

# 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.

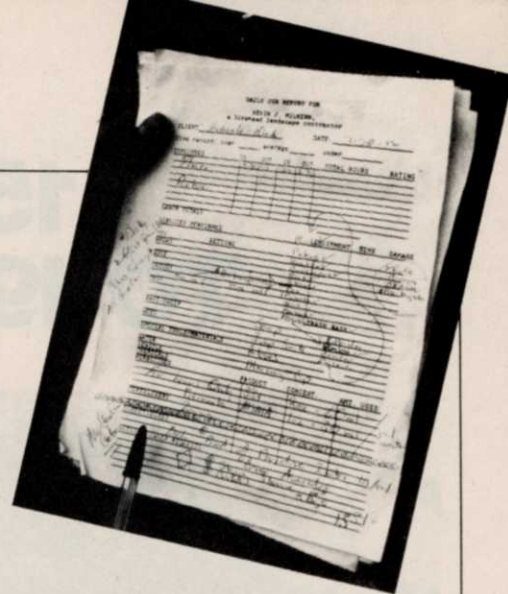
To instruct his crew on which tasks to perform at each client Mulkern has worked up a "Daily Job Report." On the form Mulkern notes which duties to perform, equipment setting, and concentration and chemicals to be sprayed. Crew members then fill in how much time was spent at each job,

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.

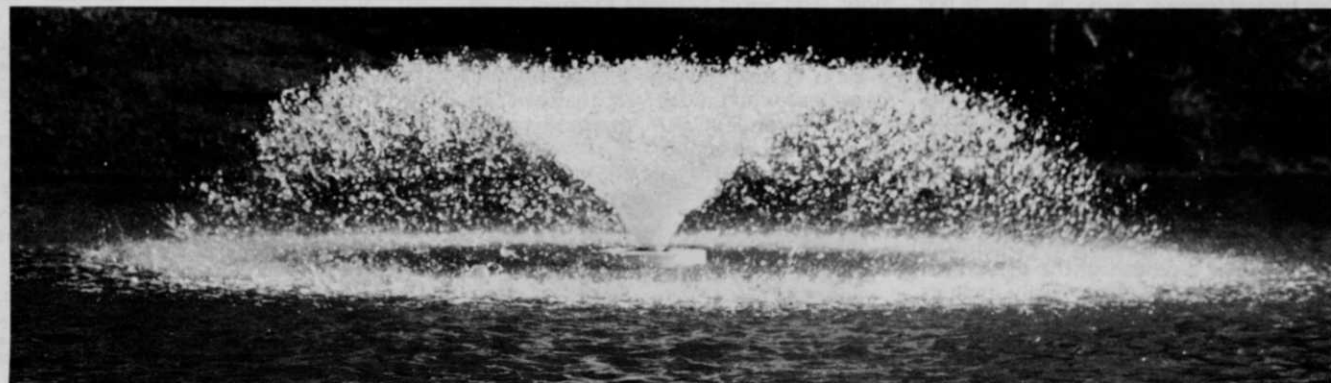
One way Mulkern tries to cut costs for his clients is by using their own plant materials. "Rather than buying additional plants we use

### 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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