



Meet the Man With the Plan

After 25 Years of Service to Turf Industry, Benham 'Retires' to FTGA

BY JOEL JACKSON, CGCS

Who is Don Benham and what is he doing here? Maybe you haven't met him yet, but you must have seen his name in the *Florida Turf Digest* as the new director of public

relations hired last year to help the FTGA strengthen ties with IFAS and to raise funds for turf research. But why Don Benham?

Benham recently had sold his company, Benham Chemical Company in Michigan, and retired to Sarasota with his wife Ruth. His unique qualifications include 25 years of working with the Michigan Turfgrass Association and Michigan State University doing the very

same thing. It is a stroke of luck and perfect timing to be able to bring Benham on board to assist the FTGA grow stronger and more effective.

Everyone who serves as a volunteer board member of an association knows that it is often very difficult to devote quality time to pursuing the goals of a professional association when you have to take care of your primary business. Now the FTGA has someone who can

Don Benham

FTGA Director of Public Relations

Originally from: Born and raised in Detroit.

Family: Wife: Ruth Kurtz, since 1992; first wife: Norma died 1989; son: David works for Anderson Consulting, married to Paula Dietz. Paula was Michigan's first turf extension agent. Lives in Novi, Mich. Two children, Erica and Catherine; son: Keith, banker, two children, Christopher, and Kelly; daughter: Carol Albo, computer security specialist. Lives in Union Lake, Mich.

Education: two years Adrian College, two years Wayne State University majored in economics.

Military Service: Served in U.S. Army in Korea 1952-1954.

Business experience/Employment history: Sold hospitalization insurance for five years, chemicals for 12 years. In 1972 joined with Lawn Equipment Corp. and Gordon LaFontaine to form L&E Chemicals. 1979 Started Benham Chemical Corporation. Sold Benham Chemical Corporation March 1998.

Professional affiliations/Memberships: Belong to: GCSAA; Greater Detroit GCSA; Western Michigan and Mid Michigan GCSA; Metropolitan Detroit Landscape Association; Michigan Turfgrass Association; Ohio Turfgrass Association; O. J. Noer Association.

Turfgrass Industry Involvement: Greens chairman, Edgewood Country Club 14 years; greens chairman St. Ives Golf Club 3 years; board of directors Edgewood Country Club 5 years, served all chair positions including president; board of directors, Michigan Turfgrass Association - 3 years; Worked on committees with Turfgrass Association and University professors at Michigan State University for 25 years.

People in the turf business who have influenced/helped you succeed: I have been helped by Frank Forier, Gordon LaFontaine, Dr. Joe Vargas, Dr. Paul Rieke and many golf superintendents and other people from the industry and golf associations to numerous to try to



Don Benham, director of public relations for the Florida Turfgrass Association and his wife Ruth at the FGCSA Reception at the 1999 GCSAA Conference. Photo by Joel Jackson.

mention for fear of missing names. The business of golf has been full of people with helping hands.

Hobbies/interests: Golf and tennis are my main hobbies.

Goals for FTGA: My primary goal for the FTGA is to form a strong partnership with the University of Florida; making the FTGA the umbrella group for all of the allied associations in turf as well as the golf industry; supplying the university with the funds needed for a strong research program on an annual basis that they can count on for long range plans as well as short term cash.

spend that time building relationships and gaining trust of the entire network of the turf industry in Florida.

Benham's first order of business has been to get to know all the people involved in the FTGA from the board members, the office staff and the administrators and faculty of the University of Florida's IFAS operations. He has made it a point to learn the chain of command and the mission and goals of all parties concerned. And at the same time always looking for the common ground on which they all can stand and build a better working relationship.

Now Benham is moving into phase two: fund raising. After many years of successfully building up a multi-million dollar business, and helping the Michigan Turfgrass Association build up a self-sustaining research funding program, Benham is unveiling a modest, but pro-active campaign to get all stakeholders in the turf industry involved in a plan of regular funding, that is neither

Pioneering the Way Chemicals are Sold

Operating from an office consisting of a telephone, a card table and a lamp borrowed from his daughter's dresser, Benham set out to overcome the skepticism of major chemical manufacturers toward his unique proposition: namely, that Benham Chemical could do a better job for them if it had the option of placing their products where they could best be used in that ' marketplace—in other words, representing them and their competitors.

By 1984 he had succeeded, to the point where other chemical companies adopted his idea.

Today Benham Chemical Corporation is generally credited with pioneering this change in the way chemicals are now sold to the Green Industry in Michigan. Offering customers the right product for their needs is the heart of Benham Chemical Corporation..."

Credit: Katie Elsila

*A Patch of Green, Sept/Oct 1993
Michigan and Border Cities GCSA*

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expensive nor burdensome. The key is that it involves individuals and makes them part of the solution.

I have taken excerpts from two articles written about Don and his business practices. They are revealing of the character, determination, and vision of this quiet but persistent gentleman who will not give in to negativity.

He merely keeps searching and offering alternatives until he finds a way to succeed. The publications have much to say about Benham's business savvy.

I found many parallels in these articles to the way Don approaches his new position with the FTGA, and I have seen evi-

dence of some early successes in building relationships with people. I have had the privilege of sharing a few hours in discussion with Don since we have both taken on these supporting roles with the FTGA and the Florida GCSA. I have tried to give him a sense of the history of our associations. In return, Don has explained how so many of

speech, and his involvement and love for the turf business. His unique history in the business provides him with a perspective that embraces every allied association in the FTGA. We are very fortunate to have him working with all of us to become more effective. And that's what Don Benham is doing here!

the things we are dealing with are the very same issues that Michigan faced not long ago. The good thing is there is a light at the end of the tunnel for everybody if we work together. Stay positive. Start small and build slowly.

I have been impressed by Don's sincerity, honesty of thought and

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Benham Founded Company With a Bold Plan

His idea was bold; to sell products from every major chemical manufacturer. What he had going for him was 18 years experience in the chemical business (he had headed L & E Chemicals of the Long Equipment Corp.) and faith he could build a business based on the idea of service.

But, he had to convince the large chemical manufacturers he could serve them too, even though he would also be handling products from their competitors. Benham, a large man with sharp blue eyes and streaks of silver in his hair, is a good businessman. He's also persuasive.

This August, Benham Chemical Co. celebrated its fifth year in business, its sales and office staff has grown from two to seven people, and the young company is anticipating a dollar sales volume of \$3 million during 1984. Benham and his close-knit staff have built the company to the point that it receives annual recognition.

Benham credits several factors for the success of his company, not the least of which was his initial decision to sell service as well as products.

"Everybody is out trying to sell chemicals cheaper," Benham said. "Of course we want to be competitive, but we want to sell the proper chemical for the proper job and for a proper profit. We are not always the cheapest place. We feel that service to the customer is more important than price and we feel most of our customers realize this. It takes time sometimes to convince people that they need service. Golf course superintendents recognize they need the service, but many lawn care customers take awhile to realize it. We

didn't build this business because we could sell it cheaper."

Several major changes have occurred in the chemical business in the past five years and one of the most notable has been the rapid growth of the still relatively young lawn care industry.

"Our biggest increases in sales came from the lawn care market," Benham said. "I didn't expect it to be that strong." Initially 95 percent of Benham's business was generated from golf courses, and although that continues to be a big part of his business (about 50 percent), the lawn care industry has literally taken off. What is remarkable, he feels, is that it occurred during the worst economic period in the Detroit/Toledo area since the Depression.

"We grew during those periods when the industry went kaput," Benham said. The company met its first-year \$550,000 sales goal and has made "significant increases" each year since. "We passed my five-year projection in the second year," he added. In more recent years he's been more accurate in predicting sales.

But, he continues to seek controlled expansion within his business area. "We have a lot more expansion and a lot more things to do in our own area, but we're actually having to watch a little that we don't grow too much and grow out of our location."

"The manufacturers are getting smarter. They want to see the background of the people selling their products..."

Credit: Ron Hall
Weeds, Trees & Turf, Sept 1984