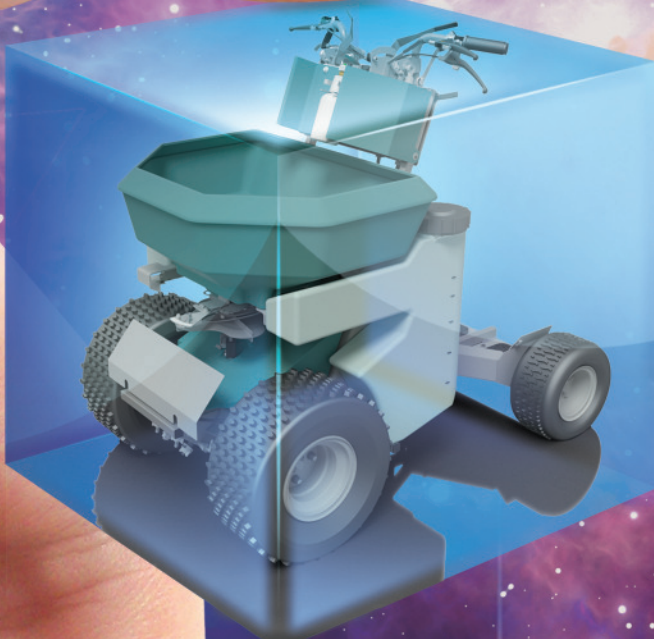


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How autonomous and
robotic equipment might
solve the labor struggle.



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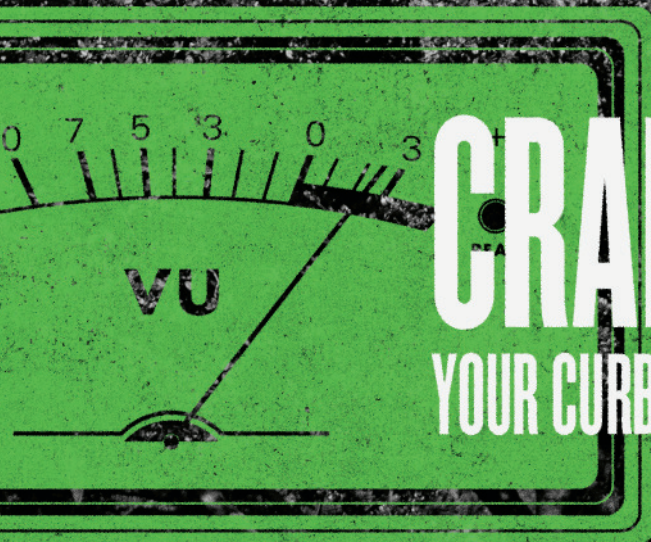
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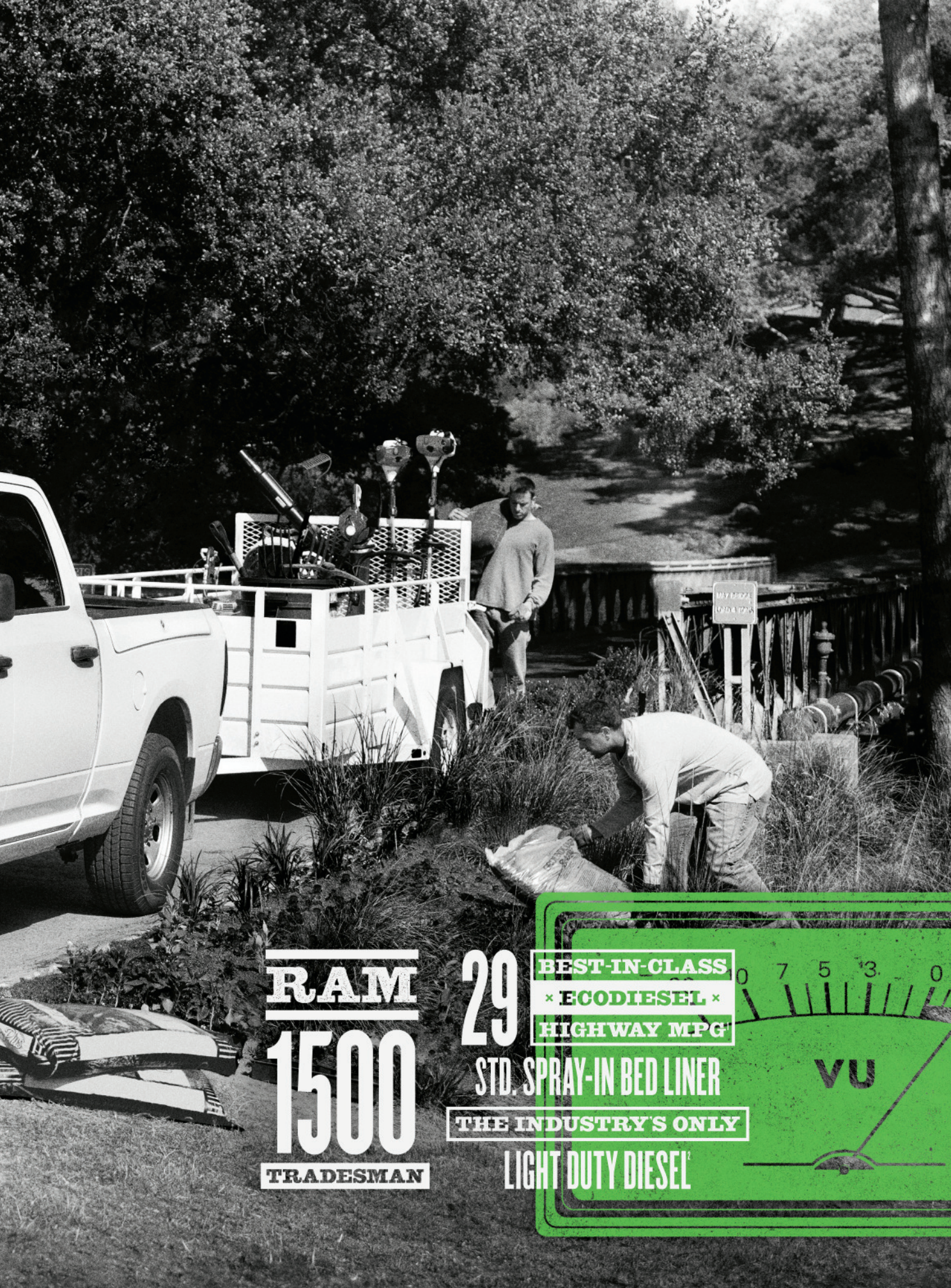
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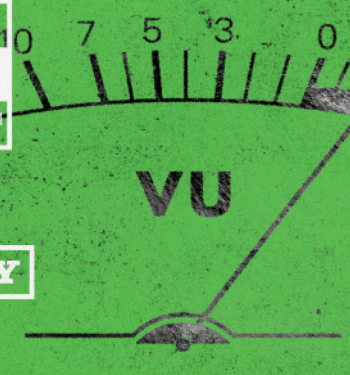
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PHOTO: CHARLOTTE PIPE



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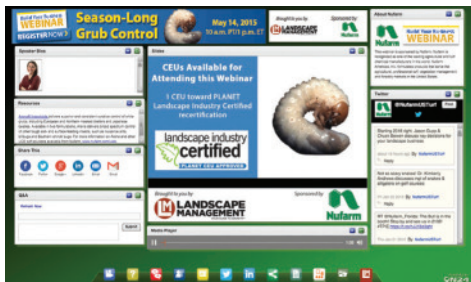
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EDITOR'S NOTE

MARISA PALMIERI
EDITOR

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mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net



Make the connection

It's less than a week since Winter Storm Jonas dumped prolific amounts of snow along parts of the East Coast, burying 14 states in more than a foot of snow.

Even several days later, I'm still seeing messages pop up on my social media feeds from snow and landscape company owners thanking their crews for literally working around the clock.

Case in point: Kurt Bland, president/CEO of Bland Landscaping in Apex, N.C., posted a photo on LinkedIn with this note, "You wouldn't know it by their smiles, but this kick-ass group of guys in Charlotte pulled a 20-hour shift after we only got an hour and a half of sleep, and we are getting right back at it before the sun comes up on Saturday. Words cannot say how much I appreciate our teams who are making properties safe and operable all over N.C. during Winter Storm Jonas."

Bland's comments got me thinking that 1). I wouldn't be able to function on that little sleep, and 2). When you're working that hard for that long, I can imagine how easy it is to forget why you're there in the first place. I can imagine that at some point, people are just going through the motions. (I don't mean to project onto Bland's team at all; he just got me thinking.)

Heck, I get overwhelmed and distracted some months during the run-up to *LM*'s deadline. And I'm certainly not freezing cold, wet and physically exhausted.

When you're feeling drained and your motivation is waning, it helps to get a reminder about why we do what we do. Joe Kucik, CEO of Real Green Systems (RGS), offered an excellent example during his presentation at

the RGS Solutions 2016 user conference in Orlando last month. When he thanked the attendees (his customers), he showed a slide with the following:

Because the customer has a need, we have a job.

Because the customer has a choice, we must be the better choice.

Because the customer has sensibilities, we must be considerate.

Because the customer has an urgency, we must be quick.


Because the customer is unique, we must be flexible.

Because the customer has high expectations, we must excel.

Because the customer has influence, we must hope for more chances.

Because of the customer, we exist.

It's an important message for any business, Kucik says. He credited RGS President Don Brown with keeping this concept front of mind in their company. RGS does 75 percent of its business in five months of the year—not unlike some landscape and snow firms. Such a crunched production period makes companies susceptible to just selling and producing work—and can cause them to forget, "Because of the customer, we exist."

As Bruce Wilson points out on page 12, your employees don't care about your business the same way you do. But there are things they value. The first and last things on the list above—having a job and a place to do that job—are perfect examples. As an owner or manager, you must make the connection between the customer's needs and the employees' priorities, so you can get everyone moving in the same direction, come rain or shine. Or snow. 



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Q+A

In what area of the industry do you foresee equipment technology advancing the fastest over the next five years?

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Wilson-Oyler Group
Scottsdale, Ariz.

"I think commercial mowers will in five years be operated either by remote control or possibly even be unmanned and operated via GPS, eliminating the need for some laborers."

"Probably with GPS systems for self-driving trucks, mowing equipment, snow removal, maybe eliminating employees in all sorts of ways."

"The future will advance accounting and cloud software technology, using character recognition that will take almost all keypunching out of the accounting function."

"Removing people—and companies—from the equation. Be prepared!"

"From natural gas to batteries."

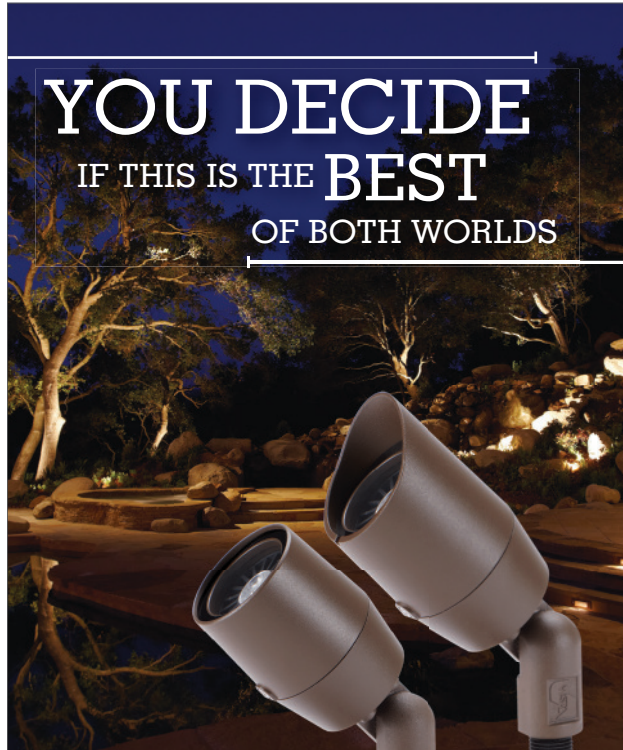
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BIG PICTURE

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LOCATION

Fairfield County, Conn.

COMPANY The LaurelRock Co., Wilton, Conn.

THE DETAILS The client, an interior designer, asked for a stem-to-stern redesign of her property. Her goals were to create a modern sensibility with a sequence of garden spaces, and to resolve long-standing concerns like a lack of privacy, drainage/grading issues and a steep front walkway.


One point of interest is depicted here: the 8-ft.-long bluestone water feature, suspended over the far corner of the pool as equal parts waterfall, diving plinth and sculpture.

Construction of this piece was complex. With careful hand digging, the existing deep-end pool shell was exposed. A frost footing was poured and engaged with rebar to the shell. The bluestone slab is comprised of multiple 3-in.-thick bluestone pieces, held together with stainless steel pins around a reinforced concrete core that houses the waterfall components. The low stone walls supporting the slab echo the house foundation, marrying the house to the outdoors.

This project earned The LaurelRock Co. a 2015 Grand Award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Awards of Excellence program.

See more photos from this project at LandscapeManagement.net/BigPicture.

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RECOMMENDER

BRUCE'S VIEW

STEP BY STEP

NEW STUFF

SAFETYWATCH

AUTOPILOT



At NJ Best Lawn & Sprinkler, putting renewals on autopilot has been a time-saving move. Since 2010 the Lakewood, N.J.-based company has automatically renewed the contracts for and charged the credit cards of clients receiving recurring residential lawn maintenance, lawn care, irrigation and snow removal services.

"It's like a gym membership," says General Manager David Hartzell. "On the contract, it specifically says it's a seasonal, autorenewing service, unless canceled in writing."

Before going down this road, Hartzell says to check whether your state has automatic renewal regulations on the books.

To balance cash flow, the company renews snow contracts on Oct. 1, irrigation contracts on Jan. 1, lawn care contracts on March 1 and maintenance contracts on April 1. On those dates, the company generates new contracts and charges clients' credit cards (the data of which are stored on a secure server) with "the click of a button" in its software system, Work Wave. Then the system generates a report on the clients whose cards that are canceled, expired or declined, so the company can follow up.

Compared to the "old way" of billing a client—waiting for a check, opening the mail, posting the check to the account and so on—it's much more efficient, Hartzell says.

"From a per-client standpoint we might be saving only five minutes, but with 26,000 active clients, it's a tremendous savings," he says.

“It's a seasonal, autorenewing service, unless canceled in writing.”



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PRESIDENT,
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MENTOR, OHIO

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JIM ZYLSTRA
OWNER, TUFF TURF
MOLEBUSTERS
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TERRY JUNGELS
PRESIDENT, TLC
TOTAL LAWN CARE
INDIANAPOLIS, IND.

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BRUCE'S VIEW



BY BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@wilson-oyler.com.

BUILD A CULTURE OF EMPATHY


You've probably heard the quote, often attributed to Theodore Roosevelt: "Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care."

Empathy improves relationships. The ability to detect what others feel and experience has many upsides.

"Learn to crawl behind the eyes of the customer" is a commandment I've used for many years when discussing how to serve our clients better. Substitute the words *employee, constituent, associate, supplier, friend* or *colleague* for the word *customer* and the results are the same: a strong relationship grounded in understanding.

Empathy can be a powerful tool in communicating with employees and in building a desirable company culture. Many owners want the same things in their companies. The difference is in how they get there.

Understanding what drives employees and customers requires careful listening. Employees will never care as much about your company as you do. But they do care about many of the same things you do, though maybe not for the same reasons. Good leaders succeed by marrying their own emotions and values with those of their employees and customers.

Building a culture of empathy starts with leaders making it a core behavior. It's not easy "letting go" and putting others' needs first. But when CEOs use their capacity for compassion and understanding, they gain a competitive advantage thanks to increased innovation and productivity. 



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STEP BY STEP

How to design a container

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A basic container design should include a “thriller,” a “spiller” and a “filler”—a combination of an upright plant, a trailer that spills down the sides of a pot and a filler to add fullness and color. Incorporating seasonal plants can keep clients’ containers looking lively year-round, and combining three or more containers of varying sizes and styles can make an even bigger impact.

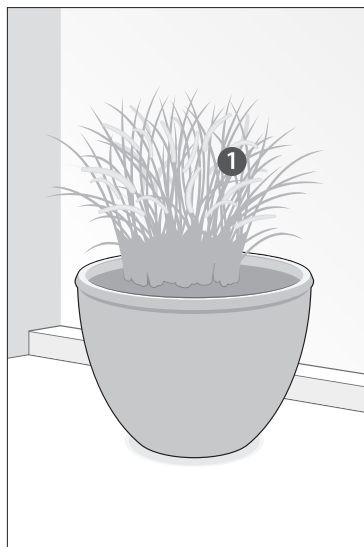
Other considerations include sun, wind and upkeep.

Regarding sun, consider the type of sun exposure your client’s property receives. “Full sun” is considered six to eight hours of sunlight. “Partial sun” is considered four hours of sunlight. “Partial shade” is two to three hours of sunlight, and “shade” is two or fewer hours of sunlight. Which direction the home faces also plays a role in the type of light received. Homes facing west and south get longer afternoon sun, which is ideal for many plants, including most edibles.

Taller plants can break in gusty winds. Hot, windy days can evaporate water more quickly, requiring more frequent watering. Wind chills also affect plants. Most annuals and edibles need to be covered if the temperature falls below 40 degrees F.

Consider how much time will be dedicated to the care and maintenance of the plants. Some plants are more drought tolerant, while more delicate varieties need regular watering. Plants also need to be deadheaded and fertilized to keep them healthy and to keep the containers looking lush and full. 🌱

SOURCES: Garden Supply Co., Cary, N.C.; Gethsemane Garden Center, Chicago



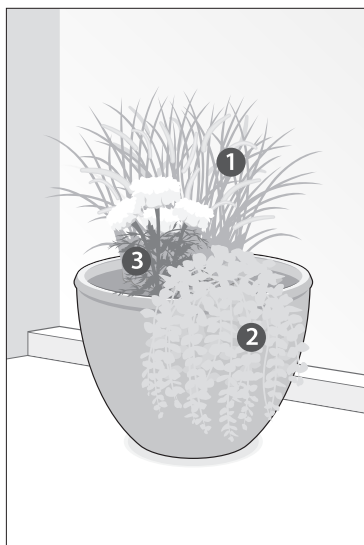
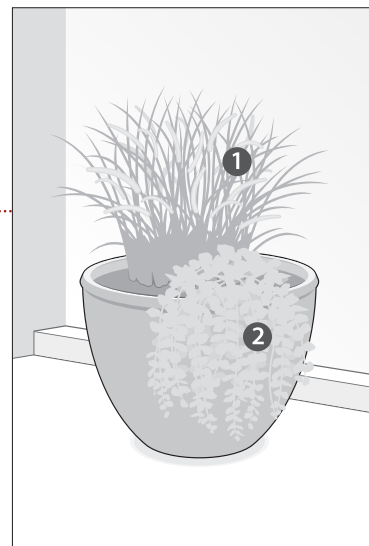
STEP 1

Choose a thriller plant. Options include yuccas, cannas, fountain grasses, Angelonias and dracaenas, among others. Ferns, hostas or heucheras can work in shady container gardens.



STEP 2

Choose a spiller plant. Options include creeping Jennies, lotuses, scaevolas, vincas, sweet potato vines, calibrachoas and bacopas.



STEP 3

Choose a filler plant. These are available in all different styles, colors and textures. Most annuals are perfect fillers.



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NEW STUFF



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To stay up to date on all the latest landscape industry products and services, visit LandscapeManagement.net/tag/product-news.

1. 60-IN. VANTAGE S-SERIES PROPANE STAND-ON RIDER MOWER

COMPANY: Exmark

URL: Exmark.com

A Kohler Command Pro PCV740 V-Twin EFI propane engine powers the new 60-in. Vantage Stand-On Rider Mower, an expansion of Exmark's propane-fueled commercial mower line. The mower, which starts with the turn of a key, is built with maintenance-reducing features, like sealed, no-maintenance spindles, 7-gauge spindle reinforcements and a spherical bearing design idler arm pivots, according to the manufacturer.

2. MX-18 BOX RACK

COMPANY: Gravely

URL: GravelyAtlas.com

The heavy-duty, 12-gauge MX-18 box rack configuration is designed to transform the Atlas JSV utility vehicle into a workstation able to transport tools and equipment in one trip, Gravely says. The full-rack structure features an extender basket, half-clip and full-clip basket, a string trimmer carrier, backpack rack and cooler/bucket cruiser.

3. BOBCAT MT85 MINI TRACK LOADER

COMPANY: Bobcat

URL: Bobcat.com

The ride-on MT85's 805-lb. rated operating capacity is 35 percent higher than the company's prior mini track loaders. The left-hand joystick controls the loader's drive function, while the right-hand joystick controls the loader's lift and tilt functions. A safety pedal, which regulates the auxiliary hydraulic flow, must be engaged for the operator to use attachments. Comfort features include standard hip pads, larger grab handles for getting on and off the loader, a cup holder, a storage compartment and more.

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1. Personal Hazards

- You could get an electric shock if snow blower paddles grab a live electrical cord. Additionally, cords or other obstructions can fling at you or a bystander, causing injury.
- Your hand or foot could be injured if you came into contact with the moving paddles. Never try to clear an obstruction from the paddles or chute while the engine is running.
- Never allow your face or body to approach the discharge stream.
- When shoveling, pace yourself. Stay dry with proper clothing and drink enough water. Your back will suffer from poor posture; start your shift by going slowly at first, and bend your

knees and use your legs to do any lifting.

- Wear nonslip footwear and watch your step; you can easily slip.
- Always get help to lift and raise a blower from a truck bed. Otherwise, you could injure your back.
- Be careful around moving vehicles, especially at night; visibility is poor and drivers may not see you clearly.

2. Bystander hazards

- Thrown snow or objects can injure someone badly. Don't blow when pedestrians are within range of the discharge.

3. Property

- Thrown snow or objects within the snow can break windows and damage paint on a vehicle. Never throw snow against property other than the ground or an existing snow pile.

- Don't damage surfaces from which you shovel or blow snow. For example, a blower can scratch the side of a car and a shovel or blower handle against a garage door can scratch the paint.
- It takes two people to properly lift a blower; you can damage the blower if you drop it, even from 1 foot off the ground.
- Excessive salt can damage concrete, plants and turf.

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➤ PAGE 34



interview

GENERATIONS OF GROWTH & SUCCESS

BY: JAY LO MONACO

"LMN has given us, as owners, the ability to focus more on managing our staff and our clients and ultimately work toward creating an environment where anyone who works with us can have an incredible experience."

After growing up in the landscape industry and watching his father manage the company, Jay Lo Monaco, Co-Owner of Paul's Best Lawn Service (PBLs), understands the importance of putting the customer first. Striving to meet and exceed their expectations is crucial.

We chatted with Jay about the hurdles this family owned business has overcome.

Q. Tell us a little bit about PBLs' history.

A. My father Paolo Lo Monaco was born in Sicily. His family moved when he was young to Uruguay, South America. In his late teens he came to Canada and lived there for approximately 10 years. While on a trip to Mexico he met my mom and in six months was living in the US. He drove buses for Metro while working for a local landscaper on the side. In 1979 he struck out on his own and hasn't looked back.

My brother Tim and I purchased the company from my father in 2013. We currently offer residential grounds maintenance (everything from mowing to mulching to cleanups, etc.), sustainable turf care (we offer a carbon based program and do a lot of soil testing and amendment work), irrigation maintenance as well as drainage and grading solutions.

Q. Please describe some challenges that your company has recently faced, and how you were able to overcome these obstacles.

A. Before we bought the company in 2013, I reached out to an outside source for some help. I had made the call initially because my father was ill and had no transition plan in place should something happen. I was really trying to get an idea to see if the company was worth trying to

save or if he should sell it. The few years before that had been a steady decline in growth and was not doing very well. We learned a lot from that experience and started making changes soon after. It was difficult to come into an environment like PBLs as the oldest son of the owner to say the least. I had a love/hate relationship with my father and PBLs and had worked there on and off for my whole life but ultimately we had to make changes or my father's life's work was going to go down the tube and I was not going to let that happen regardless of what people thought or think about me.

2013 was the start of a lot of different changes - not great by any means but we could see internal progress. 2014 ended up being the worst year in the company's history. No question about that. At that point we had a full year of accurate tracking procedures using LMN systems and we had to make some very difficult decisions. We started the year with 51 people on staff and by the end of the year were down to 36. We cut out an entire division (landscape and hardscape install) and were forced to let go of a lot of people, some I have known my whole life. It is not easy, nor will it ever be, to let someone go but there are certain realities you have to face as an owner that are unavoidable. If you can't make those decisions you shouldn't own a company. We were in the negative at the end of the year by close to 4%.

There was a lot of uncertainty for PBLs going into 2015 but there was also a lot of confidence as well because we were armed with very clear goals and expectations. The ability for us to see what divisions of the company were making money and which ones weren't. This year we are on track to be about 10% growth so about 3-4% profit, which isn't great but it's a move in right direction. Wouldn't be possible with LMN.

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Q. Can you describe a success story for us?

A. In reality the success story is the change in culture that has begun at PBLS. Before LMN we were not able to accurately price jobs. We weren't able to track productivity. We were trying to move forward in a changing environment without systems. LMN has given us, as owners, the ability to focus more on managing our staff and our clients and ultimately work toward creating an environment where anyone who works with us can have an incredible experience. Whether that is a client who has peace of mind knowing that they are investing their money with a quality company who offers a superior service or program. Or it could be the new hire who gets in and has an opportunity to better himself or herself and grow from the experience.

Q. What other resources offered through LMN have helped your company's success?

A. I have done a lot of the training videos on learnlmn.com which are awesome, but I think that the workshops are invaluable. I have attended one in Baltimore, MD in January of 2013 and just recently in Sterling, VA December 2015. I went solo to MD but my brother who co-owns the company with me attended the one this year.



It can be hard for a lot of people to come into an environment like the workshop and listen to a success story like TBG and have their practices come under the microscope in a sense and see what is not working. Ego comes into play as well and a lot of people aren't willing to change out of pride. It can be humbling, no doubt, but for me I was thankful someone was willing to help. It's important to remember that it's you sitting in the chair listening not the other way around. I was there to learn because what we were doing wasn't working. I am also someone who wants to be the best at what I do so in order to get there, I needed to get around guys that were crushing it like TBG. I think that TBG's willingness to share the information is really cool.

Q. If you could 'forecast the future' - what do you see down the pipeline for your company? Is there any exciting news that you could share with the readers of this publications?

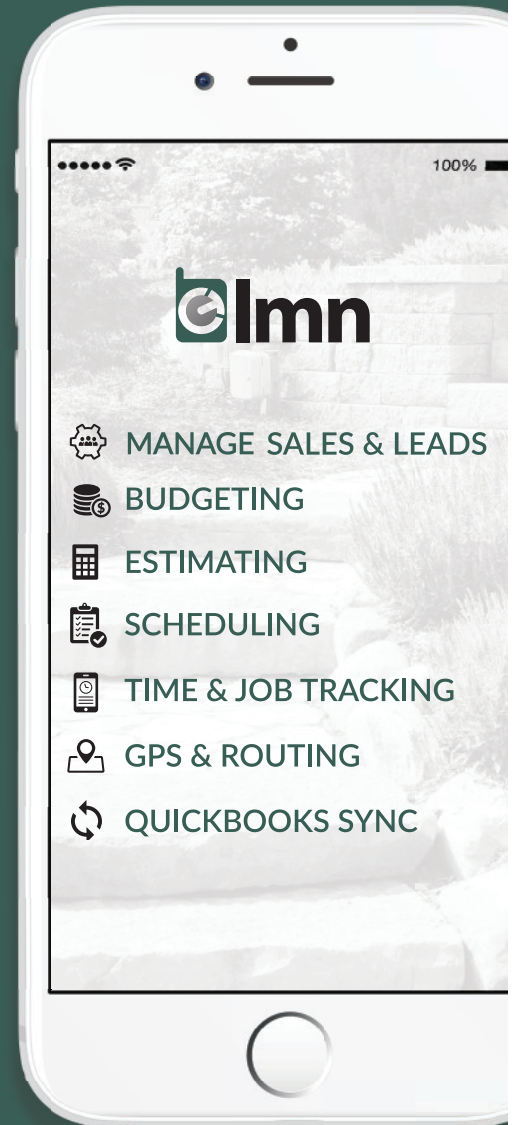
A. We have a long way to go for sure but we are getting better every day. We are continually refining our processes and working to make sure our customers are getting the most exceptional service in the industry. We have some new options for contractors who want us to take care of their turf care and/or irrigation needs. This year we are offering a true carbon based fertility program to our existing turf customer and a new program for new clients and prospects that will include a money back guarantee on the work. I don't see us slowing down at all and LMN will continue to be an integral part of what we do moving forward.

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TURF+ORNAMENTAL CARE

Long-time advocate

Before Tom Delaney steps down as government affairs director for NALP, he shares what he's seen over a few decades of advocacy.

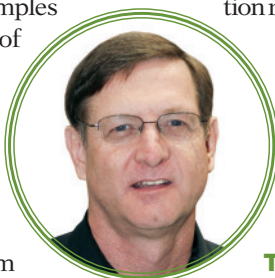
BY MARISA PALMIERI

If you've ever used the H-2B program's returning worker exemption, you've benefitted from Tom Delaney's work. If you've ever operated under a state pesticide preemption law, you've benefitted from some of his efforts.

These are just two examples of the issues the director of government relations for the National Association of Landscape Professionals (NALP) has supported over his nearly 27 years in the landscape industry.

When he steps down from NALP this spring to make room for a new vice president of government relations, he's not sure what will come next, but he's hopeful he'll still help landscape professionals in some capacity.

"I'm leaving options open," he says. "Maybe something else with the green industry, because I hate to let all the connections and experience go to waste. I've always enjoyed being able to educate somebody so they were more knowledgeable about the issues."



Tom Delaney

Delaney first joined the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) in 1989, which merged with the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) to become the Professional Landcare Network. The association rebranded to NALP last year.

We talked with him to reflect on his career and get his take on advocacy efforts.

LM: TELL US ABOUT HOW YOU CAME TO WORK IN THE INDUSTRY.

Tom Delaney (TD): I worked with the state of Georgia Department of Agriculture. I started in the field, but I wasn't out there very long before the guy in the office left and I took his place. I was in charge of the pesticide certification and training program, the licensing program, the chemigation program, the treated wood program and the enforcement program. My inspectors would go to places that produced pesticides and do Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) inspections.

PLCAA happened to be not that far away. In fact, I'd see the exec in Washington all the time but never would see him in Georgia. They were starting to have problems with local ordinances, and so they were looking for somebody for state work. I had also become aware that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) was doing an investigation on chemical lawn care.

I went to work there in May 1989, and in March 1990, we had our first U.S. Senate subcommittee chemical lawn care hearings with Sen. Harry Reid and Sen. Joseph Lieberman.

Right after that Supreme Court hearing (which ruled in 1991 that federal law does not preempt local jurisdictions from restricting the use of pesticides), we started working with the agriculture and pest control industries. We worked together, state by state, passing preemption laws.

LM: WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE ISSUE TO WORK ON?

TD: In the early 1990s, we had a Federal Trade Commission report and a GAO report, and the hearings that were all saying what you couldn't do. EPA started a federal Lawn Care Pesticide Advisory Committee. What I brought to it was saying, "Well, this is all fine and good—what we *can't* say and *can't* do. How about working with us so we get a little better guidance of what we *can* say and do?"

That's when we came up with some brochures for members of what they could talk to their customers about. We established the first advertising guidelines for the industry, which would lead companies to stop saying products were

Continued on page 26

NEWSFEED

MAJOR MERGER

TruGreen and Scotts LawnService said they would merge. The deal is expected to close in

March. Combined, the companies have approximately 2.3 million customers and more than \$1.3 billion in

annual revenue. They will operate as TruGreen and will be based in Memphis, Tenn.

EPA ON POLLINATORS

Last month the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

released a preliminary pollinator risk assessment for the neonicotinoid insecticide imidacloprid, saying it shows a threat to some pollinators when it comes in contact with certain crops that

attract pollinators. After a 60-day public comment period, EPA may revise the assessment based on comments received and, if necessary, take action to reduce risks from the insecticide.

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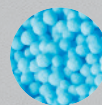
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TURF+ORNAMENTAL CARE

Continued from page 24

“safe.” That was when we started diving into the area of risk communication.

LM: ARE THERE ANY REGULATIONS THAT YOU INITIALLY THOUGHT WOULD BE NEGATIVE BUT TURNED OUT TO BE POSITIVE?

TD: We learned that posting a (pesticide application) notification actually could be a positive thing. Everybody was appalled that we had to start posting lawn signs with a child and a dog and a universal symbol of “don’t enter here.” With posting, the public now knew something was applied and could take what precautions they wanted to.

What started happening, too, is states introduced new regulations to meet those posting and notification requirements. We had to start tracking state laws and

regulations, and work to get uniformity. We were very lucky in that all the posting requirements—the size of the sign and stuff—became pretty uniform. When I was with the Department of Ag, we had an association of state pesticide regulators. So when the states all started proposing new regulations, I had that relationship with them to work and get some uniformity.

LM: WHICH REGULATION HAS HAD THE GREATEST NEGATIVE IMPACT?

TD: It really was that Supreme Court ruling. As a result, we ended up with Montgomery County. (In 2015, the Maryland

FROM THE ARCHIVES

“I remember that was about the sickest I’ve ever been to date, when I got out of the lawn care hearings with Reid and Lieberman,” said Tom Delaney, referring to being nervous testifying before a Senate subcommittee hearing on lawn pesticides in March 1990.



county was the first major locality to ban cosmetic pesticides.) That was one of the states that didn’t get a good preemption law and caused problems.

A negative perception about lawns was a problem back then, too. I remember Terry Kurth from Weed Man, when he had his Barefoot Grass franchise, always saying turf was like Rodney Dangerfield: It didn’t get any respect.

Really, what happened was the lawn care companies were pretty resilient. Once they had posting, they learned how

Continued on page 28



PHOTO: LM ARCHIVE



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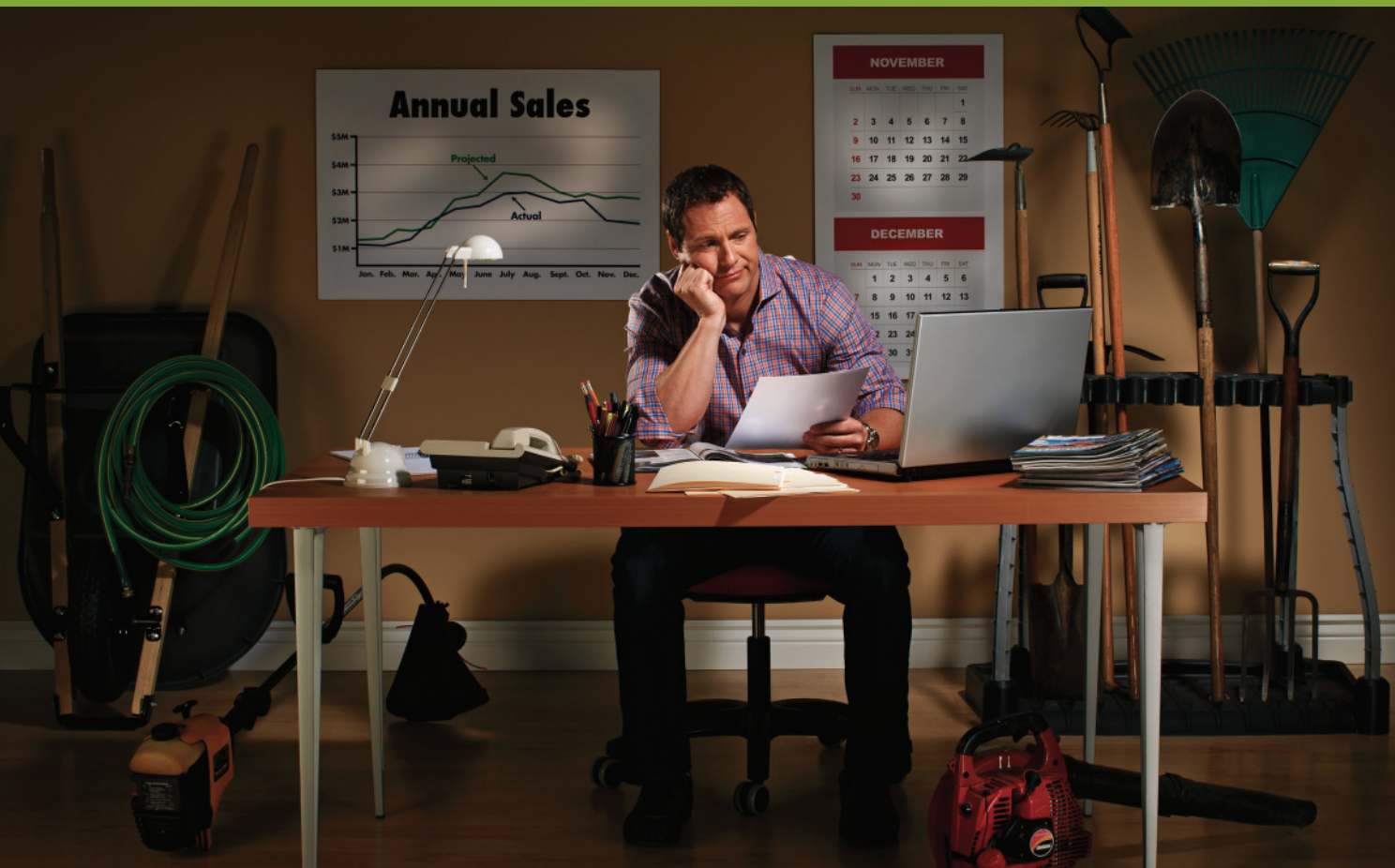


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Continued from page 26

to make it an advantage and live with it. We came a long way to adapting to what the requirements were and turned them into some positive things.

LM: IS THERE ANY ISSUE THAT YOU THOUGHT WOULD HAVE BEEN RESOLVED BY NOW?

TD: I always thought environmental issues were the worst to deal with until I got involved in the H-2B program. All of the sudden I had to learn immigration and learn the H-2B program. That's something that's going on, like, 11 years now, and we still haven't resolved a useful program.


LM: WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE YOUR BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT?

TD: Helping Phil Fogarty start the first Renewal & Remembrance at Arlington

National Cemetery. That's something I always look back on, because we've kept it going all these years with Day on the Hill. We got recognition as an industry, as a player out there and truly being the voice of the lawn and landscape industry. We got legitimate.

LM: ANY PARTING ADVICE?

TD: The one thing I wish I were more successful in is getting more grassroots action by our members. There are not enough people that participate in the grassroots movement, which is important at the local, state and federal level. That's what I hope my successor is more successful in.

Regulators and lawmakers don't want to hear from associations directly. We have to mobilize our members if we're going to be successful on the state and federal issues. 

Mendelsohn joins NALP

The National Association of Landscape Professionals (NALP) hired Paul Mendelsohn as vice president of government relations. He will work alongside Tom Delaney, NALP's director of government affairs, for several months to ensure a smooth transition, the association said.

Mendelsohn served for 15 years in government relations positions with the American Institute of Architects, most recently as vice president of government and community relations. He also has experience as legislative director and chief of staff for several Michigan state representatives.



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IDEA GUYS

Brothers Bob (left) and Jim Hawkinson run a commercial landscape company and have invented several landscape-related consumer products.

.Wired to innovate

Brothers Bob and Jim Hawkinson run their Florida-based landscape business with entrepreneurial eyes and innovative spirits.

BY EMILY SCHAPPACHER

The Hawkinson brothers have always been inventors at heart. From cofounding their company, Total Lawn Care, nearly 34 years ago, to constantly dreaming up better ways to do everyday things, they've never been satisfied with the status quo.

"Every piece of equipment we've ever bought, we've made modifications to improve it," Bob Hawkinson says, laughing. "We have always been wired that way."

"We're not afraid to experiment," Jim Hawkinson adds. "Actually, we enjoy experimenting."

The brothers' love for the outdoors and their entrepreneurial, innovative spirits are the motivations behind running their business and creating new opportunities for success. They look for ways to capitalize on big ideas and surround themselves with creative, business-savvy people who inspire

them to keep growing and improving.

"Everything runs in cycles and you have to adjust to them and accommodate them to ensure that you have long-term sustainability as a company—it's a constant tweak, a constant improvement," says Bob Hawkinson, who also is the founder of the North Florida Inventors Group. "The market doesn't reward inefficiency, so we are always trying to find the systems and equipment to gain advantages."

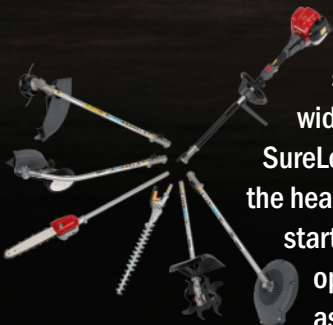
Total Lawn Care is a Jacksonville, Fla.-based primarily commercial maintenance company serving 14 counties throughout North Florida. With 75 employees at peak season, the bulk of the company's business is maintenance and enhancements (70 percent), with the balance being fertilization, pest and irrigation services. Clients include multifamily complexes, HOAs, industrial properties, municipalities

Continued on page 32



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Continued from page 30

and retail establishments. Total Lawn Care started out also serving residential customers, but after about four years the brothers decided they found it more rewarding to work with their commercial clientele.

"We found that if you do residential it's hard to do commercial because they are really different businesses—the equipment needs are different, the clients are different, the billing cycles are different," says Bob Hawkinson. "We find the commercial side to be dynamic and always changing. It's very competitive so it keeps you on your toes."

Total Lawn Care's goal is to be each client's favorite vendor, Bob Hawkinson says. The company achieves this feat by striving to be "a little bit better than everyone else." The company focuses on its quality of work and the expertise of its team members, and runs as lean as possible to stay competitive and flexible. It strives to make sure customers are never surprised by anything, and rely on customer feedback, surveys and good, old-fashioned conversations to make sure they're satisfied.

"If you're a commercial property manager, you probably deal with 20 different companies that provide all different services—we want to be their favorite," Bob Hawkinson says. "We're always looking at what is in the best interest of the customer and making sure we are matching what we sold them and that we are being as efficient as possible."

NEW SOLUTIONS

One way the Hawkinson brothers improve efficiency is by combining their experience and their inventive natures to create new products and solutions.

For instance, Total Lawn Care uses proprietary business management software, and it runs custom-designed trucks and trailers that the brothers say are safer and more efficient than the industry standard. For example, wider doors and extended ramps make it easier to load

equipment, and a longer trailer tongue prevents jackknifing. Bump rails keep crews from slipping and banging their shins, and spring assists on the ramps help protect their backs.

Each piece of the company's equipment is engraved, detailed with reflective tape and painted with the company's colors for safety and also to prevent theft. They even have custom-designed safety equipment, such as the chaps Jim Hawkinson invented to be more hygienic and comfortable in the heat.

Meanwhile, the Hawkinsons are using their experience to create products on the consumer side of the industry.

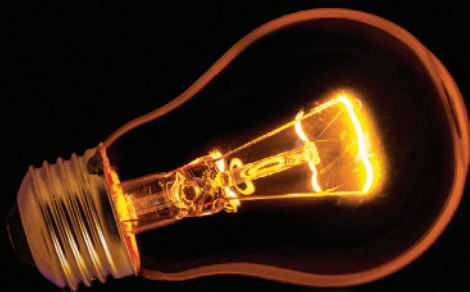
"I have been working around buildings for decades, so when you see problems you think, 'Hmm, there must be a better way,'" Bob Hawkinson says. "Because of our exposure to the landscape, we see problems that happen and we come up with solutions that work."

For example, their company, Weed Recede, produces a biodegradable mulch bag that acts as a weed barrier and then disintegrates into the soil. They designed the disappearing mulch bags as a solution to the more than 2 billion plastic mulch, rock, sand, soil and shell bags disposed of in the U.S. each year—many of which they've thrown out themselves.

"You have 250 plastic bags to get rid of after a job, and they aren't recyclable, so they go to the landfill," Bob Hawkinson says. "We thought we could use the packaging as a product."

Working with producers of biodegradable plastic, Weed Recede is geared toward sustainability-minded consumers who want to control weeds without the use of herbicides or traditional weed cloths.

Weed Recede was a winner at the 2011 Jacksonville Startup Weekend, and was recognized as the Most Innovative Emerging Business at the 2015 Think Beyond Plastic competition. Last September, Bob Hawkinson participated in a two-week acceleration program and expo in Menlo Park, Calif., where



“Every piece of equipment we’ve ever bought, we’ve made modifications to improve it. We have always been wired that way.”

—BOB HAWKINSON, TOTAL LAWN CARE

he had the chance to pitch his idea to capital investors. After spending the past few years getting the patents, licensing and technology in place, 2016 is the year Weed Recede biodegradable mulch bags will come to market, he says.

Other products the brothers have invented include the EcoBoundry rock border system, the Speedy Paver easy underlay system, ColorPocket plant-through garden bags and the Gutter Guppy rain downspout diverter and dampener.

All these products solve problems the Hawkinsons have encountered while working on their clients’ properties. For example, the Gutter Guppy diffuses the force of water coming out of the downspout, reducing erosion. EcoBoundry is an efficient way to surround a building’s foundation

with rocks, which separates it from organic material and protects it from insect damage.

Going forward, the brothers plan to make headway with their product launches, while continuing to grow Total Lawn Care organically and through acquisition. They declined to provide annual revenue, but they say the company made its first acquisition three years ago and looks for other opportunities to grow—while no doubt thinking up new ways to improve along the way.

“All of our customers are trying to improve their little bit of the world by having a better looking property at a competitive rate,” Jim Hawkinson says. “I like being able to help them do that.”

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.

NEWSPEED

INDUSTRY LEADER GACHINA DIES

John Gachina, founder and president of Gachina Landscape Management, died Dec. 27. He founded the company in 1988 in Cupertino, Calif. Today, it employs more than 350 team members and operates from multiple locations. The company is a long-time member of the National Association of Landscape Profession-



als, and Gachina served as a mentor through its Trailblazer program.

DEERE EXPANDS MOWING LINEUP

John Deere added the new Z960M zero-turn mower and the modified Z970R ZTrak mower to its 2016 commercial mowing lineup. The Z960M is available in three deck offerings: 60 in., 60 in. Mulch On Demand (MOD) or 72 in. The Z970R now offers two more deck options: 60-in. side discharge or 60-in. MOD.

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Lend a hand

How offering financing could help you close more, larger sales. BY MARISA PALMIERI

Would you like to increase the scale of your clients' projects, close more jobs and avoid having to track down payments? Offering consumer financing might be an option for you, say contractors who've walked that path. Here, two of them share their experiences.



**MIKE SANDERS,
PRESIDENT**



**JIMMY TOMPKINS,
OWNER**

Company	Crimson Valley Landscaping, Rockford, Ill.	JT's Landscaping & Lawn Care, Rolesville, N.C.
Financing partner	Rock Valley Credit Union	EnerBank USA via the Belgard Preferred Payment program
How long offering?	About 10 years, first through a different lender	About seven years, first through a different lender
Financing offers	No standard offer; clients work with the bank	Zero percent financing for 12 months or 18 months
How many clients participate?	A few per year	30-40 per year
Cost to the contractor	"We looked at some other options with the national companies that do this, and our costs on those are a little beyond our comfort zone," Sanders said, estimating they were 8-10 percent. The company pays no fee to work with the credit union.	"The dealer fee is 5.3 percent, so we factor that into our estimates. If people ask for a discount, we say we have a 5 percent cash discount, so we recapture that indirectly."
Client process	In-person or online application with the lender	Phone conversation with the lender; email or mail approval
Contractor process	On large jobs, clients submit a form to the bank authorizing a draw. On small jobs, clients typically write a check to Crimson Valley for a start payment. Upon completion, the client signs off on the project and the bank direct deposits the payment within 48 hours.	Upon financing approval, JT's Landscaping submits an invoice to the lender and receives a 50 percent draw. Upon project completion, the client submits a payment authorization form to the lender, which pays the company electronically.
Biggest benefit to the contractor	"It's a sales advantage because some other companies aren't able to offer it. And instead of doing the bare minimum, customers can look at the total scope of a project."	"We get paid within two days of the project's completion. There's no back and forth with the client. It's very nice from a cash flow perspective."
Biggest benefit to the consumer	"A customer's budget doesn't always match the design or project. By providing someone who will give them a loan, they're getting the time they need to be comfortable spending the money."	"It's free money, essentially. On a \$30,000 project, anybody with economic sense realizes they'll recapture (that 5 percent) by keeping that cash in the bank."
Marketing/sales strategy	Website (links to bank's loan application); information included in sales packet and discussed on sales calls	Website; used as a "back pocket" tool in sales presentations
Best advice	"Know who you're dealing with. That's where the local credit union has been really good. When you're connecting your customer to somebody, you need to know they're following your core values and operational philosophy."	"You're getting an extra tool in your back pocket to close the sale; it's more leverage over competitors who can't offer this. If your price is 5 percent more—that's nothing over 18 months. We won't come down on price, so this is something we wave in front of them."

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NEWSPEED

THE TROPHY AWARDS

The California Landscape Contractors Association presented the Trophy Awards at its annual convention. The Stuart J. Sperber Memorial Sweepstakes Trophy for Best of Show went to CLP Landscaping of Livermore, Calif., for its work at the Del Amigo residence in Danville, Calif. Fifty-two awards were presented.



FORK ATTACHMENT

John Deere unveiled a nursery fork attachment for skid-steers and compact track loaders. The nursery fork is the latest addition to the Worksite Pro attachments lineup and is optimized to work with select John Deere E- and D-Series skid-steers, compact track loaders (CTLs) and most competitive models, the company said.



NEW TRANSFORMER

Unique Lighting Systems expanded its line of outdoor transformers with its new 150W LED transformer. Featuring a 15-amp resettable circuit breaker for fuse protection, the 150SSSL-LED comes with multi-tap 12 v, 13 v, 14 v and 15 v outlets for multiple voltage range options. It has a stainless steel construction with a lockable front cover, a 10-year warranty and includes mounting hardware.



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In the pipeline

Irrigation pipe products are evolving to make systems more efficient and installations quicker and easier.

BY EMILY SCHAPPACHER

When it comes to irrigation pipe, contractors have strong opinions.

“Users of PVC will argue that it’s the best, and users of polyethylene will say that’s the best,” says Scott Knowles, president of Wolf Creek Co., a distributor of landscape, irrigation, lake management and drainage supplies based in Trotwood, Ohio. “It’s a never-ending argument.”

But despite their personal preferences, experts agree that contractors should be open to different varieties and new products and should consider soil type, environmental temperatures, water pressures, elevation changes and other project factors before choosing one or the other to ensure the system runs as efficiently as possible.

“Pipe is directly related to the hydraulics of an irrigation system, and if you don’t get that right, the sys-



POWER OF HABIT
Irrigation contractors often use the type of pipe they’ve always used, experts say.

tem won’t perform as it should or will become a maintenance nightmare,” says Knowles. “That’s not good for the installer or the end user.”

Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and polyethylene are the two most common types of pipe used for traditional irrigation systems. While irrigation experts recognize that both types of pipes work, there are some notable differences.

PVC is available in 20-foot lengths of rigid pipe that needs to be connected by a coupler or fitting. Polyethylene typically comes in 100- to 300-foot coils, so a much longer length of pipe can be installed before a fitting is required. It also can be easier to transport, as the coils fit in any truck bed. Because of its rigidity, PVC pipe is known to crack and shatter

in freezing temperatures, but the pipe has a higher burst pressure. Polyethylene is made of a softer plastic that is more flexible in extreme cold and is also more effective in sandy soils.

The type of pipe used generally varies region to region but often comes down to a contractor’s personal preference.

“Habits and what products have been used in the past are the primary factors used to base irrigation pipe selections,” says Tim Ricamore, central procurement manager for SiteOne Landscape Supply in Troy, Mich. “This has been the case for many years, as the habits of contractors are difficult to change.”

Jess Stryker, a retired landscape architect and owner of Jess Stryker & *Continued on page 40*

NEWSPEED

IT’S OFFICIAL

After announcing plans to combine last summer, California-based Hunter Indus-

tries bought long-time strategic partner Senninger Irrigation, based in Florida, for an undisclosed amount.

ANOTHER ONE FOR SITEONE

SiteOne Landscape Supply acquired Hydro-Scape Products, an irrigation store and landscape supplier with 17 locations in Southern California. This move is

SiteOne’s second acquisition since rebranding in October.

READER’S CHOICE

Subscribers to *Facility Executive*, a trade publication for facility

executives in all industry and service sectors, awarded Rain Bird a Readers’ Choice Award in the water management category. Winners were determined by a reader survey.



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Continued from page 38

Associates in Ventura, Calif., agrees. He says he always used PVC pipe primarily because it's what is most commonly used on the West Coast.

“I think the main reason for the West Coast using PVC versus the East Coast using poly tube is just habit,” he says. “It's just how things have been done.”

CHANGE COMING?

Contractors may be prompted to change their ways, as products evolve, systems become more efficient and installations become easier. In PVC pipe, there has been an ongoing trend toward the use of reclaimed water pipe, commonly known in the industry as purple pipe. It's driven by a growing emphasis on water conservation and reuse, particularly in areas where water is a limited resource.

“When it's determined that nonpotable, nonpurified water can be used for the purpose of irrigation, purple pipe will be specified and used on a given project,” says Ricamore. “This type of pipe has seen a significant increase in usage over the past 10 years.”

High-density polyethylene, or HDPE, is another emerging trend, particularly in commercial landscape and golf course applications. It comes in pipes measuring 2 inches wide and larger, has thicker walls and is made of denser material. Also, HDPE pipe doesn't require fittings. It's heated up and welded together. Knowles says this difference makes HDPE ideal for irrigation system main lines because it reduces the risk of breaks or cracks.

“When done properly the weld joint is stronger than the pipe itself,” he says. “On every pipe network, the weakness is the fittings, not the pipe—that's where you get cracks because of surge pressures and velocities that are too high. By eliminating fittings, you're eliminating points of failure.”

The introduction of 4710 resin in the production of HDPE began about three years ago, and has since become industry standard, replacing the 3408 and 3608 resin products used in the past. This change has allowed the pipe's pressure requirement to be met using less material, providing a production



PVC irrigation pipe has been used historically on the West Coast.

PHOTO: WOLF CREEK CO.

“I expect we will see more irrigation systems everywhere using flexible piping systems, with PEX for mainlines and poly for laterals.”

—JESS STRYKER, JESS STRYKER & ASSOCIATES

advantage to the manufacturer. As the dimensions of the pipe are reduced, the pipe becomes more flexible and easier for contractors to install. These changes also provide advantages in coiling, which reduce shipping costs for distributors.

Cross-linked polyethylene, or PEX, pipe is another product making its way into the irrigation industry. PEX is made of HDPE, but cross-linked bonds in the structure of the polymers make it stronger. It has a higher burst pressure, which is great for high-pressure mainlines, Stryker says, and PEX can withstand freezing temperatures so it can be used in any environment.

“I expect we will see more irrigation systems everywhere using flexible piping systems with PEX for mainlines and poly for laterals,” Stryker says.

When it comes to fittings, “Push-to-connect” fittings are gaining popularity. They’re quick and easy to install, saving contractors time and money. The tube is simply pushed into



Polyethylene pipe is popular in the North and East due to its flexibility in cold temperatures.

the fitting, eliminating the need for soldering, clamps, glue and even tools. An O-ring is used for sealing, and a grip ring holds the tube in place. These fittings are available for polyethylene and PVC pipes, and they also work with PEX.

“It’s really easy and quick to press those fittings on the end of a pipe and be done compared to the insert fittings needed for poly or the solvent weld fittings for PVC, which have to be clamped or welded together,” Knowles says. “That takes more time and also introduces a possible point of failure if it’s not done right.”

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.

PHOTO: GRAPIDS IRRIGATION



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THE FUTURE WORKFORCE

The landscape industry isn't alone in its labor woes; golf course superintendents fight to find good people, too. So in the midst of a worker shortage, Santaluz Club Superintendent Jeff Miller decided to hire a robot for his operation in San Diego.

Last year, Cub Cadet released the RG3 robotic greensmower after its parent company acquired Precise Path Robotics in 2014. Miller was sold on it as soon as he saw it demonstrated. He started with one unit to test its efficiency. Soon, he'll buy three more, which he says will save him nearly six figures.

He operates the RG3 on five greens; it can be programmed to mow up to 30,000 square feet. Each morning before golfers get on the course, a crew member—the RG3's wingman—hauls it to the first hole and leaves it on the edge of the green. He situates four beacons around the outside of the

**It's not if—but
when—autonomous
and robotic mowers
will help solve the
landscape industry
labor crisis.**

BY DILLON STEWART

green in a pattern specific to that hole. The beacons and the mower exchange ultrasonic sound waves, which tell the mower what green it's on and that green's cut specifications. Once they're set and the wingman pushes start, the mower cuts the green on its own.

A smarter version of this technology could be coming to the commercial landscape market soon, if a 67-year-old landscape industry veteran and a robotics research center in Pittsburgh can find an investor.

"The hypothesis is if you can make a two-man crew into a one-man crew or a three-man crew into a two, it reduces the cost of labor," says Dana Lonn, managing director of The Toro Co.'s Center for Advanced Turf Technology.

More than a decade ago, Toro dabbled with autonomous mowers to the point of producing a functioning prototype, before abandoning it due to cost. All parties believe there could be a market for the technology in a labor-starved green industry—eventually. But taking a theoretical piece of equipment and bringing it to market in a way that is affordable and practical for end users has been decades in the making.

DABBLING WITH TECHNOLOGY

The National Robotics Engineering Center (NREC) is a developmental wing of the renowned Robotics Institute at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Computer Science in Pittsburgh. The 1,000-person Robotics Institute is one of the largest bodies of researchers studying the technology in the world. These minds are so coveted that last year Uber poached 40 of its scientists to work on an autonomous cab, leaving NREC with a \$5.5 million donation as reparation.

About 50 percent of NREC's budget comes from partnerships with the U.S. government. The largest fraction of that comes from the U.S. Department of Defense, for which NREC builds autonomous military vehicles and robotic systems. NREC also has industrial partners, like John Deere. Its agriculture division isn't selling driverless equipment yet, but products like the NREC-developed Active Fill Control and the Deere-developed AutoTrac system guide tractors to harvest crops, lay seed and perform general tasks at an efficiency rate unmatched by human control. All the while the operator, or supervisor, sits back and monitors data on a video screen. *The Washington Post*

even called Deere more progressive on autonomous technology than Google.

Jeff Legault, NREC's director of strategic business development, says its purpose is to turn the Robotics Institute's research into something tangible that its partners can bring to market.

"We're trying to solve problems for clients instead of doing research of our own," he says. "The problem is solved when we find the lowest cost solution."

Currently, John Deere's only foray into the robotic mower market is its Tango, a Roomba-vacuum-style mower for consumers that sells in England. Other mower manufacturers have gone down this road, too. (See sidebar, page 46.)

Toro experimented with the idea of an autonomous mower more than a decade ago. In 2002, the company partnered with NREC to build an autonomous mower for the golf market. Toro built NREC two mower platforms for the prototypes: a Greensmaster 3100 for greens and a Groundsmaster 3500 for golf course roughs and sports fields.

NREC and Toro were successful in building a functioning prototype. Unlike a Roomba-style robotic mower, the autonomous mower did not need beacons or guide wires to



operate. Instead, it used pose estimate technology, like lidars, which emit lasers to measure distance, and GPS. This technology gave the mower the ability learn its position, surroundings and terrain and react to them. It also gave it pinpoint accuracy and the ability to stop if a human or object got too close.

Though it worked, this technology wasn't cheap enough yet. NREC and Toro couldn't produce the equipment affordably, which Toro defined as about double the cost of a commercial mower. So Toro abandoned the project. The two organizations keep in touch, but they haven't actively worked together since 2013.

SWAN SONG

Rick Cuddihe is president of Rick Cuddihe & Associates, which operates Lafayette Consulting Co. and Let's Be Green Landscaping in Prospect, Ky. While on assignment for a client of his consulting firm, Cuddihe was researching the commercial mower market and mostly found what he calls "varying degrees of good."

"Companies are basically making the same product in different colors," he says. "They take what they sold last year, manufacture it at a slightly lower cost and sell it to the consumer for more."

Upon further research, Cuddihe stumbled upon NREC's website detailing the project with Toro. He was enamored by the idea. Deeper

GLOSSARY

Robotic, autonomous—what's the difference? Here's your primer.

Robot: A device that automatically performs complicated often-repetitive tasks; a mechanism guided by automatic controls.

Autonomous: Existing or acting separately from other things or people; having the power or right to govern itself; existing or capable of existing independently.

Automated: To run or operate (something, such as a factory or system) by using machines, computers, etc., instead of people to do the work.

Lidar: (Light Detection and Ranging) A device that's similar in operation to radar but measures distance by emitting pulsed laser light instead of microwaves.

Pose estimate: The specific task of determining the pose of an object in its environment and to determine each object's position and orientation relative to some coordinate systems.

RTK: Real time kinematic (RTK) satellite navigation is a technique used to enhance the precision of position data derived from satellite-based positioning systems.

(SOURCES: MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY, NREC)

PHOTOS: DILLON STEWART, THE TORO CO.



NREC is housed in a 118-year-old ex-foundry building on the shore of the Allegheny River.

investigation convinced Cuddihe that autonomous technology had advanced and could be produced affordably.

Cuddihe knows the mower market. He's been all over the industry, starting with selling Bob-Cat snow blowers. In 1983, Dane Scag, who owned Bob-Cat, started Scag Power Equipment and asked Cuddihe to follow him.

As Cuddihe puts it, Scag was an inventor, not a businessman. So Cuddihe's business acumen made him Scag's right-hand man. He stuck with Scag as he created Great Dane in the mid-1990s and followed the brand to John Deere, which purchased it in 2000. Later, he worked with Husqvarna.

Though he's proud of what he's done, Cuddihe still has energy to do more. So in 2013, Cuddihe started Robotic Turf Equipment, reached out to NREC and embarked on a quest to produce a viable autonomous mower.

"It doesn't interest me to do the same thing everybody else is doing," Cuddihe says. "What excites me is bringing something new and different to the market."

Since the Toro project stalled, the technology became cheaper and more accurate. In the first run, GPS technology was too inaccurate. RTK base stations had to be used to bolster GPS strength within a certain proximity. Today, new algorithms and lower sensor costs enable alternate solutions for pose estimate, and more robust



Left: Toro also has built an autonomous utility vehicle prototype. Below: Toro's autonomous Greensmaster.



pose estimate systems will allow operation with poor or no GPS signal. Lidar is also cheaper now and can be coupled with or even replaced by cameras that can sense objects and the surrounding area in 3D and discern between grassy or nongrassy areas.

With a lot of money invested in confidential equipment, the barbed-wire-fence-surrounded NREC can be a secretive place, so it was difficult for Cuddihe to get in touch. But after four months, NREC staff realized who was calling and hashed out a deal to get him on board.

BIRTH OF ZERO-TURN

Most landscape companies have the desire to grow and many have the sales potential to do so—but staffing is holding them back. A survey conducted by the National Association of Landscape Professionals showed approximately 60,000 professional-level positions and nearly a quarter million labor positions needed to be filled industrywide in 2015.

To Cuddihe, this environment calls for an innovative product that changes the way contractors do business. It reminds him of the era when Dane Scag invented and

started testing hydro-drive, walk-behind zero-turn mowers in the late 1980s. Dealers said contractors would never buy the product because it cost \$1,200 more than the standard gear-drive mower.

So Cuddihe drove from northern Massachusetts to southern Florida, hauling the mower with him. He would pull up to an operation, ask for an owner or foreman and let them test the mower. Operators loved it because of how much less physical exertion it required. Employees didn't need to be as big and strong to operate the machine, opening job opportunities up for even more people.

Contractors ran to the same dealers who said it would never sell to request it for their operations, Cuddihe says.

"What I learned working with (Dane Scag) is that landscape contractors were starving for ways to produce more work with the same amount of labor, increasing the productivity of their employees," he says.

Cuddihe believes an autonomous commercial mower could have an effect similar to what Miller, the superintendent, has seen with his RG3. He reports his operation runs more efficiently than ever and the robot hasn't erased his human workers. In fact, he hasn't let anybody go and doesn't plan to. Instead, he reallocates the labor to other tasks. Where he used to send a three-man crew, he now sends one crew member and the robot. While the mower cuts, the wingman performs other tasks on the green. The RG3 cuts his average green of 7,000 square feet in about 50 minutes, giving the wingman a specific time frame for completing his end of the work.

"We do so much work by hand, like raking and rolling, that it just fit our operation perfectly," Miller says. "When I put the robot out there, I free up three guys in the morning."

CHICKEN AND THE EGG

Again, Cuddihe is crisscrossing the country trying to sell an innovative product. Again, people are having a hard time accepting new technology and its cost.

If the autonomous mower hits the market, there might be sticker shock initially. Cuddihe estimates the entire system's price tag at \$25,000. But with the labor it could save an operation that uses the wingman approach on a commercial property, he says it will be worth the investment.

For Cuddihe, the difference this time is twofold. First, instead of contractors and dealers, he's trying to convince an investor. Second, he doesn't have a prototype yet.

Cuddihe expects a \$2.5 million to \$4 million investment for a completed project, which, to him, means getting a product on the market.

Furthermore, the technology is vast. To come up with the most affordable solution, NREC engineers want to build a mower specific to the needs of a customer, which hasn't been defined yet.

"Does it need to work at night? Does it need to work in the rain?" asks Legault. "Maybe, maybe not. But the next step is engineering the system for a particular market and a particular application."

Cuddihe is targeting manufacturers with stakes in the golf and landscape markets, like John Deere and Toro. Once the product hits one market, he expects it to

organically evolve into the other.

Companies have met with Cuddihe and are interested in the technology, but they're turned off once they find out there's no prototype. It has created a chicken-and-an-egg scenario. To get an investor to believe in the product, he needs a prototype. To get a prototype, he needs an investor.

"Just come to NREC," Cuddihe says to nonbelievers. "Once people see what's going on here, they'll know it's possible. And once a prototype is built, everyone is going to want a piece of this technology."

Why? Consider Miller. His robotic mower cost \$45,000, plus another \$10,000 for programming, installation of a perimeter wire around the collar of the green and a custom trailer. But he says the machine will pay for itself within two years. On a daily basis, one mower saves him six to seven labor hours, which he equates to \$5,000 per green and \$25,000 per year. He's buying three more, which should give him an estimated \$86,000 to \$113,000 in savings per year. 📺



"(ONCE THERE IS A PROTOTYPE), EVERYONE IS GOING TO WANT A PIECE OF THIS TECHNOLOGY."

—RICK CUDDIHE

The Husqvarna Automower 450X, which sells in Europe, retails for over \$4,000.



ROOMBA'S QUEST FOR THE LAWN

For a decade, companies like John Deere and Husqvarna have made robotic mowers that function similar to a Roomba vacuum. In fact, iRobot, the company behind the Roomba vacuums, recently settled a dispute over radio frequencies with the Federal Communications Commission and will produce its own brand of robotic mowers.

Similar products are already on the market, like Husqvarna's Automower designed for homeowners. A new feature includes a weather timer, which allows the mower to operate rain or shine. Sensors in its blades measure the size of the load, telling the machine the rate at which the grass is growing. If it's not growing vigorously, the mower returns to its dock. It mows at night and in the cold. With a goal of constant maintenance, the mower typically cuts on a daily or bi-daily schedule. While a homeowner won't get those pretty straight lines with this style of mower, the lawn never gets to that due-for-a-cut stage. The customer also can manage the mower's settings and schedule remotely with a smartphone.

But robotic mowers are not flawless. Uneven terrain can throw them off course, and they have a limited coverage range. Companies boast an acre to 1.25 acres of coverage with perfect terrain, but a half-acre to a quarter acre is an optimal range. Plus, the aimless mowing pattern diminishes the quality of cut, often resulting in a rough look. In *Consumer Reports* tests, lawns were left with frayed and torn turf.

"They've sold well in Europe because the yards are smaller and people aren't as particular about the way their yards look," says Dana Lonn, managing director, Center for Advanced Turf Technology at Toro. "Yards there tend to be more ground cover than large expansions of turfgrass."

Robotic mowers are also not cheap. Some start at \$1,000, but they can run up to \$5,000. They also require the installation of a border fence, similar to an invisible dog fence.

Though they haven't had enough of an impact in the U.S. to affect business, it is certainly a product to keep an eye on going forward, experts say. Some food for thought: iRobot CEO and Chairman Colin Angle told *Forbes* recently that robotic vacuums make up 15 percent of a stagnant \$6 billion vacuum cleaner market.

PHOTO: HUSQVARNA

BUSINESS INSIDER

PRACTICAL
ADVICE FOR
RUNNING A
PROFITABLE
COMPANY

BUSINESS BASICS: NUMBERS

LET'S GROW

CASE STUDY: OUR WAY



MAKING MONEY?

Take Kevin Kehoe's advice to ensure your financial reporting system isn't holding you back from profits.

➤ PAGE 50

BUSINESS BASICS: NUMBERS

Principles of tax depreciation



BY DANIEL GORDON

The author is a CPA who caters to landscape and lawn care firms. Reach him at dan@turfbooks.com.

Many tax deductions were made permanent and several were extended for two or more years as part of the 2016 omnibus budget bill signed into law late last year. For landscape professionals, the most critical parts of the tax extender law are the Section 179 expensing and the bonus depreciation provision.

The big change this time around is the increased Section 179 equipment expensing limits of \$500,000 are now permanent, so future year-end tax planning will have more clarity than it has in the past. The law also extends bonus depreciation while paring it down each year until it phases out in 2019.

What makes this law so important? Under Section 179 of the Internal Revenue Code, if a business and the assets it is acquiring meet certain requirements, those assets can be fully expensed in the year acquired. There is no requirement that cash be expended for those assets in the year of purchase, making financing and leasing even more attractive. It's a subtle but powerful piece to the puzzle. If you're in a 39.6 percent tax bracket and you finance a \$100,000 piece of qualifying equipment, you have just reduced your federal tax liability by \$39,600 without laying out any cash.

While Section 179 doesn't increase the total amount that can be deducted over time, it allows a business to get the entire depreciation deduction in the year of acquisition—rather than taking it a little at a time over the term of an asset's useful life (five to seven years for equipment and vehicles).

Caution: The accelerated write off of Section 179 and bonus depreciation can be a double-edged sword.



The deduction is taken in full at the time of purchase, leaving no deduction in future years even though the asset is in service during those years.

So is purchasing equipment and taking an accelerated deduction at the end of a profitable year a better idea than depreciating that purchase over five to seven? Absolutely!

CPAS VS. MBAS

A colleague of mine wrote an article a little over a year ago in which he argued it's a "flawed" recommendation for accountants to suggest that their clients purchase equipment at the end of a high-profit year. His argument suggested that making asset purchases promoted over investment in assets and would surely reduce return on assets. While MBAs like to focus on many ratios, return on assets is not one well suited to our industry. It's better suited for manufacturing or other capital-intensive industries. Our industry is labor intensive and return on labor is a much better indicator than return on assets.

The two overarching factors that dictate success among my clients are high gross margins (see "Why gross margins matter" at buff.ly/1PJXxR2) and high return on investment (ROI) on marketing dollars spent. When you have a profit at year-end, pur-

chasing assets is an excellent way to have the government fund a significant part of your growth (through reduced taxes). Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Here's an example of how effectively purchasing assets in a profitable year increases short-term profits and the value of your firm. Let's assume we have profit of \$100,000 and our effective federal and state tax rate is 35 percent. Let's also assume we have the opportunity to purchase a piece of equipment for \$100,000.

Solution 1: Don't purchase equipment. Pay \$35,000 in taxes and leave the after-tax profit of \$65,000 in the company for future investment or distribute it to ownership.

Solution 2: Purchase the equipment financing 100 percent of it using a capital lease, and take the full \$100,000 deduction using the 179 deduction. With this approach, the business now has \$65,000 for future investment or owner distribution and has an additional \$35,000 to put to work as a result of reducing taxes down to zero.

Let's invest that money in marketing and see what happens. Assumptions: We're in the lawn care business, our cost per lead is \$50 and we have a closing rate of 50 percent, making our cost per sale \$100. Our average annual contract is \$500.

With this investment, we'll increase our annual number of lawn contracts by 350 (\$35,000/\$100 cost per sale), adding \$175,000 of annual recurring revenue to the long-term value of our business, which, if valued at 0.9 or more times annual revenue (a popular multiple currently being paid for lawn care companies), the ROI approaches

Continued on page 55

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"Am I really making money?"



BY KEVIN KEHOE

The author, owner-manager of 3PG Consulting, is a 25-year industry veteran. Reach him at kevinkehoe@me.com.

Is your financial reporting system costing you money? Many managers ignore reporting and rely on preconceived beliefs. Sloppy reporting combined with conventional wisdom leads to poor decision making.

Even when I demonstrate reality, many managers refuse to believe me. They say, "I make no money in maintenance; I make my profit on extras." This scenario is rarely true. Or, "I make a lot of money in snow." Maybe you did 10 years ago but not today.

Conventional wisdom married to sloppy reporting perpetuates these misconceptions. If not for management, how else do we explain that median industry net profit levels have declined over the past 10 years? It's a widespread situation that I'll address in my next few columns.

Once upon a time, sloppy reporting didn't matter as much. There was more innate profit available in the landscape business. Now, that's not the case. There are more landscapers, customers pay less and costs are higher. There is less room for monetary mistakes. Good information costs money whether it's spent on staffing or software. Yet, less has been invested in this task as overhead spending (seen as the net profit culprit) has been slashed over the past few years. The truth is, falling gross profits are the real culprit, and it's here—where reporting is sloppiest—where the real action takes place.

Outsiders think landscape management is a simple business. It's not. There are more moving parts than in almost any industry. Numerous combinations of services, weather, people and deliverables make it difficult to track "the numbers" with consistency.

Sloppy reporting is, to some degree, the "nature of the beast."

CAUSES, SOLUTIONS

Aside from the nature of the beast there are two causes: 1). lack of agreement on what exactly is the "correct" form for reporting, and 2). improper methods (processes and responsibilities) for processing, reviewing and presenting information. In simplest terms, we don't agree on the definition of gross profit or how to account for costs of goods. We don't agree on *what* is "included" in revenue and cost of goods and *when* it should be "included." Sure, everything might wash clean in the year-end financials, but what about the other 364 days when money is being made or lost?

We need agreed upon operational and financial reports and a system of processing transactions that addresses the amazing number of combinations and permutations of

services, weather, people and deliverables. At the heart of this system are a few key concepts: reporting (Figure 1) and business process (Figure 2).

Reporting defines gross profit. Business process defines the steps in processing, reviewing and presenting transactional information. The key business process concepts are: 1). estimate (whether it's a recurring contract services or a one-time service), 2). ticket (permission and budget to deliver services), 3). purchase order (permission to buy or allocate materials), and 4). invoice. All the rest are activities in the flow of managing these key concepts. So whether you spend money on software or people to get this right, you spend it wisely because the cost associated with mismanaging gross profit far outweighs the overhead associated with proper reporting.


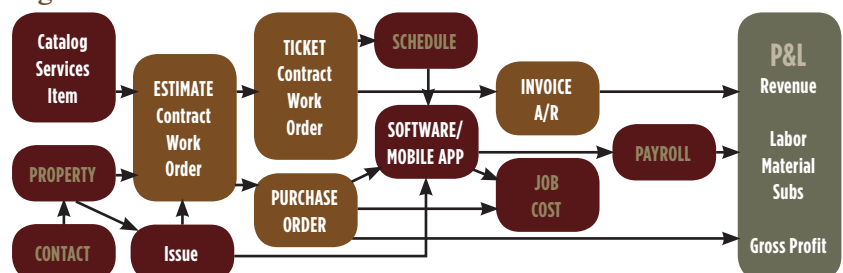
In May, I'll cover the definition of gross profit and cost of goods for proper reporting. 

Figure 1: Reporting

Divisions	Maintenance	Enhancement	Irrigation	Trees	Total
Revenue	\$1,508,720	\$419,317	\$223,901	\$141,742	\$2,293,680
Material	\$37,017	\$137,949	\$49,339	\$6,201	\$230,505
Subs	\$1,189	\$7,560	\$535	\$53,067	\$62,351
Labor	\$768,967	\$124,399	\$61,109	\$10,685	\$965,160
COGS-Direct Cost	\$807,173	\$269,908	\$110,982	\$69,952	\$1,258,016
Gross Profit	\$701,546	\$149,409	\$112,918	\$71,790	\$1,035,664
Gross Margin	46.5%	35.6%	50.4%	50.6%	45.2%

Figure 2: Business Process



CASE STUDY: OUR WAY

‘Way’ to go

Recognizing well-deserving employees boosts morale at J.W. Townsend Landscapes. BY CASEY PAYTON



Leigh Townsend, president of J.W. Townsend Landscapes, is always looking for ways to invest in his people, and he's willing to learn from ideas that have been successful at other companies. When he heard in his peer group about a successful employee recognition program at another landscape company, he adopted the idea and tailored it to fit his Charlottesville, Va., operation.

The idea was an employee standard of conduct and monthly recognition program. Since implementing it, morale has increased and employees have received the appreciation they deserve, Townsend says.

The program is called The Townsend Way, and it's based on the company's core values: integrity, teamwork, safety, community, client focus and excellence. Employees who exemplify these characteristics are eligible to win The Townsend Way award. Team members nominate peers to receive the award, and it's announced at the monthly company breakfast.

"We've always looked for ways to recognize our employees," Townsend says. "So when we heard about this idea from Nathan Helder, (owner of Gelderman Landscaping Services in Waterdown, Ontario) we knew it would be a good fit."

In addition to being honored in front of the company, the recipient's name goes on a plaque that hangs in the front office, recognition on the company's website and a small gift. Townsend says the monetary investment in the program is minimal,

but taking the time to recognize a deserving employee is invaluable.

"Our staff is out there doing great work every day and may not always get special recognition for it," he says. "This has been a way to change that—to show employees that their peers are recognizing what they're doing."

One of the best examples of an act that lead to a The Townsend Way nomination happened when the recognition program was still brand new. A field staff member had clocked out for the evening when he noticed the nursery manager unloading a delivery truck full of plants. Rather than getting in the car and leaving, he stayed and helped.


"It's that kind of action—an employee doing something above and beyond when they're not even asked—that represents The Townsend Way," Townsend says. "The classic definition of integrity is 'doing the right thing when nobody is watching,' and that's what this idea boils down to. We feel strongly that our people are the most powerful part of our company. If we can recognize those extra efforts they're making that might have otherwise gone unrecognized, we feel that's the right thing to do."

Although some employees were unexpectedly averse to recognition, Townsend says the program has enhanced an already strong, positive company culture since he introduced it four years ago.

"There are occasionally those individuals who prefer not to be recognized and are uncomfort-

able with it—something we hadn't initially expected," Townsend says. "But for the most part, the response has been very positive and the effort has been well received."

Typically, there are five or six nominations for the award and one person often receives multiple entries, so there's no need for management to weigh in. But if there's a tie, Townsend polls the executive staff to determine the honoree. Some team members have won multiple consecutive months.

"When we were just starting to implement the idea, that was something we kind of frowned on," Townsend says. "We wanted different people to win each month. But one of the lessons learned is that it's OK for the same person to win multiple times. If they're repeatedly deserving of it and their peers believe they should continually win, why wouldn't we give it to them? The whole idea is to recognize employees who are going above and beyond—even if it's the same person." 

Payton is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

COMPANY: J.W. Townsend Landscapes

HEADQUARTERS: Charlottesville, Va.

REVENUE: Not disclosed

EMPLOYEES: 50

CLIENT MIX: 95 percent residential

SERVICE MIX: 50 percent maintenance; 50 percent installation

ZERO-TURN MOWERS



LAZER Z E-SERIES

COMPANY: Exmark

URL: Exmark.com

The Lazer Z E-Series commercial zero-turn mowers, featuring heavy-duty tubular steel unibody frames, are now available in side- and rear-discharge configurations with a 72-in. deck. Their simplified hydro-drive systems use exclusive Parker unitized pump and wheel motor systems, with no hoses to leak.

WRIGHT ZTO

COMPANY: Wright Manufacturing

URL: WrightMfg.com

The Wright Zero Technology Optimized (ZTO) mid-mount zero-turning radius mower is available in deck widths of 48, 52 and 61 in. An undercarriage cage protects the transmissions and their filters, and an exclusive transmission interlock is built into the controls, eliminating the need

for a separate parking brake.



SILVER EAGLE SERIES

COMPANY:

Dixie Chopper

URL:

DixieChopper.com

The Silver Eagle series is now offered in a 72-in. Elite X deck design, featuring blade overlap. Choose from a Kawasaki FX or Kohler electronic fuel injection (EFI) engine to cut up to 6.4 acres per hour. A five-year, bumper-to-bumper warranty and an extended five-year, 3,000-hour pumps and wheel motor warranty are available.



CXR-52/60

COMPANY: Mean Green Products

URL: MeanGreenProducts.com

The quiet CXR-52/60 Mean Green Commercial Electric Zero Turn Mower features an aerospace-designed chassis, contributing to its low weight and low center of gravity. Powered by Mean Green Lithium Energy Modules, the CXR Zero Turn offers all-day mowing, the company says.



B23i

COMPANY: Walker Manufacturing Co.

URL: WalkerMowers.com

The B23i compact mower features a 23-hp Kohler EFI engine and a ground speed of 8 mph. It's designed for tight spaces and can tackle hillsides easily, the company says. A variety of seasonal add-on attachments are available.





Z960M ZTRAK

COMPANY: John Deere

URL: Deere.com

The 31-hp Z960M is available in three deck configurations: 60 in., 60-in. Mulch

On Demand or 72 in. Options include dump-from-seat material collection system capability, three-way adjustable suspension seats and easy-to-use diagnostics.



XR SERIES

COMPANY: Altoz

URL: Altoz.com

The XR Series consists of four precision-cut models: XR 480, XR 540 with option of Honda GXV or Kohler engines, and 48- or 54-in. cutting deck widths. Features include Twin Hydro-Gear ZT-2800 transmissions, 20-in. rear tires and a high back seat for a comfortable ride, the company says.



RZT PRO SERIES

COMPANY: Jacobsen

URL: Jacobsen.com

Choose from 50- or 60-in. cutting widths, a 25- or 27-hp Kawasaki FX engine, or a fuel-efficient 27-hp Kohler EFI engine to power up to 5.3 acres per hour. A cooling fan reduces the belt and spindle's operating temperatures while keeping the top side of the deck clean.



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PRO LANDSCAPE



COMPANY: Drafix Software

URL: ProLandscape.com

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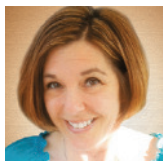
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Tax depreciation

Continued from page 48

500 percent. In addition to increasing the value of our company, we've also added more annual net income from these newly acquired customers for as long as we have them on our books.

By purchasing assets in a profitable year, we can increase profit, increase net income, increase the value of our company and use the money that would've otherwise been given to the government to fund these increases and purchase the assets needed to service our newly found increase in business.

Currently the highest federal tax rate is 39.6 percent. Add to that the top state rate, which can be 10 percent or more, and the top combined rate approaches 50 percent. Any serious discussion about company finances must consider the tax effect of various decisions as the government will either be your partner in profits, by having you pay taxes, or help you fund your business by allowing you tax deductions and credits.

The savvy operator will take advantage of the crucial help the government gave growing landscape industry firms when it passed the 2016 omnibus budget bill and related tax extender provisions. 

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BACKSTORY

INTERVIEW BY DILLON STEWART



Habitat for Humanity, contributing contractor, "We always look for ways to give back. We've done food drives before. But this was great because we were able to use our skill, people and materials to help."

Daniel Plawski

Plawski, who immigrated to the U.S. when he was ten, says life in Poland shaped his work ethic. "I think it came from being from a country where, simply, there is no work. You come here, and you can essentially work as much as you want."

**FOUNDER/CEO
PENINSULA LANDSCAPING
HAMPTON, VA.**

EDUCATION

Tabb High School
Yorktown, Va.
Class of 2010

Old Dominion University
Norfolk, Va.
Studied business administration
2010-2011

WORK EXPERIENCE

2006

Sign Holder
Pizza King
Yorktown, Va.

2007-2008

Cashier
Chick-fil-A
Yorktown, Va.

2008-2009

Store Manager
Busch Gardens, Anheuser Busch
Williamsburg, Va.

2015

Founder
Lawnwizard
Yorktown, Va.

2006-Present

Founder/CEO
Peninsula Landscaping
Yorktown, Va.

"Everybody was following that path because it was supposedly the key to a good job, but I realized I didn't need a degree to make a good living."

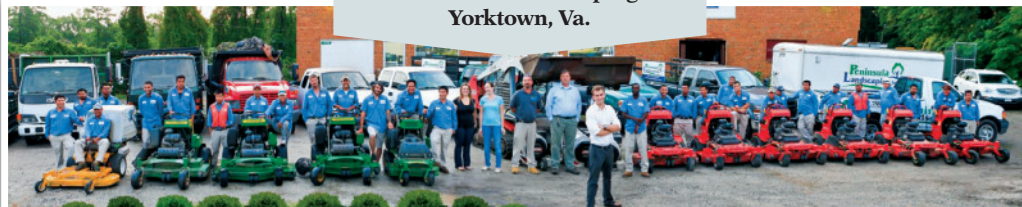
"I learned about good customer service there, and I think it had to do with my success."

"The low cost of entry attracted me to this business. I came from nothing. I had the clothes on my back, essentially. But I could get a lawn mower for \$40 and start cutting lawns."

To be allowed to work at age 13, he had to get a work permit from his middle school verifying that he was passing his classes.

"I wanted to be financially independent, so I was working 80-100 hours a week. Once, I couldn't get a ride, so I biked 35 miles to the store."

WORDS OF WISDOM "I have a network of people who have businesses. They say you'll be like one of the five people you spend the most time with. So I choose very carefully." • "The green industry needs to not be afraid of asking for the full price. If you can't, then you shouldn't be in business because you're not a businessperson, you're just a lawn mower." • "There is a big difference between having a business and having a job, and I think there are a lot of businesses that aren't really businesses. They're just people who are self employed."



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*Class defined as vertical-shaft, commercial 800cc to 875cc gasoline engines. **Compared to a comparable KOHLER carbureted engine under comparable loads and duty cycles. Based on 600 hours of annual operation.

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