

The future of landscape construction and maintenance is in the hands of a new breed of manager who knows how to deal with people and money, as well as plants.

WANTED: Managers!

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

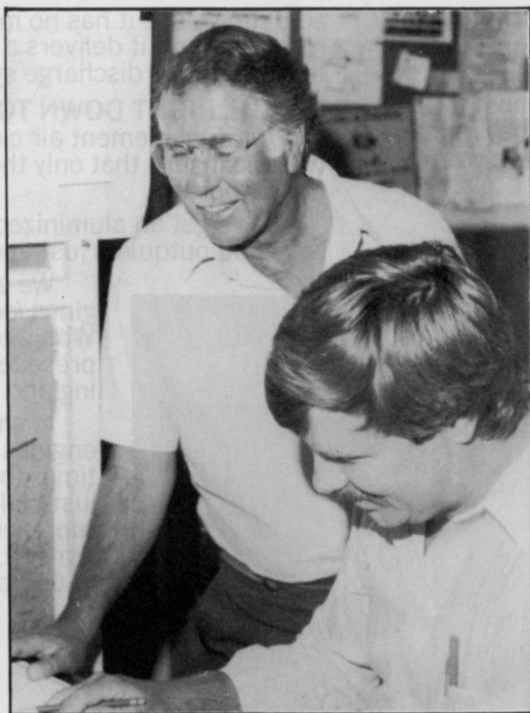
There are no trees on a Monopoly board but there is a wheelbarrow. It's a symbol of the past to veteran Florida landscaper Marvin E. Gross who says the days of the wheelbarrow operator are over; but the profession of landscape contracting/management has yet to see its best days.

The era of the trained manager is at hand, he insists, and the profession is ready to blossom. The key is the influx of young, professionally-trained managers.

Management skills essential

"Laborers, they're easy to find. Managers, good managers, that's what this profession needs. It's difficult to get a good manager," Gross says. "The people in this industry have to be extra knowledgeable about a lot more than just the technical names of the plants. To do a good job they've got to know their soils, they've got to know habitats. They've got to know business and how to manage."

Gross is the owner of Marvin's Garden & Landscape (the name was inspired by the popular Parker Brothers board game) just outside Sarasota, FL. Sun-tanned and laid-back, the mustachioed Gross has carved himself a Garden of Eden, complete with airy bungalow, among the palms and flowering foliage behind his 25-acre tree farm. He laughs when he says you won't find a "Yankee bush" in his bewildering assortment of semi-tropical plantlife, but that doesn't mean you



Gross and Mississippi State University graduate Mike McMurry. Gross has hired several MSU graduates who received the practical training of Bob Calloway.

won't see him north of Tallahassee from time to time. His company tackles landscape construction jobs in the (heaven forbid!) so-called temperate zone as well as major design/build projects in south Florida.

Along the sometimes bumpy path of experience (he'll be marking his 25th year in business soon) he's had to learn—and live with—the capricious whims of nature in a variety of climates. He's had to learn that some varieties of palms "will die if you walk by them with an ice cream" while others can survive even the 1983 Christmas freeze that devastated much of the semi-trop-

ical plantlife north of the Caloosahatchee River. To Gross, who takes pride in the hardy stock he keeps in his wholesale tree farm, "there is a risk involved in about everything you do." Particularly planting.

His enthusiasm for the landscape industry, however, continues to grow. One reason is his son Aaron, a student in the excellent landscape architecture program at Mississippi State University.

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— Gross

Aaron is one of a handful of co-op students at the university. In addition to classroom studies they gain practical experience between terms by working with quality contractors around the nation. Aaron is learning about the real world at Environmental Care in Los Angeles.

Strong ties

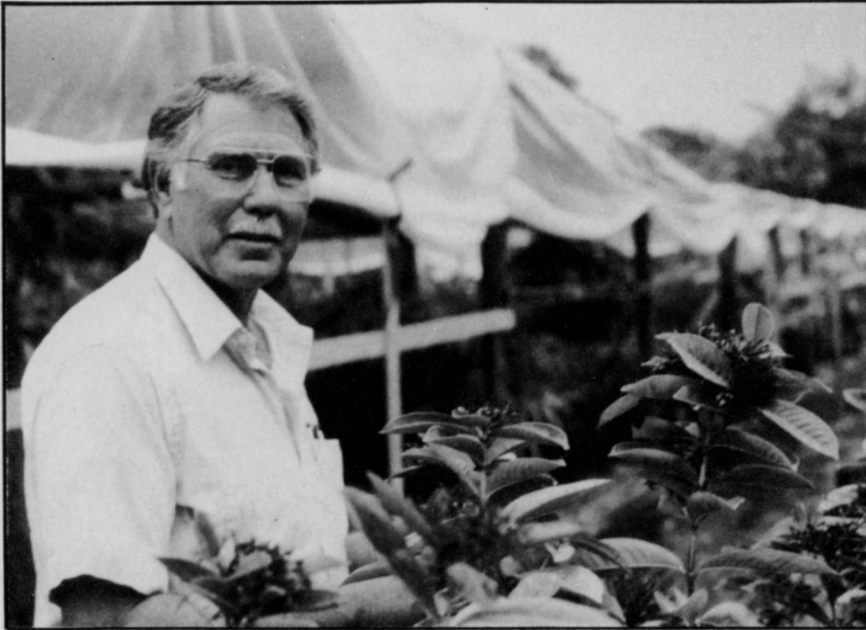
The ties between Gross and Mississippi State go deep and have had a major influence on him and his business. It was in 1973 at a seminar in Louisville that Gross met Bob Callaway head of the Landscape Architecture Department at Mississippi State University. In fact, Gross hired Callaway's first graduate as a result of the meeting. Since then he's hired several others right out of the program.

Michael McMurry, vice president and sales director of Marvin's Gar-

dens, is a graduate of MSU as is the company's architectural designer Tidwell and its landscape designer William Vaughan. Gross says if his son, Aaron, returns to the Sarasota business following his formal studies he'll do so as a foreman. He'll have to demonstrate his business abilities just like the others. Rounding out Gross's management team is Michael F. Getzman, manager of the company's Irrigation Division and Mark Anderson, project supervisor.

managers that can manage people and dollars."

The value of education didn't come to Gross in a blinding flash. Gross left West Virginia for Florida in 1947 chasing a career in animal husbandry and eager to learn more about Brahman cattle. He never left Florida. He did change his plans. In 1956 he acquired a degree in landscape architecture from the University of Florida and within a few years he was in business.



Gross pampers 25 acres of semitropical material at his nursery.

Opportunity knocks

MSU's Callaway echoes Gross's enthusiasm about exciting new opportunities in the landscape field where in recent years the demand by respected landscape contracting firms for top-flight graduates has been outdistancing supply.

"Our students compete financially with any of the other disciplines at the university with the possible exceptions of engineering and computer sciences," Callaway says. "If the student has intelligence, energy, and is mobile the opportunities are there." Callaway, who spent 15 years in the industry before joining academia, says salaries in the \$22,000-\$25,000 range are not unusual for bright professionally-trained managers with a couple of years experience.

"Basically what the industry is looking for today is not a technician," he adds. "It's looking for managers that have an understanding of the practical as well as theoretical aspects of the industry. Industry is looking for

Marvin's Garden and Landscape found a place in the balmy breezes off the Gulf of Mexico where its growth has been hard pressed to keep up with the growth of Florida's Gulf Coast communities. The population of Sarasota County has jumped from 120,000 to 220,000 since 1970. "When I came down here all these towns were small villages," he recalls

The good life

Gross says Sarasota is a place where the quality of life is important. He claims area residents are proud of the beauty of their area and its growing reputation as a major cultural center. Few other American cities of 50,000 can boast an opera house, several professional theaters, and a futuristic performing arts center, the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall.

Add the presence of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (the official state art museum of Florida) and the quarters of the East Coast Symphony and you've got a powerful

lot of the arts hugging Sarasota Bay where the average annual temperature is a pleasant 73 degrees.

Although fully 75 percent of the dollar value of the work done by Gross's company is commercial, the landscaping of single family resi-

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—Gross

dences remains important to the success of Marvin's Gardens. Some of that work is showcased at beautiful residences on the offshore keys with names like Longboat, Siesta, Bird, St Armand's, Lido, and Casey.

Marvin's Garden & Landscape, Inc. approached \$2 million in business last year.

Competition? Gross doesn't consider others in his trade as competitors.

"In our community there are about four companies that do what we do. We're always bumping heads with each other. All of us have been in a business a number of years. But, I never felt that I've ever been in competition with the other companies," he says.

"I'm in competition for the luxury dollar. I'm in competition with the other luxury item salesmen because if you think about it you really don't need a tree or plant. The more luxury dollars there are to spend, the more we're going to get if we're informed about what we're doing and doing the job right."

Gross puts emphasis on the word "informed". That's the keystone of the landscape construction and management industry now.

"If you're not informed about what you're doing, you're not going to make it. The man with the pickup truck and the wheelbarrow and little professional training just doesn't have the knowledge to gain the customer's trust," he adds.

But to those entering the industry with professional training and enthusiasm the sky is the limit, he insists. "This industry is going to grow forever and forever—just like the bushes," Gross laughs.

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