

WINNER: LAWN CARE

Terry Kurth

**Director of Development, Weed Man U.S.A.,
Middleton, WI**

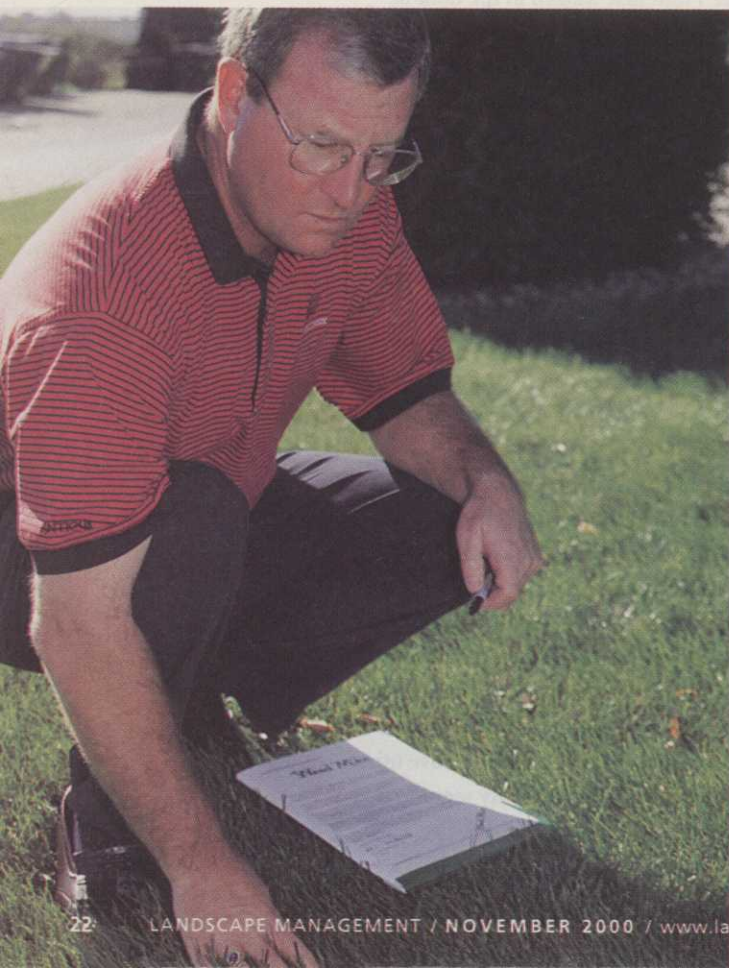
BY SUE GIBSON

While many of his peers also came of age in lawn care's formative years, few have the impact of Terry Kurth.

Kurth developed a taste for turf on a golf course maintenance crew, then followed up by studying for a B.S. degree in Agronomy from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He interned at nearby Nakoma Country Club. "It inspired me," he recalls.

After working for the State of Wisconsin through 1976, he was recruited as a technical representative for Scotts' Pro Turf organization by Bill Hoopes, now director of training and development at Scotts Lawn Care.

Terry Kurth spent many Saturdays inspecting lawns in the early days of his involvement with Barefoot Grass.



Moonlighting for Marvin

At the same time, Marvin Williams' infant firm, Barefoot Grass, was starting up in Marysville, OH. "There was a real chinch bug problem that summer of 1977, and he needed help making all the lawn inspections and sales. I spent my Saturdays doing that and really enjoyed the work," says Kurth.

Kurth and Barefoot struck a deal, and he moved back to his beloved Wisconsin to start one of Barefoot's first franchises, located in Madison.

Thanks to a \$5,000 line of credit for franchise startup money, Kurth and family resettled in Madison.

"I sold 94 out of 99 leads," he recalls of his first lawn care mailing. "Those were the days. I had about 275 accounts the first year and did about \$44,000 in business."

At the start, it was a one-man operation, he remembers. "It was me, myself and I doing the routes. I remember when my wife went into labor with our first child, I was in the hospital room with one hand on the small of her back and the other hand holding a phone on sales calls. That was motivation! She helped me incubate both the family and our business."

Kurth gradually added employees and opened other Barefoot Grass franchises in Appleton and Green Bay, WI, before expanding into the Austin, TX, market in the late 1980s.

Solving the brown grass mystery

At the peak of Kurth's Barefoot operations, he also owned franchises in Peoria, IL and Lexington, KY for a total of \$3 million in sales.

In 1987, that business was jeopardized by a mysterious epidemic of brown grass that plagued his customers' lawns in Madison and Green Bay. Company records pointed to a common denominator: all lawns received a granular fertilizer containing a fungicide. Once atrazine contamination was diagnosed, Kurth called his supplier, who agreed to pay for damage repair for 325 lawns.

During the emergency, Kurth's company educated customers, then enlisted outside landscape firms to repair the lawns. Kurth also sent customers boxes of meats to thank them for understanding.

Industry consolidation eventually came to call in 1997, when Tru-Green-ChemLawn bought Barefoot Grass' operations. Kurth sold his

continued on page 24

Career highlights

1975

Graduated from University of Wisconsin (B.S. in Agronomy)

1976

Joins Scott's Pro Turf organization

1979

Opens Barefoot Grass franchise in Madison, WI

1985-1992

Expands Barefoot Grass franchises in Midwest and Texas (reaching \$3 million combined sales)

mid-1980s

Becomes active in local and national industry associations

1996-1997

President of PLCAA

1997

TruGreen-Chem-Lawn buys Barefoot; sells Barefoot business

1999

Becomes Weed Man's director of development for U.S. business



continued from page 22

interests to TGCL, and he now has Badgerland Irrigation, a Madison-based firm he co-owns with Curt Winter and Bob Smith.

He also added local Christmas Décor franchises to Badgerland's service mix and is transferring majority ownership to Winter. In the past few years, Kurth managed his interests until he was asked to help Weed Man expand into the U.S.

The challenges are exciting to Kurth as he participates in Weed Man's move: "I compare it to the car rental business. TGCL is like Hertz without a consistent number two, but right now, Weed Man is trying to fill that void and so are several others."

Pay it forward

Although Kurth defines himself as a "typical entrepreneur who gets more fun from growth than from administration," his reputation as an organizational fireball goes back more than 15 years.

Kurth has been actively involved with several organizations, including: the Wisconsin Landscape Federation (where he is currently president elect); Grounds Management Association of Wisconsin (past president); Wisconsin Agri-Business Council (executive board member) and others.

Kurth initially joined PLCAA "for the education and networking," he says, but soon realized that active membership "was my duty, no question about it." He took over as PLCAA president in 1996.

Although he recalls it was a tough year to lead the organization (TGCL bought Barefoot and former executive director Ann McClure departed), Kurth saw it as a personal challenge. "PLCAA has given me opportunities for learning, lobbying and networking. The feeling of being 'family and friends' is huge and through it, I've made a ton of friends. I can never pay back what I've been given but I can pay forward."

It was also a time of uncertainty for PLCAA members and staff. He recalls, "The staff didn't miss a beat, but we were afraid of losing members



due to consolidation. Now, we have Scotts,

Weed Man and other former employees starting their own firms coming into PLCAA. I think there's a definite rebirth within the industry."

Working side by side

"He personifies volunteerism," says Lou Wierichs Jr., president of Pro-X Lawns in Appleton, WI, former PLCAA president and friend of Kurth since the late 1980s. Both men work together on GMAW and Wisconsin Landscape Federation projects, as well as PLCAA projects.

"He has a propensity for making money and is a smart businessman," Wierichs says. "He also shows unselfishness, is honest and is loyal. I trust him — we're close to being like brothers."

Kurth's strong leadership qualities made an impression on Karen Weber, PLCAA's associate vice president/communications director. "He always has the good of the industry at heart and is someone who cares," she says.

Those who show up

Once Kurth learned about the Ambassador speaking program started by RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment), he was hooked.

"I talked to Allen James, RISE president, and got PLCAA involved. We got funding and commitments to speak, then set up a training program," he explains.

Asked if he has trouble saying "no," Kurth admitted he continues to be involved with groups espousing the politics he supports, such as the NFIB's initiatives to limit government intrusion into small business. "Most entrepreneurs are autocratic at first, then they start delegating," he explains. "But I don't want someone who doesn't understand my business making judgments for me."

Despite Kurth's busy work with Weed Man, look for him to continue his involvement with PLCAA and other industry issues. The way he sees it, there isn't any alternative. "This world is run by those who just show up," he says.