



Since turf areas are scarce in Honolulu, Mulkern believes renovation is the key to a healthy yard.

LANDSCAPING, ALOHA STYLE

Hawaii may be a tropical paradise. But landscaping on the islands is a competitive business, in which Mulkern Landscaping has carved a niche for its customers.

by Heide Aungst, managing editor

Most people know of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos for one of two reasons: the hostility in the Phillipines or the thousands of shoes. Kevin Mulkern of Mulkern Landscaping in Honolulu, Hawaii knows the couple by its landscape. Or, would have, if things had gone as planned.

Mulkern's company installed the landscaping at the home the Marcos' planned to purchase in their flee to Hawaii. But neighbors didn't want the Marcos' to move in. Because of the

neighborhood pressure, the infamous couple bought a home elsewhere on the island.

Still, Mulkern and his co-owner and wife, Susan, landscape many of the homes of the rich and famous on the island of Oahu.

Their business is small, but successful, amidst the competitive atmosphere of the island. Susan estimates 1987 gross sales around \$300,000. The company has seen steady growth and success since its beginning in 1975.

Back then, Kevin worked alone,

when he wasn't too busy surfing, he confesses. The business started out by the North Shore, famous for its surfing. But after several years, and more than an hour commute to most accounts, he moved it into the city. "More of the money is on this side of the island," Mulkern explains. "And now I'm within 15 minutes of all my accounts."

Susan joined the business in 1978. Today, the company employs eight workers year-round, since there's never an "off-season" in Hawaii. They



Orchids can be planted in tree crevices to help create lush landscapes.

do a little bit of everything in the plant and landscape realm for the 40-plus homes under contract. Susan says the business expanded in 1987 from primarily installation/maintenance to about 50 percent design/build, 50 percent maintenance and installation. "We're finding that people are wanting a one-stop shop," she says. "It makes life a lot easier for them."

Much of the design/build includes nightscaping. Lighting is a popular

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landscape addition on the island, since people spend most of their time outside around their pools.

A different terrain

Working the Hawaiian landscape takes skill. "There's one inch of rainfall every block up to about two miles toward the mountains from Waikiki beach. It's dramatic going from desert to mountains," Mulkern says. "There are a lot of soil types, like sandy soils along the coastline. There's very alka-

line to very acidic, such as volcanic ash."

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Bermudagrass and zoysiagrass are the common home lawn turfs, while St. Augustinegrass grows in low-

maintenance areas.

Sprigs from the mainland must be quarantined for up to two years, since turf carries the same viruses as sugar cane. Then, it's expensive to install, a flat (1.39 square feet) of zoysiagrass sells for \$6 to \$7; centipedegrass is \$4 to \$5; and Bermudagrass is about \$3.25 a flat.

Mulkern uses mostly walk-behind equipment because of the small area of most lawns and narrow gates leading to yards. The rotaries include Lawn Boy, Snapper and Sensation. Reel mowers, which he uses on hybrid Bermudagrass lawns, are Pro Master and Trimmer.

The best tool, he says, is his Ryan verticutter. "Verticutting pulls out stems, rhizomes and stolens," Mulkern explains. It's especially important in zoysia lawns which develop thatch quickly. The process includes thinning the lawn, then aerating. Next, the crew top dresses with a light coat of sand or soil, depending on the site. "For clay soils we use a heavier soil so you don't get that ice cream sandwich effect," Mulkern says. Within two weeks, at any time during the year, the lawn begins to fill in.

But Mulkern found out through one lawn renovation that it's important to have good communication with customers. One of Mulkern's clients is a wealthy real estate investor who's home overlooks the ocean and who's spotless garage holds Andy Warhol prints. The man decided to throw an important party just days



Susan and Kevin Mulkern: landscaping paradise.



chads in tree crevices. "Trees bloom throughout the year based on how much water you give them," he says. I don't really notice a difference in seasons."

Uniformity

Despite the naturalness of the Hawaiian "tropical look," competition on the island is intense. "In the old days, I used to tell people it's a great business to get into, but there's too many now," he says.

One thing some of his competitors don't do is to require uniforms. "We

Each employee has 11 sets of shirts and pants. Each week they turn in five sets to be cleaned by the uniform supplier.

do a lot of work inside people's houses and it's awkward not to have people easily identifiable," he explains. "It's also convenient for them to have uniforms."

Each employee has 11 sets of shirts and pants. Each week they turn in five sets to be cleaned by the uniform supplier. The supplier also does alterations. That way Mulkern guarantees his employees show up in clean uniforms.

Another competitive aspect to the job is getting the projects. "Bids on a project can vary 40 to 50 percent," Mulkern says. "The most frustrating part of dealing with customers is that they don't understand what you're selling or what they need. Our higher price reflects that they're getting personal service."

Hawaii businesses also face laws which don't govern other states and which run up the cost of doing business. For example, it's mandatory for employers to carry medical insurance for employees. Companies are able to deduct 50 percent of the cost. The Mulkerns provide 95 percent of the cost of insurance. Employees contribute \$5 monthly toward the medical plan.

Business insurance is getting better. "Three years ago it was 17 percent," Mulkern says. "Now it's down to eight percent."

But the benefits outweigh the price according to Susan and Kevin. They plan to expand to the nursery side of the landscape business in the future.

One thing's for sure. They won't leave the island. Even residents know when they're in paradise. **LM**

To get a competitive edge in the market, Mulkern's employees will go all-out to maintain ocean-front homes.

after Mulkern's crew had heavily renovated the lawn.

"We used dye..green dye," Mulkern reminisces. "He had tables set up on the lawn, and even received compliments on his lawn."

Almost all landscapes are irrigated in Hawaii. Mulkern recommends his clients use automatic Rain Bird systems. "I haven't had a lot of success giving homeowners irrigation sched-

ules," he says.

Since turf is scarce, much of the landscape maintenance is done on plant material, like flowering jacobinia, plumeria trees or the state flower, hibiscus. In fact, Mulkern designed his own version of the hibiscus for his company logo.

"Most people want a lush tropical look," Mulkern says. To add flowers to trees, Mulkern's crew will plant or-