

LAWN & LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY

Going **RETAIL**

by Christian Zenk

■ The decision to bring our landscape services corporation into the retail market evolved out of economic necessity. After continued erosion of our company's customer base in Westchester County, New York, a change was warranted. Our market share loss was primarily due to a downturn in the local economy, along with increased competition from illicit one-man moonlighting operations.

We noticed this trend approximately five years ago and have watched it evolve and infiltrate every segment of the landscape market, from maintenance to planting.

Our opportunity to give a new face to the landscape division arrived in 1994. It was then we discovered an existing garden center in adjacent Fairfield County, Conn., whose proprietor was retiring after 30 years. The garden center is located in an affluent and growing area, and had been closed for approximately 12 months. The closing occurred in early February 1995. After much sweat, equity and a great deal of assistance from the previous owner, the garden center is fully functioning. The location was perfect, and there is limited competition in the local market. The garden center is the only one in town.

We decided to run the facility as an entirely separate and independent entity from our existing company. A new name was chosen and marketing strategy developed. The relatively close geographic locations complement each other nicely. The potential crossover business would be beneficial in assisting growth.

The garden center now attracts potential customers to a central locale where we can advertise our special and unique landscape



Richard Zenk, above, secures the Locust Glen signpost. At right, Chris Zenk holds one of the custom-made signs sold in the garden center.

service to an upscale clientele. It does this effectively as it is the centerpiece of a new 50-house subdivision with high-end homes starting at \$400,000. Conversely, many of our oldest established accounts now can visit our retail endeavor for excellent service and savings. Also, a great economy of resources and scale is realized in that the garden center is a prime supplier of materials to our landscape firm.

On the customer level, we have found that people like to know the physical location that their services originate from, rather than some non-descript post office box and a voice answering machine. Their access to us is open and unlimited as it

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RETAIL from page 17L relates to our people and resources.

In-house, at the employee level, the morale is high and everyone is content due to guaranteed work all year. Inclement weather days are spent inside, stocking shelves with products and working in outdoor greenhouses potting plants. Retail sales seminars offered by our suppliers to our employees are available. Just as important, our employees who maintain excellent horticultural skills can deploy their skills in a different direction.

With the purchase of Locust Glen Garden Center in conjunction with the of Zenk Country Landscapes business, our customer base is growing. Materials are purchased directly from sources such as growers and manufacturers rather than retailers. There will always be the black market in the landscape service sector with the fly-by-night individuals out to grab a few quick dollars after their workday ends. But we have found that the high-end customer who values the extra level of complete devotion to their property will seek

out the true professionals.

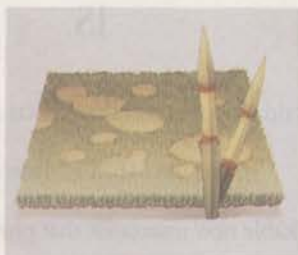
Those of us who dedicate endless hours in the horticultural service sector must constantly think of ways to expand business and stay ahead of the competition. As a result, we will protect the livelihoods we have worked so diligently to establish.

—The author is vice president of Zenk Country Landscapes, Granite Springs, N.Y. and co-owner of Locust Glen Garden Center, New Fairfield, Conn.

Cultural control of diseases in residential home lawns



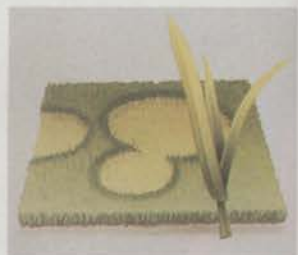
Red thread



Dollar spot



Leaf spot



Brown patch

■ Seed selection, mowing, fertility, irrigation and aeration can all affect the incidence of turf diseases in home lawns, says Dr. Karen Plumley of the plant pathology department at Cook College, Rutgers University.

If homeowners indicate some resistance to their lawn/landscape company using chemical disease controls, there are options, she says.

Here are steps you should take:

1) Place a plant (turf) in an area that is friendly to its growth. In other words, select the right turf type for the right lawn. And select disease-resistant cultivars.

2) Mow with sharp blades.

3) Give the turf a "balanced diet" of fertilizer to increase plant strength.

4) Irrigate deeply and infrequently. "Irrigation is one of the practices most misused," Plumley notes.

5) Aerify to control thatch. "Thatch build-up leads to shallow rooting and water build-up that further weakens the plant," she says.

Here are some common plant diseases,

their symptoms and their cultural controls, though she recommends supplemental chemical control in most cases:

Leaf spot/melting out (*Drechsleria* spp.) most affects Kentucky bluegrass. It appears as yellow lesions with bluish borders on the leaf tissue. Cool, moist weather, excessive nitrogen, thatch and low mowing are conditions that favor leaf spot. To control, you may want to raise your mowing height, avoid over-fertilizing, avoid light frequent irrigation, control thatch through aeration or verticutting, use resistant cultivars and apply recommended fungicides.

Dollar spot (*Sclerotinia homeocarpa*) most affects Kentucky bluegrass, bentgrass and ryegrasses. It appears as lesions with bleached white centers and brown borders with white halos. Conditions favoring dollar spot are warm weather, high humidity, dew, low nitrogen, moisture extremes, thatch and low mowing practices. To control, you should maintain proper fertilization levels, avoid drought stress with irrigation, control thatch, use resistant cultivars and apply recommend-

ed fungicides.

Brown patch (*Rhizoctonia solani*) appears most frequently on bentgrass, ryegrasses and fescues. You will note circular patches of thinning turf and tan lesions with brown borders. Brown patch shows up in hot, wet weather, periods of high humidity, over-nitrogen-fertilized lawns and heavy thatch. To control, use good water management practices, avoid excess nitrogen, control thatch, mow at the proper height and apply recommended fungicides.

Red thread (*Laetisaria fuciformis*) will affect bentgrass, bluegrass, ryegrasses and fescues. Patches with a reddish cast will appear, and you will actually be able to see red threads, reproductive structures of the fungus, in the turf. It will appear under conditions of low nitrogen fertility, free moisture, low temperatures, drought stress and with the use of some plant growth regulators. To control: maintain adequate fertilization, maintain pH, use resistant cultivars, prevent drought stress and apply recommended fungicides.

—Jerry Roche