

HAVE SOIL PROBE, WILL TRAVEL

Green industry consultants come in all shapes and sizes. Whether you're in the private or public sector, a landscape contractor or a golf course superintendent, you might need one some day.

by Jerry Roche, editor

They are the trouble-shooters. They're the hired guns of the turf industry. They're "consultants," and they come in all shapes and sizes, each armed with enough technical information to solve your problems.

But many landscape managers and golf course superintendents are not all that interested in them. Why? Because most consultants cost money—money that could just as easily be spent on fertilizer or a new mower. Yet they do exist—on any level from your local extension agent to the USGA Green Section to commercial interests—and they do have a place in the green industry.

Got a seemingly unsolvable problem with either your turf or your business? Don't be afraid to seek outside help, even if you've got to pay dearly. It will probably be worth it. "Consultant," by its very definition, is someone who specializes in answering specialized problems. Most have advanced college degrees; virtually all have seen problems you would probably never think of. And, through years of experience, they have the answers—or they know how to get the answers.

The trick to efficiently using consultants is to define your objectives before you start, and then work toward those objectives. Do you need an answer to a particular problem? Do you need help implementing a particular program? Or do you need an overall analysis of your operation or golf course, like an annual physical check-up?



Ken Miller (right) and associate Mike Miller on-site, the "first link in getting a client in touch with the last link."

Here, then, is a brief rundown of the kinds of consultants available to you, the landscape manager or golf course superintendent.

Agronomic consultants

You can find specialists in turf, trees, ornamentals or soil—virtually any horticultural or agronomic area. But they're in short supply.

"There's a deficiency in horticulturally-trained people," says Ken Miller, who owns his own consulting business in St. Louis. "It's not a financially attractive job; it's usually a labor of love. I think there's an incredible need in this type of service."

Miller, for one, offers specific services. He begins every job with a site inspection, tagging every tree and plant, giving the landscape manager a maintenance schedule, recommending purchases, and answering any particular technical questions.

"We're not pathologists or entomologists," says Miller, "but many

times we're the first link to getting clients in touch with the last link."

Miller is a believer in problem-solving with plants. Erosion problems, traffic control, masking ugly sites and eliminating wet areas can all be accomplished through judicious use of plants.

"Many of the people that hire us are happy to get another management perspective," Miller notes. "But nothing I say means anything if the follow-through is not there."

Dorothy Borland runs The Turf Expert, Denver, Col. She is a frequent speaker at state turf conferences.

"Many lawn care companies and maintenance companies don't know anything about turf—they're businessmen," she observes. "I can act as a mediator for on-site problems and take a lot of time-consuming duties off their hands. I can take that time to fine-tune turf recommendations. Landscape managers have other things to do."

Borland lists some of the services she offers: training sessions for employees in class and in the field, soil tests, problem evaluation, maintenance program evaluation, irrigation evaluation, phone consultation and mediation between property manager and landscape contractor.

"In essence, consultants provide technical expertise in an area that may not be the landscape manager's specialty—for less annual expense than having a full-time staff member," Borland says.

Bob Moeller of Grounds Manage-

ment Consultants, Carmel, Ind., cites these advantages of hiring a seasoned consultant:

- 1) the opinion of impartial professionals;
- 2) direct savings in cost of maintenance, personnel training and cost of supplies;
- 3) reduction in staff errors; and
- 4) individual attention to each facility.

The Grounds Management staff includes landscape architects; arborists and murserymen; specialists in turf, irrigation, maintenance and soil.

Extension agents

Agronomically-oriented, these are specialists in horticultural problems. They are paid by the land-grant college in your state and operate out of county offices so that they are probably the most authoritative people you can find for different geographical regions.

Janet Hartin, environmental horticulturalist for the San Bernardino County Agricultural Cooperative Extension, is responsible for the largest county in the nation, stretching from just east of the Los Angeles area all the way to the Nevada state line.

"The stronghold we have is that we



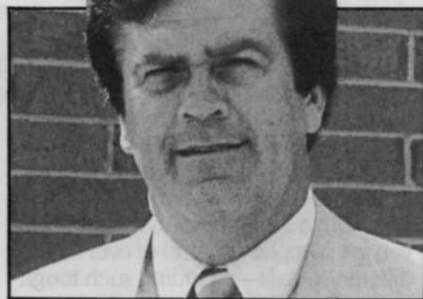
Dorothy Borland helps take time off clients' hands.

are unbiased," notes Hartin. "And our goal is to extend research-based information to commercial agriculturists, including landscape contractors."

Services provided by the nation's broad network of extension agents include testing soil, water and tissue samples; publishing educational agronomic brochures; and making on-site visits.

"We try to offer on-site consultation unless we physically do not have the time to do it," says Hartin. "Most of the time it's a one-shot deal. We have a list of consultants who we know are knowledgeable that we recommend."

Because of extensive field work, most extension agents have one spe-



Ed Wandtke is one of a "very limited" number.

cific day that they are in the office taking phone calls. If you plan on using extension agents as consultants, make sure you know their day in the office.

"Extension agents are great examples of narrowly-defined consultants," notes Ed Wandtke of All-Green Management Consultants, Columbus, Ohio. "They are uniquely qualified in a certain geographic area. And they're dynamite in that particular area."

Green Section

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Janet Hartin's stronghold is her objectivity.

since 1953. The service offers either a half-day or a full-day consultation for a minimal fee.

The consultation consists of a tour of the course by one of 10 regional agronomists, a discussion of all maintenance, an evaluation of individual problem areas and a written report.

"We're not trying to second-guess the superintendent," says Bill Bengeyfield, national director of the Green Section. "We're there as an employee of the course trying to form a conduit of information. We've helped superintendents sell ideas to their greens committees many, many times."

Each of 9 regional agronomists visits approximately 150 courses per year.



Bill Bengeyfield says Green Section "absolutely unbiased."

The Green Section consultants are unique in that they do not sell products, but are provided as a service to golf. "Our ace in the hole is that we're absolutely unbiased," Bengeyfield comments.

Business consultants

"Business consultants for advice in the industry are very limited," notes Wandtke, who with Dr. Rudd McGary writes a monthly column for *LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT*. "The biggest problem is that most business advisors are not really experts in the industry and don't know consumer- or commercial-driven businesses."

Wandtke points out that his clients use All-Green's expertise in one of four ways:



Bob Moeller promises individual attention.

1) for a particular project, like installing an accounting system;

2) for a one-shot "task," like a sales training seminar;

3) on call, as a 12-month-a-year consultant; and

4) on an informal basis as a member of the company's board of directors.

A final note

In your position as a landscape manager or golf course superintendent, you have to deal with turf problems, business problems and people problems. It is the rare person who can be an expert in all areas. When a problem arises that you don't feel qualified for, don't be afraid to admit it.

Then seek out a consultant. **LM**

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