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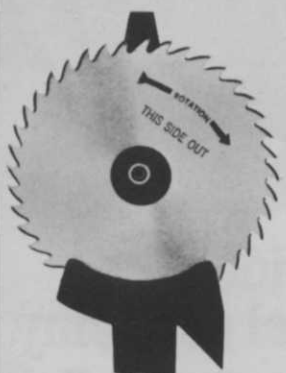
OUTLOOK

By Bruce F. Shank, Executive Editor

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Residential construction is a moving target

Many facets of the Green Industry depend upon the residential construction market. Tight money is causing an acceleration of changes in this business sector. The landscape industry must accelerate its changes to keep up.

Residential construction starts are down severely while apartment conversions are way up. Condo or coop living is gaining acceptance. The young, home-owning family is disappearing in the suburbs as is construction of small, single family homes. The big homes are being built at a conservative pace.

First time home buyers are getting older and are in higher income brackets. Nevertheless, due to high mortgage payments, they have no more disposable income than younger couples of five years ago.

Many families are asking if a single family residence is worth the money and effort to maintain. They have a better selection of condominiums to choose from, where they can avoid yard care worries.

Of course, the harder you work for something, the better you take care of it. Those that struggle and succeed in breaking the new home barrier are more careful and more interested in their property. They won't jeopardize the value of their home with a cheap landscape.

For this reason, the willingness of a homeowner to call a professional landscaper is greater. They want the job done properly. If they don't enjoy the landscape, it is at least insurance for property values.

Contractors should realize their residential customer is older, wiser, and probably more concerned about the landscape. They want to know more than the garden center can provide. They know good things are more expensive.

The landscape nurserymen, the original landscape contractor, no longer has the time to assist a customer design his landscape and select the proper plant material. The large garden center has let service slip to keep up with the volume demand of mass merchandising. Too often, there is only one knowledgeable person to answer the questions of tens of customers. That is insufficient to answer the questions of new homeowners who want to make sure they are not buying a mistake.

Garden centers must make a better effort to educate by wall displays, brochures, and knowledgeable sales people. If they do not, the homeowner will pay the landscape contractor to do the job correctly.

The landscape contractor must also allow time to answer customer questions. Work with homeowners who must phase landscaping. Stress that plant varieties commonly found in mass merchandising establishments have weaknesses not found in improved varieties. Excite them with your designs and earn their dependence with quality installation.

Part of the success of the lawn care market is the professionalism of its marketing material. Simple doorhangers don't work anymore. It takes colorful, educational, and impressive literature to get the attention of today's homeowner. They require more of your time to explain things. Price ironically is less a factor than quality. They need to see that the landscaper knows horticulture and design.

The residential property owner is changing. It's time to change our methods of reaching him or her.

This winter is a critical time to evaluate your promotional literature for residential sales. Get professional advise yourself from a small, local advertising agency. If you are near a college with an advertising program, approach instructors. Printers can help for small jobs and may have a graphic artist.

Experts are now setting mid-82 for recovery of housing and real estate. If this works out, demand will be extremely high next summer and fall. Some predict a boom in housing of unprecedented proportions. Don't sell construction equipment yet. You are going to need it before the end of 82. **WTT**