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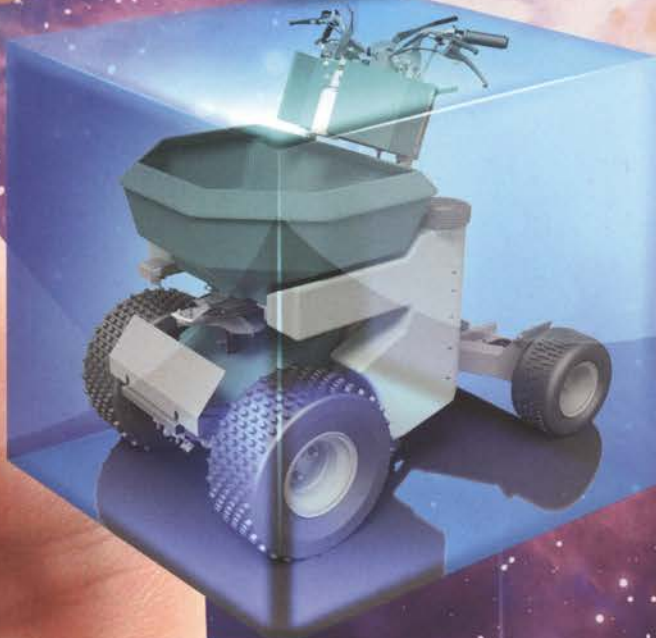
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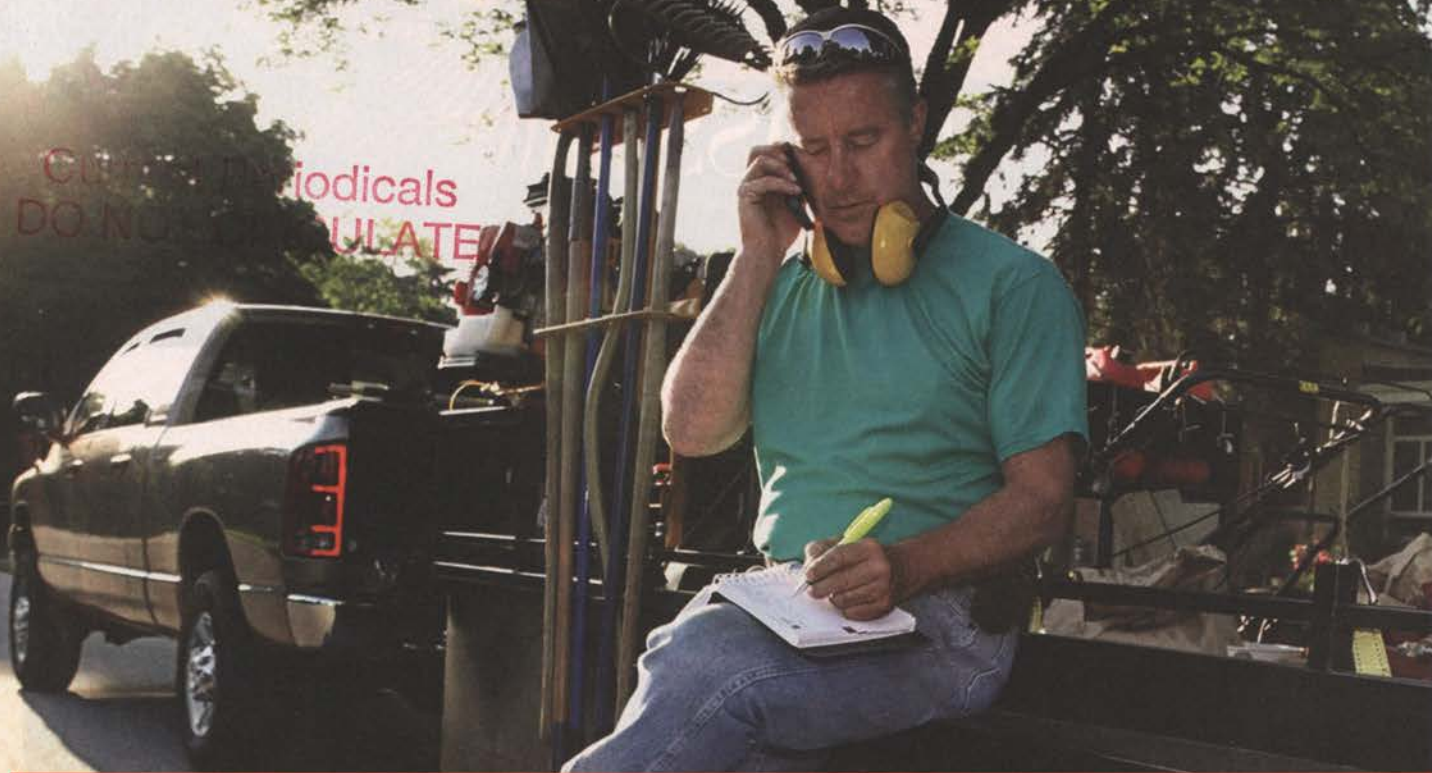


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# Lawn & Landscape

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## ONLINE CONTENTS

Check out what's new online from **LAWN & LANDSCAPE**.

## WHAT YOU'RE READING

These are some of the most-viewed stories on [Lawnandlandscape.com](http://Lawnandlandscape.com) from Jan 1 to March 22.

### Former Brickman investor acquires Yellowstone Landscape Group

The 15<sup>th</sup>-largest landscape company in the country gets new owners and positions for growth.

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

### DOL can temporarily process H-2B applications

The department is allowed to operate the H-2B program until April 15.

[bit.ly/h-2b](http://bit.ly/h-2b)

### Foot, meet mouth

When it comes to what you should say at work, here are eight things you shouldn't.

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### 16 ideas to steal from Coastal Greenery

From the simple to the complex, the CGI team shares how you can improve everything from your morning huddle to your hiring practices.

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### The ants go marketing

As much as ants may be a pest, they can also be a helpful reminder about the importance of planning ahead.

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## GET CONNECTED



FOR A FUN FOLLOW OR A LIVELY "LIKE," check out these accounts of people in the industry who know how to use social media with great photos of jobs, funny posts and engaging content.

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### Keep covered

The number of jobs is growing for landscapers, but there's only so much plant material on the market. Cameron Cantrelle, CEO of Plantbid, talks about how to network to get what you need.  
[bit.ly/plantbid](http://bit.ly/plantbid)

### The paper trail

What do you do when an employee asks to be fired? Jason Cupp, former business owner and now growth consultant, shares HR horror stories and talks with editor Chuck Bowen about the importance of documentation.  
[bit.ly/lcupp](http://bit.ly/lcupp)



## ONLY ONE MONTH AWAY

OUR TOP 100 ISSUE IS COMING UP NEXT MONTH and we've got some great stuff planned. But before you get your hands on that, take a look at last year's coverage, which includes a series of webinars we hosted with some Top 100 owners.

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## EDITOR'S INSIGHT

What do you think? Email me at [cbowen@gie.net](mailto:cbowen@gie.net).

# How to find good help

I was paid a very heartening compliment last month. I was in Tennessee, giving a talk about hiring to a group of landscapers. After my presentation, one came up to me and said, "Thanks for what you said up there. You made me realize that I've just been sitting around bitching for years. I've got to get off my ass and go do something about it."



Now, excusing the gentleman's salty language, I think he made a good point. Contractors have always had trouble finding quality employees, and it's not gotten any better lately. According to our 2014 State of the Industry Report, 36 percent of landscapers say the biggest challenge to growing their business is finding quality candidates for hire.

To find many of those candidates, contractors rely on the H-2B program. In fiscal year 2014, the industry employed about 35,000 seasonal workers, more than three-and-a-half times the next largest segment. The program solves a true need – it brings skilled labor to landscapers who can't find it anywhere else, when they need it the most. And without it, many contractors would be up a creek.

But H-2B is a stopgap at best and a crutch at worst. In early March, the H-2B program shut down, leaving many contractors scrambling at the beginning of their season. But even after it gets running again, how reliable will it be in the future?

So what's a landscaper to do? Here are some ideas I shared that night in Tennessee.

- Finding new employees is someone's job. You have someone who is in charge of sales. You have someone who's in charge of operations. Whose job is it to make sure you have a quality team?

- You might have to pay more. The highest-paid entry-level crew position in the industry is a spray technician, who makes \$11.20 an hour at the national average. Without overtime, that makes a gross annual wage of about \$21,000. That's not a lot.

- There's a lot you can't fix. The guys who apply just to get unemployment benefits. The guys who work one day and then complain of the heat and quit. The guys who quit for a quarter more an hour. Those types of prospective employees will always be in your market. Don't waste time worrying about them. Everyone else has to deal with them, too.

- Focus on who you already have. You (hopefully) have a couple of solid employees. Ask them why they work for you. Ask them why they stay. Then ask if they have any friends looking for work.

There's no one solution to the labor problem. L&L has been writing about it since we started publishing the magazine three decades ago. But the main point of my presentation – and the point of this column and the whole magazine – is that you have to try something to solve the problem. The federal government isn't going to find you more quality employees. Sitting around and bitching isn't going to, either. — *Chuck Bowen*

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At the second annual iLandscape show, attendees had the chance to attend more than 20 educational sessions, attend the 2015 Excellence in Landscape Awards and see exhibitors demonstrate their products and equipment.

## The power of personalities

L&L attended the iLandscape show in Illinois and learned how different types of people can benefit a business. **By Kate Spirgen**

SCHAUMBURG, Ill. — Know who you are and don't try to be someone you're not. It's good advice for life in general, but it's also the way to drive sustainable growth in your business, according to Joe Abraham.

The founder of BOSI Global and author of "Entrepreneurial DNA: The Breakthrough Discovery that Aligns Your Business to Your Unique Strengths" shared the four personality types with iLandscape show attendees, explaining the value of knowing your own personality as well as that of your employees and your customers. iLandscape ran Feb. 25-27 at the Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center Hotel.

"A lot of the business decisions we make are based on who we are," Abraham said.

### L&L ON THE ROAD



• **Builder:** Builders tend to grow a business, acquire companies and spread to multiple locations very quickly. They tend to push employees to the next level and always want to be expanding. "They can get people to do things they wouldn't normally do," Abraham said.

Their weakness tends to be relationships because their ambition can make them think they are more competent than their employees.

• **Opportunist:** These are the

people that can't make enough money and they're always after the next big thing. When opportunity comes knocking, they always answer the door. "There's always a new, shiny object and they have to go pick it up," Abraham said.

They want to be reaching for the stars so they need unlimited opportunity. "If you give them a good base income, you've completely deactivated them," he said.

Every business needs some opportunists, Abraham said, noting that the best sales teams have a lot of this kind of person. Their biggest drive is financial independence, but their biggest weakness is their up and down income.

• **Specialist:** This is the most common type of person. They

tend to look for reliability and consistency, and most of their business comes from referrals and networking. Their businesses tend to grow well and then plateau, "and that's not necessarily a bad thing," Abraham said. "That's because they want stability."

For these people, reputation is the most important factor, making them analytical and risk-averse. "They'd rather lose money than lose their reputation," Abraham said.

• **Innovator:** Only about 12 to 15 percent of people fall into this group, who love to spend their time creating.

They measure their success by their mission, so they're most concerned with whether or not the client likes their landscape. "Every decision an innovator makes is seen through the mission lens," Abraham said.

While these types are great for marketing or design, their greatest weakness is management.

Once you realize your own strengths and weaknesses, you can see the gaps in your business and hire the right people for the right positions, Abraham said. For example, if you're a Specialist who looks for stability, you'll need a partner or staff member who can generate new leads, like an Opportunist.

And it's important to look at your entire company to see where your strengths and weaknesses are.

To take the free personality test, visit [BOSIdna.com](http://BOSIdna.com).

Visit [bit.ly/ilandapril](http://bit.ly/ilandapril) for more coverage from the iLandscape show.



JCB grew by record numbers in 2014, but company executives still see room to grow in the landscaping market.

**By Brian Horn**

SAVANNAH, Ga. – While it's coming off a record year in North America, JCB still has a way to go when breaking into the landscaping market, company executives said during a media event March 5 at the company's North America headquarters.

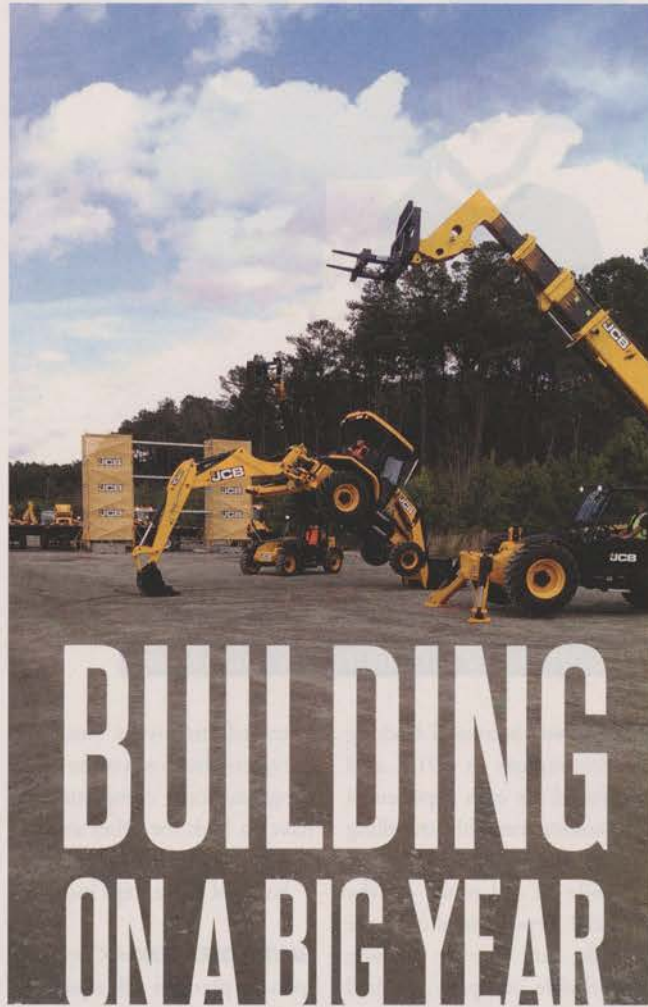
Both Arjun Mirdha, president and CEO North America, and Keith Hoskins, vice president of compact products, said they would like to increase awareness of JCB in the landscaping market.

When asked how he thought JCB factored into the landscape market, Hoskins said, "Not well enough."

Hoskins said he'd like to receive more direct feedback from contractors about what features they want on their equipment. He also said the company will invite local contractors to the JCB headquarters to drive the company's equipment.

"We hope to have a more dedicated focus (on landscapers)," he said.

**Breaking records.** JCB North America increased its sales in 2014 23 percent compared to 2013, marking it the company's fifth consecutive



JCB had a record year in North America after four consecutive years of growth. But the company would like to increase awareness among landscape contractors, and get more feedback on what contractors expect from their construction equipment.



year of growth. During the past four years, JCB North America has achieved 193 percent growth.

"JCB will be the brand to watch in 2015 and beyond," Mirdha said. "Investing in our facility in Georgia is a cornerstone of future growth."

The company has increased its field sales and service staffs, while also adding factory jobs. JCB also expanded its warehouse distribution, most recently doubling the size of its Canadian facility and later adding a new Chicago warehouse which has more than doubled JCB's total warehouse footprint.

In addition to those investments, the company has big plans for its dealer network.

JCB now has more than 300 North American locations with a growing number of independent, dedicated construction and agricultural equipment dealerships. The company plans to have 500 distribution outlets in place by 2018.

**New iron.** The company has invested in a number of its compact equipment lines. Those upgrades and new products were unveiled during the media event, which was highlighted by the introduction of company's largest compact excavator, and Tier 4 updated skid-steers and tractor backhoe loaders.

"Over the past four years, we've invested over \$60 million to revamp our skid-steer and compact track loader product lines," Mirdha said.

Visit [bit.ly/lljcb](http://bit.ly/lljcb) for a list of some of the products released by JCB at the event.





# CREATE A BETTER TEAM

Consultant Jason Cupp lays out tips on how to improve your company's culture. **By Brian Horn**

CLEVELAND – In what he is calling one of the most exciting times in the green industry, Jason Cupp, former business owner and now growth consultant, gave a number of tips on how companies can capitalize on the positive activity. Cupp was the guest speaker at an Ohio Landscape Association meeting Thursday night, and cited Lawn & Landscape magazine research

that showed increased backlog for contractors in 2014, and referenced his own experiences with contractors while travelling the country.

While he did touch on the financial steps owners can take to make sure they are running a profitable company, he laid out simple steps contractors can take to make their companies more appealing to current and

potential employees. And with the recent shutdown of the H-2B program, some companies will have to look for other avenues to hire workers for this season.

Some of those steps included:

**HAVE A DEEP BENCH.** Cupp said owners plan on all aspects of their businesses to be operating 100 percent, but with workers calling in sick, weather and holidays, that's just not realistic, which is why you have to look for good employees all the time. "You always have to have an ad out there and have to be looking at resumes," he said. If the process works and you realize you have too many employees, that's when you have to let go of the weakest employees.

**LEAVE A MESSAGE.** When you run an ad, leave a Google Voice number in it, and ask people to

call it and talk about why they want the job and why they are qualified. The service is free and Cupp said laborers are more likely to call a number leave a voicemail basically laying out their resume, instead of putting one together and mailing or emailing it to you. In addition, you can get a better feel for their enthusiasm and attitude via a voicemail, compared to a piece of paper. "You can tell a lot by the voice and what they say," Cupp said.

**FILL THEIR BELLIES.** One client of Cupp's kept a full fridge in the office full of Gatorade, water and frozen meals. While the liquids come in handy during work days, employees could take the frozen meals as their funds got lower closer to pay day.

**SHOW APPRECIATION.** Instant gratitude can go a long way with motivating an employee, but Cupp said sending handwritten notes to the homes of employees can be even better. The actual action of sending it home instead of giving it to them at work allows someone from the worker's family to open it, creating a sense of pride in the home. "It's something that gets displayed on the refrigerator," Cupp said. "I used to spend a lot of time writing these cards when I had my business, and my guys loved it."

Other tips Cupp stressed to create a better company included having a handbook in place to protect yourself against lawsuits, providing or improving medical benefits and 401k plans, and doing reviews with employees once a year.



Growth consultant Jason Cupp suggests ways to make a company more attractive to employees like hand-written notes and improving benefits.

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## L&L INSIDER

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# PLANET unveils new name

Ten years after it was formed, the industry's national association has updated its name and logo as part of a strategic rebranding.

By **Chuck Bowen**

NASSAU, The Bahamas – Ten years after it was created, the landscape industry's national association has a new name.

PLANET – formed in 2005 by a merger of the American Landscape Contractors Association and the Professional Lawn Care Association of America – announced Feb. 26 at the opening of its Green Industry Great Escape event that effective April 1, it will change its name to the National Association of Landscape Professionals.

As part of the announcement, the association also unveiled a new logo.

"The brand allows us to raise the visibility of the industry," said PLANET Executive Director Sabeena Hickman in an interview prior to the announcement. "We will continue to promote – and not only promote – but advocate for the industry. ... I think we're going to see a lot more traction with the new brand. The media and consumers are going to know we are the National Association of Landscape Professionals because the name's very clear and concise. I think it will definitely benefit the industry."

According to research that PLANET conducted as part of the rebranding study, 90 percent



Scott **JAMIESON**

of members had to explain just what PLANET (an acronym that stands for Professional Landcare Network) meant when they mentioned the group to customers or colleagues.

Scott Jamieson, PLANET president-elect and vice president of Bartlett Tree Experts in Northbrook, Ill., was involved in the rebranding effort, and said not only did members need to explain the association's name, but the group's public relations team said it was a hurdle as well.

The decision to change the association's name spurred more discussion about PLANET's strategic plan and long-term goals. Hickman said PLANET will now focus on three core areas: advocacy, professionalism and education.



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## L&L INSIDER

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"We realized rather quickly that PLANET was trying to be all things to all people," she said. "We wanted to focus on things that mattered most to our members."

Jim McCutcheon, PLANET president and CEO of High-Grove Partners in Austell, Ga., agreed.

"As opposed to us just being this big organization that just flows along in different directions and gets pulled by different folks and does different things, for the first time, we've got all of us pulling the same direction and heading in the same direction."

Hickman said the association plans on "enhancing" many of its



Jim  
McCUTCHEON



Sabeena  
HICKMAN

signature programs like Student Career Days, Renewal and Remembrance and the Green Industry Conference, as well as member benefits like peer groups and the advisory Trailblazers on Call program, but would not go into detail, citing the need to update the group's board of directors and membership first.

She also said PLANET is



developing a company accreditation for members similar to what the Tree Care Industry Association and National Pest Management Association offer their members, and is exploring online training options.

Jason Cupp, a former PLANET president, was on the board of ALCA when it merged with PLCAA to form PLANET.

"At the time a new brand was essential for the success of our legacy organizations to form a new entity and direction and culture of the association," Cupp

"We realized that PLANET was trying to be all things to all people. We wanted to focus on things that mattered most to our members."

– Sabeena Hickman, PLANET

said in advance of the announcement. "I'm excited about the process the PLANET board of directors has gone through for the rebranding and renaming effort, and feel it's in the best interest of the association to open the door wide open to market the organization and its members to the end uses in the massive green industry." L&L

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## LITTLE THINGS, BIG RESULTS

**T**he more things change, the more they remain the same. Recently, at my annual event for landscapers, GROW!, we had the pleasure of listening to my friend, New York Times best-selling author and award-winning speaker Mark Sanborn.

Mark is the author of several books, including the smash hit, "The Fred Factor." The wisdom that Mark shared with my group was priceless. He made all of us think about what we are doing at our businesses. However, it was something that Mark mentioned to me outside of the event that has really woken me up.

Mark told me that in our marriages, "We don't get extra credit from our wives for the big things we do, like being faithful to them or earning money to help support our families. That's the cost of entry into marriage, a basic requirement, if you will."

He said we get credit for the little things we do like, "saying thank you, being considerate, cleaning up the kitchen, celebrating important dates and showing appreciation." Mark went on to tell me that it's the little things people appreciate that

make a difference. He commented on how this is true for all relationships – business and personal. Ain't that the truth?

Recently, I had to take my new vehicle in for warranty work. When we take our vehicle in for service, we expect it to come back the way we had it. Well, that's not what happened. When I got into the vehicle, the seat was all the way up, so I had to fix that. The mirrors were adjusted to fit whoever drove it which doesn't make much sense to me as I didn't think it needed to be driven very far. The radio was switched to a station I did not have programmed, and finally, no one at the dealership explained to me what they did.

On top of that, while they were removing the top to work on a crushed wire in the GPS, whoever did this got their greasy fingerprints all over the bright white inside of the top. I spent 30 minutes cleaning it up. Now, none of these things are terrible. And I sent an e-mail to the owner of the dealership which he forwarded on to his people who called me. I'm going back. This isn't a deal breaker. However, if it happens again, it probably is a deal breaker, and that leads me to the

point of this month's column. Little things make a big difference!

Mark is right. We don't get credit for the big things we do right. The dealership fixed the GPS. It now shows my office on a road, not in the middle of a cornfield. However, the other little things, the things that I could really notice, were not done well and left a sour taste in my mouth. Look at your own business. How are you at the little things?

At most of the landscaping companies I work with, they do the hard part very, very well. If they didn't, they wouldn't be in business. They can mow a lawn with the best of them, they can design a breathtaking landscape and install it, too. They can stop water from pooling in their customers' back yards, and they can do a floral display that makes passersby say "Wow!" However, they aren't very good at the end of day clean up, writing thank-you notes, calling clients back or making sure their teams act professionally at all times.

Most landscapers I work with can get their team their paychecks like clockwork, give them nice trucks to use and have a way for them to feed their families. However, they also aren't good at saying thank you, don't recognize the top performers and share little or no information with their team.

The landscapers that I work with that realize substantial profits and have less stress are the ones who know that their teams sell the next job by the way they are handling the current job. They know that client satisfaction is paramount and they have an ongoing dialog with their clients asking them constantly what they should stop doing, keep doing and start doing.

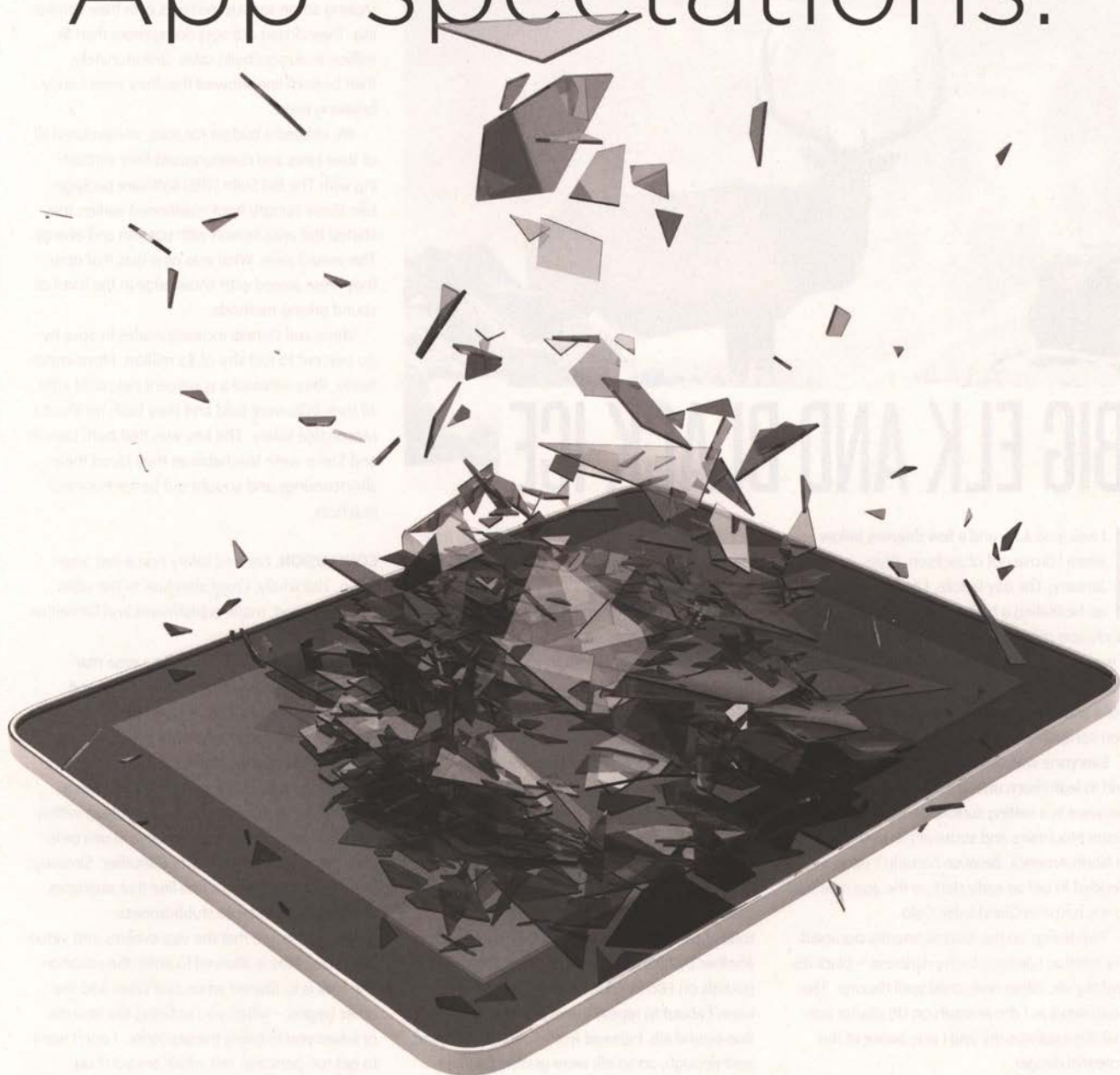
They also understand that the way you engage a team is to share your story with them, tell them where they are going in great detail and share information. They are careful about promises they make and always do what they said they would do. These are all little things when you think about it.

Thank you, Mark Sanborn. You wrote a great book. However, it is the little things like this that you have shared with me and my clients that have made a big difference. Everyone reading this should go buy Mark's new book, "Fred Factor 2.0." **L&L**



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## BIG ELK AND BLACK ICE

It was 3:08 a.m. and a few degrees below zero when I drove out of Jackson, Wyo., in late January. The day before, I had just wrapped up facilitating a brainstorming meeting for 18 landscape companies from all parts of the U.S. It was a diverse group comprised of commercial installation and maintenance, residential design/build and bid-build, fine gardening and fertilization companies.

Everyone was there to share best practices and to learn from one another. It didn't hurt that we were in a setting surrounded by the Grand Teton Mountains and some of the best skiing in North America. Because I couldn't sleep, I decided to get an early start on the 450 mile trek to my home in Grand Lake, Colo.

Two things on the road constantly occupied my mind as I drove into the darkness – black ice and big elk. Either one could spell disaster. The good news as I drove south on US 189/191 was that the road was dry and I was aware of the potential danger.

**WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW.** As I drove, it struck me how teachable and willing to learn the brainstorming meeting attendees were. Sure, there were strong egos there but everyone par-

ticipated, asked questions and contributed their feedback and ideas to the group. Like hungry trout scouring the water's surface for freshly hatched flies, these men and women sought out new ideas, strategies and techniques that would improve both their management acumen and their bottom line.

They knew that there were things that they did not know but they were humble enough to admit it and press on as they sought out the wisdom found in the shared knowledge and experiences available to them.

**WILLING TO LEARN.** As I sped south on US 191 toward Rock Springs, Wyo., I saw a sign warning that elk were in the area. Years before I had totaled one rental car and seriously damaged another by hitting deer weighing less than 200 pounds on I-80 in Pennsylvania (Sorry, Hertz). I wasn't about to repeat the experience with an 800-pound elk. I slowed from 60 to 40 mph and, sure enough, 20-30 elk were grazing just feet from the road.

Passing the herd of elk, one company from the brainstorming meeting came to mind. There were two owners. I'll refer to them as Dennis and Steve. One and a half years ago, they brought

me in to work with them. They were great guys who did great work in the field but they were making some serious mistakes with their estimating. They closed out 2013 doing more than \$1 million in design/build sales. Unfortunately, their bottom line showed that they were barely breaking even.

We created a budget for 2014, re-calculated all of their rates and computerized their estimating with The Bid Suite (TBS) software package. Like those hungry trout mentioned earlier, they started the 2014 season with passion and energy. This wasn't new. What was new was that now they were armed with knowledge in the form of sound pricing methods.

Steve and Dennis increased sales in 2014 by 40 percent to just shy of \$2 million. More importantly, they showed a 15 percent net profit after all their bills were paid and they both received a reasonable salary. The key was that both Dennis and Steve were teachable as they faced their shortcomings and sought out better business practices.

**CONCLUSION.** I arrived safely home just after noon. Thankfully, I paid attention to the signs along the road, made adjustments and hit neither ice nor elk.

The Psalmist states, "Rebuke a wise man and he gains knowledge. Rebuke a fool and you only get your words thrown back into your face." It's a wise man who challenges his most deeply held beliefs and belief system with wise counsel and rational objective scrutiny. Many, perhaps most, men hold onto areas deep within themselves where they still believe in unicorns and leprechauns of one sort or another. Similarly, I've found that there's a fine line that separates persistence from brute stubbornness.

It seems to me that the vice evolves into virtue when creativity is allowed to enter the equation. The trick is to discern when one stops and the other begins – when you're being the neurotic or when you're being the psychotic. I don't want to get too personal, but which are you? **L&L**

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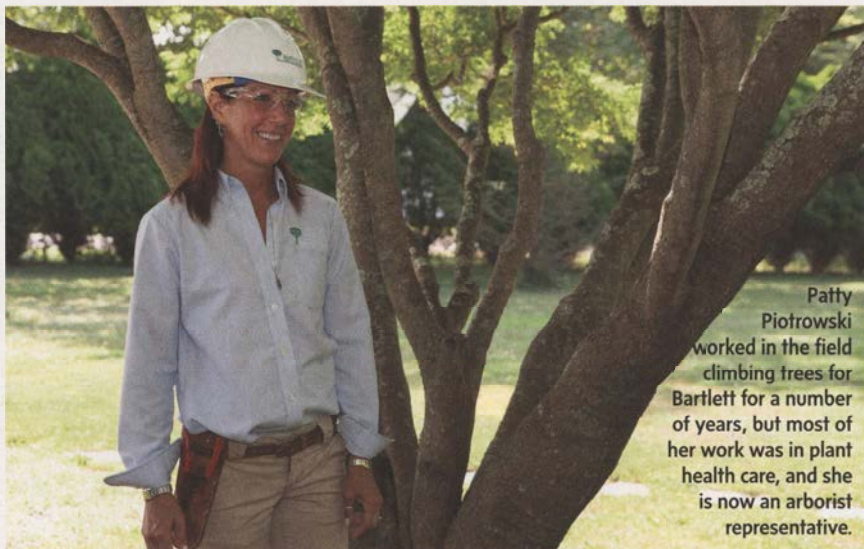
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BY SCOTT JAMIESON

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



Patty Piotrowski worked in the field climbing trees for Bartlett for a number of years, but most of her work was in plant health care, and she is now an arborist representative.

## SUCCESS KNOWS NO GENDER

There is a strong, very visible trend in recruiting in the landscape professional industry. For more than 20 years, I have been recruiting for landscape professionals at most of the top universities in our country. During those 20 years, I have seen an overwhelming increase in the percentage of women seeking careers in our profession.

Just 10 years ago, it was not uncommon to have 20 percent or 30 percent of those visiting our recruiting booth to be female. Back then we thought that was an encouraging trend. Today, it has been my experience that 60 percent to 75 percent of the students inquiring at our Bartlett Tree Experts recruiting booth are women.

What's also so encouraging is that, generally, these students have outstanding resumes filled with tremendous leadership activities. Much has been researched and written about the "disappearing American male" at our universities. But, most importantly, is our profession in a position to take advantage of this substantial shift?

There is no question our profession is male-dominated; it's not even worth the debate. Sure, there are successful women working in and owning companies in the landscape profession, but it

is typically the refreshing exception. How can an organization be better prepared to bring talented women into the landscape profession as more female students graduate from these programs?

Well, when I sat down to write this, I realized a lot of the advice I have for employing and developing women in the industry can be applied to employing and developing men, as well. But there are a few areas Bartlett is working on in regards to the increasing presence of women in the industry.

**1. Listen.** Bartlett has a number of successful women who have moved through the field into sales and leadership positions. We are actively listening to them about the experiences from their perspective so we can learn and adjust. During a focus group with our female teammates, we heard that women often feel that their opinions are not being heard as much as others.

So, we've been providing that feedback to managers so that they are alert to that potential. When there is trust in a company people can be very candid and we are getting some very candid information to help us get better. Not only can you learn much from listening to others, you can also let people know how valuable they are simply by taking the time to listen to their input.

**2. Focus.** A few years ago we brought in a full-time, 100 percent dedicated recruiting professional. Noel Dubak brought much experience to the table at Bartlett but, most importantly, she brought energy and the right attitude to devote all of her time to finding outstanding talent for Bartlett. The fact that Noel, who led our female focus groups, is a female means she is able to relate to our female candidates on a different level. Putting the spotlight on recruiting and retention issues takes energy, time and yes, money. Bringing in someone to relentlessly focus on recruiting and retention isn't just for the big companies.

**3. Develop your people.** Development of people is the best way to keep great people. We have created career paths and development plans for those teammates who want to move ahead in the organization and this is especially important for our female teammates. Women in our profession may not fit into the same roles as men in our profession and we should have the courage to talk about it and ultimately find solutions. A career path for a female employee may take a completely different path than a male employee.

Paths are meant to be flexible with twists and turns that have to be customized for the teammate. We often see that our women teammates often progress well though our plant health care operations. There is a lot of client contact in that role and though still physical, not as demanding as climbing.

Development isn't just about those outside of leadership and it is even more important to focus on continually developing your leaders. We realize, thorough listening to our teammates, that most of our issues, really all of our issues, are self-created. Where we see successful career development of our female employees is where we undoubtedly have a manager who is a leader. In almost every case, that manager has been developed into a leader though education, desire and focused efforts.

As I wrote above, I'm not sure there are major differences between developing successful women and men in the industry, but there are a few. If you pay attention to the items above you have a great chance for success. **L&L**

Scott Jamieson is vice president at Bartlett Tree Experts in Stamford, Conn.



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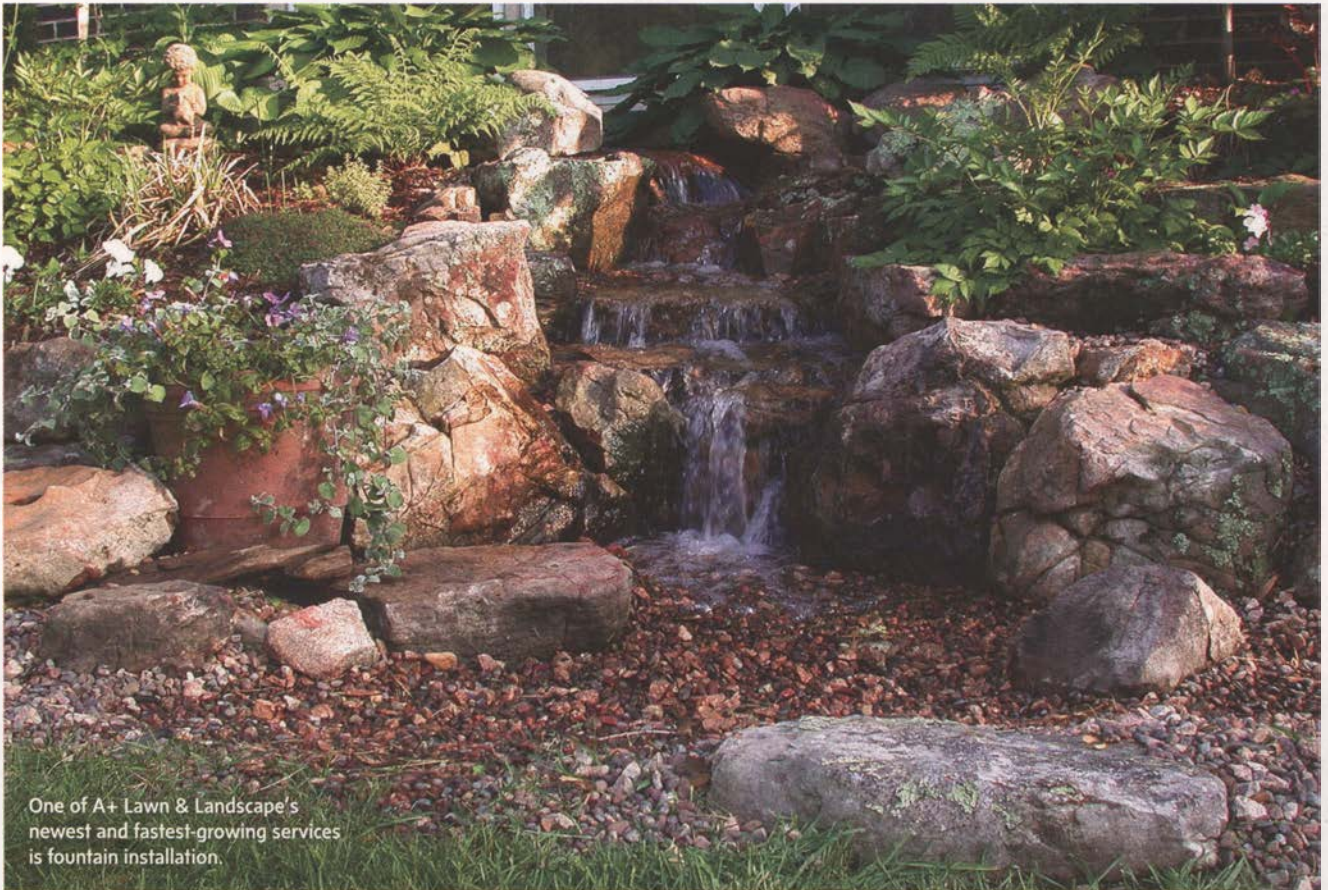
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By Brooke N. Bates

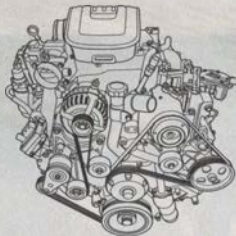
**W**

hen Shawn Edwards founded A+ Lawn & Landscape in 1988, there were individual mowing companies, lawn care companies, irrigation companies and design/build companies, but none in central Iowa that did it all. So he set out to build a full-service company that aced every area.



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## COMPANY PROFILE

Edwards started with mowing and lawn treatment, leveraging his experience from ChemLawn to build a foundation. The next year, after training with his sprinkler vendor and earning his certification, Edwards added irrigation. Design/build came a couple of years later, as A+ continued to diversify, training employees along the way.

"How I grew each division is, when I had a good handle and good people in place, I was able to give my time to a new division," Edwards says. "I try not to work in the business full-time. I try to work more on the business. The key is once you've got guys in place, you can start another division."

An acquisition gave A+ its newest services two years ago, offering fountain installation and pond treatment—the company's smallest but fastest-growing segment.



By 2006, A+ Lawn & Landscape had outgrown its original Ankeny location, so the company broke ground on a new building project in Des Moines in March 2014.

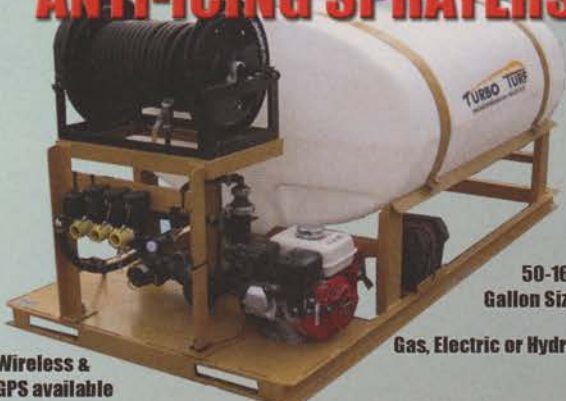
Now, A+ employs about 40 year-round and 60 full-time seasonal workers who specialize in services spanning design/build, mowing and trimming, lawn care, irrigation, snow removal, ponds and fountains, as well

as mower repair and holiday lighting. These people are key to keeping each division of A+ at the top of its class. Through an extensive training program, Edwards has learned to identify and lock in the top performers.

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**TRAINING FOR THE LONG-TERM.** The training program, which includes written tests, at A+ begins before employees even start working.

"We'll say, 'We're going to hire you, but take these tests,' just to see if they're going to like it or can even handle it," Edwards says.

Hunter Industries provides video training courses for irrigation as well as spraying and landscaping to orient new hires. Mowing doesn't require coursework, but new employees receive a half-day of in-house training before hitting the field.

Edwards requires these pre-tests for employment, but doesn't pay people to take them. As a result, many candidates drop off before they even get to work – and that's the point.

"A lot of companies spend all this time on training and they lose those people. Then they have to start all over. So when we hire, we make them jump through a lot of hoops," he says. "Some people quit before they start, but they're really not the people we want. If they're not committed to do a little bit, then they're not committed long-term."

**▶ FREE!** Read this story online at [lawnandlandscape.com](http://lawnandlandscape.com) to find out what A+ gives to customers for free.

A candidate's background skills and test results help determine where he'll work in the company. After testing, new hires attend company orientation before they're assigned a mentor – a foreman in their department who trains new teammates through an increasingly hands-on learning cycle.

"The first step is video," Edwards says. "The second step is observing. The trainee just watches the job. I don't want him getting his hands dirty. I want him just observing and taking in as much information as he can for two or three days."

Third, trainees work side-by-side with mentors for a couple of weeks. At this half-way point, they start to wean themselves off their mentors' support, gradually taking on more responsibility.

In the fourth stage, the trainee performs

the work while the mentor observes. Though he's not involved, he'll stop and correct mistakes immediately. In the fifth and final step of training, the mentor again observes

the new employee, but this time, he doesn't point out errors until the end, when the employee has to go back and fix them.

This prepares employees to go out on



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## COMPANY PROFILE

their own. To make sure they keep meeting expectations, Edwards has to “inspect” what he “expects.”

He brought in two retirees to check

properties the day after his crews mowed. Likewise, production managers in spray, landscape and irrigation divisions also check jobsites daily.

“Not every one,” Edwards says, “but they now know they’re getting inspected.”

“They don’t know when or where, but if they know they’re getting inspected, they do what you expect.”

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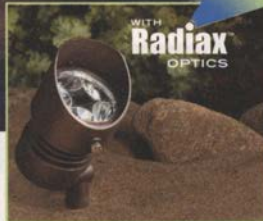
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**GROWING INTO A NEW OFFICE.** By 2006, A+ Lawn & Landscape had grown so much that the original Ankeny location could no longer hold it.

Just as Edwards was preparing to buy a bigger building in 2007, the economy crashed. Edwards held tight until the markets turned back around, waiting to buy property until spring 2013.

He couldn't find the features he wanted in any existing structures, so A+ broke ground on a new building project in Des Moines in March 2014, allowing him to build in efficiencies to make employees more productive.

The efficiencies include an outdoor loading dock where semis full of trees and shrubs can easily unload. The new headquarters also feature space to store rock, brick and limestone on site.

Since moving into the new location last summer, Edwards has noticed what a difference the space makes.

“Our loading time is cut in less than half, and it goes across the business,” he says. “We used to have one bay to fill up the spray trucks. Now we have two so they can get in and out. When it was taking 10 spray guys 45 minutes to get out and now it’s 15 minutes, that’s like five hours a day saved. That’s almost a whole person’s salary.”

A similar transformation happened inside the new offices.

“Instead of each manager having their own office, I wanted my managers to be in with the guys doing the production,” says Edwards, who arranged the entire team in 5-foot-tall cubicles, with one shared office and one conference room for private meetings.

“Even the managers didn’t know if they’d like it at first, but they love it now. It’s just a more open feeling, like ‘We’re here with you. It’s not us against you,’ so that has been wonderful.” **L&L**





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# Breeze by

How landscape companies facilitate a seamless morning rollout to set up the day for success.

By Kristen Hampshire

**W**hen you press “snooze” and begin the day rushed, the day tends to unfold at a harried pace. You’re running behind before you ever get started. But when you prepare the night before, wake up with a plan, stick to a schedule and know what’s expected, you can accomplish goals and tackle any surprises that crop up. You gain a sense of control.

In an operations-focused business like landscaping, morning dispatch is a critical time that sets the tone for the day and factors into a company’s profitability. This month, Lawn & Landscape spoke with three firms about the systems that make rollout go smoothly.

## Setting expectations

**M**inimizing variables and mitigating risk – that’s the goal underpinning morning rollout systems at DLC Resources, headquartered in Phoenix. Specifically, a “3, 5, 1E” protocol is the basis for preparing vehicles for proper equipment. Crews are responsible for filling out materials forms to ensure that necessary equipment and materials are on the truck for the week’s jobs.

The “3” is for three days notice for equipment that deviates from the regular lineup, and the “5” is for five days notice for plant material and fertilizer. The “1E” is for exceptions, which always occur but DLC attempts to minimize through reporting. “We can always deal with last-minute changes the same day, but we want that to be the exception not the norm,” says Jeff Penney, CEO and co-founder.

Electronic request forms are completed by smartphone or via email to make equipment and materials requests in advance. “We have an accounting process where shop managers send out 3, 5 1E violations,” Penney adds. “When there is someone who is chronically breaking the rules, then we have a follow-up (disciplinary) process.”

Setting expectations is critical to executing a smooth rollout. At DLC, there are three dispatch times at the two locations (Phoenix and Avondale) that are adjusted seasonally. During summer, start time can begin as early as 4:30 a.m., with crews departing every half hour. Trucks are loaded the night before and there are two inspection processes prior to leaving the facility.

Crews perform a 360 inspection to ensure that equipment is properly fastened onto the vehicle, tires have appropriate air and the truck is clean. 1E requests could be made during this time if a crew needs a part or piece of equipment – but again, that should be an exception. The field manager performs a final inspection before rollout.



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## FORMULAS for SUCCESS

### DLC RESOURCES

**Jeff Penney,**  
CEO and co-founder

**LOCATION:**  
Phoenix

**ESTABLISHED:**  
1989

**EMPLOYEES:**  
300

**2014 REVENUES:**  
\$20.1 million

**CUSTOMERS:**  
100% commercial

**SERVICES:**  
Landscape management,  
tree care, irrigation

### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

#### SET EXPECTATIONS.

The 3, 5, 1E system sets parameters for ordering equipment, materials and other necessities to complete jobs and allows for exceptions.

But, the system emphasizes that the rule (not the 1E) is the expectation.

#### INVOLVE THE CREW.

Accountability is a driving factor of rollout. That's why DLC Resources encourages employees to interact with each other, foremen and managers about risks and appropriate behaviors. "We want everyone to hold each other accountable for safety," Penney says.

#### 'ROLL OUT' ON SITE.

The first part of rollout happens at the shop before vehicles leave the facility. But the crew reconvenes after arriving at a job to plan and set the tone for success. "We regroup and talk about what we are going to do and the risks involved," Penney says. "Our No. 1 priority is getting home safely."

Then, once crews arrive on site – average drive time to accounts is 45 minutes – they perform another type of rollout in the form of a pre-task plan. "It's a sheet of paper and the crew gathers around, and it could include two people or 10, but they discuss what they have to accomplish that day and how they are going to do it," Penney says.

Then, the foreman takes the task list a step further. "We say, 'All right, what are the risks that we face with regards to accidents or injury, and what behaviors are we going to employ to minimize those risks?'" Penney says.

"The pre-task plan is a method of getting some interaction with the crews," Penney says, adding that the foreman isn't always the point person. "Even if a crewmember has only been with us for a month, he might do the pre-task plan one day and we help him with it," he says.

Fostering accountability is a big part of facilitating a smooth rollout. With these systems in place, and a Speak Up, Listen Up program, where any employee at any level can point out poor behaviors and safety violations on the spot, workers are always keeping each other in check. Penney shares that one crewmember asked him upon arrival on site if he had a safety vest to wear. "That was perfectly legitimate, and I commended him," Penney says.

Rollout is routine, but Penney never wants it to be on cruise-control. "The whole challenge here is for us to battle routine," he says of the pre-task plans and interaction through Speak Up, Listen Up. "Because routines cause complacency."



## Marking time

The morning dispatch paints a distinct picture of how operations are going at a landscape maintenance firm if you ask Brian Steele, who says observing rollout is one of the first items on his task list when evaluating a green industry firm's "health."

The trend he notices among struggling companies is inefficient, unorganized rollout. "Dispatch tells you a lot about the operational component of a business," says Steele, region operations manager, ABM Onsite Services – West.

"The more predictability you breed into the business, the better," he adds. That is accomplished with careful planning. "We can't manage the weather, but there are some activities we can do that make operations more predictable."

What smooth-running operations have in common is stable, consistent crews and a planning protocol. "We happen to plan one month at a time," Steele says, relating the importance of getting organized when you manage six landscape branches like he does. Well-run operations also have tagging systems in place for equipment repair and a mechanic in-house with a different work schedule than crews. You want that team member to be fixing equipment before and after crews are in the field, not during.

And, perhaps the most critical piece is leadership that owns the rollout process and sets the tone for smooth running. "Leadership must be visible during dispatch, and that's an expectation for our

## ABM ONSITE SERVICES – WEST

**Brian Steele, region operations manager**

**LOCATION:**  
Jupiter, Fla., headquarters

**ESTABLISHED:**  
1975

**EMPLOYEES:**  
700 (300 in the west)

**2014 REVENUES:**  
\$42 million

**CUSTOMERS:**  
90% commercial, 10% govt.

**SERVICES:**  
Landscape maintenance, irrigation, lawn care, aquatic

## TAKE-AWAY TIPS

### LEAD THE ROLLOUT.

Leaders must be invested in rollout and present during dispatch every morning, Steele says. And, if a manager is not strong in operations – and not all are – then bring on a leader who can oversee this portion of the business. "It takes someone with a passion for operations and attention to detail to manage dispatch," Steele says.

### GET A PLAN.

Schedules are set a month in advance, and crews stay consistent. Predictability breeds efficiency. "When the guys come in to work, they know where they are going day after day, week after week," he says.

### CLOSE THE GATE.

Draw the line: Set strict work start and dispatch times and stick to them. Every minute at rollout matters to a company's bottom line, Steele says.

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## FORMULAS for SUCCESS

branch managers," Steele says. "Any branch manager that is not focused on dispatch is missing it – that's the most important part of the day. And, you have to be present to set the pace and tone for the day."

Actually, rollout for the morning starts the prior day when leads prepare forms for equipment and materials, which are routed to supervisors and managers. "When crews clock out at the end of the day, they are ready to come to work in the morning and pull out of the driveway," Steele says, noting that vehicles are washed and stocked before shift-end. Also, equipment that needs to be repaired is tagged.

In the morning, leads arrive 15 minutes before crews and there is a hard start time

for employees. "The expectation is that crews start work at 6:30 a.m. and they are out of the gate by 6:45," Steele says, relating that staggered dispatch times help with any exit logjams. Crews know their clock-in and departure times.

Steele says one branch was struggling with rollout, and he set a hard line on departure. "I said, 'Starting a week from today, when that gate closes if you are not out of the gate, you're not out of the gate,'" he says, noting that plenty of communication preceded this decision. "You have to make dispatch part of the culture."

That's because every wasted minute is money out the door.

"If you are not efficient and streamlined, you are giving money away," he says.



In the morning, crews at HighGrove Partners have 15 minutes to gather, talk safety and get out the door. Crews are expected to arrive by 6:15 a.m.

## Build accountability

**T**he morning routine starts the day before at HighGrove Partners in Austell, Ga., which runs 70-plus crews among its landscape service groups. That's about 225 crewmembers that exit the facility by 6:30 a.m. every morning.

When trucks return at the end of the day, usually about 4 p.m., they are washed and loaded for the next day. Equip-

ment that requires repair is tagged and left for mechanics that work past crewmembers' shifts. And, crews fuel up vehicles on the way back to the shop. "They are required to sharpen blades, have their trucks packed up and locked down," says Gary Tomlinson, vice president of operations.

In the morning, crews have 15 minutes to gather, talk



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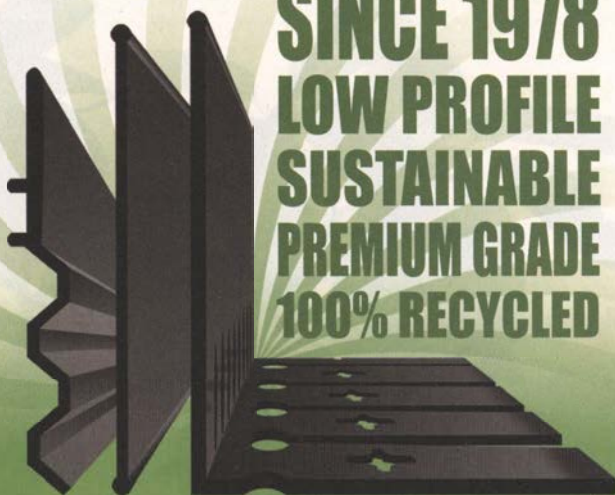
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## FORMULAS for SUCCESS

### HIGHGROVE PARTNERS

Gary Tomlinson, vice  
president of operations

LOCATION:  
Austell, Ga.

ESTABLISHED:  
2001

EMPLOYEES:  
150

2014 REVENUES:  
\$17.9 million

CUSTOMERS:  
100% commercial

SERVICES:  
Landscape maintenance,  
water management

safety and get out the door. To prepare, supervisors (who drive the trucks) arrive at 6 a.m. and study the crew's notebook and time sheet. They review the daily route and discuss necessary changes. "We have a hard line on what time employees have to arrive in the morning," Tomlinson adds.

Systems underscore the expectations at HighGrove. End-of-day vehicle prep activities are steered by a check sheet and an inspection to ensure that trucks are prepared. "It's about managing the process from start to finish," Tomlinson says.

And in the morning, crews are absolutely expected to arrive at 6:15 unless managers are notified of an uncontrollable circumstance. "We do have some guys that ride a bus, and we'll get a call that it's running late so we'll run up (to the stop) and pick them up," Tomlinson says, relating that managers do everything possible to keep crews on schedule. It's a team effort that starts at the top.

Also, HighGrove shares numbers with employees to help them understand why every minute matters. "We tell them that for every five minutes wasted in the shop per person, that's 15 minutes for a three-man crew and we explain what that costs in dollars," Tomlinson says.

Accountability is critical to keeping rollout moving smoothly. "People respect what you inspect," Tomlinson says, relaying a managerial adage. "You have to lead the process and managers have to enforce expectations, and check and double-check that everyone is doing their part." L&L

### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

#### MAKE TIME FOR SAFETY.

There's a 15-minute window between when crews arrive at HighGrove and when vehicles dispatch from the gate. During that time, a safety discussion happens every morning. "The very first thing we say is, 'Good morning,' and then we talk about safety," Tomlinson says.

#### A CLEAN START.

Tidy vehicles help operations run smoothly because crews can stay organized and easily access necessary equipment and materials.

At the end of the day, all trucks are swept out and washed. A diagram outlines where equipment and tools go on every truck.

#### ENFORCE ATTENDANCE.

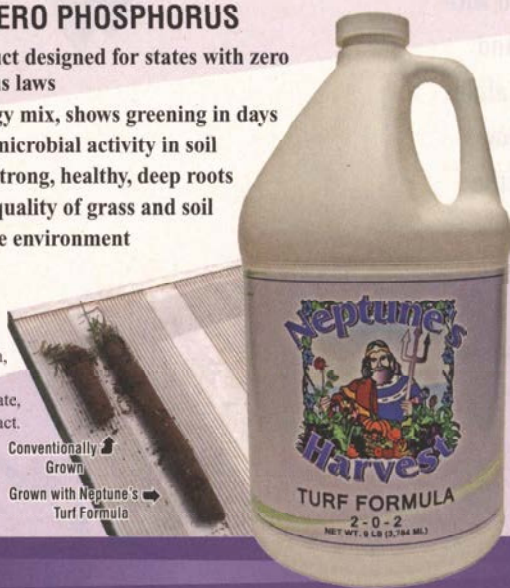
Arriving to work on time is critical for assuring a smooth, efficient rollout. HighGrove paints a clear picture of just how much money can be wasted at the shop by sharing its numbers.

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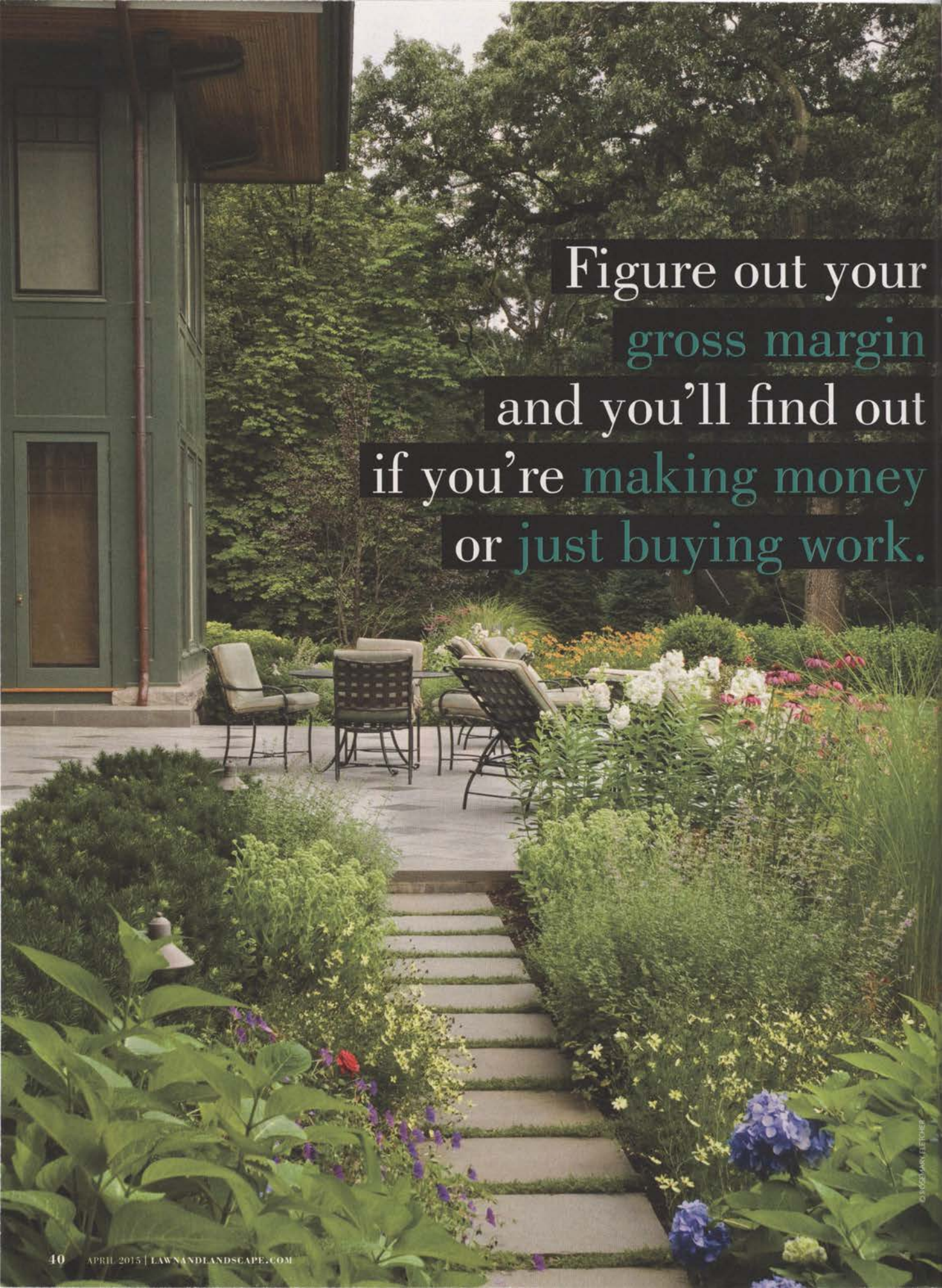


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# PROFIT or LOSS

By Bill Arman

**There are lots of areas of your financials that deserve attention: revenue, equipment, salaries, tools, rent. But few are more important than gross margin – a key metric that determines your company’s financial success. It’s just as important as revenue, cash flow and accounts receivable.**

Remember that without the right amount of gross margin, you won’t be able to pay your overhead costs and have enough left over to make a net profit.

The gross margin of your company pays the overhead, which includes indirect costs like gas, equipment, vehicles, supervisors and mechanics, as well as SGA costs (sales, general and administration) like salespeople, office staff, administration staff, yard rent and your salary.

Whatever is left over after paying for the overhead costs is net profit. Without achieving the right amount of gross margin, we just become very hard working folks making a living and not a profit.

And, ultimately, you are in business to make a fair and reasonable profit. Profit is not a four-letter word. If you don’t focus on gross margin at the beginning of your pricing process, you will go out of business.

**GETTING TO KNOW GROSS MARGIN.** Understanding gross margin requires a keen understanding of your direct costs – what it costs to actually perform the work you’ve sold. These are the out-of-pocket costs or the costs that were included in your estimate to perform the work.

In the landscape industry, labor costs are the greatest expense line item. Normally, materials will range from 2-6 percent of revenue in maintenance operations and as much as 30 per-



Understanding your gross margins can help you determine if a patio install and maintenance contract actually makes you money or not.

cent of revenue with installation operations. However, the labor to perform the work will range from 25-55 percent of revenue, depending on the type of business you have. These direct costs are the foundation of understanding and calculating gross margin.

#### **THE GOAL FOR GROSS MARGIN.**

Generally, the combined gross margin of a company needs to be a minimum of 45 percent (and preferably 50 percent) to make a fair and reasonable net profit. Remember: Gross margin is the financial furnace that keeps the company warm. So first, let’s discuss how to calculate this important metric.

• **Step one: Determine total net revenue.** Take the total combined revenue of your organization less subcontracted revenue and its associated costs to get to

net revenue or sales.

• **Step two: Subtract out your direct costs.** Now, subtract out your cost of labor plus your burden (payroll taxes, workers’ compensation costs associated with the labor costs) plus your material costs. Some companies can retrieve this pretty quickly, but most will have to search through their P&L to determine all of these costs.

• **Step three: Math!** Subtract direct costs from revenue to get your gross margin. Then, take this dollar figure and divide it by net revenue to get your gross margin as a percentage. Assume \$100,000 net revenue (from self-performed with-



# Working "on" Your Business Can Lead to Great Rewards

As a business owner, you're often told to work "on" your business and not "in" it. But what does that mean and, more importantly, how can that lead to increased growth and profitability? Among the many reasons that landscape contractors find themselves consumed with day-to-day business tasks is the fact that they ARE the business since many of the systems and processes they employ are documented only in their head or scratched out on a yellow legal pad. The owner then becomes a bottleneck for progress making it virtually impossible to pull away and focus on a long-term vision, financial planning, and profitability improvement.

But how can a business owner who is already stretched thin change the situation without having to re-invent the wheel? Simply, by leveraging a proven solution that defines roles and responsibilities, creating a culture of confidence and predictability that will breed scalable growth. That proven solution is LandOpt.

## The LandOpt Advantage

While allowing businesses in the Green Industry to maintain ownership and their unique identity, LandOpt specializes in working with strong, established, independently-owned landscape contractors to help them plan the growth and success of their businesses for today and tomorrow. Along the way, LandOpt shows them how to increase their profitability, cash flow, and revenue – regardless of outside influences such as the weather or the up-and-down economy. Perhaps best of all, they become a part of the Powered by LandOpt Network, a non-competitive group of leading landscape contractors who freely share their experience and expertise with other network members for the benefit of all.

## You Win By Focusing on The Three P's.

LandOpt makes it all happen by focusing on The Three P's: profitability, predictability, and professionalism. LandOpt ensures that Powered by LandOpt Contractors demonstrate the very highest levels of

professionalism and customer service via ongoing coaching and support by the Success Coaching team. This builds customer satisfaction and the repeat business that comes with it. LandOpt Contractors learn how to develop a REAL plan for continuing business growth, with set goals and the proven methodology to achieve them. In fact, many LandOpt contractors proactively secure the majority of their next year's revenue by January 1st, minimizing the dreaded "revenue anxiety" that others in the industry face each year. And most LandOpt Contractor businesses return a net profit that's much higher than the industry average. So it seems they must be doing something right.



*"Since becoming Powered by LandOpt, my maintenance base has tripled. And now, I not only have a solid growth plan in place, but the means by which to make it happen."*

*Steve Corrigan, owner of Mountain View Landscapes & Lawncare in Chicopee, Mass.*

## A Long-Term Relationship That Benefits Everyone.

As Tim Smith, LandOpt CEO sees it, "Today, continuing success means being committed to raising the bar on business performance and flexibility to new levels – permanently. LandOpt gives our contractors the power to do just that." Powered by LandOpt Contractors learn a new and better way of doing business, delivered in a staged and manageable way, that allows the business to run as usual while transformation progresses. LandOpt introduces contractors to the LandOpt System – tools and processes designed to institute permanent, beneficial changes to every aspect of their business.

This "whole-business" approach addresses everything from Sales and Operations to Human Resources and Management. It includes a proactive sales approach as well as a specific financial planning process.

It shares tools developed to track costs, profits, and margins. It provides detail and tools to properly recruit, hire, and train team members. And it specifically defines responsibility – so every member of a LandOpt Contractor's team knows exactly what their role is and has the confidence to do it to the best of their ability. There's no more duplication of effort or bottlenecks in the process. The business becomes proactive instead of reactive, helping satisfy existing customers and gain new ones. The owner will have the confidence to empower his or her team, eliminating micro-management. And the business model is exceptionally scalable, helping businesses grow and prosper on a continuing basis.

## Results Speak for Themselves

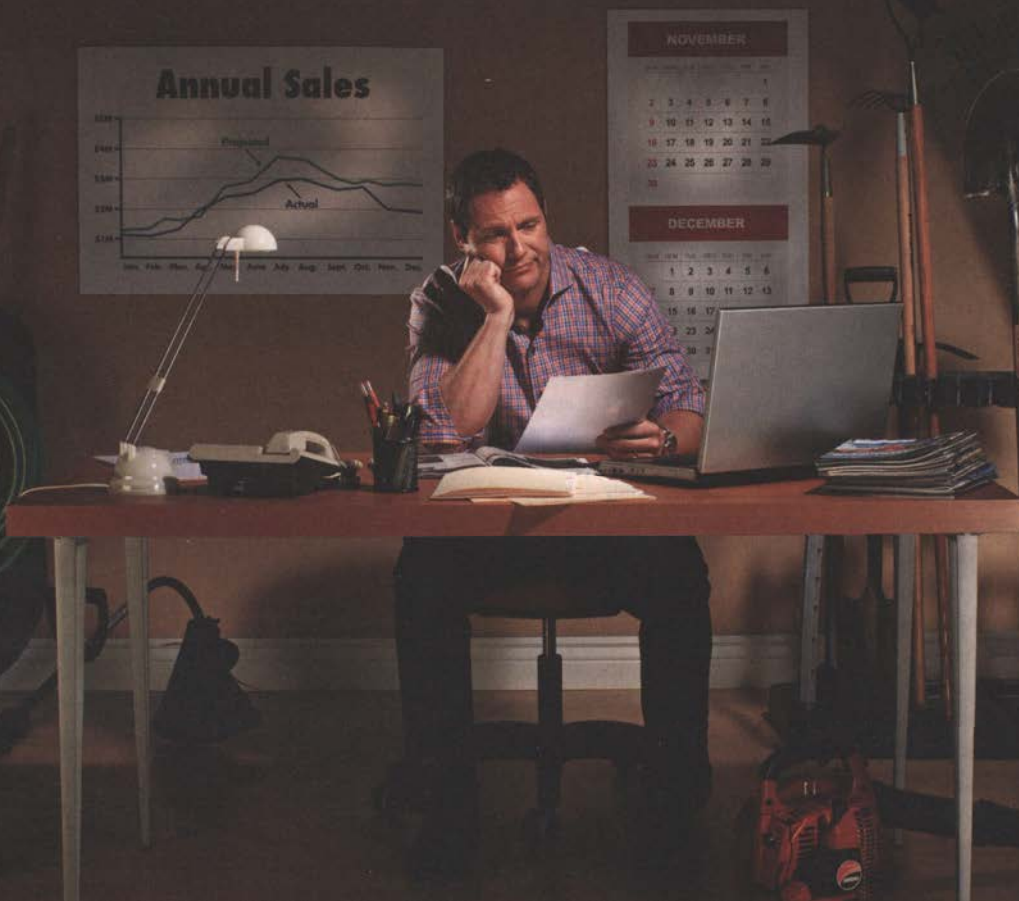
The LandOpt System works. Network Contractors significantly outperform current business norms and they have the success stories to prove it. Steve Corrigan, owner of Mountain View Landscapes & Lawncare

in Chicopee, Mass. is just one example. "Before we became part of LandOpt, growth was a real struggle within our organization," the owner remembered. "We worked hard to bring in new business only to watch it 'fall out the back door' each season because we weren't focused on the right things. Since becoming Powered by LandOpt, my maintenance base has tripled. And now, I not only have a solid growth plan in place, but the means by which to make it happen. LandOpt allows me to work on my business, and not in it. The results have been tremendous."

**If you'd like to learn more about the LandOpt Contractor Network and how you can begin working on your business, visit LandOpt's website: [www.landopt.com](http://www.landopt.com) or contact them directly at 412.567.4345.**



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**Bill ARMAN**

is Head Harvester at the Harvester Group landscaping consulting group and a 40-year veteran of the green industry.

out subs) minus direct costs of \$57,000 gives you \$43,000 of gross margin. Divide that by the gross revenue and you get 43 percent gross margin.

So now we need to see if this is enough to pay for your overhead expenses and have enough left over to make a net profit.

• **Step four: Calculate the gross margin per revenue stream.** In step three we found that the overall gross margin is 43 percent. The next question is: What gross margin are you making per revenue stream? Most companies we work with have not taken the time or don't have the ability to separate the revenue streams and their gross margins. This requires setting up a chart of accounts that spread the associated costs (labor, burden and materials) to the specific revenue streams.

So in our example of \$100,000 total revenue and a margin of \$43,000, we now want to find out what the gross margins are for each separate revenue stream. Your sources of revenue may include maintenance, enhancements, lawn care, irrigation, installs, tree work, snow, etc.

## LET'S GET GROSS

Use this formula to calculate your gross margin as a percentage of revenue:

$$\% \text{ Gross margin} = \frac{\text{Net revenue} - \text{direct costs (labor + burden + materials)}}{\text{Net Revenue}}$$

### NET REVENUE:

This comes from the work and services you have sold, both self-performed and invoiced.

**Note:** Because sub-contracted work is marked up differently than self-performed work, the associated revenue and costs aren't included when calculating gross margin.

### DIRECT COSTS:

The labor or workforce needed to perform the work, plus the associated burden costs and the materials needed to perform the work.

### LABOR:

This is your direct payroll. Typically this is for the foreman and below or the actual folks performing the work.

### BURDEN:

This portion of direct costs includes the employer's portion of payroll taxes (SUI, FUI, FICA, etc.) plus workers compensation insurance, health benefits, 401(k) or IRA costs where applicable.

### MATERIALS:

Such as chemicals, fertilizers, mulch, flowers, plants, soil, rocks, pavers, etc. **Note:** While some people may add other cost items to direct costs, we have given the simplest definition so we are all on the same page.



At this job, masons building the pool will have different workers' comp rates and hourly average wages than arborists climbing the trees.

### ESTIMATING FOR GROSS MARGIN.

Start with determining your HAWs – hourly average wages including burden for each separate revenue stream. Some types of revenue streams require different rates of pay and have different worker compensation levels. For example, a tree climber would be paid more than a gardener. The workers' compensation rate for tree climbers is a lot higher because of the safety and exposure factor.

Add together the base pay rate for each person within a revenue stream and divide it by the number of employees to get the average wage. Then, add the burden rate plus workers' compensation rate to arrive at the hourly average wage.

**Here's an example:** You have a three-man crew made up of a foreman who makes \$15 an hour and two crew members who make \$11 and \$10 an hour. Their total hourly pay is \$36. Divide

Take the revenue total for each of these revenue streams and then repeat the four steps mentioned previously. The gross margin for each stream will be different, but as a whole should average out to your company's gross margin goal.

### 3 DRIVERS OF GROSS MARGIN.

When looking at reasons for achieving low or high gross margins they can be traced back to three areas. We usually find it's a combination of all three of these that eat up gross margin.

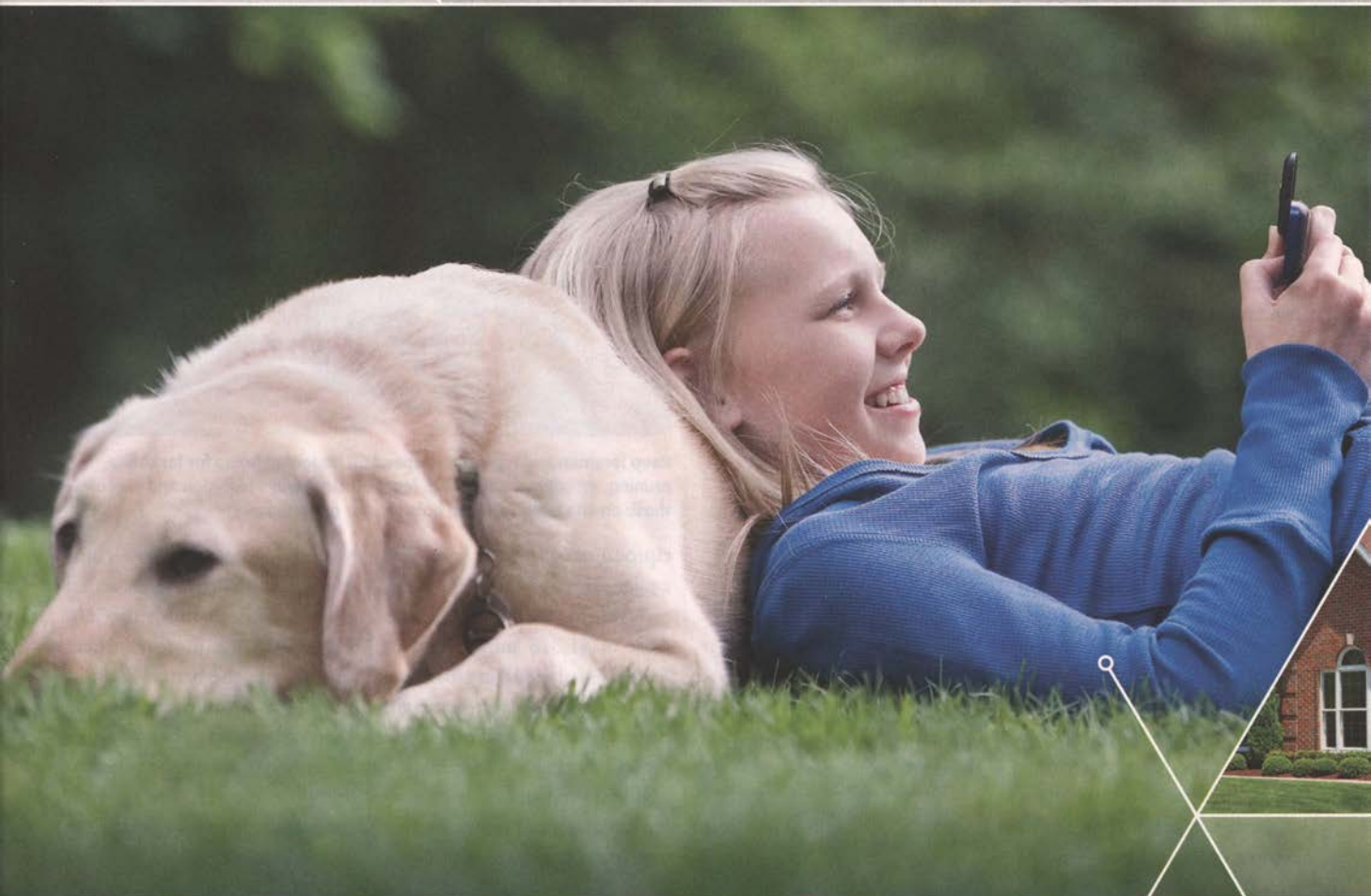
**1. Estimating.** This is where

it all begins with your accurate assessment of what it will take to do the job with the needed labor and materials.

**2. Pricing.** After you have accurately estimated the total direct costs to perform the work, you need a method to arrive at a price that will achieve the right gross margin and also be competitive within your marketplace.

**3. Efficiency and execution.** OK, after the first two parts are completed, you now must go execute the work on budget, make the customer happy and collect the money.

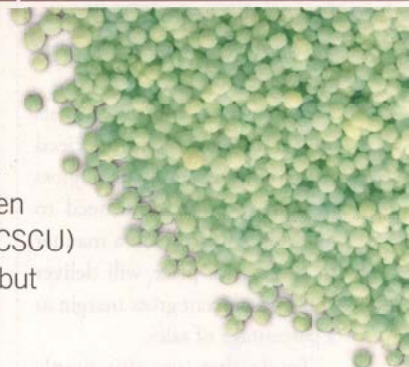




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that by three people to get an average hourly rate of \$12.

Now add payroll taxes and workers' compensation insurance rates. Assume these add up to 25 percent of labor, so add \$3 to the \$12 and you get an average hourly wage of \$15 per hour.

**SET YOUR ESTIMATING PROCESS.**

Now you will need to determine how many hours or HAWs it will take to perform the work you are estimating. Try to establish some time standards or production rates to perform the tasks needed to perform the work. See where you can work smart and efficient, and trim your time down to the most "tightened" down cost you possibly can. Next, determine the materials needed and the cost of these. Get really good at this because this is at the very core of your pricing when we are at the next step.

The key takeaway here is to get this estimate of your direct cost as accurate and as tight as you can get it. Don't leave any unneeded cost.

**PRICING FOR GROSS MARGIN.**

Review the estimate and make certain all of the costs are accurate and achievable.

Let's assume your direct costs are \$1,000 and you have decided that you want a 45 percent gross margin. So you now need to mark up your costs in a manner that the sales price will deliver you a 45 percent gross margin as a percentage of sales.

To do that, use this simple formula: Take your costs and divide them by the reciprocal of the desired gross margin.

**Example:** Take your \$1,000 cost and divide by .55 (the re-

**TOP GROSS MARGIN DESTROYERS**

Here are some of the most common things that can eat up a landscape company's gross margin. How many do you have?

- "We're too busy to figure out why we are losing money! We'll just make it up on volume!"
- High personnel turnover
- An increase in costs without a price adjustment, or insufficient price increases
- Scope of work change without price adjustment or getting a change order
- Extra work performed or change order submitted without being billed
- Simple administration errors: inaccurate job costing, time card issues, etc.
- No cost tracking system or process in place
- Estimators are winging it and submit inaccurate estimates
- Field guys don't know what a job's budgeted hours are to perform tasks
- Poor dispatch process in the morning (e.g., coffee and donut stops, forgot to include travel time in estimate)
- Lack of job sequencing being used: Who does what? What is the order of priority?
- Time spent repairing broken vehicles, equipment or tools



Keep foremen and crews up to speed on budgeted hours for tasks like pruning, mowing and planting. More efficient ways to assign and execute those on-site tasks will help bolster your gross margin.

cipocal of .45). That gives you a sales price of \$1,818.

Working backward: A sales price of \$1,818 minus costs of \$1,000 equals \$818 in gross margin. Divide the \$818 gross margin by the \$1,818 sales price and you get 45 percent gross margin.

If you need an hourly charge-out price, use our example of an hourly average wage of \$15 per hour. If you want to achieve a gross margin of 45 percent, take your HAW of \$15 and divide it by .55. That gives you an hourly charge-out rate of \$27.27.

When you set your prices with gross margins in mind, it allows you to be even more competitive. Ask yourself: What types of work get lower mark-up opportunities? Higher mark-ups? Why? When and why do you mark up work at a higher rate? A lower rate?

Keep in mind that gross margins are not the same for all revenue streams or even for all jobs. You will need to determine the desired gross margins by considering the overhead costs associated with the revenue along with what the fair market value is for the work being performed.

**EFFICIENCY AND EXECUTION.** This area will always need some keen scrutiny. It deals with how well

your budgeted times to complete work compare to the actual time it takes to finish the job. Obviously, the more you beat the budget, the better. Keep in mind that if you easily beat the hours all the time, then you may be over-estimating the hours to complete the job. Always look for areas to improve your time to complete.

Even the best-laid plans and estimates will have some hiccups or unexpected costs; others will have some victories. Always be on alert as the job unfolds for things that will whittle away your gross margin. Focus on your budgeted hours and materials, and keep track of how you are spending your time on the job.

Look for the best and most efficient means to accomplish the work on budget and with the desired level of delivery by your clients.

**CONCLUSION.** Now you have the tools to figure out and monitor one of the most important financial metrics in your company. Remember that if you don't plan on the correct amount of gross margin for each division, you won't have enough at the end of the day to make any money. **L&L**



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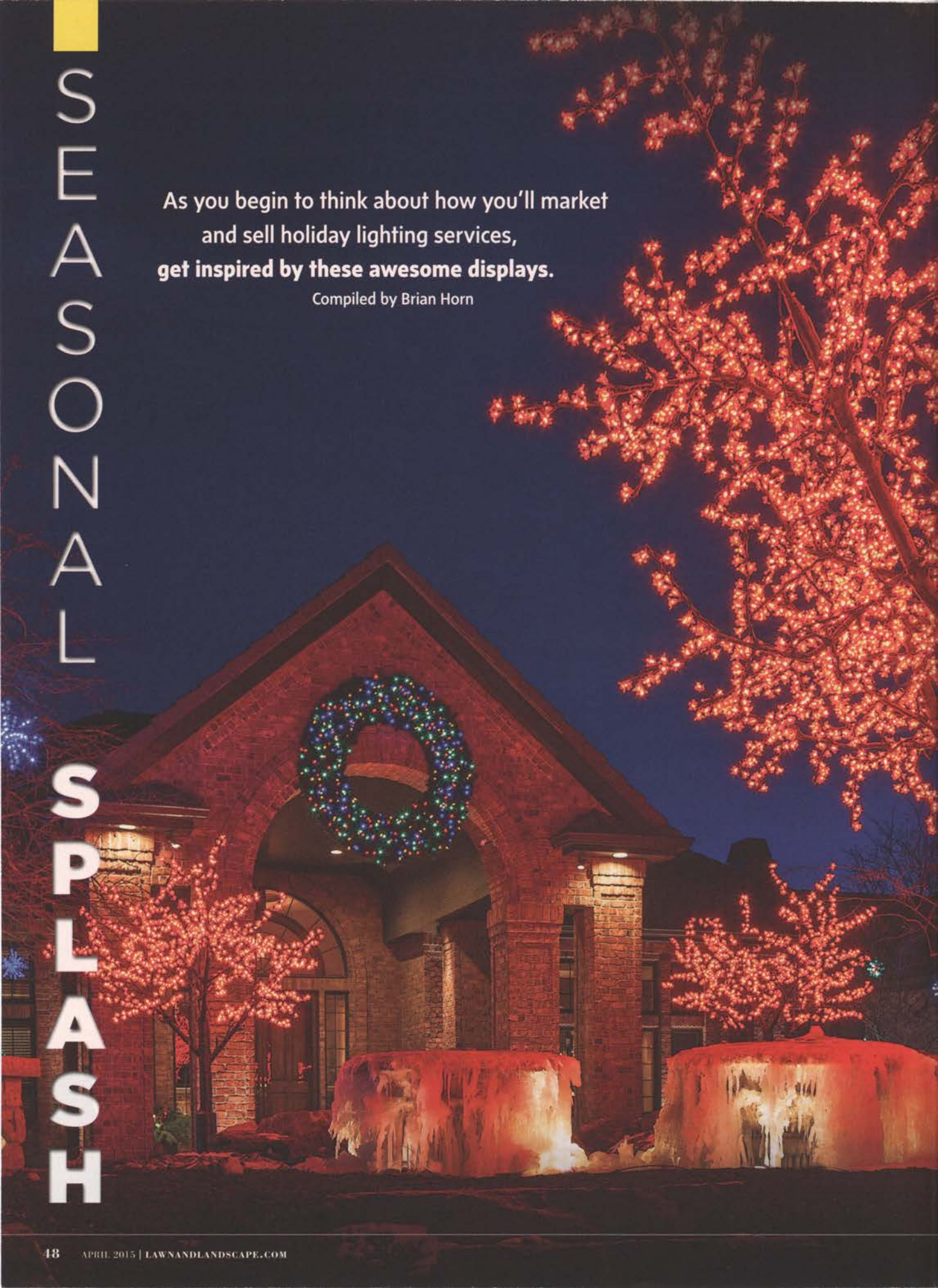
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# SEASONAL SPLASH

As you begin to think about how you'll market  
and sell holiday lighting services,  
**get inspired by these awesome displays.**

Compiled by Brian Horn





# McKAY LIGHTING

**T**wo years ago, a client came to McKay Lighting in Omaha, Neb., to expand the holiday lighting on his home and find a creative way to hide a newly installed water feature in the front yard during the winter. The company developed a design that included one 14-foot LED RGB cherry blossom tree and two 3-foot RGB trees that are wired together to rotate through the color wheel.

McKay installed the three trees along with 50 24-inch LED starbursts in red, green and blue hanging in the canopy of the trees and wrapping the tree trunks with white LED strands. In the back the company installed the owner's existing "Merry Christmas" sign on the fence and one 14-foot RGB cherry tree, and hung 50 24-inch LED red, green and blue starbursts in the six blue spruces. "It was a huge success so the next season he was eager to continue making it bigger and more unique," says Andrew J. Coleman, a McKay outdoor lighting designer. Coleman added another 100 LED 24-inch red, green and blue starbursts to the rest of the front trees and evergreens, and added two red, two green and two blue solid color 8-foot LED cherry blossom trees along his circle drive.

"He has the ability to control his RGB trees by a remote control that lets you change the colors and speed," Coleman says. "The client wanted a unique display that presented well in the neighborhood, but not over the top." The weather can be a challenge in Omaha, and Coleman had to make sure there was consistent power for the display that turned on and off every night. "We can't control the weather, but can minimize our exposure

by waterproofing the connections by using longer cords, having fewer plug junctions and a service team ready at all times if there are problems," he says. Photo courtesy of McKay Landscape Lighting/Kessler Photography



# ELKHORN LAWN CARE

**T**his Omaha home, decorated by Elkhorn Lawn Care in Omaha, Neb., has more than 50,000 LED lights. Icicle Linkables line the front and rear of the home along with tree lighting and displays in the front yard. This project is one of a kind with lighting at every angle. "One obstacle we had to solve was the amount of moisture we had this holiday season, which caused tripped breakers," says Elkhorn owner James Manske. "We solved this problem by making sure all major connections were lifted off the ground and were not sitting in water or by taping up plug-ins that were not being used." | Photo courtesy of Michael Borman Photography



For more holiday lighting displays, visit [lawnandlandscape.com](http://lawnandlandscape.com) and search "seasonal splash."



## NEAVE DÉCOR

This is one of my favorite residential jobs," says Kathleen Neave, Holiday and Event Decorating division manager/owner at Neave Décor, a division of Neave Outdoor Solutions in Greater New York. The core products were from the Christmas Décor franchise system plus some specialty features. The client had been with Neave since 2011, and started with a very simple design, which took about nine man-hours – less than the cost of the company's average sales amount for décor jobs. By 2012, the client wanted more of a "wow" experience, which led to an animated lighting show.

That involved a lighting set up with music and an animated lighting box, and a lot of separate extension cords to create the lights to turn on and off. "The music can be tuned in on a car radio that we have programmed," she says. "The client has a sign in front of the home that has the radio station information on it."

The installation and takedown of this job was up to 26 man hours. In 2013, wreaths were added to all of the windows of the house, and green LED lights were added to the shrubs, taking the job up to 29 man hours. For the 2014-2015 season, the client wanted more, and the company added two 6-foot toy soldiers. "We put spotlights on the soldiers and separated them from the show so that when the lights were going on and off to the music the soldiers would stay lit all the time," she says. "This job now takes 40 man hours for installation and takedown, and its cost to the client is four times the original small job we did in 2011." | Photo courtesy of Neave Décor



## SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Due to the large expanse of property on this estate, the holiday lighting display was divided into phases in 2013. As one of Southern Exposure's largest residential maintenance clients, the Windsor, Colo., company's objective for phase two of the project was to continue the client's goal of creating a "whimsical and enchanting" lighting and décor design, says Meghan Simonds, landscape designer.

A few of the highlights of the project included expanding on the tree lighting at the main entrance to the property and at the front of the residence, as well as decorative elements such as nutcracker soldiers and custom decorated greenery at the front door. One of the challenges the company faced with this project installation was the elements, specifically the wind on the Colorado plain. For this phase in 2014, the project took approximately two weeks with a four-man crew. | Photo courtesy of Glass Photography

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## IDENTIFY AND ELIMINATE PESKY TURF AND ORNAMENTAL INVADERS.

Fire ants will be active once the weather warms up, so now is a good time to apply treatment.



# PUT PESTS IN THEIR PLACE

By Kate Spirgen

**A**fter a long, snowy and brutally cold end to the winter in many parts of the country, spring is finally here. But conditions are still a little behind normal, about two weeks in the Eastern half of the U.S., and even further behind in New England, says Jill Calabro, Nufarm plant pathologist.

Out West, however, conditions have been warmer and drier. "So when conditions are dry, generally

the pest pressure is a little bit lower in most cases, but everything is warmer so things are sped up a little bit, especially in the Pacific Northwest and California," Calabro says.

### NORTHERN PESTS

**ANNUAL BLUEGRASS WEEVIL.** Applications should start in April as these start to lay eggs, says Jeff Marvin, manager of field research for PBI/



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## PEST CONTROL



Fall armyworm is a problematic pest in the south, and is most severe in late spring through summer, depending on the region. Affected areas will yellow and the turf will thin.

Gordon. You can also apply in May to target the pupa of new annual bluegrass weevils. To spot them, look for yellowing patches in bluegrass turf.

**GRUBS AND BILLBUGS.** While pressure isn't too bad early in the season, Calabro says, there could be some springtime damage from grubs that were not properly controlled last season. "The recent cold and wet weather has made it hard to get preventative treatments out on time," she adds.

Grubs are easiest to control with preventative applications in the spring. Curative treatments can be done in the summer, but control is much more difficult, Marvin says.

According to Dean Mosdell, Syngenta technical manager for the Western U.S., grubs of several beetle species in the area can cause significant turf damage in late summer as they feed on roots. Look for dry, brown patches in the lawn and check the soil moisture. If the soil isn't dry, give the lawn a good pull. If it comes up easily, grubs or billbugs are most likely eating away at the root system.

Billbugs are a persistent problem and feed on turf in the early summer, especially on Kentucky bluegrass lawns, Mosdell says.

A good imidacloprid product should solve the problem with an application and a follow-

up two weeks later. The lawn will require extra watering after grub damage in order to establish new roots.

## SOUTHERN PESTS

**CHINCH BUGS.** These pests could be a problem on St. Augustine grass, Mosdell says. While their damage looks like drought or root rot, the bugs can be identified on closer inspection. Simply cut the end off a coffee can and insert it in the ground. Pour water into it for about five minutes and see if the bugs float to the top. Chinch bugs love nitrogen, so be wary of over fertilizing, as it can actually help the bugs mature faster and lay more eggs.

**FALL ARMYWORM.** This is a problematic pest in the South, and is most severe in late spring through summer, depending on the region, Marvin says. Affected areas will yellow and the turf will thin, and most infestations start near a wood line or tree. You can spot the ½ to 1-inch caterpillars on visual inspection. Technicians servicing Bermudagrass should especially be on the lookout Mosdell says.

**FIRE ANTS.** According to the Bayer Green Solutions Team, fire ants will be active once the weather warms up, so now is a good time



to treat for them. "Fire ants are like people. If the weather is mild, warm, but not too hot, they become very active. If it gets too hot, they're not nearly as active."

## ORNAMENTAL PESTS

**MITES.** "Mites are typically active during periods of drought or stress to plants," PBI/Gordon's Marvin says. Depending on the weather, that can range from spring to fall. You can spot the pests' damage by looking for bronzed or chlorotic leaves.

**THRIPS.** Thrip damage looks like a small silver line or vein on a leaf. "Thrip damage may also result in stunted plant growth and leaves that appear distorted," Marvin says. Be sure to look at the undersides of leaves as that's where most of the damage occurs. Silken webs may also be present around the infested plant parts, he says.

## INVASIVE SPECIES

**EMERALD ASH BORER.** Emerald ash borer has spread into Colorado, southern Arkansas along the Louisiana border and even into Georgia, Calabro says. "It is continuing to spread so we'll probably start seeing more positive identifications in areas that previously had not seen emerald ash borer, but the signs of that pest, you wouldn't even notice early in the spring."

The bug has been in the news recently as it is now infesting white fringtree. Wright State University professor Don Cipollini found evidence of EAB attacks on specimens in Ohio during the summer and fall of 2014.

Signs of infestation include canopy dieback, shoots growing from the trunk or root zone, bark splitting at the beetle's entry point and callus tissue formation around the bore hole as well as epicormic shoots, which can be seen as larger than normal leaves.

Bore holes are D-shaped and tunneling or galleries may be visible if the bark is peeled away, Marvin says. Increased woodpecker activity can also be a sign of an infestation.

If you are servicing areas where EAB has been spotted, be sure to treat in the spring. The optimal time to make applications is

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## PEST CONTROL

before adults emerge early to mid-April. However, there are treatments available for summer months such as dinotefuran, which can be applied via a basal trunk spray or a soil treatment.

**PINE MOUNTAIN BEETLE.** Pine mountain beetle is another one to look out for, especially in western states, according to Calabro. Adults range in size from 1/8-inch to 1/4-inches.

"Needles that turn a reddish brown color are characteristic of pine bark beetle damage and needle cast during severe cases," Marvin says. "Trees under stress are typically infected first. Red-



Japanese beetles become active in the south in late May and in northern regions in late June and July. They can also be seen by the naked eye.

dish boring dust is visible at that time."

To control the bug, infested trees should be removed and burned or chipped as most trees that have been infested will eventually die.

"Treatment must be applied to target the adults when they land on the trees," Marvin says, but he cautions that applications could also target beneficial insects.

**JAPANESE BEETLES.** Adult Japanese beetles typically become active down south around late May, and in northern regions in late June to July, Marvin says. Look out for trees or shrubs

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## PEST CONTROL

losing leaves, which can happen within a few days. And be on the watch for the beetles, which are large enough to see with the naked eye, he says.

**BE READY FOR ACTION.** Technicians should be on the lookout for signs of injury from insects, which generally look like thinning turf, off-color or browning foliage, Mosdell says. While turf may look like it's suffering from drought, it's important to dig down into the thatch or soil to find the cause of problems.

To deal with early season pests, Calabro recommends keeping a good broad spectrum product



You can spot mites' damage by looking for bronzed or chlorotic leaves. The pest is typically active during periods of drought or stress to plants.

on hand so that technicians can put down treatments right away.

"LCOs should be able to identify the ornamental plants and assess the overall health of the shrub and tree," he says. "Sometimes nutrition may be the key factor but examination of the tree or shrub may reveal other issues. Many times pests are host-specific so identification of the plant is important."

Marvin says it's best to target problems with preventative applications. He also says it's important to actively monitor and scout properties to ensure that applications are made right when they're needed. L&L

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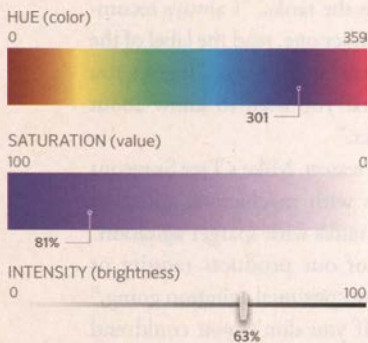


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Superior Lawn Services' spray rig consist of equipment from local suppliers because it can be serviced faster in case of a breakdown.

# SPRAY THE RIGHT WAY

LCOs discuss the details of putting together a solid rig.

By Katie Tuttle

**B**uying a spray rig for your company may be a harder decision than you imagined. Different options for tanks and hoses mean you need to take the time to consider which choices will be best for your specific company.

John Glover, general manager of Superior Lawn Services in Jonesboro, Ark., says it's always important to find one supplier for your spray rig equipment, and to find someone local.

"You can go to the internet and buy

some cheaper stuff off sites but I just don't know if you'd get the service after sale, which is what you want to look for," he says. "If we have a breakdown, all we've got to do is get on the phone. They have parts in stock, ready to go, and to me that's important."

**THINK TANKS FIRST.** The first thing to consider is the tank. Tanks come in different materials and different sizes, and with different set ups. Gary Eichen, BioTurf/PHC manager at Mike's Tree

Surgeons in Troy, Mich., says it's important to consider the products you'll be using in the tanks. "I always recommend, number one, read the label of the products you buy," he says. "It gives you exactly what you need to know about the product."

For this reason, Mike's Tree Surgeons uses tanks with mechanical agitation instead of tanks with sparger agitation.

"A lot of our products require or should have continual agitation going," he says. "If you don't, you could end up in the mornings spraying at one rate when the tank is full, then by the afternoon you're spraying at another rate." Jon Rick, owner of J Rick Lawn & Tree



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## LAWN CARE

in Colorado Springs, Colo., says his company uses a space saver type tank almost exclusively.

"They take up less than half of the pickup bed and then your hose reel and pump are mounted on top," he says.

Dayna Wagner, operations manager of Fit Turf in Michigan and Colorado, says she considers appearance when deciding on a tank. "We like the fiberglass tanks because they look really nice and we want to make sure our trucks look good," she says.

Glover says his company also uses fiberglass tanks. "We've had some of the poly tanks, but we don't think they hold up to the sun as well," he says. "We buy a

tank and we're going to use it for 20-something years. With fiberglass tanks we can paint them on the outside and the paint holds up to the UV rays."

Glover says you can buy a poly tank for a lot cheaper, but the more expensive fiberglass tanks will hold up longer so it's something to consider before purchasing. Size is also something you need to think about. Rick recommends calculating how much product you're going to apply each day.

"You don't want to get too small of a tank where you're going to have to go back to the shop to fill it up," he says. "Calculating the amount of product

you're going to put down on a daily basis will really determine the size of tank you buy."

If your budget can support it, it might be a good idea to get tanks of two sizes. Glover recommends using a drop tank on a spray rig. Instead of just buying one tank for the bed of the truck, purchase a smaller one and put it in the bed as well.

"When (technicians) are out spraying a yard, they've got their normal pre-emerge or post-emerge in their big tank," he says.


"If they come to a yard with a specific problem or a specific weed, a lot of times they're going to have to come back to

keep from having to do water and a mix."

Instead of waiting to empty your tank, go back to the shop and mix up a special mix to treat that yard, you can take the smaller tank, pump the regular mix into it and then add the special chemicals for that specific yard.

"You're going to have to do different things to each yard," Glover says. "You may have a yard that's Bermuda grass or fescue side by side. You don't want to have to do one (yard) one day and one the next when they're right next to each other."

**CHOOSE YOUR HOSE.** There are two types of spray hose available



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## LAWN CARE

for spray rigs: spiral one pass and spiral two pass.

On a spiral one pass, the nylon cord that holds everything together runs through the hose, beginning to end, once.

On a spiral two pass, the cord runs through beginning to end and then back, making a stronger hose.

"The decision is based on the amount of pressure you're going to be putting through the hose," Eichen says. "Spiral one pass is rated lower pressure than spiral two. I recommend for most cases, especially lawn care where it's running 150 PSI to 250 PSI, the spiral one pass because of cost."

Something to keep in mind is that hose pressure is determined at a temperature of 70 degrees Fahrenheit. If you're working in a part of the country that is continually above that, your hose will be slightly lower in pressure because the heat makes the hose softer.

J Rick Lawn & Tree typically uses a 3/8-inch hose that's 400 feet long.

"When you have to go around houses and through gates, the smaller size makes it a lot easier to drag around obstacles," he says. "Especially for residential purposes when you're dragging it out and reeling it up 20 times a day. It makes a big difference."

Eichen says flipping your hose once a year helps extend its life.

"In most cases, a technician is pulling out maybe 150 feet of hose," he says. "Most hose reels come in 350-foot lengths so the last 150 feet is not used nearly as much as the first 200."

**PICK YOUR PUMP.** "The decision on the type of pumps you use is based on how much maintenance you want involved and how much money you want to spend," Eichen says.

Eichen is a certified diaphragm pump specialist, so those are the pumps his company uses. He says a lot of companies use piston pumps because they don't

require much maintenance. "We now have two other guys that I've trained at my warehouse on how to fix them so we have adequate knowledge," he says.

Glover says his company hasn't had good success with diaphragm pumps because they require more cleaning.

"They work well for companies where the chemicals don't sit in the tanks very long, but for lawn chemicals and things like that, the piston pumps are a lot better," Glover says.

You also have to consider what product you use.

"In some cases, certain products will void the warranty," he says. **L&L**

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# Appetite for CONSTRUCTION

Customers want more than your standard firepit  
when it comes to outdoor kitchens. **By Stacie Zinn Roberts**

**IT'S**

a warm summer night and your best friends crowd around a flat-screen television mounted above a granite-topped outdoor bar. On the grill, steaks and chicken sizzle. You grab a beer from the mini-fridge mounted under the counter and hand them out to the guys in celebration. Nearby, your wife and her friends sip wine around an open fire.

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**AFTER**

## CUT OUT THE MIDDLE MAN

One way to expand your offerings is to become a resource for related purchases outside of your standard hardscape sales. At Boyce Design & Contracting in Atlanta, Thomas Boyce is in the process of creating a website that will offer clients a one-stop-shop for all of their outdoor needs.

**APPLIANCES** **BOYCE SIGNED DEALERSHIP** relationships with several appliance lines. Clients select everything from dishwashers to refrigerators to grills from Boyce's catalogs (and soon the online website) and order from his company directly, cutting out the middle man. Markup ranges from 25 to 50 percent.

**AUDIO/VIDEO** **BOYCE ENCOURAGES CLIENTS** to select their own audio/video components but he wires and installs them for a fee.

**FURNITURE** **BOYCE SPECIFIES OUTDOOR FURNITURE** during the space planning stage, and subcontracts with an interior designer to help guide clients through outdoor furniture color and style selection. Once his e-commerce website is up, clients will be able to do much of their shopping online.

**FEEDING THE FLAME.** In Atlanta, Thomas Boyce designs and builds 50 to 100 outdoor projects annually at Boyce Design & Contracting. About 75 percent of those projects have firepits.

Another 40 to 50 percent include some kind of outdoor kitchen, from a simple grill and countertop to a completely equipped

kitchen with a full appliance package. Space planning, Boyce says, is the key to a successful project.

"Don't put a fire feature right on top of where the kitchen is going to be. Create outdoor rooms," he says. "Make sure you have designated seating around the fire feature, and a good work space and seating for eating



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## OUTDOOR KITCHENS



Many customers want more than just a basic firepit when it comes to their outdoor living space. Many want unique designs with kitchens and dining areas.

around the kitchen, either bar seating or a dining table. It's basic space planning, but a lot of contractors neglect that in an exterior space. Lay out a room the same as you would do it inside when you take it outside."

Boyce allows 150 to 200 square feet to create a room around a fire feature. Outdoor kitchens vary depending on the size and scale of what you want to do," he says.

In the space planning phase, Boyce draws in furniture placements, and takes sight lines into consideration to make sure the outdoor rooms flow together.

In Pleasant Grove, Utah, Rick Meinzer, founder and president of Platinum Landscape, says fire features generally start at \$5,000 and outdoor kitchen features start at \$9,000.

"Outdoor kitchens can be simple or grand. Most of our clients keep their outdoor kitchens simple – a built-in BBQ with counter space for serving food," Meinzer says. "We find that granite countertops work great in our setting.

"We are also doing a lot of outdoor kitchens with raised bars so that people can sit on bar stools rather than having a bunch of tables on the patio."

Firepits, or what Meinzer prefers to call "fire features," are common.

"Anyone who spends time outside, especially in our environment and weather, loves the heat and ambiance created by a fire. Our clients are looking for living spaces that will

allow them to gather with friends and family," Meinzer says. "Fire is magical and a huge draw. Most of our high-end resorts have fire features. Unless it is 100 degrees outside, you can expect to see guests gathered around, enjoying the dancing flames and warm glow."

**PRETTY AND PRACTICAL.** What's not common, however, is the way Meinzer designs them. More than just a hole in the ground with fire, Meinzer takes both safety and aesthetics into consideration.

"We really push gas versus wood because of simplicity and safety," Meinzer says. "Wood is nice because of the fragrance and the sounds created as wood spits and hisses, but there are lots of safety concerns with embers that can blow into nearby hills.

Plus, wood leaves ashes, which need to be cleaned out. Most of our owners want the simplicity of turning a valve and immediately having an adjustable flame. When they are done, they turn it off and go inside, not worrying about extinguishing the hot ashes."

Rather than just digging a hole to hold a firepit, Meinzer raises the fire feature for both safety and beauty.

"We prefer to have our fire features raised so that people can't accidentally step into them and get hurt," he says. "We generally raise them about 18 inches, which is seat height. This way people can gather around



and look directly into the fire and directly enjoy the heat. When a fire feature is raised, it also becomes a more prominent focal point."

In Victor, Idaho, Dan Sanders, owner of Enhance Designscapes, says 25 percent of the projects his company works on include a firepit. Most of the features are custom-built and framed with heat-resistant concrete block.

He frequently uses a thin veneer stone product as an accent on the exterior and flagstone capstones. He is partial to the veneer stone because, "We prefer that real look and don't want the appearance of a cultured fakeness," he says.

The biggest challenge Sanders faces is the cold and wet Idaho weather. "When it gets around freezing, I start to worry about things curing up," he says.

But if a client doesn't want to hold off on a job until the weather improves, Sanders has a strategy to deal with the elements.

"We'll create a little warm bubble, use plastic tarp and fill it with hot air; it's common out here," Sanders says. "We'll build a mini-enclosure to work in and have heat in that space. At freezing, you have trouble with (cement and mortar) curing, and will have trouble with it cracking. Your cure times slow down dramatically."

Sanders, Meinzer and Boyce say that good planning and communication with subcontractors is key to avoiding hiccups, fixing mistakes early and delivering a successful project. Communication is critically important, Boyce says,

especially when dealing with contractors who run gas lines and other utilities to a site. "Thinking through the utilities, the gas and electrical, access to the utilities and getting it wherever you need them is very important," Boyce says.

"The stone fireplace and kitchen is set in stone. You need to make sure you have enough electrical and gas, and put some forethought into that before you start building."

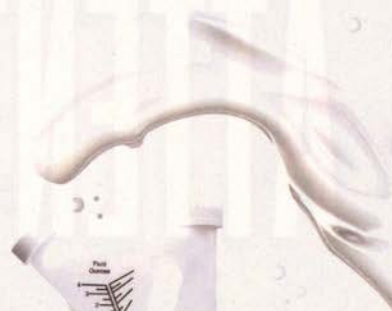
Although his company doesn't do many outdoor kitchens, which he attributes to Idaho's "rugged winters," before he and his brother Martin started Enhance Designscapes five years ago, Sanders was a designer and estimator for a design/build firm in Denver. At that company, Sanders says, outdoor kitchens were fairly common and they included such elements as sound speakers hidden in "faux" rocks placed outside.

In Atlanta, outdoor televisions and audio have been a trend, Boyce says. "Our clients pick out their own components and we install them."

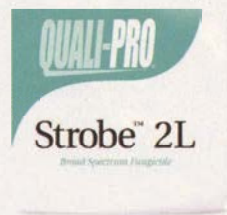
Creativity may be the greatest asset to a contractor working to design and build firepits and outdoor kitchens. "With all of the cool products available, the sky is the limit," Meinzer says. "Our clients want unique. They want something no one else has. This requires constant experimentation." L&L

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

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# Light it up

When designing a customer's landscape, it's important to consider both daytime and nighttime use. These products can help achieve a safe and attractive look to satisfy your clients.



## FX Luminaire Luxor ZDC

**The pitch:** The new Luxor ZDC is an LED lighting controller with zoning and dimming.

- The ZDC combines RGBW LED technology to offer a spectrum of 30,000 color possibilities.
- Manage colors with the optional Luxor Wi-Fi app with a finger-operated color wheel for exacting color replication.
- Existing Luxor ZD systems can be upgraded to ZDC simply by replacing the ZD facepack with a ZDC facepack and acquiring a ZDC replacement kit for each fixture.

**For more information:**  
Fxl.com

## Kichler Outdoor Post Mt 1Lt

**The pitch:** The design of Kichler's Outdoor Post Mt 1Lt fixture from the Morris collection reflects the Southwest Mission style.

- The post top features a distressed copper finish, and the inside of the product features etched, iridescent-seedy glass.
  - 1-light, 200-watt max. The fixture uses a hybrid (23-30-watt) incandescent bulb.
- The fixture measures 12 square inches with a height of 15 inches. The pole is not included.

**For more information:**  
Kichler.com

**For more lighting products, check out the products section at [lawnandlandscape.com](http://lawnandlandscape.com).**

## Orbit Industries' Lighting Fixture

**The pitch:** Orbit Industries has introduced a new line of solid brass outdoor landscape lighting fixtures.

- Select from a 20-watt halogen lamp, or energy saving 3-watt or 6-watt LED lamps to illuminate any pathway.
- Fixtures include PVC spike and underground connectors for easy installation.
- Features a tempered glass lens, a porcelain socket with nickel contacts and Teflon-jacketed wire leads.

**For more information:**  
Orbitelectric.com

## Unique Lighting Systems Iso Ledge Light

**The pitch:** Unique Lighting Systems introduces the Iso Ledge Light fixture, designed for hardscaping installations.

- The Iso can be used to illuminate stone walls, outdoor bars and decks.
  - This fixture is a 3-watt LED lamp in 2700K or 3000K color temperatures, offered in black and bronze finishes.
  - A remote 12V transformer is required and may be ordered separately.

**For more information:**  
Uniquelighting.com

## Vista 5000 Series Up & Accent Fixtures

**The pitch:** Vista Professional Outdoor Lighting's 5000 Series Up & Accent Fixtures combine the energy savings of LED with the performance of Vista's new MR-16 LED lamps.

- The Vista MR-16 LED lamps provide up to an 80 percent energy savings over standard halogen lamps.
- A silicone diaphragm gasket prevents moisture from being drawn into the lamp and socket.
- The design allows for light output that can be concealed throughout the landscape.

**For more information:**  
Vistapro.com



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## GROUND COVER



## GET THE MOST OUT OF

# M U L C H

Keep your crew moving smoothly during application.

By Holly Hammersmith

**P**lacing top dressing on a finished landscape bed may sound like an easy final step, but with any process there is room for improvement. Here are some tips from contractors on how to best avoid mulch mayhem.

**TRAINING THE TEAM.** A well-trained mulching crew begins with the right lead man or supervisor, says Chris Chupp, operations manager at Perimeter Landscape

Management, which has four offices in Georgia and South Carolina. Most of his clients have pine straw bedding and a few use hardwood mulch.

“You have to be able to convey to (the crew supervisor) exactly what you want done and where you want it done,” he says. Chupp says his training approach is hands-on and includes up to one hour of demonstration and practice before new team members begin work on the job site. Once new employees make that transition,



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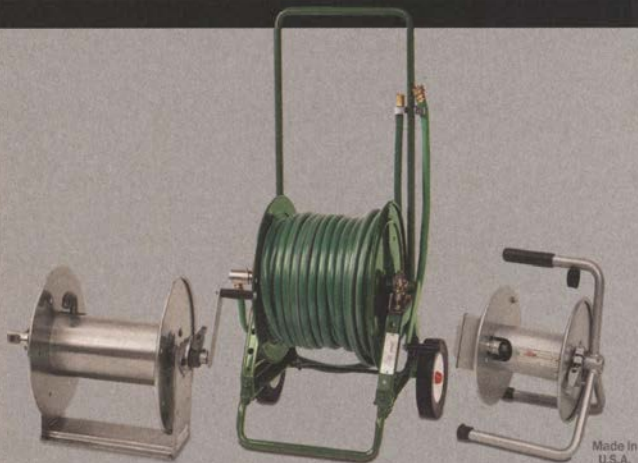
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## GROUNDCOVER

crew leaders continually monitor the work and provide feedback.

At Russell Landscape, which has offices in Georgia and Tennessee, Executive Vice President Hugh Cooper says his company primarily uses pine straw, which is readily available in the Georgia and Florida markets, followed by hardwood mulch, cypress mulch and pine bark mulch.

"The basics of applying mulch, moving it into a place and spreading over the bed is pretty simple," Cooper says. "First, we do a visual training. We clearly define all safety initiatives and then we do not allow deviation from it."

The visual training, which may be watching a video or an experienced crew in person, is followed by hands-on practice. New employees practice applying mulch alongside an experienced crew.

Cooper adds that his mulching crews are typically cross-trained to do other work within the company.

It's important to train employees on the company's quality control standards for product, Chupp says. Sometimes when unloading product, there will be a section of mulch that is uneven in color or deemed "bad product."

It's important for crews to pay attention to the quality of the product and not apply anything inferior, he says.

**TIPS FOR PLACEMENT.** Each job site typically has several drop sites for mulch, assigned in advance, Cooper says. "Then, if it's a large area, we'll use a machine ... to move the mulch," he says. "We'll also use wheelbarrows, shovels and mulch pitchforks (for pine straw) or flat shovels with hardwood mulch."

Prior to application in beds, Cooper says the mulching team will often trench the bed line to create smooth, flowing curves.

"You have to make sure it's spread out evenly. If you get over

## KEEP MULCH LOOKING FRESH

**M**ulch colorant extends the life of mulch applications – keeping customers happy and keeping business on the books, says Teddy Russell, president of Russell Landscape.

The seasonal reapplication of mulch can cause the top dressing to become quite deep, which can be harmful to trees and plants. An environmentally friendly colorant enhances hardwood mulch color without adding bulk. Colorant is typically applied once per year.

"In open areas, the mulch is going to lose color faster just because of the sun exposure. In shadier areas, it'll hold its color and most sites will have a blend of sun and shade, and so the colorant will help keep the color consistent throughout the whole property," says Hugh Cooper, executive vice president of Russell Landscape.

Chris Chupp, operations manager of Perimeter Landscape, has successfully used colorant on pine straw as well.

"You get up to a year of really good color out of your pine straw. The coloring is about half the cost of a strawing, so it saves them 50 percent of what their budget would be," Chupp says.





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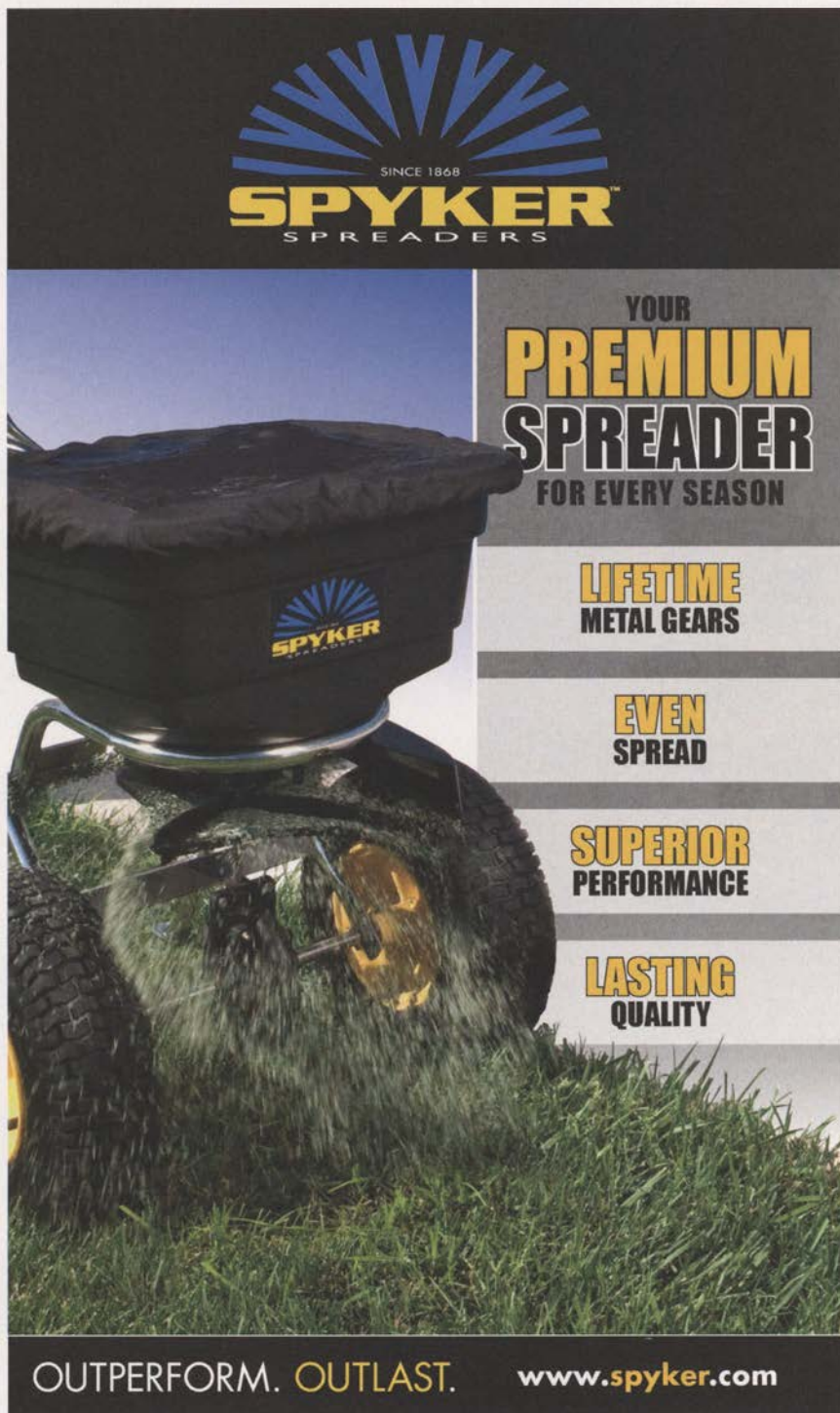


## GROUND COVER

three inches around the base of the tree, it could be detrimental to the plant," he says. "Mulch has specific benefits, moisture retention, erosion control, weed suppression,

moderation of soil temperatures, nutrition, but if it gets too thick, it will actually force the roots to become shallow and then make (the tree) more susceptible to disease and

fluctuating temperatures." After application, cleanup is important, especially with hardwood mulch, which can leave debris or stain surfaces.



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**TEAM EFFICIENCY.** Having a vendor deliver mulch to the site location of a larger job is paramount, as it cuts down on load and unload time, Cooper says. But one challenge with having the vendor drop off product is timing. If traffic is heavy, it can affect the arrival time of the product, he says.

"A lot of the time, we'll schedule delivery and have one person go out and meet the delivery person so that we can confirm the mulch is there, but sometimes, if it gets delayed longer, then it can waste time on the crew," Cooper says.

Before delivery, his team will often visit a site, identify the best places to drop mulch and determine what equipment they will need for the job, Cooper says.

You should place the mulch in an area that does not disrupt pedestrian or vehicular traffic or damage the landscape, typically on a hard surface. Safety cones are also added to highlight the area, he says.

**THE SUBCONTRACTING EQUATION.** Perimeter typically only does mulch application during the slower winter months and on smaller jobs like the entrance of an HOA, requiring 500 bales of pines straw or less.

During the busy season, Chupp has found that subcontracting this piece of the work to mulch suppliers to be lucrative. He says profit margin normally is about 20 percent if he subs it out, compared to 2-20 percent if his company does it.

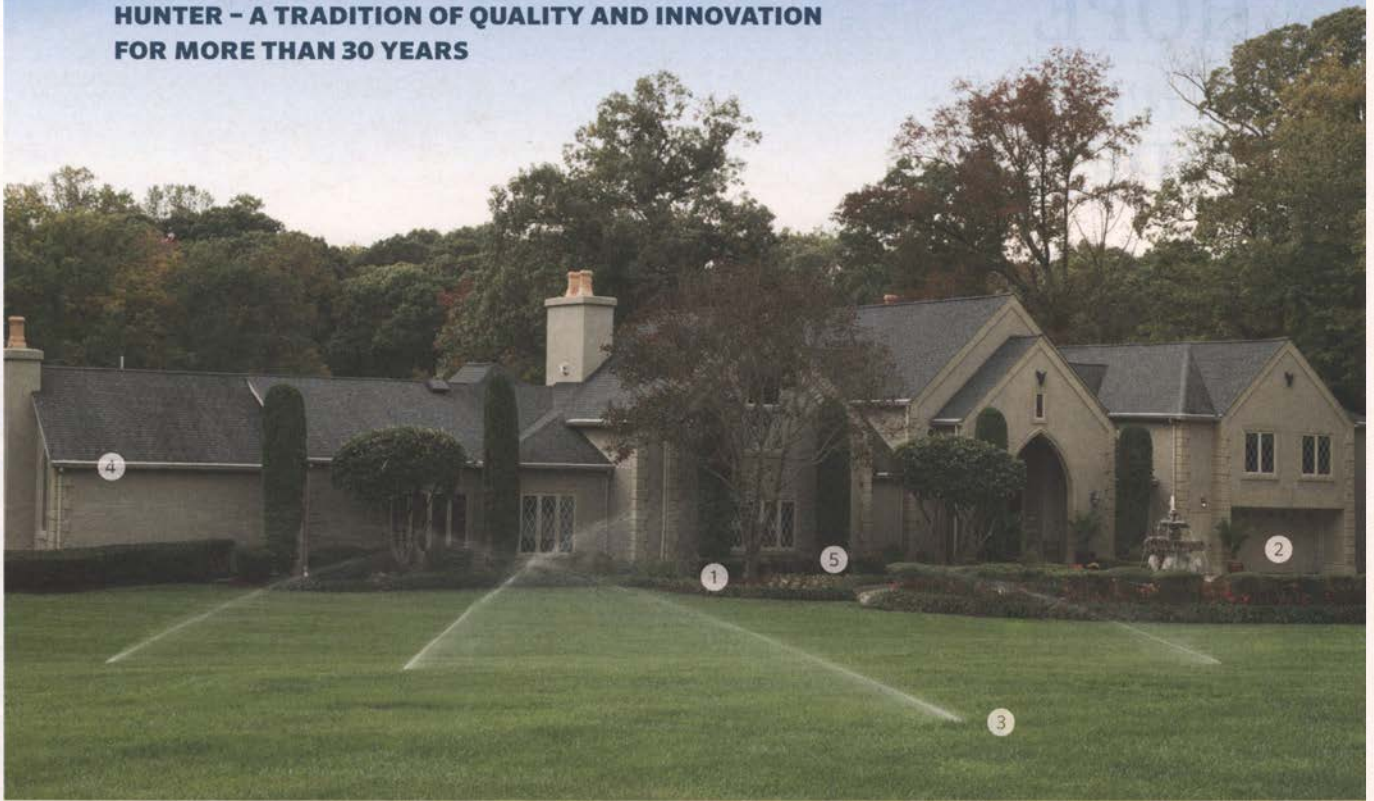
Chupp says the subs do this work every day so they are very well trained and they are paid by the bale when installing pine straw as opposed to Chupp's employees who are getting paid by the hour. "(It's) more motivation when you are getting paid for each bale you put out." And subcontracting has not been a concern among clients, Chupp adds.

"They still want us because we're ultimately responsible. If they don't like the way it looks, it's my responsibility," he says. **L&L**



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# HOPE *with* SLOPES

Even on a steep incline, you can provide effective erosion control.

By Neil Moran

**L**andscapers often encounter obvious and not so obvious slopes in commercial and residential lawns and landscapes. These slopes are prone to erosion, which not only results in an unsightly lawn profile, but can also result in various problems, including washing away valuable topsoil and the runoff of pesticides into storm drains and waterways, potentially polluting drinking water and harming aquatic wildlife.

How to deal with slopes has as much to do with the degree of slope and accessibility of equipment as it does the location. Different states have different regulations regarding erosion control, so it's important to have a knowledge of state and local guidelines as well as EPA regulations before bidding on a job.

"In a bidding economy where margins are slim and penalties are shared by contractual obligation, an EPA fine can be the end of a company," says Austin

**RIGHT:** Hydroseeding is an option on sites with gradual slopes, but steep slopes are another matter.





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## EROSION CONTROL

D. Edwards, president of Emerald Inc., in Elk Grove, Calif.

"It's better to do the right thing and comply with the law than to get a fine."

**NATURAL AND HUMAN INFLUENCES.** Erosion is a naturally occurring phenomenon that is often initiated and/or made worse by human influences. In nature, it's influenced mostly

by wind, rain and spring runoff. Human-caused erosion can be traced to the use of heavy equipment for different construction projects. Erosion can also be caused by a simple case of neglect, e.g., not providing the proper vegetation to control and prevent it.

Mudslides and the wholesale washing away of plants and soil are an obvious, if not extreme, example of soil erosion. However, don't rule out the more subtle signs of erosion – exposed tree roots, soil accumulating at the bottom of a slope and the splashing of soil on objects in the landscape.

**SLOPE.** Methods used to control erosion depend on the degree of the slope. Gradual slopes that are hardly noticeable to the eye simply require seeding with a hydroseeder over a prepared seed bed. Steeper slopes will require more material, equipment and manpower.

Hydroseeding is a practical method on sites with gradual slopes and where a hydroseeder can gain reasonable access to the site. Steep slopes are another matter.

"Some slopes are just too steep to assure good adherence of a hydraulically applied product," Edwards says. He says geotextile products can be superior on steep slopes due to its immediate pinning of erodible soils. "Oftentimes, we combine both seeding and RECP's (rolled erosion control products) to create a vegetated geogrid."

Edwards says, where possible, he'd choose the cost saving potential of hydroseeding over RECPs. "On average, you get permanent hydroseeding for a quarter of the cost of a RECP," Edwards says. "With the very best form of erosion control being natural vegetation, and the cost of hydroseeding being the value of engineering solution, we often try to use this option where practical."

Edwards says hydromulch is also used in erosion control, but only as a preventative measure to control the erosion that can occur from a single rain event.

Ben Carter of Carter Land Services in Jesup, Ga., uses mostly sod to control slopes that are hardly comparable to those found in mountainous California.



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## EROSION CONTROL

"Typically sod is used, which is about the extent of our erosion control issues because we're so flat," Carter says. However, like Emerald, he needs to be certified and knowledgeable about the effects of water runoff, especially working along coastal Georgia.

### EROSION CONTROL PRODUCTS.

There are more biodegradable products available these days to meet the increasingly stringent regulatory guidelines for erosion control. Excel S-2, manufactured by Western Excelsior, is one such example of a biodegradable RECP, which is made from shredded wood fiber sandwiched

between two layers of stitched natural netting. Edwards says they use it to stabilize slopes and channels while also providing protection to freshly seeded areas so seeds can germinate.

A cheaper, less acceptable, but also less permanent product for environmentally friendly erosion control are slope interruption devices, commonly referred to as wattles. Wattles are elongated tubes made of compacted straw and other fibers that are installed along contours or at the base of slopes to help reduce soil erosion and capture sediment.

Wattles are mostly used as a temporary option. Earth Saver

and other companies make photodegradable wattles that easily degrade from the UV rays of the sun. Edwards says the preferred bioproduct for the market he serves in the Sacramento area is Terra-Tubes.

These consist of tubes filled with straw fiber and wrapped in burlap. He says they eventually break down, leaving no material behind that could pose a threat to wildlife. Carter uses a jute matting to keep erosion in check on what is much flatter terrain than what Edwards and others deal with. His crew rolls it out over an area that has been graded and seeded to stabilize the slope.

**COMMUNICATION.** Like any potential project, companies need to discuss erosion control options with clients, whether they be residential, municipal or commercial. Discuss cost, risk tolerance and other concerns they may have before taking on a job.

Following the rules and regulations, using the best tools and materials and communicating with the property owner will keep you off a slippery slope and ensure maximum profits. **L&L**

The author is a horticulturist and freelance writer based in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

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**The pitch:** The TurfMaker 325 with mechanical agitation mixes and pumps thicker wood mulch slurries associated with sod quality results.

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



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# LEAVE THE GUNK BEHIND

The better your irrigation system is filtered, the more effective it will be.

By Hilary Daninhirsch



**I**rrigation filters are a vital component of an irrigation system.

Filters are designed to keep irrigation systems free from debris such as sand, dirt, algae and other particles that can clog the sprinkler heads, negatively affect the system's overall performance and leave you with dry plants and an unhappy customer.

There are a variety of filters out there to prevent solids from accumulating and disrupting the irrigation systems, including screen filters, disc filters, media filters and centrifugal filters.

"Discs are one of the more universal filters and are good at catching organic and aggregate or sand matter," says Justin Crocker, owner of Earthtones Greenery in the Dallas and Austin markets.

"They can be, in my opinion, used for almost any application. Screen filters are good for catching sand and rocks, but not for catching organic matter that can grow inside pipes and valves."

**WATER SYSTEM.** The choice of what filter to buy depends in large part upon the condition or quality of the water as well as the water source, and regional differences abound greatly. Water pumped out of a lake, for example, may carry organic matter or rocks, while water pumped out of a well can produce sand.

Crocker says in Texas, filters are not an everyday component of a regular irrigation system because most of their water comes from municipalities and cities.

Nonetheless, he says in general, screen filters are the most common because they are the most economical.

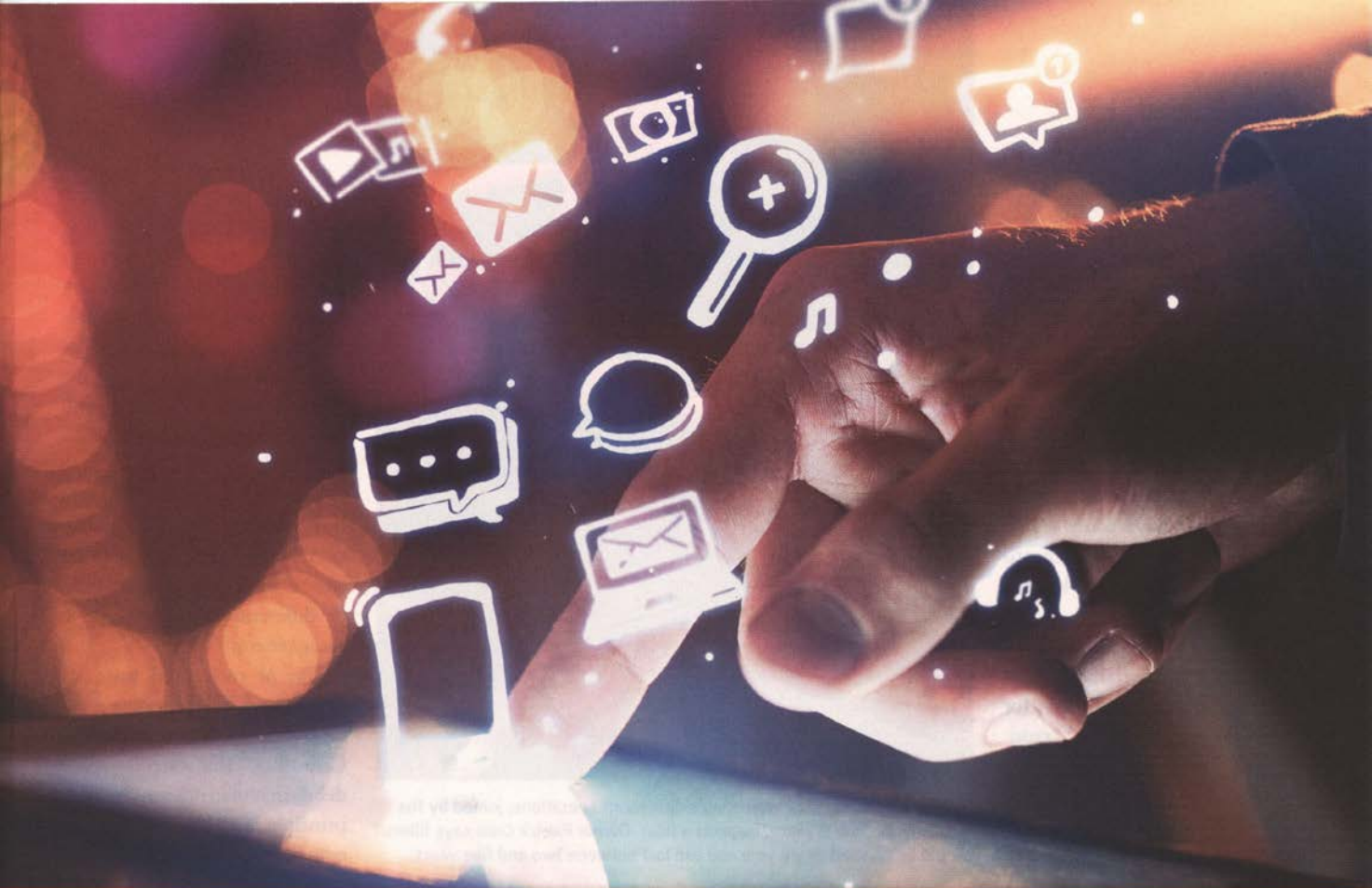
"A screen filter is an excellent way of removing small particles from water," Crocker says. A screen filter can be self-cleaning or will need to be cleaned manually.

Between the two, he prefers the self-cleaning variety because they require less maintenance, but they are significantly more expensive.

Crocker's second favorite filter is the disc type. He says that centrifugal

“  
A filter  
should pay  
for itself  
over the  
long run.”





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## IRRIGATION

filters are good at getting out sand, so they may be more common with well water systems. Media filters are generally for use by large companies.

In Jackson, Wyo., flood irrigation is common, with water being delivered via ditch pipe. Many folks have water rights and pump out of those ditches to irrigate their properties, but the ditches transport debris.

Plus, many residents have well water, which can transmit sand. "Spray heads are notorious for getting clogged up with sand. It's so fine, it doesn't take much to clog up," says Lee Bushong, owner of Bushong Property Services. Bushong says a purchas-



Gabriel D. Michael, Blue Watchdog's director of operations, joined by the company mascot, Wallace, inspects a filter. Owner Patrick Crais says filters should be cleaned every year and can last between two and five years.

ing decision should be based on how big your system is, including water usage and gallons per minute output.

Some irrigation systems will even specify how much filtration is needed.

This way, for example, if you buy a screen filter for a drip system you can determine the size of the mesh, which would be different than if you had a rotor system.

Use of reclaimed water is becoming a trend in some areas of the country, especially in California. "That water has more debris in it than other water. The principle is to keep water clean enough to function in a sprin-

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kler system,” says Patrick Crais, CEO of Blue Watchdog, a water conservation firm in southern California.

“While no one will be drinking it, a filter is just making sure that debris doesn’t shut down the irrigation system.”

**MAINTAIN AND INSTALL.** Whether the filter is above or below ground can make a difference in maintenance, especially in a climate such as Jackson’s.

“We have to winterize all our sprinkler systems in October because ground temperatures are zero (degrees), and all water has to be out of the pipes or it will freeze,” Bushong says.

Thus, for above-ground filters, Bushong suggests they be protected by a box, or by installing a concrete pad with a hot box on top to create an insulated enclosure. Crais cautions that if a box is used, it remain accessible for maintenance.

Crais says a filter, which should be cleaned once a year, can last between two and five years. Some of the parts have inexpensive, replaceable components, though Crais says he doesn’t believe replacing parts is cost-effective.

Crocker suggests when it’s first installed, to check it monthly to see how much debris has accumulated. After that, the cleaning

process can be adjusted. However, both Crais and Crocker know from experience that most homeowners aren’t going to take the time to clean their own filters, which can make good business sense for the contractor.

“If a customer doesn’t want to spend money for a self-cleaning filter, that’s an opportunity for you to upsell and get them on a routine schedule for maintenance to check and clean their filters,” says Crocker.

**COST.** A filter should pay for itself over the long run, saving money in irrigation repairs.

But there can be a wide variety in cost. Choosing the best one

depends on your client’s budget. Bushong charges between \$200-\$400, plus installation.

However, that up front cost should be balanced against the manpower hours you’d have to spend cleaning out dirty sprinkler heads.

“The parts are nothing compared to our labor costs,” he says, noting that high labor costs are part and parcel of doing business in a resort town.

“It’s a lot easier for a homeowner to clean out one filter than to hire me to clean out 30 sprinkler heads every month.” **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Pittsburgh.

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The following is an  
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# E-ENNOYING

Don't let your email inbox control your day. **By Paul Burton**

**E**mail is the boon and the bane of our modern existence. It's the app we love to hate. Most of us claim to despise it, but few of us can go an hour without checking it. Our purpose here is to find ways. We'll start by tackling one of the most intrusive and distracting events that occurs dozens of times a day.





**TURN OFF NEW MESSAGE ALERTS.**

Most people visibly flinch when I suggest this. The problem is that every time a new email alert pings on your computer or smartphone, you're yanked away from what you were just doing.

I know, I know – you can't do your job without email. Of course you can't. However, every time your attention is diverted by a new email alert, you become increasingly unproductive.

Be brave. Take the step. Turn off the alert and remove this self-inflicted distraction. Quiet down your space by 99 pings a day. Now, let's find a better way to manage the inbox.



While you may not be able to run your business without email, you can take actions to minimize the amount of time it distracts you.

**PROCESS EMAIL IN BATCHES.** Get outside the box – the inbox. Go to your email inbox periodically throughout the day, as regularly as necessary to remain effective and responsive.

Start by checking it every 15 minutes, and then stretch it out to 20 minutes, before finally heading out to 30 minutes. Some people have even gone a whole hour without checking their email. Imagine, an hour without checking email!

Don't worry. No matter the interval, there will always be new emails to read. That's the problem with emails – they're constantly arriving.

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## TIME MANAGEMENT

Once you've arrived back at your inbox, read and sort (mentally) all the new emails in one continuous behavior – just like how you process your physical mail when it arrives each day. The point is that processing is a singular effort and should be started and completed in one effort to keep it most efficient.

**ONLY ONE SUBJECT PER EMAIL.** We've looked at a couple of ways to deal more effectively with email that's coming into our inbox.

Now, let's turn our attention to a couple of things we can do to make the emails we send a little

more efficient, which includes how we handle the subject line of emails. Not only is putting multiple subjects into a single email unnecessary – they're virtually free to send – but doing so greatly increases the risk of misunderstandings and mistakes.

People recall things differently all the time and mix subjects up. When you commit to a one-subject-per-email policy, you will increase efficiency and receive responses that make sense and are pertinent to the information you are seeking.

One subject per email will also provide the following benefits:

- The email is easier to find

later, whether through a search function or a sort function.

- It's easier to file.
- It reduces the risk of inadvertently disclosing sensitive or confidential information by a downstream reader looking at the content related to the other subject in a multiple-subject email.

The fourth suggestion in our focus on email is a complement to our third ...

### **CRAFT GOOD SUBJECT LINES.**

Email subject lines are routinely underused, if not completely

misused. Here are the top violations that are committed each day:

- [ ] (blank subject line)
- Hey, what's up?
- I was thinking
- Urgent (or ASAP or HIGH PRIORITY!)
- Thoughts?
- Update

Well-crafted subject lines tell the reader what the email is about and how important it is. You don't need to create a naming convention for subject lines (i.e., a format for repeated use), though it helps.

You just need to leverage the space you have to give your

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reader a quick insight into the body of your email. Here are two examples:

- Johnson Matter, #345365 – Activities in the Last 30 Days
- XXX Strategic Marketing Project – Documents for Review

#### CREATE NEW APPOINTMENTS.

Before diving in to the specifics of this suggestion, please understand that this particular trick works best with Microsoft Outlook.

Other email programs, such as Lotus Notes or Google Mail, have some limited ability to perform this same feat, so proceed

### Every time a new email alert pings on your computer or smartphone, you're yanked away from what you were just doing.

with caution if you are using something other than Microsoft Outlook.)

Many people use email to coordinate events and exchange information about tasks and projects. Many of these messages taken back and forth contain valuable information about the event or task. In order to capture that content, most people cut and paste it from the email into a new appointment or task.

Here's a trick that can save you quite a bit of time: Click on the email with the content you need for the upcoming event or project. While you're still clicking on the email, drag it over the new appointment or task icon (whichever is applicable to your specific application). Now release the mouse.

The body of the email will be automatically copied into the comment area of the new ap-

pointment or task. This is a very convenient and effective way to move information between email and appointments and tasks.

#### MINIMIZE THE USE OF REPLY ALL.

Reply all has become the de facto icon to hit when replying to email. Based on interviews of email users I've spoken with, the thought is that everyone who's on the list needs to receive the information being contributed. The second most popular reason for using reply all is a form of covering your ... well ... bases.

The reality is that most people do not need to read the information you are contributing to the



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**Scott Parker** | Parker Homescape, LLC.

### Tools and resources you need

"We have been using the Wells Fargo Outdoor Solutions financing program for almost a year and we are very happy with it. The initial program training was quick and thorough. Our Training Consultant was awesome! She did a great job with the material (she knows her stuff) and was always willing to answer any questions we had after we completed the training. We also have a wonderful account representative who is very responsive and is always willing to answer any questions/ concerns that we have.

We have found that the Outdoor Solutions program has given us the opportunity to market our services in very unique ways, which sets us apart from our competitors. The application process is quick and easy which makes it a viable option for many of our clients.

I highly recommend the Wells Fargo Outdoor Solutions financing program!"

**Navid Derakhshan** | Outdoor Makeover

### Fast and easy-to-use

"The Wells Fargo Outdoor Solutions credit card program allows us to offer our customers a total service package, from inception to close, on their new project. Our customers and sales staff love the fast and easy online application process. Our office staff loves the quick and simple paperwork. The Wells Fargo Outdoor Solutions program gives us another tool to attract more customers, help them achieve their goals faster, and help us turn over larger sales! We look forward to continuing our relationship with Wells Fargo in the future."

**Ken Erwin** | A+ Lawn & Landscape

### A competitive market advantage

"The convenience of the Wells Fargo Outdoors Solutions credit card program has allowed Meadows Farms' customers to be comfortable doing phases of their landscape projects that would typically be undertaken after another year or two, and sometimes never. There is no doubt that we've gained sales from our participation. The application process is simple for customers, and submitting and processing applications and charges are easy for us, too. We've dipped our toes into financing in the past with little success, but now we're financing projects regularly, and we have a competitive advantage in our market."

**Dave Reed** | Meadows Farms, Inc.



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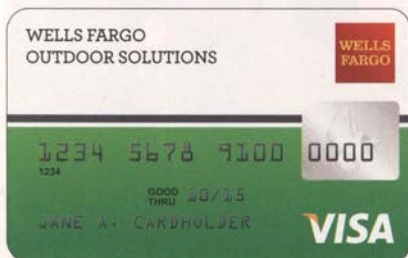
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— Dave Reed, Meadow Farms, Inc.



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## TIME MANAGEMENT

thread; only some of them do. The best practice here is to click reply and add back only those people who will benefit from the information you have to contribute. This will cut down on the total number of emails the other people on the thread receive.

Cutting down on the number of emails people receive has the obvious benefit of reducing the total number of emails they need to process. It also means they are less likely to accidentally delete an email they do need to read and address.

**HERE TO STAY.** Email is com-



munication technology that's not going away. In fact, as more and more people across the globe come to the Internet, email use will continue to increase for some time to come.

Since ignoring it isn't an option, we need to find ways to make better use of this powerful technology.

Pick and choose among the suggestions listed here to find small ways to increase your efficiency and effectiveness with this modern-day tool. **L&L**

The author is developer at QuietSpacing, a customizable time management system.

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**LETTERS to 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 216-393-0227 or [cbowen@gie.net](mailto:cbowen@gie.net).

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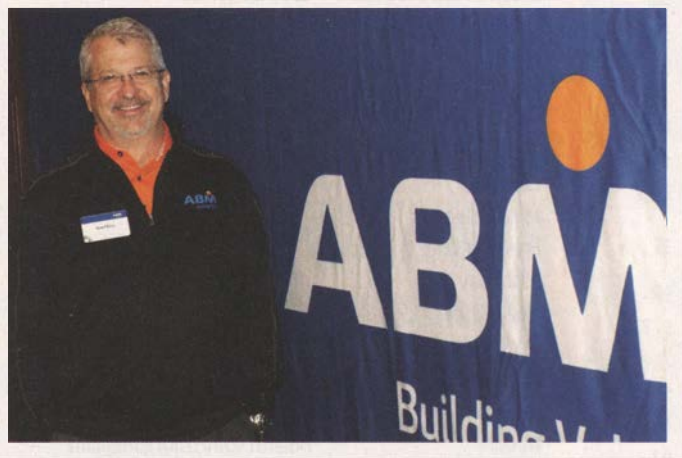
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## TIPS FROM THE TOP

Interviewed by **KATIE TUTTLE**



# DALE ELKINS

// REGION PRESIDENT,  
ABM LANDSCAPE & TURF SERVICES

**I had always wanted to be a landscape architect**, but when I enrolled in Auburn University's LA program, I discovered I enjoyed the horticulture and science classes more than I did the architectural side of the industry. So I shifted my focus and curriculum to ornamental horticulture and landscape design in the School of Agriculture.

**And if anyone who knows** Dr. Harry Ponder at Auburn, he is the most engaging, positive and supportive person who guided many of today's leaders in this industry. Dr. Ponder is not just a college professor, he is a wonderful mentor, adviser and friend to all he comes in contact with. His following is incomparable.

**This man not only has** an unbelievable memory of his students over the last 35 to 40 years but genuinely cares for every single individual

### LOCATION

**Tampa, Fla.**

### TOP 100 RANKING

**30**

### 2014 REVENUE

**\$40 million**

who comes through his classes. All you have to do is take a Dr. Harry Ponder class and you're hooked.

**I am the region president** for ABM Landscape & Turf Services (formerly OneSource Landscape & Golf Services). We are a subsidiary of ABM

Industries, Inc. Our landscape and turf service offerings consist of commercial landscape, golf course and athletic field maintenance.

**We have a presence** in many warm-season markets across the country. Our sites are set on many other geo-markets in states such as Louisiana, Tennessee, Virginia, Oregon and Washington, to name a few. At a minimum, we will have opened operations in Alabama, Georgia and Texas by the end of April.

**The growth is right in front of us**, which is very exciting but we need to be able to per-

form at a high level on day one of a new contract. Recruiting great people, executing our processes and operating production schedules on a high level are all non-negotiable.

**Work your hardest** In the service industry. Things change quickly and you need to be ready to handle both the upsides (growth) and the downsides – loss of work. Because we're human, we naturally feel there is an opportunity to slow down when things are really clicking along and it takes a very disciplined approach in watching the business during those times that you can't get off your patterns of watching all your team metrics. Our top lines can change quickly and being prepared will minimize the stress on your time, your people, your clients and your finances.

**As soon as you take your eye off the ball**, you will lose some of what you worked hard to build. You're going to give some of that security back if you're not careful.

**On key accounts**, you've got to have multi-layer customer contacts with these companies that you're working for. You must make sure that if one of your contacts leaves, your service agreement is still secure. This particular client was a customer that we only focused on building a relationship with one person. When he left, our relationship and this major job left.

**So now we make sure** that we know all the potential decision makers at our clients' facilities.

**There's also another side** to the multi-layered requirement. Your lawn and landscape company must have more than one person who is very familiar with that client. If your employee leaves, you're not starting from scratch with building a valuable relationship with a new face.

**Your company and your people come first.** Invest your "extras" – time and money – there. Your current clients and prospective clients will be on board because of that philosophy. Loyalties and subsequent growth will happen. **L&L**



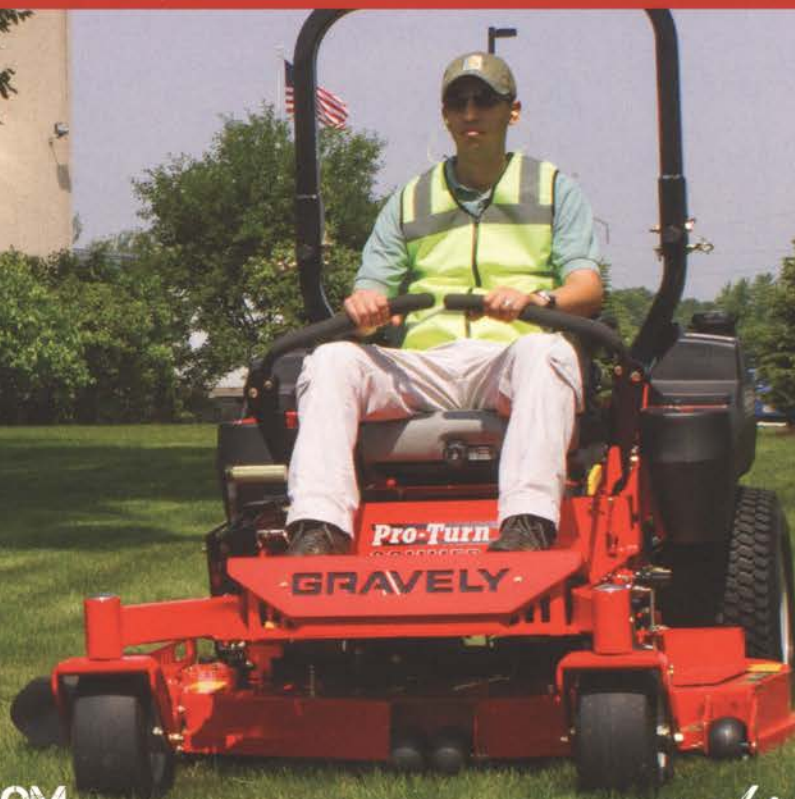


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