

20 Great Smaller Companies

Good things do come in small packages. Most of these guys gross less than \$5 million, but all are bulldogs when it comes to quality and service.

Summer Rain Margate, FL

Over 12 years, Rick Wilson has built Summer Rain, a chemical/fertilizer application and aquatic weed control company, into a force to be reckoned with in the Deep South. After earning \$1.8 million in 1999, he expects that figure to jump to \$2.1 million in 2000. About 90% of Summer Rain's accounts are commercial, but the company recently opened a residential unit to solicit business from high-end properties larger than 3/4 acres. The company services accounts from 1/4 acre to 575 acres (the city of Westin, FL). With 23 employees and two branches, one in Margate, FL, and another in West Palm Beach, Wilson is counting on averaging 10% growth a year. "Capital infusion is the biggest problem for small businesses," Wilson says. "Growing a \$200,000 business 10% means gaining \$20,000, but that same 10% for a \$1 million business is \$100,000. The bigger you are, the harder it is to grow."

E.F. Pouly Co. Orville, OH

"I think we're more old-fashioned than other companies," says Gene Pouly, president of E.F. Pouly Co. "We have a lot of customers who still want to make a business deal on a handshake."



We don't have a problem with that, and we don't ask for 20% down before starting a job." Pouly's old-fashioned ways must work, as he has seen his under-\$1 million company average 8 to 10% growth per year. A full-service landscape management company,

Pouly offers plant health care, design/build, landscape maintenance, arbor care and chemical application services to a mostly residential clientele (80%). "I wouldn't mind if we had 5% more residential accounts and 5% less commercial," Pouly says. He prefers to stay away from competitive bidding situations, admitting that his niche leans more toward high-end maintenance.

Allentuck Landscaping Inc. Gaithersburg, MD

Since founding Allentuck Landscaping Inc. in 1986, Bruce Allentuck managed to ride the wave of development in the Washington, D.C. area to



the tune of \$1.3 million in 1999. Expected revenues for 2000 are \$1.7 million. With a 65% commercial account base, Allentuck has the luxury of taking on residential accounts on his own terms. "We offer the complete maintenance and design/build package," he says. "It's either all or nothing with us." Despite having a sizeable workforce behind him with between 42 to 45 employees, Allentuck feels he is barely scratching the surface of his market. But he won't grow faster than his core values will allow — they're on the wall of his office for everyone to see. "We aim to treat all people we come in contact with fairly and have a 'can do' attitude," Allentuck says. "We also want to solve all problems and issues quickly."

Kotalic Landscaping Huntington, WV

George and Debbie Kotalic founded their landscape design company 30 years ago, and are rather proud that they are still small. "We love our size," George Kotalic says. "We're not trying to be any larger — we don't want to be large. We're selective about our clients. We have less quantity, but more quality." Even with that attitude, the company expects to increase revenues 15% over 1999's total of \$325,000. "We haven't increased our number of employees (4-7)," says Debbie Kotalic, who draws all of the master plans by hand because her clients prefer it that way. "We've simply purchased some high tech pieces of equipment that have allowed us to do more." Even though the company is doing more work, its waiting list is still growing. "It'll be next year before we get to some of them," Debbie says. "We charge the most, but we do the best work."



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Landscape Projects Bethesda, MD

How does a guy with a computer science degree end up running a landscape business? We don't know, but with \$1.5 million in revenue last year, he's not looking back. After starting the business in 1986, Michael Abert bought his partner out in 1994 and guided the company to over one million in sales and 27 employees. Serving mostly high-end residential accounts in a booming market, Abert can afford to be choosy about his clients. "We don't negotiate," he says of his prices. "We

get complaints, but we say, 'That's life in the big city.' There almost isn't any competition because you make an offer to someone and that may be the only offer they get." Even if the market does turn sour, Abert still feels safe with his client base. "We work with the more established money; they're never going to cut their own grass."

The DiSanto Companies, Inc. Cleveland, OH

By concentrating on customer service and adding a design/build department, The DiSanto Companies, Inc. expects its earnings to jump to \$2.5 million in 2000 from \$2 million in 1999. With 32 employees and 41 years of experience, the company has built its reputation on a number of things. "We pay attention to details, and look at landscapes from the owner's perspective," says Tim Korte, vice president of operations. "We look for customers who are looking at their landscapes as long-term investments." Speaking



of long-term, the average employee at DiSanto has 8 to 9 years of service. "We try to vary their jobs and make them feel a part of the company," Korte says. A 75%-25% commercial/residential service mix is the result of a highly competitive residential market. "We find that homeowners look more at costs," Korte says. "If that's all they're looking at, then we can't compete."

Natural Landscape Design and Maintenance, Inc. Keego Harbor, MI

Dan Weiss has probably one of the only triple majors in the industry — English literature, horticulture and anthropology. Not to mention he's currently working on his Ph.D. in English lit. He's also owner of a 10-year-old landscape company that expects its profits to increase 12.5% to \$900,000 in 2000. He's gone out of his way to create a Web site with a vocabulary list of landscape terms to help clients communicate their ideas better. With a 75%/25% residential/commercial client mix, this comes in handy. "Residential consumers are looking for somebody who can interpret what they want," Weiss says. He also travels the globe to pick up new landscape design ideas and use them in his own work at home.

Hendrikus Schraven Landscape Construction and Design Issaquah, WA

Hendrikus Schraven, whose company grossed \$1.5 million in 1999 and expects a modest increase in 2000, does literally everything himself except for "high voltage electrical stuff" — carpentry, masonry, irrigation, lighting, softscapes, hardscapes, etc. He and his 20 employees espouse the organic way of fertilizing and revitalizing

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ing soil, and use a "microbrewed tea" to nourish plants and control foliar diseases. "I can create life in soil within minutes instead of using chemical fertilizers that actually kill microbes," Schraven says. He's been described as everything from a counter-culture

hippie to an environmental extremist's marketing ploy, but his awards speak for themselves.

Embassy Lawn and Landscaping Kansas City, MO

Dan Nelson, manager of Embassy Lawn & Landscaping's Landscape Division, puts it simply when asked what makes his company unique. "We're a diversified company that's able to handle many problems," he says. With a Government Contracting Division that manages, for instance, Peterson Air Force Base, a company has to be good at dealing with complexities. Under the leadership of president Joe Smith, who let Nelson, with 30 years experience, start the Landscape Division from scratch four years ago, it has seen revenues grow from \$3.5 million in 1999 to an expected \$5 million in 2000.

Dan's Landscaping and Lawn Care Terrytown, LA

"I would rather grow less and net more," says Dan Standley, whose company, founded in 1981, grossed \$840,000 in 1999 and expects to hit



\$900,000 this year. His specialty, which is servicing and renovating large accounts, is reflected in a 97%/3% commercial/residential client mix. But that doesn't mean his company lacks a personal touch. "If we mess up, we fix it better than anybody," Standley

says. This extends to his employees, who, for good work, are offered "bonus bucks" good for dinners for two, car washes and oil changes.

Yard Smart, Inc. Olmsted Falls, OH

Bob Smart's goal is to one day hit the \$2-\$3 million mark, but he's not rushing anything. He's happy with the 10%-15% yearly growth his company has averaged since its start in 1986, and this year will pull in \$1.3 million thanks to a booming residential market. For now, he's enjoying the loyalty his 30 or so employees have shown over the years as the result of the company's unique attitude. "It's open book, open door here," Smart says. "Everyone knows what I

make, and how much it costs to do business. Plus, there's a team environment, and everyone's really comfortable." Smart considers maintenance his company's specialty, but design and installation are services it offers as well.

Oakview Landscape, Inc. Clarence, NY

With 12 employees and anticipated revenues of \$350,000 in 2000, Oakview Landscape is considered small. But owner Ken Ward, who started the business in 1983, likes it that way. "We were actually bigger, but we went backwards and are now making more money," Ward says. "We do first-class work at the right price. Sometimes we knock our prices up to carry demand." The firm does mostly high-end residential work, but has recently taken on maintaining and designing parks for assisted living facilities. "I think in five to seven years when the next generation takes over, we'll be more open to a lot of growth," Ward predicts.

Arborlawn, Inc. Lansing, MI

After finishing with revenues just under \$1 million in 1999, Arborlawn is on pace to break the million mark in 2000. Maybe it's because of a strong Christmas light business, but president Jerry Grossi says there are other reasons, too. "I think we give a high level of service," he says. "We're more local and down home. We tailor our programs to customers." Almost 14 years after the company's start, Grossi is comfortable with its growth rate. "Explosive growth can sometimes hurt, but so can not growing."

GroGreen Plano, TX

This five-year-old application company founded and owned by Gary LaScalea keeps racking up consistent growth in the metropolitan Dallas marketplace. GroGreen added exterior pest control services to his lawn care routes about a year ago and it's helped boost 2000 sales to about \$1.8. "We don't lose customers and we don't lose employees," says LaScalea. "We have very little turnover. I hate turnover. We build our business on the referrals of our customers."

Kinsella Landscape, Inc. Blue Island, IL

Kinsella Landscape, Inc., founded by George Kinsella, has grown from \$190,000.00 in 1994 to a projected \$2.6 million this season. That's impressive, like its 93% customer retention rate.



Attention to detail is the company's strategic objective whether it's providing high-end maintenance or design/installation. The company employed 54 this season, including 10 full-time.

Barringer & Barringer, Inc. Charlotte, NC

Since starting in 1985, Barringer & Barringer has steadily grown into a \$1.6 million. It's no surprise that the company is on top of its game financially given that co-partners John Barringer and W. James Ormond come from banking backgrounds. "We look at things from a financial perspective," Barringer says. "We emphasize communication with clients and doing things correctly."

Groundmasters, Inc. Cincinnati, OH

With \$7.3 million in revenues in 1999 and an expected \$8.1 million in 2000, Groundmasters, Inc. covers a lot of territory — and does it well. Now a branch operation, with four locations spread through Dayton, Cincinnati and Kentucky, service is as strong as ever. "That's where we dominate," says president Mike Rorie. "We have better people and a better structure to resource our people to service our clients. Clients like dealing with the same people, and I think we do a good job of that." With 75 year-round employees, the firm offers all services to commercial clients.

Lambert Landscaping Co. Dallas, TX

Jess Wetzel says that Lambert Landscaping Co. belongs to a dying breed of landscape firms. "There's just not a lot of high-end residential contractors left," he says. One of the reasons Lambert has been around since 1919, he says, is its "extraordinary people." Doing design/build and maintenance services with some tree maintenance, the company grossed between \$5 million and \$10 million in 1999. Wetzel said he isn't so much concerned with growth in revenue as growth in other areas: "Better projects and greater efficiency."

Tovar's Landscape Contractors, Inc. Elgin, IL

Constant improvement is what Jeff Tovar seeks for his company, started in 1990. With \$2.8 million in sales in 1999 and an expected \$3.4 million in 2000, the company is reaching its goal of 20% yearly growth without a problem. But Tovar not just concerned with the bottom line. "We're on a mission to constantly improve ourselves," he says. "We do this through college courses, association seminars, national certifications and networking." Around 2% of gross sales goes toward employee education. With 20 year-round employees, Tovar offers several services.

Apple Tree Nursery Central New Hampshire

With a retail garden center and design/installation, maintenance and snow removal services, Apple Tree Nursery took in \$1.1 million in 1999 and is on track to grow 20% in 2000. It's a family-run operation — Jay Rotonelli runs the landscape side, and brother David and father Joe run the garden center. They started the company in 1990 and are big believers in employee training.