

Four decades of service allow the reins of management to pass smoothly at growing Lied's Nursery near Milwaukee.

Lied's Deep Wisconsin Roots

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

Delmar Lied knows a little bit about putting down roots in the rich but rock-peppered soil of Wisconsin. He knows that with business, as with growing plants, you sink them deep and you nourish them.

Even then, when the seed of the idea flourishes as it has with his Lied's Nursery Co., Inc., you can still be surprised.

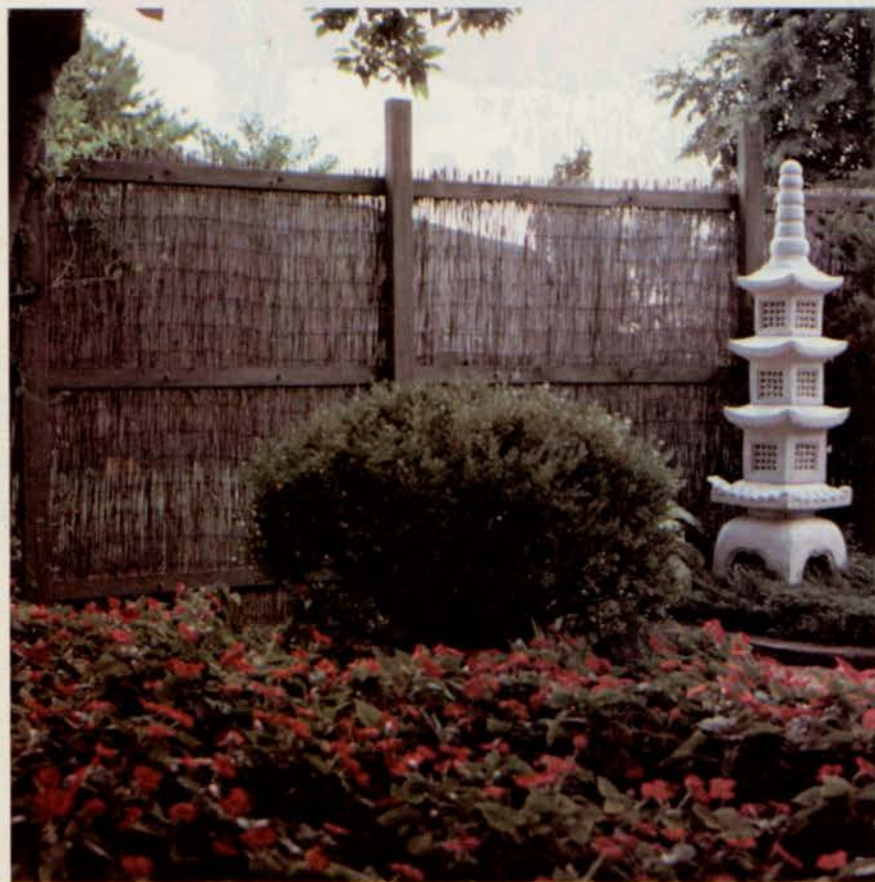
"I would have never thought it would have grown like this," Lied says of the growth of the company he started in 1946 when he and his

brother set about building a small wooden wagon for lawn work.

In the 39 years since, Lied, a vigorous big man with the ruddy, sun-creased face of a sailor and a calloused grip that means business in spite of his 70-plus years, has been pretty well rooted to the Wisconsin land.

It's a fascinating land.

When the glaciers retreated for the last time they left a jumble of a mess, scraping away earth here and piling it there so that you don't know what the heck you've got just under the skin of



Japanese garden adjoining Lied's office shows the company believes in what it sells to others.

topsoil; except Lied knows he's got a crumbled mountain of big, round rocks that pop up like mushrooms with each spring thaw. And he knows his trees and shrubs. He also knows people and business.

His one-time, tiny maintenance company can now put 20 work crews on various landscape projects during the growing season.

Sprouting branches

Lied's Nursery is a well known concern in Wisconsin. Based in Sussex, a short drive from Milwaukee, it continues to spread and branch, providing landscape construction and maintenance services in addition to a nursery and a brisk retail store business. Although Delmar Lied is still actively involved in the business, the company has long since passed the point where one man can manage it.

Many of the decisions are now handled by a management team headed by his son, Tom, grandson, Robb, and Rich Skelton, an experienced landscape contractor originally from Youngstown, OH.



One of the Lied's crews completes a major landscape project at a fashionable Wisconsin home.



Rich Skelton, left, confers with Bob Koca in the Lied's Sussex, Wisconsin office.

Tom, with a formal education in horticulture and landscape architecture at Michigan State University and experience gained as a lifelong part of the family business, is the driving force behind the operation now. His son, Robb, 26, gave up a promising career as a public accountant in Dallas to come home as the company's secretary-treasurer. Skelton is the administrative vice president.

"We're beefing up the top management," Tom Lied explains. "We'll be responsible for monitoring the progress of our various divisions and teaching in some areas. Dad wants to slow down and be more of a teacher. He still works a full schedule and has more enthusiasm than most men half his age."

Best not biggest

Although the business has been expanding, the company's management does not pursue growth for growth's sake.

"We had to decide what our market was and we came to the conclusion that we couldn't do

everything for everybody," Tom Lied says. "We decided we would spend all of our efforts to be known as the best and none of our efforts to be known as the biggest. The philosophy is great and the ideas are sound, but there are always the tune-ups and moves to keep everything in place. We know we don't have all the answers, but we have capitalized on a number of opportunities and we have grown to a reasonable size."

During the growing season Lied's

Lied's provides landscape construction and management in addition to doing a brisk retail store business.

employs as many as 125 employees (the number drops to about 40 in the winter), filling more than 20 landscape construction and management crews in addition to the personnel needed in the retail store, Leid's Garden Valley, and a handful of man-

agers and other experts such as landscape architects and draftsmen.

The business—which includes the retail store, landscape construction and landscape management divisions, and the nursery—has been so well received it has practically outgrown its Sussex facilities. A second story for office space was added above the retail store a few years back. Design and drafting is done in offices in the remodeled basement. Almost two years ago Lied's purchased a similar business 80 miles to the north in the rural community of Neenah in the Fox Valley.

Lumping all divisions of the company together, Tom Lied says the company did slightly more than \$4 million in business in 1984 with \$1 million from the retail section, \$1 million from landscape management, and about \$2 million from construction.

The company's landscape workload includes a hefty amount of "fussy, custom residential work," Lied says, in addition to simple residential projects and commercial jobs. Lied's handles few blockbuster accounts with the largest this past year being about \$100,000. The smallest jobs tackled by the company cost \$25 and, surprisingly, Tom points out, they get calls for these as well.

"I guess the significance of all the figures is not a great deal, except it involved a whole lot of work," Tom says.

Esthetics important

Lied's approaches both residential and commercial customers with the idea of being "both technically sound as well as esthetically pleasing," Tom Lied explains. "If we favor one over the other we may lean a little to the esthetically pleasing. We believe the plants are there to serve the client and they should be organized and maintained to serve that purpose."

That's the reason a Lied's consultant will never say to a client: "If I lived here I would do it this way," Tom says. "First, it's terribly unimportant how you would want it done. You don't live there. We have to find out how the client wants it done, how the client wants to feel in his garden. We have to know the things that please him."

Selling landscaping to commercial accounts calls for a slightly different approach.

"If we can dramatize to them what a well maintained landscape can do for them in terms of image, if we can

focus the competitive edge they can gain, then we've done them a service," Lied stresses.

Experienced and capable landscaping firms are entitled to the fees they charge, Lied maintains. "We are in an extraordinarily high service industry and we should have a dollar sign attached to this service. We're in a market where we have to generate 12 months income out of an 8½ month time frame. Our clients owe us the 12 months income for assembling the experts and specialized knowledge we've assembled."

What does Tom Lied enjoy most about his role in the Green Industry?

"I enjoy weaving the talent of people together to make things happen, using my talent to please people and to create and accomplish. Of course I like to get the compliment too," he reflects.

It's no secret what the company founder, Delmar, enjoys most either—his nursery stock, chosen and bred for Wisconsin's sometimes harsh weather. A product of Wisconsin and the farm, Delmar is a Thoreau-like mother hen to his 200 acres of

plantlife with species from as far away as Siberia and Korea.

In a sense, Delmar considers the nursery an experiment in living and he relishes the opportunity to get his hands dirty. His convictions are still as hard as the boulders that emerge

"Clients owe us the 12 months of income for assembling the experts and the specialized knowledge we've assembled."

—Tom Lied

each spring and are often used in sculpting a customer's garden.

He doesn't use chemicals in his nursery. He prefers to keep his fields weed free with regular cultivation, a practice, he admits, that creates a tre-

mendous amount of labor but, he believes, results in heartier stock.

"I'm not interested in doing it easier, just doing it right," he says. "By keeping this cultivated we eliminate the weeds and if we don't have weeds we don't have a place for the insects to stay."

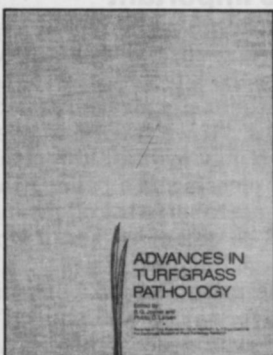
Delmar Lied's hard-won experience is aided by an amazing curiosity in the genetic makeup of plantlife; and the work he has done (and continues to do) with clones and grafting has added significantly to the practical knowledge of plants and their adaptability to conditions in the Midwest.

"My mom and dad taught me soil and a love of soil and I guess I never lost it," he says. Delmar remains the soul of the company and, in some respects, its inspiration, because after 40 years he's about as down-to-earth as that weekend so long ago when he and his brother built a small wagon and went into business on their own.

"My brother had an axle and some hinges off some gates. We started the wagon on a Friday, worked on it that Saturday, and Monday we were in business." **WT&T**

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