

HOT TOPICS

Flood causes 'worst year,' but Missourian still smiling

Russell Schmidt says customers are anxious to restore lawns/landscapes following this year's historic Mississippi River deluge.

FESTUS, Mo.— His smoky blue eyes narrow into slits as he surveys the Mississippi River. It's not where it's supposed be. It's at his feet where a football field used to be. It should be out beyond the tree line at least a half mile away.

Russell Schmidt, who started Schmidt Landscape, Jefferson County, Mo., 7 years ago, says "it's been our worst year yet."

But he's still smiling.

He's confident his 12-person company will survive the flood that caused so much destruction in the small river communities just south of St. Louis, his market area. (Schmidt's offices and home are in neighboring but higher Hillsboro.)

Compared to many others, he says he has little to complain about.

"I came down here two weeks ago and saw a couple pull up a nice stringer of catfish, right up from the stands. Caught 'em on the football field," he grins.

Schmidt, 28, stands over the sullen river that looks more like a slowly flowing lake. Humidity seeps from its coffee-colored surface and coaxes sparkles of perspiration from his forearms and forehead.

Hatless in the noonday sun, he relates how he and his Hillsboro High School mates battled the Crystal City Hornets on this very football field just 11 years ago.

Slow retreat—Now, in mid-August 1993, the muddy water still laps up to the third row of concrete steps at the stadium.

It's been an unforgettable year in more ways than one, says Schmidt.

Spring rains which seemingly never



Landscaper Russ Schmidt shows what turfgrass surrounding a bank looks like after the Mississippi River flood.

ended crippled maintenance schedules almost from season's start.

"We were contracted to mow properties four times a month, but we could only cut some of them once or twice. That's revenue we can never get back," he says.

Then, in July, the floods came.

The Mississippi, day by day, crept up to—and, in many cases, over—homes and businesses. River dwellers had more to worry about than lawns and landscapes, like saving the pews at the First Baptist Church. They put them on styrofoam blocks, hoping they would float. They did.

Indeed, when President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore arrived in July and reporters from around the world jostled for high ground for their mobile broadcast units, townsfolk piled sandbags shoulder high to keep the river out of downtown businesses.

Road work—No wonder that instead of installing or repairing irrigation systems this past July—jobs normally scheduled when summer drought turns lawns brown—Schmidt's crew, using the two company loaders, built an emergency road for homeowners cut off by high water.

"Everybody was involved in this flood. A lot of people shut down their businesses to help. Sometimes when they were sandbagging the water was coming in faster

Lessons learned from The Flood

1) Build a history of dependable, reliable service. When disaster strikes, clients will know you're trying. "I had guys sitting in trucks beside properties waiting for the rain to stop to get on properties," says Schmidt.

2) Develop a loyal, well-trained staff. As flooding worsened, Schmidt says his employees often relied upon their own initiative to solve problems. "We have meetings every Monday at 6:45 a.m., but my guys know what to do on their own."

3) Communicate with clients. His company left "obnoxious-looking" red door hangers ("That way I know they'll look at them") on every property.

Schmidt spent extra time in the office so he could personally answer clients' calls.

4) Two-way radios pay for themselves over and over again, particularly in an emergency.

5) Don't gamble with low bids. If anything unusual happens, you're working for nothing—or losing money. Schmidt says he now adds a little extra for labor on bids.

6) Keep smiling. "You wouldn't believe how many of my customers tell me how much they appreciate my men's cheerfulness even though there's not too much to smile about," says Schmidt.

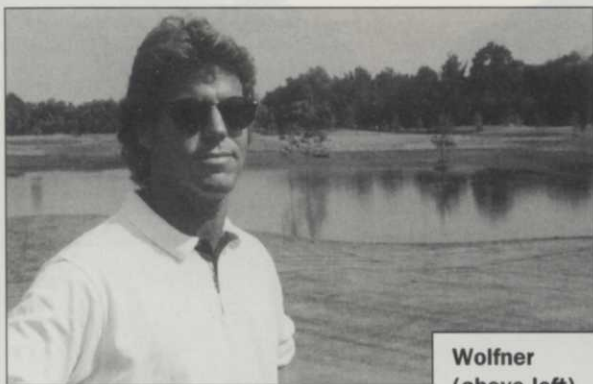
—R.H.

than they could work," says Schmidt.

Schmidt says recovery is under way. The number of calls from homeowners wanting flood-damaged lawns and landscapes repaired and renovated surprises even him. The commercial properties—well, that he kind of expected.

"We're going to take our chances and start replacing plant material. If we lose some of it, we lose it," says Schmidt. "We can't afford to wait. Not this year."

—Ron Hall



Wolfner (above left) is taking the opportunity to upgrade the irrigation system at Riverside Golf Course.



The Meramec created a moonscape at Fenton City Park.

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Course being rebuilt on faith

FENTON, Mo.— It's August 17, and behind the desk of J. Walter Wolfner Jr., sits a single Petri dish containing a pinch of turfgrass seed. Planted two days ago, the tiny crop of bentgrass is little more than a hint of green.

This is faith.

"My supplier tells me it germinates in two days and I might be able to have a putting surface in 30 days," says Wolfner. "But I know it's going to be tough growing bentgrass here in August."

Wolfner, 39, is owner/operator of Riverside Golf Course here. The Meramec River, usually little more than a creek in mid-summer, destroyed his 18-hole course and his increasingly popular par-3 course.

Of his 120 acres, only the clubhouse escaped damage.

"The course was just beautiful this season, too," says Wolfner. "We were so happy with it. And we just had to sit and watch the water come up, slow, real slow. It just kept coming."

Wolfner is using a low-interest Small Business Administration (SBA) loan to rebuild and improve Riverside.

"We're putting in automatic irrigation, installing zoysiagrass aprons around all the greens, reseeding all the greens with bentgrass, and sodding all the tees with bermudagrass," he says. The greens take the most work. "First we have to hose all the scum off, then aerify them in a couple of different directions, and then overseed."

Wolfner hopes to re-open Riverside this fall, but the flood's legacy will be apparent for years to come.