

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

**LANDSCAPE CONTRACTORS
STICK TO CONSTRUCTION**



WEEDS TREES & TURF

CONTRACTORS STICK TO CONSTRUCTION AND WAIT FOR RECOVERY

The majority of landscape contractors in a recent *Weeds Trees & Turf* survey is unyielding to pressure toward maintenance over construction, despite an uncertain future for construction and a good record in maintenance over the last ten years.

Nearly 80 percent of the contractors in the survey list construction as a primary or secondary business with 60 percent in the primary category. Only ten percent list maintenance as a primary business, however it is the dominant secondary business of the contractors with 25 percent in the secondary category.

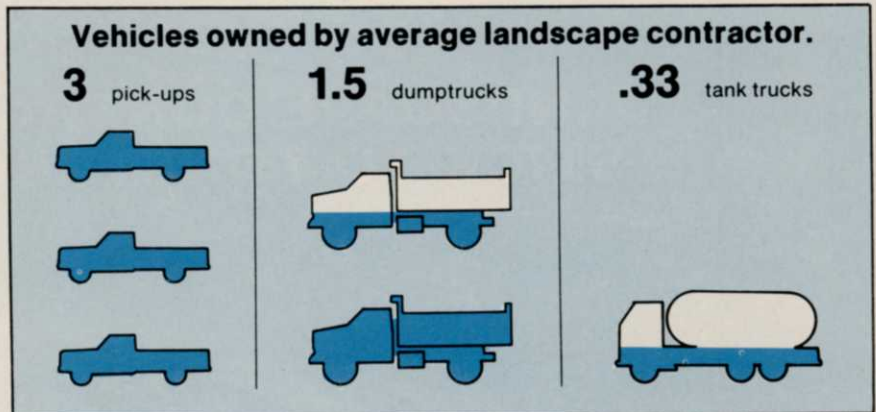
Landscape design is primary with six percent of the contractors and secondary with 12 percent. A third of the contractors operate a retail or wholesale nursery in addition to contracting.

Slightly less than a fourth of the contractors divide their companies into divisions. Divisions listed by the contractors include design, irrigation, maintenance, construction, retail, sod, and wholesale.

Single-family residential is the target market with the most potential, according to the contractors surveyed. It is also the highest priority market at present.

Comparing present target market priorities to markets with the most potential indicates a shift toward serving multi-family residential, a steady concentration on single-family residential, equal emphasis on single-business commercial, and falling interest in multi-business commercial. A slight increase in interest in government agency work is also indicated.

Owners of landscape contracting companies made up 45 percent of the respondents, managers 25 percent, presidents 15 percent, others 15 percent. These



contractors reported an average crew size of 2.75 foremen, 8.75 crew workers, and 3.5 part-time workers. Their companies averaged 19 years in existence. Four companies had been in business more than 50 years and most others more than 10 years.

Hard working, trainable people are the most sought after employees by contractors. People with previous landscape experience are the second most desirable. People with horticultural education are sought after by only 16 percent of the contractors. People with a good business sense without landscape experience are sought after by 10 percent of the contractors.

More contractors buy equipment on an as needed basis than by any particular buying month. Chemical purchasing is heaviest in February and March although planning for

both chemicals and equipment is heaviest from October through February.

The dominance of construction in the market is evident by the high ownership of construction equipment, such as tractors, spreaders, seeders, and trenchers. The contractors on an average own 2.25 tractors, 4 seeder/spreaders, and 1 trencher. Most companies owning trenchers have more than 1, actually an average of 2.2. Roughly half, a figure approximating those listing construction as their primary business, own trenchers.

All contractors listed ownership of tractors, seeder/spreaders, chain saws, and small mowers. Two-thirds of the contractors own large mowing equipment, an average of 2 each. Spray units are owned by more than half the con-

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TABLE 1
Current market priorities and growth potential. (6 lowest, 1 highest)

Market	Current Priority	Growth Potential
single-family residential	1.85	2.12
multi-family residential	3.33	2.65
single-business commercial	2.64	2.67
multi-business commercial	2.5	3.17
government agencies	4.08	3.86

tractors. Turf aerifiers are owned by just less than half, the same for line trimmers.

The contractors own an average of 3 pick-up trucks and 1.5 dump trucks. Tank trucks are owned by less than a third of the contractors.

The state association is the dominant organization in the landscaping industry. Half of the respondents belong to state associations. More contractors belong to no association at all than belong to national organizations, a third of the respondents. Those national organizations listed in order of the number of mentions are Associated Landscape Contractors of America, the American Association of Nurserymen, the National Landscape Association, the Professional Grounds Management Society, the American Society of Landscape Architects, and the Society of American Florists.

Quality is the prime reason contractors feel they have done well in business. Service to the customer was listed as the next reason for

success. Price was down the list, below firm bids, broad plant selection, and reliability. Offering a guarantee was listed by only one contractor as the key to success.

When asked about the keys to future success, the contractors listed the economy and careful management most often. Contractors are not looking to any particular segment of the market for fu-

Contractors may shift toward multi-family residential as a future market.

ture growth or making any great changes in their direction. Markets mentioned specifically by contractors as promising for increased involvement are renovation, new construction, commercial maintenance and government work. However, there is no indication that a large number of contractors are going to abandon construction for maintenance.

Overall, the survey indicated most contractors are sticking to their present type of business while laying low until the economy improves. They are aware of promise in certain types of markets, specifically multi-family residential and government work. But, they believe construction will pick up with the economy and make major changes in direction unnecessary.

This does not support the concept of contractors rushing into maintenance. Consultants have been strongly advising a shift toward maintenance to shore up cash flow. Perhaps their advice is limited to mid to large-sized firms with greater overhead. Cutbacks by smaller firms to survive the recession were evident in the survey. The keys to survival are clearly based upon the size of the company. An improving economy may show some change in contracting firms as they once again staff up. *Weeds Trees & Turf* will make a follow-up report on the landscape contractor in January 1984. **WTT**

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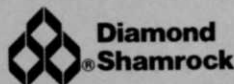
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DALLAS CONTRACTOR FOCUSES ON MANAGEMENT AND SERVICE

By MAUREEN HREHOCIK, associate editor



LDC is doing everything but electrical and plumbing at Universal Resources

For most people and industries, the roller coaster economy continues to wreak havoc. But for Carl McCord, president of Landscape Design and Construction, Inc., of Dallas, the current economic tide is providing the impetus for a carefully-designed game plan for his company, assuring its longevity—and more importantly, profitability—in the years ahead.

"The industry is bad now," concedes McCord. "It's as bad as I've ever seen it in my 22 years in the business. But I'm convinced there'll be a recovery, a slow one, possibly taking two to four years, but a recovery none-the-less."

The Dallas businessman believes in creating a "landscape system"—a business structure that functions as competently in the managerial side as it does in the services it delivers. This, he says, is the key to survival.

"Now is the time to get rid of any dead wood, tighten up spending, set priorities and really get down to the basics. It's important to have people in your company that are willing to put out 110 percent."

Only after this type of individual company belt-tightening is done, can steps be taken to improve the overall profit-margin of the industry which McCord feels is sorely lacking.

"We need to correct or equalize profits in our industry," says McCord. "People are getting quality service, yet they find it hard to acknowledge us (landscape contractors) the way they do the medical or real estate professions."

McCord founded Landscape Design and Construction in 1969 with three other partners on a shoestring budget. Michael Boydston, one of the founders, currently serves as vice president of the

company. In its early days, the fledgling company worked basically on residential jobs. Everyone worked seven days a week and did a little of everything. Currently, the Dallas operation alone, headquartered in three small renovated houses in North Dallas, is a \$2 to \$2.5 million a year venture with upwards of 35 employees. Sixty percent of the company's work is done in Dallas, the rest is state-wide. Since the mother company was founded in 1969, five other companies and branches have formed:

- in 1971, Maintain, Inc., was founded as a commercial landscape maintenance firm and has now positioned itself as one of the leading maintenance firms in Dallas.

- in 1977, a Houston branch of Landscape Design and Construc-

Continued on page 36

tion was founded.

- in 1978, a Houston branch of Maintain, Inc. was formed.

- also in 1978, Landscape Construction Corp., a strictly landscape contracting company, was acquired in Oklahoma City.

- in 1981, Sunbelt Tree, a containerized tree-growing operation in Richmond, TX was founded.

Now, with McCord's combined ventures, he heads companies responsible for \$4 to \$5 million worth of business a year and employs more than 135 people.

With the scope of his business, the rapid changes confronting all aspects of the industry and McCord's own wide, but self-taught business acumen, he relies heavily on consultants. Joe Marsh of JM Landscape Maintenance Consultants, Inc. of Coopertino, CA advises him on construction matters, Ken Morfield and Sandy Seay are his consultants on wage and hiring matters and he even employs an industrial psychiatrist, Dr. Jack Bentham.

McCord is also a firm believer—and practioner—of the low compensation/high bonus theory. He has devised a bonus system



Carl McCord founded LDC in 1969

that rewards managers whose output levels are particularly good. It's been a tremendous success, according to McCord.

"We need more jobs based on performance, less on raises just for seniority alone," he says. "We've got to be sharper."

Up-to-date procedural and operational manuals are an integral part of LDC's operation.

"I want to position this company

now so that in the next couple of years, we will be a dominating force in the Texas market," he says. "I want to provide good service and make a profit."

And how did a man who started off his college career as a banking and finance major make it into the green industry?

"During the summer while going to college, I worked at a nursery,"

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Operations manager Corley promotes flexibility, resources

An overcast Tuesday afternoon finds Marti Corley, operations manager for Landscape Design and Construction, on-site at Universal Resources, one of the many new office facilities under construction on the north side of Dallas. Rain the day before has forced workers inside to work on an interior atrium. The only thing subcontracted out on this \$115,000 job will be the plumbing and some electrical work. Everything else, including irrigation, concrete work, decks and designing, has been done by LDC.

"With each job we accomodate the needs of the client," explains Corley. "With this one, we're doing practically everything."

Corley oversees six crews of 25 workmen and five foremen. In the course of a day, he may go on site to any number of given projects,

checking work progress, ironing out problems and troubleshooting. Each day presents a new set of problems, not the least of which is the weather.

Most of LDC's primary customers are commercial, multi-business concerns. The company also does much municipal and institutional work, and when the job is large enough, residential contracts, such as the Johnson Residence, also in North Dallas. That project alone called for the removal and later, replanting, of 65 trees to permit grading of the 9-acre estate. The trees were balled and moved to LDC headquarters until it was time for replanting. On this particular job, Corley's decision to switch to a Hustler riding mower because of an increased cutting distance, will pay off. He said he also prefers John Deere tractors because

"they're simple and easy to use." LDC also owns a Deere backhoe.

In the late fall and early spring, Corley begins thinking about equipment buying and his needs for the following year. He buys chemicals year-round.

"I usually read trade magazines and go to trade shows to pick up what's new in equipment," Corley said. Information from the manufacturer also influences his decisions.

Besides some other smaller pieces of equipment and the usual assortment of pick up and dump trucks, the company also owns Bobcat push mowers, four Beene turf sprayers and two Beene tree sprayers. Corley prefers Cyclone fertilizer spreaders, Gannon turf aerifiers, Ditch Witch trenchers and has several Stihl and Echo chain saws.

WTT

recalls McCord. "That's all it took."

He changed majors and was graduated from Texas A&M University's School of Agriculture in 1961 with a BS degree in horticulture and landscape architecture.

McCord prides himself on being not only a registered landscape architect, but also a horticulturist.

"I'm so turned on by this business, I eat, sleep and read it. There's never any reason to burn out. There's just no limitation on where you can go or what you can do whether it's in maintenance, design or construction.

Wherever you go in Dallas, you're likely to pass at one point or another, some of LDC's work. Whether it's the award-winning landscape work at Gabbert's Furniture Studio, the more than \$500,000 Interstate 45 in downtown Dallas, Lord & Taylor's, Thanksgiving Tower or the Republic Bank Towers. Some projects are planting alone, such as the Johnson Estate project, others are complete

design, construction and maintenance jobs.

"True landscaping is getting a landscape contractor to handle everything on site at a project," McCord says. "That's what we try to do. We're a very versatile company. It's worth it to pay for the expertise of a landscape contractor."

McCord says that expertise is easier to find now. Colleges are turning out better candidates, although, he says, the project manager level of individual is still hard to find.

"Experience and education is, of course, the ideal. You can always find laborers and management is pretty available as well. But it's that middle level of project manager that's still pretty difficult to find truly qualified people for."

McCord prides his business on always doing quality work and its involvement with the Associated Landscape Contractors of America.

"I've met the finest people you'd

ever want to know at ALCA," he says. "Also, it's a tremendous opportunity to exchange business practices. Everyone helps everyone else."

McCord has served on the ALCA Design/Build board, been on the Instructional Board of Directors, served on in the Educational Progress Division and is currently the Southwest Regional Director.

While McCord continues to be the originator of most of the company's policy, major managerial decisions, finances and long-range planning, he is eager to find and train the right kind of people to eventually run the company competently and profitably.

"I've devoted a lot of time and energy to this industry and company," he says now. "I'd like to have a little more free time in the future. My family has really sacrificed along with me in this business. I'd like to be able to spend more time with them." **WTT**

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HAWAII'S MULKERN PRESERVES DESIGN OF ORIGINAL CONTRACTOR

BY THOMAS PACIELLO



Kevin Mulkern checking his crew's work.

Landscape maintenance in Hawaii is big business for one reason: GROWTH. Plant life of all types is continually popping up and more and more frequently the average homeowner is just overwhelmed and seeks a professional. Someone like Kevin Mulkern.

Mulkern has been maintaining landscapes in Oahu (the island that sports Pearl Harbor, Diamond Head and the capitol city of Honolulu) since 1975 and his maintenance business, much like the island's flora, is continually growing. One of the reasons for his success is his philosophy of working with the theme of the original landscape contractor. This, along with his professionalism and ability to work with his clients, has made Kevin Mulkern one of the island's most successful residential landscape maintenance contractors.

"I like to try to keep the theme that the architect set up," said Mulkern, "rather than ripping ev-

erything out and replanting." When Mulkern visits a client he visualizes what the original landscaper had in mind. At one residence he noted that the landscaper had planted Mondo grass and Rhapsis palms, both shade-loving plants. The third element in the area, Autograph trees, were planted close together. Mulkern concluded that the landscaper wanted to develop a canopy to create grotto under the trees. That made a critical difference in how he went about his maintenance. Instead of pruning the trees back, he is encouraging them to grow up and knit together. Some maintenance contractors have a different view of the landscape from both the original contractor and their client. Mulkern believes the view of the original contractor and the client should take precedence and he works within those confines as long as it is reasonable.

Working with his clients is an

important part of Mulkern's business. At one residence the client insisted on planting azaleas. The problem is that much of Oahu's soil is very sandy and lacking micronutrients. Inevitably the azaleas would have died but to please the client, Mulkern planted the azaleas in sunken pots and set up a drip irrigation system. "I like talking to the clients, making suggestions, and getting the go-ahead to act," said Mulkern. His preference for that direct relationship with his clients is one reason he hasn't actively expanded into the condominium market. At condominiums, townhouses and cooperative apartments, one group gives you specifications and another group contradicts that, saying its too costly, according to Mulkern. "Most of my residential clients realize nothing can be done overnight," said Mulkern. "They are patient and are aware that sometimes things don't work out as planned."

After consulting with a client, Mulkern works up a contract that details his responsibilities. His basic program calls for mowing (weekly), edging (biweekly), trimming (every 10 weeks), fertilizing (monthly) and weed control and sprinkler repair (as required). Additionally, Mulkern handles outdoor lighting and insect problems.

One of the benefits of Mulkern having a small but expanding company (9-man crew), is its flexibility. He will often add small non-related duties to the program as a service to his client. At some residences he repairs wooden doors and fences, hand waters potted plants and washes decks and patios.

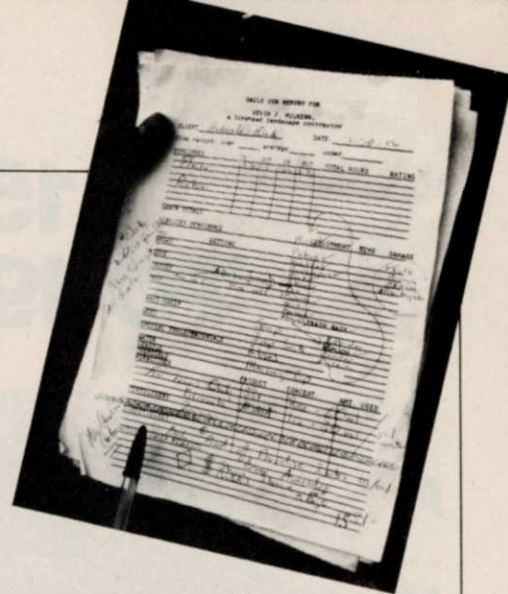
To instruct his crew on which tasks to perform at each client Mulkern has worked up a "Daily Job Report." On the form Mulkern notes which duties to perform, equipment setting, and concentration and chemicals to be sprayed. Crew members then fill in how much time was spent at each job,

the condition of the equipment, how much chemical was used and client comments. The Daily Job Report helps the crew by taking out the guesswork at each job site and it helps Mulkern to be more cost-effective at each client.

Mulkern hasn't been a boss so long that he has forgotten the employee's point of view. He believes coordinating employees is basic to a successful maintenance operation. The Daily Job Report provides one aspect of coordination. Mulkern knows the feeling of workers who believe there is no prospect of promotion in the future. He has begun organizing his crew so that selected workers supervise others. He currently has one man in charge of weed control and in that area the rest of the crew reports to him.

"I want my crew to know that as the company grows they can work their way into a supervisory position," said Mulkern.

He is also concerned about their training and safety. Weed identifi-



Daily job report makes instructions clear, keeps Mulkern informed.

cation is taught to crew members, not a small task considering the number of similar-looking plants in the Hawaiian landscape. Workers are also supplied with jumpsuits, rubber gloves and other safety equipment. Mulkern noted that many area landscapers take a cavalier attitude toward safety, something he finds shocking consider-

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ing the chemicals and equipment that is being used.

Mulkern is a strong proponent of informal pruning and instructs his crew on cleaning out deadwood and making neat cuts close to the trunk so the tree will heal over. "My attitude is 'you have a tree, you plant it as a tree, let it grow into a tree—not a ball,'" said Mulkern.

With the rapid growth rate of plants in Hawaii, weed control is a constant problem. Nutgrass is one of the most persistent offenders. Besides having a nut on top, there is a nut at the root which makes chemical control difficult. "The quickest way to burn-out an employee is have him pick nutgrass all day," said Mulkern. "Our spray program is designed so we spray once then encourage the weeds to sprout, then spray them two or three more times."

Mulkern prefers to pinpoint weeds with a backpack spot sprayer. As the weeds die the lawn often has yellow spots but he explains to the client that following fertiliza-

tion the whole lawn will green-up uniformly. "Most of the times it is wasteful to spray the entire lawn so we spot spray," he said. Spurge and Asiatic pennywort are some of the other problem weeds Mulkern encounters.

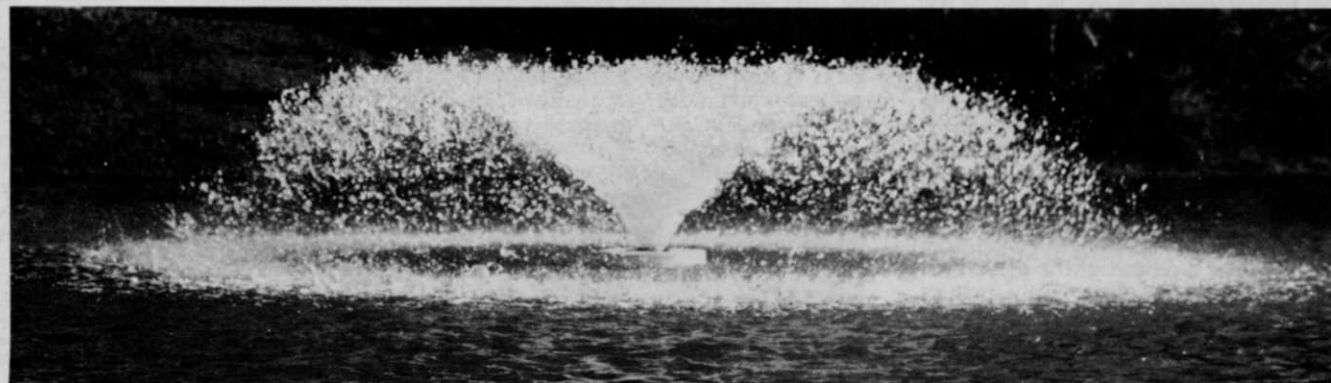
One way Mulkern tries to cut costs for his clients is by using their own plant materials. "Rather than buying additional plants we use

Mulkern is dismayed at lowballing

their plugs instead," he remarked. "That way they are guaranteed of the same variety of grass at no additional cost." This is even a greater factor now that sod costs an average of \$3/sq. ft. wholesale. Mulkern also plants trees from client's cuttings. At one client he planted a mock orange tree to serve as a backup, just in case any of the trees in the front of the house failed.

Mulkern prides himself on his company's professionalism and he is dismayed at the lowballing tactics of some of his competitors. "A lot of newcomers get involved in landscape maintenance by getting a truck, mower and some tools," said Mulkern. "They feel the only way to get customers is to beat you on price. I feel they should bill out their work at reasonable rates and if they feel they are not qualified to do good enough work at more reasonable rates then they should join a landscaping association and improve their talents."

Besides being professional, Mulkern is very promotion-minded. Employees wear "Kevin J. Mulkern" t-shirts and company vehicles also carry the company logo. Mulkern also has professional brochures made up to publicize his business. "It is very competitive on Oahu and every little bit helps," said Mulkern. His mixture of professionalism, talent and concern has him nosing ahead of the competition. **WTT**



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