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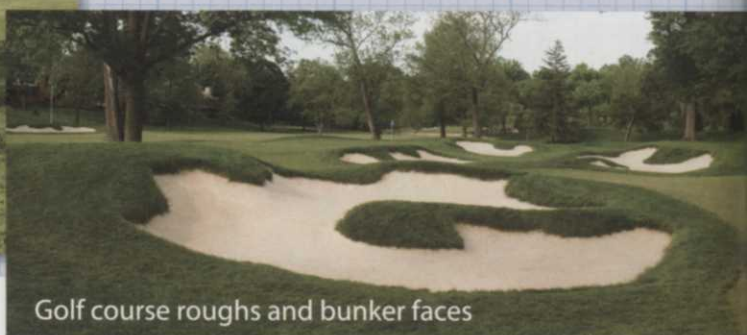
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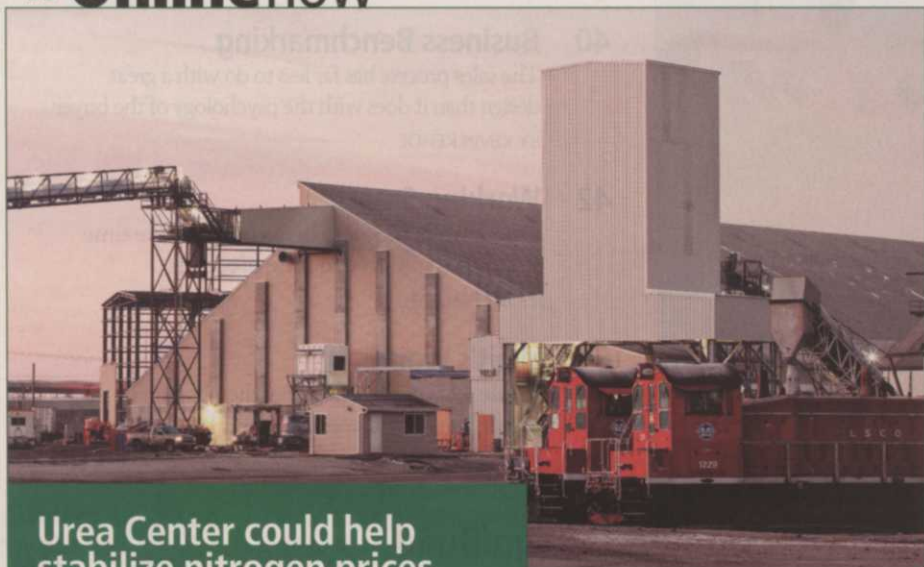
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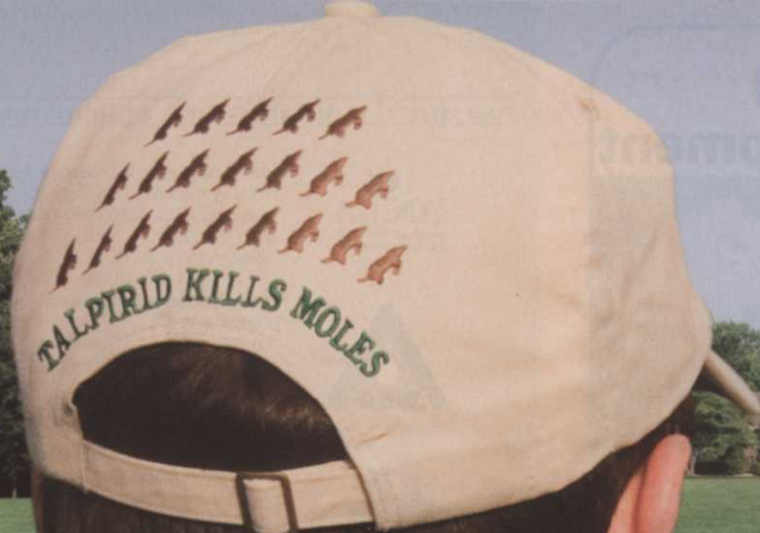
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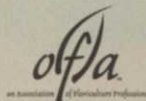
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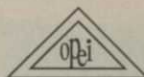
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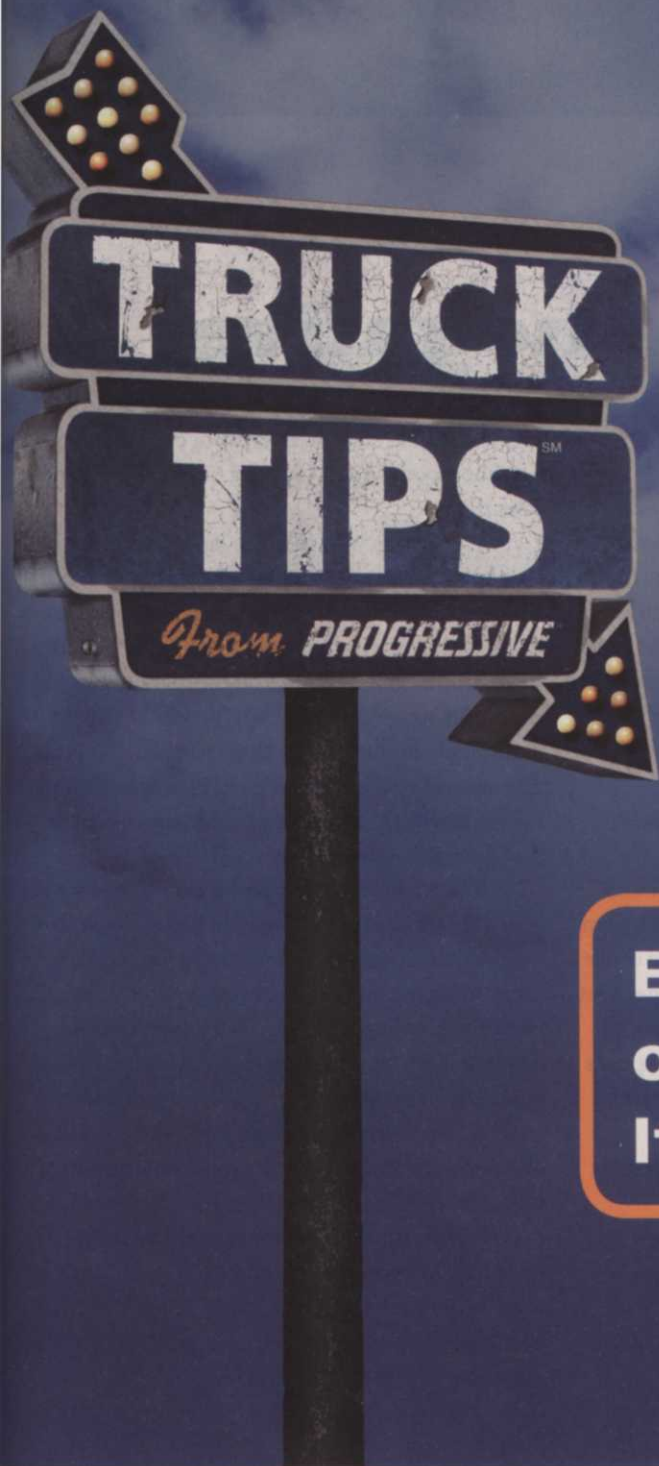


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## Let's dump the negative

BY RON HALL / Editor-at-Large

**S**o, what do we do now? That's the question I often ask myself when I'm facing a challenge. And, yes, I talk to myself. Not in a room with family or colleagues (hopefully not often, anyway), but as I walk alone. Often it's in the evening, south along a country road that on clear winter nights provides an IMAX-like view of bold Orion dead ahead in the sky.

No cell phones. No radios. No CD players. No negative thoughts; they're draining.

Everything's quiet, except for my self-talk. I walk — about three miles does it for me — and the rhythm of my steps eventually clears my mind. It's kind of like hitting the "empty trash" button on my computer. Out goes accumulated mind clutter, and the challenge of the moment comes into focus — usually with options to meet it, too. They might or might not be the best options, but they often suggest a start.

All of this gets me back to the original question: What do we do now?

While we can't escape the recent economic trauma, we do remain in control of the success or failure of our businesses. That said, and after walking and reflecting on the approaching 2009 season, I share these thoughts:

► Recurring revenue is the most reassuring kind of income. If our core business is maintenance (especially commercial maintenance) or lawn care, good for us. We likely have, and certainly should have, an accurate handle on our costs and hopefully on success with customer retention as we

prepare our '09 budgets. We're identifying our most profitable customers, types of customers and neighborhoods. We're focusing our marketing and sales there.

► Those of us who rode the landscape construction boom during the residential housing run up are likely looking for other services to add, in addition to construction. It will take time for home buyers to absorb the glut of houses on the market. Just like the advice we get with our 401(k) or other investment funds, in this market being diversified is probably wise. And it's always a good idea to be able to deliver services that return a continuing stream of cash back to our businesses.

► If we've been good business people, and we've got cash and good credit, we're in better shape than many of our competitors. We'll have nice opportunities when undercapitalized competitors shrink, close down or begin looking for a buyer. Then as now, we'll rely upon numbers — not emotions — to guide our decisions.

These are tough and uncertain times for our economy and industry. Don't get bogged down in negative thoughts or the day's routine. Get away from time to time. Walk, fish or do whatever works to give your mind quiet time and an opportunity to reveal actions you can take to meet your biggest challenges. Sometimes, to move forward, we need to step back and quietly think things through.

Contact Ron via e-mail at [rhall@questex.com](mailto:rhall@questex.com)

While we can't escape the recent economic trauma, we do remain in control of the success or failure of our businesses.





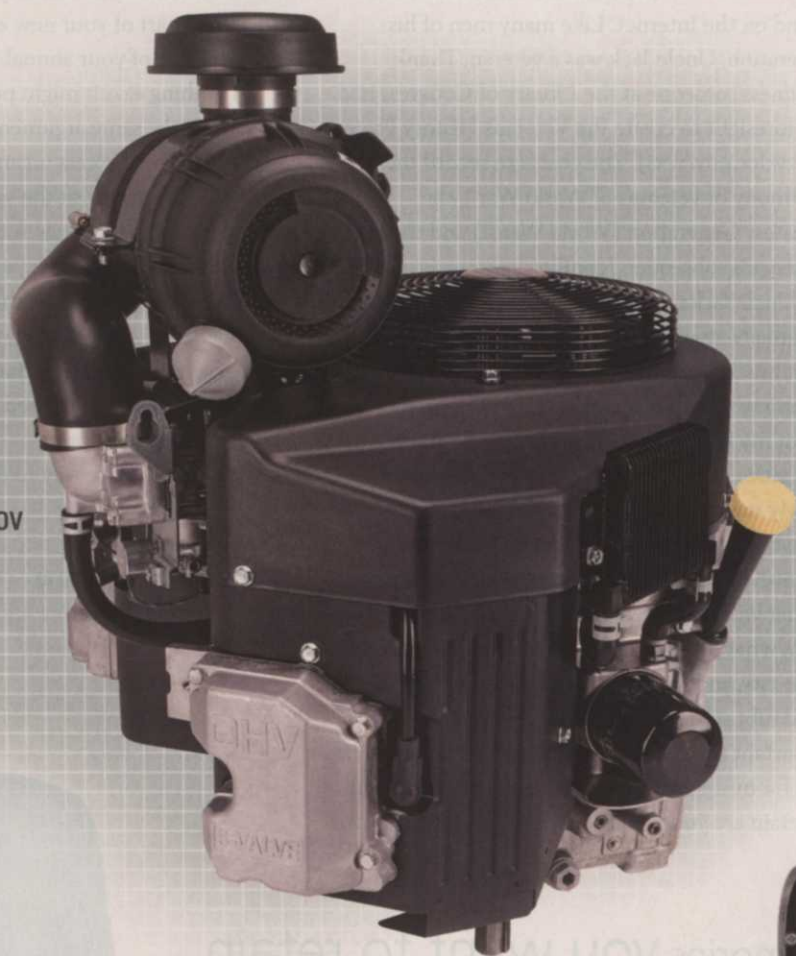
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## Preserving best practices

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS / Managing Editor

**T**he call came over the weekend: My Great-Uncle Jack passed away at an all-too-young 84.

His loss is a great one to our family on many levels. When my sister relayed the news, she mentioned a video that can be found on the Internet. Like many men of his generation, Uncle Jack was a veteran. Thank goodness someone at the Library of Congress had the foresight to create the Veterans History Project ([www.loc.gov/vets](http://www.loc.gov/vets)). The goal is to record the testimony of veterans of World War I, the Greatest Generation (World War II) and those of America's subsequent conflicts.

Uncle Jack remained in the reserves after the war, eventually attaining the rank of Brigadier General. That much I knew. It's what I learned watching the interview that took me by surprise. I learned more about my family's history in the first 15 minutes of that video than I had at any one time in my life.

My uncle's passing is a tragic loss, but it would have been compounded had we lost his story, his memories, his knowledge and his history. Much of that will be carried on by his wife and children, what bits I can remember growing up in the same city, and from the materials he left behind. No doubt some things will be lost, but the most important memories will live on. The same can be said for businesses. Only the memories you want to retain are your company's best practices. If your

institutional memory resides with only you or the guy who's been with you for a decade or more, you might be in trouble. What do you do if something happens to the individual with that knowledge?

Start by documenting your practices and procedures. Fill a notebook with articles you tear out of this magazine and documents you collect attending seminars and conferences. Find a way to record institutional memory in a format accessible to all and part of your new employee training and make it part of your annual training.

If nothing else, it might prevent you from rehashing the same arguments and repeating the same mistakes. A press organization I belong to always seems to revisit the same issue over and over at our monthly meetings. A former colleague called it "institutional Alzheimer's," a very apt description.

There's no need to let the best ideas slip away simply because the one who remembers them is no longer with us. Whether that person is a beloved family member or a trusted employee, preserve and cherish those memories.

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# A letter to all commercial mowing professionals, dealers, distributors and manufacturers.

Dear Commercial Mowing Industry Professionals,

Over the last few years, there has been an undeniable trend in the commercial mowing industry toward stand-on products. I'd like to take this opportunity to share my insight regarding the recent growth of the stand-on market and encourage our continued mutual success.

As our industry grows, all of our businesses grow and vice versa. Our individual efforts to improve our businesses through our respective areas of expertise result in greater success for all of us. The stand-on trend is a perfect example of this phenomenon.

**First off, I congratulate and commend each of you who have embraced the stand-on as the most productive mower category today.** There are currently about six brands of stand-on mowers. If you've researched stand-on mowers, you certainly understand their productivity and profitability. For those of you who have not looked into them, I encourage you to do so this winter.

In my career, I've witnessed similar trends three consecutive times in the following three categories of mowers:

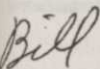
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1. The rise, plateau and decline of commercial intermediate **walk-behind** from the early '80s to the early '00s.
2. The rise, plateau and decline of commercial zero-radius-turning, **mid-mount riders** beginning in the late '90s and losing momentum over the past two or three years.
3. The growth of the **stand-on** market, which began around 2000 and has dramatically accelerated over the last few years in spite of industry-wide commercial mower declines.

Incremental advances in technology and the resulting productivity gains have driven this evolution of the commercial mower market. As a leader in the stand-on category, we at Wright are naturally grateful that the industry has begun to embrace standing as superior way to mow. Just as our company, partners and users have profited from this trend, I believe the entire industry will profit as more of you make the shift to stand-on mowers.

Again, I congratulate and give a hearty welcome to the newer participants in the stand-on category. I hope all is well with your businesses and families these days and that you have the finest season ever in 2009!

Sincerely,



William R. Wright, CEO  
Wright Manufacturing, Inc.

In 1981, Bill Wright started with a lawn maintenance business, Lawn-Wright, which grew to mow about 500 lawns per week. In 1983, he also founded a separate manufacturing division, which led to the development of stand-on mowers. In 1993, he formed Wright Manufacturing, Inc. for the purpose of manufacturing stand-on mowers and Wright shipped their first Stander® in October 1997.



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# In the Know

BUSINESS

NEWS YOU CAN USE

## Scrambled eggs and sustainable landscapes

BY RON HALL / Editor-at-Large

Is your company a leader and recognized as such in your market? Or are you counting on the best practices that you've implemented, the competence of your well-trained employees and the value of the services you provide as evidence enough that you're the environment's friend?

During two lively discussions by landscape company owners and managers at the recent Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) Green Industry Conference in Louisville, KY, the consensus was somewhere inbetween those two points of view. Even so, the owners and managers were eager to gain new insights into offering (and selling) more sustainable services.

"Green is where it's at. It's our future," said Brian Zimmerman, ASLA, Zimmerman Lindberg, Charlotte, NC.

### Hot coffee, great talk

The discussions — each of them involving 10 professionals — occurred at PLANET's Breakfast of Champions. More than 700 landscape company owners and managers participated in the 7-8:30 a.m. events.

The topic at Table 28 was sustainability. Michael Peters, a certified arborist employed with KEI in Milwaukee, facilitated the first morning's discussion. Mark Urbanowski, senior marketing specialist with Dow AgroSciences, led the second



morning's discussion on "green" products, practices and services.

### What customers want

Yes, sustainability is becoming more important to customers of professional landscape services, but it's still not at the top of their list, said KEI's Peters.

What they look at, with each customer arranging this list differently:

- ▶ A visually pleasing landscape;
- ▶ Cost;
- ▶ The landscape's functionality;
- ▶ The landscape's maintainability; and
- ▶ The environmental benefits of the landscape.

"Every company has to figure out where it stands on sustainability," said David Snodgrass, president of Dennis' Seven Dees Landscaping, Portland, OR. "I don't think we want to be over the top with it."

**Editor's Note:** For the complete article go to [www.landscapemanagement.net](http://www.landscapemanagement.net). Also, look for continued coverage of sustainability online and in the next issue of our e-newsletter, LMdirect!



## LEGALLY Speaking

BY KENNETH D. MORRIS, ESQ., L.L.C.



**Q** My local Chamber of Commerce tells me they have several customer complaints saying I am overcharging. Am I allowed to see these complaints?

**A** Yes, you can ask to see them, but more than likely, your Chamber of Commerce will provide you with the complaint details when they contact you. The Chamber will not want to hold onto them since if the allegations are true, state or federal authorities might want to investigate. If the complaints are justified, you need to rectify the problem with a full or partial refund.

**Q** A homeowners association wants a refund because I was unable to cure a chinch bug problem. But the contract disclaimer states chinch pest control is not guaranteed. Am I protected?

**A** The answer will probably depend on state law. Where a contract is not with another commercial establishment, a traditional contractual disclaimer may not protect you. If you made it clear up front there are several variables that affect the effectiveness of your treatment, the association is more likely to understand that no guarantee can be expected.

Kenneth D. Morris, a Philadelphia-based attorney with more than 30 years corporate and law firm experience, offers information on industry legal issues in each issue of LM. Contact him via [www.kenmorrislaw.com](http://www.kenmorrislaw.com).

**Note:** The above should not be interpreted as offering legal advice in any jurisdiction where such practice is not authorized. Engage competent counsel familiar with your jurisdiction when legal issues arise.



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**Problem** Many clients request that flowers be planted around and at the base of trees. Unfortunately, 95% of the time clients are not satisfied with results of those plantings. What would you do?

**Solution**

For many, ringing the tree is something they saw their parents or grandparents do. Old habits die hard. If the client is already unhappy with the results of the floral display, then you are in a great position to educate him about tree root, light, nutrient and water competition, and root damage caused by soil preparation. You are also in an excellent position to show the client that he could more effectively spend his money by moving and creating a massed floral display in another location where there is minimal competition. Ideally, no flowers would be planted in tree rings.



Every day you see horticultural problems. Sometimes the solution is obvious, but others are much more difficult to solve. Brickman Group Senior Horticulture Specialist H. Bruce Hellerick tackles these issues each month in Problem Solver. He can be reached at [Hellerick@BrickmanGroup.com](mailto:Hellerick@BrickmanGroup.com)

## I hate moles

**ST. LOUIS** — In man's ongoing war against the mole, it appears the moles are still winning. That's according to entrants in the second annual "I Hate Moles Because" contest, sponsored by Sweeney's, a St. Louis-based maker of mole control products.

More than 300 people penned their worst "mole woe" stories. This year's winner was a poem, "Twas the First Day of Spring," and recounts one woman's dismay as moles destroy her grass.

Brenda Tolson, from Chesapeake, VA wrote: *The tunnels and mounds, made by moles and voles with care, were running in all directions, chaos and destruction everywhere! And what to my wandering eyes should appear? But chewed up plant bulbs, and holes far and near.*

Tolson received a \$500 gift certificate to Lowe's. Ten runners-up each won a gift basket with Sweeney's mole control products.



## Day of service

**LOUISVILLE, KY** — The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) is launching the PLANET Day of Service on April 22, 2009. The goal is to build on the organization's "Renewal and Remembrance" program held each summer at Arlington National Cemetery and Historic Congressional Cemetery, by encouraging Green Industry members to give back to their communities. Events will be spearheaded by the local state associations.

PLANET members across the country will create their own projects focusing on lawn, landscape, tree care or interior plantscape projects, which benefit a chosen venue in their local areas. Members and state associations will register their service projects with PLANET and unite across the country for one day of giving back.

For more info visit, [www.planetdayofservice.org](http://www.planetdayofservice.org).







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# Field *of* teams



## WINNING SPIRIT RETURNS

From left are Ruppert Nurseries' Ken Hochkeppel, CFO, Phil Key, vice president of the firm's Landscape Management Division, Craig Ruppert, CEO, Bob Jones, vice president of the Landscape Construction Division, and Chris Davitt, president.

## Ruppert's Seeds of Success

**1971** At age 18, Craig Ruppert (current CEO) creates Ruppert Lawn Service. He focuses on residential lawn and garden maintenance and operates the start-up from his family's back yard using an \$800 pick-up truck.

**1973** Brother Chris Ruppert (now a board member and part owner) becomes the firm's first full-time employee. Annual revenue is \$20,000. Chris Davitt (current president), age 12, is hired to deliver filers and help mow lawns.

**1976** The firm incorporates, becomes Ruppert Landscape Co., and refocuses on commercial maintenance as installations play an increasingly important role.

**1980** With Ruppert Landscape's annual revenue

topping \$440,000, Craig Ruppert makes the move to full time.

**1981** Chris Davitt comes on full time to lead the firm's landscape management division. The company employs about 25 people.

**1987** The company

employs 100 professionals, has 37 trucks and 15 trailers, and records annual revenue exceeding \$5 million (60% installation; 40% maintenance).

**1989** Ruppert Landscape reorganizes to a four-branch system with decentralized management. This marks



# Ruppert's winning spirit re-emerges — whispering from the rustling corn stalks, 'If you rebuild it, they will come back'

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARTY WHITFORD / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**S**omewhere along my 30-mile drive from Washington to Ruppert Nurseries' Laytonsville, MD, headquarters, I'm transported to a different place and time.

Our national monuments have sauntered into the horizon in my rear-view mirror. I'm surrounded by an endless veil of corn stalks. They stand straight and tall, very much together, whispering in the wind, welcoming me.

*I must be in Iowa, I think as I coast up the long, winding road toward Ruppert Nurseries' corporate offices. Then, Terence Mann, played by James Earl Jones in the 1989 classic flick Field of Dreams, bellows to my heart:*

*"They'll come to Iowa for reasons they can't even fathom. They'll turn up your driveway, not knowing for sure why they're doing it. They'll arrive at your door as innocent as children, longing for the past," Mann says. "They'll find they have reserved seats. The memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces."*

## Called home

Ten years ago — 27 years after founding the firm — Craig Ruppert sold Ruppert Landscape's services, customer list and equipment to ServiceMaster (TruGreen). He had begun planting the company's seeds of success at the age of 18, and it was harvest time.

"When they sold Ruppert Landscape, the owners shared with employees almost \$4 million from the proceeds of the sale," says Bob Jones, vice president of Ruppert Nurseries' Landscape Construction Division. "They didn't have to do that, and they never told the media. That says a lot about Ruppert's corporate culture — which really is why so many came back to Ruppert once its non-compete ended and the owners decided to rebuild it.

"Our customers and employees called out to us, asking us to please come back, and we did," Jones adds. "Nine branch managers came back and so did hundreds of our key customers and employees."

*continued on page 24*



the start of the company's present-day structure, creating rare autonomy and true ownership for key managers.

**1990** Ruppert Landscape purchases the equipment, field inventory and nurseries of J.H. Burton and Sons, and Ruppert Nurseries is born.

**1995** Ruppert Landscape acquires Green Thumb's maintenance division. Coupled with steady organic growth and related branch openings, Ruppert Landscape now has 12 branches throughout Delaware, Georgia, Maryland and Virginia.

**1996** Ruppert Landscape becomes the local Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) chapter's first Accredited Quality Contractor. The Georgia branch completes more than \$6.5 million of landscape work in preparation for the 1996 Olympics.

**1997** Ruppert Landscape is honored as a national finalist in the Arthur Andersen Enterprise Awards for Best Business Practices program for its efforts in motivating, training and retaining employees.

**1998** Twenty-two years after incorporating, Ruppert

Landscape's services, customer list and equipment are sold to ServiceMaster (TruGreen). The sale does not include properties. At the time of the sale, Ruppert Landscape has 14 branches, more than 800 employees and \$45 million in annual revenue (40% installation; 60% maintenance). Ruppert



*continued from page 23*

From 1998 through 2002, Ruppert Nurseries raised and sold trees, and pursued limited related landscape work as permitted by its non-compete with ServiceMaster/TruGreen.

The company's sales rose from \$4.1 million to \$7.8 million in 2003, the year the non-compete ended, says Chris Davitt, Ruppert Nurseries' president, who started with the firm part-time at the age of 12 some 35 years ago.

Ruppert Nurseries doubled its sales in 2004 and then again in 2005. It grew 33% to \$41 million in 2006 and 27% to \$52 million in 2007.

Five years after the decision to rebuild, Ruppert Nurseries is on track to record revenue of approximately \$65 million this year, Davitt says. The company's annual sales will be \$20 million more than when ServiceMaster/TruGreen purchased Ruppert Landscapes.

**Player-Manager-Owners**

"Our people are why we're so successful, and why so many employees and customers came back to us and stayed

*continued on page 26*



**Then & Now**

Here's a look at Ruppert Landscape in 1998, when its services, customer list and equipment were sold to ServiceMaster, versus the resurrected Ruppert Nurseries just 10 years later:

	RUPPERT LANDSCAPE 1998	RUPPERT NURSERIES 2008
No. Employees	800+	560
Annual Revenue	\$45 million	\$65 million*
Annual Sales Per Employee Average	\$56,250	\$116,071*
No. Branches	14	10
Average Branch Size	\$3.2 million/year	\$6.5 million*/year
Average Job Size	\$100,000	\$300,000
Revenue Mix	40% installation; 60% maintenance	60% Installation; 40% maintenance

\* PROJECTED

— MW

Nurseries is retained and continues to operate under Ruppert management.

**1999** Ruppert Nurseries performs limited landscape contracting work as permitted in the non-compete with TruGreen to complement Ruppert Nurseries' 160 acres of tree-growing operations.

**2003** Ruppert Nurseries'

non-compete expires. The company re-enters the commercial landscape market from its Laytonsville, MD, headquarters, and opens a Pennsylvania landscape management branch.

**2004** The company opens four branches total in Georgia and Virginia.

**2005** Chris Davitt is named

Ruppert Nurseries' president; Craig Ruppert becomes CEO.

**2006** Chris Ruppert retires from the company after 33 years. Ruppert Nurseries is recognized on the *Inc.* 500 list with a 659.9% three-year growth since re-entering the industry unrestrained in 2003.

**2007** Ruppert Nurseries

opens a landscape management branch in Prince George's County, MD.

**2008** The company opens a landscape management branch in Frederick, MD. It projects 2008 revenue of \$65 million (60% installation; 40% maintenance) with 560 employees.

**2009** The company plans

to kick off the year by opening a fourth landscape management branch (in Charlotte, NC) and adding an eighth maintenance branch there, after moving into its newly constructed LEED-certified Laytonsville, MD, corporate campus. Please see "On deck: Green central" on page 30 for a story on Ruppert Nurseries' new "green" home.





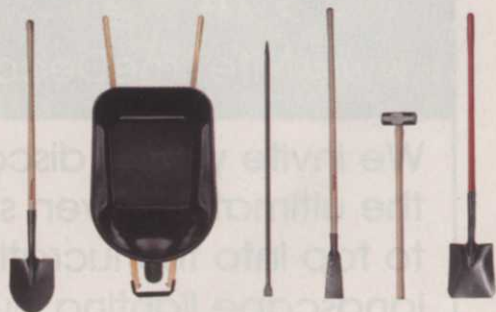
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Ken Thompson (middle), who manages Ruppert's landscape installations throughout Virginia, observes work being done at an upscale condominium complex.

*continued from page 24*

with us," Davitt says. "Our winning spirit is all about empowering and rewarding our managers and employees."

It wasn't always this way. Leadership by example and iron fist management is where Ruppert started. But outside consultants and years of listening to co-workers and customers led management down a decentralized path, says Jay Long, director of organizational and people development.

This time around, 17 partners — including division, branch and corporate managers — hold stakes in Ruppert Nurseries and collectively own 30% of the company. Additionally, Ruppert Nurseries has a structured bonus plan that shares about 17% of its annual profits with employees. The company also gives back to the community: 5% of its profits are earmarked for charitable organizations.

But sharing the harvest is just one part of it. At Ruppert Nurseries, being true stakeholders also means division, branch, mid-level and field managers hold rare autonomy (and related responsibility).

"We still watch the numbers closely and have our fair share

*continued on page 28*

Ruppert has a structured bonus plan that shares about 17% of its annual profits with employees.



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“When they sold Ruppert Landscape, the owners shared with employees almost \$4 million from the proceeds of the sale.”

— BOB JONES, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE LANDSCAPE CONSTRUCTION DIVISION

*continued from page 26*

of corporate systems, but they're not built to control," says Craig Ruppert, the company's founder and current CEO.

"Our processes are designed to empower our people to better manage themselves, their teams and the markets in which they compete," Ruppert

adds. "Our people control the processes; it's not the other way around."

Ruppert Nurseries' branches are teams in their own right. Each team

hires its managers and players, sets its performance bonuses, establishes its pricing parameters for purchases and project work, and sells its services.

"We drive autonomy and decision making down to the field level," Long says. "Our people are in control of their own destiny."

"We give guidance on margins and other aspects of the business, but lessons learned in the field and from the top flow freely both ways," adds CFO Ken Hochkeppel.

For more about Ruppert's growth see **ON DECK: GREEN CENTRAL**, pg. 30

*continued on page 32*

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## On deck: Green central



Many Major League Baseball teams have built new, greener homes recently. Now it's Ruppert's turn at bat.

Ruppert Nurseries is building a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certified corporate headquarters campus just down the street from its longtime Laytonsville, MD, corporate offices.

What a perfect new home for a company whose teams have been all about green for decades.

Since its inception in 1971, the company has planted 1 million trees and shrubs. It manages 475 acres of wholesale tree nursery in Montgomery County, MD, where it grows 70,000 trees for customers on the East Coast.

When it opens next year, surrounded by 160 acres of Ruppert Nurseries' trees, the 16-acre corporate campus will comprise six structures, including a historic home, totaling 32,000 sq. ft.

"We believe a healthier, greener environment is a more productive environment," says Ruppert Nurseries' CEO Craig Ruppert (pictured on the left with co-workers installing pavers at the firm's new headquarters). "We could have saved money building elsewhere, but it's more important that our team leaders be close to the action — our Maryland landscape installation and maintenance branches are just across the yard — and to each other so we can more readily share knowledge."

— MW

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continued from page 28

**Winning ways**

Ruppert Nurseries' corporate values underline how much attention and commitment its teams give to business basics such as: "People: Our most impor-

tant strength," and "The Customer: Our real reason for existence."

While repeating successes is a key to winning, new paths must constantly be cut. That's why Ruppert Nurseries added "Innovation" to its corporate

values a few years ago.

"This was when Chris [Davitt] put his rubber 'REJECTED' stamp away — or at least out of sight," half jokingly says Phil Key, vice president of Ruppert Nurseries' Landscape Management Division.

Ruppert Nurseries' corporate leaders all chuckle and nod in agreement, especially Davitt.

"Remember Chris, you're not growing unless you're outside your comfort zone," Hochkeppel chimes in.

"But I don't feel like growing," moans Davitt in a gloomy, Eeyore-like tone — dripping with the sarcasm of a man

continued on page 34

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Day	Start	Lunch	End	Jobite	Activity	Hours
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Tuesday	7	1/2	3:30			8
Wednesday	7	1/2	4			8 1/2
Thursday	7	1/2	4	Crestline		8 1/2
Friday	7	1/2	4			8 1/2

Employee Signature: [Signature] Total Hours: 41 1/2

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**David Burns**

Time card for: Monday, December 8, 2008 - Friday, December 12, 2008

Job Site Name	Cost Code	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Total
Brentwood Job	Irrigation	7:38	7:25	7:53	-	-	23:06
Crestline Job	Planting	-	-	-	7:58	7:49	15:47
		7:38	7:25	7:53	7:58	7:49	38:53

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David Burns

Our people control the processes; it's not the other way around."

— CRAIG RUPPERT, CEO



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*continued from page 32*

who clearly holds a master's in banter, having grown up No. 8 of 10 in a close-knit Irish-Catholic clan.

Davitt then proudly discusses one such innovation — Ruppert Nurseries'

"Bid to Win" program, which is based on off-the-shelf estimating software that's been customized for the firm. At its Atlanta branch alone, the company doubled the value of projects it's estimating on just by adopting the software and

adding one estimator.

"This exemplifies Ruppert Nurseries' commitment to both innovation and empowerment because it was a concept conceived by — and a decision made by — our rank-and-file," Hochkeppel says.

"We at corporate initially said 'Not now,' but then we conceded — and it was to everyone's benefit that we adopted Bid to Win," Hochkeppel adds. "Not only are we bidding on tens of millions of dollars more each year

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— CHRIS DAVITT, PRESIDENT

in new business, but the program also helps pinpoint our pricing and bolster our closing rates."

Key and Jones say the company's customer retention hovers between 85% and 88%, and is steadily rising. And unlike many companies, Ruppert Nurseries counts any job lost for any reason as a mark against this enviable performance, Hochkeppel notes.

Employee turnover is one-half to one-third the industry average, Long adds.

"Being closely held, it's easier for us to make the right decisions at the right time — which, in turn, helps us keep good customers and employees," Davitt says.

"We won't make short-term profit decisions that might jeopardize our people's success and service levels," Davitt adds. "We're here to serve our customers and our people — the true seeds of our success." **LMI**



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 **BUSINESSLINK**





# Lawn Care Pro

BUSINESS LM'S OPERATOR OF THE MONTH



## Robert Palmer »

Owner, Weed Pro Ltd.

BY JAMES E. GUYETTE

**R**obert Palmer does a lot of commuting: In addition to his Weed Pro operation in the Cleveland suburb of Sheffield Village, there's also a Lewis Center, OH, outlet down Interstate 71 in the central portion of the Buckeye State. To make it work, Palmer eagerly stays on top of the industry's latest technological developments.

"Without technology, it would be very difficult to run the operations and still be there for my family," he explains. "Same goes for my management in Columbus, as they need help and support from the staff in Cleveland as well."

Weed Pro uses Web-based software for day-to-day functions so Palmer has instant access to sales, production and other information to evaluate and track the business.

"Of course, I make the two-hour trip to Columbus frequently, but the key to the success is the human factor. In the end, managing people and process has no boundaries," Palmer points out.

The company has established a set of deliverables for each employee.

"Everyone wants to know how they are doing and what they are being measured against," he explains. "Upon making each employee's deliverables known, managers can coach success instead of complain of failure. Likewise, we have established a pay-for-performance structure that rewards individuals for delivering world-class customer service."

**How have you been dealing with higher gasoline prices?** If I can build customer density and reduce the miles-per-vehicle per year by 1,000 miles, each vehicle will save about \$400. In so doing, a tech's production value will increase from \$1,100 per day to \$1,265 per day. By using mapping software and targeting our advertising to build density, we can reduce the fuel cost burden. In the end, fuel — like all costs — is a percentage of sales.

**What has been the impact of the slowing economy on your customer base?**

To date, we have felt no significant impact to our business as a result of the economic factors we are all facing.

**Your wife, Melissa, quit her job as a teacher to stay home with the children while you pursued the Weed Pro endeavor. How tough of a decision or risk was that undertaking?** It was a very easy

decision. I understood the marketplace and had the support of some very smart people. Sure, we had to tighten our personal budget, but we were willing to have some short-term pain for long-term gain.

**Your business has reported annual growth rates of 20% to 35%. How have you accomplished this?** We have put a lot of effort into knowing who our clients are and how to most effectively communicate with, and serve, them.

### AT A GLANCE

- Founded: 2001
- Number of outlets: 2
- Employees: 18
- Education/certifications: Political Science and Urban Studies, from Cleveland State University
- Industry involvement: Bayer Lawn Care Advisory Inaugural Board Member, Ohio Lawn Care Association Board of Trustees
- Business outlook: "We expect the next several years to challenge our goal of 28% growth."

**Personal highlights/hobbies:** "I have coached just about every level of basketball for 15 years, ranging from boys varsity to CYO all the way down to running a youth basketball league."

■ **Family:** Married for 12 years to Melissa, with children Abigail (10), Elias (7) and Robert (5). "Melissa's support and command of the household has made all the difference in the world."

■ **Web site:** [www.weed-pro.com](http://www.weed-pro.com)

**You are on the Board of Trustees for the Ohio Lawn Care Association. What lessons have you gained from your involvement with industry organizations?** I have really benefited by networking with many like-minded, smart, experienced professionals. Thanks to our involvement, I think we have been able to shorten the learning curve so critical in the success of new companies.

— *The author is a Cleveland-based freelance writer. Contact him at [jimguyette2004@yahoo.com](mailto:jimguyette2004@yahoo.com).*

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'Trust Busters' include failing to follow through, overpromising, and surprising customers with large bills.



## Attain 'trusted adviser' status

BY BRUCE WILSON

**A**lmost without exception, account managers in the landscape maintenance industry manage customer relationships. Often, they also are focused on selling enhancements, and in some cases even schedule work and manage landscape crews.

There is an increasing trend, however, toward turning over crew management to other supervisors, limiting the responsibility of account managers to nurturing customer relationships, and selling enhancements and possibly new work. With that in mind, let's focus on best practices for building solid customer relationships and related revenues.

### Earning trust

It is essential to recognize that as an account manager, your first priority with a customer is to become a "trusted adviser." Once you have achieved the trusted adviser role, you have the beginning of a long-term business relationship that puts you in position to renew year after year, at an increase, and to make recommendations for upgrading the property and sell enhancement work.

In building the trusted adviser status,

you must be well aware of potential "trust busters." You begin to lose customers' trust when you do not follow through, you overpromise, or you fail to proactively manage their landscapes and lawns and they have to bring things to your attention. An account manager also loses trust when customers receive surprises such as larger-than-expected bills or enhancement estimates that are way more than they anticipated.

Many times, when clients bring problems to our attention, we inadvertently become defensive. Some clients are experts at putting us on the defensive, but remember: getting defensive is another trust buster. Often, you end up sounding like you're making excuses — or trying to get out of paying for a mistake.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to be proactive and observant, as well as to have adequate communication with crews so you can bring problems (and solutions) to clients before being asked. By doing this, you retain and enhance your trusted adviser status.

A trusted adviser cares for customers' properties as if they're his or her own. That includes when recommending and implementing enhancements — the trusted adviser spends his/her clients' money as if it were his or her own money.

In building trust, we must go the "extra yard" for every customer, while at the same time protecting our service companies' interests.

— The author is a partner with entrepreneur Tom Oyler in the Wilson-Oyler Group, which offers consulting services. Visit [www.wilson-oyler.com](http://www.wilson-oyler.com).



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So much of the sales process has little to do with the greatness of the design; it has much more to do with the psychology of the buyer.



## Be different: Keep your word

BY KEVIN KEHOE

**R**ecently, I conducted market research with several residential design/build customers. The goal was to understand the customers' purchasing mindsets so we could develop a marketing/sales approach that would generate leads and bolster our closing rates.

To accomplish this, we needed to answer the key question on the mind of every customer: *Why should I buy from you instead of the other guy?* Without a good answer to this question, the sales conversation too often comes down to a price negotiation.

When asked what they wanted, the customers responded with standard stuff like quality, responsiveness, professionalism, warranty and fair price. Not much opportunity there for differentiation — everybody talks that game.

We decided to push a little: "What do you hate about working with contractors?"

The responses were far more interesting.

Customers said they hate surprises and messes. Specifically, they abhor being promised one price in the beginning only to pay more at the end, and the "mess" created in their lives by contractors' delayed completion schedules and the overall physical chaos created by construction work.

This information provided an opportunity to sell to the customer from *their* point of view, and solve these problems.

### Answering the call

Because customers like to make simple decisions and are trained to purchase programs, we created two trademarked solutions — hypothetically called Smart Design and ProBuild purely for the purposes of this column.

Our sales pitch was simple:

"You, Mr./Ms. Customer, hate surprises in pricing, and the inconvenience of delayed schedules and chaos on your property. First, our Smart Design program assures you that the price you are quoted is the price you pay (save any change orders you request). Second, our ProBuild program assures you that we meet the production schedule and minimize inconveniences on your property. *That, Mr./Ms. Customer, is the reason why our customers choose us.*"

In the sales and marketing world, this is called a "promise." A promise addresses a service feature and communicates the benefit.

So much of the sales process has little to do with the greatness of the design; it has much more to do with the psychology of the buyer. Most customers want lowest risk, not lowest price. But they too often purchase on price because the contractor provides no compelling reason not to do so.

In a tight market, you need more than a great design to sell a high-ticket item. You must provide a compelling reason that addresses the purchase from the customer's point of view, reducing his or her risk of a bad decision. This will help you stand apart from lower-priced bidders.

— *The author is the owner-manager of Kehoe & Co.*

Contact him at [kkehoe@earthlink.net](mailto:kkehoe@earthlink.net).



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Often times, we're too busy being busy. We need to take time to stop and observe routine processes.



## Observation key to growth

BY JIM PALUCH

**T**o get to where we want to be, we first must determine where we're at. As business owners and managers, we're already doing this to some degree when we look at profit-and-loss statements. But what about the processes behind those numbers?

For instance, do you know how efficiently your crews are getting out in the morning, or how many hours are spent tracking down paperwork from them at the end of each day? How many minutes are lost throughout the hundreds of processes your company performs each day that could, if recovered, significantly improve your workflow and RPM (revenue per manhour)?

Often times, we're too busy being busy. We need to take time to stop and observe routine processes.

### Going to the mat

In the Working Smarter Training Challenge, we borrow an idea from Ariens called the "Ariens Oval." It's a rubber mat of the Ariens logo that a supervisor will put down on the factory floor. When an individual stands on the mat, that person is to do nothing else but watch everything that is going on.

When was the last time you stopped working to watch your crews prepare to leave in the morning? I don't mean watching out your window until you catch somebody doing something wrong and then running out to instruct that person on how inefficient he or she is. Instead, practice the Kaizen continuous improve-

ment process by going through these steps:

- ▶ **Choose a process.** The morning routine is a great place to start.
- ▶ **Form a group.** Select five or six employees, including a few who typically would not be involved, like office staff for a technical process. Make sure all are equipped with pens and notebooks.
- ▶ **Observe.** Select a few places around your yard where you can observe what's going on. See whether you and your team can simply watch what happens from the time the first employee arrives in the morning until the last truck leaves the yard. And do it without talking.
- ▶ **Analyze the results.** Then, gather around a conference room table with a lot of markers and big sheets of paper, and transfer your observations to a process map.

### Map to success

To make a process map, first identify your starts and stops. In the case of mapping the morning routine, for example, use the time at which the first employee arrived and the time the last truck left for the day.

Next, simply fill in graphically *everything* your team observed between those two points. The good, the bad and the ugly all should be documented without critique and fear, so you can better identify opportunities for improvement. Be hard on the process and soft on the people. This is not about "catching" someone. It's about capturing reality so we can begin to improve it.

— The author is president of JP Horizons Inc., and has partnered with Ariens and hundreds of other companies to develop the Working Smarter Training Challenge.

To learn how you can benefit from being involved in the program, visit [www.jp horizons.com](http://www.jp horizons.com) and explore.

### MONTHLY CHALLENGE

Create a process map as described and email it, along with related photos, to [jjim@jphorizons.com](mailto:jjim@jphorizons.com). We will post some of the examples on our Web site.

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# Project Portfolio

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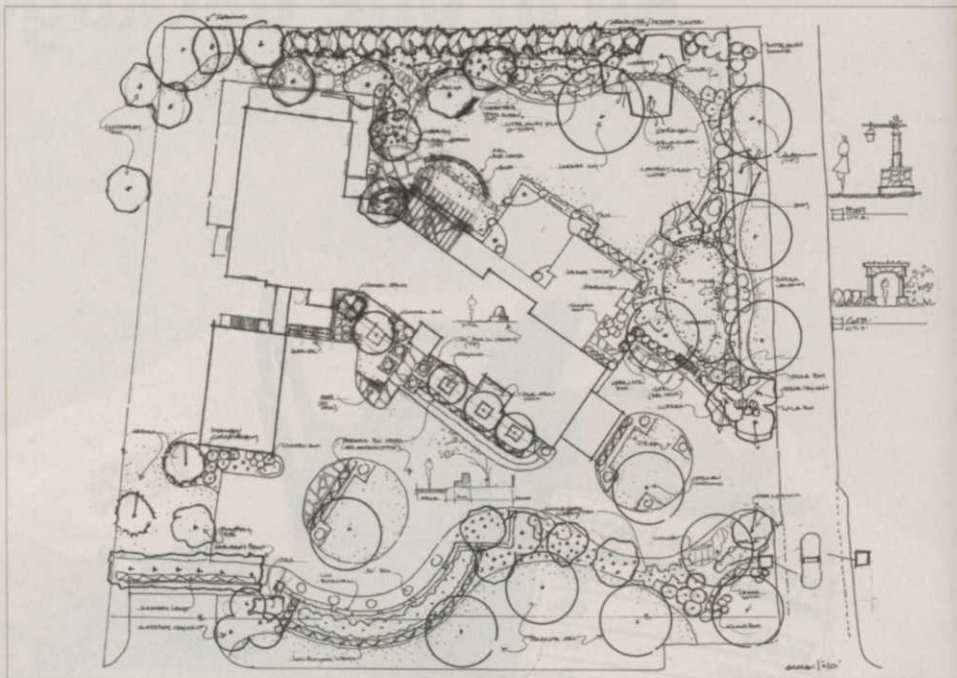
HARDSCAPES / COMPLEMENTARY PLANTINGS / IRONWORK

## The design

An "old Kentucky home" receives a property-wide facelift.

## Project Specifics

- Regrade front so water flows away from house
- Create both public and private outdoor space
- Work around a bevy of other contractors' activities on-site



## Project Requirements

- Budget range: \$500,000-\$600,000
- Tie in main house and carriage house landscape
- Provide year-round color

**ABOVE** Hillenmeyer did or subcontracted all of the work except for the stamped concrete driveway. That includes the arbor, fountain, fireplace and ironwork on the balconies. Hillenmeyer used a five-person crew for the landscape install and about eight hardscape subcontractors.

**RIGHT** The front lot was completely regraded because of all the water running toward the house. An estimated 30 tri-axes of soil were added.





**ABOVE** Much of the hedging is Green Velvet and Green Mountain boxwood. The firm also chose Oakleaf hydrangeas and Winterthur viburnum for their hardiness.

**INSET** When the clients decided to build an addition to their house, they went in full force — a complete demo of the existing land. Hillenmeyer had a landscape designer's dream: A blank canvas on which to work, and homeowners who were hands-off on the design, preferring instead to put their trust in the firm's choices.

**LEFT** Both public spaces and more private areas, such as this stone path, were established for the homeowners.

### Project Principals

- Designed by Joseph Hillenmeyer, Joseph Hillenmeyer & Associates, Lexington, KY, [www.jhillenmeyer.com](http://www.jhillenmeyer.com)
- Joseph Hillenmeyer & Associates specializes in upscale homes and horse farms, following a creed of "second nature" landscape design. Joseph himself is active in several Green Industry associations, including serving on the board for ANLA's Landscape Division.



# Marketing in a green environment

**Inform your customers about the reasons behind the treatments you use, and why they are the best choice.**

BY JANET AIRD / Contributor

**L**andscapers have learned to tread carefully when it comes to talking to customers about using chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Many consumers are shying away from chemicals, even when they may be the best solution for a given landscape problem.

"Many homeowners say they don't want to risk having any chemicals on their property — and at the same time they want a landscape that's both aesthetically pleasing and functional," says Paula Johnson, a marketing consultant based in Pasadena, CA. "Unfortunately, while composting and using jalapeno pepper tea is lovely, sometimes you have to use chemicals to clear the decks."

## Understand your customers

It's helpful to understand the risk/benefit process your customers are facing, and reassure them about the risks, says Johnson, who has done marketing consulting work with a variety of businesses since 1984. Often, she says, the customer may not know the differences among different chemical products, or even how significant the dangers are.

"It isn't always rational," she adds.

"Sometimes it's almost an 'enviro-snob' thing. They don't want to be the kind of person who uses chemicals."

Know when to give up, she warns: "When you find people who are really adamant, they aren't going to choose you."

The benefit of using these products, of course, is having the landscape they want. Chemicals eradicate weeds, pests and diseases that might be well-entrenched.

If you have customers whose landscapes need serious chemical control, tell them that selectively using insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and fertilizers on the front end can keep their landscape on an even keel. Later, when insects, weeds and diseases are under control, they can transition to integrated pest management (IPM).

"Tell them it's a trade-off," Johnson says. "If you use more serious chemicals now, you can have the option of using more natural alternatives down the road."

For customers whose landscapes need only occasional help from chemicals, tell them you'll use the least-harmful product, as little of it as necessary and only when necessary, in an environmentally sound way. Tell them if you use IPM, and explain

that it includes biological, cultural, manual and mechanical controls in addition to chemical options.

## Educate yourself

Staying on top of the latest technologies, chemical and otherwise, will let you educate your customers and allay their fears, Johnson says: "The bottom line is that many people have been told chemicals are bad, but that's all they know. If a landscaper comes across as someone who has more information than they do, they might listen."

Get information from manufacturers' representatives and Web sites. Ask questions of your suppliers and distributors. Read trade magazines regularly to keep up with the latest information. Join a professional association such as the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), as well as local groups to know what's going on in your market. Take industry

*continued on page 48*



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*continued from page 46*  
 classes and attend conferences.

Be able to tell your customers what you'll be using, what it does and why they need it. Explain that the products have been tested and approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for residential use. Tell them how long children and pets should stay off the lawn, and especially, according to Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE), not to let pets drink from puddles or eat granules after an area has been sprayed.

**Brand your business**

Let your customers know if you recycle green waste, use fuel-efficient vehicles or do anything else that shows your concern for the environment.

Join at least one local association,

Johnson suggests. It can be related to landscaping, such as a rose or orchid society, or a business organization like a chamber of commerce. Talk to other members and pass out business cards. Have your name — and if possible, a Web site listing — in the directory.

"If someone finds you through an association or organization they already belong to, it makes you look more legitimate," she says. "But you can't just join and do nothing. You have to be visible at meetings and involved in the organization." A good way to get people to know you and your work, she adds, is to donate some time on a landscape project for the group.

Being active in these organizations shows you're trustworthy, she says. It creates affiliations, which can develop into relationships with people who

might hire or refer you. It also might make that conversation about using chemicals easier.

Having marketing materials shows professionalism, Johnson says. In addition to business cards, have a brochure and a Web site. Show photos of projects you've done. List your qualifications, such as degrees, credentials or certifications, and the organizations to which you belong. Point out that your applicators are trained and licensed. Give information about the chemicals you use to show you've done due diligence on them.

But above all, be ethical, Johnson says. "All the things you do are going to come back to either help you or haunt you." **LM**

— The author is a freelance writer in Altadena, CA. Contact her at [info@landscapemanagement.net](mailto:info@landscapemanagement.net).

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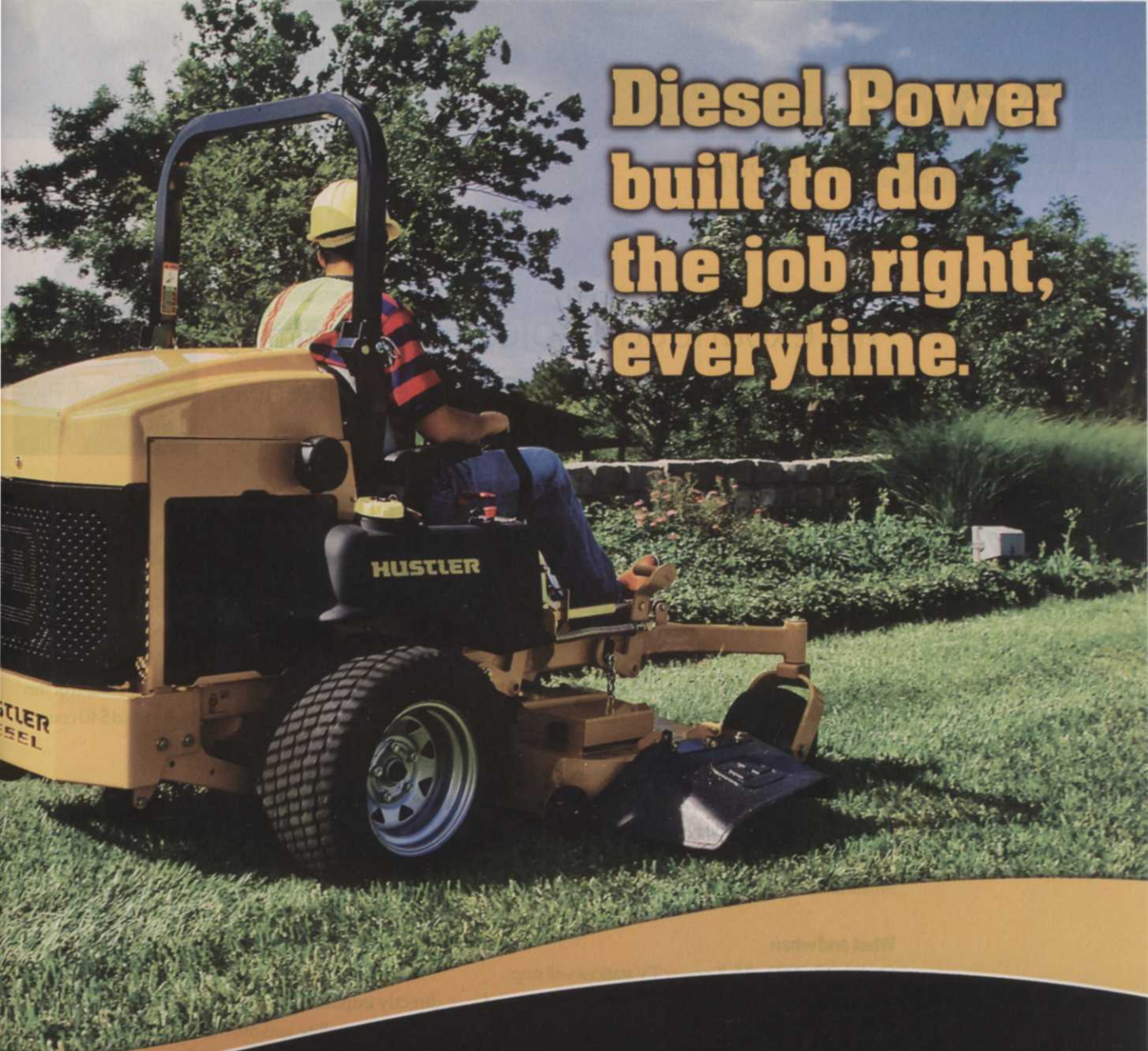
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## TV ads fight for eyes, ears

BY TYLER WHITAKER

**H**opefully by now, you have heard of the impending change coming to our nation early next year. I'm not talking about vague and non-specific promises of presidential politics. I'm talking about the national change from traditional analog television broadcasts to a new digital format.

### What and when

On Feb. 17, 2009, all full-power TV stations will stop broadcasting the traditional analog signals they have used for the past 50-plus years. These stations will still be on the air. They'll just be using a new digital TV format that provides better pictures and sound, as well as more channels of programming.

The conversion to digital TV signals is what's driving the high-definition TV market as consumers purchase sets capable of receiving the new digital signals. The transition is similar to one completed by the cell phone industry last February.

### Converter boxes

Any older TV that receives signals from an antenna will require a digital-to-analog converter box — often called an ATSC receiver or HDTV tuner — to continue to function with the digital broadcasts. These converter boxes go between your antenna and the analog television, much like a cable tuner box. Depending on the model you choose, new features like an onscreen programming guide are available. Converter

boxes are available nearly anywhere electronics are sold for \$40 to \$60. The Federal Communications Commission also has a coupon program to help ease the burden of this transition. You can apply to receive up to two \$40 coupons for free at [www.dtv2009.com](http://www.dtv2009.com).

### Industry implications

As the nation moves to digital TV, there is the potential to create a new digital divide. Those people directly affected by this transition have three choices: Switch to cable or satellite TV, purchase a converter box, or go without. And if you use TV commercials in your advertising, each choice directly impacts your marketing effectiveness.

Cable, satellite and over-the-air digital TV bring more channels to consumers. This expanded choice of programming reduces the effectiveness of commercials on local TV stations. To reach the same level of consumers, you will be required to advertise on more stations. Consider taking a closer looking at your TV advertising strategy to ensure you are reaching the right targets and numbers.

Time will tell the success of the digital TV transition and its long-range effects on our economy. Business owners who account for this transition in their marketing 2009 plans will be better positioned to capitalize on it.

For more information on the digital-to-analog transition, visit [www.dtvanswers.com](http://www.dtvanswers.com).

— The author is a freelance technologist focusing in business automation. Contact him at 801/592-2810 or visit his blog at [www.tylerwhitaker.com](http://www.tylerwhitaker.com).







## Irrigation pumps and controls

To help determine the size of pump needed for a particular water garden, calculate the volume of the pond in gallons using the following formula:

$L$  (length of pond in feet) x  $W$  (width of pond in feet) x  $D$  (depth of pond in feet) x 7.5 = pond capacity in gallons

It is recommended that the water be circulated at least once an hour. For example, a 4,000 gallon pond will need at least a 4,000 GPH pump. Please note that ponds utilizing a waterfall or other water features should use a pump with 25-50% more flow than the pond volume.

—*Courtesy Little Giant Pump Co.*



### ► Reusing rainwater

Aquascape introduces its RainXchange System for capturing, filtering and re-using rainwater. RainXchange combines a re-circulating water feature with a sub-surface rainwater harvest storage system. The filtration captures, filters and houses rainwater run-off for future use. The system also reduces flooding. **Contact Aquascape Inc. at 630/659-2097 or [jzuri@aquascapeinc.com](mailto:jzuri@aquascapeinc.com). [www.landscapemanagement.net/search](http://www.landscapemanagement.net/search)**

### Toro

Toro introduces 570Z PRX, which is a spray head for those desiring unmatched water management. The 570Z PRX stabilizes the performance of the system at about 30 psi from the first head to the last, ensuring the most effective irrigation by combining the patented X-flow and pressure-regulation technologies into one riser. The 570Z PRX also includes a powerful zero-flush seal. **Contact Toro at 888/384-9939 or [www.toro.com](http://www.toro.com).**

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GoatThroat Pumps for liquid transfer are built to last for eight to 10 years, which makes the cost of ownership \$20 to \$30 per year. Made from durable, high performance polypropylene, the series of pumps will safely deliver most solvents, acids, caustics and oils from 5- to 55-gallon drums at rates up to 4 gallons per minute depending on viscosity. **Contact GoatThroat at 646/486-3636 or [www.GoatThroat.com](http://www.GoatThroat.com).**

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### Hunter Industries

Hunter Industries offers an easy to install and change PGJ Rotary Sprinklers system with a water-efficient nozzle and easy adjustment from the top of the sprinkler, and the safety and durability of a rubber cover. The PGJ is capable of working with larger rotors to combine big and small areas in a single zone, offering a convenience and efficiency that most sprays do not. With PGJ, few heads perform the work. The PGJ's interchangeable nozzles provide a wide and versatile range from the optimum performance is based upon 40 PSI (2.8 bars; 275 kPa), dynamic operating pressure. The average precipitation rate is approximately .60" per hour (15 mm/hr) for an 180j arc sprinkler. The actual precipitation rate may vary, and should be calculated. **Contact Hunter Industries at 760/744-5240 or [www.hunterindustries.com](http://www.hunterindustries.com). [www.landscapemanagement.net/search](http://www.landscapemanagement.net/search)**

### Rain Bird

The Rain Bird MDC2 Two-Wire Decoder Based Controller can support one to 200 decoder addresses and completely manages contractors' landscape and turf needs by operating as a central controller for all decoder-based irrigation functions. With its two-wire, decoder-based communication construc-

*continued on page 54*

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# LM Reports

*continued from page 52*

tion, it's ideal for multi-phase projects where the two-wire cable can be capped for future expansion. Located throughout the irrigation system, the decoders act as simple and reliable switching stations. The decoders work like conventional satellites but are simply installed in valve boxes, making them unobtrusive and protecting them from weather and vandalism. The new Rain Bird MDC2 Two-Wire Decoder Based Controller features improved resistance to electrical surge and lightning strikes, increased resistance to water intrusion, streamlined user interface and 10 flow sensors. **Contact Rain Bird at [www.rainbird.com/](http://www.rainbird.com/).**

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**K-rain ▶**

K-rain features its new Pump Start Relay. The Pump Start Relay enclosure is constructed with a corrosion- and UV-resistant, shockproof material. The landscape irrigation solution has grade enclosures for long product life and is designed to deter tampering. K-rain's Pump Start Relay is U.L. approved. Its expanded enclosure provides easy accessibility during wiring and fosters quick connections from any direction. K-rain's Pump Start Relay is available with 110 VAC or 24 VAC coils, providing for a variety of applications up to 7.5 h.p. The system has plastic inset cover screws for extra system safety and security. **Contact K-rain at 561/844-1002 or [www.k-rain.com](http://www.k-rain.com).**

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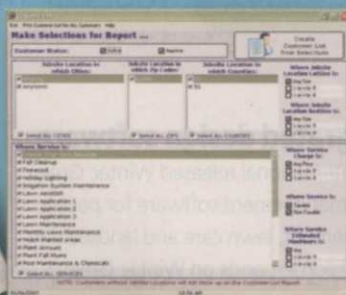
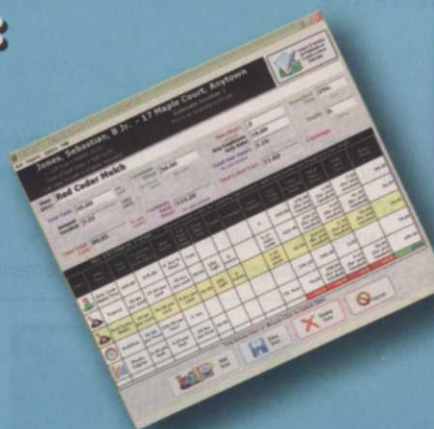
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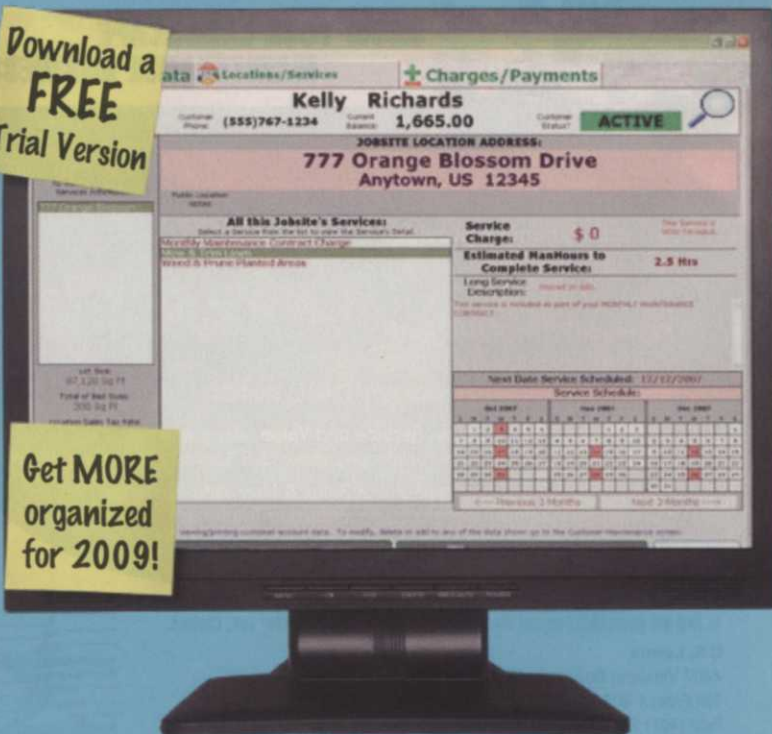
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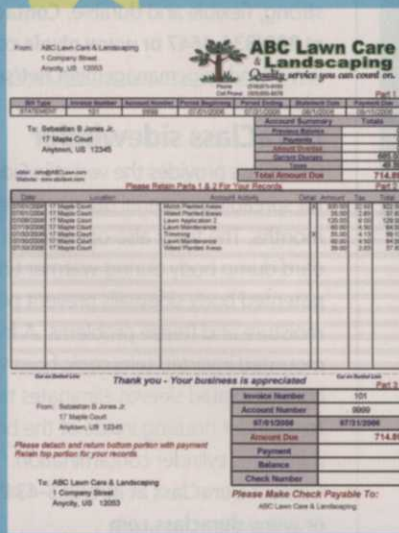
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and complete accounting. The software is available in single-user and multi-user network configurations and comes with an interactive tutorial, both an online and a printed user's guide, and unlimited access to their live technical support services for a full year. **Contact Intac at [www.wintac.net](http://www.wintac.net) or 800/724-7899.**

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## Paver restraints

Oly-Ola offers paver restraints in six styles to fit a variety of projects and installation preferences. The paver restraints are made from 100% recycled vinyl. They are engineered with thick wall construction and specially designed "key-hole" cuts to make them strong, flexible and durable. **Contact Oly-Ola at 800/334-4647 or [www.olyola.com](http://www.olyola.com).**

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## DuraClass sidewinder

DuraClass provides the versatile Sidewinder for spreading material during winter months. The truck also operates as a standard dump body during warmer times. The patented body sidewalls prevent potential moisture and freeze problems. A front-mounted inverted telescopic hoist with hard chrome-plated sleeves eliminates the need for cylinder housing inside of the body and minimizes cylinder contamination.

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## Rabbit repellent

Liquid Fence has debuted its Dual Action Rabbit Repellent, which repels rabbits with taste and scent. It doesn't harm humans, pets or vegetation. Liquid Fence is long lasting and rain-resistant; and it dries without odor or residue. It is easy to use for the home gardener, but effective enough for large commercial properties. Liquid Fence is environmentally friendly. **Contact Liquid Fence at 570/722-8165 or [www.liquidfence.com](http://www.liquidfence.com). [www.landscapemanagement.net/search](http://www.landscapemanagement.net/search)**

## John Deere excavators

John Deere offers two new hydraulic excavators in the 12- to 13.5-metric-ton range, the 120D and 135D — mid-sized machines with big performance. The 120D is a perfect "dig-and-run" unit for jobs such as excavating basements or placing pipe and transports easily between jobs. The 135D is a reduced-tail-swing machine capable of maximum production in confined areas and work within a single lane of traffic. A short counterweight allows it to dig nearer to buildings and obstructions. **Contact John Deere at 847/298-9900 or [www.johndeere.com](http://www.johndeere.com). [www.landscapemanagement.net/search](http://www.landscapemanagement.net/search)**

Find more tools of the trade at:



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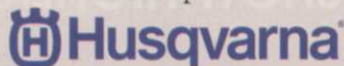


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## Great teachers live on

BY MARTY WHITFORD / Editor-in-Chief

**S**ooner or later, all great teachers die — but in many ways they live on in the minds, hearts and works of their best students. We all remember our favorite teachers in grade school, high school, college and even on the job. Though we might not always realize it, family members and friends also share lessons that live on through us at work and home.

One of the best ways to honor our favorite mentors is to “pay it forward” and readily share the gifts they have so freely bestowed upon us. Here are just a few of life’s great teachers from whom I’ve been blessed to learn:

► *Lois Violand, my English teacher in the seventh and eighth grade* — Diagramming sentences was her forte. And because of it, deconstructing and reconstructing sentences became my life-long love.

► *Father Bernard Streicher, S.J., an English teacher at St. Ignatius High School* — This Jesuit nurtured my obsession with words and sentences, and extended it to paragraphs and organized stories.

► *Ann Schierhorn, my feature writing coach at Kent State University's School of Journalism & Mass Communication* — This professor taught me that every person, place and thing has a great story behind it, and that it’s our calling as writers to unearth and breathe everlasting life into each story.

► *Master Chief Petty Officer Grimm of the United States Navy* — “The Grimm Reaper” made a man out of me, and dozens of others, in eight long weeks of boot camp. Every morning, he showed us how

a trash can makes an excellent alarm clock when hurled down our barrack’s floor at 3 a.m. And every night, before we turned in for five hours of sleep, he made us use toothbrushes to scrub away the many scuff marks made by that trash can as it steamrolled down our pristine floor. On the last morning of boot camp, there was no 3 a.m. trash can wake-up call. It was Grimm’s last lesson: If we work closely together and never give up, we all will have our day.

► *James Whitford, Dad* — We are both life-long students and teachers.

► *Patricia Whitford, Mom* — A life lived for others is a life well lived.

► *Timothy Feeney, my beloved uncle and godfather* — Hard work and fun can, and should, go together.

And most recently, Adam Gaspar, my dear friend of 36 years, taught me how to live, and die, with honor, courage, gratitude and love. After a courageous 10-month battle with brain cancer, Adam — a 42-year-old husband of 20 years and father of six children ages 21 to 11 — went home to God on Sept. 30. I recently had the honor of working with God, and my past and present teachers, to breathe everlasting life into Adam’s story:

[www.landscapemanagement.net/](http://www.landscapemanagement.net/)

[AdamEulogy.com](http://AdamEulogy.com)

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Sooner or later all great teachers die — but in many ways they live on in the minds, hearts and works of their best students.





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