

With only six years in the business, Jim Marria's Perma Green, based in Boise, ID, continues to sprout branches in a multi-state area. Even in a saturated market, Perma Green's brand of quality and service has kept it on top of the lawn care market.

## Gentleman Jim

by Maureen Hrehocik, managing editor

Six years ago, Jim Marria sat in the garage/office of his newly-formed company, Perma Green. He had one truck, one employee and a secretary—his wife, Karen.

Today, Marria sits in a new office complex overlooking the Boise, ID, airport (where he keeps the company plane), has 45 vehicles, 120 employees, five multi-state branches with plans to open a sixth next year, and has sampled the sweet taste of success. This year Perma Green will do about \$4 million in business; ninety-five percent of that will be residential, the other 10 percent commercial. His



**Jim Marria**, president and founder of Perma-Green flanked by a drawing of his twin-engine Cessna.

company is a leader in the industry and not even overtures of a buyout by the largest lawn care company in the country has deterred Perma Green's growth and determination.

Growth has been so great that Marria, 35, even got his pilot's license. His twin engine Cessna is a much more efficient way of getting to his company branches in Reno, Spokane and the Tri-City area than driving or commercial flights.

The branch visits have been cut down, though, usually to once a month.

"When you have good managers, you don't need to supervise as much," Marria says.

For all his success, Marria prefers a low profile and downplays his accomplishments. "I'm a good organizer and can accomplish a lot in a short while."

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### Where it all started

Marria's gut feeling that he knew what he was doing and knew the industry well prompted him to start his own business back in '78.

"I also knew we had good people," he says. Much of what Marria learned about lawn care he credits to his eight year tenure with the Davey Tree Service Co. of Kent, OH. There, along



**Marria's company is very safety conscious.** Worker pictured is wearing boots and mask to apply Oftanol.



Part of Perma-Green's fleet lined up by one of its larger commercial clients, Morrison-Knudsen in downtown Boise.

with Marty Erbaugh, (now owner of Erbaugh Corp., Lawnmark Division, Peninsula, OH), they started Davey Tree's lawn care division.

"We did a lot of research on lawns back then," he relates. "I also read a lot. It was difficult to convince people they needed lawn care. Word of mouth and seeing the product was, in

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the end, what convinced them." Marria continues his people-oriented philosophy. He says he looks for people who are willing to give 110 percent.

He, in turn, practices what he preaches. He makes visits to branches as often as necessary, usually about once a month. Before he had the man-

agerial manpower to delegate some of that responsibility, he made visits more often.

"I'm still there to support my managers when they need it."

Marria has two managers who report directly to him. Lowell Troyer is the branch manager and Mike Spicer is division sales manager. There is also a marketing manager and a corporate office manager. All marketing work, including marketing studies, is done internally.

Marria's efficient corporate team affords him time to indulge in one of his favorite pastimes—running. The 35-year-old puts in about five miles a day and in May ran his first marathon—in Paris. Summing up the grueling experience, Marria says, "I finished."

"I was supposed to run the Seattle Marathon, but a week before it, I hurt my leg during a run in San Francisco. I was going to Europe anyway and decided to try to run the Paris marathon. It was a goal."

Back home in Boise, Marria runs frequently in local races.

## Biggest threat

Like other concerned lawn care company owners and operators, Marria feels the single thing that could bring the industry to its knees is governmental pesticide regulation.

"There are so many things we (lawn care industry) could cope with, but not this," predicts Marria. "It really scares me. It's a larger threat than most people perceive.

"Our business is to provide green, weed-free lawns," he continues. "If chemicals such as 2,4-D are limited in non-agricultural applications, it could do us in."

Marria feels exposure as an industry is 98 percent of the solution.

"Lawn care operators must join associations and become involved in

**"Our service and quality will continue to grow; that's how we will continue to offset the competition."**

the Professional Lawn Care Association of America and with the Pesticide Public Policy Foundation."

## Nowhere but up

Marria's business continues to grow. Last year, business increased about 30 percent. But, Marria is quick to admit the market is small and it's becoming somewhat saturated.

"Our service and quality will continue to grow; that's how we will continue to offset the competition."

With his increasing managerial responsibilities, Marria does admit missing being out in the field and dealing with people.

Looking back on his experiences and on starting a business, Marria says two things have definitely changed about him.

"I've become a much better businessman. Now there is more and more of a need to do things right. My decisions have a major impact on the future of this company." He pauses and adds with a smile, "I've also gotten a lot more grey hair." **WT&T**