



## Environmental Industries Inc. Grows as Fast as Its People Can

Large west coast company avoids publicity and concentrates on building a company around its employees

by Bruce F. Shank, executive editor

The management of Environmental Industries, Calabasas, CA, doesn't seek publicity. Success is something they don't like to flaunt. In fact, many people still think 'the big landscape company in California' is Valley Crest Landscape, it's old name.

"Although we have grown rapidly, we are not motivated by taking over the nursery, construction, or maintenance business," says Bruce Wilson, president of Environmental Care Inc., the maintenance subsidiary. "Our growth is based more on our peo-

ple and our customers than it is on sales objectives. We try to grow at a rate that provides opportunity for our people without the wheels falling off. Good employees want growth and opportunity. So, we grow at the rate our staff can take on more work." Environmental Industries has grown from \$28 million to \$60 million in sales in five years.

"As a rule, we enter new cities, like Houston and Denver, when one of our California clients asks us to handle facilities there," Wilson states. "We started the

Houston branch when Shell Development Co., a Los Angeles customer, asked us to take over maintenance at its West Hollow Research Center. We took the job and built the Houston branch around the Shell job."

"You can't go into a city and start a branch as if you are MacDonalds," Wilson pointed out. "It takes years to get your name to the right people and to be accepted as not being an 'out-of-towner'."

Behind this seemingly loose style is a finely-tuned machine driven by Burton Sperber, presi-

dent and chairman. "His philosophy," Wilson states, "is to let the branches worry about business and corporate to handle details such as banking, insurance and benefits."

From this service core, branch out four subsidiaries. Environmental Care Inc. is the maintenance branch. There are two landscape construction companies, Valley Crest Landscape Inc. and Western Landscape Construction. Valley Crest is the 35-year-old company Sperber built into Environmental Industries. The fourth subsidiary is Valley Crest Tree Co., a nursery operation. The subsidiaries have offices in California, Colorado, Texas, and Arizona with roughly 1,500 employees.

### Starting at the bottom

Wilson grew up in Rye, NY, was graduated from Cornell University in 1969, and worked for Starner Tree Service in Harrison, NY, for almost two years. In 1970, he and his wife decided there was no better time to try the "California life" and moved to Los Angeles.

Sperber had just purchased Green Valley Landscape maintenance company from Joe Marsh and formed Environmental Care with Marsh as president. Marsh hired Wilson, started him trimming hedges and mowing turf. Wilson, after working his way up to branch manager, became president of the subsidiary upon Marsh's retirement in 1979.

This 'start at the bottom' policy is still in effect. "It is a disadvantage in recruiting college gradu-

ates since they often believe college permits them to skip field work," Wilson muses. "But, they are much more effective later on if they have experienced the type of work they manage."

### Keys to growth

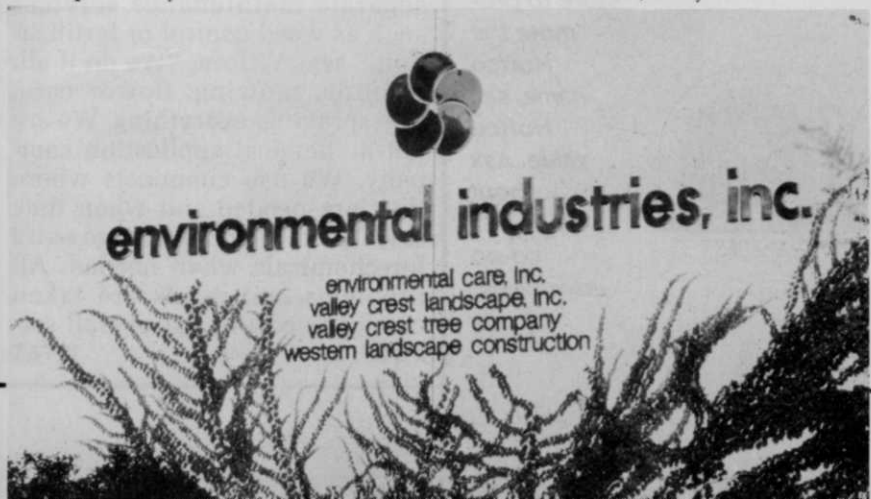
Green Valley specialized in municipal and industrial landscape maintenance. Environmental Care has continued that specialization with more emphasis on industrial and multi-family residential. "We are being moved out of municipal work by low bidders," Wilson said. "Public work is very volatile, going out to bid every two to three years. Industrial/commercial work is based more on quality and reliability than low price."

We are also experiencing an influx of landscape construction companies competing for maintenance work to cover overhead while construction is off. This is cyclical, fortunately, and we'll get our share back when construction picks up again."

"We are not adverse to bidding," Wilson adds. "We make our own subsidiaries bid for work we do. Our biggest problem with bidding in maintenance is most clients don't have specifications, so they are not comparing apples to apples."

Much of Environmental Industries' success today is based on establishing good relationships with developers and corporate level property managers. "A majority of construction and maintenance is in the hands of a

Headquarters for Environmental Industries in Calabasas, California.



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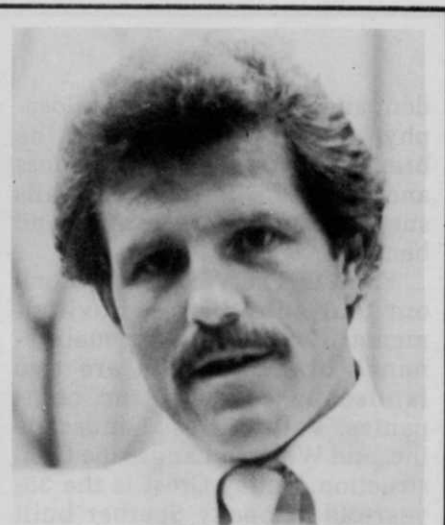
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**Bruce Wilson, president of  
Environmental Care.**

few individuals," Wilson points out. "Impress them with performance, fairness, and quality, and you become part of their team. Undoubtedly, there is danger in relying too greatly on a few accounts, so we try to balance each branch with a variety of accounts."

Attracting a variety of accounts requires flexibility. Large construction work is primarily union, so Valley Crest Landscape, run by Burton Sperber, is union. For smaller, more competitive construction work, Western Landscape Construction, run by Stan Colton, is non-union. To supply plant material to its own construction companies, as well as other landscapers, Environmental Industries has Valley Crest Tree Company, run by Burt's brother Stuart.

After the landscape is in and the unions leave the job site, Environmental Care's non-union crews can take over with maintenance. "We don't generally offer separate maintenance services such as weed control or fertilization," says Wilson. "We do it all, pruning, mowing, flower care, tree spraying, everything. We are not a chemical application company. We use chemicals where they are needed and when they save labor. We don't charge extra for chemicals when needed. All problems and needs are taken care of as part of our overall service."

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