

An unusual alliance

Four former competitors pool interests and service strengths to become a market force

BY RON HALL / Editor in Chief

Sharing clients, equipment, advertising is rare. In the real world contractors compete. But there are instances where contractors refer business to each other, often in a contractor/sub relationship. But four companies serving a market in what can most accurately be described as a "confederation"? That's a stretch.

Finding synergy

Located in the far northeast corner of Ohio, the four companies, last year, crafted a relationship to share resources such as advertising dollars, jobs and sometimes even equipment and employees.

Previously, they competed for essentially the same customers, even though each company specialized in a different service. This meant they relied upon subcontractors to deliver all of the landscape services that many clients wanted. It wasn't a satisfactory arrangement, several of them felt. They were losing clients to ambitious subs. Also, they weren't

satisfied that the subs were recommending work back to them from potential clients.

That led to each of the four companies becoming more specialized and joining forces in a loose "partnership" to offer a complete range of landscape services. The companies are:

- ▶ **Basic Lawn Care**, specializing in residential lawn care, gutter cleaning and maintenance;
- ▶ **Brobst Landscaping**, offering mulch blowing, lawn installation, hydro seeding, commercial mowing and snowplowing;
- ▶ **Just Gardens Landscaping**, a landscape design and installation operation; and
- ▶ **Reflections Natural Waterscapes** water features and hardscaping.

"The worst thing is to turn away business because you're too busy," says Julie Cole of Just Gardens Landscaping. "Sometimes you have to be because there's too much work and not enough of you to go around. You lose a sale and, usually, the potential for future work. That was a problem, but I also was reluctant to send business elsewhere.



The 4-in-1 team: (from left) JR Cross, Basic Lawn Care; Joe Brobst, Brobst Landscaping; Eric Eland, Brobst Landscaping; Julie Cole, Gardens Landscaping

How it started

Cole started thinking about thinking about partnering with other quality companies when she visited a client's house and was impressed with the backyard pond built by Eric Eland of Reflections Natural Waterscapes.

"I called Eric and told him how impressed I was with his work, asked questions about his company, insurance and other work he did," she says. "Soon Eric's company became my go-to company for water features and brick work."

Similarly, she found herself referring more of her clients to Basic Lawn Care for lawn care and Brobst Landscaping for other landscaping work at which her company wasn't proficient.

"We liked how our individual companies cooperated, and we discovered that we all liked specializing in certain services," Cole says. "Of course, we were comfortable referring work to each other because we were all fully insured, reputable and committed to great customer service."

That comfort eventually grew into trust.

This spring the relationship changed again with Eland hooking up with and bringing his expertise to Brobst Landscaping. As a result, Basic Lawn Care is adding pond care and cleanup services at the request of Reflections Natural Waterscapes, which couldn't keep up with demand. Even so, the officers of the companies continue to talk each week, share ideas and offer help to the others. **LM**