

Advantage: Certification

Set your business apart with professional credentials that demonstrate your commitment to quality and to your clients

BY MICHAEL RILEY

While professional certification is still relatively new to the Green Industry, those who have earned their credentials are enjoying a competitive advantage. How much? That's hard to judge. But it's real. Certification brings increased knowledge and self-worth to the employee, credibility and respect to the business owner, and a sense of reassurance to customers that they're hiring the best in the business.

It's not just a piece of paper to hang on a wall. Educated clients know the value of professionally trained and certified contractors and crew members, and many are willing to pay a little more for it.

"To the extent that you can convey to prospects and clients the benefits of using certified people, you can get their endorsements and have a greater marketing advantage — and charge premium prices," says David Frank, owner of David Frank Landscape Construction, Georgetown, WI. "There are so many credentials that are for sale these days — this isn't



one of them. It means something to the Green Industry, and to those who don't know, you have to educate them."

Raising the bar

Frank is one of only a handful of contractors to be designated as a Charter Certified Landscape Professional (CCLP) — a distinction that comes from having passed a challenging battery of exams during the charter year of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America's CLP certification program.



David Frank

ALCA offers three certifications: Certified Landscape Professional (CLP), Certified Landscape Technician - Exterior (CLT-E), and Certified Landscape Technician - Interior (CLT-I). Anyone working in the industry is eligible to take the tests, although ALCA members receive a discount (tiered pricing is standard practice with all of the associations listed in this article).

"This isn't an easy test," says Frank. "Most people have to work at it two, three, even four times to pass. It's tough, but it's worth it. It improves the morale and self-esteem of our staff of roughly 300, and I've found it to be very beneficial in promoting our firm's professional image through our brochures, business cards and all of our marketing material."

Certification is the accredited acknowledgement by an organization or society that verifies a person's

tested knowledge of professional standards. Its roots can be traced back to medieval times when doctors were first certified after schooling. The concept of professional credentials eventually spread to encompass blue collar industries, and, by the late-1970s (the time when the Green Industry began forming its own programs), there were over 300 industry certification programs in place throughout the United States.

Beyond providing a well-rounded education to those who become certified, the concept of standardization establishes a baseline of competence for an entire industry. By raising the bar, people who achieve certification benefit by having a greater sense of pride and reinforced confidence. They feel good about themselves and their abilities, and produce a better product — which translates into more success for the

companies they work for, as well as increased customer satisfaction and esteem for the service provider.

Association involvement

As a key component in professional development and an overall package of member benefits, most Green Industry associations today have certification programs in place (see chart, p. 28, for a list of national ones).

A well-rounded education often involves certification in more than one area of the Green Industry. For example, the Irrigation Association (IA) and ALCA formed an alliance in 2001 to provide a "certification track" for contractors and employees who work in both landscape and irrigation.

"It's a professional development and learning experience designed to help the individual stay on the cutting edge of

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS BY ASSOCIATION

Association	Certification(s) offered	Contact	Phone	Web address
Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA)	Certified Landscape Technician – Exterior (CLT-E) Certified Landscape Technician – Interior (CLT-I) Certified Landscape Professional (CLP)	Marcia Higgins, BCA Professional Standards Mgr.	800/395-ALCA	www.alca.org
Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS)	Certified Grounds Technician (CGT) Certified Grounds Manager (CGM)	Tom Shaner Executive Dir.	800/609-PGMS	www.pgms.org
Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA)	Certified Turfgrass Professional (CTP) Certified Ornamental Landscape Professional (COLP) Certified Cool Season Turfgrass Professional (in cooperation with the Lawn Care Association of Pennsylvania)	Thomas Delaney VP of Government Affairs	800/458-3466	www.plcaa.org
Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA)	Certified Sports Field Manager (CSFM)	Suz Trusty Communications Dir.	800/323-3875	www.sportsturfmanager.com
Irrigation Association (IA)	Certified Irrigation Designer (CID) Certified Irrigation Contractor (CIC)	Kelly Benedetti Certification Mgr.	703/536-7080	www.irrigation.org
Snow & Ice Management Association (SIMA)	Certified Snow Professional (CSP)	Tammy Higham Executive Dir.	814/835-3577	www.sima.org
California Landscape Contractors Association (CLCA)	(Same as ALCA)	Tara Stout Events Mgr.	916/830-2780	www.clca.org

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changes in the industry," says IA Certification Manager Kelly Benedetti said of the program. "It's brought a new level of cooperation and visibility to both associations."

The Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS) is another association that works to promote certification through partnership, coordinating with the Association for Higher Education Facility Officers (APPA) and the American Public Works Association (APWA). PGMS was also the first Green Industry association to offer certification (1980).



Van Haasteren

"One of the most important things that you can do to improve your career is to continue your professional development," says George Van Haasteren, CGM (Certified Grounds

Manager). Van Haasteren is Director of Grounds for Dwight-Englewood School in Englewood, NJ, and chairs the PGMS certification committee. "Sure it's hard work; anything worth having is. But it's worth it."

Industry certification
now includes
cooperative efforts
with universities.

Industry certification has expanded to include cooperative efforts with universities as well. The Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) teams up with the University of Georgia to administer its Certified Turfgrass Professional (CTP) and Certified Ornamental Landscape Professional (COLP) programs. PLCAA also recently added a third certification for cool-season turfgrass profession-

als, offered through Penn State University in cooperation with the Lawn Care Association of Pennsylvania.

But you don't need a college background

to qualify for a Green Industry certification program. Each association has a complete listing of requirements based on experience and education, and offers study materials

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and frequent testing to all candidates. Most programs also require re-certification every few years in order to remain current with technology and industry changes.

All of this might seem like a lot of work. So why do it? "Certification shows that you're not only competent, but that you've taken the extra step to work through the process and affirm your professionalism," says Suz Trusty, Communications Director for the Sports Turf Managers Association.



John Gachina

It also earns respect from customers who can relate. "Property and facility managers have their own certification programs, which I think creates a greater respect for landscape companies that have certified employees," says John Gachina, CLT, CLP, of John Gachina Landscape Management, Menlo Park, CA. "Certification demonstrates a unique level of professionalism to customers and instills pride in the work force."

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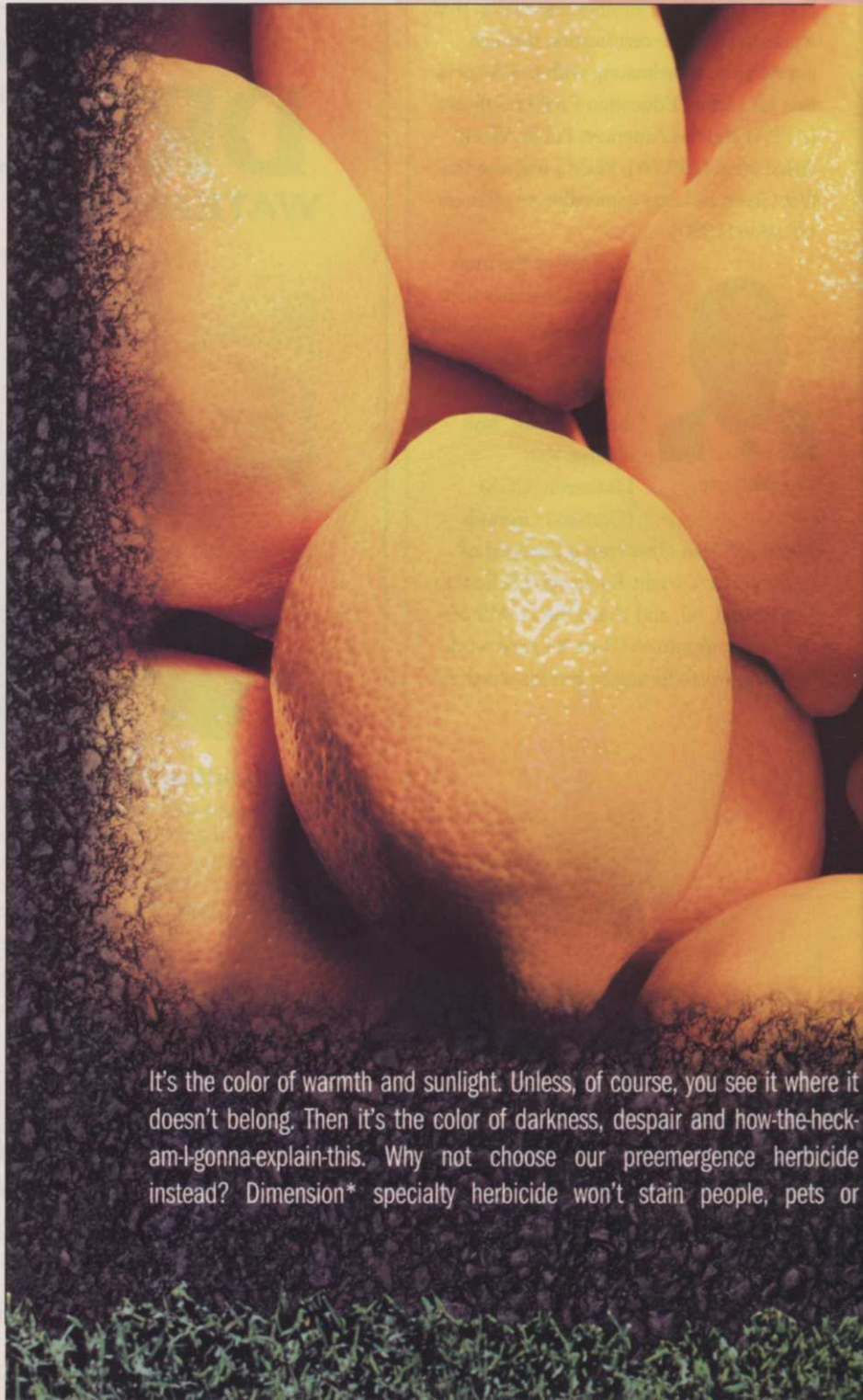
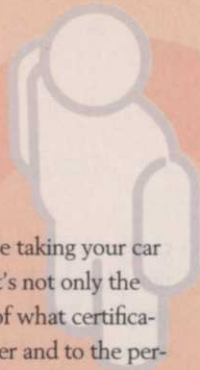
Coming of age

"The level of sophistication of the industry has progressed to where you can no longer view it as something that 'just anybody' can do," says Klaus Kumme, CLT, CLIA, of KL Landscaping, Castaic, CA. "Contractors now recognize that they aren't only in competition with each other but with

other industries that have well-developed certification programs.

"Customers have come to expect credentials from their professional service providers. Think of 'Mr. Goodwrench.'"

Are you more comfortable taking your car to a certified mechanic? It's not only the image but the substance of what certification means to the customer and to the person who's certified."



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Kumme joined the California Landscape Contractors Association's program during its fledgling stages in the early 1980s, and was the first southern California testing chairman in 1984. He's worked

with other states to assist them in starting their own programs, and notes that while early resistance to the idea is common, it becomes popular once it catches on.

"It usually takes that one person who



Ron Kujawa

says, 'Hey, this could really work for us!'" Kumme says. "Once that happens, the ball gets rolling and people start benefiting from it."

Looking ahead

Regarding the future of certification, Kumme points to ALCA's relatively new Advanced Endorsements program, which offers credentials in specialties such as irrigation, masonry, low-voltage lighting and several other key areas.

"Advanced endorsements are on the cutting edge," says Kumme. "With water shortages and droughts growing into bigger issues, specialized knowledge is becoming more important than ever."

"When certification began for the industry, there was a misconception that it would automatically bring prosperity," recalls Ron Kujawa, CLT, CLP of Kujawa Enterprises, Inc.(KEI), Milwaukee, WI. "But it's a means to an end, not the end itself."

"We've taken the service industry a step further by promoting professionalism at every level," adds Kujawa, who also served as Chairman of ALCA's Certification Board of Governors for two years. "A customer with a sizeable investment in his or her landscape is going to have a higher degree of appreciation for professional competency." Hence the competitive advantage.

"There's a limited economic pie that we're all trying to partake of," notes Kumme. "Certification is one of the best investments you can make in your business, or, if you're an individual, in your profession — especially now, as the public's appreciation for certification continues to increase. With certification, everybody wins." **LM**

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