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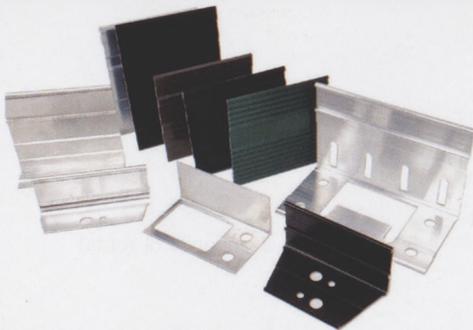
Worth *the* Wait

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Worth the Wait

Frustrated with the H-2B process, Molly and Joel John took on the difficult task of securing green cards for their workers at M.J. Design Associates. **28**

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It's that time again! Don't miss your chance to be featured on our list of the top 100 landscape companies. Head to bit.ly/2019LLTop100 to fill out the survey. Submissions are due Friday, Feb. 1.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We love hearing from you. Head to lawnandlandscape.com to weigh in on our latest poll and find out what others in the industry are thinking.

INSTAGRAM



ON THE ROAD AGAIN

On Instagram, we like to highlight the events we attend and the places we travel. Last month we spent some time in Maryland getting to know one of our 2019 Turnaround Tour winners.



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Brian Horn

Editor | Lawn & Landscape

Each owner is putting their best foot (and dollar) forward to keep their employees.

The many ways to invest

Our cover story this month reminded me of an email I received about a year ago around this time. A reader responded to some news about contractors reaching out to local government officials to tell them how important the H-2B program is to their businesses.

That reader was a contractor in Arizona who emailed me to say he was going to do the opposite and ask that it be stopped. From his perspective, there were plenty of employable American employees to fill positions.

I asked him what he did to attract and retain employees. He listed some items we've covered here before like referral bonuses, networking with local colleges, incentives and ongoing training.

He also pointed out that he doesn't focus on profit maximization. Profits, yes; maximization, no.

He said he read an article about the need for an alternative to the profit-focus of business. He continued, "Well, this is that alternative: Providing job security and economic stability that, in turn, promote family and community health.

"This eliminates any need for 'guest workers,' which arises when companies focus on

profit maximization and view those who work for them as interchangeable."

I found the premise of profit maximization to be an interesting point that other business owners may argue, but that's a topic for a different day.

One point I did disagree with is the perspective that companies using guest worker programs view employees as interchangeable. Some companies request the same H-2B workers every year.

In the case of our cover story subject, M.J. Design Associates in Columbus, owners Molly and Joel John were willing to invest in helping those workers obtain green cards because of how much they appreciate their hard work and loyalty. That's the exact opposite of interchangeable employees.

In fact, the reader and M.J. Design Associates have something major in common – they both are willing to invest in their quality employees to retain them.

Each owner is putting their best foot (and dollar) forward to keep their employees.

Let me know at the email above if you have any unique incentives or ways of investing in your employees. We are always looking to share great ideas to help the industry.

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FOUR SECRETS TO MAKING A TEAM FEEL INVALUABLE

Before he was setting records for most shots blocked in an NBA season, **Mark Eaton swore he'd never play basketball.** At over 7 feet tall, it was the question he loathed most, and the one he always got asked.

He tried his hand at the sport in high school and spent most of his time on the bench. His body wasn't designed for speed and the drills his teammates were running didn't work well for someone as tall as Eaton. It wasn't until a persistent coach approached him at his job as a mechanic that he really started to consider what he could bring to a team.

At the 2018 Irrigation Show keynote address, Eaton shared his four commitments with attendees, and the importance of making team members (whether on the court or in an office) feel invaluable.

At the 2018 Irrigation Show, retired NBA star Mark Eaton shared what he learned when he went from auto mechanic to basketball great.

By **Lauren Rathmell**

1. KNOW YOUR JOB. Eaton struggled to keep up with the quick runners on the court. He said it wasn't until he got some advice from Wilt Chamberlain that he realized he wasn't doing his job. Chamberlain told Eaton his job was to stand in the paint and guard the basket. "You need to narrow your focus and intensify it," Eaton said. "Find your most valuable trait and learn how you can leverage it."

2. DO WHAT YOU'RE ASKED TO DO. If you're not completely sure what you're supposed to be doing, don't just hope you're doing the right thing. "Take it from doing your best to being your best," he said. Relating his lessons to business, he said doing what your customers ask you to do will already exceed their expectations, and sometimes you might find yourself achieving something you once thought was unrealistic. When Eaton's first coach recruited him for the junior college basketball team, he was told to work out six hours a day, five days a week, and that's what Eaton did, though he never thought he'd learn the skills he needed.

3. MAKE PEOPLE LOOK GOOD. Provide others with the recognition they deserve. "When they look good, your entire team looks good," he said. When he was on the court playing with the Utah Jazz, Eaton helped the team achieve a win by blocking 19 shots in one game. The attention was on the teammate who scored the most points, but without Eaton's blocks, the team wouldn't have won. In business, the internal competition that goes on can prevent colleagues from cheering each other on or giving each other a leg up, but Eaton stressed that when your coworkers look good, you look good too.

4. PROTECT OTHERS. "If you want to be invaluable, be the person others can count on," Eaton said. He recalled when he would stand at the end of the court waiting to guard the offense. "This is my house," he would say to himself, "and no one can get in."

His team knew he had their back, which allowed them to make riskier plays. In business, you may have to give up some opportunities to protect your team, but you can take pride in knowing you've helped others succeed.



CATERPILLAR SHOWS OFF NEW EXCAVATORS AND UTVS

The company revealed its new equipment at GIE+EXPO in October but demoed the products at their headquarters in November.

By Jimmy Miller

PEORIA, ILL. – Caterpillar demoed its newest products – including mini excavators, UTVs, backhoe loaders and compact wheel loaders – in November during its year-end press event.

Though the equipment was first revealed at GIE+EXPO in October, the company invited media to its headquarters in Peoria to get an up-close look at the new products. Among other products, project managers also revealed Caterpillar's new Cat App, the

IN THE NEWS

Cat GRADE with 3D and the C13B engine.

For the event, Caterpillar flew in customers who helped conceptualize the new models and who have tested these products for several months. Greg Worley, a senior product engineer, said his team received input from hundreds of clients as they designed, particularly with their new line of Next Generation mini-excavators.

“An engineer can design anything in the



New Caterpillar excavators all feature conventional and joystick controls.

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world, but it might not be of any value to the customer,” Worley said. “It’s not just a group of customers that have been here to test products. It’s every customer who’s come to a dealer and complained, ‘Why can’t my machine do this?’”

Caterpillar’s lineup of Next Generation hydraulic excavators includes the 1-2 ton 301.5, 301.7 CR, 301.8 and 302 CR, as well as the 7-10 ton 307.5, 308 CR, 308 CR VAB, 309 CR VAB and 310. All of the models can change from conventional lever/foot-pedal steering controls to joystick control at the touch of a button. They all feature a tilt-up canopy or cab for easier servicing and maintenance.

Comfort was also one of Caterpillar’s focuses, as the cab is pressurized and sealed to reduce dust intrusion, and it includes heating and air conditioning. The front window slides upward and stores overhead, and larger glass areas on the side, top and rear of the cab increase visibility. The operating consoles feature adjustable wrist rests,

CATERPILLAR ALSO REVEALED ITS NEW CAT APP, THE CAT GRADE WITH 3D, AND THE C13B ENGINE AT ITS ANNUAL PRESS EVENT.

and a suspension seat is available. The excavators also all have expandable undercarriages across the range.

UTVS AND MORE. Caterpillar launched a two-seat UTV model last year, marking the first time the company dabbled in utility vehicles. Now it has the gas-powered Cat CUV82 and diesel-powered CUV102D models. They both have five seats and the same bed size as last year’s UTVs. Both vehicles tout a 1,000-pound total rear cargo capacity, 2,000-pound towing capacity and a long swing-arm suspension. Cat UTVs can be adapted with more than 50 accessories.

UTV marketing manager Norma Aldinger said Caterpillar always knew it wanted to start with the two-seat UTVs and get those right before expanding to a

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five-seat model. She said there's an increased demand for larger UTVs that correlates with an increase in landscaping jobs.

"I've run into a lot of landscapers who say they want versatility. They have UTVs for work and for play," Aldinger said. "(They) are carrying rocks and more of that material from jobsite to jobsite. People want to get more out of their vehicles."

Caterpillar also exhibited its new line of backhoe loaders and compact wheel loaders. The 440 backhoe loader boasts a 25

percent lifting improvement over the previous 430F2, plus revamped single tilt loader arms that provide parallel lift and versatility in a multitude of applications. The 450 BHL offers 15 percent higher lifting capacity than the 450F and introduces an all-new cab for increased operator comfort. Meanwhile, the 903D and 918M compact wheel loaders boast a higher pay load per pass, improved ground speed and more attachment capabilities than previous models in Caterpillar's CWL family.

SEND US YOUR NOMINATIONS FOR EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

Know somebody who deserves some recognition? Let us know!

LAWN & LANDSCAPE MAGAZINE

is once again looking for the best employees in the industry and we need your help. If you have an employee who has gone above and beyond in their position and should be acknowledged, now is your chance to have them publicly recognized in our publication.

Send us two to three paragraphs explaining why your employee should be chosen. Your entry should include concrete examples/stories of how this person has improved your company either culturally or financially, and how they have set a good example for other employees. Please include the employee's



title and number of years at the company.

We will choose a few winners from the entries we receive and interview them for stories in a future issue of Lawn & Landscape.

You can nominate any employee who works for your company – crew members, office workers, foremen, etc.

Email submissions to Editor Brian Horn at bhorn@gie.net. Please use Employee of the Year as the subject of the email. For more information and to see past winners, visit bit.ly/eoy2019.

Deadline is March 1, 2019.

CONTRACTORS HAVE A NEW TRUCK OPTION

International Trucks' International CV series is the company's re-entry into the Class 4/5 market. **By Brian Horn**

CHICAGO – The industry has one more choice when it comes to truck options.

International Trucks, a unit of Navistar, re-entered the medium truck market with the launch of the International CV Series.

The company launched the truck at an event in Chicago on Nov. 7. It will be available this month and was developed in partnership with General Motors.

According to David Majors,

Navistar vice president of product development, landscapers were involved in the development of the trucks and there are a number of components that contractors will find beneficial.

"It's a lot of the little things," Majors said, citing the aluminum cab access steps as one example where the truck can benefit landscapers, especially those who plow snow. Contractors can also attach plows and

spreaders to the truck.

"We see it as a growing market," Majors said of the landscaping industry.

Beyond those little things, Majors said the truck is designed with many components that fit landscapers who are focused on growing their businesses.

The CV Series has a gear-driven transfer case, a low-alloy steel frame rail and a painted chassis for enhanced longevity

and corrosion resistance.

The CV Series includes a commercial-style forward-tilting hood, which provides easy access to the engine and to routine maintenance points. Under that hood is the International 6.6-liter, 350-horsepower engine with 700 lb.-ft. of torque. Equipped with that engine and two Allison transmission options, the CV is capable of handling up to a maximum GCWR of 37,500 pounds.



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UPFITTING OPTIONS. Straight frame rails with no rivets on the top flange provide a clean area from cab to axle, making it easy to mount bodies for commercial-grade applications. Like other International trucks, the CV Series is outfitted with HuckBolt chassis fasteners that provide clamping force without re-torquing and won't come loose

in extreme environments, the company says.

Accommodating the configuration options required by different bodies, the CV Series offers a dual battery box mounted under the cab. The CV Series also includes multiple fuel tank options, optional exhaust outlets to suit the vocation and body and multiple wheelbase options that can suit almost any application.

CUSTOM OPTIONS. The network's dealership salespersons specialize in commercial transportation sales and spec'ing, allowing a customer to pick the configuration and specs that are right for any vocational application. In addition, International's Application Engineering Team offers access to vocational engineering experts who can help customers design a custom configuration geared to their application.

The International dealer network's 700+ service locations feature more than 7,600 ASE-certified commercial diesel-trained technicians in the U.S. and more than 1,900 in Canada.

"Our network is committed to providing the expertise needed to keep your business moving," said Michael Cancelliere, Navistar's president, truck and parts.

"No matter the location, if a customer needs service, help is likely to be nearby."

On top of its commercial-grade configurability, the CV Series was also designed with comfort, safety and drivability in mind.

The truck has multiple infotainment options, including an 8-inch color touch screen with navigation and, for the first time in an International truck, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

Optional air ride suspension with an engine-mounted compressor is available, which can be used to adjust height and provide a smooth ride for cargo protection and crew comfort.

"The CV Series has been compared to a field office with perks," Cancelliere said. "Our philosophy is that driver comfort is critical to get the job done smoothly and efficiently, and the CV Series brings that philosophy to life."

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BRIGHTVIEW ACQUIRES RUSSO LAWN & LANDSCAPE

PLYMOUTH MEETING, Pa. – During the reveal of its fourth quarter and fiscal year results via webcast in December, BrightView announced it acquired Russo Lawn & Landscape.

Russo, located in Hartford, Connecticut, services 26 cities in the state and six more in Massachusetts. The commercial landscaping company has been in business since 1990. The purchase marks BrightView's fifth acquisition this year, all of which account for an estimated \$117.6 million

in aggregate annualized revenue.

BrightView CEO Andrew Masterman said during the presentation that his company prefers to bring along acquisitions slowly, over the course of 12-24 months, to preserve customer relationships and to keep the companies' crews. Fred Jacobs, BrightView's vice president of communications and public affairs, said the company declined further comment on the Russo acquisition.

Masterman and BrightView



RUSSO, LOCATED IN HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT, SERVICES 26 CITIES IN THE STATE AND SIX MORE IN MASSACHUSETTS.

CFO John Feenan primarily spent the presentation discussing the company's revenue. It achieved a fiscal year revenue of \$2.35 billion, an increase of 5.7 percent from 2017. This spike in total revenue was largely supported by growth in BrightView's maintenance services and development services revenues.

The company also reported a net loss of \$15.1 million, or \$.18 per share, in 2018, compared to its \$37.4 million net loss reported in 2017.

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LDI OPENS NEW DIVISION, MAKES ACQUISITION

SANTA CLARITA, Calif. – Landscape Development Inc. (LDI) has opened a new Sacramento division, expanding the company's service territory well into northern California.

Dudley Mallinson has been appointed division president, tasked with broadening LDI's service territory and client base. The new division will offer the same services provided throughout the California and Nevada company network, including construction, maintenance,

landscape architecture, earth services, pre-construction and design-build services.

Mallinson holds a graduate degree in landscape architecture from Sheffield University in England. He moved to California in 2000 to work at LDI as a project manager and contributed to the growth of the company.

The new offices are located at 2255 Cemo Circle in Gold River, California, 95670.

In addition, LDI Enhanced Landscape Management main-



LANDSCAPE DEVELOPMENT INC.

HAS OPENED A NEW SACRAMENTO DIVISION EXPANDING THE COMPANY'S SERVICE TERRITORY WELL INTO NORTHERN CALIFORNIA.

tenance division has completed the asset purchase of Las Vegas-based NewTex Landscape.

The purchase expands the operations of LDI, which has annual revenues in excess of \$110 million in its California operations, into new territory.

NewTex owner Michael Martinez will join the ELM executive team as regional manager. The staff of approximately 120 employees of NLI is being retained, including field personnel and management.

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PHOENIX – Jack York, son of Ewing President and Chief Executive Officer Douglas W. York, has joined the green industry wholesale distributor to open a new Ewing location in the New York tri-state area and serve as its branch manager.

In 2018, Ewing expanded into markets like the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic and Northeast. With Jack York’s experience in the area and with Ewing, he’ll support the company’s long-term expansion efforts while building upon the success and future of the company. With his experience as an investment banking analyst, York will also support Ewing as a national business development analyst.

York has grown up part of the company, working in the mailroom and at Phoenix branches as a service professional and truck driver. During college, he interned in the purchasing department as a buyer and in the finance and accounting departments.

After graduating from The University of Pennsylvania with a Bachelor of Science in Economics, with a concentration in finance, York moved to Australia as a professional import player and coach for American football for teams in Melbourne and Sydney. After moving back to the states, York joined PJ Solomon, an investment banking advisory firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions (M&A) in New York City. At PJ Solomon, he worked on various M&A transactions, specifically in the retail, technology, media and telecommunications and restaurant industries.



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NALP HOSTING INDUSTRY WORKFORCE SUMMIT

FAIRFAX, Va. – The National Association of Landscape Professionals has announced that it will host its first-ever national Workforce Summit, bringing business leaders together to strategize ways to deal with the industry’s workforce shortage.

The two-day summit held in Alexandria, Virginia, on Feb. 12-13, will identify solutions for the industry to compete in the tight national labor market. Guest speakers and peer-led discussions will round out the agenda for the think-tank event.

“The Workforce Summit is unlike any meeting we have ever held,” said NALP CEO Sabeena Hickman. “We must come together as an industry to tackle the workforce crisis. No one company can solve this problem, no matter how large they are or how creative their recruiting practices are.

“The industry needs to explore new business models; we need to examine how we can compete against industries already united in trying to attract the same workers we need and,

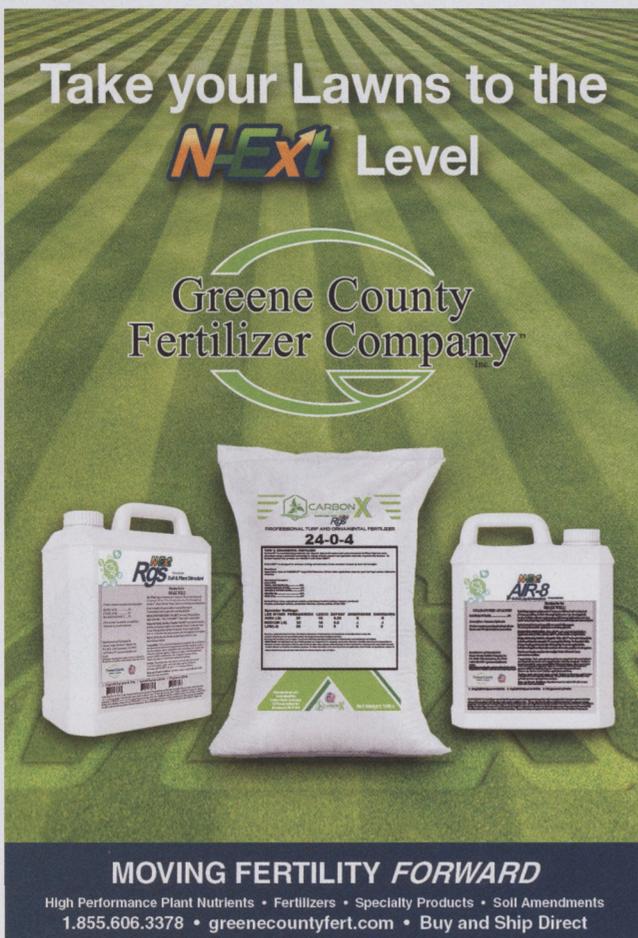
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in short, we need to identify actionable items to impact the industry’s future.”

The event also includes time for networking. Attendees are encouraged to bring their families and their key staff for a few days of team building and skills development.

Invited speakers for the event include Ivanka Trump, President Donald Trump’s daughter and presidential advisor, as well as current Secretary of Labor Alexander Acosta.

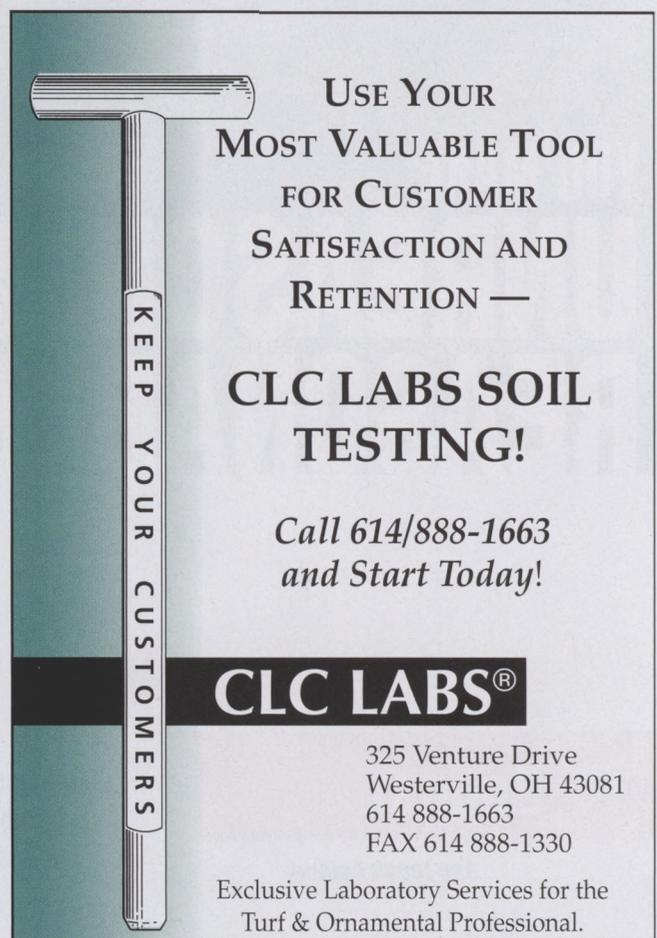
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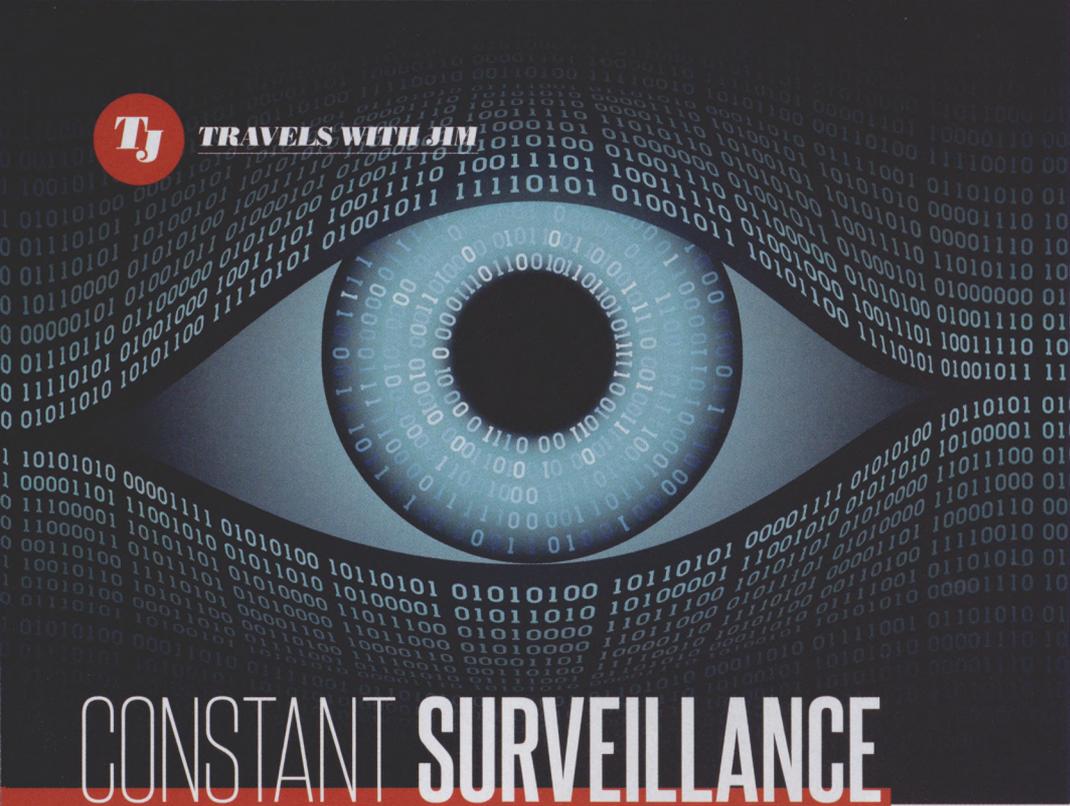
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CONSTANT SURVEILLANCE

• **2019 IS UPON US WITH ALL OF ITS PROMISES** and challenges.

It wasn't that long ago that we shared the same sentiments about 2018. Did 2018 end the way that you had hoped a mere 12 months ago? Or was it a disappointment? If it was a disappointment, when in the course of the year did you realize that it was so? Was it a surprise at the very end or did you see it coming? And if you saw it coming, what did you do about it, if anything?

I'll bet that you probably did nothing. You did nothing not because you didn't want to, but because you didn't know what to do or how to do it. You simply did not have the tools or know-how to address the situation. That's the problem. Many green industry entrepreneurs have neither the tools nor the know-how to run and direct their businesses effectively.

THE LITTLE PICTURE. To run a business effectively, a contractor has to be somewhat schizophrenic. You have to think constantly and simultaneously about the big picture as well as the little picture. You can't focus on just one. If you do, you'll get in trouble and wrapped up in minutia spinning your wheels.

First, you have to benchmark the little picture. By this, I mean that you have to ensure that every crew and/or service technician is producing a minimal amount of



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

profitable revenue per day. You as an entrepreneur need to ensure that every crew or technician is achieving these pre-planned benchmarks. If they aren't, you need to investigate and find out why.

I teach all of my clients how to calculate and monitor these little-picture revenue and profit benchmarks. Once they have them, their (and their managers) primary jobs are to ensure that every day is a winner for everyone. For instance, let's say that a lawn care technician's daily revenue goal is \$1,000. If the season is seven months long, each technician should produce a minimum of \$150,000 in revenue per year.

• 7 months x 22 work-days per

month = 154 workdays

- 154 workdays x \$1,000 = \$154,000
- Subtract out 3 or 4 holidays and your benchmark goal is \$150,000

THE BIG PICTURE. This brings us to the big picture. It isn't enough to have daily revenue and profit goals. You have to keep your annual end-game strategy in mind.

I prepare an annual budget for my clients at the beginning of each year. We benchmark the entire company and calculate costs and revenues for each division. These calculations are based upon each company's historical data and/or national benchmarks that I've developed over the last 30-plus years.

Once these big and little picture calculations are in place, a green industry entrepreneur has the tools to price his or her work accurately and monitor everyone's progress throughout the year. You should

monitor this data on a weekly, monthly and quarterly basis.

HOW IT WORKS IN THE FIELD. Bill was a lawn fertilization entrepreneur in Oklahoma with annual revenue just over \$100,000. We determined that he needed to bill between \$900 and \$1,000 per day for each technician. His season was roughly 200 days long. A technician at full capacity should generate approximately \$180,000 per season. Bill expected to grow his company to \$150,000 in 2018. However, he knew that he couldn't pursue new sales while doing all of the applications and the office work. If he was on track toward the end of 2018, he planned to hire a technician. This would allow him to grow his company's revenue to \$250,000-plus in 2019.

An irrigation company in New Jersey had four service technicians billing 1,500 man-hours each per year for a total of 6,000 man-hours per year.

Upon analysis of its hourly service rate, we found that it was \$20 per man-hour too low. The owner thought that raising his rate \$20 per man-hour in one year was too high of an increase and he'd lose lots of customers. He raised his rate \$10 per man-hour which added \$60,000 to his bottom line the next year. Not one single customer complained so he raised his rate an additional \$15 the next year.

Running a successful business is both art and science. You have to master both aspects. One successful entrepreneur refers to this as "The Art of the Deal." If you want to be more successful in 2019, learn the science behind your numbers. Benchmark both the little picture and the big one in your business. Remember, if you ignore the science in your business, the art that remains may not be a very pretty picture at the end of the year. **L&L**

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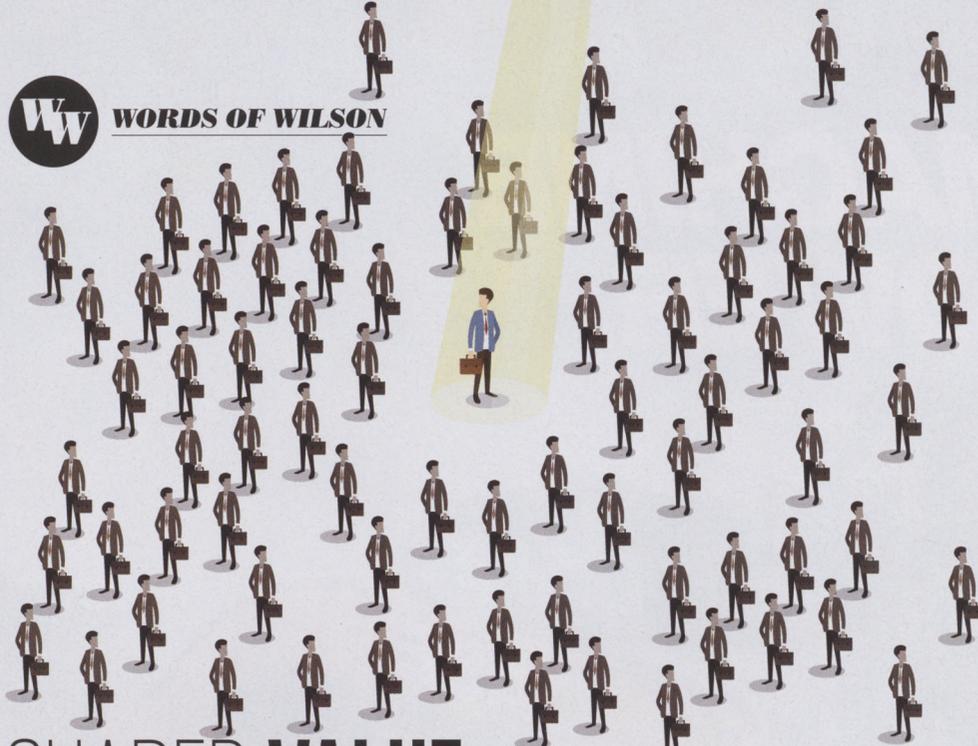


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SHARED VALUE

• **GETTING RECRUITING RIGHT** is the most important job CEOs have. Hiring top talent, hiring quickly and nurturing and maintaining a pipeline of qualified candidates in a hyper-competitive market requires forward-thinking companies to go back to school.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. businesses were operating with a record 6.6 million unfilled jobs as of last spring. Across corporate America, hiring teams are stretched and open positions are going unfilled. In the landscape industry, the battle to win top talent, with high-performing companies all competing for the same A-players, is even greater.

At one of our recent peer group universities, landscape owners were challenged to use their critical and creative thinking skills to solve this problem. One way was to look at the problem backwards – to drop old assumptions about why college recruiting may not have worked in the past, and to think about shaking up hiring practices to get different results.

In particular, there is a competitive advantage in creating shared value through internships and “high-touch” relationship-building as a means to develop closer



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

connections between schools and landscape company hiring teams.

So, how does creating shared value work? Start with these 2019 action plan ideas:

1. Focus on student organizations at targeted schools – supporting and sponsoring clubs and activities in person, and actively engaging through student social media channels.
2. Maintain meaningful relationships with faculty and influencers.
3. Host events for students at your business or at industry-wide student career days.
4. Volunteer to teach classes, speak to groups and meet student leaders.

5. Take a personal interest in students’ values, their career/life goals and workplace wish lists.
6. Create an intern program that offers a training ground for them and a talent incubator for you.

In other words, top performing students are one of your most important stakeholder groups. Like all customers seeking the best of the best, they can afford to be picky. Create a list of the reasons why your firm is a great career home, focus on what’s important and what matters to them, and be sure you can deliver the goods.

This means making a good impression. For interns, a well-thought out, well-managed and structured training experience will show them all aspects of your company, business and philanthropy, and the role your firm plays in

your community. When online review programs can make or break hotel and restaurant reputations, negative experiences posted online can sink a well-intentioned but poorly executed program strategy. Interns are great PR and brand ambassadors. Encourage your marketing and HR teams to work together. A great experience will net new hire conversion rates and generate positive word-of-mouth back on campus.

As for new graduates, transition them into your business through a wide lens. Make sure you communicate why field experience is valuable, what they can learn from it as part of their overall career trajectory and why it pays off in understanding your business overall. Make sure that onboarding is thorough, varied and mentored. Check in regularly to see how it is going and make sure they know you care about them and their progress.

Once you have a graduate new hire, take him/her with you on future campus visits to reinforce your link to the campus community. If this sounds like it will take years, it will. If you are not willing to commit to long-term investment in college relationship building, you may as well not do it because it will not work. There are too many good companies ahead of you.

As tough as it is out there, there is some good news.

Privately-held, family-owned landscape businesses offer graduating students a number of upsides. If you focus on leveraging the advantages of your firm – values, product quality, flexibility, innovation and close-knit teams – you’ll improve your odds of competing for and winning candidates’ hearts and minds. While larger competitors with deeper pockets can often offer more opportunity, they are not for everyone. **L&L**



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CREAM OF THE CROP features a rotating panel from the Harvest Group, a landscape business consulting company.

COMPANY CHECKUP

• **WHETHER YOU PLAN TO HARVEST THE FRUITS** of your hard-earned labor in 2019 or in another five years, use your New Year's energy to start working on your plan for best results. Start with a reference point for your company's value today, identify actions to add value to your company going forward and explore your options for transitioning the business. This time next year, you will be glad you did.

First, get a market valuation for your company as it stands today. You will gain a "ballpark" number for the company's value if sold in today's market. (Not to be confused with a business appraisal, which can be used for legal reasons). The report includes assumptions used to make the valuation and will indicate areas to focus on to increase the company's value.

Second, how healthy is your company? Are you optimizing your company's potential? Growing too

fast or too slowly? Potential buyers for your company will use the same factors as you do to evaluate the company. These can include:

- positive trends in sales, net income and margins over a period of years
- quality of clients and long-term retention
- leadership bench-strength
- quality of employees, culture and training
- business location, fleet and equipment
- market size and potential

What's your "grade" on these? Which ones should be improved? Ideally, have



ALISON HOFFMAN leads acquisitions for the Harvest Group. She is a former senior vice president of operations at a NYSE company.

a third party give you some honest feedback. In my experience, most owners think their companies are stronger than they really are. Independent surveys and/or a trusted adviser can give you an assessment of your strengths and weaknesses with an eye to improvement. It's better to know now so you can get to work on key issues.

Measure your performance on an ongoing basis. Smart companies create a dashboard to measure key

performance indicators (KPIs) and make necessary adjustments. KPIs will include financial measures as well as input from HR, client satisfaction surveys and operations.

Third, determine what your options are for transition. Do you want to transition to a family member or insider, or sell to a third party? Have you planned for after the sale? How much money will you actually receive from the sale? Pre- or post-tax? Or do you plan to strip out as much cash as possible and liquidate at the end of some time period?

All of these are valid options and will have aspects that can be managed for best results. Each will require some exploration with your adviser.

Having a plan will give you peace of mind as you move ahead.

The best time to plan for the transition of your business is well before you want to take action.

Make a plan in 2019 for stronger, healthier business results toward your "harvest" of maximum value for your hard work. **L&L**



Founded on

Relationships



Clark Tomlinson
Tomlinson Bomberger



Darrin Batisky
Bayer



"Bayer reps have come in and done educational training on products for our technicians, and there's been a great partnership there," Clark says. "Bayer has been excellent with us."



1981 was Tomlinson Bomberger's first year in business and in 1984, they had a decision to make. "We decided to take the leap."

Like many green industry professionals, Clark Tomlinson's path toward owning a lawn care business wasn't a straight one. From high school on through grad school, he spent ten years working summers on the greens of Lancaster Country Club with soon-to-be co-founder Dave Bomberger, who served as assistant superintendent at the course. Meanwhile, he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in counselor education, started a family and began a career as an elementary school counselor. Then in 1981, he and Dave co-founded a small lawn care business.

What Clark considered at the time to be "side work" would soon outgrow his highest expectations. And in 1984, after three years of dedication, Clark and Dave quit their jobs, took the leap and poured every ounce of energy into making Tomlinson Bomberger a best-in-class, full-service lawn and landscape company. And they did.

"Tomlinson Bomberger is buttoned up. Their shop, their offices, everything is professional. Their building is landscaped to a T... their vehicles are in great shape... and they really take care of their employees," says Darrin Batsky, the Bayer area sales manager covering Clark's region. "That's where they shine. It's hard work, but they're good to their people."

For Clark and Dave – who retired from the business in 2009 – doing great work and building trust are central to Tomlinson Bomberger's

mission to create and maintain beautiful, worry-free environments and lifelong relationships. But that's not possible without great team members.

"We're not successful without our co-workers," Clark says. "It's how we answer the phone, execute a work order, work on the job, follow-up... There are a lot of moving parts."

Success, according to Clark, comes from great co-workers who are fully committed to offering the best possible service to clients at every touchpoint. And it's why each one of Tomlinson Bomberger's 8,200 customers, spread across more than 100 individual routes, is assigned an account manager – who the client can call any time.

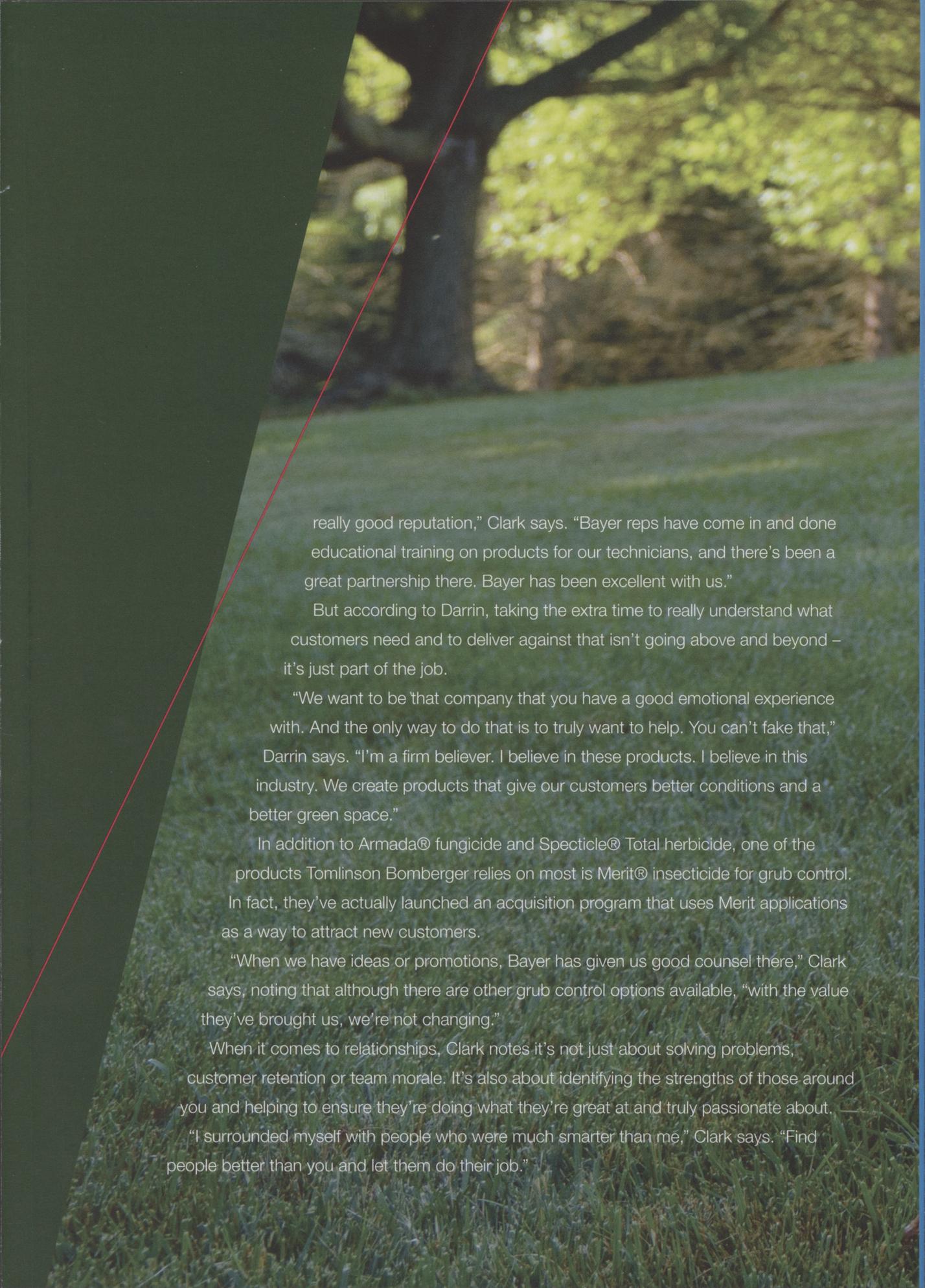
"Integrity is one of our core values," Clark notes. "It's really critical we're always honest with our co-workers and our clients. That's the key. Part of our mission statement is long-term relationships."

And those lifelong relationships that Tomlinson Bomberger cultivate aren't just in the client and co-worker spheres.

"The relationship that Tomlinson Bomberger has with Bayer pre-dates me," Darrin says, noting a business relationship of more than 25 years. "For me, it's really about being there any time they need something or might have a technical question. They're always trying to get better and do better. And their customers are loyal to them, because they're really good."

Relationships, says Clark, are at the heart of why and how business is done.

"It's been a great relationship, and Bayer has a



really good reputation,” Clark says. “Bayer reps have come in and done educational training on products for our technicians, and there’s been a great partnership there. Bayer has been excellent with us.”

But according to Darrin, taking the extra time to really understand what customers need and to deliver against that isn’t going above and beyond – it’s just part of the job.

“We want to be that company that you have a good emotional experience with. And the only way to do that is to truly want to help. You can’t fake that,” Darrin says. “I’m a firm believer. I believe in these products. I believe in this industry. We create products that give our customers better conditions and a better green space.”

In addition to Armada® fungicide and Specticle® Total herbicide, one of the products Tomlinson Bomberger relies on most is Merit® insecticide for grub control. In fact, they’ve actually launched an acquisition program that uses Merit applications as a way to attract new customers.

“When we have ideas or promotions, Bayer has given us good counsel there,” Clark says, noting that although there are other grub control options available, “with the value they’ve brought us, we’re not changing.”

When it comes to relationships, Clark notes it’s not just about solving problems, customer retention or team morale. It’s also about identifying the strengths of those around you and helping to ensure they’re doing what they’re great at and truly passionate about.

“I surrounded myself with people who were much smarter than me,” Clark says. “Find people better than you and let them do their job.”

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Worth



the Wait

Frustrated with the H-2B process, Molly and Joel John took on the difficult task of securing green cards for their workers at M.J. Design Associates.

Story by **Megan Smalley & Jimmy Miller**
Photography by **Eric Wagner**



the GREEN was everywhere.

GREEN CUPCAKES WITH GREEN ICING, Granny Smith apples, Mountain Dew – and it wasn't even St. Patrick's Day.

Instead, it was a "Green Fiesta" organized by Molly John, co-owner and CEO of M.J. Design Associates, and her husband, Joel. The duo owns M.J. Design Associates office in Columbus, Ohio, and they threw the party when the first of their crews' green cards arrived in August of last year.

Although a few of the applicants were still waiting for cards to arrive, the Johns felt it was necessary to celebrate those who received theirs.

"It was because of everything we've gone through," she says. "Even though some of the cards weren't in, it was for them to see the process is working and our patience is paying off."

The experience wasn't always a party – the

months of waiting here in the U.S. through the ever-changing process of obtaining a green card proved agonizing at times, especially during the winter.

One man missed his daughter's quinceañera. Another of John's employees, Fernando Rivera, missed the birth of his only son last February because he couldn't go home.

"It took us almost three years in waiting through the whole process," Rivera says. "It's difficult and hard to lose time. (This is) not really my case, but the other guys are losing time with their sons and daughters who are growing up, walking, crawling."

There's no telling how long the rigorous process might take, but in general, becoming a permanent U.S. citizen via green card opens up a variety of opportunities that later outweigh the hardships of waiting.

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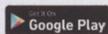
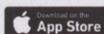
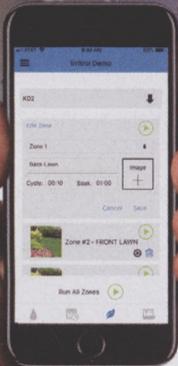
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WHY A GREEN CARD? For the past 15 years, M.J. Design Associates has participated in the H-2B program to provide the company with its seasonal workers. When the company first got involved in the program, it requested two employees. Gradually, the company increased its request for H-2B workers.

The company primarily relies on the program for seasonal workers. They now have 25 employees, 18 of which are H-2B.

Use of the program started in 2003, when John says she struggled to recruit reliable American workers. She wanted to stick to domestic labor and says she advertised the jobs extensively, but after talking to colleagues who used H-2B, she identified the program as an increasingly viable alternative.

John says the program has become much more volatile in recent years. She seldom knows if she will receive her workers until a few weeks before the season starts, so it has made planning for spring and summer tough. Yet most years, John says she has received almost all the same H-2B workers. She's familiar with them and they're familiar with her.

Some of them serve as foremen who lead her crews. She knows about their family backgrounds, their interests and their hobbies. Many of the employees know each other well, whether they're brothers, in-laws or close family friends. There's a mutual trust after years of working together.

So, with H-2B not always guaranteed, M.J. Design Associates decided to pursue green cards for its consistent H-2B workers in 2015.

"We reached out to a local attorney who told us we could sponsor (our H-2B workers) as employees," John says. "Most of our guys have come back. We've gotten to know them so we know they're trustworthy."

After a few years of filing paperwork (and much patience), 11 of M.J. Design Associates' former H-2B workers officially received green cards as of December of 2018, while three are still waiting.

"It's by far been worth the investment," John says. "Allowing them to have green cards now allows us to plan for 2019."

“IT’S BY FAR WORTH THE INVESTMENT.”

GETTING STARTED. After John learned she could potentially sponsor a few of her H-2B workers for their green cards, she approached her 18 H-2B employees to see who would be interested.

She made it clear that they would need to have some buy-in and pay for half of the costs associated with the application process. John estimates each green card costs roughly \$5,000-\$7,000 by the end of the process. Even with the cost, she says almost all of them were excited about the possibility.



After years of using the H-2B program for seasonal workers, Molly John decided to sponsor her crews for green cards. The process has been long and complicated, but she now has a domestic workforce she can rely on.



With the interest level high, John partnered with a Columbus-based attorney who had some experience with immigration laws.

While there are fees associated, it's worth the cost if it helps to ensure the process works, she says.

"Find a good, strong immigration attorney who has filed green cards and can explain to you the process and the timeline," she says.

John adds that she only decided to pursue green cards with the 15 H-2B workers she knew she could trust. She recommends employers only sponsor green cards for regularly returning H-2B workers.

"My theory is you want people you know are loyal to you. If someone has only been with you one or two years, a green card might not be a good option," she says. When John decided which

of her H-2B workers could be a good fit for the green card visas, her attorney provided her with some general steps (visit the "web extra" tab on Lawn & Landscape's website for detailed steps.)

She also brought in a translator, who comes in during performance reviews and company meetings, to help explain the green card process to employees. The steps were vague, but she says they served as a starting point.

The first step was to send a request to the Department of Labor for a prevailing wage filing. About a month after receiving that from the department, M.J. Design Associates had to spend three to six months actively recruiting domestic laborers for its vacant positions.

From there, they could officially start the green card application process with some of its H-2B workers.

John says the final stage of the application process is the longest, hardest and most expensive.

LONG WAIT. The final stage of actually applying for H-2B workers to receive green card visas involves a lot of forms and waiting. There are a few steps in the months-long process.

“It involves a lot of time, paperwork, organization and patience,” John says.

First, M.J. Design Associates had to fill out permanent labor certification (PERM) forms and PERM questionnaires for each of its green card visa applicants.

Then, the Department of Labor approved the PERM certification, typically within five to seven months, at which time each employee filed form I-140 Visa Petition with United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. At that time, John says, it is encouraged to pay the additional Expedited Filing fee along with the I-140 application.

This ensures USCIS will make a determination on each petition much faster, usually within a month, versus waiting another 8-12 months to hear from them.

Once the I-140s were approved, the employee could proceed with their final step in completing the green card visa forms, which include the form I-131 advance travel document, the form I-765 employer authorization document (EAD) and the form I-485 petition for adjustment of status within the United States.

John says forms I-131 and I-765 had the “most agonizing waiting periods” in the entire process.



Fernando Rivera, seated, and Lorenzo Garcia, far right, were two of the participants who went through the green card process as employees of Molly and Joel John's company, M.J. Design Associates.

“There is no way to know how long (the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service) will take to process the paperwork,” she says.

These forms were filed for 14 men between August and early October 2017. What was thought to be a 45-60 day process turned out to be much longer. By the end of November 2017, only two men had received their travel documents and work authorization cards, just as the H-2B workers would normally be heading home.

The remaining 10 men had to remain in the U.S. through the holidays. Two more received their travel documents in mid-January and the remaining 10 did not get their documents until the end of March.

“Two men got to go home for the holidays, but no one else was approved in time,” she says. “So, we ended up with 12 guys here all winter.”

John says the complicated part about green card applications is that timing depends on which desk receives the paperwork. Some citizenship agents can complete the process reasonably fast, while other people – even in the same department – may simply take more time finishing the process. You have no way of knowing how long your application might take to process.

This was tough on the applicants since they couldn't go home over the winter like they usually would through the H-2B program.

“It's hard, but they understand and know it's a benefit to have that (green card),” Lorenzo Garcia says through a translator.

He's also an H-2B employee who's still waiting on green card approval. “They're just waiting for me whenever I can be there, but they're excited to see me.”

John says she encouraged the applicants to be patient and reminded them the process is slow. Most of the applicants understood they had to wait, but she says it was hard nonetheless.

“They kept thinking their applications were lost,” she says. “It was hard for them to understand why. Part of it was me. I said we hoped it would take 45 days so they lost faith in what I told them.”

So, as an incentive, John says she paid rent and utilities for the applicants who were stuck in the U.S. for the winter. She took them on a field trip to an industry trade show for one day in January 2018. She also treated them to a tour of the Columbus Nationwide Arena to meet the Blue Jackets NHL team. And on Christmas Day, she and her husband invited them to their house for brunch.

“In my case, I thought it was going to be faster,” Rivera says. “The most important thing though is that it's a really nice chance and opportunity ... to be a part of the work here in the United States.”

After a hard winter, most of the applicants received approval for their form I-131 documents by March 2018, which allowed them to travel home to see families in the process.

Once the final form I-485 forms and processes were completed, workers gradually began to receive green card visas.

Eleven have received the visas as of December 2018. The green cards are good for five years and then can be renewed in five-year increments.

Even though these green card workers will go home occasionally to see family, John says she knows they'll be coming back – and she doesn't have to reapply to get them through the H-2B program.

“We can plan when they're going to be here,” she says. “We know for a fact how many staff members we'll have. We can hopefully regulate our time better.” **L&L**

For a more in depth look into the steps John took to secure the green cards, visit the web extra section at lawnandlandscape.com.



Starting a landscape business wasn't Adam McGuyrt's original career plan, but it has worked out well for him in recent years.

By **Megan Smalley**

SUCCESSING WITH PLAN B

Adam McGuyrt faced a few career options in the spring of 2011 as he was in his fourth and final year of service in the Marine Corps: he could re-enlist for another four years, work for an established company or start his own business.

A few months before his final year of service ended, he told his officers he planned to leave to start a business in his hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina. Starting a business was a financially riskier option than staying in the Marine Corps, but he says it was something he was more passionate about.

"I enjoyed the Marine Corps," McGuyrt says. "But I really wanted to start a business."

McGuyrt's Plan A was to start a homebuilding business like his father. As a kid, he enjoyed watching and helping his father with his work. However, McGuyrt says the market didn't seem strong enough in 2011 to start a successful homebuilding venture.

So, he turned to Plan B, which was to start a full-service landscaping business, which he named Turf TitanZ.

"I had to think more practical, considering the market at that time," he says. "I did some landscaping work in the past, and I worked around some of my dad's houses as he



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ABOVE: McGuyrt learned to be more selective in the hiring process and built his team to 23 solid employees.

“I went through and got rid of all the people causing nonsense, not showing up.”

**Adam McGuyrt,
Turf TitanZ**

was building them with the landscapes, maintaining them. So, I rolled with landscaping, which was also something I really enjoyed.”

YEAR OF CHANGE. When McGuyrt started Turf TitanZ, he says it wasn't too different from any other landscaper's story – it was him, a mower and a pickup truck. However, McGuyrt had the additional challenge of juggling the launch of a new business along with serving his last couple of months stationed at the Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point near Havelock, North Carolina.

For McGuyrt, 2011 was a year full of change – he got married, he ended his service with the Marine Corps, built a home, enrolled for a two-year turf management program at North Carolina State University and started Turf TitanZ.

Despite the “chaos,” McGuyrt says Turf TitanZ gradually gained some recurring customers that spring through flyers and word-of-mouth marketing. Most customers agreed to let McGuyrt mow their lawns on weekends when he was wrapping up his service in the Marines.

However, if some customers needed service during the weekdays, McGuyrt recruited his younger brother Tyler to help them.

If any customers needed maintenance services on weekdays, Tyler would perform those jobs as soon as his high school let out. Oftentimes, one of

Tyler's friends would join him to earn extra money. McGuyrt says their efforts helped the business get its start, ensuring customers were taken care of.

“They held down the fort, that's for sure,” he says. “They never whined once. I probably wouldn't have grown as quick if it weren't for their help.”

During the summer of 2011, McGuyrt worked full-time to grow Turf TitanZ. Yet, he experienced more change and a crunch for time once his college classes started that fall at North Carolina State University. He says he would go to class during the day, then perform maintenance jobs in the evenings and on weekends.

The business managed to gain 30 recurring customers that first year, but McGuyrt says working long hours on top of taking turf management courses seemed to be too much for him in 2012. He also noticed he was getting behind on equipment payments.

“I had always been one who was squared away with finances,” he says. “I was always a saver. But I got to the point where I had to put a truck payment on a credit card. I remember doing that in between classes and thinking, ‘Something's gotta change.’”

So, he decided to drop out of college and devote his time entirely to growing the business. McGuyrt used this new time to find additional workers for the company since there were only three full-time employees.

Although the first couple of years in business

proved to be demanding and cash flow was tight, McGuyrt says he and his wife Kaylyn made it work for their new family.

"It wasn't an easy ride," he says. "Going from the Marine Corps where you get a paycheck every two weeks and benefits are paid for to starting your own business where the customer's not paying you on time was a tough transition. Somehow, we made it work."

REBUILDING A TEAM. As Turf TitanZ grew, McGuyrt says jobs were easy to win but good laborers were hard to come by.

His brother Tyler and his friend left the business in 2012

after they graduated from high school. McGuyrt hired one solid employee to replace them, but otherwise he says he was short on man-power. So, McGuyrt needed to hire more reliable workers to the team.

To recruit people, he placed "now hiring" signs around town. He put magnets on trucks and trailers. The company hired a few employees through these efforts, but McGuyrt says he wasn't selective enough in the hiring process.

He also sold more work than the company could handle.

"The way that I started to build the business was sell, sell, sell," he says. "The way I hired, I just

found someone, put them on a truck and got them to do work."

This business model led to problems. McGuyrt says some equipment broke due to careless mistakes made by employees.

Some employees wouldn't show up to work, so McGuyrt had to call customers and apologize for being unable to make it to their property that day.

By 2014, McGuyrt says he decided to become more selective on who worked for the company. He fired five employees who were causing problems that fall.

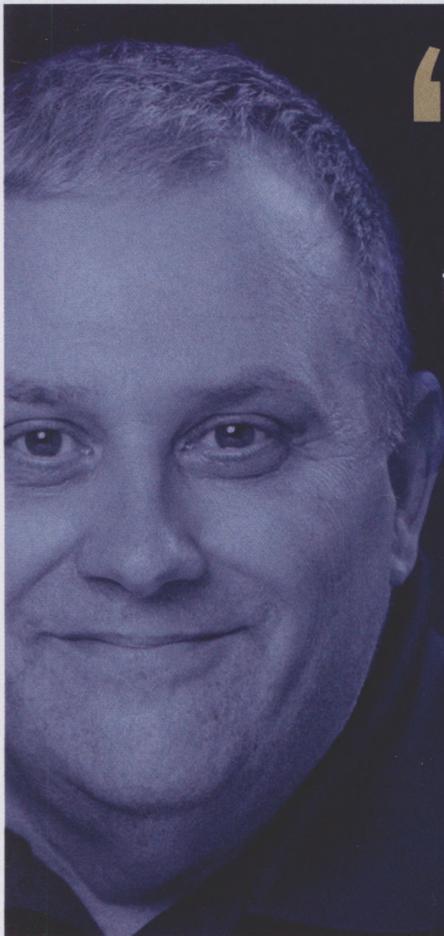
"I went through and got rid of all the people causing nonsense, not showing up," he says. "I stuck with my loyal guys who were de-

pendable and grew from there."

By late 2016, McGuyrt says he was finally confident with both the company's workloads and the team he had on board.

Since then, the company has grown slightly but he's stuck with the same business model of selling work his current crews can handle. However, the company is growing and broke \$1 million for the first time in 2018.

"Today, we've got a solid group of 23 guys," he says. "I have never been more proud of the team we've got. My biggest focus now is taking care of the good people here and to condense, tighten up and make the business more efficient." **L&L**



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1. BOB-CAT PREDATOR-PRO 7000 COMMERCIAL ZERO-TURN MOWER

The pitch: The Predator-Pro 7000 highlights enhanced performance, operator comfort and serviceability.

- The Predator-Pro 7000 features a 19-mph transport speed.
- Serviceability improves with a swing-away bumper for easy access to the engine.
- The Predator-Pro 7000 is backed by a limited warranty of 6 years/2,750 hours.

For more info:
Bobcatturf.com

2. CUB CADET PRO Z 972 SD

The pitch: Comfortably mow a straight line, execute zero-degree turns and operate on up to a 25-degree hillside slope with the PRO Z 972 SD from Cub Cadet.

- The PRO Z 972 SD features a 72-inch fabricated steel cutting deck with top, bottom and side reinforcements
- Oversized dual rear wheels provide a higher level of stability and precision for the perfect stripe.
- The drive system with four-wheel steering provides ultimate control.

For more info:
Cubcadet.com

3. EXMARK LAZER Z DIESEL ZERO-TURN RIDING MOWER

The pitch: The 96-inch Lazer Z Diesel allows for increased productivity.

- When equipped with the available 96-inch UltraCut Flex Wing rear-discharge cutting deck, the Lazer Z Diesel enables one worker to cut more than 10 acres per hour.
- Exmark RED Technology-equipped Yanmar liquid-cooled diesel engines deliver increased fuel efficiency.
- Available with a choice of 60- or 72-inch UltraCut cutting decks.

For more info:
Exmark.com

4. GREENWORKS COMMERCIAL LITHIUM Z ZERO TURN MOWERS

The pitch: The Lithium Z line offers zero-turn maneuverability with zero gas and zero emissions.

- All four models are powered by an 82-volt 13.8kW lithium-ion battery and feature three 1.5KW Brushless Blade Motors and two 1.7KW Brushless Drive Motors
- Greenworks Commercial Lithium Z mowers offer 4.5-6 hours of cutting time per charge and 2,800-3,600 RPMs.

For more info: Greenworkscommercial.com

5. HUSQVARNA Z500 ZERO-TURN SERIES WITH YAMAHA ENGINES

The pitch: Designed to ensure a long product life, Husqvarna's Z500 zero-turn series is focused on productivity, durability and cut quality.

- This series features a weld-reinforced 2-inch by 3-inch tubular steel frame and 7- or 10-gauge cutting decks.
- Improvements include an automatic parking brake, easy-to-fold ROPS and easy-to-view deck height adjustment.

For more info:
Husqvarna.com



6. JOHN DEERE Z994R ZTRAK

The pitch: The Z994R offers enhanced comfort, increased productivity and a longer engine life.

- A single 11.5-U.S. gallon diesel fuel tank offers increased productivity.
- Three seat options with adjustable armrests and the ComfortGlide fore/aft suspension enhance ride quality.
- Available with three deck options: 54-inch and 60-inch side-discharge decks, and 60-inch Mulch On Demand deck. the Z994R is also compatible with the Michelin Tweel X Turf airless radial tires.

For more info: Deere.com

7. KUBOTA Z700 EFI ZERO-TURN MOWER

The pitch: The Z700 EFI was designed to deliver exceptional performance for challenging conditions.

- Up to 11.2 mph speed and High back seat delivers excellent performance and comfort for more productivity
- Kawasaki EFI engine with E-GOV and ECU system keeps the drive wheels and cutting blades working at peak productivity.
- The wide 6.5-inch caster tire and 24-inch low profile rear tires deliver greater traction and less ground pressure.

For more info: KubotaUSA.com

8. MEAN GREEN MOWERS EVO-72 EVOLUTION SERIES

The pitch: The EVO-72 mower was designed for all day mowing with up to nine hours on one charge.

- The 72-inch commercial, electric ZTR is designed with an aerospace chassis contributing to low weight and a low center of gravity.
- It features maximum torque from the start with comparable horsepower exceeding 38 hp.
- The electric unit means low noise, low maintenance, zero gas and zero emissions.

For more info: Meangreenproducts.com

9. SPIDER REMOTE CONTROL MOWERS

The pitch: Spider remote-controlled slope mowers are designed specifically for the safe maintenance of steep, hard to mow areas.

- The 4-wheel drive, 4-wheel steer system with a zero turn option allows 360 degree mowing on slopes up to 55 degrees.
- Wheel drive (not tracks) ensures Spider mowers are gentle to the terrain, eliminating erosion and damage on slopes.
- The mowers can operate at speeds of 1 mph to 5 mph.

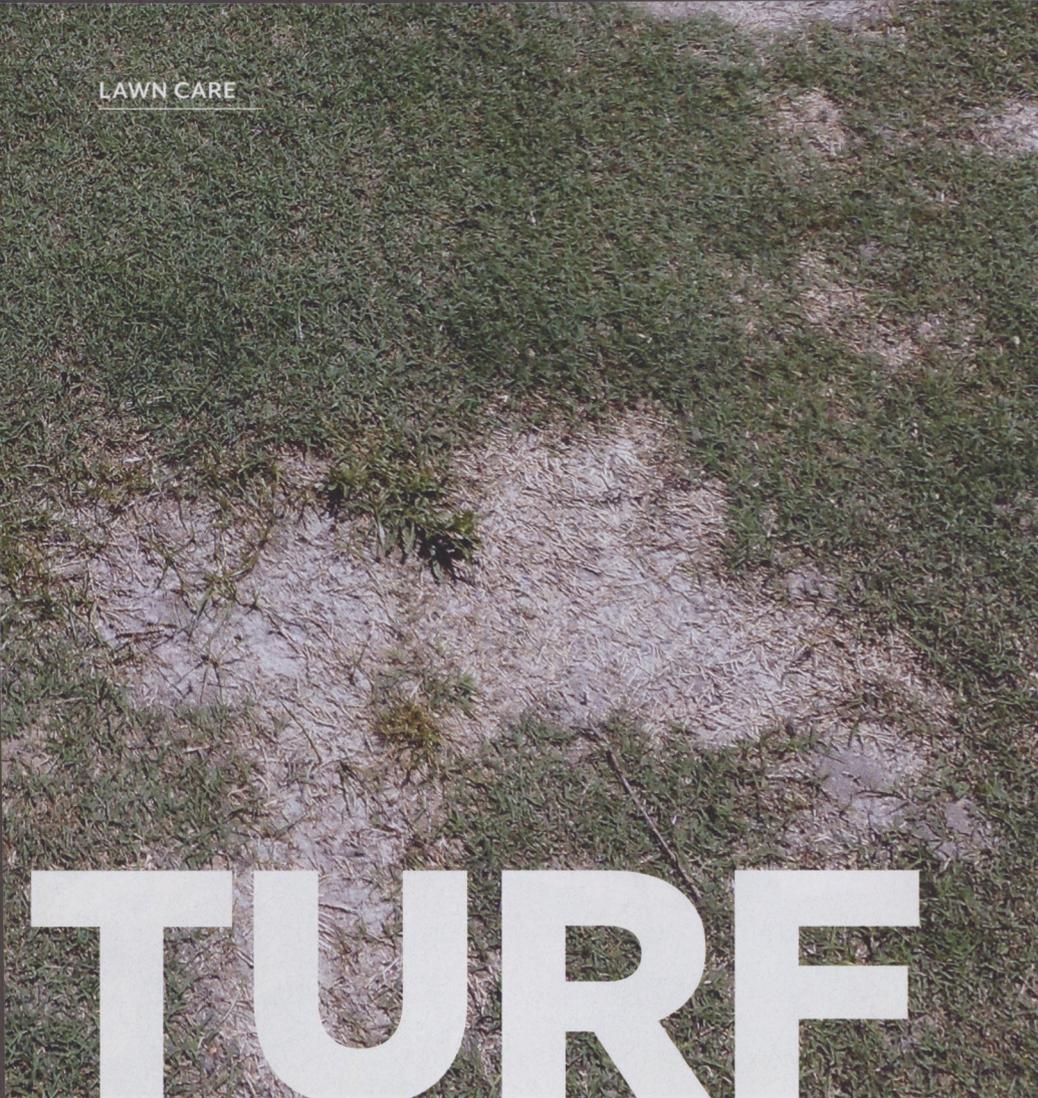
For more info: Slope-mower.com

10. WALKER H37I ZERO-TURN

The pitch: The H37i is a high-production Walker Mower that was designed to leave a beautiful cut.

- The mower is powered by a 993cc big block Vanguard EFI engine.
- The H37i features a high-capacity air cooling system and a large 5-inch diameter Donaldson air cleaner.
- An optional Model H deck Power Tilt-Up makes maintenance and storage even easier.
- Ideal applications include commercial properties, rural areas and field cutting.

For more info: Walker.com



TURF TREATMENT

Try these tips to help lawns thrive in the spring.

By Kate Spirgen

When spring arrives, your customers want to see their lawns return to lush, healthy stands of turf, but after months of snow cover, you might have to give yards a little help. Here are some steps you can take to help lawns recover from diseases that take hold during the winter months.

Regardless of the turf species, there are general best practices for healthy lawns, says Zac Reicher, Bayer Green Solutions Team. “Shade, compaction, poor drainage and traffic are common factors contributing to poor health and thus lawn diseases,” he says. “Reducing

the severity of some or all of these will maximize turf health and minimize disease regardless of species.”

To combat these diseases, Matt Giese, technical services manager for Syngenta, recommends avoiding too much or too little fertilization and irrigation, which can weaken stands of turf. “Overwatering invites water-loving diseases to gain a foothold in turfgrass systems, so moderation is key,” he says. But if rainfall is high, fungicide applications become necessary.

Reicher says turfgrass prefers dry soils to wet soils and most irrigated lawns are over-watered, so water only as needed to limit drought

stress, which might require daily or weekly adjustments. “Most irrigated lawns are over-irrigated,” he says. “It’s always better agronomically to err on the dry side rather than the wet side,” he says. “Plus, you will save water.”

COOL SEASON GRASSES. Diseases generally take hold of cool season grasses when snow falls on grass that’s just above freezing, says Brian Aynardi, PBI Gordon manager of university and contract research for the northeastern U.S.

Prolonged snow coverage leaves grasses susceptible to gray snow mold, which pops up when snow cover lasts for 45 days or more, allowing the typhula pathogen to germinate.

“Underneath snow cover, it starts to infect those leaves and it starts to cause patches to develop,” Aynardi says. “So you don’t actually see any of this going on. Under snow cover is where infection and patch development occurs.”

When the snow melts, you’ll start to see patches that can range from several inches to several feet in diameter. To differentiate gray snow mold, also known as speckled

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“It’s always better agronomically to err on the dry side rather than the wet side.”

ZAC REICHER, Bayer Green Solutions Team

snow mold, look for specks on leaves about the size of a pinhead. They’ll vary in color from pinkish to almost black.

Those specks are called sclerotia – hard-

ened mycelia that absorb nutrients and can survive over the summer. They’ll fall on the ground or lay underneath green tissue, leading to breakouts the following year.

There is a limited number of fungicides on the market available for lawn care, but flutolanil, azoxystrobin and fluoxastrobin are effective active ingredients, manufacturers say.

Typically, they’ll be mixed with chlorothalonil, Aynardi says. “Chlorothalonil is labeled for home lawn use and anything you’re going to spray is portably going to be better served with some chlorothalonil.”

Another common winter disease, pink snow mold, expands further into the growing season. Caused by *Microdochium nivale*, it will grow both under snow cover and without it, ranging in temperatures from just above freezing to about 60 degrees.

To find it, look for patches anywhere from 2 to 6 inches in diameter. Under sunny conditions, it will look pink around the edges. It looks similar to gray snow mold since both create a cream-colored tissue when the grass is destroyed.

If you’re unsure which disease is affecting a lawn, look for the distinguishing sclerotia to see if it’s gray snow mold. If you don’t see any, look under a microscope for the lunar-shaped specks that accompany pink snow mold.

Strobilurin fungicides, polyoxin D, chlorothalonil and thiophanate-methyl are all good options, Aynardi says.

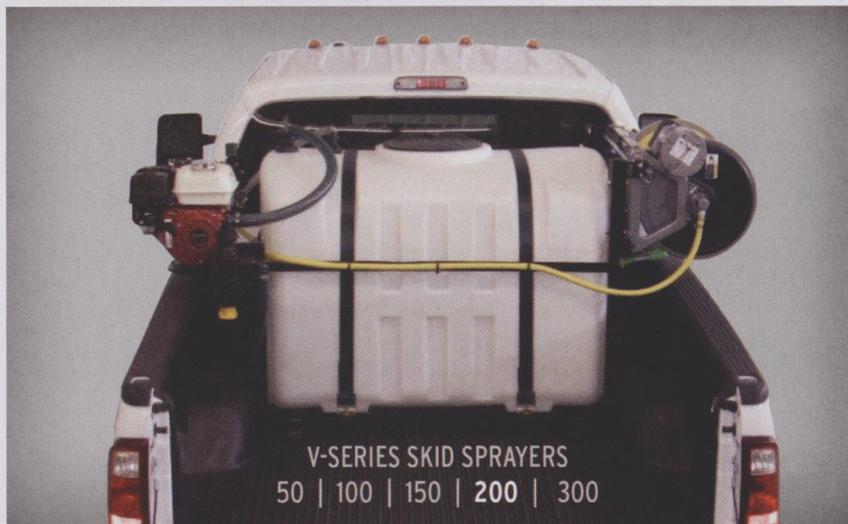
Whether you’re dealing with pink or gray snow mold, you’ll want to rake up dead turf in the spring and reseed the lawn. “You also want to rake up leaves and stuff because they’re going to act like snow; they’re going to act like a blanket,” Aynardi says.

And in the fall, don’t apply too much foliar nitrogen since that can create too much top growth. Then, when snow falls, the grass will lie fold over on itself and create that same blanket effect, Aynardi says.

WARM SEASON GRASSES. Going into and coming out of winter, spring dead spot and warm season large patch are the big issues to look out for, Aynardi says.

When it comes to spring dead spot, the soil-borne pathogen that causes it affects the roots, rhizomes and stolons of Bermudagrass.

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So Aynardi recommends an isofetamid to treat. “Make sure you get it in before the temperatures at a 2-inch depth are below 55 degrees at an absolute minimum,” he says. “But I like to say between 55 and 60.”

In zoysia, St. Augustine, centipede and other warm grasses, applications for large patch can be made when temperatures reach about 75 degrees for five consecutive days.

To identify it, look for patches of turf that have orange-ish or yellowish outer edges.

Penthiopyrad, myclobutanil and flutolanil are good treatment options and there are many good



Pink snow mold can grow with or without snow cover in temperatures up to 60 degrees.

options on the market, Aynardi says, but be sure to include a bit of post-application irrigation to move the chemicals into the whorl of the leaves.

OVER THE WINTER. Now is the time to take a look at your chemical program and make adjustments before the busy season hits and crews are running.

“Evaluate what did and did not work in 2018,” Giese says. “Reach out for advice on different approaches to those items that were difficult last year. Have a plan in place to make adjustments or wholesale changes in your programs for 2019. While each season doesn’t always go according to plan, creating and preparing for disease control now can be less hectic than doing it the morning of the application.”

The off-season is also prime for maintaining and updating spraying and spreading equipment, Reicher says, so check out calibration and particle distribution.

“Walk-behind rotary spreaders with a single propeller tend to throw granules heavily in the center of the pattern, then taper off to the edges in a typical bell-shaped curve,” he says. “It’s important to remember, though, that granule size and weight affect distribution – which is usually what causes the bell-shaped curve to shift right or left. Wear on the spreader will dramatically affect the distribution.” **L&L**

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THE DIRT ON SOIL AMENDMENTS

Give lawns and landscape beds a little something extra to boost organic content and create a better environment for roots.

By Kristen Hampshire

It's health food for your turf and landscape beds – it's chock full of macro and micronutrients, rich with nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. We know the “garbage in, garbage out” rule applies to how we care for grass, plants and trees. Quality soil amendments that are applied properly put “good in” to the landscape.

Soil amendments can improve water availability to plants, keeping more water in the root zone where plants can reach the moisture. “That happens through improving the infiltration of water into soil and improving water retention,” says Jessica Davis, head of the Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture at Colorado State University.

Davis is speaking of compost, specifically. Following a study the university conducted evaluating topdressing compost on turf, “We were surprised that even topdressing had a big effect on improving water infiltration and reducing run-off,” she says.

Considering water scarcity in many parts of the country, especially out West, the more we can do to enhance soil's ability to hold on to water, the less dependent we will be on irrigation. “In Colorado, we are always concerned about water,” Davis says. “We've had large increases in population in the last decade or so, and so we have more urban water needs and less water available for farming, or even for landscaping.”

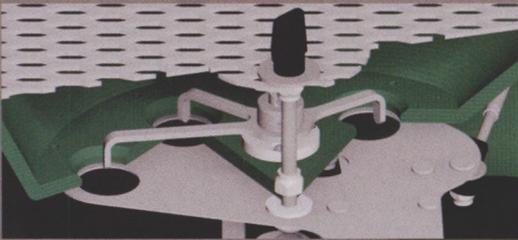
Beyond helping soil retain water, soil amendments also create stronger, healthier turf that can stand up more readily to weeds and disease. The



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“We’ve had large increases in population ... so we have more urban water needs and less water available for farming.”

JESSICA DAVIS,
horticulture department
head at Colorado State
University

key is to choose a quality soil amendment – and to apply it properly. Here’s a deeper look at how to select and use soil amendments, and why these organic add-ins can elevate the service you offer to customers.

DO-GOOD INGREDIENTS. Technically, a soil amendment is any material added to a soil to improve its water retention, permeability, drainage, aeration and structure. “Basically, amendments have organic matter in them, and as they decompose, they become humus in the soil and increase the soil organic matter content,” Davis says. “Organic matter is much more effective at holding water in the soil as opposed to sandy soil, where the water drains too freely.”

The ultimate goal of a soil amendment is to create a better situation for roots. There are a couple different ways to include soil amendments into a lawn care regimen. Compost can be applied as topdressing on to turf, or it can be worked into the soil before planting.

In landscape beds, working in soil amendments

before planting can supplement the nutrients and organic matter in soil to assure planting success, says Jim Sellmer, professor of horticulture in the Department of Plant Science at Penn State University. Sellmer prefers compost over most other organic amendments, which can include sphagnum peat, wood chips, grass clippings, straw, biosolids, sawdust and wood ash. Inorganic amendments range from pea gravel, sand, perlite and vermiculite, among others.

First, identify the goal for soil – then choose an amendment. For example, if you want to improve soil quickly, you’ll want an amendment that decomposes rapidly. If you’re looking for long-lasting improvement, select an amendment that decomposes slowly. “Soil amendments take time – they are like a slow-release fertilizer,” Davis says. “They have to decay, release nutrients to plants, and then with time, less fertilizer will be needed.”

Also, Davis says, “Whatever goes into the compost will affect what you get out of it.”

For example, you’ll find macronutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium in composted manure, along with micronutrients like zinc and manganese. “If you’re dealing with composted cow manure, those animals eat plants and then excrete plant nutrients,” Davis says.

There is no exact recipe for compost. “Feedstock affects characteristics, so each batch can be different,” Sellmer says. “Knowing in advance what the characteristics of the compost to be purchased are is an important piece of information for the contractor.”

Ask for a compost test from the supplier so you know exactly what you’re getting. “If that is not possible, request the right to reserve a pile and do the compost test yourself,” Sellmer says.

This is important because compost impacts soil pH. “If the compost is heavily manure-based, wood-based or a mushroom substrate, it can raise the pH,” Sellmer says, adding that there can be a short spike in pH as materials initially break down into the soil.

That said, compost generally reduces soil pH, which is especially helpful in regions where soil tends to be alkaline. “Generally speaking, as organic amendments decompose, they release organic acids and reduce soil pH,” Davis says.

Sellmer advises testing soil pH prior to planting in new soil – and before choosing plants for a landscape bed. A soil test will determine the nutrients available on a site so you know what supplements might be required so the plants will thrive.

"I recommend a preplant or predesign soil test, followed by a soil test about every three years," he says. "This allows the contractor or client to compare the original test with the present test to see if things have changed in the landscape."

Soil tests should come with recommendations for whether nutrients are needed. "Soil amendments should be based on soil test report results because they are intended to supplement the nutrients and organic matter in the soil to assure planting success," Sellmer says.

SOURCING QUALITY AMENDMENTS.

Even with organic matter and the benefits soil amendments bring to the earth, you can put down too much of a good thing. "It's important to know that you can over-do it," Davis says.

According to a Colorado State University Extension report, 'Choosing Soil Amendments,' manure-based composts should be applied at a rate of 1 inch incorporated 6 to 8 inches into soil. Plant-based soil amendments with lower salt levels can be used in greater volume, with an average application rate of 2 to 3 inches worked into a 6- to 8-inch soil depth.

With topdressing, you'll add a thin layer of material on top of turf – about ¼ to ½ inch of topdressing depending on the turf height. Ideally, turf should be aerated before or after topdressing to work compost into the soil.

"It's important to take a measured approach," Davis says. "I'd rather see people apply small amounts of compost topdressing annually for several years rather than trying to 'catch up' quickly by applying a lot."

Proper application is critical – "moderation is key," Davis says. Also, you want to be sure to use quality compost. "That is one of the biggest challenges that contractors need to be careful about: where you source compost, and make sure it is well composted," Davis says.

If manure is not fully composted, it will release an odor. (If composted right, this is not a problem.) Also, poor-quality compost that is not heated at high temperatures can contain weed seed. You don't have to guess whether compost was done right if you request a compost analysis. "It is possible to do damage with bad-quality compost," Davis says.

Providing this analysis to customers can give them peace of mind that the soil amendments you'll use on their property aren't "garbage in," and will make a healthy, lasting impact on soil quality and plant health. **L&L**

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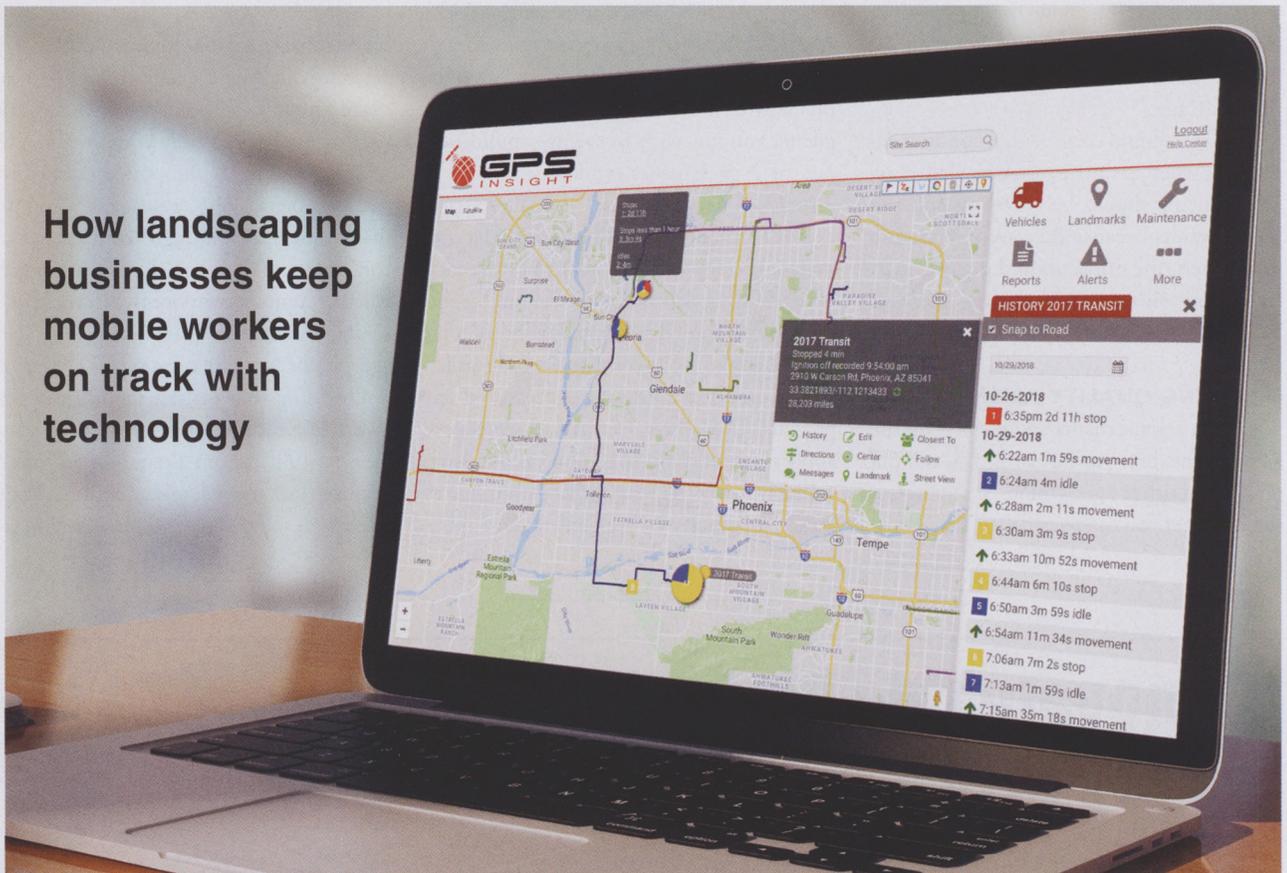
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How landscaping businesses keep mobile workers on track with technology



MAXIMIZING REVENUE THROUGH EMPLOYEE ACCOUNTABILITY

LANDSCAPING BUSINESSES depend on the reliability and efficiency of their crews to stay competitive. While it's impossible to ride shotgun with every driver, it is becoming possible to increase accountability while they are in the field. Many landscaping businesses are implementing a new culture of accountability because they know one crucial fact - revenue starts and ends with their workers.

To increase accountability with a landscaping fleet's mobile workforce, the use of fleet management solutions can help

hold employees responsible for their work performance to maximize revenue. The technology can provide visibility into real-time locations, insight into when and how long employees are on the job site, the ability to identify and prevent sides jobs and confirmation of job completion.

INCREASE FLEET VISIBILITY. When vehicles leave the yard, where are they going and how do employees operate them? The reality is, without the right tools in place to track their locations and usage, there is no

way to know for sure. A lack of accountability in the field due to crews being "off the grid" often results in lower productivity overall. That's why fleet visibility challenges are often at the root of technology initiatives for landscaping fleets.

Incorporating technology to track vehicle locations at all times, pointedly monitoring when and how employees operate company vehicles, is the first step toward having real accountability in place for mobile workforces. Gaining an eye in the field to manage a crew's productivity through the

day helps ensure they perform jobs quickly and effectively. Using the aggregate of data from fleet management solutions, managers can coach employees so the business can generate more revenue. Perhaps the data shows that the crew is making too many stops at Home Depot throughout the day, or jobs are taking much longer to complete than they should. Gaining access to this information is the resource that's been missing to achieve the maximum productivity.

ENSURE ACCURATE PAYROLL. Payroll accuracy is a struggle most landscaping businesses encounter. When employees track their hours on paper timesheets, the room for error ranges from inches to miles. Without technology holding an invisible threshold of accountability, miscalculated labor hours can vary from 15 minutes a few days a week to much more extreme cases of forgery. In either scenario, it adds up to a substantial amount of unnecessary labor expense. Challenges with payroll discrepancies don't only increase costs. They raise other important questions such as, "how are employees spending that time while they are on the clock," and "how efficiently are they performing their jobs?"

Fleet management solutions help verify timesheets to ensure payroll hours are correct down to the minute. Landscaping businesses can use this information in different ways depending on their payroll process. It can be as simple as using a report to look at when crews start and end their day, or integrating the data directly into a payroll system to identify and fix discrepancies with the click of a button.

PREVENT SIDE JOBS. An opportunity cost for landscaping businesses occurs when employees perform side jobs with company trucks and equipment. There can be far-reaching financial consequences to a business when employees decide to pocket extra cash by completing services with company property. Allowing this to occur increases fuel expenses, wear and tear on vehicles and takes direct revenue away from the bottom line.

Side jobs most commonly take place during odd-hours, such as the weekends or after hours during the week, but can also happen during regular business hours

between jobs. Regardless of when they occur, side jobs take away from the services a landscaping business can complete. Outside of the potential to lose revenue on a specific job, the business will be held liable for accidents that take place in their company trucks, even after hours.

Landscaping businesses are using fleet management solutions to monitor odd-hours to know when vehicles are in use, both during the workday and after hours. A common way to track this activity is to set up alerts to know when vehicles are moving during a specific timeframe. By monitoring all stops the fleet makes during the day, including non-working hours, businesses can quickly identify potential side jobs and investigate the events to either verify or refute them.

PROOF OF JOB COMPLETION. In today's world, news of a bad customer experience spreads faster than ever. With the rise of customer review websites, it can be a downright struggle for landscaping businesses to bounce back from negative experiences recounted by previous customers. An aged challenge for landscaping businesses is what to do when a customer calls to complain a service was not complete. If the

crew claims they were on site for an hour and the service was finished, it could turn into a matter of "he said, she said," without a way to verify the truth.

Fleet management solutions provide the information needed to confidently resolve customer disputes by looking at factors such as how long the vehicle was at the site. Using technology during disagreements helps vindicate drivers, along with providing a better customer experience in the process. When landscaping businesses use technology to protect drivers along with holding them accountable, it makes for a much more useful tool overall.

In the digital age, landscaping businesses can implement much stronger accountability than in the past by using fleet management solutions, and it's having a direct impact on revenue. Holding employees accountable ensures they are on the top of their game so that the business can be as successful as possible.

About the Author: Jenny Shiner is the communications manager for GPS Insight. She graduated from Arizona State University with a Bachelor's of Communication and is responsible for external marketing communication for all business segments that GPS Insight targets. Contact GPS Insight for more information on fleet management solutions.



Tracked landscape vehicle and equipment



get smart

Irrigation controllers can do more than ever as technology continues to advance.

By Holly Hammersmith

The increased adoption of Wi-Fi-enabled irrigation controllers is prompting contractors to sell their clients on their unique features to gain an edge on the competition, irrigation system manufacturers say.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS. “What tends to be the newest and most common with what we are seeing are integrations with Google and Amazon and other companies that offer home automation,” says Joe Porrazzo, product manager at Rain Bird Corporation.

Smart controller used to mean the controller was adjustable based on weather conditions, he says.

“I think that definition of ‘smart’ has adapted more of the homeowner definition of connectivity. A weather-based programming aspect is assumed in the connection,” Porrazzo says. “Today we are seeing basically every manufacturer offer that type

of (Wi-Fi-enabled) product.”

What’s next on the horizon includes more advanced and accurate weather programming – such as for the specific weather conditions at a physical address – micro climates, he says.

“Another trend we are starting to see is flow sensing is becoming a very popular topic for commercial and residential,” Porrazzo says. “I think that is going to get more affordable and easier to use so that a homeowner will be more enticed to use it and monitor their property.”

ETwater controllers (recently acquired by Jain Irrigation) have a feature called predictive analytics.

“Predictive analytics for weather allows us to look forward as well as backward. And that is the latest, greatest that’s happening, I think, in smart controllers, says Richard Restuccia, vice president of water management solutions at Jain Irrigation.



Two-way programmability, which allows users to fully program the controller from a computer or cell phone, is picking up in popularity, says Peter Lackner, product manager for The Toro Company.

Two-way programmability is also picking up in popularity, says Peter Lackner, product manager for The Toro Company.

“One-way programmability meant your cell phone or your computer could double as a remote control where you’re just turning the sprinkler manually on or off,” he says. “But with two-way programmability you’re now able to fully program the controller from a computer or a cellphone as if you were standing at the controller.”

POPULARITY CONTEST. For a long time, advancements with irrigation controllers were spurred by the needs of contractors. Today, homeowners’ needs play a stronger role, Porrazzo says.

“Homeowners are getting much more knowledgeable and are starting to dictate what products are being put in the home or in the ground,” he says. “Every homeowner wants to have Alexa tell their sprinkler to turn on.”

For contractors working with large clients, such as a homeowner’s association with a system controlling 40 zones, easy setup is vital, Restuccia says.

“What’s really important (in a controller) is to have the ability to set one of these zones up and then copy them for the rest of the properties, or the rest of the zones,” he says. “If you make an error on the programming, you’re not going to get the performance you expect.”

In that same scenario, the client, such as the HOA property manager, is likely going to demand readily available reports on the system’s performance, Restuccia adds.

“(They) want to be able to share the analytics with my homeowner association boards and be able to easily show them why they use more water

or why they use less water,” he says.

Another increasingly popular feature is the capability for an irrigation smart controller to control other features on a property like outdoor lighting.

“We like to think of it as controlling your whole yard, not just your sprinklers now,” he says.

MARKET VARIATIONS. “The adoption rate for different features in different states are different,” Porrazzo says. “California is one of the largest, if not the largest, markets for irrigation in the world. We have to design our products to meet those strong (water conservation) standards.”

Contractors in Texas, Colorado and Florida are feeling a similar push. States without as strict guidelines for water usage are following suit slowly, he says.

Lackner says the request for connectivity in smart controllers is universally demanded. The demand initially came through the commercial space, which is where a lot of innovations are born, but residential clients have followed suit, he adds.

“It has been kind of cost prohibitive for smaller, single home owners, but that’s kind of the next step in smart control,” he says.

PROJECT DEMANDS. “The residential customer is more interested in something that is simple and intuitive,” Porrazzo says. “Commercial properties, on the other hand, want that granular control, controllers that can operate multiple valves at a time, that have advanced flow sensing capabilities, very accurate weather sensors and stations.”

It may sound simple, but it’s also important to ensure the controller, if Wi-Fi-enabled, can access

“We like to think of it as controlling your whole yard, not just your sprinklers now.”

PETER LACKNER, product manager, The Toro Company

Wi-Fi, Restuccia says.

“I always caution people to be sure that where they’re placing their controller, they actually get Wi-Fi. I know, for instance, at my house, if I put my controller in my garage, I don’t get Wi-Fi in my garage. That’s something they should take into account,” he says.

MARKETING TIPS. There are a few angles contractors can consider when marketing irrigation smart controllers to their clients and to stay out of the lowest bidder game, manufacturers say.

“(Contractors should) market themselves as water management specialists if they are,” Restuccia says. “And I think the way they prove it is with good case studies.”

For example, if the installation of a smart controller saved a client money or conserved a certain amount of water, a case study can help explain the benefit of the controller to a client, Restuccia says.

Another consideration is to create and add opportunities for reoccurring revenue from existing customers, Porrazzo says.

“Connected controllers allow contractors to oversee multiple properties from a tablet or computer. Being able to turn these systems on or off (and monitor the system) is a service they could sell monthly similar to a security system,” he says.

Unique features that not all devices offer are another selling proposition, Lackner says.

“For our products specifically, we actually use proprietary radio technology that gets us three times the range that Wi-Fi gets us,” he says. “We like to use that as an upsell over just a traditional Wi-Fi controller.” **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.

LOOK BEFORE YOU



LEAP

Franchise opportunities can launch your business to the next level, but here's what you need to know before taking the leap.

By Lauren Rathmell

A franchise creates opportunity, offers a network of experienced help and can act as a shell for the business you've always wanted to own. However, before getting your foot in the door and signing on, there are some things you should keep in mind.

DUE DILIGENCE. Nathan Newlands, vice president of franchising for Spring Touch, says first and foremost, a good franchise should be able to address your specific needs.

"The question is, what do you need help with? Obviously, you're already in the industry so you're already enjoying it," Newlands

says. "(Maybe) it's just that something is not quite working. Identify what that is, and why you need the help. Then ask if the franchisor is able to help you in that area."

If you're considering making the conversion to a franchise, your homework is to fully understand what areas you are struggling in. Newlands says that while franchisors do consider what your company can bring to the table, it's more important to understand if the franchisor can offer you the right kinds of tools. While franchises may seem like a shoo-in for growing your business, not all of them have the best benefits.

Vice President of franchise development



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at Grounds Guys, Pat Hyland, suggests looking into what sort of coaching you will get as a franchisee after the agreement has been signed. Ask yourself if there's ongoing training available and pay attention to the type of support system the network has built.

"Sometimes brands will just award you their brand and then pat you on the back and send you out and say, 'good luck,'" Hyland says, which is a major red flag.

Aside from understanding where you stand with your goals, it's also smart to review the franchise disclosure and then review it again with a lawyer. Hyland

says working with a lawyer who specializes in franchises will be the best bet. He recommends using online resources from the International Franchise Association.

Hyland also recommends contractors talk with other franchisees before signing any agreements.

"(Find out) about their experience with the brand and the franchise," he says. "I think that's a really critical part of this... validating what their current franchisees experiences are with being with that brand."

Blaine Young, Franchise Sales & Development with NaturaLawn, also highly recommends talking to other franchisees.

"Talk to someone that is small, medium and large. Sometimes it's not a bad idea to ask about failure rate," Young says. "Look at the growth rate of the franchisees year by year to get a feel of what your growth rate would be by joining that system. The systems, processes, products and service are really what's going to attribute to the growth."

STEER CLEAR. Hyland says all good franchisors should invite potential franchisees to the headquarters and expect nothing in return.

"You should not be under pressure," he says. "(They

shouldn't) expect you to bring a check and be ready to sign right there." Contractors shouldn't be in a rush, either. "It's a big decision for a contractor to make the decision to become a part of a national brand," he says. Taking your time and thinking things through will avoid the dreaded buyer's remorse.

When you're in the agreement process, the information you gained from the franchisees should reflect what you're seeing and hearing from the franchisor.

"You want to see a consistent franchise," Hyland says. If they're always changing things, it might be best to move on.

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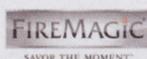
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“A potential franchisee should be able to clearly see the value in the agreement.”

PAT HYLAND, VP of franchise development, Grounds Guys

If a franchise isn't willing to be open with you as far as terms of the agreement or financials, it should make you question the operation.

“For someone looking into the franchise system, if the franchisor is elusive when asked some questions about the disclosures or their financials, that would concern me,” Young says.

FOLLOW THE MONEY. While all franchise agreements contain different specifics, Newlands says a potential franchisee should look to Item 7 in the agreement. This is where you'll find a breakdown of where your

money is actually going.

In some franchise agreements, a franchisee will be required to use a certain brand of equipment or a specific company for third-party services. Newlands says while that's relatively normal, the potential franchisee shouldn't be afraid to ask why. A worst-case scenario would be the franchisor giving business to a company that is owned by him as well.

Both Newlands and Hyland can attest to the financial benefits of a franchise. For instance, vendor loyalty can provide steep product and equipment discounts for a franchisee.

“There needs to be absolute transparency,” Hyland says. “A contractor should know what a day in the life of a franchisee will look like.”

The types of systems that a franchise has in place should also be of value to you. Experienced support staff is a huge asset for a franchisee according to both Newlands and Hyland.

“(A potential franchisee) should be able to clearly see the value in the agreement,” Hyland says.

MIND OVER MONEY. Being attractive to a franchisor is not so much about the size of the companies you've owned, but

more so about realizing where you are in terms of your business and personal goals.

“Sometimes half of the experience is realizing ‘Hey, I'm not getting to where I wanted to get to and I think I'm going to need some help along the way,’ Hyland says.

Young says he always tells franchisees to be critical of themselves.

“What I mean by that is if I were franchise prospect (I'd need to) be able to say ‘I'm great at sales, but probably not your best technician,’ he says. “I would have to acquire the good talent to make sure that I got good technicians.” L&L



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Lavish

OUTDOOR LIVING

Clients are increasingly willing
to open up their wallets for outdoor
spaces with all of the amenities.

By Arricca Elin SanSone

It's often said that the landscape business follows the stock market: When things are good, people are willing to spend. That's certainly been true recently, with many firms already booked for outdoor living projects for summer 2019.

"People are spending more money every year," says Barry Schneider, president of Surrounds Landscape Architecture and Construction, based in the greater Washington, D.C., area. "They're trying to make their backyards into a resort. They want to go out their back doors to places that are welcoming extensions of their homes."

Here's what's in demand in outdoor living:

OUTDOOR KITCHENS. Without question, design firms say the No. 1 requested item is an outdoor kitchen. "Everyone wants one," Schneider says. "Ten years ago, it was basically a built-in grill. Now it's a full-blown kitchen with high-end stainless appliances, including a natural gas grill, gas or wood pizza oven, wet sink, fridge and smoker."

What's causing the increase in demand? "I think with the uncertainties in the world these days, people are spending more time at home, less time traveling, and they want to be outside," says Chris Vedrani, owner of Planted Earth Landscaping. "We've put in more kitchens in the last two years than the last eight years altogether."

Besides cooking and food preparation areas, design elements for outdoor kitchens often include a bar and seating areas, placed strategically so people can interact with the cook. Basically, the outdoor living movement blurs the line between indoors and out. Spaces are being created that mimic the indoor environment down to the lighting and seating areas.

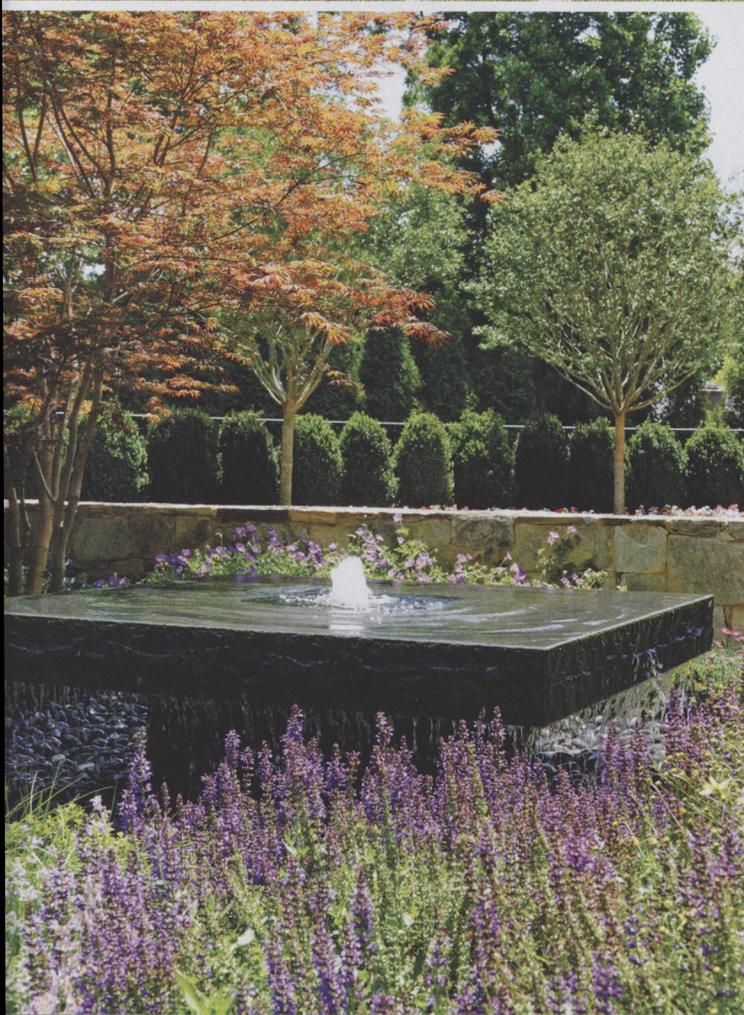
As a result, lighting has become an element

installed on every single project, Schneider says. LEDs have improved the ease of installation, maintenance and versatility. One of the latest requested features is lighting that changes for mood or season: oranges and purples for Halloween, reds and greens for Christmas and so on. Lighting is installed not only for walkways and seating and bar areas but also as accents to highlight specimen plants or to add a moonlighting effect on trees.

In addition, pavilions and pool houses that include a bathroom and storage cabinets are growing in popularity. It's a simple way to increase useable living space and create additional privacy. Pergolas are requested less frequently because, although they have a pleasing aesthetic, many clients prefer covered structures for protection from the elements.

Another element that's gaining in popularity is outdoor sound systems. "It's become very sophisticated," Schneider says. "We're hooking up high-quality subwoofers, speakers, the works." High-end outdoor furniture, typically with a modern design consciousness, is also in demand. "We've seen clients willing to spend \$3,000 to \$4,000 on an outdoor sofa, which is an indication of how much people love being outdoors," Schneider says.

OPPOSITE PAGE Customers want the allure of water features without the maintenance issues that come with koi ponds and streams, so landscapers are offering other options.



“People are spending more money every year. They’re trying to turn their backyards into a resort.”

BARRY SCHNEIDER, Surrounds Landscape

Obviously, the more complex the project, the higher the price tag. But Vedrani says a minimum \$25,000 to \$50,000 is common for basic outdoor kitchens, with most higher-end projects in the \$300,000 and up range for full-blown kitchens with deluxe appliances, according to Schneider.

FIRE FEATURES. Firepits with seating in the round and fireplaces, which make spaces feel more like interior living rooms, are common requests. The American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) 2018 trends survey revealed that nearly 70 percent of projects were expected to include an outdoor fire pit or fireplace.

These design elements add an additional layer of coziness and extend the season for sitting outdoors. Because fireplaces require plumbing and gas lines, they typically cost about \$10,000 alone, while fire pits have a \$4,000 to \$5,000 price tag, Vedrani says.

MATERIALS. Flagstone, bluestone, limestone and travertine, which works well for pool decks because it doesn’t get hot on the feet, are extremely popular choices because people like the appearance of natural stone. However, many manufactured stone companies are creating products that look more and more like the real thing, Schneider says. In

addition, they’re easier for most contractors to install.

The trend with decks is the use of more exotic materials, such as ipe wood. Ipe is a type of tropical hardwood that’s noted for its durability and rich, warm brown color (it softens to grey unless you seal it). “It’s essentially zero maintenance, so we have a lot of clients doing a sort of accent deck that’s maybe a foot off the ground with no railing away necessary,” Vedrani says. They’re sometimes located as a focal point a distance from the house.

When it comes to preferred railing, one of the most commonly requested products nowadays is stainless cable railing.

“It’s the number one choice,” Vedrani says.

The disadvantage is that it’s expensive (at least twice what typical railing costs) and it needs tightened every few years. The advantage is that virtually no other maintenance is required.

WATER FEATURES. Many designers say that client requests for water features have tapered off. Water features such as streams and koi ponds are not as popular as they once were, in part because of the maintenance issues such as algae and potential leaks. “People still want water, but we’re doing more projects such as an urn that spills water into a gravel bed,”

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Schneider says. “You still get the sense and sounds of water with this kind of feature, but with fewer maintenance challenges.”

PLANT PALETTE. According to the most recent ASLA trends survey, about 80 percent of projects are expected to include low-maintenance plantings, per client request. Low-maintenance gardens always have been popular, but there’s a distinct move-

ment toward a more relaxed feel to the landscape. “We’re selling a lot more sweeping beds of grasses, even in traditional gardens,” Schneider says. “They’re more natural in appearance and you get three-seasons of interest. They’re often placed alongside a meandering gravel path and a mixed border of perennials.”

The other benefit is that grasses fill in quickly. You can plant hundreds of them in April and

within three months, you’ve got a nearly full-grown plant. “They don’t cost as much as boxwoods or evergreens,” Schneider says.

Another growing design development is the use of pots grouped throughout the property. “Almost every project has at least six to 12 pots and they’re planted with 90 percent annuals for color,” Vedrani says. Limestone or concrete urns or large (3’x 3’) metal planters, set on the front porch or on and around the pool deck, are most popular. They’re usually filled annuals that are swapped out for three turns (spring, summer and fall) including seasonal options such as pansies or mums.

One of the challenges for designers in recent years has been plant materials at reasonable cost. “For example, boxwoods are three times what they used to be and you need to find the blight-free varieties,” Vedrani says. “There’s a real shortage because many growers folded after the 2008 recession.” The result has been fewer growers and fewer mature plants. Vedrani says one of their solutions is to substitute other lesser-known plants that are as attractive but resist blight, such as blue hollies or an inkberry holly, such as Gem Box. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in the Northeast.

\$25,000-\$50,000

The minimum that is common for basic outdoor kitchens, according to Chris Vedrani, owner of Planted Earth Landscaping. Most higher-end projects cost in the \$300,000+ range for full-blown kitchens with deluxe appliances.

“Almost every project has at least six to 12 pots and they’re planted with 90 percent annuals for color.”

CHRIS VEDRANI, Planted Earth Landscaping

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For more info: CaseCE.com



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For more info: Takeuchi-us.com



3.

3. VERMEER CTX100 MINI SKID-STEER

The pitch: Designed according to customer input, the Vermeer CTX100 mini skid-steer fits into small spaces and is lightweight enough to use on most landscape surfaces.

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- The CTX100 features vertical lift boom arms, which keeps the load closer to the machine and helps increase lift capacity.

For more info: Vermeer.com



4.

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For more info: Asvi.com

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RUN IT LIKE YOU OWN IT

Rental equipment is a valuable resource for landscape companies. Here are some rental dos and don'ts so you can develop a true partnership with a rental company.

By Kristen Hampshire

Rental equipment can add more muscle to your fleet so you can take on a large project without buying more machines. And borrowing equipment from a rental house can allow you to get into new types of work or grow an area of your business to discover its potential before you invest in buying the tools.

For these reasons and more – like getting a machine in a pinch when you've got equipment down – your local equipment rental provider is an important partner.

"Rental equipment can enable contractors to get jobs they might not have before," says

Nick Casale, vice president of Casale Rent-All in Clifton Park, New York.

Casale also says education is an important part of renting out equipment. Not only do rental associates consult with contractors to help them select the most efficient, cost-effective and productive tools for their jobs – they also walk through important maintenance and fueling information so the equipment can perform as expected.

There are dos and don'ts for renting equipment. And the ideal rental customer is one who owns some equipment and needs more machines for a job, says Darren Lewis,

branch administrator at Company Wrench in Charlotte, North Carolina. "They know how to take care of equipment and have qualified operators to run it," he says.

Ultimately, you should run rental equipment like you own it. Here are some pointers to be sure you're maximizing the possibilities of rental equipment.

PLAN AHEAD. Last-minute jobs pop up; machines go down. You can't always arrange rentals a week in advance. But, when that flexibility is possible, do plan ahead. "Even a few days in advance is helpful and will give you opportunities for the best options available from the rental house," Casale says. "The more notice you can give, the more likely you are to get the best tool for what you need and to be ready to rock and roll for your project."

TALK ABOUT THE JOB. Explain the project you're tackling to the rental provider. "Our staff generally asks multiple questions before renting equipment, including what the job will be and what materials the contractor will be dealing with," Lewis says. "That makes it easier for our sales force to match a piece of equipment for the job if the contractor isn't sure."

And sometimes, customers ask for a piece of equipment that might not be the best fit. "There's no sense in renting out a massive piece of equipment if we can show them something else that will do what

FIND THE RIGHT RENTAL PARTNER

they need and save them money,” Lewis says.

UNDERSTAND MAINTENANCE NEEDS. Some of the biggest mistakes happen because operators use the wrong fuel or put fuel in the wrong reservoir. “We see quite often where contractors will put diesel fuel in the after-treatment system or into the hydraulic system,” Lewis says. “That can cause a lot of damage – a lot of damage.”

Damage done to equipment during the rental period is fixed by the rental house, and the rental customer picks up the tab for service.

Another issue is allowing diesel exhaust fluid (DEF) to run out, which can cause damage. This fluid is designed to trap nitrogen particles so they don't release into the exhaust.

Casale advises customers who are renting equipment that will sit out in cold temperatures to use pre-treated fuel. “If the machine is sitting idle in winter, the diesel fuel can actually gel up,” he says. “Then, when you need the machine for a snow storm, (it won't start).”

So, be sure to find out exactly what type of fuel the rental equipment requires. Ask about other fluids you'll need to replace during the time of rental. A salesperson at the rental house will walk you through fueling basics because every machine is different.

“Ask the rental company if they can give you an abbreviated list of things you should and should not do for maintenance,” Casale says. “Some machines require that you grease certain points on them.”

The rental company might come to the jobsite to check on the equipment to see if needs service or maintenance. “Depending on the length of the rental, we'll service the equipment as needed,” Lewis says. “But our customers are required to grease pivot points on a daily basis because of the wear.”

SNAP A PICTURE. Before you leave the rental provider, Casale suggests taking pictures of the equipment to denote any wear and tear or marks and the general condition of the machine. “Just like if you were renting a car, take pictures as you are taking possession of the equipment so you have those for your records,” he says.

TREAT IT LIKE YOUR OWN. “When we supply equipment for rental, it is sent out into the field very clean,” Lewis says. “It has been serviced and all the pivot points are greased. It's full of fuel.”

When you return the equipment, it should be in the same condition as when you left the rental house with it on your truck.

THE BOTTOM LINE. A rental provider can be so much more than a place to get extra equipment.

Beyond actual equipment, a rental company can be a great place to network and even find new customers, Casale says. “We get to know contractors and if they come in and are looking to subcontract out work, we can give referrals,” he says.

When homeowners stop in looking for equipment, uncertain if they can actually do the job, Casale says his team can send them to area contractors who specialize in the work they want to accomplish. “We want to be the easiest part of our customers' day and help them solve their problems,” he says. **L&L**

AN EQUIPMENT RENTAL COMPANY is an important extension of any landscape contractor's business. The key is to establish a relationship with a rental house, and the American Rental Association (ARA) suggests these five steps to ensure that you partner with the right provider.

1. SEARCH FOR RENTAL STORES IN THE AREA WHERE THE MAJORITY OF YOUR WORK IS BEING DONE. A rental store locator is available on ARA's RentalHQ.com website. Enter the type of equipment you need and where you need it to get a list of local ARA-member rental companies that can meet your needs.

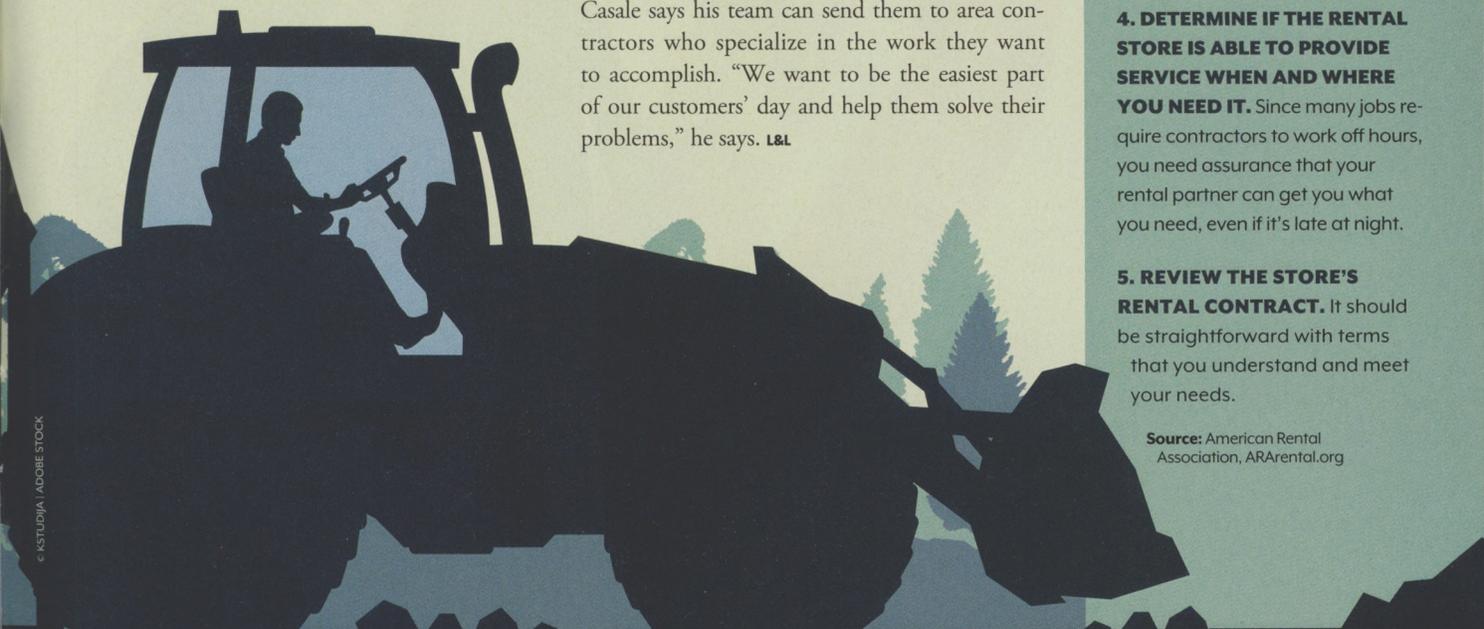
2. TALK TO OTHER CONTRACTORS IN THE AREA. Ask others for references and about their experience working with a particular rental store. You want to do business with a company that has a good reputation among your peers.

3. ASK THE RENTAL STAFF ABOUT THE STORE'S EQUIPMENT FLEET. Does it match your needs? If they don't have something, can they get it? How often is equipment replaced in the fleet?

4. DETERMINE IF THE RENTAL STORE IS ABLE TO PROVIDE SERVICE WHEN AND WHERE YOU NEED IT. Since many jobs require contractors to work off hours, you need assurance that your rental partner can get you what you need, even if it's late at night.

5. REVIEW THE STORE'S RENTAL CONTRACT. It should be straightforward with terms that you understand and meet your needs.

Source: American Rental Association, ARARental.org



Searching for ANSWERS

Beginning SEO can be confusing, but simple tips and tricks could help more customers find your business online. **By Jimmy Miller**

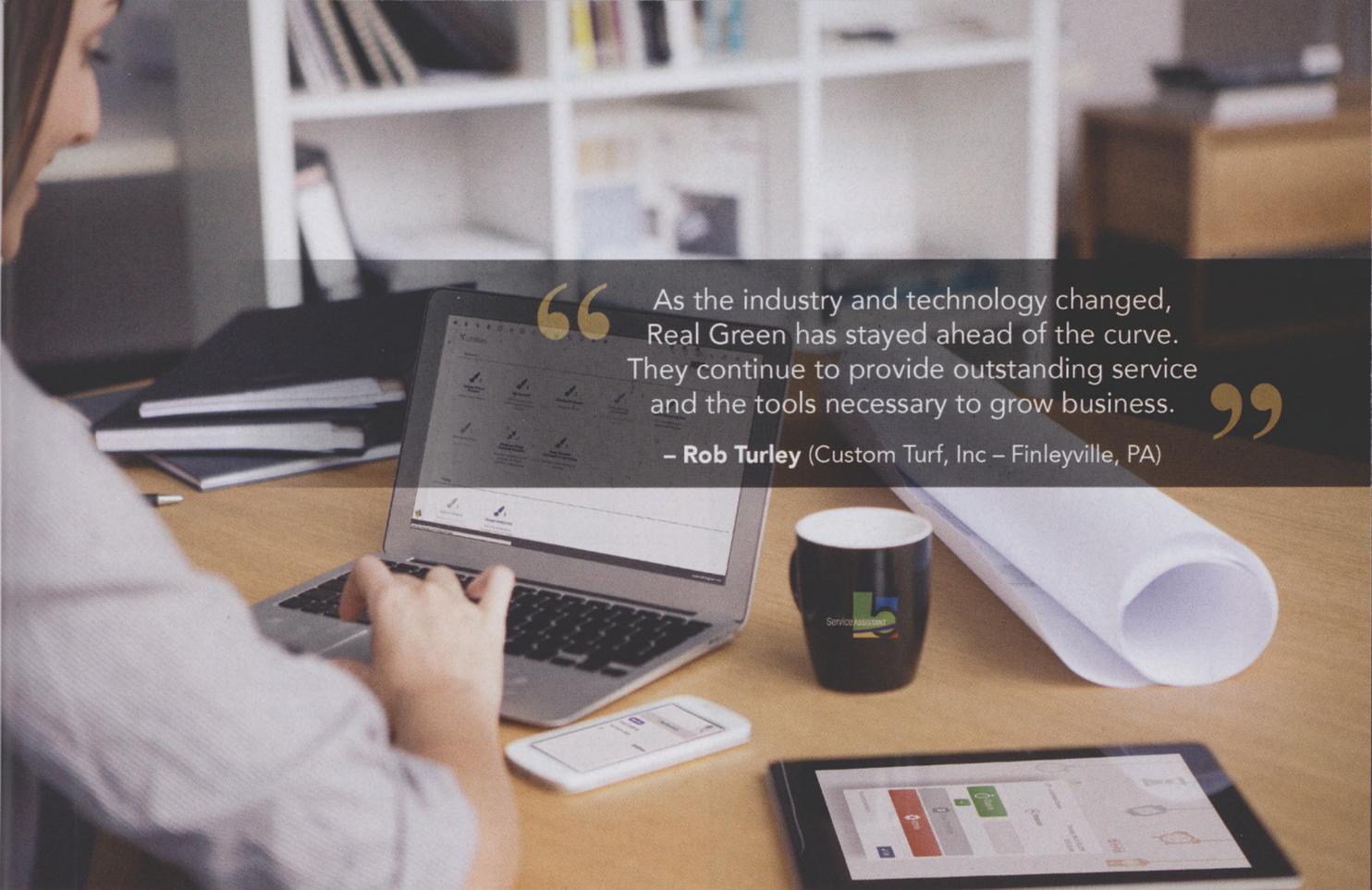
Implementing and investing in search engine optimization can be as difficult or expensive as you let it. That's why Nick Saint, owner of OneLove Lawn in Grove City, Ohio, has managed his team's own SEO since the company started in 2013.

At the time Saint launched his company, prices were simply too high for them to hire someone to help with SEO. After spending so much time dabbling to learn what works and what doesn't, the company is now helping other businesses cheaply build websites during the winter.

"We got our nerd on and just started reading," Saint says. "We started experimenting with SEO – keywords, tags – and we learned it all the hard way."

IF YOU'RE NOT FIRST, YOU'RE LAST

According to a study by online advertising network Chitika, the first website listed on Google search results generates roughly **33 percent** of the web traffic. The second position only gets around **18 percent**. By the time a user gets to the bottom of the first page of results, there's little chance remaining websites will be considered.



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GETTING STARTED THE RIGHT WAY

You don't need to break the bank to improve your online presence. Straight North's Brad Shorr, a director of content strategy, offers three initial steps for SEO beginners.

1. NAP: It's an acronym he coined, and no, it doesn't mean sleep away your problems. Shorr says the first thing companies must do is ensure their names, addresses and phone numbers are listed online and on every page on your website. Including a physical address won't hurt, either. "That's one of the big signals that tells Google, 'Hey, this is a company that's based in Chicago and they're here,'" Shorr says.

2. CREATE A MOBILE-FRIENDLY WEBSITE: This one could cost a bit of money if your company's website is really behind the curve, but Shorr recommends businesses find a webmaster who can ensure your website looks good and is responsive on any device. "More people are using the internet from their phones than from desktops," Shorr says. "You want to make sure anyone who's looking at your site on a mobile phone has a really good experience, or you'll lose them."

3. MONITOR ONLINE REVIEWS: "If (Google sees) your business has positive reviews, they'll factor that into your rankings," Shorr says. He cautions companies from urging customers to leave reviews because on websites like Yelp, it could get your business blacklisted – review websites hope to be independent and don't want users to feel obligated to write positive things on behalf of a company. Shorr also says taking the time to respond to negative reviews can't hurt, and it would be a good idea to feed reviews onto your website from other sources.

That research is critical even for companies who hire externally to help with their SEO. Tony Gricar, founder of SEO company Green Pro Marketing, says understanding key terminology helps you study what your competition is doing. Analyzing the websites of rival landscape companies takes basic knowledge on title pages and meta descriptions, which are portions of characters in a website's HTML that describe the web page in 155 words or less.

But once you learn what someone ahead of your company on the rankings is doing better than you, making that tweak is much more seamless.

"It really becomes a numbers

game of what it is you can conceivably do, what your budget allows you to do, and what you can target," Gricar says. "Who are those legit local companies who are ranking? Look at what their website structure looks like. Start poking around under the hood, and that can actually help you learn SEO as you go."

WHAT NEXT? How long it takes for your SEO practices to take hold is entirely dependent on the competitive nature of your market. Adapting or redesigning websites will improve your ranking, but getting on the first page of search engine results – or even in that coveted top spot – might

“You don’t need to reinvent the wheel – you just need to do marginally better than the other person.”

TONY GRICAR, founder, Green Pro Marketing

take more time. Gricar says it can be a matter of minutes or months before you notice a difference.

“You don’t need to reinvent the wheel – you just need to do marginally better than the other person,” Gricar says. “A lot of times, it doesn’t take much to outrank somebody. It can seem daunting, but once you start breaking it down, it’s not the hardest thing in the world, especially for the majority of landscaping companies in those smaller or mid-size markets.”

Brad Shorr, the director of content strategy at SEO company Straight North, says once you get the basic understanding of SEO, little tweaks can help make a dif-

ference. For example, ensuring your page title tags are descriptive of services people would actually search for online helps. Also, making sure your page loads quickly helps because speed is factored into Google’s SEO.

Shorr says another proactive thing that helps is getting your website linked to other websites. Google’s search algorithm is heavily dependent on links from other websites that come back to your website. It’s likely that competitors in landscaping aren’t doing this, so you can get a good edge, Shorr says. A good place to look would be asking local news media or journals that mention your company to link to you, or

to ask local chambers of commerce for links.

“Google’s logic is, if a lot of websites are linking to yours, then you must have a really good business,” Shorr says. “It’s good enough for people to want to link to. Good, quality links over time will help your organic rankings.”

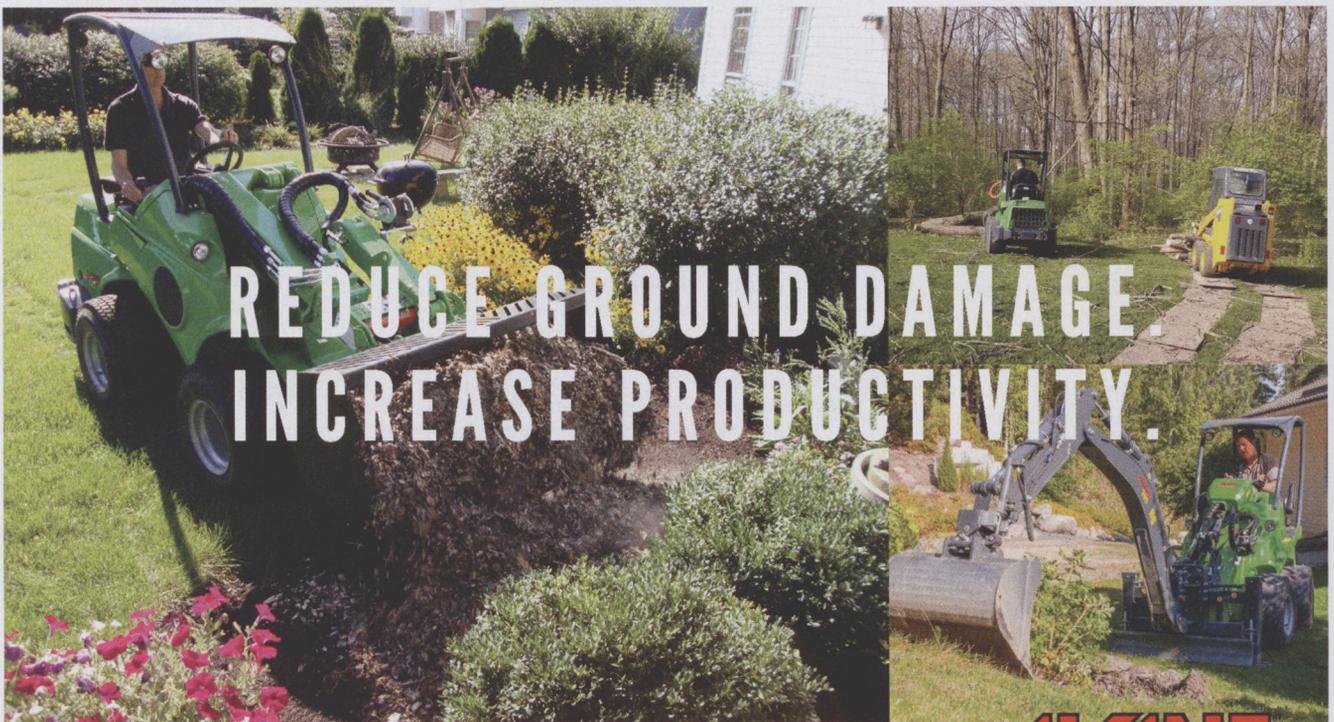
ALONG FOR THE RIDE. Google is always changing its algorithm process, so constant research is critical to keeping your ranking ahead of the competitors.

Gricar and Shorr both recommend studying resources like Moz, Search Engine Watch, Google’s SEO Starter Guide and the Google Webmaster blog.

Gricar also recommends you test your own SEO by seeing where you rank on Amazon Echo, Siri or other voice-command devices’ search results.

Saint says the difference between good and bad online presence is how deliberately companies implement strategies. The work can be rigorous, but despite that, Saint says SEO isn’t “rocket science.”

“Ask lots and lots of questions, and read a lot,” Saint says. “YouTube is wonderful as well. You have to do your research – that’s really the best thing I can say. If this is something you want to do on your own, it’s something you have to research.” **L&L**



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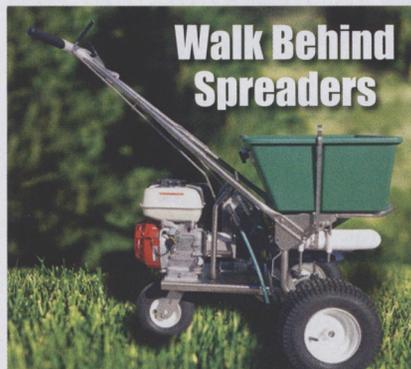


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Want to sound off on something you saw in this issue?

Have an idea that you think would be worth featuring in next month's Lawn & Landscape? We want to know.

Call or email Chuck Bowen at 216-393-0227 or cbowen@gie.net.

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Lawn & Landscape



LAWN & LANDSCAPE MAGAZINE is once again looking for the best employees in the industry and we need your help. If you have an employee who has gone above and beyond in their position and should be acknowledged, now is your chance to have them publicly recognized in our publication.

Send us two to three paragraphs explaining why your employee should be chosen. Your entry should include concrete examples/stories of how this

person has improved your company either culturally or financially, and how they have set a good example for other employees. Please include the employee's title and number of years at the company.

We will choose a few winners from the entries we receive and interview them for stories in a future issue of Lawn & Landscape.

You can nominate any employee who works for your company – crew members, office workers, foremen, etc.



Email submissions to Editor Brian Horn at bhorn@gie.net.
Please use Employee of the Year as the subject of the email.

DEADLINE: Friday, March 1

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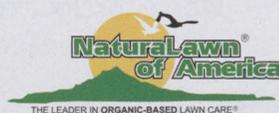
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STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Haley Peterson

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT brings you the perspectives of horticulture students and insights into the future of the industry.

By Jimmy Miller



The one class that changed Haley Peterson's entire life was a last-minute addition to her schedule.

Had she chosen differently, it's largely possible she would be studying to become a teacher, not a landscape designer. When she was a senior at Pekin Community High School in Illinois, Peterson figured "What the heck?" and squeezed a hands-on landscaping class into her schedule. She had no idea it would spark an interest that grew strong enough to change from education into her current major of horticulture landscape management at Illinois Community College.

Now approaching her final semester at the two-year school located less than a half hour from her home, Peterson is thankful for that high school class. She fell in love with the project she and a classmate spearheaded, which was a plan to beautify a dirt patch on school property. The class assignment involved budgeting, drawing plans and physically implementing their landscape design. They created a 3-D model and a computer-assisted drawing sketch, then pitched the idea for eventual approval to the school board. Once that was completed, Peterson and her partner even implemented the designs on school campus, where it still stands today.

The project was Peterson's first experience working with landscaping, let alone planning and implementing a whole project.

"It meant a lot because I was shocked (my teacher) put so much trust in me and my classmate, who was my partner in it," Peterson says. "He kind of let us run the show. We just approved everything through him. He guided us through and made us do all the work, so it just kind of got my foot into the door."

Even today, Peterson prefers the hands-on experience outside a classroom, which includes her maintenance job with the greenhouse on campus and various laboratories, trips and seminars attended by the horticulture club. Though she completed her final season this fall, Peterson even balanced her classwork and related activities with a spot on the ICC volleyball team. This proved particularly

difficult when she'd be away for tournaments on most weekends, plus the practices and weekday games cut into how much time she had to work on post-class activities.

Still, Peterson says she's glad she learned to handle a stressfully busy schedule since it will help her after graduation. "Some days were long days, but I got through it and there's nothing I regret," Peterson says. "It was the greatest time of my life, I should say."

Peterson says she intends to take at least a year off school to work professionally, or she'll transfer from ICC to a larger school to obtain a Bachelor's degree. She's interested in Southern Illinois University, roughly four hours south of ICC.

For students who are interested in horticulture, Peterson recommends they extensively research the career path and consider all the different possibilities. ICC alone offers two variations of a horticulture degree, including Peterson's choice that focuses on landscape management. The other is turfgrass management, which deals more with lawn and golf industries.

Options are out there, Peterson says, but it was only a few years ago that she didn't know they existed in horticulture.

"You should have a general idea of what this field's about and what you'll be asked to do," Peterson says. "If they're not up for that calling, then maybe they can do a different field within (horticulture), but there's specifics they've got to figure out. You've just got to figure out what you like." **L&L**



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