



Fall Brings Harvest of Success

Fall is a good time to look at the fruits of our labor throughout the industry.

By ROBERT E. REAVES

We all like to read about success stories in our industry. They make us think about ways we can improve our own business. And with the summer of 1998 behind us, can you think of a better time to reflect about the projects, products and business practices that made a difference in the green industry around the country? Our sampling of various business accomplishments came up with a wide range of responses — everything from computer software to plant growth regulators.

Software a plus

Our first stop on the "success story tour" is Pro Scapes, a Jamesville, NY-based landscape management firm. Pro Scapes installed new business management software that makes a difference — both from a financial and quality standpoint. "Our customers will come out winners because they'll get a much more accurate estimate,"



Rick Kier, president of Pro Scapes is happy with new business management program for tracking job completion and costs.

says Rick Kier, president of Pro Scapes. "To set up the program, we hired an outside computer consultant for around \$9,000," discloses Kier. "However, many landscape management companies can use a commercially available software program that would cost less."

The software focuses on goal times, which includes the hours to complete a job and the amount of materials used — such as pesticides, fertilizer, topsoil and mulch. "For our foremen, goal setting gives them the independence

to do the job, yet still know their time and budget limitations," Kier says. If the costs go above budget, the foreman has the ability make revisions and communicate the information with the the customer.

"We now have the ability to track and set goals for every job," adds Kier. "As an example, we maintain a condo complex where spring cleanup varied between 120 and 180 hours to complete." Pro Scapes used a goal time of 157 hours for the site, based on the average of the low and high end of the job times. "The time to complete the spring cleanup is now just under or at the goal time of 157 hours."

"Because we'll have an ongoing account history, we can fine tune our goals at contract renewal times. And when a crew foreman receives a job order, he knows where he is going and how much time the job should take," explains Kier. Even with the attention to goals, Kier wants his crew to understand that safety and quality are always more important than the goal times. "We don't want the crew rushing around to get a job completed at the expense of safety and quality."

New software is a success story down in Austin, TX, too. With a budget of \$7.9 million and more than 200 parks, the City of Austin Parks Department needed help tracking expenses, employee work crews and predicting future costs. Two years ago the department had difficulty tracking expenses versus budget. To solve this dilemma, the answer arrived in the form of some new maintenance management software. "Because of the software, we can now track expenses on all routine and preventative maintenance and even know the time it takes to mow the medians or repair an irrigation system," explains Leon Barba, division manager of operations for the Austin Parks Department.

"The software program is user friendly, too. From now on we can track expenses against budget," remarks Barba. The software is already improving efficiency in the department's forestry division, which had a backlog of more than 1,000 calls. "That number is now down to approximately 100 because of the software," says Barba. "The software also provides daily input sheets and lets us know where the crews are each day."

Computerized Irrigation and PGRs

Computerized irrigation control is one success story for Jerry Coldiron, CGCS, superintendent for Boone Links Golf Course, a 27-hole facility — as well as 18-hole Lassing Pointe Golf Course in Florence, KY. Lassing Pointe is ranked 29th Best Public Golf Course in the U.S. by Golf Digest and the number one public course in Kentucky. It's also the home to one of the NTEP turf trials scattered throughout the country.

"We continue to convert all 45 holes to OSMAC, a central irrigation control system based on radio communication from The Toro Company," says Coldiron. "We're also looking at Toro's SitePro to help us track equipment and labor. It's all part of our mission to take advantage of the golf boom. We

are upgrading all our facilities to move forward into the next century.

"Before OSMAC, we had controller clocks that required manual adjustments. OSMAC saves us a great deal of time and offers individualized irrigation head control. It even allows me to make adjustments to the system from my home computer." Coldiron says the cost of automating an irrigation system is really not that great compared to the benefits a golf course receives. "People who aren't taking advantage of computer technology are missing out on a great deal."

Coldiron is also pleased with Primo, a plant growth regulator manufactured by Novartis Turf and Ornamentals. "This was our first year to use Primo and I was initially conservative with its use." Coldiron started using Primo for its pre-stress water reduction benefits.

"With 45 holes and a lot of play, the mowing reduction has proven to be another important benefit." Surprisingly, Coldiron says the turf is easier to mow. "Our mechanics believe the combination of going spikeless and using Primo is easier on our reel mowers. We used to get a lot of mower damage from spikes. Primo also tends to soften up the grass."

Decoration Sales

Ruppert Landscape, Ashton, MD, began a push to spur holiday decoration sales during the summer months to avoid the last minute rush and to offer clients their first choice in decorations. "By booking orders earlier, our customers will find it much easier to locate hard to find or elaborate decorations," says Wendy Bell, director of corporate sales for Ruppert Landscape. "For those of us in the commercial end, we are not going to get the first choice in product if we wait too late in the season."

The early order program offers an advantage for Ruppert employees, too. "By beginning holiday decoration sales early in the summer, we now have a better feel for the number of employees we can hold over through the winter months," says Bell. She also emphasizes the importance that training plays in this program. "This year we had an early June training seminar specifically designed to teach our employees how to sell holiday decorations," says Bell. Installer will get more training in October.

The summer push not only benefits customers and employees, it's a significant financial payback for Ruppert. "Not only do we have a better feel for what we will sell in this year, we expect to dramatically exceed our 1997 decoration sales," says Bell.

Wildflower Mix Popular

For the past five years, Perennial Wildflower Sod has done an excellent job for Milwaukee County Stadium, home of the Milwaukee Brewers. "We've planted the wildflower sod in raised beds, parking areas and on a hillside too steep to mow," says David Mellor, assistant director of grounds



◀ David Mellor, assistant director of grounds at Milwaukee County Stadium, plants wildflowers as part of management program.

at the stadium. "Hillside plantings help our crew avoid mowing hazards and improve erosion control."

Perennial Wildflower Sod is available from American Sod Corporation, based in Palatine, IL. The sod arrives in 19 x 19-inch flats with a biodegradable burlap backing, making it easy to cut and shape the pieces as needed. Each flat features 19



A broadcast wildflower mix enhances seasonal color of Perennial Wildflower Sod.

species of perennial wildflowers and comes with about 100 established, three-inch perennial plants.

"One of my initial concerns was whether the perennial sod would turn into a monoculture of one or two dominate species." However, Mellor finds the species balance continues to be very good — even after five years. To enhance color, the crew broadcasts an annual wildflower mix over the perennials. "Our fans, players and stadium employees really enjoy the wildflowers. We frequently take cuttings and use the flowers for bouquets in the stadium offices." Like any landscape plant material, Mellor notes there is still maintenance with the wildflower sod. "We selectively go in and spray with Roundup to control invasive weeds like thistles," he says.

Outsourcing Works

Larry Iorii, president of Down To Earth Inc. in Wilmington, DE, has a success story

that involves a team approach to business.

The company outsources portions of its landscape management services and even shares a warehouse complex with two competitors. "My team approach evolved while I was president of the local Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS). I developed strong business relationships through networking and gradually learned who I could count on for outsourcing," says Iorii.



Teamwork works: L to R, Dave Quillen, Grass Roots, Inc., Tim Schaeffer, Chelsea Flower Gardens; Larry Iorii, Down to Earth, Inc.

"Not every job requires high-end maintenance. For accounts with only mowing, we can often outsource 100 percent of the work. For other job sites, the split might be 50/50, where we perform the detail work and our subcontractors do tree trimming and lawn mowing," explains Iorii. Subcontractors enjoy teaming with Iorii. "I pay all my subcontractors on the 10th of the month. And because I only have three-year contracts with my customers and a contract retention rate of 95 percent, they know it's stable work for them."

Iorii says outsourcing is a two-way street, because he also receives business from competition. "For example, when people think of lawn renovation in this area they think of Down to Earth. My competition frequently will call me to perform lawn renovation. It helps them because they don't have to buy core aeration equipment. In other cases I might sell my consulting services." Iorii believes the team approach benefits his customers, too.

"Even though we're a small company, we can provide our customers with people who specialize in all areas of landscape management."

The team approach even extends to Iorii's shop complex, which includes three warehouses. "I lease two of these warehouses to my competitors. We share a forklift, instead of buying three, as well as sharing a tractor to load up mulch," adds Iorii. "And when I buy supplies like fertilizer, seed and pesticides, I

purchase larger quantities and sell it back to my competitors at cost. We get a better price because of the larger quantities."

New Turf Care Facility

At Bluegrass Yacht & Country Club in Hendersonville, TN, the big news is the groundbreaking for a 6,000 square foot turf care facility. The building will have an administrative zone, break room/training room, equipment shop area and ample equipment storage. It's scheduled to be completed during December of this year. "Bluegrass was constructed in the 1950s and has undergone many improvements in the past few years," says Lynn Ray, vice president of Golf Management Group, based in Brentwood, TN. Ray is directly responsible for turf care at three golf facilities, including Bluegrass.



Lynn Ray, vice president of Golf Management Group, expects the turf care center to extend the life of maintenance equipment.

"A turf care center is not as tangible as a new green or tee. Bluegrass should be applauded for its recognition that the facility will improve their golfing experience and extend the life of maintenance equipment," adds Ray. He says discussions to build the turf care center began three years ago. "Don Dixon, greens committee chairman for the club, really helped move the process forward."

"We set out to identify the positives and negatives of building a new facility and to examine it from a cost and function standpoint," recalls Ray. Some dollars were approved to do a feasibility study by the Hawkins Development Company of Nashville.

"We did not take the usual architect/owner/contractor scenario. Hawkins is a design/build firm. They worked with us from a conceptual standpoint that allowed us to develop a sound budget number as we refined our plans."

"Virtual Reality for Landscape Design

"We've been impressed with a new landscape imaging software package we learned about while attending the Green Industry Expo," says Bill Arman, vice president of business development for Environmental Care, Inc., Santa Ana, CA branch. The software package is called Earthscapes, available from Visual Impact Imaging, headquartered in Hopatcong, NJ. Arman says ECI purchased the software and has found it to be a useful sales tool.

Earthscapes software offers imaging, site plan and estimating capabilities. It provides 2,300 high resolution images — featuring an extensive plant library from all climate zones, as well as a modern hard-

scape library. The library also includes water features and lighting. The site plan is a CAD software.

Arman details a classic example of how ECI uses Earthscapes. "Right now there's a large retail center where we do not currently have the business. The property manager casually mentioned he liked an annual display we planted across the street



Earthscapes allows Environmental Care to optimize sales opportunities.

at another property," explains Arman. "We took a picture of his site and scanned the photo into the computer, then used the software to enhance this picture with the same plant treatment." ECI was able to show the property manager how it would look at his property. "The property manager was impressed and we're now in the final proposal stage to obtain the business."

The author is with Irricom, a communications firm in Austin, TX. He holds a Master of Science degree in horticulture from Oklahoma State University.



Happy to begin breaking ground: L to R, Don Dixon, Bluegrass Yacht and Country Club Greens Chairman; Garrett Martin, employee of 43 years; John Gardner, course superintendent.