

BY RON HALL / SENIOR EDITOR

Boring? Are you kidding?

The Sonnen family — Rudy, his wife Paulette, and their sons, Cory and Ty — started Western Productions, a seed company, about six years ago. Rudy had already logged over 20 years in the turf and forage seed business.

The Sonnens work elbow-to-elbow in a small building just outside the small town of Woodburn, OR. There's nothing fancy about their offices. They roll up their sleeves when they walk through the front door.

The day I visited their operation, you didn't have to wipe the dirt from your shoes, the telephone jangled incessantly and everybody seemed to be moving in all different directions at once. And this was two or three weeks before the "busy" season, which usually kicks off with seed harvesting about July 4.

When somebody remarks that something is about as boring "as watching grass grow," they probably haven't spent much time in the Willamette Valley in western Oregon.

If they had, they would know that many people here — like the Sonnens — spend a lot of their time watching grass grow. And they can, in fact, get darn excited about it. Growing grass seed, both turf and forage, is the livelihood of several thousand people in this valley.

While grass seed is grown elsewhere in the United States and Canada, northern Europe and even New Zealand, the Willamette Valley is ground zero for most of the world's cool-season turf seed, including almost all of its perennial ryegrass seed.

For this reason, you should be aware of the valley, too, which gets its name from the Willamette River that meanders northward, mostly through farmland, before emptying into the mightier Columbia River

near Portland. The valley produces an amazing variety of crops, at least to a Midwesterner like myself — everything from berries to hops to hazelnuts.

But the production of grass seed — half a million acres worth — is, by far and away, King of the Crops here. It's Oregon's third most valuable agricultural product, surpassed in value only by nursery stock and cattle.

There are good reasons why this valley is such a prime location for growing grass seed, including climate. The valley is bounded on the west by the Coast Range and by the higher Cascade Mountains in the east. Winters and springs are generally cool, but rarely bitter cold, and moist. Summers are usually hot and dry.

But the biggest reason is the development over the last 50 years of an amazing infrastructure which this season will harvest, package, inspect, label and ship about 800 million pounds of grass and legume seeds. Much of this takes place in a period of about two months.

Growing grass for seed, even in good times when the economy is rolling and demand is high, is, like all agriculture, a tough business that takes tough, determined people like the Sonnens and the many others like them in the valley.

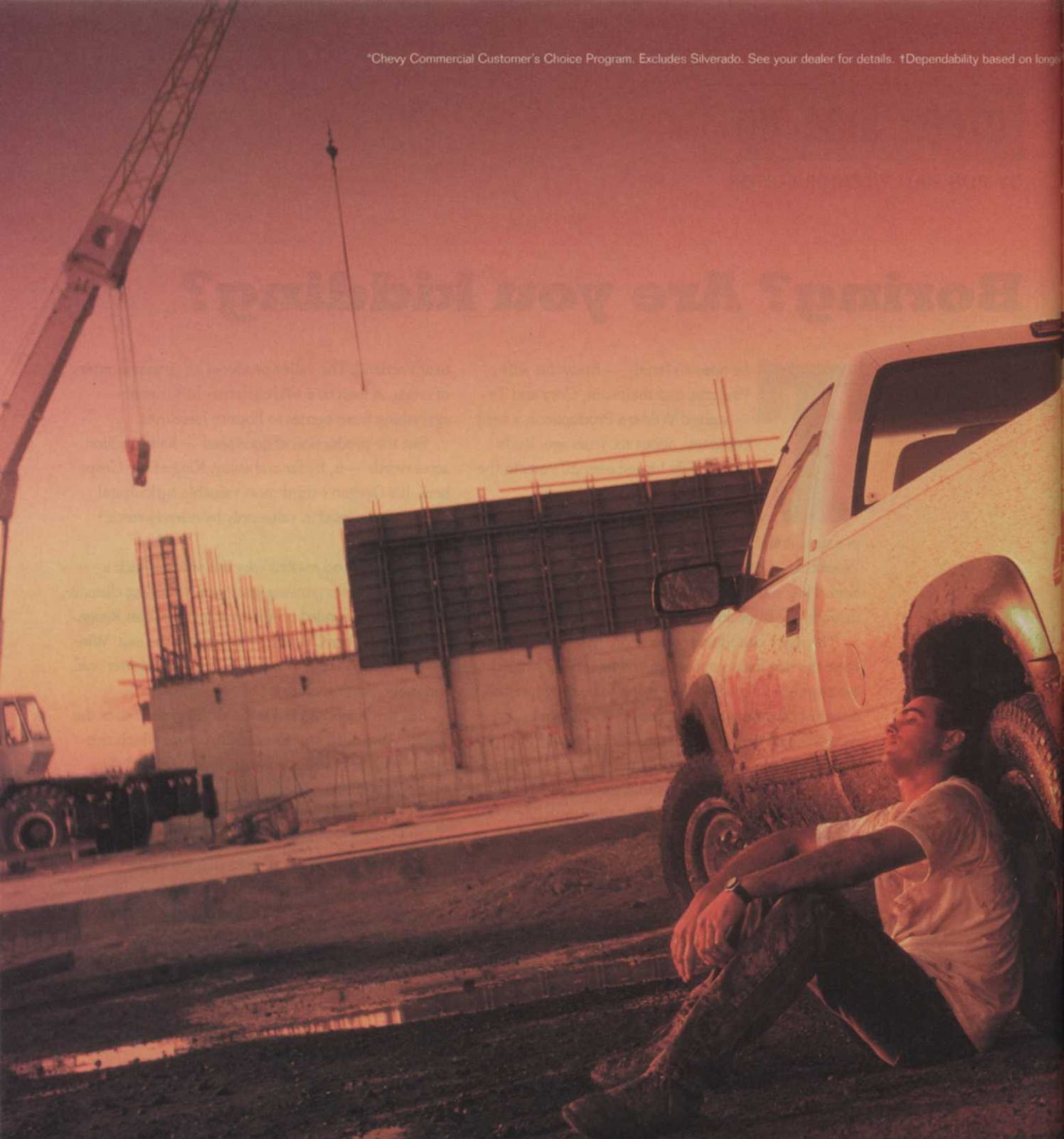
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"Operating headaches are part of the industry, but it's how they're handled and how they're kept from reoccurring that makes a company run smoothly."



Don't plan, and go nowhere

There seems to be a common question that Green Industry owners and managers constantly ask: Is all this work and worry worth it? Nothing ever seems to go right.

Operating headaches are a part of the industry, but it's how they're handled and what solutions are used to keep them from reoccurring that makes a company run smoothly and efficiently. The type and volume of these headaches occur at all levels of your business (from the field to the office) and affect companies of all sizes. Through pre-planning, you can avoid some of these.

But pre-planning is often the last thing a fledgling business owner does. Here's a typical landscape and maintenance firm start-up scenario and its problems.

John's stab at success

John works as a field foreman and sees that the owner of the company drives a nice car, has a nice house and takes great vacations. John tells his wife that through his efforts, the owner is making lots of money and he's not getting paid what he's worth. They decide to start their own company so they can make all that money for themselves.

At this point, the headaches begin. They borrow start-up money and purchase trucks, equipment and office equipment. They are now in a cash shortage but don't know it yet.

John sells the work, installs the work, fixes the equipment and more. His wife tries to raise the family and run the office simultaneously. At first, they can

manage the daily affairs because the company is so small. It's not difficult to get work because John works on every project himself, and therefore the quality of the work is high and the price is low.

But soon John has so much work he has to hire a foreman to run the crews while he sells work. The office work becomes too much for his wife, so they hire an office staff. Cash flow is at a critical level — they scarcely cover payroll and get way behind with payments to their vendors. Soon, they can't pay themselves a salary. It now becomes harder to get equipment fixed and buy material for jobs due to the cash crunch.

The office staff doesn't know what information to track so they track everything, but John can't understand why he's losing money when his company is so busy. His employees are not producing the same quality work, and his customers begin to complain. Some laborers don't show up every day, causing scheduling problems. John works harder than ever and makes less money.

After three years, John closes the business. He and his wife never developed a plan for managing the company's growth or proactively (not reactively) running the company.

Unfortunately, this is typical in our industry since landscaping and maintenance seem so easy. John still can't understand why his former boss, Sandy, was doing so well. Next month, we'll see what made Sandy's company so successful.

— Jerry Gaeta is a partner with The Good Earth Inc., Mt Pleasant, SC, and a Green Industry consultant. He can be reached at 843/884-6114.



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industry almanac

NEWS YOU CAN USE

Kawasaki, LESCO form alliance

GRAND RAPIDS, MI — Kawasaki Motors Corp., USA, has formed an alliance with LESCO, Inc. Through the new venture, LESCO will carry Kawasaki power products as its exclusive hand-held power equipment line in 234 LESCO Service Centers® and 75 LESCO Stores-on-Wheels® throughout the U.S. Selected LESCO locations will also inventory Kawasaki water, trash and semi-trash pumps along with four generator models, while others can special order these products.

Albizo leaves ANLA

Joel Albizo left the American Nursery & Landscape Association (ANLA) in July to join PlantAmerica, a green industry technology firm. He joined the ANLA in 1988 as director of public relations.

Griffin markets new fungicide

VALDOSTA, GA — Griffin LLC, a joint venture company of Griffin Corporation and DuPont, will market its own brand of chlorothalonil fungicide, to be sold under the trade name Concorde SST.

BASF responds to EPA study

RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK, NC — As a result of the tolerant reassessment process conducted by the EPA under the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA), BASF Agricultural Products has agreed to amend usage patterns for the broad-spectrum fungicide Curalan

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CLIPPINGS

ABT saga drawing to a close

LAS VEGAS, NV — The saga of the bankruptcy of AgrioBioTech Inc. (ABT) is finally coming to an end, and the U.S. turf seed industry is hoping for more stability.

The bankruptcy court, located in this desert city, sold most of ABT's grass business to a group consisting of former ABT president Kenneth Budd, Dick Olson of Proseed Marketing, Jefferson, OR, and Idaho-based J.R. Simplot Co. The price was \$24.5 million.

As of press time, it wasn't clear how the three parties would split the assets of the failed seed company, but split them they will, sources in Oregon told *Landscape Management*. The new owners reportedly began entertaining offers from other seed companies for certain varieties soon after the announcement was made, the industry source said.

The purchase price, along with the sale of most of ABT's forage business to Research Seeds Inc., should generate about \$60 million. With another \$20 million due from seed inventories and accounts receivables, the court expects to generate \$80 to \$90 million to help pay off farmers and other creditors who took big hits when ABT declared bankruptcy this past January.

David Nelson, of the Oregon Grass Seed Council, said that the resolution of the bankruptcy — along with management of ABT's inventory by experienced seed people — "will help bring stability to the industry and to the market."

ABT, with sales of less than \$1 million in 1992, went on an extended buying spree through the 1990s and bought up over 40 turf and forage seed companies, most of them family-run operations. The company grew to \$200 million in sales by 1999 but ran out of capital and declared bankruptcy this past January. The failure left behind a lot of unhappy farmers and other creditors, and lots of turf seed looking for buyers.

Ryegrass — what a bargain!

BY RON HALL/
SENIOR EDITOR

If you purchase large quantities of perennial ryegrass seed — perhaps for overseeding warm-season grasses or for establishing new lawns — you'll love this story.

Perennial ryegrass seed is a bargain this season. While not all varieties are available, it may be a long time before you will see prices this low for many other of your favorite varieties of quality ryegrass seed.

Here are some reasons why:

▶ the large amount of acreage planted for ryegrass turf seed in 1998. The number of acres of perennial ryegrass harvested in



Turf managers will get a ryegrass price break

Oregon rose from 137,750 acres to 186,500 acres from 1995 to 1999. Production rose from 170 million lbs. to 279 million lbs. of seeds in the same period.

▶ the use of the plant growth regulator

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Palisades (Primo) on production fields which increases seed yields by about 30%.

► a sizable carryover of the 1999 ryegrass crop was exacerbated by the January bankruptcy of the huge turf and forage grass consolidator AgriBioTech. Some growers who had been under contract to grow AgriBioTech varieties found their barns full of 1999 ryegrass seed as this year's harvest began. (See related article on AgriBioTech, page 16.)

New lawns, overseeding

In general, Oregon farmers have been boosting ryegrass seed production to meet the demands of the overseeding market. Golf courses in the southern United States routinely overseed perennial ryegrass into their courses for winter color and wear tolerance. The home and commercial construction boom in the 1990s also bumped up turf seed demand.

But nobody in the Willamette Valley (where most of the perennial ryegrass seed is grown) is happy with the oversupply of this one species of seed this season.

"It's definitely a buyers' market," said Phil Ward, director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture, during a June visit to the new Barenbrug warehouse/packaging facility in the Valley. "Basically, every company has carryover of perennial ryegrass. This happens about every four or five years."

Look for the seed companies and the farmers who they

contract to grow the seed to take steps, including cutting acreage, to get supply better in line with demand.

Seed crops in demand

Don't expect soft prices in other species of turf seed this season in spite of average to relatively good crops in the Pacific Northwest.

"The crop of common and proprietary bluegrass is estimated at approximately 80 to 85 million lbs.," reported Gayle Jacklin of Simplot Turf and Horticulture, headquartered in Post Falls, ID. "Overall yields will be average to slightly above average. We are estimating carryover pounds to be the lowest on record, about 6 million lbs. Traditionally, 10 to 12 million lbs. are carried over."

Demand for Kentucky bluegrass has been high. "During November and December ('99) and extending through April and May, we experienced a movement of proprietary bluegrass like I have not seen in 20 years," said Tom Stanley, marketing director of Turf-Seed, Inc., Hubbard, OR.

Expect firm prices for turf-type tall fescue also. Because of a very dry 1999 autumn, Missouri's Ky-31 tall fescue production was estimated to be off by about a third. Shortfall will increase demand for other varieties — keeping turf-type tall fescue prices firm.

"The Ky-31 crop looks to be less than 100 million lbs. for 2000," said Stanley. "Compared with a 140-million lb. crop in 1999, the 2000 Ky-31 crop will be significantly less."

The John Deere Worldwide Commercial and Consumer Equipment Division recently celebrated the production of the first Gator® utility vehicle at the company's new \$30 million, 300,000-sq.-ft. facility located in Williamsburg, VA. Here, Lou Gomez, project manager, John Deere Vehicle Group (driver's seat) and Al Smalls, technician, display the first Gator utility vehicle for local government officials, members of the local business community and all John Deere Vehicle Group employees at a celebration marking the first production on Thursday, June 15, 2000.



Exmark launches new Web site

BEATRICE, NE — Exmark Manufacturing Corp. joined the growing number of Green Industry companies entering cyberspace by recently launching its new Web site: www.exmark.com.

Exmark national marketing manager John Cloutier believes the site will enable his company to provide better customer service. He also hopes the company's Internet efforts will spur on dealers to take advantage of the Web.

"A key element in our Web initiative is to act as a facilitator in getting our dealer network to utilize the Internet as a sales, customer service and communications tool," he said. "Our goal is to have 100% of our dealer and distributor group with Internet and e-mail capabilities."



continued from page 16

in professional turf and ornamentals. Curalan uses will continue after 2000 in golf course and industrial turf management areas.

Vendex® OK for ornamentals

VALDOSTA, GA — The EPA reinstated application to ornamentals for the Vendex 50WP-T/N/O miticide label.

Toro aiding Audubon program

RIVERSIDE, CA — Design a sprinkler, help wildlife. That's the message The Toro Company sent as it announced a program aimed at helping Audubon International's Cooperative Sanctuary System. For every irrigation design submitted to Toro Irrigation by Oct. 1, 2000 that employs the 570Z PRX Series spray sprinklers, Toro will donate \$100 to Audubon's Backyard Program. Designers are encouraged to submit designs. Send them to: The Toro Company, Toro/Audubon Partnership, 5825 Jasmine St., Riverside, CA 92504.

DTN partners with ESRI

MINNEAPOLIS, MN — DTN Kavouras Weather Services, a subsidiary of Data Transmission Network Corp. (DTN), Omaha, NE, has partnered with the Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) to provide real-time weather information in ESRI format that can be used with GIS software.

Users will be able to better calculate and communicate when and where a serious storm will impact a specific area.

[CLIPPINGS]

PLCAA polls members on Dursban limit

According to a recent poll conducted by the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA), a little over half of landscape professionals say the loss of the insecticide Dursban will affect their business. Most say they haven't received any complaints from customers, and a large percentage are concerned about the future ramifications of government regulation. (See related story, page 44.)



The poll was sent to 605 regular PLCAA members and received 16% response. Here's how each member responded to the three questions asked in the poll:

- ▶ Will the eventual loss of Dursban affect your business? Yes: 55% No: 45%
- ▶ Have you experienced customer complaints, questions and confusion about the negative publicity surrounding the Dursban story? Yes: 24% No: 76%

The strongest response came with the question: How are you conducting business in the face of losing this product and potentially other products due to environmental regulations? Most members question the reasoning behind such decisions and whether the EPA is more politically than environmentally motivated. Some said they have no Plan B, but displayed resiliency by saying, "Business will go on."

The poll also revealed a discrepancy in members' knowledge of insecticides. Many feel that the loss of Dursban is a minor issue because of all the other products available. Other responses showed that some members didn't know of any alternative products.

Those who said the loss of Dursban would affect them cited a lack of other effective insecticides and possibility of lower customer satisfaction when a less effective insecticide is used. Others cited the low cost of Dursban vs. other insecticides. Those who said they weren't going to be affected argued that they hadn't used Dursban in years, or had never used it at all.

The small number of members who said they had received customer complaints blamed the news media for presenting an unbalanced story of the reasoning behind the ban. Several mentioned that the calls they got were from customers who were not really anti-Dursban, but simply concerned about the overall safety of lawn care products.

Eco Soil, Simplot amend purchase deal

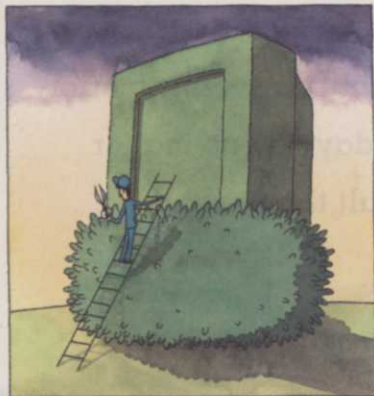
Eco Soil Systems, Inc. (ESSI) amended the agreement to sell its Turf Partners subsidiary assets to the J.R. Simplot Company. The new agreement calls for a fixed purchase price for Turf Partners' assets, payable in cash at the closing of the transaction.

The total purchase price includes a payment to ESSI of \$23 million, assumption of Turf Partners' bank debt of \$17 million and assumption of Turf Partners' liabilities associated with its existing vendors, contracts and leases. Under the amendment, ESSI will not be required to deliver a tangible net worth of \$3 million nor repay at least \$7 million of inter-company debt to Turf Partners.

Simplot agreed to provide ESSI with a \$2 million letter of credit and a loan of \$3 million to be used as working capital. The \$3 million loan is to be repaid at the close of the transaction.

Eco Soil and Simplot have also agreed to several distribution, supply and field trial agreements, including Simplot's purchase of a minimum of \$5 million of Eco Soil FreshPack® product over the first two years of a five-year agreement.

Web-wise operators



Survey respondents *Landscape Management's State of the Industry Report* are starting to frequent the Internet in record numbers. Our survey showed that one in five (21%) of respondents' organization have their own Web-sites and that more than half (53%) use the Internet for business-related purposes.

Grounds managers in our survey are by far the most active Internet users for business, with 71% of them reporting, compared to landscape contractors (55%) and lawn care companies (46%).

Cyber-savvy landscape pros

Bozzuto Landscaping's site attracts hundreds of hits per day from current and potential customers. Searches for potential customers, product research and limited buying also occupy users. But one of the best uses benefits the company directly, says Tom Davis, president. "People can apply for a job with us online. We've already hired several people from our Web-site applications."

Wayne Richards, COO of Cagwin & Dorward, also sees a world of opportunity online: "The Internet will become a primary communication tool for the green industry within five years. If you think about the impact the facsimile had on the speed of communication, look at the possibilities of the Internet."

Several landscape managers noted the advantages of using Web-sites to communicate with residential customers.

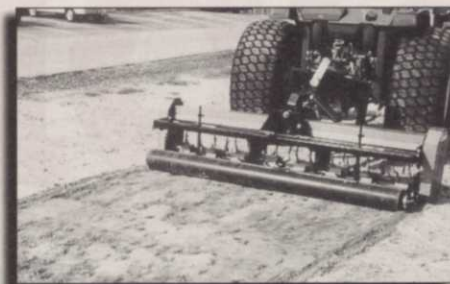
"If we were residentially driven, the Internet would be good for marketing," says Neil Thelen, president of Landmark Landscapes. "The residential customer need special attention."

And the face-to-face relationship with dealers still rates high, despite some ventures into Internet buying. Gary Nichols of Twin Oaks Landscaping is typical of many landscapers checking plant supplies and occasionally buying office supplies online. But he still prefers to buy equipment from local vendors. "They're quality people with whom you want to do business," he notes.

Don't look for Internet use to decrease in the future. Rick Randall, CEO of Randall & Blake Inc., sums it up: "Two years ago, we expanded to a wide area network bringing all our offices online and giving us Internet access. Now, we are ordering materials, downloading and sending plans, negotiating change orders, you name it. We will be doing most of our business on the Web within the next couple of years."

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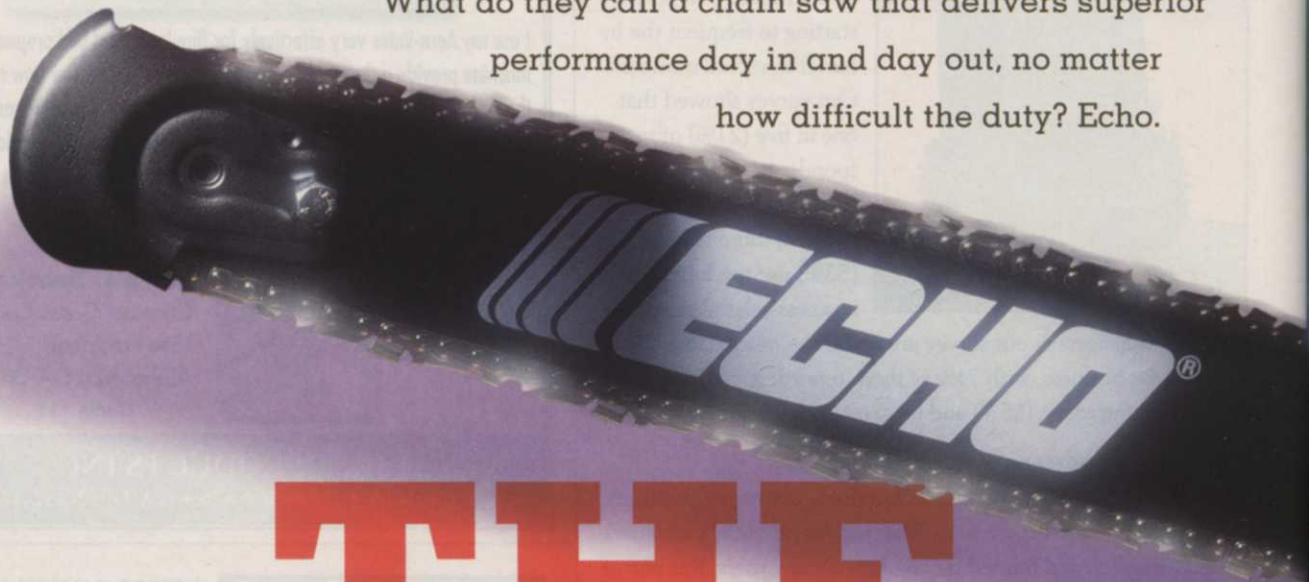


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