

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT



Richard Miller, owner of Ever-Green, is a self-confessed workaholic.

as well. He's also a man who believes in his business instincts, then acts on them although he downplays this.

"A lot of us in the lawn care industry have roots in agriculture," he says. "I guess we bring that hard work philosophy of agriculture into this business. Iowa agriculture just seems to breed a bunch of workaholics."

Chuck Kirkpatrick, who does consulting work for Miller, revealed the other side of his client, "He's willing to take risks for the payoffs. He creates an atmosphere that we like. It's a fast-paced, entrepreneurial atmosphere."

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Ever-Green's Gold

The largest lawn care company in Colorado attributes its success to knowing its territory and delivering a quality product.

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

You can tell the boss from the others because he's the only guy wearing bluejeans.

Richard "Dick" Miller, the boss of Ever-Green Lawns, stepped from his office wearing jeans with his sport-coat, a tipoff of sorts that in spite of being the owner and operator of the biggest lawn care business in Colorado, he's about as down to earth as a person can get.

How much more down to earth do you want?

Son of an Iowa farmer, Iowa State University ag graduate. "I would have preferred to have farmed but I was pretty sure I was going to be broke the rest of my life," he says almost wistfully; and, at the relatively young age of 36, he isn't ruling out some farming yet which would be good

news for his competition in the front range of the Rocky Mountains which, when the sun is setting nice and big and red, throw a heck of a shadow well out over the lawns of Miller's 40,000 lawn care customers.

Discard any notions about plans for Miller's imminent retirement, however. His lawn care company is prospering with five branch operations serving customers from Fort Collins to Colorado Springs. Ever-Green Lawns employs 300 and uses more than 70 pieces of equipment.

In spite of his background—or, more correctly because of it—Miller is certainly no hayseed, a hard worker for sure, but no rube. He's the kind of guy who believes in getting to work at 8 a.m. and putting in a full day, which is what he expects from his employees

Revolutionary new truck

In line with that assessment is Miller's latest project, the development and manufacture of a stainless steel tank truck specifically designed for the lawn care industry by Denver Leasing and Manufacturing, the manufacturing arm of Ever-Green Lawns. Like the lawn care business, it too is based in Golden on the fringes of Denver.

"I think this (truck) will be a big deal for us," Miller says. "We've entered the marketplace and we will have a booth in Tampa (Professional Lawn Care Association of America Show Nov. 12-15). I think we've got a better mousetrap and we've accomplished what we set out to do—to produce an extremely high quality item."

The truck, designed and engineered by Bob Smith and Steve Tangsrud, features a low center of gravity, automatic transmission, power steering and handles beautifully, Miller explains, while cutting maintenance and fuel costs in half over models presently in use. "This fits into our philosophy of minimum maintenance. We're not in the lawn business to maintain trucks. We're in business to satisfy customers," he adds. "It (the truck) is a little bit more expensive, but a lot less costly to maintain."



Ever-Green's client list is more than 40,000 strong.

Another related venture is Ever-Green's liquid organic soil builder, Revive, which is sold commercially as well as used extensively in Miller's lawn maintenance business. Last winter Ever-Green purchased Revive from Amesco of Denver. Miller's company had been using the soil builder Revive, composed of plant bi-products, decomposition extracts, and fulvohumates, extensively to improve water penetration into Colorado's hard clay soils for some time.

The truck and Revive ventures are in line with Ever-Green's do-it-yourself, take-control reputation, evident

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in the Golden sales and production office which, besides the usual array of offices, is equipped with a full-service garage and paint room, printing office, and conference room.

Pivotal year

This year marks Miller's tenth year in the lawn care business and unquestionably a pivotal one. He became aware of the industry as an agricultural sales consultant for Dow

Chemical, came to Denver in 1974 with two partners to start the business as part of Ever-Green of St. Louis and Kansas City, and in 1980 Ever-Green Lawns Corporation in Colorado separated itself completely from the other Ever-Green. The two are not related now.

Miller remembers his step into the lawn care business 10 years ago. "I had a career decision to make. I could have moved to New Jersey, gone back to the farm, or..." The rest is history.

Starting out on what had been a small truck farm in the nearby community of Welby ("you needed strong legs and a loud voice to communicate," one associate recalls) Miller's business grossed \$170,000 that first year. Ever-Green, with branches in Aurora, Golden, Colorado Springs, Littleton, and Windsor, is looking at a gross of about \$7 million in 1984.

Pattern for success

"A couple of things allowed us to grow," Miller explains. "The largest thing was just being locally owned and being able to respond to the needs of the Denver area. We were perceptive enough to figure out the differences in this area as opposed to others. With our continuous irrigation throughout the year we have to apply heavy amounts of fertilizer all year long. We got that under control with sulfur-coated urea."

Ever-Green started buying sulfur-

coated urea from Canada in 1976 ("it meant you could put down more fertilizer in the summer and reduce the risk of burning," he explains) and the lawns maintained by Ever-Green looked better. Miller is convinced it is better to "put down more, charge more and give the customer a lawn that beats the hell" out of the neighbor's lawn.

"Our success is due to our employees," Miller emphasizes. "I've got a

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bunch of neat people. A lot of them have been around here for ages and I guess I feel it's been the growth of the entire organization that has made it successful."

Perhaps the most visible member of Miller's management team the past five years has been staff horticulturist Herb Gundell who was extension agent 30 years for Denver County prior to joining Ever-Green. In addition to putting together three weekly radio spots, Gundell's weekly television show about lawns and gardens is the longest-running television program in Denver. "Anytime you get that kind of run you're very visible," Miller says. "He's a very important part of our organization."

Miller feels the big growth in the Denver lawn care market has peaked, "maxed out," as he puts it. "We'll swap customers and we'll either increase or decrease depending upon the degree of service we provide."

Future plans for Ever-Green?

"There's potential expansion into the tree and shrub business," Miller reflects. "Maybe lawn care in other areas, other states, Dallas maybe. Our expansion plans are kind of in limbo."

As for Miller, with his business now bigger than most of the others in the Denver area combined and the new lawn maintenance truck ready to make its mark on the industry, the farm will have to wait.

"I guess you could probably say I am involved in farming in a way," he reflects.

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