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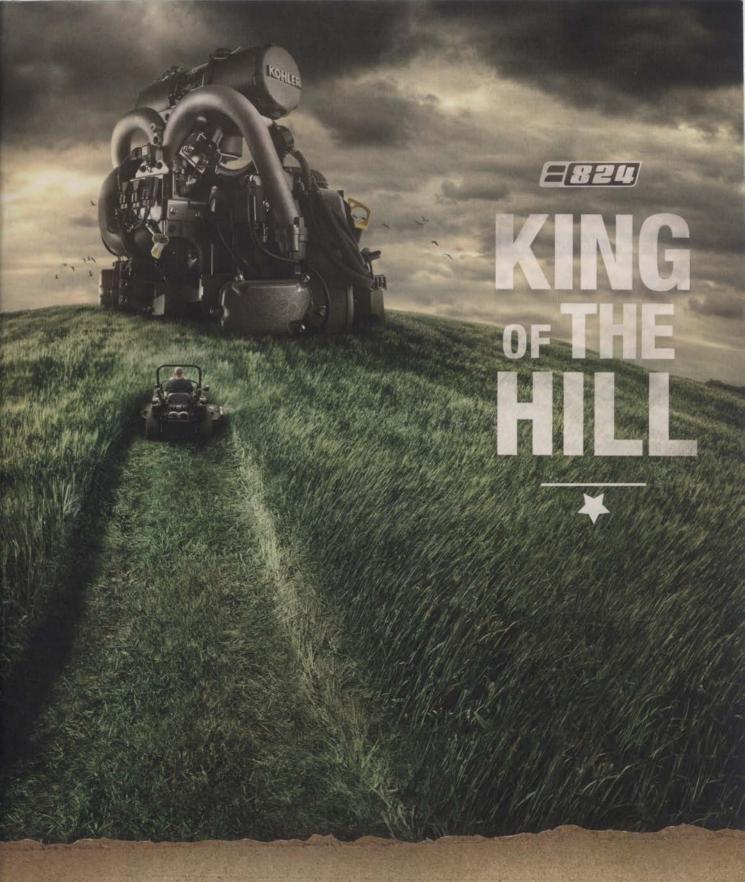
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EXPANDING EXPERTISE

Jeff Blunkosky rounds out his service menu and gives clients a turnkey solution by aligning with professionals that complement his design/build business.

ittsburgh Stone & Waterscapes in Pennsylvania's Steel City installed about 30,000 square feet of patio pavers by the end of last year. In-house crews will prep the foundation and then enlist in an "associate" company as a subcontractor to lay the pavers.

"You can get subs involved in the work that is either going to be low-liability on your side, or that will not affect your service bracket," says, Jeff Blunkosky, company president.

"We surround ourselves with others in the industry that handle products and services that complement ours." "Involving other (landscape) companies becomes a great revolving door," Blunkosky says of the backand-forth referrals that result.

To read about how Blunkosky approaches designing and installing water features, turn to "Go with the flow" on page 84. For the rest of the story, visit bit.ly/pittstone.



OUALITY, NOT QUANTITY

A passion for nature and design shows in Van Zelst's award-winning work, and a decision to stay right-sized has kept the boutique firm focused on delivering quality to its high-end clients.

rom the outside, it might have seemed that Van Zelst had a crystal ball and executed a strategic move out of risky developerbased business just in time. But actually, he just recognized a need to scale back the business and focus more on the type of work he loved to do: high-end residential design/build projects for quality-minded clients who are looking for more than a cookie-cutter landscape.

So in the mid- to late-90s, Van Zelst pulled back from multi-family and commercial accounts.

Van Zelst basically stopped bidding. Through referrals, he grew the residential side of the company and within a few years, virtually flipflopped the customer mix. "We looked really smart because about two years later, that whole (multi-family and commercial) market turned south and we already were positioned really well in the residential space," he says.

For the rest of the story, bit.ly/davezelst.



HAUTE HARDSCAPES

► Capturing the summer cottage market on northern Michigan's lakeshore, Matt Esch and his team create high-end outdoor living spaces that garner industry attention.

he lakeshore cottage properties on Michigan's "thumb" are a canvas for creativity at Esch Landscaping in Pigeon, Mich., where the home offices are just a mile from Lake Huron and the client base appreciates high-end design/build work, including the complex hardscaping projects that Esch and his crews master.

Esch grew up mowing lawns there, maintaining vacation homes when he was just 13 vears old.

Once he got his driver's license, Esch was able to travel "out of town" to the communities dotting the lake - geographic expansion is important when you live in a town of population 800. "I have the same story as a lot of landscapers," Esch says, though his target market and business approach distinctly separate him from the lot

For the rest of the story, visit bit.ly/mattesch.



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It's showtime

With tradeshow season in full swing, hear Virginia Wood's, executive director of New England Grows, tips on how to approach one. bit.ly/llshowtime

The state of social media

Landscape Leadership's Chris Heiler says the social media buzz has worn off a bit. He talks about how to still use it to market a company. bit.ly/llsocialmedia

Inside the Top 100

HOTOS FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF JEFF BLUNKOSKY, COURTESY OF VAN ZELST, COURTESY OF MATT ESCI

Steve Glennon, CEO and COO at Cagwin and Dorward in Novato, Calif., takes you on virtual tour of his \$31 million landscape operation. Visit watch the presentation.

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What do you think? Email me at cbowen@gie.net.

We choose fun

y first boss here at GIE Media, the parent company of Lawn & Landscape, was Dan Moreland. He was - and still is - the publisher of PCT magazine, a trade magazine for structural pest control operators. He was my mentor as I tried to figure out what the heck I was doing working at a publishing company writing about bed bugs.

One of the many, many smart things he taught me during my year with PCT was this: You can make any trade magazine interesting, and you can make any trade magazine boring.

You probably get a few other magazines related to landscaping in the mail or your inbox every month. As a kid, I'd sit in my dad's office and leaf through the trade magazines that he got for companies that manage parking lots. These days, I sit in my office and leaf through trade magazines for publishing (it's a very weird and meta thing to read a trade magazine about publishing a trade magazine).

One thing that helps us in the trade magazine business is our ability to know and understand the lawn care and landscaping market better than anyone else. The tremendous amount of data we have and the deep reporting we do help us understand on a very granular level what's happening with contractors in the field.

But there are still lots of things we don't know, things that I think can help us better understand not just the business you engage in every day, but the type of person you are. What do you do for fun? Do you vote? Did you play sports in high school?

So we built a survey and sent it out, asking those questions and many more. A lot more, in fact - 70 questions in all, which is about twice as many as our annual State of the Industry Report survey. We asked about pets, children and coffee. We asked about divorce, alcoholism and cancer. We asked if you had the chance to do it all over again, would you even want to go into landscaping?

And a ton of you responded. More than 300 LCOs and landscapers took the time to answer, and I thank all of you.

But, will knowing how many landscapers vote in every single election (81%) or how many grow a beard (22%) or when the most popular month is to take a vacation (February) help you make more money tomorrow? Maybe not. But I think it's very interesting and a lot of fun to know these things, and helps you understand where you fit into the larger universe of 80,000 landscapers across the country. You won't find a bunch of boring stories in Lawn & Landscape. We choose fun. - Chuck Bowen



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Misty Johns, head of CGI's marketing team, reviews the company's wide range of marketing materials. She maintains the marketing calendar and is the lead on developing collateral like newsletters and thank you cards.

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. By Chuck Bowen

BRUNSWICK, Ga. – Jeffery Johns started Coastal Greenery in 1994 because he loved plants.

And after several years of 70-hour-plus weeks and scrambling to meet overhead, he learned to love the business side, too.

Johns and his team hosted a them.

tour as part of GROW! 2015, an annual conference organized by L&L columnist Marty Grunder.

More than 200 landscapers from across the country converged on southeastern Georgia to learn how to work more on their businesses instead of in them. For pictures of the event, visit bit.ly/growphotos.

Coastal Greenery employs 47 people and posted \$3.2 million in revenue in 2014.

During the tour, the company's staff opened up to share how it operates everything from when the gates open in the morning to when they close at night. Here are 16 ideas the team shared that you can use to improve your company, too.

- 1. Misty Johns, Jeffery's wife and head of the marketing team at Coastal Greenery, worked with an outside agency to develop a sharp, eye-catching logo to help the company stand out in the very crowded southeastern Georgia market. That logo is everywhere on business cards, trucks, trailers, uniforms and leave-behind materials for clients.
- 2. The company prints and mails a quarterly newsletter to current, past and prospective clients to build and reinforce relationships. It's not a sales pitch from Coastal Greenery. It's meant to educate clients on things like how to protect plant material in the cold and how to choose the best color for their landscape plantings.
- 3. Any prospective employees are first asked a series of questions to determine if they're worth even talking to, such as, "Are you currently working?" and, "Do you smoke?" (CGI is an entirely smoke-free company, which gets it a break on its insurance rates.)
- 4. New employees are asked if they can run equipment, and then, regardless of their answers, are asked to demonstrate their proficiency at the CGI yard, not on a client's property.
- 5. CGI has a standing meeting Tuesday mornings with the leadership team to discuss any problems and keep each division informed of what's happening and why it's happening in the



rest of the company. That team includes Jeffrey as head of sales, Misty as head of marketing, Crystal Price as head of finance and Faulkner Bell, operations manager.

6. Price plans a quarterly meeting that brings the entire company together for a few hours. Here, the leadership team can publicly celebrate employees who have gone above and beyond in their work, announce birthdays, weddings and births, and update the team on financial progress.

7. The company tracks "kudos" on index cards. Those are compliments from customers and team members. Whoever has the most kudos at each quarterly all-staff meeting wins an MVP award.

8. Crews refill gas cans and equipment when they return to the yard every afternoon. Next to the gas pump is a Dumpster, where they empty any trash



TOP: Each morning, Operations Manager Faulkner Bell runs the morning huddle where he gives out safety reminders and praises good work.

ABOVE: All CGI crews are represented on this schedule board. Green is maintenance and orange is enhancements.

from their trucks. Green waste is dumped in the back of the property and removed by a third party to be composted off site.

9. Crews wash their trucks regularly (once a week or more as necessary) at one of several wash sites on the property.

10. CGI crew members are still on the clock when they clean up their equipment, and they are scored by the company's mechanic according to a punch list. The crew with the cleanest truck for the month wins free lunch.

- 11. Gates open at 6 a.m. so crews can punch in and get ready, and reopen at 4 p.m. The yard is locked during the day. The morning huddle, led by Bell and translated for Spanish-speaking employees, starts at 6:30 sharp. It is usually finished by 6:36 and the trucks roll out. If an employee is late to work, he is sent home without pay. He's replaced for the day with a floater crewmember.
- 12. Bell tracks the daily cost of the huddle. He figures it costs 26 cents per minute per man, so about \$55 for six minutes. Each day's figure is posted in the office near the schedule board.
- 13. CGI's sales team uses Skitch to communicate client requests on job sites to team leaders and crew members. Marked up photos can be emailed to the office, printed out in color and attached to job forms for the crews
- 14. The CGI team uses Aspire software, which combines the features of Excel and Outlook to allow scheduling, job tracking and communication between sales and production staffs.
- 15. Russell Pittman, CGI's lead mechanic, works five eight-hour days, and also maintains the facility (electric, plumbing, etc.). Friday, when crews are off, is truck maintenance day (regular oil changes, tire inspections, etc.).
- 16. Pittman uses Mower Meter software to track equipment maintenance and hours. When CGI has spent three-quarters of the value of handheld equipment, they trade it in and replace it with a new piece.



BRAINSTORMING

to better your business

Jim Huston's workshop gave contractors the chance

to discuss a wide range of topics. By Brian Horn

JACKSON HOLE, Wyo. - L&L recently had the chance to sit in on two days of columnist Jim Huston's brainstorming session at the Snow King Hotel. Forty contractors from 19 companies participated in the 2 1/2-day workshop where topics ranged from hiring methods to marketing strategies to choosing the right clients.

Below is a roundup of topics discussed and what contractors had to say about them. (Editor's note: Due to this being a private brainstorming session, L&L did not identify or quote contractors.)

EMPLOYEES. Finding quality em-

ployees wasn't the only problem when it comes to hiring. Finding any employees was a common issue among those in attendance.

In addition, once they've found some keepers, contractors struggled to create ways to make the job enticing. Solutions suggested:

- · Pay to send them to training workshops. They come back pumped up because they feel they've bettered themselves and are especially proud of the certifications they received. The actual paper certificate is something your workers can be proud of and it gives them confidence that they can do their job the right way.
 - · Pay tuition for employees.

If your employees are interested in going to school, or back to school, pay the bill. This can help to show that you value growth as a company, and you may also be able to write it off when tax time comes. If state law allows, you may be able to write into the payment agreement that the employee has to stay at the company a certain amount of time before leaving. You can also write into the agreement that the employee must maintain a certain grade point average.

· Offer transportation reimbursement. Make the ride into work a little more enjoyable by paying for mileage if they drive in, or take care of their bus or train fare if they use public transportation.

INCENTIVE PROGRAMS. A little extra money for employees can go a long way. And the financial incentive doesn't have to be for extra work or a job done especially well. It can be for tasks they should be accomplishing, but maybe haven't prioritized some as high as you have. If you are seeing crews slip at some practices you feel are important, like cleaning out their trucks, add those to a list. If a crew can check off those items every day for a certain amount of time. reward them with a bonus.

VETTING CLIENTS. A long-heard complaint from contractors is the time it takes to travel to a lead, and then meet with that lead, only to find out the potential client isn't close to fitting the criteria of an ideal customer.

Instead of meeting leads in person, take the time to vet them on the phone. Tell them what your minimum budget is, and if they balk at that, there's a good chance they won't be a fit. One contractor said he was only getting 30 to 40 percent of the leads he was visiting in person, and now is up to 95 percent by questioning them more in depth on the phone.

MARKETING. Many ideas were tossed around - all with varying degrees of success. Post cards were a hit for one contractor, while a client tagging another company in a Facebook photo resulted in six figures worth of work for that company. Those were anomalies, but the point was you have to try different

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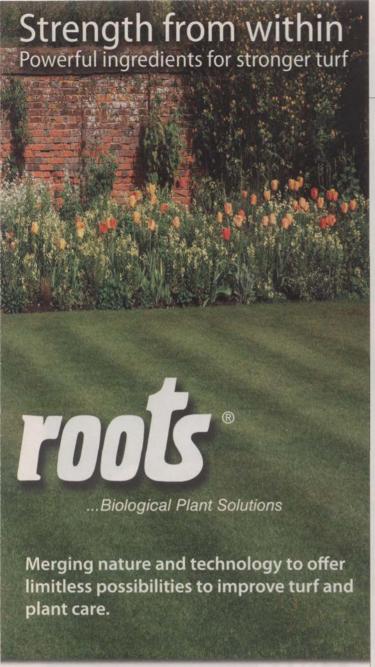
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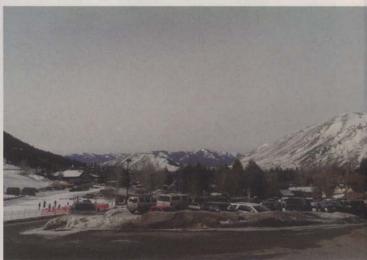
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At consultant Jim Huston's brainstorming session in Jackson Hole, Wyo., contractors helped each other solve problems and better their businesses.

methods to find out what works in your area.

A number of contractors used money from their marketing budget to repaint their trucks one color with a logo, and found success using those as marketing tools. Huston said one of his clients painted a trailer like a billboard and had an employee just drive around town to be seen.

ONLINE PRESENCE. While most in attendance said an online presence was necessary, which avenues to take were debated. Yelp was not a popular website due to the amount of negative comments it has.

One contractor experienced a potential client creating a Yelp account for the contractor's company just to post a negative remark. The person was never a client, but the contractor put in a bid to work on the person's property. The potential client felt it was too expensive and went to Yelp to express their dismay. The lesson was you have to take control of your online presence,

which includes creating your own Yelp account before someone else does.

One other site discussed was Houzz. A few contractors got leads from the site, and one contractor was able to get nine positive reviews from clients. The contractor simply asked customers who were happy with a job to post a review. She emailed the clients and explained how to post the review, which lead to more jobs.

OVERALL FEELING. Contractors were experiencing the same pains and successes L&L has heard recently. Business is good, but finding employees is difficult. None in attendance complained of business being down, but some would like it to be more successful in certain service areas. Huston also went over the amount each position should be paid and how much they should generate in revenue. To find out more about those wages, check out Huston's Benchmarking Your Business article in the November issue of L&L.

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WHOOPS.

YES, EVEN US SHARP-EYED EDITORS MISS THINGS.

In this case, it was something pretty big. In our January issue, we wrote an article about soil preparation with the headline, "Know before you grow." While the image we used was a beautiful picture, as we looked closer when the magazine arrived, we noticed that it was indeed a picture of artificial turf. So, while it's too late to change it now, we offer you this photo of a lush lawn, which we bet had the most prepared soil you can find.



Greenleaf Services in Linville, N.C. received the Landscape Installation Residential merit award from the NCNLA.

NCNLA honors five companies

GREENSBORO, N.C. – The North Carolina Nursery & Landscape Association has announced the winners of its 2014 Excellence in Landscape Awards. NCNLA's Excellence in the Landscape Awards reflect a company's commitment to promote high standards of quality landscape design, installation and maintenance.

The program recognizes and awards landscape professionals who execute quality and sustainable landscape projects. The award categories are the following: landscape management, landscape installation, design/build, sustainable landscape, ecological plantings and container plantings.

Below are the winners of the 2014 Excellence in Landscape Awards:

Receiving MERIT Awards:

Appalachian Naturescapes, Morganton, N.C.

Landscape Installation Residential and Design/Build Residential

Greenleaf Services, Linville, N.C.

Landscape Installation Residential (above)

Coats Lawn Service, Clayton, N.C.

Landscape Installation Residential

Landvision, Raleigh, N.C. Design/Build Residential



Receiving DISTINCTION Awards:

PLI Co., Garner, N.C. Landscape Installation Commercial

Clayton, N.C.
Ecological Plantings

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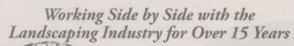
ASK THE EXPERTS

Overtime concerns

Q: What's the best way to avoid the overtime scenario? These guys want to work, so in the growing season it's going to be really hard to keep them to 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and have a happy crew.

However, we can't afford to pay the kind of OT we've been paying. I've heard of doing a 10-hour day four days a week, but I don't know what the extra day is for or if you rotate crews all week? Perhaps we have too many workers? Any advice on how to approach this question would be very beneficial.

A: Managing your overtime is a requirement for your business to stay healthy. At points, we've all allowed OT to get away from us, and it will kill your bottom line. Of course, not all OT is bad. In the right situations, it can lead to increases to your bottom line. Consider creating an indirect overhead ac-





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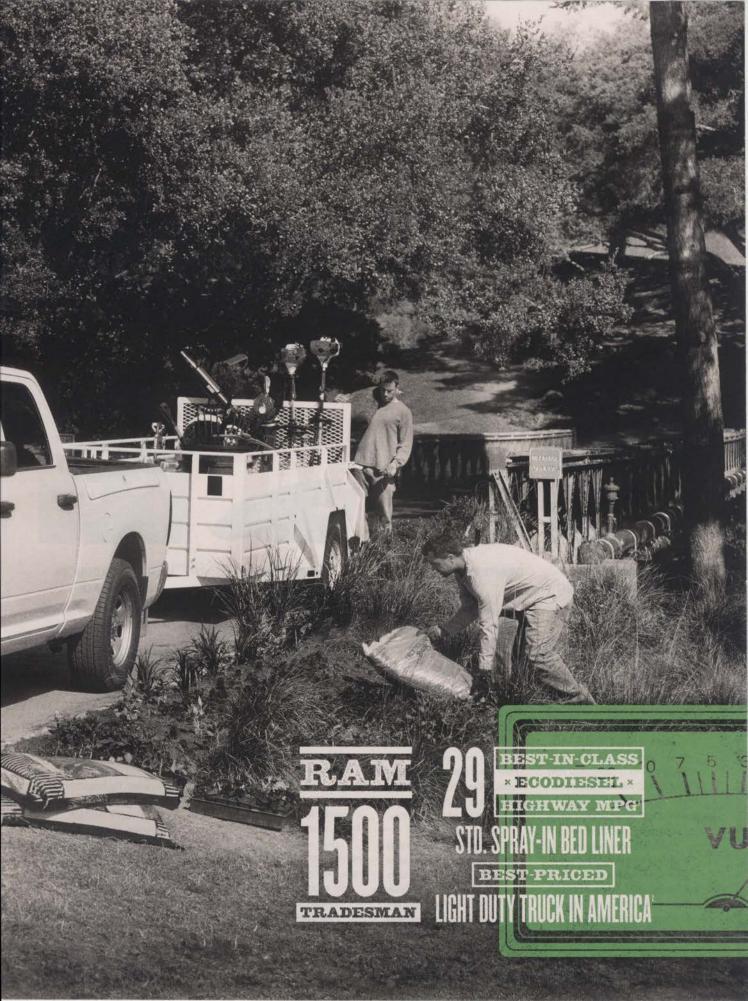


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count in your chart of accounts for OT. Watch it regularly and once it's gone, it's gone. Careful though, it can quickly get away from you. OT has to be managed at the field level on a daily basis. Regarding four 10-hour days (four 10s) of work, this could have an impact on your OT but likely not a lot. Those contractors that work four 10s tend to do it to eliminate the



ASK THE EXPERTS is brought to you in partnership with PLANET, the national association for lawn and landscape professionals. Questions are fielded through PLANET's Trailblazers, the industry's leading company mentoring program.

For more questions visit www.landcarenetwork.org. fifth day of indirect labor and to give themselves a "makeup" day. My company works four 10s. This week it rained all day Tuesday but was nice every other day of the week.

We worked Monday, did not work Tuesday, and just pushed back the schedule by one day for the remainder of the week. We still got a twoday weekend, and if it hadn't rained at all, it would have been a three-day weekend! (Note: four 10s work great for production but most administrative, management, and sales staff need to align their working hours with those of their customers who usually work five 8-hour days)

Roscoe Klausing, Klausing Group **PLANET Trailblazer**







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- PRO Landscape Version 21 also includes new features such as an enhanced edit menu, auto-save feature, legend options, improved backup utility, symbol array offset tool, update check tool and more.

For more information: Drafix.com



GREEN CLIMBER

The pitch: Green Climber is a mower used for maintenance of green areas and embankments, as well as cleaning of roadsides and undergrowth.

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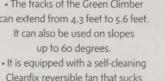
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The pitch: The SpreadSmart Rx Touch offers technology such as temperature-controlled spreading. integrated load and rate management and Wi-Fi data transfer compatibility.

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Know what makes you great

O ONE SAID BEING SUCCESSFUL IN THE GREEN INDUSTRY IS EASY OR WOULD BE EASY.

There are a lot of things we must do well to have a well-oiled machine that makes money, is fun to participate in and can be sold to someone else one day. Ponder your answers to these 21 questions surrounding your efforts, mark yes or no as appropriate, and add up your score at the bottom to see how you did.

1. You have a vision and mission statement that is posted and used, and you have core values that are adhered to and talked about often	YES	NO
2. You have an "ideal client" and an "ideal team member" defined, and you have an illustration of each one showing what they look like that is posted for all to see.	YES	NO
3. You have a truck assigned to individuals, all the tools they use are stored on the truck in boxes, and that truck is the responsibility of the team leader. His or her name is on the side of the truck	YES	NO
4. You have a schedule board that all jobs are organized on.	YES	NO
5. You use work orders. No one works without one and the work orders show how many manhours are budgeted for the job so the crew knows what they have to do to make the job profitable	YES	NO
6. On large jobs, you have a pre-meeting with all parties involved before the bid is turned into a quote and, if sold, this is done again before any work is done. Everything is talked about: where you will park, what equipment will be used, what challenges there are, and what all budgets for materials and labor are.	YES	NO
7. If a client calls you, you call them back that day.	YES	NO
8. If a client inquires about your services via your website, you respond to them within a hours	YES	NO
9. You write at least five thank-you notes per week to clients.	YES	NO
10. You survey all clients and share the results with your team.	YES	NO
11. When a client makes a complaint, your responses are impressive, and make the client feel important and want to do business with you again.	YES	NO
12. All of your people get a sit-down review held with their supervisor at least once a year	YES	NO
13. You have read three books on leadership or business in the last year	YES	NO
14. You have a coach or mentor in whom you confide your weaknesses and issues and are working with them to get better.	YES	NO
15. You are a member of PLANET	YES	NO
16. You read Lawn & Landscape magazine cover to cover each month (shameless plug)	YES	NO
17. You have a 401k or retirement plan that you offer your team or are a part of	YES	NO
18. You know who your top 25 clients are and they know you know that	YES	NO
19. You have a consistent brand – no matter what the public sees – your trucks, equipment, your website and so on all resemble each other.	YES	NO
20. Your website is mobile enabled	YES	NO
21. If you Google, "landscaping, your town or county (or whatever you call your area)," your company is one of the top five to come up.	YES	NO

SO, WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

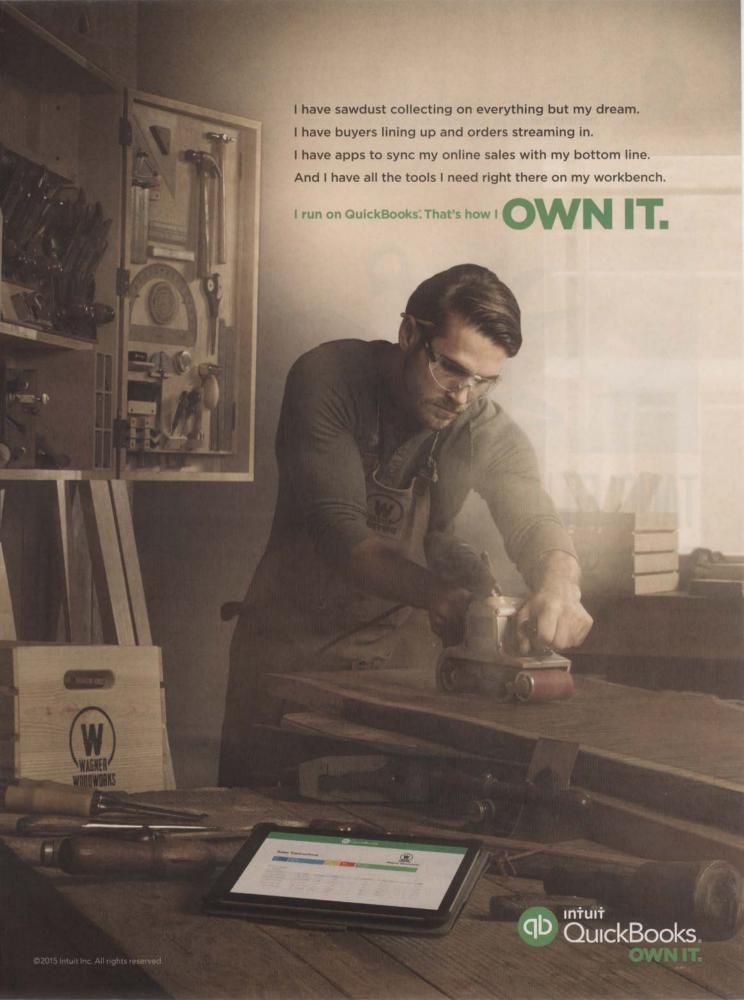
0-5 Y: You need some help. Join PLANET, read Lawn & Landscape magazine and get some help growing your business. A year from now, you need to be able to answer yes to at least 10 of these questions.

5-10 Y: You could use some help, too. Find a mentor or a coach and get serious about what you are doing. With a little bit of work, you need to be able to answer yes to at least 15 of these questions.

10-15 Y: Not bad, unless you've been in business to years or more. If you have, you need to get to work! Go see a market leader in another town and ask that owner how they do it. Let your guard down, share the answers to these questions with them and get better. Next year you need to be able to say yes to at least 16 of these questions.

15-20 Y: Great job! Be happy. However, don't be complacent. Keep working hard as Jim Collins says in his wonderful business book "Good to Great" (a book every landscaper should read), "Good is the enemy of great."

21 Y: Liar, liar, pants on fire. There are only a couple of landscapers I know who could answer yes to all these questions and I'm not one of them. I also suggest you give your leadership team this quiz and see what they say, then compare how far apart all of you are. Can you think of simple things you can do right now to improve your score?





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



TANGLED UP IN THE TRIVIAL

pring is finally upon us and another season is under way. As green industry contractors are gearing up, especially those in the northern climes, I'm beginning to wind down from my winter consulting season when I visit the offices of 50 to 60 contractors. During these visits we prepare budgets, review pricing, implement systems, write job descriptions, adjust company structure and so forth.

By now, contractors should have their budgets in place, sales projections identified, pricing for all of their services and products calculated and ready to go, client contracts approved, spring cleanups and irrigation turn-ons scheduled, crews hired and trained, and the like. Office staff and crews should also be trained and ready to use new software, such as scheduling and GPS tracking applications. I refer to this part of the business as the "little picture." Such preparation is necessary and very important. However, if this is all that you do, you've missed something very big – the "big" picture.

THE BIG PICTURE. Peter Drucker, in his classic, "The Effective Executive," explains that managers are supposed to ensure things get done right. Leaders, in contrast, are supposed to ensure

the right things get done. Managers address efficiency while leaders address effectiveness. Is the organization and team focused on the right stuff at the right time? Too often, owners get wrapped up in and overwhelmed by the minutia of daily business operations and fall victim to "crisis" management. The little picture overwhelms them while the big picture is ignored.

STAY IN THE OFFICE. A number of years ago, a huge storm hit the New England area. Heavy snow started falling late in the morning on a week day and continued bombarding the area right through rush-hour. Traffic was a mess. One of my clients was manning his office and directing snow and ice operations. Plow trucks became snarled in the chaos of rush-hour commuters trying to get home. Clients were screaming at my client as his plow trucks and sanders attempted in vain to service all of the accounts in a timely fashion. While my client was in the office overseeing the disaster, he was at least able to maintain some sort of damage-control. However, he made a crucial mistake. He decided to jump in a plow truck and help out. Without someone observing the big picture and managing the disaster, things soon went to "hell in a hand basket." This

client lost a number of big accounts because he panicked and focused on the wrong stuff.

A landscape installation client in the southeast called me in a panic in the late fall. He sold a lot of work and individual jobs were going very well. The gross profit margin on the jobs exceeded the bid amount as he brought the jobs in under their man-hour budgets. However, he wasn't making any money. As it turned out, he had sold a lot of work in the spring and summer. To improve productivity, he decided to work with the crews in the field. That was fine but he stopped selling and he ran out of work in the fall. While profitability on individual jobs looked great, he didn't sell enough work to cover his general and administrative overhead and his bottom line deteriorated. In both cases, these contractors lost their focus. They got so wrapped up in minutia that they forgot about the big picture - their main job as a leader.

GET ORGANIZED. I have my clients use a bid board to track all of their leads and bids. It's a simple MS Excel worksheet that provides daily feedback comparing the sales budget for the year to actual sales. The bid board, combined with a monthly profit and loss statement, can help contractors keep their eye on the big picture. Unfortunately, too many contractors do not use such tools to help run their businesses. Email me at the address above for a free copy of the bid board.

Industry contractors need to guard against the tyranny of the urgent and keep their eyes on the big picture. Spring preparation needs to focus on the ultimate goal as well as all the details. Like an NFL coach who decides to don a helmet, run into the game and replace an injured quarterback, entrepreneurs cannot afford to lose perspective. You can't control and manage what you don't see. Entrepreneurs have to be somewhat schizophrenic and ensure that everyone is performing at peak efficiency (the little picture) while keeping an eye on the score board (the big picture). Where you stand determines what you see. L&L

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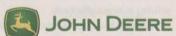
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BY MARGIE HOLLY

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



NEW ADDITIONS

any businesses reacted to the recession by downsizing staff and leveraging key employees for expanded responsibilities. Now, with landscaping budgets starting to grow and competition in many markets waning, owners are facing the question of when and how to begin up-sizing to meet the challenge of growth.

While keeping your compensation budget lean may help you remain profitable, forward-thinking entrepreneurs also weigh the opportunity cost of such a strategy, the side effects of which can be burn-out of valued employees, wasted compensation dollars and sacrificed growth opportunity. You may also risk damaging customer relationships, as your already slim team becomes increasingly unable to serve the growing business effectively.

Here are a few clues to help you know when it's time to expand your team:

- Employees on overload: Some employees will habitually complain of being overworked, but if they can justify their claims, and if you know they work hard and manage their time effectively, then adding a role may help increase productivity as well as team morale.
- Rising customer complaints: If you are hearing more negative feedback from customers on a consistent basis it may be because you've grown too fast and your current team can't keep up with the demands of the additional work. Of course, it could also signal

a need to increase the efficiency of your processes, but if you have attended to that and your team still can't deliver the quality your customers demand, then it may be

time to bring in reinforcements.

- Paying too much for simple tasks: If you or your senior staff spend a significant amount of time on tasks that could easily be handled by someone less skilled, that signals you are not only wasting your compensation dollars but you and your senior staff are less available to focus on core functions.
- Innovation stagnation: You have enthusiastic innovators who would love to sink their teeth into a new project, improve outmoded production processes, or explore new revenue streams, but they just can't find time because they are mired in the extra responsibilities they took on when you downsized. You may be sacrificing the next iteration of your business to save a few pennies now.

You want to take advantage of a new opportunity to expand your service line but you have no staff to assume additional responsibilities. Or, the current mix of talent and skill sets are fine for the work you have, but you want to expand into areas that require different or more advanced skill sets.

To really understand the cost vs. benefit of creating a new position, you need to put fear aside, run the numbers and build a business case for the hire. Ask yourself two questions. How much more will you have to sell in order to pay for the new position? Or how much will the position bring to the company in recovered opportunity cost?

Here's a very simplified example:

Your sales team, who seem to be stuck at the same level of performance for the past two years, have been asking for a sales administrator for more than a year now. The administrator would answer phones, correspond with customers, open mail, help prepare contracts, maintain databases, take notes at sales team meetings, etc. The position would be compensated at \$40,000 per year + benefits (figure 30 percent) = your total cost for new hire = \$52,000.

What does it cost you now?

Currently you have four sales people who are spending roughly 20 percent of their time each sharing these duties. The average of their annual compensation is \$70,000 \times 20 percent = \$14,000 \times 4 = \$56,000

On compensation alone, the new position will save you \$4,000 per year. But what will that position save in opportunity cost if the sales team were free to focus on their core function?

What is your opportunity cost?

Say the annual new sales revenue from the four salespeople over the past year has averaged \$100,000 each. If each salesperson were free to spend 20 percent more time on generating new sales, you could predict 20 percent more revenue per person: $100,000 \times 20$ percent = $20,000 \times 4 = 80,000$ more revenue per year.

In this example, creating the new position will not only save \$4,000 per year, but has the potential to bring in an additional \$80,000 in new sales.

Once you've decided to create a new position, you should also determine the scope. Maybe you only need someone part time. Or, if the need is seasonal, perhaps a temporary employee would fill the bill. If you are dabbling in new territory that requires expertise beyond your current skill set, hiring a contractor may be the best option.

Regardless of the specifics, one thing is certain, if you want your business to grow, at some point you will have to expand your staff. When it's time, applying some critical thinking and considering opportunity costs will help you make what can be a very emotional decision. L&L

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



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TWOBRANDS





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Andy Kautz with his wife, Lindsay

ARE BETTER THAN ONE

Andy Kautz maximizes the collective strength of A&E Curbing and Landscaping and Sylvan Nursery & Landscaping. By Brooke N. Bates

or three years, Andy Kautz wore two hats: elementary school teacher by day and owner of a landscaping company during weekends and summers. About three years after committing his full schedule to A&E Curbing and Landscaping, Kautz began sporting two hats again: one with an A&E logo, and another bearing the name of Sylvan Nursery and Landscaping.

The Montana resident was teaching full-time when he founded A&E – named for the initials of Andy and his son Ethan – in the spring of 2006.

"I had built a new house and was looking into doing the landscaping, and thought, "I can do this," he says. "After getting some ideas and prices, I recognized there were decent profits within the industry. So I purchased a turnkey setup and started doing concrete landscape curbing on the weekends and summer months."



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COMPANY PROFILE



Employees often switch back and forth between working for A&E Curbing and Landscaping and doing jobs for Sylvan Nursery & Landscaping.

In the early days of the business, Kautz's father helped with concrete curbing, and other family and friends pitched in on larger projects.

By the second year, Kautz had to hire a couple of employees during the summer.

Through the late 2000s, the declining housing market meant fewer new construction curbing jobs for A&E. So, to sustain the company through changing markets, Kautz started mowing lawns and adding other lawn maintenance services. A&E soon became a full-service landscape installation and maintenance company.

The variety and volume of work continued to increase, prompting Kautz to leave his teaching position in 2009 to focus solely on A&E. Once he devoted his time to the business, the opportunities for growth and expansion abounded.

"We attempt to look at every job and consider how to improve the property with the allowed budget," Kautz says. "We became extremely diversified, offering nearly every possible desire for someone's yard.

"Some might say to stay focused on one or two objectives that you do well. We felt it was better to offer more services so the customer only had to make one phone call."

GROWTH BY ACQUISITION.

Usually, adding a new service meant Kautz was actively involved in physically learning and completing the project. As the company grew, he began training employees, who practice landscaping techniques on A&E's property before handling customers' projects.

In 2012, Kautz saw an opportunity to diversify his services substantially. Sylvan Nursery & Landscaping – a local grower of annuals and perennials, trees and shrubs, vegetables and more – was for sale.

"I had always looked up to Syl-



van as a (predominate) company in town," Kautz says. "They have been known in Billings for nearly 40 years, and at the current location for over 20 years. I heard Sylvan was

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possibly for sale and briefly looked into it, but it seemed out of reach financially." Kautz brushed off the thought of buying the business, as Sylvan Nursery closed in October 2012 and began liquidating its inventory while trying to sell the property.

In January 2013, Kautz stopped by Sylvan again to look at a truck that was for sale, and encountered the owner. When asked about the sale, he invited Kautz inside for a full, owner-guided tour around the facilities.

A few weeks later, Kautz was signing the papers with his wife, Lindsay, becoming the new owners of Sylvan Nursery.

"At the time of purchase, it didn't leave us hardly any time to place orders for the upcoming season," he says. "The entire first year was a complete race."

DOUBLE VISION. Now, Kautz is still racing as he runs both businesses simultaneously – continuing to operate A&E Curbing sepa-

"Finding and hiring experienced employees and/or training others in a semi-seasonal business is very difficult. Employees make or break how successful a business is any given day."

- Andy Kautz, owner, A&E and Sylvan

rately from Sylvan Nursery. Combined, the array of services spanning both businesses offers a one-stop lawn and garden shop for residential customers – from year-round lawn maintenance, landscaping and snow removal services to seasonal retail perks, such as hanging baskets, vegetables, pumpkins and Christmas trees.

Though 70 percent of the companies' customers are residential, the commercial customer base is on the rise and, during the winter, makes up most of their snow removal business.

The retail side of the business rests solely within Sylvan Nursery – and is, in fact, financially independent from the other services. But the separation between the two companies' landscaping divisions is less clearly defined.

"The nursery is retail, yet you can walk in, purchase a tree and schedule to have it planted



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all in one transaction. The employees showing up to plant the tree may be driving a truck with a Sylvan logo and an A&E trailer," says Kautz, who wears both hats – or logoed shirts, more accurately – in any given week. "In my eyes, it's the same experienced people, same quality product and same excellent service."

In fact, whether you call Sylvan Nursery or A&E Curbing, chances are the same person might answer the phone.

"Personnel are closely linked," Kautz says, noting that several employees work for both companies and receive paychecks from both.

"One guy could mow yards two days a week, plant trees one, install irrigation the next," Kautz says. "If employees are willing and quick to learn, we do try to cross-train them as much as possible. This helps if someone is sick or absent."

During peak season, Sylvan Nursery employs about 12 people, while Sylvan Landscaping and A&E Curbing share about six. Kautz, who usually works in the field alongside employees, sees room for growth in these numbers — especially on the landscaping and maintenance side, which could "outpace the nursery with the right people in place," he says.

By cross-training employees and sharing resources instead of remaining entirely separate, the two companies are optimizing their collective offerings, making their combination even greater than the sum of their parts.

LEARNING TO MANAGE PERSONNEL. The biggest challenge of nearly any business is finding talented employees to perform the work. For Kautz, that challenge is doubled.

Kautz has to find talented employees who can perform a variety of landscaping services, often working seamlessly across both businesses.

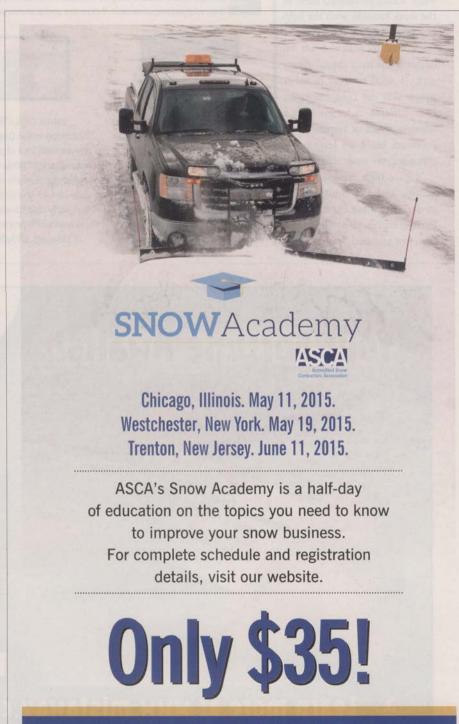
"Personnel has probably been the most difficult aspect of running a business," he says. "Finding and hiring experienced employees and/or training others in a semiseasonal business is very difficult. Employees make or break how successful a business is any given day."

The most valuable employees to Kautz are

the most flexible ones, who can smoothly move from one landscaping service to another to efficiently fill needs for either company.

Learning how to find, hire and manage

these people is a challenge, but absolutely crucial for the growth of both companies. Training and cross-training have become more important. Each year, the training



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manual grows a little thicker and the length of training period increases. It's a much different approach from the early days when Kautz performed most of the work himself, with the help of a few friends and family.

"I had to realize I am no longer a one man show," Kautz says. "I need to trust in other people that can complete tasks. It is difficult to let go with a monster cloud of responsibility overhead, but I am learning to communicate more effectively.

"I have high expectations of people, and I'm beginning to understand that expectations must be explained in detail rather than just assumed." L&L

THE SPOTLIGHT'S ON YOU

very month we feature stories on a company that has succeeded in the industry. The owners can talk about lessons they've learned in the industry, what they've done well and areas where they needed improvement. Below are some stories you can learn a thing or two from:



Aaron Katerberg never considered branching out beyond his company's longtime core business: irrigation. That said, Grapids Irrigation, located in Grand Rapids, Mich., has overhauled its business model and pumped up cash flow to keep the profitable ideas flowing. bit.ly/abovewater



Patrick Crais, CEO of Blue
Watchdog in San Diego, looks at
anyone with a lot of property as a
"water agency." While the company
started out primarily working with
one- or two-acre properties, the
company now travels the region
and works with properties as large
as 120 acres. bit.ly/bitewater



As Andre Landscape Service has grown, the company has not lost sight of the understanding and ability to relate that has earned them valuable clients. When the company began branching into commercial 15 years ago, it applied the same approach in spite of the competitive market. bit.ly/teamandre











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Moving to a new building is a major undertaking. Here is how three businesses managed the process from property search to settling into their new facilities.

by Kristen Hampshire

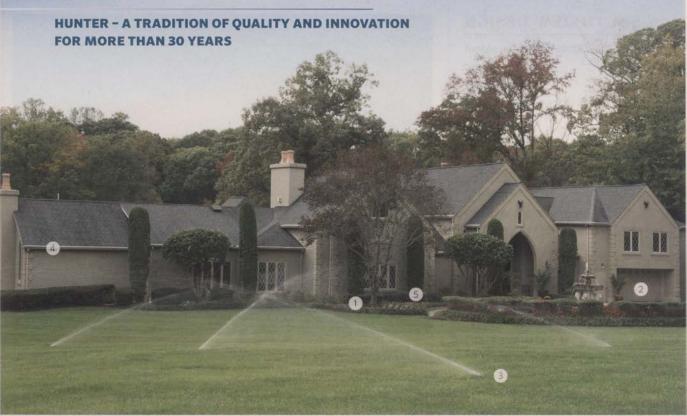
elocating a business is a lot like moving your family to a new home, except the "family" includes crews, equipment, materials, an office of technology and more. Plus, you can't exactly press "pause" on your workload and take time to transition.

There are significant preparations involved in moving a business: finding a facility or property, razing a building or retrofitting an office, and then actually transferring your physical assets to the new digs. Let's not forget marketing. How will people find you if you don't tell them you moved?

This month, Lawn & Landscape spoke with three owners who share how they executed a business move and the lessons they learned in the process.



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SOUTHVIEW DESIGN

Chris Clifton, president

LOCATION: St. Paul, Minn.

ESTABLISHED:

1978

EMPLOYEES:

260 in summer, 125 in winter

2014 REVENUES: \$14.8 million

CUSTOMERS:

95% residential, 5% commercial

SERVICES: Design/build

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

CONSIDER THE GEOGRAPHY.

Southview is a St. Paul company, and Clifton wanted the relocation to honor the company's past – and respect the employees, most of who live on the St. Paul side of the Twin Cities. "We wanted to stay true to our St. Paul roots," he says.

CRUNCH THE NUMBERS.

Clifton purchased an option on the land for two reasons. First, he wanted to have the land "blessed as OK to build on," while also figuring out the true cost of building the facility. Once financial details were ironed out completely, he closed on the land. "We wanted to make sure this was something we could afford," he says.

ENLIST AN ADVISER.

If Cliffon were to build again, he'd bring on an adviser with real estate development experience to help navigate the construction process. "It seemed simple on the surface – hire an architect, get a general contractor – but the real estate development side of things took more time than I expected," he says, estimating about 18 hours a week dedicated to managing new construction matters. An adviser to manage and oversee the project would have been helpful.



With a need to accomodate for rapid growth, Southview moved to its new 17,000 square-foot facility, with 9,000 square feet of office space and outdoor covered storage in November.

A venue with vision

new \$3-million facility for Southview Design in St. Paul, Minn., represents a growth milestone and opportunity to raise the company's professionalism. Owner Chris Clifton says the new building will "get people's creative juices flowing" when they visit the office, and employees are inspired by a space that better suits the business with room to grow.

Southview was in desperate need of space to accommodate the growth it had experienced in the past few years, tripling revenues in that time. "We simply ran out of space in our old location," Clifton says, noting that the 600 square feet of office space and 1.5-acre construction yard provided no room to expand. "We had no indoor storage, no shop space," he says, adding that the employee facilities also lacked. "There was not room for another single desk, and the bathroom situation was difficult," he adds, relating that the

long hours employees work necessitate a break room and comfortable facilities.

So two years ago, Southview Design began planning a move, with a priority of staying true to its St. Paul roots but finding a spot close to its mostly Minneapolis client base. The company found some desirable land in the core of the metro area in summer 2013 and purchased an option on it.

During that time, Southview Design began crunching numbers. How much would the new facility truly cost? "One of the reasons we bought an option on the land to tie it up before we actually closed on it was because we wanted to verify what the full project cost would be and make sure it was something we could afford," Clifton says, noting that financial preparations included analyzing historical facility costs as a percentage of revenue, then estimating costs at the new facility.

Clifton also factored in that the com-

pany would be purchasing land and investing in a building rather than leasing space. "That would give us flexibility to acquire larger quarters," he says, adding that the location is close to an industrial park and offers an option to gain more space if needed.

Southview Design financed the new facility and land through a combination of cash and standard commercial bank loans.

In January 2014, the company closed on the land, and construction started in June. Southview moved to its new 17,000 squarefoot facility, with 9,000 square feet of office space and outdoor covered storage in November 2014. "We are near the airport, and when planes fly over people can see down into our yard, so we want to keep it looking immaculate," Clifton says, adding that mulch, rock and other bulk materials are concealed.

The facility inside resembles a modern warehouse, with high ceilings and cable railing. "It is a square, industrial building and we wanted it to have a downtown loft feeling," Clifton says, adding that the space will forward the company's business development, from recruiting talent to attracting clients. "People prefer to work in a professional building, and a lot of landscaping companies are places like where we used to be which is not as aesthetically pleasing as a brand-new building custom built for our application."

The new facility is designed just for Southview, but Clifton has a broader vision for the building's purpose. He hopes to host industry association meetings and networking events. "We want it to be an open forum designed to further our industry," he says.

A new 'family' home

ver the years, the 13-acre property where Greenland Landscape's design/build operation and nursery were located had been developed into residential neighborhoods. Along with that came increased property taxes, and some strategic business changes at Greenland that reduced its demand for so much land – namely, a desire to close the nursery.

"We had to monetize the land we were on because it was a very big parcel, and we had acquired various pieces over the years," says William Weiss, second-generation owner with his brother Tom.

The Weiss family was seeking a developer to either purchase the land, or they'd develop it as a residential area themselves. So when an assisted living company approached them with a long-term lease offer for the land, where it hoped to build a 177-bed facility, the Weisses took the opportunity.

After 65 years in Paramus, N.J., this critical move was possible. But finding a spot in the densely populated region was challenging. No one wants even a light-duty commercial operation in their neighborhood, and warehouse space in New Jersey is too expensive, Weiss says. "We finally got far enough away from town," he says. They found a 2.5-acre plot in a "quasicommercial" area in between key population centers in Wayne.

Next, the Weisses had to

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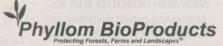
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GREENLAND LANDSCAPE

Michael Weiss, project manager; William and Tom Weiss, owners

> LOCATION: Wayne, N.J.

ESTABLISHED: 1950

EMPLOYEES: 25 (8 to 12 off-season)

2014 REVENUES: \$3 million

CUSTOMERS:

40% residential, 60% commercial

SERVICES:

Landscape architecture, design/build, maintenance

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

PINPOINT THE LOCATION.

Staying close to the customer base was a main priority when choosing a new location. "We put a pin in the map and drew a circle around it and wanted to keep the radius tight," says William Weiss of the real estate search.

PURGE BEFORE THE MOVE.

"You don't know what you have until you have to move," says Michael Weiss, noting that they found parts for equipment the company no longer owned, and "stuff we haven't touched for 20 years." Before any packing, he asked the question: Do we really need this? "It's beneficial to streamline before you move," he says.

KNOW THE NEIGHBORHOOD RULES.

Understand zoning guidelines and follow them so you stay in good standing with the neighbors. "No one wants to see yellow equipment sitting outside or trucks parked in the yard. There are always guidelines to follow and as the new guy going into a location, you have to follow the rules,"

Michael says.

choose a date to move. Michael Weiss, project manager and next in line to run the family business, coordinated the logistics of the move. He hoped to stage the move during winter, but because of the timing of the real estate close, Greenland's move was slated for September. "We were trying not to skip a beat," Michael says, noting that the company was entering leaf-removal season for its maintenance accounts.

Moving in two stages helped the process go smoothly. First, the construction division relocated to the new Wayne space – a lease-to-own property that the Weiss family plans to purchase. Materials were moved to the location first, then within a couple of days the crews began reporting to the new facility. Phase two was moving maintenance equipment, and then relocating those crews.

"We moved a mechanic over to the new location and got him set up in two days," Michael says. His crews helped move equipment on a Saturday. Monday, the mechanic moved to the new facility to prepare the shop, and Wednesday the crews reported to the Wayne location.

Organizing inventory before the move made the actual relocation of equipment and materials easier. Greenland closed its nursery at the previous location after Fourth of July weekend, then took advantage of the employees working in the store to pack prior to the September 2014 move. "The store was officially closed after that weekend, but we sold what we could to people who stopped in because we didn't want to move (the inventory)," Michael says.

The move offered an opportunity to streamline inventory. The tighter space in the new location, and the cost of moving inventory, weighed into packing decisions. "You find inventory you haven't used in 20 years," Michael says.

Now, in the new location, Greenland Landscape is poised to evolve into the next generation, while continuing to reach the loyal client base it has served for more than half a century. "We're taking this to the next level," Michael says, relating that the move is a new, exciting phase in business life for the family operation. "We can guide it into the future."

A grassroots effort

hen Josh Schnaiter bought Prairie Nursery & Landscaping last year from the previous owner, he initially planned on taking over the property, which was located in Princeton, Ill. But when the property was appraised for nearly \$100,000 more than the asking price, Schnaiter and partner Bryanna Poorman realized, "There was no way we were going to do that."

Schnaiter had reservations about moving the longtime business. He had worked there since 2000 and actually helped the previous owner build the facility. "There was sentimental value there," he says.

But the price tag for the property quickly negated that feeling, and Schnaiter began searching for other options. The couple found a 20-acre bean field west of the old shop, just out of town, "but not conveniently out of town," Schnaiter adds. The property sits between Princeton and Pisgah, another small town.

"There is a decent bit of traffic from people going between the two towns, and a quarter mile from our shop is Lovers Lane, where there are a lot of nicer homes," he says. The land is close enough to both towns to continue driving bulk materials business – selling mulch and rock. (Schnaiter moved about 600 yards of mulch last year.)

There was no building on the land, so Schnaiter had to meet with the local zoning board to ensure he could continue selling mulch and rocks.

"We are on a state highway, so we had to get permission for our entrance to make sure it was in the right area because the land is positioned where the highway curves," he says. The driveway location had to be deemed safe.

Schnaiter opted to build a pole barn on the property, similar to the structure at the old location. He worked through Morton

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PRAIRIE NURSERY & LANDSCAPING

Josh Schnaiter, owner

LOCATION: Princeton, Ill.

ESTABLISHED:

EMPLOYEES:

2014 REVENUES: \$400,000

CUSTOMERS:

75% residential, 25% commercial (landscaping); 25% residential, 75% commercial (snow removal)

SERVICES:

Landscaping design/ installation, maintenance, snow removal

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

UNDERSTAND ZONING.

Schnaiter had to attend several county zoning board meetings before building on the land and ensure that his plans would be approved. Because he planned to sell mulch and rock, he also needed zoning approval.

DIY TO CUT COSTS.

Schnaiter opted for a building option that would allow him to complete it himself. The company installed the pole barn, and he handled the rest.

MARKET THE LOCATION.

Schnaiter was concerned about gaining foot traffic in the new facility, since locals were used to the previous store. So he advertised on radio and at a community event. "Word spread quickly," he says.

Buildings, which provides the supplies and then builds barns (and other structures) on site. Schnaiter acted as the general contractor on the project. "We did all the concrete work and electrical. I had a guy help with the plumbing. We tried to do anything and everything possible to cut down on cost and really make it our own," he says.

The building also includes living quarters for Schnaiter and Poorman, along with stables for Poorman's horses.

Balancing time working in the field and finishing the building was the greatest challenge. Schnaiter spent days working on clients' projects. After 5 p.m. he moved on to his own building site. The building was completed and the business moved to the new property in August 2014.

After the move, Schnaiter did some radio advertising to let the locals know that the business had a new home.

But because there are about 7,700 people in town, word traveled fast, he says. At the town's annual Homestead Festival, Prairie Nursery & Landscaping had a float in the parade with brickwork and a sign announcing the move.

"It was amazing how many people would drive by the new property and stop to see what was going on while we were building," Schnaiter says.

Schnaiter hopes to begin planting nursery stock this year, and he wants to grow the retail business. He says the building will probably never be "finished." "There will always be something," he says, "but we're feeling settled in now and everything is flowing." L&L



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he next few pages illustrate the results of the firstever Landscaper Census, a project we undertook earlier this year in an attempt to gain and share a better perspective on what the average landscaper and lawn care operator are really like.

Some of our suspicions were confirmed — most of you prefer to drive trucks and identify as Republican, for example, but some were a surprise. Here's what I found most interesting:

- You're not making millions: Nearly half of respondents said their takehome pay was less than \$50,000 a year.
- You're working at family businesses: 43 percent said their spouse works in some capacity or is co-owner in the business. About as many landscapers had parents who worked in the green industry (17 percent) as have children who work in the industry (19 percent)
- You're educated: A third (32 percent) of landscapers have earned a fouryear degree.
- You're engaged: 52 percent attend church regularly, 81 percent vote in every election
- You're passionate: Just 42 percent said landscaping was their first choice of career. Previous industries and jobs ranged from farming to hospitality to insurance to graphic design. But more than double that 86 percent of landscapers said that if given the chance to do it all over again, they'd still go into the landscape industry.
- You've still got problems: 20 percent have had or are currently dealing with high blood pressure; another 20 percent with bad backs. Thirteen percent say they've battled depression and 15 percent with anxiety.
- You're clearly very busy: Only 31 percent said the landscape at their own home was good enough to win an award. Most 61 percent said it was just OK. (That's OK, guys. Mine's not much to look at, either.)

So read on to learn more about what the industry is really like and how you fit in to the larger universe of landscapers.

- Chuck Bowen



WHAT YEAR WERE YOU BORN?

1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s
1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991
1942	1952	1962	1972	1982	1992
1943	1953	1963	1973	1983	1993
1944	1954	1964	1974	1984	1994
1945	1955	1965	1975	1985	1995
1946	1956	1966	1976	1986	1996
1947	1957	1967	1977	1987	1997
1948	1958	1968	1978	1988	1998
1949	1959	1969	1979	1989	1999

OF PEOPLE

0 1 2 3 5 6 9 10 11 12 13 8

WHAT IS YOUR GENDER?

89%



WHAT KIND OF FACIAL HAIR DO YOU HAVE?

- Neckbeard (1%)
- · Sideburns (4%)
- Mustache (8%)
 - Goatee (15%) ->
 - · Beard (22%)
 - · None I'm



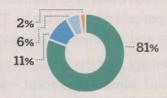
WHAT'S YOUR POLITICAL AFFILIATION?

Republican (60%) Democrat (17%) Independent (22%) Green (1%)



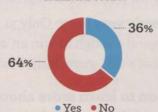
Other responses included: Libertarian, Constitutionalist, "They're all criminals."

HOW OFTEN DO YOU VOTE?



- Every election
- Just for president
- Never
- Not registered to vote

HAVE YOU EVER LOBBIED OR TALKED TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL - WRITTEN LETTER, MADE PHONE CALLS OR PERSONAL VISITS, FOR EXAMPLE - ON BEHALF OF THE GREEN INDUSTRY?



ISSUE OR ISSUES DID YOU DISCUSS?

IF YOU DID, WHAT

- Tax reform
- H-2B program/ immigration reform
- Chemical regulations
- Water regulations

limits on loan, landscape ofessional regulation



IF YOU DO HAVE A BEARD, DO YOU ONLY GROW IT IN THE WINTER?

Yes: 35%

No: 65%

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ARE YOU AS PRODUCTIVE COULD BE

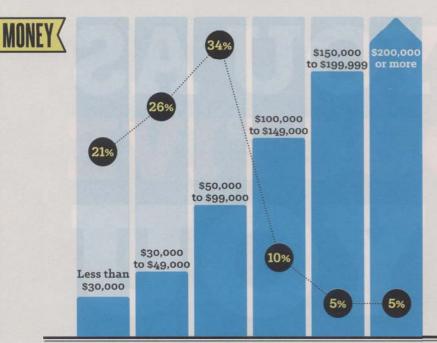
TheWalkerAdvantage.com

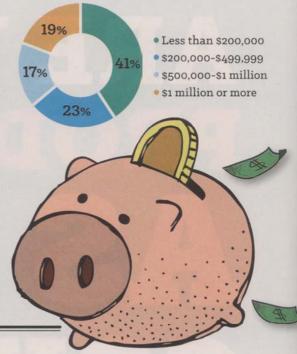




WHAT WAS YOUR TAKE-HOME PAY FROM YOUR LANDSCAPE BUSINESS IN 2014?

WHAT WAS YOUR COMPANY'S APPROXIMATE REVENUE IN 2014?





WHAT'S YOUR
PREFERRED METHOD
OF GETTING YOUR
CAFFEINE?

Coffee: 58%

Soda/pop: 17%

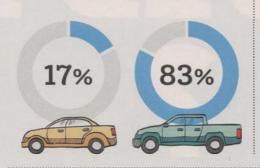
Tea: 8%

Energy drink: 4%

5-Hour Energy shots: 1%

I don't drink stuff like this: 12%

WHAT TYPE OF VEHICLE IS YOUR MAIN MODE OF TRANSPORTATION?

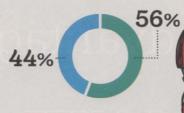


WHAT DO YOU DO ON YOUR COMMUTE? (CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY.)



Other responses included: Howard Stern, pray, walk in silence

WHO OWNS YOUR PRIMARY VEHICLE?



• I own it myself.

My company owns it.

WHAT KIND OF MUSIC DO YOU LISTEN TO? (CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY.)



Other responses included: Christian, punk





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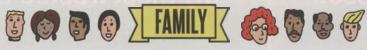
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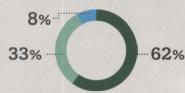




DID YOUR PARENTS WORK IN THE GREEN INDUSTRY – OR DO THEY CURRENTLY?

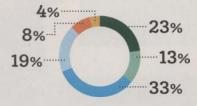


IF THEY DID, WHERE DO THEY WORK?



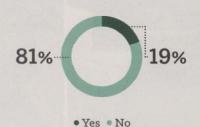
They work for my company
 They work for another landscape or lawn care company
 They work for a supplier

HOW MANY CHILDREN DO YOU HAVE?

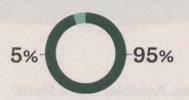


• 0 • 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • More than 4

DO YOUR CHILDREN WORK IN THE GREEN INDUSTRY?



IF THEY DO WORK IN THE GREEN INDUSTRY, WHERE DO THEY WORK?



They work for my company
 They work for another landscape or lawn care company

HOW MANY PEOPLE WHO WORK AT YOUR COMPANY ARE RELATED TO YOU?



• 0 • 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 • More than 5

WHAT PETS DO YOU HAVE?

DOG: 62

CAT: 31%

FISH: 13%

HORSE: 6%

Other responses included: Chickens, guinea pig, rabbit

DO YOU BRING YOUR PET TO YOUR OFFICE OR JOB SITE?

YES: 21% NO: 79%

VEC 21... NO 70...

ON MARRIAGE

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU BEEN MARRIED?

ZERO	TIMES	 11%	
Company of the Control of the Contro		Contract of the Contract of th	

ARE YOU MARRIED CURRENTLY?

YES	•••••	87%
220		0.00

IN WHAT CAPACITY DOES YOUR SPOUSE WORK FOR YOUR COMPANY?

MY	SPOUSI	E DOESN'T	
WO	DIZATA	AV COMPANY	

IY SPOUSE AND I	120
O OWN THE DUCINECS	13%

MY SPOUSE IS	3%
AN EXECUTIVE	3%

Y SPOUSE RUNS	9%
HE OFFICE	370

N 4%

57%

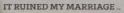
WHETHER OR NOT YOUR
SPOUSE WORKS AT
YOUR COMPANY, HOW
HAS YOUR BUSINESS
IMPACTED YOUR
CURRENT MARRIAGE?

IT'S MADE OUR
MARRIAGE STRONGER
IT'S MADE

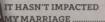
IT'S MADE
OUR RELATIONSHIP
MORE DIFFICULT



34%









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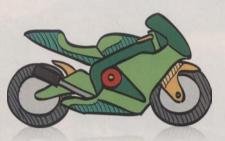


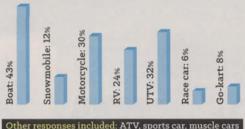
The 0.99% APR finance offer expires June 30, 2015 and is only available through Isuzu Finance of America, Inc. Finance terms limited. Participating dealers only. Credit approval required. Please see your authorized Isuzu dealer for qualifying information. Vehicles shown with optional equipment; some equipment is dealer installed. These vehicles are assembled from component parts manufactured by Isuzu Motors Limited and by independent suppliers who manufacture such components to Isuzu's exacting standards for quality, performance and safety. Supreme is a trademark of Supreme Corporation. Morgan is a trademark of Morgan Corporation. Thermo King® and the Thermo King logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Thermo King. Please see your authorized Isuzu truck dealer for complete details.





WHAT "FUN" EQUIPMENT DO YOU OWN?







DID YOU
PLAY
SPORTS
IN HIGH
SCHOOL
OR

68% 32% NO

Football: 52%
Baseball: 35%
Softball: 9%
Track & Field: 25%
Wrestling: 19%
Hockey: 8%

IF YES, WHICH SPORTS DID YOU PLAY?



IF YOU WATCH PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING, LIST YOUR FAVORITE WRESTLER. (SOME RESPONSES INCLUDED)

STONE COLD STEVE AUSTIN

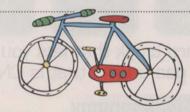
THE ROCK

RIC FLAIR

JOHN CENA

DOLPH ZIGGLER

HULK HOGAN



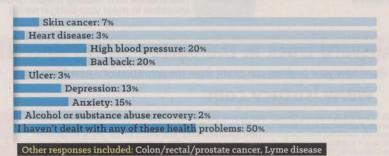
WHAT DO YOU DO FOR EXERCISE?



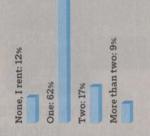
Other responses included: Walk, hiking, work, kayaking

HEALTH

HAVE YOU EVER - OR ARE YOU CURRENTLY - DEALING WITH ANY OF THE FOLLOWING HEALTH PROBLEMS?



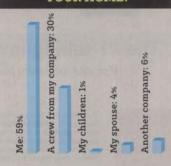
HOW MANY HOMES DO YOU OWN?



WHAT DOES THE LANDSCAPE AROUND YOUR HOME LOOK LIKE?



WHO MAINTAINS THE LANDSCAPE AROUND YOUR HOME?







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DO YOU OWN A GUN FOR PERSONAL PROTECTION

ON - NOT FOR HUNTING OR COLLECTING?

Yes: 46%

No: 54%

DO YOU KEEP A FIREARM IN YOUR VECHICLE?

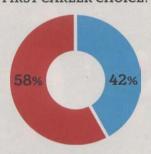
Yes: 35% No: 65%

DO YOU KEEP A FIREARM IN YOUR OFFICE?

Yes: 57%

No: 43%

WAS LANDSCAPING YOUR FIRST CAREER CHOICE?



• Yes • No

111¹² 1 10 2 9 3. 8 4. HOW MANY HOURS DO YOU SLEEP AT NIGHT?



- Less than 5 hours: 4%
- 5 hours: 10%

YES

0

0

- 6 hours: 25%7 hours: 35%
- 8 hours: 22%
- More than 8 hours: 4%

IF NOT, WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST CHOICE?

FINANCE INDUSTRY

SALES

FARMING

HAULED ROCK 'N' ROLL BANDS AROUND THE WORLD

HOW MANY HOURS A WEEK DO YOU WORK IN YOUR BUSY SEASON?

0000

More than 50 hours: 659

IN THE BUSY SEASON,
DO YOU REGULARLY WORK WEEKENDS?



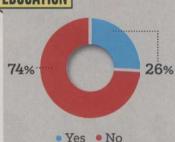
- Yes, Saturdays: 54%
- Yes, both days: 24%
- No, never: 20%
- Yes, Sundays: 2%

WHAT IS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION YOU ATTAINED?



IN THE LAST FIVE
YEARS, HAVE YOU GONE
BACK TO SCHOOL FOR
EXECUTIVE TRAINING
OR EDUCATION?

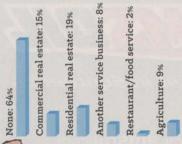
EDUCATION



HOW MANY BOOKS – BOTH BUSINESS AND PLEASURE – HAVE YOU READ IN THE LAST YEAR?

Zero: 12%
One to three: 42%
Four to six: 20%
Seven to nine: 8%

WHAT OTHER BUSINESSES DO YOU OWN OR INVEST IN?



DO YOU HAVE A TATTOO? >>>>>>>> IF YOU DO, WHAT IS IT OF?

Y: 19% N: 81%

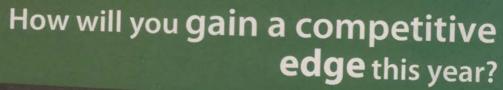
Answers including calvin from calv.

Less than 40 hours: 6%

40-44 hours: 11%

4-50 hours:

ANSWERS INCLUDED: CALVIN FROM CALVIN AND HOBBES, KIDS' NAMES, FATHER'S GRAVESTONE





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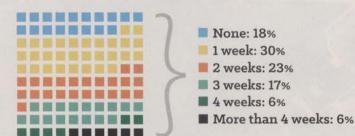


Win with Go iLawn Today

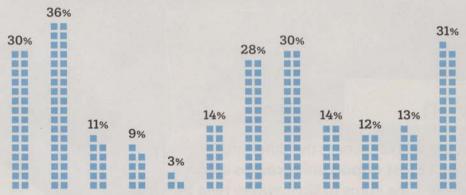
Get started with a free Go iLawn trial. Visit: www.GoiLawn.com/promo. Use code LL153.



HOW MUCH VACATION DID YOU TAKE IN 2014?



WHEN DO YOU TYPICALLY TAKE A VACATION? (CHOOSE ALL MONTHS THAT APPLY.)



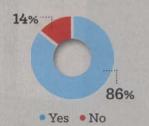
JAN. FEB. MAR. APR. MAY JUNE JULY AUG. SEPT. OCT. NOV. DEC.



SURVEY METHODOLOGY

▶ We fielded the survey via a link emailed to Lawn & Landscape readers who are owners or principals of landscape or lawn care businesses. We also posted the link on our website and shared via social media during the first two weeks of January, and the results are drawn from an aggregate of 321 respondents.

IF YOU HAD TO DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN. WOULD YOU STILL GO INTO THE LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY?



WHY?

- · It's my passion.
- · I love the outdoors, the challenge, meeting many different types of people in my business and the satisfaction of seeing them happy over a job I have done.
- · I love playing in the dirt and having multiple jobs that are in process and making deadlines. I've never felt like I was going to work yet.
- It's great being your own boss and working outdoors and getting the satisfaction of making a vard look good.
- · Every career has its frustrations, but I have found that I have fewer complaints than friends in other industries as related to work experiences.

WHY NOT?

- · Local decline in business.
- Even though landscaping has been very good to us, if I had a redo. I would have worked harder in school and applied myself early in life to position myself in a better career - like a doctor or lawyer. Hard work in the landscape business pays off, but not like hard work in some other professions.
- Too much depends on the economy. When times are good they are great, but when times are bad they are real bad!
- · Seasonal work is hard and elements are difficult.
- · Too cutthroat.



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STAYING POWER

Growers and greenhouse managers weigh in on which perennials will be popular this year. By Lindsey Getz

Ithough typically not quite as colorful or dramatic as annuals, perennials are desirable for their hardiness and their consistent return with each new season. They can often be sold as a way to provide a lot of "bang for the buck" since they do come up again and again. Perennials provide a wonderful backdrop or base for plant beds, to which annuals can be added for that extra "pop." We spoke to growers and greenhouses nationwide to get their take on what perennials are going to be popular in this coming season.



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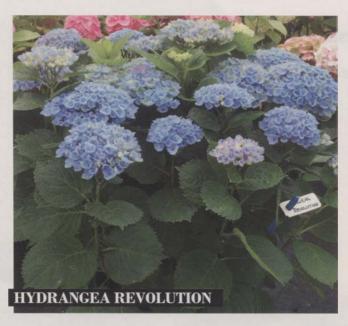
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ENHANCING AESTHETICS. Suzie Wiest, marketing representative for Village Nurseries in Orange, Calif., says that both Agapanthus 'Gold Strike' and Erigeron 'Sea Breeze' will be top perennial picks this year and both can add some pop.

Erigeron, of the daisy family, is a very floriferous compact perennial that showcases pink blooms with a vibrant yellow center. As a drought-tolerant perennial, Wiest suggests these plants as an excellent choice for rock gardens, though they perform equally as well in containers.

Agapanthus also can provide year-round interest with its deep



blue buds which open dark and light blooms from April through September. As another drought-tolerant choice, once Agapanthus is established it's very low-maintenance, Wiest says.

Laura Hess, owner of Hickory Grove in Callicoon, N.Y., has also seen an increased interest in butterfly gardening and perennials that attract bees and birds. "There's been a trend toward attracting wildlife to one's property," Hess says.

"I'm definitely seeing a lot of interest in lavender, which is a perennial that bees love. I think people like the idea of adding interest to their properties —



though wildlife like deer which will eat the plants are a different story."

Deer resistance remains an ongoing trend and one that likely isn't going away any time soon. "In a region like ours, which has a lot of deer, clients still want a garden they can enjoy so deerresistant varieties are a must," Hess says.

THE MAINTENANCE FACTOR.

Drought tolerance and low maintenance remain two of the biggest trends in plant selection and there are many perennials that can meet these needs.

Hess says clients like the fact



that they can "leave something in the ground or in a container and come back and it will still look like it's been cared for – when it hasn't."

With people's busy schedules, this has been an ongoing trend.

"Perennials like succulents and sedums are popular because they are easy to care for and don't need a lot of maintenance," Hess adds. "Things that are easy to maintain are always going to be popular."

In the dry, hot days and cool nights in Colorado, Patti Pfeifer, program manager for the finished program at Center Greenhouse in Denver, says that



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perennials do really well. But it's the ones that perform well with "minimal maintenance" that are the best sellers among landscapers. Landscapers like the varieties that are known to be reliable, she says.

"These include things like Salvia May Night, Galium Odoratum, Dianthus Fire Star, and Sedum Autumn Joy."

Selling to landscapers is a big portion of Center Greenhouse's business so they tend to keep a lot of standbys in stock.

But Pfeifer says garden centers are a little more interested in something new and different so they'll also try some new varieties each year.

"Ball, Bartles and Planthaven are great sources of new breeding in the main varieties like phlox, subulata and gaura," Pfeifer says. "But we try to keep those numbers conservative until we see the market response and performance.

"Landscapers are a big part of our market and they do like the tried and true varieties best." HARDY AND LONG-LASTING. With unpredictable weather these days, hardiness is also a big trend. Ko Klaver, director of sales and marketing for Botanical Trading Co. in Hockessin, Del., says hardy perennials like hostas or heuchera are popular right now as customers appreciate their ability to tolerate more extreme weather conditions.

"The nice thing about heuchera is that they have heat resilience and sun tolerance," Klaver says. "And the Coral Bells that have the Villosa blood line are even hardier and can handle conditions all the way up to New England, where weather can be more extreme. They're beautiful and they're hardy so it's a win-win. The Pink Pearls are really quite beautiful and there are many other beautiful varieties."

"Hostas are definitely popular where we are and one of the reasons is the fact that they're so hardy," adds Shane Weaver, sales manager with Sunshine Growers in Lakeland, Fla. "They also attract butterflies and hummingbirds which make them enjoyable."

Weaver says Sunshine has also been grow-

"It's easy to get stuck in a rut and ask for the same old perennials each year. With a little bit of study, landscapers might find something new that they really love and haven't used before."

- Ko Klaver, Botanical Trading Co.

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ing a lot of coreopsis and salvia. "People really like those resilient flowers that can hold up to some harsh weather conditions," he says. "Coreopsis is cold hardy and can take the wind or the sun. Plus it's easy to install."

While Weaver says there are definitely some perennials that top others in popularity each year, he also believes it's "cyclical." "Just like furniture or clothing I've watched plants go in and out of style," he says. "Something might be really popular one year and then trail off for a bit, but it always comes back around."

SOMETHING DIFFERENT. While most growers and nurseries do report that landscapers prefer to go the "tried and true" route, Klaver says that he is seeing a bit more creativity in recent years. For one, he's definitely seeing a return of more three-dimensional landscape designs.

"For a long time, everyone wanted plants that were short and compact, even though you lost that vertical dimension," Klaver says. "But now we're seeing more requests for three-dimensional depth. They want to get some height in there. The taller hybrid lilies are a popular choice to add that depth."

It's not always easy to try something new, particularly in harsh or unpredictable climates. But Klaver suggests landscapers do a little bit of research to find out about some of the other varieties out there. "It's easy to get stuck in a rut and ask for the same old perennials each year," Klaver says. "With a little bit of study, landscapers might find something new that they really love and haven't used before." L&L

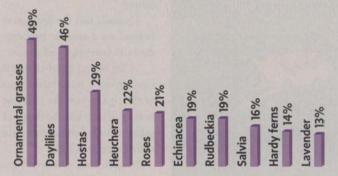
The author is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.

PERENNIALS

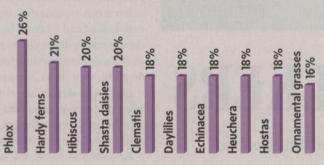
THE MARKET ON PERENNIALS

e surveyed 150 growers and greenhouse representatives about which perennials were popular last year and which they see as being top sellers in 2015. Ornamental grasses are expected to continue to dominate in 2015, along with day lilies and hostas. But respondents were surprised that phlox, which less than 1 percent said was a top seller in 2014, was not more popular in 2014. It doesn't look like that will change as only 5 percent said they expect it to be a top three seller in 2015.

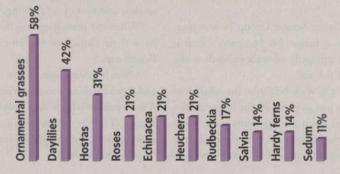
Which are your top three selling perennials purchased by landscape contractors in 2014?



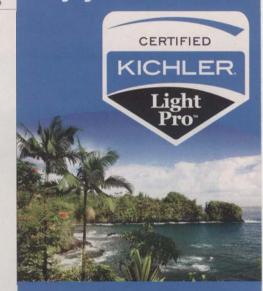
Which perennials weren't as popular as you'd thought they'd be with landscape contractors in 2014?



Which are your top three anticipated perennials purchased by landscape contractors for 2015?



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POWER WALKERS

Zero-turn and stand-on mowers get all the attention, but walk-behinds can show your clients you are paying especially close attention to their properties. By Amanda Ibey

hile not as flashy as its rideon counterparts, walk-behind mowers come with many advantages. Depending on the amount of space being mowed and number of hard-to-reach spots, you could benefit from adding a few to your mower fleet.

QUALITY OF CARE. As Derrick Meek, presi-

dent of Green Season Group in Suwanee, Ga., says, a reason his company's fleet is made up primarily of walk-behinds is the quality of the cut.

"With the walk-behinds, the quality of the cut is just as good, if not better than a rider. And when my operators use a walkbehind, they're also more likely to do the extra things that provide a better service to our customer - things like stopping to pick up trash or dead branches. Sitting on a rider creates complacency, and they might not see that branch or they might forget to stop and pick it up."

Daniel Quezada, fleet manager at New Way Pro in San Diego, says walk-behinds have a specific role to play.

"While they aren't practical for big properties with large, flat and open lawns, for smaller or medium-sized lawns, or those with trees, lots of tight spaces, slopes, pools or gates, a walk-behind will do what a zero-turn simply cannot."

Quezada says the decision to use a walkbehind on a specific property also comes down to customer preference.

"A lot of our hotel clients simply prefer that we use a walk-behind mower because of the tighter cut, the machine itself is less noisy and they like the image of an operator using a walk-behind more than someone sitting on a zero-turn."

Brian Beniek, owner of Beniek Property Services in Chanhassen, Minn., has also encountered customers who prefer walkbehinds. "For some of our customers it comes down to perception. If you're using a walk-behind and it takes a little more time, the customer feels like they're getting a better service and they appreciate that you're taking time with their lawns," he says.

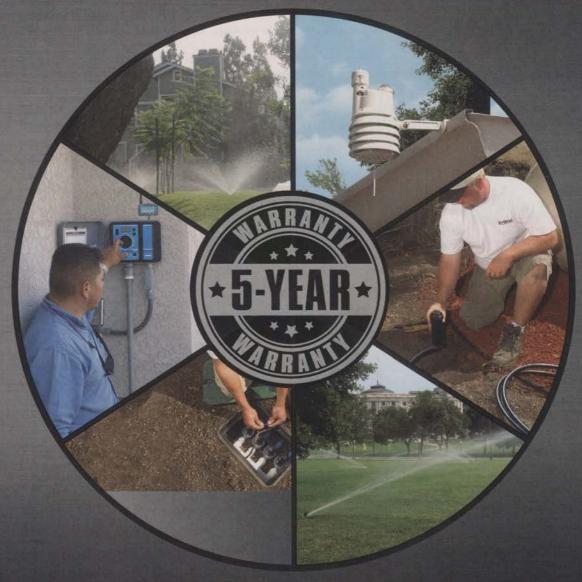
Beniek also says because of its smaller size, many property owners prefer walk-behinds over the heavier rider, because they're afraid a rider may leave ruts or tire marks.

According to Meek, the walk-behind is also easy to learn to operate. "These machines are safe to use and it's easy to teach an operator how to use them properly, which saves us time and money on training," he says.

"When my team goes into the field, they have their choice of equipment to use," Beniek says.

"Often it comes down to how comfortable and easy a machine is to use for my operators. A walk-behind is both. And people don't like change. If they're used to using a certain piece of equipment, then they'll continue to use it because they know it."

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TIME SAVED. In the landscape business, the difference between success and failure often comes down to efficiency and costs.

"I'm a business owner and the main reason

I continue to use walk-behinds is that they're dependable.

They do exactly what I want them to, and these machines are rarely in my shop," says

Meek, who employs a full-time mechanic. Meek says he usually gets about five years out of his machines because of the focus on maintenance and prevention.

The life expectancy for walk-behinds is similar for Beniek.

Since his company doesn't use walkbehinds in large open areas, he's able to get about five to six years out of them.

And in California, Quezada says the life expectancy of his machines comes down to maintenance and operator care.

"At three years, we start to consider replacing parts like pumps, tires or even the engine," Quezada says.

"Typically, we'll put in about 25 percent of a unit's value back into it over its lifetime, sometimes as much as 50 percent, but that number depends on our budget."

All the contractors agree a walk-behind isn't suitable for large or wide open spaces, but for smaller properties a walk-behind can save time.

"My business is about 80 percent commercial and 20 percent residential," Beniek says. "For those residential properties, especially small townhomes, using a walk-behind sayes time."

Meek seconds that assessment. "A zeroturn may be a little faster, but unless you're dealing with a lot of large, open spaces, you rarely move at top speed.

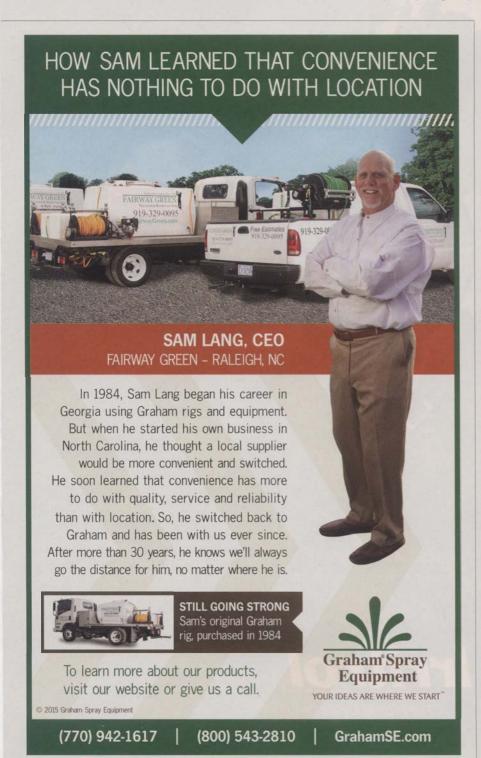
Yes, a walk-behind is limited to the operator's pace, but because it's such a versatile piece of equipment and able to negotiate tight spaces that a rider can't, I'm actually able to be more competitive," he says.

If you're new to the industry or you have a relatively small operation, all the contractors agreed walk-behinds are the perfect piece of equipment to start and build your fleet.

Is the walk-behind the perfect piece of equipment? No, it has its limitations.

But as Beniek says, "You have to have a multitude of equipment in your toolbox if you're going to be competitive, and that means you still need the traditional walkbehind mower as part of your mix." L&L

The author is a freelancer based in Burlington, Vt.



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The heart of Irrigation

Proper installation and maintenance of valves keeps systems pumping along.

By Anne Marie Hardie

rrigation valves are an integral part of an irrigation system. In fact, Alexis Bookman, product marketing manager with Irritrol, and Steve Hoveln, rotors, valves and accessories product manager with Hunter Industries, both describe valves as the heart of the system.

"If the valve fails to operate, the entire system fails," Bookman says. These system failures may result in lost time and, in the case of repeat issues, dissatisfied customers. Contractors need to be confident that the valves they choose will operate correctly the first time and will continue to operate consistently for years after installation.

The good news is that the majority of the issues arising from valves can be solved at either the point of installation or through simple maintenance.

"I hate to be too simplistic, but valves in general are really trouble-free given a few basic things," Hoveln says. "If there is minimal to no debris running through the system and they are wired correctly, they will last for a long, long time."

FIT THE VALVE. The first step to a problemfree valve is selecting the right one for the job. Contractors should have a clear idea of the jobsite before selecting the

valve, says Bookman, paying attention to the flow characteristics, the water source and even the types of sprinkler heads that will be used.

Ron Wolfarth, principal product manager for contractor valves at Rain Bird Corp., says that contractors should take the time to choose the right product, ensuring that the valve is designed well and has the appropriate pressure rating for the job site.

"A key to a long-lived valve is to not push it to its limits," Wolfarth says. "High stresses, which can be absorbed in the short term, have long-term detrimental effects on valves, pipes, fittings and the joints between the fittings."

In areas where reclaimed water is used, Wolfarth recommends using a valve designed to withstand the corrosive effects of chlorine in the water. Other factors to consider before choosing the valve are the wiring system and flow conditions.

According to Haveln, the one item that contractors often complain about is closing speed. By selecting the proper valve for the flow application, contractors can alleviate this concern.

When selecting the valve, contractors should not only consider the conditions today but also in the future. Is the water source likely to change? Will the system need to be



With proper installation and maintenance, valves should function well for decades.

expanded down the road? Are the valves easy to access, manage and service in the long run? All these conditions may change not only the type of valve a contractor may use, but also where the valve is installed, Bookman says.

TIME TO INSTALL.

Proper installation is critical to ensure that the valve functions at its optimal potential. Debris and improper wiring at the point of installation are the two main causes for

challenges with valves, Haveln says.

To limit the amount of debris, start the job out by ensuring that the lines are fully flushed before the valves are installed.

"If you've ordered pipes and they are sitting in a construction yard, water and debris may get into the pipe," Haveln says. "All that dirt has to go somewhere, so if the lines aren't flushed, the debris will go right through the valve and right out the sprinkler head. And that's the same type of debris that could cause an issue upon installation."

Debris can also occur when contractors use pipe dope to secure connections from the main line to the valve.

"Excess pipe dope often makes its way to the internal parts of the valve, causing the valve to fail," Bookman says. Polytetrafluoroethylene or Teflon tape is a preferable material for making waterproof connections to the valve, Bookman says, but contractors should be mindful of manufacture recommendations. To avoid future debris clogging the system, Haveln suggests installing a filter in irrigation areas with potentially high debris, like a pond.

One of the largest complaints Haveln hears from contractors is shorting or wiring problems. A common wiring error is failing to connect them correctly with good water-



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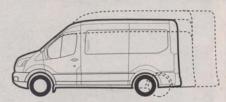






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IRRIGATION

proof connectors. "So much of our business is about knowledge that is passed down from the supervisor to somebody else and you just kind of learn," Haveln says.

"Or you go to the supply house and ask, 'What do you use?' But if you don't really know, you kind of learn as you go."

Something as simple as using a good wire connector instead of a wire net will help ensure that an irrigation system functions efficiently.

PROLONG THE LIFE WITH MAINTENANCE. Once properly installed, valves should function well for decades. Add in a bit of a regular maintenance, particularly in larger commercial sites where more damage or debris can occur, and a contractor will help ensure that the heart of the irrigation system keeps ticking.

"Taking the time to periodically check on the valves for any visible leaking or weeping goes a long way in avoiding water waste," Bookman says.

Contractors should occasionally open the valve to check the diaphragm for debris or visible tears to prevent problems from occurring. Contractors should also pay attention to any changes in how the valve functions. If the valve is taking a long time to turn on or off, this could suggest a problem.

In this situation, Wolfarth recommends contractors begin with the obvious: checking to make sure the water is available at the valve, adequate power is supplied to the solenoid and the dump port below the solenoid is free of debris.

"I have had contractors tell me they had to go back two and three times to 'top out' the valve," Wolfarth says.

"It is likely that debris was causing each of these failures. If the lines had been flushed out completely at installation or at the first sign of trouble, successive trips to 'top out' the valve could have been avoided."

By taking the time to properly install and maintain the irrigation valves, contractors will not only help ensure that an irrigation system runs smoothly but also avoid potential damage to the lawn and landscape from valve failure. L&L

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





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GREAT FERTILIZER DEBATE



Consider these factors when choosing between granular and liquid products to achieve that lush lawn your customers desire. By Hilary Daninhirsch

ecisions, decisions. Lawn care operators make a multitude of choices every day. One fairly important one is whether to use granular or liquid fertilizer. The problem is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Granular fertilizer contains nutrients in a pellet form that is applied with a spreader. Once it hits the ground, it requires external forces, such as moisture, enzymes and microbes, to break it down and turn it into food to feed the plant. Liquid fertilizer, on the other hand, already contains the needed materials.

A major component of fertilizer is urea, a type of nitrogen-based fertilizer that can be coated in sulfur, polymers or other chemicals, but there are also stabilized nitrogen and many other technologies.

SPRAY OR SPREAD? The key is to apply the right fertilizer

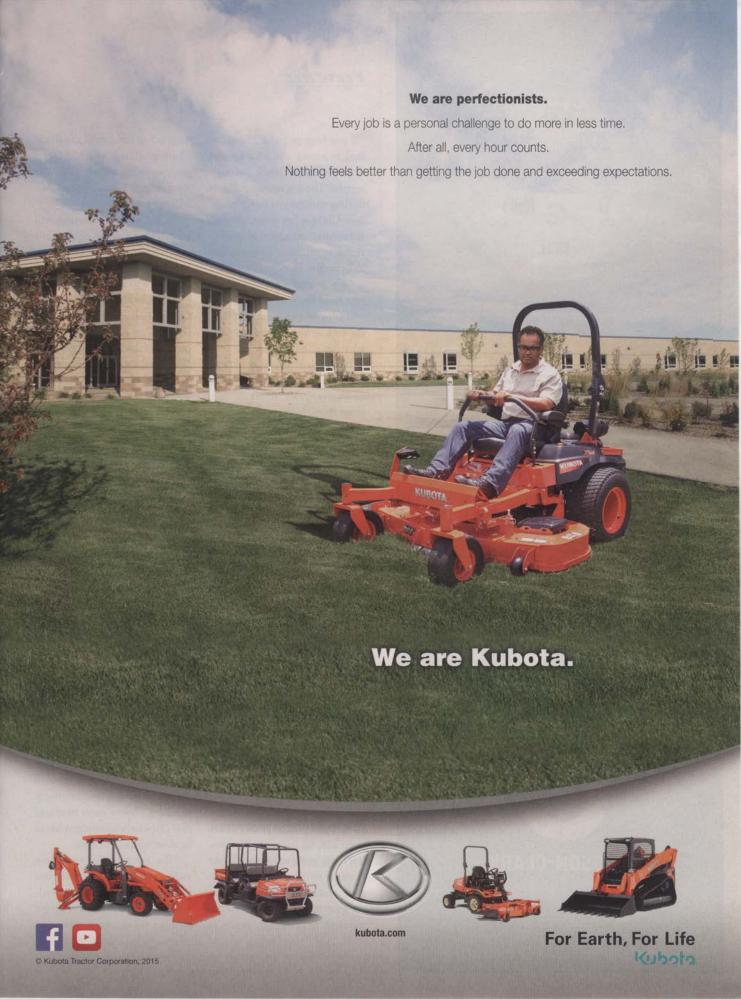
in the right place at the right time at the right rate, says Eric Miltner, turf and ornamental agronomist with Koch Agronomic Services. In general, there are more options available in the granular form of fertilizer.

"Every kind of technology out there is available as a granular product," Miltner says. In extreme examples, there are granular fertilizers that only need to be applied once in the spring which might be particularly attractive to a landscape contractor.

When deciding which form of fertilizer to use, the first thing to keep in mind is the application process and what equipment you have on hand.

Granular fertilizer can be applied with a basic push spreader. Other types are drop spreaders or hand rotary whirlybird spreaders. For application of liquid fertilizer, though, you need a truck, a spray tank and a hose, or a ride-on sprayer.

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FERTILIZER

"If you have to put a 250-gallon tank in a truck and fill it up with water, will the truck be overweight? There is more liability in dealing with sprayer equipment," says Christopher Gray, product marketing manager of professional fertilizers at LebanonTurf in Lebanon, Pa.

"If you send out an employee, you want them to do the job in one trip, so you want to fill up the tank as much as you can, but it's more cumbersome."

But what if you make a mistake and misapply the fertilizer, or inadvertently streak or miss some spots? In that case, granular is more advantageous in that it is easier to spot any errors.

"When applying granular, you might misapply it due to walking too fast or slow," Gray says. Also, if you skip some spots or apply it too heavily, it could lead to streaking. "If you don't want to retreat an area, then liquid fertilizer has its advantages," he adds.

Also, applying granular can be a little messier. "Once you apply them, the fertilizer gets on hard-scapes. That has to be swept up or picked up and removed," Miltner says. "That is an extra step that you probably won't have to do when you apply by liquid."

And having storage capacity for the equipment is another consideration that a LCO will want to keep in mind. For example, liquid fertilizer requires more temperature control.

LONG-TERM VERSUS SHORT-TERM.

For a start-up landscape business, it is likely going to be easier to use granular fertilizer, at least in the early phase of business, because the spray tank required for the liquid fertilizer can be very pricey, in

addition to the cost of the truck. "You're talking \$40-50,000 or more to outfit a spray truck – a much bigger initial investment," Miltner says.

"A lot of your decision will be based on what equipment you have currently," Gray says. Spreaders are generally priced between \$50 and \$250, he says.

As far as longevity goes, Gray says granular is the way to go. "You can get 10 to 12 weeks out of one single application of granular. With liquid, most of the nutrients are quickly available to the plant. You get a very quick reaction but end up with four to six weeks' longevity."

With polymer-coated ureas, there is an incredible variety to choose from, Miltner says. "You can get extreme longevity," he says. How long the fertilizer lasts also ties into expense, so a land-scaper should know how to track the cost per gallon of the product versus the overall endurance of it.

And in terms of effectiveness, Gray and Miltner believe both are equal in that regard, provided it is being applied correctly.

Neither Gray nor Miltner see any geographic trends regarding which type of fertilizer is more commonly used, but price will often fluctuate wildly, making it the deciding factor for many.

Plus, Miltner says, operators should be aware of state regulations, particularly with regard to slow release of the newer nitrogen products. "Some states have said that 20 percent of nitrogen has to be slow-release," he says.

"This can be easier to achieve with granular over liquid, but there are liquid slow-release products. This is something that people have to think about now that

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they didn't have to think about years ago."

CLIENT REQUESTS? Do customers have a preference as to which one landscapers should use on their property? Not really, Gray says. They just want you to do a good job.

But there is one thing that most customers can agree on: They hate weeds. And that's where liquid can come in handy. "You can put in weed killer and fertilizer; you can apply two at the same time. Liquid weed control is more effective and quicker," Gray says. On the other hand, granular fertilizer can

contain other nutrients needed by the soil.

"When we fertilize grass, we use more nitrogen than any other nutrients because that's what the turf needs. But certain sites also need phosphorus and potassium. You can get blends made with right proportions of these, all in the blend, with the granular fertilizer," Miltner says.

The size of a property is another consideration when determining usage. "If you have a large area to apply fertilizer to, a broadcast spreader for granular is easier and can cover it more efficiently," Gray says. Liquid is easier to apply on a smaller area.

Sometimes a situation could call for using both liquid and granular on the same job, depending upon a customer's needs or other plants in the landscape.

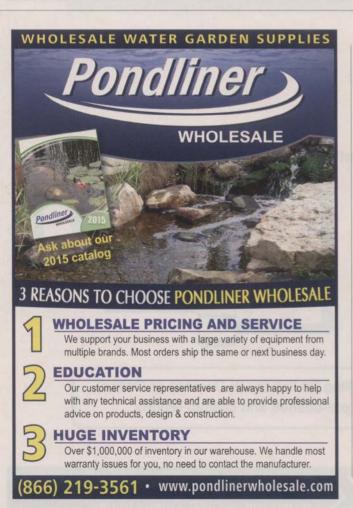
"The application method doesn't have an over impact on customer satisfaction. It has to do more with the agronomic program, the technicians and their knowledge and competence at what they do," Miltner says.

The type of customer interaction you are seeking may also play a role in what fertilizer you tend to use. "I've talked to a lot of landscapers over the years," Gray says. "Most don't want callbacks. They just want to get the job

done and don't want to repeat applications." Consequently, they will use granular products with the mindset that they are saving on labor.

Others, however, prefer regular face-to-face customer interaction, so they might use liquid fertilizer, as that would get them in front of the customers more frequently. "It depends on the philosophy of business that can drive the choice of granular versus liquid, and there's a happy medium in there somewhere," Gray says. L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Pittsburgh.





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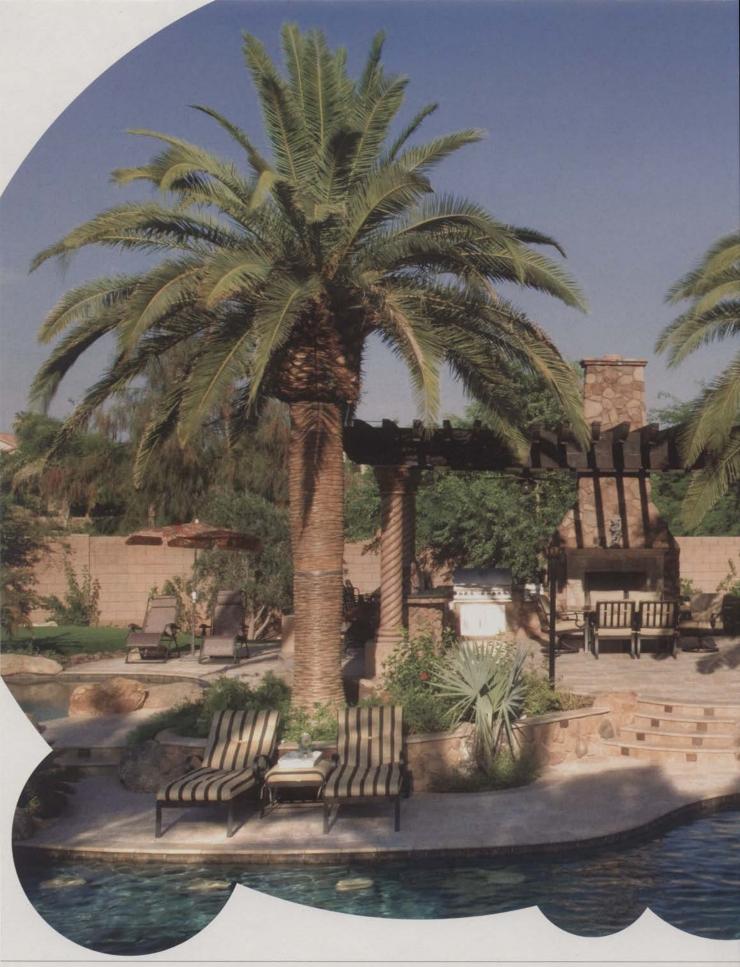
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Water features ranging from ponds and fountains to pools and spas are a spectacular addition to a customer's landscape – and a contractor's service mix – if they're done correctly. By Julie Collins

here's something special about the trickle of water in a fountain, the view of a backyard koi pond surrounded by lush plants or the inviting sight of ripples on the surface of a swimming pool. As pleasant as water features are for people living or working near them, they can also be a boon for contractors.

"Water features are one of the most rewarding services we offer," says Jeff Blunkosky, owner and president of Pittsburgh Stone & Waterscapes. "Our specialty is outdoor living spaces and I think one of the most overlooked, undervalued components is the water features. They really make the backyard come to life."

Yet water features come with their share of challenges. Although the rewards can be great, the problems that accompany poorly done jobs are even greater. Here, some water feature pros share lessons they've learned along the way.



Pool projects will require additional permits. Check with your local building department to make sure you're up to code.

TRAINING TRICKS. Contractors who work with water features agree: Proper education is vital for success. That's why all employees who work on water features for Red Rock Contractors in Mesa, Ariz., undergo training. Co-owner Rick Chafey says some employees are prepared to handle high-end tile installations, expensive glasswork and waterproofing. Others have basic masonry skills. And superintendents and designers regularly attend seminars, and are involved in different education groups to stay up-to-date. Much of the employees' training comes from Genesis 3 University, a continuing education program. Although the training offered by Genesis 3 focuses mostly on pool design and construction, Chafey says much of what his employees learn translates to other types of water features, too.

After more than 20 years of work on water

features, Pittsburgh Stone & Waterscapes has developed a company operations manual that includes a detailed, step-by-step learning guide employees can follow. To Blunkosky, it's the best resource new employees have, particularly when it's supplemented with hands-on training in the field, where new employees are paired with experienced ones on the jobsite.

David Katz, president of Elite Landscaping in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and a director for the NorthEast Spa & Pool Association (NESPA), also stresses the value of hands-on training in the field. In addition to offering in-house training, Katz is a big proponent of connecting with associations like those mentioned in the sidebar (located on pg. 94).

EDUCATING CLIENTS. Clients also need to understand the ins and outs of water features.

"What is the expected end result? What is your client anticipating?" Katz asks. Once you have a sense of what a client is looking for, you can work to design a feature that meets their needs – and educate them on what to expect once the water feature is installed.

"A lot of water features in drawings look very clean, pristine and perfect, but most are going to age and show the character that the water makes them take on, whether that's deterioration of finishes or calcification buildup," Chafey says. Sometimes that's acceptable to clients, but other times clients expect a water feature to look brand new all the time.

For this reason, Chafey says, setting expectations is important. "There's no such thing as a maintenance-free water feature or pool,"

Continued on page 90

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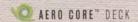


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THE WRIGHT WAY TO MOW





Pond care pointers

hen Pittsburgh Stone & Waterscapes installs a pond, its goal is to turn a completed water feature into a self-sustaining ecosystem. Here, Jeff Blunkosky, owner and president, shares a few tips for keeping ponds in shape.

- COVER POND LINERS. Covering liners with river gravel can increase the life expectancy of the liner to 20–25 years, versus 10 years without covering it.
- INSTALL SKIMMER BLOCKS. By placing a pond pump in skimmer blocks, debris is caught before it hits the pump, improving the duration of the pump and keeping the water clear.
- **KEEP ALGAE IN CHECK.** "One of the biggest problems people have with ponds is they don't want to see the green algae in the water," Blunkosky says. "But if you have algae in the water, it means your water is clean." The trick, he says, is reducing the algae. Covering at least half the water surface with plant material minimizes the space algae has to grow.
- PICK THE RIGHT FISH. Choosing the right fish helps keep your pond clean.
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Continued from page 86

he says. Although maintenance of some koi ponds is minimal if they are properly designed and installed, other features such as water walls require more attention and care. Clients who understand the reality of the water features they select are less likely to be disappointed later on.

DESIGN AND INSTALLATION. Of course, to ensure clients are happy with their water features, proper design and construction are a must. "It's very easy to draw a pretty picture of a water feature," Chafey says, "but most

water features start to look terrible in a very short amount of time if they are not done properly, so understanding materials and proper construction methods is critical." In particular, the pros encourage contractors getting started to:

Consider location. "Does it look like it belongs? Does it look like it has been there forever?" Katz asks. "A lot of people buy a hot tub and stick it on the patio. There are a lot of alternatives to that."

In addition, a water feature should be placed where it can regularly be enjoyed both outdoors and indoors. "You don't want to place a water feature where you have to go sit out in your yard to enjoy it," Blunkosky says. Sound is as important as sight, which is why he suggests situating water features where they can be heard inside the building when windows are open.

Understand design. Chafey says that it is vital to understand design fundamentals. "It's easy to draw different ideas, but to make them look like they belong in the environment is key to making that work so you have a beautiful project that is sustainable."

Calculate proper components. "It's very important that you design the water feature with the

right components so it functions and looks aesthetically proper," Blunkosky says. When contractors are working with materials such as cast stone or cast concrete, there isn't room for error. If pipe size doesn't match water flow, he says, "the results can be disastrous."

That's why proper design and engineering of hydraulics is so important. "The last thing you want to do is have issues with hydraulics and plumbing," Chafey says. "Although there might not look like there is a lot of water moving with some of these features, there is."

Focus on a solid foundation.



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"During excavation of any water feature, you need to dig it out in such a manner that you keep in mind the structural integrity," Blunkosky says. Good soil is top priority. "If you have poor soil and set your rocks on it, it's going to settle," he says. Once a water feature starts to settle, it may start losing water, which, Blunkosky says, "becomes a nightmare." He recommends digging in tiers. "You don't want to dig a big 3-foot pond like a bowl because then you have to do a bunch of rock stacking, and the more you stack the less sustainable your feature is."

Remember maintenance.



Maintenance on water features is important because the water can take its toll through deterioration of stone finishes or calcification buildup.

Once a water feature is designed and constructed, the work isn't done. Without proper maintenance, water features will fail to live up to both contractors' and customers' expectations. Yet there isn't a one-size-fits-all formula when it comes to maintaining water features. With pools or spas, Katz says, many requirements are set by code. "Sanitary considerations go into it," he says, because people will be in the water. With ponds that have fish, on the other hand, primary considerations are biological.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, Chafey says that smaller water features are often



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harder to maintain. With small bodies of water, the slightest change in chemistry from something falling in the water has an immediate effect. As a result, small features require frequent management and water changes.

knowing what to expect. The amount of time it takes to install a water feature varies greatly depending on the type and size of the project. Smaller water features, such as an 8- by 10-foot pond with a small waterfall, typically take about two days to install. In contrast, multimilliondollar pool projects can take as long as 24 months.

Profit margins vary greatly,

Get water-feature smart

he pros agree: Education is key to designing, installing and maintaining water features. Here are some of their go-to sources for information, workshops and more.

GENESIS 3 UNIVERSITY

(genesis3.com) offers coursework, projects, examinations and continuing education opportunities for professionals involved in watershape design and construction. **AQUASCAPE** (aquascapeinc. com) provides online and regional hands-on training on installing water features through Aquascape Academy.

ATLANTIC WATER GARDENS

(atlanticwatergardens.com) also has online water gardening education through Atlantic University, which includes four colleges – construction, pumps, filtration and biology – with lessons presented by visiting professors with years of experience working on water features.

THE ASSOCIATION OF POOL & SPA PROFESSIONALS (apsp. org) offers online training and a variety of levels of hot tub and swimming pool certifications.

Many regional associations also offer education opportunities. For instance, the NORTHEAST SPA & POOL ASSOCIATION (nespapool. org) offers the Professional Training Institute (PTI), which provides hands-on and classroom-based technical and business training.





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too, depending on the complexity of a project and a contractor's location. For instance, in the Arizona market, competition with other pool builders is high, which decreases margins unless contractors focus on higher-end work like Red Rock Contractors does.

In some cases, insurance requirements increase along with the complexity of water projects. Most of the ponds Pittsburgh Stone & Waterscapes constructs are less than 2 feet, so additional liability insurance is not required. But companies that undertake pool construction may be subjected to additional requirements and permitting.

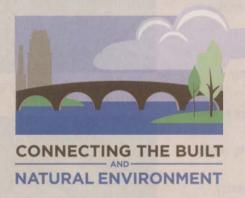


Smaller water projects can be completed in a couple of days, while multimillion-dollar pool projects can take as long as 24 months.

Red Rock Contractors has standard construction liability insurance for swimming pools and basic water features. Yet a multimillion-dollar water feature for a commercial client may require an insurance level 10 times that of other projects. Red Rock also has a separate design company that carries its own professional liability insurance because it is often contracted to tackle design work for other contractors.

Many companies outsource parts of their work, ranging from design to installation, depending on employee skillsets. Katz says it all comes down to "recognizing what your strengths are and what you need to do to achieve the

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WATER FEATURES

project." For instance, Pittsburgh Stone & Waterscapes designs pools but works with a contractor on installation and maintenance. "Pools are a whole different animal than landscape installation, a whole different skill set and system," Blunkosky says. "It's complex, and for us doing the quality of work we do, we'd be spreading ourselves thin by doing pool installation in-house."

STAYING SMART. "Water features are definitely one of the most profitable services we do," Blunkosky says. He admits, however, that increased profit margins only came with more

experience. "The first couple of years weren't very profitable. It was a big learning curve." That's why he recommends that contractors looking to begin installing water features start small.

Chafey says it's not uncommon to hear of a contractor who bit off more than he could chew. "There are stories on a daily basis of contractors who built average in-ground pools for 15 to 20 years, then got a chance to do a project outside their capabilities and it put them out of business or cost them a ton of money," he says. His company takes over projects for builders who start them but can't finish them. The

results are often disastrous, he says. "It's not like building a small house, then a bigger one. These are complicated situations, especially with higher-end glass tile work," he says.

"As beautiful as these things look, they require a lot of attention to detail. There are going to be mistakes, especially when you are just starting," he adds. One way to avoid costly mistakes, Katz says, is to reach out to companies not in your competitive area for guidance. He also suggests joining trade associations and attending regional and national conventions.

"Water features have been

constructed for thousands of years. It's not a new concept," Katz says. "There's so much information available. If you're willing to read and study, you shouldn't have a problem making an attempt at it."

"My biggest recommendation is: Don't go into it without accepting the responsibility of getting an education," Chafey adds. "Ninety-five percent of the time when we repair other peoples' work, it's not lack of caring but lack of knowledge on how to do it right." L&L

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

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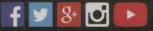
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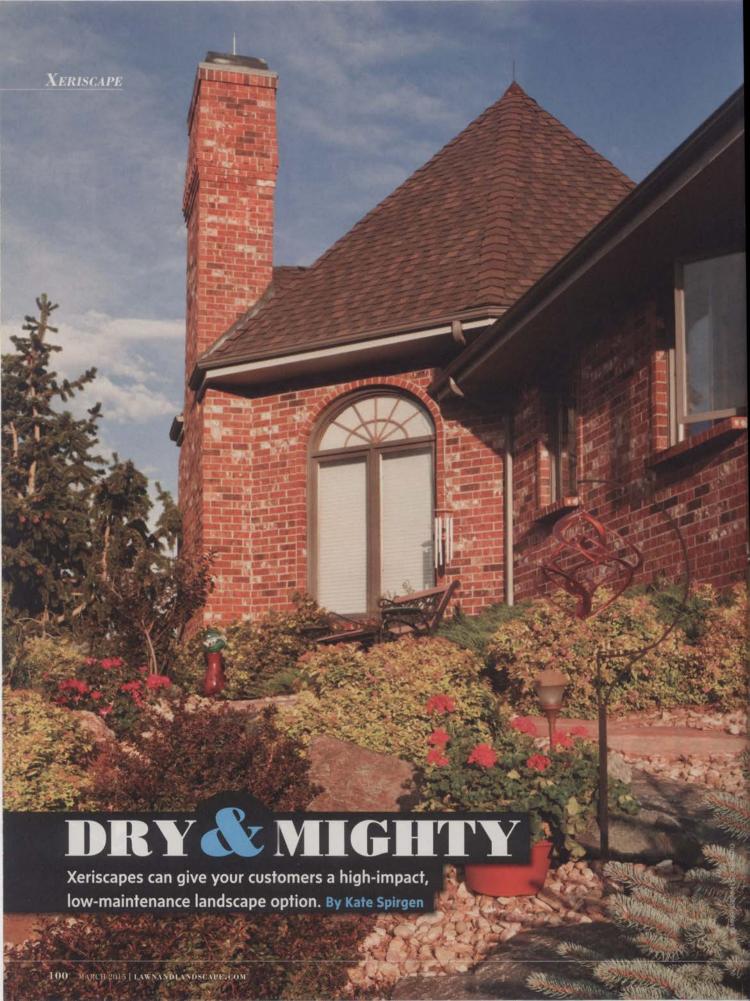
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pollinator-friendly, low-maintenance and droughttolerant. Xeriscapes often incorporate all kinds of eco-friendly components like native plants, pollinatorfriendly flowers, rain barrels, compost and more. But the defining feature of a xeriscape is that it's designed with plants that don't need much, if any, supplemental water.

Although the concept was originally designed for arid or semi-arid climates, there are lots of benefits in northern climates as well. There's the lower water cost, less runoff, decreased disease, lower maintenance and increased pollinator support. But the results can also be uniquely beautiful.

While many think that eco-friendly gardening is a sacrifice, Sean James, president of Fern Ridge Landscaping & Eco-consulting in Milton, Ontario, sees it as an opportunity. He's passionate about the idea that xeriscaping should be just as beautiful as any other type of garden or landscape.

"If you have a dry hillside or a low, wet area, you can plant plants that nobody else can, and you can make your landscape shine out from everyone else's, which is really what a lot of gardeners are trying to do," he says.

Aside from the lower or nonexistent watering requirements, the plants tend to grow healthier with deep roots. And less water means fewer opportunities for disease to set in. For example, a summer phlox grown in a traditional landscape is an easy target for powdery mildew. But in a xeriscape, the plants grow shorter and more compact, but also thinner, so there isn't as much of a cluster of stems, which allows for air movement.

Plus, with deeper roots, plants are soaking up more micronutrients, which helps keep them happy and healthy. "If you're matching your plants to the soil and the conditions, then it's less work," James says. "I know in my business, no one ever calls me for something like the Palace of Versailles. The first thing everyone says is they're looking for low-maintenance."

SHOW CUSTOMERS THE BENEFITS. Low-maintenance and eco-friendly are huge selling points for a xeriscape. According to a February 2014 Pew Research Center



This rain garden only needed to be watered for the first year and provides great winter interest while supporting biodiversity.

> **PLANTS: Sean James'** picks for a northern xeriscape | PG. 108

WATER: How to responsibly irrigate when necessary | PG. 110

survey, 39 percent of Americans consider themselves environmentalists. But in James' experience, they often don't say so.

"If you ask them, they'll say 'no, no, no' because they don't know much about it as far as landscaping goes, so they often don't want to look like they don't know what they're doing so they just say no," he says. "But if you show a xeriscape to customers, they get interested."

Communicating those benefits is key to getting customers on board and building good relationships. "As a landscaper, it makes you look really good if you're looking out for the customer's best interest financially, and more and more, for the environment's best interest," James says. "So many people are ecominded right now."

But if customers hear the words drought-tolerant



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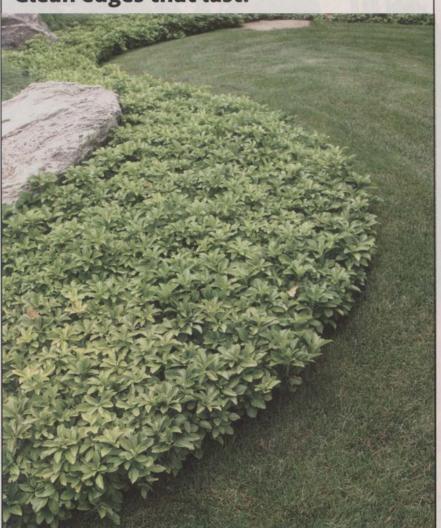
and xeriscape before they know how beautiful it can be, many are unwilling to consider the idea. That's why you have to show them, rather than tell them what you can do. And

communicating the low effort, cost savings and environmental benefits can really make you stand out from the crowd.

"It's really a missed niche from a profes-

sional point of view in many cases," James says. "I think a lot of landscapers could build their businesses by marketing that they're doing these projects and that it's all of the

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All of these native plants are growing in sandy soil with no water beyond rainfall.

PICK THE RIGHT PLAYERS

xeriscape doesn't have to be all cactus and sedum. It can be just as beautiful, and sometimes more stunning, than a traditional landscape. It's all about knowing the plant palette. In southern Ontario, Sean James of Fern Ridge Landscaping says there are so many options that a gardener will never get bored.

"There are so many plants out there," he says. "It's not a question of being limited by the circumstance; it's a question of learning the palette of plants that are available."

James recommends paying attention to what works in nature. Prairie plants like deer's tongue grass are great options, as are native plants like wild ginger and various ferns. He's also a big fan of nativars, which are cultivars of native plants.

People always tell James that you can't garden in dry shade. "Well, go for a walk in the woods and you'll be amazed at how green the forest floor is because the plants are adapted to those situations," he says.

And don't feel like you have to start from scratch. Existing plants that are thriving in the garden will tell you what does well in that area. "I find there's a tendency to become a garden snob and I'm forever fighting it," he says. "I think there's a danger in shunning a plant because it used to be common."

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above: saving money, saving water and saving the environment."

MAKE IT WORK. To start a successful xeriscape, the first year is critical. Although the goal of a xeriscape is to thrive without supplemental water, irrigation is necessary until the plants get established.

But before you start planting, soil amendment is a must, says Bobbie Schwartz of Bobbie's Green Thumb, just outside of Cleveland. Without the proper drainage, xeriscape plants will get root rot, particularly during the winter. "Soil amendment is crucial," she says. "It won't succeed without the proper soil amendment." So before Schwartz does anything else, she adds enlarged shale called Haydite to help break up the heavy clay in Ohio soils.

She also adds an organic material like a leaf humus or compost to add microorganisms to the soil. This helps the soil retain water and make it available to the plants when they need it.

In Ontario, James puts down 2 inches of composted pine mulch, but says that any rich compost will do. "That keeps the water in. It cools the soil in the summer and keeps it warm in the winter, and obviously adds nutrients to the plants. It does all of the things mulch will do,



Nativars like this Diablo Ninebark have all the benefits of native plants with the crowd-pleasing foliage of nursery-bred plants.

but it keeps the water in the soil.

After that, it's just a matter of the perfect design, taking into account form, texture, foliage, flowering time and all

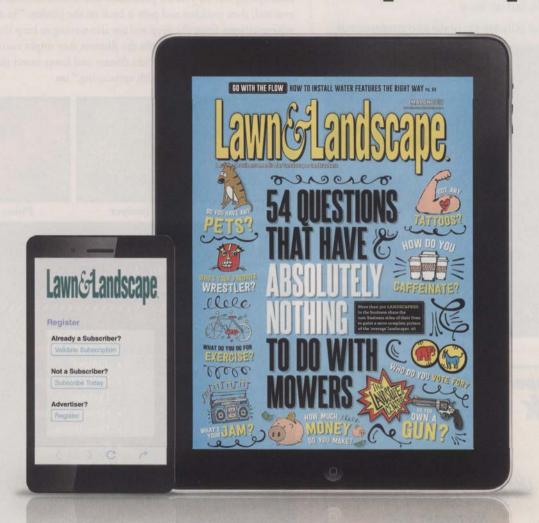
of the other considerations of any other landscape, only with drought-tolerant plants.

Another trick of James' is to leave the garden standing



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XERISCAPE

until spring. He cuts down perennials and throws in all of the bed material, then mulches and puts it back on the garden. "So all those micronutrients from the deep soil are also serving to keep the plants healthier and happier, and fight the diseases they might encounter," he says. You're going to have less disease and fewer insect problems and healthier plants overall with xeriscaping." L&L







Butterfly Milkweed

Juniper

Phlox

SO MANY OPTIONS

HERE ARE SOME OF SEAN JAMES'
SUGGESTIONS FOR A NORTHERN XERISCAPE:

- Agastache rupostris
- Artemisia
- Asarum canadense
- Asparagus
- Allium
- Aurinia saxatilis
- Arabis aubrieta
- Baptisia australis
- Big bluestem
- Butterfly milkweed
- Calibrachoa involucrata 'Wine Cups'
- Caryopteris
- Caulophyllum thalictroides
- Deer's tongue grass
- Eastern red cedar
- Euphorbia
- Europa Gold cedar
- Evergreen goldenrod
- Geranium macrorrhizum
- Giant miscanthus grass
- Helianthus angustifolius
- Hemerocallis flava

- Hemerocallis 'Autumn Minaret'
- Juniper
- Little bluestem
- Lvchnis
- Nepeta mussin
- Oenethera
- Panicum
- Peonies
- Perovskia
- Polyganatum biflorum
- Purple coneflower
- Pussywillows
- Rubus odoratus
- Rudbeckia
- Sea kale
- Seaside goldenrod
- · Shining rose
- Showy stonecrop
- Solomon's seal
- Solidago flexicaulis
- Solidago rugosa 'Fireworks'
- Spotted phlox
- Stachys byzantine
- Summer phlox
- Tiarella cordifolia
- Veronia



WATER WISELY

ean James, president of Fern Ridge Landscaping & Eco-consulting in Milton, Ontario, says that xeriscaping isn't about using no water; it's about using water the smart way. After watering to establish a xeriscape in the first year, some need no supplemental irrigation. But if a customer really wants to have rhododendrons, there are ways to accommodate that. "It doesn't mean you can't have water in the garden," he says.

James notes that you can even include a lawn in a xeriscape if you use a variety like RTF Water Saver, a tall fescue that spreads like Kentucky Bluegrass, but has a 6-foot-deep root system. It's all about knowing what will survive the summer in your area.

And it's important during the height of summer to make sure a xeriscape isn't drying out. During the July/August heat wave, James will spot water when necessary. "It's a good idea to have supplemental irrigation there for emergencies," he says.

James uses drip irrigation to maximize the amount of water reaching the plant, and uses smart irrigators to measure the soil moisture. "You need to educate your customers ... showing them what, where, why, how and when is a big deal," he says. "Don't just set it up but tell them the guidelines: irrigate early in the morning, here's how you use a rain barrel."

Often, James will set up a rain barrel with a sweating hose through the garden. Then, the homeowner just has to open the valve a few days after it rains, and make sure to close it again to catch more rain. "That way the water goes right into the roots of the plants, so now you're even saving infrastructure as far as stormwater goes because you're reducing the off-flow from your property to the stormwater system," he says.



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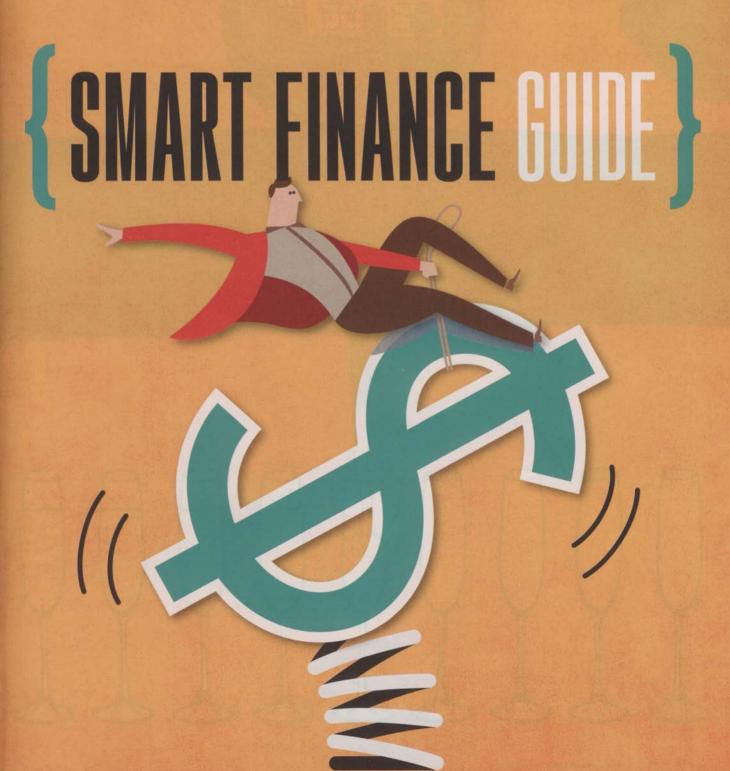


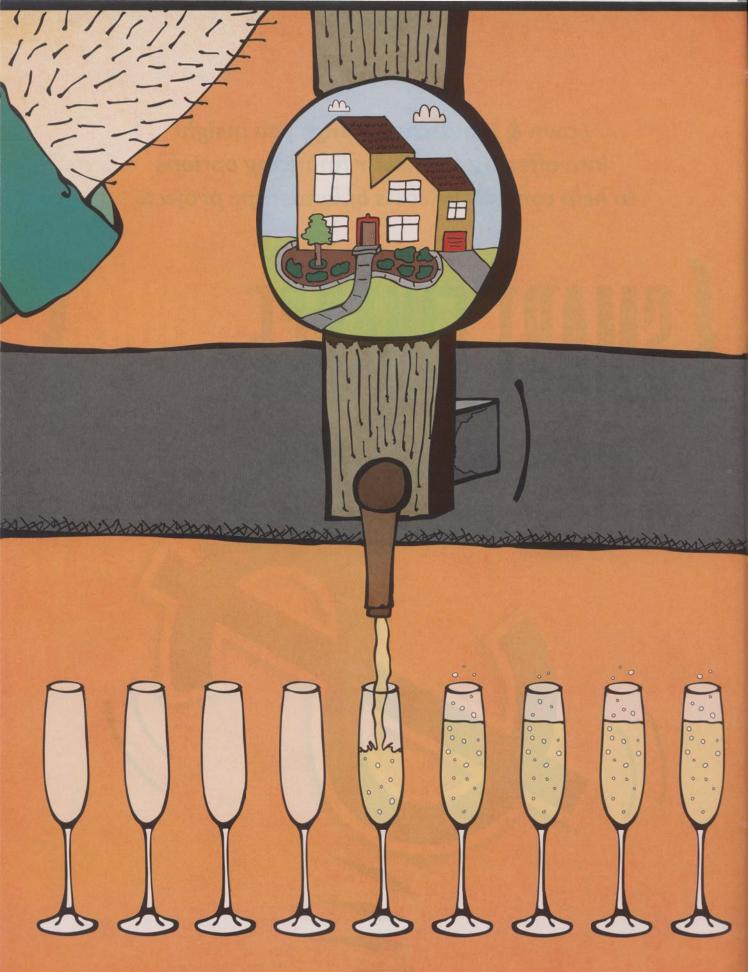
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Offering financing options can help customers afford the landscaping designs they want.

story by Katie Tuttle illustration by Justin Armburger

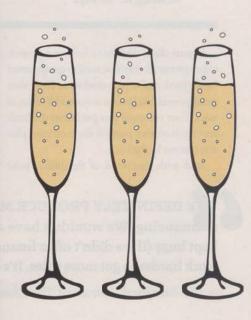
CHAMPAGNE TASTE ON A BEER DGE ET



hen it comes to designing projects for customers, your team may find itself in a rut when it comes to what it thinks up and what the customer can actually afford.

Third party and consumer financing is a good way to get out of this rut, especially when it comes to getting customers to bump up the size of their projects.

When it comes to financing, imagine it as yourself buying a new appliance and paying with a credit card. You don't physically hand money to the store from which you purchased the product. Instead, you pay from your bank account to your credit card company and the credit card company gives money to the store.





{ ELIGIBILITY INVESTIGATION }

F YOUR COMPANY IS CONSIDERING ADDING a financing option, the first thing you should do is contact a bank and see if it's an option for your company.

"I had an experience where I purchased a new air conditioning system for my house and they had a similar setup on their site and I thought it was very clever," says Michael Cournoyer, owner of Total Landscape Concepts in Davie, Fla. "It made my decision to use that company because I had 11 months to pay it off with no interest."

Seeing how easy that option was, Cournoyer reached out to a financial institution about offering financing. He says once the company got back to them, it was relatively easy to get set up.

The bank did a credit background check on the landscape company to make sure it had been in business for a good amount of time and had no bankruptcy in its past.

The bank also offered training where a rep came to Total Landscape Concepts and went over the whole process of offering financing to customers.

"It wasn't too complicated and then we were up and running," Cournoyer says. "The first year was a little rough going, just trying to get the salesmen into using it as a sales tool, because they weren't used to doing it."

Cournoyer says after he got used to it, he realized it made for a much easier sale and now they use it almost all the time.

"We quadrupled the number of [financed] sales the second year of using it," he says.

If your client decides to finance a project, either part or all, they first need to get approved by the bank you've partnered with. Once they get approved, the bank acts as a middle man of sorts. Your company gets paid from the bank and the customer pays off the total cost, plus any interest to the bank.

And with that kind of flexibility, your

clients can expand their project budgets or get what they want sooner.

"I know there are some cases where someone was planning to spend something but since they could finance it, they were able to do more," says Dave Reed, vice president of landscaping at Meadows Farms in Chantilly, Va. "We used to hear with some of our fringe

"WE DEFINITELY PRODUCE MORE AND SELL MORE because of financing. We wouldn't have as much sales. We would have kept busy (if we didn't offer financing) but we would have had to work harder to get more sales. It's definitely been a positive impact."

- Bill Banford, owner of The Sharper Cut in Marlboro, Md.



Sometimes customers want to finance a project because it means it will be done all at once, instead of in separate phases.

customers that they had to wait to get their taxes back, but when you offer this, that kind of timing is not an issue."

A GREAT ADVANTAGE. Bill Banford, owner of The Sharper Cut out of Marlboro, Md., has a number of customers who can afford a small budget, but because of the size of the project, they finance the difference.

"One lady last year had a \$25,000 budget," he says. "Then once we started designing, she did an almost \$100,000 project."

He adds that financed projects are carried out in the same way as unfinanced options.

"The contract is carried out like any other contract; the only thing different is payment terms," he says. "Whatever the client commits to is installed all at once. This could be a project that is 100 percent financed or partially financed."

Banford says it's not always about the customer upgrading. In some cases, like the \$100,000 project he referenced, it's a matter of a customer's desired project being completed all at once and not in phases as they have money come available.

"We may have designed a project that has a two-level patio, seat wall, fire place and outdoor kitchen," he says. "Instead of breaking that into a series of phases, the financing may allow the client to do more, or all, at once."

Meadows Farms offered financing previously, but at the time the interest rate was 18 percent so it wasn't very successful. Because of that, Reed says the company discarded the option and only picked it back up a couple of years ago.

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"The banks have choices from either ones with lower percentages with extended terms or zero percent financing with regular payments," he says. "For simplicity's sake, we chose just to go with zero percent for six months. Then we added to it with zero percent for 12 months."

The Sharper Cut offers customers a few financing options, including one of 12 months with zero interest. It costs the company a percentage of the project, a discount fee between 4 to 7 percent.

"Some people like that interest free because they can get it without getting charged any interest," Banford says. "But the interest rate for the interest free programs is high (after the interest free period expires) and you'll want to pay it off in 12 months. If you don't, it'll be cheaper to put it on a lower interest term."

Michael Cournoyer, owner of Total Landscape Concepts in Davie, Fla., says when considering finance options, it's important to think of your company as well as the customer.

"Each program costs us money," he says. "So the more time we give the customer, the more it costs us in the money we pay (the bank). The more favorable it is to the customer, the more it costs us."

"For instance, if we do zero down, zero interest over 12 months, that program costs us 4.5 percent of the transaction," he says. "But when you're looking at getting the job versus not getting the job, 4 percent is a good commission to do something like that."

He says that shouldn't sway your decision on what you offer, but it should be something to think about.

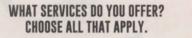
Reed says the financing options are successful because not a lot of the competition is currently offering it.

"It catches people's eyes," he says.

On the other end of the spectrum, Tammy Price, office manager at SYNLawn Central California, says her company offers it specifically because the competition in the area does.

"We have to do it to be competitive with what's going on in the market," she says.

E SURVEYED MORE THAN 150 CONTRACTORS about how they use third-party financing, and the results showed not many do. Only a few offered it previously and stopped, citing reasons such as: it cost too much, it took too long for me or my staff to understand and sell the benefits to our clients, it took too much time to process/manage the finance program and my clients preferred other means of payment. Results also showed that more customers want to pay with cash rather than write a check or put the bill on a credit card.

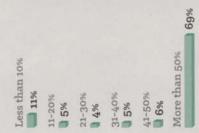




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DO YOU CURRENTLY OFFER THIRD-PARTY/CONSUMER FINANCING?



"That's why we offer it. I would just think it puts the edge of the competitiveness to your competition. It gives you one more tool to offer."

Meadows Farms offers a link on its website for financing options.

"People can apply for financing and I think it just takes a few minutes to get an approval and an approval amount," Reed says. "There there's one form that needs to be signed – a physical contract – and that's it."

Despite having the website option, Reed says most of the projects they finance happen when the landscape designer is at the customer's home presenting the design estimate.

Cournoyer says it has had a positive impact on business.

"We're getting in the somewhere 60 percent rate of people using it," he says. "It's turned into a very significant option."

Banford says offering financing has helped improve business at The Sharper Cut.

"We definitely produce more and sell more because of financing," he says. "We wouldn't have as much sales. We would have kept busy (if we didn't offer financing) but we would have had to work harder to get more sales. It's definitely been a positive impact."

CLEAR EXPLANATION. Making sure the customer understands expectations is vital to a smooth financing process.

Cournoyer says financing may have a negative impact if you don't make sure customers know what they're signing up for.

"What you don't want to have is a customer going back to [the bank] and saying, 'This isn't how it was explained to me," he says. "They're going to err on the side of the client."



Banford has a number of customers who have a small budget, but because the size of the project is much larger than they anticipated, they finance the difference.

He says they had one customer tell the bank it was explained differently, even though the customer had acknowledged online and signed a document.

"It caused us grief and a lot of back pedaling," he says. "We didn't want to have a bitter experience with the customer. So in the long run, it actually cost us another 4 percent to offer the customer what they thought they were getting." As a result, Cournoyer says his company is now very clear and upfront in making sure the customer understands exactly what they're signing up for.

"We do everything except tattoo it on their forehead," he says.

If you do that, there's no reason you'll lose customers, and Cournoyer says you'll actually gain business from customers returning for more work.

"We've had a lot of multiple repeat business that I'm not sure we would have gotten without it," he says. "And they've already had the experience; they've already had the credit. If they decide to do it, they've already gotten the approval."

COLLECTING CASH. If you decide to try offering financing options to your customers, something important to look at is how you will get paid for the financed projects.

WHICH METHOD OF PAYMENT DO YOUR CUSTOMERS PREFER?



12 PERCENT







CASH

CREDIT

CHECK

SELF-FINANCING (LOANS FROM THEIR BANK)

CONSUMER



"With some vendors, it's an easy online or fax submittal process and you are direct deposited within 24 hours," Banford says. Other vendors may require a form mailed to the client for them to sign off on first. If this is the case, it's important to send the form while the job is still in progress, so the client has it to sign as soon as it's completed.

"We made the mistake of not getting this particular form sent in a timely matter, and that took an extra seven to 10 days to get paid due to our own fault," Banford says.

You'll also want to know when you'll get paid. Banford says this was a problem early on for his company, because a lot of the vendors pay you when the project is completed.

"If you have two crews running and money's a little tighter, and you have two jobs being financed, that \$40,000 job could take two weeks so you could go an extended period of time without money coming in the door," he says. "We had times where money was a little tight so what we ended up doing on the news sales is we asked for a bigger deposit."

Meadows Farm doesn't get down payments, but Reed says the company has had surprisingly few problems with it.

"We could have required that," he says. "We could have set it up that a down payment was necessary. But you're doing it to market and gain customers, so the simpler you make things, the better. If you complicate things you're shooting yourself in the foot."

For Meadows Farms, financing makes up around 10 percent of the company's total business, so not offering a down payment doesn't affect them too much.

"It's not the most important thing that we do, but it's a piece that makes us better than what we were," Reed says.

Banford suggests planning your jobs so that your company isn't doing multiple financed jobs at the same time, and Reed adds, that payment on a financed job may not come as soon as it would on an unfinanced project. "We get money three weeks later than we normally would have," Reed says. "That would be a big consideration to smaller companies that depend on a constant flow of money." L&L

{ IDENTIFYING WORTHY CLIENTS }

HILE FINANCING CAN BE A VIABLE AVENUE to increase the price of a project, you may not want to offer it to all potential clients.

"Part of our sales pitch is that we don't like to push on people," says Bill Banford, owner of the Sharper Cut. . "(Otherwise) they think we think they can't afford it. When we're going over job budgets and pricing, if we get a sense they can't (afford) it, we tell them we have the ability to help them spread out costs."

On the other hand, you may want to cast a wide net and see what you catch.

"We bring it up on a first meeting," says Michael Cournoyer, owner of Total Landscape Concepts. "It's hard to pick the person it's going to fit for because the people you think won't do it because of their expensive house, they're the most interested because they understand the value of the dollar."

Tammy Price of SYNLawn Central California says her company doesn't exactly get a say in when to offer it and when not to.

"They're pretty well attuned to it, so most of the time they're asking us, 'Do you have this available?'" she says. "The clients are much more savvy on it than we are these days. They're expecting it, so we find we have to offer it because our competitors are offering it."

Cournoyer says the most important part of offering it to customers is making sure they understand exactly what they're signing up for, especially since there are other financing situations out there that are scams or aren't upfront with interest costs.

"I'm very upfront with them on how high it will be if they don't pay for it," he says. "You have to be very clear and make sure they understand what they're signing up for."

Cournoyer says a lot of customers have mentioned bad experiences they've had with financing for a local furniture company and because of that, they're wary of doing it again.

"If they've had a bad experience and don't want to do it, I don't push them," he says. "But I let them know that the pricing isn't going to change. They don't get a better deal if they pay cash. Whether you finance it, pay for it on a credit card or write it on a check, it's all the same amount."

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ost lawn care and landscape professionals know it's not enough to slap together a five-page website and wait for the calls to start coming in.

To establish an effective web presence, you need to invest in search engine optimization (SEO).

But, here's the secret: SEO is not rocket science. There's no need to feel

intimidated at the mere mention of it. SEO is all about ensuring your website generates the right signals for the search engines, and your potential clients.

To illustrate how simple SEO can be, the following are seven basic practices you can complete over the next three to six months to optimize several elements of your website.

Try these seven search engine optimization quick-fixes for your lawn care and landscaping website. By Chris Heiler

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*Formerly Mapping Assistant



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1. IMPROVING DOMAIN AGE. Let's start with the easiest task. Though it won't significantly change your rankings, domain age is an important factor for your website's credibility. Search engines not



your past, they also take into account your future. If you currently own a domain, visit

only care about

whois.com and check your expiration date. If it expires in less than 12 months, renew it for at least two years. The same principle applies to new domains. Purchasing domain names over

WITH THIS CHECKLIST AT YOUR SIDE, THESE IMPROVEMENTS COULD BE SPREAD OVER A WEEK OR OVER THE NEXT MONTH.

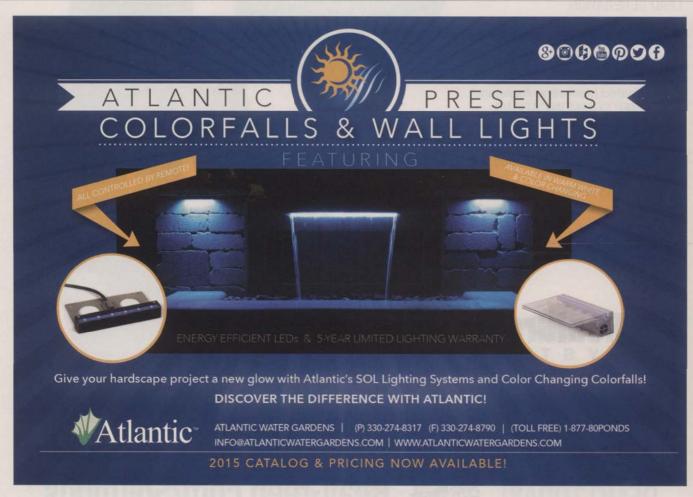
several years adds credibility to your website and shows the search engines you plan on being in business for a while.

2. FINDING LOCAL KEYWORDS. In "Bullseye," published in Lawn & Landscape's October issue, we discussed creating buyer personas. You can apply the same prac-

tice when determining keywords as well. The first step you should take in finding the best keywords for your business is defining your target service area. Where are your potential customers? Which city, state, county, neighborhood? Does your local service area have a geographical referrer e.g. "panhandle," as in the

Florida panhandle? The second step is discovering how specific you need to be in defining service offerings. What problems are your clients trying to solve? Do they want general landscape services, or something more specific like grading?

To find the most appropriate keywords, you can use a paid ser-



vice, such as Hubspot, an inbound marketing software. Or you can use a free service, such as Google Keyword Planner Tool.

3. OPTIMIZED TITLE TAGS. Unlike URLs, title tags are not your actual webpage addresses. Title tags are part of your website meta data, which acts as a more descriptive and formatted version of URLs. Each page on your website should have a unique title tag, which is not more than 55 characters long. To explain this further, take a look at the website URL for HighGrove Partners in Atlanta, Ga. (disclosure: HighGrove is a client of Landscape Leadership):

HighGrove's current home page URL: www.highgrove.net

HighGrove's current home page title tag: HighGrove Partners | Commercial Landscaping Atlanta Austell GA (turn to page 124 to see a screencap of the website.)

The company uses unique title tags on each page to replace the non-descript URLs with local keywords and services. These flow more naturally, like short sentences describing the services referred to on each specific page.

4. ENGAGING META DESCRIPTIONS. Similar to your page title tags, meta descriptions are created in your website meta data, which means they're not visible on your website, only in search engine results. Consisting of 150 characters, these descriptions should contain one or two compelling sentences describing your specific company services and local service area to give your potential clients a preview of the contents of your webpage.

Each page of your website should contain a unique meta description which focuses on improving your click-through conversions, not just your rankings.

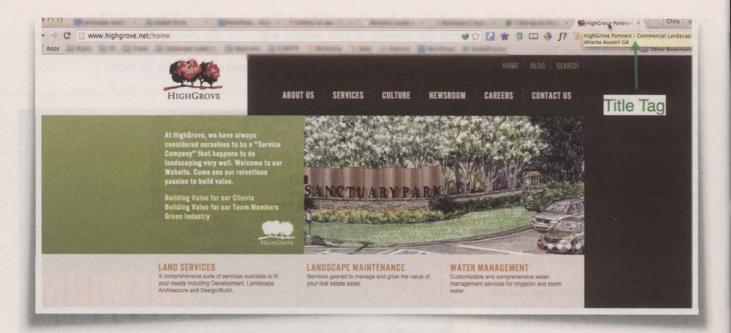
For examples, conduct a search on any type of business in your area. Scan the search results and compare the optimized and un-optimized meta descriptions below the web page titles. Which websites were more effective in convincing you to click through?

5. DUAL-PURPOSE IMAGES. No matter what type of lawn care or landscape service you

provide the results are generally visual. That means the majority of your website will feature photographs of your work. There are three values you can update or add to your image files to fully optimize them:

• File Name – Delete numbers and generic photo attributes. Instead, add location and services to the file name.





- Image Title Add your company name, specific location and services provided, similar to your page titles.
- Image Alt-text Basically a short meta description for images.

If you format your images properly, they can help initially attract potential clients to your website, then assist in closing the sale by showcasing the results of your services.

6. GOOGLE+ LOCAL. Google's local business directory, Google+Local (formerly Google Places), is the largest online local business citation available. There are many advantages to listing your website with Google+Local, including increased exposure in local search results, step-by-step driving directions through Google Maps, hosted branding and service images, as well as promoted client reviews.

For new lawn care and landscape companies, it's important to create a listing as soon as you're ready to start promoting your business. To start a listing, visit the Google+ Local website and create an account. Once the account is active, you can navigate to the listing page and add your company Name, Address and Phone number (NAP), along with a description, hours of operation, etc.

Also, check the business category and

▲ Title tags are part of a website's meta data, and acts as a more descriptive and formatted version of URLs. Each page on your website should have its own unique title tag, which is not more than 55 characters long.

ensure you are listed in the right services. If possible, pick the most specific category available. A complete listing will always be more effective than a basic listing.

7. CONSISTENCY IN ALL CITATIONS. Since the recent Google Penguin update, Google has allowed certain citations to have some influence in your search rankings. Citations are listings on local business directories, such as Bing Business Portal, Foursquare, Manta, Yellowpages, Yelp, WhitePages and YahooLocal.

Google crawls each of these sites and compares the NAP information you entered against other citation listings, so ensure multiple citations display the same information. Google discounts mismatched information, so exact matches of all data helps improve your website credibility and search rankings.

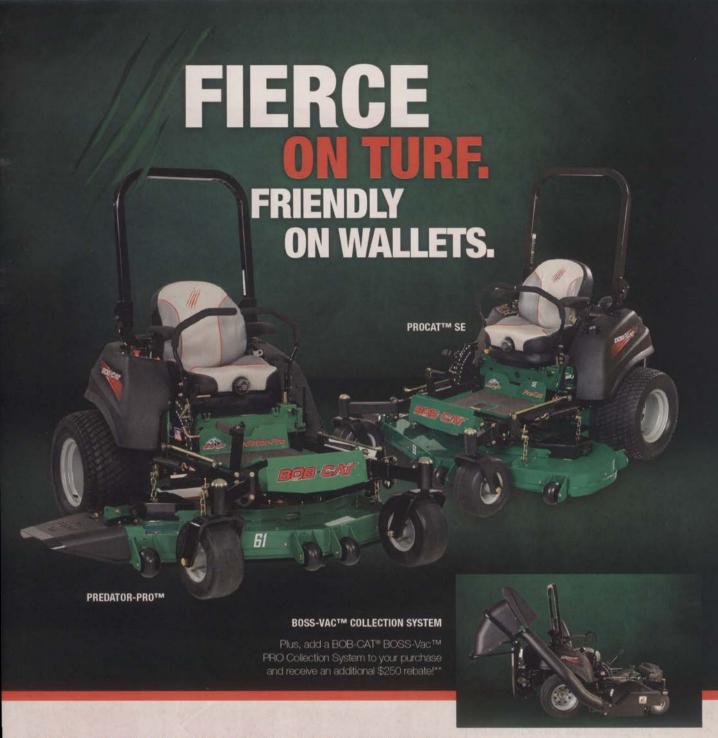
If you are not sure where and how you are listed, you can use Landscape Leadership's free website scanning tool by visiting bit.ly/llwebtool to run a report.

Remember, do not list your company in hundreds of directories. Focus on quality over quantity. To save you time, we've compiled a downloadable list of the top 20 citations here: bit.ly/bizdirect.

START RIGHT NOW. The amount of time it takes to implement these improvements depends on your experience with website design and the size of your website. With this checklist, these improvements could be spread over a week or over the next month. And, many of these quick-fixes are one-time tasks - title tags, images and meta descriptions may never need to be updated again.

You may not notice instant results with these seven quick-fixes. These are just the building blocks of a complete SEO strategy. If you're struggling to establish a foothold in local search results, these basic practices will help you to improve your rankings and build credibility for your website. But if you want to maintain your position, you must consider a more comprehensive inbound strategy. L&L

The author is the founder of Landscape Leadership, a digital marketing agency for green industry companies. He's a former landscape designer and frequent contributor to Lawn & Landscape.



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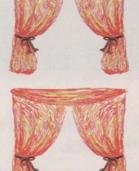
company, don't forget software for your back office.

By Katie Tuttle

ith the business world being so technology-focused, the days of keeping your back office in order with pen and paper are becoming obsolete. Many companies offer programs and software to help keep your business running smoothly, but with so many out there, use the following pages to find the best fit for your company and staff.





















ARBORGOLD

Cost: A one-time set up and training cost, and subscriptions start at \$99/month. Support and upgrades are included.

Website: Arborgold.com

How it helps you: Arborgold is a cloud-based customer and job management program, designed to help tree, lawn and landscape companies manage their workflow. With a phone message center, all phone calls and appointments are managed and dispatched to the outside sales team. Using the MobileEstimator app, salespeople can instantly retrieve messages and appointments, look up customer history and create new proposals to print or email. Arborgold also offers scheduling, routing and crew management. Crews can access job information as well as update job time and resources using the MobileCrew app. The built-in marketing features include automated email marketing, renewals and voice broadcast to customers. The mobile apps work for both IOS and android devices.

Training: Arborgold offers a five-part training/on-boarding process that includes a combination of online classroom training and one-one coaching. It also offers ongoing weekly training webinars at no charge, plus an extensive online searchable help system with training videos.

ASPIRE MOBILE LANDSCAPE BUSINESS SYSTEM

Cost: Monthly subscription standard in Cloud based software (like Microsoft 365

or Google). The subscription is based on a percentage of monthly revenue.

Website: Youraspire.com

How it helps you: Aspire is a complete integrated software system: contact/customer management (CRM), company calendar/email, estimating, sales reporting, scheduling, routing, mobile field time keeping, purchasing, payroll, invoicing, accounting and "real time" job and financial reporting. The system was designed by long-time landscape industry professionals. It runs on any phone, tablet, laptop or desktop linking everyone in a company "real time" to everyone else eliminating miscommunication and duplication of data management.

Training: The software is packaged with a complete installation and support program. Installation includes (1) conversion of current system data into the Aspire system, (2) set-up of critical customer, pricing and reporting practices inside the Aspire system, (3) on-site training by Aspire product specialists and (4) unlimited online and phone technical support.

BOSS LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Cost: A small percentage of client's revenue Website: bosslm.com

What it is: BOSS enables communication between your prospects, employees, clients and subcontractors from the time a prospect is entered until you're cashing the check. BOSS provides actionable intelligence by giving you near unlimited access to the events that drive your business. Whether you want to examine profitability by service, performance by account rep, how quickly managers resolve client issues, it's all there. BOSS is a cloud-based system that's constantly being improved, one that enables field functions over mobile devices and drives accountability throughout your organization. It works in all seasons and is intentionally designed to help you outperform your competition.

Training: Monthly face-to-face new user training classes, monthly Deep Dives (live webinar training), quarterly BOSS University classes (face-to-face training for the experienced users), video training materials available anytime, annual BOSS Client Conference with break-out training and requirements sessions, and on client site custom training.



BUSINESS SOFTWARE GUIDE



CLIP SOFTWARE

Cost: There are three plans: The Basic plan is free and includes one username and 100 customers. The Plus plan is \$50/month and includes two users and 400 customers. The Enterprise plan is \$80/month and includes four users and unlimited customers. Website: CLIP.com

How it helps you: CLIP is designed to streamline processes in your company

and provide in-depth job costing and reporting. With mobile apps, a customer portal and marketing capabilities, the system is designed to be simple and easy to run on a daily basis.

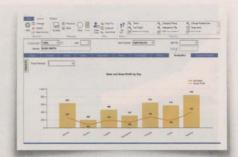
Training: Unlimited support is included. An online help desk is available for users. It has tutorials and manuals you can search by keyword. There are also "Playlists" for new users on how to setup their account.

EPICOR EAGLE N SERIES

Cost: Epicor representatives complete a comprehensive business review to provide price quotes on software solutions.

Website: Epicor.com

How it helps you: Epicor Eagle N Series lawn and garden business management software is designed to give independent businesses and retailers the information



required to improve results, outservice the competition and run their business efficiently. It takes business intelligence functions and blends them into a manager's workflow as real-time, in-context embedded applications.

Training: Users have access to a fully integrated Support Bar that delivers quick answers via Online Help, Training on Demand, Advice Line Chat and Eagle Com-



munity Assistance. Training on Demand offers online, personalized training. The Advice Line Chat feature gives employees a quick, direct connection to support team members, and is good for quick questions or requests. The Eagle Community is a moderated forum for customers to share ideas and best practices.



GOPHER SOFTWARE

Cost: Gopher Basic - \$99.95, Gopher Plus - \$149.95, Gopher Pro - \$199.95 Website: Gophersoftware.com

How it helps you: Gopher Software is a Windows-based billing and scheduling program. You can schedule recurring and one-time jobs, along with any required materials. It comes in three packages: Gopher Basic handles the scheduling needs of most companies. Gopher Plus has more advanced scheduling options and allows you to track expenses and export invoices and payments to QuickBooks Pro. In addition to the features in Gopher Basic and Plus, Gopher Pro can also track chemical applications, help track equipment maintenance and usage and manage employees.

Training: The company provides free email-based support and training.

HINDSITE SOLUTION

Cost: A startup fee of \$795. Then, \$99/ mo. each for the first two licenses, \$49.50/ mo. for each additional license.

Website: HindSiteSoftware.com
How it helps you: The HindSite
Solution is designed to be a completely
paperless back office software solution that
makes it easier for landscape contractors
to manage their business. Contractors can

manage their customer database, schedule quickly, collect accurate information immediately in the field and invoice faster. The software is designed to eliminate paper both in the office and in the field. **Training:** HindSite has a structured, five-day training program designed to get contractors up and running quickly. Using





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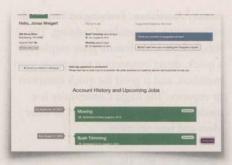
a combination of on-demand videos, live webinars and one-on-one training, the goal is to ensure new customers can hit the ground running. Once they're trained, HindSite offer unlimited live support, which is available from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. Central Monday through Friday.

LAWNSTARTER PRO

Cost: Free

Website: Lawnstarter.com

What it is: The software provides schedule management, automatic billing and a unique customer login. To keep track of a schedule, enter your jobs and what type of recurring schedule you'd like, and check them off as you complete them. Additionally, your customers are notified each time a job is rescheduled. With LawnStarter Pro, you can opt to either send an email invoice or have a customer's card charged automatically after each job is completed. All of your customers will receive a unique login where they can update payment information, view upcoming services and request specialty services. To push upsells, fill in a



price, and customers will have the option to order the service on their dashboard. Training: LawnStarter offers a personal demo to each business owner who downloads it. These usually last about an hour, consisting of a Q&A and a live-action demonstration. The company also gives users the CTO's direct line, so they can ask technical questions at any



time. Monthly webinars are offered, and customers are sent a few instructional documents on how to use the software, such as quick guides and FAQs.

are,

time, anywhere with Service Assistant. Manage marketing outreach, monitor calls, process invoices, schedule routes, handle receivables and more. All other Real Green Systems software products integrate with Service Assistant.

Training: 4 days of online training, training videos and online support available L&L



INCLUDE SOFTWARE ASSET

Cost: Asset base software is \$5,000, plus a fee per concurrent network license. Packages are tailored to each company's needs. Initial purchase encompasses data conversion and a structured and comprehensive one-on-one training program.

Website: Include.com

What it is: Asset is a landscape service industry software designed to bring every aspect of your business together: sales and estimating, accounting and administration, production and operations and executive reporting. Asset replaces independent software programs and gives landscape service companies a single software system. Add iCREWtek, Include's mobile app that integrates seamlessly with Asset, to provide a real-time connection from field to office for ultimate command and control.

Training: Includes unlimited technical support from the Client Care Team.



SERVICE ASSISTANT

Cost: A business consultant will complete a comprehensive business evaluation to determine specific requirements. One-time setup and monthly access fee applies.

Website: RealGreen.com

What it is: Manage your business any-









The grass is greener

A healthier housing market is good news for the lawn and landscape industry.

By Kate Spirgen

hile some would say the U.S. economy is due for a recession this year, Charlie Hall says the economic indicators point in a different direction. The Texas A&M University Ellison Chair holder and economist says, "There's nothing holding us back from having a great 2015. We're going into this spring season better off than we have or have been."



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IT'S TIME TO GROW!

In his Economic Outlook for the Green Industry in 2015 presentation, Hall notes low gas prices, a rise in the housing market and an increase in personal consumption as good signs. "We're not knocking any homeruns out of the ballpark, but we're consistently getting singles and doubles, so that's roughly good news," he says. **THE INDICATORS.** Even though last year started out with a negative GDP, 2014 averaged out to be the best year since recovery from the Great Recession began.

And while there is still a 1.9 percent gap between the U.S. potential and the actual GDP, it's shrinking. That's based in large part on the personal spending of consumers. In the fourth quarter, those expenditures were 65 percent of the GDP.

Gross private domestic investment, such as new inventory or equipment, has been on an upswing since the recovery began, which is a good sign of growing business prospects.

When it comes to income, more and more people are joining or rejoining the workforce regardless of how long they've been out of

"There are a lot of forces at play but we're poised. There's nothing that's going to rear its ugly head that's going to cause us to really shrink back and see our economy suffer."

- Charlie Hall, Texas A&M professor

work, dropping the unemployment rate to 5.7 percent. However, Hall warns, a lot of people who quit looking for work are going to re-enter the workforce now that conditions are improving, which will skew the unemployment numbers.

With more employed Americans and a drop in gasoline prices, consumer confidence is definitely on the rise. "Gas prices make people feel better or worse, depending how high or low they are," Hall says. And with the Energy Information Administration predicting an average gas price of \$2.33 in 2015, "we're sitting pretty good in terms of confidence," Hall says.

In fact, Americans are spending more today than they did prior to the recession. And beyond the increased consumer confidence, which means more spending, low gas prices should be huge savings for contractors in terms of fuel and supply costs.



THE HOUSING MARKET. The housing market is generally increasing, but we still haven't returned to pre-recession start numbers. That could all change this year as excess housing stock is taken off the market.

"We had overbuilt the housing market so much, and the housing bubble, that we had that much supply of excess housing and that has been whittled away and so now we have less than three months of excess supply," Hall says.

As U.S. household net worth increases, along with consumer confidence, people are feeling more comfortable making large purchases or investing in homes.

"It's been a long time since we've seen that rate of increase in our net worth, so that's good news, but we still owe a lot of money," Hall says, citing the \$1.2 trillion of student debt in the country.

Experts expect single-family starts to be roughly on par with 2014, with multi-family housing on the rise due to younger generations opting to rent for a longer time than their parents.

That actually bodes well for the coming years, and starts are expected to reach 1.5 million in 2018.

For existing homes, investments in remodeling, including landscaping, are expected to make a 7 percent increase this year, Hall cites from Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University Leading Indicator of Remodeling Activity.

However, that number will vary depending on location.

THE INDUSTRY. Overall, the green industry is doing better than it was, but it's still "a bit overleveraged," Hall says.

The lawn and landscape sector in particular has seen a lot of mergers and acquisitions in recent years with smaller regional players trying to compete with national players. "There are still some companies out there that need to have a good spring," Hall says.

The good news is that banks are starting to loosen up credit, particularly in the housing sector, and low fuel prices will mean lower distribution costs. That, along with increased

consumer confidence and lower unemployment rates, puts the industry in the shape it's been in years.

"There are a lot of forces at play but we're

poised," Hall says. "There's nothing that's going to rear its ugly head that's going to cause us to really shrink back and see our economy suffer." L&L





On the radar

Private equity firms have their sights set on the green industry.

By Brian Corbett

uch has changed in the landscape industry since we first wrote about private equity in Lawn and Landscape's 2009 article "Acquiring equity" (bit.ly/llequity) and the L&L piece "Wrecking stereotypes" in 2014 (bit.ly/llwreck).

In the last year alone, we have seen KKR acquire Brickman from Leonard Green, then acquire ValleyCrest from MSD Capital, Merit Service Solutions (backed by L2) acquired Sunterra in Texas, Terracare (Progress Equity) acquired VMC in Texas and most recently CIVC, a former longtime investor in Brickman, acquired Yellowstone Landscape Group with operations in Georgia, Florida and Texas.

All signs point to an even busier M&A level of activity in 2015, which could well see the highest number of green industry transactions in decades.

It reminds me of a question the late Burt Sperber, founder of ValleyCrest Landscape Cos., used to ask my clients: "When is the best time to sell a landscape company?" The answer: "When people are buying them."

Factors driving this activity include:

- · Record levels of un-invested private equity capital
- · Aggressive lending for transactions at historically low interest rates
- · High-profile transactions at the top of the industry
- · A highly fragmented market
- · Maintenance companies provide an attractive B2B service with high levels of contractually recurring revenues
- Aging Baby Boomer business owners
- Improved business performance with revenue growth and increased earnings
- · Higher levels of new contract sales, increased enhancement budgets and better customer retention
- · A seller-friendly market in terms of valuations, terms and conditions
- Today, the top 30 companies alone (maintenance and design/build focused, not arbor- or spray- focused businesses) would include: seven private equity backed, five employee stock ownership plan and two divisions of publicly traded companies.

These top companies would range from BrightView (the rebranded Brickman/ValleyCrest) at \$2 billion in annual sales to companies with sales at approximately

> \$30 million. The second largest company is TruGreen

> > LandCare, owned by Aurora Resurgence, with a reported \$200 million in revenue and a new CEO. Mike Bogan, formerly of Brickman.

This certainly implies a renewed excitement about the opportunity in the industry.

Never too early

For more on preparing your business to be sold, read our December cover story "The Easiest Exit" on why you should start thinking about selling your business now, even if you aren't ready to hand over the keys. bit.ly/easyexit

In terms of market share, estimates put the annual spend or addressable market for commercial landscape services at \$30-\$40 billion.

This would mean BrightView commands 5-7 percent of the market. The balance of the companies in the industry are primarily privately-held with less than \$30 million in annual revenue – most less than \$5 million. Thus, private equity investors would still consider this a highly fragmented market notwithstanding more than 17 years of consolidation. That consolidation has shrunk the number of larger maintenance-driven companies, making them the most attractive target.

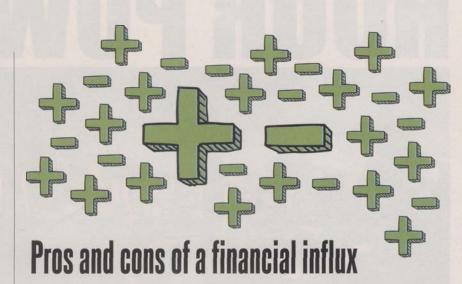
If you look at the industry today, it looks very different than when the roll-up era of the late 1990s began. While the industry has always been highly fragmented, the number of large independently owned and operated companies has greatly diminished. This is a natural byproduct of a maturing industry.

Think about other examples, such as home improvement (Home Depot and Lowes), grocery stores (Albertsons, Kroger, Safeway and Publix), pharmacies (Walgreens and CVS) and so on.

As more institutional capital enters the industry and as larger property owners and managers look to rationalize their supplier base, we expect this trend to continue. While there will always be many small competitors, we anticipate the ongoing shrinking of the middle-class.

The best-built businesses are not built to sell; they are built to last. They are built the way you'd want your company to look if you were planning to own and operate it in perpetuity. However, a well-built business can be a very hot commodity in a market with no shortage of professional private equity buyers who want and need to grow their own businesses more than organic growth will allow.

So, what's the punchline? That you as the owner of a business cannot afford to think the industry is the same as it has been since you started your company. Size, ownership profile and capital structure of larger competitors has changed dramatically and this affects you.



Private equity investment can be highly positive for the commercial landscape industry, but it can also have a downside.

POSITIVES

- Multiple buyers for your business creating the ability for you to monetize your equity and create personal liquidity
- PE investors putting huge sums of equity into industry bodes well for growth in the sector
- Potential for one or more publicly-traded companies at some point, driving even more access to capital and M&A activity
- Ability to become a platform for one of many PE groups currently looking to invest
- Sell to an existing PE backed company; taking advantage of scale and infrastructure already in place
- Lenders providing large sums of debt capital; also affirming bright future

NEGATIVES

- PE backed companies have access to large sums of debt and equity capital at substantially lower cost than independently owned companies and thus can be aggressive competitors
- Will be on the hunt for top industry talent and can offer some opportunities owner-operated companies cannot
- Normally have opportunistic but still defined timeline to exit their investment
- Typically will have lofty goals for growth and profitability that can strain the business or cause an imbalance between short and long term priorities
- Financial leverage can create a burden on operations especially if earnings falter

Companies of scale with institutional capital behind them can be both a likely buyer and a formidable competitor. It also means that whether your hopes and dreams are tied to one day selling your business or not, you need to understand the underlying fundamentals of value and marketability.

This is vital for you to be prepared when the time comes for you to maximize the return you will receive for the years of hard work building your landscape company. L&L

The author is managing partner, CCG Advisors, a business advisory firm in Atlanta.



How Gothic Landscape tightened up its labor tracking and saved hundreds of thousands of dollars.

By Jason Stahl

ntil 2010, crews at Gothic Landscape approached labor on most jobs the same way. Typically it didn't matter if a project would be complete in a few weeks or take several months to finish. The company would be awarded a contract, often start the job within days and begin to learn several weeks into the job how the labor crews were performing compared to the estimate. On large projects it was not unusual to find direct labor hours exceeding budget estimates without early warnings.

"At the time, we were doing a lot of large

projects, especially prevailing wage jobs where the governing agency dictates wage rates that can be three to four times greater than employee private wages," says Nick Arena, vice president, administration for Gothic Landscape, based in Valencia, Calif. "As a landscape contractor, you never want to have a bust in your labor, but if it's a private wage job, you may be able to offset the additional cost, reduce your margin or absorb a loss on the job. On large prevailing wage jobs, a 1,000 hour labor bust and excessive overtime could noticeably impact branch profitability."

DAILY RETURN. It was the late Gothic owner, Mike Georgio, who recognized the need for a labor management system (LMS). He tasked Brian Rasmussen, vice president of operations, and Arena to develop a system that would improve labor management. The system had to provide for scheduling and production reporting of labor tasks as estimated in the project budget. It was required that the system identify labor problems and success on a daily basis to allow managers to respond quickly.

Gothic started the process of creating its own labor management system software application to track labor tasks and budgeted hours. Rasmussen provided Arena an understanding of Gothic processes and tasks

ABOVE: Operations Manager Mike Jakeway and Superintendent Javier Carrillo review LMS reports in the field.







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that would be needed to manage crews and accurately track labor costs. "Gothic had done some labor management using Excel spreadsheets," Arena says.

"We made some changes that made were big improvements managing prevailing wage jobs at the time. That's when we decided it was worth moving ahead and creating a true software application." Arena was able to create screenshots for project setup, scheduling, production reporting and management

Rasmussen and Arena reviewed the screen shots to verify they were intuitive and to specify the functionality needed to accomplish the software goals. With screenshots and functionality in hand, Gothic found

locates hours accordingly - maybe 15 percent of budgeted time for excavation, 45 percent toward planting the tree and the remaining 40 percent to staking and pruning. "So after the LMS setup, we know we have 32 minutes per tree to lay out and excavate," Arena says.

"So, if we're excavating 30 trees today, we know the excavation should take almost 16 hours and should only require two men. If a four-man crew is on the job, they will need to plant an additional 10 trees to achieve the budgeted labor tasks for 32 hours of labor."

The LMS allows superintendents to schedule work in advance by matching labor tasks with crew size. This allows for clearly defined work goals and avoids sending more labor to the project than there are work go back and determine if there were certain areas of work where you need to improve."

SAVE TIME AND MONEY. During the last three years since implementation of LMS, Arena estimates Gothic has avoided several hundreds of thousands of dollars in losses. Part of that savings, he says, is due to the company being more disciplined on prevailing wage jobs and using the LMS program. Even though overall labor costs are typically less on private jobs, Gothic uses the LMS on larger private jobs and realizes similar benefits.

To evaluate performance, Gothic monitors "labor efficiency" that is calculated by dividing the budgeted task hours by the actual labor hours. Gothic has improved labor efficiency by five to eight percentage points and today is typically above 95 percent on most projects.

"Now, we recognize quickly when things aren't going well and jump in to figure it out," Arena says. "Often, the result is a change that brings our efficiency up or we realize we are performing extra work that may not be in the budget or contract negotiated with the client. Before the LMS, the red flags did not always come up early so they could be addressed timely

All in all, the system proves the old saying, "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it." Labor efficiency is measurable, and when the crews can see the goals they find better ways to be successful. "When you have the ability to set goals that are realistic and meaningful in regards to the budget, the guys can accomplish them," he says.

"With our system, that's what we're able to do. On a daily, weekly or monthly basis, people can get feedback on how they're performing. We have excellent foremen, but when they go out there without a measurement tool, they do their best but they may not know they're at 90 percent labor efficiency. When you give them the opportunity to see what it means to get to 100 percent, it's amazing how they can find a way to step up and get 3, 5 or 10 percent more." L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

The crux of the LMS system is being able to take bigger units of labor, break them down into sub-tasks, determine what work is available to complete on the job, apply the right amount of labor to the scheduled work and measure performance by entering daily production reports.

- Nick Arena, vice president, administration for Gothic Landscape, based in Valencia, Calif.

a developer who created the software application.

Now, Gothic doesn't wait weeks or months to learn how labor is performing on a project. "If we have a job that will take six months to a year, we know in the first week and throughout the project how we're doing on labor," says Arena. "In the past, a large labor budget would make it difficult to know exactly how well we were performing on the job. Today, the LMS will throw up red flags if we have a labor problem and we can tell every day whether we were successful or not."

Arena uses the example of planting 30 trees budgeted at 3.5 hours each. "In the past, the crew would go out and excavate for 30 trees and we were not sure if the labor production was good or bad for the excavation activity."

The planting of a tree is now broken down into actual labor tasks and the company altasks available to complete. "The crux of the LMS system is being able to take bigger units of labor, break them down into subtasks, determine what work is available to complete on the job, apply the right amount of labor to the scheduled work and measure performance by entering daily production reports," Arena says.

"The bottom line is at the end of the day we know the task hours that were budgeted for the completed work and the labor hours that were used on the job."

Everyone who has a need for the system can check it every day. The operations manager can see if the crews are performing at budgeted production rates for the tasks completed, and the superintendent can add comments to document events occurring on

'So, from a management perspective, you could learn about the job on a daily basis," Arena says. "You could also use the system to

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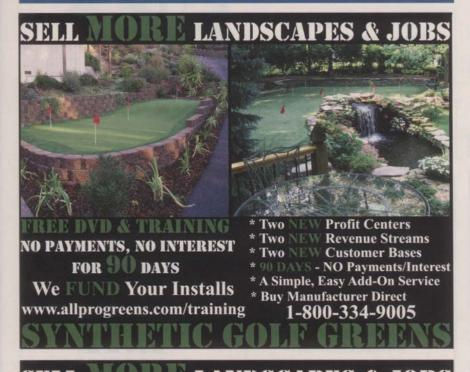
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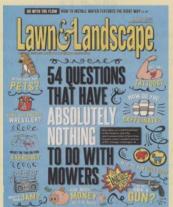
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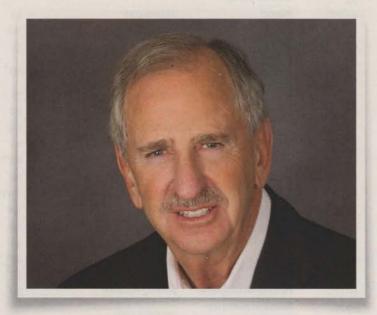
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TIPS FROM THE TOP

Interviewed by KATE SPIRGEN





Steve Pruchansky

// CEO

I owned a business before. It was successful. I sold it. Retired for a few years. Moved to Florida in 1988 and then I started looking for businesses again with business brokers.

I found a landscape company in 1991. I did a great deal of due diligence on it and what turned up was that the woman that was running it was exceptional. Everybody raved about her. Her name was Linda Nelson. So I sat down and I talked with Linda and we had common ideas, common thoughts on customer service and how to approach the market and so forth and so on. So I made an offer and acquired the company.

I have no horticultural experience except that I mowed lawns when I was in elementary school.

It was a service industry, which I was looking for. And from a financial analysis of it, it was a future that I was buying into and I was buying into a relationship with Linda Nelson, who I thought was just an exceptional, passionate person and had tremendous knowledge of the horticulture industry and was really committed to it.

The company's focus is primarily lawn maintenance. When we set it up, we decided that we should be a full-service company. We do mowing, pruning, irrigation, pest control, other services including enhancements.

We took full responsibility for what we did and we focused on quality service and exceptional client services and we continue to do that.

Twenty fourteen was a good year. We continued with a little stronger growth than we have over the past four or five. We got the economy in a different mode. People were in a different mood. They were willing to spend money and do things around their properties.

Last year, things picked up and we had a very, very strong year and strong growth and I expect to do the same thing in 2015. Our goals are to exceed what we did last year. We've got fantastic people in place; the staff is exceptional.

Labor is a primary issue. Our pay rate is slightly above local scale but with construction and other jobs the way they are right now – the construction industry is booming. Finding qualified labor is very, very difficult. Our rates are up almost 20 percent more this year than we did last year for people.

People have told me about many things. One is: Don't ever make the same mistake twice. Learn from your mistakes and move forward.

We have a belief here that a company is like a three-legged stool. On one leg you have your clients, on another leg you have your vendors which are critical because if you're not getting good products at good value then you're not conveying that on to your clients. So it's employees, vendors and clients that hold up your business.

I think a company is made up of its people. Lawn mowers, assets, vehicles, trucks – that's not what makes a business. What makes a

business is quality people that are committed and passionate and get the support of upper management to do their jobs well.

The reason we grow our business is to provide greater opportunities for our employees. We do an awful lot of not just safety training, but training to provide them additional knowledge on their jobs, whatever phase of the business they're in, whether it's pest control or irrigation or accounting or clerical work. We focus a great deal of our efforts on training the folks and having them establish goals and strive to be better.

We grow the business because it's the way we attract quality people. We can allow the folks that we have to reach new heights. L&L

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