

## The money machine

Lawn care and landscape maintenance businesses begin to feel the nation's recovery from the recent economic recession, according to a survey by 'Lawn Care Industry' magazine.

by Jerry Roche, editor

Chemical lawn care revenues increased 40.2 percent from 1983 to 1984—a phenomenal rate—as the economy continued to recover from the recession of the early 1980s. Overall, according to LAWN CARE INDUSTRY magazine's 1985 "State of the Industry" report, the industry grew by 26.6 percent as landscape maintenance increased 11.1 percent from 1983 to 1984.

"From return on assets, this industry is a money machine," says John Kenney of Turf Doctor, a chemical lawn care company in Framingham, Mass. "Absolutely fabulous."

Spending by industry companies was also expected to increase drastically—22.5 percent—this year.

Chemical lawn care and landscape management companies predicted in the LCI survey that their expenditures on chemicals, equipment, and seed would be \$415.5 million in 1985. That's an increase of 22.45 percent over 1984 expenditures.

### Growth areas

Biggest gains were expected to be in the areas of tree care equipment, spray tanks, and irrigation equipment. Many companies are diversifying into tree care, while proper irrigation is playing a bigger role in creating beautiful landscapes, especially in high-growth areas like Southern California.

Tree care equipment purchases were expected to almost triple to \$8 million in 1985. Sales of spray tanks were predicted to double in sales to more than \$18 million. Irrigation equipment was supposed to hit the \$23 million mark, an increase of nearly 200 percent.

"There are some other interesting figures here," says Jerry Faulring of HydroLawn, Gaithersburg, Md. "It's



John Kenney



Jerry Faulring

interesting to note that granular fertilizer use is growing faster than liquid (13.5 percent to 8.6 percent). Pre-emergents should show a parallel relationship, but they're only up 4.6 percent. So people are becoming more selective in the use of pre-emergents.

"Insecticides (up 23.2 percent) are still not being used discriminately enough. A lot of seeding (up 53.9 percent), a lot of discrimination in post-emergents (down 4.6 percent), fungicides—a little more awareness (up 3.1 percent), and a lot more awareness of soil amendments (up 74.7 percent).

"I think that follows the trends real well," says Faulring.

### Replacing fleets

It appears that many of the companies founded in the late 1970s are begin-

ning to have to replace fleets, judging by predicted sales of spray tanks.

"The cost of money is favorable, compared to what it was two, three, or four years ago," notes Kenney. "Maybe it's expensive to replace equipment, but it's less expensive now, and if you wait the interest rates could go back up."

Number one complaint of customers, according to those responding to the LCI poll, is high cost. Other complaints run the gamut from poor weed control to improper scheduling to poor communication.

Nearly 68 percent of the respondents cited insurance costs as being a major business concern. Sixty-two percent said vehicle costs were a concern, while "liability costs," "government regulations," and "interest rates" were also cited by more than 50 percent.

### Big numbers

Not surprisingly, the survey found that the vast majority of chemical lawn care by its readers was being conducted in the East North Central region of the nation (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin). Lawn care companies owned by LCI readers in those states grossed an average of \$908,938 last year. The overall average for the East North Central region (\$415,338) led the industry.

The Mountain region (Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada), surprisingly, led the nation in landscape maintenance revenues with a per-company average of \$353,640.

New England was statistically the region of least lawn care/landscape maintenance with the average reader's business grossing just \$83,050.

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## PREDICTED EXPENDITURES (1985) FOR CHEMICAL LAWN CARE AND LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT COMPANIES

	% Sample Purchasing	Average Per Purchaser	Projection To LCI Readership	% Change Since 1984
<b>Chemicals, Supplies</b>				
Granular Fertilizer	84.7	\$9,755.70	\$92.41 Million	+ 13.5
Pre-Emergence Herbicides	73.9	\$5,259.18	\$43.46 Million	+ 4.6
Liquid Fertilizer	32.9	\$11,701.40	\$43.05 Million	+ 8.6
Insecticides	75.0	\$3,518.92	\$29.51 Million	+ 23.2
Grass Seed	72.1	\$3,102.86	\$25.02 Million	+ 53.9
Post-Emergence Herbicides	73.7	\$2,748.33	\$22.65 Million	- 4.6
Fungicides	58.2	\$1,704.73	\$11.10 Million	+ 3.1
Soil Amendments	33.2	\$2,563.57	\$9.52 Million	+ 74.7
Plant Growth Regulators	16.6	\$501.03	\$0.93 Million	N/A
<b>Equipment</b>				
Tractors	19.7	\$11,551.33	\$25.46 Million	- 15.5
Irrigation Equipment	19.2	\$10,902.63	\$23.41 Million	+194.8
Spray Tanks	33.4	\$4,901.04	\$18.31 Million	+219.5
Riding Lawn Mowers	19.7	\$7,518.00	\$16.56 Million	+ 30.3
Walk-Behind Mowers	46.3	\$2,665.86	\$13.80 Million	- 17.1
Sprayers, Pumps, Etc.	52.1	\$2,350.63	\$13.70 Million	+ 27.8
Spreaders	47.4	\$1,520.19	\$8.06 Million	N/A
Tree Care Equipment	25.5	\$2,888.06	\$8.00 Million	+278.7
Aeration Equipment	22.1	\$2,805.37	\$6.93 Million	- 1.7
String Trimmers	41.3	\$778.47	\$3.60 Million	+ 11.8

1985 Projected Totals = \$415.48 Million +22.45%

Source: LAWN CARE INDUSTRY MAGAZINE

### LAWN CARE from page 26

Nationally, the average size of a chemical lawn care business is in the \$350,000 range. Average size of a landscape management company is between \$175,000 and \$200,000. Overall, the average LCI reader's company grossed \$250,982 with a pre-tax profit of 21.25 percent (more than \$53,000).

### Still growing

So 1984 exceeded last year's expectations. In LCI's 1983 survey, readers predicted that their businesses would grow to an average of \$247,000, about

\$3,000 less than the final figure. And the growth trend will continue in 1985, poll respondents say.

They have predicted an industry average of 23.99 percent growth this year.

Diversification appears to be a growing trend within the industry. Of the 380 survey respondents, 50 said they are also involved in landscape installation and design. Twenty-two said they service trees, 19 said they are involved in landscape construction and 18 said they are involved in the sod business.

Snow removal, with 13 responses, was another popular sideline. **WT&T**

## ServiceMaster goes 'Green'

Chicago's Richard White built Village Green from the ground up. Now he and his former company are part of an \$800 million service company that is building a nationwide network of 'ma and pa' lawn care operations.

by Ron Hall, associate editor

John Willis once taught flying at Chicago's Midway Airport. He traded that for the drudgery of cleaning homes and offices in Elgin and Schaumburg.

He dug hard cash out of his pocket and presented it to a company called ServiceMaster for the privilege.

Now his blue eyes dance as he describes the \$400,000 cleaning and disaster restoration business he owns and manages from his 10-year-old home, evidence of a profitable 14-year association with ServiceMaster.

This brick house, tucked in a corner of a wildlife preserve near Elgin, Ill., is a comfortable home. The basketball hoop over the garage suggests anything but the business beehive which is in the remodeled, basement where employees man the phones.

Opportunity comes knocking again, Willis believes. He digs again.

This time for lawn care.

The key again, ServiceMaster.

Says Willis, "I want to get in on the ground level of ServiceMaster Lawn Care. I enjoy the pioneering part of it more than anything. Who knows? Maybe I'll put all my efforts in one direction—lawn care."

You in lawn care ought to know more about ServiceMaster.

It knows about you and the healthy growth of your industry.

ServiceMaster, the \$800 million service giant headquartered in Downers Grove, Ill. about a half hour from O'Hare International and 45 minutes from the Willis' home, eased into lawn care in 1985 with the purchase of Village Green, the Chicago-area business headed by veteran lawn care businessman Richard White.

"ServiceMaster looked for nine

months, 12 months trying to find a good fit before it bought Village Green," White recalls. "I think our company did business the way ServiceMaster likes to do business."

White believes "they wanted a company to use as a model for lawn care. The management was in place to do lawn care."

The management, of course, was White. He'd already put together a comprehensive training manual. It was no secret he was thinking franchise with Village Green.

Industry insiders consider White, still trim and on the sunny side of middle age, one of lawn care's pioneers. The idea is that young. White treated his first lawn in 1962, before the industry had a name. He was 16. In 1973 he started Village Green in suburban Chicago.

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Richard White poses in front of ServiceMaster headquarters in Downers Grove, Ill. White, vice-president of the Lawn Care Division, is former owner of suburban Chicago's Village Green.

Grass is his livelihood. When he walks the grounds at corporate headquarters, a pancake of greensward big enough for three football fields, he eyeballs the turf like an old friend at a high school reunion. He knows this particular turf.

Not long ago, but before ServiceMaster made its move into lawn care, White convinced management to mow that grass more often. This erased bagging of grass clippings. It gave workers 25 percent more time for other jobs. The grass looked better, too.

White doesn't walk this lawn often now. He's vice president of the Lawn Care Division of ServiceMaster. He's a Heinz-57 blend: administrator, teacher, troubleshooter. His office is on the second floor of the Downers Grove building.

### Good vibes

His office bustles. Bright. Cheerful. It, like the others, displays a small plaque with these four maxims: "To honor God in all we do. To help other people develop. To pursue excellence. To grow profitably."

Business-watchers claim ServiceMaster pursues the fourth of these with particular zeal.

Fortune magazine in its June 11, 1984 issue described ServiceMaster as the nation's "most profitable" large service company with an astounding 30 percent return for its shareholders from 1974 to 1983.

It reaps these rewards by convincing and helping people build profitable "in-home" businesses: by granting franchises and training people to do jobs most people (and businesses) don't want to do for themselves.

Carpet and upholstery cleaning is one service often associated with the increasingly evident green-and-yellow ServiceMaster vans.

Company founder, the late Marion E. Wade, a hard-working Baptist not a bit bashful about mixing Christianity with business, started this way 35 years ago.

In 1962, ServiceMaster expanded its horizons, offering what it describes as "housekeeping management." And in the 1970s, business mushroomed as it spread into the health care industry.

Today ServiceMaster contracts with more than 1,000 hospitals, and provides management for everything from cleaning and laundry to the food that is prepared in hospital cafeterias. The locations of franchise-holders dot a huge map on a lobby wall.



ServiceMaster vans should become more common to lawn care customers. John Willis (left) and employee Ron Wizeck at Willis' home in Elgin, Ill.

### Training school

ServiceMaster nurtures its newest baby, lawn care, with a familiar formula: by licensing "ma and pa" businesses, providing the support of a respected and nationally-known business name, and giving licensees week-long training at its "service academy" located fittingly in a convent in Wheaton, Ill.

"Everything is controlled at these academies," says White, who teaches agronomics to hopeful LCOs. Others instruct subjects like insurance, bookkeeping—skills needed to provide a service, to turn a profit. "These people (licensees) don't go out for dinner or anything. We just don't allow for any lost time. Besides, they have money invested in this."

This September, ServiceMaster graduated its second class of 16 hopeful lawn care businessmen. Next summer there will be another crop. In the fall of 1986, another.

"When they leave, we want them ready to go into business," White says. "After they leave we follow them. Our function is to assist these people to become successful."

All, like flight-instructor-turned-businessman Willis, a member of the first training class this past April, pay a \$10,500 license fee (\$6,000 down) to become an LCO. Startup costs, including van and materials, eventually come to \$18,000.

Franchise owners also purchase their supplies via an arrangement with ServiceMaster and return 8 per-

cent of their revenues to the company.

Although ServiceMaster promotes the "ma and pa" operation—the one-person, one-van business—don't let that mislead you.

Says White: "There really is no limitation. Sure, we think a one-man operation can be successful and some people will probably be happy with that kind of business, but they don't have to be."

Many of that first graduating class of LCOs, like Willis, already operate successful ServiceMaster cleaning businesses. Some, again like Willis, are distributors in the ServiceMaster cleaning chain. They provide the licensees (Willis has 20) with supplies and support.

These first training academies could provide the management link, the distributors, for ServiceMaster's nationwide lawn care network.

Willis sees opportunity here while he gauges the progress of his infant lawn care firm. He should reach 200 customers by year's end, hopefully 400 next season.

"These are minimum projections," he says. "Actually, I hope—and I think—we can do much better. I'm a builder. I'm enjoying the pioneering spirit of this."

How about ServiceMaster? How big does it want to become in the lawn care industry?

Says White: "Let's just say I decline comment. Everytime somebody says 'we're going to be as big as somebody else,' they flop."

WT&T

## Growing in all directions

A Kalamazoo, Mich., company blends a lawn care operation with its pest control operation. And it's working. That versatility has lifted gross revenues to \$2 million.

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor

When ChemLawn offers you the chance to become a franchisee you take it, right?

Today perhaps you would but, in the early 1970's, Linden Griffin said "no" to the giant's offer. His company, Griffin Pest Control of Kalamazoo, Mich., was strictly into pest and termite control.

At the time, he didn't catch the natural connection—the use of pesticides in both fields.

"It seemed kind of strange at the time," he recalls of the offer. "I thought, 'boy, they're emphasizing chemicals.' I didn't think that was a positive PR move."

In retrospect, Griffin says he should have accepted the offer.

"It was probably two or three years later before I really even considered getting into lawn care," he says. "At the time of their offer, I was really into making pest control a success. I still owed my parents money from my purchase of the business (1973)—that's why I was reluctant."

Within a short period, Griffin solidified the pest control operation and realized the natural relationship the field has to lawn care.

Three years later he began his own lawn care division with the help of a capable employee, Wayne Bro. "He is a young man who we thought could handle that kind of challenge," says Griffin.

With Bro providing guidance, Griffin Lawn Care traveled a bumpy road to profitability.

"We got 220 customers (from the pest control client list) and decided we'd better learn what we're doing," he says.

Griffin Lawn Care progressed from nursery school to graduate school in a period of months. Branch offices are now located in Battle Creek and



Griffin headquarters in Kalamazoo, one of three Griffin offices.

Grand Rapids, in addition to the home base in Kalamazoo.

### The right approach

"We'll do \$500,000 this year," says Griffin of the lawn care division.

That figure climbed sporadically as lawn care in his area has experienced "years where growth was flat."

Griffin will tell you he's made mistakes along the way.

He did a lot of television and radio advertising in 1982.

"It was a disaster," he says. "I think TV and radio advertising are impulse purchases. It didn't help us grow at all."

Instead, Griffin prefers phone solicitation. "We've been more successful with our phone solicitation program than with any other. That's the most cost-effective way of reaching the customer," he says.

Barely two years old, the program

netted 1,629 new customers in 1985, says Griffin.

With a week to go in the latest 10-week sales period, phone solicitation has recorded a gross intake of \$261,301, says Griffin, pointing to a sales chart in the corner of his office.

"Any lawn care company loses 20 to 30 percent of its customers each year," he says. Even when you consider that and other loss factors, he says, phone solicitation has been a boon for his company.

"We sold \$261,000 to get \$130,000," he says, figuring losses with gains. "That's not bad considering (hired lawn care) is discretionary income for a lot of people."

### Room for growth

Perhaps most encouraging for Griffin is the potential for growth. Three Griffin offices lie in markets totalling a million people. That's a lot of lawns.



**Linden Griffin**, owner of Griffin Lawn Care and Pest Control, Kalamazoo, Mich.

Grand Rapids, a market Griffin entered just five years ago, has a population of 500,000. It offers the best potential of the three because of the numbers.

In Kalamazoo, Griffin has reached a "saturation point," but remains a stronghold in the industry.

Battle Creek, with just 125,000 people, has brought in steady income but lacks the numbers to become a wind-fall area.

A state unemployment rate hovering around 10 percent doesn't help

matters. "In Michigan, we haven't been under a 10 percent unemployment rate in the last decade," says Griffin. "In Michigan, you have to work hard to make your business grow."

Another factor related to Griffin's bottom line is the cold southwestern Michigan winter. His lawn care employees are sent onto the streets with their snow plows, sometimes working up to 14-hour days.

Snow removal doesn't generate much income, says Griffin, and takes a quick toll on equipment and personnel. He doesn't recommend it as a winter alternative.

The days of ice and snow can seriously damage a cyclical business, he says, adding, that the company's bottom line "looks like a giant roller coaster," over a year.

He's made an attempt to remedy winter's cash flow woes by implementing a pre-pay (or pre-bill) system for lawn care customers. It sometimes aids sagging cash flow. "\$40,000 in cash is helpful in January and February," he says.

### The total package

Among the three Griffin divisions, gross revenues of \$2 million are pro-

jected for 1985.

In Linden Griffin's first year at the helm (1973), revenues totalled \$180,000 (without lawn care, began in 1977).

Griffin almost missed out on a million dollar gross revenue figures.

He had no intention of following his parents into the bug business.

His parents, Linden Sr. and Irene, founded Griffin Pest Control in 1929 and their son worked on-and-off for 20 years beginning in 1954.

Linden Sr. became ill in the early '70s and reached an agreement with his son for the purchase of the business.

After a few months as president, Linden Jr. realized he had underestimated his parents.

"When I graduated from college (Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo), I felt I could do a better job running the business," he says. "After a year-and-a-half, my parents became a lot smarter."

Pest control was then and is today the cornerstone of the business. It accounts for 60 percent of gross revenues, while lawn care has reached 25 percent in just eight years. Termite control, always a small part of the operation, accounts for 15 percent.

In five years, he says, the company "may be out of the termite business."

Pest control continues to grow though not at the pace set by lawn care. "Lawn care has an excellent growth potential because it's in its infancy. It has more growth potential for us than pest control," says Griffin.

He predicts lawn care will provide 40 percent of the company's revenues in five years.

Currently, the company is carrying 3,000 lawn care customers.

### Pre-notification

Griffin is concerned about Michigan's notification question, requiring prior notification of the use of petro-sensitive chemicals to any sensitive person within a 2,000-foot radius.

In Michigan, Senate Bill 65 (pre-notification) is pending and Griffin, as local governmental affairs representative for the Michigan Pest Control Association and Professional Lawn Care Association of America, is lobbying for its defeat.

"I think states should have primacy over the use of pesticides," he says, agreeing with the recent Wauconda (Ill.) decision.

With a nod of his head Linden Griffin admits he enjoys speaking to gatherings of his peers. He sometimes practices for an hour, achieving just the right voice inflection or gesture.

It's the same care he puts into running his growing business. **WT&T**

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## Growing up in an adolescent market

Trendsetting Southern California lags in lawn care.  
A Riverside firm looked to the Midwest to tap this potentially lucrative market

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor



This narrow strip of turf in front of Bourbonnais' Riverside office is a portion of the commercial real estate he maintains.

While Midwest-based lawn care companies like ChemLawn perfected their treatments in the late '70s and early '80s, Larry Bourbonnais didn't know there was such a thing as liquid lawn care.

His Riverside, Calif.-based firm, the Larry Bourbonnais Company, had specialized in professional grounds management since 1973; but he was, in his terms, one of a horde of Californians who call themselves "gardeners."

Liquid fertilization? He'd never heard of it. Not until 1980.

While attending a Southern California Turfgrass show, he strolled to a booth featuring liquid fertilizer.

He'd stumbled on something that would forever change his business.

He went from shorts and no shirts to three-piece suits in less than four years (although he admits he's still a casual dresser).

"I asked the guy 'what is this?' and he said that liquid spraying was a big deal in the East."

The 37-year-old Bourbonnais was miffed. "I'd never heard of it. I'd been in business for almost eight years. Well, the guy said he'd ask a consultant in Chicago to get hold of me," he says.

Bourbonnais flew to Chicago, a first for the California boy, to meet with the consultant, Jim Mello, owner of Nice'N'Green lawn care service. He saw his first spray truck. Impressed yet undecided, Bourbonnais prayed for guidance and was answered.

### Spray Green

With Mello's assistance, Spray Green was born in the spring of 1981. Bourbonnais took the Midwest route into

lawn care. He and Spray Green said "hello" to the '80s.

The "Inland Empire," as Riverside, San Bernadino, and surrounding areas are called, was a market aching to be tapped.

Bourbonnais instituted a direct mail campaign. "Response was good," he says. Oddly, Spray Green trucks boosted interest in his business. People asked what they were.

"I'd never heard of it (liquid lawn care); they hadn't either. But they were fascinated by the truck," he says.

Curiosity and profits and two different things though. The locals didn't educate easily. "Most thought it was hydroseeding, some thought maybe we sprayed dye on lawns," he says with a straight face.

Today, his clients are a bit more sophisticated (as is Spray Green's application schedule), but education remains a top priority for Spray Green crews.

Here, Bourbonnais feels he can't compete with big lawn care companies. "Companies like ChemLawn and others have a lot more money than we do. They can spend the money to educate their customers," he says. "Sometimes I feel like the man from Mars when I talk to these people."

ChemLawn has moved into neighboring Ontario, he says, and is "expanding inward." He expects heavy competition from the Midwest-based giant in the near future.

### A promising market

Larry Bourbonnais has the level personality needed to make it in the business world. A born-again Christian, he treats both employees and customers with respect, although he's the first to tell you he's short on positive feedback to his employees.

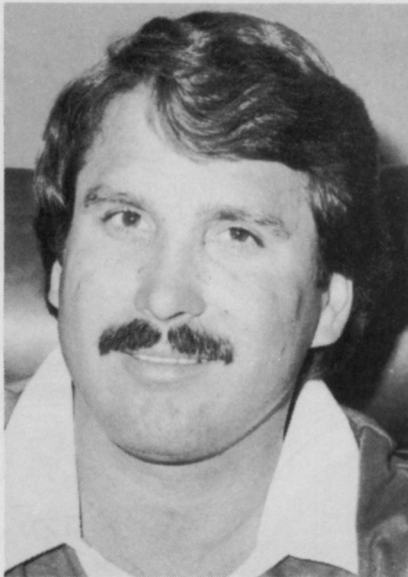
He will compromise. Example: Bourbonnais enjoys the comfort of an air-conditioned office. Company secretary Mary Steinkoenig, whose desk is located directly inside the front door, has an aversion to air-conditioning.

They reached an agreement. He leaves his office door almost closed (to trap the cool air) and she opens the front door (and keeps it open) to let in the sometimes smoggy Riverside air.

It's the same with the customer—a lot of give and take.

With a wink, Bourbonnais tells you it's a lot more give.

"We have the best reputation in town but people don't call me and say



Larry Bourbonnais, owner of The Larry Bourbonnais Company of Riverside, Calif.

'I want you to bid on my property' or 'I want to hire you.' I have to call on people, I have to knock on doors," he says.

The cold-call strategy, however cumbersome, has been a boon. He landed his two largest commercial accounts (Bournes Inc. and Bear Medical) with cold calls.

In Riverside, they're just two in a market that could make Bourbonnais a rich man. Development is everywhere, laying a foundation for a million-dollar lawn care business.

Bourbonnais hasn't reached that point. He's looking at a gross of \$250,000 this year between the landscaping and lawn care divisions. That figure is doubled from 1980. It's a long way from the \$150 (used to buy a mower and edger) he started with in 1973.

With his usual candor, Bourbonnais says his growth is slower than anticipated.

"Riverside is a good market, but it hasn't taken off like I thought it would. The problem is that the area is growing tremendously, but you don't have the big bucks like you do in Orange County," he says, noting that most living in Riverside have emigrated from affluent Orange County.

The reason is obvious, he says. You can buy the same home in Riverside for half of what you would pay in Orange.

Locals want to save money. And that means many skimp on other costs, including lawn care.

"Most don't know much about

lawn care around here," he says. "They don't know how to water their lawns correctly during our hot spells. We had 17 days this past June and July over 100 degrees. Our environment (semi-arid) makes it tough on lawns."

### An image

In laid-back Southern California employing a "gardener" is a status symbol but Bourbonnais bristles when discussing their merits.

"I never saw a gardener until I became one, and now everybody's a so-called gardener. This is casual California and there's guys here working on lawns in shorts with no shirts. I think it's horrible," he says.

"We have lettered trucks and I make sure they're cleaned and polished. Our guys wear nice shirts and clean pants.

"I think it's important especially with the commercial end. You have a company doing a half a billion a year and they don't want to see a bunch of losers hanging around with no shirts and long hair," he says.

He considers his commercial clients cake. He does 99 percent of his business with the individual homeowner.

He's lukewarm about the prospect of adding more condos to his client list, but says "there's going to be a lot more added to this area."

Typically, the Spray Green liquid fertilization and weed control program, designed for the Inland area, is a seven-step procedure.

It starts in February (fertilizer, potassium, and crabgrass pre-emergent control) and ends in December with fertilizer and potassium application. In between are more fertilizer (timed- and instant-release in May, July, and August) and broadleaf weed control applications.

There are no slow periods in sunny Southern California.

His two divisions are complementary. When it's raining, the grass is growing and the need for lawn care is high.

When it's dry (the norm in Riverside), maintenance booms. Maintenance and grounds management account for 75 percent of the firm's revenues.

Candid Larry says he wouldn't want to be in any other business. "I'm into grass," he says. "Even when I started I just liked to be outside mowing lawns."

That passion has developed into a business he hopes will gross \$500,000 by 1989.

WT&T



# LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

## Solving problems

Bob Clouten is a custom applicator seeking new ideas to old problems. His North Dakota firm is servicing 2,000 customers a year and that number is increasing.

The morning shower is somewhat of a ritual for custom applicator Bob Clouten. He doesn't just sing in his shower. As the water pelts his body, Clouten mulls what he can do to make his business—Fertilawn, Inc.—stronger.

By 6 a.m., Clouten, at his shop/garage well ahead of Fertilawn's 25 peak-season employees, is already in motion.

"Good service will always sell," says Clouten. "It's the key, whether you're talking lawn work or industrial application. You need to be competitive, but service is what builds long-term business."

Clouten feels long hours, hard work, and a creative approach in the custom chemical application business still pay off.

Early last spring, for example, Clouten worked to earn a contract to control all vegetation at Basin Electric Power Cooperative substations. The new business calls for year-round bareground control at 36 electrical substations, some located 500 miles from Bismark, home base to both.

### Hard work pays

Clouten, 33, started the business seven years ago in his father-in-law's garage. Selling door-to-door and by telephone, he custom-applied fertilizer, herbicide, and insecticide to about 200 lawns.

Last season, his company tended 800 lawns. For many, Fertilawn pro-



Bob Clouten, owner and operator of Fertilawn Inc. in Bismark, N. D.

vides complete lawn care—from spring power raking through season-long fertilization and pest control to regular mowing. "All told, we serve about 2,000 customers a year," says Clouten.

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**'It makes me a better manager if I do some of the sales and application work myself.'**

**—Clouten**

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Fertilawn's services extend to other cities and towns in the region, including adjacent Mandan. The company holds its own against highly-promoted and franchised lawn care services.

The company's industrial division has enjoyed rapid growth.

"We work closely with manufacturers, conducting local experiments with new herbicides," he says. "We want to be known as the custom applicator with new ideas and products that solve problems."

Along with lawn and commercial chemical application, the crowded print on his business card also advertises: tree spraying; soil testing; ground sterilization; garden fertiliz-

ing; tissue analysis; lawn power raking, mowing and edging.

Lawn work at homes, businesses, schools and government institutions make up 75 percent of Fertilawn's business. Non-lawn industrial and commercial weed and grass control are increasing rapidly, he says.

### The boom sprayer

Nineteen trucks equipped with solution tanks and a variety of application systems are used. For lawns, the company gains attention by using a small, hand-pushed boom sprayer with wheels. It's connected by a feeder hose to the service truck.

Fertilawn claims that greater fertilizer and chemical application accuracy are achieved with the boom, versus a single hand-held spray nozzle.

"People often call and ask if we're the lawn company with the boom sprayer," says Clouten.

Clean, attractive equipment and operators also are important, he says. "People comment about our clean trucks and uniformed men."

Homeowner invoicing also is innovative. Upon completion of an application, the Fertilawn operator leaves behind a handy pre-addressed envelope with the amount due included.

Clouten divides his time between selling, management, and application work. He often does all three the same day, changing from suit and tie to applicator uniform.



Fertilawn's Brad Jossart uses the boom sprayer.

"It makes me a better manager if I do some of the sales and application work myself," he says. "I stay familiar with the problems. And for some of

our industrial work, I have the most experience." About 60 percent of his work time is spent on sales and management and 40 percent on applica-

tions. His usual work day during busy seasons is 6:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.

### Business goals

Clooten credits his success to hard work, inventiveness, a positive attitude, and good employees.

Employee performance comparisons, meetings, individual conferences, job-related training courses, and incentive pay help maintain continuity.

Fertilawn uses Du Pont Hyvar herbicide to achieve soil sterilization under hard-surfacing, such as in the case of parking lots. Karmex and Velpar herbicides are also applied at industrial and commercial locations.

"Setting business goals is vital," he says. "We look for referrals from present customers and a high rate of repeat business."

Can a custom application business such as Clooten's Fertilawn be sustained? "I'll make it go on," he answers. "I get up every morning with a positive attitude and make it grow."

"Taking my morning shower, I start thinking, 'What can I do today to make the business more productive than it was yesterday?'" **WT&T**

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Circle No. 126 on Reader Inquiry Card

# LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT



Partners Mike Baty (left) and Tom Ayers of Chem-Spray, Stockton, Calif.

## Thinking small

A Stockton, California, firm still services the first client it gained in 1975. Ten years growth hasn't led to a decline in attention to the little details.

Success as small custom applicators in the competitive weed control field was just a dream, back in 1975, for two young Californians.

Today the dream is a reality. And it's in Stockton, Calif., that Tom Ayers and Mike Baty first established and have now developed their quality-minded firm known as the Chem-Spray Co.

Chem-Spray targets its operations at the industrial customer. The firm controls weeds and grass on plant sites, fence lines, roadsides, parks, school sites, housing developments, curbs, ornamental plantings, and similar areas.

Much of its business is close by, in California's central valley but a good chunk is also as far away as Reno, Nev. (200 miles east), where a difference in climate means an extended treating season for Chem-Spray applicators.

### Humble beginnings

The small firm began as a boot-strap

organization, with \$1,000 invested by each partner and a \$13,000 stake from a friend (which took five years to repay).

But Chem-Spray has grown, because Ayers and Baty know that chemical weed abatement is more economical than pulling weeds manually or controlling them mechanically.

"We had an idea," reflects Ayers. "It was to give a one-year guarantee with every job we do.

"We started out selling weed control—not weed treatments. We've developed satisfied customers by delivering performance. In the first year, we had only 50 customers and we grossed about \$30,000.

"Today we've got over 600 customers, many with multiple sites that need annual care. A few of these customers ask for help on good-sized areas—up to 100-150 acres, for example. But the average is quite small—a few acres or even less. And we still serve our very first customer, a custom-builder of looms," says Ayers.

The Chem-Spray partners recall their early days when they shared the use of a single spray rig they had built themselves.

Today their three rigs are operated by Chem-Spray employees, men who have joined the business to work on an incentive system, so that precise application results in few call-backs and added compensation for the employee. It's a system that's built loyalty and stimulated results.

Ayers and Baty handle sales, paperwork, and management. They get along without secretarial help. "We aim at maintaining quality at reasonable cost," say the partners.

They've used a wide array of herbicides, both residuals and contact materials, and have kept intricate records with various products and rates.

### Computerization

But it was in 1983 that Chem-Spray took two big steps that have helped build business success at a faster rate than in earlier years.

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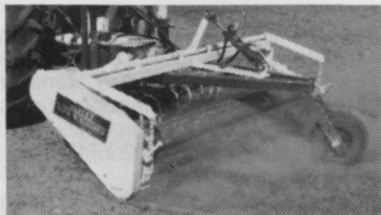
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The Tagalong sprayer, designed by Ayers and Baty, is used for fertilizer application on garden apartment turf.

First, the partners switched to a computer system to handle the records. "We use our computer to schedule work, to bill our customers, to keep records and file reports," says Ayers.

"It helps in a bid situation, giving us confidence we're working on an economic level. It tells us when to check up on specific jobs and when to follow-up on customers for another year's business."

Ayers notes the company has a computer program geared specifically toward small business needs in industrial weed control.

"It saves time every day. Initially, we indexed the computer to help evaluate our herbicide experience with various problem weeds and guide us on application rates. The idea was to point the way toward the right products in repeat applications."

Secondly, Ayers and Baty took a look at some early trials with Dupont's Oust herbicide.

Chem-Spray reports this new herbicide has been effective in controlling a very wide range of tough weeds.

In addition, the few "escape weeds" from Oust are easily controlled. Says Baty: "With Oust, you also get a much broader application window than with the earlier residuals. We treat in California from October to March, and we've found that by working with Oust, we've reduced our call-backs for follow-up contact treatments by well over half."

### Innovation

Chem-Spray has developed specialized equipment for applying

herbicides and also fertilizers (a minor part of their business).

A "Tagalong" spray rig, for example, can be hooked up with a three-wheeled Honda or with a four-wheel pickup.

The spray boom is controlled by the light switch on the Honda. The vehicles are very maneuverable, and hence they're ideal for tight turns and small jobs.

Bare-ground weed and grass control is a standard customer expectation on most Chem-Spray jobs.

In the West, local lawmakers consistently set up tight specifications on weed growth to minimize or avoid fire hazards in the summer, when vegetation dries up on unirrigated land. So the "clean look" in a vacant yard or open-air storage facility means no heavy vegetation stands during the winter growing season.

### One product

It's problem species like ryegrass and Russian thistle that have often triggered two or more chemical treatments in years past. One herbicide spray took care of the winter weeds; another, the summer species.

"Now, we can get away from that routine," Baty says.

"We've been able to use Oust at a number of different rates, on a single site, depending on what we have to control. We always survey our new sites before we start with any weed control program. Then we set up the treatment on our computer and our team follows through. We've never stopped thinking small. It's helped us grow," says Baty.

WT&T