

A GOOD ROOT FEEDING

Yes, the green industry remains strong as 1987 ends. But a good diet of education all around is needed to keep it healthy.

by Jeff Sobul, assistant editor

As the green industry closes out a dynamic year, it becomes obvious that education is needed.

Education not only within the industry, but for the public, the customer and potential customer.

The healthiest segment of the green industry remains the golf course segment. "I've never seen as many golf courses being built or reconstruction jobs done," says Gerald Faubel, superintendent at Saginaw (Mich.) Country Club. "It's wonderful to be associated with such a growth industry." (For more on the golf course boom, watch for a special section next month.)

There is, however, a flip side to this growth, Faubel notes. "I've seen no increase in students in university programs." He is not alone. Everyone contacted for this report expressed similar concerns.

People problems

A number of prominent schools such as Purdue have experienced significant declines in enrollment in agronomy programs. Others have remained steady, but have not increased to the point of nearing industry demands for graduates.

John Street, Ph.D. at Ohio State University, reports 110 students enrolled in agronomy, an increase of five from last year. Fifty of them are in turfgrass management. "This (enrollment) is pretty good considering other schools are down," he adds.

The Agronomy Department uses a strong state show (2,000+ attendees from 35 states) and the Agriculture

School's informational mailings as its chief methods of spreading information.

Penn State University is in a similar situation. Tom Watschke, Ph.D., has seen no increase in agronomy enrollment, with about half of the 38 students in the program studying turfgrass management.

Watschke says he would like to see about 150 students in agronomy, with the same 50/50 ratio of turf to non-turf. By his estimation, the program could place about 20 graduates a year—more this year, he says, if the grads were there. "There are barely, if ever, enough graduates to meet industry demand," he says.

Graduate students generally range from four to six. This year there are seven.

Why the shortfall of students? Education. "The opportunities are not being delivered to the high school students," Watschke says. He feels part of this is a stigma attached to agronomy because of its association with crop agriculture. Students are not well-informed on what agronomy is. High school guidance counselors fall victim to the same stigma, often steering away potential agronomy students because of it.

Richard Akerman of Oregon Landscape Maintenance echoes this sentiment. "The industry is not perceived as glamorous or well-paying," he notes.

Watschke says university and college programs need exposure and visibility at the high school level. Part of Penn State's information program is a new brochure mailed to students who

recently completed the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in Pennsylvania and probably neighboring states such as Ohio and New York.

In addition, Penn State is going to increase the activity of its agronomy alumni now in the green industry—between 1,200 and 1,500. "We know our course of action and we're going to take it," Watschke states.

Marvin Gross of Sarasota, Florida-based Marvin's Garden and Landscaping Service also sees the shortage. "There is a need for skilled, trained managers and sub-managers in the landscape industry," he says. With the public putting a greater emphasis on harder-to-maintain native ornamentals in landscapes, he notes there is a need for "more schools putting out better people." The industry needs to make employment opportunities more attractive, highlighting management and training opportunities, Akerman adds.

"Industry organizations should combine to promote, encourage and market careers in the industry," says Jeff Bourne, chief of the Bureau of Parks in Howard County, Md., and 1987 president of the Professional Grounds Management Society. "We must look to the future, to the foundation of the industry. Self-preservation of these organizations is a basic reason."

Some indications show that relief from the small graduate pool may be in store. Akerman reports that freshman enrollments in horticulture-related majors in northwest colleges, mainly Oregon State and Washington State, increased this year by 25 per-



Jeff Bourne: Contractors will diversify



Ron Kujawa: Mount public relations campaign.



John Street: Enrollment is up some at OSU.



Eliot Maras: Local media is positive

cent. Whether that increase is still reflected four years from now remains to be seen.

More PR?

The rest of the green industry needs to take the example set by the Professional Lawn Care Association of America with its recent campaign to beat back negativism directed at the industry.

Elliott Maras, editor of *Lawn Care Industry* magazine, notes that the PLCAA ran a sophisticated national public relations campaign which offset much of the negative publicity the industry was receiving as a result of attacks on 2-4,D and other chemicals.

"Local media ran more favorable articles and the national media did nothing, which was an improvement over the negativism of last year," Maras says.

He adds that as part of the campaign, education of existing customers also helped retain business. With the campaign, "existing customers put more credence in what LCOs were doing, not in negative media."

Ron Kujawa of KEI Enterprises feels the entire green industry should band together in an effort such as the PLCAA's, mounting one public relations campaign a year to battle such issues as unfavorable pesticide legislation or tax laws.

"We have to have ways of surviving," he states. "Get together as one voice. One guy writing doesn't mean a thing. A thousand, that's different." He calls on the major industry organizations to mobilize their members for such an effort, perhaps for a period of just one or two months a year, deluging Congress with letters and working to get favorable press.

Labor pains

The labor pool overall seems down in the green industry, partly because of the new federal immigration laws, partly because unemployment is down.



Rich Akerman: Perceptions aren't glamorous

Immigration laws have affected the South Central region (Texas) and west into California the most.

David Marsh of Industrial Landscape Service in San Jose, Calif., says the labor pool is a chief concern in the West. Marsh, who is Region 2 director of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, says "there used to be two or three people outside in the (company's) yard every day looking for work. They're not there anymore."

He notes the biggest effect is on larger businesses, which can't afford to try and skirt the new law. Smaller businesses, however, have an advantage because the law is harder to enforce on them. Marsh adds that many industries now are competing for the same reduced labor.

With unemployment down nationwide, Akerman notes, there is a smaller pool of employable people without jobs to hire seasonally; a double-edged sword if there ever was one.

Business sense

As with most businesses or industries, the health of the green industry is dependent on that of the U.S. economy.

Now things are going well, though the day most of the people were contacted for this report, the Dow Jones Industrial Average had just dropped 500 points.

But the industry is still attractive to outside investment. The lawn care industry can attest to this. It has consolidated extensively in the last year through takeovers such as Ecolab's purchase of ChemLawn and Waste Management's purchase of Tru Green (see *LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT* November, 1987).

Though lawn care market growth has slowed some, it remains at a healthy 15 to 18 percent annually, down from a high of 25 percent. Maras says this is a result of market saturation and not negativism, though.

Even with a downturn in the economy, the green industry generally



Tom Watchke: Programs need exposure

isn't affected for at least six to 12 months, when housing starts are completed and new starts slow.

This reaction time should be used wisely, Bourne notes. A lot of contractors, he feels, will be looking to diversify their services, such as a design/install contractor adding maintenance as a service. Akerman sees LCOs adding lawn maintenance as well.

A result of this is a greater need for business skills, Akerman adds. He says ALCA has begun a management seminar series to address this. Also, looking at the schedule for most state shows, management sessions are becoming more and more common.

Akerman says this increased awareness is something that has been going on most of the decade. "Without it, the industry would not have grown as it has in the last five years."

Industry growth has had a few unpleasant outgrowths as a result. Doug Fender, executive director of the American Sod Producers Association, has seen a lot of "me-too" entries into the sod market, people not sure what they're getting into, and worst of all, not sure what they're doing. "It's dangerous for them and the people in that immediate area," he says, with poor quality product being produced. "The long-term effect is negative in many cases for the professional sod market."

Contractors share similar concerns. Bourne terms them "Midnight Gypsies:" someone with a pickup truck, a lawn mower and a rake who calls himself a contractor. Bourne hopes that professional organizations can establish professional standards: quality—not quantity—for price.

For the most part, though, the quality is there, and the growth is continuing, though maybe a little slower. However, Kujawa summarizes, "if the whole economy goes to hell then we just suffer. We can't do anything about it. But as long as the economy is good, we can adapt."

So start adapting.

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