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For evidence look no further than our On The Job program, which gives qualified businesses commercial breaks, so to speak.

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ON THE JOB

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Cover Story

18 Ready to Grow Again
Tom Pruett recognizes that biggest isn't necessarily best, but he's got his company poised for some controlled growth.



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Organic and compost are words that people like to throw around, but where do they really fit in the contractor's business?

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With fall approaching, now is the time to be selling customers on the benefits of aeration.

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Fall preemergents offer contractors the opportunity to get a jump start on spring weed control.

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Overhead recovery has to be done correctly, and that means doing it uniquely for maintenance and installation companies.

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Knowing how to install an irrigation system isn't the only challenge associated with setting up an irrigation division.



Cover photo

by Rob Flynn,
Raleigh, NC

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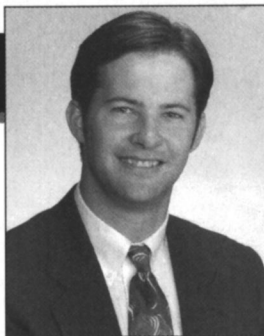
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Bob West
Editor

H

ow long has it been since you made yourself unhappy?

Strange question, isn't it? Who in their right mind would consciously seek out an opportunity to make themselves unhappy?

We do it, though, but we don't even know it. We do it every time we lose our perspective and forget about the things that really matter in life and to us.

Keeping things in proper perspective is something I've always prided myself on because, in the grand scheme of things, I think I have a pretty good life, free of any troubles of consequence.


But that doesn't stop me from wondering, "Why me?" at certain times or feeling that things will never improve when I find myself especially challenged. I would imagine that more than a couple contractors also find themselves thinking the same thoughts during the hectic times in the middle of the season when the crews are running, problems are occurring and solutions are missing.

This is when it seems there's always something to do that has to be done 'now' and that only you can do it. It can be enough to make a person crazy, or at least less pleasant than they need to be.

The last few days before my writing this have been this way, and I haven't handled it particularly well. One of my favorite remedies for these times is just to get out of the office for a little bit, go for a walk and restore my sanity before I say something I'll regret or do something I can't fix.

Yesterday, I took one of those walks at a particularly harried point in the afternoon, and it was probably my most productive time of the entire day. Along the way, I encountered two scenes that reminded me how insignificant my problems at the time really were: a person in dirty clothes sleeping on a park bench and an ambulance with lights flashing and sirens blaring as it raced toward a nearby hospital.

Regardless of how upsetting my problems may have seemed in my own little world, I was reminded then that I was not lying in the back of an ambulance requiring emergency medical attention and I knew that I was going to sleep comfortably at home at the end of the day. The problems that I was momentarily escaping were still there when I returned to the office, but then I saw them for what they really were, and appreciated what they weren't.

Now I'm not so naïve or idealistic to think that I will never again lose my perspective or ability to discern real problems from minor inconveniences in life. That's a trap I know I'll be ensnared within again at some point, but I bet we all can do a better job of delaying how long it takes until that happens. 

Bob West

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"Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing can help the man with the wrong mental attitude. ."
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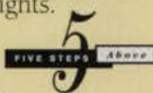
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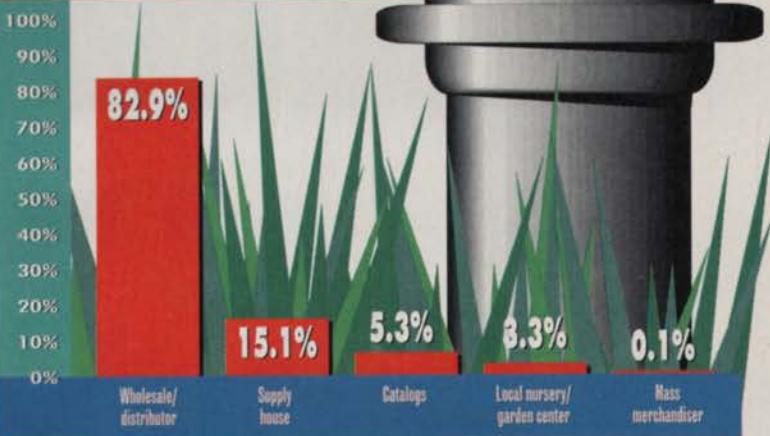
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USE READER SERVICE #82

A WHOLESALE PURCHASE

When it comes to purchasing irrigation supplies, contractors have a number of options available to them. One, however, is clearly the most popular irrigation component provider — the wholesaler/distributor. Better than 82 percent of 1,000 surveyed *Lawn & Landscape* readers offering irrigation services said they buy their irrigation products from a wholesaler/distributor, followed by supply houses (15.1 percent), catalogs (5.3 percent), local nurseries/garden center (3.3 percent) and mass merchandiser (0.1 percent).

IRRIGATION SUPPLIES SOLD HERE



(Source: *Lawn & Landscape* Reader Survey)

SEED GROWERS FIELD A FULL LINEUP

SALEM, ORE. — It was nothing short of a seed lover's paradise as producers of turf for the professional contractor and golf course markets held field days in the Pacific Northwest.

Attendees had the chance to visit with researchers and field representatives from Jacklin Seed, The Scotts Company, Seed Research of Oregon, Turf Merchants, Turfseed and

Advanta Seeds Pacific.

While the majority of the attention was on the companies' research plots, attendees also had the immediate future on their minds.

The continuing story of acquisitions by AgriBioTech, Las Vegas, Nev., was a popular topic of conversation, with some turfseed farmers wondering how ABT plans to secure

the necessary acreage throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Regulations against field burning are beginning to take their toll on farmers, who have seen post-burning yields drop and now have to plant new fields of crops about every three years, compared with every seven to 10 years before.

"Not being able to burn the fields costs us about 250 pounds of bluegrass seed per acre," noted John Cornwall, a farmer for Jacklin Seed. "From my perspective, that means costs for seed have to go up."

Most growers seem to project an average to moderately good 1998 crop yield, depending on the variety, although since recent weather conditions have depressed seed demand and driven inventories up, a smaller yield isn't necessarily bad for the industry.

ACQUISITIONS CONTINUE

The industry's giants continue to grow larger and continue the consolidation trend as TruGreen-ChemLawn, Mem-

phis, Tenn., acquired Lifescapes, Atlanta, Ga., and Cook's Landscaping, in Austin, Texas.

Lifescapes and Cook's represent a total of approximately \$14 million in 1998 revenues.

Meanwhile, The Brickman Group, Long Grove, Ill., announced that it entered the Denver market and continued its westward push with the acquisition of Allen Keesen Landscape, a \$6-million firm.

The key personnel of the acquired companies are expected to stay on as employees of TruGreen-ChemLawn and Brickman, respectively.

SIMPLOT MERGES TURF, FERTILIZER BUSINESSES

BOISE, IDAHO — The J.R. Simplot Co. merged its grass seed business with its professional turf and horticultural fertilizer businesses.

Jacklin Seed and the Best® brand fertilizer will now operate as Simplot Turf and Horticultural Products.

(continued on page 10)



Attendees at the various seed fields events had the opportunity to examine a host of experimental turfgrass varieties up close. Photo: *Lawn & Landscape* staff

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(continued from page 8)

"We believe this will strengthen both product lines and make us more responsive to customers," said Doyle Jacklin, president of the newly formed entity. Wayne Burk will continue to manage the Best operations as senior vice president and general manager of fertilizer products.

Steve Beebe, Simplot president, said the merger will not affect the brands, labels or production facilities for the products involved.

In an unrelated announcement, Simplot signed letters of intent to acquire the assets of seed distribution companies – National of Illinois and National of New Jersey – which will become part of the new company.

PEOPLE

Briggs & Stratton has named **Marv Klowak** vice president of engineering and quality assurance and elected **William Reitman**, corporate officer.

AgrEvo promoted **Larry Norton** to business support manager for its Green Industry Group.

Florists' Mutual Insurance Company appointed **Andrew Protz** as marketing representative for the eastern Ohio region and **Brent Bates** as vice president – director of claims/claims counsel.

David Will is a new territory manager for Echo Inc.

Travis Meacham joined Jacklin Seed's Washington operation as a grower services field representative.

Scott Burgess was promoted to director of marketing and sales for Stens Power Equipment Parts, and **Bennie**

Moseley and **Darrell Johnson** have been appointed territory managers.

The L.R. Nelson Corp. named **Ernest Dunbar** Texas/Oklahoma sales manager.

Mark Nattinger has been named southeastern regional manager for Century Rain Aid.

Plant Health Care appointed **James Sutton** sports turf account manager.



Larry Norton



Brent Bates

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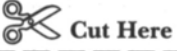
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CALENDAR

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AUG. 20 Indiana State Lawn Care Association Field Day, Carmel. Contact: 317/575-9010.

AUG. 20 Michigan Turfgrass Field Day, East Lansing. Contact: 517/321-1660.

AUG. 20 Virginia Nursery & Landscape Association Annual Field Day, Riner. Contact: 540/382-0943

AUG. 22 Ohio Landscape Association Landscape Facilities Tour, Broadview Heights. Contact: 440/717-0002.

AUG. 28-30 Farwest Show, Portland, Ore. Contact: 800/342-6401.

SEPT. 2-4 International Society of Arboriculture Florida Chapter's Annual Conference & Trade Show, Groveland. Contact: 352/429-2171.

SEPT. 9-11 Landscape Design Short

Course For Residential Properties, Broadview Heights, Ohio. Contact: 440/717-0004.

SEPT. 10-11 Southwest Horticultural Trade Show, Phoenix. Contact: 602/966-1610.

SEPT. 10-12 Florida Nursery and Allied Trades Show, Orlando. Contact: 800/375-3642.

SEPT. 11 National Horticulture Short Course, Orlando. Contact: 800/375-3642.

SEPT. 18-19 Washington Landscape Trade Show & Field Day, Enumclaw. Contact: 800/833-2186.

SEPT. 15-16 Annual Turfgrass and Landscape Research Conferences and Field Days, Riverside, Ca. Contact: 909/787-3575.

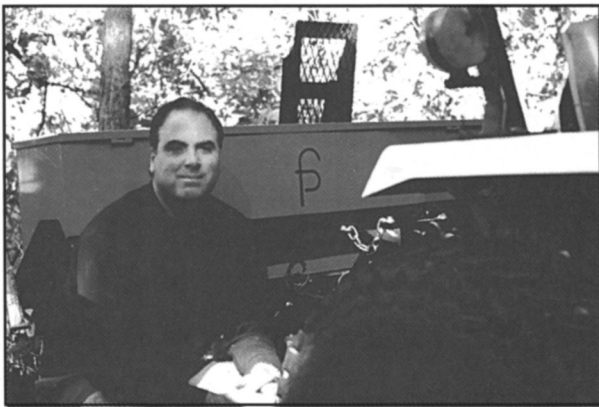
PLCAA REDEFINES FOUNDATION

MARIETTA, GA. – The Professional Lawn Care Association of America renamed its educational foundation The Evergreen Foundation.

"Many of the foundation's original objectives are no longer relevant," noted Dale Amstutz, Foundation president. "Through a survey, members of PLCAA told us there's no need for us to fund turf research."

Instead, the Foundation will serve as a bridge between the industry and the green movement through efforts such as the promotion of green spaces for public use.

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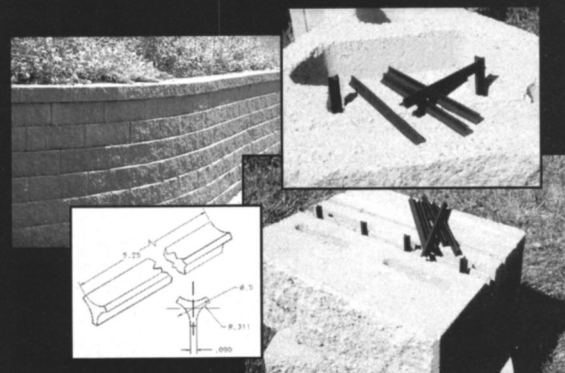
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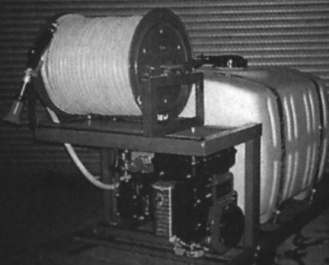
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MARKET TRENDS

TRUGREEN-CHEMLAWN TECHNICIANS DECERTIFIED

ST. PAUL, MINN. – Thirty-eight technicians at a TruGreen-ChemLawn branch in Burnsville, Minn., had their certifications canceled by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture after a copy of the state's closed book certification exam was found in the branch office.

According to the MDA, 28 of the applicators soon retook a modified version of the test and passed with significantly lower scores than they had previously. **LL**

ASSOCIATION NEWS

The Professional Lawn Care Association of America announced that it will introduce its new Green-Team Day at the Green Industry Expo. The day will be dedicated to the lawn and landscape employee, and will feature a presentation by speaker and author, Kerry Johnson. The conference is held in conjunction with the Green Industry Expo, Nov. 13-17, in Nashville. GreenTeam Day-only registration is \$35.

The California Association of Nurserymen announced it has awarded Tom Bellows of University of California with the CAN Research Award; Mark Bender of Modesto Junior College, the Bert Kallmann Educator Award and Dan Lassanske of California Polytechnic University, the Ron Reagan Education and Career Award.

The itinerary for the Associated Landscape Contractors of America's 1998 Landscape & Grounds Maintenance Conference, to be held Nov. 14-17 in Nashville, Tenn., will include a general session presentations by Roger Herman that addresses the causes of employee turnover and how contractors can control it.

The Oregon Nurserymen's Foundation awarded \$11,900 in college scholarships totaling 15 students planning to study horticulture.

POWER IS THE PRIORITY

IF YOU WERE to relate a mower to a human body, the wheels would clearly be the feet and the blades or cutting deck would be hands. It stands to reason then that a mower's engine would be its heart.

THE DURABILITY DYNAMIC. It's no secret that contractors' biggest demand of equipment is that it start when they need to use it. With mowers, that puts the emphasis on the engine.

"Contractors should look at how an engine is designed and constructed," recommended Cameron Litt, product manager, Kohler Engines, Kohler,



Larger mowers, such as this riding machine, are using mower liquid-cooled engines to take advantage of reduced noise and increased durability. Photo: Grasshopper

Wis. "For example, a cast iron cylinder will last a lot longer than an aluminum cylinder."

Contractors should also be aware, however, of any trends influencing current engine development, such as an in-

creased preference for liquid-cooled models.

"Generally, intermediate walk-behind mowers are powered by air-cooled engines because of the smaller size of the machine and the higher cost of

liquid-cooled engines," noted Mike Koppen, product manager for commercial mowers, John Deere & Co., Raleigh, N.C. "But the durability associated with liquid-cooled engines as mowers run in dirty, hot air is making them more popular on larger mowers."

Litt noted that engines of less than 18 horsepower are almost exclusively of the air-cooled style, with engines from 18 to 25 horsepower available with both air- and liquid-

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cooled options and engines beyond 25 horsepower relying almost exclusively on liquid cooling.

"The liquid-cooled engine will be quieter, which is important to the mower operator," noted Deb Szymczak, marketing coordinator, Kawasaki Motors Corp., Grand Rapids, Mich. "There's also less vi-

bration with a liquid-cooled engine and they're easier to maintain."

The overhead valve design of engines, described as a "new, old idea," by Dick Tegtmeier, president, Encore Mfg., Beatrice, Neb., has also become popular.

"These engines seem to offer longer life, and they also have a full pressure lubrica-

tion system to let contractors mow sidehills without worrying about lubricating the engine," Tegtmeier explained.

Some dealers may have difficulty getting replacement parts for an engine on equipment they sell.

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SWAP SHOP.

Many contractors will run a mower beyond the life of the original mower engine, so the ease with which that engine can be replaced is important. "Contractors don't have to use the same brand engine if a replacement is necessary, although that's generally what they do," observed Szymczak. "They can pretty much put any engine on the machine as long as it's within the same horsepower range as the original engine."


Litt pointed out that there can be a few restrictions on replacement options. "Replacing an air-cooled engine with a liquid-cooled engine can be a big task because the latter requires additional space to install a radiator," he said.

MAINTENANCE REGIME. Many headaches associated with repairing engines can be easily avoided, or at least delayed, with a simple maintenance program.

"On any engine, the key is maintaining it properly," Litt noted. "That means keep the air cleaner clean, change the oil and clean the air filters."

"We recommend checking the oil and filter every 25 hours of use, but contractors might want to do so more often if they're operating the mower in particularly dusty conditions," noted George Thompson, vice president, corporate communications, Briggs & Stratton, Milwaukee, Wis.

Bill Shea, vice president of sales and marketing, Ferris Industries, Ferris, N.Y., also noted the importance of purchasing a mower or engine from the proper dealer.

"Some dealers sell a lot of commercial equipment but aren't listed as a dealer for that type of engine, so they may have difficulty getting replacement parts or servicing the machine," he said. — Bob West 

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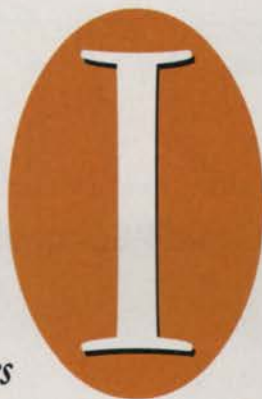


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Tom Pruettt recognizes that biggest isn't necessarily best, but he's got his company poised for some controlled growth.

By Bob West



It may be the most common trap for small businesses to fall into, along with the most dangerous.

Growth becomes a goal driven not by hopes to build a healthier company, but instead by a belief that sales volume correlates directly with success, regardless of profitability.

Tom Pruettt has avoided that trap since the first day his firm, LanArc, opened its doors to the Durham, N.C., market. "Our philosophy all along has been that we want to give the customer the best value for the dollar," Pruettt explained. "I knew I didn't want to be one of the biggest, but I did want to be one of the best."

This past year represented LanArc's 15th year in business, and the company totaled revenues of \$1.08 million, which suited Pruettt just fine.

THE EARLY DAYS. "Our first year in business, I just wanted to make what I was making previously," recalled Pruettt. "After that, I wanted us to do \$250,000, then \$500,000."

LanArc hit Pruettt's goal that first year. "One of the keys to our early success was good, loyal, repeat customers," Pruettt observed, which he credited to the company's quality work and the market he chose to setup in. "I wanted to be in town that had some growth potential but that was small enough so we could establish an identity after a few key jobs."

Growth was steady and regular as LanArc climbed to the \$500,000 plateau. It was during this period that the company really found its niche. "The thing we do best is planning and planting," Pruettt explained. "We're always explaining to customers that the best value is not always in the most junipers, holly or azaleas, but in the most creative design. We would rather use a three-gallon plant than a five-gallon



Tom Pruettt, flanked by Chris Myrick (left) and Barry Wilbur (right), plan to keep LanArc growing at a double-digit rate. Photo: Rob Flynn

Ready to Grow



plant if it will save the client money without compromising the job."

High-end residential and light commercial design/build jobs became the company's bread and butter. "We only solicit the nicer residential maintenance jobs," Pruett said. "And we subcontract out more of our irrigation and construction work than we do in-house, which helps to keep the job moving and also minimizes payroll."

It was this realization that led to a key shift in the company's path. "When we first

got into business, I took any job to keep the guys busy and generate revenues, but then I was spending too much time in ditches and missing too many leads," Pruett explained. "During the first six months of subbing the irrigation work out, I sold a lot more business, which meant a lot more profits."

LanArc does look for some variety in the size of jobs it pursues. "We do smaller jobs as well as the big jobs," Pruett added. "We'd prefer to do all bigger jobs, but those smaller

(continued on page 22)

LanArc

HEADQUARTERS: Raleigh, N.C.

OWNER: Tom Pruett

PRIMARY SERVICES: Landscape installation work comprised 72.5 percent of 1997 revenues, with landscape maintenance services of 24.5 percent and irrigation accounting for 3 percent.

NUMBER OF MAINTENANCE SERVICE CALLS MADE IN 1997: 2,964

AVERAGE SQUARE FOOTAGE OF PROPERTIES MAINTAINED: 12,000 square feet on residential accounts and about 100,000 square feet for commercial/industrial accounts.

EMPLOYEES: 12 year-round; 4 seasonal

1997 SALES: \$1.08 million

1998 SALES PROJECTION: \$1.25 million

Executive Summary

THE CONCEPT: To provide the client with creative design solutions resulting in the best landscape value; delivered within budget and on time.

FUTURE CHALLENGES: Finding good people to support our growth and being sensitive and responsive to the economy while serving client and employee needs.

The Owner

Tom Pruett

AGE: 43

BACKGROUND: After graduating from North Carolina State University and teaching high school horticulture, received degree in landscape gardening from Sandhills Community College. Worked for various landscape firms and as an industry consultant for four years before starting LanArc.

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(continued from page 19)

as well as the big jobs," Pruett added. "We'd prefer to do all bigger jobs, but those smaller jobs supplement our cash flow whereas the bigger jobs can drag out."

The company's growth slowed during the late 1980s and early 1990s to 3 to 5 percent, Pruett noted. "At this point, it was me and a bunch of guys in the field without a lot of structure. I was doing all I could. That was the first time I realized I would have to turn some of the responsibility over to other employees in order to start actively growing the company."

"So I started to look for people with an education who were looking for a career," he said.

Perhaps that statement more than any other speaks to what should continually put the company in a position to succeed. The one-time high school horticulture teacher encourages any LanArc employee to improve him or herself through education.

"The employees pay for the certification

program up front so they have a vested interest in their education, but when they pass the exam, the company reimburses them for that money, gives them a bonus and may give them a raise," Pruett explained. "Some contractors don't want their employees certified because they're afraid those employees will be stolen by other companies or go into business by themselves, but I hope these employees will give our company better credentials and benefit us while they're here."

Pruett has since found the people he believes represent much of the company's future in his installation and maintenance division managers, although they arrived at LanArc via different routes.

Chris Myrick manages the installation division, which accounts for 75 percent of the company's revenues. He first encountered LanArc while on a field trip with his

.....
'We'd like to have some more high profile jobs, but I'm not going to go buy them as losers.' – Pruett
.....

landscape class from Sands Hill Community College. "I volunteer our company for this field trip every year for a recruiting tool," Pruett explained.

Barry Wilbur, maintenance division manager, has a degree in business and wasn't necessarily looking for a green industry career when he found one. For Pruett, Wilbur's background and lack of green industry expertise is a strength to take advantage of. "Technically, yes, he's handicapped," Pruett

(continued on page 24)

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cover story

(continued from page 22)

recognized, "but from a business and customer service standpoint, he's in tune with what we need to do to be successful."

SIZE AS A STRENGTH. The end of this decade finds LanArc at a critical juncture in the company's life. With Myrick and Wilbur aboard, double digit growth has returned and is expected to continue, but Pruett knows that won't come without being able to successfully meet additional challenges.

The key to growing, while remaining a small company, will be Myrick's and Wilbur's ability to maximize the efficiency of their crews. "Last year, we produced \$63,000 per maintenance employee and \$101,000 per installation employee," Pruett shared. "The keys to doing that were matching the right crew talent and personality-wise to the right job and having the right equipment."

"There are a lot of ways to minimize manpower with equipment," noted Myrick. "We look at every part of a job and look for something that will save us money. If we have to take materials into a backyard, maybe it will take longer with a wheelbarrow but we might save money by not damaging the turf with a heavier machine."

Pruett called the company's investment in equipment the smartest decision he made. "When you're just starting out, renting equipment may be the only option," he noted, "but you've got to have those machines for an entire job, not just on a per-day basis."

Additionally, Pruett looks to maximize the productivity from each piece of equipment. For example, the company has at least 10 attachments for his skid steers.

Pruett also explained that LanArc is a big believer in specializing the various employees' skills so they spend most of their time doing the same one or two tasks on a job.

The company also prefers keeping crew sizes as small as possible – usually two men per job – for maximum efficiency. "We'll send bigger crews for bigger jobs, but then it's important to make sure everyone knows who is ultimately responsible for that job."

And as with any company looking to grow, LanArc will have to find additional leadership personnel to do so.

"I need to find a really strong design/salesperson so that I can begin to manage the business more," Pruett noted. "That way I can focus on a select group of customers who are high revenue people."

Finding the right people will also enable Myrick and Wilbur to focus their energies in other areas. "Right now, 70 percent of my time is spent working in the field," Wilbur noted. "The other 30 percent is set aside for customer follow-up and acquiring new contracts. To get where we're headed, my non-billable hours will have to rise and someone will have to step up in the field."

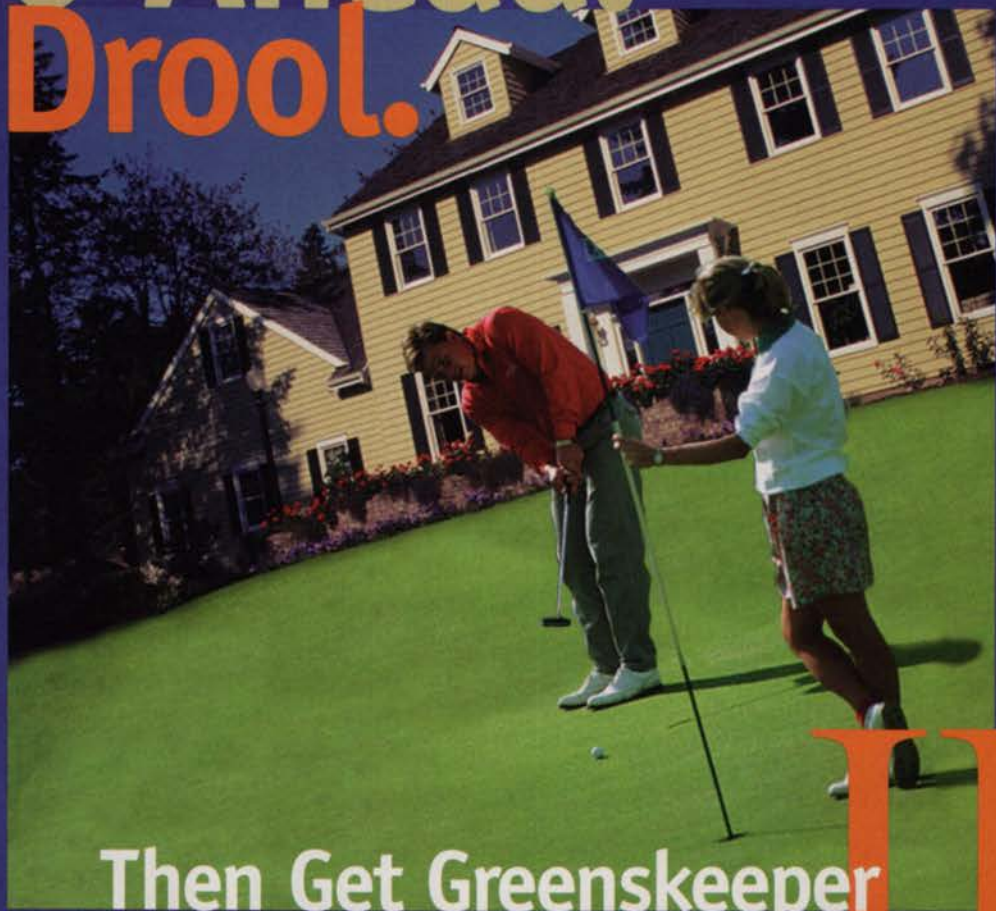
The final challenge may be keeping the company true to the initial goal of quality over volume, something Pruett has no plans to sacrifice.

"We'd like to get some more of those high profile jobs, but I'm not going to go buy them as losers," he affirmed. "Having 20 employees is great for us, and we'll just see how much work we can get out of them." LL

LanArc is located at 3505 Carpenter Pond Road, Durham, N.C. 27703. The company can be reached at 919/598-3605.

The author is Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine.

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s compost availability becomes more prevalent, it is important as a buyer and user of compost to be a stickler for quality.

Compost is the only annually renewable, recycled, 100 percent natural organic product that gives so much value to the soil. And peat moss, barks, manures and other organic sources work in combination with compost in mixtures that help contractors adjust soil pH and fertility.

But how can the landscape contractor spot quality compost?

For starters, look at the projects where it was used successfully last year. Quality compost is most easily separated from average compost in the performance of plants where it is used. However, without the time and ability to remember all of the places compost is used, the following few points may make it easier for comparing products.



Contractors should be sure tests for soluble salts have been conducted on any compost samples in order to know which plant varieties that compost can be used with. Photo: Rod Tyler

Organic and compost are words that people like to throw around, but where do they really fit into the contractor's business?

By Rod Tyler

OPTIONS ABOUND. Unfortunately, there isn't enough research about all of the types of soils, composts, climates, application rates and plants to be able to guide contractors as to what kind of compost to buy.

Fortunately, though, the answer is quite simple. All composts help almost any plant grow better if they are used correctly. As a general guide, composts with higher fertility work well when used with plants which are heavy feeders. Likewise, plants that are sensitive to over-fertilization or high soluble salt levels are a better fit for composts of a lower fertility level. As a general rule, most perennials, especially grasses, respond well to compost. Although trees and shrubs do not double in size like many annuals and perennials do when planted in compost amended soils, these plants often stay alive longer and perform better when compost is used. If you are still unsure of where to turn for answers, contact your local extension office or testing laboratory and they should be able to answer your questions.

(continued on page 30)

& the

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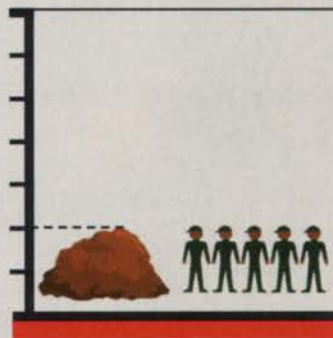


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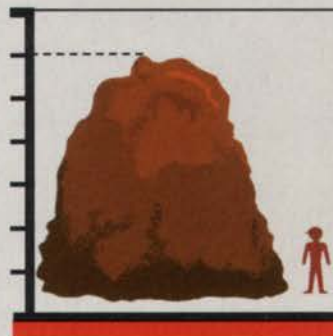
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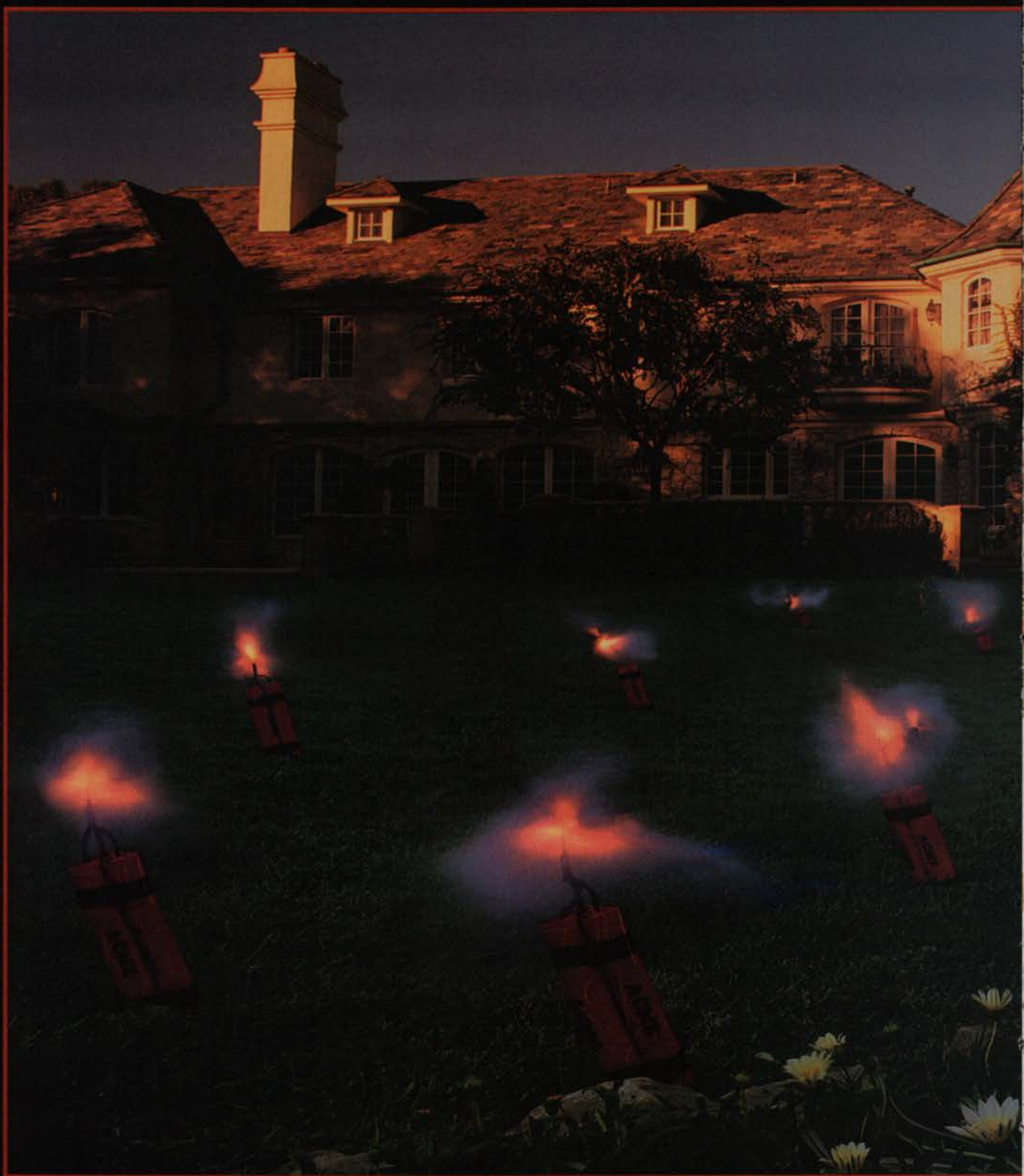
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compost

(continued from page 26)

THE SHOPPING LIST. At the same time, there are some critical items to consider when going shopping for compost. Be sure that the source of the material to be used is consistent. Nothing is worse than getting halfway through a project and finding out that you cannot get any more of a particular product. When you arrange to get your compost, make sure to ask some questions of the provider:

1. Does the vendor provide directions for proper use of the product in the application you have chosen?
2. Is a steady, consistent supply available at all times?
3. Is the source of the compost the same...ie., if you buy from a garden center, does it buy from only one compost facility or many?
4. Has the product been tested? If so, are the test results available?
5. Has the compost been used in any



The use of quality compost in ornamental beds can also help contractors control soil pH and fertility levels while minimizing additional fertilization requirements. Photo: Rod Tyler

local projects such as demonstration plots, university research programs or award winning landscapes?

6. Does the vendor have the ability to custom mix the product to your needs?

7. Does the product have favorable price and packaging?

Notice that these issues are arguably in descending order of importance, with price being the last consideration. Without quality, what good is a low price? Quality is an important part of making, selling and using compost. Using a compost product that is not yet ready may not fulfill your growing goals.

Interested in more information?

- Step-by-step guides on using compost in the nursery, landscape and topsoil fields. A complete set of specifications is available from The Composting Council, Washington, D.C. The specifications have already been formatted in Masterspec, have been reviewed by the American Society of Landscape Architects and are ready to use. They come on a floppy disk and the cost is \$25 for members and \$50 for non-members. The Composting Council also has numerous other publications with step-by-step photos illustrating how to effectively use compost in landscape, nursery and topsoil settings. For more information, call the Composting Council at 301/913-2885.

IT'S TIME TO CHOOSE. The growing popularity of compost use among landscape contractors means a lot of professionals may be working with these products for the first time. Selecting quality compost material to work with is obviously a key to the project's success, and some tips to selecting the best material follow:

1. Pick up the product and run it through your hands. Does it smell earthy like soil or sour like vinegar? If it smells earthy, it is probably stable and ready for use. If it smells like vinegar, it needs to compost more.

2. Look at the material's color. Most composts that are ready to be used are very dark brown to black in

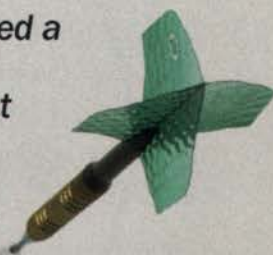
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compost

(continued from page 30)

color. There are some exceptions. Chicken manure compost, for example, is normally a little lighter in color. But most products are consistently dark without great varia-

tion of color through the compost pile.

3. Fertilizer analysis should be "around" a 1-1-1 N-P-K value, but this does not mean

(continued on page 36)

Putting it Down

As the green industry becomes more aware of the benefits of the use of compost and related organic materials, a new questions arises: How should these materials be applied to the landscape?

Some manufacturers have offered one potential solution to this quandry with the advent of pneumatic application machines.

Currently, there are two general types of these machines available based on the application size. Finn Corp., Fairfield, Ohio, offers trailer-mounted and truck-mounted models for contractors applying 2,000 to 3,000 cubic yards of compost, bark, mulch and other related products annually. Eugene, Ore.-based Rexus Express caters to the even larger applications, for contractors applying anywhere from 8,000 cubic yards to 40,000 cubic yards a year.

Both manufacturers quickly point out the benfits of these machines, which have only been introduced to the market during the last five years.

"Pneumatic applications virtually eliminate 10 laborers on a job," claimed Kevin Sabourin, product development manager for Finn, comparing pneumatic applications to the traditional rake, shovel and wheelbarrow method of applying these materials.

Dan Sutton, vice president, sales, at Rexus Express, pointed out that contractors can enjoy tremendous materials savings as well. "Applying materials by hand will require an extra 20 to 30 percent of material because then there is so much more waste and it's going to be applied unevenly across the job," he said.

Depending on the type of equipment they use, contractors have taken different approaches to bulk material applications. Those using the smaller machines, which may still carry a six-figure price tag, handle residential and commercial mulch applications, topdress compost into topsoil, work for erosion control or heel in root balls of trees in nurseries.

John Engwer, owner, Groundscape Express, Renthem, Mass., has a 30-cubic-yard capacity unit that applies material between four and nine cubic yards per hour. "The application rates really vary depending on the different materials and how wet and heavy they are," he explained.

Engwer said manufacturers' claims about labor savings have also proven true, and his crews are composed of just two people — one person on the front of the hose and one to move the hose and handle cleanup.

Rexus Express' units, however, are much larger — trucks in the 56- to 80-cubic-yard capacity range — and therefore are favored by contractors with larger application-driven revenues in mind.

A common approach by owners of these machines is to setup a business entirely separate from the landscape contracting company and operate as a subcontractor for the various landscape contractors in the market, who may otherwise be competitors.

Joe Alcini is a vice president for Ground Efx, Macomb, Mich., which operates separately from his landscape company, Foxfire. "We handle mulch on a lot of larger, commercial projects, and we're using a system to inject the seed mix into the compost as it's applied, which saves a lot of time," he explained. "Making it a separate business lets us work for other contractors as subcontractors without having our own Foxfire trucks on the job." — **Bob West**

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(continued from page 32)

that a compost having a 1-5-5, N-P-K value is useless. Remember, the main value of using compost is for the organic matter added to the soil. Biosolid-based composts, chicken manures and some other manure composts, often have N-P-K ranges from 1-1-1 to 3-3-3 or slightly higher. Most composts never get above a 5 percent N level, so

depending on the application rate, additional fertilizer may be needed. However, if 1 inch of 1-1-1 N-P-K compost is used in annual or perennial flower beds, tree planting, turf or ornamental beds, it will normally supply enough nutrients for the first growing season.

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fertilize in addition to using compost to ensure that the plants are getting plenty of nutrients. An analysis of the compost's value as a fertilizer can save these fertilizer dollars.

4. Check to see if tests for soluble salts have been conducted. This is an important test for contractors to be aware of as it relates to the type of plants that are grown in the compost amended soil. For instance, several tender annuals are very salt sensitive and struggle during transplanting. This is sometimes referred to as "transplanting shock," but can often be a slight burn from the salts.

Make sure the soluble salts in the compost are below the safe level for the plants used in the project and proper irrigation is provided after transplanting. Salt tolerance levels of various plants are often available at many labs that do the testing. If they do not have what you are looking for, contact your local extension office, but a good rule of thumb is that most plants do well if salts levels are below 5mmhos/cm.

5. The original ingredients of the compost should be unrecognizable. If the compost is made from leaves, you should not be able to see any leaf parts in the finished compost. Likewise, if the compost is made from twigs and branches, none should be visible in a product for sale.

Keep in mind there are uses for "mulchy" composts. Some contractors actually use a one-half or three-quarters composted mix in mulches that they feel help offer a wider spectrum of food for the soil over time. If you use compost like this as a mulch, still limit applications to the normal 2 inches per year to be effective. **LL**

The author is National Field Representative of the Composting Council. He can be reached at 440/926-8041.

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Pulling the Plugs

• With the
• fall season
• approaching,
• now is the
• time to be
• selling
• customers on
• the benefits of
• aeration.

• By Gary
• Burchfield

The lawn care industry, both manufacturers and contractors, has done a good job of selling homeowners on the benefits of aeration. Perhaps too good a job. Healthy turfgrass is often an invitation for heavy pedestrian traffic, which leads to excessive compaction of the soil and poor root growth. And contractors realize that the benefits of aerating a lawn include short- and long-term plusses. For the short term, aerating changes the physical and chemical characteristics of the soil and thatch, thereby improving water retention. An annual aeration of a lawn will also help breakdown the thatch layer and serve as a substitute for a direct topdressing. However, lawns that haven't been aerated regularly in the past may require multiple aerations to achieve the desired levels of thatch and compaction control.

Nowadays, aeration is an easier sale to make. "Homeowners have become educated on the value of lawn aeration," noted Greg Schreiner, president and owner of Aeration Consultants, Inc., Denver, Colo. "Proper aeration can save them up to 25 percent of their summer water bill, especially in a drier climate like Denver. Plus, their lawns look better."

Lorne Hall, president and owner of Western Lawns in Oklahoma City, Okla., said only about 1 percent of his customers request aeration service, but there's potential for "at least 10 percent if we promote it more."

PRICING TO PROFIT. When it comes to offering an add-on service such as aeration, many contractors are challenged to find the proper price.

"Today, the issue is pricing," Schreiner said. "Because aeration is readily accepted, there are a lot of one- or two-person operations and weekend part-timers that will aerate a yard for \$25. That makes it harder for professional firms like us, because our minimum starts at \$37 per yard."

Schreiner knows the aeration business well. He moved to Denver from Illinois in 1985 and literally started his business with one truck. Today, Aeration Consultants services 10,000 residential customers in the Denver metropolitan area, as well

(continued on page 40)

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benefits of aeration

(continued from page 38)

as 50 commercial accounts as large as 40 acres of turf.

Aeration Consultants now averages more than 80 employees and has a landscape

edged. "A homeowner who bought the \$25 deal last summer will call us. Either they can't find the person now, or they weren't satisfied with the job and want it done better this year."

In general, Schreiner said his rates are "around \$10 per 1,000 square feet" for home lawn aeration while commercial clients pay from \$5 to \$7 per 1,000 square feet, depending on the size and layout of the property.

Sandy Springs Lawnsapes, Smyrna, Ga., provides aeration to its residential and commercial customers, but it's an "add-on" to the regular full maintenance package.

"Although it's a billable extra, about 80 percent of our customers request aeration," said Greg Ehrenberg, assistant maintenance manager for Sand Springs.

Whereas cool-season grasses are aerated

in conjunction with overseeding and customers are charged a "combination" rate for both jobs, warm-season aeration is performed as a "straight labor" operation and charged accordingly, said Ehrenberg. Rates vary from around \$10 per 1,000 square feet to \$17 to \$18 per 1,000 square feet, depending on lawn size, slope, obstacles, etc.

Aeration work is usually handled by Sandy Springs Lawnsapes' lawn care technicians, according to Ehrenberg, because it fits in better with those technicians' usual duties, and they try to fit in aeration jobs between their second and third scheduled pesticide applications.

He noted that when Sandy Springs compiles its customer contracts for landscape maintenance jobs each spring, the company establishes service routes with an eye toward grouping customer that will receive the same services as each other, such as aeration.

Ehrenberg said the company runs seven

(continued on page 44)

'You really have to have an idea of how you want to zone the job before you get started though.' — Ted Munson

maintenance division as well as a landscape installation division. Aeration remains the firm's primary business, however. And, despite the low-ball price competitors, it's a profitable operation for the company.

"We do pick up some customers from the low-price guys," Schreiner acknowl-

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There are three primary considerations in selecting aeration equipment, according to Bob Brophy, product manager for Turfco, Minneapolis, Minn. "Number one is operator comfort and safety. Number two is production and profitability. And number three is the machine's maintenance requirements," he said.

Ease of lift is important to operator comfort. "Aerating 10 to 15 lawns a day means the operator will activate the lift perhaps 2,000 times a day," Brophy explained. "If it takes 50 pounds of force to raise the lift, that's a total of 100,000 pounds of force the operator expends every day."

Besides lift force required, machines should be easy to turn and handle well on sidehills, Brophy added. "How much does the aerator

wobble back and forth as the operator walks across the lawn? A machine that wobbles creates extra muscle tension between the operator's shoulder blades after six to eight hours of work."

Bruno Harris-Quanquin, vice president of marketing and sales for Bluebird International, Englewood, Colo., said more maneuverable aerators create less fatigue for the operator. "Things like free-wheeling outer tine wheels to facilitate turning take less energy and enhance productivity," he said.

A primary indicator of productivity can be the spacing of the tines used to remove soil cores. Tines vary in size, but most are 3/4-inch diameter and, depending on such variables as soil type, soil moisture, weight of the aerator, etc., will penetrate from 2 inches to 4 inches deep.

Tine spacing may vary from unit to unit and in some cases can be modified by adding or removing tines or tine wheels. For example, 3/4-inch tines spaced 6 inches apart and penetrating 3 inches deep will remove about 1.2 percent of the soil volume in a 3-inch soil profile. The same size tines placed 2 inches apart will remove about 10 percent of the soil volume in the same 3-inch soil profile. Generally, closer tine placement opens up more soil for increased water and fertilizer uptake. Where compaction is a problem, closer tine spacing relieves compaction better. — Gary Burchfield

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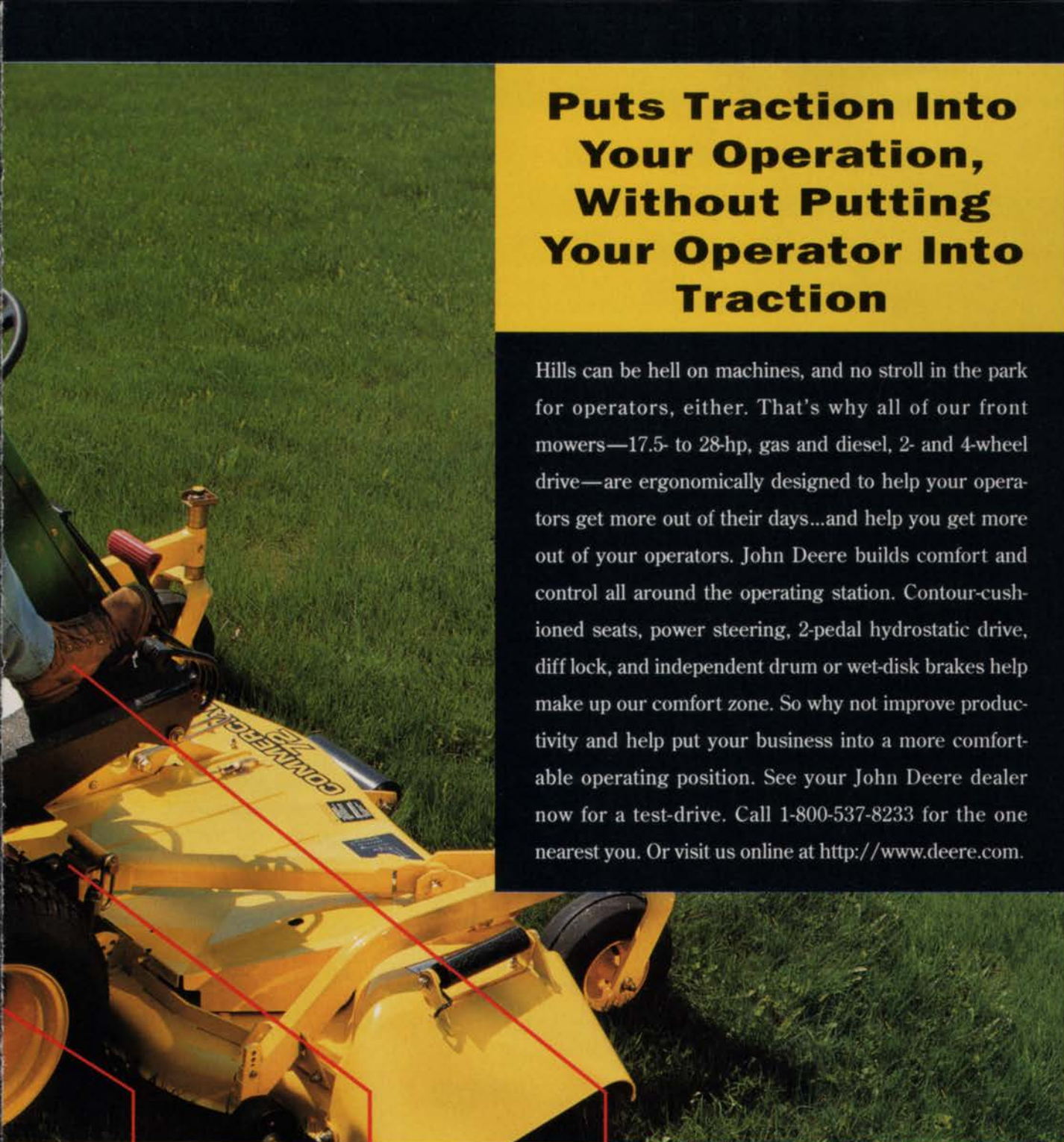
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benefits of aeration

(continued from page 41)

maintenance crews, serving a customer base that is about 35 percent commercial and 65 percent residential. Most homeowner lawns average around 8,000 to 10,000 square feet. "Aeration is a good revenue source for us, and homeowners and grounds managers can definitely see the difference it makes in turf," he added.

Western Lawns prices aeration services on a time basis rather than area covered. "We shoot for a return of \$30 per labor hour for aerating," Hall said. "Our pricing varies by size of yard, of course, but requirements for a 5,000- to 6,000-square-foot home yard are considerably different from a 100,000-square-foot commercial property."

RIGHT ON TIME. Turf specialists say most lawns can benefit from at least one aeration per year, and heavily used lawns will benefit from more aerations. Cool-season turfgrasses can be aerated in the spring, fall or both, with a spring aeration being conducted between March and May, and the fall aeration taking place from August to November.

Warm-season turfgrasses should be aerated while they are actively growing – mid-spring to summer. Avoid aerating warm-season grasses while they're dormant; it may encourage cool-season weed growth. Also, it's best to avoid aerating warm-season turf during spring greenup. Wait until after the grass has been mowed at least once.

Because of Denver's dry climate and cool-season turfgrass, most of Schreiner's customers order spring and fall aerations. "If it's a hot summer, some customers ask for a mid-season aeration," he said.

For fescue and other cool-season lawns, Sandy Springs typically aerates in the fall, usually while overseeding. "Even if the lawns don't need overseeding, we still recommend fall aeration because it improves turf health and appearance," added Ehrenberg.

He said they may aerate cool-season turf in spring, but don't recommend it unless aeration is followed up with a preemergence application for crabgrass.

Warm-season turfgrass varieties, such as zoysiagrass or bermudagrass, are aerated when it is actively growing, usually anywhere from early June to Aug. 15. "It's good for the turf and customers like the results," Ehrenberg said.

"It's a struggle to fit aeration into our work schedules," Hall said, noting that aerations are timed from mid to late April through early July. "We've had our regular maintenance crews try to aerate along with fall seeding, but too often it's all they can do to get the seeding done.

"What we plan to do next year is put a crew together just to handle special projects like seeding and aeration," said Hall. "The cultural benefits to customer lawns are tremendous and our return per hour for aeration is better than for mowing. We like it, customers like it, we just need to figure out how to do more of it."

The author is a freelance writer based in Lincoln, Neb.

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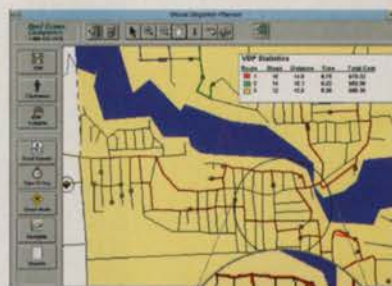
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A fall preemergence plan needs products with long-term residual. Photo: Rohm & Haas

Fall preemergents offer contractors the opportunity to get a jump start on spring weed control.

By Prasanta Bhomik

Doing Tomorrow's Work Today

A phone call during the onset of the spring season for a weed problem is the last thing a contractor wants to deal with.

But it doesn't take a customer long to become unhappy with his or her lawn. That adds one extra visit to a property that a technician already doesn't have time for and another application.

What if it were possible to apply a weed control product in the fall that would eliminate this spring problem? Some pesticide manufacturers and contractors believe this is the case.

POSITIVE PROGRAMMING. The successful turfgrass management program results from an integration of recommended cultural practices and a complete weed control program. In most landscape and turf care operations, knowledge of weed control is important. Maintaining a dense, healthy stand of turfgrass is one way

to control many weeds, including annual grasses and broadleaf weeds. Proper mowing height and frequency, fertilization practices and irrigation scheduling are part of a cultural management program and should be practiced throughout the growing season.

Turfgrass managers should also be familiar with the following steps for a successful weed control program: (a) Knowing the specific weed problems (grassy weeds vs. broadleaf weeds) and life cycle of the weeds (annual vs. perennial), (b) Selection of the right herbicide, in relation to effective weed control and turfgrass tolerance.

Some of the commonly found annual grassy weeds include large crabgrass, small crabgrass, goosegrass, annual bluegrass, yellow foxtail, green foxtail, fall panicum and barnyardgrass.

EMERGING PATTERNS. The preemergence weed control program has been a popular and very convenient program for lawn maintenance professionals and landscape operators. Some of the preemergence herbicides for grassy weed control in cool-season grasses that have been tested at the University of Massachusetts are prodiamine, bensulide, dithiopyr, pendimethalin, oxadiazon and siduron.

For some lawn care operators, preemergence application options include the application of such products in the fall for activity the following spring. Many turfgrass managers and lawn care operators need to cover numerous prop-

(continued on page 48)

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fall preemergents

(continued from page 46)

erties for preemergence applications and the time required to do this during the hectic and weather-vulnerable spring creates a major challenge for covering all of their clients' properties.



Meanwhile, preemergence treatments can be applied in the fall as long as the soil is not frozen. The applied herbicides remain in the soil and provide control in the following spring based on their residual activity as well as the weather conditions. Some of the treatments applied in the fall have provided control of many weed species in the following spring or even throughout the year with the length of control the following year also being dependent upon the rates being used.

However, it is important to note based on the research we have conducted at the University of Massachusetts, fall-applied treatments have proven more effective in the cool-season turfgrass environments compared to other areas. This is most likely attributable to the increased rate at which the pesticide products will breakdown in warmer soils.

In general, one fall application of the recommended rates of some preemergents would provide weed control for the next season, and our data indicated that would be 90 to 100 percent control of many weed species during the year. Typically, a subsequent fall application would be required at the end of this first year for control to be achieved in the second year as well with any of these products.

Germination of annual grassy weeds is related to soil temperature. When the soil temperature reaches 65 F for a week, grasses begin germinating, although the peak germination period varies with the local soil type, rainfall and weather in the spring.

Therefore, timing the herbicide application accurately is very important. The key point is that preemergence herbicides need to be applied before grasses germinate in the spring. Treatments made too late will not control emerged grassy weeds. If the application's timing does not coincide with the normal germination period of annual grassy weeds, control results may be erratic or poor. In general, preemergence herbi-

fall preemergents

cides should be applied one to two weeks prior to the expected weed seed germination period. Therefore, the application dates of preemergence herbicides will vary from one part of the country to another.

The most important product characteristic in the concept of fall preemergence applications is the increased residual properties exhibited by many of the newer products since herbicidal activity in controlling weeds is dependent upon the effectiveness of products still in the soil. Some herbicide may last only four to six weeks, while others may provide control 12 to 16 weeks from the time of application.

Based on the concept of long residual effects of several herbicides, we decided to examine the potential preemergence activity of various fall-applied herbicides in controlling weeds in the following spring. We initiated experiments in the fall of 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997 at the Turfgrass Research Center, University of Massachusetts.

Experiments were conducted on established Kentucky bluegrass. Treatments were applied in the fall. All herbicides were formulated in granular form, including fertilizer base.

In our trial during 1994-95, several preemergence products applied in October 1994, resulted in excellent large crabgrass control on July 22 and Sept. 15, 1995. These dates correspond to 45 and 52 weeks after treatment (WAT). The weed control was best at the highest rate of each of these herbicides.

In other trials from 1994 to 1997, several preemergents, applied in the fall, were very effective in the control of crabgrass during the following spring. However, other products achieved effective control only when applied at the highest labeled rate.

The Kentucky bluegrass stand itself was generally not affected by most of the fall-applied treatments. However, some products, when applied at the highest labeled rate, did show potential to affect as much as 40 percent of the turfgrass.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS. It is important to plan for fall-applied treatments since they also limit the effectiveness of programs such as reseeding. In general, preemergence herbicides persist in the soil for a length of time, allowing season-long weed control, so a



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reseeding interval would have to depend upon the herbicide and dosage used. However, contractors should not plan to use a fall application strategy if they plan to reseed a particular area in the spring.

In summary, a successful preemergence weed control program results from selecting the right herbicide and applying it uniformly at the proper time and appropriate dosage. The herbicide selection is dependent upon the weeds to be controlled and the turfgrass to be treated.

Choose the most effective herbicide offering maximum safety to the turfgrass. For crabgrass and other grassy weed control, lawn maintenance professionals should emphasize a preemergence herbicide program along with a good cultural program. The preemergence program would have the option of herbicide application either in the fall or in the spring. **LL**

The author is professor of weed science, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Fall application of preemergence herbicides is becoming more widely debated in the professional lawn and landscape industry. If you have comments pertaining to the use and effectiveness of these products as fall preemergents for the residential and/or commercial markets, we'd like to hear them. Please contact Bob West at bwest@gie.net.*



Putting it Down

During the winter months in the southern United States, bright green spots of annual bluegrass can be unsettling to lawn care customers who expect a brown lawn. According to contractors, the use of a fall preemergent herbicide application is essential in keeping their customers in the warmer climates happy.

As for the northern states, a fall preemergent herbicide application to control spring crabgrass can be a contractor's operational dream. "It means less customers in the spring, which means we have more time for new sales," assured John Buechner, director of technical services, Lawn Doctor, Holmdel, New Jersey. "And there's no pressure to beat the germination period."

A fall application, according to contractors, can be made from mid-August through October. But a fall application won't last the whole year, stressed Phil Fogarty, who develops national accounts for Scotts Lawn Service in Cleveland, Ohio. "It only postpones the spring application until June."

The spring application becomes a "booster shot" to extend the residual of the fall application, said Dick Bare, owner and president of Arbor-Nomics, Norcross, Ga.

The primary problem associated with fall preemergent applications, besides possibly putting grasses into dormancy prematurely, is with customers whose contracts expire Jan. 1. "After the fall application, there is no guarantee that the customer will renew their contract," Buechner recognized. "You're gambling with customer renewals."

Ergonomically, a fall application is the smart thing to do, but when relaying the idea to customers, it's still experimental, Fogarty stated.

"Customers think spring is the time to fertilize and take care of crabgrass and the late summer is for controlling weeds," he said. "It takes a lot of communication and education to convince the customer fall is a good time for the preemergent application. They don't think they have to worry about their lawn after Labor Day."

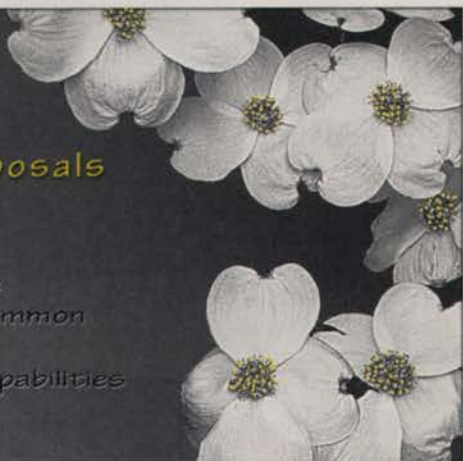
The idea isn't a fresh one, unless you're talking to the customer. "This is not a new idea, but it's new to them," Fogarty assured. "It'll take about two years to change the habits of lawn care customer buying." — *Nicole Wisniewski*

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Controlling Overhead

By Frank Ross

A

very common philosophy for the recovery of overhead is one which uses labor as its basis. I like this method quite a lot if I am dealing with a company that is predominantly labor-driven, such as a maintenance organization. The look of a labor-driven organization is one where more than 70 percent of what it sells is labor, so we are talking about low levels of materials and subcontracts. Also unique in a labor-driven company is an overhead structure that can often be equal to 50 percent of sales, or greater, such as the example below.

Maintenance Contractor

Earned Revenue	\$1,000,000	100.0%
Direct Costs		
Material	\$53,000	5.3%
Labor and Labor Burden	\$365,000	36.5%
Subcontracts	\$20,000	2.0%
Other Direct Costs	\$1,000	.1%
Total Direct Costs	\$439,000	43.9%
Gross Margin	\$561,000	56.1%
Overhead Expenses	\$511,000	51.1%
Net Profit Productive	\$50,000	5.0%

As I said, this cost structure is tell-tale of a maintenance or pure service organization. Examples of this type of concern might be one practicing interior maintenance, exterior maintenance, irrigation service, tree care, lawn care or design services.

Because the cost structure is so predominantly labor and overhead oriented, it serves no real purpose to get fancy with some esoteric method of overhead recovery. My personal preference is to keep it simple and recover overhead as a function of labor. To

Overhead recovery has to be done correctly, and that means uniquely for maintenance and installation companies.

By the Numbers

do this, simply divide overhead by the combination of direct labor and labor burden. The quotient of this formula is the percent markup you would apply to the combination of labor and burden in your job estimate to recoup your overhead.

Overhead Markup =	Overhead
	Total Direct Labor + Labor Burden
Overhead Markup =	\$511,000
	\$365,000
Overhead Markup =	140.0%

Therefore, were you to estimate a job by first determining your direct costs and then applying overhead, you would multiply the sum of total direct labor plus labor burden by 140 percent. This will calculate a pro rata amount of overhead to be applied. Add direct costs and overhead together to determine your breakeven point, and then add the net profit percentage of your choice.

Whenever I am figuring overhead as a function of labor, I always like to test my calculation to make sure that it makes logical sense. The way I do this is to price one hour of labor. Consider the following givens: the composite wage rate I use in estimating jobs is \$7.30 per hour; I have figured labor burden at 20 percent of labor (remember, labor burden is the payroll tax and insurance that is a specific function of labor); overhead has been calculated at 140 percent of labor and labor burden; and I would like to earn a 10 percent profit.

Composite Base Wage	\$7.30
Labor Burden of 20%	\$1.46
Raw Cost of Labor	\$8.76
Overhead of 140%	\$12.26
Breakeven Cost per hour	\$21.02
Net Profit of 10%	\$2.34
Selling Price per hour	\$23.36

Note, however, that one of the reasons this selling rate for labor is so high is because of what we have lumped into overhead. In a green industry company that is very labor intense, the chances are good that included in overhead is a large sum of money devoted to the ownership and operating cost of equipment.

In the above example of determining the selling price of one hour of labor, I would hazard a reasonable guess that included in the \$12.26 per hour figure for overhead is about \$5.00 for equipment. If you wanted, you could isolate that equipment portion of your overhead and charge it to jobs only when you use equipment. This would lower the price you would need to charge per hour for your labor and establish hourly rates to be charged for the use of equipment as your jobs required. Calculated correctly, you should mathematically end up in the same place at year end, regardless of what system you use.

The difference arises on a job-by-job basis. By isolating equipment so it is charged to jobs only when you use it, you will lower your price on less equipment-intensive work, theoretically making you more competitive, and raise your price on heavy equipment jobs, thereby making your pricing more representative of what it costs to perform the work. If you are set up to handle the details and the paperwork, my personal preference is to unbundle equipment from overhead and charge it on an as used basis. This is not a critical issue, but it could be useful in fine tuning your competitiveness on certain jobs.

MAKING IT ON MARKUP. What about the company that sells both material and labor, such as any installation contractor?

An all-material markup won't work because of the weightiness of the overhead, which supports labor. The all-labor markup isn't satisfactory either as, in an installation environment, a good portion of the overhead structure supports the expediting process of the material. And the markup on total direct costs doesn't get it because, while this method marks up both labor and material, the markup assumes that overhead supports material and labor equally, which is not correct.

Both labor and material require a markup, but because so much of my overhead is in support of labor, I know the markup there

must be a greater percentage than on material. What I'm saying is that in an installation company I am in need of two markups for overhead – one on labor and burden and

My personal preference is to keep it simple and recover overhead as a function of labor.

one on material.

In an installation company, direct costs consist of large portions of material and labor, costs that we are selling to our clients. Overhead in an installation company is also rather substantial and is, in great part, de-





voted to the support of the material and labor we are selling. In a perfect world, it would be ideal if we could actually segregate the overhead that supports labor in a labor column and the overhead that supports material in a material column. Then we could total each column of overhead and calculate the percentage of each column to its respective labor or material cost. In a literal sense, this is what we could do if we chose not to use the dual rate formulae.

What this does is take the two major exposures we sell in our work – labor and materials – and allocate each overhead account to the exposure that is principally responsible for creating it. We end up seeing that labor is principally responsible for the existence of the indirect overhead expenses, which is logical because the biggest account listed in indirect overhead is indirect labor, or the non-billable portion of our payroll. Equipment overhead expenses are also unbalanced in support of labor. This stands to reason in that to perform its work efficiently, labor must use the latest innova-

tions possible in the equipment arena. Expediting material does require some equipment, but that support only calls for about one-third of the division's total dollars spent in the equipment categories.

So what does all of this tell us? Well, if every year we do a budget by division and every year we allocate the overhead accounts into columns indicating the direct cost accounts they support, then we can figure how to recover overhead as a function of what created it. If accuracy is what we are looking for, this is utopia.

Using an example where total labor and burden is responsible for recovering \$111,022 of our overhead and total material has to recoup the remaining \$67,577, we can create two markups – one for labor and one for material – that would apply a correct amount of overhead to a job, regardless of the mix of material and labor on that job. When labor is incurred, we would apply a certain percent of labor overhead to that job, and the same is true with material.

If I am budgeting total labor and burden of \$88,662, then I can figure what kind of markup I need on my jobs for labor by dividing the overhead created by labor, \$111,022, by my labor and burden budget.

$$\% \text{ Markup on Labor} = \frac{\text{Overhead Created by Labor}}{\text{Total Direct Labor and Labor Burden}}$$

$$\% \text{ Markup on Labor} = \frac{\$111,022}{\$88,662}$$

$$\% \text{ Markup on Labor} = 125.22\%$$

Similarly, if I am budgeting the total direct material costs for the coming year to be \$161,358 and I want to recover the overhead costs associated with that material, I will follow the same procedure.

$$\% \text{ Markup on Material} = \frac{\text{Overhead Created by Material}}{\text{Total Direct Material (Plant and Hard)}}$$

$$\% \text{ Markup on Material} = \frac{\$67,577}{\$161,358}$$

$$\% \text{ Markup on Material} = 41.88\%$$

We have just created our own dual overhead markup system so that no matter the mix of material and labor on the job, we can be sure of applying the correct amount of overhead – a markup of 41.88 percent on every dollar of material and 125.22 percent on every dollar of labor. For an installation company or a company with a large value of both material and labor to sell, this philosophy makes great sense and, from my view, would be hard to improve upon. **LL**

The author is an industry consultant with Ross-Payne & Associates, Barrington, Ill. He can be reached at 847/381-8939.

DISCLAIMER: The specific figures used in the above examples were developed for these examples. Each companies' specific dollar values will vary based on their businesses.



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Contractors

Irrigation:

A New Match

Knowing how to install an irrigation system isn't the only challenge associated with setting up an irrigation division.

By Bob West



The technical knowledge required for irrigation system installation can be a daunting obstacle to contractors considering expanding their offerings to include this service. Many contractors push forward, however, and have found that offering irrigation services enables them to meet another customer need and grow per-customer revenues.

In particular, more contractors who have traditionally focused on just landscape services have been expanding into irrigation. A recent survey conducted by *Lawn & Landscape* magazine found that more than 40 percent of landscape contractors now offer irrigation installation and maintenance services.



BEST FOOT FORWARD. People want attractive landscapes. They drive past a neighbor's yard, note the healthy lawn, attractive beds and impressive trees and want the same. This can, at times, simplify the landscape sales process.

The same is rarely true with irrigation systems, however. While homeowners may realize the benefits of such a system from a convenience standpoint, it's unlikely that they see any correlation between the presence of a professionally installed system and a healthier landscape.

But once a customer has been convinced of the need for an irrigation system, what matters is winning the job.

"The most important thing on the sales end is the quality of the materials you work with," noted Lance Adler, president, Adler Irrigation Systems, Evansville, Ind. "For example, I take different types of pipe or insert fittings to meetings with customers and explain to them how some are solvent welded together to produce a better fit."

Day's Landscaping, West Newbury, Mass., deals primarily with high-end residential customers. "The residen-

(continued on page 58)

Opinions vary as to the most effective method of pricing and the most efficient crew setup, but contractors agree on the value of a company's reputation for success. Photo: Toro Sitework Systems

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irrigation installation

(continued from page 56)

tial market is usually the most profitable because these customers are looking for more detail, and quality in the work and service means a great deal to them," claimed Norman Day, president.

To Day, a contractor's reputation is the key to successes. "Customers want to know

they can trust whomever they're working with," he said. "This means you have to really talk to them and find out what their needs are during the sales process, and propose a plan that takes care of their needs instead of just selling what you want to sell."

Martin Thomas, president, Hydroscares,

Dayton, Ohio, targets high-end residential customers, but since his company doesn't sell landscape services it partners with area landscape companies to generate business. "We work with two or three of the best landscape com-

panies in our market who don't perform irrigation work themselves," he explained. "Typically, we work with the contractor but for the homeowner, so there's no subcontractor markup involved and it's still a coordinated installation."

For other contractors, the commercial market is the customer of choice. "We offer potential customers a couple of properties around town that they can go visit to see the importance of irrigation," explained Scott Hundley, co-owner, S&S Creative Landscapes, Bentonville, Ark. "We also give them examples of similar jobs without irrigation so they really get the point."

THE BOTTOM LINE. A real challenge on any job is submitting a price to the customer that is low enough to win the job but high enough to ensure a profit.

"I've tried to come up with a simple method of price per square foot or price per head for 28 years, but I keep coming back to time-and-materials estimates as the fairest and truest method," remarked Day. "The price of a foot of pipe changes drastically if we're doing a football field vs. a detailed perennial garden requiring all hand labor."

Adler also bases his pricing on material costs. "We do a design for every system we estimate so we can take every head, every fitting and every valve and price it all out," he noted. "A lot of contractors bid on a per-head basis, but I think you can be burned this way. Going through the design helps to anticipate everything that might come up."

"Doing a design for every estimate does take a little more time, but it also produces something we can give to the customer to

'There are some important design principles and rules to learn, which takes some real caring about the work.'

— Thomas

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irrigation installation

(continued from page 58)

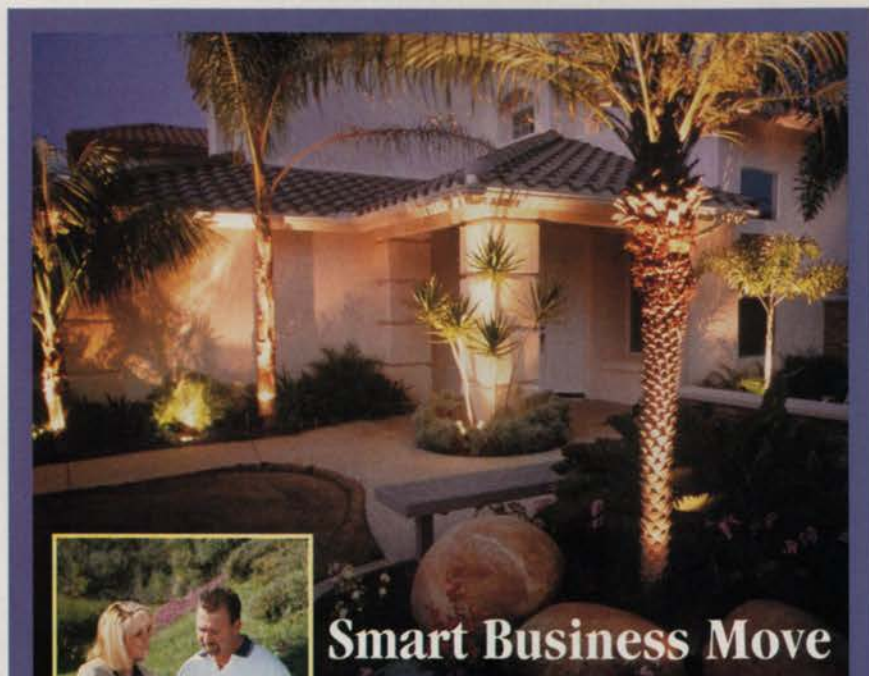
show what we'll be doing," Adler added.

As Adler noted, per-zone bidding is popular with some contractors. "We have broken down every cost that could be included in a zone," explained Hundley, who said the typical zone costs \$700 to \$750. "From there, I know my material and labor costs, and I just plug it all into the computer."

DOING THE DEED. All of the challenges with selling and pricing irrigation work only lead up to the real work – installing the system.

"There are three components to a quality irrigation system: the design, the mechanics and the products used, and I would put them in that order of importance,"

(continued on page 62)



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Making the Commercial Move

While installing a commercial irrigation project is similar to residential work, there are important business differences a savvy contractor needs to be aware of.

A residential transaction:

- Sales presentations are made to homeowners and the contractor receives immediate feedback.
- Contractors and homeowners can usually agree on the job schedule.
- Payment terms are agreed upon up front.
- Changes are handled immediately.
- Inspections during and after installation are easily coordinated.
- Presentation of the invoice is made directly to the homeowners for all work.
- Acceptance of the work and payment of the invoice generally occur at the same time.

A commercial transaction:

- Contractors deal with a general contractor or subcontractor.
 - Sales presentations are in the form of bids or quotes submitted, based on a plan given to all contractors, so feedback is limited and can come weeks after the bid/quote was prepared.
 - Payment terms are usually specified by the general contractor.
 - Changes during installation must be approved in writing by the subcontractor, general contractor or owner.
 - Inspections during installation and final inspection are required by the subcontractor, general contractor and architect.
 - Invoices are submitted to subcontractors, followed by general contractors and finally to the property owner/developer.
 - Acceptance of work and payment of invoices from owner to general to subcontractor and finally to installation contractor can take up to 30 days for each step.
- The problem contractors run into moving from residential to commercial work is managing this time differential. While contractors await payment, labor and material costs must be honored.

Remedies can include arranging for partial payment as work progresses, as well as negotiating favorable terms from lenders or suppliers. — **Scott Foerstner**

The author is Treasurer, Century Rain Aid.

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irrigation installation

(continued from page 60)

asserted Thomas. "The product can usually be changed if necessary because there's so much available on the market, and the mechanics of the system are actually something the homeowners could do themselves. But the system's design is the absolute key."

Thomas said the influx of new contractors offering irrigation services has created a

problem. "Everybody seems to get into irrigation work by focusing on equipment," he noted. "What people need is the knowledge of how to do this work, and that's tough to learn on the job. If you start performing installations in the spring and you're making a mistake, that might not become appar-

ent for three or four months until it gets dry outside. Then you've got a real problem.

"There are some important design principles and rules to be learned, which takes real caring about the work," Thomas affirmed. "That's what this industry lacks."

One key to installing systems as efficiently as possible can be the crew setup, which seems to offer almost as many options as there are for pricing the work.

"We'll have five or six guys on a crew," explained Hundley, assigning them to digging for utilities, trenching, cleaning out the trenches, gluing pipe, setting the heads and backfilling. "That crew can get a residential job done in one day, but it's taken us awhile to get to that point," he said.

Adler tends to go with smaller crews. "Two experienced technicians can handle a residential job by themselves, but our crews usually have four people with a supervisor, a skilled person and two laborers," he added.

When it comes to servicing irrigation systems, those interviewed were uniform in their desire to maintain as many of the systems they install as possible. "The first year's service and winterization generally come as part of the installation price, so contractors need to realize that they have to be able to provide this service as well," commented Day.

"I've eaten a ton of money on some jobs, but no matter how bad the problem is, you have to fix it," agreed Hundley. "Your reputation is too important not to."

"We have a production manager to oversee the installation, but he works very closely with the service manager because it's that service manager that does the final delivery of the system to the customer," explained Thomas of his way of transitioning into the system maintenance.

For companies offering irrigation and landscape installation, contractors generally recommend keeping the crews focused on one area or the other as much as possible.

"Irrigation employees tend to be more mechanically inclined, whereas the landscape employees have a love for horticulture and a better understanding of plant requirements," according to Day. **LL**

The author is Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine.

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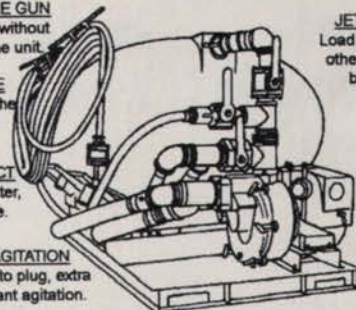
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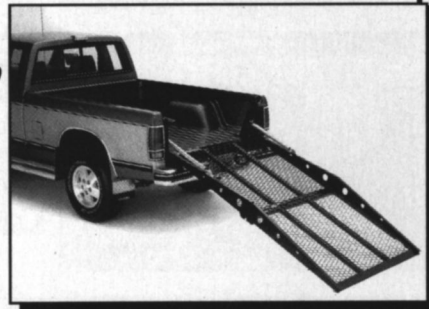
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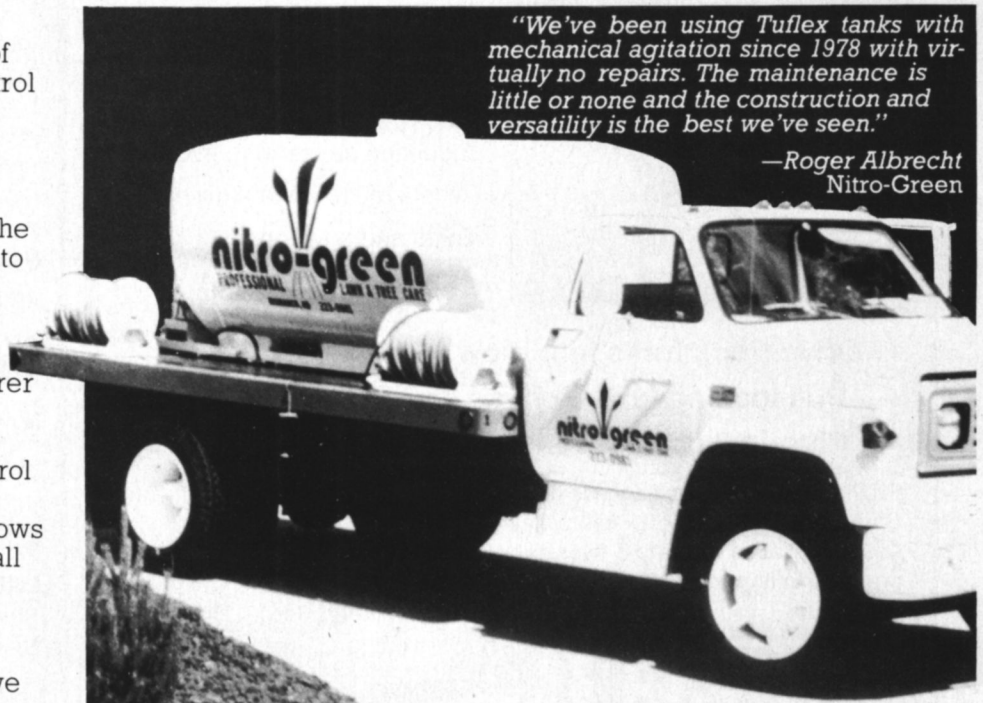
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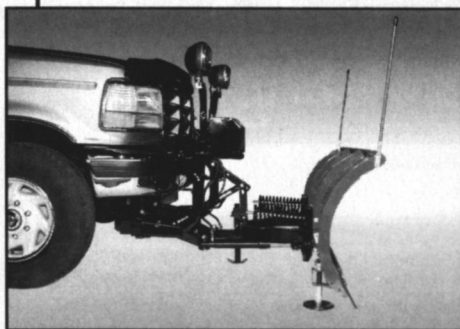
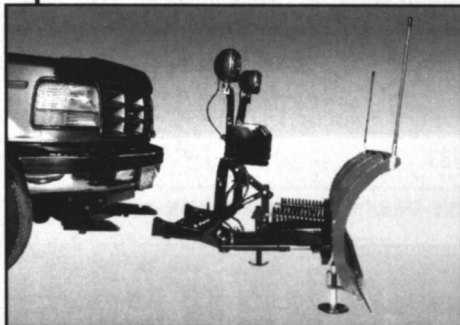
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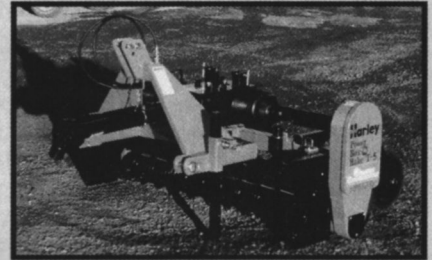


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(continued from page 64)

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Circle 212 on reader service card

(continued on page 68)

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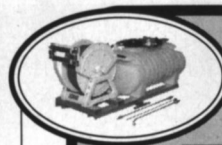
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LAWN & LANDSCAPE • AUGUST 1998 67

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(continued from page 66)

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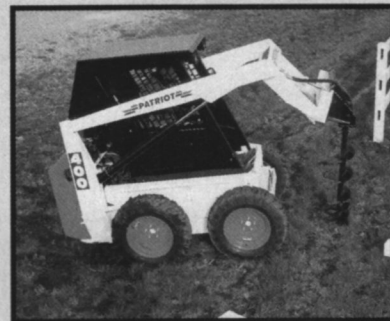
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(continued on page 72)



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NEW PRODUCTS

(continued from page 70)

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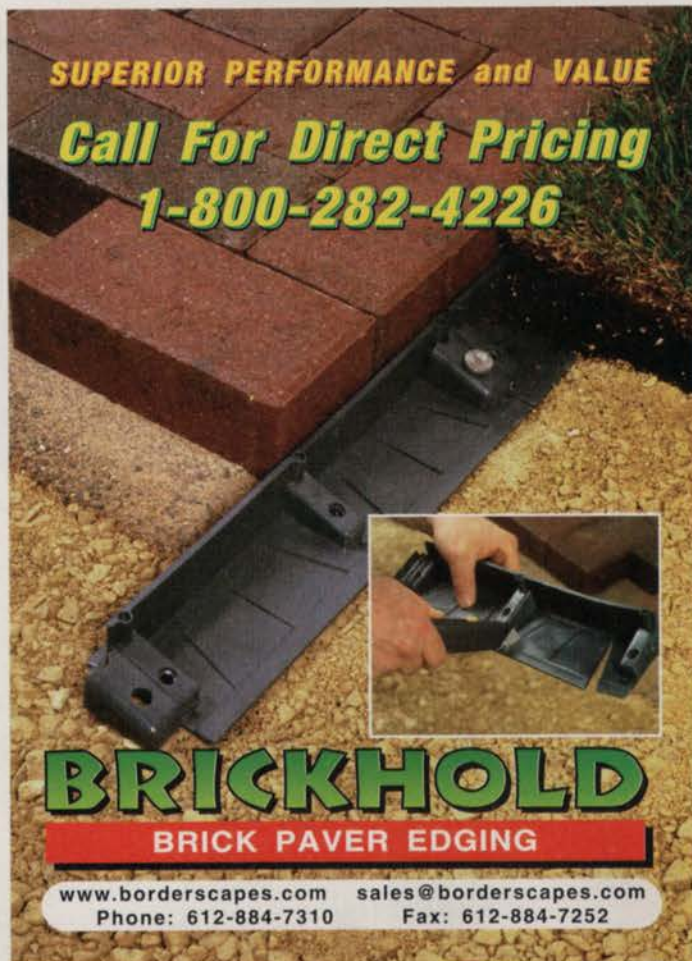
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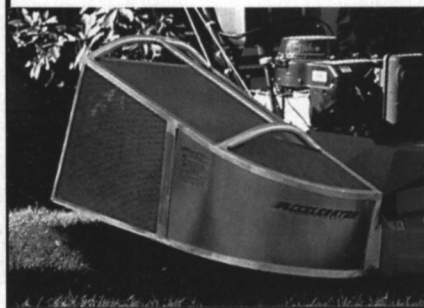


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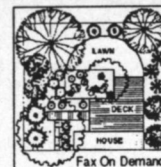
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LEGISLATIVE/REGULATORY AFFAIRS MANAGER

LEGISLATIVE/REGULATORY AFFAIRS MANAGER

Terminix International and TruGreen-ChemLawn, global market leaders in structural pest control and professional residential and commercial lawn care, respectively, are seeking a person to manage its legislative and regulatory affairs program. This person shall be responsible to impact with state legislative bodies, regulatory agencies and the U.S. EPA to proactively address issues of concern. Testimony completion for these purposes shall be an important function of this position as it relates to various issues. Terminix and TruGreen-ChemLawn are two enterprises in The ServiceMaster Company, a New York Stock Exchange-based company. Relocation may not be necessary and subject to discussion. Travel will be required. All expressions of interest shall be held in strict confidence. Kindly submit resumes and other pertinent information including compensation requirements to Norman Goldenberg, 860 Ridge Lake Blvd., Mail Drop A4-1060, Memphis, TN 38120 or fax to 901/766-1275.

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