

# Thinking about a nursery?

**Landscape contractors can give many reasons to start their own nursery, but there's only one valid reason: better customer service.**

■ Please: this stunt should be attempted by professionals only.

Approach the thought of starting your own nursery—particularly if you're a landscape contractor—with a level of trepidation equal to that of attempting to hurdle a razor-wire fence.

As your nursery ambitions grow, whether you're considering a small "holding" area, most assuredly if you're thinking wholesale or retail, raise the height of the fence correspondingly.

"There's an awful lot of work involved in operating your own nursery," says Ken Smith, The Landscape Company, Jacksonville, Fla. "It's a separate business from the landscape business, and if you're going to run a nursery and you're a small business, you won't get a vacation."

Barclay Bullock, Barclay's Gardens, Lake Oswego, doesn't see much benefit either from running his own nursery, particularly, not in the nursery-rich Pacific Northwest. He buys much of his material from brokers and wholesalers. "They (growers) don't want landscapers coming in and picking up five flats of this or two of that," says Bullock.

So much for the prerequisite dire warning.

There are, in fact, operations that successfully combine both a nursery with landscape services. We found several examples near our Cleveland offices.

Barnes Nursery Inc. of Huron maintains more than 125 acres of shade and ornamental trees and some evergreens on several small farms. But its core business is landscaping and landscape maintenance.

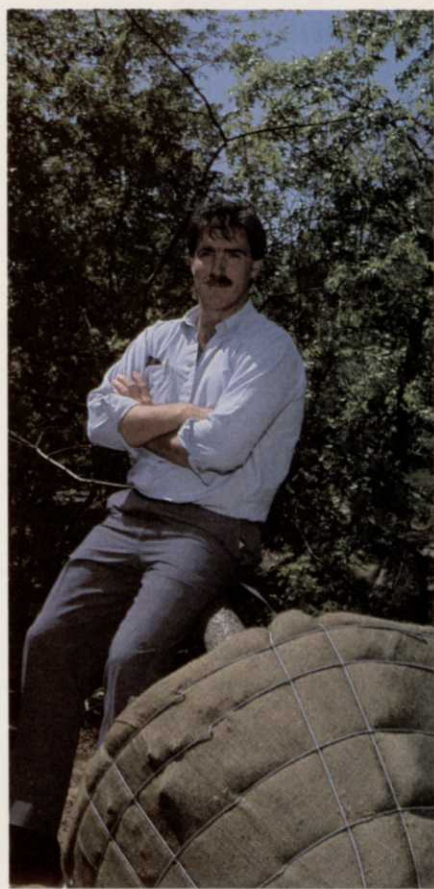
Barnes does not propagate its own trees. It buys "whips" and seedlings from many sources across the United States, much of it bare-rooted. The young plants, "liners," are stored in a cooler, which is about the size of a railroad box car, until they're planted in the fields, usually in early spring, says Stephen Coughlin, a landscape designer and Barnes' chief buyer.

**Lots of trees**—In the spring, Barnes' crews dig their trees, before they leaf out. Other landscapers have contracted for some of these dug trees; many end up in Barnes' landscape projects; and the public buys many at Barnes' colorful garden center.

"It's a crop that sometimes takes five to seven years before you harvest," says Coughlin. "It's a sizable expense because you have to trim and spray and water these trees as you would any other crop. You need extra equipment, and materials like wire baskets and burlap. Besides that, you're paying tax on the land."

Coughlin visits tree suppliers in person, including those on the West Coast, to get the best plant material at the best possible prices.

Sometimes he finds something



**Kurt Kluznik : how many businesses can a person be in?**

unique that will thrive in north central Ohio.

"A friend once told me that he can always tell a Barnes' landscape because there's almost always something unusual in it," says a smiling Coughlin.

**Busy company**—But Barnes isn't your typical landscape company—if there is such a thing.

Harold and Jean Barnes and several other family members started the company just over 50 years ago as Barnes Roses. A son and daughter-in-law, Robert and Sharon Barnes, and a handful of capable managers direct the company now.

Suggest to Bob Barnes that he wears four or five different hats and he responds with a wry smile, "make that 11 or 12 hats."

Barnes Nursery employs over 200 in season and offers landscape design, installations, maintenance, tree & shrub, lawn care, a retail garden center (with a new greenhouse of hanging baskets and exotics) and even a plant recycling/compost facility.

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**Another example**—Kurt Kluznik helped start Yardmaster, Inc. of Painesville fresh out of high school in 1971. It's also a full-service landscape company, but it doesn't have a retail garden center and Kluznik has no plans to start one.

"How many businesses can a person be in at one time?" asks Kluznik. "In May I can't handle one more thing. My springs are already full, and that's when the retail business kicks in."

Yardmaster does have a nursery, though: 40 acres of trees, evergreens, shrubs and some perennials.

"It's an expense, and you question it on a regular basis to make sure it still makes economic sense," admits Kluznik who cites certain cost savings like volume buying, and the advantage of having well-tended landscape stock always available for his company's installations.

"A lot of our work is sold in advance so we go ahead and buy the plants in the fall or spring, and put them back in the ground, and then we'll be able to harvest them later," says Kluznik. Typically, the plant material puts on more growth as it's tended and irrigated in Yardmaster's almost pure sand nursery.

"To use big plant material, you have to go out and find it. We do," says Kluznik.

Most of this stock is targeted for Yardmaster jobs. The company's designers and sales people get regular printed inventories of the stock including sizes, availability, etc.

"One of the things we try to do is give our customers a little bit more than they bargained for," says Kluznik. "If a person buys a six-foot hemlock, we don't want

**Stephen Coughlin, left, and Robert Barnes of Barnes Nursery say nursery expenses include extra equipment, materials and land taxes.**



them to go out and measure and say, 'This is only five-and-a-half feet.' We want them to measure it and say, 'Hey, it's seven feet.'

"We like to leave a client with an instant effect. We don't want it to look like we went to a garden center and put everything in a station wagon and then planted their job."

**'No' votes**—Despite these success stories, Tom Lied, Lied's Nursery Company, Inc. of Sussex, Wis., says most landscape contractors shouldn't be in the nursery business. Period.

He feels most landscape professionals can serve customers and themselves better by directing their energies and resources more directly to their core businesses: providing quality landscapes and/or maintenance services.

Landscape professionals thinking about starting nurseries, and even many who already operate them, may not really realize the true costs associated with farming trees and landscape plants, believes Lied.

Steve Coffey of Scapes, Inc. in Atlanta, Ga., is happy to leave the farming to others.

"We get almost all of our plant material directly from the growers," says Coffey.

"If everything goes like it's supposed to, it goes directly to the job site and gets planted. That way we don't double and triple handle the plant material. We don't even bring it to the yard. It takes time to handle plant material, and that's especially true if we're handling big trees."

There's a down side to this method, admits Coffey, particularly if a shipment doesn't arrive when it should. "You could have a crew sitting at a site with nothing to do," he says.

"Certainly, the way we do it takes a lot of coordination. But, it saves a lot of labor too," says Coffey, whose company, with offices in Atlanta and near Washington D.C., works throughout much of the Southeast.

—Ron Hall

## Nurseries mean legwork

### ■ Search and ye shall find.

That's the key to acquiring professional quality tree and plant material from suppliers.

You might even have to travel.

The nursery industry is increasingly more sophisticated, particularly the distribution of tree and plant material through wholesalers and now even re-wholesalers. But you'll still have to do a lot of the footwork yourself.

Stephen Coughlin, buyer for Barnes Nursery, regularly attends nursery industry trade shows, and makes trips to other nurseries, including periodic visits to the West Coast to personally meet suppliers and inspect their offerings.

Yardmaster's buyer makes the rounds of tree and plant suppliers and hand tags specific stock. Operator Kurt Kluznik says

this past year has been a good year for stock. Prices are reasonable because of the recession, and quality is good because of 1992's favorable weather.

Scapes, Inc. spends thousands of dollars each year in telephone charges in tracking down quality landscape material, says Steve Coffey.

"You have to search out the best sources for quality plant material," he says. "Without doing that, you just buy whatever's out there, and there's nothing more costly than an unhappy client when you get there with trees they're not happy with."

For more information, contact the American Association of Nurseryman, 1250 I Street, NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005; (202) 789-2900.

—R.H.