

IN CONTROL

At 28, Mark Yahn is writing a youthful success story as president of Ground Control Landscape & Maintenance. Orlando, Fla., is the right market.
by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor



Mark and Laurie Yahn, owners of Ground Control Landscape and Maintenance in Orlando, Fla.

Ed Phillips calls to me as he sees me walk out of Ground Control Landscaping and Maintenance in Orlando, Fla.

"Mr. Photographer," he says, seeing my camera but unaware of my name. "Why don't you come out back and get a few pictures. When all the trucks come in and all the equipment is lined up it's pretty impressive."

Phillips, Ground Control maintenance supervisor, takes great pride in "his" equipment and the fine shape it's in.

He's one of three maintenance supervisors ("I'm the senior supervisor," he says) at Ground Control, a seven-year-old gold mine in east Orlando.

As the crews return from their daily routines and the trucks and equipment are cleaned and lined up—indeed, an impressive sight and a daily event—I ask him if Ground

Control's maintenance division is really that good.

A smile sneaks across his tan face. "There's no doubt about it—we're the best in the area," he says. "You can drive down the streets here in Orlando, the ones with the apartments on both sides, and you can tell the ones we do."

That pride seems typical of Ground Control employees, 110 in all. As Phillips calls instructions, he gets no dirty looks or sneers in return. They know their jobs, they do their jobs.

The clean-up continues as 15 or so Ground Control employees rub, shine, spray, and sharpen, readying the equipment for another day. Mechanics continually rebuild. They seem unaware of the stranger with the camera around his neck.

The front office

Meanwhile, back in the office,

Ground Control's "administrators" wrap-up another day with an eye on tomorrow.

Most are named Yahn.

The head man is a Wheeling, W.Va., native, who moved to Orlando in 1970 when his father was transferred.

Mark Yahn is your average 28-year-old—with an above-average business. He drives a new Mercedes, his 25-year-old wife an Alfa Romeo.

His boat he keeps south of his Orlando home near Port St. Lucie. He and wife Laurie are in the process of moving into a new home in an upscale area northeast of Orlando.

His business, started in 1978 by Yahn and two friends, grossed \$3.4 million in 1985.

This year, gross figures upwards of \$3.5 to \$4 million are expected. In Yahn's first full year (1979), he grossed \$330,000.

He was 22 then. "From the beginning one of the keys was that we controlled our money," says Yahn. "We didn't split it three ways and spend it at the local bars. We put it back into the business."

Yahn and partners Frank Edwards and Alan Curran began in the sod business, getting the bulk of their work on referrals from Edwards' sister, who worked for American Sod, a local supplier.

In October 1978, one month after the corporation (yes, they incorporated from day one) was formed, they got a big break.

He took a ride

The story goes something like this: the sod trio was replacing turf and redoing the landscape for a woman in the River Run II housing development.

Down the street rolled the developer, Lester Zimmerman of the Greater Construction Company, in his Lincoln, ready to talk business.

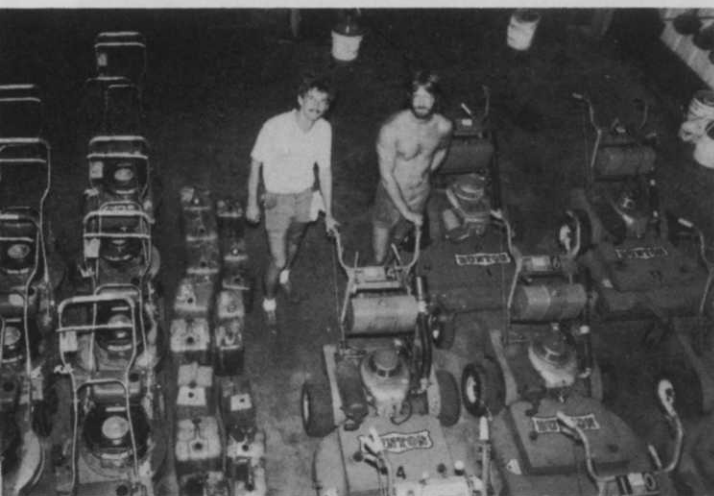
Zimmerman asked the slightly-soiled Yahn if he wanted to take a ride. Perhaps to escape the Florida heat, Yahn consented.

Zimmerman informed the whiskerless Yahn that he needed a landscaper for the 100-plus homes he was developing in River Run III.

They arrived. "How much do you want to do this?" asked Zimmerman. Yahn didn't know. This was new to him. Zimmerman gave Yahn a couple days to get a bid together.

With the help of American Sod,

LANDSCAPE PROFILE



A profile of Ground Control. Top, the well-landscaped home base in Orlando. Left, maintenance supervisor Ed Phillips (left) and maintenance foreman Wayne Smith line up equipment at the end of the day. Right, employees Gary Stephenson and Shalom Simms get ready to call it a day.

Yahn arrived at a price.

Zimmerman accepted. "He told me that our price was a little more than what he had been paying but that I seemed honest," recalls Yahn.

Ground Control got the job—and the mess that came with it. The lots were in poor shape, some half completed and abandoned.

Somehow, Ground Control survived that first big job, leading to a

long and prosperous relationship with Greater Construction.

It finally ended in the spring of 1984 when Yahn "started slipping," not giving Greater Construction the personal attention he always did.

"They were a major part of our business," says Yahn, noting that Greater Construction gave Ground Control \$250,000 in business in 1982.

Smartly, Yahn had developed

other resources and the loss of Greater Construction didn't crush his operation. By 1984, Ground Control had established itself as one of Orlando's biggest and best landscaping and maintenance companies.

And now there's one

Of the original partners, only Yahn

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Mike Guthrie, Ground Control maintenance administrator.

remains. Edwards left in 1979, Curran late in 1985. It's Mark Yahn's show with the capable help of office manager/wife Laurie, bookkeeper/mom Mary, and irrigation specialist/dad John.

Along with Mike Guthrie (maintenance administrator) and Jeff Deyo (construction administrator) they form Ground Control's management base.

Landscape construction accounts for 25 percent of gross revenues, maintenance 60 percent, and irrigation 15 percent.

'We have to improve the professionalism in our industry. That means fulfilling your end of the contract.'

—Yahn

Landscape architect Stephen G. Pategas, hired in December 1984, has helped the growth of the construction division, giving Ground Control design expertise it once had to hire from the outside.

Yahn's quick to credit the Orlando area for his success. Steady growth continues with a parallel growth in multi-family and commercial structures.

Maintenance/landscape firms are warring for the business. "You think this is a highly-competitive area until you go to an ALCA conference and

Mark Yahn: growing up with Ground Control

Take your average 28-year-old. A bit wild still, a bit emotional, perhaps, a little flighty. And certainly almost always right.

Now take your average 28-year-old and put him at the head of a multi-million dollar business and what do you get? Someone a bit wild, emotional, and flighty, who almost always thinks he's right, running a multi-million dollar business. Right?

Well, maybe. At 28, Mark Yahn runs Ground Control, probably exhibiting some of those 28-year-old traits. Like most young men, he's emotional, maybe too much so. He admits: "I'm very emotional with my business. I take my business very personally. I get excited when we get the big job and take it real personally when we just miss the big job."

He has weaknesses and strengths. He's taken time to analyze his traits and use the "data" to his advantage.

According to Mark Yahn, he excels at:

- **Marketing.** "I know what we are and I know how to tell people what we are."

- **Delegating authority.** "Some people call it lazy, I call it delegating authority."

- **Planning future growth.** "Our growth projections have been fairly accurate."

He lacks in these areas:

- **On-site instructions.** "I don't do real well with in-depth instructions to the workers. I'm not good at handling the on-site labor force."

- **Accounting.** "My accounting abilities—there's not a lot of talent there. That's where (wife) Laurie complements me."

- **Technical knowledge.** "I don't have much technical knowledge on the irrigation end. That's where my dad (John Yahn, head of irrigation) comes in."

Similarly, the landscape business has its advantages and disadvantages.

Among the advantages Yahn cites are: 1) challenge ("making the machinery run smoothly."); 2) freedom of movement; 3) financial possibilities; 4) direct results attainable from the work; 5) variety of people you meet.

Yahn's list of disadvantages: 1) disappointments ("losing the big job."); 2) quality and quantity of employees; 3) financial risk ("the sheer risk of being in business."); 4) level of competition; 5) the need to be so heavily equipped.

—Ken Kuhajda

everyone has the same problem. It doesn't seem as bad," says Yahn.

But that one low-baller or semi-professional is a risk to the industry, says Yahn.

"We have to improve the professionalism in our industry. That means fulfilling your end of the contract—by using high-quality materials, for example," says Yahn.

"And at the same time the owner needs to be sincere in his bidding and needs to qualify his contract to eliminate the non-professional," he says.

The real key

Mark Yahn pauses. He's asked what is the one ingredient needed for a successful maintenance/landscape business.

Another pause, a rarity for the glib businessman. "I guess getting on an architect's bid list. That's it in a nutshell. Everytime you turn around

a new job comes up."

In 1986, Yahn may think twice before bidding the new jobs. He calls 1986 a "critical year."

"We're not going to grow as much this year and that's on purpose. We need to slow down a little bit and not relax on any job. We don't want to get reckless," he says.

The maintenance division, which accounted for almost all the \$1.1 million in gross revenues in 1982, has slowed somewhat, as landscape construction and irrigation have taken off.

Despite maintenance's slowdown, Ground Control has grown, leading one to conclude that there is a bullish market to be tapped in Orlando for the construction and irrigation divisions.

Talk of millions of dollars doesn't awe the 28-year-old. For like his company's name, Mark Yahn has his feet completely on the ground. **WT&T**



David Frank points out the area where a new office addition will be located.

STRAIGHT SHOOTER

David J. Frank Landscape Contracting isn't among the top 50 landscape companies in the country—yet. But, with 60 percent annual growth, it might show up on the list soon.

by Jerry Roche, editor

In 1959, when David J. Frank was 10 years old, he started a lawn and garden service. Seven of the original clients are with him today.

In 1970, when David J. Frank was a junior in college, he was making more than \$20,000 a year in the landscaping business.

January 1, 1986, David J. Frank became president of the Milwaukee Chapter of the Wisconsin Landscape Contractors Association.

Today, his company—David J. Frank Landscape Contracting of Germantown, Wis.—has 19 crews and is growing at a 60 percent per

annum clip.

You should have figured out by now that David J. Frank is not your prototypical entrepreneur.

Slim, bespectacled and dapper, Frank is also a self-proclaimed straight-shooter...from the hip.

"When I started, I was exactly the kind of thorn-in-the-side business that I now sit around and complain about," Frank states frankly. "But in November of 1976, I went to my first ALCA (Associated Landscape Contractors of America) Landscape Maintenance Division conference in Lincolnshire, Ill. That meeting blew

me away. It really opened my eyes.

"Today, I can trace most of my business progress through things I learned from ALCA."

His company has evolved with the industry.

"One of the most exciting changes is that professionalism is improving," Frank notes. "Years ago, I used to get discouraged because the consumer had so little esteem of the intricacies of landscape contracting. That has changed, and the contractors and professional organizations have changed it. What the industry's doing, clients like."

Roots of success

The roots of Frank's success are deep.

"I was brought up in a middle-class family with a real work ethic," he says. And by the time he was in high school, the people around David J. Frank knew that work ethic would serve him well.

Upon his election as senior class president, Frank decided to operate the resources at his disposal like a business. The outcome was predictable.

LANDSCAPE PROFILE *continued*

"Our net income was \$25,000," he remembers, a big smile crossing his face now. "All those Dominican nuns couldn't believe it when we handed them the money at the end of the year."

"I've always kind of had a take-charge attitude. Four or five years ago, I realized I couldn't work for somebody. I'm afraid I wouldn't be a very good employee."

But he's not always been a good employer either.

"Because of my high standards," he admits, "I used to be an SOB at times. For years, my standards were way up here. Entry level people have standards, too, but there was just such a chasm. I had unrealistic expectations."

Turnover rates low

He has survived that challenge just as he survived some lean early years back in 1972. This last year, turnover at the important crew leader level was zero; a few years ago, it might have been 50 to 60 percent.

"I'm involving more people in decision-making now," Frank says. "I don't shove things down their throat any more. If people make decisions by themselves, they're motivated to carry the plan out."

The company has two vice-presidents: Mike Frank, David's brother, for the landscape construction division and Robert Heldt for the management department.

Frank himself likes to divide the business another way, though: into what he considers its three most important components—hiring, training, and managing personnel.

"First of all, you need the right person for the right job, and that's a big job in itself that consists of recruiting, interviewing, and selecting.

"Then there's training. If you want to teach effectively, your employees need to see, hear, write, discuss, and experience.

"Managing and motivating is the third thing: how you keep people on track and how you let them know they're a winner."

To that end, Frank recently established a new position: senior crew leader with a pay scale 50 percent higher than that of crew leader.

"One of the classic mistakes is taking the best crew leader and making him a supervisor. Some

don't do well at all," Frank explains. "The senior crew leader position is for people who want a career path in horticulture. We have one, Ken Plumb, who's been in the industry 16 years. He's a poet on a grading tractor."

Frank says that the position is not granted, but earned, based on three factors:

- costing consistently under budget;
- complaints and callbacks low or zero; and
- mastery of 70 percent of the skills in the job description.

"You should see the productivity of somebody like that," he claims.

Expansion

As you might expect, Frank sees a bountiful future for his company. As

'One of the classic mistakes is taking the best crew leader and making him a supervisor. Some don't do well at all.'

—Frank

a matter of fact, he is expanding his physical facilities this winter with the addition of one building (new total will be three) and 5,400 sq. ft. (new total will be 18,000 sq. ft.).

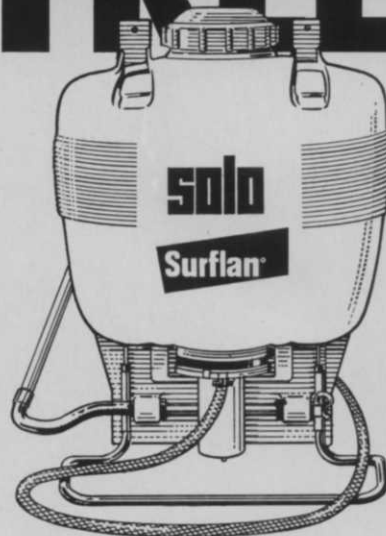
"The new facility will include a training center that seats 125 employees," Frank says. "We've spent the last couple of years getting our people resources in place. Now it's time to expand our facilities."

But he doesn't want to give away long-term plans. In one breath he says that there will be no branch expansion. "Despite the growth, my managers and I are clearly not doing as good a job as we could...so why consider branches?...we don't want to expand in errors and mistakes!"

Then, later in the conversation, he contradicts himself: "In the next 10 to 20 years, we're going to see some exciting things happen like the emergence of more regional landscape management firms...I want to make sure my company is part of that."

It will be, if past success is any indication. **WT&T**

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LANDSCAPE PROFILE

A GOLD MEDALIST

Award-winning Chapel Valley Landscape Company of Woodbine, Md., continues to gather the accolades. Owner Landon Reeve thinks that's great but not as great as a satisfied client.

Ken Kuhajda, managing editor



Landon Reeve could probably wallpaper his entire office with awards earned by his Chapel Valley Landscape Company.

Those walls do support plaques and certificates earned since the company's birth in 1968. Chapel Valley is that good.

Those in the industry realize Chapel Valley is one of the finest landscaping companies in the Eastern United States.

Awards are more than wallpaper, says company owner Reeve, but he doesn't enter competition for himself. He does it for the clients.

"I don't count them," he says, genuine modesty surfacing. "When we feel we have quality jobs, we enter them, not only for the recognition of the employees and our company—more for the recognition of the client."

Some of those clients? Mobil Oil headquarters, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore Hyatt, Martin Marietta headquarters, and a wheelbarrow-full of others.

Baltimore, Washington D.C., or northern Virginia, you'll find Chapel Valley Landscape crews improving the landscape.

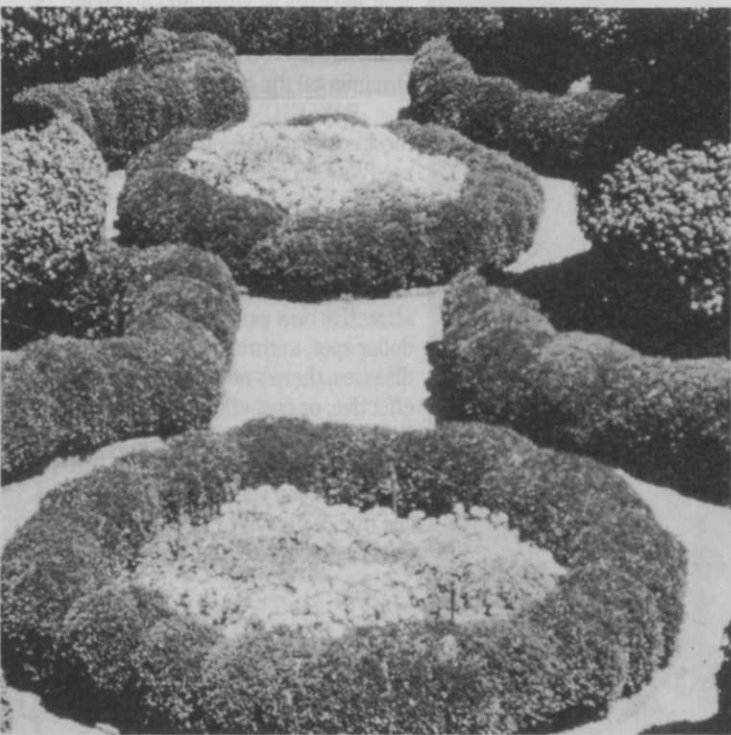
37 acres

If you're heading west of Baltimore and you're hungry, it's a good idea to stop on Baltimore's western fringe. If you continue out I-70 West, you



Three of Chapel Valley Landscaping Company's showcase award-winners, counterclockwise from top: a condominium project in Bethesda, Md. that features a courtyard over the top of a parking garage; Duke Street Metro Office Building, a leased office building; and Martin/Marietta Corporate Headquarters in Bethesda.

LANDSCAPE PROFILE



Two flower beds set on white gravel make a striking setting.



Landon Reeve, the brains behind the success of Chapel Valley Landscaping.

won't find much.

Baltimore doesn't have many suburbs that way.

For 20 miles along I-70, cows and silos dominate the landscape. It's farm country, it's serene.

On a 37-acre plot of land amid this tranquility sits Chapel Valley.

Six acres are developed; the nursery takes up 10.

That gives 100 or so peak-season employees room to roam. Reeve gives them the figurative room. "In this industry, people are number one in importance. If you have the right people, you can do anything," he says. "I can buy 50 trucks tomorrow but couldn't buy 50 good employees."

Most Chapel Valley field people work four 10-hour days. Reeve pays them well. He gets results.

"Our staff is excellent," he says. Unemployment is an obscure two to three percent in the Baltimore-Washington area. Reeve admits he can't fill all his positions. But he's been lucky over the last 17 years. "In our industry, the number one problem, as always, is people," he says.

A first-class area

Although there's a manpower shortage in the Baltimore-

Washington area, there's no shortage of development.

Commercial construction, Chapel Valley's niche, runs unabated. Competition between Baltimore and Washington for that corporate dollar is at an all-time high.

Similarly, competition among landscape firms is heavy. Chapel Valley has changed to keep pace.

In the last year-and-a-half, Chapel Valley has computerized

'My goal has always been to do a quality job and let the result of that dictate the size we will be.'

—Reeve

its buying, billing, and marketing functions.

The landscape installation division, the company's strength, has been streamlined. Landscape manager Dan Tamminga supervises two regional managers, each with his own territory.

Each manager oversees specific

projects, maintaining close contact with field foremen. Reeve says the structure has worked, providing efficient construction methods. Landscape workers total 35, with five crews of six.

Another change is the success of the maintenance department, formed just five years ago.

Maintenance manager Rich Grigalus oversees eight crews and 27 employees.

The workers further their educations by attending horticulture training seminars. Five have pesticide licenses.

Chapel Valley has maintenance field offices in Bethesda, Md., and northern Virginia. The company makes an effort to hire those in the local work force.

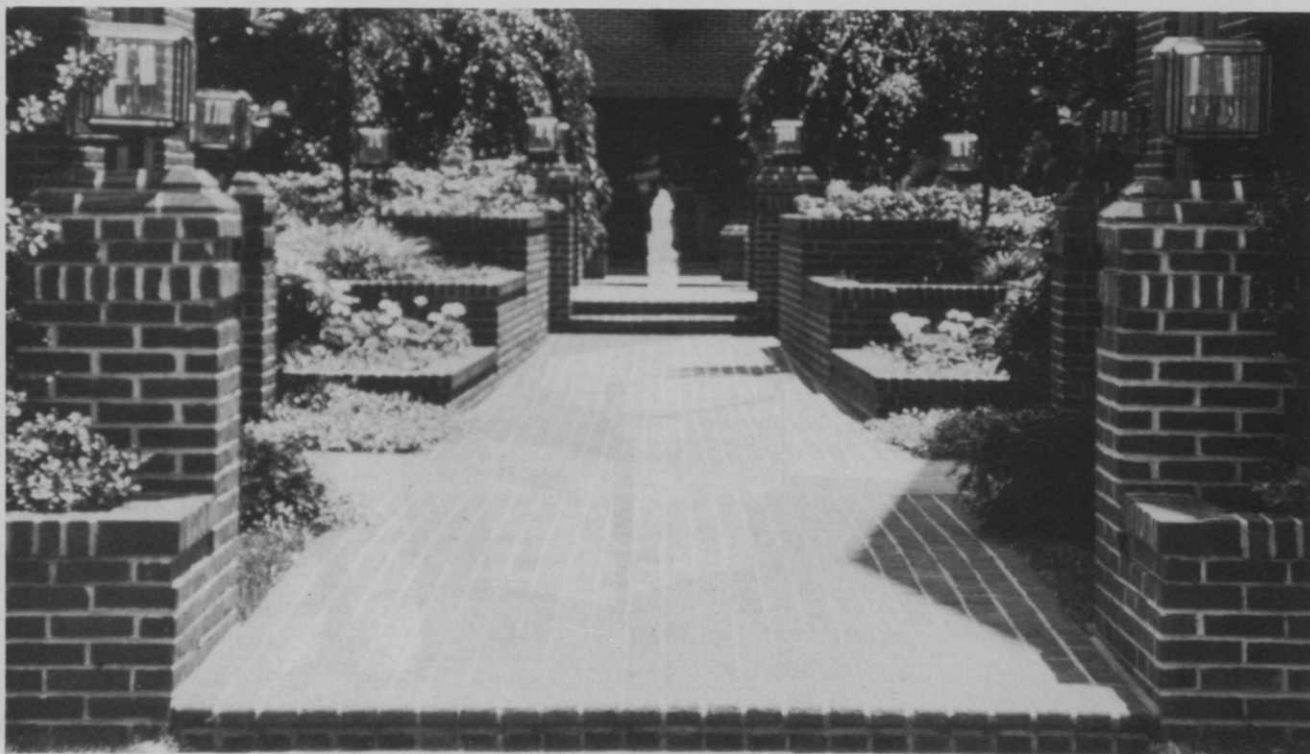
Another asset is a growing landscape design department that now includes five landscape architects.

Just a day off

When the pieces of Chapel Valley interlock, gross revenues total almost \$5 million. Back in 1968, Landon Reeve only wanted to work less than a seven-day week. He didn't dream of heading a multi-million dollar corporation.

"We've become a little larger than

LANDSCAPE PROFILE



A harmonious water fountain installed on the Duke Street project in Alexandria, Va.

I thought we would," he says. "My goal has always been to do a quality job and let the result of that dictate the size we will be. I felt we could grow, but we didn't sit down and say we would be this size by this date."

His partnership in a lawn and garden center lasted from 1964-67 ("we struggled," he recalls), but working every day from March 1 to July 4 left the University of Maryland grad little time for his wife Janet, who was expecting their second child.

(Daughter Deonne, 19, is now a sophomore at Western Maryland College while son James is a junior at Blue Ridge School in Dyke, Va.)

They solved their problem by starting their own business on a plot of land purchased in 1967.

A commercial business

Little Chapel Valley, officially seeded in 1968, prospered from day one. Landon and Janet still worked six to seven days in the early years until growth and key hirings made possible more relaxing five-day weeks.

Chapel Valley started in both residential and commercial landscaping but has made an intentional turn toward commercial.

"Ten years ago we did as much residential as commercial," says Reeve. The switch, he says, allowed the

company to reach a "comfort level."

"We felt our production could be a little better with the commercial end. We get a better return on our dollar," he says.

"We felt you couldn't serve both with the same attitude and same people. Residential is a much more emotional experience while commercial is much more objective."

Reeve feels his company—with its large-equipment inventory—is more effectively geared toward the less labor-intensive commercial construction end. "We really felt we weren't serving the residential customer properly," he says. "We still do a certain amount of residential, generally large residential projects."

Reeve: a support person

Commercial landscaping, maintenance, marketing, quality control—Chapel Valley's services are prototypical of a successful firm.

Reeve touches all areas, both directly and indirectly, in the form of a support employee. "I spend a lot of time working with the four managers, working to help them achieve their goals. Since I am a horticulturalist I might accompany the sales people to a presentation."

At other times, Reeve thinks

about tomorrow, not today. "I'm spending more and more time doing forecasting and planning—that is, what are we going to do next year," he says.

He's also the PR man. "I'm involved with ALCA (he's immediate past president of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America/Landscape Maintenance Division) and other associations. As a person I feel I have an obligation to try and project our company in a positive way to both the industry and the public," he says.

One of his PR tools is a slick, full-color brochure titled "Landscape." It's published quarterly.

The marketing tool showcases Chapel Valley accounts, explains company philosophy, and introduces and reintroduces company employees.

Employees Tom Tait (Baltimore marketing manager), Stewart Rom (landscape architect), and Peter Koeppen (marketing representative) collaborated on the editorial material while Koeppen and Reeve handled photography.

Group participation. Teamwork. A blending of various talents into one coherent whole. Satisfied clients. That's why Chapel Valley has enough awards to wallpaper its office. **WT&T**



INSTANT EFFECT

Today's landscapers know that clients can't afford to wait. The results are much more mature landscapes in much shorter time periods.

Traditionally, landscaping is used to decorate and direct.

It highlights your strengths, hides your weaknesses, and indicates where to look and walk.

But recently it has taken on a new role: helping lease space at new office complexes and industrial parks.

In the past, the star at a new development was the bright new building. The trees came later. Developers landscaped only minimally, planting small trees, hoping that in 20 years the trees would be bigger and fuller, thus hiding the aging building.

Today, that's not the case. "Trends in commercial landscaping have changed dramatically in the last 10 to 15 years," says Walter Flowers, president of Moon/Rickert Nurseries in Yardley, Pa.

"Until recently, the main consideration for landscaping was the zoning requirement, what you had to do to get site plan approval. Today, to put it in a nutshell, developers are spending more money on larger specimens to create an instant effect earlier in the construction of a project," he says.

An established look

Flowers says developers want potential tenants to "feel" that a new building has been there for a while.

"Going in up front with landscaping creates that impression. Then leasing agents don't have to rely only on renderings showing



Above and below left, the landscaping is showcased at The Prudential's Freedom Business Center in Valley Forge, Pa.

projected landscaping. It's an immediate amenity. And if the site is aesthetically pleasing, it's much easier to sell the package," he says.

Flowers cited Prudential's Freedom Business Center in Valley Forge, Pa., as an example of the new trends.

Long before the steel went up, the site was graded, topsoil was spread, grass was planted, and the parking lot, signage, and marketing trailer were landscaped.

"When a potential tenant came to the site, he saw attractive landscaping from the highway to the parking lot to the marketing center and back again," says Flowers.

"Hopefully his impression was that if Prudential is taking care of the outside, they probably will take care of the inside as well," he adds.

Ken Koldziej, Rickert vice-president of sales, says competition has caused the landscaping change. "The better developers are spending money because they're trying to attract better tenants in return," he says.

"Some clients are spending \$1.50 a square foot just for landscaping alone. Some will spend more than that on small projects," says Koldziej.

"Suppose you had \$10 million in buildings. Even with a 10 percent interest rate, that's \$85,000 a month it costs to have empty square footage sitting there. So if landscaping helps to rent the space, it's worth the investment," he says.

An expected amenity?

But there's a flip side to the investment issue. Some say quality landscaping is becoming such an expected amenity that it's difficult to know if you're getting a return.

"As far as working out the dollars and cents, it's very hard to pinpoint," said Kim Sermersheim, investment manager for The Prudential Realty Group and project manager for Freedom Business Center.

"You look at landscaping from a cost point of view but you also look at what the landscaping contributes to the quality of the site.

"As we come into work along the highways, we're bombarded with various forms of visual pollution," Sermersheim continues. "Road signs, parking lots, and electrical and mechanical equipment, for example, all detract from an attractive and comfortable office complex."

Sermersheim adds that landscaping can transform these unsightly areas and create a natural and pleasing environment.

Sermersheim has no qualms about calling Freedom Business Center "extensively landscaped."

"Most times it refers to quantity, not quality. When we use the term, it refers to both. The Prudential philosophy is to create quality work environments that people will appreciate on conscious and subconscious levels. That's where you get returns on your investments: by tenant satisfaction, lease longevity, and a positive image as a developer who cares," he says.

At Freedom Business Center, situated on 24 acres, the landscaping was purposely blended with the existing campus.

"The design goal was to introduce four new buildings to a site bordered by well-landscaped properties and Valley Forge National Park," says Koldziej.

"Prudential added 400 trees to the site and accented it by adding berming and mounding, which gives the site curves and angles and makes it appear softer visually and physically. Now the site gently rolls right into the park," he says.

A softer look

Koldziej notes several techniques that give a site texture and color to make the buildings appear to be more than steel and concrete.

Among them:

- Small, round trees or shrubs at corners to soften visual lines,
- Winding paths from the parking lots to the buildings to create a relaxing mood,
- A variety of trees to give visual relief.

Flowers tells an interesting story of how a different tree didn't work.

"We had a client who spent \$150,000 to landscape a fairly small site. We put some trees in the entrance that were outstanding specimens but had strange, twisting shapes.

"The chairman of the board had us remove them and put in evergreens. His rationale was that crooked trees projected a crooked image. Evergreens, on the other hand, were straight and trim, corporate and structured.

"That's how far it's gone. Even CEOs are concerned with how landscaping projects an image," says Flowers. **WT&T**

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Bob Sowers (right) and Rhone-Poulenc turf products sales specialist Chuck McGilloway discuss disease control on one of Sunnybrook's immaculate greens.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Sunnybrook super Bob Sowers makes the most out of a modest operating budget, keeping the course maintained to tournament standards. Though difficult, it's not an impossible task.

Many superintendents of private, limited-membership golf courses have at least two things in common, a membership that demands first-class playing conditions and a modest operating budget. Sunnybrook Golf Club in Plymouth Meeting, Pa., with a membership that holds steadily year after year at about 280, is no exception.

Bob Sowers, superintendent at Sunnybrook since 1970, has learned by necessity to prudently manage his budget and his course without

compromising the quality of play at the Club.

Designed by William Gordon and constructed in 1954, the 6,800-yard par 72 course gets a meager 12,000 rounds of play per year. However, Sunnybrook annually hosts the U.S. Women's Amateur and U.S. Senior Amateur tournaments. So despite the relatively light daily play, Sowers, his assistant Fred Ammon and a fulltime crew of two men must keep Sunnybrook maintained to tournament standards.

When it was built, Sunnybrook

was surrounded by farms and woods. During the past 15 years, the rolling hills of Montgomery County, which adjoins Philadelphia, have been sprouting homes instead of crops. Sunnybrook was carved out of the heavy clay soils characteristic of southeastern Pennsylvania. Unlike most soils in the Northeast which are in the acid range, the soil at Sunnybrook is slightly alkaline because the course abuts a limestone quarry.

"On windy days you can see limestone dust blowing across the

course from the quarry," says Sowers. "To bring the pH down to 6.0 I apply about 65 pounds per acre of sulfur each year."

Water, fertility

The clay soil at Sunnybrook drains poorly, so water management is one of Sowers' biggest concerns. "The worst possible situation is to have our members play through water," he says. Fortunately, the course's drainage system does a fairly good job. On the other hand, summer dry spells are not uncommon; throughout the season Sowers frequently uses a soil probe to keep track of soil moisture levels.

Sowers believes that most courses are overwatered. By irrigating only when it's necessary, Sowers controls his equipment operating and maintenance expenses, and reduces the turf problems associated with too much soil moisture.

"I keep water and fertility levels to the minimum required to maintain healthy turf so that thatch doesn't get out of control," he explains.

The tees and greens at Sunnybrook receive two 2 pounds



Bob Sowers believes that the key to thatch control is keeping water and fertilizer to the minimum required.

per 1,000 square feet applications of nitrogen annually, and the fairways get one pound per 1,000 square feet of nitrogen twice each year. In addition, Sowers fertilizes the turf once late in the season to build up carbohydrate reserves and to get a quick green-up in the spring.

Thatch control

Thatch control is an important concern for Sowers. Not only does heavy thatch affect golf play, but it ties up vital nutrients and harbors disease organisms.

To control thatch, Sowers verticle mows the fairways once per week during the growing season and aerifies twice per year. He generally keeps the fairways cut to 1/2-inch, tees to 3/8-inch and greens to 5/32-inch, but during the mid-summer he'll raise the cutting height slightly if the weather remains hot and dry for any length of time.

Sowers, a Penn State graduate with a degree in agronomy, prefers the perennial grasses because they require less maintenance and water than annual bluegrass. Sunnybrook is about 85 percent bentgrass. Sowers has a constant battle with poa annua and clover, which tend to spread if the bentgrass is stressed for any reason.

Spreading it out

The annual budget at Sunnybrook permits Sowers only a limited amount of money for construction, so major projects such as the renovation of Sunnybrook's bunkers are spread over several years. The most recent major project was the construction of a new equipment building in 1981. Sowers is pleased with the spacious new building which houses his office and provides plenty of space for equipment maintenance and storage.

During the past couple of years, Sowers has had to deal with two problems affecting Sunnybrook's trees that superintendents in other parts of the country don't commonly encounter: gypsy moths and Diplodia tip blight.

Controlling a heavy infestation of leaf-munching gypsy moth caterpillars in 1982 was fairly straightforward. Sowers hired a local aerial applicator who used a helicopter to make one application of carbaryl. He doesn't expect that



The view of the 16th hole fairway at Sunnybrook shows well-groomed predominantly bentgrass turf that Sowers works hard to maintain.

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LANDSCAPE PROFILE

he'll need to repeat the application, but he plans to carefully monitor caterpillar populations this spring.

The second problem was not so easy to diagnose or control. With the help of Penn State Extension Service, Sowers discovered that *Diplodia* tip blight was responsible for the death of 24 Austrian and red pines, and the decline of 122 other conifers on the heavily wooded course. This spring, Sowers plans to follow Penn State's recommendation to make three applications of benomyl to halt the disease.

Disease control

In addition to carefully managed fertility and water management programs, Sowers feels that a regular turf disease prevention and treatment program is essential to maintaining the turf quality at Sunnybrook.

"Bentgrass is more prone to diseases than most species," Sowers says, "so a good fungicide is a necessity. Dollar spot is my biggest disease problem, and it was particularly bad this past July because of the high temperatures.

"Our board of directors approved the purchase of Chipco 26019, based on a photograph I had taken of one fairway where I had tried the product," he says. "One of my crew accidentally missed a strip down the middle of a fairway while he was spraying. The contrast between the untreated area infested with dollar spot and the lush treated grass down the sides convinced the board."

In 1985, Sowers' first fungicide application was on June 10. He treated greens and tees every 14 to 21 days and fairways every 21 to 28 for the remainder of the season.

"With the cost factors, such as labor and equipment that you face today, you can't afford to apply a fungicide every seven days," says Sowers.

Sowers believes that getting out on the course and playing golf, as he does regularly, has helped him learn to manage his course better. "Many superintendents look at the course from a maintenance point of view rather than from the player's point of view," he explains. Bob Sowers has managed to combine the best of both worlds at Sunnybrook. **WT&T**