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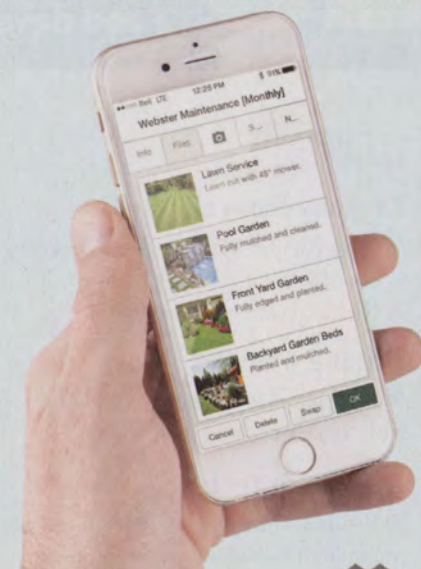
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Landscapers like Patrick Lynch and local associations are tapping into a younger generation to help change the perception of the green industry and develop a future workforce. **36**

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TAKING THE RIGHT APPROACH TO TRAINING

Learn the five steps to run an efficient course for your crews.

By Kate Spirgen

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE IS KEY when it comes to training. You have to know what they know and what they don't know, said Kurt Thompson, owner of K. Thompson & Associates, at the 2017 Irrigation Show, hosted by the Irrigation Association.

Begin by dividing information into the categories of must-know, should-know and could-know. Then, "start with all of the must-knows and almost forget everything else," he said. "You don't want to run out of time to get all of the must-know information."

Say you're teaching how to size pipe

to a technician. Rather than giving the trainee a whole chart of pipe sizing, give them the maximum flow rate. Or, tell them what nozzle size they need and then ask them to call their supervisor if they have questions. In this case, teaching them how to calculate or use a chart is more could-know information.

"You're going to be able to trim this down and give them time to get this practiced because when they leave your training, they must know how to do this," Thompson said. Visit bit.ly/IrrigationShow17 for Thompson's five steps.



TURNAROUND TOUR UPDATE

Be sure to check out the February issue of Lawn & Landscape for stories on our 2018 Turnaround Tour winners. Until then, check out the Turnaround Tour page for a list of free webinars featuring our 2017 winners: bit.ly/turnaroundtour.

REMEMBER WHEN?

This issue features new Wi-Fi-based irrigation controllers, but 10 years ago we were reporting on the complexities of decoding for two-wire irrigation systems. Check it out here: bit.ly/2WireTech

TELL US ABOUT YOUR OPERATION!

If you're interested in being profiled by Lawn & Landscape, writing a story for the magazine or just have a good story idea for us to look into, visit bit.ly/companysubmission. Our editorial team will review it and see where you might fit into our upcoming coverage.

INSTAGRAM

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Follow @lawnlandscape to get a behind-the-scenes look at the magazine and our travels. Use #lawnlandscapefeature to show us your work!



OVER ON INSTAGRAM, we like to highlight events we attend and the places we get to travel. Recently, we got to check out Caterpillar's new UTVs at Edwards Demonstration & Learning Center in Peoria, Illinois. You can read about the new UTV on [pg. 12](http://pg.12).



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Brian Horn

Editor | Lawn & Landscape

What makes this
so encouraging
is the industry
is making a
concerted effort
to tap into a
population with
no bias.

Green teens

When I was in high school way back in the late '90s, I knew my next step was going to college. That's just what you did at my school. You received a scholarship or took out loans (I did the latter), and spent the next four years studying a major.

Then, hopefully, you'd receive that oh-so precious piece of paper from a university which was proof you were ready to enter the workforce and make money (after paying back all that debt).

But that trend seems to be changing.

Both PBS and CNBC recently published articles about how attending a 4-year college is becoming less popular. You can find those articles at the following two links – bit.ly/lawnschool and bit.ly/lawncnbc.

The good news is the green industry can and is capitalizing on this change in thinking.

Both the National Association of Landscape Professionals and local landscaping associations are reaching out to high school students and touting the strengths of a career in the green industry. You can read more about that in our cover story starting on page 36.

I always wondered why this push wasn't made more often, and I'm sure it was in certain areas and I missed it, but I heard one reason why last summer. A state association executive director told me that the association was so focused on making sure the

members were stable after the Great Recession that there was no time to focus on the future. Now, the association can make that effort.

What makes this so encouraging is the industry is tapping into a population with no bias. A 16-year-old may have some idea of career aspirations, but most still are undecided or not fully committed to their dream job.

Some may not even know that a landscaping company has more to offer than a bunch of people riding mowers and cleaning up leaves.

This type of outreach also gives business owners a chance to show a younger generation that landscaping companies run like professional operations. Your pitch doesn't have to be "come work for a landscaping company." It can be "come work for a great company that performs landscaping services."

Start thinking about how you can position your company as a career option. Reach out to a local high school to setup a time to make a presentation to a class, hold a career day at your location, work with a local landscaping association on an event; there's a number of ways to make a difference. You may get more skepticism from the parents, so appealing to mom or dad is just as important.

This won't solve all the hiring problems in the industry or the negative perceptions, but it's better than watching even more talented kids succeed in another industry. – *Brian Horn*

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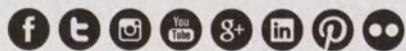
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Stellar customer service

Bob Grover, president of Pacific Landscape Management, listed top reasons landscapers should focus on customer service at New England Grows.

By Megan Smalley

Bob Grover, president of Pacific Landscape Management, discussed the value landscape contractors gain if they practice good customer service. Grover shared an example of how a flight attendant had almost refused to serve him coffee, explaining how this gave him a negative opinion of the company even if everything else on the flight went well. "You won't get credit for great service in landscape unless the customer's happy," he said. The following are Grover's 11 keys to outstanding customer service:

1. COMMUNICATE. Grover said about 90 percent of communication should be initiated by the landscaper rather than the customer, so it takes work.

2. IF CUSTOMERS TELL YOU A PROBLEM, IT'S YOUR PROBLEM; IF YOU TELL THEM, IT'S THEIR PROBLEM. Grover said landscapers should tell customers if they notice a problem so the landscaper has control of the story. "Some of my best relationships I've had are with customers I failed, but I owned up to the problem and they respected that," he said

3. A PICTURE TELLS 1,000 WORDS. If there is a problem on a job, use pictures to explain it to the customer.

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New England Grows took place Nov. 29 through Dec. 1 at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center.

4. HAPPY CUSTOMERS PUT UP WITH OCCASIONAL QUALITY PROBLEMS, BUT DISSATISFIED CUSTOMERS POINT OUT EVERY FLAW. Happier customers tend to be more loyal and provide referrals.

5. ADMIT FAILURE TO BUILD CUSTOMER LOYALTY. It's human nature to try to hide mistakes, but Grover said to confess mistakes when they happen. He said this will help to build trust.

6. EVERY INTERACTION MATTERS. "For me, if a customer calls and I don't know why they're calling, I'm going to assume something's gone wrong. Maybe the customer is happy, but I prepare to accept any feedback and take charge," Grover said.

7. CREW PROFESSIONALISM IS CRITICAL. Managers need to stress to crew members that customers will be watching and taking note of negative interactions.

8. THE CUSTOMER IS NOT ALWAYS RIGHT, BUT THAT DOESN'T MATTER. Sometimes customers are irrational. However, this doesn't mean they should be ignored. Grover suggested finding middle ground with tough customer requests.

9. LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO BE A HERO. "Heroic service is a number of things, but if you just do regular work, you probably won't get credit," he said. "If you exceed expectations, though, that will be noticed."

10. IF YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU'RE DOING, ASK. To send out a customer survey, keep it short, design it so there will be measurable results, make the questions simple and consider rewarding respondents with an incentive.

11. GREAT SERVICE IS A CULTURE, NOT A DEPARTMENT. Grover said business leaders need to instill this in their employees by giving them clear and concise examples of their expectations.



CATERPILLAR UNVEILS UTV LINE

The company will offer a gas and diesel model of the UTVs. **By Lauren Rathmell**

Caterpillar debuted UTVs at its training facility in Peoria, Illinois.

Two versions of the UTV will be available for purchase in the summer of 2018. The CUV82 features a standard cab with a gas engine. The vehicle can reach a maximum speed of 45 mph. The gas model features a Chery engine. A diesel version, the CUV102D, can reach a maximum speed of 25 mph, built with a Kohler engine. Both vehicles have a 2,000-pound towing capacity and 1,000-pound cargo capacity.

A push from customers prompted Caterpillar to begin designing the utility vehicle. "We were hearing from our dealers that customers would love to have a UTV," said Norma Aldinger, commercial supervisor for Caterpillar UTVs. "But they wanted it to look like a CAT and be CAT tough."

Caterpillar also wanted to appeal to new customers who were looking for a work vehicle solution.

Aldinger said customers want an alternative vehicle aside from their pickup trucks when traveling around jobsites. For the UTV, Caterpillar used the same designers who work on their other equipment to ensure their model met customer expectations.

The UTVs feature steel beds and wide cabins to fit operators more comfortably. With the UTV launch, Caterpillar will offer more than 50 accessories.

Campbell Lowman, product engineer for Caterpillar, said there will be accessories offered to allow operators to fully enclose the cab with soft roofs and doors, as well as hard tops and more durable doors. Windshield options will include full plastic coverage and half-windshields.

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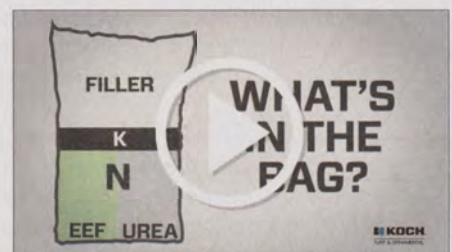
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Other optional accessories include a Bluetooth radio with speakers, a heater pack option and task lights.

Caterpillar's goal was to make the machine intuitive enough for any operator to figure out the controls in 30 seconds. From the operator's seat, a column shifter and power steering were included to give the UTV a more familiar truck-feel. The seats and steering wheel are adjustable to accommodate a variety of operators.

With a focus on safety, built-in features can set speed limits on vehicles. The machine won't operate over 10 mph unless the seatbelt has been fastened.

For larger crews, Caterpillar announced they will be launching a crew version of the UTVs in fall of 2018. In addition, the crew version of UTVs will feature two rows of seating.

The UTVs were developed in collaboration with Textron Specialized Vehicles.



IRRIGATION UPDATES

Check out the highlights from the
 2017 Irrigation Show. **By Kate Spirgen**

Lawn & Landscape traveled to Orlando, Florida, for the 2017 Irrigation Show to get the latest education and news from the irrigation industry. Here are some of the highlights from the show:

- Mike Barron and Robert Starr, both from the Toro Company, won the Irrigation Association Innovator Award for The Water Zone radio program.
- The Irrigation Association installed its incoming president, Warren Gorowitz,

vice president of sustainability at Ewing Irrigation & Landscape Supply. Gorowitz was the winner of a 2017 Lawn & Landscape Leadership Award.

- The IA honored the National Mall revitalization project with a Vanguard Award. The project, completed in 2016, spanned four years of construction. The Mall now uses 40 percent storm water runoff and Wi-Fi communication.



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WHY ARE YOU IN BUSINESS?

Doug Rauch, former president of Trader Joe's, shared his business philosophy at the Irrigation Show. **By Kate Spirgen**

BUSINESS CAN GET A BAD REPUTATION, but it can elevate our existence, raise the standard of living and improve the quality of goods and service, said Doug Rauch, former president of Trader Joe's, in his keynote address at the Irrigation Show in Orlando, Florida, in November.

Rauch helped grow Trader Joe's from a small local chain into a nationally known brand. He's a recent senior fellow at the Harvard University Advanced Leadership Initiative and is founder and president of Daily Table, a nonprofit retail concept designed to bring affordable nutrition to the food-insecure in our cities.

"I think many businesspeople are heroic," he said. "They take tremendous risks. They put themselves and their businesses on the line. And it's heroic because it can lift people out of poverty."

He asked attendees of the Irrigation Association event why they're in business and what their purpose is. "The easy and cheap answer is that we're here to make money," he said, "but that isn't a very satisfying answer."

It's also not a very smart answer because customers don't care about that. The real goal of business should be to create and amplify a value chain to your investors, your customers and the communities you serve.

Of course, that's not to say that you shouldn't make profit because you need to do that in order to survive. But you have to think beyond that. "A lot of businesses use people and love things," Rauch said. "Smart businesses use things and love people."

AIM HIGHER. "You're innovating or you're dying no matter what industry you're in," he said, because your customers' needs are always changing.

Millennials are now entering the industry. Rauch said when you look at what fuels millennials, it's more aspirational than anything else. "For many people it's, 'I want to do well, but I also want to do

good,'" he said. "It's what you stand for as well as what you sell that customers care about."

Also, company culture is not something that can be copied. "They can copy a product or a brand look, but they can't copy the DNA," Rauch said. "It's how decisions are made – your core committable values."

In that company culture, it's key to allow for mistakes and failures. "You're either creating cultures in your organization that allow for risk, that allow for appropriate failure or you're in trouble," he said. "If you never take risks, you're never going to innovate."

Knowing when to let your people make their own mistakes and grow is tricky and he said he had to learn how to do it the hard way. Here are four things he's learned about failure:

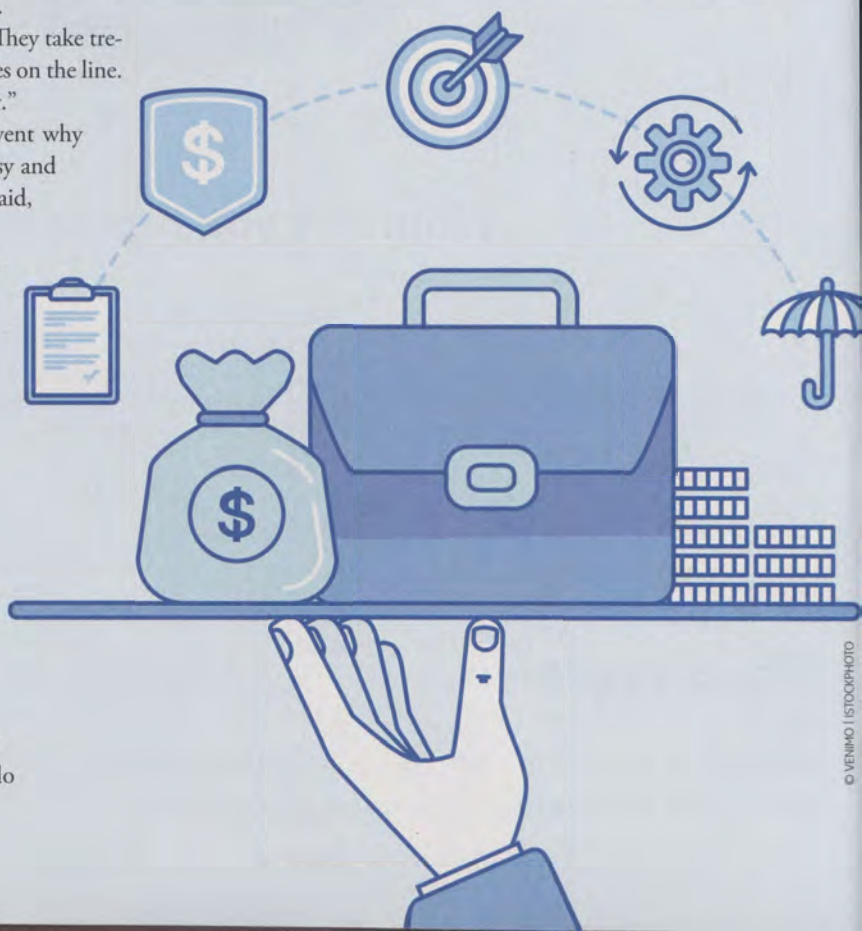
1. You want to fail on purpose. "You want your failures to be around your purpose. Don't fail in your gap reporting. That's not a good place to take a risk."

2. Make sure you're learning. "You are driving, consciously to take risk because it's something you need to know."

3. Manage your risk reward ratio. "Never test the water with both feet."

4. Share your mistakes. "If you're willing to share your mistakes institutionally, everyone gets to learn. If you don't, everyone is going to make their own mistakes and learn that way."

Some products from the Irrigation Show are featured on page 76. For more news from the 2017 Irrigation Show, visit bit.ly/IAShow2017.



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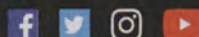
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Sexual harassment in the green industry

MORE THAN 20 YEARS AGO, I was on the staff of a national nonprofit organization. A board member – the CEO of a Fortune 500 company – showed up at my hotel room door late at night, under ridiculously flimsy pretenses, seeking sexual gratification. It was neither my first nor last experience with questionable conduct in a professional environment, but it WAS one of the most blatant.

I've told that story a lot through the years. It happened

shortly before I came to work with the green industry, an industry that felt kinder, gentler, safer – We are good people. I have seen the very best of us through these 20 years. Sadly, I have also seen some of the worst of us.

We are also an industry made up predominantly of men in positions of leadership. And thus, we are not immune. Looking broadly at the industry, I also know that these are our uncomfortable truths:

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

- There are “handsy” guys at pretty much every event that I have ever attended. A too-long hug, a roaming hand when photos are being taken, an uninvited shoulder massage, a blatant groping.

- There are customers at tradeshow booths or in your sales yard, leering at women with thinly veiled come-ons, trying to cajole favors from

your sales reps or office staff, or who linger just a little too long, tell a provocative joke, seem just a little too suggestive or stand just a little too close.

- There are people calling women they work with (or the waitress at the restaurant) “baby, honey, sweetie” without thinking – are they coming on to us, or can they just not be bothered to remember our names?

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Monthly Fuel Usage

	Vehicle	Odometer	Miles Driven	Fuel Cost
1				
2				
3	121	3854	88	\$263.12
4	122	199	12	\$35.88
5	123	32565	398	\$1,190.02
6	124	10003	100	\$299.00
7	125	49987	600	\$1,794.00
8	126	97825	454	\$1,357.46
9	127	44862	520	\$1,554.80
10	128	32511	125	\$373.75
11	19	9663	325	\$971.75
12	130	279	0	\$0.00
13	131	5544	123	\$367.77
14	132	58962	0	\$0.00
15	133	98123	410	\$1,225.90
16	134	54287	385	\$1,151.15
17	135	63555	460	\$1,375.40
18	136	87111	288	
19	137	92546	171	

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from a woman in this industry.

Far too often, all of this behavior is brushed off. As a society, we need to stop apologizing for the creeps.

I have always been fortunate enough to feel secure that my job wasn't in jeopardy for telling (INSERT NAME HERE) "NO." But I lose sleep at night thinking about the woman making \$12 an hour who is too meek to push back, who fears reporting her co-worker/supervisor because it might mean losing the job that keeps a roof over her kids' heads.

Through the years, one of my most effective coping mechanisms was to create



NONE OF US ARE COMPLETELY INNOCENT HERE. WE'VE ALL LAUGHED AT AN INAPPROPRIATE JOKE OR MADE A COMMENT THAT COULD HAVE BEEN MISCONSTRUED.

a massive "adopted family" for myself – a whole cadre of "uncles" and "big brothers" who I could count on in an instant if I needed support at an event. Which is great, but it would have been far better to have never felt like I needed it.

If you haven't heard these

stories, if you're struggling to believe me, I encourage you to start a conversation. Ask the women around you to share their stories. I'm asking you to pay a little more attention to predatory, tasteless or just "walking the fine line of inappropriate" behavior going on around you.

None of us are completely innocent here. We've all laughed at an inappropriate joke or made a comment that could have been misconstrued.

This is a problem that men are uniquely positioned to fix, and it's simple. If you see something, say something. Offer to get someone home

or in an elevator safely. Say, "hey – that's not cool" to the guy getting handsy or with the tasteless jokes. If you're not part of the problem, you need to be part of the solution.

KELLEE O'REILLY

CXO, MonkeyBar Management

O'Reilly was the director of member resources for the American Nursery & Landscape Association from 1997 - 2007, and remained a consultant with ANLA until 2012. MonkeyBar Management also works with green industry clients. For the full letter, visit bit.ly/GreenIndustry_OpenLetter.



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RETHINK & REFLECT

• **BEFORE WE ALL DIVE HEADLONG INTO A NEW YEAR**, it's worth taking some time to reflect on 2017. Did you accomplish what you set out to do? Where did you come up short? What lessons did you learn? What will you stop, keep or change doing? Here are my biggest takeaways from 2017:

Make time to talk regularly, one on one, with your clients and your team members. You'll be surprised by what you learn. I had one employee who I thought was doing a great job until I started talking directly with those he worked for and with. It turns out they were frequently disappointed or frustrated with him. He didn't follow through, they said. He was hard to reach and harder still to get through to. They felt he didn't seem to care about the work anymore, and the evidence backed them up, with tasks not done, balls dropped, avoidable mistakes made.

Had I made the time to check in more regularly with my clients, my team and this particular employee, I would have uncovered these inconsistencies much sooner and



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

saved us all some grief. Instead, I got complacent. No more. Now this doesn't mean I'm going to stop trusting people, but I am going to schedule regular one-on-one meetings with my direct reports in 2018, and I've asked my managers to do the same, not just to fix what's wrong – sometimes you very pleasantly discover what's right. I started doing one-on-ones with another direct report and found out he was doing more than I ever realized and has great ideas for making Grunder Landscaping better.

SALES PROCESS DRIVES DEALS.

I've always known sales are key, but I haven't been as dialed in on the actual process as I should have been. Now I see how capturing every single detail on my drawings and my quotes makes it easier for everyone to do their jobs. I know you might be thinking, 'how could I not know that?'

The truth is that while I'm confident in my ability to network and close deals and I have a clear vision of where I want to take my company, I'm not always good about the daily details. Now I have a new vice president of sales who's a master of specifics driving the process and I can't wait to see where we go with him at the helm.

FAMILY IS EVERYTHING. When

you're nearly half a century old (yikes!), you tend to have a different perspective on life than your younger, brasher self did. I'm no longer motivated to make money in order to serve my ego or acquire more things but rather for the time it buys me to spend with my wife and kids. What can I delegate to capable team members so I can take more time off to spend with them? I've challenged myself to take concrete steps in 2018 to lessen my company's dependence on me. This includes reorganizing and redefining some key positions as well as communicating a clear career path for talented junior team members.

MAKE YOURSELF ACCOUNTABLE.

As business owners, we talk a lot about holding team members accountable, but who really holds us accountable? Years ago, I was too stingy with my money to pay others to help me do things I thought I should be able to do myself. Now, I'll gladly pay experts to help me improve my fitness, my mental well-being, my leadership skills and my finances. We all benefit from the advice and discipline of a good coach who can see us in a way we can't see ourselves and insistently hold us to our own goals. Really, it's the best money I've ever spent.

Speaking of which, you can help hold me accountable too. I need to lose 15 pounds by Feb. 19 when I and my team at Marty Grunder! Inc. kick off our GROW! 2018 Annual Conference in Florida. There's no way I'm getting on stage in front of 500 ambitious landscape pros at the beautiful Grand Hyatt overlooking Tampa Bay in my current state. We've got three days of all-new interactive programming planned with some of the best minds in the business. Come and get inspired and empowered to succeed, and hold me to my goal.

Here's to a great new year. **L&L**

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DEFINE AND MEASURE

- RECENTLY, A LANDSCAPE INSTALLATION CLIENT called to ask, "How much profit should I put on my jobs?" I knew this contractor, his business and his market. However, before I could answer his question, first we had to clarify what he meant by profit.

There are three types of profit margins: gross profit margin (GPM), net profit margin (NPM) before taxes and net profit margin after taxes. My job as a consultant is to help clients make as much money as possible (before taxes). Your CPA's job is to make it look like you're going broke and to keep you out of jail. Let's define our terms using an installation job as an example (below):

The GPM for this job is calculated by subtracting the total direct costs (TDC) from the price (\$4,000/40%). The NPM (before tax) is calculated by subtracting the general and administrative (G&A) overhead cost from the GPM (\$1,500/15%). The break-even



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

point (BEP) is the TDC plus the G&A overhead cost (\$8,500/85%). You, your CPA and the IRS calculate your after tax NPM.

INDUSTRY BENCHMARKS. Now that we've defined our terms, we can apply industry benchmarks to our analysis for this job. You'll notice that I've kept any subcontractor costs and margins added to them out of this analysis. This will distort the percent-

ages due to the low margins applied to them. For a normal economy, the benchmarks are as follows (at right):

HOW IT WORKS AT THE BID TABLE.

When bidding and pricing your various market segments, calculate both the GPM and the before tax NPM for each job. I'd recommend doing this for jobs that you've previously priced and installed. Look for trends regarding these two categories.

If your margins exceed the industry benchmarks, great! If they are below industry standards, you might want to increase your NPM on your projects, if you can.

CONCLUSION. Once we defined our terms, I told my client that he should apply a 20 percent net profit margin to his break-even point. He should also review the GPM on his projects. It should range between 35 to 40 percent. This will provide him with an objective reference point for pricing his work. I told him if he could price his work with higher margins, by all means, do so.

GROSS PROFIT MARGIN

SPECIFIC MARKET SEGMENT	INDUSTRY BENCHMARK
Residential installation*	35% +/- 5%
Commercial installation*	25% +/- 5%
Residential & commercial main.	35% +/- 5%
Irrigation service	50% +/- 5%
General tree work	35% +/- 5%
Christmas decorations	45% +/- 5%
Chemical applications	50% +/- 5%
Fine gardening	40% +/- 5%

NET PROFIT MARGIN

Residential installation*	15% to 20%
Commercial installation*	10% to 15%
Residential & commercial main.	10% to 15%
Irrigation service	20% to 25%
General tree work	15% to 20%
Christmas decorations	20% to 30%
Chemical applications	25% to 35%
Fine gardening	15% to 25%

*To include landscape, hardscape and irrigation installation.

When analyzing your pricing, first you must define your terms clearly. Then calculate your GPM, BEP and before tax NPM on future projects and work that you've previously completed. Look for trends and compare them to my industry benchmarks as a starting point. Then, calculate the benchmarks for your company using your data to make your pricing more scientific and more consistent. And who couldn't use a little more of both in today's business environment. **L&L**

PRICE	\$10,000	100%
DIRECT COSTS		
MATERIALS	\$2,500	25%
FIELD LABOR	\$2,000	20%
FIELD LABOR BURDEN	\$500	5% (25% of field labor)
CREW TRUCK & EQUIPMENT	\$1,000	10%
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS (TDC)	\$6,000	60%
GROSS PROFIT MARGIN (GPM)	\$4,000	40%
G&A OVERHEAD COST	\$2,500	25%
NET PROFIT MARGIN (BEFORE TAX)	\$1,500	15%

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THE CURSE OF 'OR'



- **IN “BUILT TO LAST,”** AUTHOR JIM COLLINS spoke of “the tyranny of the ‘or,’” an approach to decision-making that restricts choices to either one or the other. For landscape contractors, the either/or conversation comes up often as in, “which is more important, quality or profit?” Efficiency or productivity? I believe one does not have to take a backseat to the other.

To be truly exceptional, landscape businesses need a high-quality level of service delivery and a simultaneously profitable operation. In other words, both. This is the true genius of problem-solving: eliminating the restrictions that limit what's possible.

When I was president of Valley-Crest Landscape Maintenance, I faced similar challenges and found ways to address multiple objectives simultaneously without sacrificing priorities. For example, in determining the Branch of The Year Award, we gave equal weight to gross margin, contract retention, growth rate, enhancement sales, safety and quality scores and employee retention.

To win, a branch had to be good at almost everything. In fact, the



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

most profitable branches were not only leaders in gross margin and profit, but also in quality and client retention. They had better work crews who were better trained, made fewer mistakes and had lower turnover.

In cases where branches had new and inexperienced employees, we found that a lack of a seasoned team correlated to compromises in efficiency and shoddy work, resulting in fire-fighting and loss of customer trust – which results in

“CHOOSING QUALITY OR PROFIT IS LIKE CHOOSING BETWEEN HAVING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH EMPLOYEES OR PROVIDING VALUE TO CUSTOMERS.”

customers watching your work and expecting to see deficiencies. This self-defeating cycle causes customers to think your mistakes relate to not having enough labor, and wanting you to put in more hours or add new people.

When faced with either/or options, managers who understand how to succeed at both quality and retention, for example, manage

the process better than those who don't. Good managers manage in a way that corrects glitches immediately and use them as teachable moments while not losing sight of the bigger picture. This inclusive approach to problem-solving leads to good service recovery, which can create a positive moment of truth in a customer relationship and significantly improve overall performance.

“Lean” best practices, initially developed for manufacturing, are important tools to help landscape maintenance companies generate improved results and behaviors. Lean-style processes can improve service and support operations, while improving customer experience. Specifically, improving delivery by better defining and aligning scope and budget, using the right equipment for the right reason, and establishing tighter start-finish work schedules, which eliminate long walks back to the truck doing nothing productive.

Heavy detailing and over-servicing in the name of quality is an example of a waste of valuable time if it's a task that's not strategically justified. The string trimmer, for example, is one of the most over-used pieces of equipment in our industry. Modifying its use on turf areas, for example, is a small production change that has a big impact on efficiency.

The pursuit of quality and profit as part of a cluster of objectives is not about having a vested interest in one over the other. Choosing quality or profit is like choosing between having good relationships with employees or providing value to customers.

The advantage to having both is as simple as embracing the value of ‘and’: focus on your customer and create value. Remove inefficiencies and waste. Track data and manage improvement by the numbers and empower your employees to own their role in the value creation process. **L&L**



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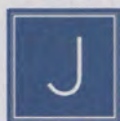


John Richter, right, uses his coaching techniques to manage his design/build, irrigation and maintenance crews at Richter Landscape.

LESSONS FROM **THE FIELD**

John Richter applies sports coaching skills to foster a winning team spirit at Richter Landscape Company.

By Brooke Bilyj



JOHN RICHTER WASN'T A STANDOUT ATHLETE on the baseball field, but his high school coaches took notice for another reason.

Now, it's the same trait he looks for when hiring employees at Richter Landscape Company.

"My coaches saw that I was a hard worker and that I had a desire to get better," Richter says. "It wasn't that I was the best athlete – far from it – but I was coachable."

Through one of his first summer jobs at age 16, Richter found his future career in landscaping – where he saw similarities to the sports he loved.

"I really enjoyed the work and the camaraderie (of landscaping), and I knew



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right away I'd enjoy it as a career," he says. "Playing football and baseball is really tough. It's really hot, but when you have success, there's something fun about celebrating a

victory as a team. It carried over into (landscaping) with the heat, the dirt, the grime and getting over hardships together."

By applying lessons he learned on the ath-

letic field, Richter has coached his company through consistent 10 percent annual growth, with more than \$2.5 million in 2017 revenue.

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YOUR IDEAS ARE WHERE WE START

BUILDING TEAM LOYALTY. Richter Landscape started in 2004 with a focus on landscape design and installation – not maintenance. But after one of the company's first design/build projects, the customer asked for a quote on maintenance. Richter explained that he didn't offer that, but the customer persisted.

Realizing the opportunity for a long-term relationship, Richter decided to make Fridays maintenance days and focus on design/build work Monday through Thursday. Fridays soon filled up – and then Thursdays, too – so Richter added a full-time maintenance crew.

Now, the company runs two landscape installation crews, an irrigation/lighting installation crew (plus one service tech), four maintenance crews (soon to be five), and an enhancement crew focused on property improvements for maintenance clients. Landscape installation makes up 57 percent of the company's revenue. One-third of the revenue is maintenance and the remainder is irrigation/lighting. More than 85 percent of installation revenue comes from residential clients, 70 percent of maintenance and 90 percent of irrigation/lighting.

Richter doesn't target commercial clients (especially companies that put property maintenance out to bid every year), but will perform commercial work for residential clients who own businesses. These relationships tend to build more loyalty, he says, and long-term relationships are more important to him than whether they're residential or commercial.

To make sure clients get the "exceptional service and quality craftsmanship" the company tagline promises, Richter focuses on internal training and teambuilding. The way he treats employees is key to the company's success, he says, because that determines how they, in turn, treat clients.

FINDING THE RIGHT FIT. "Coaching my sons and being involved in youth athletics reminds me how much fun it is to be part of a team, where we don't start the season

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Richter doesn't target commercial clients, but will perform commercial work for residential clients who own businesses.

as the best in the league, but we all work together to find everybody's talents," says Richter,

who started coaching his oldest son (who is now 13) when he was 6, and also coaches his

middle son, who's 10.

At the start of each season, Richter tells players' parents that

every child will have equal opportunity to play every position they're able to play. "We've got a season to figure out where they're best skilled," he says, but then when championship play begins, "it's time to put the starters in the starting positions."

Richter applies the same strategy to his nearly 30 employees, often moving new hires around to understand where their skill sets fit best. He calls it "pulling a Steve Spurrier move," referencing the Heisman-winning college (and later NFL) quarterback who most recently coached at South Carolina.

"If one of his quarterbacks wasn't getting the job done, he'd

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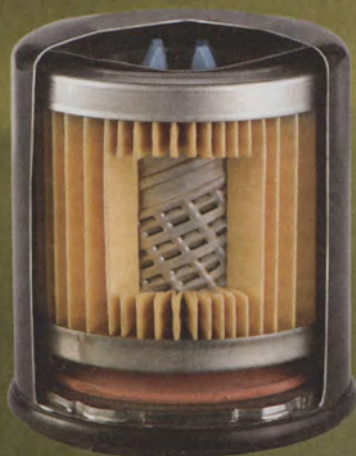


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Company Profile | Richter Landscape Company

Improving efficiency without sacrificing quality

Richter Landscape Company's tagline of "exceptional service and quality craftsmanship" requires a keen balancing act. "Everybody wants their project done fast, but you can't be a craftsman and do it overnight," says owner John Richter. "So we've got to move at a rapid pace, while trying to do things right."

This year, Richter began incentivizing this balance with monthly awards for loading efficiency.

Every morning, team leaders review their work tickets, and double-check the load boards that list the equipment required for the day's jobs. Then, to avoid traffic jams, crews load up and leave on a staggered schedule – starting with maintenance at 6:30 a.m., which creates more yard space for installation crews to leave at 7 a.m.

When each crew leaves, the group leader notes the time – and if anyone forgets something they have to come back for or have delivered to a jobsite, they're out of the running. Teams can see where they stand every week, and then at monthly companywide safety meetings, Richter announces the maintenance and installation crews with the winning times out of the gate.

"Everybody loves competition," he says, "even if you're only getting a cheeseburger at McDonald's or a \$10 VISA card."

THE NEXT STEP: In 2018, Richter wants to add another incentive to award crews that stay within their budgeted hours. To emphasize both halves of the company tagline and prevent cutting corners, of course, "the quality has to be there," he says. Returning to jobsites to fix mistakes counts against them.

To track this, the company uses mobile software, which Richter implemented in spring 2016

(and wrote about in L&L: bit.ly/RichterSoftware). This allows employees to easily clock in and out at jobsites to more accurately log hours.

"In the past, it was so difficult to get guys to remember and write the time they clocked in for the day, arrived at the job, left the job, etc. Now it's on their hip," Richter says, referencing the mobile app on their phones that uses GPS to confirm their location when they clock in and out. "It calculates overhead hours driving to the job, then once they clock in at the job, we're spending job hours that were bid. Then when they clock out of a job, drive back, get the trucks cleaned up and clock out (for the day), we calculate those administrative hours."

If a team struggles to hit budgeted hours, Richter sits down with each person to understand the gap.

"If they say they need three hours on a job that I know only takes an hour and a half, we're going to have a discussion," he says. "But if they say, 'We need 10 or 20 more minutes to really execute the details and give our clients exceptional service and quality craftsmanship,' we'd be foolish not to listen."

Combined with communication, this software helped Richter identify profit leaks – ultimately improving his bottom line by 8 percent in the first year.

The company was having trouble with accurate job costing and labor reports, but mobile software allowed crews to accurately report load time, drive time and on-site hours.

"It's changed how we can more intelligently bid jobs, sped up our bidding process and turnaround time, and added a measure of accountability," Richter says.

grab a guy off the bench and put him out there," Richter says.

On a landscaping crew, that might mean giving a "team member" a shot as "team leader," or crew foreman, "just to see how he can perform." To explain it to the team leader who's getting benched, Richter emphasizes the team goals, and the importance

of good sportsmanship while finding the best position for each person.

"Now, if you go and sulk on the sideline, your bad attitude could get you kicked off the team," he says. "We all want the same thing, right? We've just got to figure out the right spots."

(continued on page 92)



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**to help change the perception of the green
industry and develop a future workforce.**

STORY BY MEGAN SMALLEY • PHOTOS BY KEVIN KOPANSKI



W

hen the Illinois Landscape Contractor's Association organized focus groups to gather perceptions of the green industry, the feedback was less than stellar.

"It's all hard work."

"They're out there in the elements."

"The only person who makes money is the owner."

"It's all Hispanic workers."

The ILCA hosted one focus group with members of the general population, one with parents of students and one with high school students.

About 10 to 14 people attended each focus group, where they met with a moderator to share their thoughts on the landscaping industry, watch a video about landscaping jobs and respond to follow-up questions on their perceptions of the industry after watching the video. Members of the ILCA monitored the groups from behind a two-way mirror.

"It was tough to listen to, but at least it was ungarished and unbiased," says Scott Grams, executive director of ILCA.

But there was a silver lining. The responses from the high school students were more positive than the

high (school) HOPES

general population and the parents. Some perspectives from high school students included seeing the industry as something “stable” and “in-demand,” as well as something that helps the environment and an industry with plenty of opportunities.

At the beginning of the focus group with high school students, four out of the 10 students said they would consider a career in the green industry. At the end, eight out of the 10 students said they would consider a career in the green industry.

To Grams, this portion of the study provided good news for landscapers. It revealed that high school students are much more open-minded when it comes to learning about career opportunities. If a landscaper’s main goal is to recruit people, then high school students are a good demographic to target – not elementary school students whose opinions are shaped by that of their parents nor college students who sometimes have already made up their minds on a career path.

“You would be wasting a lot of time and resources trying to start (recruiting) students when they’re in the fourth grade,” Grams says. “You would be better off starting when they are in high school.”

Since completing the study, ILCA and its Future Landscape Industry Professionals (FLIP) committee has been planning to reach out more to high school students to expose students to green industry careers. This includes attending high school career nights and science,

technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) events. FLIP also plans to lead a career day for green industry students who attend the 2018 iLandscapes show Jan. 31 - Feb. 2 in Illinois.

“As we build off this study and give these resources to FLIP, we’re focused on finding ways to get these careers in front of high school kids, which is a laser-focused audience,” Grams says.

ILCA isn’t the only group to conclude high school students might be a viable solution to the labor shortage problem. Other industry associations and contractors connected with Lawn & Landscape to share how they have been working to change misconceptions about the industry and target high school students as next-generation employees.

“Almost every student said, ‘My parents would be disappointed.’ That was the jumping off point – we have a huge problem.”

CASSIE LARSON,
executive director,
Minnesota Nursery &
Landscape Association



EDUCATE EDUCATORS.

Nearly a decade before ILCA’s focus groups, the Minnesota Nursery & Landscape Association (MNLA) performed a similar study. Cassie Larson, executive director of MNLA, says the most interesting finding in the study came after students in the focus group were asked what their parents’ response would be if they told them they wanted to be a landscaper or a grower.

“Every student said, ‘my parents would be disappointed,’” Larson



says. “That was the jumping off point – we have a huge problem.”

One of the ways MNLA tackled this problem was by teaming with agricultural educators at the high school level. The association purchased a horticulture curriculum from the Pennsylvania

Landscape & Nursery Association in 2010. MNLA then reviewed the curriculum to make it region-relevant. By 2015, MNLA released the curriculum to be used in the state’s ag schools, vocational schools and public schools. The association connected with the

High school students are a more open-minded age group, willing to learn about different landscape industry career opportunities.

Minnesota Department of Education to approve the curriculum in order to meet state education standards.

Today, MNLA offers educational materials to students of all ages. For the younger kids, the lessons teach students how to plant seeds or it prompts them to use Legos to build what might be

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perceived as a patio. For the high schoolers, the lessons educate them on careers offered in the landscaping industry as well as plant sciences and math skills.

The Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado (ALCC) has also been focused on connecting with high schools. Becky Garber, director of communications at ALCC, says the association has had much success in partnering with high school educators and students the last few years. She attributes this success to the association's long-time partnership with the Colorado Community College System, which has helped connect the association with high school teachers.

"For the last two years, our partnership with the Colorado Community College System has allowed us to actively give (high school) teachers training in hands-on skills so they know how to teach their students basic skills such as planting, installing pavers, irrigation system installation and maintenance and how to use the greenhouse to teach plant science," Garber says.

ALCC first partnered with the Colorado



Students compete at the National Collegiate Landscape Competition last year. This year, high school students are invited to the event, which you can learn more about in the sidebar below.

NEW NATIONAL CONNECTIONS TO STUDENTS

The National Association of Landscape Professionals brought together about 40 association leaders and industry professionals for its Workforce Development Summit in October to identify ways to attract new people to the industry, including students.

"Up until now, it felt as if everyone was trying to handle this issue on their own," says Missy Henriksen, vice president of public affairs at NALP. "We thought it would be wise to bring people together."

At the meeting, leaders talked about what their organizations were doing to address the workforce shortage, what worked well, what they wished they could do better and ideas for collaboration. Henriksen says the association also looked at what other industries were doing to resolve workforce shortages.

One solution discussed in the meeting was to encourage all landscaping professionals to host a career day event in the spring. Landscape professionals could use the day to invite people from outside the industry – including students and teachers – to visit their company to learn firsthand what they do and to provide background on jobs available in the industry.

"We want it to be an opportunity to invite a variety of constituents to see the industry – women's groups, Latino groups and certainly students," she says. "We'll put together a toolkit where it offers ideas of activities landscape professionals can do as well as ways to promote the event, measure the impact of the event and we'll also promote it nationally." NALP plans to share more details about this event in early 2018.

In addition, NALP wants to expand its National Collegiate Landscape Competition in 2018 to invite local high school students in FFA. In March 2018, NCLC will take place at Alamance Community College in Graham, North Carolina, and the host college will invite high school students in the surrounding area to attend and watch competitions. "This year, with our new push with workforce development, we said, 'Let's just get the high schoolers there,'" says Jenn Myers, director of workforce development at NALP. "We're hoping that will really get those students to think there's a career in this for them, whether they end up at a two- or four-year university or enter straight into the industry."



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Community College System about 12 years ago to try to build connections with high school educators, and Garber says opportunities to connect with educators ramped up about two years ago as more high school educators gained interest in teaching technical education to high school students. "That's when the stars really aligned for us," she says. "Most of the Colorado Community College System's effort is to help high school teachers develop programs that sooner or later will lead students to post-secondary education. In order to get them on that path, high school is the strategic point to recruit."

ATTEND EVENTS.

In addition to connecting with high school students through vocational programs, associations and contractors might want to consider getting involved in events such as school career nights, STEM nights at schools or FFA competitions.

Patrick Lynch, senior designer at Peabody Landscape in Columbus, Ohio, and his twin brother Mike Lynch, account representative at Environmental Management in Columbus, both saw benefits in getting involved with FFA's nursery and landscape-based Career Development Events, which is a testing program for high school students considering a career in landscaping.

A few years ago, though, Patrick and Mike had the idea to develop a more interactive landscaping competition for students.

"A teacher told me his students could never pass the test to attend CDE," Patrick says. "So, I said, 'What if we create an event where

all high schools throughout Ohio, no matter what, can come? We could have test problems and industry representatives. Would you come?' And he said, 'In a heartbeat, my students would love it.'"

With that, the Lynch brothers pitched their idea for a more inclusive student landscaping competition to the Ohio Nursery & Landscape Association. ONLA loved the idea – the state association formed a committee for the event and recruited help from contractors across the state. By 2016, the association hosted its first event, which it dubbed the Ohio High School Landscape Olympics.

Part of the Lynch brothers' idea for OHLO was to involve many regional landscape contractors and industry companies in the event. While ONLA would handle event logistics – such as finding a host school, providing food and recruiting vocational schools and students to attend – the contractors and companies would create and manage their own competitions. Each company is responsible for their own test problem, so they develop a hands-on test for students and pay for everything needed with the test.

"The neat thing about it is each test problem we have is ran, operated and facilitated by an industry company," Patrick says. "So, the ONLA doesn't have to mess with the test problems. They just take care of overall event management, while us companies put together test problems for students."





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..... It's no surprise then, that a turf school research professor with a passion for helping others would find Ryan Lawn & Tree to be an enticing career move. Dr. Rodney St. John was working at Kansas State University when he jumped at a chance to be the VP/Director of Agronomy and Environmental Stewardship at Ryan Lawn & Tree. "For me, personally and professionally, I just enjoy helping people," Rodney says. "Whether it's a customer, or a neighbor – I love helping people out."

Rodney's responsibilities with Ryan Lawn & Tree, much like those at Kansas State, involve education. "It's about developing lawn care programs that utilize products and services that are the best choice for our customers, the environment, and Ryan Lawn & Tree as a whole."

To build lawn care programs that deliver consistent results and customer relationships that last, Ryan Lawn & Tree looks to Bayer, and in particular, their Area Sales Manager – Wes Kleffner – who lives in Kansas City and services territories in Kansas, Missouri, and Colorado. As a self-described outdoorsman with a green thumb, Wes never saw himself working behind a desk. "I really enjoyed the game of golf and love being outdoors. That's what led me to choose a degree in Golf Course Management at Kansas State."

It was at Kansas State that Wes and Rodney's paths would first cross. Wes knew Rodney as a

professor, but it was later in Wes' career when he joined Ryan Lawn & Tree in their Turf Department that he developed a friendship with Rodney. "When I was looking for my next career move, a mentor encouraged me to look into lawn care. During my time at Ryan Lawn & Tree, and now at Bayer, Rodney and I have gotten to know one another really well."

This is the kind of trust that both Ryan Lawn & Tree and Bayer are known for. Relationships that solve problems through collaboration and innovation, and that are deeply rooted in friendship. In a word, Rodney says Ryan Lawn & Tree's relationship with Bayer is "fantastic." "I like that Bayer backs their products. I always feel like they've got my back. They're also a leader in supporting the industry as a whole, and I appreciate that."

According to Rodney, it's not just the relationships and support that make Ryan Lawn & Tree choose Bayer. "The products work. The coverage is consistent. And consistency is key – I need a product that I can apply to 26,000 different customers and know that it's going to work in all situations." Ryan Lawn & Tree trusts products like Merit®, Prostar®, Specticle®, and Tempo®. "We use about 3,000 acres of Merit per year, in particular," Rodney says.

"But this isn't just about great products," Wes agrees. "The relationships we as Bayer sales managers make with our customers are cool stories to tell.

We're not just out here selling product and calling it a day. We take the time to take care of our customers and the environment."

His admiration for Ryan Lawn & Tree is also strong. "You don't see a business model like theirs often," he says. "They invest a lot of time and money into their employees. They build relationships with their customers. To them, their customers aren't just numbers. They are Mr. and Mrs. Smith with two kids and dog and they love to vacation at Lake of the Ozarks – that's what sets them apart. People stick around at Ryan just like people stick around at Bayer. That says a lot about both companies."

Wes and Rodney's friendship is a direct reflection of the partnership between Bayer and Ryan Lawn & Tree, and one that benefits all parties involved. "We appreciate Wes and all he does for us" says Rodney, "and his willingness to be available at any time. He and Bayer are great partners."

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The Ohio Nursery & Landscape Association hosted its second Ohio High School Landscape Olympics in 2017, where 250 students, including the one pictured left, participated.

“On the professional level, we need people in the industry. The industry has been good to me, so I want students to know this is a viable career path for them.”

MIKE LYNCH, account representative,
Environmental Management



Partnerships can help with these test problems, too. Patrick says Peabody Landscape teamed with Willoway Nursery to manage the plant installation test at OHLO 2017. In addition, he says some landscaping companies and local colleges donated money to provide ONLA with funds for food, tents and tables to use.

At OHLO, students compete in a variety of events like truck and trailer operation, skid-steer operation, sales presentation, irrigation, landscape maintenance and plant installation to name a few.

OHLO was such a hit among teachers and students in 2016 that ONLA decided to bring it back again in November 2017.

ONLA plans to host OHLO again in 2018, with hopes of adding new competitions to the event in arboriculture and turfgrass management.

This past fall, 250 students from 20 schools participated.

“As a first impression, I really like this event,” says Aaron Blaney, a junior at Auburn Career Center in Painesville, Ohio, who participated in OHLO in 2017. “It got me out into the elements and prepared to get into the business and work for people. I learned techniques here that I might not learn anywhere else.”

ONLA plans to host OHLO again in 2018. Mike envisions the event growing to include new competitions in 2018 such as turfgrass management and arboriculture. Although helping to manage an event such as OHLO can add to busy contractors’ work schedules and

it sometimes means partnering with competitors, Mike says it’s more than worth it to be involved in these types of events.

“We want to give back to the industry and encourage these (students),” he says. “Is there cost involved? Yes. Is it worth it? Absolutely. I’m out a couple of days of sales and some of my staff is here, but it’s all worth it. On the professional level, we need people in the industry. The industry has been good to me, so I want students to know this is a viable career path for them. When it comes to improving the future of our industry and giving students an opportunity to showcase their skills, we all need to be a team.”

OFFER SCHOLARSHIPS AND REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE.

When connections with high school students are established, associations and contractors can also try to promote industry scholarships or internships to further engage these students. James Martin Associates, based in Vernon Hills, Illinois, has offered internships for just over 30 years and sponsored scholarships for about 18 years. President Jim Martin says both the internships and scholarships raise awareness about landscaping job opportunities.

"I think by being active in the (scholarships), most candidates consider us an opportunity for work," Martin says. "That's a significant differentiator for how they see and perceive us."

In addition, Martin says he requires his interns to put together a PowerPoint presentation at the end of their internship to share about their experience, and he asks them to share that presentation with their classmates when they return to school. "That has also helped us to feed, sponsor and promote the internship program," he says.

Also, adding real-world expertise about landscaping in the educational setting can also raise awareness to students about the industry. The Pennsylvania Landscape & Nursery Association hopes to incorporate mentorships in schools with horticulture programs to bring professionals with landscaping expertise to the classroom.

Cathy Corrigan, president of PLNA, says many high school horticulture programs have science teachers or general vocational teachers lead the horticulture program at a school, yet these instructors sometimes lack hands-on knowledge about landscaping.

As a solution, PLNA launched a high school mentoring task force to discuss how it could develop a mentorship program for high schools or vocational schools with horticulture programs.

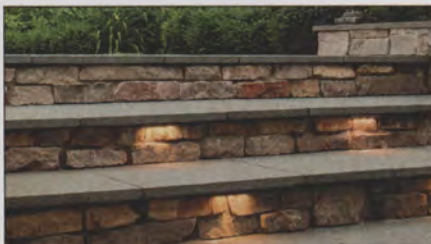
The association wants to encourage a contractor to serve as a mentor in each horticulture program in the state to work alongside the teacher in the classroom. The instructor would provide the book knowl-

edge, while the mentor would provide industry experiences and in-field knowledge.

"By having mentors from the industry come into the school, we can make sure

students are learning what they need in order to be successful," Corrigan says.

The association aims to integrate this program into Pennsylvania schools in the



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2018-19 academic school year. Corrigan notes there will be some obstacles in incorporating industry professionals in the classroom, as each mentor must be approved by the Department of Education. To date, Corrigan says about 15 contractors have expressed interest in partnering with horticulture programs in the state to serve as mentors.

"Bringing outside people into the schools to have one-on-one time with students requires many clearances," she says. "It comes down to what each school's administration allows, and every school is going to be different. But that's why we are willing to have different packages for this. We want to be able to get someone in front of the kids, even if it's just a professional talking to (horticulture students) four times a year. Then, at least someone's coming in the door to show students more practical experiences." **L&L**



Students Max Zupan (left) and Aaron Blaney participated in the 2017 Ohio High School Landscape Olympics. Patrick Lynch (center) helped pitch the idea for the event.

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Franchise ownership sometimes comes with resources in place to boost brand recognition and marketing.

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BUYING A BRAND

Find out if franchising
is right for you with
these tips from
the experts.

By Kate Spirgen

MAKING THE DECISION to join a franchise can mean a huge increase in resources, but how do you know which would be a good fit for you? While it can be great for brand recognition, marketing and other resources that come from partnering with a national company, it also comes with requirements, expectations and challenges.

"You're buying into that but in doing so, part of buying into a franchise is now you are protecting the brand with which you just bought in," says Lou Schager, COO of Mosquito Joe.

"Some franchises offer detailed organizational systems, training and day-to-day support, and others are more product focused. Each has its own strengths and its own personality," says Phil Fogarty.

Fogarty says his experience with two different franchises was dramatically different and served very different markets. The Ohio Weed Man franchise owner has also owned a holiday lighting franchise in the past and while Weed Man is very system-oriented, the holiday lighting franchise was much more focused on products.

The Christmas Décor franchise gave him the buying power for the variety and quantity of products he needed at the right time of year

Brad Saunders has owned a franchise before and is

now the director of business development at Spring-Green Lawn Care. He says most people are looking for an organizational system for the weed and fertilization side of their business when they choose to partner with his company.

"Because these green industry guys want to do everything, it can be beneficial to partner with the franchise to get the technology, the experience, the technique out of the way by purchasing a franchise," he says.

Take a good look at your books before you make any decisions, Saunders says. In his experience, franchisees are usually using cash flow or profits from other businesses to help them invest and grow their business.

"Our suggestion always is not to put cash down," he says. "Try to use minimal cash but then try to have a business that's strong enough to make those payments for you ... You've got to have a systematic way to help support and finance that first couple years so that you're able to grow the business fast enough to get that personal return on it."

Smart budgeting, especially in the first few years is a requirement as profits take some time to come. "Sometimes we have people who like to start a business and start making money right away and that's not a good approach," Schager says.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK. If you've ever considered a franchise before, you know there's a lot of paperwork involved. The franchise disclosure document, or FDD, can be daunting to look through and you may want to consider enlisting the help of a lawyer or accountant before you sign.

"It's a pretty overwhelming decision in a lot of ways because once you sign, there's always post term and in term non-competition things," Fogarty says. "You really have to be all in and to be successful in anything you have to be all in. You can't do things half-baked and expect great results."

And if you're looking at a turf care franchise, you'll want to have an agronomist on staff as well, Saunders says. "Specifically the turf care of the green industry there's so much licensing and technology and equipment and materials and everybody's got a new brand of weed killer coming out every year," he says.

Marketing is another area where you might need some assistance. While many franchises have marketing experts and consultants who can make a great plan, the execution is the tough part, Saunders says.

Marketing locally is what's most important, Schager says – getting around to local chambers of commerce, establishing connections with different associations and building a referral network.

A business consultant is another thing to look for in a franchise operation. Franchises may require a certain amount of growth and set goals for your business, and a business consultant can hold you accountable and help you make a plan to achieve that growth.

"Internal support is very important," Saunders says. "(Business owners) are already busy. They're already trying to do too many things. If you don't have somebody to tell you how to reinvest that money into growing the business, you're not going to do it. You're too busy."

Looking beyond the brand, consider what type of support you're going to get once you've signed the papers. "I'm surprised always at how a lot of franchise systems are more about selling the franchise and how little support there can be at the back end of it," Fogarty says. "They're prepared to sell



Part of buying into a franchise is the expectation that you will protect the brand you now represent.

NICHE MARKET

THINGS ARE LOOKING GOOD FOR IRRIGATION FRANCHISING, says Russ Jundt, founder of Conserva Irrigation. The company just finished its sixth complete season as a licensing company, and its first as a franchise. It now has more than 2,500 clients and just over \$1 million in top-line revenue.

"The timing is right with the increase in prices for water across the nation and government initiatives to control when and how and how much water we use. We're seeing fines and penalties and things like that," Jundt says.

While Conserva does installation, the company focuses on servicing existing irrigation systems.

"Our business model really works on building to scale. It's a repeatable service model so it's based on maintenance and service packages and upgrading existing systems. And while we do install, of course, really we focus on the service," Jundt says.

His background is in underground utilities and from that, moved into irrigation from there. But then they moved out of irrigation around 2008 and moved into mosquito control. "It just seemed silly how we were wasting water," he says. "Nobody really had any clear plans on how to design and specify and install properly highly efficient irrigation systems so we departed from irrigation."

He and his partner loved the idea of repeat service of mosquito control and then in 2010, he started looking into starting a national irrigation company. They studied irrigation and started to develop field protocols and opened up shop.

Jundt says there are four types of franchisees at Conserva. Some want to build an existing irrigation business to scale with the systems Conserva has developed. Others are the "second in command" who want to strike out on their own in the irrigation industry. Others are already in the green industry and want to diversify their offerings. And a smaller section are former corporate workers who want to try something different, which Jundt says is exciting.

"I believe this is the first time in the irrigation industry where we're going to have a big influx of owners and industry participants that are bringing new, fresh looks or outside looks to the industry and bringing in fresh ideas," he says, noting that they're bringing their business experience and marketing ideas from the corporate world with them. "That's a huge influx of great people into our system."

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and get the brand out there but they're not prepared to handle the variety of needs that people have when they join up with the franchise system."

MAKING UP YOUR MIND. The decision-making process can take months, or even years, but it is crucial to fully understand the ins and outs of a franchise agreement before making a commitment. Moving from owning your own business to owning a franchise means you can't dabble in both, Schager says. You must follow the systems in place per the franchise agreement, so it's key to understand all of the requirements.



Spring-Green advises looking at the books before making any decisions on starting a franchise.

Besides the initial investment you'll have to make, look at business expenses for the first year. Consider equipment purchases, new uniforms or supplies, software and training.

"I think that anytime you're required to buy materials or required to buy proprietary equipment from a franchise, you should be cautious," Saunders says. "It may be a great deal and

it may be the best way to go but you should be aware."

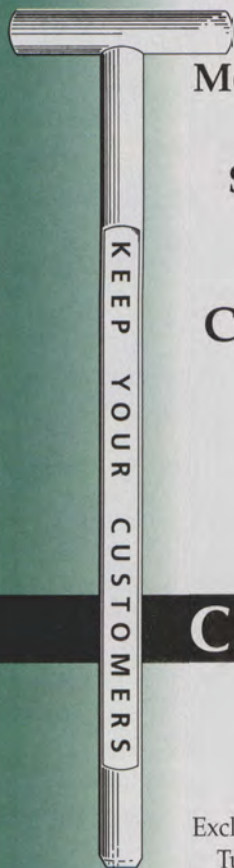
Mosquito Joe requires franchisees to use Ford trucks and STIHL blowers because they've found them to be the most effective, both in cost and production. They have relationships with both companies, which helps on cost.

While Spring-Green does require franchisees to purchase

a custom-made tank for efficiency, Saunders warns that when it comes to buying chemicals and fertilizers, franchisees should do it on their own. "Absolutely do not buy that from the franchise. Even if they think they're getting a better deal, there could be hidden markups," he says.

They key decision-maker, besides the owner, is often the spouse in Saunders' experience.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SPRING-GREEN



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He says about 50 percent of Spring-Green franchisees are husband-wife teams. And at Mosquito Joe, Schager says the most successful franchises are family-run.

He recommends that the point person in the organization, whether that's a spouse or not, be involved in the decision-making process. But it's important not to involve too

"You really have to be all in and to be successful in anything you have to be all in. You can't do things half-baked and expect great results." **PHIL FOGARTY**, Weed Man

many people who are already dealing with the day-to-day operations.

"I've had that happen in our operation," Saunders says. "Those people are sitting in that conversation going 'What else am I going to have to do?'"

Once you meet with a franchise representative, you'll get the franchise disclosure document, or FDD, which is the Bible when it comes to learning about the terms and conditions of a franchise agreement. Regulated by the FTC, it includes everything from the benefits and training to the default procedure.

Validation through references is one of the most important steps in the process, and making one or two phone calls isn't going to cut it, Saunders says. "All organizations are going to have a third of the people that are cheerleaders, a third of the people that are just getting by and a third that hate what they're doing, so you're going to have to take that into consideration," he says.

MAKING IT HAPPEN. Once you do take the plunge, you need to get your employees and your customers on board. Depending on the size of your company, you may want to inform your customers yourself, or you may want to delegate that communication to account managers. "Ultimately what the customer needs to know is that the owner of this business is taking on a franchise in order to give you professional, top-of-the-line service," Saunders says.

Selling the employees on the idea can be simple since it shows the company is growing, giving them opportunities to move up.

"There's no more powerful way to do business because you have the personal service and the vested interest of a local owner with these great resources and experts that leverage all their experience, time and skill into this brand and this service, so I think it's an extremely easy sell to tell someone I'm going into a franchise," Fogarty says. "I've done it a couple of times now and every time it's always been a positive because people just inherently understand this. Hey, if you're going to join up with somebody that's going to give you better resources, but you're still delivering it? That's great, I'm all in." **L&L**



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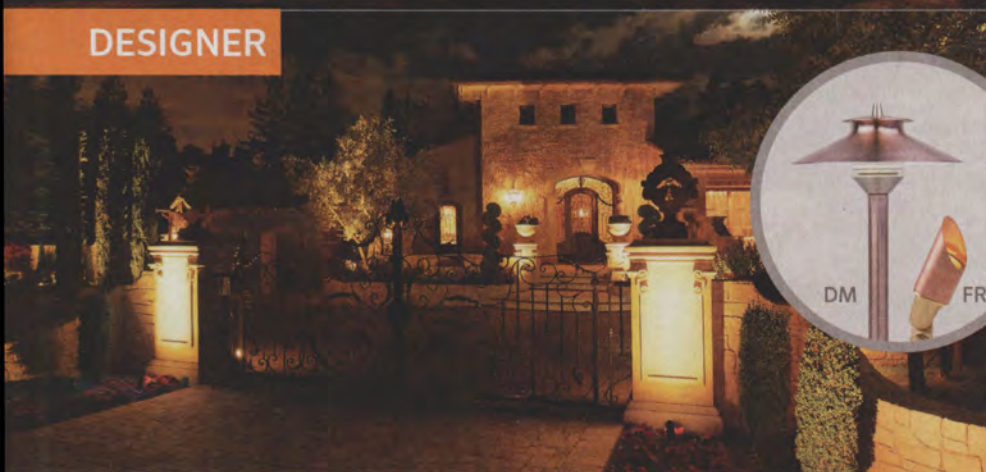
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PLUS	Aluminum	Integrated LED	Zoning/Dimming	10 Year
DESIGNER	Copper/Brass	RGBW Color LED	Zoning/Dimming/Color	10 Year

A man wearing an orange shirt, blue jeans, and a white cap is operating a red zero-turn mower on a green lawn. The mower is positioned in front of a large tree with green and yellowing leaves. In the background, a white building with a balcony is visible.

**While technology
and design change,**
productivity always
remains on the
contractor's
zero-turn wish list.

By Lauren Rathmell

ZERO-TURN TECH



ZERO-TURNS HAVE MADE INCREASING advancements in technology and operation. At Ferris, Dan Roche, director of marketing, says they have noticed trends that lead back to the bottom line of productivity.

"It's not surprising to us, but we have been monitoring these trends through the voice of our customers," Roche says. "There is an ongoing desire for productivity. These contractors need these machines to go further in their work."

Roche also considers operator comfort to be crucial to the productivity of the machine. "We've seen operator comfort getting more air play in terms of what contractors want," he says. "They want to isolate the operator from the terrain."

Good suspension systems and comfortable seats are increasing in popularity to offer smoother rides for operators, while still maintaining the quality of the cut.

"We've heard of operators doing stretching exercises to reduce their fatigue before they hop on their mower," he says.

Josh Sooy, director of the professional business segment at Cub Cadet, says zero-turns will have to keep up with the demands of professional landscapers.

"As new technology becomes available, professional landscapers

will need reliable technology that helps them grow their business and supports their livelihood," he says.

At Cub Cadet, Sooy says they are offering more automated products evaluating the right types of technology to use in the zero-turn market.

ENVIRONMENTAL ADAPTABILITY. With landscapes that combine both hardscape and green elements, Roche says zero-turns are offering more maneuverability to mow within those mixed elements. The quick on and off aspects of stand-on ZTRs are favored, but mowers that can maneuver around tighter spaces are gaining popularity as well.

"With more obstacles in the yards they are mowing, maneuverability will be an important feature for them," Roche says. "More crossover of these industries is leading to smaller deck offerings to better fit in tight spaces."

HIGH TECH. With zero-turns, contractors can expect to see more digital options for managing and operating their equipment.

"From simple apps on smartphones that help drive contractors to websites and other venues, to technology infrastructure that aids in maintenance history and alerts to aid in landscaper efficiency, technology will permeate the zero-turn market," says Ron Scheffler,



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lawn care professionals need, all at a value-driven price point.

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- Dual fuel tanks with 9.5-gallon capacity improve run time for better productivity.

- Available with a 6-year/1,200-hour Mow With Confidence warranty.

For more information: Bobcatturf.com



JOHN DEERE Z955M EFI

The pitch: This zero-turn features easy-to-operate height-of-cut adjustment that enables quick and easy on-the-go changes.

- Three seat choices offer enhance operator comfort.

- Available with Michelin X Tweel Turf airless radial tire technology, eliminating downtime and reducing cost of operation.

- Available with multiple deck offerings like a 60-inch side discharge or 60-inch Mulch On Demand (MOD).

For more information: Deere.com



**ZERO-TURN MOWER ROUNDUP
CONTINUES ON PGS. 60 & 62**

product manager at BOB-CAT.

Roche has also seen an increase in the desire for technology specifically designed for mowing fleets.

“Contractors want a technology to tell them not only where their equipment is, but what it has been doing on the job,” he says.

OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY. A lack of available labor in the industry puts more pressure on equipment to run well, which is why Roche says enhancements to zero-turns are so important.

“It’s tougher to get operators now,” he says. “It’s not only about the right people, it’s about the right product.”

Roche says reliable and comfortable equipment will help keep operators happy.

With the bottom line continuing to be productivity, landscapers can expect

to see a better approach to maintenance on their zero-turns. “Maintenance means downtime,” Roche says. “We continue to think of the daytime life of these mowers, but when they’re in the shop for maintenance, you have to consider that as well.”

Sooy hears the same thing from Cub Cadet’s customers as well.

“Scheduled maintenance equates to downtime for commercial cutters,” he says. “There has been a move across the industry for maintenance-free spindles.” In response to those needs, Cub Cadet is making several low-maintenance zero-turns.

As prices fluctuate and demand increases, add-on features may start to become standard on zero-turns. “Items such as lights and other electrical adapters, and no-flat tires and other maintenance-free items may become a norm in the market,” Scheffler says.

LOOKING AHEAD. With the industry changing quickly, manufacturers realize they need to work to keep up with increasing demands.

“The professional category continues to grow and that’s where we are focusing our efforts,” Sooy says.

Sooy believes there is still room for improvements to be made in ergonomics and other areas that will reduce operator fatigue. He anticipates contractors will start to see more efforts made in technology that will improve side hill stability, allowing operators to mow straight lines on steep slopes.

“Contractors are looking for durable products that will last all day and work as hard as they do. They want products they can be confident in and support the busy lifestyle they lead,” Scheffler says. **L&L**

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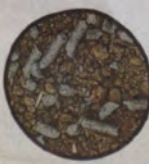
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ZERO-TURNS



EXMARK LAZER Z DIESEL

The pitch: The Lazer Z Diesel commercial zero-turn riding mower has a 96-inch UltraCut Flex Wing cutting deck and Yanmar liquid-cooled diesel engines equipped with Exmark's RED Technology.

- The deck uses four matching blades to deliver consistent cut quality across the entire 8-foot width of cut.
- Fully fabricated and welded from high-strength 7-gauge steel, these decks feature Exmark's exclusive flow-control baffles for a signature quality of cut.
- The machine is capable of mowing in excess of 10 acres per hour.

For more information: Exmark.com

FERRIS 400S

The pitch: Landscape professionals who are looking for the benefits of a commercial-grade ZTR at an entry-level price can now turn to the new Ferris 400S.

- The 400S features an independent, large rear progressive coil-over-shock suspension.
- A 5.5-gallon fuel tank allows operators to mow further before stopping to top off the tank.

- The mower features a solid rod cable-less drive mechanism and 1-inch aluminum spindles.

For more information: Ferrismowers.com



KUBOTA Z700 SERIES

The pitch: Redesigned in 2017, Kubota's Z700 Series zero-turn mowers offer extra comfort with the durability and performance commercial turf professionals demand, all at a competitive price.

- It features a new Premium Suspension Seat that is designed to reduce fatigue.
- 3-inch vertical suspension travel and 6-inch seat travel help keep you mowing longer with less downtime.
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For more information: KubotaUSA.com



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The pitch: This commercial zero-turn mower was designed to meet the needs of landscape crews in varying sizes.

- The line has a triple-7-gauge deck, available in 48-, 54-, 60- and 72-inch cutting widths.
- The cutting deck has three layers of 7-gauge steel, a rolled leading edge and side reinforcements.
- The spindle assembly features sealed, double-row ball bearings that are maintenance-free to extend the life of the spindle.

For more information: Cubcadet.com



GRASSHOPPER 900 SERIES MAXTORQUE DIESEL MODEL

The pitch: This 900 Series model is a front-mount diesel mower that offers high-torque power while producing fewer emissions than gasoline or propane tanks.

- The mower features a Tier 4 Final-compliant 1.3-liter, 3-cylinder, liquid-cooled diesel engine.
- The torque of the diesel engine allows for uninterrupted mowing, even in overgrown conditions with choices of either a 61-inch or 72-inch DuraMax decks.
- Standard features on the 900D 1.3-liter model include a combination electronic fuel gauge and digital hour meter and two USB charging ports.

For more information visit:
Grasshoppermower.com



WRIGHT SPORT I ZERO TURN MOWER

The pitch: Wright Manufacturing 36-inch Sport Intensity mower combines all the features of a stand-on mower with the choice of stand-on or sit-down operation.

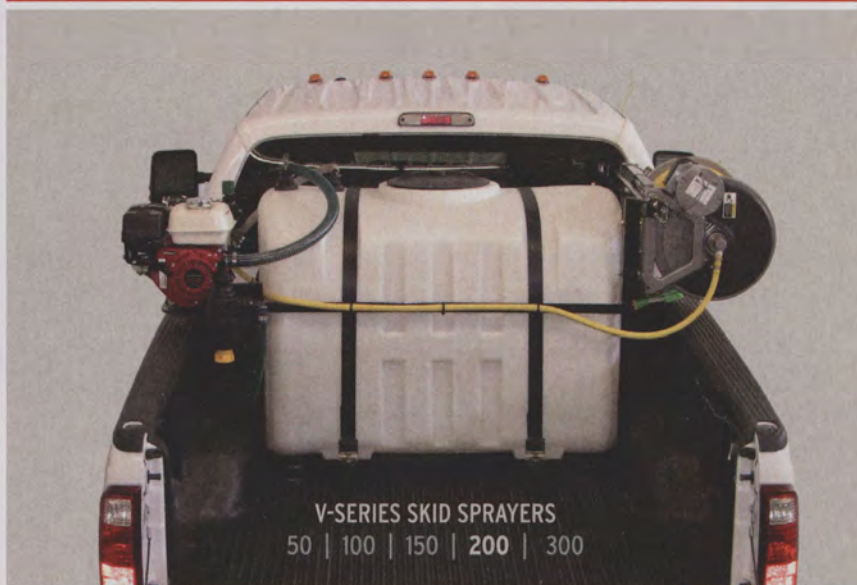
- The Sport I's fold-away seat is positioned so the operator can step off for quick exits or to remove debris, and the mower stops immediately.
- Wright's floating AERO-CORE deck on the Sport I tilts side to side and front to back, allowing the mower deck to better follow the terrain contours, and rollers automatically adjust the deck height to changes in terrain.
- Recessed caster wheels reduce the mower's turning radius.

For more information: Wrightmfg.com



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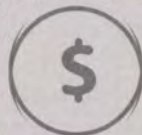
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SEARCH & SELL

Improve your website's SEO to make sure potential customers can find you on the web. **By Camelia Clarke**

YOU MIGHT HAVE THE BEST service in your market, but if your website doesn't pop up when potential customers are looking online, you're missing out on sales. SEO strategies, content performance, user engagement and social media all factor into your status on the web, but a few tweaks to your online presence can make all the difference. Try these six tips to make your business searchable.

1) ANSWER QUESTIONS AND CREATE RELEVANT CONTENT.

Content is important now more than ever, but the key is quality content in the right context. Turn your website into a resource for your customers and let them know about your expertise in your field. This gives Google more information on connections of relevant content throughout the web and helps improve your rankings.

2) LINK TO BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE SOURCES. This increases your user engagement, decreases your bounce rate and ups the amount of time people spend on your site. All of those factors will help your

Google ranking. Linking to well-known domains will also help move your search results up.

3) USE DESCRIPTIVE URLS. Using keywords in your URLs helps Google and other search engines find your website and include it in results. Stick to five or fewer search terms in your URLs. Any more than that may look like spam to search bots, and work against you.

4) IMPROVE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA. The quality and quantity of links on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, etc., influence your search engine optimization so make sure you're sharing useful and pertinent content.

5) ANALYZE YOUR PERFORMANCE. Sites like Google Analytics can help you determine what type of content is most popular so that you can keep giving your customers and potential customers reasons to come to your website. If you can answer questions potential clients are asking, Google will recognize your site as a resource and improve your ranking.

6) GO MOBILE. As more web traffic is coming from mobile devices, it's important to make sure your site looks good, and functions, on mobile platforms. An easy way to check multiple platforms is to run a URL through Google's mobile-friendly test at search.google.com/test/mobile-friendly. If you know which software your website was built with, you can often find a guide to mobile optimization on that platform. **L&L**

The author is an SEO specialist.

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splashes & flames

**In 2017,
fire features
and water
elements**

were the biggest
trends in outdoor
living spaces.

By Megan Smalley

ABOUT A DECADE AGO, outdoor living spaces typically consisted of a patio, a grill and a few chairs.

Today, they've become extensions of the home, with many incorporating kitchens, fireplaces, sound systems, lighting, pools, shade structures and more.

Several contractors from across the United States told Lawn & Landscape they received more requests for outdoor living space jobs in 2017. In addition, they said homeowners were more willing to spend money on improving the look of outdoor living spaces.

"It's becoming more mainstream that everyone hires a designer," says Freyja Kendrick, design install manager at Dig Right In Landscaping near Chicago. "They want pergolas, patios and fire pits. They're willing to pay for design."

Prices for outdoor living space jobs have increased, yet this hasn't deterred demand, contractors say. "Prices are through the roof," says John Durso, design group lead at Pacific Outdoor Living in Los Angeles. "What used to cost \$5,000 is now \$16,000."

Durso recalls a time a few years ago when he told a customer it would cost \$6,000 to redesign her front yard. "She looked at me like I was a bank robber," he says.

Today, Pacific Outdoor Living customers hardly bat an eye if they hear it costs \$20,000 to redesign a front yard or outdoor living space, he says.

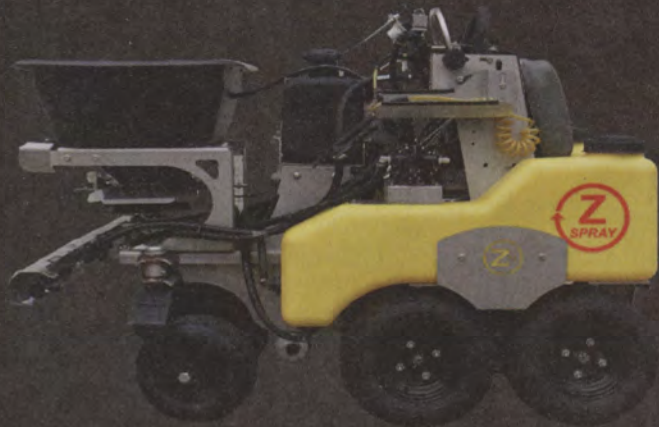
Although Durso says landscape design work is somewhat of a requirement in Los Angeles communities due to the culture, more places are treating the design of outdoor living spaces as an art form. Stylistically, homeowners are looking



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HOT DEMANDS. The outdoor living space today comes with more features than it did one decade ago: fire pits, a water features, shading and lighting to name a few. Of those features, Durso said homeowners in Los Angeles often want either a fire pit or fireplace.

"People gravitate toward fire," Durso says. "You have friends over, and fire is a great social gathering tool."

For Jeremy Rose, co-owner of Precision Landscape in Knoxville, Tennessee, fire pits were a must. While many homeowners prefer the look of a fireplace, he says the cost savings of the fire pit made them more desirable.

"About 80 percent of patios included a fire pit," he says. "Fire pits are maybe \$10,000 versus



Dennis Shennard, owner of New Jersey-based Groundmasters, finds that many homeowners are most drawn to fire and water features.

\$15,000 for a fireplace. There's a huge cost savings."

He also thinks fire pits tend to function better for outdoor living spaces. About eight to 10 people can sit comfortably around a fire pit compared with only four to six people in front of a fireplace.

Not unlike the allure of fire pits, homeowners are drawn to water features, primarily for the sound effects they add to

the yard. "People like the idea of being by fire and water," says Dennis Shennard, owner of Groundmasters in Hightstown, New Jersey.

Many of Groundmasters' customers live near highways, so they usually request a water feature for the sound in order to drown out cars on the freeway.

In Los Angeles, homeowners still like adding water features to

their outdoor living spaces. Durso says the state's water restriction periods aren't usually a concern to meet this demand, either.

"We get a fair amount of requests for water features," he says. "Water features use less water than a lawn. The average lawn in California requires 3 inches of water per week to keep it well and alive, whereas a water feature requires half an inch for





the same square footage of area. It's cheaper and less water use."

For shading, homeowners are often requesting pergolas, as they provide a special area for people to congregate. With heat being an issue in California, Durso offers customers misting systems for their pergolas to keep them cool. His higher-end customers also add space heaters so they can be used in winter.

In the Chicago area, most customers want pergolas to provide an open shade structure for summer months and to provide a place to block wind in spring and fall. Kendrick achieves this by placing pergolas that have partial roofs.

Lighting has also become essential to the design of outdoor living spaces.

"Landscaping is not cheap," Durso says. "Say you spend \$50,000 on an outdoor living space and you can't see it at night. Adding lights creates magic and you can highlight certain elements like a tree, a fountain, a statue. It doubles the time you can enjoy it."

For lighting, almost all homeowners were requesting LED lights in 2017. The LED lights last much longer than standard bulbs and are made of a higher quality material such as bronze

“People always gravitate toward fire. You have friends over, and fire is a great social gathering tool.”

JOHN DURSO, design group lead, Pacific Outdoor Living

or brass versus aluminum used on halogen lights.

LOW-MAINTENANCE DESIGNS.

Increasingly, contractors are noticing homeowners want “maintenance-free” designs for their outdoor living spaces. Many people want contractors to perform even more basic outdoor living space jobs, and fewer people are attempting DIY jobs. In Tennessee, Rose says he seldom receives requests for water features due to maintenance aspects.

“Years ago in 2008 or 2009, everybody wanted a pond,” he says. “There are still people who want some water features, but they need to require less maintenance.”

Shennard has experienced the same demand for low-maintenance water features in New Jersey. About a decade ago, he says his company installed up to 25 koi ponds each year. “Now,

if I install two a year, that's a lot.” Today's homeowners want easier-to-maintain water features such as a vanishing water system or bubbling rocks.

Most of Dig Right In Landscaping customers requesting “maintenance-free” designs tend to be younger Chicago-area homeowners, Kendrick says.

“This new generation – people in their 20s and 30s – have never really gardened. They're looking for maintenance-free programs,” she says. “They have less of a concept of what it means to take care of a garden, so they're hiring out.”

In particular, Kendrick says homeowners in her area want native plants for their outdoor living spaces, as they require less work. For Chicago, native plants are primarily prairie plants such as coneflowers, black-eyed Susans or goldenrod. **L&L**

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SWISS ARMY KNIFE

New capabilities
are making
skid-steers
**more versatile
than ever.**

By Kate Spirgen

WITH IMPROVEMENTS to hydraulics and electronic controls, skid-steers are more versatile than ever before. And as they become more powerful, they're able to do the jobs of much larger equipment.

"Now we can get into areas and do jobs and applications with much smaller equipment and less costs by moving equipment in and out that we've never been able to do in the past," says Perry Girard, attachments product marketing manager for CNH Industrial, which provides attachments for New Holland Construction skid-steers. "There's a lot of attachments out there for a landscape contractor and other things people may not be aware of."

Skid-steers and the right attachments can speed

up all kinds of hand work, reducing the man-hours required for a job. And with the current labor shortage, that can be a big advantage.

"With today's machine capabilities, hydraulic circuit capacities and variety of attachments, there are few landscaping tasks that cannot be enhanced by a skid-steer or compact track loader," says Ryan Connelly, aftermarket sales manager for JCB.

In some cases, skid-steers can now perform the work of many machines. From side discharge buckets to direct track motors to mulchers to brush cutters, attachments allow the same machine to take a job from beginning to end.

"Loaders paired with attachments are vital to ensure landscapers can complete projects in

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a timely manner because they are versatile,” says Christopher Girodat, marketing manager, Bobcat Company. “Operators can quickly switch from one attachment to another to quickly level an area, lift and carry seed or sod, plant trees or shrubs, clean an area with an angle broom ... The list is endless.”

Essentially, being able to use the same machine for multiple applications can allow landscapers to expand their offerings and take on more jobs.

Think about what you can do with a preparator vs. five guys with rakes, Girard says. The man-hours you save allow you to take on more jobs. And that can allow



New attachments and add-ons for skid-steers allow the equipment to perform the tasks of multiple types of machinery.

you to purchase more equipment that will save even more time.

BEFORE YOU BUY. When it comes to purchasing new attachments, the No. 1 thing to do is match your machine to your attach-

ment, Girard says. “What’s really key about attachments too is how easy they plug and play well with your machine. That’s going to save you a lot of aggravation.”

Girard says he’s seen a lot of people who don’t understand

that attachments require a certain lift capacity or pounds per minute flow. “It’s like a car. How many people am I going to handle? Am I carrying seven people around with a bunch of kids or is it just me and my wife? What are you using this car for?”

Also consider not only how often you plan to use them, but also whether you can use them across multiple carriers like compact excavators, mini track loaders and compact track loaders.

Other things to consider are the loads you’ll need to lift so that you can determine the horsepower and hydraulic flow you’ll need to power your attachments.

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“What’s really key about attachments too is how easy they plug and play well with your machine.”

PERRY GIRARD, CNH Industrial

value of high-flow auxiliary hydraulics that can benefit from an extra power boost.

“If a particular attachment is expected to make up a significant portion of your opera-

tional time, it increases your productivity and your overall return using machines and attachments with high-flow hydraulics capabilities,” Girodat says.

Renting can help landscapers expand service offerings even more. “For example, a landscaper may pick up work clearing overgrown areas with a rotary cutter or flail cutter,” Girodat says. “Attachments like these enable landscapers to add revenue without a significant capital investment.”

Girard recommends if you’re using an attachment 40 percent of the time or less, to just rent. But if you’re using it 60 percent of the time or more, it’s probably something you should purchase since renting is more expensive than buying outright over time. And don’t forget to think outside the box. While you might be buying an attachment for a specific function, consider what else you can do with it. For example, a contractor may buy a broom attachment for jobsite cleanup, but that can also be used for snow removal in winter.

THE LATEST SCOOP. Just this year, JCB launched the Teleskid, the world’s first skid-steer with a telescoping boom and the ability to reach 3 feet below grade.

With a dump height of 13 feet, 3 inches, it allows landscapers to load high-sided trucks without a ramp, load and unload across 8 feet, dig and clear drainage ditches and mow slopes, Connelly says. This allows landscapers to use the equipment from site preparation to cultivation and surface finishing.

Bobcat’s new M2-series of skid-steer loaders has some new features like the automatic ride control option, which reduces material spillage, allowing operators to travel at faster speeds. The reversing fan option keeps debris out of the radiator and rear screens to reduce downtime.

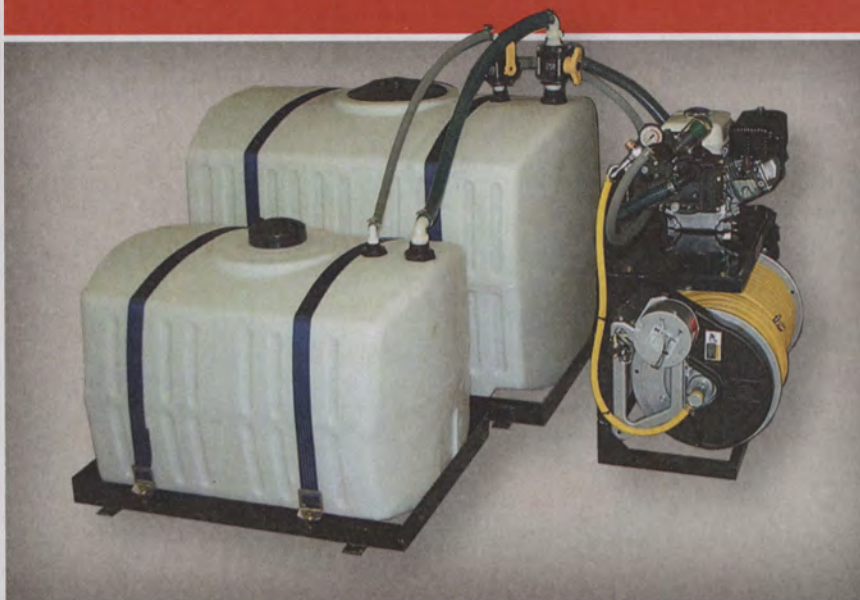
This year, CNH Industrial has a new nursery for general use from hardscape materials to more delicate items like tree balls. Bobcat Company introduced a new pallet fork frame enhancing visibility and ease of entry for operators.

And for improved snow removal efficiency, CNH Industrial has a new snow sectional that contours to uneven areas of pavement, clearing snow up to 90 percent in one pass. “So it allows you to catch the low spots and the high spots at the same time,” Girard says. **L&L**



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FOR RENT!

You're facing the decision – rent or buy?
Here are some pointers for partnering with the right rental business.

By Kristen Hampshire



BOYD RUCKHABER RENTED A BOX TRUCK to haul materials for a job. It isn't a vehicle he uses all the time, so it made sense to borrow it rather than invest. "I was driving along, and a tree fell on the car in front of me," says the president of BR Landscape in Carnation, Washington.

The tree then bounced up over the cab of the box truck. "I ducked and it hit the box of the truck, ripping a hole in it," he says. "Then, the tree went over the truck and landed in the road."





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Ruckhaber happened to have said “yes” to the extra rental insurance, and he never hesitates for a second when asked, “Do you want our coverage?” especially after that unusual situation.

Sure, no one plans on a tree falling and crashing down on equipment. But as Ruckhaber learned, anything can happen. “I always get the insurance on equipment I rent, even if my own insurance would cover damages, because it’s peace of mind,” he says.

Overall, Ruckhaber’s rental philosophy is: He buys when he knows he will keep the equipment busy, or when he needs immediate access to equipment and doesn’t want to worry about whether it will be available for rent.

He rents when he’ll only use a piece of equipment for a limited period of time. For instance, he always rents an air compressor



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“Maybe a piece of equipment we decide to buy won’t pay for itself the first few months, but we look at future usage.”

JACOB GODAR, CEO, Scooter’s Lawn Care

for irrigation winterization. If you own one, he says, “You have to license it and insure it, and since we only use it for three weeks out of the year, it makes more sense to rent.” Plus, he doesn’t have to find room to store it when he can just return it to the rental yard when he’s done.

Jacob Godar, CEO of Scooter’s Lawn Care in Springfield, Illinois, also seriously considers equipment usage before he’ll make a purchase. “It’s all about usability,” he says. “Whatever asset or piece of equipment you are looking to buy needs to spend time making revenue – that’s the determining factor.”

Godar also considers the fu-

ture. Even if he doesn’t have a full schedule of jobs lined up to keep a skid-steer busy, he recognizes the demand his business has for the equipment could grow. “I tend to prepare early,” he says.

Figuring out whether to rent or buy is an important business decision that impacts the bottom line.

If a machine sits in the garage while you make monthly payments on it, that eats away at profit. And, if you find yourself scrambling to rent the same machine all the time – possibly paying more per month in rental fees than a financing payment would cost – it’s probably time to invest in the asset.

**WHAT TO RENT.** The decision to rent or buy certain pieces of equipment depends on the business, service demands, rental opportunities in the area and usage. Godar always rents aerators, even though he uses them every year. “We only use an aerator for a short period of time during the year,” he says.

Godar blocks those services into a two-week period and rents the machine for that time. “Then, we make sure we have the equipment set aside for us to rent,” he says.

On the other hand, Ruckhaber decided to purchase an aerator because then he doesn’t have to worry about access to rental

equipment when the weather’s right to perform the work.

“It’s just nice to have around,” he says.

Ruckhaber also chooses to rent smaller pieces of equipment he uses infrequently, such as a cut-off saw or excavator. These are both machines he uses for specific jobs, such as cutting bricks for hardscaping or installing an irrigation system. Then, he can figure the rental fees into the job estimate to be sure his costs are covered.

When Godar began calculating the amount of time he and his crews needed a skid-steer loader, he decided to make the purchase. Also, his rental bills for

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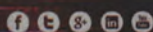
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## EQUIPMENT



this machine were adding up. With a down payment, the cost of purchasing the skid-steer is \$337 per month. “We were paying in the neighborhood of \$1,000 a month to rent it because we were using it so often,” he says. Even without a down payment, that rental cost would be about double the price of financing the purchase, Godar says.

And, there’s always the question of availability. What if you need a machine to complete a job but it has been rented by someone else? Can you afford to adjust the schedule, or find another rental location that might not be as convenient or with higher prices? These are all questions to consider in the rent versus buy case.

**THE RIGHT RENTAL PARTNER.** Location, availability, equipment quality and pricing are key factors Ruckhaber and Godar consider when looking for a company that rents equipment.

“It’s not going to be all about price,” Godar

says. “You don’t want to pay a really cheap price for a rental and get a machine that falls apart.”

Beware of the lowest-of-low rental prices. Additionally, find out how the rental company backs up its equipment.

“We had one aerator that broke down, and the rental company came out to the job site and brought a replacement,” Godar says.

Find out what type of support is provided with the rental agreement. “Ask them how they take care of dealing when equipment breaks down,” he says, adding that most rental companies are upfront about their policies. Review the rental agreement for conditions.

Ask about how the company manages and services its equipment. How often are machines replaced? How old or new is equipment? “Get a good feel for what the company is all about,” Godar says. How a rental company takes care of its equipment is likely a reflection on how they’ll care for customers, too.



“I always get the insurance on equipment I rent, even if my own insurance would cover damages, because it's peace of mind.”

BOYD RUCKHABER, BR Landscape

Convenience and location are key factors when considering a rental company, Godar says. “You want the place to be close enough so it's easy to use,” he says. He advises checking into the rental company's incentives. Find out how long you can rent a machine at one time and whether there are minimum requirements.

He notes that one rental place in his area offers incentives for being “registered” as a company – and this includes the ability to run a monthly tab for machine rentals, which Godar does not do.

While it's beneficial to build a relationship with a go-to rental company, have back-ups in the wings in case you need a machine for a project and it's not available at the preferred rental business.

Whether renting or purchasing, Godar says the best advice is to do the math and plan ahead. “Maybe a piece of equipment we decide to buy won't pay for itself the first few months, but we look at future usage,” Godar says. “We're thinking forward.” L&L



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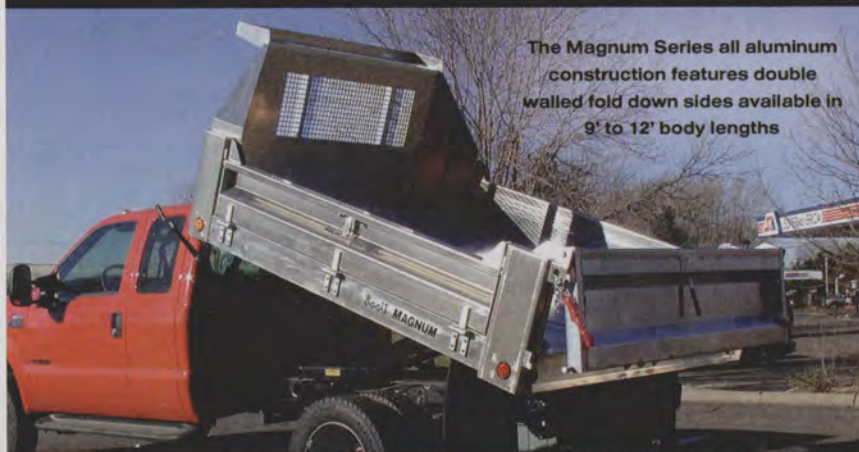
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# THE KEY TO PERFECT GROWING CONDITIONS

Soil analysis and cultivation will keep growing conditions ideal in your landscapes.

By Debbie Swanson

**EVERY LANDSCAPER** has faced that situation where, no matter how much tending, pruning or fertilizing you do, the plants and grass just don't seem to thrive. That may mean it's time to look beneath the surface – in the soil.

Amendments are often necessary to correct an imbalance or offset a structural problem in the soil. These organic or nonorganic substances are tilled several inches into the topsoil, unlike mulches or top dressings which are left on the surface. Amendments release nutrients and aerate the soil, supporting an ideal growing environment. Understanding the soil you're working with and addressing its needs can help to cultivate that flourishing landscape your customers crave.



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**DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM.** Sometimes a problem with the soil has visible symptoms: excess weed or moss, lingering puddles or standing water, recurring salt stains, or areas that remain dry and parched regardless of watering. Or, you may notice that despite routine fertilization, there's little response.

"Soil is composed of many different living organisms that work to provide nutrients to the plants that it supports," says Jerry Schill, CEO and co-owner of Schill Grounds Management in North Ridgeville, Ohio. "It's always best to test your soil to determine exactly what it needs. Just like you shouldn't switch and swap medications with friends, soil amendments are not a one-size-fits-all solution."

The test will indicate if there is an imbalance in nutrients, which you can then address with a more targeted additive. Schill says there are other factors to take into consideration with the test results.

One is knowing what a property will be used for. "For instance, agricultural properties that have a lot of heavy equipment running on them are more likely to experience compaction. In these situations, you might want to add sand and leaf compost to alleviate that problem," he says.

Also, it's important to know what your client is planning to grow and understand the environment in which those plants thrive. "If you're using a lot of hydrangeas and azaleas, for example, you might need an alkaline amendment rather than one that's more acidic."

Testing the pH of the soil will help diagnose any chemical imbalances contributing to an undesirable lawn.

Once you have all the pieces of the puzzle, you can then take steps toward addressing the problem.

#### COMMON CHEMICAL IMBALANCES.

A pH imbalance is one of the most frequent reasons for a lack-luster lawn, and this is something your soil test will reveal.

"If the pH is too low, you'll see an off-color appearance and the inability of the lawn to properly respond to a fertilizer application," says Greg Adams, president of One Step Tree & Lawn Care in Rochester, New York.

A pH reading of 7.0 is generally desirable and considered neutral. A pH of 0 to 7.0 means the soil is increasingly more acidic and a pH of 7.0 to 14 means the soil is increasingly more alkaline. Some plants thrive in either extreme, but for more general purposes, neutral pH is advisable. "Lawns require a pH of between 6.2-6.8 to perform to its best," Adams says.

To correct low pH, add lime. For a high reading, add elemental sulfur or organic matter such as peat moss. It takes several months to a year for the change to become effective, so early planning and follow up is key. "With extremely low pH, it is not uncommon to correct the situation over a couple of seasons," Adams says.

Excessive salinity is a common problem in sites near salt-treated roadways or in coastal regions. A white film or outline may be visible on a soil with excessive salt, or plants may exhibit signs of drought, despite receiving adequate fresh water.

A pH reading above 10 indicates the soil is too high in sodium, also called sodic soil. Such

a soil will not properly absorb water. The addition of gypsum, sulfuric acid or a product containing calcium will help restore the imbalance. Another approach is to add organic materials to the soil to promote good drainage, enabling the salt to flush from the soil.

**ADDING COMPOST.** Compost, which is decomposed organic matter or manure, is a common soil additive that provides numerous benefits. It helps to feed the microbes in the soil, causing them to release valuable nutrients needed for plants and grass to flourish. Regular additions of compost will help to maintain soil quality and promote aeration.

“Soil is composed of many different living organisms that work to provide nutrients to the plants that it supports.”

**JERRY SCHILL, CEO,**  
Schill Grounds Management

Adding compost can also correct water issues. Soil that is too compact or high in clay will retain water, resulting in mildew and poor root development. Compost will help to aerate this type of soil and promote better drainage. Soil that is very sandy allows water to pass through it too quickly, preventing absorption. Adding compost to sandy soil will enhance its ability to hold water, improving retention.

**CUSTOMER EDUCATION.** While many customers are happy to turn their lawn care and maintenance over to professionals, it's a good idea to keep them in the

loop when it comes to their soil requirements. Educating your customers deters problems and helps them to understand their landscape's needs.

“We always tell our customers when we are going to do a pH test. When we get the results, we share those with our customers and discuss what changes or additions (if any) should be done,” Adams says.

Beneath every thriving plant or lawn is a carefully tended soil. Proper analysis and cultivation is the key to keeping each landscape healthy and pleasing to the eye. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Massachusetts.

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# Green Up

Start the season on the right foot  
for healthy lawns this year.

**By Rick Woelfel**



## ONE CONCERN FOR LAWN CARE OPERATORS

is avoiding a disease outbreak at the start of the season when the turf may be vulnerable.

Dr. John Kaminski, associate professor of turfgrass management at Penn State University, maintains that the most effective way of warding off disease in the spring is to nurture healthy turf through the fall and into the winter.

"I think of it as fundamental Turf 101," he says. "I think the stronger you are going into winter, the more likely you are to avoid some avoid some (disease issues) that you may come across."

Dr. Jim Kerns, associate professor at NC State University, agrees. "Turf that struggles through the winter months is predisposed to disease in the spring," he says. "Pathogens are opportunistic, therefore having weak plants at any time can allow for disease development."

When it comes to heading off early season disease problems, Kaminski says LCOs working in northern sections of the United States and Canada are at a disadvantage. "The northern guys have the challenge of having annual bluegrass," he says. "You can have perfect turf and still have a bad winter and get turf

loss, but the adage of having healthy turf going into the winter is definitely going to be important."

The primary disease issue confronting northern-based LCOs each spring is snow mold, whether it be pink, gray or speckled. "The type depends on snow cover and conditions in the spring or before snow falls in the winter," Kerns says. "In order to get gray or speckled snow mold, at least 60 days of snow cover are required. Pink snow mold, or *Microdochium* patch, does not require snow cover and can be severe when temperatures reach 65 degrees Fahrenheit or below with periods of high humidity."

Another concern is take-all patch. “The disease won’t show up until the following summer,” Kaminski says, “but the best time to apply fungicide is when the pathogen is active. And that’s going to be in the fall, October and November.”

As an alternative, the fungicide can be applied in the spring but in any case, soil temperatures should be between 55 and 65 degrees, NC State’s Dr. Jim Kerns says.

Turf that struggles through the winter months is more susceptible to disease in the spring. “Pathogens are opportunistic, therefore having weak plants at any time can allow for disease development,” Kerns says.

Other disease issues come spring include, depending on the variety of grass, spring dead spot, large patch, fairy ring or take-all root rot.

In addition to applying fungicide, Kaminski recommends maintaining an ongoing fertility program through the fall as well. “I think what (LCOs) want to do is continue fertilizer programs at a moderate level,” he says. “And as the turf starts growing more as we get into the fall they can bump that up a little bit.”

“The key to me is getting a good fertilizer down where the plant is going to store that and not use it all. So, you’re basically going to want to continue to fertilize it as normal and then right before the grass pretty much shuts down but is still able to take up those nutrients. Then it will store (the nutrients) over the winter and give it a better chance of surviving some of the pressures over the winter.”

Fertilizers can be beneficial.



**Implementing basic processes to protect turf will give you a better chance of beating issues like spring dead spot, pictured above.**

Kerns notes potassium’s effectiveness against spring dead spot, but he says fertilizers are not a substitute for fungicides. He says when dealing with issues such as large patch, spring dead spot and take-all root rot, the applications must be scheduled to coincide with a period when the soil reaches a temperature of 70 degrees at a 2-inch depth for a minimum of four or five consecutive days. He says that in these instances the calendar should be set aside. “Pathogens respond to temperature and moisture,” he says, “not the season.”

The weather is the wild card in all this. “The weather has been odd,” Ka-

minski says. “Everyone says it’s getting so warm but in 2013-14 and 2014-15 we had some of the worst winters that we’ve had. You can’t predict that. And so you have to do the basic things to protect your turf; with fertility and fungicides, and hope that things turn out in the spring.”

LCOs must be alert to the prospect of having to deal with issues they haven’t faced before. Both Kaminski and Kerns are seeing issues that, while not new, are becoming more common farther north than in years past.

“We’re seeing some oddball diseases,” Kaminski says. “We’re seeing an

“The key to me is getting a good fertilizer down where the plant is going to store that and not use it all.”

JOHN KAMINSKI, associate professor, Penn State University

unusual *Pythium* that's hitting *Poa*. Not in the winter, it's a seasonal thing. Thatch collapse is a new disease that we've seen. There's really no good control for that. We just try to tell people to treat it like fairy ring.”

Some diseases that in years past were more problematic in the Transition Zone are now advancing northward, Kerns says.

“We've diagnosed *Pythium* root dysfunction and *Pythium* root rot in more northern areas than we have in the past,” he says. “Another disease that seems to be more problematic is summer patch. It also seems like nematodes are more problem-

atic in more northern climates. These diseases are by no means occurring as frequently as we see them in North Carolina, but the incidences seem to be increasing. (But) this is just an observation and we do not have data to support that claim.”

In the end, Kaminiski says disease control comes down to adhering to the basic principles of turf management. “I think the thing is just try and stick to the fundamentals,” he says. “And don't get so far removed from doing normal things that you know are going to result in a healthy plant.”

It's important to not subject

the turf to unnecessary stress and increase its susceptibility to disease. “A lot of times we see people whose expectations are so high and are just pushing their turf so hard for such a long period of time that it makes it a little tough,” Kaminiski says.

Attending winter conferences can help LCOs expand their knowledge about diseases such as *Pythium*.

“When the winter season hits, it's conference season,” Kaminiski says. “There are always new things that are coming out and are important. It would be good idea for (LCOs) to go and continue to update themselves on the

latest information that's out there because things are changing fast.

“This new disease with *Pythium* a few years ago it was thatch collapse for us. There are a lot of new things that are coming out and there are also new management options like the new nematicides that are out on the market. Kind of educating themselves about it and knowing what to look for. I think it's a good time, as you get into winter and put the grass to bed, to really focus on revitalizing yourself and that includes continuing education.” **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Pennsylvania.

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## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

(continued from page 34)

### ASKING TWO KEY QUESTIONS.

Richter recently got a call from a long-term client about some services that weren't getting done. Richter drove to the site, ready to fire the two employees responsible, but then wondered if he had failed as a leader to equip them for the job.

When he got there, he asked his employees two poignant questions.

"One of them is your problem, and one's my problem," he told them. "First: Do you want to be here? They said, 'Yes, we want to be here.' Then the second thing is: Do you know what you're doing? If you don't, then that's my fault, because if you truly want to be here — not just come in and get a check, but advance within our organization — and you're not doing a good job, then we have not properly trained or taught you what you need to do to have success at your job."

Richter spent the rest of the day with those employees, talking about edging techniques and pruning tips. He wishes he had more time for this hands-on interaction — and jokes that maybe one day he'll hire a CEO so he can go back to working in the field. Plus, he says, it's much easier to terminate someone's employment after you've exhausted resources by training them directly, in various positions, and they still don't improve.

**STAYING UNIFIED.** Growing three different divisions — installation, maintenance and irrigation/lighting — is, in a way, like growing

**"The last thing I want to do is go outside to hire people to fill those leadership roles."**

**John Richter, owner,  
Richter Landscape  
Company**

three separate teams. When that separation became an issue, Richter had to remind crews that they all played for the same team.

"I started noticing a lot of division — there was a lot of 'us' and 'them' between installation and maintenance," he says. "So, a couple of years ago, we started doing a companywide safety meeting on the first Monday of every month at 7 a.m. sharp."

This gives crews an opportunity to intermingle, while Richter gets to interact with them all. He provides breakfast and coffee, as division leaders take turns discussing safety issues. Afterward, he acknowledges birthdays and announces the monthly efficiency winners. "It's a good way to unify everybody," he says.

At a recent meeting, Richter gave his team this pep talk:

"We've grown almost to capacity, where four trucks can't manage the (maintenance) routes we have. We need to buy another truck and fill it with another crew," he told them. "The last thing I want to do is go outside to hire people to fill those leadership roles."

His last piece of advice to his team doubles as good advice for other LCOs:

"You've got to be willing to train up some of these guys," Richter told them. "I know you don't want them to leave your truck, but the goal is for them to grow as we grow the company." **L&L**

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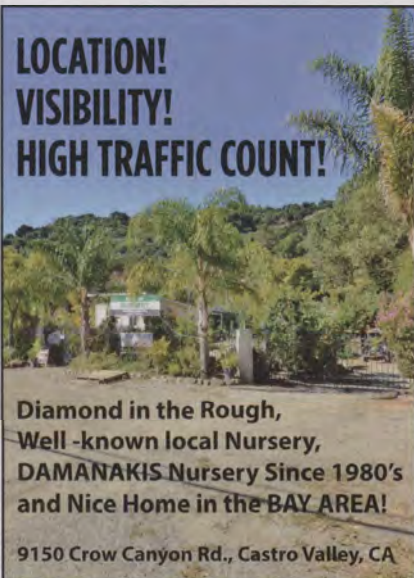
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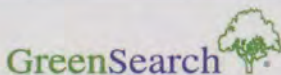
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## GET TO KNOW YOUR APPLICANTS

• **AT BLADES OF GREEN**, our hiring process has evolved every year for the past three years that I have been here. In 2016, we added a work shadow to our process. In 2017, we revamped the questions that we asked, and we have already started discussions about what we are changing in 2018.

It is important that companies take the time to ensure their process is attracting the right people and is keeping with the times. If you have concluded that your process is not attracting the right people, you need to change it.

We hire less than 3 percent of the candidates who apply for our positions and can weed out approximately 25 percent of those applicants with just a phone interview.

### IDENTIFY YOUR NON-NEGOTIABLES.

These are the things every candidate must have to be a fit for your team. They are also the things that would immediately disqualify the candidate. Companies need to decide what is most important to them. Is it finding



**ANGELA HIERONIMUS**  
is an HR manager  
for Blades of Green.

great people or filling a position? The stance we have taken at Blades of Green is finding great people. Sometimes that means we are understaffed. However, if we weigh being understaffed against hiring a person who is a bad fit for the team, we would rather be understaffed in a heartbeat.

**START SMALL.** Before contacting an applicant, we review what we call a pre-application form. This is a form candidates fill out to indicate

they are interested in one of our positions. The pre-application form asks very basic qualifying questions that help weed out candidates who don't meet our minimum qualifications. If they answer all the qualifying questions appropriately and they have a good work history with applicable skills, a phone interview is scheduled with the candidate.

The phone interview gives us insight about their work experience, their reason for leaving previous positions and what they are looking for in an employer. It also offers a great first impression for both the candidate and our team. If that 30-minute phone interview goes well, the candidate

is then asked to complete Blades of Green's full application and a personality survey. This process is for every candidate, no matter the position. Once those steps are complete and satisfactorily answered, we invite the candidate to an in-person interview.

**FACE-TO-FACE.** The in-person interview is conducted by the departmental manager who oversees the position the candidate applied for and whoever did the phone interview. It is imperative to have that person who did the phone interview in the in-person interview to ensure the consistency of the story. Additionally, as part of the first in-person interview, candidates are asked to complete a cognitive assessment. Lastly, prior to an offer and pre-employment screenings, the candidate would be offered an opportunity for a work shadow with the appropriate department. We have learned some of our most valuable information about a candidate from our employees during these work shadows. What works so well is the candidate is placed in an informal environment with a peer. Their guard is down and their true personality shines.

The process can be tedious, at least the first time around. But once companies have built a solid foundation, it only requires revisions when necessary. Having a consistent pre-hiring process also reduces risk associated with claims of discrimination.

And, since every employee at Blades of Green knows the intentionality we place on hiring the right person, they can be proud of the person they work beside because they know the process they went through. **L&L**

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