

BY JAY LEMKE

**T**hough onlookers were amazed at the job, it was a commonplace one for Diane Lease, owner of Lease Landscaping, Grand Rapids, MN. Her small crew was using a “crawler” to develop a beachfront for a homeowner whose house was perched above a lake up a 2:1 slope covered with trees, rocks and undergrowth.

“People are amazed at what we do, and sometimes they just stand around and watch,” Lease says.

With growth that has doubled every year for the past eight years, plus the technology she uses, it’s no wonder people enjoy watching her crews work.

Part of that enjoyment comes from Lease’s philosophy on how she has grown her business from an extremely small outfit to the largest in a city of 10,000.

“We stress more equipment, and a small, family-like crew of extremely talented employees,” explains Lease.

**Man-machine mix**

According to Lease, it’s important for every landscape professional to determine the proper mix of machinery and hand labor. In other words, if a machine can replace a number of laborers on a job site, those workers can move to another job, which increases profits and productivity.

“We have five full-time employees, but have two excavators, two dozers, one skid steer, three all-purpose crawlers and one all-surface loader,” she said. “With that equipment, plus our seasonal help, we do the work of landscapers with many more employees.”

Lease credits much of her company’s success to equipment from ASV, Inc., a Caterpillar affiliate. She owns three Posi-



Mark Lease uses a compact, all-purpose crawler to clear a 2:1 slope in building a beachfront.

# What labor crunch?

## Minnesota landscape pro Diane Lease counts on machines to cut tough work down to size — not her employees

Tracks, but it’s the newest addition, the compact RC•30, that most excites her.

This recently introduced model is small — less than 4 ft. wide and 6 ft. tall — so it occupies about the same space as a laborer. It uses a rubber tracked undercarriage that gives it the traction and power to be as productive as larger machinery, or a crew of laborers. And the 3,000-lb. machine applies a mere 2.5 psi of pressure to the ground.

"We couldn't get along without it," said Lease. "The amount of labor we save by having it is incredible. We used to send three laborers to a site and now we just send one with the machine."

To build the beachfront, Lease Landscaping used a Posi-Track to haul dirt to the bottom of the hill, where the RC•30 was waiting for landscape duty.

"Few other machines could even go down that hill," Lease said.

Landscapers use the RC•30 when they need to work in tight

areas without harming turf.

"Homeowners do not want you to damage their lawns when you're working on their property," said Lease. "If you damage the turf, not only does it cost more to resod, they're left with having to nurse the new sod for months before it's as good as the old."

In addition to owning lawn-friendly equipment, Lease Landscaping offers customers more than a typical landscaper.

"I think we're the only one in town that can do everything

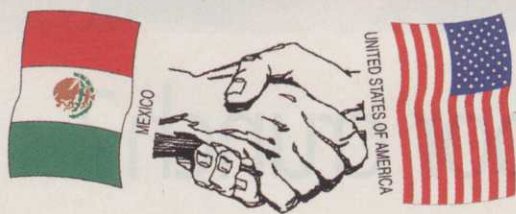


Diane Lease, owner of Lease Landscaping, relies on just a few trusted employees, but brings a lot of equipment firepower to every big job.

from start to finish on a new home site," said Lease. "From clearing lots to digging base-

ments to putting in septic systems to manicured landscapes, we do it all."

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"I treat my employees like they're my kids. We're a family and we trust each other,"

— Diane Lease

Though Lease Landscaping today owns a nice lineup of equipment, it wasn't always that way. Eight years ago, Lease had just left her job as a nurse, and her husband was a sheriff's deputy for Itasca County.

"We got started part-time in landscaping because my husband loved machinery," said Lease.

But work at the sheriff's office was busy, and Diane soon took over the business. It quickly became a full-time passion.

"It was a big learning experience," Lease said. "We started

small, with just a skid steer and a little dump truck, spreading dirt and planting flowers. Fortunately, I hired great employees who brought their knowledge of the industry with them."

The ability to work quickly and efficiently helped her institute a policy she believes all landscape professionals should follow.

"We always start a job and then finish it; we don't jump from job to job to job, leaving the customer unsure of when we'll be back," she explained.

In addition, Lease said, her

business continues to excel because she has loyal employees.

#### Built on trust

"I treat my employees like they're my kids. We're a family and we trust each other," she said.

"It's important to have the ability to go and be with your family when you need to; we don't have a time schedule. If employees have a baseball game to go to with their children, they leave early, with no questions asked."

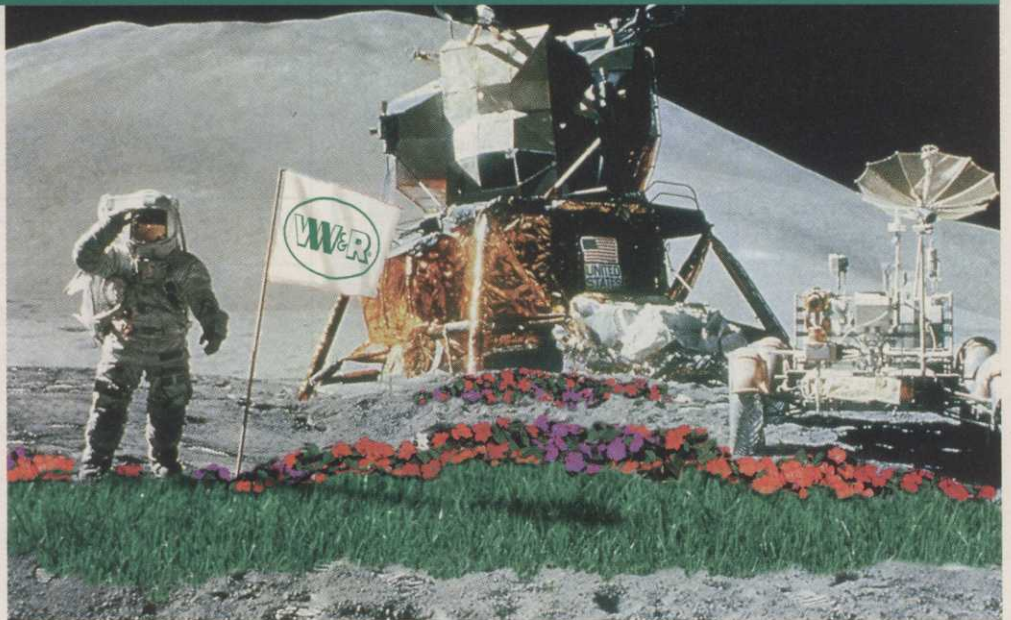
Though Lease said she could continue to grow her business, it may have reached the perfect size.

"I think we might be big enough," she said. "If we get much bigger, I'm worried we could lose some of our personal touch. I think we've reached the right size with the right equipment where we can continue to be great on every job."

— The author is an account executive with Carmichael Lynch Spong, Minneapolis, MN, and can be reached at 612/375-8529.

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