

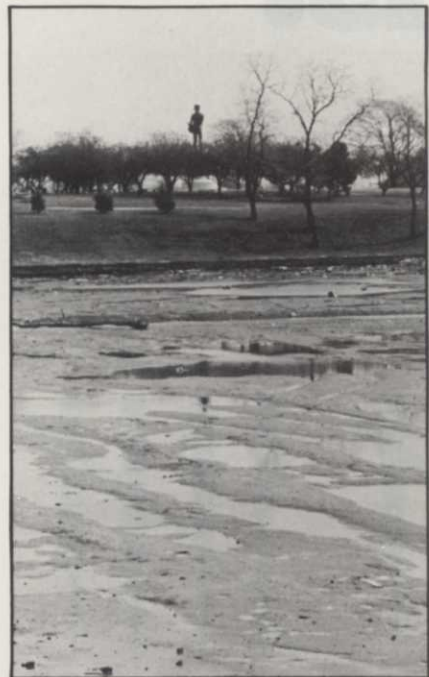
ALL-PRO LANDSCAPERS

The Ruppert Landscape Co. maintains an impressive client list with a 'mission' to be the best.

by Heide Aungst, associate editor



The Ruppert brain trust: Chris Ruppert (left), Chris Davitt (center) and Craig Ruppert. The trio began their turf career mowing lawns in Chevy Chase, Md.



It's easy to drive right past Ruppert Landscape Co.

The quaint red-brick house, which sits off an Ashton, Md., road, doesn't look like an office. It's just another house in the neighborhood.

But the house's history gives it an appeal the surrounding homes don't share.

Baseball Hall-of-Famer Sam Rice of the Washington Senators once lived there. And, if there was such a thing as a landscape Hall of Fame, the Rupperts would probably be inducted.

The Ruppert brothers, Craig 31, and Chris 33, moved their small business to Rice Manor in 1980. At that time they bought just two acres of the land surrounding the home. Today, the company owns almost 10 acres.

Back then, the company made \$440,000. This year the company will do about \$4 million in business.

They've come a long way from the humble beginnings of mowing neighborhood lawns in Chevy Chase, Md., for a few extra bucks. Their list of clientele includes the Saudi Arabian embassy and Vice President George Bush's home in Washington, D.C.

They're award winners, as well. The Rupperts won the Landscape Contractors Association of America's Metropolitan Washington award in 1984 for the Blair Complex, an apartment building.

Billers from the start

Craig started the company in 1971 at 18. Chris joined him the next year. One thing that set the Ruppert brothers apart from other neighborhood kids is that they would bill their customers, like a professional business.

In 1972 they hired a friend's kid brother, age 12, to help with the lawn mowing. Chris Davitt, now 26, has become a key decision-maker in the business.

Craig holds the title of president; Chris Ruppert is director of landscape; and Davitt is director of landscape management.

The three have never let their young ages deter them. In fact, the spirit of youth has perhaps

The "Wetland" project required restoring marshlands destroyed when a tunnel was built. The Ruppert Landscape Company won an award for the project shown here in before and after photos.

contributed to their success.

Take Ruppert's 1985 "Wetlands" project. Other landscape companies in the intensely competitive D.C./Baltimore market turned up their noses at the idea of restoring the marshlands which had been destroyed when the Baltimore Tunnel was built.

The trick was to create a wildlife environment in the tidal waters of Baltimore Harbor.

But the Rupperts, with no knowledge of aquatic plants, said they'd try.

They bought a boat and 25 life-jackets. Wading through mud between high and low tides, the daring company planted 650,000 bare root tubers (plants such as cattails) over 40 acres.

"There's been the attitude here which has prevailed since the beginning that they've never said they can't do a job," says Pat Ruppert, special projects coordinator. That's an attitude Pat had to learn when she married Craig five years ago. "There sure are a lot of dreamers here," she says.

Those dreams should lead to the opening of an office at a second site soon and possibly expanding to a national company someday.

Already, with close to a hundred employees, they're outgrowing the Rice Manor office.

Handling that many employees is something the three admit they didn't do well at first. As long as crews were working hard, it didn't matter if they were happy.

Employee rewards

"We used to get in the truck and curse the boss, who happened to be the Rupperts," Davitt says laughingly.

"Our biggest challenge is people," says Craig. "And we can't grow without people. Keeping everyone happy and productive, that's something we do well."

"We do it well," Chris Ruppert chimes in, "but it's still our biggest challenge."

To meet that challenge, they now give three annual awards for employee achievement. They hold monthly staff meetings, regular training seminars, and a competitive field day including a family cook-out.

They've begun an employee profit-sharing program. On top of that, the Rupperts know every worker personally, and publish "The Ruppert Report," a newsletter printed three times yearly to keep employees informed on projects and



The Rupperts purchased current home Rice Manor along with two acres of land in 1980. Today the company owns 10 adjacent acres.

company growth.

As with most companies, financial management is as important as personnel management. Although the company has printed financial statements since '72, they've learned a lot by trial and error.

"You name it, we've done it wrong," says Craig.

Their list of clientele includes the Saudi Arabian embassy and Vice President George Bush's home in Washington, D.C.

"There were several different times we didn't plan for the growth," Davitt explains.

"The key is not that you make mistakes, but that you learn from them," Chris Ruppert adds.

Running the company has been an education for the brothers.

Craig doesn't have a college degree. Chris has an associate's degree in business. Chris Davitt stopped short of receiving a bachelor's in business.

They learned about plant materials in the field and at seminars. Sometimes, the instructions on a fertilizer bag served as a teaching tool.

Trade associations and using the local extension agent helped the three

make it through some projects. Hiring qualified workers has helped, too.

Many of the Rupperts' managers are educated in related areas, such as horticulture.

In fact, the Rupperts have established a relationship with the University of Mississippi where students work on a co-op basis and then have the opportunity for a full-time position after graduation. They also plan to recruit from other universities.

More installation

But some things won't change as the company grows, the Rupperts emphasize.

For one thing, they will continue to concentrate on landscape installation and management. Landscape design or growing their own plant materials might look promising to some companies, but the Rupperts are wary about spreading themselves too thin.

They will still take on jobs which other companies might refuse.

The company's philosophy, which they call "The Ruppert Mission," is framed in almost every office at Rice Manor. The goal: to be aggressive, efficient and profitable.

"I have to read it every other day," Craig says.

One thing he doesn't need to be reminded of is the company's multi-million dollar figures. With those in hand, the three partners can breathe easily at the end of each day.

Mission accomplished. **WT&T**