



COVER STORY

Our greener future

BY **RON HALL**
EDITOR AT LARGE

You can't put off getting in step with America's growing environmental movement if you want to ensure your place in tomorrow's Green Industry.

YOU MIGHT ALREADY have figured this out, but here's the scoop: Most of your customers aren't interested in green services, particularly if it means they will be writing bigger checks to you. The hype and posturing regarding sustainability, regardless of products or services, far exceed the public's acceptance and adoption.

At least that's the case right now.

"Very few people today are making buying decisions based on what is green," says Dr. Honey Rand, APR, president and CEO of Environmental PR Group, Lutz, FL. Rand describes selling propositions based solely on environmental claims as "meaningless."

"Green is the new branding. There is so much green now that (the term) has no meaning anymore," she adds.

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Rand has solid, hands-on expertise in that arena. She started her marketing and public relations company that specializes in environmental issues after serving as director of communications at the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

But if the majority of the public has yet to embrace green with its wallets, why would anyone suggest, as we now are, that the Green Industry must become greener, and that ultimately

following that path will provide landscape and lawn service providers with its best opportunities for long-term revenue growth and prosperity.

The short answer is the Green Industry might have no choice in the matter.

Government agencies, activist organizations, the state of the economy (the age of extravagant waste is over) and other industries that provide allied services, such as the building industry, will see to that.

ULTIMATE SUSTAINABILITY?

BALLARD, WA — The only aspect of Eco Mow lawn service in danger of not being sustainable might be the legs of its owner/operator. Scott McCredie, 55, bicycles to his job sites, pulling a small trailer loaded with a battery-powered (or corded) mower, a broom, grass shears and, on bigger properties, an electric trimmer.

"The weight starts to add up pretty quickly when you put a mower and few tools on a trailer like that," says McCredie, whose service vehicle is his Jamis Dakota city bicycle.

"The bicycle has 27 speeds so it can handle the hills here — and we have some pretty steep hills, which means I have to go into granny gear and go one mile per hour or less when I'm going up a hill with the loaded trailer," says McCredie, acknowledging it's unlikely he will challenge the likes of TruGreen anytime soon.

"Most of the lawns here are fairly small," he explains. "It usually takes me a half-hour to an hour to mow them."

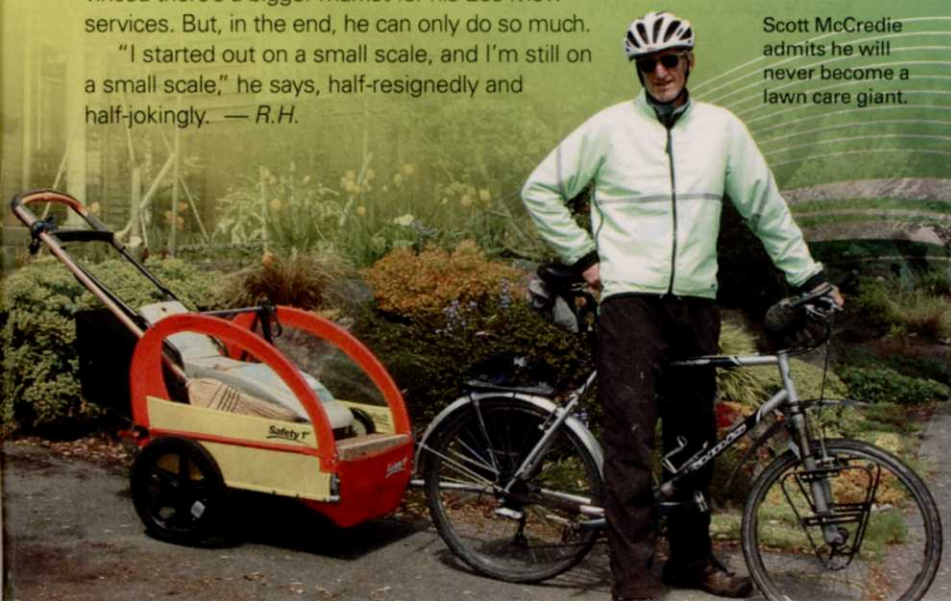
What prompted McCredie, an avid bicyclist and confirmed outdoorsman, to start such a unique (and physically taxing) service two years ago?

"I watched the mow-blow-go guys pull up in their pickup trucks pulling trailers with big gas-guzzling mowers on them, and listened to lawn mower after lawn mower, noisy things in my neighborhood. When I looked into it, I learned that it's polluting on a number of levels, and felt that property owners needed another option," he says.

McCredie says the Seattle area embraces environmental issues, and he's convinced there's a bigger market for his Eco Mow services. But, in the end, he can only do so much.

"I started out on a small scale, and I'm still on a small scale," he says, half-resignedly and half-jokingly. — R.H.

Scott McCredie admits he will never become a lawn care giant.



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Changing standards

Will the public accept this new reality? Evidence suggests yes. Witness how Canadian citizens have accepted the ban on the use of synthetic pest control products on public and private landscapes in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Or how property owners throughout the United States are

changing their landscape irrigation practices because of water agency restrictions or water costs.

Hendrikus Schraven, owner of a successful design/build company in Issaquah, WA, and a decades-long advocate of sustainable practices, says the industry must shift its mindset. Professionals must begin designing and

delivering landscapes that provide clients with ecological benefits in addition to being functional and beautiful.

A conversation Schraven had with a client several decades ago — in this case, Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft — suggests to him that it can be done. “I’m going to put a computer in every home in America,” Gates told Schraven, who found the statement to be more than a bit bold at the time.

“How are you going to do that,” queried Schraven?

“I’m going to change the standard,” he recalls Gates responding in a matter-of-fact voice.

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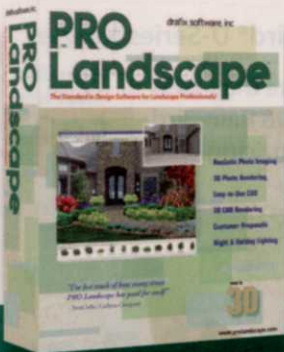


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“This isn’t the ‘in’ thing to do any longer. It’s the life thing to do. There shouldn’t even be a question to do it.”

HENDRIKUS SCHRAVEN, *The Hendrikus Group*



SSI'S BENCHMARKS A TURNING POINT?



Heather Venhaus

AUSTIN, TX — Heather Venhaus, program director for the Sustainable Sites Initiative (SSI), says the nation's growing green consciousness offers landscape, lawn service and irrigation contractors a "huge opportunity" to increase

the value of their services to customers. In fact, it provides a path for the Green Industry, as a whole, to follow to prosper indefinitely into the future.

"This (the green movement) is about building upon the eco-system services that landscapes provide. It brings a whole new value to the people who design, develop and maintain those landscapes," says Venhaus, headquartered at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin. "We're moving the discussion beyond aesthetics, and toward landscapes that provide cleaner air, cleaner water, more diverse habitats and all of those other special needs."

Get up to speed with SSI, because it promises to affect the landscape industry, perhaps profoundly — and soon because some landscape architects and municipalities already are starting to adopt them.

Briefly, SSI is a collaboration among three organizations — the wildflower center, the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) and the U.S. Botanic Garden — to develop voluntary national guidelines and performance benchmarks for sustainable land design, construction and maintenance practices. These, of course, are services that landscape, lawn service and irrigation contractors perform.

Last fall, SSI published a draft of guidelines and performance benchmarks, seeking comments from stakeholders and the public. The draft represented several years of work by SSI committees and covered topics such as soils, materials, hydrology, vegetation, and human health and well-being. That draft document generated more than 350 responses to SSI, which later this year will publish a full report. SSI is also plan-

ning to launch its pilot project process in 2010. This is where SSI will test its performance benchmarks and make adjustments prior to its eventual incorporation with LEED, perhaps in 2012.

LEED is short for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, an international certification system developed and administered by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC).

In the 11 years since its inception, LEED has become a powerful force in the building industry. During 2008, and counting Jan. 2009, LEED-registered and -certified "green" construction projects doubled from about 10,000 to 20,000, reports the USGBC. As of March 2009, worldwide there were an estimated 101,000 LEED-certified professionals.

While the intent of LEED guidelines is to drive energy efficiency and the adoption of sustainable and human-health practices in building construction and maintenance, some of its provisions focus on the grounds and landscapes that surround buildings, as well.

This attention on the outside environment will grow once SSI folds its guidelines and performance benchmarks into future versions of LEED, creating in essence an expanded scorecard for contractors to track the sustainability of their operations and services on LEED projects.

In light of the number of cities, governmental organizations, corporations and others requiring LEED certification for construction projects, SSI will have a huge impact on any Green Industry contractors working on those projects.

"Until we have guidelines to judge against, everyone can call themselves green, everyone can say they're making a difference," says Venhaus. "Until we can grade, until we have criteria to grade against, we can't make improvement. Once we have benchmarks, we can begin to work toward them, and then push beyond them and raise the bar again.

"Projects like this initiative are providing the will for the landscape industry to demonstrate why its work is important, and to set itself apart from those industries that aren't operating in such a sustainable manner," she says. — R.H.

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The new normal

Schraven, founder of The Hendrikus Group and a 30-year-plus devotee of sustainable landscaping, says he was considered "a weirdo" when he first began promoting his sustainable landscape services, but no longer.

"This isn't the 'in' thing to do any longer," says Schraven. "It's the life thing to do. There shouldn't even be a question on doing it."

Schraven says that healthy, "alive"

soil is the basis for all landscapes. He says the industry must increase its knowledge of soils and must work with builders and developers to insist upon better quality soils. The other option is to remediate soils so that they can nurture healthy plants.

What's the answer? Schraven advises accepting only projects that allow for the remediation of poor-quality soils. Because of The Hendrikus Group's reputation, this strategy works for him. Obviously, most contractors, operat-

ing in the competitive and price-driven landscape services business environment, feel they can't do this.

But they can, says Schraven, particularly if they approach the market with an ecology-based value proposition.

"You do a project right the first time and you pay less later — less plant replacement, water, maintenance. Clients will listen to this," says Schraven.

In 1997, Brad Wolfe started Organo-Lawn, shortly after graduating from the University of Colorado.

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He says he couldn't find a lawn service in Boulder responsive to his concerns about the environment. Sensing a business opportunity, he put together a lawn care company built *mostly* on the use of natural products.

As the company grew — something that happened rapidly, thanks to his university entrepreneurship train-

ing — Wolfe incorporated even more ecologically friendly initiatives into his company. Today, he points to the proprietary natural products that his technicians use to improve customers' lawns, along with the firm's fleet of biodiesel-fueled service vehicles, company-wide recycling efforts, wind-generated energy powering its shop and



Organo-Lawn treats lawns with proprietary, natural, soil-enriching products.

office, and the organically grown cotton shirts its employees wear.

"Organo-Lawn understands these steps are small in comparison to what can be done," Wolfe says. "But, we're continuing to grow and we're always looking at ways to become more sustainable."

In the decade since its founding, Organo-Lawn has grown to be a dominant lawn care firm in Boulder and surrounding communities. Wolfe now eyes the Denver market as he contemplates franchising the Organo-Lawn model.

Schraven and Wolfe are among the growing numbers of Green Industry business owners recognizing the industry is on the threshold of a new era and must make one of two choices. The first is to embrace products and services that enhance the ecology, conserve resources and build diversity within urban landscapes — this in addition to delivering landscapes with lifestyle and aesthetic benefits customers desire.

The other choice is to continue to offer the same services in the same ways, face increasing regulations and realize the possibility of stagnating growth.

Actually, there might be no choice. The possibility exists that the Green Industry will get dragged kicking and screaming into the new era if it doesn't embrace more ecologically sound business decisions on its own. **LM**

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