

[DRUG PROBLEMS]

by JERRY ROCHE / Editor-in-Chief

"Hung-over employees have caused problems ranging from simple tardiness to embarrassing the company, and even destroying equipment. I've seen hung-over employees throw up on a customer's front lawn while raking leaves. I've watched a hung-over employee back the truck through the wall of the garage. I attribute problems like forgetting to latch the pintal hook for the trailer and crashing mowers into cars, buildings and flowerbeds to hung-over employees."

Like the diseases you control in turf-grass, the diseases of drug and alcohol addiction are easier to handle on a preventive rather than a curative basis.

This is what readers who responded to our February "Talkback" seem to think, anyway.

"Like many problems, they're easier to prevent than to repair," notes Bill Wattendorf of the Grass Man Lawn Care Co. in Brant Rock, Mass.—who also wrote the introductory paragraph to this article.

"I check up on an employee's personal background extensively before hiring him or her," Wattendorf writes. "I put a lengthy explanation of my drug/alcohol policy in the employees' handbook. Strict intolerance of possession or use of alcohol or drugs is clearly explained."

Chuck Twist of TNT Lawn & Landscape Management Co. runs his business in a college town, "so there's lots of partying.

"Our help-wanted ads say, 'must be able to pass drug screening,'" Twist notes. "This brings us about half as many applicants as before. So far, we never have implemented any drug testing, but it keeps the 'dopers' away."

Tom Shackelford of Shackelford Landscape & Lawn in Anaheim, Calif., uses two preventive measures—drug screening and pre-employment evaluations—and one curative measure—"employee rehab through the insurance company" to control drug and alcohol abuse.

"Employees 'under the influence' mean poor productivity, unnecessary financial bills and loss of business," Shackelford writes.

Regulations for government workers, generally, are much stricter than in the private sector. Dale W. Ivan of the Moses Lake (Wash.) Parks and Recreation Department says tough new laws "get people's attention quick." Moses Lake has had a written policy and has random drug/alcohol testing procedures.

"In the parks department," Ivan continues, "we have a core of good full-time folks. We have been very fortunate to not have had any incidents related to drugs on the job. Over the past five years, there were two part-time folks with a first-time DWI that couldn't drive for a few weeks. This happened after hours. We worked with them through the problem."

Jim Haines of National Turf in Newport News, Va. has a little talk with first-time offenders. "They are given 30 to 45 days, during which an unannounced re-test is given. They do not operate equipment until after the new test, and if they fail, they are fired."

The people who responded to our February article report an average of one drug- or alcohol-related incident in the past 12 months and five in the past five years.

One landscaper wrote that he's had

three problems in five years, each of which was "cured," one way or another: one employee went into rehab, one quit and one was fired. These are the normal alternatives.

One golf course superintendent who wished to remain anonymous wrote:

"Our long-term conscientious employees quickly allow us to know when job performance is hurt because of drugs or alcohol. Our dependable employees will not long stand for others being 'under the influence' and, of course, management will not, either. So this incompetent type of worker is soon gone."

Robert J. Shoen of Burlington Country Club in Mt. Holly, N.J. demands a hiatus from drinking or doing drugs 11 hours before employees are scheduled to work.

"If, for instance, employees know that they are working Monday, they then must put the drugs and/or alcohol down 11 hours before work. If they can't schedule their recreation around work, they are not responsible enough to work for me," he writes.

Ken R. Meredith of Harbour View Golf Complex in Little River, S.C. believes in rehab. "But it will only work when the person has a strong desire to stop," he writes.

—Thanks to all who contributed. The nine respondents quoted in this article will receive free LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT painter's caps.