

# What they're saying out there...

## LAWN/LANDSCAPE

### ON BUSINESS EVOLUTION...

Charlie Racusin, Environmental Landscape Services, Houston, Texas:

Racusin is a realist who always looks for ways to attract new customers, which he says is essential in highly competitive markets.

"Today, landscaping has become, like many businesses, a commodity," explains Racusin. "Customers can buy it anywhere. So many people in this business today are shaking the same trees. They are telling the same story and writing up the same brochures. I see most landscape contractors as exceptionally competitive pricewise



Messina: Customer service goes "one step beyond reasonable."

because they don't have anything different to offer.

"What was best in 1972 wouldn't be the best today. Technology has improved, systems have improved, clients have become better educated and more sophisti-

cated, and they understand the work better and they demand excellence at a real competitive price. Everyone has gotten better, so you'd better be able to deliver something better or you've got no extra sizzle on your steak."

**ON HOMEOWNERS...** Ken Thomas, Landscape Techniques, Alpharetta, Georgia:

Thomas realizes the economic facts of life that often face new homeowners in higher-priced housing developments. "The people who are paying \$150,000 to \$200,000 for homes don't have a lot of extra income for landscaping because they are buying as much house as they can afford," says Thomas. "But

if we can catch up with them in three or four years, they'll be ready to spend some money, if the neighborhood is landscape-conscious.

"You get into the \$350,000 range and up, and those people are more likely to buy more initial landscaping."

**ON SERVICE...** Larry Messina, Lawn Cure of Southern Indiana, Jeffersonville, Indiana:

Messina adheres faithfully to the cornerstone of success.

"I preach service," he claims. "If a customer calls, we're on their lawns in 24 hours. When it comes to satisfying customers, we go one step beyond reasonable."

"This business is the lifeblood of our existence. To lose a customer is almost like an insult...[even though] 75 to 80 percent of the reasons a person cancels are the kind of things that are out of our control."

**ON HIRING...** Chris Senske, Senske Tree & Lawn, Kennewick, Washington:

These days, when it's getting harder to find good help, Senske's company has been fortunate to draw some of the best, but he's modest in his self-appraisal.

"Getting good employees has very little to do with my talent," he says. "It's mostly

### OPERATING COSTS

	GOLF COURSES	GROUNDS MANAGERS	LANDSCAPE CONTRACTORS	LAWN CARE	INDUSTRY AVERAGES
LABOR	47.0%	56.9%	35.0%	37.1%	41.7%
OVERHEAD	18.0%	10.9%	25.5%	24.1%	21.3%
EQUIPMENT	12.1%	14.8%	16.0%	14.8%	14.6%
FERTILIZERS & PESTICIDES	11.9%	6.7%	7.2%	13.8%	9.9%
OTHER (INC. PROFIT)	10.0%	10.75	16.3%	10.2%	12.6%

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the abilities and drive of the people at Senske that make it a fun place to work and a successful business.

"It's been a lot of luck at finding great people, I think. I don't have any particular prescription. We don't pay as much as other industries, though we try to be competitive within our industry. So there has to be something else—the environment—that makes it a pleasant place to work."

## GOLF/GROUNDS

### ON THE GROWTH OF GOLF...

Bruce Williams, CGCS, Bob-O-Link Golf Course, Highland Park, Ill.:

One of the industry's leaders, Williams always looks at the big picture.

"Golf encompasses so many more things than just 'the green industry,'" says Williams. "As the population grows, so too does the game. We have to orient more people to the game, teach more people the game."

"All the associations need to work together to provide quality golf at affordable prices. There's tremendous cooperation between the allied associations and golf. We are all on the same page. There are some things for which we compete, but they are minor versus the things we are in concert on."

"Architects have to work to design maintainable golf courses that can be played in a reasonable amount of time.



Smith: More hydraulic mowers.

"We need a good complement of public and private facilities, and get people starting at an early age to understand etiquette, the rules of the game and the environmental aspects. It's harder to change people's opinions in mid-life."

**ON NATURAL AREAS...** Alan Culver, Mahoney Golf Course, Lincoln, Nebraska:

"Prairiegrass (little

bluestem, big bluestem and switchgrass) is being seeded in out-of-play areas that don't require a lot of mowing, fertilizer and water. We don't know if it's going to work. It's like an experiment, but it worked out at Highlands, one of the other Lincoln public courses. I'm putting in four acres that will be a different look and take some areas out of mowing."

**Bruce Williams:** "There's a lot of science versus emotion. We have people speaking on emotion [on what golf 'does to the environment']. There's factual information available on golf courses as wildlife habitats, and the positive benefits wetlands provide to a golf course. Data from universities show how a golf course can enhance the environment. GCSAA is working in schools to share that."

**ON GOLFERS...** Jean Esposito, Hinckley Hills Golf Course, Hinckley, Ohio:

A reality of golf is... golfers. Esposito often gets critiques from players who don't fully understand the realities of turf management and turf science.

"Customers are more critical once they see the television," says Esposito. "They don't realize that most courses don't have the budget to look like Augusta National."

"People are always trying to push me toward lower cutting heights. We mow our greens at  $\frac{3}{16}$  of an inch, our fairways at  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch. We used to mow our greens at  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch. At one time, we mowed our fair-

## PRODUCT PURCHASES IN 1995 by Landscape Management Readers

	% OF SAMPLE PURCHASING	MEAN PURCHASE	PROJECTION TO READERSHIP
CONTROL PRODUCTS (including fertilizers)	93%	\$19,000	\$811 million
MOWERS (reel & rotary)	67%	\$20,400	\$627 million
OTHER EQUIPMENT (hand powered, sprayers, etc.)	87%	\$17,200	\$683 million
VEHICLES (heavy trucks & pick-ups)	41%	\$36,000	\$678 million
SNOW REMOVAL PRODUCTS	29%	\$5,010	\$66 million
MISCELLANEOUS (seed, nursery stock, sod, software, etc.)	93%	n/a	n/a

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ways at 3/4-inch, but the drought a couple years ago forced us back to one inch."

## ON GOLF COURSE

**MAINTENANCE...** Tim Smith of Hawks Nest Golf Club, Creston, Ohio, sees these trends:

► Mowing with hydraulic equipment.

► Narrower (8-foot rather than 18-20 feet) tractor bridges because the tractors are smaller.

► More "links look" with wildflowers and fescues and just letting them grow.

► Tapered creeks that we can run equipment down to the edge on.

► Planting trees so you can maintain around them.

**ON TECHNOLOGY...** Brad Kocher, Pinehurst Country Club, Pinehurst, North Carolina:

"I would say the trend is still toward more maintenance, to a degree," says Kocher. "A lot of that can be

done without a negative impact on the environment by using better mowers, better frequency, lighter weight units. The chemical companies will continue to work on products that you use less—if less is better.

"All those sorts of things that show there's an interest in technology. Any superintendent would love to not have to treat things, or bother with insects and fungus. I'm not sure that a lot of our maintenance practices cause that to happen; there seems to be a very, very minor correlation."

Don Aderman, mechanic for Stillwater (Minn.) Country Club: Aderman sees what can happen to equipment over time, and always keeps his eyes open for innovations that will save on repair time, work and money.

► The hydraulic drive

## TYPES OF CONTROL PRODUCTS PURCHASED BY FACILITY TYPE, 1995

(% of respondents)	GOLF COURSES	GROUND MANAGERS	LANDSCAPE CONTRACTORS	LAWN CARE	(WEIGHTED) TOTAL
FERTILIZERS	96%	85%	87%	90%	91%
HERBICIDES	91%	83%	69%	79%	80%
INSECTICIDES	83%	63%	60%	65%	69%
FUNGICIDES	90%	42%	48%	51%	63%
NONE OF THESE	6%	1%	8%	9%	7%
AVG. AMT. SPENT	\$28,100	\$29,300	\$12,500	\$13,900	\$20,400

## TYPES OF MOWERS PURCHASED BY FACILITY TYPE, 1995

(% OF RESPONDENTS)	GOLF COURSES	GROUND MANAGERS	LANDSCAPE CONTRACTORS	LAWN CARE	(WEIGHTED) TOTAL
WALK-BEHIND ROTARIES	27%	45%	50%	42%	40%
RIDING ROTARIES	39%	46%	28%	8%	34%
PTO-DRIVEN ROTARIES	12%	24%	12%	11%	13%
PTO-DRIVEN REELS	9%	6%	0%	1%	4%
WALK-BEHIND REELS	31%	7%	6%	4%	15%
RIDING REELS	53%	13%	3%	2%	21%
NONE OF THESE	22%	30%	31%	39%	29%
AVG. AMT. SPENT	\$30,200	\$12,100	\$8,600	\$24,600	\$19,000

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mowers are more trouble-free than the belt-drives," says Aderman. "Belts will wear and stretch. The hydraulics are less time consuming to maintain. Good record keeping helps superintendents decide what equipment to get next; it lets the super know if it's time to get rid of a machine; maybe it's costing too much."

Aderman mixes a colorant in with mower oils. "That way, we can tell whether it's engine oil or hydraulic oil that's leaking," says Aderman. The colorant is available from a local auto dealer.

**Jerry Coldiron, Boone Links/Lassing Pointe Golf Courses, Florence, Ky.:**

Coldiron recently tried a tool he had long wanted to use, and found it solved two problems at once.

"We had 22 inches of rain in the last six weeks (as of June 18). The Floyd MacKay drill alleviated some compaction and really helped dry out the greens. The tapered

Indoors, Coldiron is taking advantage of new communications tools

"I probably use 'e-mail' daily," asserts Coldiron. "The guys who aren't taking advantage of 'e-mail' are missing the boat. I know nothing about computers, but I can peck out



**Kocher: More maintenance offset by better equipment.**

a paragraph of electronic mail [to get in touch with an industry colleague or find an answer to a particular turfgrass question]."

**ON HIRING...** Coldiron admits "it's tougher" to find reliable help, but he's come up with

looking for 40-hour weeks; most are kids whose parents don't want them working 40 hours.

"This day and age is different than 10 years ago," claims Coldiron. "The last three years we've struggled with labor, trying to keep up with the McDonald's wages. We have a seasonal equipment operator for \$7 an hour. Another seasonal laborer, 'Jack-of-all trades' who we pay just under \$6.

"We also recruited two full-time guys who have degrees in turfgrass, one from Rutgers, another from Eastern Kentucky."

Coldiron strives to impart in all his workers the goals listed in the Boone County mission statement, something that might be rare among golf courses. It's a values-centered statement that focuses on the "Golden Rule" of treating everyone as you would like to be treated; listening; and always looking for ways to improve.

**ON THE WEATHER...** Casey Crittenden, CGCS, Beatrice Country Club, Beatrice, Neb.: "It all started in the spring of 1995," remembers Crittenden, whose course recently achieved Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Certification.

"We had extremely wet conditions, then heat and humidity which promoted disease and weed infestation. Then it was a dry fall and a cold, open winter in this area. Now we're back to 95 degrees; pythium weather came



**Mitchell: "An unusual year and a half."**

overnight. So you have to be flexible to adapt to the weather. Stay on top of weather information. The weather forecast will tell you what you can and can not do."

**Robert V. Mitchell, CGCS, The Greenbrier, White Sulphur Springs, WV:** "It's been a very unusual year and a half, getting golfers around the course, regardless of wetness. We never close the golf course. We went to lightweight fairway mowers, to get over wet ground without making tracks. It saved our life!

"As far as the weather changing our management practices, we had to cut when we could, spray a little bit more. We had a run of red thread. But it's hard getting out to spray when it's so wet. Tees are growing profusely!"

Even in ideal weather, Mitchell says, "the days of the carte blanche pesticide applications are behind us. We've made a concerted effort to reduce [control product] use."

—Jerry Roche; Terry McIver

*"I probably use 'e-mail' daily. The guys who aren't taking advantage of 'e-mail' are missing the boat."*

—Jerry Coldiron

bits bring up very little material. It did a super job.

"We also bought a Toro plug pulverizer. It disintegrates the plugs on fairways into topdressing, then we go over it with a harrow. We also have a new core harvester."

some "part-time" remedies.

"We've been more efficient in the way of seasonal and part-time guys," explains Coldiron.

"We have 15-20 hours a week-type guys. They're not