

# Contractor favorites

**C**ontractors expect a lot from their trucks. They want accessibility, good gas mileage and proven brands they can rely on — all for a fair price.

However, there's always a new model that comes along that makes their "far-out" trucks seem "far gone." We wanted to know what features matter most when it comes to buying a truck, so we grilled three landscape contractors mercilessly on the topic. Here's what they had to say:

## Straight talk from three landscape professionals on what they like and don't like in pickups and vans

BY VICKY POULSEN

### HighGrove Partners



Greg Nelson

**Name:** Greg Nelson  
**Title:** Fleet Manager  
**Location:** Smyrna, GA  
**2002 gross revenue:** \$15.3 million  
**Business mix:** 80% commercial, 20% residential

**Employees:** 200 year-round/full-time and 30 seasonal/part-time. There are 19 three-person crews (strictly maintenance) and two floriculture crews in Atlanta.

**Company profile:** In business since 1991, the company's services are divided as follows — 55% landscape maintenance; 35% landscape design/build; 7% irrigation installation/maintenance; 2% chemical lawn care/fertilization; and 1% snow removal.

**Trucks:** "We have a total of 107 vehicles, in-

cluding three utility work vehicles, eight dump trucks of various sizes, 42 pickup trucks, 10 SUVs, four irrigation install and repair trucks, 23 open ramp trucks, eight van body ramp trucks, three Turf Care spray trucks, and one mechanic service truck."

**Features:** "All of our vehicles are built to do the intended job. Having lockable storage for the small equipment is our 'must-have' feature. For management vehicles, such as 1/2-ton and 3/4-ton trucks, driver comfort features is the must-have. Most of these are now ordered as base-extended cab units with seating and stereo upgrades. For upper management and sales vehicles, four-door seating is a must-have."

**Finance methods:** "We have bought and leased, but we're currently acquiring all new vehicles with open-end leases. About half are owned and half are leased. Cost considerations would be truck specific. The sky

isn't the limit when building a truck, and we won't go bare bones either. Our trucks are more middle-of-the-road priced. The truck has got to fit the job requirements, it must be efficient to work out of and it must present a good image."

**Dream truck:** "A Kenworth SUV or a truck that will never require a brake job. But realistically, I build my dream truck every time we spec out a new ramp truck, SUV or pickup."

### R.A.R. Landscaping Co.



Allan Davis

**Name:** Allan Davis  
**CLP, CSP**  
**Title:** Executive Vice President  
**Location:** Baltimore, MD  
**2002 gross revenue:** \$5.4 million

**Business mix:** 100% commercial

**Employees:** "R.A.R. Landscaping has 120 employees. We have a full-time Director of Human Resources, a full-time sales staff managed by a Director of Sales, Fleet Manager, and various support administrative staff. We have an executive management team of four people — President, Executive Vice President, Controller, and Vice President. Crew sizes range from two to five people. We believe that small crews are the most efficient. We handle all size properties."

**Company profile:** "R.A.R. Landscaping Co. has been in business for over 25 years, servicing the Baltimore metropolitan area. We have five service lines: grounds management, landscape design and installation, snow and ice management, tree care, and holiday decorating. We see grounds management as our core service and add services around it that offer value to our core client base. We have a commercial client base and believe in building lasting relationships."

**Trucks:** "Sales and field managers use small pickups, either Ford Rangers or Toyota Tacomas. We're looking for accessibility, good gas mileage and the ability to occasionally transport something small. Our tree care division uses various specialty vehicles, such as bucket/chipper trucks, spray rigs and regular chipper trucks. Any landscaping or landscape maintenance is handled with Ford F700 and F800 trucks with 14-foot dump bodies on them. We have several that have crew cabs to accommodate larger crews. These trucks have cab protectors and side boxes for storage. They have racks on the sides for handled tools. They also have rear swing doors, and we have custom-installed ramps on the rear. Many of our crews have Ford F350 trucks with either pickup beds or eight-foot dump beds on them. These are versatile and can be used by mowing crews, cleanup crews and install crews."

**Favorites:** "The vehicles I'm most proud of are in our van fleet. Several years ago, we began purchasing off-rental vans from Ryder. These vans are three to four years old and have anywhere from 90,000 to 130,000 miles each. We pay between \$9,000 and \$12,000 for them. We spend an additional few thousand dollars to have them painted red and have our logos emblazoned across them. They're workhorses that we use for everything, including mowing, installation, flower plantings, snow removal and even for repairs in the field. We have racking inside for equipment, and ramps that we built to load them with equipment."

**Finance method:** "We always purchase, not lease, vehicles, and most of the time take the lump sum discounts the manufacturer is offering and arrange for financing through our banks. We try to use the same dealerships and negotiate the best prices we can. We also are on a fleet discount program through Ford. We also occasionally purchase used vehicles, as in the vans, but also for our other operations."

**Dream truck:** "My dream truck would be one that never needs to sit in my lot. The vans come close, because they can be used for so many different jobs. Any vehicle that can be used for multiple functions and put in the field no matter what season is the best."

### Dickerson Landscaping



William Dickerson

**Name:** William Dickerson

**Title:** President

**Location:** Tallahassee, FL

**2002 gross revenue:** \$700,000

**Business mix:** 60% residential, 40% commercial

**Employees:** The number averages around 13 in winter and 17 in summer. Although the company prefers teams of two employees, crew sizes can range between two and five employees depending on the size of the project.

**Company profile:** "Dickerson Landscaping has been serving Tallahassee's landscaping and outdoor maintenance needs for years. We started in 1987 as Dickerson Enterprises, a lawn maintenance company. In 1993, we changed our name to Dickerson Landscaping to encompass the real focus of our company. We now offer an extensive venue of products and services including landscape design and installation, landscape maintenance, and irrigation repair and installation."

**Trucks:** "We've made a few changes with our truck fleet. We had Chevy trucks, but we dropped them and went with Fords and Toyotas. I like Toyotas for their longevity, but they aren't the most suited for this industry, so Fords have been winning out. Our fleet breakdown is as follows — three Ford 150s (2001, 2002), two 1999 Ford 350s, one 1997 Ford 477 Super Duty, two 1998 Toyota T-100s and two 2002 Toyota Tundras."

**Favorite features:** "I would have to say with Ford is the diversity. You can get so many bed designs. The Toyotas you can put through anything and they still go."

**Financing methods:** "We buy new. The reason for that is that we get better prices and warranties. When we're looking for a new truck, we write down what it is we want, then fax it out to all the dealers in the state of Florida and south Georgia. We then sit back and wait for the bids to come in."

**Dream truck:** "Toyota is my favorite, but we're going to be looking at some of the new hybrids coming out just for lawn maintenance like the Super Lawn Trucks."