Irish legend says if you catch a leprechaun, he’ll tell you where he hid his pot of gold. Likewise, landscaping lore says that if you find a good mechanic, he’s worth his weight in gold.

BY CURT HARLER/CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

It’s a bear to find a good mechanic,” laments Virgil Russell, executive director of the Equipment and Engine Training Council (EETC), Austin, TX.

Dominic Morales, chairman of the golf/plant sciences department at Delhi College, Delhi, NY, says the biggest demand is on golf courses where equipment must be maintained on the spot and there is a large inventory of equipment with little outsourcing.

“We get 150 job offers for our 25 grads each year,” says John Piersol, chairman of the department of golf/landscape/forestry at Lake City Community College in Florida. “There is a bidding war on for a good tech.”

Indeed, some shop owners feel they have to have a pot of gold in hand before they go looking for a technician. That, of course, depends on a mix of knowledge and experience.

Jack of all trades?

“In a small shop, the mechanic is a jack-of-all-trades,” Morales says. “The larger the shop, the more likely the mechanic will be specialized.”

“If you hire a technician, they should be trained in 2-stroke, 4-stroke and diesel en-
gine systems," Russell says. Electronics is another key area. With hydraulics playing an important part in many dealers' products, knowing hydraulics is a valuable extra. For a good mechanic trained in the fundamentals of his trade, there is not much difference in dealing with 2-stroke, 4-stroke or diesels, the instructors maintain.

“Training on diesels is not that big a step from gas engines, but it is becoming more important,” Russell continues. “A lot of firms like Scag have small diesels," he notes. It is clear that the ability to read a manual is more important than knowing a particular engine — especially considering that engine sizes and types are likely to change quite a bit in the next decade.

Morales likes to see technicians trained in related areas such as sharpening and grinding. Delhi offers a three-credit course on handling mower blades. Welding ability, too, is important in any shop.

For Piersol's money, the person should be trained both in management skills and mechanical skills. “Some people think all a mechanic needs to do is turn a wrench and fix stuff. But if your shop is a mess, it costs you money.”

Piersol lists ability to organize a shop, stock the right spare parts, do preventive maintenance, read engine manuals and perform other management functions as being just as valuable as mechanical ability. The market seems to agree.

“When they start, we tell students that wrench-turners go for $7.50 or $8.50 an hour. Students who have good management skills make $12 to $16 an hour,” Piersol says.

“You are depending on a person who must have multiple skills," Morales adds. Delhi offers both a one-year course for students and a one-week course for professionals, including a turf equipment management course in February. The one-year course is packed: this year there are 15 students. “Large, private golf courses need to have a person who is proficient in all aspects of mechanics, including electronics and hydraulics," he says. This applies equally to large landscape and grounds operations.

Valuable certification
Perhaps the most valuable certification is the Outdoor Power Equipment Technician Certification (OPE) offered by the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute. OPE certification is the industry’s equivalent of the ASA (Automotive Service Association) certification for car mechanics.

In fact, John Kane, executive director of the Engine Service Association (ESA), Exton, PA (www.engineservice.com), says it is not rare for a technician to pass the 4-cycle part of the test and fail to be certified in the diesel area. In any case, certification lasts for only three years.

Specialty accreditation will become more common as companies like Kohler make certification a requirement for working on engines. Some equipment companies offer training as part of a sales package. Remember to figure in the cost of a mechanic who is not available for other tasks on school days (but that cost is still far less than a partly trained worker). Much of the impetus for OPE came from manufacturers concerned that there would be no trained mechanics to do their warranty work. Most major equipment manufacturers have representatives on EETC and ESA.

Watch out for pirates
Right now, too many landscaping firms are simply pirating good workers from shops in the next town. While this merry-go-round is great for the technician’s income, it is not the answer to finding a proven worker at a fair wage.

“Demand is driving up their wages,” Morales states. He says many of their students come from the automotive business or from the large tractor and agricultural markets. These people have solid, basic skills as mechanics but need to be trained for specialty areas.

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) has model programs it has developed to give workers
LABOR FACT

How landscape work compares

Weekly wages (average 1998)

Groundskeepers and gardeners, except farm $306
(Bclosest BLS comes to weekly wages of landscaping laborers)

Brickmasons and stonemasons $573

Truck drivers $516

Drywall installers $493

Printing machine operators $495

Carpenters $490

Concrete and terrazzo finishers $483

Carpet installers $476

Roofers $441

Bus drivers $428

Operators, fabricators and laborers $415

Machine operators, assemblers and inspectors $406

Painters $402

Construction laborers $390

Woodworking machine operators $379

Sawing machine operators $366

Construction helpers $335

Janitors and cleaners $327

Textile, apparel and furnishings machine operators $293

Food preparation and service occupations $288

Farm workers $281

Editor’s note: $306/week tends to roughly confirm a green industry wage of $7 an hour for laborers with a small amount of weekly overtime beyond 40 hours, as well as the BLS median hourly wage of $8.24 for landscaping laborers.

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necessary mechanical skills. Delhi and Lake City Community College offer a similar program to students. Delhi’s program will be three years old in the fall of 2000. At that time, it will be able to do OPE or specialty certification. At Lake City, Piersol wishes he had more students to fill the 15,000-sq.-ft. facility. He says one way to get more and better workers is for landscape industry leaders to get into the high schools and tell students about the high-paying opportunities for workers.

One strategy Piersol suggests is hiring people in high school and then offering them a paid internship as they complete their technical program. He says the auto courses are a good place to look for workers, as well. But, he maintains, the best way to get to the student is to talk to the teachers and guidance people at the high school and to parents whenever possible.

A shop that brings a couple of students in as part of a co-op program will have first pick of the better mechanics upon graduation. “You’re handpicking your future,” Piersol says.

EETC’s Web site, www.eetc.org, is a good place to start reviewing qualifications. Russell also suggests getting involved with a local vo-tech school. Right now, EETC has accredited 14 schools in its program and has 80 more pending. Accredited schools are authorized to teach either at the high school or the adult education level.

Kane says ESA may post a list of certified mechanics by region on its Web site to get trained people and employers together. He notes that leasing equipment — doing preventive maintenance in-house but sending equipment back for major work — is another option.

Even if you elect to stick with dealer service, check to be sure the dealer’s mechanics are OPE certified. Look for specialty certificates that attest to the technician’s completion of factory-sponsored courses. The alternative is to sit out on the lawn after a rainstorm and hope to catch a leprechaun who can lead you to the golden mechanic.

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Mechanics’ jobs pay $25,000 to $40,000 to start, with the potential to go to $50,000 or $70,000