

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

INCORPORATING LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Certifying the industry

More landscapers are becoming certified, to raise the industry standards, boost their image, and in some cases, win bids.

■ Certification of landscape professionals is gaining ground throughout the green industry.

The benefits of certification are many, say the various directors of both state and national landscape associations, and can include better pay for a certified employee and more customers for the company that advertises its workers as certified. Crew certification can also grant a company exclusive bidding rights to certain projects, which is something many in the industry want to see made a standard practice.

Certification testing brings all the land-

scaping "tools" together. It helps the professional see what kind of progress he's made, and makes sense of all the "stuff" he's learned over the years. And in an industry that's had more than its share of mavericks, certification can be a step forward in establishing uniform professional standards coast-to-coast.

A handful of state and professional landscape associations offer certification programs. In February, the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) offers its first certification exam for business management, which will be available to 50 people. The curricula includes business planning, accounting, management, health safety and human resources, production and horticulture, law, sales, marketing, communications and public relations.

Other certification programs are offered by the Irrigation Association (IA), Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS), Florida Nursery Growers

Association (FNGA), and the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).

State landscape associations now offering programs include Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon, Texas and Washington. The Maryland/Washington D.C./Virginia association has a program for nursery growers only, but is considering whether to copy the California plan for contractors.

The ALCA program—Gary Thornton, of Thornton Gardens, Maineville, Ohio, is one of the leaders of the ALCA certification program. He says the association wants to improve the public image of both the association and the landscaping industry. "The obvious secondary benefit," says Thornton, "is to be able to qualify a person as a professional in the minds of others in industry and potentially, to a customer."

The ALCA program focuses on persons in the owner/manager/branch manger categories. Thornton says ALCA wants to cooperate with state associations that already

Green industry certification programs

Organization	Title	Fee	Description
ALCA (703) 620-6363	Certified Landscape Professional	\$225, members	400 multiple-choice questions designed for owners, managers or branch managers.
American Landscape Horticulture Assoc. (805) 498-6916	Certified Landscape Professional	N/A	For those above the technician level; two-year certification; continuing education required.
Arizona Landscape Contractors Assoc. 602) 468-9336	Certified Landscape Professional	workshops, \$30 exam, \$60	A 12-month program covering numerous skills, including: equipment operation; plant identification; safety; chemical application regulations, pest management.
California Landscape Contractors Assoc. (916) 448-2522	Certified Landscape Technician	\$250/\$175 \$50 discount for members	Not a substitute for the state's C-27 license. Three segments: construction; maintenance; and irrigation.
International Society of Arboriculture (217) 355-9411	Certified Arborist	\$100, members \$150, non-members	Includes tree nutrition and fertilization; installation; tree biology; identification.
Texas Assoc. of Landscape Contractors (800) 832-6934	Certified Landscape Professional	\$100, members \$300, non-members	Covers 20 areas of landscaping, including plant selection, hardscaping; blueprints; landscaping for resource efficiency and environmental safety.

Note: Oregon and Washington have begun programs modeled after California's. The following states have programs for nursery certification: Arizona, Alabama, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington.

Why certify?

1. Raise industry standards of excellence.
2. Establish guidelines for achievement.
3. Award high levels of competence in the profession.
4. Improve worker performance by encouraging continuing education.
5. Increase the self-esteem of the worker, manager, branch manager or owner.

offer certification programs for crewmen and specialists. A 15-title list of suggested reading material is provided to prepare for the four to eight hour test. The test contains 400 multiple-choice questions.

Beth Palys of the Landscape Contractors Association of Maryland/Washington D.C./Virginia, is awaiting a vote from the association's members to approve a proposed certification program. Palys says the program would be patterned after those in other states, and would include a hands-on construction test.

Palys says that some of the impetus for a certification program is the prestige that comes with the title. "It's a way of rewarding employees, and is a sign of a person's advancement in the profession," says Palys.

An industry model—California's certification program is becoming a model for the industry, and has been adopted by the Oregon and Washington groups. Divided into nine areas, it includes a much-admired two-day, hands-on construction test and a three-part written exam.

Irrigation installation is broken into connecting controllers, wiring valves, mainline installation, and lateral installation.

Applicants need to have a 70 percent score, and need to pass all different field tests to become a certified landscape technician in one of those three areas.

Kim Heckes, program coordinator, says a growing number of companies are requiring their foremen and supervisors to become certified, and some municipalities have written the requirement into specifications for companies bidding on government projects.

Heckes believes certification gives a contractor "an edge" when bidding projects, and says certification "shows that the person has the minimum skills to construct a landscape project and work on irrigation systems."

A veteran program—The Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association's (MNLA) certification program is entering its second decade.

Amy Frankmann, director of education for the Michigan Nursery and Landscape

Association, says certification helps to "identify the most dedicated" within the industry. The program is 11 years old.



Frankman: the 'most dedicated' become certified professionals.

Frankmann says the test had a 75 percent success rate last year, which was the highest results ever. She adds that many companies that send their people use certification as a basis for pay raises.

The Arizona Landscape Contractor Association program is designed to test basic landscape skills, according to Sharon Dewey, the association's executive director. A small part of the exam is written, 90 percent is practical and hands-on.

Dewey says certification "helps boost the individual's self-esteem, which is a plus in itself."

The xeriscape portion of the Arizona program was recently awarded the Arizona Water User's Education award for its contribution to water conservation education.

The Arizona certification program is sponsored by the University of Arizona, and endorsed by the International Society of Arboriculture. The state's extension office provides the facilities for workshops, and teaching staff. Extension members also make up the advisory board.

"Our entire program is geared toward the Arizona landscape," says Judy Alexander, president of the Arizona association and landscape superintendent at the Tucson Airport Authority. "It's main

emphasis is in the desert regions. There is some high-elevation training, but not as much as we'd like."

Although the program is still new, Alexander says early results are positive. "We know that there are individuals who have benefitted by it with salary increases," she says, "and their status and position in the company has been upgraded."

"As an industry, we have heard of only one project that has specified that it wants certified people to work on the project. "We need to educate landscape architects about who we are and what we are doing. Those are the people who will specify certified."

Defining the elements—John Gillan, marketing director for the Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS) says the association felt that all of its members would benefit from certification. "If nothing else," says Gillan, "it would indicate a willingness of grounds managers to define the basic elements of grounds management."

The PGMS program includes instruction on consumer protection and economic protection, as well as uniform recognition and establishment of parity.

The PGMS believes certification protects potential employers, since the employer would know that a certified grounds manager had passed a peer review as to minimum knowledge and competence.

The Texas Landscape Contractors Association—as a statewide entity—is now 10 years old, and has 175 certified members, out of a total of 335 company memberships.



Brinkley: certification strengthens association professionalism.

"In 1988," says president-elect Larry Brinkley, "we put together a long-range plan (for the association), and that included certification. We want to 'professionalize' our businesses, and be on a higher level. During 1992 we have strived to place TALC on an even higher level of professionalism."

—Terry McIver