out in all directions, but rooted in gardening. While she considers the danger of spreading herself too thin, the joy she derives from the shop and its many offerings, along with the intentional overlap of those services, gives people many ways to "reach" Outdoor Environments. "I think the more I can offer, the more business will be generated," she says.

Her community and family have been generously supportive of her venture. "Without them, I would be absolutely nothing," she says. "All of the people here in our little town, and this area, come to me and support me with their business." **L&L**

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# Versatility on the job

Compact tractors and skid-steers can make the work you do a lot easier. **By Holly Hammersmith**

Utilizing compact tractors and skid-steers can reduce manual labor and save time on landscaping projects. Because of this, contractors say these pieces of machinery are an irreplaceable tool for their business.

**VERSATILITY.** Steve Pierson, the owner of Pierson Landscaping, based in Charleston, R.I., describes his compact tractor as a versatile and integral component on any residential landscaping job.

With two employees and revenue around \$150,000 annually, Pierson's company specializes in maintenance and design/build services, while also providing tree care.

Pierson's Kioti CK25 tractor is still going

strong roughly a decade after purchase. "It changed everything," he said. "Basically it goes on every single job site."

The compact tractor aids tremendously with moving trees and other large vegetation, Pierson added.

Jeff Steckline is the owner of Rock Solid Landscape, a hardscape and landscape-focused company based in Reno, Nev. He says a skid-steer is helpful on mounding and excavation projects. He has five employees and does residential work exclusively, mostly for high-end customers. Total revenue for Rock Solid Landscape ranges from about \$350,000 to \$500,000 annually.

Steckline says he uses his skid-steer in any instance where a "big shovel" could

be needed. "Anything I can think of that will utilize it and use less labor I use it for," Steckline says.

**CUSTOMIZATION.** When it comes to selecting special features or add-ons for his Kioti, Pierson says turf tires are essential.

"With the turf tires I can take it virtually on any property and not make a mess of the property, and do very little damage that has to be fixed afterward," Pierson says.

Both Pierson and Steckline opt for an open cab on their equipment, which is economical and allows easy access to step on and off the machine.

"My guys needed the basics. They needed good quality equipment, they didn't need the bells and whistles," Steckline says.

Pierson also avoids many of the bells and whistles. He started with a basic model, but has purchased a variety of attachments for the tractor over the years including a power rake, brush cutter, overseeder, post-hole digger, tractor forks and even a four-in-one bucket.

When researching compact tractors,



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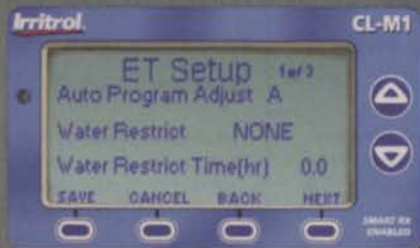
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Pierson says he selected Kioti in part due to having a local dealer. This allows him to easily order new parts and attachments.

**PROPER MAINTENANCE.** Steckline's last skid-steer, also a Bobcat, lasted about 10 years before the motor started to experience operation trouble.

"Typically, if well-maintained, you can get 10,000 hours out of a Bobcat," he says. "Stay on top of the maintenance. That's the biggest thing."

Initially, Steckline chose a service that travelled to Steckline's company to take care of his machine instead of taking it directly to a dealer, thinking it would be more con-

venient. Unfortunately, the company used cheap materials to service the machine, which cost his business more money in the long run when his compact tractor broke down.

Today, his lead foreman is in charge of the machine. That individual will check the fuel, fluids and air filters, keep track of how long the compact tractor runs every day, and report back to Steckline if there are any maintenance concerns.

Having a smaller operation and seeking a more hands-on approach, Pierson opts to maintain his machine himself. From oil changes to checks on the air and fuel filters, he does it all.

Pierson says just like on a vehicle, he is

also conscious to replace any worn or broken parts. "If you can do it yourself you can save quite a bit (of money)," he says. "At least I know how it was done and the quality that was behind it."

Moving forward, both men say they would buy a compact tractor again and plan to continue using this vital piece of equipment long-term.

"That's pretty much the one piece of equipment that I would really not want to do without," Pierson says. "I think as far as one machine, it's more diversified than others." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

## Don't get *too* attached

These compact equipment attachments can help with any landscaping job.



### 1. Bobcat Push Broom

**The pitch:** This push broom attachment is faster than hand sweeping, and is able to clean along tight areas such as curbs and walls.

- It has the ability to sweep materials when operating in either forward or reverse.
- For a loader model, the push broom attaches to the bucket with spring-loaded pins.
- Sweep and clean up materials, whether wet or dry. Designed for sweeping dirt, leaves, light snow, standing water, and spilled materials.

**For more information:**  
[www.bobcat.com](http://www.bobcat.com)

### 2. CEAttachments Heavy-clipper

**The pitch:** The EDGE Heavy-Duty High Reach Clipper is designed for commercial and rental use for contractors.

- The rotator is hard-wearing and built with several extra gussets, and features 180 degree rotation.
- A wireless remote control allows the operator to activate the solenoid valve for rotation, without the complication of wires getting tangled in brush.
- It's made of 5/8-inch steel for durability in cutting trees and branches up to 9-inches in diameter.

**For more information:**  
[www.ceattachments.com](http://www.ceattachments.com)

### 3. John Deere MH60C Mulching Head

**The pitch:** The MH60C Mulching Head is designed for durability by utilizing oversized 64-mm (2.5 inch) sealed rotor bearings and double carbide-tipped teeth.

- The heavy-duty push bar helps to topple trees and brush while protecting the carrier from any flying debris.
- Featuring a two-speed hydraulic system, the mulching head is able to efficiently utilize available horsepower.
- Preset pressure levels allow the motor to automatically shift to high displacement.

**For more information:**  
[www.johndeere.com](http://www.johndeere.com)

### 4. Toro 22520 Narrow Bucket

**The pitch:** Toro's narrow bucket attachment can handle compact construction and remodeling sites by moving through 36 inches gates.

- This 34.5 inch-wide bucket allows you to get through narrow spaces, including gates and doorways.
- Can be used on the Dingo TX 420 or any Dingo model equipped with narrow wheels and tires.
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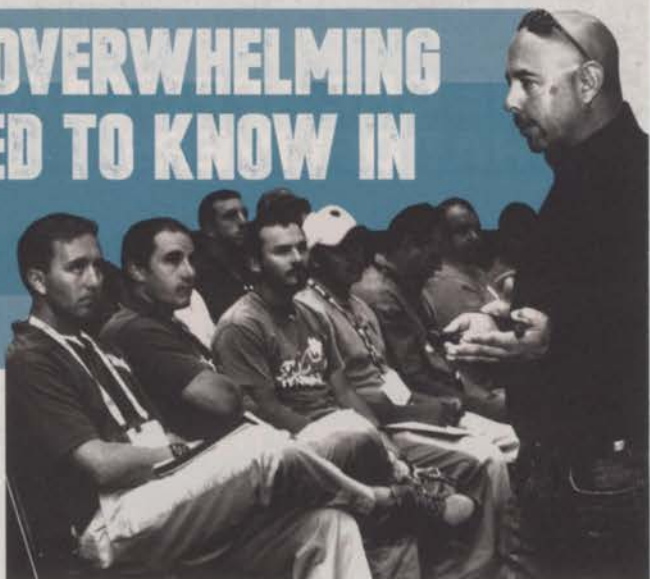
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# Time-tested

DeVisser Landscape Services enhanced its reputation with the proven systems of a Weed Man franchise.

**T**hrough the mix of services at DeVisser Landscape Services has shifted over 75 years, the principles behind the offerings remain solid.

Originally known as DeVisser Brothers, the Kalamazoo, Mich.-based business began in 1939 as a general hauler of topsoil and gravel. By 1950, landscape construction became the main line of business and landscape maintenance was added around 2001.

Then in 2003, second-generation President Dave DeVisser ventured into lawn care by purchasing a Weed Man franchise.

"Before that, I never wanted to get into anything like that," he says. "All I could picture was problems, and we have enough challenges in the regular business."

But a conversation at a convention in Nashville changed his mind. At a networking breakfast, he sat next to a Weed Man franchisee, who explained how the business was set up to run smoothly.

"All of a sudden, I had an aha moment, like the light bulb went on," DeVisser says. "I thought, 'We can do this.'"

His son, Joel, already managed the Land-



In 2003, Dave DeVisser, president of DeVisser Landscape Services, decided to buy a Weed Man franchise in order to branch out into lawn care.

scape Division, so DeVisser brought in his younger son, Nate, to manage Weed Man.

Pairing the franchise's systems with DeVisser's core philosophies, Weed Man became DeVisser's largest division, driving growth throughout the entire company. The

combined companies posted more than \$3 million in revenue in 2013.

"The advantage of buying a franchise is that their systems are already in place, so you don't have to reinvent the wheel," DeVisser says. "We found that we could take some of

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DEVISSER LANDSCAPE SERVICES



Dave DeVisser

## Going the distance

**O**pening a Weed Man franchise in Kalamazoo, Mich., where DeVisser Landscape Services built a reputation for more than 70 years, brought a few business development challenges. But opening another one 70 miles away in South Bend, Ind., unleashed a new set of trials.

"Nobody knew us down there," Dave DeVisser says. "Breaking into that market was extremely tough."

DeVisser rented a facility, bought a truck and hired a manager to run operations in Indiana – but soon realized that an isolated approach presented problems.

"You don't have quite the supervision," DeVisser says, although he connected with the manager a couple times per week. "It was really hard to keep a person down there

because they're all by themselves. So we started running it out of Kalamazoo. Even though it's more expensive to run trucks down there, there were a number of advantages because we had more control over things."

With the Indiana Weed Man expanding to add another truck or two this year, DeVisser plans to restore the satellite office based on strength in numbers. With more than one person to propel operations there, he expects a culture to develop and drive business better than one man could alone.

"You've got to have key people," DeVisser says. "But if you're not big enough yet and you only have one person working out of a satellite (office), it's tough. If you have key people that can work together, then it can be successful."



those systems and apply them to the rest of our business.”

**SEPARATION OF SERVICES.** Weed Man’s lawn care services were natural complements to enhance the rest of DeVisser’s business – and vice versa.

“While we’re mowing the yard, we can offer fertilization or weed control from Weed Man,” DeVisser says. “We can also use Weed Man services as incentives to sign up for lawn maintenance.

For instance, ‘If you sign up for lawn maintenance, you get a free core aeration,’ which comes from Weed Man.”

Technically part of the same full-service company, all three divisions – Weed Man, maintenance and design/build – share one financial statement. DeVisser’s vehicles



DeVisser Landscape Services began in 1939 as a general hauler of topsoil and gravel, before switching to focus on landscape construction in 1950. The company now offers lawn care.

display the Weed Man logo, but franchise rules restrict advertising DeVisser Landscape Services on Weed Man trucks.

Although DeVisser’s maintenance webpage lists fertilization and aeration next to

mowing and pruning, Weed Man actually handles all of the lawn care-related services.

While the divisions cross-promote each other where possible, Weed Man maintains its own operations with dedicated personnel in a separate building next to the office shared by maintenance and landscape.

Led by Nate, the full-time Weed Man team includes an operations supervisor, seven technicians, a sales manager and five salespeople.

But lead-generation through cold calls and door-knocks was a new practice for DeVisser Landscape, whose reputation draws business from word-of-mouth rather than active marketing.

“The biggest challenge is to go strictly by the franchise’s systems,” DeVisser says.

“It’s not like you have to, but if you want to be most successful, then you follow their

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proven systems.” The company hires extra help – about a dozen people – to canvass neighborhoods from February through May, drumming up business through cold calling and door knocking.

“It really is about finding the right people to fill gaps where we weren’t strong,” Nate DeVisser says. “Once we started finding passionate people that could take it over, then we really started seeing growth – specifically in sales.”

**FOUNDATION OF VALUES.** While proven franchise methods drive lawn care revenue growth, DeVisser’s long-standing core values lays the foundation for success.

About five years ago, the organization began to articulate the principles that DeVisser’s father and uncle built the company around.

The company identified an underlying goal of making “a positive impact beautifying properties,” propped up by core values of personal integrity, positive attitude, putting others first and doing it right the first time.

“Companies need to know who they are and why they exist, and then hire key people that fit those values,” DeVisser says, who hires based on character, chemistry and competency.

“You need to convey those to the people that work for you to develop a culture that people can buy into and find fulfillment in.”

DeVisser reiterates those values at weekly division meetings to keep the 40 employees focused as the company grows.

Each week, for example, he asks them, “How did you exceed the customer’s expectations?” to remind them to put customers first.

“You can have the best systems in place, but if you don’t have good people, it’s not going to do anything,” he says. “The systems are important, but the people are the key.”

DeVisser’s goal this year is to align his divisions even more by reminding everyone that they’re on the same team.

“When you have three divisions with separate trucks in separate areas that punch in separately, you find that they compartmentalize,” he says.

“We all need a sports team mentality. Your defensive team and your offensive team might not practice together, but if you don’t have a culture of one team working toward the same goal, efficiency isn’t as great. It takes constant effort to develop that.”

Already, the combination of culture and proven systems has grown the lawn care part of the company into the largest division at DeVisser surpassing \$1 million in sales in June 2013. It continues to experience at least 30 percent growth each year.

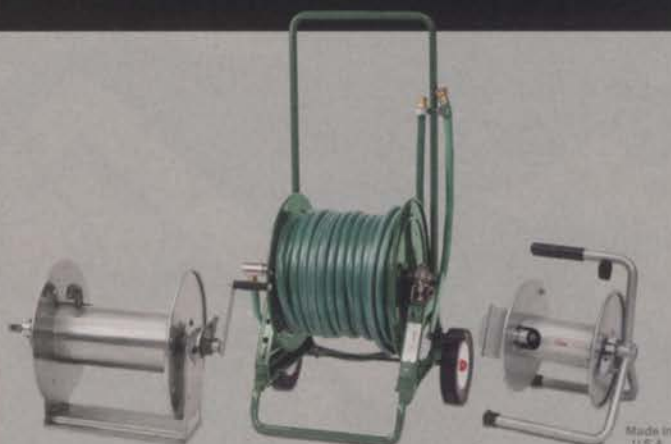
“Even if people can’t spend on big ticket items like patios and decks and landscaping, they’ll spend to get a nice-looking lawn,” DeVisser says. “We’ve found that Weed Man is pretty recession-proof.”

The lawn care division’s stability buffers the company’s other divisions, as well.

“Weed Man has a broader range of customers, therefore you’re in front of more households,” Nate DeVisser says.

“If you can let them know about your other services, it definitely helps feed the other divisions – and, likewise, them to us.” L&L

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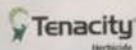
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# SPRAY IT OR SPREAD IT?

If you're trying to figure out whether you should be using a sprayer, a spreader or a combination of the two, consider these pros' purchasing, training and maintenance tips.

By Julie Collins

**K**nowing whether to use a sprayer or a spreader for lawn care applications isn't an easy task. These pros' pointers can get you spraying or spreading in the right direction.

**PICK YOUR PRIORITIES.** When it comes to shopping for new equipment, Ron Connor, fleet and safety manager for Lawn Dawg in Nashua, N.H., keeps four considerations top of mind for his nearly \$13 million company: "Number one, the equipment has to be reliable," he says. "It has to live up to the commercial requirements we have of a million square feet a week per applicator."

Second: Is the equipment easy to fix?

"Most lawn guys work on their own equipment, and not many mower shops know how to work on fertilizer equipment, so we look for equipment we can fix in-house that's relatively easy to work on and get up and running in less than an hour," Connor says.

Budget comes next. He says an entry-level sprayer-spreader will run around \$6,000-7,000. A higher-end unit, he says, will cost closer to \$10,000 on the retail side. When you're buying multiple units, it pays to negotiate a better deal, Connor says.

Finally, customer service is key. "How well does the company stand behind its products?" Connor asks.

**CONSIDER KEY FEATURES.** Chris Lemcke, technical director for Canada-based Weed

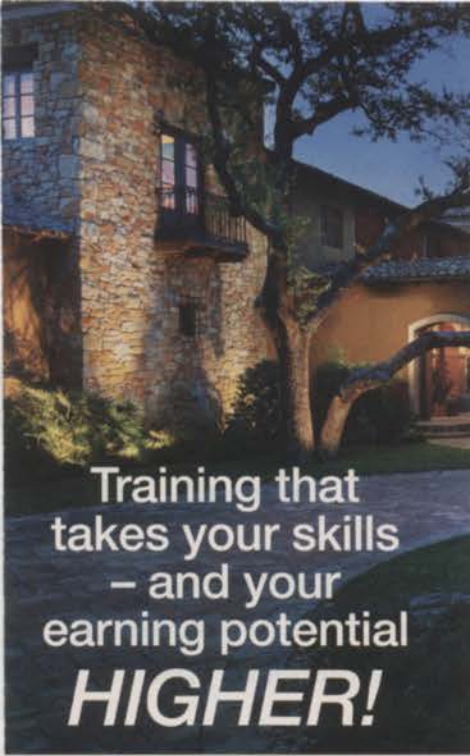
Man, is all about keeping things simple when it comes to selecting sprayers for his company. "We try not to make them too complicated," Lemcke says of the company, which posted \$134 million in 2013 revenue. He favors sprayers with reels on each side of the truck, so employees can pull from either side.

Rather than using a spray gun, most of Weed Man's almost 300 franchises use a low-pressure, heavy-droplet wand. "It's easier to train on, we save on chemical costs and it's more environmentally friendly because we can spot treat when we need to versus blanket spraying," Lemcke says.

Lemcke is also a fan of aluminum tanks rather than plastic ones. "We've used aluminum tanks for nearly 40 years. We've had rollovers and the tanks hold, so they don't spill any material," he says.

Although Weed Man franchises, which serve mostly residential customers, have used electric pumps in the past, most now use gas-powered ones for their versatility. "They go at a lower pressure, which is great, but can go at higher pressure for more output," Lemcke says.

On the other hand, Tod Hampton, president of 20-employee Tender Lawn Care in Cummings, Ga., favors electric sprayers. Originally, his company used gas sprayers and pumps for tree and shrub services, but now that landscape technicians are cross-trained to also take care of trees and shrubs – and gasoline equipment can't go in the enclosed vans



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the company uses – the company switched to all electric models. “It saves us a lot of money having one vehicle on the property instead of two,” Hampton says.

In terms of features, Hampton raves about the remote deflector kits on his rotary spreaders. “When we’re trying to spread around areas like sidewalks and driveways and beds, we can remotely put a shield down and keep it from going into those areas,” Hampton says.

**TACKLE TRAINING.** Lawn Dawg’s 10-day training program for all new employees – regardless of previous work experience – involves textbook training, agronomics, preparation for pesticide exams in some states, safety considerations and a week of field training that focuses on push training. “It’s basics first,” Connor says. Once employees have mastered the push spreader technique, they undergo a mandatory 16-hour ride-on training program with a service manager in the field.

Weed Man utilizes online training provided by the company that custom-builds its sprayers. The training covers everything from how to spray properly to how to rebuild a pump. Calibration is particularly important. “We have systems in place to make sure they’re calibrating properly. That’s something we stress in all of our training,” Lemcke says.

**KNOW WHEN TO USE EACH.** “We’re trying to teach employees to be good decision makers and know when to use the right piece of equipment,” Connor says of his more than 100 workers. With big commercial properties, Connor says nothing beats the efficiency of a ride-on sprayer-spreader, particularly when employees can apply insect and weed control as well as fertilizer in a single pass.

But on a smaller lawn with a lot of backing up and tight turns, employees using a ride-on piece of equipment may waste valuable time being overly cautious about where the product is going. “You might spend twice as long as you would if you grab the backpack sprayer and do it by hand,” Connor says.

In addition, slope and size matter. “We don’t use ride-on equipment on anything with any degree of slope, because it gets them into

trouble and becomes a safety issue,” Connor says. “So if it’s flat, we use the ride-on.” Any lawn smaller than 6,000 square feet is done by hand.

**BE MINDFUL OF MAINTENANCE.** “If you don’t clean, maintain and lubricate these machines, they will break down. If you stay on a preventative maintenance schedule, it saves a lot of money in the end,” Connor says.

Connor created a weekly maintenance schedule that covers key tasks including lubrication, visual inspection of belts and hoses, and more for each type of equipment. “Whether the machine was used five or 30 hours, it’s checked weekly,” Connor says. He also follows all manufacturer guidelines for less frequent maintenance, such as hydraulic fluid changes. As a result, all of the machines Lawn Dawg purchased in 2010 are still in use.

Maintenance is key for Weed Man franchises too. “One of the things we train our franchises on is that at the end of every day you have to take the fertilizer out of the spreaders, wash them, grease them and put them back in the proper spot. Same thing with trucks with spray systems,” Lemcke says.

**CALCULATE EXTRA COSTS.** Connor suggests factoring in annual costs for maintenance on machines. “One machine might not be a lot, but if you’re buying 18 to 20 machines in one year, maintenance might be minimal in the first year but \$200-\$300 in years two or three. That adds up.”

And, Connor stresses, you’ll also have to consider how you’re going to transport your sprayers and spreaders to the field. If you have to buy new vehicles, trailers or ramps, your new investment is going to get a whole lot more expensive.

Although all of these considerations might seem daunting, Lemcke says they’re worth thinking about upfront. “It’s better to spend money now and make sure it’s right than to find something cheap. We want the best equipment to ensure the applications are being put down properly,” he says. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Lincoln, Ill.



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# Home again

Landscape leaders share how they stayed in the new home construction game.

By Kristen Hampshire

**N**ew home construction was a major liability for some landscape businesses that were heavily vested in the sector when the market dropped out in 2008 and continued to stay quiet for the following several years. But not all regions experienced the bust. And some landscape firms servicing these accounts continued to thrive, even in the tough times.

*Lawn & Landscape* spoke with a few landscape companies that weathered the storm to learn how they do this type of business differently today.

## Reverting to renovation

### Prairie Tree Landscaping

Eric Weishaar, president **Location:** Elkhorn, Wis. **Established:** 2009 **Employees:** 15 to 18 in season **Customers:** 60 percent residential, 40 percent commercial **2013 revenues:** \$1.4 million **Services:** landscape design, construction, maintenance and landscape supplies

**R**unning a lean operation and flexing services to accommodate builders' evolving needs in the economic downturn has kept new construction in the black at Prairie Tree Landscaping.

Several years ago, when the high-end builders that Prairie Tree works with began selling more renovations than new homes, the landscape firm adjusted its offering to those clients. "A lot of the builders that



Weishaar

didn't go under transformed into renovation companies, so we followed their lead," says Eric Weishaar, president of the Elkhorn, Wis.-based firm.

Weishaar, a 20-year industry veteran, started Prairie Tree in 2009, a bleak time in new home construction and real estate. "It was probably the worst time," he quips. "But I saw an opportunity that (other landscapers) would be downsizing and scaling back, and I thought it would be a good time to start up and grab some market share."

Weishaar established relationships with several reputable builders in the custom home sector, whom he says weathered the storm "just fine." Prairie Tree continues to work with those builders, and Weishaar says the market is starting to "reverse a bit." Prairie Tree is working with a builder now that's developing a five-parcel high-end neighborhood. Weishaar's firm will handle the landscape installation.

But up until the past year or so, Weishaar says there has been a limited amount of new

home construction. The ratio of renovation projects vs. new home landscape install shifted from 50/50 to about 70 percent renovation during leaner times. Now, Weishaar says the pendulum is swinging back toward more new home projects.

Being the go-to landscaper for builders working on home renovation projects kept Prairie Tree busy during tough times. "Builders would put on an addition to a client's home, and we'd come in and install a patio or clean up the landscape," Weishaar describes.

This allowed Weishaar to keep key people on board for installation projects while continuing to fine-tune operations so the company could run better. Weishaar says maintaining a low overhead has been critical for accommodating the stretched-out payment terms generally associated with new home landscape install.

"By nature, we have had to run lean because we started (the business) when the economy was challenging," he says. "We had to be smart and savvy. And then, we did not have to grind



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# FORMULAS FOR SUCCESS

the brakes like other companies that grew very big, very fast through the mid-1980s through early 2000s. When the brakes hit, those companies were not able to pivot or adjust."

Prairie Tree was born lean. This has allowed the firm to accept beyond-30 day terms, which are the norm with developers, Weishaar says. "If we were 70 or 90 days out from being paid on a project, it did not hurt us as much," he says. "And a lot of our builder clients appreciated that we were willing to work with them. We could say, 'I get it. I understand you are waiting to get paid on a project, and so we can work with you on that.'"

Another reason Prairie Tree could afford to stretch when builders needed that payment leniency is because Weishaar was, and still is, not focused on hooking the biggest

projects out there. "I've seen companies get really excited about \$50,000 and \$100,000 jobs, and that's great, but you have to finance that job," he says.

That \$100,000 job will likely take a good month to get going, and materials must be purchased in advance. On the other hand, Weishaar can produce five \$20,000 projects and reach that six-figure number while spreading out his risk and staying within his credit line. "It's easier to finance a job that size when you are growing than it is a big monster job," he says, adding that then the firm has five happy clients instead of just one.

In the end, diversifying and maintaining realistic project scopes has resulted in Prairie Tree's continued success. "If you take a little hit on one or two of those smaller jobs," he says, "you'll still be able to survive."



## TAKE-AWAY TIPS

**Stay Lean.** Prairie Tree trimmed back its overhead during challenging economic times by doing more with less in the office. The company shares a building, and some resources like accounting and payroll, with a trucking company. (The owner of that company is Weishaar's business partner.)

**Flex with the times.** When builders stopped constructing homes and shifted to creating new additions for existing residences, Prairie Tree maintained those builder relationships so the firm could serve as the landscaping leg of the renovation project. "We had to ride the ebb and flow and work with what kind of projects were out there," Weishaar says.

**Vet builder clients.** Weishaar is careful about engaging in contracts with builders. He makes sure that their values align with his – and that's producing more custom, quality work. "We have relationships with several higher-end builders that weathered the storm just fine, and we continue to work with them," he says. "That has been a good fit for us."

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## Hustling for homes

### Carolina Outdoor Care, Inc.

Chris Lambert, president **Location:** Raleigh, N.C. **Established:** 1994 **Employees:** 20 to 25 in season **Customers:** 40 percent residential, 60 percent commercial **2013 revenues:** \$1.6 million **Services:** design/build, maintenance

"Our diversity saved us," says Chris Lambert, president of Carolina Outdoor Care Inc., in Raleigh, N.C. And, so did his mantra to "never stop hustling."

Lambert says he has never worked harder in his business than today – and during the last several years. He believes in another year, the company should be in a "good position" following 2007, when revenues dropped by \$600,000.

Lambert responded to the loss in new home landscape install business by leaning operations, pulling back from contracts

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## FORMULAS FOR SUCCESS



with tract builders – many of which had halted construction anyway – and developing relationships with custom builders, where projects produce larger profit margins. (Tract home landscape jobs maybe brought in a 10 percent margin.)

Another saving strategy: Carolina Outdoor offers a range of services, including irrigation, lighting, drainage and tree services. “We wouldn’t have made it otherwise,” Lambert says bluntly.

Carolina Outdoor has always worked in the new home construction market. In the heyday, a quarter of the overall business was new home landscape installs and 45 percent of those clients were tract builders. Today, developers represent about 10 to 15 percent of the firm’s business, Lambert estimates. And most of those are custom builders.

“With custom, you get larger jobs and you’re not putting out your basic builder packages,” he says. “That’s more enjoyable for us, and you can add some flair to the landscape.”

There’s movement in custom home building, too, but the price tags on homes (and their landscapes) are lower than before. For example, Caroline Outdoor is working with a builder who purchased a foreclosed development that was slated for homes priced \$600,000 to \$800,000. That land is being redeveloped and prepared for new homes in the \$300,000 to \$450,000 range.

“The lighting systems need to be redone, the irrigation has a host of problems, and the landscape was done and now it has weeds,” Lambert describes of his company’s renovation efforts on the land. For now, the work his firm is doing is focused on the infrastructure. But there’s a possibility for more.

Meanwhile, Carolina Outdoor is careful about choosing its relationships with builders, and the company does a few things differently after the fallout. For one, Lambert keeps a close eye on change orders. “They can make or break a company if you don’t track the extra work you do, document it and get it signed off – and we could still do



### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

**Keep hustling.** “In this business, you just have to hustle,” Lambert says, relating that a never stop attitude kept his business afloat during leaner times when new home construction install projects dwindled.

**Delegate admin.** Allowing invoices for change orders to pile up slowed the payment process, and Lambert learned that his admin staff could best keep track of this paperwork. “Invoices need to be sent out on a timely basis, daily if possible,” he says. “If they are in a 45-day or longer billing cycle, you want to get that invoice in to them as soon as possible.”

**Managing material costs.** Jumpstarting a project with a builder requires a cash outlay to procure materials – before any paycheck arrives. With smaller, single home jobs, this isn’t a big deal. But when a development’s landscaping is on the table, the materials list (and cost) can be staggering. Now, Lambert asks for a deposit to begin jobs so he can procure some cash to finance materials.

a better job of this,” he says.

The change orders slow up payment, he adds, and they can already lag. Lambert speeds that process by delegating invoicing to office staff so he isn’t trying to balance bookkeeping along with everything else.

Managing man-hours is another key to success in new home landscape installation, Lambert says. The cash outlay for materials to start jobs can require significant financing if the dollars aren’t in the bank. “I didn’t manage that nearly as well as I could have earlier on,” Lambert admits. “We ask for deposits – if you don’t ask, you don’t get.”

Meanwhile, Lambert explains that while his business dropped by \$600,000 back in 2007, the company did more with less and had “a couple of decent years” in the downturn. “We were more profitable, but we were still paying for our sins of not being prepared for the downturn,” he says.

The company just celebrated 20 years in business, and Lambert says the business is growing. “2013 was a good year.”

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## FORMULAS FOR SUCCESS



### Servicing single homes

#### Johnson Lawn & Landscape

Mike Johnson, president **Location:** Kearney, Neb. **Established:** 1997 **Employees:** 20-25 in season **Customers:** 60 percent commercial, 40 percent residential **2013 revenues:** \$1.1 million **Services:** design/build, maintenance, irrigation

The housing boom and bust never really shook central Nebraska, where Mike Johnson runs his firm, Johnson Lawn & Landscape. "We're more even-Steven here," Johnson says. "We don't have those ups and downs like the coasts."

That's not to say his region escaped any impact from the economic downturn, especially the real estate bust in 2008. Business in the new home landscape install sector did slow down. And during that time, diversity was a key to staying busy, as was a willingness to travel around the area for work. Kearney, where the company is based, is a town of 30,000 people. "If projects are going on 40 miles from us, we certainly look at doing those. We can't always hang our hat on staying here in Kearney," Johnson says.

Kearney is where Johnson has grown valuable relationships during his 17 years in business. He began doing new home construction installs about 15 years ago, but the builder landscape is different in Kearney. Yes, there are tract builders raising developments – currently, there are three in the works with homes starting in the \$200,000 range and extending to \$800-plus. But Johnson isn't contracting directly with builders to win landscaping projects. Homeowners are responsible for finishing off their landscapes, and Johnson works with them directly. (Builders refer his company to those homeowners, he notes.)

This project-by-project approach to new home construction install changes the financial picture in a big way. For one, the materials outlay is no more than with any other residential design/build project. He's not financing materials for 15 homes before getting paid. Also,



#### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

**'Onesies' are gratifying.** Rather than capturing business directly from builders, Johnson works with homeowners contracting with those builders. He's dealing with single home new landscape install – not entire developments. This results in referrals to other residents, and an ability to work one-on-one with a client and customize a landscape.

**Manage expectations.** This goes for any job. Johnson has found when his company does a careful job of laying out an exact plan, communicating change orders and setting time-frames and budgets, clients are more satisfied upon project completion.

**Choose your niche.** Johnson knows his company performs best on projects where they can showcase their skills – and that means going after custom residential projects vs. tract home work. "I'm a big believer in singles and doubles," he says of winning contracts. "Homes runs are great, but those singles and doubles will get you through each day."



Johnson

these projects tend to be more gratifying and come with better budgets than tract home work, Johnson says. "The new install projects we want to do are start-to-finish turnkey jobs," he says.

"We do the sprinklers, landscape, everything."

The problem is, too many homeowners run out of money come time to landscape. And, Johnson adds, in Nebraska, "you have a lot of DIY-ers, so it's tough to capitalize on some of those new construction jobs."

The company also does new landscape installation on commercial projects but what Johnson likes about new home construction is turning a blank canvas into a property that makes a homeowner proud.

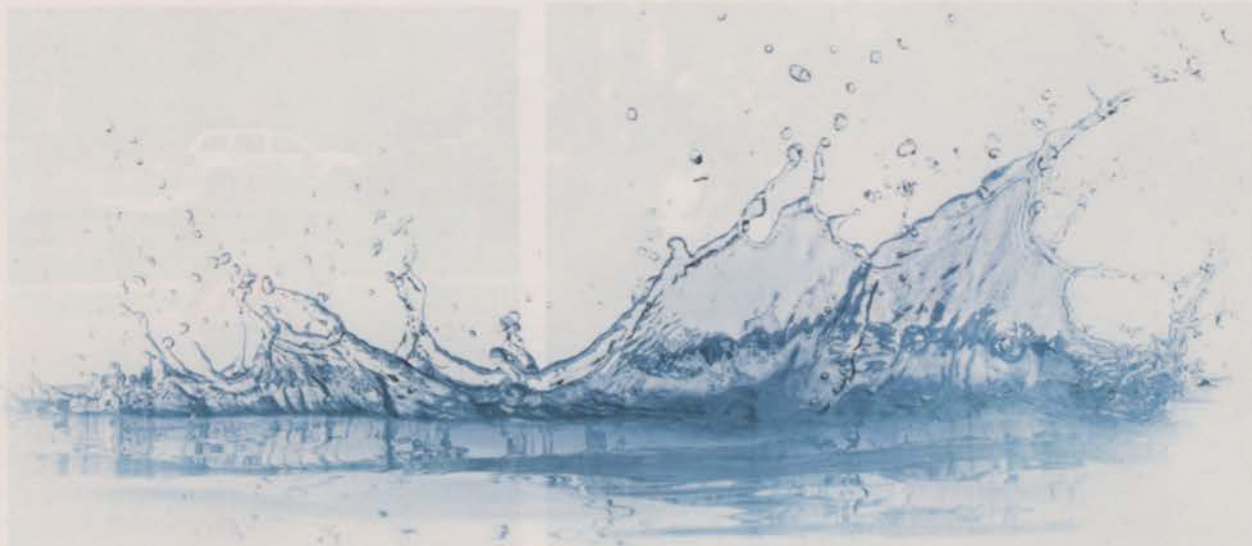
"We love to really show off our talent and if the homeowner is willing to see the value in their landscaping as much as the rest of their house – if given the right budget – we can install a landscape for them that outshines the neighbors and stands out about town," Johnson says. **L&L**

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# *The Water Issue*

**ENVIROSCAPE'S SHIFT TO DRIP IRRIGATION** PG. 64

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**LAMBERT'S TAKES THE LEAD WITH RAINWATER HARVESTING SYSTEMS** PG. 66

---

**GARDENWORKS IS BUILT ON WATER MANAGEMENT** PG. 68

---

**THE LATEST SMART CONTROLLERS** PG. 70

---

**DROUGHT-TOLERANT TURFGRASS** PG. 72

---

**TREE SPECIES BEAT THE HISTORIC HEAT AND DROUGHT** PG. 76

---

**WORKING TOGETHER WITH WATER** PG. 78

---

**THE BENEFITS OF DESALINATION** PG. 80



# Making it rain ONE DROP AT A TIME

Mike Garcia has found more gold in California thanks to a shift to drip irrigation. **By Lindsey Getz**

**A**long with the state's water supply, some of the once-flourishing California landscape business has begun drying up. In Sacramento, groundskeepers are letting the grass die on the state Capitol lawn and are encouraging oth-

ers to follow suit. While many think it might be time to find a new job, one landscaper says he's at capacity. "Much of my old competition has already gone out of business" says Mike Garcia, owner of Enviro-scape in Redondo Beach, Calif. "I'm turning work away and those people are disappointed."

PORTRAIT BY JODY FRANK



"They want water conservation efforts and they're willing to pay for them. The market is there and it only makes sense to capture it."

The key to that demand was adaptation. Garcia shifted the focus of his company from traditional landscaping to water management and now approximately half of his revenue comes from such services as subsurface drip irrigation and rainwater harvesting.

He says this work can have margins of 30 percent, which has meant a nice boost to the bottom line for his \$500,000 company. "Instead of feeling like it's time to find a new profession, I see a huge opportunity to make a difference in this profession," Garcia says.

And with California in the midst of one of its worst droughts in history, marketing these services has been easy. In fact, Garcia says he's reaping the benefit of the millions of dollars that have already gone into water messaging by the water companies.

"Two years ago when I was talking about the drought, people were clueless," Garcia says.

"They had no idea what I was talking about. But now, two years later, when I talk about the drought everybody knows. There's a true consciousness about just how bad it really is."

Garcia says using keywords and phrases on his website that are picked up during Internet searches has been critical to marketing and selling the service.

Phrases like "rainwater harvesting," "drip irrigation," "native gardens" and "save water/save money" are all popular searches.

"People will call me and use the correct terminology, which gives you some sense of how well the message has spread," Garcia says.

"I'll get a voicemail asking about subsurface drip irrigation. It kind of blows my mind. Two years ago nobody would have had any clue what that was."

Garcia says it took him a "few installs" during a two to three month period to get the hang of the work, but says if you have the basics down, you should be able to do subsurface installations.

"All irrigation systems require knowing



Two years ago, Garcia says no one knew about subsurface drip irrigation, but he now gets calls about it.

about water hydraulics, friction loss, pressure, volume, plant needs for certain times of year, etc.," he says.

"If you have a good foundation in current irrigation methodologies, you will see subsurface drip as an easy add-on. The very first systems we installed several years ago are still going strong."

Garcia says one thing contractors should acquire is a trencher.

"Do not hand trench," he says. "This will discourage you. Buy or rent a machine."

He also advises documenting your work. "I'd encourage contractors to grab their smart phones and videotape their crew installing jobs," Garcia says.

"Video has worked very well for me. I have helped other contractors by directing them to my YouTube videos, which show how subsurface drip is done, and I've encouraged them to share that with their own

customers." While customers may like to see the installation, it comes down to the dollars. "Like anything, people want to see what kind of money it will save them."

"When you can start demonstrating those cost savings, the proof is in the pudding," he says.

Installing drip will result in an escalated cost of about 10 percent compared to a traditional sprinkler system, Garcia says.

"The savings come in the form of water, which is spiking in price every month due to drought," he says.

As water prices continue to rise, the ROI will be greater, Garcia says.

"A client called and was horrified to see their water bill had risen dramatically," he says.

"Upon looking at their bill, it was noted their usage had actually gone down. The cost of water is rising at alarming rates." L&L

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit [bit.ly/lldrip](http://bit.ly/lldrip) to listen to a webinar Garcia did with L&L on drip installation. You can also visit [bit.ly/lldrought](http://bit.ly/lldrought) to read an article on the impact of drought in California.



## CATCH AND RELEASE

A Texas design/build company takes the lead with rainwater harvesting systems. By Lindsey Getz

**I**t was a rainy workday when Paul Fields, president of Lambert Landscape Co., watched money just pouring off his roof. He was watching rainwater stream off the company's 6.5-acre roof and into the storm drain. His Dallas-based business could really have used all of that water. After all, it was paying to hook up to the local fire hydrants to mix its compost tea.

Much of Texas has been in a drought for three years, and the forecasts for the summer don't look good. The Texas A&M Forest Service has reported that approximately 301 million trees died in rural Texas because of the 2011 drought. And as the drought has carried on, the number may now be creeping closer to 500 million.

"It's gotten pretty bad here and our growing population is a big part of the problem," Fields says. "Just for our area, the Dallas/Fort Worth region, it's estimated that the population will double in the next 25 years. If you consider that the water supply through our reservoir systems is already limited, it's obvious there's going to need to be a solution."

The company is already working toward being part of that solution with services like rainwater catchment and harvesting. "The need for change is already here," Fields says.

To show its own commitment to rainwater harvesting, for its first project, the company installed a 20,000-gallon cistern to catch the water pouring off the roof. It uses that water – instead of the city's – to mix its fertilizer blends, saving approximately \$800 a month.

And while the water conservation started in-house, Fields says Lambert's entire business model takes water use into account.

"This whole theme of water has become

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**Above:** After watching rain pour off his company's 6.5-acre roof into a drain, Paul Fields decided to install a cistern to catch the water. The company uses the water to mix its fertilizer blends, saving approximately \$800 a month.



**Above:** One of Lambert's residential cistern installations holds 46,000 gallons of water underground. **Right:** Lambert Landscape Co. installed a 20,000-gallon cistern to catch rain off the company's roof.



integral to every step and process of our business," Fields says. "It's not something we market as a stand-alone service – it's just part of our overall philosophy. The integration of water conservation starts with design and carries through the entire process."

The biggest benefit to the client/property manager is cost and water savings. Many businesses are also implementing sustainability programs or going for LEED certification so this is a huge contributor toward that, he says.

The company has run some ROIs on several of these systems and no matter the size of the cistern, the company always finds that it's a six to eight year return on investment.

"It's not something you can just jump into if you're looking at more involved systems but there are definitely systems out there that are 'plug and play' where you basically get a kit and hook it into the drain line and you're done," he says.

"A landscape company who was interested in this could install prefab systems with just a little bit of training. Getting into it on a larger scale – actually designing a system – is a bigger learning curve. We only recently started marketing these systems within the last 18 months or so. They've gained interest through word of mouth."

**NOT A SIMPLE SELL.** Although Texas has been experiencing severe drought conditions, and homeowners are beginning to feel some effects of water rationing, they haven't been hit hard enough to want to forgo their lush landscapes – at least not yet.

Fields says that selling water-efficient landscapes does require some client education. The result has been the realization that clients are able to have water-conscious landscapes that save water while still looking great.

"I think we've done ourselves a disservice in this industry by how we've presented water-wise landscapes," Fields says. "Clients will say 'I don't want that,' right off the bat. But when we dig deeper we find out it's because they think it has to be all rocks and cactuses to be water-efficient. We've structured our business around allowing clients to still have beautiful gardens in their style with the use of plants that are water-wise. They're a lot more beautiful than clients realize."

In addition to focusing on water conservation efforts for each new design/build project, Fields says that the company also helps existing clients retrofit their older systems with more water-friendly equipment and drip irrigation.

Although the company doesn't track the water portion of their business as a stand-alone service, Fields says it's helped the company's bottom line.

"I can tell you that our revenue is up 20 percent this year but there's no way we can attribute that all to rainwater harvesting," he says. "Certainly it's played a role but I can't give you any number to pinpoint exactly how much of a role. We do believe it's been a positive impact but we don't track it independently."

But sometimes it just has to hit the pocketbook first. As water rates rise, Fields believes the interest in water collection and conservation services will also increase.

"Supply and demand is going to dictate more interest in services like rainwater catchment," Fields says. "With a limited number of reservoirs, which are already at their capacity for demand, water rates will increase drastically. I think that the ROI for cisterns and rainwater catchment systems is going to continue to become more cost effective and will continue to pique clients' interest." **L&L**



Jay Tripathi, left, and Peter Estournes made water management a focus of Gardenworks.

## A LIQUID FOUNDATION

Gardenworks has built a solid business on its management of water.

By Stacie Zinn Roberts

**I**n the heart of Sonoma County in California, Peter Estournes thinks more about water than wine.

As vice president of operations for Gardenworks, a \$2.5 million landscape management and design/build company, Estournes has made it his mission to manage water wisely in Northern California, and to teach others to do the same. "It is the cornerstone of our business, water management," he says, adding that 10 of his 25 full-time employees have some type of irrigation certification.

Estournes serves on the California Department of Water Resources Independent Technical Panel which is appointed by

the state legislature to examine water management practices. A past president of the California Landscape Contractors Association, Estournes served as chair of the State Education Committee, and along with his business partner Jay Tripathi, helped to create the CLCA Water Management Certification and Performance Program. He teaches water conservation at Santa Rosa Junior College and at workshops for CLCA.

Yes, Estournes takes water management seriously. And he thinks you should, too. "I can't think of a thing more important for the landscape industry right now than showing we can manage water on a job site. Because if we don't,

it's going to be taken away from us," he says.

One of the main tools Estournes and his staff use for water management is a water budget. Through a program developed with CLCA, landscape professionals input information such as a site's square footage, irrigation type and plant material, and the program spits back a water management budget – an allocation of how much

water should be needed to effectively manage water on that particular site.

"We really think that water budgeting is the key, not only to the future of the industry, but the real key to saving water," he says.

When the nearby town of Cloverdale, home to 15 Gardenworks accounts, implemented mandatory water restrictions, Estournes contacted the municipality. He suggested the town implement CLCA's water budgeting program, as opposed to the city having to create a methodology for water management from scratch.

After a 45-minute meeting, the city decided to do just that, and asked Estournes to lead a workshop for Cloverdale residents to educate them on plant selection and water conservation. "That's advertising you can't pay for," Estournes says.

**WATER ALONE.** An attempt by the company to break out water management services "went nowhere," Estournes says. "We tried to do that at a threshold of \$35 per month for crews to come onto a property and look at controller settings, inspect for broken valves and make sprinkler adjustments, but the market wasn't ready for that kind of standalone service."

Instead, water management is included as part of every client contract. Creating the water management program, training staff and earning certifications took about seven years to implement company-wide. The first thing a Gardenworks crew does upon arriving



Gardenworks crew members perform a catch can test.

at a job site is check the water meter. If the meter is spinning, the crew looks for leaks and troubleshoots.

Estournes says it's hard to say how much a customer saves because the company doesn't ask for a client's water bills. But at the end of the year they provide a year-end report to each client in the program stating how the company did compared with the water budget.

"For example, if we have a project with a 5,000-square-foot landscape and our water budget calculates to a yearly use of 62,500 gallons of watering to meet that budget, our goal is to hit 80 percent of that target or be under by at least 12,500 gallons," he says. "If the cost of water is \$2.90 per thousand gallons then we have saved our client about \$36.35."

"While this does not sound like much, it may be that before we began this process the client was overwatering by as much as 50 percent – often more – of what their landscape actually requires, which means they might have been at around 90,000 gallons per year. Our savings would then be more substantial both in water and money."

Even though Gardenworks customers know water management is an important part of their service, Estournes says, "most of them don't think about it until the end of the year when I send out the reports. Then I get about five or six thank you notes from customers saying, 'I had no idea you saved me that much water.'" **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Mount Vernon, Wash.

## STAFFING TIPS for water managers

**F**or the past year, in an attempt to hire a new irrigation technician, Gardenworks, located in the Sonoma Valley of Northern California, ran an ad in the local newspaper. They didn't have much luck. A few people applied. Their only hire lasted a week.

Rather than rely on luck, Peter Estournes, vice president of operations, says the company created career path opportunities for existing employees who show aptitude and a desire to learn. The company implemented a point system, whereby employees earn points every time they master a new skill or attend an educational program. Points lead to raises in pay, and the opportunity to move up in job description and responsibilities.

"We have a gentleman right now showing a lot of potential with irrigation. We're starting to initiate him on controllers. He's beginning to take English classes. He wants to learn and get better. This is how it has to happen," Estournes says.

The company also employs interns, some of whom have come to California from as far away as France. Estournes says he likes to have a paid intern work with the staff for about nine months so they become proficient and have the time to take a project from start to finish.

While most interns move on to other learning opportunities, occasionally, after venturing out into the wide world, an intern returns to Gardenworks fully trained and appreciative of the company's positive work environment. One of the company's past interns now runs an entire division.

"We don't have a shortcut when it comes to staffing. I wish we did," Estournes says. "Anyone who wants to move to California wine country that's really good at irrigation, we are looking to hire them."

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- It is equipped for Baseline's LiveView, which makes your controller accessible from any Internet-ready device.

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## 2. The I-Core Irrigation Controller

**The pitch:** Hunter's I-Core advanced irrigation controller now has built-in compatibility with the Hunter Solar Sync climate sensor, allowing automatic self-adjustment for changing weather conditions.

- The new version of the controller features a Solar Sync dial position and allows all sensor setup functions from the main control panel.
- The controller also permits a Solar Sync Delay feature, allowing the installer to specify a number of days before the controller switches to automatic adjustment mode.
- Each of the controller's four irrigation programs may be set to use the weather adjustment or to run individually without automatic adjustment for special applications. The climate sensor also adds the ability for automatic rain and freeze shutdowns.

**For more information:**  
[www.hunterindustries.com](http://www.hunterindustries.com)



## 3. 400A battery-operated controllers

**The pitch:** The 400A series battery-operated controllers are a solution for irrigation control when AC power is not available. Fully waterproof, you can easily program your 400A series controller to meet your landscape's unique watering needs.

- The controllers are intuitive and simple to program, with multiple programming options available and a large LCD screen with easy-to-read icons.
- The controller is rain sensor compatible, and the sealed potting technique provides IP68-rated waterproofing.
- The 400A series has a battery life of up to three years, and the controller can handle both below-grade in a valve box, or above-grade.

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## 4. The ESP-SMTe

**The pitch:** The ESP-SMTe is an enhanced version of the original ESP-SMT that features numerous enhancements and the ability to manage up to 22 zones.

- Like its predecessor, the ESP-SMTe consists of two key components: a controller chassis with an integrated smart panel and an on-site weather station that includes a temperature sensor with an integrated solar shield and a unique tipping rain bucket for instantaneous rainfall measurement.
- An on-screen wizard prompts users for site-specific and zone-specific information to create a customized, optimum irrigation schedule.
- The ESP-SMTe also combines historical data along with actual temperature and rainfall data to determine how much water is needed to maintain the optimum level of moisture in the soil. Each day, the controller uses all this information to adjust the schedule.

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# CUT DRY

Turfgrass that stands up to drought conditions gives landscape contractors a mindful solution.

By Kristen Hampshire



In many areas of the country, watering the lawn isn't as turnkey as turning on the irrigation system or setting out sprinklers. Many regions face water restrictions, and even markets with plenty are growing more mindful of water consumption. With increased awareness of our diminishing water supply, soaking the lawn on a hot summer day is just not a widely-accepted practice.

But all that doesn't change clients' desire for green grass. It does, however, alter the way customers want professionals to care for their properties. In response, turfgrass breeders are initiating trials that mimic drought conditions and scrutinize varieties' performance with reduced water and fertilizer.

Their goal is to improve drought-tolerance of turfgrass so the landscape consumes less than natural resources but still lives up

to traditional expectations. The result is a palette of turfgrass varieties that recover and green up following drought conditions. Some use up to 40 percent less water (others require even less) than typical turfgrass varieties.

"Turf is going greener," says Jeff Wienkes, forage and turf specialist at La Crosse Seed, Madison, Wis. He encourages landscape contractors to consider varieties that bear a label from the Turfgrass Water Conservation Alliance (TWCA), which indicates that the turf type has met rigorous drought tolerance testing standards.

The main cost difference between the drought-tolerant turf varieties versus a "typical" grass is if the grass is a low seed yielder, meaning the company has to charge more per pound to cover the less seed per acre produced.

Seed researchers across the country today

are more focused on providing green options that still meet expectations.

**RATING DROUGHT TOLERANCE.** So how do you determine a turfgrass species' drought tolerance? The National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) takes a two-pronged approach to testing turf for its resilience in low-water conditions. It performs trials in "rain-out shelter" environments, where turf only receives irrigation as needed or for limited periods of time. The turf's decline and recovery are then rated, says Kevin Morris,

**Above:** Rainout shelter at the University of Arkansas. University of Arkansas is a Research cooperator of the TWCA and was a integral piece in developing the testing protocol and qualification process.

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NTEP executive director.

The second environment is a reduced irrigation model, a testing situation that mimics water restrictions in certain areas of the country, Morris says. Testing in different conditions is important because some regions, such as the east coast, may experience a "sudden, acute drought situation" with complete lack of rainfall. Other areas of the country are under constant drought stress and have water restrictions in place.

Aside from subjective analysis of turfgrass – basically, eyeballing its color and vigor – more objective digital imaging analysis is performed to identify exactly how resilient turfgrass is following simulated drought conditions. Imaging reveals a pixelated view of grass blades so shades of green are carefully analyzed. "We can see which ones are green, and which are browning out," Wienkes says.

To receive a TWCA stamp of approval, a variety must use at least 40 percent less water than other varieties in its class. This doesn't mean a variety is "plant it and forget it," Wienkes says. But the label does give landscape contractors a guide for choosing turfgrass species that are proven to thrive with less water.

But subjective ratings are still important, Morris says. And so is feedback from local researchers who can cite which turfgrass varieties have proven effective in your region. "Each turfgrass species has its unique characteristics depending on location – they all have strengths and weaknesses," he says.

Meanwhile, Morris reminds that considerations should extend beyond drought-tolerance to ensure choosing a variety that will meet clients' expectations.

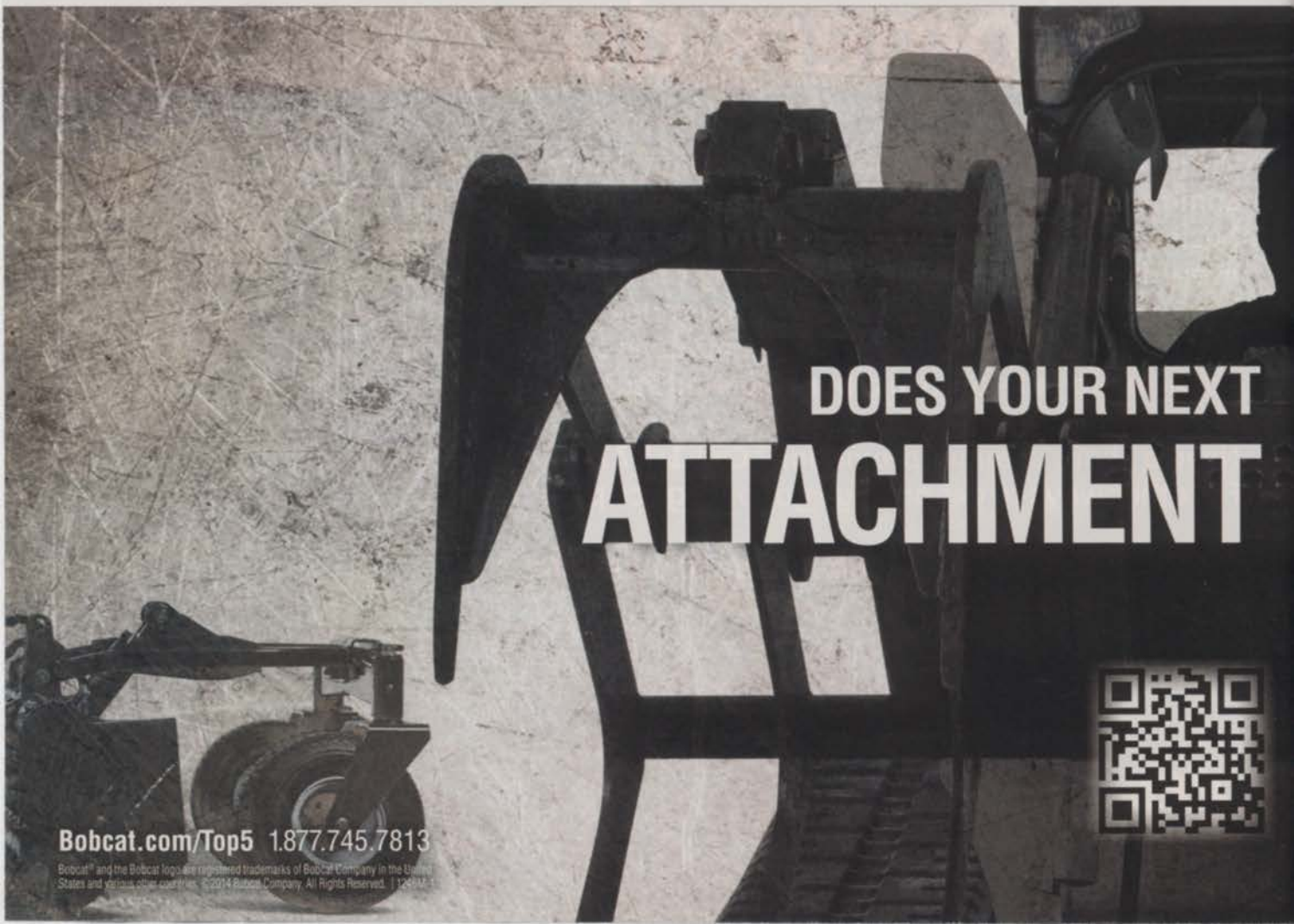
"There is a whole series of qualities that

landscape contractors should look for, not just drought-tolerance, but the density, disease resistance and percentage of decline over time," Morris says.

**CHOOSING A TURF TYPE.** There's no such thing as a single, drought-tolerant turf solution. When choosing a turf variety, landscape contractors must consider location, soil content, water and nitrogen requirements.

Be open minded when choosing a variety. "Everyone assumes that tall and fine fescues are the most drought-tolerant, but we have Kentucky bluegrass that can be winter-hardy and drought-tolerant," Wienkes says.

Murray Wingate, turfgrass marketing and sales manager for Lebanon Turf Products, points out that Mid-Atlantic Kentucky bluegrasses tend to be more drought-tolerant than others in the same turfgrass family.

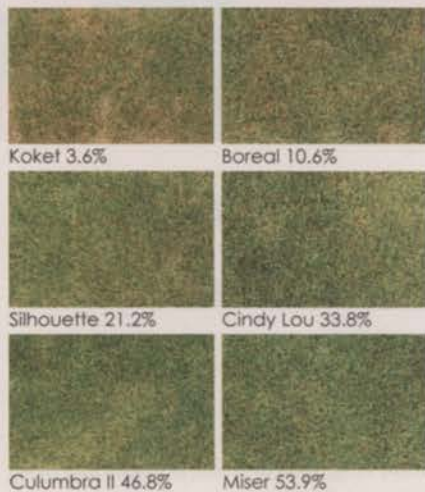


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Chronic drought stress differences in chewing fescue varieties. Software analyzes the pixels and calculates precisely the amount of green cover percentage.

Wingate recommends seeking out “cutting-edge” varieties that are new to the market. “Those are the ones with the most recent breeding work in them in terms of how salt- and drought-tolerant they are,” he says.

Salt tolerance is a consideration for areas that receive little rainfall. Salt content in the irrigation water supply can impact turf vitality if the variety is not bred to manage in those conditions.

Regarding bluegrass, Morris says that this type tends to be even more drought-tolerant than zoysiagrass, but requires more fertilizer and mowing to maintain an attractive appearance.

Meanwhile, zoysiagrass does not generally like wet soil. The warm-season grass goes dormant during winter. “Homeowners and property managers have to understand that’s what they’re getting into with Zoysia,” Morris

says, adding that homeowners should understand the appearance of a lawn in dormant state and opt for another variety if this does not suit their goals. Meanwhile, fine fescues’ wide leaves require little fertilizer and thrive in warm, southern climates.

“The area of adaption or usage of tall fescues has really spread. In areas that were traditionally Kentucky bluegrass (territory), the pendulum is swinging toward usage of tall fescues,” Wingate says. He notes that the northeast and upper-Midwest is beginning to use this turf type, which generally was planted in transition zone states.

Above all, be sure to communicate to clients how a turfgrass will look in drought-conditions, and what type of care is necessary. And look beyond drought tolerance, Morris says. “All of this is really a balancing act as far as what turfgrass to choose.” **L&L**

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# HOT, BUT NOT BOTHERED

These seven tree species beat the historic heat and drought. **By Jason Griffin**

**P**rolonged record-setting heat and drought are not comforting words if you work in the green industry. However, from March 2011 to spring 2013 a large portion of the central United States experienced just that. The historic event impacted the horticulture industry in many ways, including some surprises.

The John C. Pair Horticultural Center of Kansas State University is a research and extension facility near Wichita, Kan., with a mission of introducing and evaluating woody landscape plant material for the state and region. Seasonal drought, rapid temperature changes, scorching summer heat and perpetual drying winds make it an ideal location to stress-test woody plants. The calendar years of 2011 and 2012 were a reminder that our mission is important beyond our state's borders.

This unusual weather event provided an opportunity to observe the effects of heat and drought on mature, established landscape plants. No greenhouse; No growth chamber; No artificially induced drought. This was real-world stress testing. The following list of 10 species survived the event with little to no observable effects.

While I am nearly certain that somewhere across the region stricken by this drought, readers will be able to point to an incidence where each of the following has failed. However, when well-established and otherwise healthy, each of the species performed admirably and deserves further consideration in areas with regular periods of extended heat and drought.

**PISTACIA CHINENSIS (CHINESE PISTACHE).** This tree continues to amaze. It is perfectly hardy in USDA Hardiness Zone 6, yet is also a widely used landscape tree in Phoenix. Additionally, the species seems perfectly at home in the continental climate of the southern Great Plains where rapid temperature shifts are a common occurrence.

Fall color is a primary ornamental attribute and can range from none, to yellow, to orange, to brilliant red, and some with hues of purple. Since the vast majority of established landscape trees are of seed origin, this presents an opportunity for selecting superior specimens. There are a few named cultivars and others in the works that have reliable fall color or a cooperative growth habit.

With it comes a warning – it's invasive. It is true that in the southern plains from Kansas through Texas you can find Chinese pistache escaping and invading fence rows, abandoned fields and empty urban lots.

**ACER SACCHARUM (CADDO SUGAR MAPLE).** For 30 years this southwestern ecotype of sugar maple has repeatedly proven itself to be one of the toughest shade trees in heat and drought-prone areas.

Originating from a disjunct sugar maple population in western Oklahoma, these genes know heat and drought. As an added advantage, they also grow rather well in soil pH up to 8.0. At our facility, Caddo sugar maple is surrounded by scorched, dying and dead sugar maple cultivars. Yet Caddo sugar maple has the audacity to push a mid-summer

flush of growth as if the drought had never occurred. Landscape irrigation systems are no friend to Caddo maple.

Trees surrounded by over-irrigated turf are generally in poor health. Cultivars have been selected for brilliant red fall color and are superior to seedlings for that reason. Plants have performed well as far north as Ames, Iowa, and as far south as Dallas.

Its drawback – niche market. The beautiful and abundant cultivars of sugar maple already on the market are plenty drought tolerant for most locations.

Availability can also be a limiting factor. Some growers may try to collect seed from established trees in the landscape. Unfortunately, those seeds are probably contaminated by neighboring non-Caddo pollen parents.

**ACER TRUNCATUM (SHANTUNG MAPLE).** A beautiful tree with a purple flush of spring growth, gorgeous fall color and drought tolerance. Trees of seed origin can range in fall color from yellow to orange to red. Our experience has shown that specimen trees tend to produce a high number of progeny with fall color similar to the seed parent. In other words, collect seeds from parent trees that turn red in fall. This species continues to impress on an annual basis. There have been no observed pest problems. It has dependable cold hardiness and reliable fall color.

Size is appropriate for suburban lots and trees are not messy. However, vigorous growth going into fall can be damaged by an early freeze in more mild climates where

## ◀ ACER TRUNCATUM (SHANTUNG MAPLE)



***Pistacia chinensis***  
(Chinese pistache)



***Acer saccharum***  
(Caddo sugar maple)



***Chionanthus retusus***  
(Chinese fringetree)



***Heptacodium miconioides***  
(seven-son flower)



***Quercus shumardii***  
(shumard oak)



***Quercus muehlenbergii***  
(chinkapin oak)

the plants produce a late summer flush of growth and fail to properly harden off. In the southern plains region with intense summer heat, that does not seem to be a problem and plants are always prepared for the first freeze.

**CHIONANTHUS RETUSUS (CHINESE FRINGETREE).** Widely recognized for its incredible bloom and excellent bark characteristics, we now feel confident promoting this species for its drought tolerance. In the midst of back-to-back record setting heat and drought events, not a single scorched leaf could be found, their flowering was not diminished, and their fall color was a

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more drought-tolerant trees, visit [lawnandlandscape.com](http://lawnandlandscape.com) and search "Hot, but not bothered."

beautiful golden yellow. Leaves remained dark emerald green throughout the growing season.

Be aware that clonal propagation can be frustrating, but it can be done. Reports of biannual blooming exist but this has not been widely viewed as a criticism of the species.

**HEPTACODIUM MICONIOIDES (SEVEN-SON FLOWER).** The bark is eye-catching when the plant is limbed up for viewing. The flowers light up the landscape the first week of September (Wichita) and are visited by more species of pollinators than can be counted. The sepals keep the show going for two to three more weeks when they change to a rosy pink.

Perhaps most surprising was the way its dark emerald-green leaves persisted through exceptional drought completely unscathed. Even flowering was perfectly normal despite coming at the end of the growing season. But the plant suffers from a lack of diversity.

It's an amazing plant, but the gene pool is relatively small which limits the potential for cultivar selection. A species this good, yearns for improved cultivars.

#### **QUERCUS SHUMARDII (SHUMARD OAK).**

This widely adapted species is native to moist bottomlands, yet handles drought extremely well. A fibrous root system lends its self well to B&B production and makes transplanting fairly successful. Its fall color can be outstanding burnt orange to red in some selections. Some individual trees push a red flush of growth in the spring that holds color into early summer. This could be an interesting character to select for. I have never seen this species suffer the effects of an extended drought.

The only drawback I can provide is that clonal propagation is difficult. A moderately successful means of asexual propagation would simplify and speed the introduction of new selections. Acorns can be messy in heavy fruit set years.

#### **QUERCUS MUEHLENBERGII (CHINKAPIN OAK).**

No bells and whistles here – it's just a really tough tree. Often found growing on elevated limestone outcroppings, this species is right at home in well drained, high pH soil. Chinkapin oak is a large tree with attractive bark, clean green leaves, and acorns that are highly prized by all forms of wildlife. Keep watch for cultivars with improved foliage quality and growth habit. They are on the way. Transplanting is tricky. If careful attention is not taken to ensure a well-branched fibrous root system, then B&B trees are likely to contain few roots in the ball, which correlates to few successes in the landscape. Acorns can be objectionable in years with heavy fruit load. **L&L**

The author is director of the John C. Pair Horticultural Center, Kansas State University.



## THE WATER PUZZLE

As water concerns rise, industry professionals need to work together. **By Kristen Fefes**

**T**he fight over water is starting to change. I always used to say Colorado's water situation is unique. We are one of two headwaters states that lets more water go than it keeps. The water that starts in Colorado belongs to several different entities downriver in other western states, and changing those river compacts is essentially impossible. Rainwater collection of any kind is illegal for that very reason – what falls from the sky is not ours to keep. Add arid conditions and more frequent drought cycles, and our landscape water is viewed as non-essential.

During the last 15 years, I have come to realize that everyone's water situation is unique. Colorado's drought was a headline for many years. But then North Carolina, Georgia, Texas and even parts of New York were challenged by water issues. Water availability and quality is not exactly a national problem, but it is a nationwide problem.

The ALCC board – my boss – spends a great deal of time talking about how we can influence water use. Part of that work is being able to deliver messages about water in the context of the value of landscape and the professionalism of those folks who design, build and maintain it. We believe sustainability in Colorado starts with water conservation. One challenge that seems universal is the regulation side of water – anything from watering restrictions to a

city- or state-wide licensure. We struggle locally with water providers and the myriad restrictions that they put in place for landscape watering. There are roughly 200 water providers in the state of Colorado and they all have different rules – and those rules are not usually based on horticultural science. They're based on infrastructure issues, peak demand and water delivery. Unfortunately, teaching people to water on Tuesday and Friday doesn't help them understand how to better care for their plants. How much water does Tuesday use anyway? So while we understand why water providers make the decisions they do, we don't usually agree with them.

But here's the opportunity – we work with those water providers to be the messaging and content arm for their summer watering messages. It's not a simple task, but it can be done. Denver Water, the largest provider with the largest reach in the state, has asked us to help them with their messaging.

In early 2013, it appeared that drought conditions were going to be severe. We approached the Colorado Water Conservation Board to do some consumer outreach, and they gave us a grant to develop factsheets and videos on various drought topics for all different kinds of consumers, from HOAs to homeowners. It's opportunities like this

where the green industry can shine.

As an industry, we can provide so many tools to our diverse audiences. Water budgets for both single-family and large commercial sites are something we can help develop. So are landscape standards or specifications for architectural review committees and municipalities. Community outreach that stops the client mentality of "keep it green or you're fired" is within our reach.

Here's my crystal ball for the future: Drought cycles won't go away. In Colorado, we'll always have a little bit of water or a really little bit of water. I am guessing California, New Mexico and Arizona will be the same, but we could see it in other, wetter places too. We need to change the culture of our communities and help them not only understand the value of landscape, but how critical water management is as part of that value proposition. It's possible that regulation is part of the answer, but so are incentives that reward people.

Collaboration is key. We have partners in our customers, in our suppliers and, most importantly, in each other. Leveraging those partnerships moves the green industry away from a fight and positions us as the solution to solving the outdoor water puzzle. **L&L**

The author is executive director of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado.



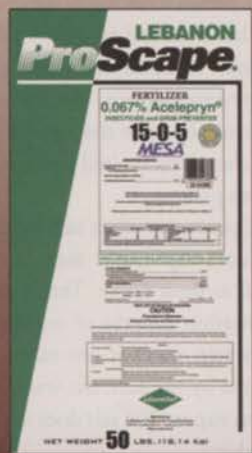
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**EQUALS**

# WHERE'S YOUR WATER COMING FROM?

Desalination makes sense as an alternative source – to a point.

By Richard Restuccia

**I**n the next 10 years, the increase in population in the U.S and worldwide is going to be dramatic. Where are we going to find water for all the people and still have water left over for landscape irrigation?

World population today is more than 7 billion people, and in the next 10 years the United Nations estimates we will add another billion. About 71percent of the earth is covered by oceans. Removing salt from water, especially ocean water in coastal communities, is an option for solving the problem of finding more water for the increase in population.

Desalination or "desal" is the process used to remove salt and minerals from seawater or brackish water. According to Planet Green, the first and only 24-hour eco-lifestyle television network, there are more than 15,000 desal plants operating in the world, and more than 300 of those are located in the United States. About half of them are in Florida. Texas and California combined have another 86.

**HOW DOES IT WORK?** There are two popular technologies currently used for the desalination

process. One is membrane technology. This process uses pressure to force water through a membrane that does not allow the salt particles to pass through. You probably know this process by the term reverse osmosis. Sometimes, instead of using pressure to drive the water through the membrane, electricity is used and we call this a voltage-driven process.

A thermal process is when salt water is heated which produces vapor and then is condensed and collected as fresh water. This is very similar to the evaporation process of ocean water and explains why rain water is not salty. When the ocean is heated by the sun, the water evaporates and escapes as vapor. The salt does not evaporate and is left behind.

**BENEFITS OF DESALINATION.** Ninety-seven percent of the world's water is salt water. Desalination of salt water provides an unlimited supply of water to the world's population. As demand for water grows, desalination provides a source of water that can meet our new demands for water.

The costs for desalination are trending lower, according to the WaterReuse Association. And the

The World's Water

3% of the world's water is fresh

97% of the world's water is saltwater



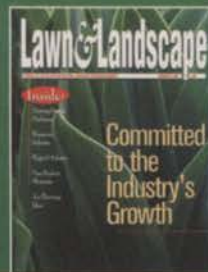
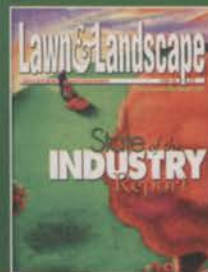
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quality of the water is very high, according to Carlsbad Desalination Project, which consisted of more than 1,200 decision-makers and stakeholders touring the pilot plant and

sampling the product. More than 99 percent of respondents rated the desalinated water taste as either "excellent" or "good," with 83.9 percent ranking it as excellent.

Combining this with the availability for water makes desalination attractive to many people around the world. The main issue around the cost of desalination is the energy needed for the process of removing salt and then moving the water.

The good news is that in the U.S. 53 percent of the population lives within 50 miles of the coastline. This keeps the cost reasonable compared to places like Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where almost all the domestic water used is produced at a desalination plant at the gulf and pumped more than 400 kilometers.

As the price of traditional water sources increase and the efficiencies of desalination improve, some believe in the near future desal water will be less expensive than traditional sources of water.

After twelve years of planning and more than six years in the state's permitting process, the Carlsbad \$1 billion desalination project has received final approvals. The San Diego Water Authority has contracted with the plant to purchase all the water it produces. It will be piped from the coast (where the desal process will take place) to San Diego's aqueduct in San Marcos 10 miles away. The plant is a reverse osmosis plant and should be producing water by 2016. By the year 2020, because of improved efficiencies and high cost of water, the desal water should be less expensive than the municipal water.

**SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?** The first challenge is the cost of the water produced. As mentioned above, the cost is decreasing overall, but even in coastal communities we find the cost of desal water to be about twice the cost of traditional water.

Another expense is the cost of energy needed to operate a desalination plant. According to a congressional research service report, approximately 33-50 percent of the operating costs of a desalination plant are for electricity. This energy consumption also adds to greenhouse gas emissions, which in turn threaten our coasts.

In addition to costs, what we do with the brine created in the desal process is a big



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question. If the concentrated salt water is disposed back into the ocean, there is chance the salt will sink to the bottom and may have an adverse effect on marine organisms.

There is also a concern the apparent ease of desalination will decrease the motivation for conservation and the development of additional ways to save water. This might be the biggest issue of all since we know we can't afford to slow conservation efforts.

Another negative we don't hear much about is the impact of the water on infrastructure. Pure desal water is highly acidic and is harmful to water pipes so it has to be mixed with other sources of water that are piped onsite or else adjusted for pH, hardness and alkalinity before being piped offsite.

**A COMBINED APPROACH.** I believe the biggest issue today is capacity. When it comes online

in 2016, the \$1 billion Carlsbad, Calif. plant will produce 50 million gallons of drinking water per day. That is enough drinking water for about 300,000 San Diego residents annually. San Diego County currently has more than 3 million residents. To supply desal water to all of them would require a tenfold increase in desalination plants.

There is also a concern about developing complex and expensive means of water when simple and cheaper opportunities still exist. Conservation has to be given a chance to work. Incentives from water agencies in forms of rebates for better technology like smart irrigation controllers and high efficiency nozzles can make a positive impact on landscape water use.

I believe the solution to our water issue is going to be a combined approach of conservation, technology and desalination.

In coastal areas and inland area with access to saline groundwater, desalination has to become more prevalent. We're seeing proof of success in cost reductions for desal and environmental impacts from the brine in the discharge water have been significantly reduced in Australia.

As desal technologies continue to develop, and energy use continues to fall, costs are reduced and the viability of desalination improves. At the same time, additional emphasis needs to be placed on infrastructure, catchment, technology and conservation.

We can make an impact on water availability with a combined focus approach. This type of approach is going to be needed to make water available to everyone and their landscapes. **L&L**

The author is director, water management solutions at ValleyCrest Landscape Co.

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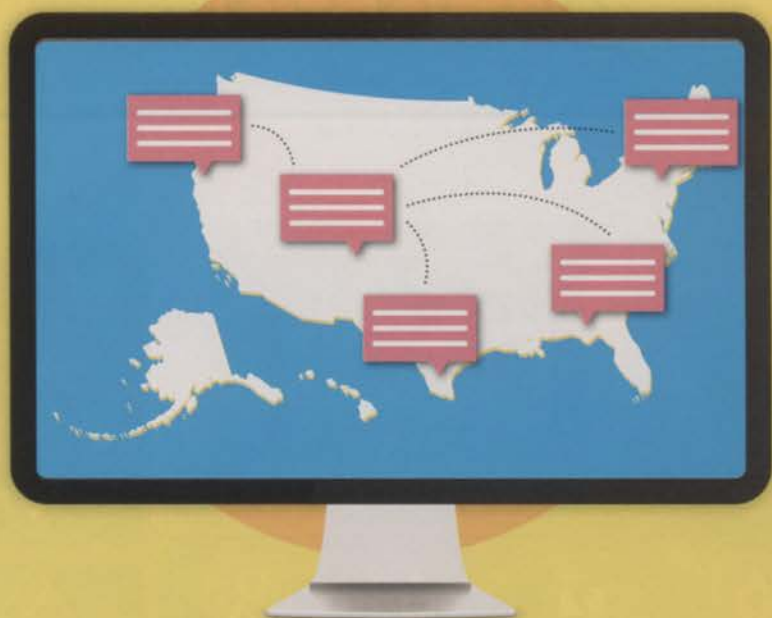
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# DESIGN *from a* DISTANCE

Hiring freelance designers is a way to limit your overhead and free up your time to sell.

By Jill Draper

**W**hen landscaper Brad Maryott started a design/build business in Nebraska 15 years ago while finishing up college, he was too afraid to charge for his designs.

"I was afraid I'd scare the homeowners away and then I wouldn't get the more lucrative installation work," Maryott says. It's a question that vexes design/build contractors across the country: How much – if anything – do you charge for just the drawings?

Today Maryott and partner Matt Hiner are promoting a new business that aims to elevate the design standards of the average landscaping contractor while freeing up time that could be better spent finding new customers.



Maryott



Hiner



## LIKE WE'RE THERE

Here are some tips from RDS on how contractors can make a remote designer feel like they are on the property.

- **Call us.** Even though we're an online company, we put a lot of time and effort into getting to know our contractors. A 5-minute phone call is worth 100 emails back and forth.
- **Be able to translate what your homeowner is looking for.** Know the right questions to ask so you can translate that into a design your homeowner will love.
- **Take thorough and detailed site pictures.** Make sure there's a site reference point in every picture. Again, take lots and lots of pictures of the property.
- **Take an accurate base map.** Our designs and take-offs are only as accurate as the information we receive.
- **Inform us of site lines the homeowner wants to maintain.** We rarely make a physical site visit.
- **Try to get a budget out of your homeowner.** We can design a \$200,000 install or a \$50,000 install in the same amount of space. Budget is important.



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## DESIGN SOFTWARE

Their business, Remote Design Solutions, opened last fall as a company that produces custom landscaping plans for contractors, who then sell the plans (often rebranded with their own logos) to customers. But here's the twist – Hiner and Maryott, based in Colorado Springs, don't usually visit the landscape site. Instead, they work from photos and information gathered by the contractor.

"Contractors often say – 'I can't charge for a design. I don't have the skill or the right design program,'" Maryott says. "We tell them 'Yes you can and yes you should.' We hate seeing shoddy sketches on a napkin."

A design for Remote Design Solutions takes about 10 hours and is priced at four base levels starting from \$445 for a front yard to \$995 for an entire lot.



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## DESIGN SOFTWARE

**FREE TIME.** Charging for designs is a great way to weed out homeowners who are just window-shopping for ideas. Both men were landscapers promoting their own businesses when they met at a Colorado home and garden show five years ago.

Around the same age (Hiner is 29 and Maryott 33), they became good friends after discovering a mutual passion for outdoor activities and craft beer.

In 2012, Hiner hired Maryott as a freelance designer during an especially busy period. By the end of the year, he was surprised to find his business had doubled. The gross revenue for 2012-2013 was \$450,000 and his gross revenue for 2013-2014 was \$800,000 with all the 2013-2014 designs completed remotely.

"Not being bogged down with the design work had given me time to get out in front

of potential clients. That's every contractor's top priority," Hiner says. That realization led to an idea: Why not turn this arrangement into a business? He and Maryott worked on the concept for about 18 months with the help of a local marketing firm and Maryott's brother-in-law, a computer programmer who put in some 300 hours on their website.

At first, they used email and Dropbox to share files. But they decided to bring the information sharing in house.

With an account on remotedesigntco.com, a contractor can keep site photos, a plot map, restrictive covenants, customer preferences and other notes from a detailed questionnaire in one place. Hiner and Maryott ask clients to send in wholesale plant lists from their local suppliers.

The company uses Dynascope software to produce designs that are returned to contrac-

tors as a PDF or digital file; printed copies are available for an extra fee. A typical design takes about 10 hours and is priced at four base levels starting at \$445 for a front yard to \$995 for an entire lot.

So far they've completed 20 remote design jobs ranging from a narrow curb-to-sidewalk strip of lawn to a complicated Parade of Homes yard with retaining walls, water features, LED lighting drought-tolerant native plants and even some artificial turf.

The company has done designs for contractors in eight states and will appear at three trade shows this fall as a way to continue to grow the customer base.

Alissa Shanley, owner of B. Gardening Landscape Design in Denver, has used Remote Design Solutions when her company is too busy physically working on job sites to do a design. She said the experience was

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# THE RIGHT FIT

Two design software companies break down what different-sized companies need when it comes to design software.

## Drafix



### SMALL-SIZED COMPANY:

When bidding on a smaller job, it's possible that a sales tool like photo imaging might be just what's needed. Take a picture and a quick design and estimate can be achieved. In addition, a tablet app for design and bidding could be the perfect solution.



### MEDIUM-SIZED COMPANY:

Along with photo imaging, it will be paramount to have an accurate, scaled drawing both for the crew, but also to create an accurate bid and a complete customer proposal. A medium sized business could be well served with a complete landscape design software package providing it was easy to learn and use.



### LARGE-SIZED COMPANIES:

You will likely have one or more full-time landscape designers. These designers probably bring with them some computerized design or at least basic CAD skills. These companies will be looking for a complete software solution where they can not only design the landscape and hardscapes, but also irrigation and lighting designs. Ideally, these will all be in the same software product.

## Dynascape



### SMALL-SIZED COMPANY:

At a very minimum, you should have a software application that helps them automate their drawing process, word processor, spreadsheet application and an accounting package.



### MEDIUM-SIZED COMPANY:

You will utilize CAD based landscape design software to produce accurate construction drawings, with the ability to render in color for presentation drawings. They will also want to utilize industry specific business management software for customer resource and sales management, opportunity tracking, material take-offs for cost-based estimating, job tracking and crew management.



### LARGE-SIZED COMPANY:

You will need to be able to present their drawings in 3D. A landscape industry specific business management solution that has strong reporting capabilities will give key performance indicators at a moment's notice. It's more important for large landscape companies to have software that is highly integrated for easier communication between departments.

initially a challenge for her since she is the one who usually completes a design and interprets what her clients want into a design.

"In the case of using a freelance designer, I had to step into my clients' shoes and explain to someone else what I wanted and let them interpret," she says.

"I tend to be controlling over my work so that was the hard part. I had to learn to let go a little, which was a great lesson to learn. It made me have more appreciation for my clients and what they feel like talking to me."

She says establishing clear expectations right away with the freelancer is very important to building a good relationship.

"If your ideas do not match up with your freelancers ideas, find someone else ASAP," she says. "You need very clear communication, meaning you need to be able to hear what your designer is saying to you and you need to be able to express what you want to your designer."

**A LEARNING CURVE.** Maryott shut down his previous design and install business, but Hiner Landscapes will continue as a separate company that serves as a training ground for their new hires.

"All of our employees will help install some of their own designs," Maryott says. "That way they can figure out what actually works." Maryott recalls the first pergola he worked on.

"It was very pretty on paper, but when I started building it, I found I had severely over-designed it," he says. "Now we design our pergolas and other structures to be both pretty and practical."

Maryott and Hiner report a good initial response from most people in the industry, especially the tech-savvy 40-and-under crowd. "When contractors come up and talk with us, they see we've been exactly where they are," Maryott says.

The next step for their business is to explore marketing partnerships with nurseries and hardscape suppliers. As Hiner sees it, "Our designs will help them sell more jobs."

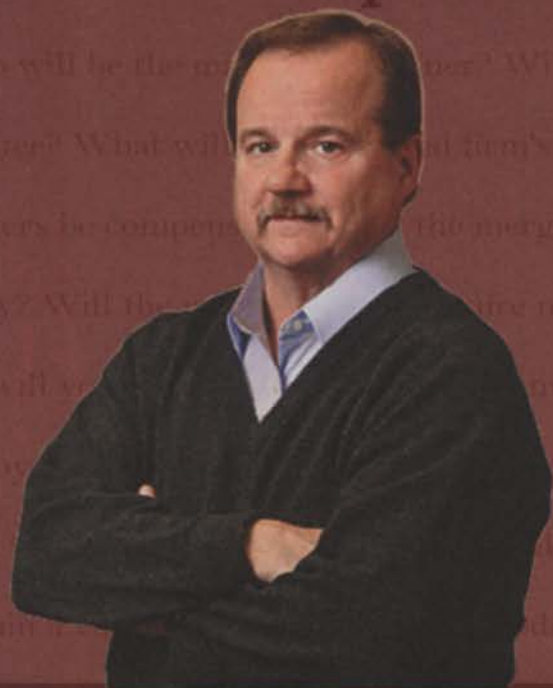
They've also been asked to return to some of the shows where they've staffed an exhibit booth to teach a class for contractors on why

landscape design is important, how it sets the whole tone for a house or building and how to brand yourself as a professional. "Using the wrong plants becomes a big problem in

20 years," Hiner says. "It makes sense to get advice from an expert." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Kansas City, Mo.

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# Decorative introduction

By Jill Draper

**A**s winter approaches and business naturally slows, adding holiday lighting installation to your company's services can keep maintenance crews busy, attract new clients and increase profits. But maybe not right away.

If you decide to purchase seasonal decorations to lease to customers, plan for a lean two or three years before you see a good return on investment, says Abhi Sharan, manager of Southern Irrigation. "There's an upfront cost," he says. "Realize that for the first few years you won't make a lot of money, and don't rush the service by cutting corners."

His company has been decorating in the Nashville, Tenn., area for the past five years. About 60 percent of his holiday lighting clients are residential and 40 percent are commercial.

Beaver Creative Environments charges an hourly rate to decorate 50-60 residential properties in the Kansas City, Kan., area. "I've always enjoyed doing my own home and

we had some requests," says Jon Beaver, company owner. "It's just one more way to offer a creative service and it's always an introduction into people's homes. Once we get on a property, we want to take care of all their needs."

Since Beaver began offering holiday lighting almost a decade ago, he has seen more than 80 percent of his customers transition to LED, which use much less energy and break less often. The newer lights work especially well on older homes which are not wired to handle a lot of wattage, he says.

**THE SALE.** Both companies first meet with clients on their properties to discuss their vision. Homeowners often prefer warm, white lighting, while many commercial customers like colors that attract attention. The layout of the structures is noted, and light strand footage and other materials are estimated. At Beaver Creative, crews start installing decorations by the second or third week in October and usually finish by Thanksgiving. Southern Irrigation begins installations in November.

# LED Performance You Can Count On

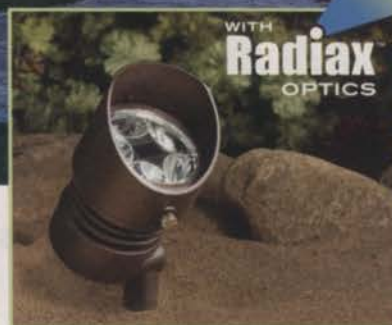
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## HOLIDAY LIGHTING

Beaver says he purchases and stores decorations for 80 to 90 percent of his customers, documenting each design with photos. He contacts past clients to confirm their interest

for the coming season as early as August.

Southern Irrigation advertises its holiday lighting services by mailing 15,000 to 20,000 flyers. Sharan says he keeps up with lighting

trends by reading trade journals, since every year there's a slightly different style.

Both companies cite annual revenue in the neighborhood of \$2 million. Holiday lighting contributes to less than five percent of that for Beaver Creative, while Southern Irrigation considers it one of its core services.

**HIRING.** Gary Fouts, owner of Christmas Décor by Principle Lighting in southwest Chicago, started doing holiday lighting in 1999.

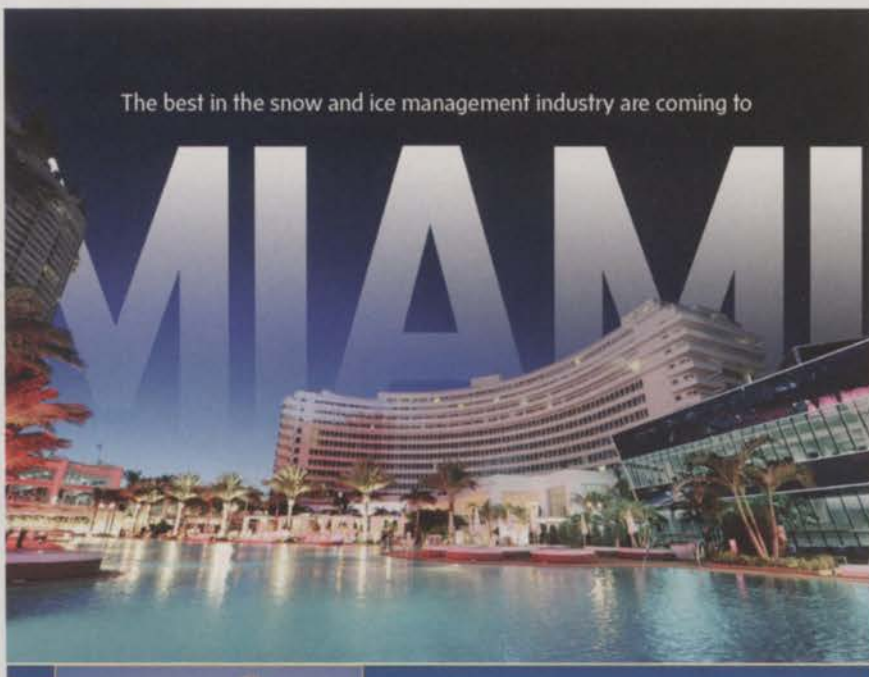
"The larger our company has become, the challenge has been to find enough employees due to the fact that we have a lot of repeat clients who all want their lights ready to turn on the day after Thanksgiving," he says.

Total revenue for 2013 was approximately \$600,000 with \$260,000 of that being Christmas Décor. The company employs approximately 10 employees year round, adding five during the Christmas season.

"By growing our core business we have had more employees available to carry over into the Christmas Décor part of the business." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Kansas City, Mo.

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- Safe, clean power is critical. Use the services of an electrician or certified technician to check circuits and voltage.
- Avoid powering a major decorating job with a home's interior circuits. "People get really aggravated if the holiday lights blow out their TV," Beaver says, adding that a dedicated Romex line with a new breaker might be necessary.
- If clients are considering remodeling, advise them to add dedicated circuits to soffits or some other place on the outside of their house.
- Insist that crews wear safety harnesses for anything higher than 6 feet, and always have someone holding a ladder.

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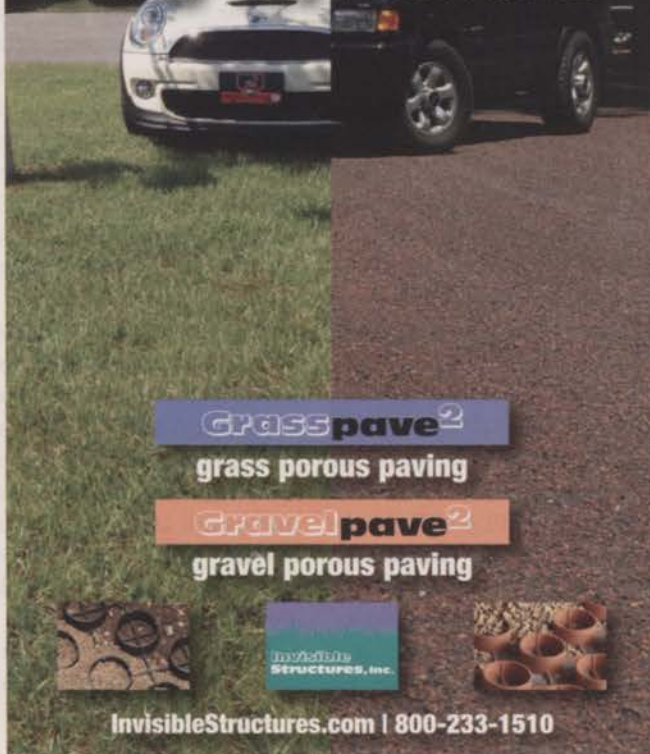
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## CHAMPIONS OF INNOVATION

Champions of Innovation is a quarterly series presented by *Lawn & Landscape* and sponsored by Hunter Industries. Each story will shine a light on the smartest and most dedicated people in the irrigation industry.

# 'Blue' humor

Alan Harris gives a friendly voice to water management as an advocate, educator and writer covering irrigation innovation.

By Kristen Hampshire

Alan Harris recalls an early lesson in how water distribution impacts supply. He was visiting his grandparents' farm in rural North Carolina and the family drove into town for the day. "All of the social media – you know, the people at the barber shop – were talking. 'Do you think it's going to rain again? We haven't had much rain in a while.' 'No. Sure haven't,'" he says.

Then, a public service message blasted on a loud speaker warning that the town water tank was literally running dry: Conserve! Don't take a shower or flush the toilet.

He and his family returned to the farm, about 10 miles from the small town, and his mother said, "Alan, go take a shower."

What? Alan couldn't believe this. "I said, 'We just heard we are running out of water,'" he says. "My mom replied, 'That's in the city. We are out here on the farm and we have a well, so we have plenty of water.'"

Now fast-forward 45 years. Harris' career in landscape architecture includes garnering numerous national and state awards from PLANET and the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), for which he also served as a chapter president.

Then Harris, director of sales operations at ValleyCrest, re-

ceived a phone call from Richard Restuccia, the company's director of water management solutions. He asked Harris if he'd write a blog about water.

That's because Harris has a smart sense of humor. ValleyCrest was looking for an entertaining, honest voice to highlight water management issues and educate the public. Restuccia told Harris, "We don't want formal, politically correct writing – we want you to be a little bit on the edge."

No problem for Harris.

"I try to bring a little humor into the blog when I can," says Harris, who has been working on valleycresttakeson.com for about four years now. He writes about innovation (water conservation in the cloud), best practices (how to fix a leak this week), trivia (why water is better than helium), and everything water management.

His voice has gone viral. His Twitter handle, @h2oMatters, has 850 followers. A single post might be shared in 20 different countries and the blog receives more than 10,000 page views each month. "All we write about is water," he says. "We don't get away from water." And people are tuning in.

Meanwhile, Harris edits and distributes Water Matters



**ALAN HARRIS,**  
ValleyCrest Co.

Weekly. He also teaches a class at the WaterSmart Innovations conference about how to reduce water use through social media.

Water does matter to Harris. He works tirelessly to help others understand why conservation and management practices are critical. "There is a real possibility that communities will turn on their faucets one day and nothing will come out," he says. "That is something that very few people in the U.S. have experienced."

**WATER SMART MESSAGING.** Harris says more communities are starting to get real about water waste and warn residents that the supply really could tap out.

"It's like having a milkshake," he says. "If you have it to yourself, you have more than you want. If you share it with someone and put another straw in there,

it goes a little quicker and you might not feel like you have all the milkshake in the world. Put three, four or five straws in there and everyone begins trying to drink up as much as they can. As there are more straws that go into the available water source, everyone wants their piece of it and there will not be enough to go around."

This is how Harris levels with readers and breaks down complex water issues so people can understand the big picture.

Harris realizes he's writing about the same topic every day, so he keeps up on the latest water management stories.

He reads about water for at least an hour every day. He follows other social media authorities on water. He's particularly fascinated by green infrastructure as a component of water management.

Harris is impressed by how far the industry has progressed since he began designing irrigation systems as a landscape architect 30 years ago. Then, the cutting-edge concept was zoning. Today, we're talking about controllers in "the cloud."

As for Harris, he's forging a fresh path in the green industry as an educator and advocate for water management and communicating about H2O issues.

"I'm in this position now where I want to enjoy my life and my career, and writing about water," he says, adding that he has accomplished his professional and personal goals and is embracing this new chapter.

For now, Harris says, "I just want to make water interesting and entertaining." **L&L**



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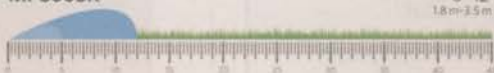


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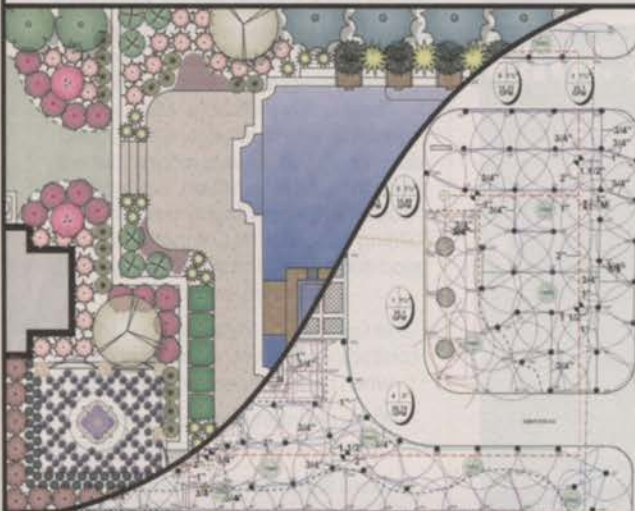


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# AD INDEX

Advertiser	Website	Page #	Advertiser	Website	Page #
3M	www.3M.com	28	Ecologel	www.hydrretain.com	18
AAT Direct Solutions	www.aatdirectsolutions.com	40-41*	Ewing Irrigation	www.ewingi.com	59
AMSOIL	www.amsoil.com	19	Exmark	www.exmark.com	26
Ariens/Gravely	www.gravely.com	107	FMC	www.fmcprosolutions.com	17
Bainter Boom Trenchers	www.BainterBoomTrenchers.com	98	Galcon	www.galconusa.com	99
Bair Products	www.bairproducts.com	95	GE Capital	www.GECapital.com	73
Bayer	www.BackedbyBayer.com	55*	Gempler's	www.gemplers.com	88
BOB-CAT	www.BOBCATTURF.com	83	GIE Expo	www.gie-expo.com	45
Bobcat Co.	www.bobcat.com	74-75	Gowan	www.gowanco.com	21
Cascade Lighting	www.cascadelighting.com	48	Great Oak	www.DeerProRepellent.com	98
Caterpillar	www.CatResourceCenter.com	9	Ground Logic	www.groundlogic.com	58
Christmas Décor	www.christmasdecor.net	90	Grounds Guys, The	www.GroundsGuysInfo.com	104
Classen	www.schillergc.com	36	Hannay Reels	www.hannay.com	49
CLC Labs	www.syntheticturftesting.com	105	Hunter	www.hunterindustries.com	97
Conard Pyle Co., The	www.starrosesandplants.com	62	Invisible Structures	www.InvisibleStructures.com	95
Core Outdoor Power	www.coreoutdoorpower.com	89	Irritrol	www.irritrol.com	43
Cyber Rain	www.cyber-rain.com	95	Jack's Small Engines	www.jacksmallengines.com	14
Dan Gordon	www.turfbooks.com	105	John Deere	www.JohnDeere.com	2-3, 71
Dig Corp.	www.digcorp.com	32			

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Advertiser	Website	Page #
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Kichler Lighting	www.landscapelighting.com	54, 93
Koch Agronomic Services	www.KASTurf.com	35
Kohler	www.kohlerengines.com/EFI	5
Kubota Tractor Corp.	www.kubota.com	31, 87
Lebanon Turf Products	www.LebanonTurf.com	15, 79
Little Beaver	www.littlebeaver.com	29
MistAway	www.mistaway.com	84
Neely Coble	www.neelycoble.com	81*
Netafim Irrigation	www.netafimusa.com	16
PermaGreen Supreme	www.permagreen.com	57
Pro Landscape / Drafix	www.prolandscape.com	108

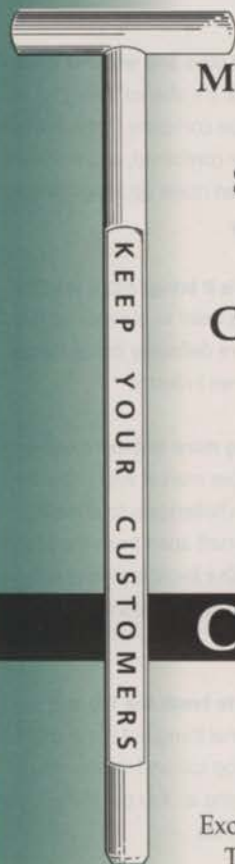
Advertiser	Website	Page #
SipcamAdvan	www.sipcamadvan.com	37
Snowfighters	www.snowfightersinstitute.com	82, 91
Software Republic	www.RainCAD.com	99
Syngenta	www.syngenta.com	25, 50-51*
Takeuchi	www.takeuchi-us.com	23
Toro	www.toro.com	12-13
Toro Irrigation	www.toro.com	85
Turfco	www.turfco.com	46
US Lawns	www.uslawnsfranchise.com	34
Valent	www.valentpro.com	7
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## Brian DuMont

// CEO

**My dad would bring home a load of mulch** and all the kids would run. I'd run home and grab a pitchfork. When someone always asked me what I want to do, I would say I want to open up a nursery. People would look at me and ask, "Like a daycare?"

**When I first started the company,** it was all about landscape horticulture – that's all we wanted. And then I woke up one day and said 'I got great horticulturists but they might not understand customer service, might not understand the business side of the business.'

**Fourteen percent growth** last year was actually a down year for us because the year before we did about 29 percent. We've steadily grown. We achieved growth even when the economy hit in '08 – very small, but we grew \$300,000 or two percent.

**I've always said "OK, we'll go hard** for two and we'll back off for one." So last year actually at 14 was a back-off year for us.

**Now it's time to back off a little** bit to make

sure that we have the growth under control and the right people, place and procedures.

**As we continue to grow, I continue to take a step back.** I hear it all the time from business owners: "If you want something done right, you need to do it yourself."

**In order to grow, you got to delegate** and you got to find the best people. You create the best team, and you give that ownership and just let them do their thing. Learn how to delegate and don't be afraid to make mistakes, because you will make mistakes.

**At any given moment there's probably 10 to 15 fires that we need to put out.** My job is to evaluate what's the biggest fire and how can we focus on that. So I continue to focus on people to make sure our team is motivated and on board with what we're doing with our growth strategy.

**Employees are harder and harder to come by** as the economy improves. If the team turns around and says, "Hey, we need to hire a new

crew; we need to hire a new manager" – and they say we needed it done yesterday, it's already too late. So we've got to continue to keep a full 24/7 focus on recruitment.

**We actually now use rehab facilities, too.** It's really exciting to see these guys – they're motivated, they're excited about opportunities and they want to change their lives.

**I'm very proud of our team.** I started the company but it's not about me now. I'm not digging the holes. I'm not running the crews. We create a lot of opportunities for folks and it's really exciting to see them grow within the company and grow as people.

**Our head of business development used to work for Proctor & Gamble** but he's been in the industry for 10 to 12 years. My dad is our CFO – he is a retired IBMer. Our COO is from the building industry. We definitely have a diverse background.

**We have ValleyCrest guys and we have Brickman guys.** I just think it's phenomenal that we now have a landscape company that's doing over \$2 billion a year combined, and believe it or not they don't even make up a big market share of our industry.

**What I love about it is it brings more validity to our industry.** Folks want to put money into this industry, so we're definitely doing something right in the green industry.

**We're actually seeing more and more companies** coming into our market every day. It makes it even more challenging to diversify. How do you set yourself apart from the other 3,000 landscapers? Our focus is always on customer service because there's always somebody cheaper.

**I think it's one thing to break the Top 100,** which is a phenomenal thing, but it's another thing to stay in the Top 100 and continue to grow. The hardest thing is: You got there, now you got to stay there. **L&L**



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