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### BACK FROM THE BRINK

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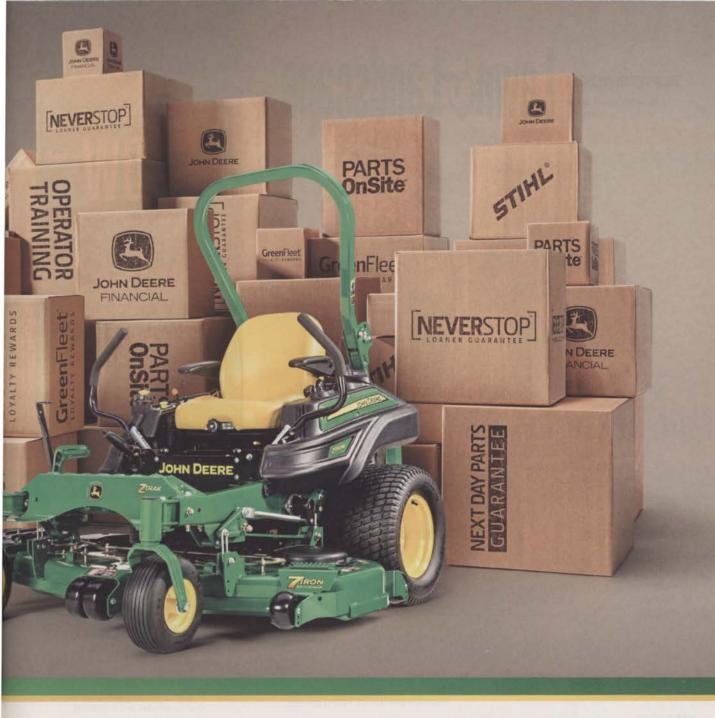


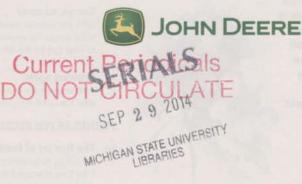
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# SEPTEMBER 2014 A GIE MEDIA PUBLICATION VOLUME 35, NUMBER 9



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Bland Landscaping took on major business changes at one time that might have closed the doors at another company. Today, the firm is stronger, smarter, leaner and poised to have a record year.

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### **ONLINE CONTENTS**

Check out what's new online from Lawn & Landscape

### A perennial problem Dr. Jim Brosnan shares his knowledge on dallisgrass.

hat are the optimal growing conditions for dallisgrass? Dallisgrass seems to grow in all conditions throughout Tennessee. We see it

conditions throughout Tennessee. We see it thrive in both irrigated and non-irrigated turf, and areas receiving regular mowing/fertilizer applications as well as areas mowed sparingly and not receiving fertilizer. Again, it is arguably the most troublesome turf weed in the state.

What should technicians look for to spot dallisgrass problems?

Dallisgrass is fairly easy to identify in a lawn situation. Its bunch-type growth and coarse, textured leaves differentiate it from desirable lawn grasses. Often it can be confused with smooth and large crabgrass when mowed at similar heights.

Besides having a different growth habit, dallisgrass has a prominent membranous ligule and



Dallisgrass can be confused with crabgrass.

ridge along the mid-rib of the lower leaf surface. Additionally, when left un-mowed, dallisgrass will form a distinctive seedhead different from either smooth or large crabgrass.

What products work well to control dallisgrass?

There are minimal options to selectively control dallisgrass in either warm- or cool-season lawns. In warm-season lawns, many of the ALS inhibitors can suppress this species when applied with calibrated equipment at the correct timing. This would include herbicides such as combination of thiencarbazone, foramsulfuron and halosulfuron, trifloxysulfuron, foramsulfuron and flazasulfuron. None of these products will provide complete control with a single application, though.

Multiple applications are required to control dallisgrass over several seasons regardless of product. In cool-season lawns, fluazifop is probably the best option for selective control based on the research we've done here at UT.

However, it is limited to only fall and spring applications in fall fescue to limit the threat of desirable turf injury. For the rest of the article, visit **bit.ly/llbrosnan**.

LAWN CARE

Listen up!

Dan Bantell, client consultant

and account manager for AOS

Landscaping, talks about going

relationships with gatekeepers and

what challenges he's seen in his

in cold for a sale, developing

THE ART OF ACCOUNT MANAGING

D CHARLES T. REPSON, USDA AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH SERVICE, INJONODU

### Killing kyllinga

The perennial weed is hard to get rid of, but there are options you can try to satisfy customers.

villinga is a relative newcomer on the weed scene, but it can spread like crazy, damaging landscaping as well as lawns. The weedy sedge tends to thrive in soil that remains wet for an extended period of time and receives full sun, although it will do just fine in partial shade.

According to the Cornell Cooperative Extension, kyllinga moves easily from landscape beds to nearby turf and only becomes evident in later summer. The seeds can be spread by mowing equipment and even technicians' clothing, taking it from property to property.



Kyllinga easily moves from landscape beds to turf.

Close mowing can also cause a kyllinga outbreak as the lawn grass is unable to spread and compete, according to the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

But kyllinga also spreads through short rhizomes, or underground stems. That means even if technicians pull up the weed, each node can still reproduce. While pre-emergent control is the preferred option, there are ways to deal with a problem area.

For the rest of the article, click here. bit.ly/llkyllinga

#### YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE

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bit.ly/llbantell

Public speaking isn't for everyone, but Scott Topper says it can help boost your brand and is a talent that can be learned. He gives his tips on how to be a better speaker, how often to practice and who to use as an audience. bit.ly/llstopper



# From the Scientists at PENNSTATE.

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### Stop peeing in the pool

get a lot of landscaping marketing at home. Most of the fliers and postcards are fine – very nice photos of manicured lawns, patios and the like. The ones that stick out most to me, though, are in bright colors with impossible-to-fulfill promises: "\$20 a cut!" and "We will not be undersold!" and similar promotions.



A note to those of you who make these claims: Maybe it works for your company. Maybe you've figured out your numbers to such a degree that you can make a healthy profit on super-cheap services. If that's the case, good for you. I hope it is. The rest of this doesn't apply to you. Skip to the next page.

But, by and large, I don't think that's the case. I think many of these contractors are working just for cash flow, and are locked in a desperate hunt for market share. That's a bad idea. Here's why.

- It's an untenable position. It's a race to the bottom. There's no way you can sustain that model of selling on price, because anyone else can come along and say \$19. Then \$18. This is the mindset of a 14-year-old who borrows his dad's push mower. You may have started your business that way, but it's no way to continue running the business.
- 2. You're doing yourself a disservice. You run a company. You are the owner and maybe even president of a firm that employs other people. You are a professional who creates jobs and helps manage the environment. Act like it.
- The work you sell today needs to pay dividends for your company and the industry

for the long term. Undercutting just for marketshare doesn't do that. You're hurting yourself and thousands of other owners in the industry.

The same is true for anyone who operates without the proper insurance, or pays employees under the table. If you do that, you have no place in this industry. Find something else to do. You're peeing in the pool. Get out.

I was talking with Chris Lee a while back about his approach to pricing and the highly competitive Dallas-Fort Worth market. He said the hardest thing he had to learn at Earthworks was that not all jobs were the same and that it was very possible that many jobs were bad for his company.

Not all revenue is good revenue, he said. The jobs his company accepts today need to serve them not just this season, but also in five or 10 years.

No one said this would be easy. Labor is expensive and it's difficult to find employees who want to do the work. You might not have the resources to do all this at once. But you need to find some resources to do some of it now. You owe it to yourself, your employees and your industry. – *Chuck Bowen* 

### Lawn&Landscape

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## **L&L INSIDER**

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More than 400 volunteers from 30 states cared for the 180 acres of Arlington Cemetery on its 150th anniversary as part of PLANET's 18th annual Renewal & Remembrance in late July.

### A service industry

#### Volunteers from all over the country donated time and efforts at PLANET event. **By Kate Spirgen**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The green industry showed its dedication to the red, white and blue at Arlington Cemetery and on Capitol Hill July 28-29, honoring our fallen soldiers and advocating for key issues for the industry.

PLANET's 18<sup>th</sup> annual Renewal & Remembrance project and Legislative Day on the Hill brought together industry professionals from all across the country to donate their time and efforts during the two day event.

**GIVING BACK.** More than 400 volunteers from 30 states repaired irrigation, aerated, protected trees and laid down 78 tons of lime on 180 acres of Arlington Cemetery on its 150th anniversary to thank those who served the United States.

Walter Money, of Bartlett Tree Experts

and a Marine, has spent more than 50 years as an arborist. But he never would have been able to do what he loves without the sacrifice of those interred on the grounds.

"I never cease to remember as I walk these hallowed grounds that those 55 years are a privilege granted to me unlike many of the people buried here. They gave their last ounce of devotion so that you and I can be here today doing the work we love for our country," he said.

"We are here today to do with actions what words cannot express. Our work is just a symbol of our gratitude to all those who have served our great nation in every war and armed conflict."

MOVING FORWARD. Following the day of



service, many headed to Capitol Hill to voice their support for four key pieces of legislation:

Seasonal workers: Advocates voiced their support for the Simplifying Technical Aspects Regarding Seasonality, or the STARS act, which would simplify the definition of a seasonal worker.

This would allow businesses to better understand and execute their health care requirements, PLANET said. The legislation would define a seasonal employee as someone who is on the job for six months or less and exclude them when determining whether or not a business is an applicable large employer.

Immigration reform: Professionals requested to raise the cap on the number of seasonal workers allowed, as well as legalize workers who haven't been able to get visas. H-2B reform would also give employers more control over the wage for workers, which employers say would better reflect the current economy and scope of work.

Clean Water Act: PLANET is pushing to rescind the proposed Waters of the United States rule, which lawn and landscape contractors find overly burdensome in terms of permits. Advocates say that this action will relieve confusion and unnecessary bureaucracy surrounding waterways, floodplains and more.

Disease Advisory Board: To create a central source of education and prevention of Lyme disease, PLANET members once again asked for a committee dedicated to tick-borne illnesses.

Noting the increase in instances of Lyme disease in particular, attendees asked that an advisory committee be formed to help identify the illness and protect workers from infection as well as research preventative measures and a cure.

### HPE hits three decades, announces new products

Honda Power Equipment celebrates 30 years with the development of its first two-stage snow blower made outside of Japan. **By Brian Horn** 

SWEPSONVILLE, N.C. – Scott Connor still remembers his first trip to the Honda Power Equipment Manufacturing facility in Swepsonville N.C., 30 years ago.

At the time, the factory was only producing one unit, but while visiting, he was told the factory would one day produce a million products.

The senior vice president at HPE said that on his flight back home to California, he thought "yeah, right." But 30 years later, the group has hit 30 million products manufactured and now houses more than 600 employees.

Honda will continue to help the 375,000 square-foot facility grow with an \$8.5-million investment, which will include the addition of a new line for the production of two-stage snow blowers and new generators. Production of the equipment is



Honda will produce a two-stage snow thrower in addition to the single-stage pictured here.

expected to start in the next 18 months. Connor said the Swepsonville snow blower will be the first two-stage snow blower designed and manufactured outside of Japan.

"Japan is still helping, but the primary development work is here," he said.

Connor said more professionals have been using Honda mowers and snow blowers that were designed for the consumer. He added that the company makes an investment in the Swepsonville plant every year, but this was an above average investment.

"For us, it's big news and reassuring to the associates," he said.

The Honda power product research and development team is also based at the HPE campus, where most lawn mower and snow blowers, and several general-purpose engines are designed and developed. There are a total of four HPE factories in America, but the Swepsonville plant is the largest.

The announcement came as part of HPE's 30th anniversary celebration, which was attended by Takuji Yamada, Honda COO of North American Regional Operations; Shinji Oketani, HPE president; local officials and North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory, who spoke at the event.

#### **Bobcat opens Acceleration Center**

The office is designed to encourage collaboration. By Katie Tuttle

BISMARCK, N.D. – Bobcat Co., recently opened the Bobcat and Doosan Acceleration Center, which is located on 35 acres of land in Bismarck, N.D.

The Acceleration Center campus features a 195,000-square-foot operational building and a 22-acre outdoor testing area. The building includes 100,000 square feet of lab and a 35,000-square-foot indoor testing arena. The center has 175 employees, with 102 of them in the engineering department.

The center will be used for developing and testing Bobcat products. Doosan will also use the center for research and development. The offices inside the center will have no assigned seats. Employees instead have carts where they store their laptops, phones and any other office equipment they need for their jobs. The office is made up of more than enough desk spaces, allowing employees to sit in different places, depending on what they're working on and who they're working with.

According to Mike Wetzel, director of engineering at Doosan Infracore Construction Equipment, the company looked at different companies across the country to see what new tricks and techniques were being used to allow employees the best chance to work efficiently.

Along with the open spaces, the two-floors office also features enclosed focus enclaves for more privacy, different sized meeting rooms and group table spaces for collaboration. With a focus on chance encounters, the office houses a few games, such as shuffleboard, to allow co-workers to interact in a non-workrelated environment to spur innovation, he says. There is outside research that suggests a good amount of ideas are thought up in interactions between employees who may not work directly together and therefore don't interact on a daily basis, he says.

Building an environment, Wetzel says, that focuses on chance encounters, whether on the stairs, around the shuffleboard table or in the cafeteria, gives employees more interaction time.

He adds the acceleration center will decrease testing time because instead of taking the equipment to dealers and customers around the country to test, which could take months, Bobcat can bring those people to the Bismarck facility in one group event.



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#### L&L INSIDER

#### ASK THE EXPERTS

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: Why should I have diversity within my client base? And what does diversity really mean to my business?

A: I know that a lot of us have large clients that we become dependent on. Never put all your eggs in one basket. Having a diverse client base will create different types of revenue streams.

Sometimes it is a hard pill to swallow and make the decision to invest time, money, and other resources to diversify. In a lot of cases, diversity means meeting the customers' demands, growing your marketed area, and creating long-term profits. It's a daunting thought that could keep you awake at night. Here are a few ideas that might help with the process of having a diverse customer base.

Never stop marketing yourself question for the and your company. We can experts? Send get very comfortable with our it to llexperts@ clients. Do not get so comfortable in a customer relationship that you stop advertising, branding and continuing to obtain new clients.

Word of mouth is a wonderful tool; however, it is just as important to use websites, social media, local ads, or whatever means of advertisement works for your company. All I am saying is if it is not broke, don't fix it. Use the tools that have worked for you in the past, but also keep up with the changing times.

Offer different services. In the landscape industry, this is also referred to as upsells. I know in our busy lives, we just want to get our routes done.

However, if you cannot be there personally, make sure your customers know what other services you offer. Keep it in front of them. Put these services on your



website, social media, on a blog, or even a newsletter once a month. It's a good idea, when you have time, to visit each customer and offer these additional services.

More or less. So, which do you choose: more customers or more services? Both. Start with your customer base first. You don't want to overdo it either, so try to maintain a slow and steady growth. It's okay not to add a customer if you are booked.

Learn how to job cost and which customers are bringing in a profit. Once you get a handle on having a diverse client base, then you can offer more services to each client. Never try to be the superhero and do everything at once.

Trying to grow too fast could be disastrous. Make sure you can handle the growth you are targeting. Depending on limited

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services and a limited client base is very high risk. It is also risky to go outside your comfortable home zone, so be sure to know the risk of going outside your market.

Look at your current customer base. If you only have a few large clients, then you should

immediately look into more customers. If vou have a lot of smaller clients, look to sell them more services.

Either way, there are plenty of growth opportunities for your company. Listen to the needs of the customers, ask the right questions, and come up with a successful strategy. Whether you go after new clients or sell more services, you are on the fast track to diversifying for profits.

Offering more services and/or servicing additional clients will give you the peace of mind for business longevity. In my opinion, diversity is the way to go to stay competitive and profitable. LEL

Crystal Arlington, PLANET Trailblazer Affiliated Grounds Maintenance Group

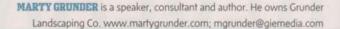
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# The facts on fuel

We surveyed 100 contractors across the country about their fuel buying strategies and overall thoughts on how fuel affects their businesses. Below is a snippet of the results. For more fuel numbers, turn to page 83 for our Smart Fuel Month coverage.

Q: What % of your budget goes to fuel? • = 1%		Q: How often do you purchase fuel? • = 1%	
<ul> <li>0%-10% (38%)</li> <li>11%-20% (38%)</li> </ul>	. 21%-30% (17%)	💩 Once a day (35%) 💧 Once a week (57%) 🌲 Once a month (8%)	
💩 31%-40% (6%) 💧 41%-50% (0%)	More than 50% (1%)	Source: Lawn & Landscape researc	





### Don't play the waiting game

MARTY

Want to share with you my favorite quote. I'm not sure who said it or where I even heard it, but I use it all the time and I love it. "Good things come to those who wait; however, only the things left behind by those

who did not." For the landscapers I teach how to grow their businesses, it is wisdom they need to follow. To be blunt and challenge you, how long do you wait to take action and how many things around your landscaping company aren't going well because you haven't taken action? I know there are a lot of things you need to do. You know you should do them. You just aren't doing them.

In my ACE groups (Accountability Creates Excellence) we push on each other to take action and get things done. The logic we teach our clients is quite simple. We think that taking action in an area consistent with our strategy is better than sitting still and waiting. Sure, you'll make mistakes, but most times it's a lack of action that cripples our businesses. In a recent meeting we had, one of my clients, Matt, proclaimed that since our last meeting "he fired Tommy." We had heard about Tommy at the previous meeting and how he just wasn't doing what needed to be done.

The group praised Matt for his action and I could tell Matt felt great about taking action. Rather than doing what most landscapers I see do, he did the hard thing and told someone they could not work at his business any longer. A hard thing to do, unless you look at it from the perspective that the sooner you get the bad ones off the bus and more good ones on the bus, the sooner you can work on more important things that make money.

Brian, another ACE client, used to be someone who blamed everyone else for his issues, never taking responsibility for the results he was getting. After some coaching by my colleagues, Brian has taken his business to the \$1-million level by taking action. He puts out a regular newsletter, he has focused his business on residential design/build and has made taking action his top priority. He doesn't see it. However, 1 do. 1 have told him many times that he's not even the same person I met to years ago. He's a businessman destined for big-time success because he now knows what he wants and takes action.

Where we start isn't normally where we finish. Along the way we learn more about ourselves and by gaining more knowledge and experience, we are empowered to make decisions. Smart landscapers don't chase every new idea, piece of equipment or client. They have a strategy in place. are the ones that I know have a high probability to work. When we see a new hire not even closely measuring up to what we thought they were, we get them out of our company.

For years, my actions were mostly two types. I either sat and procrastinated, taking no action, or I jumped into things that had nothing to do with the strategy we had laid out for our company. Neither one is good. The best kind of action is a well-focused, intentional move locked in on the desired target.

#### "Rather than doing what most landscapers I see do, he did the hard thing and told someone they could not work at his business any longer."

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They know who their ideal client is; they know who their ideal team member is and they know what they do best and find others to do what they don't do well. Empowered with these talents, they tend to take action – and more times than not – the right actions. Having a strategy is the key.

Two other owners I know, Mike and Chris, have grown their landscaping company to close to \$4 million in eight years. Think about that, folks. And they are profitable. In my eighth year, I was doing \$1 million, not \$4 million. They have done this by taking action – actions supported by a strategy, a filter of sorts. These "filters" are what we need to run our ideas through. Grunder Landscaping Co. is focused on high-end residential design/build and maintenance. While it is easy to get excited about the contractor wanting us to bid the new shopping center, we're not good at that and we're not going to chase that "squirrel."

The actions I direct my team to take

Identify your ideal client, identify your ideal team member and, by all means, write down on a piece of paper in great detail in no more than three sentences how you know you will be successful one year, two years and three years from now. Armed with that, take action. As Victor Kiam, a very successful businessman, once said, "Procrastination is the language of the poor." Take some action, you'll be glad you did. Lat.

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#### **Travels** with **JIM**

JIM HUSTON runs J.R. Huston Consulting, a green industry consulting firm. www.jrhuston.biz; jhuston@giemedia.com

### The green industry's place to be

f you want to grow your business, first you have to grow yourself. Like such explorers as Columbus, Marco Polo and Lewis and Clark, business professionals embrace the edge of the unknown for it is there that discovery, newness and innovation take place. It's where life transforms from an experience of the mundane to one of adventure. It's where the risk of chaos replaces security as its safety melts away.

Most men cannot handle the trauma of such chaos. Today those who embrace it are called entrepreneurs. However, to grow you have to make a conscious decision and take action to plan a metamorphosis of your intellect and spirit. You have to plan the evolution.

There are things you have to do to grow your intellect and spirit. Class room study, onthe-job training, apprentice programs, college courses, networking groups and audio books are just a few. One form of growth comes from attending trade shows. The really good ones combine a number of learning experiences into a high-impact and content full smorgasbord for the senses. It's like Jazzercise for the green industry.

One of the best of the trade shows is the GIE+EXPO on Oct. 22-24 in Louisville, Ky. Here are some reasons why I'm going and six reasons why I think you should join me.

 The GIE+EXPO attracts green industry leaders from all over the globe. You'll have a chance to meet and network with vendors, manufacturers, distributors, association leaders, consultants, publishers, educators and so forth.



- 2. You'll see more equipment than General Norman Schwarzkopf used in the Persian Gulf War. If it has anything to do with the green industry, it will be there. You'll not only see it, you'll be able to ride it, operate it, crawl all over it and maybe even break it. There will be trucks, tractors, skid-steers, mini-excavators, trenchers, pullers, mowers, edgers, trimmers, grinders and much more. If you can't find it at the show, it probably doesn't exist.
- 3. Are you looking for software to help run your company? Virtually all of the software companies with products for the green industry will be there. There will be vendors with software for scheduling, estimating, accounting, job costing, customer relations management and more.
- There will be educational workshops and seminars on marketing, selling, managing, HR, operational techniques, hardscape,

"Most men cannot handle the trauma of such chaos. Today those who embrace it are called entrepreneurs. However, to grow, you have to make a conscious decision and take action to plan a metamorphosis of your intellect and spirit. You have to plan the evolution." GIE+EXPO will take place Oct. 22-24 in Louisville, Ky., and attracts green industry leaders from all over the globe. If it has anything to do with the green industry, it will be there.

etc. There are so many educational opportunities that, like me, you'll get educated way beyond your intelligence.

5. Of course, there's my seminar on Oct. 22. It's on my fifth book covering the six methods of estimating commonly used in the green industry today. During the seminar, I'll explain how to price your services and projects, format a profit and loss statement, identify direct and indirect costs, bid equipment costs into your pricing and more. I'll also explain why you should not use percentages to calculate general and administrative overhead costs for including in your bids. As an added bonus, attendees will receive a free audio book copy of my book.

 And sixth, you'll be at the premier for my new book: "Job Descriptions for Green Industry Professionals." If you come visit me at the Lawn & Landscape booth, I'll give you a free copy of the new audio book.

If you want to grow your business, you first have to grow yourself. The GIE+EXPO is a great place to grow.

To help make it worth your while, I'm going to raffle off a free day of my Bid With Confidence on-site consultation (a \$2,400 value). Come grow with us! You'll be glad you did. LEL

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By Scott Jamieson

### 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 with topic ideas.

### The consultant quandry

s companies evolve, sales and leadership training quickly become essential for growth and development. Soon, comprehensive training programs come together in a congruent format that begins to take on the appearance of a university curriculum. Advanced training and development programs can take all essential elements of a successful business and weave them together to educate teammates.

One question that often quickly comes up is whether or not to use outside consultants for a training program. Consider these factors when making your decision.

#### 1. Do we have the expertise to do the training?

Early on, much of the training a company needs to accomplish can be provided by ownership and key managers that have helped build the company. The basic training needed in the early stages of a company can be effectively delivered by those within the company.

Processes and procedures that are developed by company owners are often best trained by those same people. Although technical expertise may exist in the early stages of a company's growth, it is important to also keep in mind the training expertise of those conducting the training.

Many of us have met people who have great expertise and knowledge but are not able to effectively transfer that knowledge to others. Sometimes knowledge is seen as power and not readily shared, which makes it important to document and assess what needs to be trained within a company.

If the technical expertise is within the company but there is a gap in training skills, getting outside help can be of benefit.

Adult learning models for training are increasingly popular and effective. Arming your technical experts with "how to train" expertise can go a long way to increase the effectiveness of training.

If your assessment determines that the expertise does not exist within your company it may be beneficial to seek outside help. This could take the direction of bringing someone in to conduct the training or by sending a teammate to gain the expertise.

#### 2. What is our training budget?

This can be a difficult question to answer if you've never had a training budget. The place to begin is by simply making it a line in your budget by acknowledging that planning and paying for training is important for the company.

By making training a budget item, you begin the process of consciously thinking about training as the company investment it should be. Like other budget items, you can track spending throughout the year and from year to year. Deriving a return on investment with your training is always tricky because the benefits are rarely realized at the same time that you incur the expense.

The key is to track your training expenses from year to year so you have a good handle on your investment year over year. Find measurements to track that can give you an insight on actual results from the training – sales closing rates, safety performance, employee retention, etc.

Capture all training expenses including the time (and associated dollars) your teammates are spending in training sessions. Tracking your internal training investments can also help you answer the question if you should hire from the outside to conduct training.

From a pure budget standpoint, you may find an outside provider can deliver training not only more effectively but also more cost efficiently. Knowing your numbers will help you decide from a cost perspective what makes sense.

#### 3. Is it time for a new perspective?

Sometimes expertise and training ability resides in the company but teammates have grown a bit numb and need a new perspective.

Unless a company has the means to employ a full-time trainer whose job is to constantly look for new perspectives and training process, it may make sense to bring someone in from the outside from time to time. A new trainer can bring new life to the same messages and processes.

Just having an outsider come in with a slightly different approach and perspective can reach people who have previously shut down and turned off their listening skills.

It is critical to make sure that the message the trainers convey is congruent with and helpful towards the training objectives set out by company leadership. Trainers should also be thoroughly interviewed and observed training before letting them affect the culture of your company.

Training is one of the most powerful things you can do in your company and when bringing in outside trainers you are effectively putting the culture of your company in their hands. Make sure it is the message you want.

All trainers have a unique style and you will find some teammates will connect with that style and some will not. The important thing is that the trainer's style is congruent with the culture you want to create. You want a trainer's style to connect with the majority of your team.

Even though the content may be spot on, there are times you will want a different training style in front of your people. Ask your team, gain its insight and feedback and make adjustments.

Some of the best training is when adjustments are made along the way based on feedback from those being trained. Don't be afraid to listen to your feam. Be proactive and ask them to give constructive feedback so adjustments can be made to make the training as effective as possible.

Most importantly, check in regularly with those being trained. They know best on how effective their training is going. Use their feedback to adjust. When you begin using words like "education" and "development," you know you are heading in the right direction in preparing your teammates to do their best. L&L

The author is vice president of Bartlett Tree Experts in Stamford, Conn.



### Grow Your Business, profits and reputation with tree healthcare

#### Why Should You Offer Tree Care?

For property owners, healthy, well-maintained and attractive trees improve property value, provide shade and benefit the environment. But trees are often a secondary thought, and property owners may not even realize their trees are in jeopardy until it's too late.

By offering tree care services, you can provide your clients with the convenience of having their exterior services handled by one company committed to their needs. Darryl Zellmer, owner of Turf & Tree Worx in West Bend, WI, started his landscape business in 1992, and expanded into tree care six years later.

Successfully adding tree care to your services starts with building the right relationship with your customer. "Weed and feed gets your foot in the door," says Zellmer. "Then, you can use the relationship you've built to open the door for other services, because the customers would rather keep it all under one roof."

Lucas Mitchell, Tree Division Manager of CLS Landscape in Chino, CA, agrees; "95 percent of the places we provide lawn service, we also do tree work." He adds, "trees and turf go hand in hand; they struggle against each other, and they both need care."

Pete Benz, owner of Pete Benz Landscaping in Fountainville, PA, adds, "Whenever we're on a customer's property, I'm always looking at shrubs and trees to see if there are any needs to address. That helps to separate us from the competition."



Getting ahead in today's competitive lawn care and landscaping business requires professionalism, high-quality work and services your competition can't match. Tree care services can help bring in more profit, while benefiting your customer. Keep reading to see how lawn care experts across the country have enhanced their business by adding tree care services.



Properly caring for trees isn't a difficult task, and when done using quality micro-infusion systems, like those offered by Mauget, keeping your customer's trees healthy becomes a simple, easily performed and profitable service.

#### Easy to Use

Micro-infusion systems from Mauget allow lawn care professionals to quickly, easily and reliably rid trees of damaging diseases and pests. The process consists of measuring the trunk, drilling a series of shallow holes at the base, inserting the capsules and allowing the tree to absorb the contents through its vascular system.

"With capsules, you know it's all going into the tree. You can see it," says Lucas Mitchell. "It's a very simple product to use." Mauget also provides convenient and economical liquid loadable microinjection systems for those who want to inject chemistry directly into the tree via a hypodermic system. Roger Peterson of Approved Tree Care in Newport Beach, CA, prefers Mauget injectable products over foliar sprays. "With foliar sprays, we often had to go back and re-spray in 3-4 weeks to control a second hatching. But, with trunk injection, it covers the entire tree, inside and out. So, if there is a second generation or hatching later in the season, the injectable keeps providing control."

### Easy to Sell

More often than not, homeowners are unaware that the trees on their property are sick or under attack. Lawn and landscape professionals who take the time to educate their customers about their trees can provide them with the knowledge they need to make an informed decision.

The biggest objection Mitchell encounters is, "that tree's been like that for years and it's not dead yet, so why should I treat it?" That's when Mitchell relies on the Internet to help him educate his clients. "I take a couple of photos, and match them up with what's going on from the Internet. I use my Mauget catalog and websites like the University of Minnesota, print some informational things out and submit it with a proposal. Customers like that." He adds, "I'm definitely not a sales person, but out of 350 people in my company, I sell more than anyone. I keep it factual, and don't try to sell anything that's not needed."

Zellmer relies on his experience to help his customers understand their trees. "I tell them about the health of the tree, my opinion, and encourage them to think about the value of the tree to them. Once I present the information, the customer usually has a better understanding of the situation. I don't try to talk them into it; it's their decision."

#### Easy to Learn

Taking the time and energy to learn about tree care and add it to your list of services may seem like a huge challenge. But, the benefits can be well worth it. Zellmer knew it wouldn't happen overnight. "If you add it to your business, it's a gradual thing. Just like the business we started in the first place; we grew and added things. You don't need to be an arborist to start – you just need to identify some trees and common diseases."

Mauget offers training seminars and selfstudy programs designed to provide lawn care professionals with the education they need to keep their customer's trees healthy and protected. "Mauget is easy to use, so training isn't an issue," says Zellmer. "I could show a friend how to do it. It's an easy add-on, and as you gain more experience, you might decide to expand your offerings." As Zellmer so aptly puts it, "knowledge builds confidence, and confidence builds sales."

Staying up to date on training is vital for success. "The pests and diseases are constantly changing, so you need to continually adapt to the changing needs to be ahead of the next guy," says Mitchell. Attending local training seminars hosted by distributors and organizations, like the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA) and the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA), can help you learn how to combat the latest threats in your area, and maintain quality service.





#### Featured Lawn & Landscape Professionals

Darryl Zellmer, Owner Turf & Tree Worx West Bend, WI Over 16 years of tree care and landscaping business

Lucas Mitchell, Tree Div. Mgr. CLS Landscape Management, Inc. Chino, CA Certified arborist with 25 years of experience

Pete Benz, Owner Pete Benz, Landscaping Fountainville, PA Almost 30 years as a professional landscaper

Roger Peterson, Owner Approved Tree Care Newport Beach, CA Has offered tree injection services for over four years

#### Easy to Earn

Adding tree care services using microinjection systems allows lawn care professionals to bring in extra profit without having to buy new equipment. With quality tree care services performed by trained staff members, lawn care companies can improve sales and help add to their bottom line.

Zellmer explains his pricing formula; "I charge a diagnostic fee of \$38 to diagnose the problem (\$50 if it's outside of my normal route). Then I write up an analysis, a price quote and make my recommendations. The capsules cost me about \$5 to \$6 each, and I charge \$16 per capsule to cover my time. In the end, it's every bit as profitable as my weed and feed services."

Mitchell does it a little differently; "I usually add 25% to the cost of the capsules, estimate how long it will take and apply our hourly service rate. I put it all together into a single line item quote to the customer." He adds, "I think you should charge more for tree care than for other services because you've taken the time to gather the knowledge." Mitchell estimates that their tree care services generate twice the margin as lawn maintenance.



#### Mauget Fast Facts

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#### **OPERATIONS PROFILE**



### All hands on deck

#### How a retired Navy officer provides reliable and quality lawn care service. **By Brooke N. Bates**

hen Mike Lenard deployed to Italy with the U.S. Navy, he couldn't find a reliable service in Northern Virginia to care for his yard in his absence.

So in 2009, the summer before he retired from the Navy as senior chief petty officer, Lenard started his own company – Lenard's Lawn Care Service – to provide the quality that was lacking.

"I knew there was a need for a quality guy, not just a mow-and-go," says Lenard, who had cut grass during high school in Texas. "I knew what I was doing already, so I just followed my passion. There was no quality guy around, and I wanted to fill that gap."

Now, Lenard's Lawn Care Service is a growing, full-service lawn care company offering maintenance, lawn care and irrigation.

The company focuses on residential work, and though Lenard doesn't target military

#### **OPERATIONS PROFILE**

homeowners specifically, his location in Chesapeake is near a major military hub – positioning him to provide reliable lawn care for others during deployment. **TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS.** Becoming a premier lawn care service didn't take any drastic measures. By simply conquering the basics – which many fledgling companies



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failed to do – Lenard's Lawn Care established a quality reputation quickly.

"We actually show up and do our job on the day that it's scheduled," Lenard says. "A lot of my current customers have let other people go because they don't do their job."

One customer – another retired Navy chief – asked Lenard to cut her lawn after her previous provider stopped showing up. For emphasis, she lifted the doormat to show him the check still waiting for the last crew.

Lenard realizes that anyone with a truck and a mower can start a lawn care company – but just because someone can cut grass doesn't mean the service is professional. That requires extra, although not extraordinary, effort – like showing up on time to do the work.

"First, you have to do a good job. Then, you start a relationship," Lenard says. "Some people try to build a relationship before doing a good job, and you can't always do that."

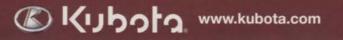
Of course, different customers have different expectations, so it's crucial to align with customers immediately. To lay the foundation, Lenard personally visits prospects to produce quotes. That initial meeting is the best opportunity to learn what customers want, and to explain why the short grass they think they want isn't conducive to the healthy lawn they really want. In other words, setting expectations is a balancing act between experience and



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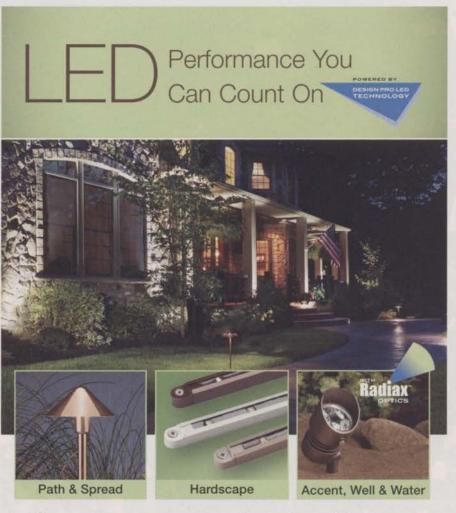
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#### **OPERATIONS PROFILE**

customer service. "During the estimates, you can get a lot of information from them, and that's also where you can really educate them," Lenard says. "If you do their yard how you want it done, that's the wrong way; that's how a lot of businesses fall flat on their face.

"You have to do their yard to their likes,



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**KICHLER** 

### Finding Business ONLINE

Most new customers come to Lenard Lawn Gare Service through referrals. In addition to neighborly word-of-mouth, more new business is coming through the company's website. Online traffic accounts for about 30 new customers a year currently about a third of Lenard's customer base.

"We've spent thousands of dollars on our website," says Mike Lenard, company owner. "We rank very well on the Internet, and that, of course, drives sales."

Lenard hired a web designer and search engine optimization expert to develop an effective website that could help potential customers find his services. Focusing on geo-local keywords, the company's website ranks high in Google search results for lawn care in Chesapeake. As the company grows, Lenard is working toward ranking well for Suffolk and Virginia Beach, as well.

Now, Lenard writes blog posts for the website and manages the company's Facebook page to reach prospects and customers alike. He spends about five hours a week managing the company's online presence, which reaps big rewards in terms of sales.

Of course, he says, "the best form of communication is face-to-face." Plus, he typically relies on email or phone as the main point-ofcontact with current customers. But an effective website and social media prosence can support that communication when face-to-face isn't possible.

"It doesn't take long to blog. It doesn't take long to Facebook," Lenard says. "You're constantly in contact with your customers anyway; it's just an extra little bit."



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#### **OPERATIONS PROFILE**



The company currently has Lenard and three employees and services residential customers.

as long as you respect the growth process of grass. If they want it short, then you have to explain to them why you can't."

However, the ultimate test isn't how much customers enjoy your explanations of ideal turf conditions. Proving quality to customers requires walking the talk by actually delivering the results they expect.

"Once you understand how they want their yard done, then you're golden," Lenard says. "Then it's just repetition."

**CONSISTENT SERVICE.** Repeating quality service can be challenging for lawn care companies – especially as you grow. Lenard's Lawn Care's footprint is quickly growing beyond Chesapeake, into Virginia Beach to the east and Suffolk to the west, as its reputation spreads.

Growth means Lenard can't service every lawn by himself, so he has to hold his three employees accountable to customers' expectations in order to maintain the Lenard standard of quality.

"I brought my military background of accountability into the civilian world," says Lenard, who personally visits customers quarterly to make sure his crews are consistently meeting their expectations.

"I might think something looks good, but it's their yard. It depends on what they think because we are only as good as our last cut."

For that reason, Lenard looks ahead to prepare for growth so that his team can continue offering an outstanding level of service without rushing off to the next job. Knowing that the company grows at least 30 percent

#### **OPERATIONS PROFILE**



When the company grows from 100 to 150 customers, a leader-in-training will drive his own truck to launch his own route. This allows a smooth transition as the company grows.

### "Some people try to build a relationship before doing a good job, and you can't always do that."

- Mike Lenard, owner of Lenard's Lawn Care Service

each season, Lenard can schedule appropriately – just enough work to keep his crew busy for eight hours a day.

Lenard's current crew consists of a leader and a leader-in-training – who both brought at least five years' experience to the company. With the help of one other employee, they service the company's 100 customers.

As soon as the customer base hits 150 lawns, the leader-in-training will move into another truck – which is already waiting in the wings – to launch his own route. This allows the company to expand smoothly without sacrificing service.

"That's why I have two crew leaders on a truck, so when I split them apart, they've gotten the same training," Lenard says. "So I've already staked out the first three crew leaders; we've just got to train up their assistants."

Lenard sees his staff as a squadron that

he's responsible for – another value honed in the military. He's not just providing for his family, but three other families, as well. In fact, now in his sixth year of business, Lenard still hasn't paid himself one cent. Relying instead on his military retirement pay, all the profits go back into the company to promote growth.

Lenard's military background of unfaltering accountability and team-minded responsibility sets his company apart from competitors. But the retired senior chief is careful not to become a militant drill sergeant who barks orders.

"That's one thing you can't be: You can't be hard on everybody all the time, or you're not going to keep employees," he says.

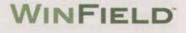
"You want the best, and if you pay them well and take care of them, then everything falls in line. They'll follow the rules as long as they know you've got their back." L&L

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Kyle (left), Dirk II (center) and Dirk Bakhuyzen III wanted to make sure they had a system with checkpoints in place before Kyle and Dirk III took more involved roles at the company.

### The fine art of FAMILY BUSINESS

We talked to family-run operations about how they managed through ownership changes and leadership transitions.

#### By Kristen Hampshire

here's nothing simple about succession in a family business. It's personal. It's managing a legacy, and transitioning ownership of a previous generation's dream so the next guard of leaders can preserve it, change it and mold it into a continued success. This month, Lawn & Landscape spoke with companies that have completed ownership transitions, or are in the process of redefining family members' roles in the company as they perpetuate the business. Here's how they managed tough discussions, created a strategy for transition and executed their plans.

#### PROCARE Landscape Management

FORMULAS FOR SUCCESS

Dirk Bakhuyzen III, general manager Location: Byron Center, Mich. Established: 1989 Employees: 40 (up to 80 during winter) 2013 Revenues: \$3.6 million Customers: 100% commercial Services: landscape maintenance, lawn care, landscape construction, snow and ice removal, irrigation

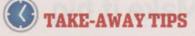
### Know your role

hen the Bakhuyzen boys, Dirk III and Kyle, began seriously discussing succession with their father, founder of PROCARE Landscape Management, the three of them knew they needed a a system with checkpoints.

Otherwise, how could Dirk Bakhuyzen

II, president, be sure his sons would take the business to the next level and succeed?

"I don't think my dad would have wanted to unleash the reins without a process in place, and I don't think he would even think about moving into retirement down the road," says Bakhuyzen III, who moved into the general manager position about five years ago with his brother taking over operations.



Start with structure. Fine-tuning key business functions gave the founder confidence that, in his absence, the company would succeed because the infrastructure was prepared for change. "At the end of the day, it's usually not a problem, it's a process problem, and if we stick with this process we can be successful," Bakhuyzen III says.

Stage family meetings. Consistent bimonthly family meetings have changed the way the Bakhuyzens air concerns and communicate with each other. An agenda, the financials and a list of goals keeps the group on target. "The goal is for everyone to leave happy and excited about the future," Bakhuyzen III says.

Timing the transition. "The transition needs to be exciting for all parties involved, and if it's not, then it's probably not the right time to do it," Bakhuyzen III says.

The Bakhuyzen boys had played various roles in the company over the years, showing their commitment to the family business.

But to take their involvement to the next level, and prepare for Dirk II's eventual retirement, there needed to be more clearly defined roles tied to the organization's strategy.

So, PROCARE decided to become a licensee of LandOpt, a network of landscape contractors that employ a business operating system based on building four pillars of success in the areas of sales and marketing, human resources, operations and business financials. By working through those four pillars, the Bakhuyzens strengthened key business functions and identified roles and responsibilities for leaders.

"Prior to having a system in place, there was a bit of overlapping – my dad doing this and maybe me overlapping his duties," Bakhuyzen III says. "This (system) helped us identify roles and responsibilities, and put the right people in those roles. It allowed us to more accurately identify our strengths and weaknesses, and figure out where each of us would be successful." At the same time, the Bakhuyzens engaged in personality assessments to tease out their natural tendencies in the business environment, and how they would behave in certain situations.

"That really helped us look at where we fit in at the company as we considered the future and where we wanted the company to be," Bakhuyzen III says.

Then, the Bakhuyzens began transitioning into their new roles. Dirk II played an active account manager role for years, and he began transitioning into a president/owner role focused on the big picture.

"That has really helped the synergy of our company," Bakhuyzen III says, who moved into the GM position.

"My brother is strong operationally, whereas my natural ability is more on the sales and business side of things," Bakhuyzen III says. "That was very evident from the beginning. Kyle is good at dealing with the equipment and customers, and account management."

Bakhuyzen III says he wasn't completely prepared to step into the GM role at first. "I had to learn," he says. "I adapted and was challenged along the way." Attending training and seminars through LandPro has fortified his skill base.

Meanwhile, the business holds bi-weekly meetings when Bakhuyzen III sits down with PROCARE's account managers. "I do a lot of listening – listening to their successes and challenges so I can provide feedback and we can lay out action items that need to happen."

Also, the family holds bi-monthly meetings where they review financials and goals, set targets and discuss issues they're facing.

"You have to stop to really talk about things, whether financial performance or other part of the business, to keep the transition moving along," Bakhuyzen III says.

Ultimately, having a process to strengthen the various aspects of the business has helped keep the family on track during transition.

"I don't think we could be successful in the transition without it," Bakhuyzen III says.

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### Make it big

#### Medina Lawncare

Carlos Medina Jr., president and CEO Location: Chicago, Ill. Established: 1967 Employees: 31 2013 Revenues: \$2.1 to \$2.7 (3-year average) Customers: 40% commercial, 50% residential, 10% other install Services: lawn care, landscaping, sod care, hydroseeding, container gardening, snow removal

hen Carlos Medina approached his father 16 years ago and offered to buy the family business, his dad and mom – sitting at the kitchen table/ office – were surprised. Then, Medina laid out his plans: The first thing he would do is move the company out of the kitchen, invest in new, larger equipment and go after big jobs. His father, Medina Sr., was skeptical.

"My mom said, OK, and my dad gruffled about it a bit," Medina admits of his initial presentation. "I told him, 'I don't want to just cut grass. I want to do install, I want to diversify.'

"I wanted to continue the family business and make the business something different," Medina says.

Medina promised his father a weekly paycheck for as long as the company existed. This was an appealing offer following the breakup of the Medina Brothers, the company Medina Sr. had run with his two brothers since 1967 before they went their own ways. Since that time, the company hadn't been the same. Each brother, Medina's father included, went out on his own.

Medina had worked in his father's business beginning at age 12, but had pursued his own ventures during adulthood: buying and selling a restaurant, running several successful carwashes, and working full-time in the motion picture industry designing, installing and duplicating landscaping sets for movies like "Home Alone," "Transformers" and "The Fugitive."

"I had been working on movies for so many years on a large scale that I wanted to



From left: Carlos Medina Jr., Carlos Medina Sr. and Sergio Medina.

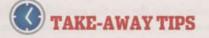
bring those ideas to our small, family business," Medina says.

The time was right for Medina Sr. to agree to his son's offer to take over as president and CEO, and they decided on a reasonable financial package that involved Medina Jr. paying his father a sum, then promising a paycheck for life.

Then, Medina moved the family business out of the kitchen – and since that time, has grown the firm from an average \$150,000-\$200,000 annual revenue to \$2.7 million.

Medina immediately applied a "think big" mentality to the business. "I put employees in uniforms and began advertising," he says. The trucks became moving billboards. Never before had the firm put itself out there like this, Medina says. "We flooded the market with as much information as possible for a few years, then we stopped and the word-ofmouth referrals started coming in," he says.

His parents never planned on marketing the company, and they saw the results of Medina's efforts. But initiating so much change so quickly was difficult for Medina Sr. to watch at times. He had to step back after running the business for 20-plus years. "I remember telling dad, 'You're getting your paycheck, just relax and enjoy the ride. Let's



Name the boss. "There can only be one person in charge," Medina says, relating that in the early days after taking over his fathers business, Medina Sr. sometimes tried to overstep his decisions. "I never wanted to disrespect him," Medina says of communicating to his father the importance of one owner, one message. "However you put it or do it, there can only be one person who has the last word."

Communicate the change. Medina had big ideas for the family business and wanted to implement many of them immediately: a dedicated office, a marketing campaign, larger equipment capable of performing bigger jobs. He laid this out on the table before the deal was sealed so his family understood his intentions for the firm. Clear communication along the way has been important for helping the older generation understand the why behind Medina's decisions.

Agree on terms. Medina offered his father a couple of options for buying out the business: a lump sum, or a modest amount followed by a paycheck that would last as long as Medina is running the business. His father chose the latter. Medina laughs, "That has cost me to times more!" But the arrangement allows his father to continue being involved, and to have a strong sense of purpose. He shows up at the office every day at 5:30 a.m. on the mark. He'll never stop "earning" that check.

see what we can do," Medina says.

He also had to tell his father: "There cannot be two bosses at this place," and, "Relax, you've done this all these years, let me do it now. I don't want you to work anymore. I don't want you to worry about payroll or fuel costs or employees."

Easy to say for Medina Jr., difficult to do for Medina Sr., who still shows up at 5:30 a.m. and is the first to unlock and open the gate for business in the morning. "He has never been able to relax," Medina says. "To this day, he tries to tell me things, and I'll say, 'Dad, stop, please."

All of this is loving, respectful banter.

Medina knows that his father is proud of how far the company has progressed, it's just

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not easy to step back. But communicating to employees "who's boss" has been important. "There can't be two bosses telling the employees different things," Medina says, relating that the first five years following the ownership change there was some friction. But immediately after taking over, Medina's brother, Sergio, and wife jumped on board.

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The new school renamed the business Medina Lawncare and was inspired to continue their father's legacy.

Meanwhile, Medina assured his dad that he had earned his stripes in business, and could apply what he knew to raising up the family business. "I had run five successful businesses that I bought and sold," Medina says. "So I had a proven track record."

In particular, Medina had grown one of his car washes by diversifying into selling auto accessories, window tinting and more. "In my mind, offering the customer just one thing was not enough," he says.

Medina has taken the same approach with Medina Lawncare. After taking ownership of the family firm, Medina's wife launched a complementary business, Chicago Xteriors, an outdoor facilities contractor specializing in pavers, concrete and fencing, including wrought iron custom built balconies. The companies work in tandem to provide clients with a broader range of services.

Medina Lawncare's commercial clients include McDonald's, Chicago Public Schools, Cook County and various developers and management companies. Time and a track record have shown Medina Sr. that he can step back and enjoy the company's success. After the first year of taking over the business, Medina doubled revenues. Within five years, he increased revenues to more than \$1 million.

And though it may never be easy for Medina Sr. to be on payroll rather than managing it, his son taking over the business has resulted in a strong bond as the family works to preserve the legacy.

In a video Medina created to commemorate his father, the voiceover tells of one man, traveling 2,430 miles as a U.S. immigrant from Los Herrera's Durango Mexico, three generations ago, with a common goal to serve Chicago.

"We work really hard as a family," Medina says. L&L

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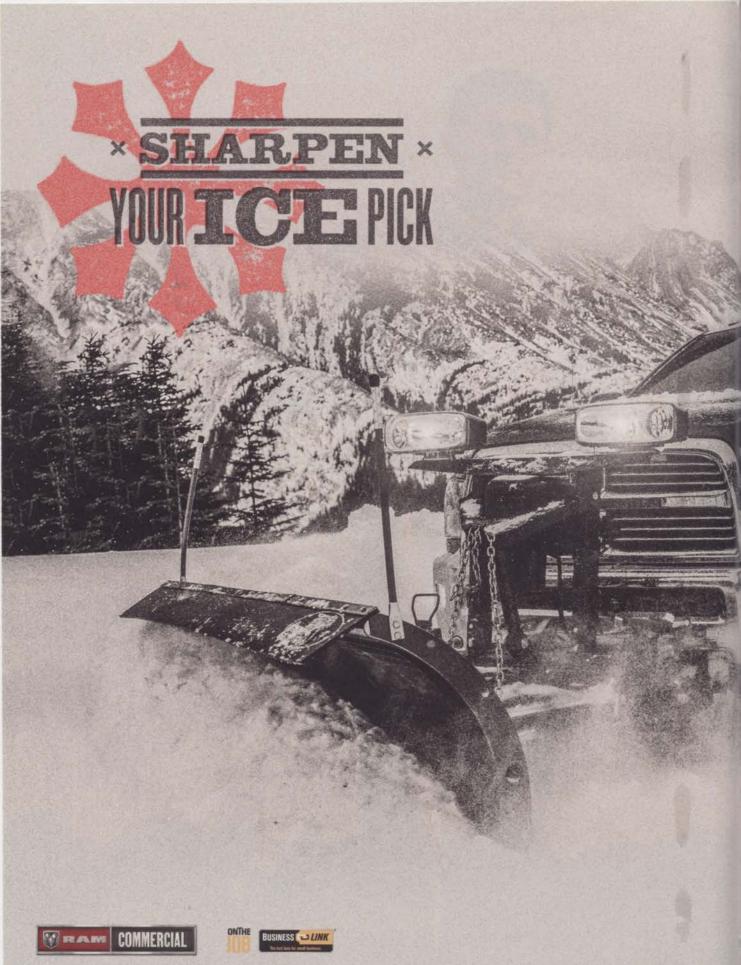
In the last six years, Bland Landscaping took on *death*, *recession, deception* and more. Today, the firm is *stronger*, *smarter* and *poised* to have a record year.

# BACK FROM THE BRINK

Story by KRISTEN HAMPSHIRE Photography by BRIAN OLSON

RIGHT: Kurt Bland, left, and his brother, Matt, made drastic changes at Bland Landscaping to fight through a number of challenging years that nearly ended the company.





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Inspiring communities to plant and grow together



# Momentum for change

By Dr. Charlie Hall

s America in Bloom begins a new year, I am happy to share with you our new vision statement that genuinely reflects our multifold mission:

America in Bloom envisions communities across the country as welcoming and vibrant places to live, work and play – benefiting from colorful plants and trees, enjoying clean environments, celebrating heritage and planting pride through volunteerism.

Our officers for the next two years are: Dr. Charlie Hall, profes-

sor at Texas A&M University and the new America in Bloom president, and Vice President Katy Moss Warner, who has diligently served as chair of the symposium committee for several years now. We also have two new members coming onto the board, each with vast experience in the horticultural industry. Dr. Marvin Miller continues serving on the board in his new role as past president.

America in Bloom is enjoying a LOT of momentum moving forward. In 2014, more cities are participating in the National Awards Program than any year since the recession. America in Bloom continues to be the catalyst for great accomplishments

in municipalities all across America. In all of our participating cities, and even in some of the neighboring communities, AIB has had a "miracle effect" of bringing people together in ways never before imagined. By working within the AIB framework and with AIB guidance, citizens have coalesced into communities of volunteers working toward the common goal of planting pride and have harvested fruitful benefits from their collective actions.

We are also proud to announce an exciting new endeavor to encourage and recognize efforts in improving quality of life through a photography contest that carries a \$1,500 first prize.

We are continuing our emphasis on the value of plants and quality landscapes from an economic, environmental, health and well-being perspective. Our 'Discovering the Surprising Side of Plants' brochure is more popular than ever and does a great job of highlighting these benefits.

Of great significance is a grant that AIB has received from the Canadian National Railroad Corporation, which is currently the largest sponsor of our sister organization, Communities in Bloom,

Hall

in Canada. The centerpiece of the grants program is for tree planting (because CN uses 600,000 trees each year just for railroad ties), but they recognize that shrubs and flowers are also important to communities. CN's program is titled From the Ground Up and will provide funding of up to \$25,000 for the greening of six America in Bloom communities along its rail lines in the U.S. Projects will address local issues and provide a means for engagement at the local level since local community groups and service clubs will join AIB in support of the projects. The projects will

> also address concerns related to water conservation, naturalization, stewardship or environmentally friendly transportation. We are particularly pleased to be selected as a partner with CN to manage the grants program that closely aligns with AIB's core values and mission.

> Since its inception 13 years ago, AIB has used 100 percent of its sponsorship funding to operate the national awards program that provides onsite, in-person coaching and mentoring for participating towns and cities of all sizes. Sponsor funds have been augmented by significant in-kind contributions. Countless hours of volunteer efforts on the

part of our judges and board, as well as thousands of volunteers in participating cities, have spread our mission's reach even more. Our participants also leverage their local investment in the AIB program as many mayors and city managers have stated that the value of the judges' evaluation is worth many times the cost of program registration.

Each week, news about America in Bloom appears in the media. I encourage you to peruse the articles on our website and share the amazing impacts with others who may be interested in America in Bloom!

Lastly, we are indeed grateful for the support of all our participants, judges, sponsors and staff – indeed, all of our volunteers – who work together to strengthen the fabric of American cities and towns. Literally 100 percent of your contributions support our mission, and nearly all of these dollars go directly to program costs. Many thanks to each of you for making a difference! 400

The author holds the Ellison Chair in International Floriculture at Texas A&M University and is president of America in Bloom's board of directors.

Cover photos (clockwise from top left) are courtesy of Fayetteville in Bloom, Arroyo Grande in Bloom and Holland in Bloom



## Inspiring communities to plant and grow together

# Raising the bar

Blooms draw visitors downtown in the tulip town of Holland, Michigan. • By Anne Nagro •

olland, Mich. is known for its spring Tulip Time Festival, when the charming town celebrates its Dutch heritage and millions of tulips burst into bloom.

It's a big reason why Forbes magazine named Holland one of the 15 prettiest towns in America last year. But Holland is more than tulips. The community's "spectacular" floral displays, crafted from more than 160,000 annuals that are grown, planted and tended by city employees, peak in mid-August, says Parks Supervisor Steve Zwiep.

The city entered the America in Bloom competition in 2011 to gain recognition for this and other efforts. And recognition it got: Not only has the city of 33,000 won its population category three years in a row, but it won the overall award for tidiness in 2011. In 2012, it received awards for environmental effort and best community gardening program, and was honored with the Circle of Champions designation, one of only nine of 200 cities to earn the honor. Last year, Holland received the overall award for historic preservation.

Civic pride is "a way of life in Holland," but the local AIB initiative - called Holland in Bloom - ramped it up, Zwiep says. More residents are improving their lawns and putting out containers of flowers. "It's amazing how that works," he says.

It's been a boon to the local economy, too. "People are now coming downtown" for Thursday night street performances, which are "phenomenally successful," to dine at new outdoor cafes, and just to see the flowers, Zwiep says. Exquisitely designed containers and beds are planned by Shelly DeVries, who operates the city's greenhouse, he says.

The city, merchants and building owners



always have prioritized making downtown beautiful, but Holland in Bloom "has helped us raise it to another level," says Downtown Manager Dana Kollewehr. The number of planters and plantings on private property in the downtown area has increased, as have the variety of plants being used, she says. The result is an appealing environment that draws people back and attracts new, quality businesses, Kollewehr says.

This year, Holland in Bloom held a Blizzards to Blooms garden competition for residents, and a build-your-own rain barrel workshop. The second annual "tulip pull" let residents fill 10-gallon buckets of bulbs for \$10. People helped clean up public flower beds and got a great value on bulbs to replant at home, while proceeds went to support Holland in Bloom initiatives.

Another benefit of AIB: the judges' evaluation report, which is "chock full of information" on "how to improve your city," Zwiep says. For the cost of the entry fee, a city could hire a consultant for two hours; AIB judges are on site for two days, Zwiep says.

Based on judges' past suggestions, Holland has hung flower baskets in Centennial Park, added flower pods to the park's koi pond and modified the way it cares for urban trees, he says. Other initiatives include a tree canopy study conducted by a local university and an incentive program to replace ash trees lost to emerald ash borer.

This spring, the city completed a \$1-million restoration of its iconic Windmill DeZwaan, located in scenic Windmill Island Gardens. The 252-year-old structure arrived in Holland from the Netherlands 50 years ago and is the only authentic, working Dutch windmill in the U.S.

All these initiatives are making a powerful impact on Holland. But Zwiep, who grew up working in family-owned greenhouses, is driven to win one honor in particular: AIB's overall award for floral display. "That is my goal," he says. w

The author is a freelance writer in Gurnee, Illinois.

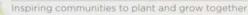
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# Inspiring beauty

Civic pride is community-wide in the small river town of Gallipolis, Ohio, and it shows. • By **Anne Nagro** •

hen the 3,600 citizens of Gallipolis get behind an idea, great things happen, especially when it comes to making their lovely Ohio River town a more beautiful and vibrant place to live.

So when Lori Kelly of Bob's Market and Greenhouses suggested the town enter the America in Bloom competition in 2006, residents lined up to help. Members of garden clubs and civic leagues, local merchants and city officials formed Gallipolis in Bloom to guide their efforts.

The group's initial beautification project was an array of 40 light pole planters for downtown, the block-long City Park and the historic bandstand. It was so successful Gallipolis won the overall award for floral displays.

"The first year we thought this was all about flowers," says Gallipolis in Bloom President Beverly Dunkle. "Well, it's not." Judges evaluated everything from how the city looked to the infrastructure and ordinances that make for a thriving community, she says.

Initially, the judges seemed "very critical," Dunkle says, citing the uncomfortable feeling of having outsiders identify issues to which you've become blind. But, "getting mad makes you do things."

Gallipolis expanded its beautification efforts and continued to enter AIB contests. In 2011, it won its population category, plus the best adaptive reuse award for the 118-year old Ariel Theatre, now home to The Ohio Valley Symphony and a performing arts center.

Last year, it was recognized for best hanging baskets and overall floral display. Dunkle received the Community Champions Award, and Gallipolis was inducted into the Circle of Champions for winning more than three major honors. Residents are more motivated than ever. "It's been pretty contagious," says City Manager Randy Finney. They're cleaning up yards and "planting flowers to match our flowers," he says.

Bob's Market stocks a special Gallipolis in Bloom section, which usually sells out early, Dunkle says.

Competitions for yard of the week, backyard beauty and business of the week have grown from a handful of participants to close to 100. Businesses sponsor the contests; local civic groups do the judging. Recognizing people's hard work keeps the motivation high, Finney says.

Community planting days in the fall and spring now have so many volunteers that Gallipolis in Bloom had to create a map and assign planting areas. And this spring, nearly 60 students, along with civic organizations, the government, businesses and neighbors, planted a new organic community garden.

The town has nearly doubled its light pole baskets and added ground planters. Earlier this year, it unveiled a beautiful riverfront sign. Up until now, recreational boaters and tour boat passengers couldn't identify Gallipolis unless they knew the river well, Finney says. The sign was suggested by AIB judges in 2006 and an anonymous donor plus the coordination of Gallipolis in Bloom's Karen Smith made it a reality.

Judges' recommendations have resulted in programs the town might not have pursued, like taking inventories of trees and streetlights. Their comprehensive reports help the city plan for the future.

Support from businesses has been vital. Bob's Market employees design and maintain the light pole planters and play a role in just about every project. "We probably couldn't do it without their help," Finney says.

The town's beauty and the care with which it is maintained enhances the family atmosphere, which makes visitors want to extend their stay and come back, he adds. <sup>309</sup>

The author is a freelance writer in Gurnee, Illinois,



# A community in bloom

Holliston, Massachusetts, grows a spirit of collaboration while beautifying the town's outdoor spaces. • By **Kristen Hampshire** •

hant a sense of pride in the community. Collaborate to create a more vibrant, attractive, sustainable environment that drives the economy and encourages residents to engage with each other, and the outdoors.

That's the goal of America in Bloom, and the town of Holliston, Mass., has embraced this vision as an award-winner, also earning a special honor for the best volunteer recognition program. Holliston adopted the AIB program two years ago when two horticulture-minded residents and Mark Ahronian, president of Ahronian Landscaping & Design, launched the effort in town.

Mary Greendale, who has an agricultural background, and retired postal worker and gardener Bobby Blair approached Ahronian about co-chairing the Holliston in Bloom committee. Ahronian, who grew up in the city and has run his business there for 27 years, offered his enthusiastic support.

"America in Bloom is not just about flowers, it's about community, and uniting people for a cause, and accomplishing goals that help the entire city," Ahronian says. "It creates more of an appreciation and value for what we do as an industry," he adds, noting that the town learns how to better mitigate issues like soil erosion and runoff. Meanwhile, residents take ownership in creating vibrant spaces around town, and businesses and local organizations back beautification efforts with funding, time and labor.

"We all want to have a healthier community where people are engaged and shop locally. We feel more part of the town," Ahronian says.

The visible impact of AIB is evident when you enter town and are greeted by elegant signage: Welcome to Holliston. The Holliston Lions Club donated funds for the first new sign in 2012 and last year, the town added two more signs, gaining support again from the Lions, and also Celebrate Holliston.

The snowball effect of community involvement continued as AIB efforts grew. Last year, Holliston cleaned up an eyesore next to its "rail trail" and transformed it into a park named after Bobby Blair with a gazebo where local concerts are held. "It was town land that was beat up with broken tree branches and junk. It was an eyesore," Ahronian says. "Now, it is this beautiful area that people can go sit. You see residents walking along the rail trail through Blair Park. It's just amazing."

AIB judges communities on the upkeep of its park spaces, overall appearance of the town and land conservancy, Ahronian says. Landscaping and flowers are just as important as giving a nod to the local heritage.

In Holliston, the centuries-old town hall benefited from a functional, "age-appropriate" enhancement when the AIB committee laid plans to create three new granite steps from the building's side door, a new brick pathway and patio space with gardens and furniture. The project made traversing the parking lot to reach the town hall safer, and created a gathering space for locals.

The town hall project exemplified AIB's collaborative vision. The highway department donated granite and labor to prepare the grounds. Ahronian's crews installed the steps and patio. The town's garden club, Holliston in Bloom committee and Holliston Marigold Fund committee donated plants, time and labor to install new gardens in the patio space. A local construction company donated money to purchase new furniture.

"By collaborating and breaking down the project into smaller pieces, it became a community event," Ahronian says.

Now, people in town can meet at the patio space outside of town hall. They can enjoy a lunch outdoors, park safely in the lot and walk downtown to enjoy the local shops.

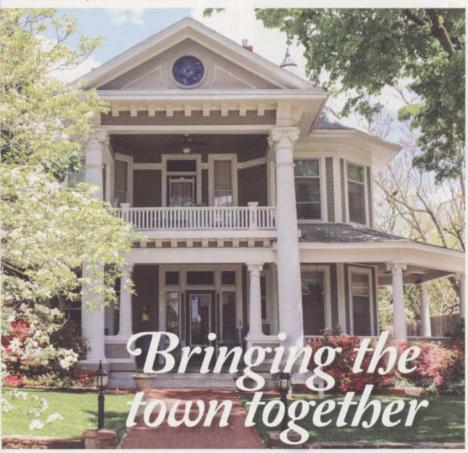
The program is spreading a desire to contribute and there is plenty to do. Everyone pitches in, from the local organizations to the parks department and businesses. "What I see is this unbelievable uniting of people and positive energy," Ahronian says.

Holliston will share this energy with the country when it hosts the 2017 AIB Symposium. "Everyone really steps up to help make this town look special," Ahronian says. 29

The author is a freelance writer in Bay Village, Ohio.



Inspiring communities to plant and grow together



# AIB is about much more than winning for the town of Fayetteville, Arkansas. • By **Deborah Abrams Kaplan** •

hen Marilyn Heifner talks about America in Bloom, what comes to mind is community pride. Pride when the judges come to visit, and pride when looking at their increased quality of life.

The biggest benefit for the city, says Heifner, executive director of the Fayetteville Advertising and Promotion Commission, is the thorough evaluation the judges give through the six AIB criteria of overall impression, environmental efforts, heritage preservation, urban forestry, landscaped areas and floral displays. "The judges are extremely knowledgeable about a lot of things," she says. For the entry fee, the Arkansas city gets 10 times the value through the judges' extensive report, Heifner says. Taking advice from one of the early reports, the city hired an over enforcer and later hired a second. The over enforcers have done tree inventories for the city's annual tree giveaway and established a tree preservation ordinance.

The AIB committee teamed up with the police department and junior high school for a program to remove graffiti from property around town. That was successful and turned into a public art project, and now they're painting all of the city's utility boxes and the storm drains. Fayetteville, a town of approximately 77,000 people, has won numerous AIB awards since 2002, and is one of 11 cities in the Circle of Champions.

The pride that Fayetteville residents get from the program, Heifner says, means that "a lot of people have started planting flowers and developing their own gardens," in addition to volunteering with the local AIB program. Heifner says that the pride contributes to other city efforts to preserve the past and create sustainable initiatives like LED light bulb giveaways and recycling initiatives. Some food-related programs focus on growing and distributing produce and teaching students the importance of healthful food, with demonstration gardens at schools.

Their AIB program has also been helpful in bringing the community together. "The community becomes publicly driven, not politically driven," she says. "That's been great as far as bringing together diverse elements. I'm one of the poster children for that." She explained that 20 years ago, Fayetteville had a contentious issue that divided the community, with Heifner leading one side. After coming together as a community through their AIB organization, the two sides realized they had a lot in common and are now working together, she says.

Heifner, who has been involved with AIB since it started in 2002 and is on the board of directors, says that the best AIB training comes from attending the national conference. "You can learn so much from them and you can see the efforts that others have made," she says.

While the rewards are many, it's a steep learning curve to start, and a lot of work to prepare for the judges. In addition to creating a book on what they've done, they also need to carefully plan an itinerary to highlighting their accomplishments. "In the end, it's worth it even if you don't win the top prize," she says. "Your community wins. It improves the quality of life for the citizens." #

The author is a freelance writer in Westfield, New Jersey.

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#### Use these tips for a better shot at winning. • By **Evelyn Alemanni** •

merica in Bloom is all about improving quality of life in American cities and uses the format of an awards program to accomplish that. Each year, towns, cities, neighborhoods, business districts and university campuses vie for top honors. America in Bloom celebrates and recognizes the great things our participants do to "plant pride" in America.

A team of two specially trained judges visit participating cities and spend two days touring, meeting leaders and volunteers, and evaluating volunteers' achievements. They write a detailed report which is emailed on the Monday after the awards. The America in Bloom National Awards and Symposium is held in a different city each fall.

Each participant is eligible for the following awards:

**Bloom Rating:** Each entrant receives a bloom rating (1-5) based on their score.

Population Category Award: This

award goes to the participant that achieves the highest score in each of the eight population categories.

Outstanding Achievement Awards: These are considered the "best of the best" in each of the six evaluated criteria: floral displays, landscaped areas, urban forestry, environmental efforts, heritage preservation and overall impressions. Each of these awards goes to only one of all entrants in all of the population categories. Entrants are encouraged to self-nominate for this award.

John R. Holmes III Community Champion Award: This award recognizes an individual who exemplifies community leadership through actions that reflect America in Bloom's mission. The award recipient, who must be from a city that has participated or is currently participating in the program, will have demonstrated a vision and selfless commitment to moving the community forward. Nominations are encouraged from all participants. YouTube Video Award: Many entrants use the power of YouTube to showcase how participating in America in Bloom has impacted them. The winning video will be announced and shown at the awards.

**Photography Contest:** This contest carries a prize of \$1,500 for the images that best demonstrate beautification efforts in American cities.

**Circle of Champions Award:** This very prestigious designation is given to entrants that have achieved a combination of three population category awards and/or three outstanding achievement awards.

**Special Awards:** Each year, a number of additional special awards are given and they change year to year. Entrants do not know what they are until the winners are announced.

For many of the awards, winning is as simple as studying the evaluation form (yes, it's like an open-book test), then strategizing how to show the judges your best efforts and progress in each area. The America in Bloom website offers several on-line, ondemand webinars to help new participants understand the process <u>bit.ly/1sf7w6M</u>.

Awards, trophies and plaques aside, so many participants tell us that they have "won" just by entering and using the America in Bloom framework to unite volunteers and move forward with constructive projects that have visible results.

Having a deadline of a judges' visit helps assure that projects get finished, and there's the incentive of a detailed, written report that provides guidance for future efforts.

One important thing to remember: you can't win without participating. So get online now and order the free America in Bloom Startup Kit that has everything you need to know to get the program started right where you live at <u>bit.ly/1svKMkP</u>.

Or, go ahead and register for next year's program and start thinking about how your town can earn some special awards at <u>bit.ly/UW2YXH</u>. 99

The author is an America in Bloom board member and international judge. She is the author of the "Fleurs du Jour" series.



# Much more than a beautiful city

Arroyo Grande, California, is building strong partnerships through its America in Bloom program.

#### By Deborah Abrams Kaplan

s the mayor of Arroyo Grande since 2002, Tony Ferrara discovered America in Bloom three years into his leadership, and he's still excited about it almost a decade later. "This organization has been absolutely amazing," he says. It's helped them build community partnerships with city government, service organizations and a wide array of volunteers within his community, tapping into an existing network of local talent.

Arroyo Grande, a town of about 17,000, has won numerous awards, including an induction into the Circle of Champions.

Friendships developed and volunteers took pride in their work, increasing the overall commitment to making the city better. "With just a few hours a day on a Saturday morning, we can step into a project that needs a lot of work, and step out three hours later and see an incredible difference," he says. The benefit of competition is one of the takeaways for Ferrara and Arroyo Grande. "It's not just a competition with other cities, but a recognition that you're essentially competing with yourself to make your city better," he says. Judges come from various parts of the country for a two day visit, with backgrounds in areas like landscape and historic preservation. "They come into your community with a fresh set of eyes. They see things you don't see on a daily basis. You see things as they are, not as they could be."

The judges leave an evaluation, which has become Arroyo Grande's annual work plan. "You'd pay someone a lot of money to come in and do the same thing. It's an element of the program that's so invaluable," he says. While their organization doesn't follow up on every recommendation, they do follow up on many. Some require additional resources or city government involvement. "But because that partnership exists, in most cases those



Left: The town's entrance sign greets visitors. Above: Bio-swale captures runoff from an adjacent parking lot and filters the water before it drains into the Arroyo Grande Creek.

resources can become available," he says.

Ferrara can list some of the changes the city has made:

 Standardizing and redesigning their city's entrance signs.

 Creating a self-guided historic walking tour to promote the town's buildings available as a website download.

 Forming a public art committee and commissioning a mural depicting their agricultural heritage.

· Revamping their community garden

Aside from the town looking better, Ferrara says the AIB awards have been a good marketing tool to encourage tourism and business development. They showcase their city nationally through the AIB website and signs in town displaying their awards.

One reason they've been successful, Ferrara says, is that they found the right leader. The organization also must be able to stand on its own as a nonprofit, so that it can accept taxdeductible donations rather than operating through city government.

"Those chartered under city government are often cut when budgets are analyzed. "That's why it's important for the community to own the organization," he says.

Even after nine years of program participation, Ferrara says the enthusiasm is still there for AIB. "For nine years, we've had an increase in volunteers and the same core group continues to exist. It's much, much more than just planting flowers in the ground. It's a way to build enthusiasm, commitment and dedication in the community. I don't know where we'd be without AIB today." ==>

The author is a freelance writer in Westfield, New Jersey.

Urban

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Forestry

Communities like Madisonville, Kentucky, and Warrenville, Illinois, are showing off their ecological and beautification efforts in AIB's YouTube contest.



# Put your city in the spotlight

The annual YouTube and photo contests give another chance to take home a prize. • By **Evelyn Alemanni** •

f you see it, you'll believe it. And not just that, you might even get inspired. That's what America in Bloom is doing with its annual YouTube Video Contest and Photo Contest. Both are intended to showcase the benefits of America in Bloom participation that more than 200 towns across America have enjoyed since 2002.

These benefits include cleaner downtowns and neighborhoods, less graffiti, increased awareness of the environment and efforts to reduce our carbon footprint, more flowers, better heritage preservation and increased care for the urban forest. And of course, America in Bloom towns all work on installing and maintaining attractive landscapes and floral displays. In short, it's all about quality of life. Showcasing these efforts through both photography and video contests lets participants brag about their accomplishments in their media of choice, and each contest offers a \$1,500 prize!

The YouTube Video Contest, started five years ago, has been a popular way for participating towns to show their enthusiasm for the program and talk about what it has meant to them. Each video is two minutes or less. Quite a few can be viewed on the America in Bloom website and others are on YouTube.

To help participants prepare their videos, a free on-demand webinar is available on the America in Bloom website with tips and guidelines for putting together a short video.

These videos are a remarkable resource for

towns that are interested in learning what America in Bloom can mean to them.

If you love to take pictures and spend a lot of time out and about where you live, you've probably managed to catch just the right light and composition on a variety of subjects. Sometimes chance photos are even better than professionally staged pictures. That's why America in Bloom has created a contest that lets photographers of all experience levels submit a portfolio of up to 18 images exemplifying what's great in America in Bloom towns. The subject matter is broad and includes floral displays, landscaped areas, urban forestry, environmental efforts, heritage preservation and overall impression in the areas that are evaluated by America in Bloom judges including municipal, business and residential sectors.

All the videos and photos will be on display at the America in Bloom National Awards and Symposium held on October 2-4 in Philadelphia, Pa. and will be available on the America in Bloom website shortly afterward.

The author is an America in Bloom board member and international judge. She is the author of the "Fleurs du Jour" series.

# 96 THE HORTICULTURE INDUSTRY'S X TO BUILD YOUR X BUSINESS any way you look at it.



# Tools to succeed

America in Bloom has all kinds of resources to help your community make the most of the program.

By Evelyn Alemanni •

merica in Bloom is all about engaging and inspiring, so we make sure you have the resources you need in your community to make your hometown the best it can be.

Perhaps you've already decided to take the plunge and enter your town, neighborhood, business district or college campus in the 2015 awards program. What's next? America in Bloom offers a wide range of free resources to walk you through the process. Or you might be an AIB "alumnus" and want to stay on top of best practices.

You can start with the free America in Bloom Startup Kit which includes everything you need: a participation guide, a CD with customizable presentations, a sample evaluation form, ideas for involving the entire community and even customizable posters and postcards. There's even a special version of the kit for nurseries, growers and garden centers that want to get their town involved.

The America in Bloom website has many free tools to use. If you need to make presentations to local groups, customizable PowerPoint presentations, that include speaker's notes, are available online for you at <u>bit.ly/1pXcQZQ</u>. Many towns decorate their gateways and main streets with signs and banners, so America in Bloom offers attractive, professionally designed banner artwork that each participant can customize for their own needs.

For guidance on how to participate in the program and other information related to the evaluated criteria, free on-line, on-demand webinars are available on the America in Bloom website. Each month, more than 14,000 people enjoy receiving



AIB's free e-newsletter. It includes gardening and community beautification news,

information about current and past participating communities and articles on a multitude of resources including grants, fundraising

ideas, and community projects. You can request it at <u>bit.ly/1sfjk96</u>.

The AIB website also has information on grant opportunities and articles related to all the evaluated criteria. These articles have been recommended by our judges and board, saving readers the time of doing their own searches on these topics.

The annual America in Bloom National Awards and Symposium offers attendees a unique opportunity to gain insight into what makes the host city special, and to meet extraordinary people who are making

America also h

loom

communities. They also hear presentations by inspirational and knowledgeable speakers offering their insights into what it

a difference in their

takes to "plant price" in our communities. In addition, there are often walking tours or bus tours to a variety of sites. Everyone is invited to attend – past, present and future participants.

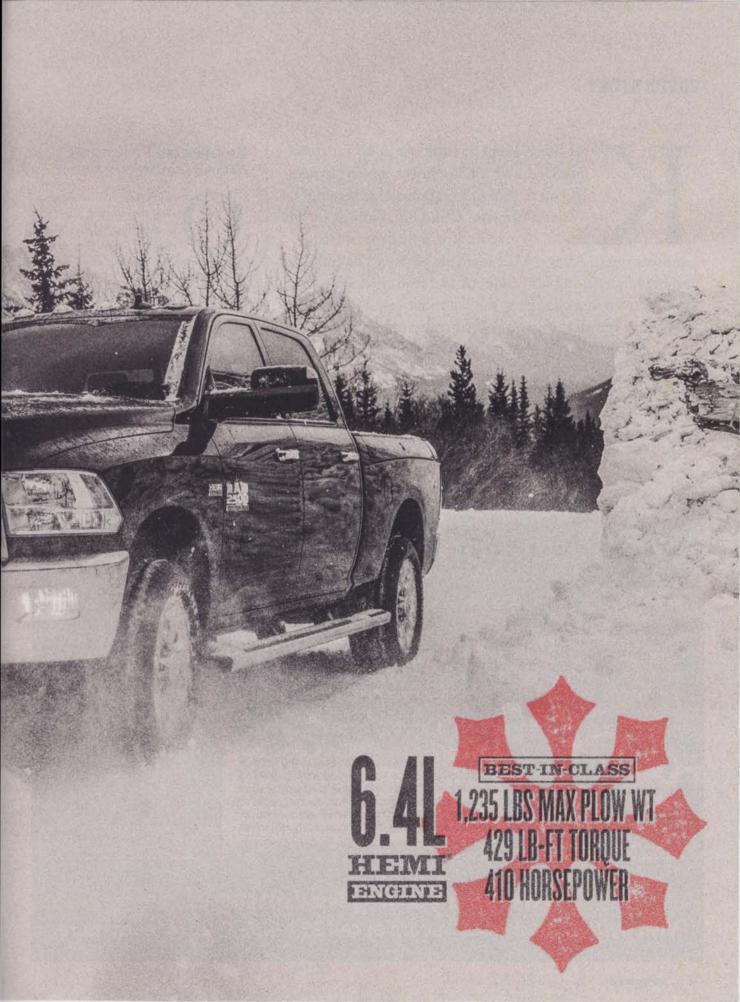
Perhaps the most unique resource offered by America in Bloom is their "Ten Years of Best Ideas" book. In full color, its 218 pages contain nearly 2000 best practices and photographs from more than 200 America in Bloom participants. The book includes the best and brightest examples of what various communities are actively doing to develop and improve their communities. Sections are organized by the AIB's evaluated criteria and observations are listed from every population category.

From fundraising activities and easy beautification actions to increasing volunteer presence, caring for the environment and securing historic preservation, there's something for every participant. The book has been nominated for an American Horticultural Society book award and is a gift to participants who register before Dec. 31. It can also be ordered from the AIB site <u>http://bit.ly/1vnHjov</u>. The price is \$25 plus \$5 for shipping. <sup>20</sup>

The author is an America in Bloom board member and international judge. She is the author of the "Fleurs du Jour" series. Visit The NCNLA Buyers Guide Website To Find Your Plant & Products Needs Today!

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#### **COVER STORY**

urt Bland keeps a bottle cap in his car that's inscribed with a bit of gritty encouragement: "If you're going through hell, keep going." That's Winston Churchill, famous for his refusal to give in. The president of Bland Landscaping in Apex, N.C., says this advice to be bullish and brave reminded him to focus and lead through four years of sweeping change at the firm that resulted in an ownership transfer, organizational realignment, massive personnel shifts and a new technology platform.

"We made decisions based on the company's present and future needs: How we would position the company to endure the recession and, at the same time, come out stronger than when we went in," he says.

#### **Recession and Realignment**

A sobering budget brings the first changes.

ne philosophy underpinned every decision and plan that brothers Kurt and Matt Bland executed when they determined that the \$12 million-plus full-service firm their father founded in 1976 was never going to be the same: Align the company to the market.

Kurt remembers the moment he and Matt, senior vice president and CFO, realized the company had to change to accommodate the turbulent market. It was during a plane ride home from a benchmarking meeting with a consultant in Atlanta. The brothers were working on a budget for the coming year, coming off of a record sales season.





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## **COVER STORY**

In 2008, Bland Landscaping had 225 employees, and the firm had landed two of its largest landscape construction jobs ever. Business was going gangbusters. But the brothers weren't feeling all that settled.

In fact, Kurt and Matt sat at the airport restaurant during a layover, shared a beer and, then, panic. After 32 years in business, and steady growth, they knew that 2009 was not going to be a repeat. Because something was wrong with the numbers they were repeatedly trying to plug into the next year's budget.

"We were having a hard time making the budget balance out," Bland says, relating that the expenses weren't lining up with the work they expected to come in. "It wasn't yielding the numbers. Matt and I looked at each other and said, 'The problem is the economy and what is to come.' The writing

DIRECT

was on the wall that we would have to do something we didn't want to do."

That "something" was to consolidate the company's separate residential and commercial construction divisions, and ultimately close down construction because of the housing market bust. This move preempted a chain of monumental business trials that tested whether the Blands had the leadership, the drive, the foresight and the stomach to manage major changes that might have sunk another company.

Bland knew he could not control what was happening to the commercial construction market, to new housing starts, to real estate or his customers' budgets. He couldn't control pricing pressure, increasing health insurance expenses and rising labor costs.

"We realized, wow, we are going to have

to do something a lot more drastic than what we have done already," Bland says, who thrives when working in fast-pace crisis mode. It's a good thing. "We talked about the fact that market conditions may require a completely different organizational structure. And we could control our structure."

#### Executive Decisions

A forced merger means job cuts.

he cascade of change at Bland Landscaping really began before the market dropped out in 2008. Four years prior, the Blands' mother, Nancy, became terminally ill, and their father, Tom, majority owner at the time, planned a yearlong leave of absence that eventually resulted in retire-

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#### BLAND LANDSCAPING CO.

**Principals:** Kurt Bland, president; Matt Bland, senior vice president and CFO

Founded: 1976

Location: Apex, N.C.

2013 revenues: \$14.9 million

Employees: 205

**Customers:** 70% commercial maintenance; 10% estate gardening; 20% construction

Services: commercial grounds management and estate gardening (landscape design/ build, irrigation, outdoor lighting, hardscape)



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## **COVER STORY**

ment from the business in 2006. "The retirement brought my brother and me into a faster-than-expected takeover of the company," Bland says.

Kurt and Matt were equal partners; their father was a majority owner by one share. Their father still maintained ownership in the company until 2011, when the owner-



ship transfer was completed, but he was retired for all intents and purposes.

In 2008, business was running smoothly and swiftly. Bland Landscaping had a residential new construction department (estate landscaping) that performed renovations and irrigation, and a commercial new construction department.

But they felt a sense of urgency going into 2009: Change or choke.

Construction jobs were nearing completion and new work was not on the schedule. "We still had loose ends on projects that were largely completed in 2008 and early 2009, but we had one \$900,000 project where the scope got whittled down to \$750,000, and just \$50,000 left of that work to do," Bland says, noting a trend of projects getting minimized, then completed – with no backlog waiting.

Profit margins in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina began to erode and customers were asking for price concessions, reduction in scope of work or taking the work out to bid. The most logical move was to consolidate the construction divisions.

"The problem that began with new construction quickly spread into all areas of the economy," Bland says.

The brothers didn't know how bad the recession was going to be.

"Matt and I soon became gravely concerned," Bland continues. "I said, 'This is not going to be a two-year recession.' We really had a strong hunch that what was coming was going to be long-lived and painful, so we made the decision at that point to do a forced merger of the different construction elements of the company."

The company folded its residential and commercial construction divisions into a single unit, and then eventually ceased performing that work entirely.

The company had five department heads running its divisions before the internal merger, and a litany of senior managers that worked under those department heads. But as the divisions rolled up and were phased out, the people managing and working in those areas of the business were either re-

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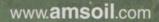
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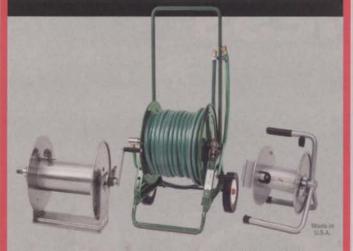


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## **COVER STORY**

aligned into the new structure, or provided with a severance package.

"When we started looking at the attrition of revenue, we had to start making hard decisions about where to make changes, and the guiding light was to make decisions not based on tenure or history, but based on the company's present and future needs," Bland says.

Reality was, Bland Landscaping needed to reorganize and tighten up – align itself with market demand for landscape construction services, which was decreasing.

The merger and initial reduction in force occurred in May 2009 and continued throughout the year.

Meanwhile, the commercial maintenance division began suffering the same economic symptoms as construction. Commercial office sector clients were cutting back. "We were losing construction revenue, so we thought we'd sell more maintenance – but we could not sell the maintenance as fast as we were losing construction," Bland says.

Maintenance contracts ran the course of the year, but upon renewal the results were not as the Blands had hoped. The company had to continue reducing its labor force, this time in the maintenance division. The company went from a seasonal high of 220 employees in 2008 to about 165 employees in 2010.

It was time for the business to go after different work. In 2010, Bland announced to his people it was the "year of the HOA," and the company would aggressively pursue these accounts. That move proved a success, and the company got a short repreive.

#### **Burning a Forest**

Strong people stay to help rebuild the new company.

3 land recalls reading an article in The Wall Street Journal when Phase I changes at the company were being executed. The writer drew parallels between the life cycles of forests and prairies and those of businesses.

As a naturalist with a degree in agriculture and life sciences, Bland related to these ideas. The theory went something like this: When a business reaches maturity, like a forest, the most effective thing a leader can do is burn that "forest" to the ground and then step back and let the strongest surviving members of the forest grow back stronger, healthier.

"What doesn't kill the business makes it stronger," Bland says. "I was sitting in meetings thinking, 'Who are the strong trees?' There were trees that had provided a great canopy for the forest for years, but we were not able to guarantee its future for the next 30 years."

The company was about to burn the forest and grow a stronger environment for sustainable success. So, the Bland brothers could not wait any longer to buy out their father. After all, they expected their organizational efforts to grow the company into a new era. From a strategic and financial perspective, it made sense to transition ownership while the company was at rock bottom.

After the division roll-up and labor reduction came a complete

organizational realignment and shifting of employees into roles that suited the company's new structure. The brothers also began the process of buying out their father on an aggressive schedule.

The time was right – the company was at its all-time lowest value. They got a few unsolicited offers to buy the firm, too. Selling would have been an easy way out.

"But why would we do that now?" the Blands thought. "The business was at its record low as far as all economic indicators would suggest, and we are young and we enjoy this, and we have managers in place that can carry this business into the future and outcompete every one of our competitors, and I believe that wholeheartedly," Bland says, quickly adding: "There is not a competitor I am scared of."

Selling was not an option. The brothers continued the transition of ownership process throughout 2011, closing it out before year-end.

#### A Personal Loss

Amid it all, the Blands lose a dear friend.

t the same time, the company was facing a serious business and personal loss when a key executive and childhood friend became terminally ill. Kyle Martin had run the residential estate gardening division and worked at Bland Landscaping for 17 years. That department became a "shining star" of the company as Bland and team worked to drive it, in a way to honor their friend and colleague.

Bland was restless, engulfed in the transition of ownership, infrastructural change, his friend and key executive's illness, and the constant market jabs.

"I would wake up in the middle of the night and type out my thoughts, either in an email or note to self," he says of the stress. "I didn't know if I would have time to focus on what I was thinking about the next day." He was working in the business, furiously, as was Matt. And in Bland's waking moments – and hours – at night, he was working on it.

The week Martin went to hospice care in December 2011, Bland visited him daily and simultaneously worked up a plan with his team to build a landscape at Martin's family home for Christmas. The company received donations of plant material, pavers, stone and a lighting system, and a team of about 40 people cleared and rebuilt the property, building the patio he had been working on for years.

A week later, Bland delivered Martin's eulogy.

But before this, during Martin's final days and an emotionally wrenching time for the Blands and the company, Bland also learned that two key employees had been deceiving the company. The situation was so ugly that Bland can't talk about it on the record, and he doesn't explain what happened off the record, either.

"They were being very dishonest to us, their peers and others," Bland says plainly.

So in 2011, Bland Landscaping said goodbye to a dear friend,

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## **COVER STORY**

parted ways with two key employees that had been dishonest, and completed an ownership change. Then, in January 2012, the company launched its realignment, which impacted every person at the organization.

#### **Decision** Time

Realignment puts pressure on everyone.

n old Islamic saying goes like this: "When forced to decide between fever and death, the fever looks like a smart decision."

2012 called for more fever decisions to restructure the company further, well beyond that initial rollup of the construction division. This put tremendous pressure on management.

In late 2011, Bland had asked his managers to prepare budgets. Then, upon reviewing the unrealistic proposals, he asked for a second round, and then a third. Bland was not getting the numbers he wanted to see from his managers.

The team, Bland decided, had impaired decision-making capabilities because they were personally affected by requests to cut back. "If someone asks you to make a decision that could affect the future of your job, that's a hard decision to make," he says.

Since its founding, Bland Landscaping had been organized into departmental silos. This new structure would remove redundancies by forming two key sectors: commercial landscaping and residential estate gardening.

Under the old, traditional model, managers served two masters: sales and operations. And they were spread too thin.

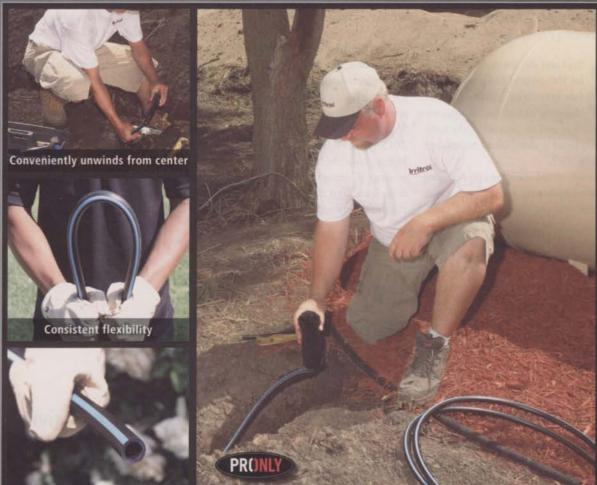
"You could not physically do the job in less than 10 to 12 hours every single day," Bland says. As the company continued to diversify and expand its HOA business, this grueling schedule would become the norm. And, this scenario was not acceptable or productive for the company and its people.

With the realignment, personnel would be dedicated solely to operations or customer service duties. It was a seismic shift to both employees and clients. The company lost some accounts due to the change. Some employees gave up responsibilities – sometimes grudgingly – to others who were better suited for their roles.

"During that year, every time we put someone in a new role, we'd counsel them and talk to them and collect feedback from the customer, and then we would re-evaluate the decision," Bland says. "We'd ask, 'Did we put you in the right role? Did you choose the right role?"



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## **COVER STORY**

Throughout the course of 2013, sales were coming back. And by year-end, following the organizational realignment and continued growth of the residential estate gardening sector, the company was 75 percent completed with its transition.

#### A Platform for Growth

New technology completes the changes.

Band says the company won't ever be 100 percent finished, but one last transition remained. After changing its services, its organizational structure and its ownership, the company introduced a cloud-based technology platform in 2012.

The mobile workforce allows for real-time information gathering and administrative capabilities. No one's tied to a desk, and, Bland can make better decisions based on future forecasts.

"Between the personnel changes, the structure, the technology platform – and we are still largely a debt-free organization – our balance sheet is stronger than it was when we came into the recession because we made prudent, timely decisions," Bland says.

The technology allows easier expansion to new facilities, since the systems are all cloud-based. The company can pursue jobs that are historically more competitive because the firm has an operational and overhead cost structure in place to present tight bids.

Today, Bland Landscaping is projecting 2015 gross revenue at \$15 million – the highest since the business started almost 40 years ago. Commercial construction work has come back, and the company's head count fluctuates between 190 and 220 employees, and there are 105 vehicles on the North Carolina roads emblazoned with the family name.

But perhaps what's most exciting for the Blands is the organization's energy. People are fired up. Opportunity is within reach for those 200-some people. "There is a really strong buzz around the company right now, and not just for owners and managers, but for foremen and skilled workers alike," Bland says.

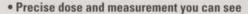
After all this, Bland is stepping back from operations, with a structure and people in place that can take the business forward. Reflecting on the long journey since that discussion with his brother in the airport, the numbers just not adding up, the long, sleepless nights and having to make very tough decisions about which employees to keep and which to let go, Bland, remains humble. "I don't take any of this for granted," he says. Lat



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# TALENT TREE

How to use college landscape programs to find your next star employee.

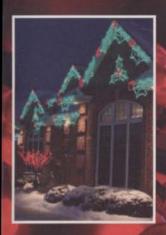
## By Phil S. Allen

f you are like most landscape contractors I have talked with lately, 2014 is turning out to be either a "very good" or a "great" year. Growth across the country is resulting in more opportunities.

But contractors are also facing challenges finding and retaining good employees. As the landscape industry matures, more companies are considering college graduates to fill key positions. As an educator at a four-year university, recruiting for our graduates has been strong for more than a decade (even during the economic downturn), but in the past two years the demand has exploded.

From February through May of this year, I received multiple emails and phone calls from company owners or recruiters nearly every day.

That said, not all contractors understand how college programs work, or how to best use them to identify and hire talented employees.



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#### HIRING

A ROUGH ROAD FOR SCHOOLS. Just as it is important to know the challenges facing your clients, you should understand the challenges faced by the colleges where you recruit. With reduced tax revenues, state legislatures have been forced to make funding cuts to horticulture programs across the country.

Administrators looking to cut costs often choose to weaken or eliminate resources like outdoor classrooms and greenhouses needed to provide laboratories for hands-on experience.

Declining budgets have also made it harder to fill vacant faculty positions. Retiring full-time professors have often either been replaced with part-time faculty, or not replaced at all. Similar to your salaried employees who shoulder greater workloads when cash flow is insufficient to support additional hires, many already-overloaded faculties are struggling to meet the demands created by the additional workload.

My colleagues and I at Brigham Young University recently completed a survey of 450 colleges and universities that offered a horticulture-related program in 1997, and learned that more than 120 of these schools no longer offered a degree or certificate in 2012. Of the schools that did, many reported sharply declining enrollments. This means that the increased need for qualified employees is occurring at the same time that there are fewer landscape graduates available to be hired.

From our survey, it quickly became apparent that two-year colleges are particularly vulnerable. Horticulture programs have repeatedly been weakened or eliminated fol-

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lowing the retirement of a champion faculty member. And some areas of the country with the most opportunities for careers in landscape contracting, Chicago for example, simply don't produce anywhere near the number of graduates from two- or four-year schools to meet the demand.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO.** Here are several things you might consider to strengthen your recruitment process.

 Identify colleges that produce the kind of graduate you want in your company, and develop a partnership with the faculty at these schools. You may not currently even know these professors, in which case my advice is to invite them to lunch. You already invite clients and potential clients to lunch – by getting

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#### HIRING

to know the faculty and sharing what your employment needs are, a professor is much more likely to think of students that may be just who you are looking for.

- 2. Many colleges have career fairs, where students and companies interact in a kind of trade show. The advantage of a career fair is that you can introduce your company to several students. However, the touch is minimal and there are better ways to connect with students. For example, you and your employees have professional skills and knowledge that are needed in the classroom. Several times a year I invite companies to send energetic employees to teach a class like "Bidding Tree Work," "Profitable Plant Health Care" and "Landscape Design in the Real World."
- 3. Many landscape companies offer an internship program, which is a temporary work experience that is structured to benefit both the student and employer. An internship program offers companies the opportunity to take a closer look at potential fulltime employees. We require our students to complete two internships prior to graduation, and about 30-50 percent of our students will eventually work for a company that they interned with. But before you launch an internship program, you should know that a bad internship experience will be communicated among the student's classmates. This can poison your company's relationship with a school for several years. Examples of bad internships include one where a student does nothing more than work as a laborer. PLANET has a template for a quality internship program that can help you get started.
- 4. Due to the limited number of graduates from landscape horticulture programs, you may need to employ some strategies to capture the interest of those who major in something other than

landscape horticulture (facilities management, construction management, business and even the humanities). I frequently encounter students in these majors who discover that they want to pursue a career in the landscape industry. Many of them have had experience in the landscape industry, but never

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#### HIRING

thought of it as a career.

5. Spending time in high schools, meeting with counselors or as a guest lecturer in a class is also a good way to attract

potential future employees. You can help them replace the common negative stereotypes with a positive image of the landscape industry.



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BUT WHAT WILL I MAKE? I'm often asked about the compensation package our students are expecting upon graduation. The range in starting salaries for my students is rather large. This is understandable, as some students have several years of experience before completing their degree while others just have the two required internships. As an educator, my goal is to motivate students to maximize their skills and knowledge. It is a challenge for educators and companies to help students acquire realistic expectations.

That said, students are biased toward companies that recognize the value of a college degree. They have invested significant time and money in earning a degree. They have learned to effectively juggle deadlines. They have dealt with professors who can be as demanding as your toughest client. And they have learned how to think.

Landscapers often say that college graduates need to start at the bottom, just like everyone else. I agree that a degree alone does not qualify a potential employee for a management position, and often use the analogy of a doctor who isn't ready to practice medicine merely by graduating from medical school - he or she first needs to gain hands on experience through rotations and a residency.

But there are enough landscape companies that treat college graduates like professionals, and these companies have a definite competitive advantage. College graduates still are expected to spend time in the field, but are presented with a clear path for upward advancement in the company.

CONCLUSION. Demand for qualified employees in our industry will continue to grow as the industry grows. There are many opportunities in our personal lives to share the passion for the landscape industry and communicate the professional opportunities available. If we don't, who will? L&L

The author is a professor of landscape management at Brigham Young University and a Lawn & Landscape Leadership Award winner. His team has taken first place at PLANET's Student Career Days competition four times.

#### ASTER SEDGE RESULTS

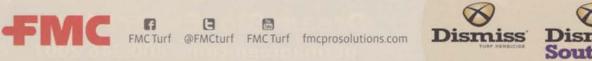
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#### FIGHTING NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

The industry's largest education foundation has reshaped its mission to go from quiet banker to extroverted cheerleader.

#### By Chuck Bowen

ince its inception in 1998, PLAN-ET's Academic Excellence Foundation has given away more than \$811,000 to nearly 800 students. We caught up with board president Tom Fochtman to find out what's changing with PLANET's educational foundation.

L&L: The mission of the foundation is expanding – what's the motivation there? Tom Fochtman: At this year's Student Career Days, we raised \$150,000 and we've not done that before. Each board member is charged with bringing in one new ambassador every year. If everybody does that, that's \$375,000.

L&L: What took so long for AEF to build a program like this?

**TF:** People get so busy and wrapped up in running their business, they don't focus on the big picture. They think: 'It's so bad – how can I do anything to help?' As the industry has developed and matured, this issue has come to the forefront. PLANET and the board members of AEF have realized that we have to address this.

L&L: How will you know AEF succeeded? TF: Not having to rely on H-2B because we have so many employees here domestically.

I sat with a client of mine yesterday. He turned down a million-dollar job because he doesn't have the people to do the job. He's not bothered by it, because he knows he'll get better opportunities that fit. But he totally passed on it. L8L

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#### **GIE+EXPO PREVIEW**



The GIE+EXPO takes place across 500,000 square feet inside the Kentucky Expo Center in Louisville, and will feature 750 exhibitors. The show will also include 19 acres of outdoor demo area.

#### **ANOTHER CAN'T-MISS SHOW**

Get a jump on planning your trip to Louisville with this GIE+EXPO preview. Compiled by Katie Tuttle

The green industry's largest trade show returns to Louisville, Ky., next month. Attendees have the chance to peruse 750 exhibits spread across 500,000 square feet inside the expo hall and another 19 acres of demonstration area just out back. As you start planning your schedule, here are items to add to your list.

There will be three free concerts on the Nissan Commercial stage at Fourth Street Live!:

- Montgomery Gentry, with openers Jeni Carr and TwangTown, Wednesday, Oct. 22 starting at 7:30 p.m.
- The Louisville Crashers, Thursday, Oct. 23 at 8 p.m.
- Olivia Henken, finalist on "The Voice," Friday, Oct. 24 at 7:30 p.m.

This year there will be a spotlight on UTVs and accessories, with at least two test tracks in the demo area. Polaris has expanded its outdoor area, and will be featuring one of the test tracks. The other test track will be at the Ariens/Gravely outdoor area.

To go along with the UTV focus, all attendees will receive a raffle entry with their show badge. One winner will get their pick of a Polaris BRUTUS, GEM or RANGER Work UTV. To enter, drop off your ticket to the Polaris indoor booth by the end of the show.

The \$10,000 Friday Giveaway will start at 1 p.m. Winners must be present to win \$1,000 at 1 p.m., \$2,000 at 2 p.m., \$3,000 at 3 p.m. and \$4,000 at 4 p.m. To be eligible, register for GIE+EXPO and an entry form will be mailed along with badges.

GIE+EXPO is again co-located with Hardscape North America (HNA). All attendees receive free access to the indoor HNA displays, which includes the latest in pavers, concrete paving slabs, stone pavements, installation accessories, landscape lighting products, segmental retaining walls, surface treatments and more.

The top hardscape contractors from three countries will compete in the Hardscape North America Installer Championship on Thursday and Friday.

Competitors from throughout North America will test their understanding of industry best practices and guidelines, safety, quality and craftsmanship in a race against the clock and other top installers.

The Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute (ICPI) will host its annual conference sessions that are approved for continuing education credits for ICPI Certified Installers. The six sessions, plus two hardscape-themed GIE+EXPO workshops will take place on Thursday and Friday.

The Green Industry Conference (GIC), organized by PLANET, and the Professional Grounds Management Society's (PGMS) School of Grounds Management will offer educational sessions beginning Wednesday, Oct. 22.

Two of the free educational sessions will be in Spanish from the National Hispanic Landscape Alliance. They will take place on Thursday at 1:30 and 3 p.m.

The outdoor demo area includes 19 acres of equipment to test drive. The demo area is open from 9 a.m. -5 p.m. on Thursday and 9 a.m. -4 p.m. on Friday. **LEL** 

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#### **TRUCKS & TRAILERS**



# THE CHAOS

#### An organized trailer makes for an efficient crew. By Holly Hammersmith

bout nine years ago the trucks at HighGrove Partners were reorganized as part of a lean process improvement. Prior to that, it was anything goes, according to Gary Tomlinson, vice president of operations for the Austell, Ga.-based company.

"Originally they were a mess," he says. "Everything was scattered everywhere. It was just really kind of chaotic and dirty." HighGrove Partners primarily provides maintenance, along with some design/build. Customers include commercial, retail and multi-family units. About 210 people are employed during the peak season and annual revenue totals \$16 million.

Today trucks at this company have cages and shelves on them for tools and equipment. Cargo boxes line the sides; one is marked for fuel, another for weed killer and ant bait. A locked cages holds expensive equipment such as blowers.

"The vehicles are set up to have every piece of equipment you would need to use on any job. Every truck is exactly the same," Tomlinson says.

"Everything is designed for speed, ef-

ficiency and security as well as safety." According to Tomlinson, the first step to truck organization is evaluating equipment and frequency of use.

"We went through and analyzed what does each truck need, then standardized the equipment load that was on the trucks," he says.

**IMPROVED ORGANIZATION.** This spring a dozen new trailers were purchased at Ruppert Landscape and are being outfitted with a new build. Existing trailers are being retro-fitted. The first new prototype at Ruppert was built in May. It was designed on paper, then mocked up and reviewed by field managers and management.

Once the final design was decided upon, instructions, scaled drawings and a bill of material were created to provide consistency among future builds.

A large mechanical toolbox stores tools, hooks were added for raincoats and brackets hold tools like pole shears. Improved organization has created more space, too, says Ken Railey, director of fleet operations for the Laytonsville, Md.-based company.

Ruppert provides commercial landscaping services including construction and maintenance. Revenue this year is projected at \$105 million and more than 1,000 employees work for the company.

The new trailer design incorporated specialized aluminum bracketing to store string trimmers and shears and shelving to hold gas cans, blowers, sprayers and other equipment. This improves organization and creates more space, Railey says. The new racks also have a narrower profile, making it easier for crews to reach for tools. Heavier equipment is housed on lower shelves for safety.

"The design and prototype was primarily focused on our people's needs. I think it makes the equipment neater, more organized, easier to access," he says. "It also prevents equipment damage. A lot of folks wanted more storage. People literally had to walk on top of equipment in order to get to the next piece."

At the Spokane, Wa.-based franchise of The Grounds Guys, organizing equipment based on when it's typically used on a job helps, says Kenny Smith, owner. The Spokane location employs 14 people and annual revenue is \$700,000.

The Grounds Guys provide general maintenance, design build, irrigation service and installs to residential, commercial and multifamily customers.

Large mowers are placed with the weight on the trailer axles for towing safety and to reduce wear on tires.

At the front of the trailer, an organization unit with bins provides a location for tools needed for field repairs, safety equipment such as earplugs and a first aid kit, Smith says.

**OPEN VERSUS CLOSED.** All contractors interviewed for this story prefer enclosed trailers over open trailers, as unsecured tools can easily be stolen or damaged. Railey says that a closed trailer also protects expensive equipment from the elements.



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#### **TRUCKS & TRAILERS**

Smith said that a closed trailer also serves as a large "rolling billboard" wherever his crews go and saves time at the end of the day.

"You don't have to empty the trailer at night. It works as a shed or storage unit," he says, adding that having a trailer with a side entry door provides two points of entry.

He conducted Internet research before purchasing racks and holders for equipment. Today he has also found success with the lightweight custom metal hooks available at hardware stores.

At HighGrove, items used less frequently, such as chainsaws, are signed out for use. The company does have a few open trailers in its fleet.

Tools are mounted on the inside and outside of the trailer and there is an equipment cage at the head of the trailer.

**CONSTANT COMMUNICATION.** Communication between crews and management is ongoing. "We are continuing to improve upon the product we just built," Railey says.

Inspections range from daily to weekly depending on the company. Inspection is not limited to inventory. During inspection if an item is worn it will be repaired or replaced. Supply needs, such as oil and fuel are also checked.

"We do weekly inspections on our trucks to make sure everything is in its spot, to make sure everything is locked down and working. It's real easy to get messy again," Tomlinson says.

In the end those habits help a business run smoother.

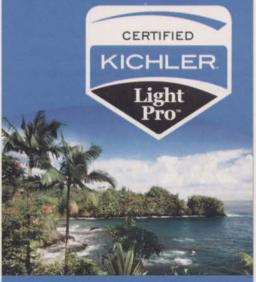
"You want to equip your team to succeed and do well in the field," Smith says. "All that organization is great but ... you've got to develop a habit of keeping those things in their place and having them stocked."

Keeping crews accountable and following organization protocols is an industry-wide best practice.

"Our real driving force behind this is our people and convenience and helping them do their job more efficiently," Railey says. **LEL** 

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

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#### **TRUCKS & TRAILERS**



Carol King Landscape Maintenance will hold trucks anywhere from 10 to 15 years and stay on top of it until that truck is worn out. Every five years, they're repainted and fixed up to look good in public.

# RIGHT FLEET

Focus on the jobs at hand when buying a new truck. By Kate Spirgen

rucks in the landscape industry work hard, and despite even the most diligent maintenance, they'll need to be replaced at some point. Good equipment can make a crew faster, more efficient and more profitable, while the wrong equipment can lead to serious problems, both on the job and on the budget.

At Wheat's Landscape, the strategic plan and budget process dictate when it's time to replace old vehicles. "We analyze our trucks like we do our jobs," says Greg Shannon, general manager at the company in Vienna, Va. "We track repairs, labor ... on each of our 75 vehicles. We know when we are spending too much money and time on a vehicle and then we rotate that one out for sale and replace it with a new truck."

At Carol King Landscape Maintenance in Orlando, Fla., Vice President Bruce Bachand tends to hold onto vehicles until they reach the end of their useful life. "Every five years, they're repainted and fixed up to make them look good to the public. We'll hold trucks anywhere from 10 to 15 years and track mileage and our preventive maintenance program and stay on top of it until that truck is worn out." When a truck has reached the end of its life, Bachand will see what he can get for the used vehicle, or scrap it for parts.

And at Christy Webber Landscapes in Chicago, the truck question is all about projected revenue, and it's a real numbers game. The company keeps records of the

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#### **TRUCKS & TRAILERS**

cost to operate each vehicle that Asset Manager Jason Sloat reviews regularly. "We're very strict," he says. "We try to do it based on work that's actually booked. When it comes to replacement, that decision is based on the combination of the age of the truck, the mileage and our records." When a truck is more expensive to operate than a new purchase, they'll pull the trigger.

**NEW OR USED?** Christy Webber and Wheat's both purchase only new trucks. "At this point, we're buying all new vehicles," Sloat says. "In the past, we've purchased a combination of new and used but used has proven to be a problem. Generally, in the landscaping or construction world, when people are getting rid of their trucks, it's because they're at the end of their life span and there are a lot of problems."

Carol King buys a combination of both for its 82-truck fleet, but Bachand never leases. He controls his overhead with a mix of new, lightly used and used vehicles, including previously leased vehicles. "We try to control our costs and overhead by being judicious with our vehicle purchasing," Bachand says. "We don't believe in leasing and we don't believe in having a totally new and modern fleet that requires monthly payments." By using cash from the operating funds, he avoids debt payments. "I'm always amazed at the number of companies that lease their fleet and are perpetually in payment," he says.

It's a strategy Bachand says helped sustain the company through the recession. "Staying lean and having less vehicle expense helped us tremendously," he says.

MAKING THE DECISION. Once it's time to buy, the decision is based on efficiency for the service the truck will be providing. Other considerations include fuel economy, reliability of the vehicle, the intended use, availability of parts and services, and the initial cost.

When it comes to extras like tinted windows, stereos and seating Christy Webber buys their vehicles "as stripped down as possible," to avoid costly repairs, and Wheat's doesn't upgrade past the basic package. Carol King



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#### **TRUCKS & TRAILERS**



Christy Webber Landscapes only purchases new vehicles, which they buy as "stripped down as possible" in order to avoid having to pay for costly repairs.

also keeps it simple, but everyone gets air conditioning to beat the Florida heat.

The focus is on the engine, the transmission and the intended use. "You can get trucks in a lot of different configurations and we put a lot of time into figuring out which configuration works for us," Sloat says. So he'll take into consideration things like which side of the truck the gate lift should be on or whether or not the truck needs an automatic tarp system.

So, at the end of the day, it's the end use that's the most important. Residential services and urban services will require different specifications like a tighter turning radius. So the right engine and transmission are crucial, Bachand says. "We want to pull the proper trailer and have the braking and towing ability for that piece,"



#### TRUCKS & TRAILERS

GETTING INPUT. Employees play a role in the decision process since they're the ones operating the new equipment. Sloat will just go to his operators and chat about the needs and the best options. "Ultimately, the employees who work in the field are the people who will actually be using the asset and I want it to function for them," he says. "I want it to make their work as efficient as possible."

Wheat's Landscape's production managers, fleet managers and key foreman all work together to find the most cost effective vehicle for different services. "We look to our field staff for ideas on how we can better service, including the trucks we drive and the equipment we use," Shannon says. After learning the trade from his father

and spending 38 years on the job, Bachand

tends to follow his heart. "It's probably about 75 percent my own experience and 25 percent manager or department heads," he says of the input, noting that a lot of times, he'll still make decisions based on his own experience.

"I do as much research as I can," Sloat says. "I listen to what other people in our industry have to say about their vehicles. I talk to as many mechanics as I can." And with a staff of 10 mechanics, he tends to follow their advice. "They're the ones making the repairs and they're not trying to sell me anything, so they're an impartial source."

**INSURING NEW VEHICLES.** Staff mechanics help Carol King avoid extended warranties, too. Thanks to the company's six-mechanic shop, Bachand finds that extended warranties aren't worth the money. "Our mechanics can do a lot of preventative and routine maintenance work, so I don't worry too much about extended warranties."

Operators don't put "tons of miles" on the trucks since they usually park at a job site for the day and then return to the garage. "They're not getting lots and lots of miles, so it's not worth an extended warranty."

Christy Webber and Wheat's will buy extended warranties on certain items. Wheat's will purchased them for heavy equipment and Christy Webber will buy them if the numbers add up. "We assume a truck will have a couple things go wrong in the five to seven years the truck is with us and we know what we're going to spend on those repairs," Sloat says. L&L



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#### FALL TURF GUIDE







# SEE YA SUMMER

With the warmer weather fading, LCOs across the country are preparing to treat turf for the fall.

#### **By Lindsey Getz**

s owners and operators gear up for the fall, the preceding seasons and the weather patterns have a lot to do with the steps they'll ultimately take with their lawn care programs. Though no one can predict nature, advanced preparation can have a lot to do with lawn care success.

**WEATHER'S IMPACT.** Though the harsh winter wreaked quite a bit of havoc, when it comes down to it, it's the summer that sets the tone for fall. And while there have been reports of flooding and higher than average rainfall in many parts of the country, contractors are also saying that this summer has been relatively mild compared to past years. Chris Lee, president of Earthworks in Lillian, Texas, says it's not unusual to have consistent 90-plus degree days in Texas. But this summer they haven't had that excessive heat wave.

The Midwest recorded lower temperatures, along with higher than average rainfall. Jim Sieger, maintenance account manager at Kenosha Grounds Care, in Pleasant Prairie, Wis., says the combination of the increased rain and the high humidity is likely the culprit behind early signs of fungal disease. "But things can never be perfect," Sieger says. "In the past, the drought has brought us less disease problems but the lawns were brown. If I had to choose between the two, I'd take the rain. Customers are looking for a green lawn."

Down South, it's also been wet and rainy. In Florida, Steve Okros, chief operating officer and co-founder of Heron Lawn and Pest Control in Orlando says his company is gearing up for fall

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#### FALL TURF GUIDE

fertilization. Applications are all based on the season and the current concerns. Soon it will be brown patch fungus and army worms, Okros says. "Our programs are all inclusive so fall application is part of that," Okros says. "Right now we're running between 5 and 8-percent profit margins but in the winter it jumps a lot higher."

**TREATMENT PLANS.** Sieger says treating for broadleaf weed control typically starts in middle to late August and carries into September for the bulk of their properties. "I also like to get in a third application for fertilizer in September as well," Sieger says. "In Wisconsin, September is when most lawns start coming out of summer stress, if they had it. September is similar to May in that you often see a growth spurt since temperatures are cooler and there's more of a rainy pattern. September and October are typically the best time to complete treatments."

Joe Weiss, owner of Green RX Lawn & Pest Solutions in Cottleville, Mo., is also expecting to see more lawns with fungus this fall season due to a lot of rainfall combined with high humidity. Dollar spot and brown patch have been particularly active this year. "We also saw longer activity of winter annual weeds like clover, henbit, chickweed and veronica," Weiss says. "These weeds appear in the early to mid-spring season here. Typical summer weeds like spurge and crabgrass have not been too bad but we have seen an increase in nutsedge due to the extra rainfall."

**PLANNING AHEAD.** For many businesses, fall is also a time for seeding, aeration and

possibly verticutting. Larry Ryan, owner of Ryan Lawn & Tree in Overland Park, Kan., says that fall seeding is an essential part of business. "As a result we have to be ready for that early," Ryan says. "A big part of preparing for fall is making sure our seed is ready to go. We try to have that on hand along with our starter fertilizer. We start looking for properties that will require seeding and we do those presales in July and August. If we fail to do those presales, we won't have as good a seeding year."

Ryan says in his restaurant industry past he learned that people often need to hear something two different times to believe it. In landscaping he's found that those two times can come from the same person – it's just a matter of being consistent. "If they hear me talk about seeding now and again a month later, often that repetitive message

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#### FALL TURF GUIDE

pays off," Ryan says. "It's a matter of giving them some time to mull it over before you bring it up again. But too often contractors don't take the time to repeat the message."

In general, successful lawn care is about planning ahead and the fall is no different. "The stuff you're treating for in fall you don't actually see until winter or spring," Lee says. "But if you skip it, you're chasing your tail and will never have that crisp appearance of a lawn that is completely weed-free. It's a matter of building client trust as to why you need to perform preventative maintenance. People can be reluctant to pay for something they can't see so you need to explain why it's important to prevent problems rather than treat them after the fact."

Lee says that going into September, preemergent application is critical. "We also



Broadleaf weeds like dandelions can overtake a customer's lawn if you don't treat the turf early enough.

do a winter fertilization to stimulate roots and make sure things are good and healthy as they go into dormancy," Lee says. "For us, that's all part of our annual package."

Ryan reiterates that message of trust. "In the end, you're selling trust," he says. "If you don't have the customers' trust, you don't

have anything. You often only get one shot to do everything right and that means taking the appropriate measures in advance of the new season. The bottom line is, if you don't have a nice looking lawn come spring, you could lose your customer. After all, it's a green lawn that they're buying." LEL

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# again

Tree services are rebounding after the Great Recession.

By Stacie Zinn Roberts

hen the economy floundered during the Great Recession, tree companies did not escape unscathed.

"Generally, we saw customers deferring their tree care expenses when possible. If there were needs such as insect pressures that were going to affect health versus cosmetic issues, customers spent money on health issues for the tree and deferred cosmetic services," says John Gibson, president of Swingle Lawn, Tree & Landscape Care, based in Denver. "Additionally, pruning services deferred to longer cycles unless there was a major storm that caused damage, therefore requiring immediate attention."

Money for turf. During the recession, treerelated revenue dropped dramatically at Senske Lawn & Tree Care. Based in Kennewick, Wash., Senske operates eight offices in eastern Washington, Idaho and in the Great Salt Lake region of Utah. The company also offers pest care services in Las Vegas.

Tony Fisher, maintenance general manager, says that the company divides its tree services into two divisions - tree care, categorized as tree health-related services such as fertilization and pest management, and pruning, which includes all trimming services. Tree care makes up 8.4 percent of annual sales for the company.

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#### TREE CARE GUIDE

Pruning is significantly less at 4.8 percent of overall revenue. From 2008 to 2010, revenue in Senske's tree care division dropped 13 percent, while pruning decreased by 7 percent.

Bjorn Gjerde, Senske's CFO, attributes the decline in sales of both divisions during the recession to customers choosing to put their money into their lawns as opposed to their trees. "A tree can hold on for a few years if it needs pruning, as opposed to a lawn that can turn yellow if you don't take care of it," he says. "Pruning is more of a luxury."

The downturn was even more painful for Randy Hannan, owner of Safety Tree Services in Sedro-Woolley, Wash. The company offers tree pruning, tree removal, stump removal and trimming services in four counties in northern Washington. Six years ago, during the doldrums of the economic slump, Safety Tree's sales were slashed by a third. "It was horrible," Hannan says. "Even my regular clients who have budgets weren't spending their money." Customers like maintenance contractors and commercial construction companies that normally used Safety Tree to perform tree removal on road construction projects or to clear land to build homes stopped calling. The business, Hannan says, "was just not there."

**Ready to rebound**. But all is not doom and gloom, at least not anymore. All three companies recorded a recent uptick in overall tree service calls. In the past three years, Senske reports a 13 percent increase in tree care, and a 26 percent increase in pruning.

At Safety Tree, Hannan says business is booming and his five full-time employees can hardly keep up with the demand. They're scheduling jobs as far out as four to five weeks. "It just started coming back noticeably in the last two years to where we are busy yearround again," Hannan says. "Now, we are back doing a lot more maintenance stuff. People were not having that done. We were just doing hazard trees. Now, we're doing maintenance work, grooming, making their places look nice again."

The story is similar at Senske. "Our lead time for jobs has stretched out significantly. It used to be that we could get to a job in a few days. Now, it's a few weeks," Fisher says. To keep up with demand, Senske has hired 15 new tree service employees in the past three years, and the company's management is considering buying new tree pruning equipment for the tree service fleet. Swingle's Gibson says



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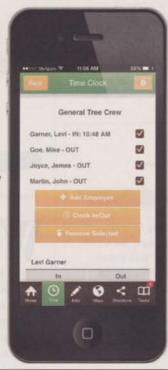
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#### TREE CARE GUIDE

"2014 will be our largest year in revenue in our history." What this means for the tree service industry overall is that the downturn appears to finally be over. "We definitely have seen a rebound," Fisher says. L&L

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

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#### **Chainsaw safety**

By Katie Tuttle



the more technology available, chainsaw companies are continually coming up with more safety features to ensure your crew members are as safe as possible when out in the field.

User comfort sometimes leads to a safer work environment, which is why manufacturers offer features focused on reducing vibration. Higher vibration levels mean more work for the user, so minimizing those levels also cuts down on user fatigue. "Fatigue is the leading cause of injury," says Gent Simmons, handheld product manager for Husqyarna.

Another feature Husqvarna has for safety is the Trio Brake. "The Trio Brake is an additional rear-handled chain braking system," Simmons says. "By having that rear brake back there, it gives the extra guard in case of a slow kickback. It also encourages the operator to use the saw in the proper position. If you try to use it over your hand, your hands are in the position to engage the chain brake. You're less likely to put yourself in an unsafe situation,"

Simmons says this is especially important for landscape professionals who aren't using chainsaws every day. "One of our customers has a 90-day policy (with his crew members) where in the first 90 days you use the Trio Brake saw. It's a great saw to learn on because it trains you to operate the saw and keeps you operating in the proper position." **L&L** 

For the full version of this article, go to lawnandlandscape.com and search "chainsaw safety."



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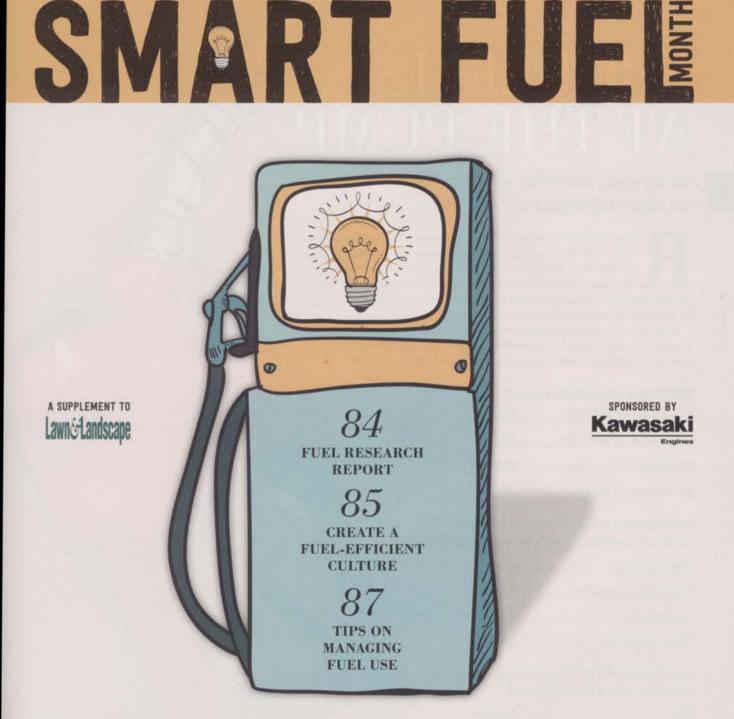
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#### Welcome to our coverage of Smart Fuel Month,

sponsored by Kawasaki Engines. Along with the stories on the following pages where contractors share ideas on managing fuel costs, we will also send out fuel-related information via social media. Just search **#smartfuelmonth** on Facebook and Twitter to receive tips on reducing fuel costs and to share your thoughts on the topic.

## PROBLEMS AT THE PUMP

We surveyed more than 100 contractors to find out what challenges they were facing.

R ising fuel prices are an issue all landscape contractors have to deal with. But how they are doing it varies throughout the industry. It's clear the topic is on the mind of contractors but not dominating how they approach it budget-wise. More than a third of you felt it was important enough to pass some of the cost to customers by adding a fuel charge, but most contractors kept it less than \$10.

Read on to get more of a feeling for the industry's fuel-buying strategies. You can also turn to page 13 for more fuel research. We'll also be sharing more of our findings in future issues of Lawn & Landscape.

#### What is your approximate revenue?

Less than \$200,000	
\$200,000-\$499,999	18%
\$500,000-\$1 million	
\$1 million or more	

How important is fuel efficiency to you when deciding to purchase a vehicle for your company?

Not important	8%
Somewhat important	33%
Important	35%
Very Important	24%

Have you added a fuel charge to your customers' bills in the last 5 years?

Yes		34	%
No	States and a state of	66	0%

If you have added a fuel charge, how much?

Less than \$5	39%
\$5-\$10	39%
More than \$10	22%

Keep an eye out for our October issue where we will cover alternative fuels and share our research on the topic.





#### **UNFORGIVING PRICES**

A strong emphasis on fuel-cost savings can spread and become a company-wide mindset. By Kristen Hampshire

Dean Snodgrass never counts vehicles to measure the size or success of a company. In fact, the opposite approach at Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping & Garden Centers has resulted in a 20 percent decrease in vehicles on the road in the last five years. "We really don't want to be in the transportation business," says Snodgrass, vice president of the Portland, Ore., firm. "We'd rather get more done with less resources."

Dennis' 7 Dees has in excess of 100 vehicles and hundreds of small pieces of equipment. Its fuel budget is about a half-million dollars per year, even after slimming down the fleet by one-fifth.

Changing habits and developing a culture of awareness have been critical in reducing vehicle dependence and fuel consumption at the company. Rather than running out to measure a property or deliver an estimate, the team takes advantage of technology – mainly smart phones that allow them to map, measure and shoot off an estimate without clocking windshield time and burning through fuel.

"We share the numbers, and our people understand what our fuel cost is," Snodgrass says, adding that foremen are cognizant of fuel consumption when pricing a job. "They see what it costs them to have two trucks on a job site or a tractor and they are actually aware of that cost."

Employees at Dennis' 7 Dees report directly to job sites rather than driving to headquarters, piling in trucks, then driving back out to the field. "It's about changing habits, really," Snodgrass says.

**SAVING WITH ON-SITE SERVICE.** To manage fuel costs, many companies have turned to on-site fueling to avoid service stations or using card lock arrangements. Dennis' 7 Dees does both.

Seventy-five percent of 7 Dees' vehicles and equipment are fueled up on site. Those are the machines/trucks that report to headquarters. The rest of the fleet, belonging to satellite locations, fills up at card lock stations. This helps the company track consumption, Snodgrass says. Employees responsible for fueling up equipment have cards and an ID number. Records are kept with who filled up when, and how much fuel was purchased at what cost, he explains.

Schill Grounds Management in North Ridgeville, Ohio, has used on-site fuel for well over a decade. The indirect savings are substantial because labor gets tangled into fuel expenses when figuring the cost of a crew waiting at a gas station to fill up a vehicle. Figuring three to four crewmembers in a truck, and 10 to 15 minutes per pit stop, "That's a huge labor cost," says Jerry Schill, president and CEO. "With 106 people here, we can't afford that many people sitting around." At the end of the day, crewmembers clock out and supervisors fuel up trucks on site.

Fueling up mid-route interrupts the workflow, and "density is king," Schill says. "The denser our routes are, with the least amount of windshield time, the better."

Meanwhile, avoiding gasoline all together – at least for powering equipment – is a goal for some firms, including Schill. Propane costs about half the price of gasoline, Schill notes. That, and reduced carbon emissions (50 to 70 percent less than gasoline), is the reason why the company's goal is to convert its entire mower fleet to propane by 2015. Schill currently runs 90 mowers, most of which are propane-powered.

With each mower burning through about five to seven gallons of fuel a day, that adds up to about 500 to 600 gallons per day for the entire fleet, Schill figures. "Propane is significantly less money and there is a huge abundance of natural gas and propane right under our feet in Ohio," he says.

A TEAM GAME. A traffic jam can cost Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping thousands of dollars in lost time, not to mention wasted fuel. "All



the while, your engines are running and the gas gauge is going down," Snodgrass says.

There's nothing Snodgrass can do about traffic or fuel prices. "It takes one hour to get across town where it used to take a half hour because of population and infrastructure – it's very concerning," Snodgrass says.

Reducing vehicles on the road and coming up with creative solutions for managing the expense can drastically reduce costs. On one project (an airport), Dennis' 7 Dees crews took public transportation. Snodgrass says, "We joked about having a wheelbarrow on the bus – we didn't do that."

Rather than job costing a vehicle to a project, supervisors consider whether a gator or smaller piece of equipment would suffice. The goal is to avoid any back-and-forth driving of vehicles. All vehicles (tractors, utility



From left: Drew, David and Dean Snodgrass of Dennis' 7 Dees in Portland, Ore.

vehicles) and equipment are secured on the project site and do not leave the property until the job is completed.

"We have a special driver who just dispatches and handles the logistics of getting the tractor from this to that site," Snodgrass says. "There was a time when we would tow a tractor out to a job site and then trailer it

#### TIPS FOR THE TANK

The one sure thing about gas prices is they likely aren't going to drop. Beyond the actual price of fuel, there are labor, miles and time involved in filling up vehicles and equipment. For these reasons, some landscape firms opt for onsite fueling services.

But equally important is creating a culture of awareness so employees understand their part in reducing fuel consumption.

Here are some points to keep in mind as you adopt systems to tighten your fuel expenses.

ESTABLISH BEST PRACTICES. Help

employees understand what's expected in terms of fueling up vehicles and equipment, and traveling to work sites. When should vehicles be fueled up?

Who is responsible for this task? How many company vehicles should be jobcosted to a site, and what steps should employees take to prevent wasted miles (and fuel) – carpooling, reporting directly to job sites, etc. Conduct regular team meetings to explain processes, address questions and gather ideas. Give everyone a part in reducing fuel consumption.

FUEL UP DURING OFF HOURS. Filling up vehicles and equipment during the workday subtracts precious labor hours from the budget. Designate certain employees to manage fuel before or after shifts.

**CARD-TRACK CONSUMPTION.** Stand-alone card lock stations serving commercial customers allow companies to fuel up 24/7, and track use (date, time, purchase amount, etc.) through the employees' cards and ID numbers. This gives companies a tool to better manage fuel consumption.

VET FUEL PROGRAMS. Consider various fill programs and how the pricing might benefit your bottom line. "Our fuel supplier is on an auto-fill program and the price averaging has seemed to benefit us," says Dean Snodgrass, vice president, Dennis' 7 Dees, Portland, Ore. back at night. We were pulling trailers and equipment more than we needed to."

And, as Snodgrass notes, habit changes have resulted in a cultural shift: more conscientious attitudes about using vehicles and consuming fuel. "To have two or three vehicles meeting on a site is just frowned upon," he says. "We work very hard to carpool and limit transportation."

What about smaller firms that don't run the volume of vehicles to consider an on-site fuel operation? Even with one truck and a trailer of equipment on the road, Monarch Landscaping in Bath, Ohio, must watch where it fuels up. "I'm not exaggerating, there is a \$.30 to \$.40 price difference a few miles down the road," says Rick Novotny, president.

Novotny relies on sites like GasBuddy. com to alert him of the best fuel prices and times to gas up. (The prices are usually lower in the morning, he points out.)

He uses a routing feature on his smart phone to figure in gas stops at locations along his daily routes. And, he takes advantage of "fuel perks" offered by his local grocery store, which can save him \$,30 or more per gallon.

The pennies add up – big time. The savings can buy him a couple extra cans of fuel per day for his two-cycle equipment and he generally goes through two to three cans of gas to run his trimmer, edger and blower.

Meanwhile, keeping equipment and vehicles well-maintained can reduce fuel expenses, too, Novotny says. He changes air filters and oil regularly, and checks tire pressure. "I have noticed that oil changes, clean air filters and changing spark plugs does make a difference and it keeps equipment running longer," he says.

Managing fuel expenses will require continuously refining efficiencies, tapping into technology including GPS and smart phone apps and educating employees about the fuel burden so they can do their part, from carpooling to smart job costing.

"There is not much we can do to control the cost of fuel, but we need to rethink our behaviors," Snodgrass says. L&L

## GO THE DISTANCE

#### Contractors use a number of strategies to manage fuel costs. By Brooke N. Bates

hen gas prices suddenly spiked several years ago, many lawn care companies offset costs with temporary surcharges on customers' bills. Since then, LCOs have switched fuel sources, upgraded equipment and installed software to more sustainably manage fluctuating fuel costs.

**BEYOND GAS PRICES.** At A Cut Above Landscape Management, however, owner Brad Terrell is less concerned about the price at the pump – and more concerned about how much time his crews spend there.

"You know how it works when four laborers stop at the gas station," he says. "About the time the tank is full, one of the guys realizes he wants a doughnut and a Coke. Then about the time he comes out, one of them realizes he has to go to the bathroom. We figured we were losing an hour a day, and we challenged ourselves to capture that hour."

Actually, estimating 200 work days, times 70 employees at about \$15 an hour, Terrell figured he was wasting 14,000 hours of labor at the pump – totaling more than \$200,000 a year. More focused on managing labor costs than fuel, Terrell installed tanks at his company in Fortson, Ga., about 10 years ago.

Terrell doesn't schedule regular maintenance specifically for fuel efficiency – although oil changes and other routine work can optimize engine performance. Generally, he just wants to keep equipment operational so crews can keep working. "A broken-down truck costs money," he says, "but the labor that's down because of a broken-down truck costs even more."

Maintenance is a must, but the investment varies from gas to diesel equipment. "Across the board, when you get a diesel truck, everything is more expensive," says Tom Grosh, owner of Grosh's Lawn Service in Clear Spring, Md. "With diesel, we had to change the fuel filter every oil change, which cost around \$400 total. Now, we have electronic fuel injection, so it's less than \$100 for an oil change on a gas truck. That's a tremendous difference."

**SOURCING SAVINGS.** Grosh's began phasing out diesel trucks for gas equipment three years ago. As prices rise, the savings add up.

"When we purchased our first diesel trucks, diesel fuel was \$1.10 a gallon," says owner Tom Grosh. "Now it's \$4-plus a gallon, and gas is 40 to 50 cents cheaper. We've started to cut back on diesel and switch to gasoline, and the trucks still have the same power and mileage – about 10 miles to the gallon pulling a trailer."

Grosh replaced his on-site diesel tank with a second gas tank – scoring better bulk gas prices to save three cents more per gallon. In June, Grosh paid \$3.55 while nearby stations in Hagerstown,



Md., charged \$3.79. Had he still been using diesel, he would have paid \$3.95.

To ensure low prices, Grosh requests fuel delivery via text or email for written quotes – which he matches against nearby service stations. "If the bulk price is above the pump price, we'll wait till the price comes down," he says, noting that bulk prices often peak on Monday and drop throughout the week.

Meanwhile, in 2011, Lemak Landscape in Slatington, Pa., made the opposite switch from gas to diesel – nearly tripling fuel efficiency.

"We had a '94 Dodge Ram 250 that was getting about 6 miles to the gallon pulling a trailer," says owner George Lemak. "We went to a '93 Dodge Cummins diesel that got 17 miles to the gallon, so it was a big change in our fuel savings. You spend a little more for the diesel machine, but it's better in the long run for fuel consumption."

After changing trucks, Lemak switched mowers, too. Instead of filling two saddle tanks a day for a gas-powered riding mower, now he fills them on site every other day with diesel. One day, Lemak's fuel delivery representative recommended off-road diesel. Exclusively for non-taxed, commercial equipment that doesn't operate on public roads, off-road diesel is consequently cheaper, because road taxes aren't built into the price,

"In the winter, we were paying \$4.19 a gallon for the trucks at the pump, and off-road was \$3.49 a gallon, so there's a big difference

#### USING DEALERS AS A RESOURCE

om Grosh, owner of Grosh's Lawn Service in Clear Spring Md., routinely ran edgers and other equipment entirely out of fuel to keep the carburetors clean. If he didn't, ethanol could take down a mower mid-season.

"We shut off the fuel tank flowing to the carburetor, and let the carburetor and the fuel bowl completely run out of fuel," Grosh says. "That way, ethanol isn't sitting in the carburetor for weeks on end."

Grosh didn't give it a second thought – until he went in to purchase a new mower two years ago. His long-time local dealer recommended switching to fuel injection. "That got us away from the carburetor issue with ethanol, which has been a wonderful asset to us," Grosh says.

Over 15 years, Grosh has built a relationship with his local lawn equipment dealer, trusting its expertise for new equipment and ongoing maintenance alike. The quick, accommodating service he gets in return, he says, is priceless.

"Listen and move on the dealers' recommendations. They really do have your best interests at heart," he says. "If you treat your servicing dealer as you'd want to be treated, you both will win in the end."

there," Lemak says. "Our backhoes and skidloaders were burning through 16-28 gallons in a 12-hour period moving snow. If diesel is \$4.19 a gallon, that adds up." Before 2011, Lemak paid \$2,200 a week to gas trucks and equipment. Now, he still fills trucks at the pump, but \$1,100 a month fills his on-site diesel tank for off-road equipment.

**STAYING ON ROUTE.** Whether trying to save on fuel or labor, efficient routing can trim both miles and minutes. That's why when prospects request estimates, Grosh first maps addresses against his existing customers.

"When fuel cost \$1 a gallon, we didn't care where you were," he says. "But especially in the mowing operation, if you're more than 10 minutes away from the closest lawn we

mow, it's not economical to drive out of our way. Because of the price of fuel and labor to get there, we have to keep a tight rein on our travel area so we're not losing what we're trying to make."

Terrell schedules geographically concentrated routes as well. With GPS tracking in every crew's truck, he can map their locations down to a particular spot in a parking lot.

"We have GPS to validate that they're taking the most efficient routes and not wasting time," Terrell says. "Obviously, if they drive extra miles, that's costing me on gas, too, but it's costing way more on labor. By managing labor, we wind up saving fuel."

In addition to tracking mileage, Grosh uses his trucks' capabilities to electronically track engine hours, too, helping measure how long equipment runs idle. Armed with that data, he communicates regular reminders to his crew about shutting off equipment instead of letting it run.

Whether the bottom line is reducing fuel costs or simply saving money and manhours, you can control expenses with systems that keep crews on route. "We have all kinds of verification techniques to make sure we're not getting burned overpaying for fuel," Terrell says. "It's more about saving money than saving fuel." L&L

Brad Terrell estimated his crews were wasting 14,000 hours of labor a year at the pump.



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#### **UNSTOPPABLE OWNERS**



This is the fourth in a series, sponsored by Bobcat, that highlights landscape contractors who have shown resilience in the face of adversity.

THE DANGLING CARROT

Barrett Lawn Care uses incentives to keep his workers motivated and his company growing.

#### **By Kristen Hampshire**

ifteen years ago, Eric Barrett never expected to be drafting construction plans to build an expanded home office for his homegrown company, Barrett Lawn Care. "I would have said, "That's crazy," Barrett says.

It started in 1998, when Barrett started his company in his garage in Richfield, Minn., with one truck and a trailer. His story is like many others in the green industry who plowed their own paths in business. But Barrett, whose wife manages administrative duties, has managed to grow his startup from a fledgling home-based operation to a \$2 million firm with up to 26 employees in summer and 40 in winter. The company's service mix is evenly divided among design/ build, maintenance and winter services.

And now, after 16 years of steady growth – and positive revenue every year, even during the recession – Barrett Lawn Care is ready to make a big move. "We'll be knocking down the building we bought next door in the very near future and building an office space that suits us," Barrett says.

**MOTIVATING THE TEAM.** Barrett recognized early on that recruiting dedicated members for his team would be critical for growth and success. "One of our employees has been with us for 12 years, and another for 10 years – they happen to be brothers – and there are many who have been with us for four, five and eight years," Barrett says, speaking to the longevity of his workforce.

Of course, finding good people is no easy task. "It's hard to get people who want to be outside," he says. When the thermometer hits 20 below zero, Barrett's crews are plowing



snow, and lots of it, in Minnesota. The work requires people who show up to work consistently and perform quality service – people who can be counted on. Barrett encourages these traits through an innovative pay-based incentive program.

If employees, or subs, show up on time for the first snow event, they receive a \$0.50 per hour raise after completing the shift. For every consecutive event, if they arrive to the job site on time, and work the entire shift, they receive an additional \$0.50 per hour. That raise continues up to a \$5 per hour maximum on top of their base pay.

"They can't skip an event to earn the raise," Barrett says. "If you have a \$10 per hour shoveler who can earn up to \$15 per hour, that adds up along with overtime," he says.

Once a worker misses an event, shows up late or does not complete the route, the entire bonus is wiped out and they must start from scratch. "This definitely keeps people motivated because they know if they miss an event, all of a sudden that \$15 per hour turns back to \$10," Barrett says, adding that this incentive program also assists with recruiting because workers recognize an opportunity to quickly earn more cash.

Another way Barrett keeps his crews excited about their work is to celebrate the success of each season. Barrett Lawn Care Eric Barrett started Barrett Lawn Care out of his garage in 1998. He now employs more than 20 people, including his wife, Laura, who manages administrative duties.

holds a fall party following the summer season, and a spring gathering as a reward for the hard winter's work. The parties are held at a restaurant or the bowling alley – someplace where the team can socialize and have fun. "What we do works for us," Barrett says of the employee-focused programs.

INVESTING IN GROWTH. Steady growth has required equipment investments over the years, and Barrett Lawn Care has significantly increased its fleet from that original truck-andtrailer setup to a garage of constantly updated equipment, including eight skid-steer loaders and trailers stocked with equipment for four mowing crews and two landscape crews.

The company also performs irrigation and lawn care services, so the company owns the tools to service that work.

In the beginning, acquiring the working capital was tough, and it required financing equipment, Barrett says. "You have a fair amount of debt hanging over you at first," he says.

The debts are long paid off, but Barrett builds an equipment savings account by depositing the same payments into the bank for future purchases. "So we do have the luxury of paying cash for equipment, which certainly, 10 years ago, I never thought would be possible," he says. L8L

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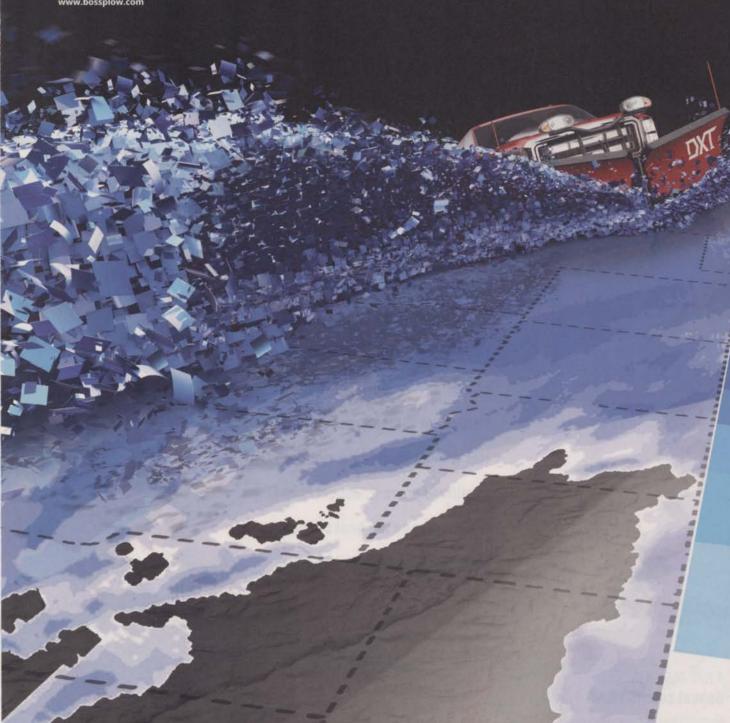
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Do your homework the next time you buy a snow blower. Pg. 98

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Lawn&Landscape SNOW

## is for versatility

#### Increase productivity by investing in a v-blade.

#### By Anne-Marie Hardie

≝B⊛S.

n the market for a new snow plow blade? Before purchasing a straight blade, take a moment to look at the versatility in a v-blade system.

V-blades have a pivot point in the middle of the blade, allowing the driver to select the right angle for the job. Although the price is higher, this increased functionality could make a v-blade a worthwhile investment for your business.

"Most professional contractors these days

are looking at v-plows," says Mark Klossner, marketing director for Boss Snowplow. "A v-plow can do everything that a straight blade can, but they also have the ability to adjust the wings independently, offering precision snow moving and stacking capabilities."

One of the advantages, Klossner says, is that the contractor is able to adjust the blades specifically to meet the demands of the snow.

The multiple settings on the v-blade allows the contractor to select the one that suits both

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## **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT

the type of snowfall and the area that needs to be cleared.

"The v-mode is useful in some instances, but the scoop mode is the real time saver," says Josh Slocum, branch manager at Mainscape in Fishers, Ind.

**MULTIPLE SETTINGS.** V-blades offer the versatility of being able to adjust the angle of the blade to the snowfall.

If the blades are placed in a straight position, then the v-plow functions similar to a straight blade. This option is most often used for back dragging or simply moving snow. However, if you have compact or ice crusted snow, Klossner recommends switching to the v-setting.

"The v-plow has the ability to pierce the snow. If you think of it like an arrowhead piercing through the material, it has the ability to cut into the snow and start a lane for windrowing," Klossner says.

"With a straight blade, if you get heavy snow that hardens up overnight, there's a lot more resistance from the snow, making it

#### "The v-mode is useful in some instances, but the scoop mode is the real time saver."

– Josh Slocum, branch manager at Mainscape

both harder on the truck and more difficult to move the snow. "  $\,$ 

If you have a lot of snow, choose the scoop setting. This function will push snow up and over even large snow banks. Working similar to a bucket attachment, this blade will quickly clear up large amounts of snow.

"A straight blade will leave trails of snow (or windrows). These can be cleaned up much more efficiently with a plow that has scoop capabilities." Slocum says. "This will eliminate passes which saves time and is easier on your equipment."

#### CHOOSING THE RIGHT V-BLADE FOR THE JOB.

"Speed of operation, specifically how fast the blades move, has become an important factor especially with an experienced contractor who's on a tight schedule," says Peter Robison, vice president of marketing and business development for Meyers Products.

The advantage of the v-blade is being able to modify your blade to meet the demands





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of the snow. However, this advantage is only beneficial if the contractor is comfortable using the various settings available.

Make sure that the system you choose is easy to switch from one blade to the next. Look for a simple control panel that will allow you to quickly modify your blade, according to your current environment. "With a v-blade you are only limited by how creative of an operator you have in terms of the positions that you can put the blades in," Robison says.

If you're going to be back dragging snow, Robison recommends selecting a v-blade that has double acting locked cylinders.

The advantage of dual cylinders, Robison says, is the ram (the piece that slides inside of the cylinder) will lock itself in position and not allow the blades to fall forward. "The v-plow has the ability to pierce the snow. If you think of it like an arrowhead piercing through the material, it has the ability to cut into the snow and start a lane for windrowing."

– Mark Klossner, marketing director for Boss Snowplow

Trip design is another factor to consider to protect the vehicle that your plow is attached to. "There's two different ways that a snow plow trips. There's the trip edge and the full moldboard trip," Klossner says.

As far as trip technology is concerned,

Robison says with bottom trip technology, it's just the cutting edge of the board that trips up, allowing the plow to pass over the obstruction.

In a full moldboard trip, the whole blade itself pivots when it hits an obstruction, Klossner says.

Both Klossner and Robison say that before making the final purchase. it is important to consider the installer, where you are going to get the parts and who is going to do the maintenance.

Developing a good relationship with your distributor is key, Robison says, particularly finding someone that can help the contractor after the sale. **181** 

The author is a freelance writer based in Ontario, Canada.



## **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT

## KNOW YOUR THROW

Make sure you have all the facts before purchasing your next snow thrower.

By Anne-Marie Hardie

Bolicat

our snow thrower should complement your current business equipment and do more than what you currently have. "The majority of the landscape contractors I've visited are using single-stage snow throwers," says Angela Raddant, product marketing manager at Ariens. "Many of them choose our smallest machines because it's easier to take in and out of the truck, cleans the pavement and it's

easy to maneuver and use." Christine Cheng, product marketing manager for Toro, agrees, sharing that these smaller machines (roughly around 21 inches) are great to get around tight spaces and work well for finishing up a larger job.

Bobcat

Single-stage snow throwers are designed to be easy to move both on and off the ground. The point of them is to reach areas that are hard for larger machines to get to. **DURABILITY IS A MUST.** Generally, there are two types of durability to look for in a snow thrower, Cheng says – whether the machine can withstand wear and tear and the durability of the rotor system.

Frequently moving a snow thrower in and out of a truck, up and down stairs or pulling them up a curb can create wear and tear on all parts of the machine, but in particular the wheels, Raddant says. To compensate for this



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CONSTRUCTION

## **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT

wear and tear, Ariens uses semi-pneumatic tires with an independent axle that can be removed, straightened and replaced.

According to Cheng, contractors should look for a snow thrower equipped with a rubber paddle that is heavy duty and known for its extended life. "The last thing you would want is that you're out on the job and all of a sudden the paddles are worn down and you can't (reach) the pavement, leaving a dissatisfied customer," Cheng says. service points of the machine itself, including the oil drain, spark plug and recoil - all of the types of things that you would need to service quickly in the field," she says.

THE RIGHT MACHINE FOR THE JOB. Despite the value in single-stage machines, there are times when a larger machine is better suited for the job. If you are cleaning up terrain like gravel, both Raddant and Cheng recommended using a two-stage unit. "In a two-stage unit,

the metal augers are somewhat elevated off the ground so they don't actually pull the gravel in," Cheng says.

Recently, Ariens installed a new steering technology, Auto Turn, on its product line. This steering technology is similar to all-wheel drive in a car, with the slip differential sensing the operator's input and automatically locking and unlocking axles for the driver when taking a corner, Raddant says. Advancements in engine output and power transfer technology have increased the overall efficiency in snow throwers, she says.

However, if snowfall is limited, Raddant says the right tool may not be a snow thrower at all. In fact, she says a power brush

may be the perfect piece of equipment. Power brushes can be used for multiple applications from light snow removal (less than 6 inches) to dethatching a lawn. This equipment not only cleans snow but can also remove debris that may be left at the end of a snow season.

"Power brushes are becoming very popular among landscape contractors mainly because more consumers are looking for greener initiatives for ice and snow," Raddant says.

Before making that final investment, take the time to consider both the snowfall and terrain in your area. Purchasing the right machine for the job can help increase your company's productivity and profitability. L81

The author is a freelance writer in Ontario, Canada.

#### Know your surroundings

Before investing in a snow thrower, Josh Slocum, branch manager at Mainscape, based in Fishers, Ind., says you should know the types of areas where you will be using the machine and the type of snow you will need to clear. The terrain itself, the width of the path that you will be maneuvering on and the type of snow are all factors to consider before making that final purchase.

"If you are clearing surfaces that you want to avoid damaging, a single-stage (paddle blower) is the best option," he says. "The machine picks up the snow with rubber paddles as opposed to metal augers." It also works well in tight quarters where maneuverability is key. Slocum says that single-stage machines are also lighter and more agile, making it easier to put on and off a truck.

However, in situations where you are dealing with heavy snow falls or you have a lot of ground to cover, the two stage throwers are the best option. "This is the larger heavy duty option," Slocum says.

Aside from the paddles, look for features such as bolted-on handles and a larger powered engine that is known for its reliability. To cope with the strain that ice and snow places on equipment, Bobcat uses gears to change the chutes instead of a chain. "We use gears because they don't get iced up," says Katie Althoff, Bobcat attachment product specialist.

Whether you're changing spark plugs or simply doing a quick overall, it's nice to have a snow thrower with equipment that's both accessible and fairly simple to maintain. Raddant says that the Ariens single-stage systems are designed so that both the engine itself and some of the key maintenance points are accessible. "Our single-stage machines are left open to both the maintenance points and the

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#### **CASE Snow Removal Package**

The pitch: CASE Construction Equipment has released a new Snow Removal Package for the company's SR250 and SV300 skid steers.

 The new Snow Removal Package includes high-flow auxiliary hydraulics that provide up to 37.6 gallons per minute (gpm) for use with snow blowers and



brushes. It comes with hydraulic self-leveling and Ride Control.

- The new package includes an enclosed cab and a heated air-ride suspension seat. It also comes with a block heater to assist in cold starts, and a 4-corner LED strobe kit and heavy-duty lighting package/side lamp kit.
- The package also has a heavy-duty rear door and hydraulic couplers.

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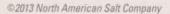


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## **SNOW** PRODUCTS

#### Henke Manufacturing HXC2000 Spreader

The pitch: Henke's new HXC2000 Spreader features a removable conveying cartridge.

- The replaceable cartridge allows users to choose between an auger, dual auger, pintle chain or belt conveyor.
- Standard features of the HXC2000 include: fully replaceable conveyor cartridge, remote chain tensioning, wide base rails and conveyor for more consistent spread and minimizing of material bridging.
- The spreader also features No Tool adjustment spinner deflectors, telescoping discharge chute for even high flow rates, spinner drive "shed" design to prevent

clogging and fouling in the chute and safety features allowing tool free access for routine maintenance. For more information:

www.henkemfg.com

#### Hiniker Company Model 775

The pitch: Hiniker's Model 775 dual-motor electric auger spreader allows users to tailor material ice control application rates accurately and conveniently.

- A 5.75 inch diameter auger delivery system provides positive delivery control with no material carry-back into the truck bed. The spreader is sized for either a 6.5 foot or eight foot pickup.
- An in-cab console provides individual variable speed control for both the conveyor and the spinner, along with blast and reversing functions. Dual 12-volt motors offer quiet, lowmaintenance operation.
- The spreader's standard hopper capacity is two cubic yards. A tip-up spinner assembly is desined to make unloading unused material simple and provides trailer hitch access.
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For more information www.hiniker.com





#### **SnowWolf Ultra Series Blades**

#### The pitch:

SnowWolf's Ultra Series blades come in five widths ranging from six to 10 feet and attach easily to small or large skid-steers and utility loaders that range from 4,000 to 14,000 pounds.



- With the 35-degree plowing angle and tight moldboard curvature, snow rolls off of these blades easily, and they save fuel because they require less horsepower to push.
- The blades can oscillate up to six inches to adjust to the contours of plowing surfaces and evenly wear the cutting edges.
- Each Ultra Series blade also features a 9 inch trip edge that eliminates false tripping that is common with full-trip style plows. This allows operators to plow through changing snow depths and consistencies.

For more information: www.snowwolfplows.com

#### **SnowEx SP-1675 Precision Pro**

The pitch: SnowEx's new SP-1675 Precision Pro spreader has the ability to spread any bulk or bagged ice melting material from four to 12 feet wide. It is is offered with three mounting systems for attaching to three-point hitches, utility vehicles or 2-inch receiver hitches.

 The unit is designed to accommodate varying sidewalk widths, which cannot be easily treated with drop spreaders.



- The spreader has a six cubic foot capacity. A volumetric vane feed system provides consistent material flow to the spinner, while eliminating the need for a gate, since no material can leak out when the spreader is turned off.
- The spreader comes with a lightweight, corrosion-resistant polyethylene hopper, which requires little maintenance. The electric drive system further reduces maintenance needs, since there are no engines, chains or sprockets to service.

For more information: www.snowexproducts.com



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## **DIRECTOR'S** NOTE

## Stop mind reading

BY KEVIN GILBRIDE

What do your customers think of you?

This may sound like an odd question. What does it matter? They are our customers, right? So of course they like us.

But how do you know? Have you asked them?

Many companies think they know what their customers think. Some even have an occasional process they go through to find out. Many companies however assume they know.

I was having a conversation the other day with a snow professional and this topic as it relates to ISO 9001 certification. Measurement and analysis is one off the six key documentation components to this certification.

We were discussing the over value to this, and this particular individual was sharing how pleased they were that it was a "requirement."

Their comment to me was that you often don't know what your customers think until they are gone. Implementing an ongoing process to measure what your customers think of you is going to improve your business.

I know companies that send out surveys to their customers annually to gather feedback on how they are doing.

Other companies do this after each season (summer and winter). Another one calls a certain percentage of customers each year with a series of questions that they answer. There are many ways to gather feedback, and most companies do this periodically. But the key is what you do with the information.

You often see the informa-

tion gathered, and results are then reviewed. Too often, that is all that happens.



You need to Gilbride

do something with this information. Better yet, you need to have a goal to achieve with your system.

If you are doing a survey, set a baseline the first time you do it. Perhaps it is 20 questions on a scale of 1-10. When you average the survey the first time out, you score a 9.2. This gives you an idea of how you are performing today.

You may find an area of your business that you scored less than you would have liked. This gives you an opportunity to improve. It also gives you an opportunity to communicate with your customers on improvements you are making in the business. After all, if they are telling you that you are falling down in a certain area, could they be the ones that are about to become former customers?

In the end, many businesses gather data, but the key is what you do with that information. **LBL** 

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## D ICE REPORT

## The lease/buy decision

#### The rules may be changing when it comes to leasing equipment. By Mark E. Battersby

Whether to buy or lease is a question facing many professional snow removal and ice management contractors and businesses, even as credit becomes more readily available. While there is no one correct answer, compared to the simplicity of buying, leasing is far more complicated and may be getting more complex.

The lease accounting rules as we currently know them may be changing as a result of ongoing negotiations between the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) which sets rules for many countries, and by the U.S. Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) which writes the rules in the U.S. The proposals would require many businesses to add all but the shortest leases to their balance sheets as liabilities, much like debt. WHY LEASE? Equipment leasing is similar to a loan: the lender buys and owns equipment and "rents" it to a snow removal business at a flat monthly rate for a specified number of months. Although lease financing is generally more expensive than bank financing, in most instances it's more easily obtained.

Among the reasons given by small business owners for leasing are the ability to have the latest equipment, consistent expenses for budgeting purposes, help in managing company growth and no down payment.

Leasing offers real advantages, including reduced cash outflows and greater control. But that's not all. Other advantages include:

- Conventional bank loans usually require more money upfront than leasing.
- · It generally requires only one or two pay-

ments upfront in lieu of the substantial payments often required to purchase.

- Unlike some financing options, leasing offers 100 percent financing. That means a snow removal business can acquire essential equipment and begin using it immediately with no money down.
- Best of all, the full amount of the equipment, as well as service or maintenance can be included in the lease. This spreads the cost over the term of the lease, freeing up cash flow for the business now.

**BUYING EQUIPMENT** Tax breaks make buying business equipment appealing, but high initial costs mean this option isn't for everyone. Among the advantages of buying equipment is, of course, "ownership." This is especially Do you follow the industry standards? **Big savings.** 

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## **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT

true with property that has a long useful life and is not likely to become technologically outdated in the near future, such as office furniture or snow plows.

#### **DISADVANTAGES OF BUYING EQUIPMENT**

Higher initial expense: For some contractors, purchasing needed equipment may not be an option because the initial cash outlay is too high. Even if the business plans to borrow the money and make monthly payments, most banks require a down payment of around 20 percent. Borrowing money may also tie up lines of credit, and lenders may place restrictions on the snow and ice removal business's future financial operations to ensure the loan will be repaid.

**Obsolete Equipment:** While ownership is perhaps the biggest advantage to buying equipment, it can also be a tremendous disadvantage. Purchasers of high-tech equipment run the risk the equipment may become technologically obsolete and they may be forced to reinvest in new equipment long before planned. Certain types of equipment have very little resale value. A computer system that costs \$5,000 today may be worth only \$1,000 or less three years from now.

**TAX STRATEGIES** In the eyes of the IRS, whether a leasing transaction is treated as a "lease," or treated as a "purchase," determines who will be entitled to deductions for expenses such as depreciation, rent and interest.

Generally, when it comes to determining who owns the property for tax purposes, who is entitled to the depreciation deductions, the IRS looks to the "economic substance" of the transaction – how it is structured and works – not how the parties involved characterize it. Lease or rental payments are, of course, usually fully deductible. With a purchase, Section 179 of the Internal Revenue Code allows the snow removal business to fully deduct the cost of some newly purchased assets in the first year. In 2014 the operation can deduct up to \$25,000 of equipment (subject to a phase-out if more than \$2,000,000 of equipment is placed in service in any one year). Although not all equipment purchases are eligible for Section 179 treatment, the operation can still receive tax savings for almost any business equipment through depreciation deductions.

Fortunately, there are no time limits on leasing. That means leasing can be effective where the business has already purchased equipment. These transactions, known as sale-leasebacks, are usually available for equipment purchased within the past 90



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days. Sale-leasebacks may also be used to legitimately shift tax benefits from the snow removal business to its new owner or owners.

Equipment that is already on the operation's books can be sold to the owner/ shareholder – or key employees – and leased back to the business. Because self-rental transactions involve shifting tax benefits from the business to its owners/shareholders, they should be "arm's length" transactions and the parties aware of possible IRS scrutiny.

CHANGES IN THE WIND. As proposed, the new rules would represent a major change in how most businesses account for the cost of leases by requiring vastly larger amounts of assets and liabilities to be reported on an operation's books. Under current rules, snow removal contractors can generally classify many leases as "operating leases" and keep them off their balance sheets. This so-called "off-balance-sheet financing" can make a business look less indebted than it really is. The proposed lease accounting rules would however, require many businesses to add to their balance sheets all but the shortest leases, as liabilities akin to debt.

The proposal would also set up a twotrack system for how lease costs should be reflected in the operations' earnings. Costs of real-estate leases would be recognized evenly over the term of the lease, while costs of other leases would be more front-loaded and would decline over the lease term.

Should these accounting standards be adopted as proposed, it is the banks and other lending institutions that would be impacted first and hardest. With lenders forced to increase their capital and new restrictions on the sources of funds those institutions rely on, leasing might face a tighter market and become far more expensive. There could be a considerable delay in making the new rules effective, probably until 2017. This would give snow removal contractors time to comply and to renegotiate loan agreements.

The many businesses that currently have borrowing limits and/or restrictions placed on them by lenders and investors could, once leases must be included on the snow and ice removal operation's balance sheet, be in violation of those agreements. L&L

The author is a financial writer based in Ardmore, Pa.

For the full version of this article, go to lawnandlandscape.com and search "the lease/buy decision."

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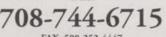
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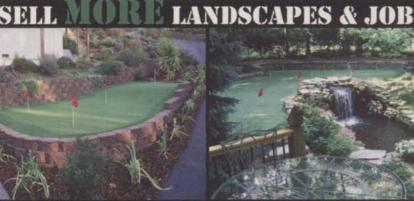
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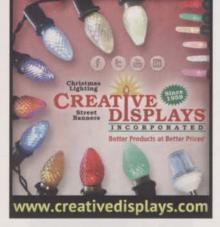
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#### LETTERS the EDITOR

Want to sound off on something you saw in this issue? Have an idea that you think would be worth featuring in next month's Lawn & Landscape? We want to know.

Call or email Chuck Bowen at 330-523-5330 or cbowen@gie.net.









Company: The Ground Guys Location: Waco, Texas Top 100 Ranking: 75 (tie) 2013 Revenue: \$18 million



#### **Chris Elmore** // PRESIDENT

I have a friend, he's passed away now. His name was Paul Strobel, and when I met Strobel I was a young manager.

Strobel was probably 70 at the time. He was an old, crusty guy, you know? Imagine Santa Claus in street clothes at about s-foot-tall. He looked exactly like Burl Ives.

I didn't know Strobel. I just knew he was a consultant and he was around. So I walk in the door and across the table from the door sat Strobel. He says, "Hello, Mr. Elmore, have a seat."

Strobel leans over the table, and he says, "Mr. Elmore, two things: Number one, you need to go to charm school and you need to learn how to treat people. Number two, there's a book you should read. It's called the Bible."

Then he starts walking around the table. He gets to the end of the table and he's coming over to my side and he says, "Mr. Elmore, stand up. I'm gonna give you a hug."

He hugs me and I'm just standing there with my arms down to the side and he goes, "Mr. Elmore, I didn't tell you that stuff to emasculate you or embarrass you. I told it to you because

someone needed to." And he sat down and we had an hour-long conversation and then, from then on, he was my greatest mentor.

#### You should seek counsel and not advice be-

cause that's what I got from Strobel. I got counsel from Strobel. That wasn't advice he was giving me. That wasn't take-it-or-leave-it. He was telling me. "If you don't do these things, you will not succeed." How did he know? Because he's been there and done that

Anyone and everyone can give you advice, and anyone and everyone will give you advice, but advice is basically an opinion. Counsel only comes from people who have been there and done that and those are the people I wanna listen to.

Most of our owner/operators are under \$500,000. What we try to do is we try to take 'em out of the mentality of "I own a green industry business." We wanna create professional selling organizations with our franchisees.

You have to become a professional selling organization that does landscape management. You can't be a landscape management company that sells.

When I learned to be an HVAC technician. one of the first things I learned was how to put a set of gauges on a system. That's your accounting system - when it's done by a qualified person, not your sister's brotherin-law's cousin who's the payroll clerk at the chicken plant.

In an HVAC business, your most expensive piece is your labor. That's a big deal because any service business, the margins are pretty thin unless you really manage your labor and materials, and then the other side of that is on the top line, which is sales.

The way businesses work together is really gonna be the big innovation in this industry over the next five years. There're several franchises now, there're several trade organizations, there're several association-type organizations. Not consolidators, but consultants. That external help for the small business owner in the green industry is really where we're gonna see a lot of impact.

Maybe someday they're gonna develop a mower that does something really cool and really awesome that's gonna revolutionize the industry but, typically, intellectually is where all the innovation happens and all the growth happens.

I'm an analyst and a problem-solver. I don't have all the answers but one thing I am is very tenacious when it comes to finding things out. My wife hates it. We watch a movie and I know all the trivia about the movie before it's over.

You never ask anybody to do anything you're not willing to do. From a leadership standpoint I've proven that I'll be in the trenches with people, and I'm willing to get dirty to get it done if that's what it takes.

I've made plenty of mistakes. Most of my mistakes come from speaking before I think. That's a problem that affects a lotta people. I'll own up to it, though. LEL



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