

Three pioneering companies share *LM's* rich history and offer their views about where the industry is headed.

It's funny how society looks at age. Sometimes it's revered; other times it's reviled. Fortunately, as companies get on in years, they're more likely to be revered.

It's been said that wisdom, experience and strength come with age. With this issue, *Landscape Management (LM)* magazine begins its 50th year of publishing. We've been around longer than any other publication covering the Green Industry.

But this really isn't about us. In the stories that follow, the editors of *LM* spoke with the leaders of three veteran enterprises that, in the case of two, surpass us in experience, and the third that is just shy of our 50 years. We wanted to get their perspectives on where the Green Industry is right now, how it's changed and where it's going.

Senior Editor Beth Geraci examines the roots of Bartlett Tree Experts, the elder statesman in this veteran trio, to find out how the company has survived (and plans to grow) into its second century. Editor-at-Large Ron Hall explores how Barnes Nursery continues to reinvent itself in an ever-changing marketplace. Finally, Editor-in-Chief Dan Jacobs talks with Grasshopper Lawns — at 47, the youngest member of the group — to find out how different the business is with a second generation running the operation.

Thank you, readers and advertisers, for making the past five decades possible. We're proud to have had the honor to serve the Green Industry for half a century, and we look forward to the next 50 years.

BY: DAN JACOBS, BETH GERACI AND RON HALL

Bartlett Tree Experts

Francis A. Bartlett must have been on to something when he founded family-owned Bartlett Tree Experts in 1907. He built the company on sound science and ethics — the cornerstones of the company to this day.

Any company that's lasted more than 100 years must be doing something right. The company's come a long way in the last century, and as it creeps into its second one, Bartlett President Greg Daniels shared his insights on what makes the company tick and where Bartlett Tree Experts and the Green Industry are heading today. His outlook is both realistic and optimistic.

Despite the Green Industry's current financial woes, he says, it "still has a lot of good opportunities facing it. The future is very bright."

Why so positive? In today's housing market, Americans now realize that stellar landscaping makes their homes more marketable, explains Daniels. Consequently, demand for freshly paved driveways, garden installations or in Bartlett's case, tree care and preservation, is steady if not growing.

Thanks to technological advances, Green Industry professionals work much more efficiently today than in years past. For Bartlett, technology has been instrumental in streamlining its business process, Daniels says, from wireless communication to being able to produce proposals on site in minutes. Bartlett also now has electronic data on every tree it's worked on in recent years.

Despite technological advances, in some ways, the client demands Bartlett confronts today are the same as those it's faced since Francis A. Bartlett founded the company 104 years ago. Take insect and disease control, for example.

"Every year you read about new insects and diseases that are being introduced into the country," Daniels says. "There always seems to be that cyclical up and down of insect and disease prob-



SOWING THE SEEDS OF HISTORY





Clockwise, from top: Bartlett founder Francis A. Bartlett; a Bartlett crew member today; and a team from Bartlett's early days

lems. That's something we've seen throughout the entire 104 years we've been around." That's why much of Bartlett's business focuses on pest management, Daniels explains.

Despite its progress, the Green Industry in general and the tree care business specifically will continue to be challenged economically and legislatively in the near future, Daniels says. Thanks to low enrollment and cuts in arboriculture and urban forestry programs at universities nationwide, none of those challenges will be greater for Bartlett than nurturing qualified employees, says Daniels.

"There's less of a pool of people at these universities," he explains. "That puts a greater emphasis on investing in and training your own people."

Fortunately for Bartlett, company leaders saw it coming years ago. "We saw a couple things. Our own needs were growing as Bartlett was expanding. We needed more qualified and trained employees," says Daniels, who has been president of the company for 12 of the 36 years he's worked there. "Number two, we saw the college programs, Green Industry programs, diminishing."

So in 2007 Bartlett's Charlotte, N.C. arboretum and training-research facility was upgraded. The 350-acre campus, established in 1965, is now home to 10 training programs covering technical skills, production, leadership and sales, Daniels says.

"You ask 'how can we better care for trees while dealing with tighter regulations?' It all comes down to training," he says. "We have increased regulations because we do use pesticides. We drive vehicles that require special licenses to drive. We employ immigrants. So there are many things that have to be done today that weren't as commonly done 15 or 20 years ago."

It's why Bartlett has staff designated for monitoring regulations and ensuring Bartlett complies with them. It's also why Bartlett makes employee safety and training top priorities.

Bartlett's foresight throughout the last century propelled its success. The company's ability to anticipate what's coming and prepare accordingly enables it to thrive to this day.

"We're very proud of the fact that the company is 104 years old," Daniels says. "Very few family-owned businesses stay in business that long." He attributes Bartlett's longevity to the fact that "we have a clear vision, we've been able to stay ahead of the research curve and we've always had dedicated employees. We know where our company wants to go and we've been able to change over time."

So where does Bartlett want to go?

"We want to be known as the best company to care for and preserve trees," Daniels says. "And we don't necessarily have a goal to be the biggest tree care company. You've got to meet or exceed industry standards. Nothing can stand in the way of providing a safe work

environment for all our employees and the satisfaction of our customers."

Barnes Nursery

Barnes Nursery Inc., Huron, OH, recently joined the social media scene. The family-owned company realized it needed a presence on Facebook and Twitter. It hired an experienced vendor to guide it because it wanted its digital presence to reflect the quality that's always been associated with its products and services.

Entry into social media is the most superficial and easiest step the company is making into what Sharon Barnes, vice president, sees as a rapidly changing business environment. She says the company has seen a fundamental shift in its market since the 2008 recession. It's now in the process of addressing that change and adjusting the company's direction to meet the regional economic challenge posed by the loss of high-paying union jobs, high employment and rising food, fuel and utility costs.

"Where are we going to be a year or more from now?" asks Barnes rhetorically. "We'll be at a different place, and I don't

Jeanne and Harold Barnes, founders of Barnes Roses, with a younger Robert Barnes, co-owner with his wife Sharon of Barnes Nursery.



COVER STORY

mean as far as physical location. But we'll be doing things differently."

Making changes to one of the largest and most respected Green Industry companies in northern Ohio is a huge challenge, admits Barnes.

The company owns a 450-acre tree nursery, operates two garden centers, owns and runs a 3-acre compost facility and offers a complete palette of landscape services. Few Green Industry service providers anywhere in the United States offer a broader range of horticultural products and services.

The company is acknowledged as a leader in terms of quality in its regional market. Its design/build services have earned multiple awards over the years. Quality and reliability come at a price, says Barnes. She admits that it's now difficult for many cash-strapped prospects to accept that.

"We're looking at the future as being exciting and having a lot of opportunity, but it's more than a little bit intimidating, too," she says. "The challenge for us is to find the niches that have the



The third generation of the Barnes family, brother and sister, Jarret and Julie Barnes Foster, are taking over operations of Barnes Nursery from parents Robert and Sharon, seated.

most potential."

To that end, the company is re-examining its diversification and scrutinizing each and every service in terms of margins and customer acceptance.

This will not be the first time the Barnes family has reassessed its business model or turned the company to meet market opportu-

nities. In fact, they have shown an enviable ability to adapt to changing economic conditions and markets.

The company dates to 1950, when Harold Barnes and his wife, Jeanne, planted 11,000 rose bushes on their property in the sandy loam soil just south of an expansive marsh on Lake Erie's south shore. The couple made the move a few years after Harold's return from WWII and his studies at The Ohio State University. The 50 acres they purchased on Lake Erie's south shore proved to be a good location for growing roses. The plants

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benefited from the warming effect of the lake in the autumn and its cool, moderating breezes each spring.

The couple grew their company, Barnes Roses, through the 1950s until it peaked in 1962 with 150,000 bushes in their fields. When California and other regions with longer growing seasons got into rose production the family realized it had to steer the company in a different direction. In 1966 it decided to quit growing roses and instead began planting and growing shade and ornamental trees.

In 1969 Robert “Bob” Barnes returned to the family business with wife, Sharon. The company, under the couple’s guidance, soon began adding talent along with landscape services and expanding the company’s nursery acreage.

In 1991 Sharon initiated the company’s 3-acre compost facility, located within a mile of its headquarters. The licensed operation recycles more than 20,000 tons of yard trimmings, food, agricultural and industrial residuals into quality soil products each year.

Sharon looks to the company’s compost facility, something she’s devoted much of her professional life to developing, as an example of the company’s commitment to meeting tomorrow’s landscaping challenges.

“NOWADAYS, IT SEEMS LIKE CUSTOMERS ARE LOOKING FOR THE BEST DEAL, AND THEY’LL JUMP SHIP OVER A NICKEL.”

— MICHAEL KRAVITSKY IV,
GRASSHOPPER LAWN

Nevertheless, it takes financing to move a company like Barnes Nursery into the future, and that’s the goal of the company — shoring up its financial future so that it can continue to innovate.

Fortunately, it can count on the experience of Bob and Sharon, who remain active in the day-to-day operations of the business with the third generation

of the family now learning as part of the management team.

Grasshopper Lawns

One of the beautiful things about so many landscaping companies is that they are family businesses, passed from one generation to the next, with each new management team working with and learning from the previous one.

Michael Kravitsky IV is president of Grasshopper Lawns, Larksville, PA. His younger brother, Shawn, is vice president. Both represent the second generation to run Grasshopper Lawns.

“We kicked our dad out officially about two years ago,” teases Kravitsky, who nonetheless learned the business from his father from a very young age: “I remember being 5 years old and going with my dad on estimates.”

As a teen, Kravitsky even learned to drive by operating the company tractor that pulled the combine that would aerate, seed, roll and fertilize all in one pass. Sometimes he would drive the tractor to school and at other times, “I would skip school a lot and work in the business.”

At 48, Kravitsky is only a few years older than the company his father, Michael Kravitsky III, started in 1964 with a Lawn-A-Mat franchise. By 1985, with Michael IV and Shawn firmly in the family business, the father and sons were considering leaving the Lawn-A-Mat franchise (which is no longer in business) and heading out on their own. A chance meeting between Kravitsky III and a friend, a former Lawn-A-Mat dealer who’d started his own lawncare company in Connecticut more than a decade earlier, cemented the idea. He even borrowed, with permission, the Connecticut company’s name of Grasshopper Lawns.

“The grasshopper is a sign of good luck,” Kravitsky IV says. “That’s why they picked it.”

And perhaps the image, which adorns the company’s bright orange vehicles, has been a bit of a good luck charm.

Like any company nearing its fifth decade in business, the company has been through its fair share of economic downturns.

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"We don't have the crystal ball. We try to gauge what's going on," Kravitsky says. "We think the economy is going to stay steady. We don't think we're going to get the big gains, like we've had in the past. We think it's going to be a slow rise to the top."

Whether it's the economy or social evolution, things have changed over the years.

"Nowadays, it seems like customers are looking for the best deal, and they'll jump ship over a nickel," Kravitsky says. "The customers are a little bit tougher. There's no loyalty there. In the old days, you had a customer until they died or moved."

Quality service is still important, however, and many of those customers eventually realize that a few cents cheaper up front doesn't bring them the same results.

"Usually, after (customers) try somebody else, they're back to us in one to two years," Kravitsky says. "Sometimes a little bit longer, but we get an awful lot of old customers back."

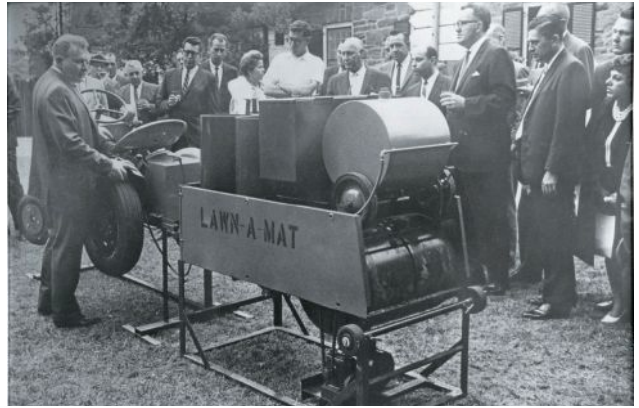
Customers, of course, aren't the only things that have changed. Equipment and the products Grasshopper Lawns' 20 employees spread have improved. Equipment has changed for the better, says Kravitsky, who remembers the days when "we had those cheap little cyclone spreaders with the plastic wheels on them. Now, our guys have these heavy-duty spreaders that you can push with one hand."

The technology is changing inside the trucks, too.

"We're moving forward with computers in the truck," Kravitsky says. "We'll have a history of everything that's gone on with that lawn in the past." Gone are the days of the service cards — long, legal-size forms that were kept year to year.

And despite having been around awhile, the Kravitskys refuse to look the part of the stodgy, curmudgeonly company.

"We have solar power on the top of the building; we're trying to be green by doing our part," Kravitsky says. "It's a good thing



Michael Kravitsky III (far right) watches a demonstration before opening his Lawn-A-Mat franchise (now Grasshopper Lawns). Co-owner Shawn Kravitsky with one of the company's newer vehicles.

to do. I'm very happy with it."

But then again, not everything needs to be modernized.

"We're from the old school," Kravitsky concludes. "We don't need to spout off to everybody how great we are. We've been here since 1964. We know what we're doing." LM



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