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MORE THAN A PAYCHECK PG. 36

READY FOR THE ROAD PG. 40

JANUARY 2022

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From evolving technology to solving common concerns, autonomous mowing companies are aiming to transform the green industry.



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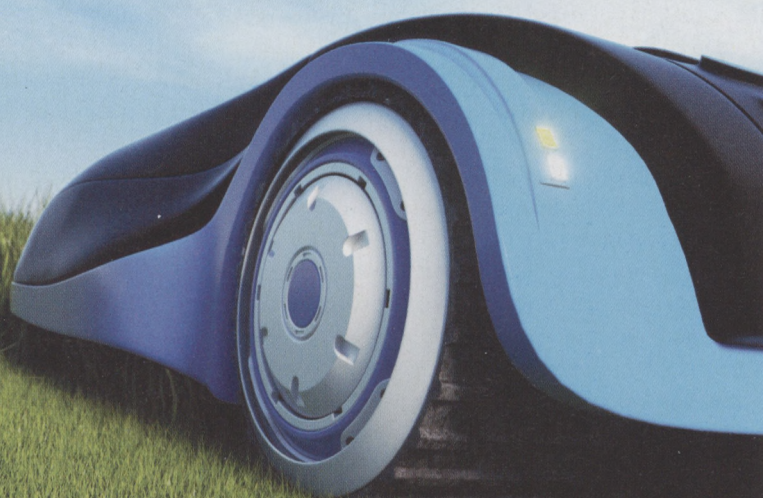
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26



# THE WAY OF THE ROBOT



36



40

## FEATURES

**26 The way of the robot**

From evolving technology to solving common concerns, autonomous mowing companies are aiming to transform the green industry.

**36 Not just a paycheck**

Cherrylake Maintenance has built an employee-first company culture.

**40 Road ready**

Three landscape company owners share how recent adjustments to their truck/trailer configurations are helping save time, improve safety and reduce costs.



24

## DEPARTMENTS

**4 Editor's Insight:** Looking to 22**6 L.L. Insider****18 Huston:** How to make money in 2022**20 Wilson:** You need a network**22 Harvesters:** Identify your ideal client**24 Women in Landscaping:**  
Jenn Myers**47 Classifieds****49 Ad Index****50 Average Day:** Eric Blevins

Cover illustration: © Sinelab





**Brian Horn**  
Editor, Lawn & Landscape

"Whether that's technology or culture, I think we're all being forced to think outside the box. That could really be a positive as we go into 2022."

— CLAIRE GOLDMAN,  
PRINCIPLE, R&R LANDSCAPING

# Looking to 22

In November, I hosted a virtual State of the Industry event where the panelists discussed how the industry fared in 2021, along with any challenges they faced, and how they or their clients worked past those. We also discussed what to expect in 2022. Here's what the panel had to say about the next 12 months. Visit, [bit.ly/lawnsoi22](https://bit.ly/lawnsoi22) to listen to the whole webinar.

**Claire Goldman, principle, R&R Landscaping in Alabama:** Just being very close to our numbers and very aware of what's going on. I think just one view of optimism is all of this is forcing us into embracing innovation a little bit faster than we typically do. Whether that's technology or culture, I think we're all being forced to think outside the box. That could really be a positive as we go into 2022.

**Jim Huston, J.R. Huston Consulting:** People are going to need to increase prices at least 5%, if not 10% or even 15%. Most of my clients are raising their hourly rates by \$5 an hour. If you got 10 people in the field working 2,000 hours a year, that's 20,000 hours. An extra \$5 an hour and it's \$100,000. We might think that's all profit.

Well, if you don't raise it five bucks an hour, you're going to be in the hole \$100,000. So, this is where I'm cautiously optimistic, but boy, be prepared.

**Ed Laflamme, The Harvest Group:** It looks like next year should be very good. Things are settling in. The customers are beginning to accept the price increases my clients are putting out. They're not getting a lot of pushback. They're losing very little. I think the supply chain will stay the same, if not get worse.

**Bruce Wilson, Bruce Wilson & Co.:** I think it's going to be a good year for companies that are very strategic. A lot more planning has to go into what a company is going to do over the next year. Strategically make sure they positioned their company to take advantage of what's in the market. The financially strong companies really don't have too much to worry about. The companies that have weak balance sheets have to be really careful. I've already seen some companies that are cutting back — they're just playing defense and not offense. The companies that win in just about any economy are always playing offense.

— Brian Horn

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## AUBURN STUDENT WINS LAWN & LANDSCAPE SCHOLARSHIP

Landon Erbrick is the 2021 Richard Foster award winner.

By Brian Horn

Since enrolling at Auburn in 2020, Landon Erbrick has been able to see all the different opportunities in the horticulture industry.

"This has allowed me to explore the different career options and learn where my interests are leaning," says Erbrick, who was named Lawn & Landscape's Richard Foster Award, which recognizes outstanding students planning careers in the landscape, lawn care or horticulture business.

As of right now, Erbrick has a strong interest in greenhouse and nursery production, but chose to major in landscape horticulture because it was prominent in his background.

"While in high school, I worked for Hand Landscaping, a hometown landscaping company, part-time for two years, all while maintaining my own yards in my self-start-up business," he says. "These years helped me find my passion in horticulture, and I have been determined to grow my knowledge and experience ever since."

Erbrick has an overall grade point average of 3.91 and a 4.0 Landscape Horticulture GPA. He ran his own company, Erbrick Lawn Care, from April 2016 to May 2020. He has taken four weeklong mission trips to Guatemala, where he helped build homes and churches, painted schools and distributed bags of food.

"Landon's grades, work ethic and recommendations are top-notch and show his desire to have a positive impact in the horticulture industry," says Lawn & Landscape editor Brian Horn. "We hope he can use the money to help him further his horticulture education."

Erbrick is currently a sophomore with an expected graduation date of December 2023.

"This scholarship helps remove part of the financial burden from tuition and student loans, allowing me to focus more on my education," he says. "I have also begun undergraduate research this fall, and this scholarship allows me to put more time and effort into performing efficient research, as well as publishing my work. I am extremely grateful for the consideration and generosity of the Lawn & Landscape scholarship committee."



Landon Erbrick

## GARDEN DESIGN ACQUIRES WESTERN LANDSCAPE

Garden Design ranked No. 34 on the 2021 Lawn & Landscape Top 100 list.

Garden Design recently acquired Farmers Branch-based Western Landscape Corporation.

This acquisition will allow Western Landscape as a division of Garden Design, Inc. to grow as a landscape provider in the greater Dallas/Fort Worth market. Western, which employs 36, will continue to provide commercial services to resorts and hotels, office parks and gated communities.

"Western Landscape is a leader in the Dallas, Texas market and represents an important addition to our employee-owned company," said Garden Design CEO William Davoli. "Over the past 20 years, Western Landscape has grown steadily and today is one of the region's top landscape maintenance firms. We are delighted to welcome them to the Garden Design family."

Western Landscape's primary focus is commercial landscape maintenance, serving clients within a 30-mile radius of their base in Farmers Branch, north of Dallas, Texas.

Garden Design ranked No. 34 on the 2021 Lawn & Landscape Top 100 list. It provides commercial landscaping services in the Texas market with operations in Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, San Antonio and Houston.



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## ▶ BARTLETT TREE ACQUIRES BUENA VISTA ARBOR CARE

Buena Vista has operated for 26 years under the ownership of Vernon and Priscilla Esplin.

Bartlett Tree Experts has expanded its operations in the Pacific Northwest with the acquisition of Buena Vista Arbor Care in Corvallis, Oregon.

The expansion grows Bartlett's operations into the Mid-Willamette Valley and to the Oregon Coast, where Buena Vista Arbor Care has operated for over 26 years under the ownership of Certified Arborists Vernon and Priscilla Esplin.

"This acquisition allows us to expand our services to customers in the mid-

Willamette Valley, a beautiful area with agriculture, vineyards and a rich tradition of forestry and horticulture," said Kevin Carr, district manager of Bartlett's Pacific Northwest division. "We are excited to provide our clients in this new area with Bartlett's full suite of scientific tree care services."

A group of 12 arborists have joined Bartlett from Buena Vista, operating out of a new Bartlett office in Corvallis. The acquisition, which was completed Dec. 6, is Bartlett's latest in the state.

## ▶ SENSKE ACQUIRES CUSTOM INSECT & WEED CONTROL

Customers will now be serviced by Washington Tree & Lawn Care, a division of Senske Services.

Senske Services acquired Custom Insect & Weed Control based in Gig Harbor, Washington. Senske is a family-owned provider of premier lawn, tree and pest control services throughout the Western United States.

Founded in 1978 by Larry Morrison, Custom Insect & Weed Control has provided lawn care and pest control for more than four decades. When contemplating retirement, Morrison looked for a partner that shared his values.

Custom Insect & Weed Control customers will now be serviced by Washington Tree & Lawn Care, a division of Senske Services. Existing services will continue uninterrupted from the Lakewood, Washington location, and customers can take advantage of the expanded service offerings.

"Our expansion and growth strategy focuses on companies with similar service lines and quality employees that can join our team," said Senske's Chief Operating Officer, Tim Ehrhart. "We look forward to providing fantastic service to our new customers." This acquisition represents the sixth completed by Senske in the last 13 months.

## ▶ GREEN GROUP EXPANDS INTO FLORIDA

The company added Pearce Power Spraying and Pest Control to its family of brands.

Green Group has expanded into Florida with the addition of Pearce Power Spraying and Pest Control to its family of brands.

Located in Melbourne, Florida, Pearce has been locally owned and operated by David Pearce since 1990. The company, which offers lawn care and perimeter pest control to residential and commercial customers, is the first Florida location to join the Green Group family. The company will continue to operate under the Pearce name and service Melbourne, Palm Bay and the surrounding areas.

David Pearce, the founder of Pearce Power Spraying and Pest Control, credits his faith and patience for finding the right opportunity to carry on his hard-earned legacy.

"I have built this business from the



ground up. Everything has been bootstrapped; I beat the pavement to make this company work and credit much of our success to my employees," Pearce said. "I was considering a sale in 2017, but I couldn't find a buyer with the heart and soul for my team that I was looking for. Green Group is about more than just profits. They are focused on the people. I have faith that my employees are in good hands."

Green Group will retain all current Pearce employees, who receive a substantial increase in their benefits packages. In addition, the company will expand and hire additional employees in the coming year while continuing to operate locally out of Melbourne.



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## ► SITEWORKS BECOMES FULLY EMPLOYEE-OWNED

The company's original founders told employees about the ESOP at their November meeting.

SiteWorks has become a 100% Employee-Owned Company. The company ranked No. 50 on our 2021 Top 100 list.

This announcement of the Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) was presented to all coworkers at their annual winter gathering in November.

An ESOP is an employee benefit plan, which provides company stock to employees as part of their retirement benefits. As a 100% employee-owned company, all of the SiteWorks stock is now held in trust by the ESOP exclusively for the benefit of all the coworkers who are employed by the

newly formed corporate business entity, SiteWorks Holding Co., Inc.

As discussed in an openly shared conversation with the three original founders, namely Chris Malham (right), Rob Spoor (left) and Don McIntyre, they said that, "we instinctively knew our ultimate succession plan was to focus on the one buyer who absolutely stood to benefit most for their wholehearted contribution made to the ongoing success of SiteWorks: Our coworkers."

In a joint statement, they said the process took eight months. They told attendees,

"it was necessary to start transitioning the company as we began to consider our ensuing retirement years, and after declining two highly attractive offers to sell the company to strategic buyers, we knew we would be wrongfully settling and 'selling out' our coworkers, many who made career commitments to join us back when we modestly started in December 2004.

"We felt there was nothing improper about selling to an outside buyer, however after our research it appeared that very few seller transactions are beneficial to those who are left behind.

Therefore, instead of one day looking back and feeling disappointed, we thought to instead focus on what is ahead and establish something wonderful for those that we cared about. To us, it was a matter of taking less to do more."

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## ► KUBOTA NAMES NEW PRESIDENT, CEO

Shingo Hanada will serve as the new president and CEO of Kubota Tractor Corporation and Kubota North America.

Kubota Tractor Corporation has announced the appointment of Shingo Hanada as the new president and CEO of Kubota Tractor Corporation and Kubota North America, based in Grapevine, Texas.

Hanada is a 32-year Kubota veteran who most recently held the position of executive officer, Kubota Corporation, and president of Kubota Holdings Europe B.V. and Kverneland AS in the Netherlands and has previously spent time in the U.S. in various roles.

In conjunction with this announcement, the current president and CEO Haruyuki (Harry) Yoshida will retire from the role of senior managing executive officer, Kubota Corporation, Japan, and the position of president & CEO of KNA and KTC. Yoshida took the presidency of KNA and KTC in January 2019 and has successfully



Shingo Hanada

built and enhanced the regional functions and operations of Kubota North America as the company continues on its high-growth trajectory.

The executive leadership announcements include a promotion for Todd Stucke, VP, sales and marketing, KNA, and senior VP, marketing, product support & strategic projects, KTC, will be promoted to executive officer of Kubota Corporation, Japan, serving as senior VP, sales and marketing, KNA, in addition to maintaining his role as senior VP for KTC. Stucke will be involved in Kubota Corporation's operations and focus on building a robust business structure for the North American market, as the company continues to invest and grow in the U.S. and Canada.



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## ▶ JOBBER PARTNERS WITH COMPANYCAM

The CompanyCam integration is available to U.S. Jobber customers on the Connect and Grow membership plans.

Jobber, a provider of home service management software, announced an integration with CompanyCam, a photo documentation and communication app for contractors.

Through the integration, service providers can take and share an unlimited number of photos with homeowners to keep them in the know.

This will help service professionals capture details on jobsites, communicate with crews and keep clients informed without

having to leave the Jobber platform. "Documenting a job well done is an important part of running a great business but is often time-consuming and can take time away from doing the actual work," said Sam Pillar, CEO & co-founder of Jobber.

"Teaming up with CompanyCam will help Jobber customers show off their great work, save more time in their day, and increase profitability by getting jobs done faster."

Home service businesses can use this

new partnership by connecting to the CompanyCam app in the Jobber app marketplace.


Once connected, service professionals can snap, edit and annotate photos in CompanyCam that automatically appear under the matching property address in Jobber.

Pros will be able to easily include the images and annotations in the customer invoices while also highlighting project timelines, before-and-after photos, galleries and reports.

"Partnering with Jobber is a no-brainer for us," said Luke Hansen, founder and CEO of CompanyCam.

"With this integration we can double down on everything our users value — effective documentation, organization and visual-first communication."


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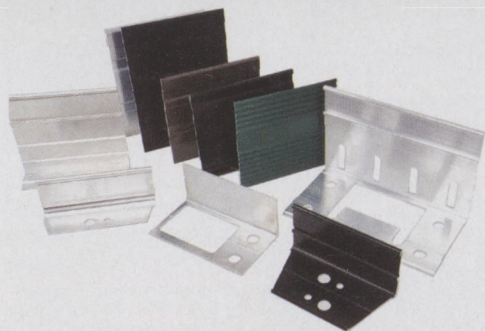
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## IRRIGATION ASSOCIATION SELECTS NEW CEO

Natasha Rankin has nine years of chief executive roles.

The Irrigation Association Board of Directors has named Natasha Rankin as its new chief executive officer.

Rankin brings more than 25 years of experience to the IA, including nine years in chief executive roles.

Most recently, she served as the chief strategy officer/chief operating officer for the American Counseling Association, where she has helped the organization achieve record levels of membership and revenue growth. Previously, while at Bostrom Corporation, Rankin was execu-

tive director for the Employers Council on Flexible Compensation and the Greeting Card Association. During her career, she also served as executive director of the General Federation of Women's Clubs.

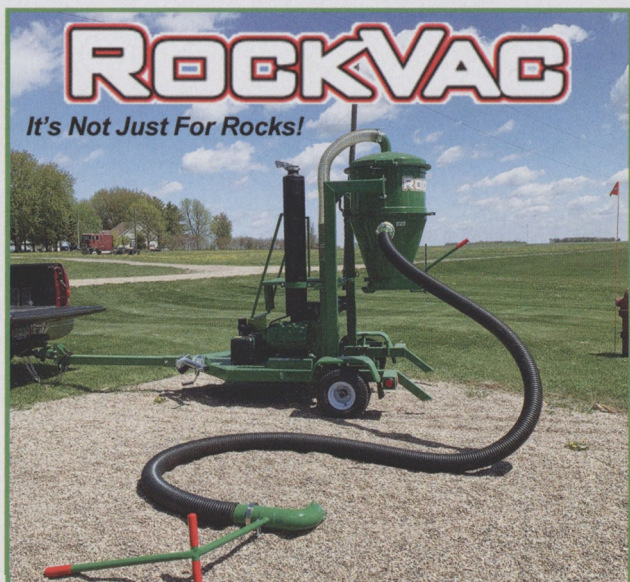
"After a comprehensive selection process that considered many qualified candidates, the board is confident that Natasha Rankin is the right person to lead the IA into the future," said John Newlin, chair of the CEO Search Committee and incoming IA president.

"Her wealth of experience with asso-

ciations on multiple levels and her track record of success in developing and executing strategies to achieve growth and sustainability will be huge assets for the IA."

In addition to executive roles, Rankin has extensive experience working with associations, including meeting planning, advocacy work, professional development and implementing membership growth strategies.

She has also been involved with the American Society of Association Executives, currently serving on the ASAE Foundation Innovation Task Force and on the ASAE Political Action Committee, where she is recognized as an APAC Ambassador. **L&L**



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→ **A COST- ESTIMATING SYSTEM** must not only accurately calculate your costs but it also must include all of your costs. Remember, every legitimate cost that you have in your business should be passed on to your customers with an appropriate net profit margin added to it. For each and every cost that you incur, ask yourself, “Where is this cost included in my pricing system and getting passed on to my customer?”

Whenever I teach an estimating seminar or workshop, I start by explaining a very simple pricing scenario. I show the audience how to calculate the hourly rate for an irrigation service technician using my MS Excel pricing worksheet. You can adapt this example to just about any service that you provide. Here it is.

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Our service technician is paid an hourly rate of \$25 and works an average of 45 man-hours per week. We add a 10% risk factor to account for weather issues, equipment breakdowns and miscellaneous unknowns. These two items increase our crew-average wage to \$28.89. We'll add a 25% labor burden to account for benefits (Federal Insurance Contributions Act, Federal Unemployment Tax Act, State Unemployment Tax Act) costs, paid holidays, vacations, PTO, workers' compensation and liability insurance, and so forth. General and administrative (G&A) overhead cost is \$18 per man-hour (we divide the G&A overhead costs by the billable man-hours in this division).

**Phase I Production Costs (on-site or curb-time costs):** There are no material, equipment or subcontractor costs but we have seven man-hours that the technician will spend on job sites ( $7 \times \$28.89 = \$202.23$ ).

**Phase II General Condition costs (off-site costs):** These are material, labor, equipment and subcontractor costs that generally happen off-site. Two of the technician's daily man-hours occur off-site for drive time, load/unload time, etc. ( $2 \times \$28.89 = \$57.78$ ). We include the service van at a cost per hour (CPH) of \$10 for eight hours per day ( $8 \times 10 = \$80$ ).

**Phase III Margins and Markups:** In this phase, we add sales tax to materials (if it applies) and labor burden to field labor. All of these Phase I, II and III costs add up to \$405, or our total direct costs (TDC).

Next, we calculate our G&A overhead costs by multiplying the 9 man-hours by the G&A overhead cost per man-hour ( $9 \times \$18 = \$162$ ). This gives us our break-even point (BEP).

Finally, we add the desired 20% net profit margin (NPM) to the BEP. This gives us a daily revenue labor goal for this technician of \$709. The portal-to-portal man-hour rate is \$78.75. I'd round this up to \$80 per man-hour.

### ANALYSIS:

Our pricing system includes all of the costs related to this technician and calculates two very important rates. First is the hourly rate of \$78.75. As important as this rate is, it is even more important that the technician bills a minimum of \$709 per day for labor. Since all G&A overhead costs are included in the labor rate, any margin added to materials is net profit.

If any of our costs change, we adjust our pricing model accordingly. For instance, if the van CPH, due to fuel costs, increases to \$12 per hour, the technician gets a \$5 per man-hour raise; the labor burden increases to 30%; and the technician works an average of fifty man-hours per week, the updated man-hour rate increases to \$94.33 and \$849 per day. (See the MS Excel Worksheet Scenario 2)

### CONCLUSION:

Too many popular green industry software programs aren't granular enough to accommodate the cost volatility of the current marketplace. They often utilize a labor rate (\$45, \$50, 65 per man-hour, etc.) that can't be broken down into the many components that it should include.

The simple but comprehensive MS Excel worksheet that I use to price labor rates addresses those shortcomings. If labor costs change, you adjust them in the labor section of the worksheet. If fuel costs increase, you adjust the cost per hour for trucks and equipment accordingly in the truck and equipment portion of the worksheet. If factors change, you simply make the adjustment in the worksheet and your pricing accurately and automatically adjusts. If you desire more or less net profit, you simply change the net profit margin field. **L&L**

FOR A FREE COPY OF THE MS EXCEL WORKSHEETS used in this article, visit bit.ly/llextra or hold your phone on camera mode over the QR code.





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**WORDS OF WILSON**  
WITH ROBERT CLINKENBEARD  
MANAGING PARTNER,  
BRUCE WILSON & COMPANY

**WORDS OF WILSON** features a rotating panel of consultants from Bruce Wilson & Company, a landscape consulting firm.

## YOU NEED A NETWORK

→ **LANDSCAPE CEOS**, more than any other, know the importance of ecosystem health when it comes to the growth of their clients' properties. What if we applied a similar principle as a growth strategy for leadership?

I've built and led several companies: some I fell into accidentally and grew organically; others I approached with a vision in mind. But across my career, one thing became clear: I owe my entrepreneurial success to a healthy ecosystem of diverse relationships.

We all agree that when it comes to competitive advantage, connections are our secret sauce. There's really no other asset more beneficial than having a group of people, within and outside our organizations, who can help us be better at who we are and what we do. But how do we build a power network and how do we manage it when it seems like we already have too many balls in the air?

Here are seven things I know now I wish I knew back when:

1. **One plus one equals three:** No business and no CEO operates well in isolation. Effective leaders understand that "we're better together" means having a network of high-value connections across generations and industries. These connections should also be at different levels and production areas, with people whose insights can help you build bridges, open doors and positively impact the success of your team.
2. **Do your homework:** Your network will change as your needs change, and quality relationships require nurturing. Define your strategy, research the market, determine what you want from the experience and how you'll allocate resources to support it.
3. **Build a circle of influence:** Identify what your employees and your customers expect from you and build a network that can help your business provide solutions others can't. If your employees or customers benefit from something you don't offer, having access to a unique outside resource can be competitive advantage.
4. **Give more than you take:** Become active in your national and state associations and your local business communities. Join and commit to an organization for entrepreneurs, CEO peer groups and community chambers and non-profits, which offer opportunities to get involved and give back.
5. **Focus on learning:** Invest in professional development activities and build a network that includes exposure to world-class authors, speakers and thought leaders to stay on top of innovations, emerging technologies and economic and market trends.
6. **Networking is a brand builder:** Everyone from your workers to your suppliers to your customers to your colleagues has a stakeholder role to play in the success of your business. Encour-

age your employees to join associations that support their expertise and engage with your wider community on social media. Make increasing the capacity and visibility of your business through strategic networking a shared responsibility for your entire company.

7. **Bring your people into a sharing mindset:** Provide opportunities to help your employees build confidence and knowledge-sharing skills. Invite your team to read or listen to one good book every quarter and discuss take-aways and ideas they can implement. Start with: "Who Not How" by Dan Sullivan, as in, *who* can help me do this better versus *how* can I do this myself? Discuss why leveraging the strengths of others increases the strength of one.

We all have mindsets that don't serve us well. If networking has been a challenge, change your approach.

Go from making connections to advance yourself to creating opportunities where everyone wins.

With the right frame of mind, and an attitude of giving more than you receive, you'll plant seeds for a community of alliances that will last a lifetime. **L&L**

↓  
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**CREAM OF THE CROP**  
WITH JUD GRIGGS  
DESIGN/BUILD CONSULTANT

**CREAM OF THE CROP** features a rotating panel from the Harvest Group, a landscape business consulting company.

## IDENTIFY YOUR IDEAL CLIENT

→ **THINK BACK TO WHEN** you were starting your landscape business. Like most start-ups, you took whatever work came your way. You may mow grass one day, do a fall clean-up the next day or install some new plants for another client on a different day. Your goal was to generate enough revenue to pay your crews and vendors, and make a modest profit.

As your company grew and matured, you started to understand what type of work you were best at, and which projects were most profitable (through job costing). You also started to find out what type of projects you enjoy most. For example, you may realize you like the excitement of designing and selling a design/build project and transforming a boring landscape into a work of art. Others enjoy the repetitive nature of maintenance work. For the number of hours you invest in growing your business, it sure makes it easier if you thoroughly enjoy what you do.

Over time, you become more discerning on the type of work you want to perform. It's important for you to come to the realization that you cannot be everything to everybody. If you try to do it all, you will forever be a generalist and never an expert in what you do. This will result in lower profits.

Here are three simple steps to narrow the playing field and finding the best clients and projects for you and your team

### STEP 1 — FINDING YOUR MARKET NICHE

To become more successful, it's best to find a niche where you can dominate the market and not have to compete with a multitude of low-priced contractors. The key is to identify the segments of your market that are under-served. Where is there a lack of qualified competitors? Do you or your team have a unique skill set that can translate into filling a market niche? If you find these niches and service them well, you will be able to charge more for your services and become more profitable.

### STEP 2 — IDENTIFY YOUR "IDEAL CLIENT"

This is easier said than done. When I go through this process with my clients, I ask them to paint a picture of the "perfect" customer. I have them think back to their favorite projects and identify what aspects of those projects made them successful. Did these projects go well logistically? Were they profitable and why were they profitable? Which clients are most enjoyable to work with?

### STEP 3 — CREATE A CHECKLIST

From your picture of an ideal client or project, create a checklist. This checklist should create a framework to help you decide if you are going to work with a new prospect or say no. I've found that saying no is one of the best ways to achieving success. This checklist will

be somewhat different whether your specialty is maintenance or design/build. Here are some examples:

#### DESIGN/BUILD

- Commercial vs. Residential
- Disposable income for property upgrades
- Reside in the established target area
- Willing to pay a high design fee

#### MAINTENANCE

- Commercial vs. Residential
- Single-family residential vs. HOAs
- Located in defined geographic areas to provide route density
- Potential for substantial amount of enhancement work

Once you have created these checklists, use them to pre-qualify your prospects. I suggest creating a script that your gatekeeper can follow to determine if the prospect is a qualified prospect.

Most of my clients are in the enviable position of having long lead times for their design/build projects or full books of maintenance clients. This will allow you to be very discerning when it comes to taking on a new prospect.

The checklist you create can also be useful during the renewal process for your maintenance accounts. How well do your current clients align with the lists? What you may find is that a number of the clients you took on when you were first starting your business no longer are a good fit for your business. It may be time to "fire" some of these clients.

By identifying your ideal client and then being diligent in working only with clients that most closely align with your list of qualifiers, your enjoyment factor will go up commensurately with the increase in your bottom line. **L&L**

#### FIND YOUR NICHE AND STICK TO IT.

Specializing in something you do really well, and sparks joy for you, can help you elevate your business and brand.



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## Jenn Myers

NALP Professionals' Foundation

Jenn Myers is the Executive Director of the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Foundation, Senior Director of Workforce Development at NALP, and is the staff liaison and an active member of the NALP Women in Landscape Network (powered by Bayer) which provides a forum for industry professionals to support each other's professional growth. The Network is free to all industry professionals.

**IT IS NO SECRET THAT THE INDUSTRY** has had and continues to have a major workforce shortage. It is the number one challenge cited by landscape businesses; now, lawn care contractors are struggling as well. There is a way to embrace, welcome and grow an under-tapped sector of our workforce — and that is by prioritizing, recruiting and retaining women in the industry.

In the recent 2021 NALP Foundation Workforce Demographic Study, the data showed that women fill a fraction of the landscape and lawn care roles (8%) compared to the jobs filled by women in the workforce at large (47%). That is a huge disparity between the numbers of women working in our industry and in the workforce at large — and it is also a huge opportunity if attitudes and behaviors change to welcome women into our industry. I know this from personal experience.

Early in my landscaping career, after a recent promotion, I had a senior male manager tell me I wasn't qualified for the role because I was: 1) too young, 2) too inexperienced (hadn't paid my 'dues') and 3) a woman. This man said to me, nonchalantly in the office kitchen, that one of the reasons I wasn't ready to lead was because I was a woman.

**WOMEN IN LANDSCAPING** is a column brought to you in partnership with the National Association of Landscape Professionals.

I was so very fortunate to work for a manager at the time who I felt comfortable sharing this episode with and who supported me in my role (and assured me I was very much qualified). Like the majority of management professionals in our industry then and now, my boss was male. He was willing to speak out for me, encourage me and help develop my skills as a leader — but that isn't always the case. While women in our industry can cheer and advocate and inspire each other to greatness, we need the support of all, including male advocates, managers and business owners, who are willing to do the hard work with us.

How do we fix things? Let current and potential female employees know that they are welcome. Provide uniforms that fit comfortably; clean bathrooms at the office and offer solutions to identify and utilize clean bathrooms on or between jobsites. Create communities within the organization that help women to connect and bond and tap into the experiences of women on your team to help lead and drive this continuous change.

Call out inappropriate behavior by employees, subcontractors and customers. Don't dismiss inappropriate jokes as locker room talk, or something that 'comes with the territory.'

Support women who choose to have a family...and those that don't. Encourage mothers-to-be, and be understanding of the needs of mothers (and other primary caregivers).

Recognize that women can be integral and essential to your business' success at all levels. Ensure that female candidates are presented with a career path that includes upper management and doesn't assume or push them into certain roles. Many of the college programs we work with continue to see strong gender shifts in their enrollment, with some programs reaching 70%+ female students. Are your interviewing, hiring and onboarding practices ready to tap into this talent?

Women are more than qualified, capable and ready to lead. Female employees are in the workforce. It's up to us to show them the door is open, they have a seat at the table and we're ready and willing to hear their voices. **L&L**



Scan this code to get a free copy of the 2021 NALP Foundation Workforce Demographic Study





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A man wearing a yellow safety vest, blue jeans, and a hat is using a long-handled tool, possibly a trimmer or edger, on a green lawn. In the background, there is a white fence, a line of trees, and a two-story house with grey siding and a dark roof.

# R

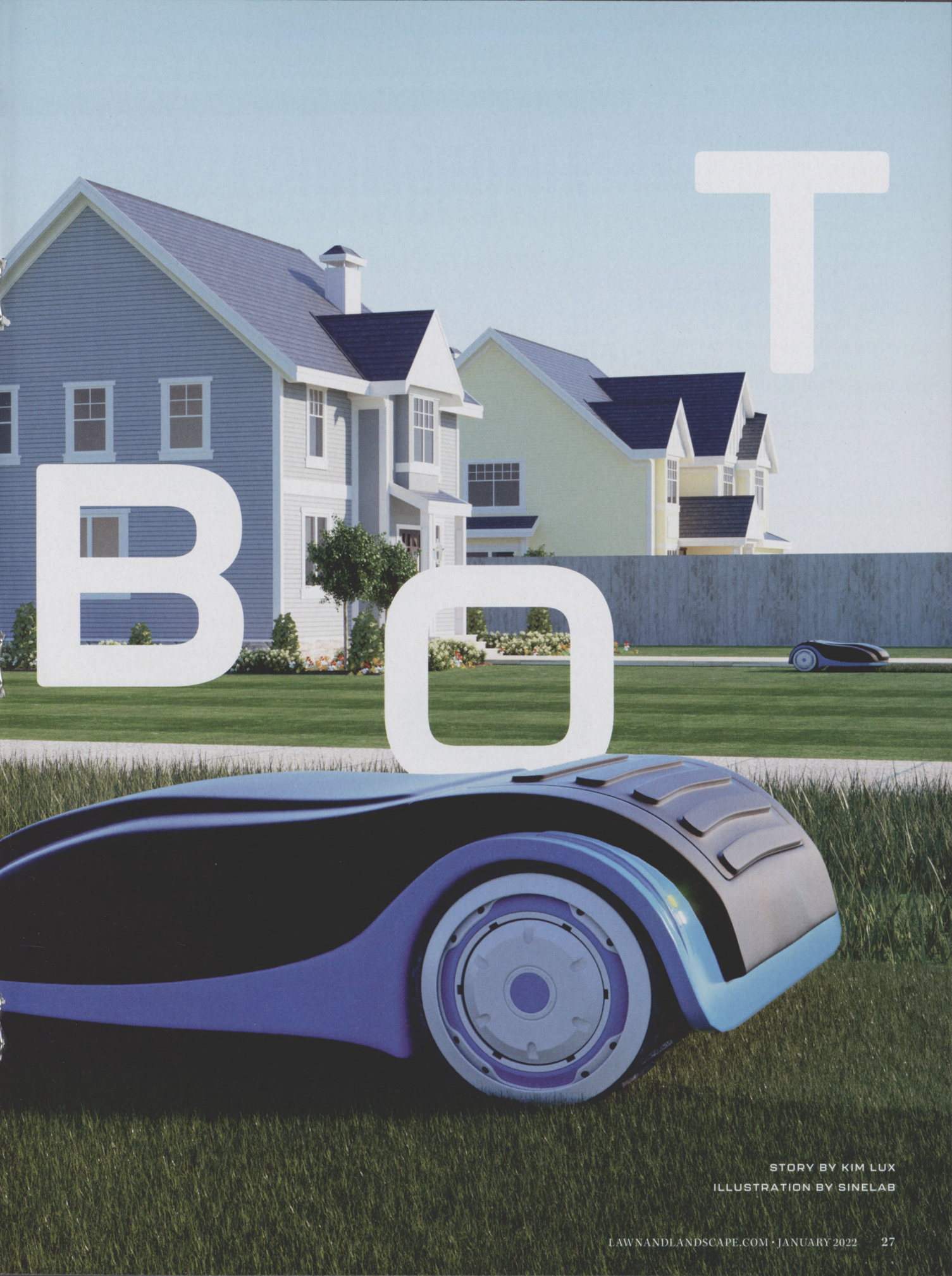
# THE WAY OF THE

From evolving technology to solving common concerns, autonomous mowing companies are aiming to transform the green industry.

# O

**W**ith labor shortages only getting worse, along with states and local municipalities pushing to pass gas-powered equipment bans, the market for autonomous mowing is heating up. There are a handful of companies far down the road in developing these machines, and Exmark is in the early stages of developing robotic and autonomous commercial mowers. With more and more autonomous mowing companies are popping up, what sets one robotic mower apart from another?





STORY BY KIM LUX  
ILLUSTRATION BY SINELAB



## SEPARATING THE HERD

For Scythe Robotics, it was about constructing a machine that landscapers would be inherently familiar with.

"It's a 52-inch, commercial grade, fully autonomous, all-electric mower," says Billy Otteman, director of marketing for Scythe. "It's tri-blade, rear discharge. Essentially it can see and respond to the environment around it, so you as a mower drive the perimeter of a property manually, as a ride on, and then you flip it into self-driving mode, and it starts laying stripes."

"Through the onboard sensing system, which is made up of eight HDR cameras and a slew of other advanced sensors, it's able then to detect what's going on in the environment and move and respond to different obstacles it encounters."

Otteman adds that because they designed it to look like a stand-on mower, it should be more user-friendly.

"We want the crews to be able to step on and immediately know what to do," he says. "The user interface is similar to a conventional mower, and we've been playing around with the hand controls to see what type will be easiest and most intuitive for people to use."

Jarrett Herold, co-founder and COO of Electric Sheep, says it's functionality that makes his mowers stand out.

"We started out with what a lot of the competitors are doing, which is open area auto-stripping — you draw a perimeter or some shape that's largely unobstructed — and the tech will auto-stripe the middle," he says.

"We understood though, that wasn't a technology that was going to unlock what we considered to be the \$20 billion mowing market. So, we shifted our focus to the technology we're working with today, which we call 'recorded replay.' So, we give our mower to our customers, and they record exactly how they would like to mow a given area and we just replay that path into perpetuity."

Husqvarna launched its first fully automatic lawn mower in 1995. Since

# AUTONOMOUS ASSETS

Investing in robotic mowers can aid in efficiency.

## CUB CADET PRO SERIES PRO Z 960 S AND 972 S SUREPATH

**The pitch:** Cub Cadet's first semi-autonomous commercial mowers are outfitted with GPS technology and an exclusive four-wheel steering system to deliver the most efficient cut possible.

- The operator simply sets the preliminary cut line, and the PRO Z SurePath units will perform straight cutting paths with an auto-zero-turn at the end of each pass with the touch of a button.
- By utilizing high-precision GPS technology, SurePath Auto Steer reduces overlap and cuts perfect stripes, allowing the operator to complete a property in less time while producing superior cut quality.
- Cub Cadet PRO Series PRO Z 960 S and 972 S SurePath units will be available at select dealers starting in Spring 2022.

For more info: [cubcadet.com](http://cubcadet.com)



## GREENWORKS OPTIMOW

**The pitch:** The commercial-grade optimow mowers include four models: optimow 33, optimow 33H, optimow 66 and optimow 66H.

- The optimow mower is equipped with 4G cellular connectivity and fully integrated GPS tracking, allowing operators to operate from anywhere.
- Optimow robotic mowers can be customized for everything from scheduling to cut height and can operate on lawns with up to a 35% grade slope.
- The optimow 33 and 33H models can cut up to 1/3 acre on a full charge, while the 66 and 66H models can cut up to 2/3 acre on a full charge. The optimow 33 and 66 models have a cut height from 0.8 inches to 2.4 inches, while the 33H and 66H cut heights range from 2.4 inches to 4 inches.

For more info: [greenworksmcommercial.com](http://greenworksmcommercial.com)



## HUSQVARNA CEORA

**The pitch:** The CEORA is a commercial robotic mowing solution, coming in 2022, that will cover more than 12 acres with one mow.

- The CEORA utilizes the company's satellite-based EPOS (Exact Positioning Operating System) technology to create virtual boundaries.
- Designed to be a low cost, low noise, zero emissions solution that will allow facility management companies, municipalities and sports field managers to bring more efficiency and consistency to the overall land maintenance process.
- Mowers with EPOS integrate with Husqvarna Fleet Services, a digital fleet management control system, and make the management of large lawns and green spaces easier.

For more info: [Husqvarna.com/uk](http://Husqvarna.com/uk)





## ECHO ROBOTICS TM-2000 AUTONOMOUS TURF MOWER

**The pitch:** The ECHO Robotics TM-2000 autonomous turf mower features five floating cutting heads and an adjustable mowing height of  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 4 inches.

- It can cut up to six acres for turf that looks manicured and professional all season long.
- The autonomous mower is self-charging with a working cycle of two hours mowing to one hour of charge time.
- With remote command and performance monitoring via a web platform and mobile app, fleet management is easier — giving users more time to focus on other parts of their business.

**For more info:** [echorobotics.com](http://echorobotics.com)



## ELECTRIC SHEEP DEXTER MEGA

**The pitch:** This machine allows commercial lawn mowers to drive themselves.

- With its “recorded replay” technology, operators record how they want the property mowed once while operating the machine, and then it replays the exact pattern autonomously each time.
- The Electric Sheep Robot works with commercial gas and electric mowers and is available through a Robots-as-a-Service model.
- A limited quality will be available in 2022.

**For more info:** [electricssheeprobotics.com](http://electricssheeprobotics.com)



## GRAZE – AUTONOMOUS COMMERCIAL LAWNMOWER

**The pitch:** A fully autonomous and electric commercial lawn mower that is controlled via GPS, Lidar and smart sensors to streamline efficiency in commercial landscaping.

- Machine learning allows the mower to map jobsites, plan and execute mowing paths, while avoiding obstacles and dangerous inclines.
- Powered completely by electrically charged batteries, operators can cut fuel costs and eliminate carbon emissions while also maximizing revenue by addressing labor challenges. The mower can run for 7-8 hours before needing a recharge.
- The mower has a 60-inch mow deck which allows it to fit in a conventional trailer while big enough to mow over three acres per hour and its run flat tires are airless thus eliminating manual checking of air pressure and inflating.

**For more info:** [www.grazemowing.com/](http://www.grazemowing.com/)



## RC MOWERS REMOTE-OPERATED ROBOTIC MOWERS:

TK-60XP, TK-52XP AND TK-44E

**The pitch:** RC Mowers remote-operated robotic mowers are for mowing steep slopes and other hazardous terrain.

- Mowers are designed to maintain steep slopes up to 50 degrees.
- The TK-60XP and TK-52XP machines cuts brush up to 1.5 inches.
- All the mowers are 100% manufactured and serviced in the U.S. They offer a 30-day buy-back guarantee and come with a 72-hour parts shipping guarantee.

**For more info:** [www.rcmowersusa.com](http://www.rcmowersusa.com)



## SCYTHE M.52

**The pitch:** The 52-inch fully autonomous commercial mower with eight HDR cameras and advanced sensors to identify obstacles on a property and safely navigate around them.

- The M.52 follows contours, tackles slopes and automatically adjusts striping patterns on its own.
- The all-electric mower can be charged overnight and run all day with zero emissions and substantially less noise than gas-powered mowers.
- With 2022 production already reserved, 2023 reservations are available.

**For more info:** [scytherobotics.com](http://scytherobotics.com)



## STIHL iMOW RMI 632 PC-L

**The pitch:** STIHL iMOW RMI 632 PC-L allows homeowners and professionals to mow yards, track progress and customize mowing schedules from the convenience of their smartphone.

- Features an 11-inch cutting width that efficiently mows yards up to nearly an acre and a fourth in about 50 hours per week.
- Removable LED control panel with bright display offers easy programming without having to bend down to reach the controls.
- Able to traverse slopes up to 24 degrees for clean and even mowing.

**For more info:** [STIHLusa.com](http://STIHLusa.com)



then, the company has continued to evolve its autonomous mower fleet and has expanded the Automower line to include 15 models for both residential and commercial use, says Alex Trimboli, senior brand manager, robotics.

Husqvarna's newest innovation is set to launch next spring and will be able to mow

larger spaces. "Our next advancement in this category, launching in Spring of 2022, is CEORA, a revolutionary new autonomous solution for large green spaces," Trimboli says.

"CEORA will utilize our satellite-based EPOS (Exact Positioning Operating System) technology to create virtual boundaries for

easy and hassle-free operation."

CEO of Graze, John Vlay, says the autonomous mowing company is unique due to its global reach, team of engineers and funding source.

Vlay says that since 2019, Graze has raised over \$9.2 million in investments through crowdfunding and has over 6,000 investors. The company is also receiving international interest for its mowers.

"We've got preorders not only from the U.S., but 50 out of Australia, 70 out of the U.K. and a lot of interest from South Africa, South Korea and the Middle East," Vlay says.

### METICULOUSLY MANUFACTURED

Because autonomous mowers come in all shapes and sizes, the building process is different among companies. Some opt to build the machine from scratch, while others build devices that are retrofitted onto existing mowers.

At Scythe, the mowers are built systematically to ensure excess safety.

"Our system is built from the ground up," Otteman says. "Everything is intended to be operating in self-driving mode. So, with that, all of the sensors are securely and safely attached. Nothing will be able to fall off...by having that built from the ground up solution, the robot is able to perform better, create a better mow and produce a better-quality cut."

In a time of never-ending supply chain issues, Vlay says being able to produce the mowers themselves has benefited Graze.

"From the very beginning, we talked about doing everything ourselves," he says. "Doing all our mow decks, doing all of the hardware, doing all of the software..."

"It gives us a much stronger patent. And it also allows us to control everything. So, we're no longer beholden to a lawn mower manufacturer that may have orders for other customers. We'll be able to dictate what we're making, and who we're making it for."

Husqvarna also chooses to handcraft its autonomous mowers.

"Each Husqvarna Automower is produced from scratch through a combination of human and robotic assembly in our Aycliffe, UK, factory," Trimboli says.

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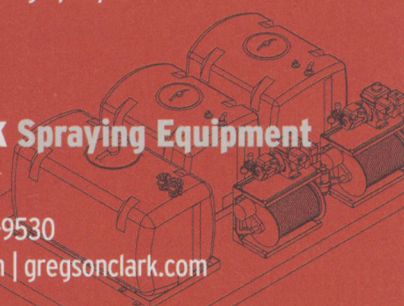


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However, Electric Sheep chooses to go in the opposite direction — at least for now.

"We have an approach that is a retrofit approach, where we're clamping on to existing mowers, but we do want to focus on a few platforms that are going to unlock a lot of opportunity for us," Herold says.

### CUTTING-EDGE ENHANCEMENTS

Since its inception, Graze has gone through several versions of its robotic mower. The company started with solar panels before pursuing other electric technology that allowed for longer runtimes and less weight. Vlay says the technology they use is always evolving and the newest version is the most advanced yet.

"Each version has iterated more and more based on where we ultimately want to be," he says. "On our third version, we're utilizing lidar, which is used for object detection and object avoidance. That coupled with our GPS and sensors allows us to map the perimeters both exterior and interior to define the mow area and mow in parallel lines and set the direction we want to mow."

The latest features for Husqvarna's Automower line are all about improving customer experience, Trimboli says.

"Lift and Tilt sensors help prevent collision, the noise-reducing motor design keeps the Automower virtually silent and advanced theft protection puts owners at ease," she says. "Additional features include automatic charging, easily adjustable cutting height and Bluetooth or cellular connectivity (depending on the model)."

What might be the biggest innovation for the mowers is Firmware Over the Air, or FOTA.

"This allows select automower software to automatically update their software wirelessly, instead of the requiring owners to take their automower to a dealer for updates," Trimboli says.

Scythe utilizes an assortment of systems for its mowers, but one stands out as a game-changer, Otteman says.

"Computer visioning is our primary sensing technology," he says. "There's various different technologies our robot uses, but



PHOTO COURTESY OF HUSQVARNA

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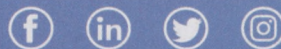
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with the computer visioning, our robot is actually seeing the world and the machine is learning and looking at the world as we would and identifying pixel by pixel what the objects it sees are.”

In addition to the technology, Otteman says there are three things Scythe is always looking to improve — reliability, robustness and usability.

“Mowers need to be tough. The mowing industry really has it nailed down, but when we think about robotics and apply-

ing this robotic technology to an outdoor environment, they have to be as durable, or more, than conventional lawn mowers,” Otteman says.

#### IT'S ALMOST SHOW TIME

While autonomous mowers are still relatively new in the United States, companies

are preparing to sell their machines. To make sure the robots are performing correctly, many have chosen to partner with landscape contractors on a trial basis to test things out.

“We’re very much at the go-to market stage,” Herold says. “We are being very judicious on how we’re selecting the right

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Reservations for Scythe Robotics' mower opened in late 2021. The orders are expected to be fulfilled in 2023 and beyond.

To watch the webinar "Inside the world of robotic mowers," hosted by *Lawn & Landscape* editor Brian Horn with a panel of Logan Fahey, Jen Lemcke and Tony Hopp, visit [bit.ly/lawnrobotic](https://bit.ly/lawnrobotic).

sites with the right customers, so that we can deliver a strong ROI.

"This year, we shifted our operations over to a much heavier turf market, which is eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey. We are deployed with five customers out there, and have 10 mowers across those five customers. Now we're fundraising to

fuel next year's expansion," he adds. Before taking on a slew of new customers, Herold says the company plans to ramp up production with its existing partners.

"We are very focused on deploying through next season with the customers we've already established," he says. "Technology like this doesn't really improve or get better in a garage somewhere — it needs to be out in the field and at customers' sites.

"We need to be partnering with the folks that have done this stuff for decades and can help shape it into what it needs to be."

Scythe, who's been working with 17 pilot partners, opened for public reservations in

October. "We will then use those reservations to gauge demand and plan production for the years ahead. Based off where we are today, 2022 production is already accounted for. Some of our pilot partners and existing customers have filled production for 2022," Otteman says.

"So, we're taking orders to be fulfilled in 2023 and beyond. It sounds like a long time, but there are a few things that are going to be happening as we ramp up production. We'll be ensuring and securing the quality and safety of the product."

Otteman adds that while it may be two years before customers receive their robots,

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they'll need that time to prepare for the onboarding process.

"Our mowers are all-electric and while it's a pretty easy switch in terms of what landscapers will need in their facilities, they will need to have enough power to charge all of the bots," he says. "They will need to get all of these things in place."

Graze is also still in the testing phase, but Vlay says he's eyeing a rollout soon.

"Right now, we're doing a couple of pilots in California and we're deploying mowers to landscape contractors in California," he says.

"We're going out every week and the objective is to get as many hours as we can

under our belts and see what kind of issues come up that we need to troubleshoot. We're expecting that to be through the end of this year.

"Depending on how those pilot programs go, will determine how quickly we go out to commercialization. My hope is early 2022," Vlay adds.

For Husqvarna's machines, contractors can order them through several avenues.

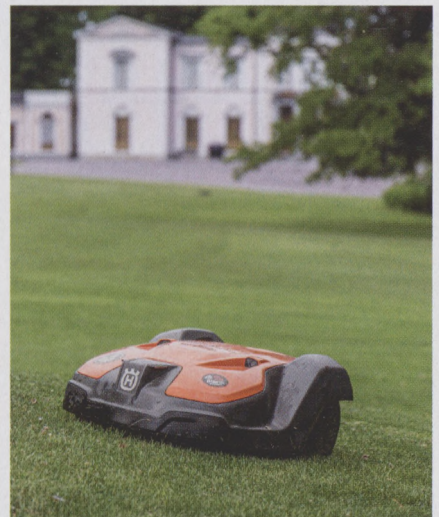
"You can order online from Husqvarna.com or visit one of our local Specialized Automower Dealers who are authorized to sell, install, and service your Automower," Trimboli says. "Contractors can qualify for fleet discounts based on bulk purchases and other advanced fleet services."

### GROWING ENTHUSIASM

As these mowers become more available, and the technology advances, Otteman says the excitement within the green industry is growing.

"It's great to see the eagerness and the excitement of the industry," he says. "It's an exciting opportunity because even though fulfillment might be further off than some customers would like, the excitement and momentum behind the autonomous mower movement is very strong."

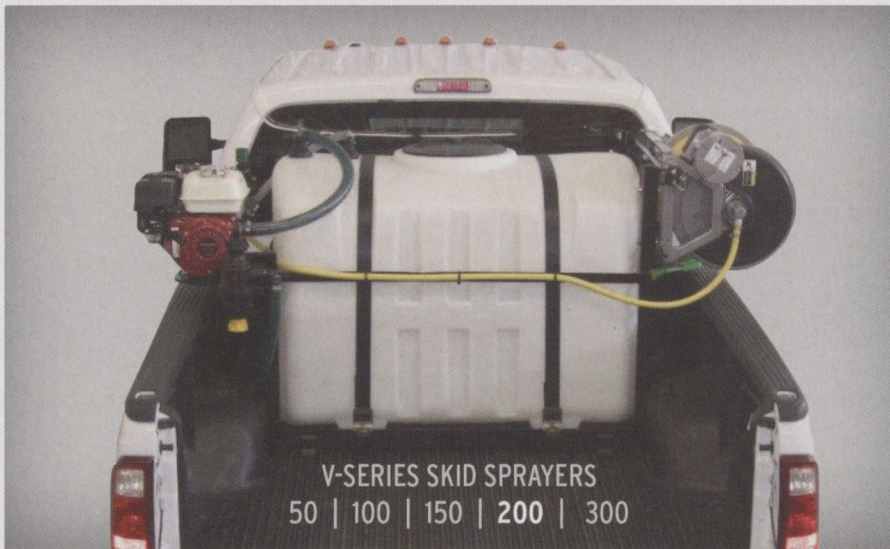
Herold says he hopes the mowers are impressive enough to get even the most "old-school" contractors on board.



The latest Firmware Over the Air technology allows Husqvarna's autonomous mowers to be updated remotely rather than taken to the dealer.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HUSQVARNA

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"The folks that we're really excited to work with are those that are willing to challenge their way of thinking," he says.

"With a lot of experience comes some baggage in the way you do things, and the companies that are willing to challenge how they think of their mowing operations, and their businesses as a whole, will be the ones to take full advantage of this.

"I think they all knew something like this would happen and the technology was arriving...everyone was sitting and waiting for something in this category to arrive to commercial landscaping," Herold adds. "For a lot of commercial contractors, the Roomba-style mowers just weren't it in their minds."

By utilizing autonomous mowers, Otteman says landscape companies' opportunities for growth are unlimited.

"In terms of what it can do for landscapers, we're most excited about the ability to multiply what landscapers can do with the

**"In the future, the robot will be able to identify things like a broken sprinkler head, or a patch of grass that looks brown, and then it can ping the business to send someone out to speak to the property owner. There are all kinds of opportunities that unlock when you have the ability to collect, analyze and act upon this type of data."**

— BILLY OTTEMAN, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING FOR SCYTHER

crews they already have today," he says.

"So, the labor crisis and labor pressures are top of mind...they can really expand the productivity of their teams."

All the data the machines can collect including things like mow time, fleet deployment, mapping capabilities and more, can provide additional selling potential.

"You also have upsell opportunities,"

Otteman says. "In the future, the robot will be able to identify things like a broken sprinkler head, or a patch of grass that looks brown, and then it can ping the business to send someone out to speak to the property owner.

"There are all kinds of opportunities that unlock when you have the ability to collect, analyze and act upon this type of data." L&L



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**Cherrylake Maintenance**  
has built an employee-first  
company culture.

# Not just a paycheck



By Jimmy Miller

When Jim Lieffort asked his employees to rank their experience at Cherrylake on a scale of 1-10, he didn't expect anyone to answer with a "1." But that's exactly what one disgruntled employee did — he even told Lieffort that he would've responded with a "0" if that was an option.

Cherrylake, an Orlando-based company with tree farm, landscape construction and landscape maintenance divisions, had long followed the Net Promoter Score system. Any client who says they're 8-10 likely to recommend Cherrylake to a friend is tagged as a "promoter." Anybody with a 6 or below is a "detractor." Many companies use NPS to determine the satisfaction levels of their clients.

But Lieffort, the director of landscape maintenance, wanted to take a data-driven look at the satisfaction levels of his employees, too. He asked them, "How likely are you to recommend Cherrylake as a place to work?" So when one employee rated the company so low, Lieffort's initial response was incredulous.

"I'm like, 'A one?' A one is unacceptable for me," he says. "(If) this guy is totally disengaged in our work, then we have a big problem."

As it turns out, sitting down with the employee to outline a clear path to a promotion was the key. The employee had been burned by previous jobs that overpromised a career and underdelivered. Lieffort and his leadership team assured the employee of his skills — he had plenty to offer some of the younger guys on staff who could learn a thing or two from a seasoned pro. The employee now runs an enhancement crew.

"Now this guy would probably give us a 15," Lieffort says.

This focus on building a leadership culture has long been the backbone at Cherrylake, a company that Lieffort says is rapidly growing. The company earned roughly \$3.2 million in 2020 and currently employs 75 people, which Lieffort attributes to a strong core executive team.

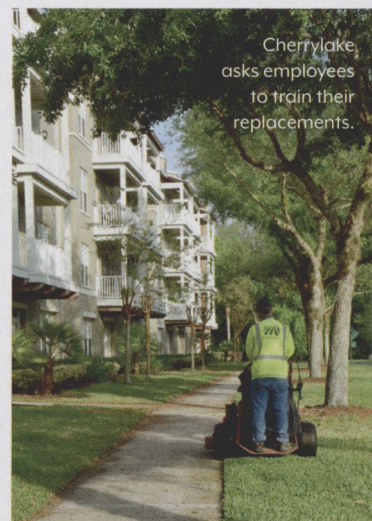
"It starts with the whole management team that has a tremendous level of trust and open, honest communication," he says. "I think it really starts with our executive group."

**ROLE MODELS.** There are at least two Google group chats the maintenance division frequently uses at Cherrylake: one where they offer critiques of everybody's work out in the field and another where they constantly share leadership and inspirational videos.

In the educational group chat, they'll share videos that explain the company's core values or principles they apply like the Lean business model. The thought process is that exposing the employees to some of these ideas early could help them develop entrepreneurial mindsets. With that comes an added level of responsibility to the company — Lieffort says people get promoted quickly when they show their job isn't just earning a paycheck. If the company belonged to them, and the equipment, and the customers, how would they approach their job differently?

Lieffort says he sits in on as many hirings as he can, including entry-level labor positions, because he wants to find employees who embody that thought process. He'll outline the company's promote-from-within strategy and emphasize that he wants them engaged with Cherrylake's vision. They're not going to go out and advertise for open leadership positions until they've already looked at promoting from within first.

He wants everyone to hone in on leadership skills as they work their way up the team's career ladder. Even if they leave Cherrylake later, Lieffort takes pride in sculpting them into better human beings first. "The core philosophy for me is, we need to provide these (employees) with good role models, good leadership and not just to be good workers," Lieffort says. "We don't ever talk about good workers. We want to make you better men or better women."



Cherrylake asks employees to train their replacements.

**TIME TO RISE.** Lieffort admits that at times, they've promoted people who just weren't ready. Lieffort says they'll simply slide the employee back into their previous position and let them continue to refine their skillset.

"For the most part, the guys who feel they're ready are ready," Lieffort says.

That's in large part because all Cherrylake employees are asked to focus on training their replacements. Lieffort says his employees aren't afraid to do that because there's so frequently upward mobility at the company. The catch is often that promoting from within creates a problem — who's going to do the soon-to-be vacant job?

"I've been in leadership a long time, and I tell guys, when you come to someone like myself and you say, 'I want this job,' what is my problem?" Lieffort says. "My problem is, who's going to do your job? So that's where 'always propose a solution' comes in."

This solutions-based mindset trickles down to regular work conflicts, too. Lieffort prefers employees have an idea in mind to remedy workplace problems before they even set foot in his office. Sure, Lieffort has final say over how a problem is handled, but often times, the fix is already known.

"If you come (with a problem), the first thing I'm going to ask you is, 'What do you think we should do?'" he says. "It's about empowerment, mentoring, caring."



## COMPANY PROFILE

So, when it comes down to replacing the talent that's missing when an employee gets promoted, Lieffort says much of the responsibility comes down to how the employee who wants a promotion trained their replacements. They should have a good idea of who will take the position once they get promoted, and there should have been training already done so the transition is relatively seamless.

Lieffort, of course, also advises the training of employees. By and large, he wants the training to be a bit more organic, coming from the employees rather than the executive team. That doesn't mean he doesn't have some ideas on where the next team leaders will come from along the way, though.

"We basically go through a constant evaluation," he says. "We're looking at our entire roster and saying, 'Okay, who's the next man up?'"



Cherrylake created three remote deployment locations to cut down on commutes.

**BUILDING SOME TRUST.** Traffic can be tricky to navigate as Orlando is such a natural tourist attraction (Disney World drivers have to go somewhere!).

So, they established three remote deployment locations so employees no longer had to drive in to headquarters first before hitting their assignments out in the field. This benefits the employees because they're able to leave home later and get home sooner, but it also benefits the company so they're not paying out so much transportation time.

"We're paying a guy to drive 30 minutes in Orlando traffic," Lieffort says. "That could be spent on the job."

Of course, that comes with a good deal of trust in his employees since he isn't personally seeing them off to their jobsites. But the trust isn't unwarranted: So far, Lieffort hasn't had any issues with employees not showing up to their assigned spots.

Their entrepreneurial mindsets have coincided with a much smaller need to micromanage.

Besides, if there were issues with slacking or failing to do work, Lieffort believes he'd find out.

"You can get away with a lot for a while," he admits, "but eventually, with open and honest communication...it'll come out." **L&L**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHERRYLAKE

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By Gregg Wartgow

# ROAD READY

Three landscaping company owners share how recent adjustments to their truck/trailer configurations are helping save time, improve safety and reduce costs.

**Landscape companies have a lot of truck options.** We're not just talking about brand name, either. A truck's size, style, capabilities, fuel source, technologies and other features all influence return on investment. Choosing the best possible machine for the application at hand should be top priority.

"We try to spec our trucks as much as possible for the work being done," says Sean Bishop, owner and president of Ground Effects Landscaping in Carver, Mass. "Up here in New England, we also need some extra versatility because we're using many of our trucks to push snow in the winter."

One adjustment Bishop has had to make relates to truck size. The pool of potential drivers has become increasingly limited over the past few years; that's why Bishop has begun moving away from larger trucks that require a driver to have a CDL. "We have our trucks built as big and capable as possible without crossing the line of the CDL regulation," Bishop says. Though it may vary by state, that "line" is a GVWR (gross vehicle weight rating) in excess of 26,000 lbs., depending on how much weight the truck may be towing on a trailer. It's always important to check your given state's regulations regarding CDL licensing.



"Regardless of size, we have our trucks customized to what we need," Bishop continues. "For example, we like barn doors on the back of a dump body so we can dump brush and stumps and not get stuck in a swing tailgate. We also like high-sided grain bodies on our dump trucks. A lot of the mulch and other bulk materials we carry are lighter. We want to get as much yardage on the truck as possible. The high-sided grain bodies also help with brush, grass clippings and leaves because a crew doesn't have to dump as often."

Reducing the frequency of dump stops is something crews appreciate. Landscape company owners appreciate it, too, because it helps reduce unbillable downtime.

**TRAILER SETUPS THAT SAVE TIME.** At Ace Outdoors in Kodak, Tenn., co-owner Ashley Foster has determined that "saving time" is the underlying consideration when selecting a truck or trailer. To that point, a change with the hardscaping crew is really paying off.

"We're now using a 3/4-ton diesel pickup to pull an enclosed cargo trailer," Foster says. That trailer is stocked with all of the essential tools and supplies the hardscaping crew needs on a daily basis.

"It has been great to keep all of these things in the same place and not have to unload and reload them every day," Foster points out. "We keep everything on there, things like screeders, levels, hand tools, caution tape, back braces, saws and a generator. Our hardscape crew also has a compactor and tabletop saw, but those get locked up in the shop every night. Everything else goes in our enclosed trailer and stays there. This has saved us a lot of time — especially at night when the crew is already tired and the last thing they want to do is unload the trailer."

Like Ace Outdoors, Jonny Nichols Landscape Maintenance in Dover, Del., has set up an enclosed trailer for its hardscaping crew. Jonny Nichols has also done the same

thing for its irrigation crew, three installation crews and five maintenance crews.

"Our installation trailers are set up identically, as are our maintenance trailers," says Nichols, the CEO and president. "If a crew ever has to change trailers, there is nothing new to learn. All of the equipment, tools and supplies are the same and stored the same way. This has been huge for us when it comes to training and being consistent in what we do."

Enclosed trailers across the fleet have also helped Jonny Nichols Landscape Maintenance reduce unbillable time. "It is amazing how much time we're saving every morning by allowing our trailers to remain loaded overnight," Nichols says. "Our crews just have to do a quick pre-check in the morning and they're off to the jobsite in seven to 10 minutes, on average."

**MANEUVERABILITY MEANS A LOT.** Largely due to the labor shortage, Ace Outdoors isn't taking on any new maintenance accounts. For the handful of large contracts the company continues to retain, a cab-forward truck (aka cab-over) with open landscape bed offers some advantages.

"We're in a mountainous area with a lot of narrow, windy roads," Foster says. "The cab-forward design is safer for employees because visibility is better. The truck is also more maneuverable and can turn around in a much tighter radius. Also, with the open landscape bed, we don't have to worry about the driver pulling a trailer. We can fit both a 61-inch zero-turn and 61-inch stand-on mower on our truck."

Bishop has also taken a liking to the cab-over truck. He still has some big pickups for plowing snow, but the cab-overs have been effective on his maintenance routes.

"The shorter wheelbase makes it easier for a crew to get in and out of a neighborhood," Bishop says. "Cab-overs are also easier to drive. They might not be as fancy with many of the bells and whistles you'll find on pickups these days, but cab-overs

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— Jonny Nichols,  
Landscape Maintenance  
in Dover, Del.





With diligent preventive maintenance and operator care, Ace Outdoors co-owner Ashley Foster is hopeful that an eight-year replacement cycle will prove to be viable.

also have fewer issues. They are also easier to maintain because the cab tilts forward. Cab-overs are also very good on fuel."

**CONSIDER THE FUEL SOURCE.** Speaking of fuel, Bishop has begun veering away from diesel — at least on his smaller trucks like the cab-overs used for maintenance.

"With all of the emissions controls on today's diesel trucks, we're finding that maintenance costs on a gas-powered truck are much lower," Bishop says. On the typical maintenance route, a truck drives shorter distances at a time with a lot of stop-and-go events. Speed remains relatively low since the truck is spending a lot of time in residential environments.

"A diesel engine doesn't get running hot enough and things get gummed up," Bishop says. "So, we started buying gas-powered pickups a couple of years ago. The cab-overs we've been buying are also gas. We haven't seen any real difference in performance. We burn a little more fuel by running gas, but that is more than offset by other savings. First off, you save around \$10,000 on the purchase price of a new truck. When you start factoring in the other savings from reduced engine maintenance, it isn't even a comparison."

Nichols has also decided to only purchase gas-powered trucks — except for anything 1-ton or larger, which still requires a diesel engine. "The maintenance aspect of a gasoline truck is so much easier and less expensive," Nichols says.

**INVESTING IN UPTIME.** Nichols says his company tends to stick with a certain brand of truck, not to mention a certain brand of enclosed trailer. Yes, the products are well-designed, but the main reason for the brand loyalty is the fact that reliable dealers are just a few miles away. "When you get tight with a certain dealer, you get excellent service as a result," Nichols says.

That excellent service comes in handy when a more intensive truck repair is needed such as a brake job. As for his trailer fleet, Nichols says the main thing is to keep an eye on the tires and make sure they are regularly rotated. His in-house mechanics handle those types of procedures, along with basic preventive maintenance on all trucks and equipment.

At Ground Effects Landscaping, basic preventive maintenance is also handled by an in-house mechanic. We're talking about oil and filter changes, minor electrical issues like wiring harnesses and trailer plugs, daily greasing, etc. Any intensive repairs involving the engine or transmission are sent to the local dealer.

As important as preventive maintenance is, optimizing truck ROI requires an understanding of when it's time to replace something. At Ground Effects Landscaping, trucks are fully depreciated before being replaced.

"Our goal is to keep a truck for 10 years," Bishop relates. "In theory, we're paying for that truck for five to seven years. Then we have a couple of years when the truck is making good money for us. Then



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Irrigation

A black pop-up sprinkler head is shown in a lush green field, with water spraying out in a wide arc.

Turf & Ornamental

A wide shot of a golf course green with a purple flowering shrub in the foreground and rolling hills in the background.

Lighting

A modern, cylindrical landscape light fixture is shown in a garden setting next to a stone path and greenery.

Hardscape

A circular stone patio with a central fire pit made of stacked stones, surrounded by a low stone wall and landscaping.





An open trailer allows landscapers to carry different equipment.

we have a year or two when signs of aging are starting to show. That's when we start watching expenses very closely. It doesn't take long before annual repair bills are more than payments on a new truck."

Ace Outdoors faced that dilemma early in its history six years ago. Like most landscape companies just starting out, Ace Outdoors relied heavily on used

vehicles. Nowadays, just one truck in the five-truck fleet is more than three years old. "We have come to find a lot of value in warranty and dealer support," Foster says.

With diligent preventive maintenance and operator care, Foster is hopeful that an eight-year replacement cycle will prove to be viable. Whatever the case may be, she says downtime and repair bills will not get the best of them any longer.

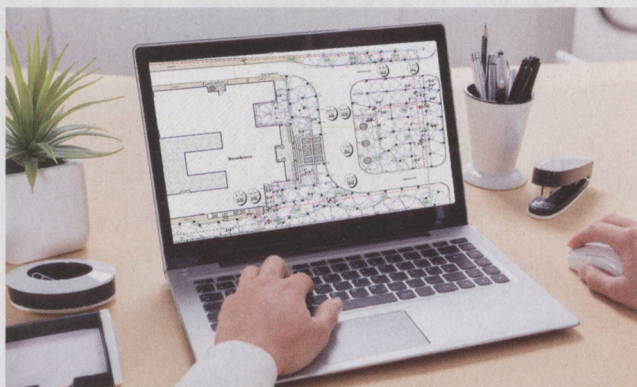
#### NEW TRUCKS, NEW TECHNOLOGIES.

New technologies can add some cost to modern-day work trucks. Some features, however, can prove to be well worth the extra upfront investment.

Foster says the dump truck driver at Ace Outdoors has come to rely on the backup camera. "It's a big safety benefit and puts our driver at a lot of ease," Foster says.

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For Jonny Nichols Landscape Maintenance, backup cameras have greatly simplified the process of backing up to a trailer. "Another feature we like is the power-extending mirrors on some of our trucks," Nichols adds.

The driver can extend or retract the side mirrors as needed. Having the mirrors extended helps when pulling a large, enclosed trailer. But if the truck is operating solo, such as when driving around a property doing cleanup, retracting the side mirrors provides a safety advantage.

"If you're on a narrow street or driveway, it's nice when you don't have to worry about those side mirrors scraping against a tree branch or taking out a trash can or something," Nichols says.

In some instances, retractable mirrors don't provide a lot of value. You can say the same thing about most optional features on a work truck. In fact, you can say the same thing



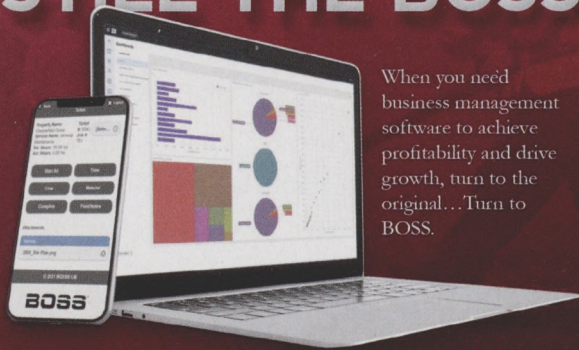
Backup cameras help with backing up to a trailer.

about most work trucks, period. As Foster points out, no truck or trailer is 100% perfect for everything.

"That's why we tend to have a slew of different things," Foster says. "It's all about matching the right equipment to the right application and setting up that equipment so employees can be as safe and productive as possible." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Wisconsin.

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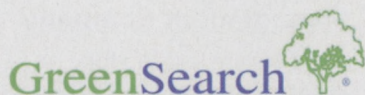
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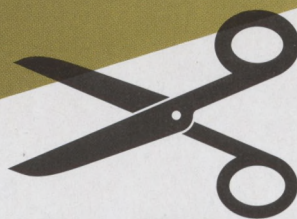
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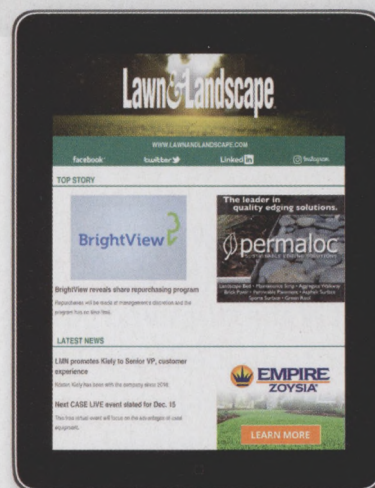


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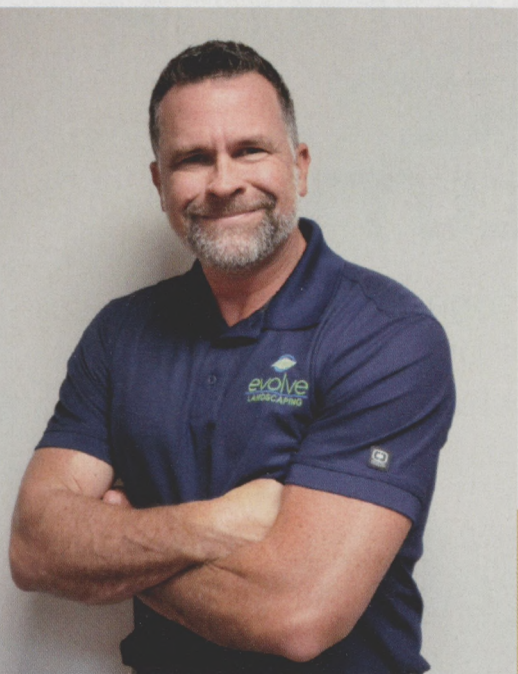


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# AN AVERAGE DAY

**Eric Blevins**, owner, Evolve Landscaping



When Eric Blevins gets to the office, the first thing he does is “hop out of the truck and go greet all the team members,” says the owner of Evolve Landscaping. “I shake hands or fist bump with everyone and call them by name. If I’m high-fiving guys and laughing with them, it puts everyone in a good mood,” he says.

Blevins says this is a great opportunity to manufacture energy for the day, and it also allows him to gauge the morale of the crews.

Interviewed by **Brian Horn**

“If someone seems to be ‘off their game,’ I can pull them aside and talk about what may be going on, or at least follow up with their manager to discuss,” he says.

#### Here’s Blevins’ average day:

I get up each morning around 5:45 a.m. to be at the shop before 7 a.m. This doesn’t give me time to do many things other than get ready, with the exception of making coffee. I roast and grind my own coffee beans, so this is a pre-work routine that I enjoy each morning. It gives me time to start thinking about my day while I wait.

My drive into the office is only about 15 or 20 minutes, so typically I just use this time to snack on a protein bar, think about my schedule and plan for the day. If there’s nothing in particular coming up, sometimes I put on sports talk or Pandora and jam out.

Additionally, by walking around in the mornings, I have the opportunity to observe how crews and equipment are looking. Are uniforms being worn and in good shape? How are the trucks loaded? Does everyone have everything they need to be successful? I can also observe if trucks roll out on time. If not, this gives me a chance to follow up with our management team on our morning process.

Once crews are out, I grab my gear from the truck and head into the office. This is my opportunity to touch base with my mid-level managers. We talk about anything that I saw during morning roll-out, how things went the previous day, what we have lined up for the following day(s), etc. This also gives me a chance to see if they need me to help out with anything they have coming up or take something off of their plate if I can.

On Monday mornings we run payroll, so I go in and approve the crew’s hours for the prior week. I always go in to make sure that time is coded correctly to the appropriate

jobs and work tickets and review hours to budget. This gives me the ability to have follow up conversations with our managers about making sure that guys are entering time and materials correctly, and that we are looking for opportunities to streamline routing and cut down on non-productive time.

Wednesday is our meeting day. I schedule our staff meeting and any individual, sales or production meetings all on Wednesday. This way, we can all be out with our crews and customers the other days of the week, and I can spend time being out of the office and overseeing quality and customer service.

If I’m not in the office, I try to stop by the gym 2-3 days per week and get in a workout. I always feel better when I’m in the gym on a regular basis.

Since I get to the shop early in the morning, I’m often heading home by 3:30 or 4 p.m. Most afternoons I still get on the computer for another hour or so, catching up on emails, designs, proposals, etc. Typically, I’m following up with my operations manager about his day to help me start planning for tomorrow.

My wife and I love to travel, and we often head out on Fridays for the weekend. However, both of us usually still get in computer work on Saturday and Sunday. This is a great time for me to catch up on social media posts, put together financial reviews for my team and catch up on administrative tasks. We also have a motorcycle and spend a lot of time on it during the summer. We have found that we really enjoy using this time together to strategize, brainstorm ideas for both of our businesses or put our heads together to problem-solve things that may come up from time to time. **L&L**



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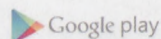
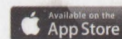


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