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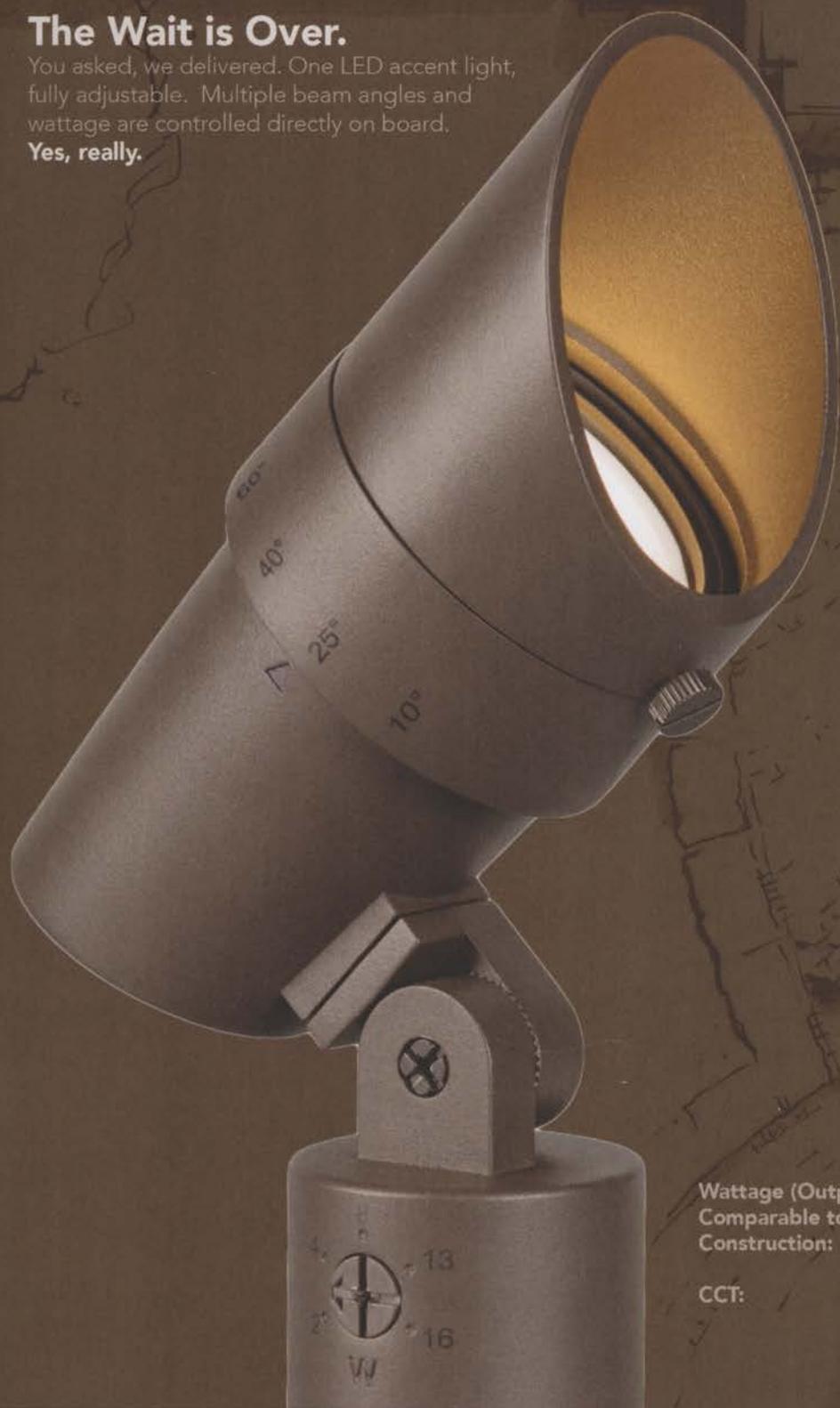
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Chuck Bowen
Editor | Lawn & Landscape

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experienced
harassment
doesn't mean
other people
haven't.

Women in landscaping

Out of seven industry leaders, Abby Santos was the only woman on the stage during a panel discussion at a conference I attended this winter. A landscaper in the audience asked her how the industry can better market itself to women and recruit women.

Santos, owner of No Ka Oi Landscape Services in Hawaii and NALP's Woman Entrepreneur of the Year, made the point that the industry should do more, but it can be difficult to recruit women or show them a path for progress in the landscape industry when there's only one woman on the board of the national association.

"It has been a struggle in a man's industry. Like in the construction industry, I have mostly men working for me, four women," she told me in an interview later. "Very few women want to come in at the entry level. Women who want to do it have to be prepared to deal with that reality."

According to our 2015 Landscaper Census, just 11 percent of the industry is female. I'm not here to say that's too low or too high, but as contractors across the country struggle to find qualified candidates for employment, the green industry could do a lot better by making itself

a better place for women to work at all levels. That means treating them fairly, viewing them as competent, capable employees, and having a zero-tolerance policy on harassment.

For a lot of reasons, we don't all start from the same point in life. Just because it's been easy for one of us doesn't mean it's been easy for all of us, and just because I haven't experienced harassment or hurdles in my life doesn't mean other people haven't.

And Lawn & Landscape could do better as well. We can and should do more to profile and promote women in the industry. The landscape industry has no shortage of smart, talented women leaders – Christy Webber, Jen Lemcke, Debbie Cole, Barb Stropko and Joy Diaz (who is on the NALP board) all come to mind.

We don't lack for sources and we need to feature more women. But we won't do it just because they're women, but because they're running interesting and innovative landscape or lawn care companies.

So that's what we can – and will – do at Lawn & Landscape. But the industry as a whole needs to diversify its labor pool and make itself a better place for women to work, and to show them that there's a path for their success as landscapers, too. – *Chuck Bowen*

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The iLandscape show took place in early February in Schaumburg, Illinois, a suburb northwest of Chicago, and featured a trade show floor, education sessions and a keynote from actor Ed Begley Jr.

EYES TO THE SKY

Drones, along with a glimpse into an industry giant and advice from an Emmy-nominated actor, were some of the highlights at the iLandscape show. **By Brian Horn**

SCHAUMBERG, Ill. – Lawn & Landscape made a stop at the iLandscape show, taking in all that Illinois and nearby states have to offer in the green industry. Here are some highlights from the show, which took place Feb. 1-3.

TAKE TO THE SKIES. One growing trend in the industry is using drones to photograph landscapes from above. This gives contractors a new marketing tool to use to get better photos and to help potential customers visualize how a job will be done.

Peter Spero and Brendan Stewart, founders of AeroVista Innovations, an aerial vehicle service company, said learning to fly a drone for commercial purposes isn't as easy as buying one and operating it. That means getting the correct paperwork filed and practicing the



"IT'S BEST TO KNOW THE LAWS OF THE PARTICULAR COMMUNITY BEFORE YOU GO OUT." –Peter Spero, co-founder, AeroVista Innovations

right way to fly one. "It's more complicated than stopping at Best Buy and buying one," Spero said.

If you want to fly over a landscape and use the image for marketing purposes, you must obtain a 107 FAA license to fly the drone. You can obtain the license by taking a 60-question test at a small local airport. You'll need to take a refresher test every two years and have a registration like you would for a car, which



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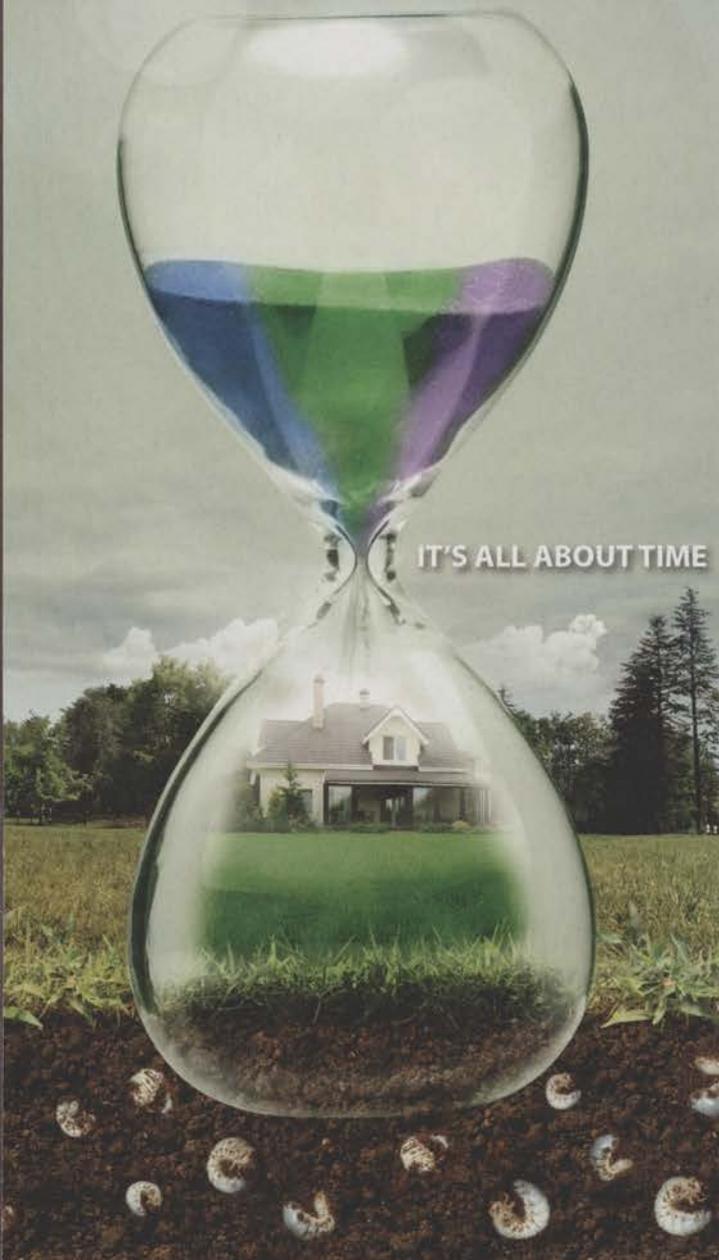
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can be done online. And though it's not mandatory, Spero and Stewart recommend buying an insurance policy.

This can be purchased at any company that sells aviation insurance, and you can buy \$1-million worth of liability coverage for \$1,500-\$2,000 for a year.

First, you have to ask yourself how you want to use it. Then, identify who on your staff is going to fly it. Third, develop standard operating procedures, especially for larger companies.

The fourth step is applying for any waivers you may need. One example of a waiver is, if you are doing a job within 5 miles of an airport, you must get a waiver. Then acquire and register the drone.

"Buying a drone is one of the last steps," McCarthy said.

To practice, Stewart has a little drone he flies around his living room to stay sharp. "If you don't do it for long enough, your skills get rusty," he said.

If you are going to fly it over a client's property, make sure you have the client's permission and all your paper work and proof of insurance with you. Some local governments have passed laws making it illegal to fly drones, but Stewart said those may not be law-binding since the federal law may overrule the local law.

Spero and Stewart said they've flown in cities where those types of laws have been passed. They called the police department or city hall and explained why they were flying, and the local government or law enforcement had no issues with it.

"It's best to know the laws of the particular community before you go out," Spero said.

AFTER THE MERGER. Three Bright-View employees, Chuck DeGarmo, vice president of sales for the landscape construction group, Peter Hunn, a principle in development, and Brent Lloyd, a managing principle in the design group, talked about what the past two years have been like since Brickman and ValleyCrest merged, forming the new company.

DeGarmo said because Valley-Crest and Brickman were already large companies individually, employees from both sides knew the challenges of communicating in a large organization. That helped ease some pains, but DeGarmo said one key to establishing good communication practices was simply getting to know the people in the organization. Whether that was through meetings or company events, it was important to develop relationships within the organization where you knew the single point of contact for a situation if you needed something for a customer.

"Then it's repetition, repetition, repetition and driving that home to create the relationships to know who we should talk to for what," he said.

Since the company has 600 construction projects going on at all times, problems can escalate quickly. DeGarmo said the company communicates the importance of the customer on all levels, which keeps managers from always having to put out fires.

DeGarmo added that since the maintenance side is bigger than the construction side, and both ValleyCrest and Brickman offered maintenance, figuring that division of the business out was much more complex.



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"The maintenance business is now three-quarters of the revenue. It's a much bigger integration challenge," he said. "We've been at it two years now and have gotten to the other

side of that lifting... where we can act quickly."

One other challenge the company faced was hiring. Since they need to hire so many workers and train them, the company tried to

use local ties and hire organically. That proved to be a problem because those who would be in charge of hiring were focused on running their departments and branches.

So BrightView invested in hiring managers whose sole purpose was to recruit, and now new employees have a constant companion with them when they start so they don't get lost in the shuffle.

"We're investing tons of money in that, and it's paying dividends," DeGarmo said.

DeGarmo said the company is looking to expand in the Midwest, but Lloyd said local contractors shouldn't be concerned if BrightView becomes a neighbor.

"We approach it as we have a lot of resources... but we also want to partner with folks on the ground who know the market really well," Lloyd said.

ADVICE FROM HOLLYWOOD. In 1970, actor and environmental activist Ed Begley Jr., started to make more decisions based on the environment. Today, the Emmy-nominated actor gets asked about what happened in 1970 to push him in that direction.

He said living 20 years as a kid in "smoggy" Los Angeles where he couldn't go out on the playground some days because of the smog, and it would hurt to breathe, planted the seed of being more environmentally conscious.

But, as a struggling actor, he had to do it on the cheap, and he stressed to the audience during his keynote address that you can start small and inexpensively.

He started composting and recycling and taking public transportation when he had little income, and it helped put money back in his pocket.

"I saved money at every turn," he says.

Begley also said avoiding "vampire power" could save you money. Vampire power is a term used to describe when electronics, like a television, are turned off but still use electricity because they are plugged in. He suggested buying a power strip and turning it off when you aren't using those devices.

"We have to do everything in our power to turn it around," he said in regards to problems with the environment.



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The event takes place on Kimberly Nurseries' 3.5-acre property the day after Thanksgiving.



CHRISTMAS IN THE NIGHTTIME SKY

A service project combining Christmas and fireworks is helping children in Idaho. **By Katie Tuttle**

FOR 26 YEARS, Kimberly Nurseries in Twin Falls, Idaho, has held its annual Christmas in the Nighttime Sky event. A fun evening and simultaneous charity event, it was started by Jack Wright, who was then the president of the company.

"My dad always liked fireworks and he liked Christmastime and he thought why not combine those two into a charitable event and put those two things together that people don't normally associate," says Dave Wright, now company president.

The event takes place on the nursery's 3.5-acre property the day after Thanksgiving, although Wright says people can see the fireworks from anywhere nearby.

"People mark it on their calendars. It's an expected annual event," he says.

For attendees who come to the facility for the event, there are bonfires set up with plenty of folding chairs and tables. There are lines for Idaho potatoes with chili, and Coca Cola sponsors the event, providing coffee, hot cocoa and soft drinks. Christmas music plays on loud speakers and a praise and worship band from a local church performs inside one of the buildings.

The event goes on for an hour and a half, culminating in a 10-minute firework display with 450 to 500 fireworks.

Admission to the grounds is one unwrapped children's toy per fam-



GOOD WORKS

Have you completed a charity project you are proud of or helped out your community in another way? Email Associate Editor Katie Tuttle at ktuttle@gie.net to be considered for coverage in a future issue.

ily. The event has drawn as many as 4,000 people and averages 2,500-3,000.

"We just like to see it grow, quite honestly, because it's such a worthwhile event," Wright says. "All the toys we gather stay in our area. It's a major – without this event it would be a lot of kids that didn't get anything for Christmas."

Wright says his goal for the event is to say it has collectively received one million toys from attendees. Currently, they're sitting at 100,000. He says some families bring more than one toy, and some people go above and beyond.

"This year we got 18 bikes that people brought," he says. "The generosity toward this is just tremendous."

After the event, the toys are packed up and taken to a facility to be sorted. Then, different agencies in the surrounding areas come with wish lists from clients and are able to pick gifts and deliver them for Christmas.

Over the years, other places in Idaho have started to do their own versions of Christmas in the Nighttime Sky. It's Wright's hope that more places across the country will contact him for the rights and begin doing it as well.

"I've trademarked it but we're willing to share, and we have everything a person needs to set up an event like this," he says.

"I would like to see these events all across the country, in every state I think they can do them."

A NEW DESIGN FOR A CHANGING INDUSTRY

Ohio's MGIX saw a rebrand, as well as a shift in safety culture and a focus on the true buyer. **By Katie Tuttle**

PREVIOUSLY KNOWN AS CENTS, the Midwest Green Industry Xperience went through a show redesign in the hopes of better encompassing the industry professionals in attendance. Running in Columbus over three days in January, the conference featured education for landscapers, snow and ice pros and other horticulture professions. Here are three takeaways:

1. WOMEN MAKE UP 80 PERCENT OF BUYING DECISIONS.

"That isn't saying your industry; that's saying all industries," said Anne Obarski, a consultant with Merchandise Concepts. Focusing on female buyers will help your company because a satisfied woman is, as Obarski describes it, "contagious."

"They'll tell everyone," she said, highlighting this as a marketing technique.

2. IN ORDER TO HAVE A SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL MEDIA

marketing campaign, you need to have a brand and a strategy. You also need to take advantage of platforms like YouTube and Instagram. Obarski suggested even asking happy clients to do video testimonials that you can post on those sites to catch the eye of potential customers.

"Video is now becoming one of the biggest ways to sell your product and you," she said.

3. IN THE FIRST QUARTER OF 2017, THE AMERICAN

National Standards Institute is rolling out new changes to the Z133 safety standard for the arboriculture industry. "This was the biggest overhaul that's ever occurred," said Phillip Kelley, owner of Samara Tress Preservation and the lead instructor for North American Training Solutions.

Not regulated by OSHA, Kelley said several incidents within the last year have caused OSHA to take serious interest in writing a standard for tree care. He said if arborists abide by the updated ANSI regulations, it may keep OSHA from getting involved in the industry.

Kelley highlighted important sections, such as one requiring all arborists to be certified in first aid and CPR within 90 days of being hired. "We've got to find a balance because we can't keep burying people" Kelley said. "I don't care how much red tape there is if it keeps people out of the ground."

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A: It is important to have a plan because the opportunities for digital communications keep expanding and it can definitely seem overwhelming, but it is also an incredible opportunity. Don't think of social media



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and digital communications as something nice to do – think of it as part of your overall marketing strategy.

DECIDE ON RESOURCES. Review your marketing goals and determine the time and money you have to commit to developing and posting content. Then choose the best platforms to go

all in on. Once you commit to a blog or Facebook page, you want to post enough content to appear timely and relevant.

Have your designated staff set aside a few hours (or whatever you deem reasonable) every week to work on digital content.

CHOOSE PLATFORMS WISELY. Focus your time on platforms where you can easily reach clients, potential clients and your community.

You may not have time to fo-

ASK THE EXPERTS

cus on every platform and every platform might not be worth your effort. We find that most NALP members focus on Facebook first with fewer contractors putting time into Twitter.

Facebook offers reasonably priced advertising options like promoted posts where you can target your audience geographically and by interest. Twitter, on the other hand, has more expensive advertising options and takes longer to build a targeted audience.

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industry has great visuals and it is quick and easy to post photos of your work.

Pinterest is a good option for residential design/build companies and LinkedIn can be a good outlet for companies that have a commercial client base.

FOCUS ON WHO YOU WANT TO REACH. Part of your content marketing strategy should include who you are trying to reach and what your goal is for communicating with them.

For client retention, a good place is on your blog or client emails.

Providing your clients with helpful seasonal tips with photos of your team in the field or sharing stories of your latest projects and community service work are a great way to keep you connected with clients, and it positions you and your team as experts in the field.

Photos and videos are critical to making your stories engaging, so have a process in place to get photos of your projects and your team in the field.

For client recruitment, posts that drive readers back to your website are key to getting them locked in as clients.

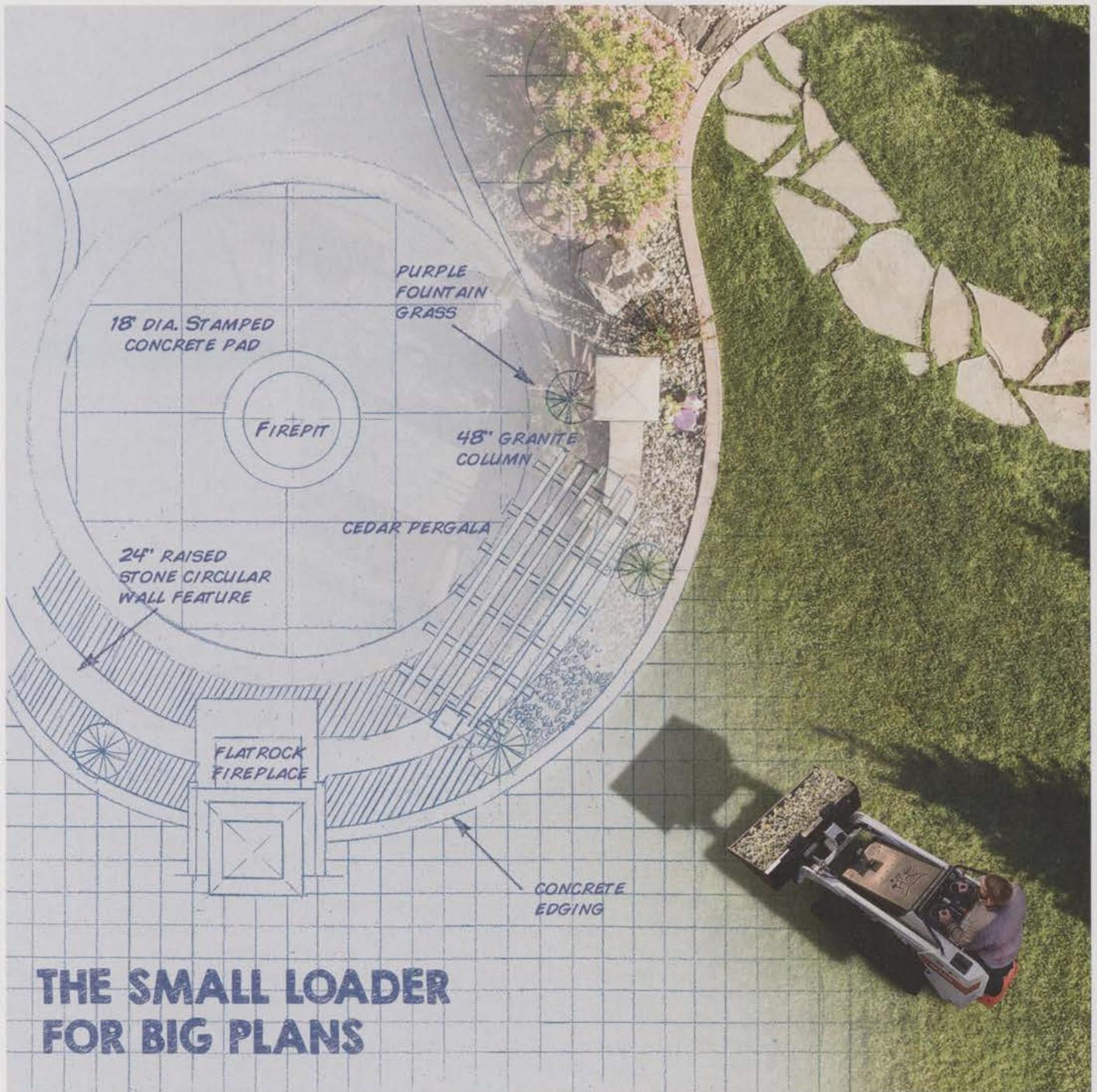
If you have a blog, news section or helpful videos on your website, create posts on your social media platforms that link back to those sections of your website.

MEASURE YOUR REACH. Twitter, Facebook, your blog, your website and most every digital platform has free analytics you can look at to see how your posts performed; i.e. how many people they reached, how many people liked a post or clicked on a link. You can use that to create future posts on topics that your audience finds most interesting.

Also, you can look at your website analytics to see which social media platforms are driving more traffic to your website.

Lisa Schaumann, NALP director of communications and public relations adviser for members

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3 KEYS TO SUCCESS

WELCOME TO SPRING, MY FRIENDS, the start of another growing season for landscape professionals. If you're like me, you can't wait to get started on another year and see just how much you can improve on the last.

I'm especially excited this time around, having just wrapped up GROW! 2017, the three-day conference my green-industry consultancy, Marty Grunder! Inc (MGI) holds every year. The event brought together 300 landscape pros to learn from industry leaders about building successful businesses and achieving our dreams.

This year I was joined on stage by a truly extraordinary group: Frank Mariani, of Mariani Landscape; Jim McCutcheon, of HighGrove Partners; Todd Pugh, of Enviroscapes; Mike Rorie, of GroundSystems; and Scott Jamieson, of Bartlett Tree Experts.

James Cali and Jason New, our newest additions to the MGI team, also delivered presentations, as did MGI Vice President, Vince Torchia.

When these men speak, I listen, and you should, too. Together we focused on three keys to success:

1. FINDING GOOD PEOPLE. I don't know of a single landscape company that's not struggling with this chal-



MARTY GRUNDER is a speaker, consultant and author. He owns Grunder Landscaping Co.

lenge now, and I didn't meet a single owner or manager at our GROW! Conference who wasn't worrying about it. Every one of our experts' approaches to this problem is at least slightly different – just as everyone's particular market is – but some common themes emerged.

Be creative in where you look for prospective employees: Catholic Services and laundromats, women and minorities. Make your company a place people will want to work at. Offer flexible hours. Work as hard at retaining good staff as you do at retaining good clients. Have a career path for every single employee, from the top down to the lowest rung.

2. IMPROVING PROFITABILITY. Again, every one of our presenters had their own particular path to

success in this realm, but I was struck more by our commonalities than our differences. We all agreed you've got to control your overhead; manage closely your outlay on rent, salaries, advertising and the like. Some of us don't pay for advertising at all, relying instead on referrals and word of mouth. The single best marketing tactic you have in your arsenal is doing the job you've won well.

MGI's Jason New minced no words when he told the audience what they need to do to get ahead: if you're only working 40 hours a week and expecting extreme growth, you're not going to succeed. Continuously monitor – monthly, weekly, even daily – what's working and what's not, and refine your strategy accordingly. Jim McCutcheon reminded us that zero debt isn't realistic or opportunistic. And if you're not opportunistic, you should close up shop and go home.

3. STANDING OUT. All of us on stage agreed that our clients can't or won't



ONLINE: You can now view Marty's video series "60 Seconds for Success," where Marty will give you quick tips on how to better run your business. Download the Layar app, then use your mobile device to scan this page. The video will then play on your mobile device. This month, Marty talks about how you should be answering phone calls.



differentiate between our own and our competitors' products, but they can and most assuredly will distinguish between our own and our competitors' service. In fact, I owe the success of my own company in no small part to this principle.

That's why our trucks at Grunder Landscaping are spotless, our crews are cleanly uniformed and unfailingly polite, and we never leave a site without letting our clients know what we accomplished that day and what we'll do on our next visit. We send handwritten notes to those who award us contracts and to those who turn us down. The rejection you get today just might become a sale tomorrow if you handle it right.

It's a lot to think about and be inspired by. But that's also what makes our profession so much fun. So, get out there, put these ideas to work, and see if you can make this your best year yet. Go GROW! **L&L**

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DON'T GET BURIED

MY 450-MILE JANUARY DRIVE to Jackson, Wyoming, for our annual brainstorming meeting was uneventful. Uneventful, that is, until 10 miles from my final destination. As I rounded a curve on U.S. Hwy. 191 something seemed out of place on the road ahead. Through the evening darkness, I saw the lights of cars and pickup trucks catawampus to the road. Many were making U-turns.

I had just missed an avalanche that covered the entire highway. Fortunately, no vehicles were smothered in the hundreds of tons of snow. Even more fortunate, no vehicles had been swept off the road into the adjacent Hoback River.

The brainstorming meeting went well. Forty-five attendees from 20-plus companies throughout the U.S. all participated in the discussions on topics they chose. Not surprisingly, the No. 1 topic was the shortage of industry labor and the upward pressure on labor rates for 2017.

CONTEXT. The cost of field labor has risen sharply in the past three years. Some reasons include the rise in minimum wage, the rise in the cost of H-2B labor from nearly \$10 per hour to almost \$15 per hour in many parts of the country, the talk about a living or sustainable wage rate and so forth. Add to this the shortage of qualified laborers and a demand for the same as the economy improves,



JIM HUSTON runs J.R. Huston Consulting, a green industry consulting firm.

and you have a supply-demand curve that shows pay rates being pushed higher and higher.

Business profitability is all about controlling risk. Field labor, due to its volatility, is responsible for roughly 80 to 90 percent of the risk in business operations. If your company is going to be profitable, you have to control labor productivity and its cost.

INACCURATE BUT HELPFUL. When calculating field labor rates, I use a fairly detailed Excel worksheet that I've developed over the years (see the example on the L&L website). After I create a budget for a client, calculate their company's overhead cost, figure the labor burden rate and include the crew truck and a reasonable net profit margin (NPM),

quite often the resulting labor rate is roughly three times the crew's average wage rate. In other words, the rate charged to clients for a three-person crew with unburdened wage rates of \$24, \$18 and \$16 per man-hour turns out to be roughly three times the average wage rate. I don't use this formula to calculate labor rates for clients as it isn't always accurate. However, it is useful to estimate a labor rate.

- $(\$24 + 18 + 16) = \58
- $\$58 \div 3 = \19.33 crew average wage rate
- $\$19.33 \times 3 = \58 per man-hour charged to clients
- The man-hour rate using my Excel worksheet is \$56.28 (with a 15 percent NPM) and \$60.12 (with a 20 percent NPM).

HOW IT WORKS. All of this means that for every dollar your labor wage rate increases, you have to increase what you charge your clients for labor by roughly \$3. If you don't

increase your prices to your clients, you're doing your company, yourself, your family, your employees and your industry a disservice. Most of my clients throughout the U.S. have seen a \$2 to \$3 an hour increase to their average hourly cost of labor in the last three years. As a result, they've had to increase the price of such labor to their clients by a factor of three.

USEFUL INDUSTRY BENCHMARKS.

If your crew members work 45 man-hours per week 40 weeks a year, they each produce about 1,800 billable man-hours per year. An increase of \$1 to your crew's average wage translates to a \$3 increase to the rate you charge. It works out as follows for a crew of five people.

- 1,800 man-hours x 5 people = 9,000 total billed man-hours
- \$1 increase to your cost of labor x 3 = \$3 increase per man-hour in the price of labor charged
- \$3 increase per man-hour x 9,000 billable man-hours = \$27,000 in extra net profit margin for your company

CONCLUSION. The average cost of field labor for my clients at the meeting and in Jackson will increase anywhere from \$1 to 3 per man-hour in 2017. Virtually all of these contractors will have to increase the price of labor to their clients by \$3 to \$6 per man-hour. While they don't necessarily like the increase, they realize they have little choice. Because most clients know the cost of labor is increasing, now is the time to increase the labor rate that you charge.

Just like my January drive to Jackson, the path that your business takes is filled with risk. Hopefully you'll prepare for the hazard that labor cost increases pose to your bottom line. If you do, your bottom line will remain on track. If not, you could be smothered in an avalanche of thousands of hours of under-priced labor. **L&L**

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For more questions you should be asking, visit Lawnandlandscape.com and search culture checklist.



CULTURE CHECKLIST

QUESTIONS EVERY CEO SHOULD ASK:

- What is working? What do you like about your culture? What do you dislike? Where does accountability rank? Is there a sense of urgency? Is there a sense of decency?
- What traits make a “keeper”? Why do your best employees stay? What motivates them? What values do they align with? What don’t they like? What do they see as your company’s weaknesses and strengths?
- What behaviors irritate you? Is there a lack of social interaction? Too many slackers? Hardworking but under-qualified people? Extreme competitiveness? A lack of teamwork? Silo politics? If so, why, and what steps can you take to fix?

• **MOST LANDSCAPE BUSINESS OWNERS** talk about culture the way most people talk about diet and exercise. Every CEO knows that the organization needs to be more fit and functional, but changing workplace behaviors to get there is as easy to put off as a New Year’s resolution to get back to the gym. Willpower is simply not enough.

Over the last decade, owners have become more aware of the advantages a high-performing culture offers. What’s less clear is how to achieve it. Defining what makes some cultures thrive and what tears others apart is knowing that:

1. Cultures aren’t fixed; they are changing and evolving and unique.
2. They are vulnerable to constant market and human variables.
3. They are defined by the cumulative traits and behaviors of employees.
4. The best way to change workplace behaviors and habits is to make change less difficult. Let’s explore.

1. CULTURE AS PERPETUAL MOTION MACHINE. Your business culture is not easy to pin down. It is subject to constant whims from diverse stakeholders, fickle customers, economic swings and generational attitudes, which all impact your company’s unique rhythms. Keeping your culture from being manipulated



BRUCE WILSON is principal of green industry consulting firm Bruce Wilson & Company.

by any one of these elements can be managed by recognizing that, like the unfit body, frequent recalibration is required to keep your culture in better shape. And the secret to cultural strength is equally universal: discipline, consistency and elevating culture to its rightful place as the driving force of your business. Make caring for it a top operational priority.

2. CULTURAL DRIFT. Avoiding drift starts with being more careful about decisions. While one bad decision, such as a bad hire, can be singularly disruptive, when combined with recurring poorly executed plans or ideas, your company will veer off course and be more difficult to turn around. Slippage can be halted by having leaders and managers – in fact your whole team – who com-

pletely buy in to your purpose and behave in a manner that supports it. When purpose is embedded into your organizational fabric, everyone can self-correct on a daily basis. Giving culture a voice at your planning and strategy table, in the hallways and at the water cooler will empower everyone to act accordingly.

3. EMPLOYEE BEHAVIORS. Make sure that you and your leadership team are united in walking the walk – that the values your company holds: codes of conduct, ethics, standards and practices, vision and mission statements, training programs and incentive/accountability systems – are clearly defined. Understand the behaviors and personalities needed to execute your mission and vision. If sense of urgency is an important behavior, interview for that trait. Use your role modeling and these tools to identify what your company stands for and why, and what is acceptable and what is not.

Be strategic about hiring people

who are compatible with your values. When people are not value/behavior-aligned, or toxic employees are indulged, the whole organization suffers. Employing people who value your values should be every owner’s No. 1 goal.

4. WORKPLACE ADJUSTMENTS. As your company gets going on cultural improvements, it’s essential to build in measures to manage the process. Enacting a system of penalties and rewards can help filter and shape workplace behavior. So can terminating cultural misfits and chronically negative employees. I have seen a number of companies that have all the makings of a great culture but allow difficult employees to sabotage unity, cohesiveness and effectiveness. These misfits are often in key positions and hard to replace.

Often owners protect these employees due to their loyalty and past contributions, while at the same time, are frustrated with their company’s financial results. They work around the misfits but rarely hold them accountable. While it might be a painful decision to make in the short term, getting rid of the people who aren’t aligned with your values will pay off over time. **L&L**

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SELLING YOUR LAWN CARE BUSINESS



ALL BUSINESS OWNERS will someday turn their business loose in one way or another. The main options are: **1.** The business is liquidated due to failure, death of the owner or other circumstances, often at a loss. **2.** The business is passed on or sold to family members. **3.** The business is successfully sold to another company, private investors, ESOP, etc., for a nice gain.

If you're fortunate enough to survive those early years and eventually build something of value, there will come a time when you will want to shed the daily responsibility of owning a business, while taking some "chips off the table" in converting your paper equity to cash.

One never plans on going the way of option No. 1, but in reality that happens to many small business owners. Option two may be good for a few, but the reality is that only 30 percent of second generation family businesses survive, and only 12 percent make it to the third generation.

So in my case, while I love my sons and daughter, I did not want to try to beat those odds in passing my business of 18 years, LawnAmerica, to them. My hope was that they



BRAD JOHNSON is founder of LawnAmerica, which he sold to Swingle in 2016.

blaze their own trail in whatever they chose to pursue, and enjoy the journey as I did during my 31-year lawn care career and selling three different businesses.

So, I started to prepare my business to be sold over the last three years or so in order for it to be passed on to another party that would not only preserve the legacy of what we'd built, but possibly take LawnAmerica to another level in the future. And of course, I wanted to walk away with a financial reward of the many years of hard work and sacrifice.

In many ways, selling a good business you love can be more difficult than starting it. It's your baby and there are many people you care about involved as customers and employees. It was important to me to take care of those people so that they would continue to be able to work at a great place.

I found that many of the suitors for my business were more concerned about cash flow than the people who actually helped to generate the profits. So, lesson one is to look for a buyer who genuinely understands the importance of taking care of the people in our

business and sees the value in what they bring to the business.

Lesson two in looking for the best suitor for your business is to find a company or investor who shares most of your core values, culture and processes. It's never going to be an exact match, but there must be commonalities in what you do in processes and in your culture. Opposites may attract in some marriages, but not in most businesses.

Once you find a possible suitor and the relationship gets to the point of an actual offer, then it can become more challenging in many respects. Business owners often think their business is worth more than it is, and buyers do not want to pay more than what it's worth... at least most buyers. I did not use a broker in the sale and negotiation of my business. In retrospect, I probably should have, considering the value and complexity of the business.

I did employ a broker as an advisor during the final stages of due diligence, which helped us solve many of the issues that will always come up in the due diligence phase of the sale.

Selling your business is almost a full-time job by itself, and can take away from your core responsibilities of continuing to run your business during the sales process. So find trusted people who can help you rather than trying to go it alone, as many of us bull-headed entrepreneurs tend to do.

You'll only sell your business once, so you'll want to do it right. I was fortunate to be able to successfully sell mine and to walk away, somewhat, as I'm still employed part-time for LawnAmerica. The buck just does not stop with me anymore, and at my age, that's fine by me! **L&L**

“IN MANY WAYS, SELLING A GOOD BUSINESS THAT YOU LOVE CAN BE MORE DIFFICULT THAN STARTING IT.”

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COVER
STORY

PRICE

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LOWBALLING
AND SMART SELLING IS A MATTER OF STRATEGY.

BY KATE SPIRGEN



POINT

LOWBALLER IS A DIRTY WORD IN THIS INDUSTRY.

Grass Roots in New Fairfield, Connecticut, defines a lowballer the same way most in the industry do: someone who cuts corners to give low prices and uses inferior products or unlicensed applicators.

"I do think lowball contractors hurt because they are cutting corners and giving what looks like the same product, but the long-term results will show it's not," he says.

Out of more than 600 contractors we surveyed, 89 percent say they've lost business to a lowballer in the last three years. However, nearly three-quarters have found it advantageous to lower their prices at some point. Some say it's a good strategy to keep their existing customers happy, while others say they'll do it when they know a client will have more work for them in the future. Still others use it as a strategy when moving into a new market.

And some don't view lowballers as all bad. "Low pricing forces us to constantly evaluate our processes and pricing, making sure we are productive, proactive and aggressively managing our expenses," says Bruce Bachand, vice president at Carol King Landscape Maintenance in central Florida. "What hurts most is when large national or regional companies buy jobs simply to increase market share. In many cases, those efforts lower job prices to levels that take years to bring back to realistic levels."

STRATEGIC PRICE SLASHES.

There are cases where lowering price can be advantageous. Many landscapers do it to keep a good customer happy or win over a new client. In fact, 80 percent say there are times when competing on price is necessary and 60 percent have lowered their price to win a job.

NOTE: We surveyed more than 600 landscape contractors to find out what they think about pricing in the industry. Lowballing is a big concern in the industry, but only 12 percent say they've ever been accused of undercutting.

But when competition is tough and you see an opportunity, is lowering price a necessary evil? According to our exclusive research, it depends on why and how you do it.

John Wolf, owner of



75
PERCENT

of contractors surveyed say they felt they had to compete on cost when they first started out. After two years, half had raised their prices.

92
PERCENT

of contractors surveyed say they've picked up business from clients who were dissatisfied with lowball contractors in the last three years.

Wolf used it as a strategy when he saw his competition offering tick control application to a client at lower price than his company. "I saw that we were doing so many services for him and getting less for the applications would be better than letting another company do it," he says.

He also says it's an acceptable strategy when a client receives multiple services and having the customer makes routes more efficient.

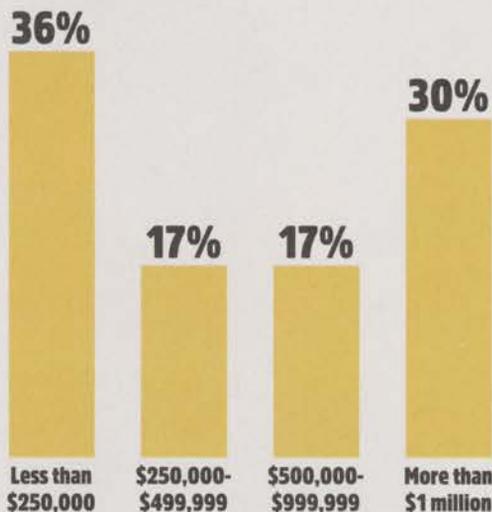
Rich Stephens, president of Red Oak Contractors, a \$1.6-million lawn care and landscape business in Arnold, Missouri, will discount some

aspects of a job if his company is already doing a project for a customer, or if a customer accepts multiple proposals for the same time frame. If that's the case, he can discount travel time or labor.

Ricardo Baldi, owner and founder of Baldi Gardens in Arlington, Texas, will lower his gross profit margins during the slow season or change the scope of work to lower the price of a job to secure a customer. But under normal circumstances, it's not an option for his team, even though lowballers are a big problem in his area, he says.

"Since there is so much work here, and we are close to Mexico,

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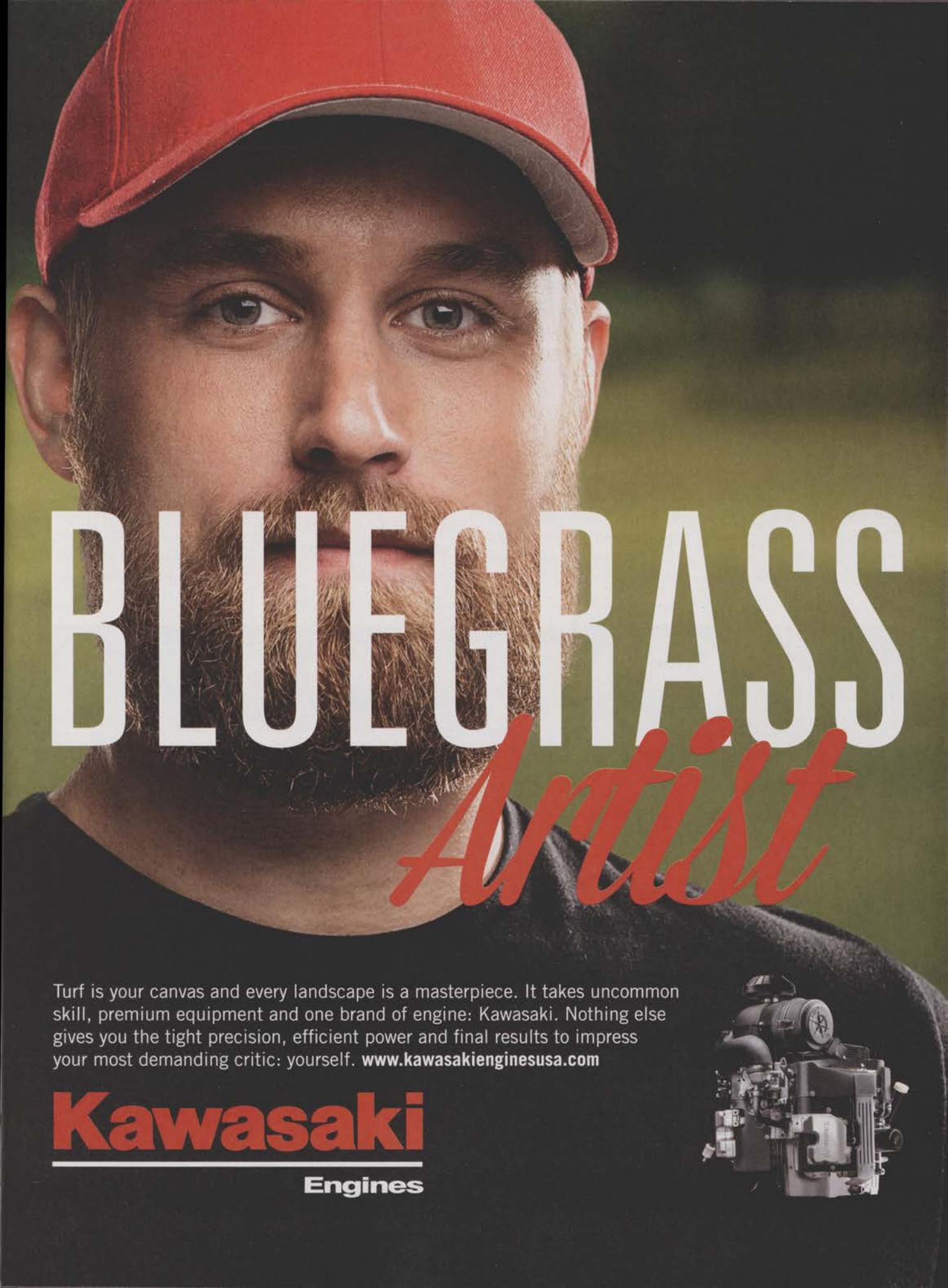
RICH STEPHENS, PRESIDENT OF RED OAK CONTRACTORS, a \$1.6-million lawn care and landscape business in Arnold, Missouri, will discount some aspects of a job if his company is already doing a project for the customer, or if the customer accepts multiple proposals for the same time frame.



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COVER STORY

we have lots of people moving into the state and they find it easy to become a landscaper," he says.

Lowering pricing can backfire though. Last year, Wolf lowered prices on fall cleanup for a customer, but when he calculated the hours it took to complete the task, he realized he should have stuck with his original number.

Stephens learned that lesson as well when he once lowered his prices to get a maintenance contract to meet a competitor's bid and couldn't make his target numbers on the job.

Cutting prices is the second most popular reason to lower prices among landscapers, right

behind keeping a current customer happy, according to our research.

But Stephens says it hurts the industry since many homeowners have a more DIY mindset and look more at the cost of materials than the cost of skilled labor. "When it comes to what we do, two finished projects using the same materials can look and perform very different as time passes," he says.

He says that the difference will show as early as a year after an installation, and customers who go with the cheaper option often end up paying twice: once to get the job installed and again to get that job fixed.

"WHAT HURTS MOST

is when large national or regional companies buy jobs simply to increase market share. In many cases, those efforts lower job prices to levels that take years to bring back to realistic levels."

Bruce Bachand, vice president at Carol King Landscape Maintenance in central Florida

GETTING INTO THE GAME.

Many entry-level landscapers felt they needed to compete on price when they first started out in the field, but there's a difference between cutting prices to achieve a goal and competing solely on price. According to our research, nearly three-quarters of those in the industry say price is among the most important factors to customers in their markets. Fifteen percent raised their prices in their first season and 35 percent raised their prices within the first two years.

"An entry-level landscaper is one who just doesn't understand the real costs of running a busi-

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While many worry about lowball competition, three-quarters of lawn care and landscape contractors say their prices are somewhat higher than the competition. Less than 1 percent say their prices are much lower than average.

THE TERM 'LOWBALLER'

can mean many things in this industry. Those who took the survey let us know where they stand on the issue and we got some very differing responses. Some see lowballers as people who are new to the industry while other see them as weekend warriors. Still others see them as competition whose profit margins are just enough to sneak by on.

Here are some contractors describe lowballers:

- "A poor quality workmanship, poor equipment and lacking knowledge and skills. Someone who is anti-construction permit and operates a business (without) professional licensing even when they are required."
- "Confuses staying busy with making money."
- "A low-ball contractor is an individual that doesn't understand their operating cost, is willing to sacrifice quality in an attempt to complete the project and cares nothing about tarnishing the image of the green industry."
- "Companies using subpar materials and minimum profit margins to undercut the competition resulting in dissatisfied customers and a blemish on our industry as a whole."
- "A contractor who only wins business solely based on lowest price."
- "Coming in to poach my customers, talking to customers and promising them the moon and doing exactly what I would do for a fraction of price for what really needs done to do the job correctly."
- "Here today, gone tomorrow."
- "Someone that low bids everybody to get the work no matter who is involved."

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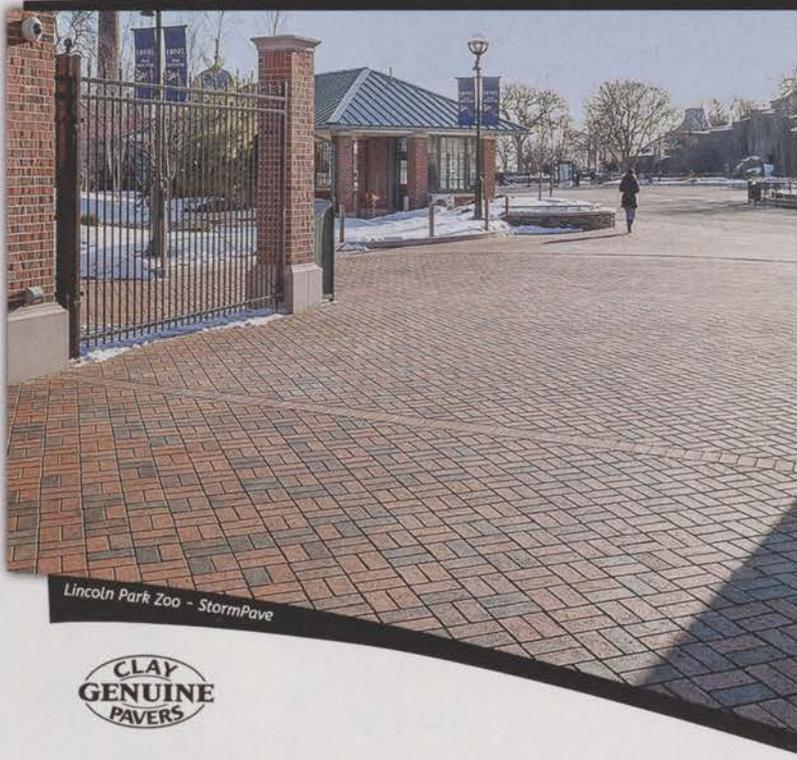
ness and tends to under-bid for a while until they either go out of business or get educated on the real costs of running a business," says Gayle Van Sessen, director of sales and

marketing at Blade Cutters Landscaping. "A lowballer is one who knows and just doesn't care."

Landscape contractors generally see a

lowballer as someone who either doesn't understand the industry and how to make a bid, or someone who will lower a price just to get a job. Many also say lowballers don't have insurance or proper licensing which allows them to place lower bids.

Bachand says entry-level landscapers and lowballers are similar since neither understands the costs associated with completing a job and making a profit. However, Wolf believes entry-level landscapers can bid lower since they have less overhead and can perform work themselves without sacrificing quality.



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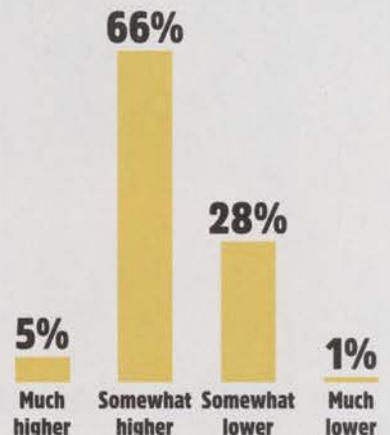
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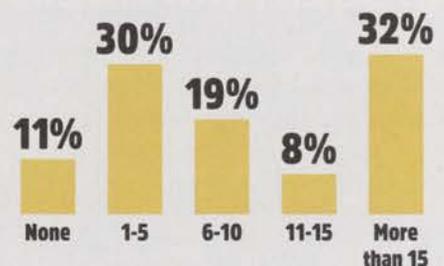


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COVER STORY

Stephens says lowballers often have a “Wal-Mart mentality” of doing high volume with low prices. “In our industry, however, this can only work so long because the wear and tear

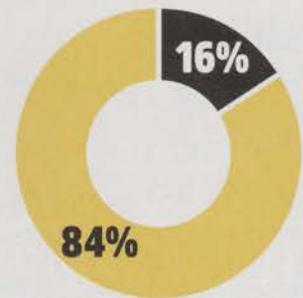
on trucks, equipment and bodies will soon need upgrades and typically the lowballer cannot afford to upgrade and that’s why most of them don’t last five years or more,” he says.

Most agree that lowballers are aware of what they’re doing and cut corners to get the job done, unlike entry-level landscapers who either figure out how to price their services in a way that will net a profit or go out of business.

STICKING TO YOUR GUNS.

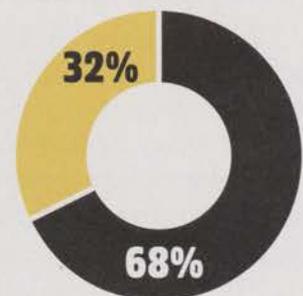
But others say lowering prices is never a good strategy. Blake Reeder, president of Verde Landscape, says he isn’t in business to lose money and instead, sells based on quality. He’s been in business for 13 years

DO YOU USE LOW PRICES AS A STRATEGY TO GET JOBS?



● Yes ● No

ARE THERE TIMES WHEN IT'S ADVANTAGEOUS TO LOWER YOUR PRICES?



● Yes ● No

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and brought in \$3 million last year.

Lowballers are a big problem in his area of Lubbock, Texas, since they drive prices down and lower the expectations of his clients, he says. And he's lost clients in the past to lower cost competitors.

"This makes it difficult to sell the quality and service because the customer has been sold based on price in the past," he says.

However, Reeder says his quality speaks for itself and lowballers actually make his business look good. He's picked up some customers

THE BIGGEST COMPLAINTS LANDSCAPERS hear from customers who got fed up with their old service provider are a lack of communication, inconsistent pricing and just generally low-quality work.

And while price is one of the most important factors to most customers, it's not the only thing that matters.

"Our quality speaks for itself," Reeder says. "Quality and service don't come cheap."

Wolf points out to his customers that his team members are properly trained and outfitted, and that he's licensed and insured. "But we are not for everyone and if there's someone lower and that's what they want to do, I understand but I think if they try us, they will most likely keep us and not have to worry about another landscaper for a long time," he says.

Others point to awards, reviews or other nearby customers to show that they're worth the money. Sometimes that education includes walking potential clients through the job from start to finish. For Stephens, that includes guaranteeing that there won't be any surprises when the final bill comes.

"Many lowballers give a low price to get the work and the finished project is less than described and then the extras kick in and the quality of work is low or there are many things the client still has to have done when the project is done," he says.

HOW CONCERNED ARE YOU ABOUT LOWBALLING IN YOUR MARKET?

41 PERCENT **→ VERY CONCERNED**

45 PERCENT **→ SOMEWHAT CONCERNED**

14 PERCENT **→ NOT AT ALL CONCERNED**



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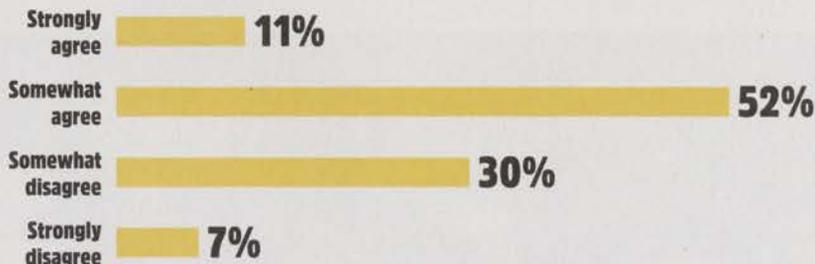


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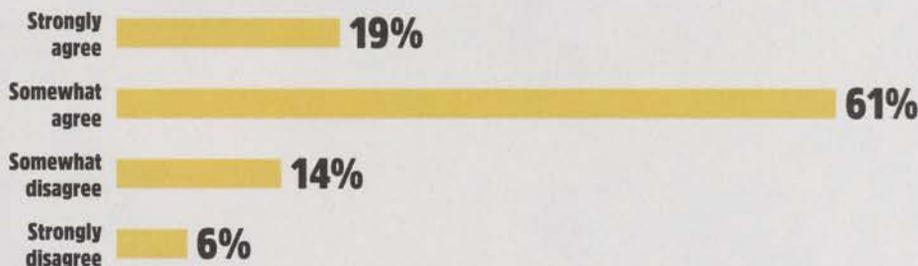
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We asked contractors if they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

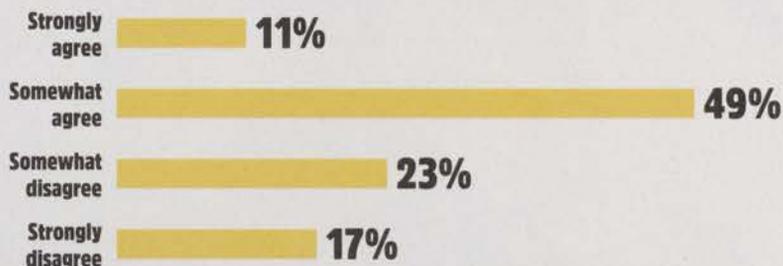
PRICE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR TO CUSTOMERS IN MY MARKET



THERE ARE TIMES WHEN COMPETING ON PRICES IS NECESSARY



I HAVE LOWERED THE PRICE OF MY WORK TO WIN A JOB



who weren't satisfied with the professionalism, consistency and attention to detail of competitors who charge less.

"They make us look good. We charge more, but we provide a top-tier service," he says.

Van Sessen agrees, although lowballing isn't a big problem for her in Crown Point, Indiana. She says most often, lowballers are either newcomers to the industry or they're landscapers who are getting ready to retire. Either way, they aren't interested in helping to further the industry, she says.

Blade Cutters' policy is not to bargain with customers on price. Instead, they always give the best and lowest price on

the first proposal no matter what. The company has been in business for 19 years and brought in \$1.9 million in 2016.

"Several years ago, we used to lower prices for a larger customer, maybe for a specific project, or a one-time project, but then they began to expect it for every project so we no longer do it for anybody," she says. **L&L**

Editor's Note: To see how your prices stack up to the rest of the industry, see our Benchmarking Your Business report in the November issue. (<http://bit.ly/Benchmarkreal>) Let us know where you stand on the topic on Twitter at @lawlandscape or on Facebook.

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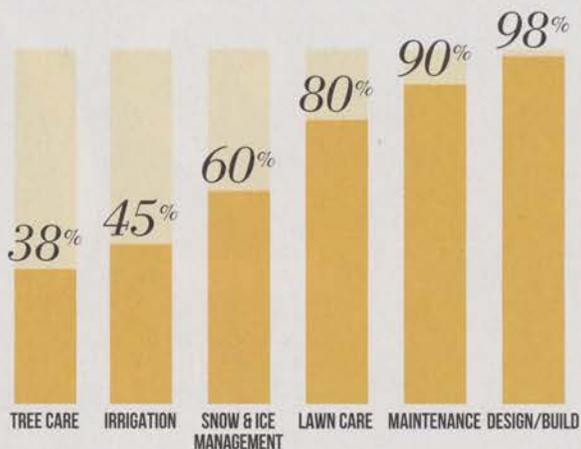
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WHAT SERVICES DO YOU OFFER? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.



*Lawn & Landscape magazine financing survey, February 2017

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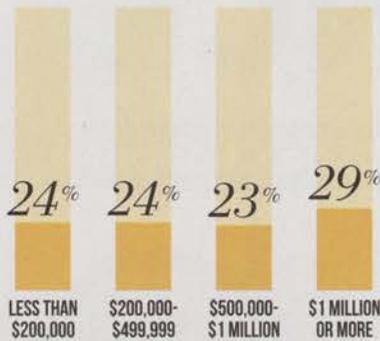
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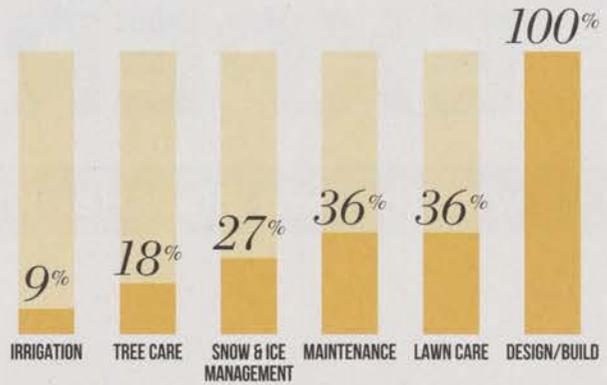


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FOR WHICH SERVICES DO YOU OFFER THIRD-PARTY FINANCING? CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY.



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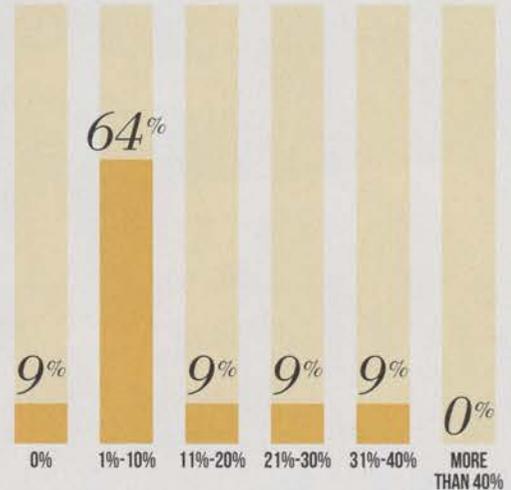
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WHEN A CUSTOMER REJECTS A JOB? (IN PERCENTAGE)

92 COST OF THE JOB IS TOO MUCH **2** PAYMENT OPTIONS AVAILABLE **6** SPREAD THE JOB OVER SEVERAL MONTHS/ YEARS TO AFFORD



AS A PERCENTAGE, HOW MANY OF YOUR CUSTOMERS SIGN UP FOR FINANCING?



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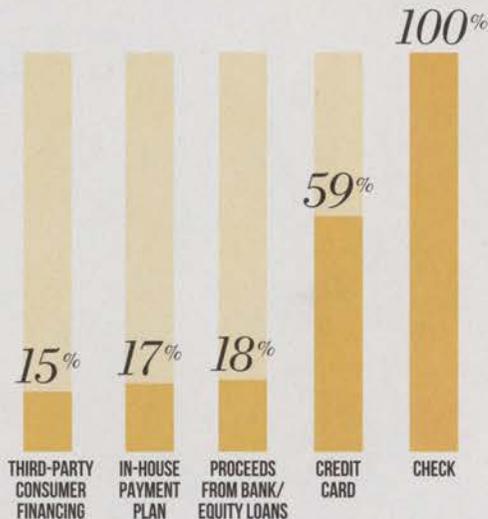
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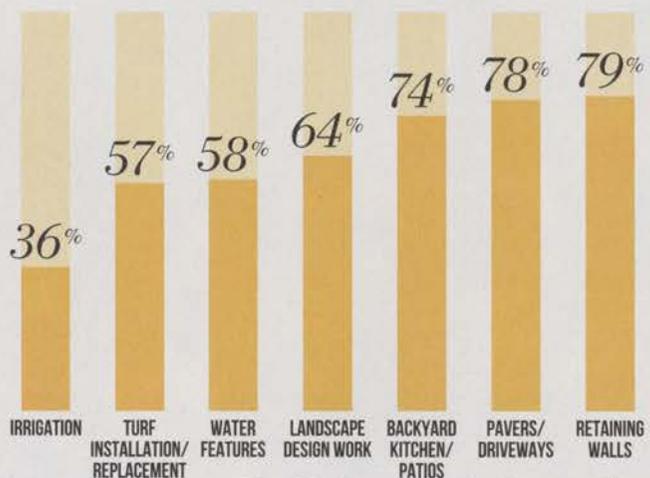
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WHICH JOBS ARE MOST LIKELY NOT PAID FOR WITH CASH? CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY.



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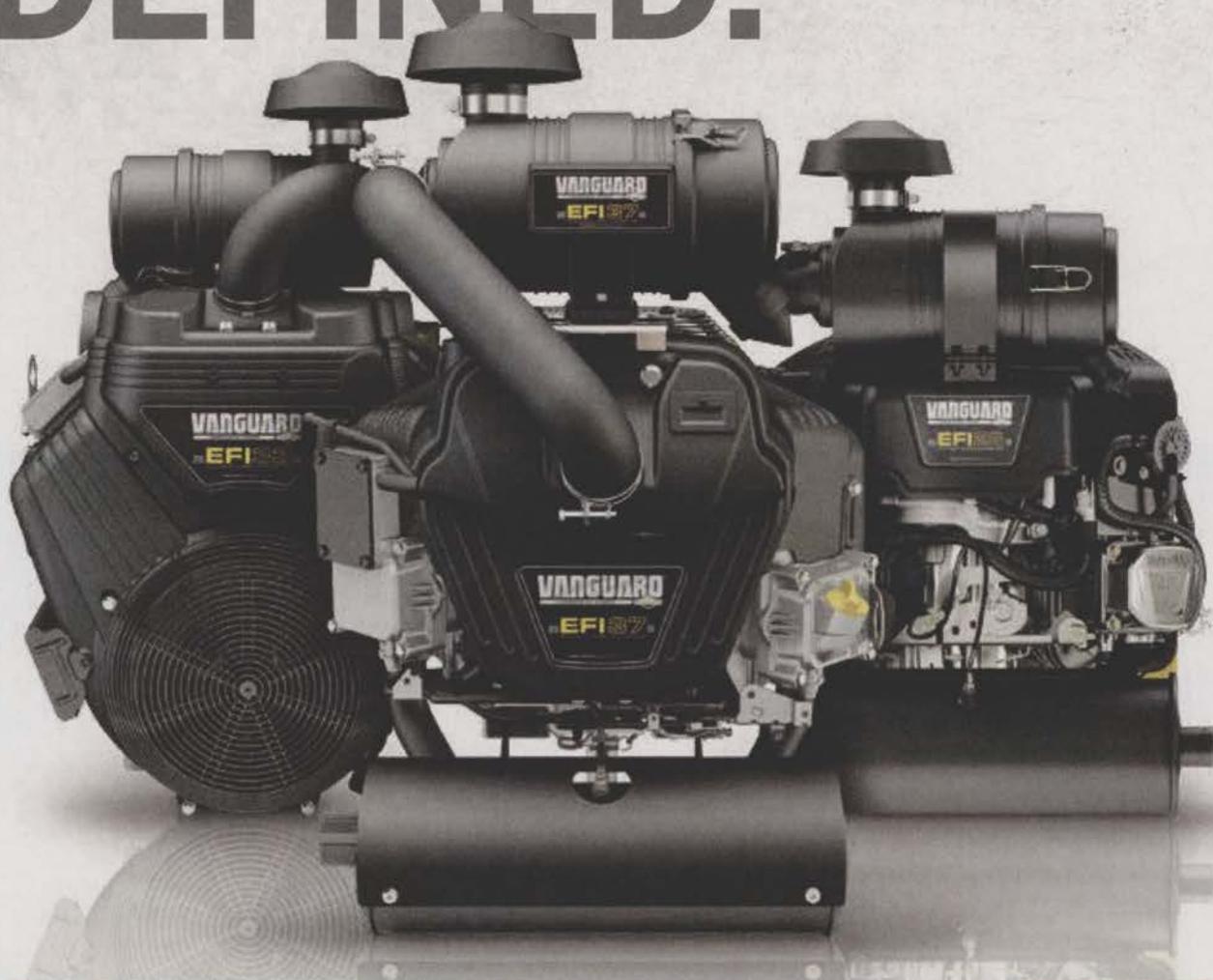
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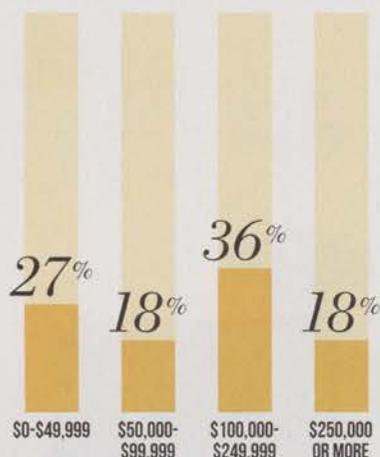
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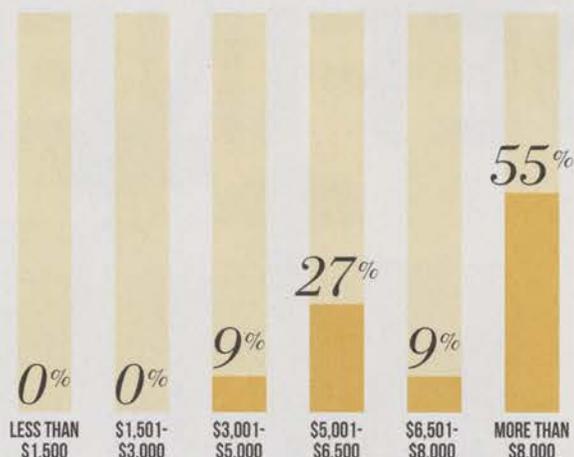
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CONSUMER FINANCE VOLUME?**



**WHEN ONE OF YOUR CLIENTS USES YOUR CONSUMER
FINANCING, WHAT IS THE AVERAGE TRANSACTION SIZE?**



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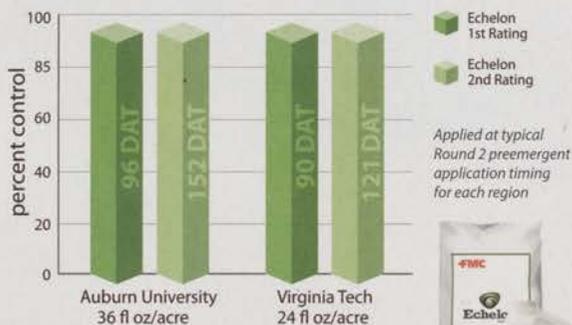


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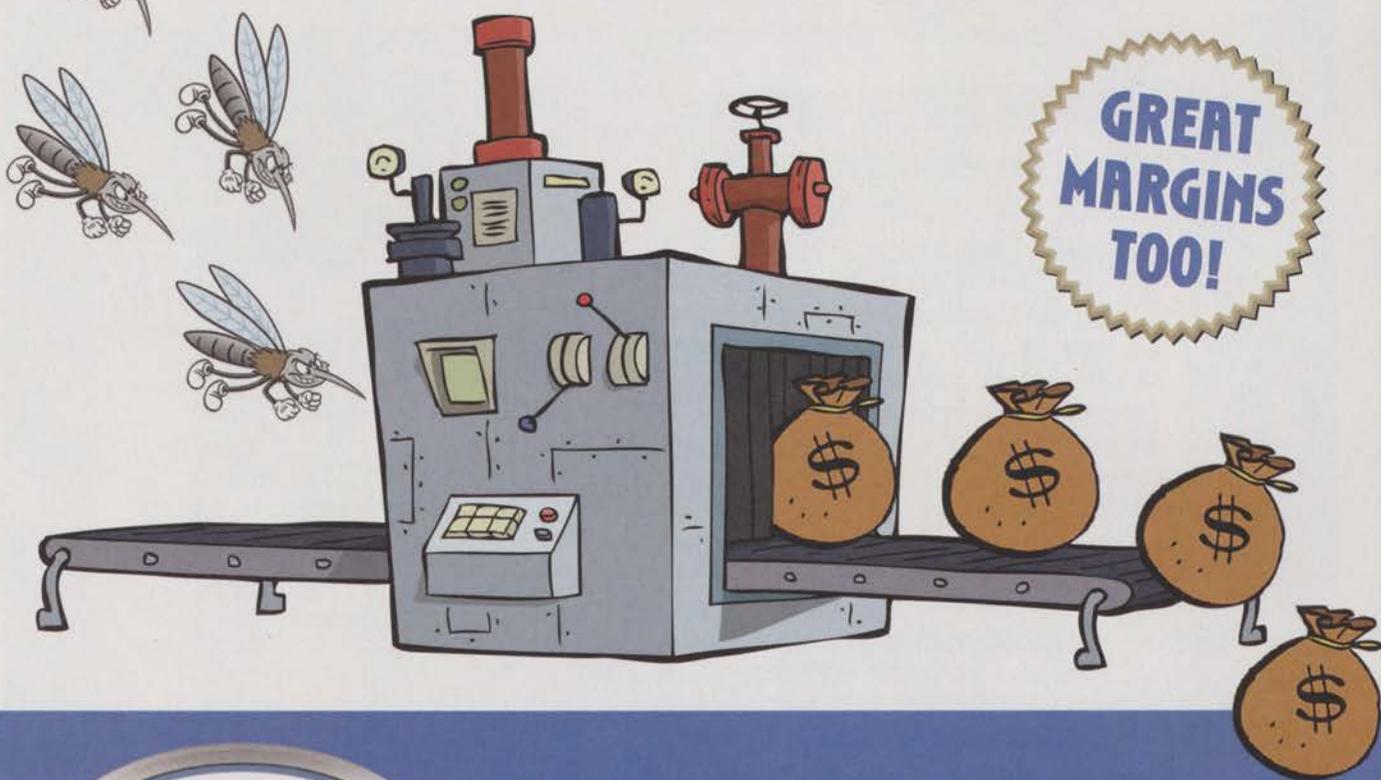
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BUZZKILL

Take the time to decide if adding mosquito services is right for your company. **By Katie Tuttle**

IN 2016, THE THREAT OF THE ZIKA VIRUS had many in the U.S. on alert about mosquitoes. “I think because of the Zika virus and the amount of media attention that it received, we actually had a good number of customers asking for the service,” says Robert Kerns, president and CEO of Custom Turf Lawn & Irrigation Services.

Located in Finleyville, Pennsylvania, Custom Turf added mosquito control as a service in 2016, first marketing to existing customers via invoice upsells.

“We took a very conservative approach to advertising,” Kerns says. “We didn’t want to invest a tremendous amount of dollars to the service, not really knowing if it would be successful.”

Roger Slaughter, owner of S&S Landscape in Hickory, North Carolina, also starts with his current client base when selling mosquito services.

“We started offering it even before the Zika problems happened in Florida and the deep south, and out of the country, but we started offering mosquito spray just because they’re a nuisance,” he says, adding that this is the company’s third year offering mosquito services.

That nuisance factor of mosquitoes can be an effective selling tactic compared to marketing the threat of Zika or West Nile.

“We’ve – in West Michigan – had West Nile virus for many years,” says Jim Zylstra, owner of Tuff Turf Molebusters in Byron Center. He says many people

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Isuzu NPR HD with 12' Dump Body
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MOSQUITO CONTROL

in the area don't fear acquiring a mosquito-borne illness unless they've known someone personally affected by one. Therefore, they're not likely to purchase the services to prevent those.

"Until it happens to somebody they know, it's really a 'not in my backyard' thing, so I wouldn't really use the viruses as a scare tactic," Zylstra says. "We go more for comfort. They're just a pain. Who wants mosquitoes landing on your arm while you're trying to enjoy outside?"

"To me, the mosquito buzzing in somebody's ear is a much better sales tactic than the threat of disease or a virus."

ADD-ON. While adding a mosquito service may seem simple, with low-cost products and equipment, it's important to look into a few factors before you just hand your guys backpack sprayers.

"First of all, you should know your state requirements for certification and licensing," Zylstra says. "At least in Michigan, they are their own classification, not general pest. So know what your state requires."

Once you've considered what requirements are present in your state, you need to train crews. Training requirements vary by state as well.

HAVE YOU HAD NUMEROUS (MORE THAN 10) CUSTOMERS ASK YOU SPECIFICALLY ABOUT PREVENTING THE ZIKA VIRUS?



"The required training comes from the state of North Carolina," Slaughter says. "I'm the one who holds the license. They dictate to me the training I need. We have to maintain our license and in order to maintain in North Carolina, we're required to have so many hours of training a year."

Ron's Organics, in Mesquite, Texas, approaches mosquito control differently. Owner Ron Hall's crews use an organic approach of applying plant oils.

Because of this, his crews require different training than most mosquito control crews.

"It's a pretty short learning

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MOSQUITO CONTROL

curve," Hall says. "A lot of it has to do with the employee." Hall's crews watch YouTube videos with him before going out in the field and applying sprays made of garlic, clove,

cinnamon, thyme or peppermint. He also applies garlic granular products to the ground.

Kerns's training focuses on showing crews the most common locations of mosquitoes



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STOP SWATTING

Concerns about Zika have more contractors offering insect control. **By Kate Spirgen**

AS NEWS OF THE ZIKA VIRUS hit last summer, lawn care and landscape companies saw an opportunity to add mosquito-control to their services and with some success last year, they plan to continue offering it.

Joseph Holland, president and owner of Majestic Lawn and Landscape in New City, New York, added about a dozen mosquito-control accounts due to Zika concerns last year. That increased the revenue of his full-service lawn and landscape business by about \$3,000. But in his area, the main concern isn't mosquitoes; it's ticks that carry and spread Lyme disease.

Luckily, the chemical Majestic uses kills both ticks and mosquitoes so he can kill two birds with one stone. The company bought a new \$1,000 backpack sprayer to apply chemicals more effectively.

Holland says most of the new accounts were either couples starting families and elderly customers.

"I spoke with a few other guys in the business and they were as surprised as I was that people aren't really going crazy to get on board with this stuff," he says.

Mike Wakeam, owner of RISON Irrigation-Lighting in Mt. Brydges, Ontario, also started a mosquito control service last year, adding it to irrigation and lighting. His company installs a lure and trap system that needs to be serviced once a month, putting it on the same timeline as irrigation services.

"The nice thing with this product that I'm selling is that I didn't have to buy any special equipment for it," he says. He simply sells the product to the resident and offers to provide the monthly service it requires.

Majestic is forging ahead with the service next year and planning to send out mosquito control marketing along with the first three billings of the year in hopes of picking up some more business.

RISON also plans to continue adding mosquito control accounts. Wakeam says the hardest part of selling his system is proving that it works, especially since control doesn't happen overnight. But as customers see results, he plans to use their reviews on his website.

"If the market keeps up and people want to purchase the product, I'm absolutely going to continue offering this," he says.

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MOSQUITO CONTROL

depending on different variables.

"The training is probably more technical than anything in terms of the habitat of a mosquito," he says. "Where they tend to congregate, under what conditions, the months of the year ... those specific questions are the specific details of a mosquito's lifestyle."

When using chemicals, one of the most important things for your crews to understand and actively do, according to Zylstra, is wear personal protection equipment. "Because this is a product that is putting up a fine particle in the air, you're going to be having to wear a lot more

PPE than we're used to," he says. This includes a full respirator, full face shield, long pants, boots and gloves.

Zylstra says it's also important for technicians to know the weather report for each day they'll be spraying.

"You can't do it with more than 10 mph wind, and you've got to watch the rain coming," he says. "It's the most weather-sensitive service we offer."

He adds that you don't want to do it on humid days because the moisture particles will stay suspended in the air.

THE SLOW GROW. If you're add-

HAVE YOU HAD NUMEROUS (MORE THAN 10) CUSTOMERS ASK YOU ABOUT PREVENTING OTHER MOSQUITO-BORNE ILLNESSES IN GENERAL NOT INCLUDING ZIKA (E.G. WEST NILE, CHIKUNGUNYA, ETC.)



ing mosquito spraying as a way to build your revenue quickly, Kerns warns you to think again.

"It's not something we expected was going to break production records for our company," he says. The company has a three-step program in June, July and August, and first started advertising in early spring. "We got a little bit of traction in June, a little bit better in July, but by the time the third and final treatment rolled around, we actually had a pretty good response."

Tuff Turf Molebusters also saw a slow increase in service after the company started offering mosquito control to customers.



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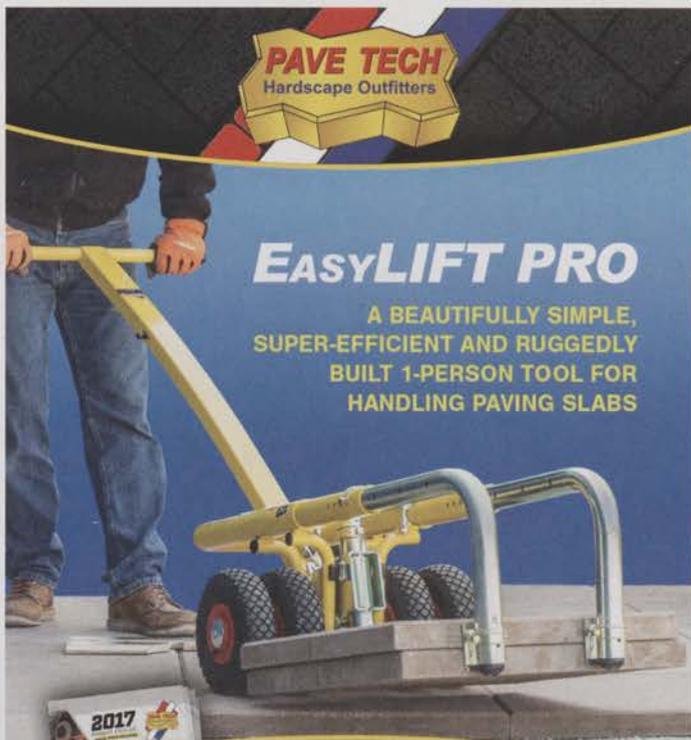
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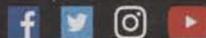


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MOSQUITO CONTROL

"It took us a long time to build up a good mosquito route," Zylstra says. "We were doing it for seven years and only had 35 clients that got mosquito control."

Then, five or six years ago, that part of Michigan saw a 100-year flood, with some yards seeing weeks of standing water.

When the water finally receded, some of the lawns were still wet and became a perfect habitat for mosquitoes.

"After three weeks, the mosquitoes were so bad, we literally went from 35 accounts to 305 within a 10-day window," he says. "I had five price increases.

We were selling 100 percent of the phone calls coming in."

The company raised prices until they only sold about 75 to 80 percent of the calls.

Since then, Zylstra says his company has had an 85 percent retention rate.

"We thought it would be one year and you're done, but they stayed with us," he says. "It comes and goes. Every year is different.

At the end of the day, location should be an important factor when determining whether it's a good idea for your company to add mosquito spraying as an add-on.

DO YOU CURRENTLY OFFER MOSQUITO CONTROL SERVICES?



"Look at the area of the country you reside and make a determination from there," Kerns says.

While he understands southern states will have more of a demand – sometimes resulting in companies that just offer mosquito spraying – he adds that states like Pennsylvania may not make as much sense, depending on companies in your area already offering it.

Still, he says to take the time and do a bit of research on what's out there for your location.

"It can be extremely lucrative," he says. "It can be very much in demand." L&L

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SOFTWARE UPDATE

After implementing CRM software, two companies weigh in on how it's helped their businesses. **By Katie Tuttle**

AS TECHNOLOGY CONTINUES to control back office operations, more and more companies are considering customer relationship management (CRM) software to help keep systems organized.

Reliable Property Services, located in St. Paul, Minnesota, and #49 on our Top 100 list, implemented CRM software three years ago. Dorie Roth, branch manager for the company's Racine branch, recommended CRM software to the company when she was hired to organize and grow her branch.

Previously, the company had used a proprietary access database with some customer information, but Roth admits it missed many components of what the company really needed.

"So, we brainstormed all the criteria or fields you might need in order to have all your contact information in there," she says. The brainstorming turned into a list, which became of flow chart

of items underneath different categories and that resulted in the full database.

This criteria included fields such as the ability to track activities, track opportunities and create history with future abilities of being able to speak to the company's accounting software.

Caretaker Landscape and Tree Management, ranked #71 on our Top 100 list, also recently implemented CRM software. The Gilbert, Arizona-based company decided it was time to have a database because client information was being saved on individual computers.

"If I was working on one group and someone else wanted to see it, they had to come over to my computer," says CEO Matt

White. "It was saved in Excel; everything was all over the place."

There also was no communication data, so any contact with a client had to be saved in an ongoing Outlook email trail for sales to figure out when they'd last spoken to a specific client.

IMPLEMENTATION. White says the system does a good job once implemented, but he says it's important to shop around and take the time to research what you're getting.

"When we started making the decision to switch, the cost seemed favorable," he says. But, as the company began implementing it, White discovered the program was too vast for the small company, and the only way to fit it was to bring in a third-party company to do it for them.

That customization ended up costing them twice as much, resulting in Caretaker going over budget and taking an extra three or four weeks to setup.

In hindsight, White says he wished the company had a better understanding of the implementation process.

"We didn't ask the right questions," he says. (See sidebar for a list of questions to ask.)

Despite problems implementing the software, White still recommends using CRM software, and advises asking other contractors about their experience with it.

"I don't think this is a differentiator for our company," he says. "It makes us a better sales team, but not a better company, so I'd have no problem talking to a friendly competitor." **L&L**

Matt White wishes he asked these questions before making his CRM purchase:

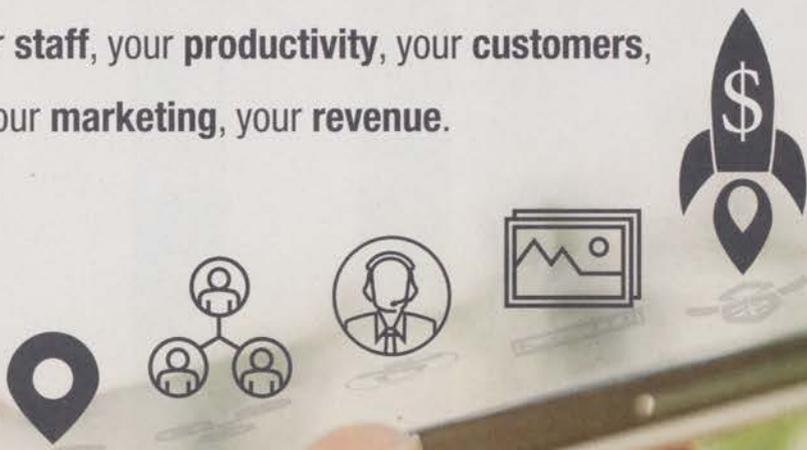
1. How much customization should we expect to meet our needs and what is the cost? Aside from the licensing, initial purchase price, customization and training, what other implementation costs should we expect? What should we budget those to be?
2. What are the maintenance costs?
3. How much additional training is included for our staff? If we need additional training, what would those costs be? What is typical training costs for companies our size? Is there long term training involved?
4. Is your company our long-term partner in the implementation and training for CRM software or is a third party our partner?
5. Is there a training class we can send our IT manager to? Is there a "train the trainer" option?

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SOIL SUCCESS

What lies beneath the turf is ultimately responsible for whether a lawn will thrive or struggle. Soil tests help lawn care operators determine what nutrients are necessary to include in a program.

By Kristen Hampshire

A SOIL SAMPLE IS THE ONLY way to take the guesswork out of lawn care. “It gives you an understanding of what’s there from a plant nutrition standpoint so you know what you’ll need to add in your nutrient management and fertilization program,” says Charles Peacock, professor and turfgrass extension specialist at North Carolina State University.

A soil sample is important for every lawn, and especially properties that a lawn care operator has just acquired. (Long-time accounts may go every two or three years between soil samples.) Also, if there are areas of lawn that are not responding to a program, a soil sample should be collected and sent to a laboratory to get answers.

“If you see some variations in the soil texture and color, you ought to isolate those spots and only sample from those particular areas,” Peacock says. “If the soil looks fairly uniform, you can take samples from throughout the property and send a composite sample to the lab.”



The number of samples drawn from a lawn will depend on what an LCO sees in terms of variations in color and texture, Peacock says. What's critical is to let the lab know that the sample should be interpreted from a fertilization viewpoint.

That way, specialists will know the purpose of the soil test and provide relevant recommendations. "You can get different recommendations based on the same soil test results depending on the lab interpretation," Peacock says.

Here are four soil test components Peacock emphasizes, though a soil test report from their local extension will provide exact recommendations based on their geography.

pH: Perhaps the important information you'll glean from a soil test is pH level. The optimum pH range for plant-available nutrients is between 6.2 and 6.5, Peacock says. If a soil is too acidic, those nutrients can be "too available" and toxic to roots systems (especially in the case of aluminum). When soil is too alkaline, not enough nutrients are freely available, so plants are basically not getting a proper meal from the soil.

The fix: Acidic soil benefits from additional magnesium. Alkaline soil requires a fertilizer nitrogen source that is acid-forming and will react with soil to reduce its alkalinity, such as ammonium nitrate or ammonium sulphate.

Phosphorus: You might have seen advertisements for phosphorus-free fertilizers, particularly

AN EFFECTIVE LAWN CARE PROGRAM IS TRULY ABOUT CREATING A NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM, NOT JUST FERTILIZING.

CHARLES PEACOCK, PROFESSOR AND TURFGRASS EXTENSION SPECIALIST, NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

from box stores promoting what is seemingly a healthier product for lawns. But if your soil is phosphorus deficient, this type of fertilizer won't deliver results. Phosphorus and potassium are critical for establishing stress and drought tolerance, and cold hardiness.

The fix: Research shows that fertilizers with a 2:1 nitrogen potassium level are effective in soils with a deficit, Peacock says. Phosphorus-deficient soils should be treated with fertilizers that do contain phosphorus.

Calcium and magnesium: Magnesium stokes chlorophyll production, which is essential for photosynthesis. Some soils have an imbalance of calcium and magnesium. When calcium is highly concentrated in the soil and magnesium is lacking, more magnesium is necessary to compete with calcium, Peacock says.

The fix: Products such as Sulfa-Mag will increase magnesium and potassium levels without affecting soil pH. (When soil pH is on the high end, adding straight magnesium can increase it further.)



Properly training lawn care technicians and educating clients can lead to beautiful lawns and happy customers.

Micronutrients: "In coastal areas and the deep south, their sandy soils have very poor inherent nutrient content," says Peacock, adding that micronutrients are not widely available in these types of soils.

"A soil test will give you an index value (of micronutrients), so you can determine what range the soil is in and whether you need to add back micronutrients."

• **The fix:** Iron and manganese are some common micronutrients that are added back into sandy soils that show deficiencies, though a soil test is the only way to identify exactly what soil needs.

ACHIEVING A BALANCE. Soil tests demystify what lies beneath the turf and help LCOs understand exactly how they can supplement the lawn with nutrients to achieve clients' goals.

"It's a real balancing act," Peacock says of making sure the nutrients in a lawn care program interact appropriately and benefit the soil pH.

"An effective lawn care program is truly about creating a nutrient management program, not just fertilizing," he says.

"You have to manage nutrients based on what the soil analysis tells you and what a particular turfgrass needs, and this can vary year to year." ●



AGRONOMIC ANSWERS

Lawn care operators solve tough turf issues by leaning on university extensions, supplier education and industry seminars. **By Kristen Hampshire**

THE THINNING BERMUDAGRASS on a client's property was receiving plenty of sunlight, but moss was growing in the turf. Garrick McCarty wasn't quite sure why the lawn was behaving this way, so he reached out to nearby Auburn University Extension to get some answers.

McCarty, owner of Running Roots Lawn Care in Birmingham, Alabama, customizes lawn care programs for every client's property. "That has been extremely important to my customers," he says. If a soil test comes back recommending an entirely different approach for a section of lawn, he'll modify the nutrient and fertilizer program accordingly.

Insight from agronomy experts helps McCarty identify lawn problems if he's not certain of the cause of an issue. That was the case on this Bermudagrass lawn. He sent in soil samples and learned that the soil was too acidic for that turf type to thrive. The extension recommended lime, and McCarty edited the lawn care program. Before he even had

a chance to tell the homeowner about the program change, the client remarked on how well the lawn had bounced back.

"The fertilizer mix recommended was a deviation from my normal summer fertilizer program, and it contained more phosphorus to help with rooting," McCarty says.

The client's remarks: "What you did really turned this around!"

LESSONS EVERYWHERE. McCarty also relies on a sales representative who works for his lawn care product supplier to provide information about turf disease and pest pressure. The supplier also

“
BETWEEN THE EXTENSION
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provides details about the latest technology and best practices for solving turf issues. A combination of resources gives him and other lawn care operators a proven foundation on which effective lawn care programs can be built.

"You can't just throw down fertilizer and be successful," says Robert Louiso, president, Louiso Lawn Care & Landscapes in Batavia, Ohio. He draws most of his turfgrass knowledge from experience working for the grounds department at a local golf course growing up. "Beyond that, I go to trade shows and attend seminars, read the trade magazines."

Information gives LCOs the power to tackle the most challenging lawn care issues. And accessing agronomic resources keeps operators' knowledge up to date.

That's why McCarty seeks out trade shows and classes held by the extension service so he can continue his education and pass that information on to his technicians. "If you can't find training, you aren't looking," he says.

AN EXTENSION OF TURF KNOWLEDGE. McCarty only focuses on lawn care, and he regularly sends out soil samples to Auburn University and emails questions to staff. "I might ask about different turf varieties that I don't always service or ways to fertilize grass when we see certain symptoms," he says.

A quick email can yield critical information for properly diagnosing and treating turfgrass issues, McCarty says. Soil samples are necessary when a lawn is not responding to McCarty's typical program.

Sometimes, customers ask for soil samples, and McCarty happily complies. When a client is invested in gathering information about soil to ensure the best lawn care program, he knows that's a customer who will value Running Roots' customized approach.

"I run a small company, and the response that I provide to customers is a differentiator for me," McCarty says, adding that he addresses turf issues with a sense of immediacy and educates clients in the process.

"We don't take a cookie-cutter approach," McCarty adds. The information he gathers from agronomist experts and longtime suppliers helps inform lawn care programs for clients. "We focus on being flexible, responsive and customizing."

"I have a sales rep who does a tremendous job of keeping me informed," McCarty adds. "Between the extension office and my supplier who has been in the business for 30 years, we get the information necessary to manage turf issues."

An agronomist's perspective also helps the way disease issues are managed at Guilford Garden & Lawn in Greensboro, North Carolina, says Eric Campbell, lawn and yard care manager.

Campbell often references TurfFiles, an online resource through North Carolina State University's turfgrass management program.

He can watch for pest, weed and disease pressure and learn about common symptoms he might find on clients' lawns. Images are especially helpful. "This is a recognized resource," Campbell says, adding that his customers are also aware of it. "I can tell a customer, 'I looked on TurfFiles,' and I can email customers links, 'Here is what TurfFiles says.'" ●



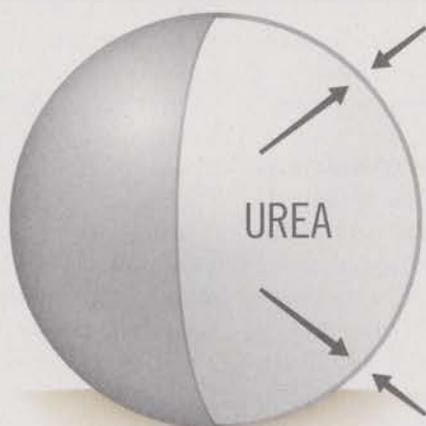
Ted Glaser, president of Summit Lawns, auto renews his customers' contracts each season to help with customer retention.

7 STRATEGIES FOR TURNING CLIENTS INTO KEEPERS

If you're looking to improve your customer retention, here are some suggestions you may have not considered. **By Kristen Hampshire**

"THIS IS A CUSTOMER BUSINESS," says Jerry Leary. "And, the customer is always right," he says, reciting an old adage that rings true today. Customers still want that relationship — they want to work with providers they trust and professionals who are knowledgeable.

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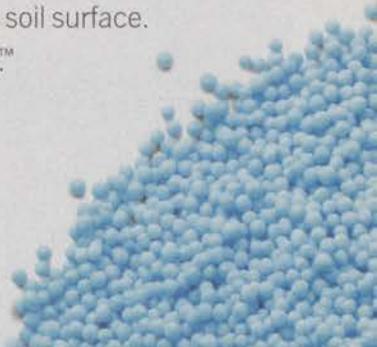
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Leary is president of Lawn Pro in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and after 37 years in the lawn care business, the average customer has been with his firm for almost 20 years.

He always takes the time to address clients' questions. "They are putting all of their faith and confidence in us," he says.

Here are seven strategies that Leary and other lawn care operators across the country use to keep their customer retention rates high.

1. LISTEN TO THE PROBLEM. Pay attention to how many times you interrupt a customer's feedback during the next call. Rushing into a solution is common; it's human instinct. But that doesn't exactly help a client feel the love.

"If a customer calls, I shut up," Leary says bluntly. "I want to listen to every word they say and then after they finish, then I respond. You don't win if you let them talk through half a sentence and then go into your 'tirade,' so to speak."

2. SQUEEZE IN FACE TIME. Emails can feel abrupt and get misinterpreted and text messages might feel terse. "If I get a sense that

a customer is having an issue that is bigger than what can be resolved easily over email or phone, I schedule time to meet in person," says Eric Campbell, lawn and yard care manager at Guilford Garden & Lawn in Greensboro, North Carolina.

In person, "you can gauge a person's tone better," Campbell says. "When we meet in person, we can talk out any concerns."

3. REMEMBER YOUR MANNERS. A thank-you note can go a long way toward earning a customer's appreciation. In today's digital age, the snail mail consists of bills or advertisements. A hand-written note is a rarity.

Leary sends holiday cards in December, and mid-season he sends thank-you notes. If he hears back from customers, he asks them, "Is there anything you'd like us to do for you?"

"This tells me if we need to tighten up with them and help them out," Leary says.

4. GIVE THEM OPTIONS. Customers won't seek other service providers if they can get what they need in one place. That's the theory that drives Robert

Louiso's diverse lawn care operation, which provides landscape maintenance, snow removal, landscape design and installation, firewood and car detailing. Louiso also owns a garden center and nursery.

Last year, he started his own operation. It's one more way to cater to the high-end clientele in Cincinnati, where Louiso Lawn Care and Landscapes operates.

5. AUTO-RENEW CONTRACTS. In some areas of the country, it's common for lawn care providers to go through an annual renewal season where all contracts are signed. But this isn't the case everywhere, says Ted Glaser, president, Summit Lawns, Lincoln, Nebraska.

"Where we are, it's understood that you'll be renewing, so in the fall we send out letters with the last invoice of the year, thank them for the season and says, 'See you again in spring,'" he says.

In February, Glaser sends out a letter that notifies clients of prepayment options. "We also use this as an opportunity to upsell spring services and say, 'We were servicing your

property last year, and we'll see you again soon,'" he says. That letter gives clients a chance to let Summit Lawns know if they will not renew versus going through an actual renewal period.

6. MAKE IT EASY TO PAY BILLS. If you can give them tools to make working with you easier, you'll increase customer satisfaction. Leary noticed this after he implemented a credit card payment option.

While only 10 percent of his customers take advantage of it, when a client asks if he or she can "charge it," the answer is yes. And, customers like to hear yes.

Sure, there's a fee for processing credit card payments, but Leary says he plans for this when pricing services. "So, I'm not losing that – the price is built in," he says. Clients who want to pay by credit card are happy they can "earn points" or whatever the motivation for charging the service, he adds.

7. USE SOFTWARE. "For commercial clients, customer retention comes down to how strong the relationship is, who we are competing against from a price standpoint and their property goals," Glaser says.

Using a CRM software helps Summit Lawns stay on top of client requests and issues so that all matters can be addressed quickly. The software automates communications, as well.

"We can send newsletters, emails and text to clients regularly," he says. "Using software to manage client relationships on the commercial side has been really helpful for us." ●



Summit Lawns sends a letter in February as a reminder service will begin soon, giving them a chance to not renew services for the season.

THE TRAINING WHEEL



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TURF & ORNAMENTAL

A 360-degree approach including soft skills, technical expertise and safety information produces a well-rounded, lawn care technician.

By Kristen Hampshire

IF A CUSTOMER HAS A QUESTION, technicians at B&B Lawncare are trained to listen carefully and offer some advice. “We make sure they understand all of the services we offer, and we try to build up their confidence that way so they have the knowledge of everything we can do for the customer,” says Larry Bennett Jr., president of the Richmond, Indiana-based business.

During monthly training meetings, various soft skills are also emphasized. “We talk about empathizing with the customer, being respectful, checking in to see how the customer is doing,” Bennett says. “With us being a smaller operation, that’s what I try to push – giving customers our best work.”

At Guilford Garden & Lawn in Greensboro, North Carolina, a similar approach to serving customers is emphasized to technicians.

In fact, communicating with

customers is so important that when a team member’s first language is not English, another technician will introduce that colleague to clients and involve him in customer interactions until a comfort level is established.

“That way, the customer is comfortable not only with me, but also with approaching technicians if there is an issue,” says Eric Campbell, lawn and yard care manager.

TEACHING CLIENT SERVICE. Erik Sweetser has been serving high-

end North Hampton, New Hampshire, clients for 25 years. He has five employees at his business, Green Grass Lawn Care. He personally trains employees to understand the level of quality property owners expect.

That includes staying in touch with customers to inform them of environmental situations. “Last year, we had a lot of drought issues and no one was able to water their lawns, so we kept up with customers to let them know, ‘This is why your applicator is showing up even though your lawn is brown – to control this insect from infiltrating,’” Sweetser says.

He sends up to five newsletters each year to “train” customers; and technicians fill out pre-made forms after every visit to leave behind and educate property owners on what products were applied, what to expect and how to follow up.

Sweetser personally walks technicians through the most common turfgrass problems so they gain an understanding of proper identification. “Certain issues can present themselves almost identically, such as drought

stress and grub damage,” he says. “You have to take technicians through the steps of deciding what the issue is.”

Sweetser is currently supporting one of his maintenance employees’ pursuit of lawn care applicator certification. The employee indicated interest in turf treatment last summer.

“I said, ‘OK, what do you see on this lawn? What is that weed?’” Sweetser says, noting how he would test him in the field as he took licensing courses.

GAINING TECHNICAL EXPERTISE.

Every year, Jerry Leary, president of Lawn Pro in Virginia Beach, Virginia, takes his team to the GIE+EXPO in Louisville, Kentucky, to learn from experts. They attend seminars and try out new products. “We gain a lot of knowledge from trade shows,” he says.

At least twice per year, Bennett sends technicians to Purdue University for training courses. These continuing education hours go toward maintaining their applicators’ licenses, Bennett says. The courses also keep technicians engaged in their profession.

Bennett pays for the courses, the travel, hotel and also the time they spend there.

“It’s an incentive for us, knowing they come back with knowledge, and for them, because they are learning and getting paid,” he says.

The training at Purdue gives his team a break from the regular routine, Bennett adds. Also, they can get a boost in their base pay when they continue their education. “That gets our guys excited,” Bennett says. ●



HAUL IT ALL

For design/build crews, the ability to carry materials is something all vehicles need to offer.

By Katie Tuttle

DESIGN/BUILD CREWS often have an array of tasks when they're on a jobsite. Because of this, there is often a large collection of tools and equipment needed by the same crew each day as the project progresses.

When it comes to keeping your crew's equipment, tools and supplies in order, a lot of it depends on the vehicle you store it all in.

"When I'm sending a crew to a jobsite, I want them to go there with as many things they need as possible," says Michael Spatola, general manager and landscape designer with Ross and Jack's Landscaping in Elmhurst, Illinois.

To handle this, Spatola's design/build crews drive dump trucks and pull trailers. The dump truck carries the materials while the enclosed

trailer houses the tools and equipment.

"So, when they get to the job site, they not only have the equipment they need, but they've also got easy access to the materials," he says. If the crew runs out of materials, they're able to easily unhitch the trailer so one person can drive the dump truck back to the supply yard while the rest of the crew keeps working.

Travis Self, owner of Rose Valley Custom Landscaping & Construction in Muscotah, Kansas, says his crews use box trucks for design/build jobs.

"They're really nice if you can afford to have a truck designated to a certain type of work," he says. "If you have one for just decks or one to do just landscaping or one to do just retaining walls, it makes your jobsite a lot more efficient."

Using dump trucks for design/build crews means materials can be carried inside the dump bed, while a trailer pulled behind can carry all the equipment and tools needed on the site.

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Self's company orders the box trucks and then customizes the inside, setting up shelves and other retaining systems to fit exactly what they need.

"Lumber's cheaper than metal shelving," he says, adding that members of his crews are able to build everything themselves. "We'll go ahead and set them up the way we want

them." That allows them to make shelves that fit the exact tools they need to hold, and leave the right amount of space for machines on the floor.

Spatola's company is able to customize its trailers as well, and his crews also do most customization in-house.

"The reason we do that is because each crew is going to be working with different materials," he says. "We have skilled guys who know how to do that stuff. Installing the shelving and everything is not that hard to do, and you're going to be paying a company a way higher labor rate if you have them do the custom things."

He says the only thing they customize prior to purchase is the length, width and weight capacity of each truck.

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EFFICIENCY IS KEY. Self says the one downside of a box truck over a setup like Spatola's is the ability to carry all supplies, resulting in lower deliver fees.

"I wish we could haul," Self says. "With all the tools and stuff we haul, we really don't leave a lot of room for raw materials with us."

Spatola says the efficiency of the dump truck-trailer system is a plus for his crews.

"For the type of work that we do, I think it's way more efficient to be able to drop tools off without having to unload everything — having that truck free to go get material or move material on the jobsite."

At the end of the day, Self suggests doing your research so you know what setup works best for your design/build crews.

"Research the brands as to what you're going to need," he says. "Research the engines. Really, you just want to do your research on what will work for you the best." **L&L**



Dump trucks allow crews to carry raw materials, tools and equipment in one trip.

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GRAVELLY PRO-WALK

The pitch: The 2017 Gravelly Pro-Walk is a completely-redesigned commercial walk-behind mower designed for the professional landscaper.

- With welded deck designs in 48-, 52- and 60-inch sizes, the Pro-Walk incorporates enhancements that improve cut quality, durability, maneuverability and ease of use.
- The Pro-Walk was designed with new steering controls, which offer a shorter learning curve while providing precision handling.
- Models are available with Kawasaki engines.

For more information:
Gravelly.com

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The pitch: New for 2017, BOB-CAT's Float Deck Hydro walk-behind mowers feature Zero-T drive tires. These tires offer improved grip on hillsides, better puncture resistance, improved tight turns without turf damage, and enhanced self-cleaning.

- The float deck is designed to move independently of the drive and caster wheels.
- Single-belt routing on the Float Deck Hydro mid-size walk-behind means a longer belt life.
- The walk-behind features a true float style DuraDeck.

For more information: Bobcatturf.com



CUB CADET SC700

The pitch: Cub Cadet's new SC700 with MaxControl is the first Cub Cadet walk behind mower to feature selectable four-wheel drive.

- Drive control enables the user to select front wheel drive, rear wheel drive or all-wheel drive for on-demand versatility.
- An integrated front bumper constructed of tubular steel provides added protection to the deck.

• It features an electric push-button start, and engine options include a 196cc Cub Cadet OHV engine or Honda GVC

For more information: Cubcadet.com



EXMARK TURF TRACER X-SERIES

The pitch: Exmark's Turf Tracer X-Series walk-behind mower features an Enhanced Control System (ECS), which places all vital controls at the operator's fingertips.

- A heavy-duty electromagnetic PTO clutch and single-belt deck drive offer increased durability and ease-of-maintenance.
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For more information: Exmark.com

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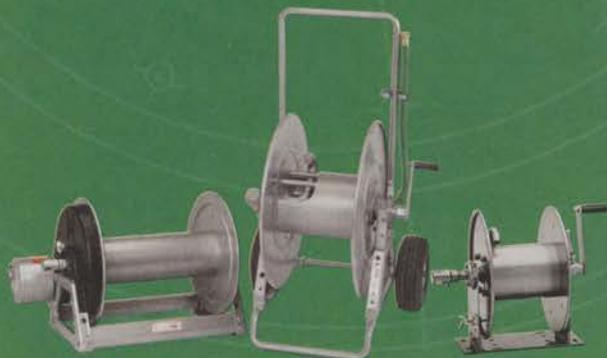
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The pitch: Honda's HRC216K3HDA lawn mower is designed to allow the user to save time by starting the engine while standing behind the mower.

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- It features a Honda Micro-Cut Twin Blade System that offers four cutting surfaces to produce finer clippings, and the mower can be adjusted to eight different heights suitable to all types of grass and mowing conditions.

- The mower has a 21-inch steel deck with front axle and bumper protection for additional structural stability and durability.

For more information: Honda.com



HUSQVARNA HU800AWDH

The pitch: The Husqvarna HU800AWDH is an ergonomic and versatile walk-behind mower that can handle tough mowing conditions.

- The mower features a 3-in-1 cutting deck, which allows users to bag, mulch or discharge clippings.

- The HU800AWDH has a 22-inch heavy-duty steel cutting deck and 190cc engine.

- The all-wheel drive system and high rear wheels gives users the power and maneuverability they need for hilly, uneven terrain.

For more information: Husqvarna.com



MEAN GREEN MOWERS WBX-33HD

The Pitch: Mean Green's new walk-behind mower is an electric mower, built for commercial applications.

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For more information: Meangreenmowers.com





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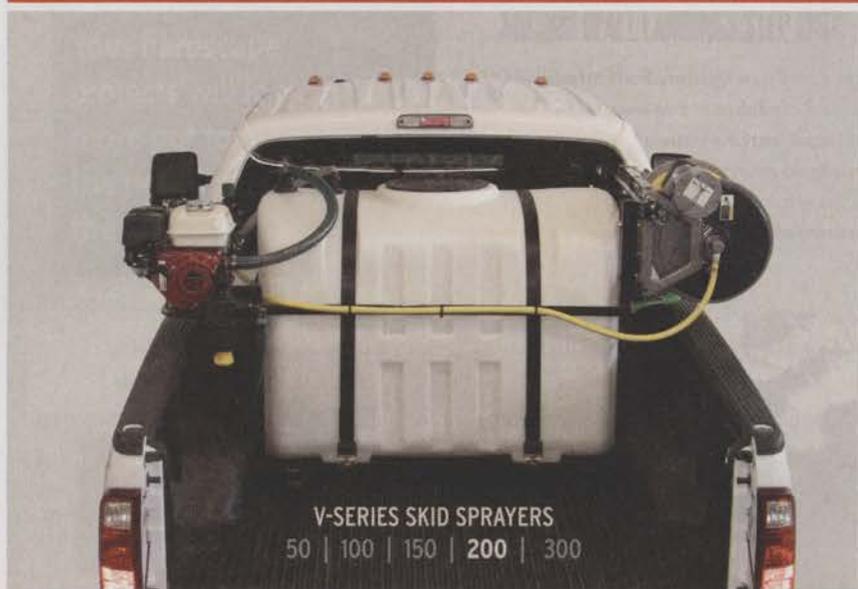


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- Heavy-duty construction ensures strength and long life.

For more information: Scag.com



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For more information: Wrightmfg.com

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To choose the right valve for a job, contractors must assess the quality and dynamic conditions of the water supply.

PIECES & PARTS

Understanding the functions of irrigation systems' crucial components can help prevent system breakdowns.

By Catherine Meany

WHEN AN IRRIGATION SYSTEM FAILS, it's important to understand the mechanics behind the system.

"If a contractor really understands what makes a valve come on, they can then understand what possible causes of a malfunction might be and may be able to more quickly troubleshoot and fix a valve," says Rain Bird Product Manager Ron Wolfarth.

VALVES. An important part of an irrigation system, valves turn the water on and off in response to a signal from a controller, says Hunter Product Manager Steve Hovel.

"Valves are the one thing that controls everything else downstream. If your valve leaks or doesn't turn off or on, it can affect a huge portion of your landscape because it controls a larger zone of spray heads or rotors," Hovel says.

The valve is made up of three main elements: the body, the diaphragm and the solenoid. The body is where water enters and exits the valve. Water flows in the inlet, above the diaphragm and up into the solenoid. It's held there by the solenoid plunger until a controller sends an electric signal.

When that happens, the solenoid coil becomes an electromagnet and pulls the plunger up, allowing water to flow out of the valve.

This also raises the diaphragm, which is a circular piece of rubber that rises and lowers based on water pressure above or below it. When the valve is open, water pushes the diaphragm up and off the inlet.

When the signal is turned off, the plunger drops inside the solenoid and the water pressure above the diaphragm eventually offsets the pressure below it

TROUBLESHOOTING TIP

THERE ARE THREE PROBLEMS with valves: they don't come on, they don't shut off or they leak. The most common culprit of those malfunctions is debris. Even the most meticulous installations can result in some accumulation of PVC shavings, flakes of extra glue, dirt or other organic debris from reclaimed water. Debris can close off the communication ports that move water through a valve and can cause pumps to wear down from erosion prematurely.

While it might seem logical to disassemble the valve to clear the debris, an easier and more efficient way is to turn the bleed screw. When operated from the controller or the solenoid, a valve's diaphragm will only rise to equal the pressure. When you use the bleed screw, the pressure on the top is zero and the pressure beneath the diaphragm is always greater than it is above it, so the diaphragm will be pushed completely open and allow debris to flush out. If dirty water is a known factor, pumps and valves can be outfitted with various filters and cleaning devices to help protect the system.

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to close the valve. Valves vary in materials, pressure ratings and configurations. The most common type of valve is a globe style, where the inlet and outlet are in a horizontal

line. Other styles include angle valves where the water enters from the bottom and exits at 90 degrees, which are popular in areas where the ground freezes, and a globe angle

valve, which can be configured either way, Wolfarth says. To choose the right valve for a job, contractors must assess the quality and dynamic conditions of the water supply.

Valves are built in different sizes for different flow rate ranges. If the application's needs fall below the chosen valve's operational range, the valve may not close, Hovel says.

PUMPS. In the same way as valves, irrigation pumps are sized based on both the flow rate and pressure of the water coming out of the source pipeline. If a contractor overestimates, the pump will not be matched to the actual needs and can destroy itself, says Rain Bird Product Manager Bill Beard.

"Pumps are what I call a dumb device; they are guaranteed to work or die trying. The amount of pressure and the flow required in the system dictates if the pump will operate, it's never vice versa," Beard says.

The most common type of irrigation pump is an end suction top discharge centrifugal pump. These pumps rely on centrifugal force to move water and a motor shaft to support the impeller. They have few moving parts and are easy to service, but for more boost, they must get larger and heavier.

In those cases, a vertical multistage centrifugal pump is more efficient because it has more impellers and can boost more pressure.

Serviceability and reliability of pumps and valves are the other important factors for contractors to consider when making purchasing decisions. The fewer parts it has, the easier it is to repair a product, Wolfarth says.

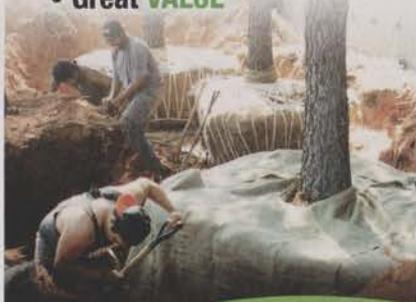
Contractors should work with the landscape designer to understand how much flow and what pressure is required at the point of highest demand on a job site, Beard says.

"The pump is designed to fill the gap between what is available for flow and pressure and what is required at the worst case scenario," he says. "That rotor or spray body that's the farthest away from the pump and the farthest uphill is the worst-case scenario. If you can't feed that particular device, you won't be able to irrigate effectively." L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Kentucky.



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Plan ahead for SPRING

The work you do before the season starts will pay off when business picks up. **By Kyle Brown**

RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL lawn care program isn't just about spreading fertilizer or chemicals on a client's property. It takes preparation to make sure your team has the right equipment and training, as well as a strong relationship with clients. Here are a few tips to get the most out of a lawn care program this year:

START EARLY. A successful start to the spring lawn care season begins in the middle of winter for the team at Landscape En-

terprise in Salem, Virginia, says co-owner Darrell Hungate. Right after Thanksgiving, the company sends out written renewal con-

tracts to all clients, then follows up on them after the holidays.

"We give them 60 days to renew," says Hungate. "That gives them through the Christmas holiday, but also gives plenty of time for them to think about it, or for us to call, if they have any questions or want any add-ons."

Hungate's team also sends out newsletters summing up the year to the client, to remind them of the crew's hard work and the value of the service. Since his 15 employees are assigned to particular properties, each newsletter can be personalized to the client.

As the only major employee (besides a longterm temp) at Wunsch's Lawn Care in Willows, California, Brian Wunsch often visits clients directly and talks to them face-to-face about renewals.

He generally waits until after Christmas to talk about contracts, because "everybody's got their mind somewhere else with the holidays," he says, but continues the discussion through February if necessary.

GET READY. As renewal contracts go out in December, employees at J. Rick Lawn & Tree in North



is ready in case anything should go wrong.

As clients renew or update their services, Wunsch takes time before the start of the season to revise his square footage numbers to make sure he has the right equipment and products to cover the properties. Though he's been applying fertilizer for the past few years, this year he's started offering chemical applications as well, which means building a new pricing structure.

He used a breakdown of the additional material cost per thousand square feet, but modified the price to cut out some overhead since he would already be on the property for maintenance. When he talked with clients for renewals, he made it a point to share how they were saving money by bundling services.

By Feb. 1, Rick has updated numbers for renewed and new customers finalized for applications starting in mid-March.

With those totals, Rick is able to use early order programs to save money on applications and ensure the first few weeks of the season run smoothly.

"We do early order for our chemical and fertilizer to make sure we're stocked up for at least 8-10 weeks into the spring, so we don't hurt production waiting on product," he says.

Rick sets aside time at work to walk his employees through the company policy manual to establish expectations for the job and for clients before the first crews go out.

He also takes his employees out and physically walks them through an application on one of his properties before the season starts, "just to make sure every-

one's on the same page on procedure and processes," he says.

GET THE WORD OUT. Because he spends time talking face-to-face with clients while he works on the property, Wunsch doesn't invest much in marketing. Instead, he relies mostly on word-of-mouth in his community.

"I've been extremely happy with who I'm getting as far as customers," Wunsch says. "If I have a good relationship with an existing client, they are most likely going to tell a friend of theirs with a similar property."

However, as Wunsch adds new offerings, he's looking into a more direct marketing approach to gauge interest in particular services. He has an order of 500 direct mail postcards to most of the mailing route in Willows this year to promote tree injections.

Rick also hasn't done much new marketing in the last few years for lawn care, even as a larger company across two states. The focus instead is usually on referral sources and maintaining current customers, as is evidenced by about a 98 percent renewal rate this year, he says.

With his team now more established in Colorado, he's started a few marketing efforts to bring in new customers through sponsored Facebook posts and technicians distributing door hangers in specific neighborhoods where they already have name recognition.

KNOW YOUR ENEMY. Though applications begin toward the end of March depending on the weather, Hungate looks at pest and disease trends locally to prepare for the season. His

TURF TROUBLE

Here's what to keep an eye on when it comes to turf disease this spring in some spots across the country.

BRADLEY GEARY, professor, plant & wildlife sciences at Brigham Young University

We won't have a lot of turf diseases this spring. The symptoms don't start showing up until summer. There will be areas that have brown rings because of necrotic ring, but that damage occurred in 2016 and is only an artifact of last year. Snow mold symptoms – dead grass – will be observed because of the heavy snow fall we had this winter, but these symptoms will quickly disappear as the grass greens up and grows.

Rhizoctonia brown patch will show up in the summer but will not be noticeable in the spring time. For insects, billbug and sod webworm are our biggest issues. Damage from the insects will not be obvious in the spring but you do want to treat for billbug in the spring.

CHERYL SMITH, extension professor/specialist, plant health, University of New Hampshire

Through the samples I receive in the UNH Plant Diagnostic Lab for the last 30 years, I can tell you the most prevalent diseases are brown patch, red thread, leaf spots/melting out (several fungi), anthracnose, Pythium blight. Winter doesn't really affect these. Snow came in late enough that I don't think snow mold will be a big issue this spring.

Dakota and Colorado are already preparing equipment for the spring lawn care season. The end of fall means cleaning and close inspection of equipment.

"Over the winter, whatever we determined needed repaired or replaced was done," says Jon Rick, owner of the company. "We want to make sure we don't have a problem out in the field where a hose bursts. A small problem can create a larger problem."

The preparation includes updating any MSDS sheets to be kept in the truck, and checking spill kits to make certain the crew



team's pesticide and chemical application recertification also comes up in March, which gives them the opportunity to talk with other technicians and see what they're fighting and what works.

"Also, we're 20 minutes down the road from Virginia Tech, which is the hotbed on the East Coast for turf, so we get firsthand info really quickly from there," on new turf pressures, he says.

Though he doesn't do a heavy amount of study before the season starts, Wunsch checks out new ideas and practices through the University of California's Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program website (www.ipm.ucdavis.edu) regularly.

For Hungate's area of the country, he's seeing molds like brown patch becoming a problem this year due to sporadic spring and summer temperatures, plus a heavy level of moisture during the winter. He's also seeing increased insect pressure, and a higher occurrence of blights like red thread.

His crew works with clients to identify the symptoms of mold and fungus diseases, and tells them about resolutions, like aeration for problem mold areas or liquid fungicide for fungus.

In California, Wunsch's clients deal with rust almost every other year, he says, but fungicides can be too expensive for them.

Instead, he talks to them to help manage expectations and ensure them that it will clear up after a little time, or with some nitrogen and aeration.

He's less forgiving with another constant, crabgrass. He'll use an application of Dimension to rein it in for clients. For other

pressures, like powdery mildew, he'll spray horticultural oil to keep plants healthy, weather permitting.

Moisture is a problem for Rick's clients as well, but only in that they don't have enough of it. Colorado has had a dry, warm winter, which could mean increased mite activity. One benefit to the dry weather is that a common issue, necrotic ring spot, might be less prevalent, since it thrives in wet seasonal conditions.

But the dry weather is an even bigger danger to the application program, since his crew isn't able to put down fertilizer without the moisture to water it in. Though they usually start applications in mid-March, this year's start date depends on the weather.

"That's going to make a heavy impact on when we start because we don't want to put fertilizer down on extremely dry lawns when people don't have their sprinklers on yet," he says. "Moisture is really going to dictate when we start this year." ●

The author is a freelance writer based in Akron.

An ounce of PREVENTION

Get ahead of problem equipment breakdowns with routine maintenance practices. **By Kyle Brown**

WINTER MEANS TIME to work on contract renewals or possibly servicing snow and ice removal clients. It's also the prime opportunity to repair and prepare equipment for the upcoming year.

Taking the time during the offseason to make sure equipment is ready to roll in spring is key for lawn care operators like Tom Uncapher of Uncapher Landscaping in Columbus, Ohio:

As leaf cleanups finish, Uncapher brings each of his machines into his garage to have them washed and start a thorough check of all of the parts. As the head of a crew of six employees, he works on routine maintenance alongside one employee

who he's trained personally as the team's mechanic. "We go right into changing the oil and fuel filters and all the easy things right away," he says. "Then, it depends on what kind of snow season we have for when I can buy the larger things that need repaired."

Uncapher will rinse any dirt or grass out of backpack sprayers and make sure there are no leaks. In the fall, he'll rinse them out and make sure no water is left in the tanks so they don't freeze and crack.

"In the winter, we'll check for crack seals/lines and replace as needed," he says. "We'll order some spare parts also."

Brian Lemmermann of Somerset Landscape operates across four states and keeps his three in-house mechanics on staff all year to maintain equipment before it can cause problems in the spring. During the winter, his mechanics start with the company's trailers, repairing and repainting before moving on to other equipment.

Winter is also the time when Lemmermann's team starts replacing older equipment, especially if it's seen heavy use. The machines might not be in bad repair, but have hit a stage where he doesn't want his crew relying on it every day in the field.

HELP AND COMMUNICATION. Uncapher teams up with his in-house mechanic when it gets

hectic during the work season to keep his crew from waiting on repairs. He'll send the machine out to the dealer for repair if the problem is beyond his own expertise, or if he just doesn't have the time to handle it.

"If it's in April or May, I'll just tell them automatically, 'I don't have time to fix it. Take it to the shop,'" Uncapher says.

Occasionally, when breakdowns take out his spare equipment, he lets clients know about the slowdown. If he's able, he'll reach out to nearby LCOs to borrow a piece of equipment for the day to pick up the slack.

"Keep your avenues open to others, even your competition," Uncapher says.

Though he does almost all his repairs in-house, Lemmermann maintains a tight relationship with his dealers, to make certain he can get service or parts when

he needs them. "We don't buy a machine unless the dealer stocks all the parts for it," he says.

Before Uncapher's crews return for the day, they clean and check the equipment for parts that need attention, he says. He'll repair what he can in the evening, getting the morning crews off quickly after running down a checklist to make sure the team has the right equipment.

Lemmermann emphasizes the need to clean and take care of small maintenance issues as quickly as possible in the evening after coming in from the field to prevent future slowdowns.

"If your machine breaks down in the middle of the day, it's a whole lot worse than taking the time to do the routine stuff at the end of the day," he says. ●

The author is a freelance writer based in Akron, Ohio.

CLARISSA BALBALIAN, diagnostic lab manager for plant pathology at Mississippi State University

Moisture is predicted to be below average this spring, so I think take-all root rot is going to be a problem, especially on St. Augustine grass and maybe zoysia grass as well. The turf is stressed from the temperature extremes we had this winter. The extended periods of mild temperatures that we had during the winter made dormancy difficult in some areas – that combined with drought stress will make turf more susceptible to the take-all fungus.

Timing herbicide applications also will be tricky this year because of the mild weather, which could lead to herbicide stress on turf, another factor that favors take-all root rot. We also may be likely to see an earlier occurrence of dollar spot and leaf spot on bermudagrass, and large patch problems in St. Augustine grass and centipede grass, especially in irrigated settings or if we have several consecutive days of rainy weather. Winter weather doesn't really affect insect pests. Scout for chinch bugs during hot, dry weather. They prefer locations that are in direct sun.





The team at Killingsworth Lawn Kare is tested each year on identifying grass varieties.

Occupied in the off-season

LCOs should refresh their knowledge, and keep up on new trends during their downtime. **By Brian Horn**

OFF-SEASON TRAINING can be a bit boring, especially if you have a seasoned team of lawn care technicians. But don't let that get you in the habit of skimming over the essentials. There's nothing wrong with repeating the same message each off-season, especially when it comes to LCO training.

"A good bulk of (our training) is the same stuff every year, but it's always good to refresh," says Nate Leadenham, field supervisor at Killingsworth Lawn Kare in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Ever year to kick off the season,

the six technicians have two, 8-hour days of training led by Leadenham in mid-February. Technicians go over the basics like safety training, application techniques and product information.

While the bulk of his classes are refreshers, Leadenham also focuses on any new problems that have popped up over the winter, including Zika and a crape myrtle bark scale, a pest attacking crape myrtle trees.

He also has employees identify grass types and has a plot of land on site where technicians can receive equipment training.

At the end of two days, everyone is tested on what they've learned. "It's an opportunity to see where one guy may be strong and another one may be weak," Leadenham says. "You can see where he needs to focus on. 'Hey this guy is really good at identifying weeds, so how about





ALEC KOWALEWSKI, assistant professor and turf specialist, Oregon State

Crabgrass and billbugs seem to be an increasing problem in lawns and landscape area in Oregon.

Crabgrass is a summer annual weed, which germinates in the spring, grows through the summer and then seeds and dies in the fall. Billbugs are a small beetle (6 mm long) with a funnel shaped nose and mouth, and feed on cool-season turfgrass maintained at lawn and athletic field height. Crabgrass and bill bug populations seem to be increasing. Crabgrass is a summer annual, which germinate in the spring. A mild winter followed by a warm spring would suggest early germination of this summer annual. Billbugs over winter as adults, emerging in the spring. A mild winter would also suggest high spring populations of overwintering adults, which will result in increased levels of damage in the spring and following summer.

you ride with him for a day and learn a little bit more?"

Josh Demers, owner of Pacific Lawn Maintenance in Spokane Valley, Washington, says he also uses his off-season training as a refresher and mixes information about any new products they may be using and new chemical laws.

His technicians want to be ready for any questions customers may ask them about a certain product or when kids and pets can play on the lawn.

"We try to get our crews and spray guys really well-rounded so they are knowledgeable and educated when it's time to get out in the field both obviously for our company to keep things rolling forward and then for the customer so they can be well informed," he says.

During Pacific's off-season months, Demers will have 4-5 in-

house classes and two full days of state required classes. And while employees aren't laid off and have work to do, like snow removal, Demers still wants to keep them engaged in lawn care.

"It's important to me to keep a close connection with my crews and top guys so we aren't going December, January and February without any communication," he says.

"Then all of a sudden, everyone is MIA come the springtime. That's a very important part of my business is keeping everyone kind of tight knit during slow times."

John Bannon and his two lawn care technicians take advantage of training courses hosted by distributors, as well as educational sessions at tradeshow.

"Two of my employees have been with me for a while so they are pretty well trained on

the basics. It's the new products and techniques we get trained on," he says. Bannon likes using the outside training courses and doesn't mind paying for them because it allows his employees to hear lessons from someone besides himself.

"It's not that they don't believe me. But it's reinforced way better when the professor or the person from the distributor speaks to them than when I do."

He's also keeping an eye out for articles in the news and in trade publications that pertain to the industry, and sharing those with his employees.

All three companies pay for employees while they are trained, and Leadenham says it's well worth the expense.

"It's extremely important," he says. "If you don't train, you pay at some point. I believe it pays to train and it hurts not to train." ●

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PROJECT FACTS

The homeowners wanted the driveway wider because there wasn't room for one car to leave and another car to enter at the same time. This led to people backing up into the retaining walls, damaging both the wall and cars. So, the driveway increased about 400 square feet. LED lighting was added so that drivers could see the walls and the edge of the driveway.

The driveway had to be straightened and split down the middle by the property line to reduce the headlights on the front house and make it easier to back up without hitting the retaining walls.

There was also water runoff from the driveway that was flooding the lower level basement, and a drainage system/grade changes had to be designed and implemented. A large fountain in the center of the driveway turnaround was also installed at the center of the driveway turnaround.

The Whitacre Greer pavers were chosen because they integrated with the clay face brick of the two houses.

A TIGHT SQUEEZE

NATURE'S PERSPECTIVE LANDSCAPING, located in Evanston, Illinois, took on a driveway project in a federal historic district. The driveway was shared by two properties, so that meant a pair of married couples would have to agree on the design. The goal was to develop a cohesive and integrated plan that would be functional and aesthetically pleasing while complying with zone codes. While the driveway was being installed, all parties agreed it would be best if the homeowners were not present for construction, which meant Nature's needed to have the plan accepted and authorized by both parties prior to them leaving. Any issues that came up were then reviewed via phone calls or emailed pictures. Nature's had the driveway portion of the project done in three weeks, when the homeowners returned from vacation. **L&L**





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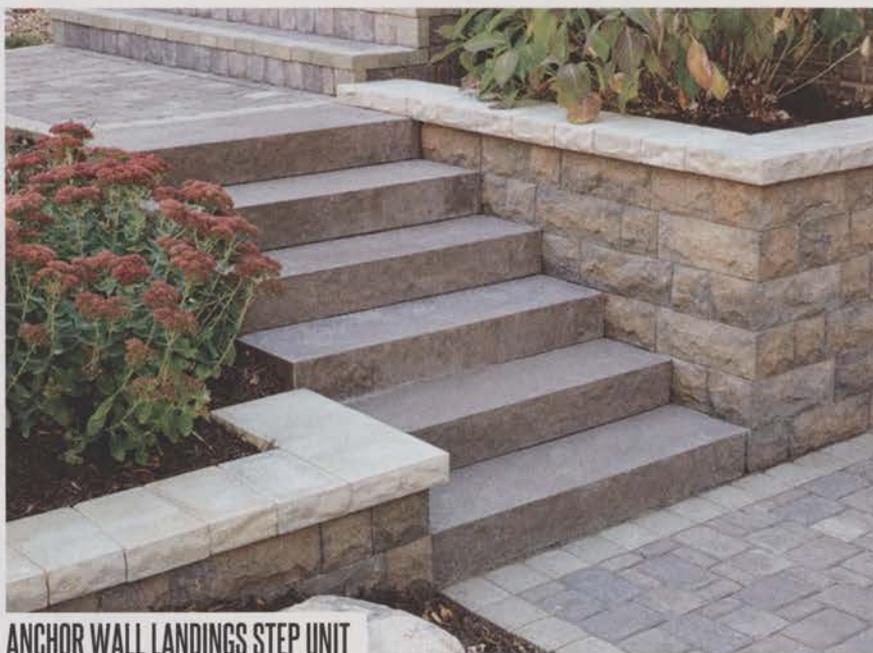


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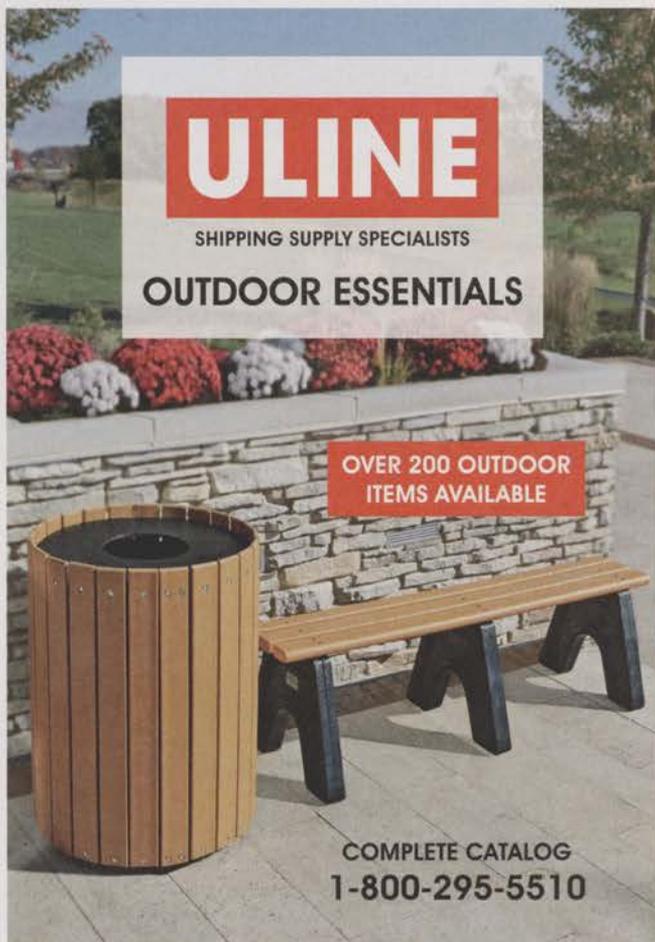
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A FERTILE DEBATE

LCOs weigh the pros and cons of liquid and granular fertilizer.

By Neil Moran

LAWN CARE operators have a number of items to consider when choosing between a granular or liquid fertilizer program.

Here is a look at some of the pros and cons of granular and liquid fertilizer in lawn treatments from two lawn care professionals who are in charge of selecting and applying lawn care products for residential and commercial properties in some of the larger markets in the country.

GRANULAR. Tom Knopsnyder, vice president of operations with Green Lawn Fertilizing/Green Pest Solutions in West Chester, Pennsylvania, says the company is sold on using granular fertilizer for most of the properties they service – 85 percent residential and 15 percent commercial.

He says the granular slow release fertilizers stay in the soil for a longer period of time than do the liquid applications. Another plus for granular is the perception of property owners.

“Customers seem to like the granular more because they can see it and they’re used to going



to Home Depot and buying a granular product,” Knopsnyder says. “With liquid, it looks like they’re just spraying these chemicals everywhere.”

The math is also a little less complicated with granular products, says Dr. Rodney St. John of Ryan Lawn & Tree, out of Overland Park, Kansas. St. John, who is an agronomist and a former professor at Kansas State University and now holds the title of vice president, director of agronomy and environmental stewardship at Ryan.

“It’s easy to do the math with granular,” St. John says. “You know so many pounds covers so many square feet – with liquid the math is a little more complicated.” St. John says one of his jobs is to prepare the recommended amount of fertilizer for the crews who will be doing the actual applications.

“The main benefit is the release time; liquid only lasts for a few weeks, where granular will last

up to 16 weeks, depending on the type of poly coated fertilizer we use,” he says.

One drawback St. John sees in granular fertilizer is with the mechanized equipment they use. He says the operator can get going pretty fast or cut corners, which reduces the amount of product that is applied.

Another drawback of granular fertilizers, according to both lawn care professionals, is the clean up that is often required after application. Pelleted fertilizer often inadvertently lands on sidewalks, driveways and streets.

LIQUID. One of the biggest advantages of using a liquid application is you can mix products like fungicides and herbicides with fertilizer into a tank, and take care of everything at once.

“Some herbicides that are available as a liquid aren’t available in a granular,” says St. John.

Both companies find occasions where it is more practical

to use a liquid fertilizer over a granular. St. John says it’s easier to pull a hose up a steep hill and fertilize with a liquid then it is to drive equipment up a sloping property.

And, of course, different products, like fungicides and herbicides, can be mixed in with liquid fertilizers as needed.

Some companies also use liquid applications in the spring for a quick green up and then follow up with granular applications.

Knopsnyder says one disadvantage of liquid applications goes back to customer perception. A customer can see that the job got done because they can easily see that someone has been treading on their lawn with a spreader while the footprints of someone walking with a hose is less discernable.

St. John adds that liquid fertilizers can be sticky and messy and even stain clothing. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Michigan.



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Harmony IN THE LANDSCAPE

Arborists and agronomists can meet in the middle when it comes to trees and turfgrass. **By Christopher Fields-Johnson and A.D. Ali**

TREE CARE professionals and turf care professional have been at odds for a long time.

Arborists claim that turfgrass is evil and must be eliminated from tree areas. Agronomists believe that their best tool is a chainsaw!

It is a given fact that in nature, trees and turf do not co-exist. Take a look at a forested area. You will notice the absence of turfgrass primarily due to shade. This did not occur overnight. In ecological succession, turfgrass establishes first, then second-

➔ For photos of examples from this article, and a history of the tree and turf battle, visit bit.ly/treeturf.

ary invaders arrive, such as low growing trees and shrubs. As the community matures, larger trees start to shade out the understory and the turfgrass dies out.

On the other hand, in a prairie setting, there is a dearth of trees likely due to recurrent brush fires that eliminate tree saplings. Where trees and grasses do co-exist in natural savanna landscapes,

bunchgrasses, not turfgrass, are typically present and the trees are adapted to be tolerant of frequent grass fires.

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HEIGHT MATTERS. Trees occupy a higher stratum than turfgrass; as a consequence, tree canopies will intercept most of the sunlight and only filtered light will reach ground level. Even though turfgrasses, in general, prefer full

sun, there are certain types that show good shade tolerance. Tall fescue and Red fescue tolerate shade well, whereas Kentucky Bluegrass does not. Warm season grasses such as Bermudagrass and St. Augustinegrass, prefer sunny conditions.

However, there are some cultivars with good shade tolerance such as St. Augustinegrass 'Bitter Blue,' Bermudagrass 'Celebration,' and Zoysiagrass 'Emerald.' In addition to intercepting sunlight, trees indirectly shade the turf through fallen leaves and spent flowers.

What about artificial turf? This product maintains its green color regardless of light levels. It does not require fertilization, irrigation or mowing.

However, depending on the product used, the underlayment may be made of non-porous material that does not allow water, air or nutrient movements into



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the soil. This may result in poor growing conditions for tree roots.

UNDERGROUND CONFLICTS. Turfgrass and

tree roots continually compete for water and nutrients. Trees consume large amounts of water that is lost to the atmosphere through transpiration. As the water supply is depleted

in the soil, turfgrass begins to show symptoms of wilt. Roots also compete for nutrients as shown in many studies in the literature.

This is especially true with aggressively growing turfgrasses such as Bermudagrass. Surface applications of granular fertilizers applied to turf are not likely to benefit trees growing in the same environment. Deep root injection of tree fertilizers would be a better option to care for trees. Removal of fallen leaves to free turfgrass from their effects also deprives the trees of their natural mineral recycling method, further reducing their supply of nutrients.

Allelopathy (or chemical warfare) is another phenomenon to consider when placing plants together in the landscape. Some plants exude chemicals through the roots which inhibit the growth of other plants. A famous example is Juglone produced by Walnut trees.

Certain turfgrasses, such as Kentucky Bluegrass, Perennial Ryegrass and Red fescue may produce harmful leachates from the roots that adversely affect the growth of small trees such as Flowering Dogwood.

Trees and turfgrass have different optimal pH ranges; so it is impossible to optimize soil pH for both at the same time. Living under the wrong pH conditions will cause the plant to become deficient in some nutrients, while other nutrients may reach toxic levels.

THE SOLUTION. Create a mulched zone around trees helps to mediate these conflicts. The area inside the mulch ring is managed for the tree needs, while the area outside the mulch is managed for the turf needs. Fertilization, pH adjustment and irrigation can then be tailored for their very different needs.

As can be deduced from the above, trees and turfgrass may be able to get along in a precarious peace treaty. However, that treaty will need the support of turfgrass professionals, arborists and landscape architects in order to maintain healthy and aesthetic urban landscapes. **L&L**

Dr. Christopher Fields-Johnson is Technical Advisor, Mid-Atlantic region; and Dr. A.D. Ali is Technical Advisor, Southeast and South regions. Both are with the Davey Institute, The Davey Tree Expert Company.



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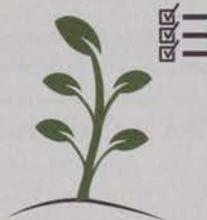
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RETAIN AND CULTIVATE YOUR CREW



• **LESS THAN ONE-THIRD OF AMERICANS** are engaged in their jobs in any given year, which usually results in low productivity and high employee turnover. As the costs of attrition and recruitment soar across our industry, we must keep in mind that an employee's first year at a company is highly predictive of their long-term goals.

Taking this information into consideration, along with the industry's ongoing struggle to secure sufficient H-2B visas to keep businesses afloat, retaining the current workforce remains a top priority for business owners nationwide.

Retention starts at the time of hiring and requires constant communication, evaluation and implementation of solutions throughout an employee's time with the company.

To improve retention, there are several components that must be considered, all of which must be applied through a holistic approach so that the team can grow both collectively and individually to promote efficacy and employee satisfaction.

HIRE SMART. Hire the right people for the job off the bat. When recruit-



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ing, try not to guide yourself by the candidate's personality. Instead, focus on their preparation, job skills, enthusiasm and proven results. This will ensure a shorter learning curve and help to mitigate turnover, which can later cost more down the road.

TRAIN YOUR MANAGERS. Too often there is a disconnect within the hierarchy of the organization. Make sure managers are trained well and are in tune with your organization's mission and goals.

Managers account for at least 70 percent of variance in employee en-

gagement scores. A good manager dedicates time to coaching their team.

Maintaining harmony in the ranks involves making sure each employee, from the top down, understands their role and can provide leadership and support as part of a team.

UNDERSTAND YOUR EMPLOYEES.

Ensure that employees are working under appropriate conditions. Always keep in mind that rules have to be followed in order to meet certain standards.

However, overly rigid rules can cause the opposite effect by driving good employees away. Foster an amiable, non-accusatory environment. Learn more about your employees' needs and get to know what motivates them.

PERFORM STAY INTERVIEWS. Don't wait until an employee has one foot out the door to learn which aspects of your business they find appealing and how they'd like to grow. Employees who feel invested are more engaged and happier in their workplace environment.

SHOW BALANCE. Be flexible with schedules, taking into account that many employees have families. Be aware of the amount of stress your employees have and, if necessary, provide them with resources to manage it. Show employees that you care about each of them personally, not just the immediate results they are producing at the company.

DON'T BURN BRIDGES. Whether you like it or not, employees may leave your company for another opportunity. Those employees should still be considered valuable assets and how you make them feel at their time of departure will affect your retention rate. Keeping your door open and treating them with respect will encourage them to speak positively about your company, which can help attract future candidates and maintain the company's reputation.

MEASURE RETENTION. Finally, don't forget to measure retention rates. You will never know how much you have improved or which areas you need to work on if you don't keep track of employment activity.

The basic formula for measuring employee retention consists of dividing the number of employees leaving the company by the total number of employees over the same time period. Multiplying the result by 100 will express your rate as a percentage. **L&L**

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