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"It's unusual to have one person that is as universally loved and respected as Alex."

— Kam Brian, COO, Par 3 Landscape



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Follow the leader

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Brian Horn

Editor | Lawn & Landscape

But as older owners sell or retire, and younger owners who grew up on the internet and playing video games take over, technology will only become more prominent in the green industry.

Ignorance isn't bliss

There are very few things in life that can make you feel old like new technology. From programming a VCR a few decades ago to barking out commands to Alexa, there's a point in everyone's life when you just don't feel like learning about the latest in electronics.

But if you are running a business, ignoring the latest in technology can be the death knell at your company. While the competition is investing in products to make their employees more efficient, you are tripping over dollars picking up pennies.

That doesn't mean you have to spend every waking hour studying the latest and greatest in technology, but at least try to be aware of it and how it can help your company.

Whether it's an app to make your back office more efficient or investing in a drone to aid in bidding a project, taking the time to stay in the loop can go a long way.

A common theme we hear when it comes to contractors investing in technology, mainly software, is they don't have the time to learn how to use it. Even if they take some time to learn enough to use at their company, they still don't feel like they are even cracking the surface of what it can do.

That's why I was surprised when we received

the survey results from our 2018 Technology Report, which you can read by flipping to the back cover of this issue.

One question we asked focused on how much of their software respondents thought they were using to its fullest capabilities. Only 32 percent said they were using less than a quarter of their software's capabilities.

From what we hear, I expected that 32 percent to be closer to 50 percent. (By the way, you can find the results to that question and others that didn't make it in the report on lawnandlandscape.com in the 2018 Technology Report under the Research tab.)

But as older owners sell or retire, and younger owners who grew up on the internet and playing video games take over, technology will only become more prominent in the green industry.

Plus, as finding reliable labor continues to be an issue in the industry, technology can help solve that problem.

It's not to the point where robomowers will replace humans, and who knows when or if we'll ever get to that point, but as the products you use become more efficient, spending those budgeted labor dollars on better products and equipment might be the answer to getting more work with less employees. — *Brian Horn*

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GIFTING A FAMILY IN NEED

Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado volunteers spent a day helping the family of a fallen deputy. **By Megan Smalley**

After El Paso County Sheriff's Deputy Micah Flick died in the line of duty this past February, many in the community looked for ways to help Flick's family – including the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado.

"Colorado Springs is a pretty big city, but it's a tightknit community," said Tammy DiFalco, member relations manager at the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado. "The whole community was shaken by that event."

According to the Denver Post, Flick was shot while trying to detain a car-theft suspect in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He is survived by his wife and 7-year-old twins.

Each April, ALCC members participate in a Day of Service event close to Earth Day. Some years, they provide free landscaping for a children's hospital or other nonprofit in the area. This past year, they decided to help provide landscaping to the Flick family as one ALCC member, Jonathan Campbell, was a close childhood friend to Micah.

"We were best friends as kids," said Campbell, who is owner of Colorado Stoneworks.

He said he and Flick lost touch in high school when they went to different schools, but the news of his death impacted the community.

"It was like two to three months ago (Flick) was killed," Campbell said. "It hit the Colorado Springs community hard. I don't think we've lost an officer in the line of duty here locally. As soon as the Flick's family property was recommended, I think everyone felt it was the right project to do for this year. There

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ALCC redesigned the Flick family's front yard and added a playground. The association also pruned trees and regraded their backyard.

was no pushback from anybody.”

So, for ALCC's Day of Service event, about 30 landscape professionals and a few high school student volunteers teamed up to renovate the outdoor space at the family home of Flick. Campbell said ALCC met with Flick's wife ahead of time to learn the design the family wanted.

“Initially, they were confused we were helping them this way,” Campbell said. “They had never heard of ALCC. But I think they are a very humble family and took this news by surprise.”

After getting design ideas from the family and having them select plants they wanted, ALCC members implemented that design on the Day of Service.

Campbell said the family used the front yard as a gathering space on Sundays after church. With that in mind, ALCC focused on redesigning the front yard along

with pruning trees and regrading their backyard.

He said they installed a retaining wall in the front yard to level out a slope, created a playground area for Flick's children, provided a playset for them to install, placed new rock beds, installed a paver patio with patio furniture and planted a memorial tree in honor of Flick.

All materials, design and labor were donated by ALCC member companies.

Campbell said the project turned out just as the family hoped it would.

“Their reaction was just joy,” he said. “They absolutely loved it. Our staff loved it too. It's just a really good feeling to help someone out. It's not all about making money. There's more to life than profit margins. There's a sense of accomplishment and pride in being able to help a family out.”

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GET CREW APPROVAL ON NEW IDEAS FOR OPERATIONS

ASK THE EXPERTS

Q: I have come up with several ideas to improve operations at my company but need help as to the best way to implement them. Do you have any suggestions on how to engage my team and make this a success?

A: A common mistake that leaders make is to come up with a good idea (or a new one each week for some leaders) and tell the operations teams to execute based on your “great” idea. We are all guilty of going to a conference or a meeting with other companies that inspires us to make changes. In hindsight, your team has heard new ideas from you many times and are not too excited about starting more processes. By asking them to run with your new idea, you delivered a new process without getting them involved in the process.

As you look for opportunities to make operational changes with your team, getting “buy-in” will be key to making it stick.

So, how do you get the team to buy into the new ideas that will improve the company’s quality, client experience and profit?

To start, operational improvements must be their idea – even if they are not. For your team to feel like they have some skin in the game on how a new process is performed, they must be highly involved in creating the solution. To help you get this started, consider the following:

- **Have an agenda:** With a “buy-in” meeting, make sure you have an agenda. Don’t talk about everything that has gone wrong with the past. Discuss a maximum of three operational pain points or mistakes made this past season based on the need for improvements. Then, pick one and work on a solution to that pain point with the team. Discuss with them how to become the best at this and the changes that need to be made to improve.



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• **Nameless/Rankless:** As you review the details of the pain point, you will drive the discussion to be productive in order to solve a pain point. The intention is that we discuss with leadership, or the whole team, so they can be a part of the solution. Do not allow the blame to be placed on specific people. Remember, we are learning together what we need to do for better results. This is not a meeting intended to be led by the owner and everyone else just sits there to listen. Instead, make sure the mindset is that we have an equal playing field where no one gets in trouble



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for saying what is on their mind, thus a nameless and rankless approach to solving pain points. However, set ground rules to be respectful, to be factual and to come with the right mindset.

• **Agree on buy-in:** When generating the idea for operational improvements, create a company with the ideas and solutions we all agree on. The result of these meetings should include an agreed format that includes:

a) **Timeline** – when does this take place? January? April? All year? When do we need to implement our new idea?

b) **Materials needed** – equipment, plants, hardscapes, soils, products, computer programs, tools, etc.

c) **Solution steps** – what steps are needed to execute this best practice for your company? What role on your team owns that next step? Who will be completing these steps?

Finalizing this new process and getting buy-in should result in an agreed written format of the revised process that can be shared among your team. Now the fun part: implementation.

Implementation is just as critical as the buy-in and creation of a new process. Make sure it is fully trained to your team by doing the new process with the team, and not in the classroom setting. Then have it reviewed within one week, then after 30 days, after 60 days and after 90 days.

Jason New, NALP Trailblazer,
McFarlin Stanford Principal

ASK THE EXPERTS is brought to you in partnership with NALP, the National Association of Landscape Professionals. Questions are fielded through NALP's Trailblazers, the industry's leading company mentoring program. For more questions visit Landscapeprofessionals.org.

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BRIGHTVIEW ACQUIRES THE GROUNDSKEEPER

PLYMOUTH MEETING, PA. — BrightView Landscapes has acquired Environmental Earthscapes, a Tucson, Arizona-based firm that operates as The Groundskeeper. Terms of the transaction were not disclosed.

The Groundskeeper and its subsidiary Greater Texas Landscape Services specialize in commercial landscape maintenance, landscape construction, tree care and irrigation services. The company has locations in Tucson, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Albuquerque, New Mexico, El

IN THE NEWS

Paso, Texas, Austin, Texas, San Antonio, Houston and Dallas. The Groundskeeper employs about 1,000 people in four states.

"Thanks in large part to the quality of their work and commitment to client service, The Groundskeeper has seen steady growth from its founding in 1976 and today is one of the Southwest's most prominent landscape maintenance, development, tree care and irrigation

companies," said Andrew Masterman, BrightView CEO. "We are delighted to welcome their team to BrightView and we look forward to continued growth and success in this critical region."

The Groundskeeper CEO Anil Hiremath said the employee-owned company shares much in common with BrightView. "Both organizations are dedicated to their teams, the communities in which they operate and to producing the very finest results for clients," he said. "Becoming part of an

industry leader like BrightView creates opportunity for our team members and assures that our customers continue to receive the highest level of service."

BrightView ranked No. 1 on Lawn & Landscape's 2018 Top 100 List, posting \$2.2 billion in revenue while the Groundskeeper ranked 19th with more than \$68 million in 2017 revenue. BrightView also acquired Girard Environmental Services in September 2017, which ranked 39th on Lawn & Landscape's 2017 Top 100 List.



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The Wisconsin Green Industry Federation plans to merge its programs and services into the Wisconsin Nursery and Landscape Association as of July 1.

WGIF's board of directors began strategically planning in 2013 to become a more sustainable, effective organization for the green industry, according to a joint press release.

The strategic plan and action plan has evolved and was accelerated with Executive Director Brian Swingle announcing his retirement from both WGIF and WNLA.

Reorganization of WGIF has been needed to reduce expenses, increase efficiencies and better serve members.

The current member organizations are: Wisconsin Nursery and Landscape Association, Wisconsin Sod Producers Association and Commercial Flower Growers of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association is an affiliated association of WGIF.

WNLA signed a three-year agreement with the Wisconsin Association Management LLC of Milwaukee, effective July 1. Chris Ruditys will become WNLA's executive director. A secondary executive director is yet to be named.

Ruditys, owner of Wisconsin Association Management, LLC, and Swingle, owner of Torri Phillips Association Management, worked with one another for the past five years on joint association conferences and events. Ruditys also manages more than 20 associations at the state and national level.

Through the merger, WNLA will assume the legislative and regulatory responsibilities, including lobbying. The WGIF board voted to transfer the legislative fund to WNLA in June 2018.

WGIF dues have already been paid for 2018 by the member organizations, so the WNLA board will set the dues amount before the 2019 membership renewal period in October.



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 ORGANIZATION TO HOST ON-SITE MEETINGS.**

OPEI MOVES INTO NEW HEADQUARTERS

The association hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony May 7 for its new location. **By Brian Horn**

ALEXANDRIA, VA. – Now that the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute has officially moved into its new headquarters in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, Kris Kiser, president and CEO, said the new building will better serve its growing membership.

Kiser said the old location, which was also in Alexandria, didn't have enough space to accommodate OPEI's committee meetings. As the organization

has grown, meetings usually had to go offsite. Now the group can have more constructive meetings, which will benefit equipment manufacturing and the industry as a whole.

"It's member engagement – just the ability to get together," Kiser said.

More than 100 people helped OPEI celebrate its new location with a ribbon cutting on May 7.

Along with Kiser, Dan Ariens,

president and CEO of Ariens Co. and board chairman of OPEI, Tom Cromwell, group president of Kohler Power and vice chair of OPEI, Bjoern Fischer, president of STIHL and OPEI board secretary/treasurer, and Tom Duncan, president and CEO of Positec USA and director of OPEI's board, were present to cut the ribbon.

The new three-story OPEI headquarters includes a confer-

ence center that can seat 50 people and a rooftop deck.

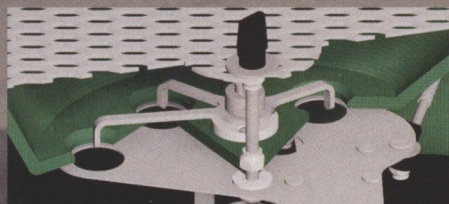
The building features paintings of OPEI's TurfMutt, a campaign launched in 2009 to influence consumers. The campaign continues to grow as does OPEI's membership, which Kiser said has reached record levels.

"Evidencing the shift away from out-of-house meeting spaces, our Engine and Fuels and Handheld Products committees met here this week, debuting our new conference center," Kiser said. "We're excited to begin the next phase of our growth in our continued service of the outdoor power equipment industry." **L&L**

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• **LIKE MANY OF YOU READING THIS COLUMN,** I got my start in the landscaping business with a single lawnmower, the belief that I could outperform the competition and the audacity to go for it.

A lot has happened in the 34 years since, but when I really drill down on what has enabled me – and virtually every other successful business owner I've had the pleasure of knowing – to succeed, I am struck by how large a role self-confidence and the willingness to take risks has played.

And history backs me up: Scroll through a list of the most wildly accomplished entrepreneurs in the world from Andrew Carnegie and Walt Disney to Estée Lauder and Steve Jobs, and you'll find they all had these two traits in spades. I bet you do, too.

It's also true that our greatest strength has the potential to become our greatest weakness if we're not careful. As confident, risk-taking owners, we tend to think we have to have all the answers all the time, when in truth sometimes the best



MARTY GRUNDER is a speaker, consultant and author. He owns Grunder Landscaping Co.

thing we can do is admit we don't and seek outside perspectives. As my mentor Clay Mathile, the former owner of Iams, likes to say, "The hardest thing for an entrepreneur to say is 'I need help.'"

It took me a long time to really learn that lesson. Earlier in my career when a problem, or an opportunity that I was both excited and unsure about would come up, I'd think, "I own this company, I should know the answer." Then I'd go it alone and often make a mess of things. But gradually I got smarter and realized just how critical it is to get outside perspective. Here's

where I've found the most valuable insights come from:

A GOOD MENTOR. I have enjoyed the good fortune to count Mr. Mathile as a mentor, along with a number of our industry's leaders, many of whom I've written about here before. Watching how these individuals approach their businesses and listening to their advice has broadened my vision for my landscaping company and for myself, while also keeping me tethered to what's real and realistic. Good mentors come in all shapes. I also learned a great deal early on from a local nurseryman who taught me how plants "weep, creep and leap," and who saved me from disaster by dissuading me from bidding on a \$50,000 job at Olive Garden when I was 19 and wildly unprepared for it.

Who are your mentors? Identify

people you can learn from who will take an interest in you, and then work to cultivate those relationships so that when you find yourself uncertain, you have trusted, knowledgeable people in your network you can turn to.

A PROFESSIONALLY RUN PEER GROUP. Having facilitated peer groups for some 16 years now, I have seen for myself the power this model has to transform business owners, both professionally and personally. When run well, with a structure and a curriculum optimized for results, these groups enable CEOs to receive from – and give to – each other relevant, real-world feedback on how to control and grow their companies. At my consultancy, we've structured our ACE Peer Groups to serve as boards of advisors. Surrounded by other ambitious landscape pros who want to help each other succeed as much as they want to advance themselves, our ACEs find themselves pushed to make decisions, improvements and progress in a way and at a pace they didn't know they could.

A GOOD BUT HONEST FRIEND. I have many wonderful friends whom I can rely on to tell me what I want to hear when I want to hear it. We all need cheerleaders at different times. And then I have my friend Mike whom I can depend on to actually tell me like it is, no holds barred. When I turn to him with a challenge I'm facing at my business, I know what he'll say may not be what I want to hear but it will be what I need to hear. And for me that kind of candor is invaluable.

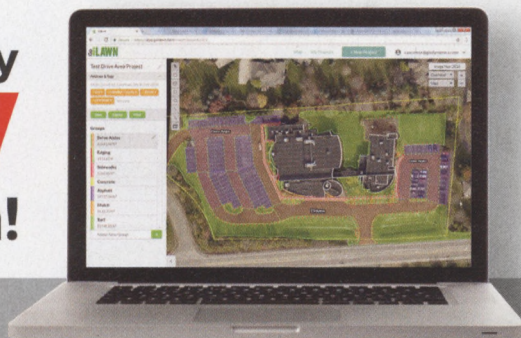
The takeaway? Value the self-confidence and risk-taking nature that made you an entrepreneur, but be honest with yourself when you need help and don't be afraid to go find it.

Happy June and I'll see you next month! **L&L**

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REVISITING HOURLY RATES



- **I FIRST COVERED THIS TOPIC** almost three years ago in the August 2015 issue of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine. Due to the dramatic increase in labor costs throughout the country, it's time to revisit hourly rates and what makes sense for your business. Keep in mind that the cost of labor has increased anywhere from \$2 to \$6 per hour the past three years and that for every \$1 increase in the cost of labor, the contractor has to raise his price to the customer \$2-3 per hour.

A mistake that many contractors make is to charge the same man-hour rate for maintenance crews as well as construction ones. This misunderstanding often results in maintenance rates being too high and construction ones being too low. CPAs often add to this confusion when they help their clients calculate these average rates without understanding some of the subtle reasons why they should not be the same. Let me explain why your construction hourly rate should be 20 to 25 percent higher than your maintenance hourly rate. I'll calculate hourly rates for both a two-man maintenance crew and a three-man construction crew using a one-day scenario and an Excel worksheet that I developed for such calculations. You can calculate your rates by substituting your costs in these scenarios.



JIM HUSTON
runs J.R. Huston Consulting, a green industry consulting firm.

CALCULATING THE MAINTENANCE MAN-HOUR RATE. In this one-day scenario, we have two people earning an hourly wage of \$18 and \$14 respectively. The crew average wage (CAW) calculates to be \$16. This crew works a 50-hour week. The labor burden – Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA), The Federal Unemployment Tax Act (FUTA), the State Unemployment Tax Act (SUTA), workers' compensation insurance (WCI), general liability insurance (GLI), vacations, holidays, paid-time off (PTO) and medical insurance – is 20 percent. General and administrative (G&A) overhead for the maintenance division is \$12 per

ALWAYS ADD A 10 PERCENT RISK FACTOR TO (YOUR) CALCULATIONS.

man-hour. The cost per hour (CPH) for the ¾ ton crew truck and trailer is \$14. The 48-inch ride-on mower runs five hours per day at a CPH of \$14. The 36-inch walk-behind mower also runs for five hours per day at a CPH of \$6. We'll put one hour on the 21-inch mower with a CPH of \$5. Edgers, trimmers and blowers run a total of three hours per day at a CPH of \$4.75 each.*

CALCULATING THE RESIDENTIAL CONSTRUCTION MAN-HOUR RATE. In this one-day scenario, we have three people earning an hourly wage of \$22, \$17 and \$15 respectively. The CAW calculates to be \$18. The crew

works a 50-hour week. The labor burden (FICA, FUTA, SUTA, WCI, GLI, vacations, holidays, PTO and medical insurance) is 25 percent. General and administrative (G&A) overhead for the maintenance division is \$18 per man-hour. The cost per hour (CPH) for the one-ton crew truck without a trailer is \$14.*

ANALYSIS. Most of our calculations are self-explanatory. However, four specific numbers need further explanation. First, I always add a 10 percent risk factor to my calculations because things don't always go as planned. Second, the labor burden for a maintenance crew is usually a little lower than that for a construction crew. Third, the G&A overhead cost per man-hour for a maintenance crew is usually 30 to 50 percent lower than that for a construction crew since construction work is much more management intensive than maintenance work. Finally, a residential construction crew should add a 20 percent net profit margin (this is a 25 percent markup) to its break-even point (BEP), while a maintenance crew usually operates at a 10 percent net profit margin.

The 2018 maintenance man-hour rate is \$7.64 higher (\$51.77 – \$44.13) than its 2015 counterpart – a 17.3 percent increase. Likewise, the 2018 install man-hour rate is \$6.91 higher (\$60.91 – \$54.00) than its counterpart in 2015 – a 12.8 percent increase.

CONCLUSION. The pricing for our construction crew is \$9.14 more per man-hour than the maintenance crew. That's almost an 18 percent difference. Too many contractors who use an average man-hour rate overprice their maintenance accounts while underpricing their construction projects. This means that they could be more competitive bidding maintenance work while making more money on construction projects. And who couldn't use more money? **L&L**

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CULTIVATE CO-PILOTS |

- **IT'S NOT UNCOMMON FOR BUSINESS OWNERS** to think about exit goals and personal needs as their companies mature. Regardless of what you plan to do when you're ready, the most important thing is to do it on your own terms, plan your end game from the beginning and have a top team of co-pilots to help get you there.

Just as they do for you in the day-to-day running of your business, a solid executive or senior management team will help you sharpen your competitive edge and push growth and profitability that can leverage your position. If they are a trusted, high-performing group, they can help you run and scale your business without you having to be there all the time to make it work.

Some owners achieve a similar result by hiring a great "number 2." However, for most CEOs, myself included, being able to rely on a great team of people who are smarter than you simply gives you more options. Consider:

1. HOW WILL YOUR TEAM MEASURE THE SUCCESS OF ITS PERFORMANCE? Establish a list of



BRUCE WILSON is principal of green industry consulting firm Bruce Wilson & Company.

expectations, actions and priorities. What are you willing to delegate and what accountability do you want associated with it? Work together on a strategic plan, broken down into annual and quarterly priorities. Each priority should have a clear direction, someone on point to drive it, a measurable result and a timeline for completion.

2. HOW DOES YOUR TEAM HANDLE CONFLICT OR DECISIONS? Make sure your expectations for behaviors are clear to management. Use your strategic plan to memorialize what's expected. Also,

“EXECUTION IS JUST AS IMPORTANT, IF NOT MORE IMPORTANT, THAN STRATEGY. THERE NEEDS TO BE REAL DISCIPLINE AND ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH IMPROVED COMMUNICATION.

establish guidelines for the team to make decisions when there is conflict or lines are crossed.

3. WHAT IS YOUR TEAM CULTURE? Invest in behavioral assessment tools like DiSC or Myers Briggs. Map out how your team is living company values versus their work ethic, which quickly deter-

mines whether they are A, B or C players. Many of these tools can help your team understand how to communicate better with others in the company and give your culture a better rhythm.

4. WHAT ARE YOUR IDEAL BEHAVIORS? If the assessment determines that you do not have all the right people, or the people you have do not model team behavior or are not open to learning, determine what is missing and develop a description of what's needed to fill out the team. Create a development plan for the people who could become future executive team leaders. I favor a home-grown team if at all possible rather than what usually ends up being a trial-and-error process of finding people who fit. One exercise I have seen that works is identifying the top three to five employees in the company, listing out their traits, and forming company values that are centered around these three to five role models.

5. WHAT DOES YOUR TEAM WANT TO ACCOMPLISH? Make executive team goals measurable. Create an actionable list of positive impacts your team wants to have on your organization's performance over the next one to three years that could include: improved collaboration, improved communication, being able to make better and higher quality decisions, fewer silos, less conflict, better interpersonal relationships. Execution is just as important, if not more important, than strategy. There needs to be real discipline and accountability through improved communication, a consistent meeting rhythm and working together as a team while trying to add to the company culture.

The ability of your leadership team to work well together as an 'operating system' can make or break your organization's ultimate goal. **L&L**



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PER HOUR."**



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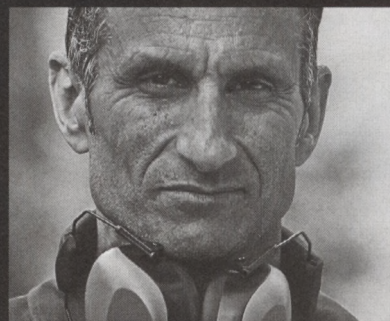


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Whether he is taking his team fishing or helping Par 3 survive the Great Recession, Alex Villarosa's actions set the example for those around him.

Follow the leader

Story by **Lauren Rathmell** • Photography by **Jacob Kepler**



Lawn & Landscape collected submissions in early 2018 for the Employee of the Year contest. From there, editors read through applications and had to make tough decisions and choose the best four out of a host of great nominees.

If you have someone in mind for the contest, we will again be collecting nominations in early 2019, so make a note to send them to editor Brian Horn at bhorn@gie.net

If anyone needed proof Alex Villarosa was going to be a success at Par 3, his work during the Great Recession would be a prime example of things to come. And that's with high expectations before he even joined the company.

"(In this industry) he was the first-round pick of the draft," says Kam Brian, COO of Par 3 Landscape. "He came highly recommended."

Villarosa joined the team in June 2005. At the time, Par 3 had one field technician running its construction business, but the jobs became too much for one person to handle. The company was about 10 years old, and the construction division at Par 3 was made up of work generated from the company's maintenance jobs. The division was bringing in about \$250,000 a month.

Villarosa jumped in wearing as many hats as he could to get jobs done. "He was work-

ing with the design team, out in the field, even collecting payments on jobs," says Shawn Buckley, owner of Par 3 Landscape.

But he really showed his worth during the economic downturn.

The industry in Vegas was hit hard, and no one could secure jobs like they used to.

For Villarosa, it meant he just had to work a little harder.

He was able to stay on top of his business by leveraging his good client relationships and focusing on the jobs that weren't hit as hard, like HOA contracts and hotels.

"Even though the recession hit, a lot of HOAs had a reserve to where they could still spend money to renovate the property," Villarosa says.

Villarosa says he can't take all the credit, though.

"I couldn't do it without my staff," he says. "I don't believe in the 'I team,' (I believe in) the 'we team.'"



- **Location:** Las Vegas
- **Years in industry:** 18
- **What would you be doing for a career if you weren't in landscaping?** It's hard to say, but maybe still industrial construction.
- **What advice would you have for an owner on how to find and keep the best employees?** Value your employees like they are family.
- **What's the best lesson working in the industry has taught you?** Treat people with respect, don't over promise and under deliver.
- **Why is Villarosa deserving of Employee of the Year?:** "He loves what he does, leads by example, truly cares about his employees, and deserves the credit for the success of his division."

- Kam Brian, COO, Par 3 Landscape Management

The construction division remained profitable and even grew in the unstable economy. Villarosa was able to run his crew of 100 guys without any layoffs.

Buckley credits Villarosa's optimism for the division's success. "A lot of people were really depressed when the recession hit," he says. "But Alex was always upbeat and that trickled down to the rest of the crew."

Villarosa reminds his staff that just because he is the vice president of construction, he's never too busy for them.

"I'm not a sidewalk manager who stands there with his hands in his pockets," he says. "I'm in the field

with them asking what we can do to be more efficient. To keep my people motivated, I knew I had to lead by example."

Villarosa graduated college with a degree in engineering and worked in industrial construction and mining. With his mining background, he can handle almost any equipment on the job.

"He's not afraid to pick up a shovel," Brian says. "He's a guy that wears boots to work every day and visits every jobsite."

Faith and family. When he's not checking in on his crews or taking care of business at the office,



Pictured from left:
Kari Miller, landscape
architect, Alex Villarosa,
VP of construction
and Art Blouin, field
supervisor.

Villarosa dedicates his time to his church community and family. With four kids ranging from ages 20 to 12 (including twin boys), Villarosa and his wife of 23 years make family a priority.

A work-life balance is an important value at Par 3 and Buckley says Villarosa is always sure to make it to family events.

"It's about knowing your priorities," Villarosa says. "For me it goes God, family then work." He leans on his Christian faith to stay focused on his job while at work and stay focused on his family while at home.

Outside of his job at Par 3, Villarosa serves as an assistant minister in his church, regularly teaches Bible study and leads the youth congregation as a group counselor.

The support from the owners at Par 3 has also helped him balance his schedule. "It's not an easy task. Sometimes I'm working more than 50 hours a week, and I attend church three times a week," he says. "But the owners always express that family is a priority."

Buckley says it's hard to keep up watching Villarosa work, but he's got his daily routine down to a

specific structure. "He beats me into the office," he says.

Villarosa spends his morning in his office. After that, he's on the road the rest of day stopping by jobsites to check on crews.

"He runs his crew like they're his family," Buckley says. It's not uncommon for Villarosa to spend time with his crews during a barbecue or take his supervisors fishing over the weekend.

"To me, that is a way to teach them ownership," Villarosa says. "It's showing them that they're not just a warm body. Having a family-style relationship with my employees, we always encourage them that family is a very high priority in their life. There's times we've had to work overtime to accelerate projects, but if an employee has a family event they have to go to, we tell them it's ok."

During company barbecues, the crew looks forward to Villarosa's blessing before their meal. "It's always such a heartfelt prayer," Buckley says. "Everyone really looks forward to it every time."

Villarosa also preaches the importance of integrity and service to his crew of about 110 field technicians. "They are the frontline of the company," he says. "The clients may not always see me, but they

“It's unusual to have one person that is as universally loved and respected as Alex.

– Kam Brian, COO, Par 3 Landscape

always see them, so I need to lead by example.”

Giving back. Buckley says Villarosa is always bringing charitable opportunities to Par 3. When the city came together to build a memorial for the victims of the Las Vegas shooting last year, Villarosa was determined to be involved. "I don't really go out and look for the projects," he says. "But people in the industry bring ideas to us."

Someone approached Par 3 about the memorial project, and Villarosa reached out to his vendors to share the task. "I use Par 3 as part of a team (when it comes to charity work) and see if our vendors are willing to participate. I've been able to establish loyalty not only with our customers, but with our vendors and that's a very important thing when it comes to these kinds of projects."

Buckley says he was the first to get involved. Currently, Par 3 is working on a long-term maintenance plan for the memorial. The company recently went back to trim, thin and lace all the trees that were planted in October.

Villarosa and his team also offered their services to a local at-risk school last year. They designed and transformed a cement lot into a playground for the students.

Beyond the charity work, Villarosa says he has been able to borrow equipment from his company to do work for his church. Recently, he used equip-

ment to help clear a vacant lot to make overflow parking for the food pantry ministry at his church. A vendor also helped to supply truckloads of material for the parking lot.

Measurable impact. Villarosa speaks English and Spanish fluently, along with his first language, Tagalog. (He was born in Manila, Philippines, and immigrated to Nevada as a child).

"The rapport that he has with his guys might be the most impressive thing about him," Brian says. "He genuinely cares about those guys. Consequently, I think his crews are a lot more productive. The numbers don't lie."

From an upper-level perspective, Par 3 has fewer accidents and safety issues and fewer jobs that go over budget or schedule on the construction side compared to the maintenance side.

"You'd think that would be just the opposite," Brian says. "On the maintenance side you're doing smaller jobs. The contrast for me is on the construction side, you have a tighter organization. Everything runs smoothly, because they follow the lead of their division head."

That type of leadership is noticed across the company.

"Even in a company of nearly 500 employees, it's unusual to have one person that is as universally loved and respected as Alex," Brian says. "He's one of a kind and an indispensable part of our success." ★





‘JOB DONE WRIGHT’

**From housing employees to officiating a wedding,
there isn't much Ben Wright won't do
for the staff at Canopy Lawn Care.**

Story by **Megan Smalley**

There's one thing Ben Wright tries to do every day at his job as operations manager of North Carolina-based Canopy Lawn Care – put the people first.

“We have employees who are people and people have a lot of things that go on personally,” Wright says. “Marriages, kids, illness. I really try to be a part of that.”

And he does. Wright's co-workers say he takes time to invest in employees at Canopy. They say he has helped employees find counselors for marriage issues. He visits co-workers when they are sick in the hospital and brings meals to their families. If a co-worker has a substance abuse issue, Wright personally helps them by finding them outside support and providing them with accountability to stay clean on the job.

Wright even took personal time and resources to house a Canopy employee who needed a place to stay for a season.

“I learned that (a Canopy employee) was sleeping on different peoples' couches and oftentimes sleeping in homeless shelters,” Wright says. “I started thinking about what it would look like if he came and lived with (my family) for a season.”

After his wife and kids agreed, Wright invited his co-worker to live with them.

“It was a sacrifice,” he says. “But to me, it was really neat for my wife and kids to get to know him and to show my kids what's important in life – someone is in need, you provide them with resources you have.”

Canopy Owner Hunt Davis says the employees all take notice of his compassion. One employee even asked Wright to officiate his wedding.

“One of our guys in the field had gone through some life stuff and Ben took such



BEN WRIGHT
CANOPY LAWN CARE



To learn about the three-day training program Ben Wright helped start, visit lawnandlandscape.com and under the "resources" tab, click "web extras."

good care of him that the guy asked Ben to officiate his wedding," Davis says. "That's evidence that Ben cares for our folks and relates with them and has an effect on them."

Rethinking landscaping. Wright always knew he wanted to pursue a career that was tied to the outdoors. His father managed a Young Life high school camp in the moun-

tains of North Carolina. Wright often went with his father to the camp in summer. He recalls watching the students and volunteers at the camp collaborate to serve one another. He says the camp shaped character and gave him a love for the outdoors. "It was a powerful sort of molding experience for who I am today," he says.

So, in college, he majored in landscaping and horticulture and then pursued it as a career. After college, he was offered a job to design Peace Haven Farms, a farm community that would help people with disabilities. "He hired me to design the community farm and build it out from scratch," Wright says.

When that job was done, he transitioned to work as a design/build manager for a landscaping company near Raleigh, North Carolina. But Wright didn't stay there long – Davis approached him in 2014 to see if he would help him start Canopy Lawn Care.

"(Hunt's) background is not in landscaping," Wright says. "But he experienced things from the customer side of landscaping and felt the pain of hiring good, reliable contractors to maintain his home. He started thinking about that and how to make the process easier, more convenient. With Canopy, it was really about rethinking (landscaping) as a whole for the customer, and that was appealing to me."

So, Wright joined Davis at Canopy. Wright served as a "landscape expert" to Canopy when plans for the residential maintenance company were being developed.

Co-workers say Wright helped make the company's motto, SERVE, which stands for Strive for excellence, Exceed expectations, Represent ourselves well, Value others and Enjoy what we do.

"Ben introduced this idea of being a servant to Canopy, which is not surprising because that's him," says Josh Nance, operations manager at Canopy. "He's a true servant of the people."

Face for recruiting. For many at Canopy, Wright was one of the first people they got to know. "When he started (at Canopy), he joined as our director of operations, but he created every role in the organization chart,"



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BEN WRIGHT
CANOPY LAWN CARE



- **Location:** Cary, North Carolina
- **Years in industry:** 10
- **What would you be doing for a career if you weren't in landscaping?** Farming and teaching.
- **What advice would you have for an owner on how to find and keep the best employees?** Get to know your employees on a personal level. Dig into their lives and know their joys, their struggles, their families.
- **What's the best lesson working in the industry has taught you?** It's a people industry. If you take care of the people, the people will take care of the business.
- **Why is Wright deserving of Employee of the Year?:** "It's hard to imagine being anywhere close to where we are now without Ben. He's helped to facilitate so much of what we've done."

– Josh Nance, operations manager, Canopy Lawn Care

Davis says. "He performed each role himself to sort of create it and then he hired someone into that role."

To fill jobs, co-workers say Wright would meet people in-person to recruit them. John Falasz had that experience when he was hired at Canopy in 2016. Falasz had worked for another landscaping company in Raleigh. While Falasz was in the middle of mowing outside an office building, Wright walked out of the building and struck up a conversation with him.

"He was asking if I liked walk-behind mowers or hydraulic," Falasz says. "Then he said, 'If you ever feel like you need a change...' and he handed me a business card for Canopy. Nobody had ever approached me like that before."

One week later, Falasz' company told him he was getting laid off and he was out of a job. So, he picked up Wright's business card and to see if his offer was still valid. Shortly after, Wright hired Falasz to work on the Canopy Pro field team.

"Ben and I hit it off from the beginning," Falasz says. "I was excited, and I've had that excitement ever since."

Wright says training and developing Canopy employees is one of his favorite parts of the job. He says his ultimate goal is to eventually train someone so well that he will be "worked out of a job."

"It's all about developing people," he says. "Like multiplying yourself and working yourself out of a job. That's my goal every day." ★

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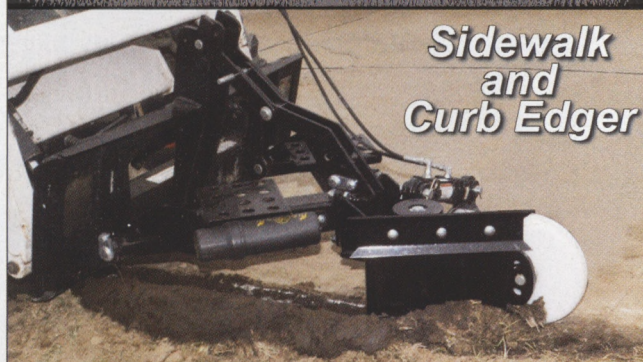


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From Spanish teacher to vice president of HR, Maureen Scheitz is a continuous learner who strives to become an expert on the topics she's studying to help her company grow.

LIFELONG LEARNER

Story by **Megan Smalley**

“We’ve got a major problem,” Maureen Scheitz told Acres Group owner Jim Schwantz on the morning she learned the company might not get all of its H-2B workers this summer.

Scheitz found out that the company would get a few dozen foremen through the H-2B program, but not the workers it anticipated. Sherman Fields, vice president of marketing at Acres Group, says making up the loss of the H-2B workers would require a lot of additional recruiting locally and would potentially impact revenue for 2018. “That was a really bad day,” he says.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ACRES GROUP



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MAUREEN SCHEITZ
ACRES GROUP



Location: Wauconda, Illinois

Years in the industry: 26

What would you be doing for a career if you weren't in landscaping? Ministry-based job or in human resources in another industry.

What advice would you have for an owner on how to find and keep the best employees? Hire for the culture fit and character. To keep them, involve them and give them latitude to make a difference.

What's the best lesson working in the industry has taught you? When things seem to be getting more difficult than they need to be, go back to green-side up.

Why is Scheitz deserving of Employee of the Year? "She cares about Acres and the people she works with far past what most people are willing to sacrifice."

– Sherm Fields, VP of marketing at Acres Group

After sharing the bad news with people, Scheitz spent that day planning an emergency executive meeting for the following morning. She says she put together a list of everything that needed to be done from both a recruiting standpoint and a business perspective to manage the situation. Then, she communicated with managers on what they could do to resolve the labor issue, so they could prepare for the executive meeting.

The next day, people gathered for Scheitz' emergency meeting. Fields says he remembers walking into the meeting with an expectation of doom-and-gloom.

"I remember walking into the meeting right when it was starting,"

he says. "Everybody in the room was happy. I remember thinking, 'Why is everyone happy?' Jim looks up and says, 'Did you hear?' I'm like, 'Hear what?' He says, 'We got 'em!' We found out right in time that our workers were confirmed. And that's all Maureen – she did everything exactly right."

Thirty minutes before the meeting, Scheitz had received an email confirming paperwork for Acres Group was received in the mail and that the company would get its 200-plus H-2B workers. She says that news was an answered prayer. "There's no way on God's earth we would have found over 200 laborers," she says.

Co-workers say Scheitz serves

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“She has performed at an extremely high quotient throughout her career, but perhaps at the highest level in 2017.

– Sherm Fields, vice president of marketing, Acres Group

as Acres Group’s expert on all-things H-2B. She even implemented the program at the company 15 years ago. She started small, applying for a handful of H-2B workers. Today, the program has grown to where the company receives a couple hundred workers every year.

“She jumped in and I really believe has become an expert and an advocate for comprehensive immigration reform in the H-2B program,” he says.

Career change. Early in Scheitz’ career, she didn’t intend to join Acres Group, the landscaping industry or HR. She started her career as a high school

Spanish teacher in Palatine, Illinois. However, a sabbatical and an illness quickly changed things around for her career.

“I was going to take a year sabbatical to get my master’s degree in Spain, but I got sick,” she says. “The school I worked at had already replaced me for the year, so I needed to find a job.”

She knew some people who worked at Acres Group in Wauconda, Illinois, including Schwantz, so she applied for a foreman position.

“I thought, ‘I’d love to work outdoors. This would be a great one-year thing,’” she says.

When Scheitz went in to interview at Acres Group, Schwantz

was in the process of forming a human resources department with a consultant. After the interview, both Schwantz and the consultant thought Scheitz would be the perfect candidate to help take on that challenge.

She did, too, so Schwantz had her make a two-year commitment to the job.

What started as a two-year job turned into a 26-year career. Over the years, Schwantz says she wrote thorough company policies and all job descriptions for the positions at Acres Group.

As the company grew from \$5 million in revenue when she was hired to more than \$50 million in revenue by 2018, Schwantz

says the policies she put in place have been critical. The company ranked 29th on Lawn & Landscape’s Top 100 List in 2018.

“We run by these policies and procedures,” he says. “Without her detailedness to these policies, we would never be the size we are today.”

While managing an HR department is a different career than what Scheitz intended, it had a few of the same elements she always enjoyed.

“I definitely enjoyed school,” Scheitz says. “I was a lifelong learner. Honestly, that’s what kept me at Acres – continual learning and continual challenge. There was always something new.”

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MAUREEN SCHEITZ
ACRES GROUP

“I was a lifelong learner. Honestly, that’s what kept me at Acres – continual learning and continual challenge.”

– Maureen Scheitz, vice president of HR, Acres Group

No stone unturned. As vice president of HR, recruitment is a primary task Scheitz oversees. Although she has a team of seven people who help her, co-workers say she comes up with the various recruitment efforts.

Scheitz lists off a slew of recruitment ideas she’s tried in recent years:

- Road signs
- Fliers in communities
- Attending Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day events
- Recruiting at grocery stores and churches
- Posting jobs on Indeed
- Sharing job opportunities with local media

- Sending e-blasts to potential job candidates
 - Attending job fairs
 - Recruiting at local universities or community colleges
 - Presentations at high schools
- “There is turnover in this industry and to hire for growth takes a lot of creativity and a lot of different ways to do it,” Fields says. “She’s not afraid to pursue new ideas. She leaves no stone unturned.”

In the past, Scheitz says she’s even asked some of Acres Group’s foremen who play on community soccer teams to hand out fliers to their teammates at games.

Scheitz stays proactive, too, playing a role in the Illinois

Landscape Contractors Association’s (ILCA) Future Landscape Industry Professionals (FLIP) committee. Through FLIP, Scheitz attends school counselor’s conferences to educate counselors on job opportunities in landscaping.

Then, H-2B is another big area of Scheitz’ expertise, as she helped initiate the program at Acres Group. Co-workers say she proactively lobbies with ILCA to Illinois state senators and occasionally in Washington, D.C., to help pass H-2B reform. And Scheitz, in turn, tries to get all Acres Group workers involved in this process, too.

She sometimes uses com-

pany meetings as a time to have workers reach out to state senators. “I used this as an ice-breaker at one meeting, saying, ‘Hey everyone, get out your computers. Let’s email senators together,’” she says.

Scheitz says all these recruiting avenues are absolutely necessary.

“The crazy thing is we’ve tracked where we’re getting our people from and it’s a little bit from every one of these areas,” she says. “There’s no grand-slam success. It’s the employing of multiple tactics, and each one providing small results.”

Best year ever. Throughout her career, Scheitz has always



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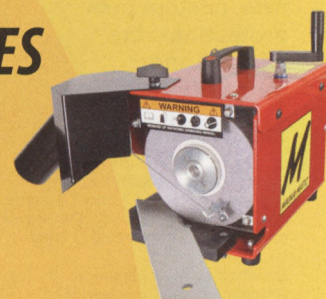
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MAUREEN SCHEITZ
ACRES GROUP



done well at her job, but Fields says 2017 may have been her best year to date.

"She has performed at an extremely high quotient throughout her career, but perhaps at the

ABOVE: Scheitz, second from left, helps the Illinois Landscape Contractors Association with lobbying to state senators.

highest level in 2017," he says.

Fields mostly attributes that to

her success in safety and training. Last year, she formed a training committee to provide more training resources at the company. This doubled the number of hours of training that salaried employees received from 1,417 hours in 2016 to 3,360 hours in 2017.

The improved training has also led to improved safety, which helped to lower insurance premiums. In 2017, the company's worker's compensation insurance premiums went down by \$100,000.

Jeff Kelly, vice president of operations at Acres Group, says Scheitz promoted safety tailgates, weekly foreman safety talks and

monthly safety committee meetings. He says she explained the numbers to crews so they could see the impact safety processes have on insurance costs. "She is really taking that knowledge of what the costs are and drives that into the production side," Kelly says.

Scheitz says it has been rewarding to see the company's safety record improve.

"It's been really quite gratifying when loss control reps come in to Acres Group and say, 'Wow, you guys have an exemplary safety program leading the industry with everything you have in place,'" she says. "That took a lot of hard work and experimentation over years." ★



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JUST IN TIME

Story by **Lauren Rathmell**

Productivity was failing so badly at David Bowman's company that he recalls the exact day he realized things weren't going well.

"It was April 21, 2010 – my daughter's birthday," he says. "I went to check on a job and the guys left the property without finishing."

After trying to get to the bottom of the situation, Bowman realized everyone was blaming someone else. "I told a supervisor to fire his whole crew," he says.

He was down a huge portion of his workforce at Complete Lawn Grounds Maintenance in Win-



PHOTOS BY COMPLETE LAWN GROUNDS MAINTENANCE

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RICK ANDERSON
COMPLETE LAWN
GROUNDS MAINTENANCE



- **Location:** Winston-Salem, North Carolina
 - **Years in industry:** 25
 - **What would you be doing for a career if you weren't in landscaping?** Trying to ride dirt bikes professionally.
 - **What advice would you have for an owner on how to find and keep the best employees?** You'll need to pay better than minimum wage and give them a set of goals.
 - **What's the best lesson working in the industry has taught you?** Be patient with employees and don't give excuses.
 - **Why is Anderson deserving of Employee of the Year?:** "(Hiring Rick) has been the best business decision I have made. I could go on and on but not describe all he does for this company."
- David Bowman, owner, Complete Lawn Grounds Maintenance

ston-Salem, North Carolina, trying to build his new home and spend time with his daughter who was sick in the hospital. "I had a meeting the next day, and a supervisor refused to show up," he says. "I was down two supervisors. It was kind of a kick me when I'm down thing."

But just as things seemed the darkest, Bowman recalled an old acquaintance who could help.

Rick Anderson had worked for a company that was subcontracting for Bowman's company, and the two had a good relationship. But Bowman's company and the subcontracting company were at odds after a few rough months, and they ended up severing their business relationship.

"Rick is as loyal as the day is long," Bowman says. "When we parted ways, I told him to keep me in mind."

One day, as Bowman was doing some work on his house, a truck pulled up, and out walked Rick Anderson. "He told me they fired him," Bowman says. "I couldn't believe they'd let him go."

While Bowman wasn't quite ready to hire Anderson at the time, Anderson found a few other jobs to keep him busy. "I was working three part-time landscape jobs after that," he says.

Now that Bowman had an opening, he knew exactly who he wanted to hire.

"I didn't have Rick's phone number and I didn't know exactly where

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he lived,” he says. He knew what truck Anderson drove and he knew the neighborhood he lived in, so he spent an entire Sunday driving around looking for his house.

Bowman says, “(When I hired him) he told us if we could pay him the salary we offered, he wouldn’t ask for anything more. And he never has.”

No job too small. In order to hire Anderson, Bowman knew he would have to pay him a decent salary. “I figured I would cut back where I could,” he says. Bowman was able to offer Anderson twice as much as he was paying the previous supervisors.

On Anderson’s first day working for Bowman, he came in and completely reorganized the shop.

“He came in at a time when we really needed structure,” says Jackie Bowman, office manager and David’s mom. “He cleaned the shop, went to work fixing broken machines.”

The company was able to save money with a lot of the maintenance work being done in house thanks to Anderson, and they didn’t have to cut back as much as they thought.

Complete Lawn Grounds Maintenance ran two crews when Anderson started with the company. Today it has four crews with four supervisors. Jackie says



**Rick is as loyal
as the day is
long. When we
parted ways, I
told him to keep
me in mind.**

– David Bowman,
owner, Complete Lawn
Grounds Maintenance

Anderson does much more than his fair share as a supervisor.

“He does all the interviews, does all the paperwork,” she says. “I tell him all the time I can handle that, but he says, ‘Oh no, Jackie. I can do it.’”

Most of the 25 employees at the company have passed through Anderson since he handles any crew-related issues. “The guys joke that if you make it through Rick you can make it through anything,” David says.

When the company hires a new worker, Anderson is the first to take them out on the job. He pays attention to the new hire to get a feel for their personality and work ethic.



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"I just watch them," he says. "You know, if they see a piece of trash on the job and they walk on past it, that's just something that shows maybe they aren't the best worker."

Moving up. The company is hoping to move Anderson out of a supervisor role and give him a foreman position soon. "He's a supervisor right now but he does more work

than that," Jackie says.

The company has been able to grow large enough for more crews and more supervisors, and David says he'd like to see Anderson in a position that allows him to spend less time working on a job and more time overseeing all the jobs. Although Jackie says she thinks he will always want to have a hand in the "dirty work."

At home, Anderson has a family and recently became a grandfather, but that doesn't seem to be slowing him down.

"His daughter was at the hospital getting ready to have a baby, so I told him to go on home," David says. "But he told me, 'I'm just going to go up there and wait,' so he stayed at work as long as he could."

If he's not catching up on jobs on the weekend, Anderson enjoys kayaking with his family and riding dirt bikes. He says everyone in the family rides together, even if he doesn't get out as much as he'd like.

Overdoing it. Anderson's work ethic, while valuable, did cause him a bit of trouble about a year ago. Anderson was enjoying some time on the beach with his wife when she noticed a mark on his neck. He went to get it checked out and his doctors told him it was cancerous.

He underwent surgery to remove the melanoma tumor from his neck and was ordered to stay home for two weeks.

"He didn't listen," David says. "I would call to check on him and he would tell me he feels fine and he's ready to get back to work."

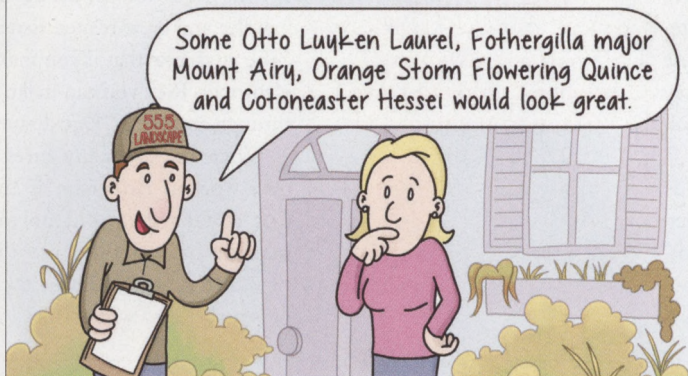
David worked out a deal with Anderson after a week of recovery. David suggested he ride around in one of the trucks, stay in the air conditioning and take it easy.

"I couldn't sit in the house anymore," Anderson says. While he was working, he tried to move something in the shop and ended up busting his wound open.

After a trip to the hospital to get fixed up, he listened to the doctor and waited the full recovery time before he returned back to work like usual.

"He's just a blessing," Jackie says. "He's always working, doing something." ★

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GETTING A GRASP, A LATE START AND BREAKING RECORDS

We caught up with the Turnaround Tour winners in the first week of May to find out how the season started.

Stories by **Brian Horn** • Photos by **Jon Arman**

COMMERCIAL CONFIDENCE

LAST TIME WE CHECKED IN: Gabe Lobato had been a bit hesitant about adding more commercial work and wanted to focus on growing only residential accounts. On top of that, the one commercial property Tucson, Arizona-based La Cholla Landscaping did have made Lobato feel a bit overwhelmed. After having to cut ties with his brother, who was going to be in charge of growing commercial sales, he had planned on turning to an automated calling program to set up appointments with commercial property managers.

LATEST UPDATES: After a few months managing his lone commercial property, Lobato has relaxed a bit and feels like he has a grasp on the job. He says the change occurred after taking a walkthrough with the client about a month after starting work on the job.

"To walk through, see her reactions, to see her feel as opposed to wondering – because you could never guess what they're feeling or thinking or hearing back from the tenants on the property," he says. "But to actually have them one-on-one walking through, it definitely is a great thing to do within one to two months after taking a new property."

In addition, he got a better grasp on how to quote enhancement work in a proposal for the property, on top of the work the company is currently performing.

"There are some things with variables and verbiage that I needed help or assistance with – how to navigate



**GABE LOBATO, OWNER,
LA CHOLLA LANDSCAPING**

that in a contract or proposal wise for those enhancements," he says.

One lesson Lobato learned when bidding commercial work is that you find out the pain points the property manager had with the previous landscaper.

"One of the biggest pain points on this property was not managing the irrigation system, monitoring and repairing it the way it should be," he says. "So that was one of the big things to be able to walk through and identify repairs that we've done, but then to also see the fact that there are still repairs popping up. Then in the conversation meeting with her, discovering 'Okay, this system is as old as the building, and the buildings are probably around 30 years old.'"


Lobato received approval to fix the irrigation systems next year, although

the property manager is trying to work out something to get the work started this year.

The success with the current property has helped him gain confidence on adding commercial property.

HARVESTER'S TAKE: Arman and Laflamme would like to see Lobato implement the calling program sooner than later to get more leads on commercial work. While he is gaining more confidence on the commercial side, they'd still like him to visit a company similar to his size who is succeeding at commercial services, and visit industry trade shows to meet more landscapers.

"Most landscapers are visual and like to hear it from their brethren," Laflamme says. ☺



TURNAROUND TOUR

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HUMMING ALONG

LAST TIME WE CHECKED IN: An ankle injury forced Mould to step away from doing physical labor on jobs but left him more time to sell for Panama, City-based New Visions Lawn & Landscape.

Even before the ankle injury, the company was growing at a rapid rate, maybe too rapid, but Mould and Tucker felt like they had a better grasp on the growth.

LATEST UPDATES: It was a record breaking month in March for Tiffany Tucker and Michael Mould. The duo had their highest grossing revenue month since taking over the company in 2016.

While there were many factors to the success, Mould says he is free to sell more jobs because they now have a foreman to manage paver jobs, which Mould was doing previously.

"All day yesterday, I went and talked to 12 customers, and I sold to 10 of them," he says. "But also what it did was led me to be able to cold call commercial properties, and every

one of them is under contract, but what I did is I made myself available to get calls when the contract expires."

Mould is targeting big properties that can bring in good revenue and are in fairly good condition; not ones that would take a while to get to average.

Mould also purchased training videos from the University of Georgia a few months ago, and finally found time to block out time for his employees to watch them.

"We cleared out the day for a Saturday, and we got them together, and just watched every film," he says. "We talked over how it applied to us, and some of the shortcomings that we've been dealing with and everything like that. It was all recognized, and it made sense to everybody."

He was impressed by how up-to-date the videos were with modern technology. The most important takeaway from the videos, Mould says, was how they focused on everyone's role in a company.

"I wanted to get through to them that they're very important. Right underneath the

customers, they're the most important thing. In the video, it kind of went through how a business works, and they needed to hear that."

Mould says business has been going well because of the immediacy the company acts on ideas.

"Tiffany and I have really stayed on top of stuff, and there's no room for procrastination. We handle stuff right there in the moment. When thoughts come into our head, we act on them, and stuff like that," he says.

"Us acting on the stuff that comes up to us and potential customers and really getting right to it, it blows the customer's mind. They're like 'Wow. We've been trying to get ahold of somebody for three weeks now.'"

While hiring is still a challenge, Mould also wants to focus on improving the quality of the work the company does. He hopes adding a third truck and moving to three two-person crews will help.

"We took a little hit on the growth, making sure that the jobs are getting done right, having to send the guys back if need be," he says.

"Overall we're still at 49 percent growth, but we would be somewhere close to 60 if it was running the way that I'm saying. If the work load was spread out a little more, dispersed a little more, I think the margin would be a little bit higher."

HARVESTER'S TAKE: New Visions is doing well and sales don't seem to be a problem, but Arman and Laflamme would like Mould and Tucker to improve recruiting since they have exhausted all current avenues.

The duo should tap into the Hispanic community for workers, and can try developing a relationship with one or two people in the community and offer them a referral fee for anyone they recommend who gets hired.

Arman and Laflamme also recommend visiting a Hispanic church and ask if they had a job board and leave a flyer there, but also ask if the church needs anything they can help them with.

"You don't want to just take and take, you need to give back," Arman says. "You want to build a long-term relationship." ()

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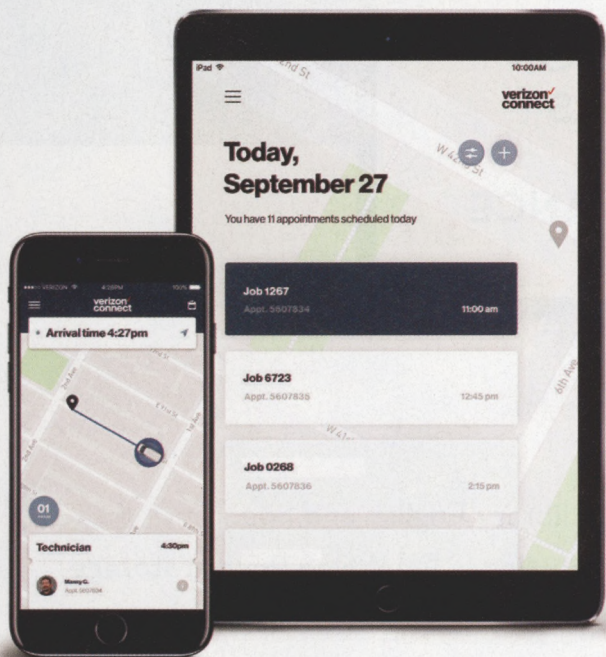
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**KIMBERLY ROWE & LAMONT HESS,
OWNERS, OUTDOOR EXPRESSIONS PA**

NOT AN IDEAL START

LAST TIME WE CHECKED IN:

LaMont Hess and Kimberly Rowe took the plunge and sent letters to customers notifying them of price increases and that the company would be switching to a prepaid systems for mowing services. These moves helped with both cash flow and increasing profits. They were looking to add more employees to the payroll, as well.

LATEST UPDATES: It hasn't been the best start for Hess and Rowe in their first spring of owning Outdoor Expressions in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

The cold and rainy weather forced Hess to start his workers later in the season than he wanted.

"I didn't bring anybody back until about the 5th of April, which was late, because we were cold," Hess says. "So, everybody was laid off. And that was technically late."

Once brought back, employees worked on spring cleanups of two big home owner associations but one of the properties took longer to finish than anticipated.

Lack of labor also cause the difficult start. Hess is still looking for more employees and will be speaking with 11 qualified candidates he found through a job posting on Indeed.com.

Hess had some luck using a temp service, which he thought would be too expensive, but after crunching the numbers, had a change of opinion.

"If you do use a temp service and you do find a good person, it's really not that bad of a deal ... for that entire time they're not on your worker's comp, they're not on any payroll taxes or anything," he says.

Hess says the company probably won't make their goal of \$450,000 by the end of the year, but he is optimistic the company can get to 70 percent of that goal. One contributing factor on falling short was lack of snow. Hess says his area only had five snow events this year, which didn't net him much business.

"One thing I learned from some of my people that have snow contracts is they have retail stores and offices that needed to be salted," Hess says. "They were able to make

money on that. I only have HOAs and residential. Nobody wanted me to bring any salt up. So, all I did was do snow.

"If I'm going to survive winter doing snow removal, I need to have some contracts — so some offices, or hospitals, or hospices, or assisted living, or something like that where the employees have to come to work and somebody needs to have salt on their sidewalks and in the parking lot. Because we had a lot of freeze, a lot of ice this winter, but very little snow."

But it's not all doom and gloom. Hess is continuing to get solid leads from visiting offices and leaving his tape measure/marketing tool, which asks, "How does your landscaper measure up?"

He also adjusted his bids after losing jobs to lower bidders. He needed to lower the margins on mowing, but increase on the enhancement work.

"I think we really have work for my enhancement crew through the month of June already pretty much booked up," he says. "So that's very promising because last year when we first took over, we didn't have any enhancement work."

HARVESTER'S TAKE: Outdoor Expressions should have started advertising sooner for new jobs, right after Thanksgiving to help hit their sales goal. As far as weather delays in the season, Arman and Laflamme advise working on equipment and cleaning the shop during the time you can't get out and work. To aid in recruiting, visit places where Hess thinks good recruits might be living or working.

"He's going the electronic way (for hiring) which is OK," Arman says. "That's a good start. But I would physically drive through areas where (potential employees) live and find a trustworthy guy to be a recruiter."

They also recommend making some changes to improve the culture at the company, such as creating a career ladder so employees can see how they can grow.

"Money isn't everything, but it certainly helps," Arman says. "You have to have enough bait to bait them with." (C)



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OH, DEER!

Services designed to control this four-legged threat are gaining traction. But what deer-repelling tactics actually work?

By Kristen Hampshire



THEY'RE BOLD AND HUNGRY – and as development strips away their natural foraging areas, the landscape is a logical buffet for deer. So, they creep in. Actually, they leap over fences and parade in prancing lines looking for a snack. Those hostas? A hardy salad. The supposedly deer-resistant perennials? Maybe not the tastiest, but they'll do.

"There is a high demand for deer control services because deer are getting braver, and as we continue to build and take away their environments, they are coming into ours," says Edward Thomas, general manager at Horizon Landscape in Wyckoff, New Jersey.

Deer control has grown as a service at Horizon Landscape, and the service is marketed especially to clients who purchase seasonal color programs since annuals tend to be more attractive to deer, rabbits and other critters like squirrels.

Chris Markham's company, New Jersey Deer Control, is dedicated to keeping the forest friends off of landscaping. "We used to do a lot of native landscaping for people – building hummingbird gardens at people's houses – and the deer were eating everything," he says, noting that the deer population exploded between the mid-1980s and mid-2000s. "Deer were affecting my projects, and I was using store-bought products that weren't effective."

So, Markham did some research and created his own repellent that is mixed every morning and applied by his team of about 16 employees.

"A lot of landscapers try to do deer control by going to the store and buying products off the shelf, and a lot of them give up on the

• THE PROS OF BEING A PRO •

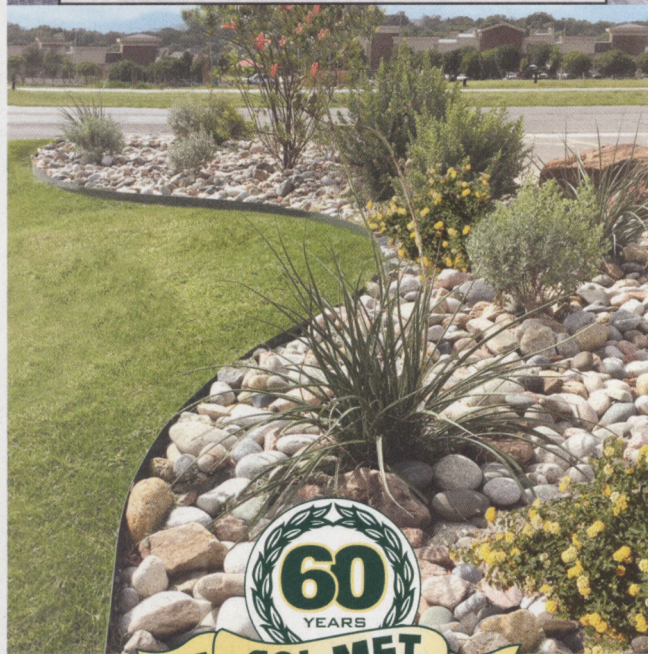
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DEER CONTROL

service because it's not effective for them," he says.

Now that Markham's company only does deer control, he partners with landscape firms to serve as a subcontracted specialist.

Horizon Landscape uses a range of commercially produced repellents, switching up their products so deer don't get accustomed to the taste. In spring, a granular repellent along with a spray deters deer for longer, Thomas says, adding that the granular adds an extra mode of protection during the rainy months.

Deer control can be a frustrating pursuit for landscape contractors, but Markham and Thomas have strategies in place that are getting results.

BORDER CONTROL. Markham says the main focus when spraying is the property's perimeter because a spray on the border reminds deer the area is off-limits, he says.

Deer are creatures of habit, Markham reminds. "If you've seen the way they cross properties, their trails are called 'deer paths' for a reason. They like to travel the same route, and if you can alter their patterns and discourage them from the property, that's half the battle right there."

There are no guarantees, Markham adds. But he does get mostly positive results when his team treats property perimeters.

DEER-RESISTANT PLANTS. These help, but remember, "Deer-resistant does not equal deer-proof," Markham says.

Research plants before you put them in the ground, Thomas says. Deer-resistant plants in New Jersey are different than deer-resistant plants in Ohio.

Thomas also emphasizes what deer-resistant means: "They won't go to those plants first. A lot of deer are attracted to properties by their sense of smell," he says. "That is their No. 1 tool when seeking plants – not by vision, by smell."

Strong-scented perennials like lavender and some herbs naturally repel deer, as do thorny plants like barberry. But there are no guarantees. "The most effective way to stop deer is install a 9-foot fence on your property," Thomas says.

BUILD A BARRIER. Fences have to be about 9 feet to be effective. "Some people in our area will install chain-link fences and do a mesh net above that to extend the height so deer won't jump in," Thomas says.

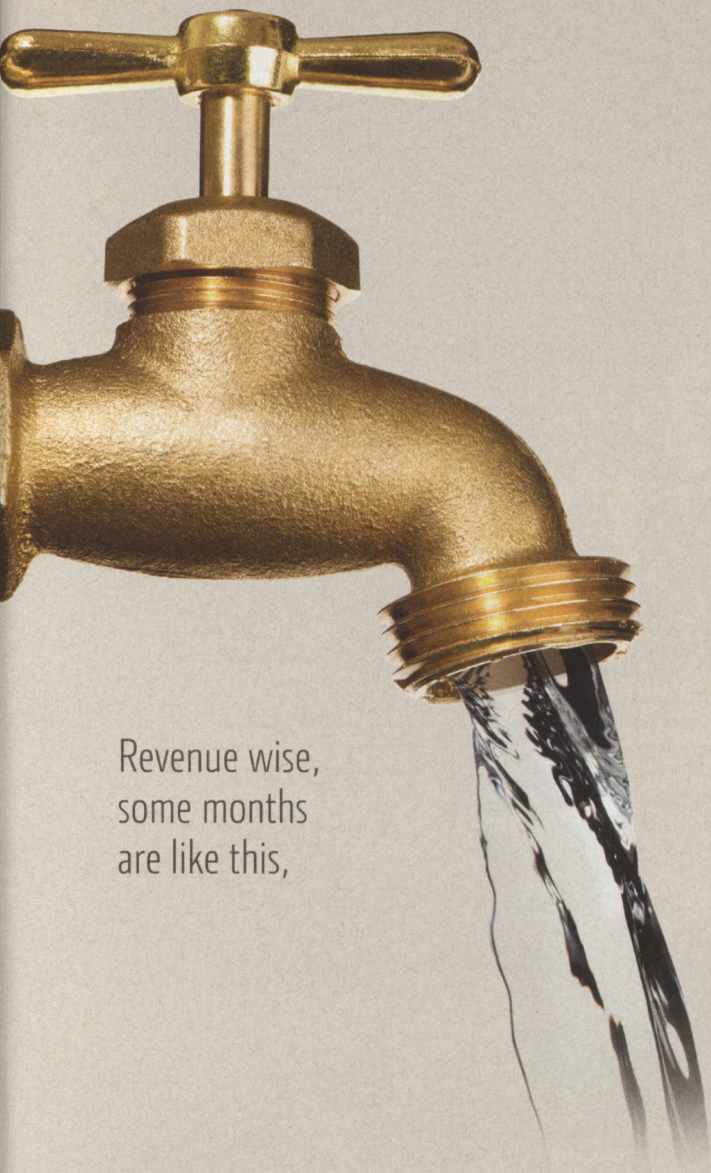
Another layer of protection: Install tall, dense evergreen hedges like boxwood or short-needed spruce.

Markham says sonic sensors and sprinkler devices activated by motion sensors can help. "Some can be effective, but deer get acclimated to these things very quickly," he says. The fence is the only sure-fire way to stop deer.

GUARANTEED TO WORK? Managing expectations is key to helping customers understand how deer control services work, which is why Markham educates clients. What he wants people to know is: the higher the deer population, the less deer-resistant plants will be.

Thomas thinks high deer populations are good for this service.

"People spend a lot of money on their landscaping – and a lot of these properties are surrounded by woods," he says. "There is a very high demand for this service, and the demand is increasing." **L&L**



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38 E

SAVE WATER

Irrigation systems get smart upgrades with water-saving technologies. Here's how they work and what your clients should know.

By Kristen Hampshire

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We've all seen it.

Rain is falling – maybe it's pouring, or even just sprinkling. Driving down the road, you pass a person's home where the irrigation system is running like it's the driest day in July. It's watering the sopping wet grass and streams begin forming, water bleeding on to the sidewalks, driveway and street.

What a waste, you think. The only thing that system needs is a rain sensor, and the system wouldn't be spraying H₂O all over a soaking lawn.

"The rain sensor is the most important part of an irrigation system," says Yoni Wiss, a project manager at Hydro-Tech Irrigation in Haymarket, Virginia. "And, even more valuable is a controller connected to a weather station that is very local, so you know a week in advance the weather that's coming to your yard."

Hydro-Tech uses WiFi controllers that claim to save its owners up to 50 percent on their water bills. "If the temperature is too cold or if rain is coming to the area, the controller tells the system to turn off," Wiss says.

Customers love the savings. And, that's how Kip Summers, owner of Summers Irrigation in Waterford, Michigan, sells rain sensors to customers getting a new irrigation system, or clients who are thinking about adding a sensor to a system they already have. "When I am talking to a homeowner, the way I break it to them is by asking, 'Do you like to save money?'" Summers says. "They'll respond, 'Everyone likes to save money.' And I tell them the initial cost and that it will probably take about a year to get your money back. Then, I explain how rain sensors work."

That return on investment is an estimate because some years there is more rain and you'll save more money by having a rain sensor, so the irrigation system doesn't run as precipitation is falling from the sky. Other years, it might take a bit longer to "make up" the cost of the sensor, particularly if it's a dry summer. "But a year is the rule of thumb," Summers says.

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— and perhaps a weather station, too — just makes good sense.

SELLING WATER-SAVING BENEFITS. First, letting property owners know just how easy it is to add sensors to an existing system can help them understand that achieving water savings is within reach. Summers explains how the wireless sensors work. Because they are WiFi enabled, "you can pretty much hook them up to any controller," including 10-year-old irrigation systems. No wire-running or digging is required.

Rain sensors tell the system to turn off when it's actually raining because the sensor detects precipitation. Rain sensor gauges are mounted and connected to the system (again, wirelessly). The gauge absorbs water and expands as more rain falls. This signals to the irrigation system: don't run now.

A weather station connected to an irrigation controller streams local weather forecasts and sends messages to the controller to not run when rain is expected. So, while the rain sensor only turns off the system while rain is falling, a weather station is a predictive tool. It can instruct an irrigation system to turn off if rain is forecasted that day.

"Say your grass needs 1 inch of water, and you're going to get an inch of rain tomorrow," Wiss says. "The system will send you a text message saying that it will not run the next two days because weather stations No. 1, 2 and 3 say you are going to get an inch of rain."

A weather station combined with a rain sensor leads to more water savings, Wiss says. Say it rains overnight. An irrigation system is programmed to run at 6 a.m., but the yard is thoroughly soaked. Because rain

isn't falling, the system will run anyway if only a rain sensor is in place. But with a weather station, the system will know that it rained and the yard only needs a certain amount of water, so it will save water by not turning on.

Weather station controllers aren't brand-new, but the technology is evolving, and Summers says he always recommends a rain sensor to clients but does not generally install the weather stations.

However, he adds, "This is the up-and-coming thing."

There are also moisture sensors that detect how much water is in the soil. This way, the sensor will disrupt the irrigation system if it rained all night, so it won't turn on at 6 a.m.

Wiss says moisture sensors can be used on larger properties, or those that have various grades or different levels of sun exposure. **L&L**

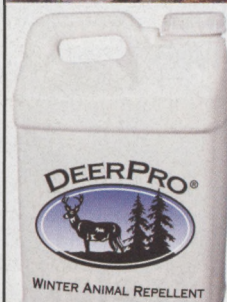
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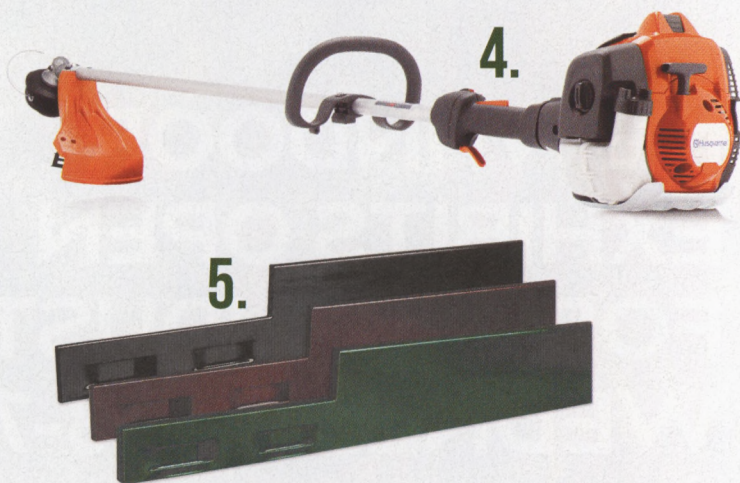
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For more information: Greenworkstools.com

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For more information: Colmet.com.

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For more information: Husqvarna.com

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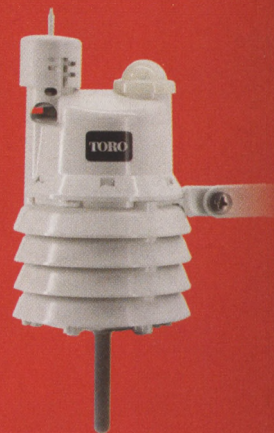
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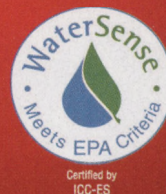


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LANDSCAPING *and you*

Retailers are diversifying services, with landscaping gaining a prominent position in the green industry.

By Conner Howard

STRIVING FOR SUCCESS in the garden retail industry can often feel like a race to differentiate your business from the big box store on the other side of town, and in most cases, that comes down to the quality and variety of services you can provide that they can't.

Knowing that, it's no wonder why so many garden centers maintain florist departments, custom container stations and extensive giftware selections, to name a few offerings. But divisions devoted to the design, installation and maintenance of home landscapes seem to be growing at independent garden centers across the U.S. as a reliable revenue stream.

For some garden centers, landscaping is a secondary department that has grown in profitability in recent years, while for others, it represents the greatest opportunity for sustainable growth.

Rice's Landscapes Redefined in Canton, Ohio, was a combination landscaper/retailer up until late 2017, when Owner Bryan Rice decided to shut down retail operations to focus exclusively on landscaping services. Rice says the decision came mostly from a place of wanting to return his focus to the company's core strengths.

His grandfather started the business in 1941 with "very humble beginnings," plowing gardens and doing light landscaping. As customers began to routinely stop by to purchase leftover plants and landscaping product from Rice's, a small retail business took shape over the years, and Rice's even started growing its own green goods. Growing and selling plants was a stable business, but it was taking up facility space that Rice eventually decided would better serve his company's core landscaping mission.

"The big driver for us was really the growth of our maintenance business," Rice says. "We actually needed more space for that maintenance business. We started looking at what's growing and what's not growing and we also looked at the margins and consistency of (growth)."

Meanwhile, Meadows Farms Nurseries & Landscape, based in Chantilly, Virginia, operates 19 retail locations and a regional landscaping service. According to Vice President Bobby Lewis, landscaping wasn't always a profitable part of the family business but it has grown into an increasingly important department in recent years. Lewis says this is likely due to two factors: a growing "do-it-for-me" segment of the





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clientele and landscaping's natural adaptability to adverse economic conditions.

"Everybody got hit hard (after the Great Recession), both (retail and landscape) departments did," Lewis says. "But, I just think the landscape has rebounded really well and retail stayed flat. The thing about landscape is that it's really easy to control your expenses. Instead of 80 crews, you send out 60. Instead of 30 designers, you have 15. I think with landscape, even with the sales drop, it was a lot easier to take care of a lot of those costs, whereas in retail you have a lot of fixed costs."

As for the clientele factor, Lewis says he's seeing a broad trend away from DIY, with demand for professional landscape installation on the rise.

"I think people have more money than they have time, at least in this area for certain," he says. "A lot of people are just making really good money but the thing they're sacrificing more than anything is time. So, if they can get (landscaping) done for them, I think it's the perfect situation for them."

In Ohio, Rice says changing expectations in the market are creating opportunity for landscapers and retailers carrying that department.

"We see this movement, and it's something we've been watching for a while, looking at the volume," Rice says. "People's buying habits, I really believe, have changed, and the demographics of folks coming in here."

ter retail and landscaping services closer together throughout the industry, but for many businesses, it's not a simple prospect of adding one department onto the other and excelling at both. There are many ways for a retailer to start offering landscaping services, or vice versa.

Like Rice's, Avant Gardening & Landscaping in Madison, Wisconsin, began as a landscape business in 1985 and, after many years of struggling to obtain the proper zoning permits, established a retail garden operation in 2016.

"I've always wanted to do retail because of the fact that we buy a lot of nursery stock," says Owner Liza Lightfoot. "You have minimum orders, so you have plants left over, and over the years, we started to accumulate. It's just a way to try to get some cash back into the business and sell our nursery stock."

Whereas Rice's shifted away from retail to concentrate on landscape projects, Avant continues to diversify by leveraging the strengths of both departments.

"It gives us an opportunity to do further marketing around the nursery. What's nice about the nursery is that when people come in to buy plants, sometimes they want a large tree and it's too big to plant. They'll hire us to do that or they say, 'I just want these small plants now, but next year, I'm planning on doing a much bigger project,' so it ties back into the landscape division. It's a very nice knock-on effect."

As a retailer, Lewis feels the landscaping department of Meadows Farms is a key point of diversification that helps them stand out from big-box competition, which do not offer services.

"We needed to right-size ... For us to go back to our roots, it was something that we needed to do."

BRYAN RICE, owner, Rice's
Landscapes Redefined

RETAIL AND LANDSCAPING — THE ODD COUPLE? A variety of factors seem to be pushing garden cen-

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GARDEN CENTERS



Avant Gardening & Landscaping in Madison, Wisconsin, originally a landscaper, expanded into retail and nursery stock in an effort to diversify.

Rice's retail operation began organically as a complement to its core offering of landscaping services. However, Rice feels the expansion got out of reach and needed to be simplified.

"That's really how the garden center was started years ago," Rice says. "Product was sitting here, and someone rolled in and said, 'Hey, I need some grass seed or I need this,' and we sold it. That was part of the model, and over the years, it got away from us. We got into gifts and all kinds of chemicals, and like anything, sometimes it works out well and sometimes you lose your way and go, 'Man, why are we doing all this?' It's too much."

NOT ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL. Though economic and industry-wide factors can affect garden centers equally, the fact remains that no two companies are identical. Not every retailer can successfully launch a landscaping division and not every landscaper can maintain a retail division on their property.

Rice says it comes down to what's right for you and your business. "We needed to right-size," he says. "Like anything in this world, you need to change. Not just change for the sake of change, but

... the world changes around you, and you just choose to change with it or not. It just happened that our business is founded on landscaping and maintenance first, then the retail came second. So, for us to go back to our roots, it was something that we needed to do."

For Lightfoot, diversification into retail was a calculated risk that has shaped for the better so far.

"Landscaping is our core strength. The retail is really a sideline for us," Lightfoot says. "A number of years ago, I worked with a consultant out of Chicago who helped me plan the business for resale. His suggestion was for us to add the retail division. He said it would make the business more sellable, and that there would be a good synergy between the landscape business and the retail, and that's definitely proven to be the case."

If a garden center wants to diversify, Lewis says that caution and research are important.

"Don't try to do too much too quickly," he says. "I think the successful ones are going to proceed very cautiously and make sure they're doing what they're doing correctly." **L&L**

The author is the associate editor of sister publication *Garden Center* magazine.

P L O W THROUGH

Choosing the right plow attachment
can get your fleet through the winter. **76**



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About 10 years ago, Dan Sneller decided to make snow management his company's main focus.

S N O W FOCUS

Honing in on snow services helps Michigan-based Sneller Snow Systems stand out.

By Holly Hammersmith

A T SNELLER SNOW SYSTEMS, snow removal is a strategic, planned service — not an off-season necessity offered as filler once the green season wraps up.

“We take the opposite approach (from most landscape contractors) and we said let’s plan ahead for snow year-round so that we can really offer better service through better planning,” says Dan Sneller, vice president.

This approach started in 2008 when Sneller, along with his brother Jeff, purchased the company from their retiring parents.

“Our primary focus is on the year-round service contracts for the landscape management and the snow and ice management,” Sneller says.

While the company’s legal name is Sneller Landscaping LLC, Sneller

says the name Sneller Snow Systems was adopted in conjunction with the rebranding a decade ago.

“We saw an opportunity for snow to be a good niche because we love snow for a lot of the same reasons that a lot of people hate snow,” he says. “It’s unpredictable, there’s so many moving parts. It can be chaotic without proper planning, but we use those challenges as strengths.”

STANDING OUT. Sneller Snow Systems is headquartered in Byron Center, Michigan, and was founded in 1984. There is a lot of competition locally, but Sneller says most of the competitors focus on the green season. By focusing on the white season, Sneller Snow Systems can differentiate themselves more and promote value-added service.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SNELLER SNOW SYSTEMS



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SNOW PROFILE

➔ To learn how Sneller Snow Systems minimized employee turnover in the winter, visit lawnandlandscape.com and under the "resources" tab, click "web extras."

"During snow events we have daily emails that go out to our customers. We also put together site maps of each property that we service," he says.

Service is customized for each client. Customer preferences are discussed prior to season start, Sneller says. "Every client is different," he says. "We offer six different service levels that they can choose from and then if they want serviced more often or less often, they can adjust that service level at any given point."

Billing is done weekly. "That way the numbers are always in front of them and that's just part of the proactive, ongoing communication," Sneller says.

Surveys are also used with clients, along with requests for feedback and face-to-face meetings.

SEASONAL PREP. For Sneller Snow Systems, the white season begins around Nov. 15 and typically wraps up by mid-April. However, preparation for the season is a year-round process.

"In the spring we are prioritizing what we're going to focus on before next season, whether it be technology upgrades or procedures that need to be created," Sneller says. Management also looks at company opportunities and risks.

Hiring is done continually. During the green season, the

company employs roughly 35 people. For snow season, there are about 230 workers, including subcontractors or as Sneller calls them service providers. About 150 of the 230 are W-2 workers, and the rest are subcontractors.

"The vast majority of the service providers are under the management of our (internal) managers," Sneller says. "They can be concrete workers, excavators, guys that have their own trucks – and they work for us on an hourly basis."

Sneller's company sets up their route and dispatches them for service. Internal employees do quality control on the sites, he says.

Sneller says they also ask em-

ployees for their perspective in the off-season to gauge their thoughts on what's needed for the next year. "We get a good feel for that and then in August will start having those discussions more formally again," he says.

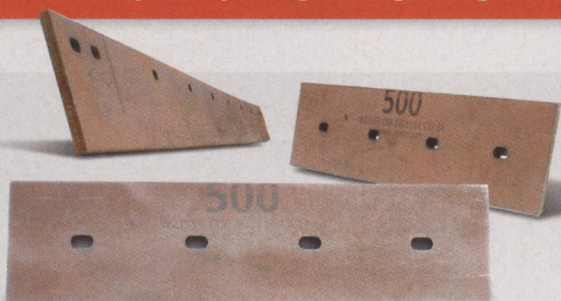
In terms of the sale season, Sneller says contracts for the following season's service can be drawn up as early as spring. The bulk of the contracts are finalized from August through October.

Because the company uses a lot of subcontractors who own equipment, internally there are only about 10 snow plows in operation during peak season. Subcontractors add another 70 to 80 snow plows to the fleet.

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Sneller Snow Systems employs about 230 workers for snow season, including subcontractors.

The company also has about 25 ice melt trucks, along with smaller pieces of equipment such as skid-steers.

COMMON CHALLENGES. The weather is always unpredictable

in this business, but Sneller says going paperless has helped them to manage the unknown.

"When it does snow, we have about 400 properties to service in a matter of about six to seven hours, and 230-plus people out

there doing it. There's a lot of moving parts," he says. "Technology is a big benefit to us because once the six or seven hours are complete, everyone's been serviced, there's really not paperwork that needs to be followed up on because everything's been logged digitally in real-time from their phone apps."

Workers access site maps using their personal smartphones. The company has its own Sneller Snow Systems app.

"When they get to a site, they log into it, they provide their service, then they enter what they did, how much product they used, and they log out when they're done. We have record of

who is on site, what they did, how much product they used. In the event of a slip and fall, we have all this information documented," Sneller says.

Advanced planning is also vital. The company is structured so that each area manager is in charge of his own geographical area, which includes snow plows, salt trucks and sidewalk crews.

"For every three or four area managers, they report up to a regional manager," he says. "There's this sort of pyramid system of organization so that it's just like a good way for everyone to work together and communicate." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.

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P L O W THROUGH

Choosing the right plow attachment can get your fleet through the winter.

By Kate Spirgen

JOHN DERRINGER, owner of John's Lawn & Landscape outside of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, has a fleet of seven pickup trucks that stay busy all year round, hauling landscaping and lawn care equipment in the summer and plowing parking lots in the winter.

The transition times are toughest, when he's attaching and removing the plows so that the trucks can do double-duty. "That's when you really need to make sure you've got the right stuff," he says. "You can waste a lot of time in the morning since the weather can be unpredictable."

Derringer makes sure his crews all check the weather the night before their shift so they know if they need to show up early to equip trucks with the right equipment. He used to have crewmembers show up early every day during the late fall months, but realized he was wasting man-hours.

"Everyone has a smartphone now, so I just tell them to check the weather at night before they come in," he says. "That way they can get some extra sleep and I'm not paying them to stand around."

Derringer just updated his fleet two years ago, and here's what he considered when he was shopping around.

WEIGHT: Derringer says his No. 1 concern was finding something that was the right fit for his trucks. "I use them all day every day, so I don't want something too big that's going to put a bunch of strain on my fleet," he says.

SUPPORT: Since downtime is a real killer, Derringer wanted to make sure he could easily repair his plows. So he looked for a dealer that would keep him up and running. "That relationship is really important," he says.

BLADE: Derringer considered moving to V-plows this year but decided against it since he's had good luck with straight-blade plows in the past. "If it's not broke, don't fix it," he says. He also says that material options are important to consider. A few years ago, he decided to move away from steel blades and start using polyethylene plows. Derringer says they cost a little more, but they're worth it.

"So far, they've been holding up really well," he says. "I haven't had the kind of wear and tear I've seen with steel blades."

Derringer also has some snow blower plows for smaller jobs like driveways and sidewalks. "The snow blower plow is great for getting the sidewalk totally clean," he says. "We have some customers that's really important to." **L&L**



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April snow means May

'OH NO'

By Mike Callahan

NO ONE GETS INTO the snow removal business thinking they will be pushing snow into spring. So, when late snow flurries plagued the Northeast in April, contractors were forced to re-examine how they would weather the storm and position themselves for summer success. A focus on labor, cash flow and operations helped to achieve this goal.

STOCK YOUR BENCH. People are the most critical part of any business. Without the right players in key roles, success is impossible. Unfortunately, due to the seasonality and unpredictability of snow removal work, reliable labor in the winter

months can be hard to come by. Employee turnover and labor shortages were two major issues for our company this past winter season. Most of the employee turnover took place in the final months of what seemed to be a never-ending winter.

Thanks to the heavy Nor'easter snow that bombarded the Northeast, many team members showed signs of burnout and were simply ready for springtime work. As a result, many of these employees threw in the towel before the end of the long winter. To make matters worse, labor shortages made it near impossible to hire replacements to fill these gaps.

To combat labor shortages and the inevitable employee

turnover, our company used persistent weekly recruitment to keep our labor "bench" stacked for the duration of the winter. Weather permitting, we interviewed every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for employees and subcontractors. This process allowed us to over-hire when possible and helped us to create a pre-qualified labor pool to draw from whenever we needed experienced help in the field.

GAVE AN INCH, TOOK A FOOT.

This past season, my operations manager and I learned from the age-old advice that says, "If it's not broke, don't fix it. Otherwise, you'll end up breaking it." This season was the second time my operations manager handled snow removal. However, this year, I wasn't living in our immediate service area to help him. My wife and I moved 45 minutes outside the service area. The move both shook and empowered my operations manager all at once.

At the onset of the season, he settled right back into his role and planned for a successful season. However, he deviated from one piece of the plan – overnight scouting. He and I planned overnight scouting down to the last detail in his first year on the job. The plan included having over-

night "snow scouts" monitoring snow and ice across the service area between the hours of 10 p.m. and 7 a.m., unless temperatures were above 50°F.

The problem arose when he requested to allow these scouts to take nights off when there were no signs of snow or ice in the forecast. I was skeptical of this plan and shared my concerns, but I allowed him to go ahead with his plan.

At first there were no major issues. However, by allowing for this deviation, he unintentionally created a new irregular work pattern. Later in the season, when asked to work overnight, the scouts pushed back, resisted working when told and demanded only to work when they saw fit.

To make matters worse, these were salaried employees. In the end, he was able to shift the plan back to its original state, but he ended up having to cover shifts during the off times to successfully monitor conditions.

We quickly found that when you deviate from initial plans, especially those that are tried and true, you can get yourself into trouble quickly. No matter what the winter brings or how long it lasts, it is important to remain flexible and be willing to adapt your business to meet the challenges you face. **L&L**



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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

2018
SNOW & ICE
Report
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D.C. BOUND

By Kevin Gilbride

WE INVITE YOU to join other leading snow and ice management contractors in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 4 and 5 to educate your elected representatives on why the Lawsuit Abuse Reduction Act (Senate Bill 237) needs to be passed. Last year, the Accredited Snow Contractors

Association (ASCA) met with representatives from 51 senate offices to explain to them the value of Senate Bill 237.

On Nov. 8, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing on five different tort-reform bills, including the Lawsuit Abuse Reduction Act. In this hearing, Sen. Chuck Grassley

(R-IA) specifically stated that "...he had heard from organizations, like the Accredited Snow Contractors Association..." and stated how this bill would help our industry. The voices of the snow and ice management industry are being heard and some in government are doing something about it.

You can view the entire hearing in the Judiciary Committee section on www.senate.gov.

Legislative Day on the Hill is not only an occasion to make a difference with legislators, but a great networking opportunity to meet the leaders of some of the industry's best companies.

This year, we will kick things off mid-afternoon on Tuesday, Sept. 4 with a briefing to get folks prepared for the day.

Each team will have an experienced lead, so have no fears about attending. We will then bring in a themed keynote speaker. There will be a networking cocktail reception and dinner.

We will kick off Wednesday with a bus ride over to the Capitol to meet with your elected representatives. The goal is to finish the work we have started and get the Lawsuit Abuse Reduction Act passed. **L&L**

The author is the executive director of the ASCA.

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Follow these
→ **five tips** for
designing
functional,
beautiful
walkways.

By Brooke Bilyj

→ PAVE

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THE PATHS THAT LEAD through landscapes can make or break the overall design. Pedestrians will notice mistakes right away if a walkway forces them to go out of their way to get where they're going – but a well-designed walkway can lead to more satisfied customers.

"It takes a lot of planning and design to get a nice, flowing, functional walkway," says Herman Solis, owner of Solis Landscape & Construction in Hollister, California. "You've got to consider all the surroundings to integrate it all."

Several factors play into the perfectly planned pathway. Keep these five tips in mind to make your next walkway design more effective.

1. PLOT A PROPER PATH. The purpose of a pathway is to guide foot traffic from Point A to Point B. But integrating a walkway into an overall landscape design requires more forethought than just plopping a path between two points.

"Look at the whole layout of the yard and design (the walkway) so the main purpose is functionality and accessibility," Solis says.

Consider the natural path someone would walk to get from the driveway to the front porch – they're likely not going to take a sharp 90-degree turn, says Brian Wismer, head designer at NOVA Landscape & Design near Washington, D.C. He says walkways should follow that same natural path, with a minimum width of about four feet.

"It's important to consider the shape of the walkway and also the flow of traffic," he says. "When you keep usability in mind, (the layout) works itself out."

Consider the architecture of the house, as well. If the house features straight lines and sharp angles, then a straight, squared-off walkway might make more sense, Solis says.

2. MAKE WAY. Walkways offer a range of different materials to choose from, depending on a customer's budget, maintenance preferences

and aesthetic style. For main walkways that connect a driveway to a front door or porch, Wismer recommends pavers.

"Natural stone pavers are on the more expensive side, but correctly installed pavers are the longest-lasting option with the least maintenance," Wismer says.

For cost-effectiveness, plain concrete is the way to go. "But the problem with concrete is it's plain, boring and blah – and (eventually) it's going to crack. With interlocking pavers, you've got a huge selection of designs and colors, and they're not going to crack," Solis says.

This is a critical advantage in California, where contractors like Solis need materials that can withstand earthquakes. The versatility of pavers makes them a good choice anywhere.

3. ENHANCE WITH LANDSCAPING. Walkways should look like they belong on a property, so they should be integrated into the overall design.

"It's important to tie the landscaping into the walkway so everything flows," Wismer says.

Also, Wismer prefers curved walkway designs because curves create natural focal points where landscaping can enhance the path. For focal points, he advises planting small, shapely trees – such as weeping Japanese maple, weeping snow fountain cherry or Blue 'Globosa' Spruce.

Then, add color along the edge with low-growing flowering varieties like verbena 'Homestead Purple,' Solis suggests.

"As a border plant, I like to use Variegated Liriope for a number of reasons," Wismer says. "It's low maintenance, and it's also tolerant to being trampled. The other thing I like about it is it's very low-growing. A lot of times, people make the mistake of putting in a nice walkway and then planting shrubs along it that grow three feet tall, so they completely block the walkway. The whole idea of a walkway is having a nice, open, inviting flow, so accent it with a low perennial that's highlighting it, not blocking it."

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“The whole idea of a walkway is having a nice, open, inviting flow, so accent it with a low perennial that’s highlighting it.”

BRIAN WISMER, head designer, NOVA Landscape & Design

4. SHED LIGHT. Landscape lighting is essential to keep walkways safe and visible after dark.

“We use low-voltage LED lighting, because it’s cost-efficient, low-maintenance, and the bulbs last a long time,” Wismer says. “They put out a decent amount of light, so they’re not like solar lights, where you need a million of them.”

In fact, excessive lighting is one of the most common walkway mistakes contractors make.

“I’ve seen people put path lights or paver lights every three feet, and it just looks like an airplane runway,” Solis says. “You don’t want too many lights; you want to space them out.”

Let the shape of the walkway dictate light fixture placement. “The important thing is having pathway lights at key points, which is typically going to be at each end of the walkway and where the walkway changes direction or shape,” Wismer says.

Wismer also recommends uplighting focal point plants along the walkway. He also suggests uplighting the house, especially to highlight brick or stone textures.

Even if customers forego lighting, contractors should plan ahead in case they want to expand in the future. “It’s important to have the foresight to put a four-inch conduit underneath the walkway, so if you want to add lighting or irrigation later, you have a place to run that wire,” Wismer says.

5. MEET CUSTOMER DESIRES. The challenge of walkway design is bringing together all these elements to fit each customer’s needs.

“One thing that can’t be overstated is the importance of listening to the customer,” Wismer says. “So step one is meeting with the customer to understand what they like and what they don’t like. I hear complaints from customers too often that contractors just don’t listen to them. If you really listen to the customer and then (combine that) with your knowledge and experience, you’ll be in good shape.”

NOVA uses 3-D design tools to help customers visualize proposed walkway designs and illustrate any changes instantly. Wismer advises contractors to show customers samples off-screen, as well.

“I like to actually take physical samples and set them in front of their house, so they know exactly what they’re going to get,” he says.

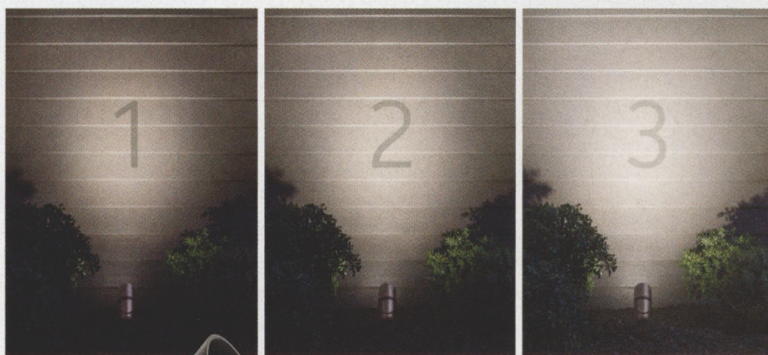
By making sure your design aligns with

your customer’s needs, you can set up walkway projects for success from the start. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.

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KICHLER

CHOOSE COMPACT

Consider adding compact tractors to the fleet if budgets are tight.

By Kate Spirgen

WHEN BUDGETS ARE TIGHT and so is time, compact tractors can be a good addition to your fleet. Compact tractors are versatile and light, so they can get a lot done without disturbing turf. Add in the different attachment options and you have a piece of equipment you can use year-round for everything from mowing to trenching to snow removal.

“Depending on what application you’re doing, the time saved by using a compact tractor instead of manual labor can be astronomical,” says Robert Cockcroft, Kubota senior product manager, sub and compact tractors. “A small tractor’s main advantage is its ease of use and versatility.”

APPROPRIATE ATTACHMENTS. “With all the implements and attachments available for compact tractors these days, the list of tasks a customer can do is virtually endless,” Cockcroft says.

Choosing the right attachments starts with knowing your tractor model. Many attachments require a certain horsepower, chassis size and lift capacity to operate properly. And, of course, knowing your jobsites is also crucial. Dealers can help make the appropriate decisions.

KIOTI Regional Sales Manager Tim Phillips says you want to focus on two main attachments – the front-end loader and the backhoe – for day-to-day use. The front-end loader allows for movement of heavy materials while the backhoe is perfect for digging retention walls and trenches, uprooting trees and more, he says.

You’ll also want to consider the number of operators, the size of attachments and transportation. Training is key as well. “Inexperienced

operators may find difficulty with the operation of the equipment, which could lead to improper usage,” Phillips says.

You may also want to look at ease of attachment and detachment if you’re planning to switch attachments frequently.

SKID-STEERS VS. COMPACT TRACTORS. Skid-steers are a great choice for operations like loading material or other less dynamic jobs, but they tend to be more costly and heavier than compact tractors. Skid-steers do a good job, but they are not as versatile or easy to use, Cockcroft says.

If you need to protect turf, like on landscape renovation jobs, a compact tractor may also be a better option.

“All jobs around an established property can benefit from a compact tractor, whereas a skid-steer would be overkill and more costly,” says Troy Blewett, director of marketing for Steiner.

And generally, compact tractors last 15 years or more with the proper maintenance, Blewett says, so it can be a good investment.

On the horizon, expect more versatility and connectivity on compact tractors since fleet management, GPS and other Internet of Things applications are making their way from agricultural tractors down to smaller equipment, Blewett says. “The days of having a different machine for each application are over.”

There are also a number of new frame sizes and horsepower options coming soon, as well as more cab offerings for comfort. “We’re seeing landscape contractors and large property owners alike continue to purchase in favor of durability and ease of use,” Phillips says. **L&L**



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIOTI

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Cool
Planet's
Biochar
Basics



GSKY's
Living
Green
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Hunter's
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PROFIT BOOSTERS



Biochar Basics

It seems like everyone is talking about biochar these days. More and more landscapers are utilizing the ancient material. So, what is all the hype about?

Biochar has long been used as a carbon-rich soil enhancer and is acknowledged for its potential to support soil health. Biochar is created by pyrolyzing biomass, and the result is a fixed carbon skeleton that sequesters carbon and locks it in place. Biochar is different from compost because it resists breakdown from microbes and provides an ideal habitat for them to live in. Biochar can provide numerous other root zone benefits including water retention and nutrient efficiency. Growers who are interested in optimizing their soil and root environments use biochar as an

enhancement to their nutrient and fertilizer regimes.

But, there's a catch: raw biochar can perform unpredictably and not all biochars are created equal. The source material and processing can mean the difference between healthy and long-lasting plants or rework and warranty claims.

Fortunately, important advancements in technology have made it possible to harness the best qualities of biochar and eliminate the bad to deliver substantial soil health benefits. In fact, one new biochar-based technology, called Cool Terra® Organic, is a biochar-based soil en-

hancer that is scientifically produced to a strict specification to provide consistent and predictable performance.

Cool Planet, the company that manufactures Cool Terra products, uses advanced techniques to select the proper biomass and then clean and treat the raw biochar. Then they post-treat the raw biochar: adjusting the pH to neutral, flipping it from hydrophobic to hydrophilic so that it attracts water and doesn't repel it, and removing detrimental residues. This means Cool Terra is ready to be used right out of the bag.

Cool Terra is highly porous which is beneficial for water holding. It has a high ion exchange capacity and can promote nutrient exchange and availability, holding nutrients in the root zone longer and making them easily accessible to roots for uptake. Lastly, this porous structure made from neutral, strong and durable fixed carbon walls, acts like a coral-reef, to provide a habitat that can optimize microbial populations that protect against stressors and diseases.

Cool Terra is a consistent, durable, and granular material that is high in fixed organic carbon. Fixed carbon works in a complementary fashion to other forms of soil carbon like compost or humics but will resist breaking down biologically over time. This means that it will stay in the soil and maintain its physical, chemical, and biological properties over many years. For those using perlite or vermiculite, try replacing them in part with Cool Terra as it provides key benefits of both!

By the way, Cool Terra Organic sequesters carbon from the atmosphere and puts it into the soil where it is the most beneficial. What does this all mean? It means your turf and landscape installations and renovations can be more successful and long-lasting. Leading to happier customer and reduced warranty claims and rework.

To learn more about what Cool Terra can do for your projects, visit coolterra.com.



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Introduce a porous habitat for beneficial microbes that can protect against stressors

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BOTTOM LINE

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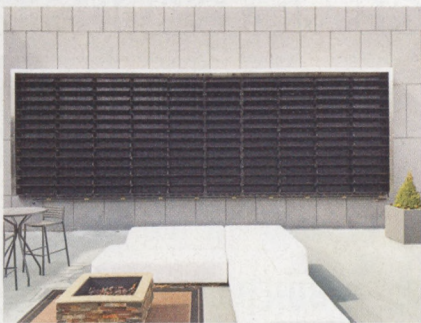
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Two Precipitation Rates Are Better Than One

To create a well-designed irrigation system, understanding precipitation rates is critical. The precipitation rate is the amount, or depth, of water applied to the landscape over a period of time, calculated in inches per hour. Different types of sprinklers apply water at different precipitation rates. These precipitation rates should be taken into consideration when developing an irrigation design and watering schedule — and when retrofitting older systems — to avoid dry areas, prevent puddling, and minimize runoff.

The industry-leading MP Rotator® family now offers two different precipitation rate options to better balance the application of water with soil type, providing

more choices for irrigation management. Choosing the best precipitation rate for the soil and plant materials will maximize the efficiency of the irrigation system while maintaining a vibrant and healthy landscape. Steady water application at a slow precipitation rate offers the safest solution against the hazards of runoff and excessive water use. New irrigation systems can take advantage of this benefit by implementing irrigation designs specific to low precipitation rates.

The Standard MP Rotator Series offers the slowest precipitation rate for pop-ups in the industry: 0.4 in/hr across areas ranging from a 5-foot-wide strip up to a 35-foot radius. This rate can be applied to almost any soil type without runoff,

especially tight soils and steep slopes. Having a slow precipitation rate across such a large radius range means slower flow rates and therefore less pressure loss through the zone, allowing more heads to run on one valve. At the same time, the slower precipitation rate also means longer run times for the desired application of water. In new designs, this can be addressed by creating larger zones. Doubling the zone area while doubling the run time results in a net zero increase in run time, all while maintaining high-uniformity coverage with a slow precipitation rate that reduces runoff.

Pre-existing systems that require an upgrade can benefit from a slightly higher precipitation rate to avoid increasing run times. If a spray system is already divided into several zones, take advantage of the 0.8 in/hr precipitation rate of the MP800 Series, which is ideal for medium-grade soils, gentle slopes, and small spaces. With the 6- to 16-foot radius range offered by the MP800 Series, existing spray zones can quickly convert to high-efficiency overhead systems without significant increases in watering times. The improvement in uniformity paired with the midrange precipitation rate balances with the generally poorer coverage and high precipitation rate of the existing spray system for a minimal increase in run time.

One size does not fit all when it comes to irrigation systems. Having more choices in the high-efficiency category further improves the performance of new system designs or retrofits applications. Choose the slow and steady precipitation rate of the Standard MP Rotator Series for the highest irrigation efficiency, or the midrange precipitation rate of the MP800 Series for retrofit applications and tight water windows. Both are optimal solutions for high-efficiency overhead irrigation systems.

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	90°-210°	90°-210°	90°-210°	90°-210°	90°-210°	90°-210°	
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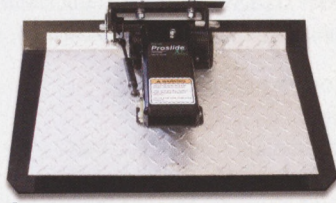
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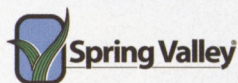
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FORWARD-THINKING RECRUITMENT

• FINDING TALENTED, COMMITTED PEOPLE WITH A PASSION

for landscaping can be a challenge – and this is likely true for all landscaping companies. Dan Dohar, executive vice president and chief human resources officer at BrightView, says his company also faces these challenges, but the company has implemented some new recruiting technologies to advance in this area.

Lawn & Landscape connected with Dohar to learn more about what these technologies are and how they have helped with recruiting.

L&L: What are the latest technology resources BrightView is using to recruit new employees?

Dohar: We launched kiosks in branches so that each could have applicants apply online. Additionally, we trained branches on how to use our applicant tracking system so they can post and receive their applicants on demand. We have placed a lot of focus on the way our applicants apply for jobs and toward the best technical sources for this, including the Text-to-Apply campaigns.

We have created marketing materials for branches and made it easily accessible for them to print locally, and we made recruitment guides and staffing plans to train branches how to recruit and how to

find talent. We are also utilizing social media to spread the word about our openings and where and how to apply. Finally, we created positions for hourly recruiters to recruit for only high-volume hourly roles.

L&L: How do the application kiosks work?

Dohar: The kiosks are computers that walk-in applicants can use to apply for BrightView openings at our branch locations. (They) were initially rolled out early in 2017 and we now have approximately 120 branches utilizing this technology. BrightView wanted to provide a vehicle for all applicants who might not have access to a computer.

The kiosks direct applicants to our BrightView Career Site (jobs.brightview.com) where we receive roughly 30,000 hourly (worker) applicants a year. Due to this, we aren't able to measure how many

people applied using our kiosks versus their own personal computer. However, we have seen a significant increase in online applications over the past year.

L&L: Could you explain what an "applicant tracking system" does?

Dohar: An applicant tracking system helps manage the recruitment process. When an applicant applies, they enter their information into our application tracking system and their information is collected in a requisition. A BrightView recruiter will see the applicant's information and contact them for the position they applied to. There are many benefits to an applicant tracking system, including keeping a historical record and tracking, use as a communication tool, recruitment pipelining and compliance. There are dozens of applicant tracking systems to choose

from, but there are about five major players in this space.

L&L: What do the Text-to-Apply campaigns involve?

Dohar: Applicants can text a number to apply for a specific job. They are texted back with a series of questions based on the requirements of the job they are applying for. From there, the responses are compiled, and an application is built in our system. (It) is a very fast application process, but it does allow the chance of receiving more unqualified applicants because it is so easy for a candidate to apply.

L&L: How can smaller landscapers integrate more technology into their recruiting strategies?

Dohar: Mom-and-pop landscapers can track the way employees are hired through their application process, which can be tracked on a spreadsheet. From there, they can use their recruitment advertising dollars toward those efforts. The applicant tracking systems are not always expensive for businesses and by putting in a very inexpensive applicant tracking system, it can provide free job board advertisements on Indeed through job scraping.

L&L: What are mistakes landscapers need to avoid when adding new technology in their recruiting strategies?

Dohar: Focusing on too many technologies at once and not the right ones can negatively affect your recruiting efforts. Companies should use the technology which returns the best results. It's best to track where team members are being hired from and then create a plan from there. **L&L**

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2018 TECH REPORT



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JUNE 2018

2018 TECH REPORT

All things technology in the green industry

EXCLUSIVE
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Find out how contractors are using technological advancements in the industry to **become more efficient** and **grow their companies**.





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SURROUNDED BY SUCCESS

THE VALUE OF ANY BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY should be measured by its ability to help you simplify the journey to profitability. In a recent article for the Verizon Connect blog, Ed Laflamme of the Harvest Group highlighted the difference between landscapers who focus on growth and those who strive for profitability.

In that article Ed wrote: "We have learned there are five things all high-profit landscapers have in common. It's not where they're from or what degrees they have or how dedicated they are to great customer service. It's what they do."

And what they do, Ed says, is these five things:

- They measure everything that makes sense.
- They have processes.
- They understand people.
- They keep things simple.
- They invest in and use technology.

We believe that last bullet point can make the first four easier to achieve. Why? Because smart technology improves the connections between measurement, processes and people. It helps simplify complexity to help businesses make better decisions and improve their profitability.

At Verizon Connect, our technology is all about delivering information and insights from your vehicles, equipment and crews that can help you measure, understand and simplify your processes, improve efficiency, productivity and safety, and even lower your fuel and maintenance costs. We're committed to delivering solutions that give landscapers the data they need to run their businesses better. We know the transformative power of technology for business, and that's why we're delighted to sponsor the 2018 Lawn & Landscape Technology Report.

You can learn more about fleet tracking, field service management and equipment monitoring solutions from Verizon Connect at verizonconnect.com. **TR**

ERIN CAVE

VP of Product Management at Verizon Connect



“

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I T SEEMS IN THE
LAST FEW YEARS
technology has become
more and more prevalent
in the green industry.

From emerging technologies like drones and robomowers, to more companies using more common technologies like software programs, contractors appear have a greater reliance on technology.

To get a better grasp on this assumption, we surveyed almost 250 contractors to find out if they are embracing technology more than in the past, and, if so, if it's worth the investment.

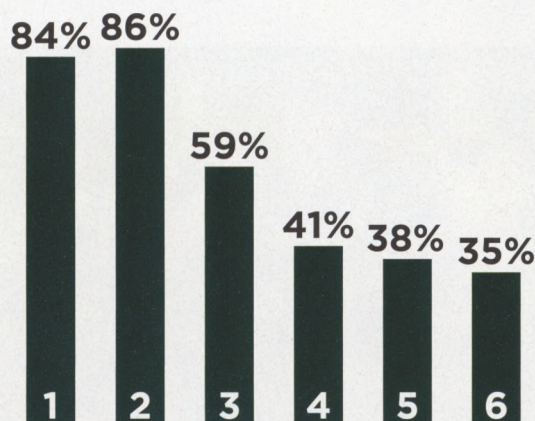
This report features exclusive research from the survey along with interviews with contractors from around the country to get concrete examples on how landscapers and LCOs use software, new equipment and other "toys" at their companies.

Visit lawnandlandscape.com, and click 2018 Tech Report under the research tab. There you will find research not included in this report.

— Brian Horn

What services do you offer? Choose all that apply.

1. Maintenance
2. Lawn care
3. Design/build
4. Irrigation
5. Snow and ice management
6. Tree care

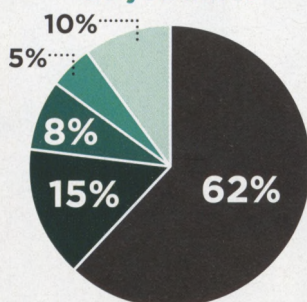


What is your approximate revenue?



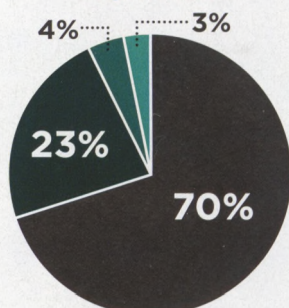
- Less than \$200,000
- \$200,000-\$499,999
- \$500,000-\$1 million
- More than \$1 million

How many employees do you have?



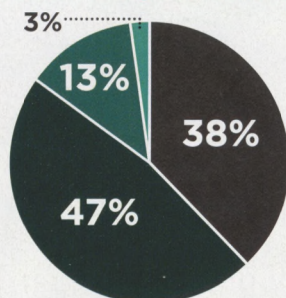
- 1-10
- 11-20
- 21-40
- 41-60
- More than 60

How much of your budget is allocated to software expenses?



- 0%-5%
- 6%-10%
- 11%-15%
- More than 15%

How important are technological advancements when purchasing products for your business?



- Very
- Somewhat
- Not really
- Not at all

What do you use software for in your business?
Choose all that apply.

82%
Payroll/accounting

58%
Job costing/estimating

53%
Field service/scheduling

49%
Landscape design/drawing

47%
Property mapping

45%
GPS/fleet management

42%
CRM/sales management and tracking

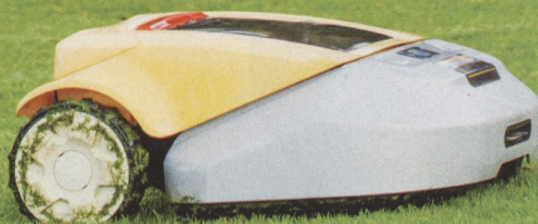
24%
Material inventory

7%
Water management services

the tech advantage

Adding software and other
technology tools helps contractors
stay ahead of their competition.

By Megan Smalley





A

DECADE AGO, EMERGING software and technology tools were more optional luxuries for landscape contractors. Today, contractors say they are becoming increasingly essential to operations in order to remain competitive.

"If you look across the board, everything is more electronic," says Roye Dillon, business unit leader at True North Outdoor in Kansas City, Kansas.

It's not just Millennials adapting to new technology, either. Dillon says True North Outdoor has some older customers making shifts to technology. He says that wasn't the case 10 years ago, but it is now.

"I have customers ages 70 and 80 texting me for things," he says. "Everything is going electronic. As we become a tech-based society, there are tools we have to embrace."

These tools include software programs, GPS, fleet maintenance programs and smart controllers to name a few things.

Dillon adds that customers of all ages and demographics are more willing to embrace technology. This past year, he says a card swipe tool on employee smartphones was a hit for some True North Outdoor customers who wanted to make payments in the field. The company added this tool to smartphones to make it easier for customers to pay for last-minute services or products. In particular, if a customer wanted to buy salt from them in the winter, a True North Outdoor employee could have the customer pay on the spot with the card swipe tool.

In addition to making things easier for the customer, it also made pay and collections easier for the company. Dillon says he hopes the tool can be used throughout the year for last-minute irrigation repairs.

"We're no longer chasing guys saying, 'Hey, you owe us for salt,'" he says. "In the future, we're hoping this will also reduce collection issues with irrigation services."

Technology and software programs also keep companies better connected with their customers. John Crider, owner of Tennessee-based Crider Landscaping, says his company added a CRM software program two years ago. He notes that his business has only been around for about four years, so he says retaining customers is important for growth.

"I can maintain conversations regularly," he says. "It also helps with scheduling, so we don't have any surprises."

With more people requesting technology, Dillon says it's essential for landscape contractors to adapt to new tools to stay ahead of competition. "Either you adapt, or you won't keep up," he says.

EFFICIENCY AND PROFITS.

One perk contractors say they experience when they add new software or technology is time savings, which then leads to more efficient work. Crider says the software program he added has helped his estimating and bidding process go much faster and smoother.

When Crider Landscaping first added CRM software about two years ago, learning to use the tool was a "time drain." But Crider says he knew that might be the case, so the company added the program in a slower season.

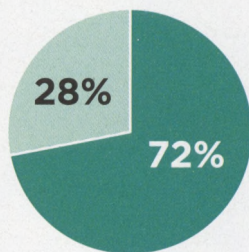
"We took our winter lull, our slow time, to integrate our information to the system and learn it," he says.

It took the company about two to three months to get into a habit of putting data into the CRM and making it an essential tool. Now, he says it's a tool they use every day to help with scheduling, email communication and organizing data – and it's helped the company see where it was wasting time.

"It's made our bidding process more streamlined and it really helps our receivables," Crider says.

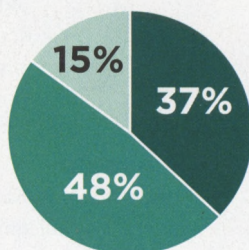
Justin Tamborski, design/sales lead at Chicago-based Three Brothers Landscaping, says his company also experienced time savings

Do you feel the technology or software you use as a company makes you more attractive to potential customers?



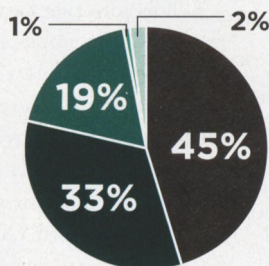
● Yes ● No

How would you describe your company's use of technology and software compared to your competition?



● Advanced ● Average ● Behind

How much does your company depend on technology and software compared to 5 years ago?



● A lot ● Somewhat more
● The same ● Somewhat less
● A lot less

when it added a software program to help with estimating on jobs. The company added a program that gives them high-resolution images of properties they can view in the office to better prepare maintenance estimate costs.

"We wasted a lot of time traveling between people and places, so it was a benefit to us," he says. "We can service our clients faster by getting insight on their property before we even get there."

PROFITABLE BENEFITS.

Tamborski says some software his company added has also helped them to be more profitable, particularly on its hardscape jobs. When Three Brothers Landscaping invested in upgrades to its landscape design software a few years ago, the company wasn't positive of the benefits it would have. However, Tamborski says this upgrade proved to be a very valuable move.

About seven years ago, Tamborski started using 2-D landscape design software to give customers a better picture of the landscape installations or hardscape jobs. Four years ago, he decided to upgrade to 3-D design software. After shopping around for about a year, he found a product that fit just right.

Today, Tamborski uses the 3-D design software on 70 percent of the landscape installation and hardscape jobs. The tool paid for itself within a year. He says the software might have been the company's best investment to date.

"Once I started doing 3-D modeling to show customers their projects, that was the real game-changer," Tamborski says. "I'm closing at least 60 percent more sales. Customers are blown away. They can't believe they can see their house in my designs."

Three Brothers Landscaping has been spending more on technology upgrades in recent years, but Tamborski says all the initial expenses provided a quick return on investment.

"The biggest ROI is having way more jobs now," Tamborski says. "With design software, we are able to close a lot more jobs at a quicker rate. Then, with the fleet maintenance tool, we have a better grasp on overhead. Because we have a better control of overhead, we're not fumbling to crunch our numbers anymore."

DOWN THE ROAD

Contractors share technologies they think will grow in popularity in the future.

DRONES AND GOOGLE EARTH IMAGING

"We're just now starting to use Google Earth. You can look at the property from above, (and) measure up. You don't even have to step foot onsite and you can gauge the price of a property to mow and maintain it. Also, (with) drone technology you can fly it over the turf and analyze what's going on with plants and turf. It's not used a lot yet, but that technology is there."

Roye Dillon,
business unit leader,
True North Outdoor

ROBOTIC MOWERS

"I think advancements on those might be better for commercial contractors than homeowners in the future. Commercially, it would be contractors putting them in, maintaining them and programming them. I could see their usage increasing a bit in a few more years. Robots don't call in sick. Robots don't need to take kids to the doctor. It's ready 24/7. So, especially for maintaining high-profile properties, I think these would be helpful."

Roye Dillon,
business unit leader,
True North Outdoor

SMARTPHONE USE

"In the next year or so, we're looking to possibly give our crews smartphones so they can login that way instead of using time sheets on paper. In an app, they can go and mark how long they've been on jobsites. But most guys have smartphones, so we're debating whether we have them use their own and make it a requirement that you need to have a smartphone to have a job here, or whether we give them new smartphones. Those are things we want to work through."

Justin Tamborski,
design/sales lead,
Three Brothers Landscaping

WIFI-CONTROLLED IRRIGATION

"It's kind of old technology, but our clients haven't moved toward this yet. We're trying to push clients that direction, though. It's been cost prohibitive for some customers, but the costs look like they're starting to come down."

John Crider,
owner,
Crider Landscaping

SAFETY BENEFITS.

Technology can also boost safety at a company. When Colorado-based Alpine Gardens Landscaping added a GPS program last year, Co-Owner Nate Fetig says safety was the No. 1 thing it helped.

"(The GPS tracking) has full vehicle diagnostics on it," he says. "That really helped us from a couple perspectives, one being safety."

As soon as Alpine Gardens added GPS tracking in its vehicles, Fetig says the managers noticed some employees had unsafe driving practices like speeding, hard braking and making unnecessary stops.

"Before, we couldn't fix what we didn't know, so it was eye-opening," he says. "We got that corrected pretty quickly."

On the maintenance side, GPS tracking also gave Alpine Gardens better information on when maintenance was needed to



"Once I started doing 3-D modeling to show customers their projects, that was the real game-changer. I'm closing at least 60 percent more sales. Customers are blown away. They can't believe they can see their house in my designs."

Justin Tamborski,
design/sales lead,
Three Brothers Landscaping

keep the vehicles in safe driving condition. Fetig says the fleet manager now checks the GPS tracking to see how many miles are on vehicles and check for any lights or codes to be proactive. He says the company is slowly adding this tool to its skid-steers, as well.

Fetig says GPS tracking was worth investing in, especially as he noticed the technology has decreased in cost. In past years, he mostly saw GPS tracking in the \$50 per month per vehicle price range. The system he found costs \$150 per year per vehicle, though.

"It was something we felt was our biggest exposure and liability," Fetig says. "We considered GPS on and off, but it's started to become affordable, so we couldn't say no. It's improved the maintenance of the vehicles and the overall safety of the company. I think that also helps improve our public image, just knowing that we're being better drivers out there." **TR**



WEB SMART

A solid website can be one of the most important pieces of technology your business uses.

By Lauren Rathmell

FAMILY-OWNED LIQUA-GROW TURF in Maryland takes a digital first mindset when it comes to customer leads. The business focuses heavily on digital advertising, and the company has been gaining traffic on its website, liquagrowturf.com, as a result.

The website houses company information, a list of services, contact information and even an account portal for current customers. The lawn care company employs 15 people during its peak season and generates about \$1.5 million in revenue each year.

Liqua-Grow's website is managed by an outside company, but employees have the ability to go in and make updates to the site in-house. Currently, Cindy Buckwater, president of Liqua-Grow, says she's on a mission to get more photos of jobsites to post on the website.

"We don't update as much as we should," she says. "It's hard during the busy season." Still, she says the company uses resources from several digital marketing agencies to increase the site's visibility.

"Our website has a lot of activity because of the ads we have out," Buckwater says.

In Amarillo, Texas, a new company, Evolved Lawns, knew to start the company right, a website needed to be made.

"It was the first thing I thought of when I was thinking of how to start the business," says owner Chance Reynolds.

Right now, Evolved Lawns is small, with two part-time employees in addition to Reynolds. The company focuses on lawn maintenance.

PAYMENT OPTIONS.

Liqua-Grow implemented online payments about three years ago, with an online account portal that allows customers to pay their bill and view account details.

"The only thing they can't do online is cancel," she says. "They have to call us for that."

When the company transitioned to the online payment process, they proactively got the word out to their current clients.

"We would include a message on the work order directing clients to pay their accounts online," Buckwater says.

Now, Liqua-Grow asks every caller for their email right away so that they have it in their system. The company has received positive feedback from customers about the online payment process.

For Evolved Lawns, the clientele the company services is not as tech-savvy as the customers at Liqua-Grow, so it doesn't make sense for the website, evolvedlawns.com, to include a "pay online" feature.

Instead, Reynolds added a page that breaks down all service costs. "It's saved us a lot in terms of bogus leads," he says.

With the online accounts, Liqua-Grow's website features a section to input an offer code. This is most commonly used for returning clients who want to prepay for their services.

Last year, Buckwater used the offer code option in a marketing tactic. She gathered the email addresses



GETTING STARTED

IN ORDER TO CREATE a fully functional and useful website, Buckwater sat down with a sales representative from the digital marketing agency she hired to brainstorm ideas. Together, the two decided on how many pages they wanted on the website and what content they needed for each page.

"We sat down together, and we wrote everything out," she says. "Then he took it to his web designer."

For Reynolds, a website wasn't the

first thing he developed for his company, but it was the first thing on his mind. He brainstormed the information he knew he wanted on his site and went with a third-party website builder.

Using templates provided online, he designed the site and posted the content himself. The first month, he experimented with a blog but realized it wasn't getting many views, so he took it down to focus his efforts on other aspects of his website.

from estimates that never turned into jobs and sent out a mass email.

"I explained our company and services," she says. "And gave them all prepay invoices with a discount if they prepaid."

Her efforts paid off because a few of the potential clients came back and signed on for services.

Reynolds says most of his web traffic comes simply from customers in his area searching for lawn services.

While he doesn't have a tracking software yet, he says he keeps track of page views and site visitors through the website's back end.

SHOW YOUR WORK.

Both Liqua-Grow and Evolved Lawns post photos to enhance their websites. "I put up before and after photos of our cleanup jobs," Reynolds says. As the company gets more contracts, he plans to bulk up website's gallery. Right now, it's set up as a slideshow where site visitors can click through the rotation of pictures.

Liqua-Grow has a small video player on their site that rotates through a collection of photos to show off good work, but Buckwater is hoping to collect more photos from jobsites, especially since most of their crews have smartphones. **TR**



crew COMPETENCE

Getting your crews on board with the latest technology can improve your operations and your bottom line.

By Lauren Rathmell

SUMMIT LAWN AND LANDSCAPE is a small company located in Fort Collins, Colorado. Cara

and David Doyle own the 10-person hardscape and design/build company, and they recently added a new operations software.

Cara, whose official title is vice president, manages the office, the HR and sometimes even the IT work. So, she was looking for a better way to operate the business on the back end.

"We were losing hours and losing estimates," she says. "I was doing everything by hand."

After some recommendations from a family member in the industry, she decided to reach out to a company that makes software for landscaping businesses.

Once she was ready to pursue integrating the software, she reached out to the company.

"I was on the phone with their tech person for an hour and a half," she says. The tech employee walked her through the software, explaining how she could use certain features. At the time, they were approaching the busy season.

"He told me if I wanted to table things for now and want to integrate until December, I could do that," she says. "But I was ready to get it going."

TECH-SAVVY WORKERS.

When it came time to share the new technology with her crew members, they were all on board.

"They were ready for it," she says. "They're all younger, in their 20s and 30s, so the technology isn't hard for them."

With the new technology, Summit's two foremen and operations manager can use their work-issued phones to clock in their crews. From there, Cara and David can review the time clock and integrate it with

QuickBooks for payroll.

Mark Black, co-owner of Country Club Lawn and Tree Specialists, has about 32 employees during the peak season. Most of his employees are millennials, which makes integrating technology into their work almost seamless.

"They're typical millennials," he says. "They adapt to the technology very easy." He says it's been beneficial to have younger employees since he didn't have to deal with any pushback when the time came to introduce new technology.

"They didn't have to 'unlearn' a way to do things," he says. Country Club supplies a cellphone to technicians, sales reps and managers. If they opt for a smartphone, it's up to them to pay the activation fee or any extra costs associated with the smart device.

Black notes that while he doesn't have to spend as much time training his millennial-aged crews on technology, he does have to stress to them that spending too much time scrolling through the phones does impact the entire company.

"I call it dumb down time," Black says. "They have to learn to find that balance."

When training is necessary, he tries to make himself the "go-to" guy for any tech questions. He attends webinars, makes printouts and has the crew members teach each other how the technology works.

At Elkhorn Lawn Care in Omaha, Nebraska, owner James Manske also issues his 33-person crew smart technology like phones and tablets.

"We issue iPads to our maintenance crews and another tablet to our lawn care crews," he says. The crews working in lawn care utilize software that isn't supported on iPads, so the company needed two different types of tablets.

All managers receive a cellphone as well. The company used to offer all crew members a phone, but Manske realized they weren't really using them for texting and calling, so they could do without the cellular service.

What was the most effective way of training yourself and your team on software?

39%

In-house training

28%

We've never done software training

21%

Online courses

8%

In-person training from software companies

3%

Sending an employee to software training

Who on your staff has a company smartphone? Please choose all that apply.

95%

Owner

61%

Management

55%

Foremen

38%

Crew members

36%

Sales team

35%

Administrative staff (HR, office managers, etc.)

29%

Account managers

Manske tries to learn all he can about a new technology, and then shows the rest of the crew how to use it. He usually sets up a meeting back at the office and spends about a half hour before the start of the day going over any updates.

TECH UPKEEP.

To keep its iPads protected and secure, Elkhorn Lawn Care puts iPad mounts in each truck to give crews a place to keep their tablets while they travel to different jobsites. Each tablet is assigned to a crew member, and it has to be returned to the office at the end of each day.

"The maintenance crews use the iPads mainly for turn-by-turn directions and GPS," Manske says. "We also use Google Drive to share designs or documents."

At Country Club, Black stresses to his workers that the company enjoys investing in things like updated software and new equipment. "We try to be as innovative as possible," he says. "We try to give them the newest equipment." With the new equipment, Black says it's up to the crews to take care of it properly.

"The equipment gets signed out each day," Black says. "If we wind up with a broken tablet, we know who's responsible." When the tablets are returned at the end of the day, they automatically update overnight, so they are ready to go for the crews in the morning.

To stay efficient and productive, after some trial and error with different products, Manske decided Google Drive was the best way to keep documents in one place.

"Google is huge," he says. "So, I felt like there was a better chance of not having any sort of downtime because of technology."

Each iPad has an email account associated with it, and that email integrates with the calendar and Google Drive services. Maintenance crews can pull up the calendar to view jobs scheduled for that day, or to get an idea of what the rest of the week looks like.

"The technology really eases out the paperwork side of things," Black says. "I could have a person in my office doing the work, taking three or four hours a day, but it's cut down to that only being about one hour a day." **TR**

LATEST AND GREATEST

AT SUMMIT LAWN AND LANDSCAPE in Fort Collins, Colorado, the crew of 10 is beginning to experiment with drones and VR technology in their projects.

The company recently secured a job working with a builder who builds hotels, and they've started using a drone to get footage of the property.

"Our hardscape foreman has the drone," says vice president Cara Doyle. "He will send me footage and we use that for our social media."

The company uses Belgard's Design Studio, and recently was able to experiment with their VR goggles.

"It's a younger couple (we're trying it with)," she says. "So, we think they will respond well to it." Doyle notes that she doesn't think that kind of technology is right for everyone, but younger clients may be more interested in it.



DOLLARS *from* DATA

Wilco Contractors Northwest takes its technology to the next level by developing a software platform just for the green industry.

By Megan Smalley

DATA DRIVES BUSINESS at Wilco Contractors Northwest. Within the past decade, the Alberta, Canada-based landscape contractor transitioned to a paperless model where it relies on a data management program.

“We are paperless in the field and in the office,” says Art Maat, owner of Wilco. “We have no time books, no inspection books.”

Years ago, Maat says field team members would drop off paperwork from in the field into an orange box in the shop. Today, there’s no longer an orange box in Wilco’s shop. No papers are saved in binders nor are any files printed out – unless a customer requests Wilco to send a printed estimate. Everything is done digitally at the company, from payroll to registrations to invoices to route planning.

The company started to transition to a paperless model about a decade ago. For a while, Wilco was using a software program to track data and stay on the cutting edge. Although Wilco had a good relationship with the software company, Maat says the program wasn’t customized well enough to meet Wilco’s needs.

Maat wanted a tool to integrate all data from different facets of the business in one system. He shopped around, but he couldn’t find a system like that for landscape contractors. He says there were plenty of fleet management programs, project management programs or accounting programs, but none that tied all that data together.

So, as a solution, Maat developed his own data management program specific to the green industry.

DATA INTEGRATION.

Throughout Wilco’s 35 years in business, Maat says the business has always stayed ahead of the curve on technology. When fax machines were new to market in the 1980s, Maat had Wilco test them out. When cellphones were new, he had Wilco test them out. And more recently when iPads were new, he had Wilco test them out.

“It’s my desire to be on the cutting edge with technology all the time,” he says.

Maat enjoys adapting new technology and brainstorming solutions. He says it was easy to come up with the idea for his program – an all-encompassing tool for him to enter all data related to Wilco. However, he needed technical help in the development, so his kids helped.

“I was the architect for the system’s functionality, but my kids had the technical skills,” he says. “My kids are in their late 20s and early 30s. Kaila is our accountant, and my sons Michael and Taylor are developers of (the program). So, they were all key to this product existing.”

Maat admits the development of the program had its challenges – it was costly at points and they had to make a few mistakes to get the system just right. “We had to learn a lot from trial and error,” he says. “We spent money, not unwisely, but we spent money to learn. We learned the expensive way, but that made us stronger in the product we built. The best way to learn is by mistakes.”

There were also changes made along the way to the system. Initially, the program was a tool that was used internally to track data on trees Wilco managed – where trees were planted, when trees were planted and species of trees that were planted. “Then we realized what we developed for trees could be used to track our construction equipment, utilities and any asset we managed,” Maat says.

Maat saw the program as a way to track all the company’s assets from vehicles to hand tools to employees. Using QR codes and ID tags, the company identified all its assets both tangible and intangible, tagged it and stored data on each asset that is saved in the program.

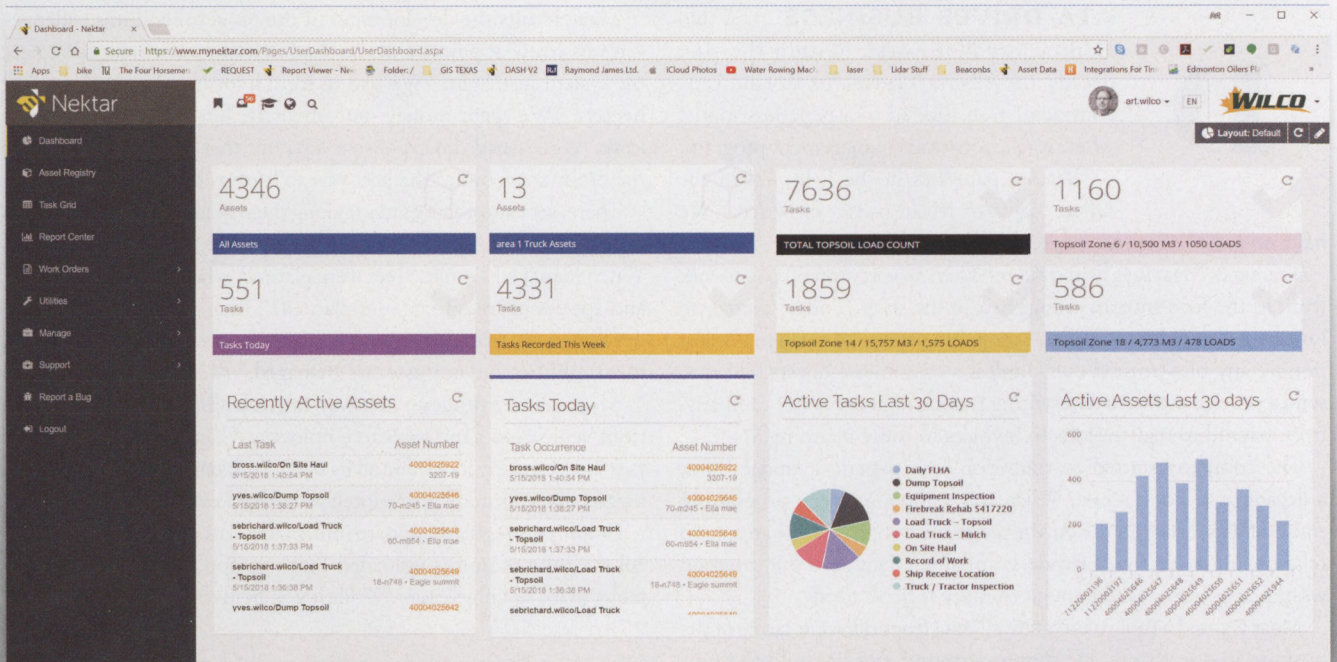
Employees regularly update information on each asset in Nektar. All the information is uploaded into one app on a smartphone or tablet to make things easier. While it was an investment to develop the

“We are paperless in the field and in the office. We have no time books, no inspection books.”

Art Maat, owner, Wilco Contractors Northwest



QR codes and identification tags allow Wilco to enter information about its assets into their data management program.



program, Maat says it's helped Wilco become more profitable.

A SECOND BUSINESS.

Initially, Wilco only developed its software platform for internal use. But about five years ago, other landscape contractors and companies in Alberta took notice of the tool.

"We realized from third parties that we could be selling this to others," Maat says.

So, their program became its own separate company and Maat started to market the tool to landscape contractors. He says marketing started slow, by word-of-mouth. Steadily, though, companies gained interest in their data management tool. Now, their program serves anything from small landscape contractors to irrigation contractors to companies outside of landscaping. Maat says even global names like Siemens now uses the tool as well

ABOVE: Wilco's software system allows Wilco to track all its assets in one location.

as a company in Israel that uses it for bomb shelter inspections.

With a growing customer base, Maat hired about 20 people to work on the software program so he wasn't pulling from Wilco team members. He hired people with computer science backgrounds. Maat says the company provides a "data management makeover" – an easy-to-access cloud of data that fits their business. He notes that his software company keeps in close contact with customers.

"We don't let them get to the point of being confused," he says. "If they're local, we'll do ride-alongs with them to better understand their needs. Or, for our customer in Israel, I went out there to show them what to do. We stay hands-on."

VALUE IN DATA.

On top of starting a data management program, Wilco also stays on the cutting edge of other new technologies to make sure crews do their jobs well.

About two years ago, Wilco started using drones for earth-moving jobs where they need to stockpile or move dirt. From the air, drones can calculate how much material was moved.

The company has also been using GPS tracking tools and georeferencing to track the location of its equipment and vehicles, as well as plan efficient routes. Wilco is now in the process of doing similar tracking on its hand tools, not through GPS, but through Bluetooth beacons.

"With GPS on your truck, you need a monthly subscription," Maat says. "With Bluetooth technology, you leverage the GPS on your phone, which recognizes the Bluetooth identity

for that trimmer or hand tool because it has a beacon on it."

The Bluetooth beacons will help Wilco keep track on all its hand tool whereabouts and whether they need maintenance. All data about the tools is stored on their software program.

Maat says having cutting edge tools and data is valuable. He's not sure what new technology might help landscape contractors down the road, but he says all contractors should be trying to embrace software at least.

"Companies that haven't adapted to tech could be left behind," he says. "You need real-time information and data. You could say, 'Oh, technology's going that way...' but that someday is here. It's not difficult – we all have phones or tablets. As contractors, leverage the computer in your pocket and use it as a tool for data entry." **TR**

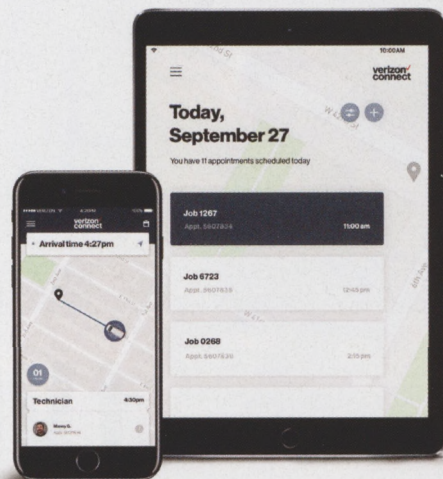


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