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Sod producers like John Chapman are growing a wider variety of grasses to offset America's housing bubble burst.



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Sod producers are growing a wider variety of turf, trying to convince customers that not all grasses are equal, and trying to squeeze the most out of the bonds with their best customers. BY RYAN DEZEMBER

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## It's a great time to build client loyalty

**E**verybody wants a deal these days. Let me rephrase that. Everybody *expects* a deal these days. A discount. An introductory coupon. An extra perk. A free service. That's the new price of attracting customers and buying loyalty in this new normal economy.

Can you remember another holiday season like this past one in which every retailer discounted or offered special deals ("doorbusters") every day leading up to Christmas?

Consumer uncertainty and bargain hunting define our new normal, and it might last two, three, perhaps four years. Who knows?

Recognizing that, most of us might be content to hold serve in terms of revenue this season despite a recovery that's starting to creep in on a fraction of a percentage point at a time. (Is anybody else as sick as I am about the term "green shoots" as it applies to the recovery?)

### Hold the champagne

Amid this new postrecessionary normal, government economists (I understand thousands are on public payrolls.) predict the U.S. economy will grow 2% to 3% next season. Growth, any growth, is welcome, but this hint of recovery is suspect. It's hardly enough to spur the level of demand for our services that we experienced prerecession.

It's evident to all of us acquiring new customers is more difficult than ever. The prices we charge for

our services are stagnant (at best) and will remain so. What's new, right?

Competitive pressures have kept most of us from raising prices for years. Despite that, many of us maintained acceptable margins by delivering new services and products to our customers, increasing productivity and aggressively controlling costs these past two years.

All of that kept us going in the right direction in terms of margins, but it probably won't be enough in this new normal in which just about everybody has become a bargain hunter. Who can blame them? The recession hammered homeowners, property managers, and commercial and institutional managers. They're financially bruised, and they're wary.

### We're in this together

We must be more aggressive about learning clients' needs and desires. This means getting to know as much about our customers (and their businesses, assuming they're commercial clients) as we can. Then we're going to have to be much more creative in meeting and exceeding their stated and observed needs and wants.

Beyond that, most of us would do well to improve our customer communication and hand-holding. We need much more of both.

Let's adopt a "we're in this together" attitude, especially in terms of clients' landscape budgets. What we do now can earn clients' loyalty for additional services and products when they're more confident of their financial prospects. Let's not get carried away, though.

Rather than slash prices, which could diminish our service quality, the better option might be to reduce services temporarily, continue to provide great service, and offer customer-loyalty bonuses.

Obviously, neither great service nor perks accomplishes much unless we inform clients (tactfully) of how their loyalty to us is beneficial to themselves. In other words, give a little extra now; earn back much more when our new normal is better.

---

Rather than slash prices, which could diminish our **service quality**, the better option might be to **reduce services** temporarily and offer customer **loyalty bonuses**.

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Reacting to America's housing bubble burst, sod producers are growing a wider variety of turf, trying to convince clients not all grasses are created equal, while squeezing the most out of their bonds with landscapers and key developers. » » »

# EXPANDING INTO NEW TURF

BY RYAN DEZEMBER  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR





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Workers harvest Magnum rolls of Tifton 419 Bermudagrass at CraftTurf Farms in Foley, Ala. The 30-square-yards of sod were bound for the Magnolia Grove Golf Course in Mobile, AL.

they're counting on close bonds with their best customers, generally landscape professionals and commercial accounts. And they're encouraging designers, builders and homeowners to think about front yards as they might ceiling fans or windows.

It wouldn't be surprising to see an architect call for Hunter fans or Pella windows in their plans, but not many specify boutique sods such as Bella Bluegrass or Celebration Bermuda-grass, says Tobey Wagner, president and owner of Mount Pleasant, SC-based Sod Solutions, which contracts with farmers throughout the world to grow the aforementioned sods.

U.S. homeowners spend about \$6.4 billion on their lawns each year, according to The Lawn Institute, a non-profit advocacy group. So, sod growers ask, 'What's a little more to make sure the most suitable sod is used?'

### Dwindling demand

Sod farmers recently sold grass as fast as they could grow it. Deacue Fields, an agricultural economist at Auburn University, studies the turf industry in Alabama, where sod rivals cotton as a cash crop. In 2003, there were 69 growers. In a 2007 survey, Fields cited 97 producers because more farmers took up sod farming. But since the housing bubble burst, many of those growers are retreating back to row crops.

That pattern is reflected throughout the country. Farms that are sticking with sod are rethinking their business strategies. Craft Turf Farms has put more emphasis on renovating ball fields and golf courses and offers custom sprigging and seeding — niches offering expansion opportunities in a shrinking market, Craft says.

An old saw in the sod business is you don't put new grass around an old home. But by challenging that adage, growers

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**IMAGINE BUYING** a new house without faucets. Or suppose it didn't have a garage door. Maybe the front yard was simply a patch of dirt. The first two scenarios seem preposterous. But it wasn't long ago the third was reasonable.

In 1976, Robert Craft was looking for ways to expand his small sod farm business in Foley, AL. A builder in nearby Mobile hired him to lay a ribbon of sod around a subdivision's four model homes and sprig their yards.

"I went to the developers and said, 'I'll give you the grass to sod the front yard of these model homes if you'll allow us to offer that as an add-on to your product through you or to the customer directly,'" Craft says. "I don't think there was another home in there that didn't sod."

Growers in other states must have taken similar initiatives because sod

farming grew from a \$97-million industry in 1974 to a \$1.3-billion one by 2007, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Much of that growth can be pegged to the housing boom. And the next government survey almost certainly will show shrinkage as a result of the sod producers who plowed under centipede and fescues in favor of soybeans and corn.

To make up for lost business as a result of the housing bubble burst, growers are focusing on producing and marketing grasses developed because of specific traits, such as appearance and maintenance. More than ever,

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## COVER STORY

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and landscape contractors might be able to stir up more residential business at a time when few homes are being built.

Picture a neighborhood where a dozen houses sit for sale. In newer subdivisions especially, there might be little to set one home apart from the others.

“If you invest \$1,500 and make your lawn look better, your whole house will look better,” says Rusty Stachlewitz, program director at The Lawn Institute.

### An industry's evolution

Above all, sod growers are counting on the evolution of their business to carry it forward.

“When this first started, there was Bermudagrass, centipedegrass and some St. Augustinegrass, and that was the turf industry,” says John Chapman, general manager for Craft Turf Farms. “In the mid '90s, many new varieties came out.”

Universities and private companies

have scoured the globe to identify grasses with specific traits, often spending years to hybridize and test patent varieties before releasing them to farmers who pay a royalty for each square yard sold.

Now, there's Bermudagrasses that can tolerate shade, centipedegrasses that won't redden, and a bluegrass that can be sprigged and will flourish from Georgia up into Canada. Next year, Sod Solutions plans to introduce its Discovery Bermudagrass, which requires almost no mowing.

“From the onset, we recognized any type of consumer good goes through stages,” Wagner says, citing the evolution of Nike running and athletic shoes. “Ornamental plants, trees, shrubs — they've all gone through that. We have to do the same with lawns now.”

In the sod realm, there are grasses that only grow sideways, grasses that survive linebackers' cleats, grasses that

remain lush in almost complete shade. And as much work as it has been to develop say, Discovery Bermuda, which blends an Australian variety with one from the Netherlands, growers aren't finished because they have to let their customers know new varieties exist.

“That's one thing landscapers just don't know,” Stachlewitz says. “You're not stuck with the regional grass of choice. There's more choices out there.”

*continued on page 12*

Tobey Wagner, owner of Mount Pleasant, SC-based Sod Solutions, contracts with sod farms across the globe that grow all types of boutique varieties.



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## BEST-SELLING SOD

Mount Pleasant, SC-based Sod Solutions develops and patents boutique grasses it contracts with growers from Alabama to South Africa to produce. For each square yard sold, Sod Solutions collects a royalty. Among its best-selling varieties are:

- › **Empire Turf**, a course-bladed zoysiagrass with a high tolerance to chemicals, is a residential sod that needs less water than other varieties of zoysiagrass. First developed in Brazil, it's dark green and chinch bug resistant.
- › **Bella Bluegrass** spreads from rhizomes rather than seeds and will grow in climates ranging from north Georgia



to Canada, spread rapidly horizontally and only grow about 4-in. tall, minimizing mowing.

› **Palmetto St. Augustinegrass** will grow throughout the southern United States, from California to the Carolinas. Emerald green, it resists frost and heat, features a fine texture and will tolerate shade.

› **Celebration Bermudagrass**, which came from Australia, is an athletic turf that recently was installed in Tampa's Raymond James Stadium. It has a blue hue, stands up to cold and drought and has a soft texture.

*continued from page 10*

### The greening of grass

More so than appearance, customers are requesting sod that requires less inputs.

"You want grasses that require a little less fertilizer, that maybe require less mowing," says Chapman. "Those types of characteristics are being considered, where as in the past, how much fertilizer you used or how much it took to mow weren't really considerations."

That's not to say traditional varieties aren't around anymore. Craft Turf Farms grows eight varieties, down from 13 five years ago, and not all of them are pricey patented grasses.

"If we have a landscaper who deals with us, and he has to have access to these kind of standard, old-school varieties, we have to grow them because we have to be able to take care of our customer," Craft says. "But the profitability of the company is dependent on being able to grow these specialized grasses."

### Know your grower

In 2004, Hurricane Ivan slammed into Alabama's Gulf-front beaches,

*continued on page 14*

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## COVER STORY



John Chapman, GM of Craft Turf Farms in Foley, AL, says specialty turfs are growing increasingly popular.

*continued from page 12*  
destroying homes and low-rise condos. Overnight, Gulf Shores-based Kutter's Grounds Maintenance went from a business strictly concerned about lawn care to working almost entirely on installations, says owner Ron Kutter. Accustomed to throwing down something green when homeowners asked

for new lawns, his posthurricane workload came with challenges, such as salt spray, working with sand instead of soil and daylong shadows cast by 20-story towers. But there were lucrative new accounts to earn, and his relationship with a grower, Craft Turf Farms, paid off immediately, he says.

A year after Ivan, Kutter was renovating the grounds of Compass Point condominiums on Gulf Shores' Little Lagoon. The owners association asked for run-for-the-mill centipedegrass, but Kutter says he was able to talk them into a salt-tolerant Bermudagrass his grower recommended for the waterfront site.

Kutter's crews had just finished when Hurricane Katrina hit. Though Katrina didn't do nearly the damage on Alabama's coast as the previous hurricane, it caused flooding. Kutter's work sat under seawater for a day until the storm's surge slipped back into the Gulf of Mexico. Many of the ornamentals died, but the grass survived.

"I was a hero," Kutter says.

Landscape professionals need to form close relationships with their sod suppliers — they're crazy not to, Chapman says.

Likewise, the most successful growers are those who have strong ties to their customers, whether they're golf course superintendents, landscaper contractors or builders, says Tricia Roberts, executive secretary of the Alabama Turfgrass Association. Because of that view, the Alabama trade association has changed the way its annual conferences are organized. Traditionally, growers would be in one room, landscapers would be in another and sports turf specialists in a third room. Now, meetings are organized by topic — pest control or business management, for example.

"We realized we were continuously segmenting our members," Roberts says. "Now you'll have a sod grower, golf course superintendent and landscape contractor all at the same table." **LMI**

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# THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

The author is the owner-manager of 3PG Consulting. Contact him at kkehoe@earthlink.net.

## 3 avenues to better manage pricing

**W**e live in deflationary times. Simply put, there's less money chasing many goods and services. It's the opposite of inflation, to which we're more accustomed. What this means for you is that raising prices is a sure way to reduce revenue — and not having a plan to save the customer money will render you uncompetitive much of the time.

There are three ways to manage your pricing:

1. Re-engineer the job.
2. Reduce overhead.
3. Reduce profit margins.

With each option, there are trade-offs, as well as the certainty that no matter which one(s) you choose, you'll have to work harder than ever to

convince the customer you're the best fit for the job while still making a profit.

Let's take these different approaches individually by addressing just the impact of job re-engineering. Starting from a budget, we determine two key estimating factors: material and labor markups on cost. The table below shows this calculation.

The markups are established by determining how the \$440,000 overhead will be recovered. In this case, 95% of overhead is allocated and recovered by labor, 5% by materials. This results in a 144% markup on labor cost (\$15/hour) and an 18% markup on material cost. In every case, we'd bid a job with these markups and a 10% profit margin given our budget.

Compare that with the impact of re-engineering job costs. Re-engineering can be accomplished through better design, smarter material purchasing and production efficiencies that result from the first two.

Let's say the original job price per plan produces a price of \$12,082 based on 200 production hours and \$3,000 in material cost. But through a review of the site, we recommend a slightly different and better design in the proposal. A relatively small reduction of labor hours and material cost — through plant substitution and leaning on the nursery for pricing (remember, it's a deflationary economy), combined with a tighter production schedule that trims 20 production hours — results in a price of \$10,611.

That's a 14% reduction, which is a step in the direction of better marketing and sales. The way to manage price, as any marketer knows, is to address product costs. And as most marketers and salespeople know, it's their job to convince customers their products are right for them — without trimming profit margins.

The great thing about the re-engineering option is you don't have to reduce your margins. The challenge is you have to be on your game and convince the customer your plan is the right way to go.

The **great thing** about the **re-engineering option** is you don't have to reduce your margins.

### BUDGET AND ESTIMATING MARKUPS

Revenues	\$1,000,000	
Materials	\$120,000	12%
Labor	\$290,000	29%
Subs/other	\$50,000	5%
Total direct cost	\$460,000	46%
Gross profit	\$540,000	54%
Overhead costs	\$440,000	44%
Net profit	\$100,000	10%

### Overhead Allocations

Labor	Materials
95%	5%
\$418,00	\$22,000

### Markup

144%	18%
------	-----

Average wage w/tax	\$15
Budgeted crew hours	19,333

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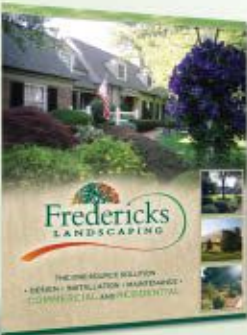
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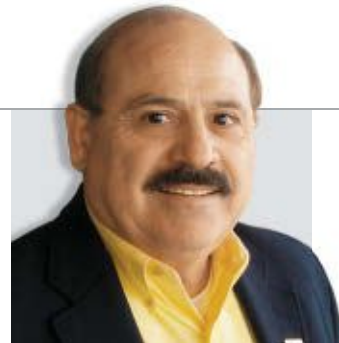
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It took **Jerry Grossi** and his partner Ed Dudgeon more than a few years to figure out the property maintenance company they formed more than 30 years ago would be more successful by concentrating on lawn care and landscape irrigation. Now, Arborlawn and Spartan Irrigation, the two divisions of their company, are well known throughout central Michigan.

**Arborlawn promotes its IPM approach. What does that mean for customers?** I'd hope that's important to them, but it's probably more important to us as a company. Acting and working responsibly is an ethic we work hard to maintain. When we connect with our customers, they see our sincerity and know our business philosophy. We have to make sure we do everything, even more than what our customers demand daily.

**Michigan has been devastated by the loss of manufacturing jobs. As a company serving central Michigan, what do you see for the approaching season?**

2010 looks like 2009 judging by the amount of work we're seeing bid and the lack of construction. It's looking pretty quiet. We're going to come out of this bad economy. We can see the light at the end of the tunnel, but it may take a few years.

**How are your customers responding to this recession?** Many of our customers are looking to reduce their

costs. We can only do one of two things: Cut the price or program, which is what some customers are asking us to do. Our goal this season is to keep our customers, even if they reduce the level of service. We feel once the economy improves, they'll appreciate what we've done for them and they'll add to their programs again.

**What are you doing marketingwise to keep your company's brand top of mind?**

There's no silver bullet. We still use many of the old techniques — direct mail, fliers, asking our customers to help us — and they still work. For the commercial market, there's still a lot of cold calling. The past couple years, we've been working on our Web site, where a lot of our future marketing will be focused. We really marketed our Christmas Décor services on our Web site this year.

**It's obvious you see a larger role for digital communications in your company's future.**

We're running more Google, Facebook and banner ads. Also, sometimes customers call asking if we offer specials or coupons, and we direct them to our Web site.

**Describe your experience with your e-newsletter.**

Our penetration for customers with e-mail addresses is 40%, and we've tried very hard to gather as many e-mail addresses as we can. It's difficult to gather them, but 40% isn't a bad coverage rate. Obviously, we want to connect with all of our customers, so we still also direct mail a hard copy of our newsletter. We need more customers' emails so we can get away from the hard copy because of the expense. Actually, we have two versions of our newsletter, one for lawn care and one for irrigation.

## AT A GLANCE

**COMPANY:** Arborlawn Inc., Lansing, MI

**FOUNDED:** 1976

**TITLE:** Vice president, co-owner, with partner Ed Dudgeon

**NUMBER OF LOCATIONS:** One

**MARKET AREA:** Central Michigan

**EMPLOYEES:** 45

**SERVICES OFFERED:** Lawn care, irrigation, tree and shrub care, perimeter pest control, ornamental bed weed control, mole control, mosquito control, Christmas Décor

**INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT:** Past President of PLCAA 2000, GIE board of directors, past president GIE/OPEI board of directors, past president of the Michigan Turfgrass Foundation

**HOBBIES:** Traveling and golf

**FAMILY:** Wife, Sherin, and two sons

**WEBSITE:** arborlawn.com; spartanirrigation.com

OUR GOAL THIS SEASON IS TO **KEEP OUR CUSTOMERS** EVEN IF THEY **REDUCE** THE LEVEL OF **SERVICE.**"

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# WEEDWATCH

STANDING SENTINEL TO PROTECT PLANT HEALTH



Recommended  
Dow solution  
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## COMMON CHICKWEED

*Stellaria media*

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ Low-spreading, prostrate winter annual or perennial has weak, shallow roots.
- ▶ Succulent plant grows in dense patches almost anywhere.
- ▶ Similar in growth habit and appearance to mouseear chickweed (*Cerastium glomeratum*). Common chickweed leaves are less hairy and light green in color; mouseear chickweed has dark green or gray-green leaves covered with soft hairs.

### CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ For optimum control, apply as a pre-emergent in late summer/early fall.
- ▶ For post-emergent control, apply a two-, three- or four-way product that contains an active ingredient such as fluroxypyr, triclopyr or clopyralid.
- ▶ Keep in mind that herbicide effectiveness is reduced as weeds mature. For optimum post-emergent control, apply to actively growing, immature weeds in the fall. If a spring application is made, you may need more than one application.



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Dow solution  
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## HENBIT *Lamium amplexicaule*

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ Winter annual has square, flowering stems to nearly 10 in. tall.
- ▶ Commonly confused with purple deadnettle (*Lamium purpureum*). Deadnettle also has square stems, but its upper leaves have petioles (henbit does not) and its upper leaves are distinctly red- or purple-tinted. Henbit features mint-like pink to purple flowers.
- ▶ Prefers thin, nutrient-rich soil.

### CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Apply herbicide in late summer/early fall for pre-emergent control, before the weed germinates.
- ▶ For post-emergent control, apply a two-, three- or four-way product that contains one active ingredient such as fluroxypyr, triclopyr or clopyralid.
- ▶ For optimum post-emergent control, applications should be made to actively growing, immature henbit in the fall. If a spring application is made to mature weeds, more than one application may be needed.

For more information regarding these and other turf weeds, and related control technologies and tips, please visit [www.DowProvest.com](http://www.DowProvest.com) or call 800/255-3726.

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**P R O V E N   S O L U T I O N S**

# LM REPORTS

YOUR GUIDE TO PRODUCT RESEARCH

## LAWN CARE: PLANT GROWTH REGULATORS



### PBI Gordon

Mefluidide, the active ingredient in Embark 2-S, provides a wide variety of benefits depending on the timing and rate of the application. Ornamental shrubs, hedges, trees and ground-covers treated with Embark 2-S four to seven days after trimming or pruning stay within a few inches of their clipped height for up to 12 weeks. [PBIGordon.com](http://PBIGordon.com)

### Syngenta Professional Products

Applying Primo MAXX prior to the onset of stresses like heat, drought, disease and traffic can strengthen turf, and therefore allow it withstand the stresses of the season. The odorless PGR mixes clear as water, and enables rich color, lateral stems and root mass development. By inhibiting vertical growth, it results in a healthy, more durable blade. [SyngentaProfessionalProducts.com](http://SyngentaProfessionalProducts.com)



### SePRO Corp.

New calibration trays are available free of charge to purchasers of Cutless (0.33G) Granular Landscape Growth Regulator, to quickly measure and adjust the amount of the product as dispersed by application equipment to match the desired application rate per 1,000 sq. ft. Cutless is spread evenly under the dripline of hedges, shrubs and ground covers for shoot growth suppression. [SePRO.com](http://SePRO.com)

*continued on page 25*

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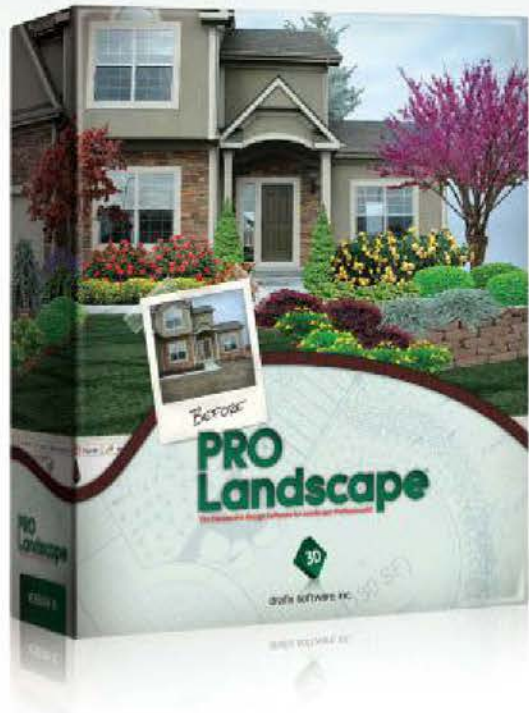


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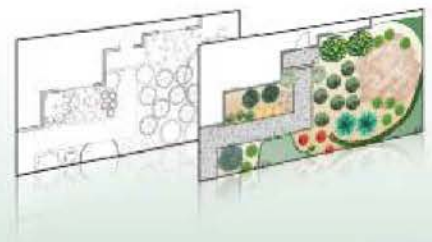
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Site: Astor’s Mansion  
Newport, Rhode Island

With contracts for many of the world’s most famous mansions, Eric Larson faces customer expectations that are as high as the real estate prices. So when ground ivy, clover and other tough weeds started showing up, he turned to 4-Speed XT. Its combination of four active ingredients makes weeds ‘Deader. Faster.’ For more on 4-Speed herbicide brands, and more of Eric Larson’s story, go to [www.nufarm.com/us](http://www.nufarm.com/us).

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[www.nufarm.com/us](http://www.nufarm.com/us)

continued from page 22

## IRRIGATION: GENERATORS

### Briggs and Stratton

The PowerSmart Series inverter generator touts computer-controlled technology that continuously adjusts the engine speed so it produces only the power needed for the application in use. As a result, the 1600-watt (2,000 watts starting) unit uses less fuel and reduces exhaust emissions. Featuring a 1-gal. fuel tank, the unit runs as long as 6.5 hours at one-quarter load. [BriggsAndStratton.com](http://BriggsAndStratton.com)



### Subaru Industrial Power Products

Powered by Hatz four-cycle, single-cylinder diesel engines, the RGD3300H and RGD5000H provide convenient yet durable operation. Both models include a full-power switch, voltmeter and 12-volt DC charging, as well as a spark arrestor that lessens noise and ignition risk. A large 4.4-gal. fuel tanks allow for hours of continuous operation. [Subarupower.com](http://Subarupower.com)



## MAINTENANCE: ZERO-TURN MOWERS

### Wright Commercial Products

The newly improved Stander incorporates a suspension platform to provide an even smoother ride, and a full-length thigh-to-knee pad to improve comfort and reduce fatigue. This latest 48-, 52- and 61-in. mid-mount Z also has cut-speeds up to 9.5 mph, while still maintaining the control and traction to tackle all terrain, including steep hills. [WrightMfg.com](http://WrightMfg.com)



### The Toro Co.

The 10 models in the Z Master G3 series have been designed with a lower center of gravity, greatly enhancing hillside stability and traction for better control and less "crabbing." The lower center of gravity results from a vertical shaft engine that sits lower in the chassis, a lower operator position and the 12-gal. fuel tank that is now located under the operator's seat. [Toro.com](http://Toro.com)

### LESCO

The 2010 commercial mowing lineup includes two highly maneuverable, stand-on zero-turn mowers, which feature dual-lever direction and speed controls and a 1.5-in. to 4.5-in. height-of-cut adjustment. They allow for maneuverability and reduce turf compaction. [Johndeere.com](http://Johndeere.com)

## BETTER RESULTS



## 4-Speed™ XT Saves Contracts

### APPLICATION RATE:

1.3 oz/1,000 sf of 4-Speed XT plus spreader-sticker (1 oz/gallon finished spray)

### APPLICATION EQUIPMENT:

LT Rich Z-Sprayer, 1/3 gal spray tips

### TIMING:

July 13, 2009

### SUMMARY:

"This was not ideal herbicide application timing for ground ivy control, but we still had great results on it and all the other weeds on the 4-Speed XT label. As a result, we saved several contracts. We'll be using a lot more 4-Speed XT and other Nufarm products in the future."

# 4-SPEED™ XT

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## The Grasshopper Co.

Clean-running MaxTorque diesel units are available with up to 30-hp engines; they meet and exceed Tier 4-I emissions requirements and are B5-ready. The fuel-injected diesel engines are fuel-efficient, saving up to 700 gal. of fuel over 1,000 hours of use (compared to gasoline units) — and offer powerful performance in tough mowing conditions. [GrasshopperMower.com](http://GrasshopperMower.com)



## John Deere

The seven models in the ZTrak Pro 900 lineup offer mulch-on-demand capabilities. The series includes a ground-drive transmission featuring a piston motor, internal wet disc brakes and a gear reduction final drive, providing more torque to the drive tires. Ergonomic control levers include built-in PTO shutoff and electronic deck raise and lower. [Deere.com](http://Deere.com)

## Husqvarna

The new PZ Series features a standard Hydro drive system that uses 16-cc Hydro-Gear fan cooled pumps and Parker wheel motors to achieve ground speeds up to 12 mph. The combination of over-sized pumps, cooling fans and large 1.5-gal. reservoir reduce heat for extended service life and provide high torque and smooth operation. [Husqvarna.com](http://Husqvarna.com)

## Cub Cadet

Unlike traditional ZTRs that incorporate lap bars to control speed and direction of rear wheels, the Z Force S uses foot pedals and a steering wheel. When a rider makes a zero-turn, its Synchro Steer technology synchronizes all four wheels based on direction and speed to improve traction, stability and user control. [Cubcadet.com](http://Cubcadet.com)



## Gravely

The Gravely Pro-Turn 200 line of commercial zero-turn mowers has 20% fewer parts and 89% fewer leak points than previous Gravely 200 models. Offering 17 cutting positions in 0.25-in. increments, and maintenance-free XL spindles with durable cast iron housings, the mowers have an Ogura GT 3.5 electric clutch and foot-operated deck lift system. [Gravely.com](http://Gravely.com)

*continued on page 28*

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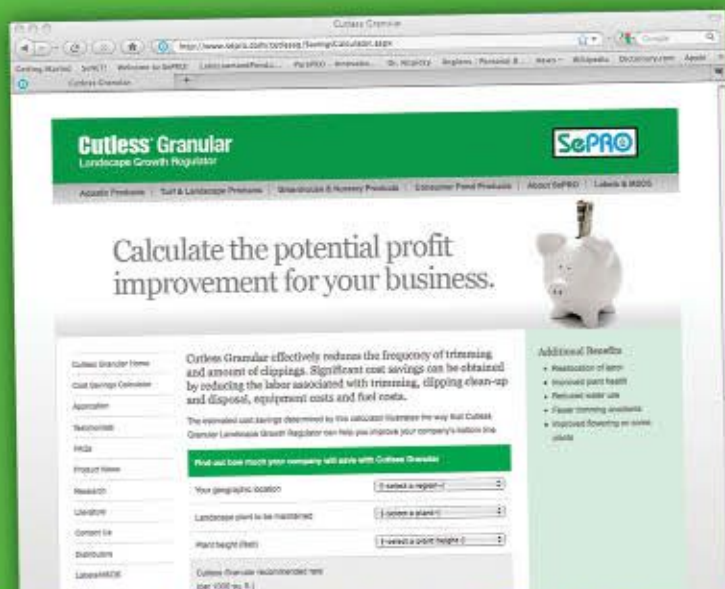
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SePRO Corporation Carmel, IN 46032

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# LMREPORTS

continued from page 26

## Ariens

The two re-designed Zoom mowers feature an updated deck designed for better air flow, which results in a quieter operation, enhanced quality of cut, improved side discharge with reduced blow back from discharged clippings, and increased belt and spindle life because of lower HP requirements. They offer seven cutting positions, six forward and three reverse speeds, and 2.5-gal. fuel capacity. *Ariens.com*



## Hustler Turf Products

Zeon is billed as the world's first all-electric zero-turning-radius mower. With no belts, filters, fluids or engine noise, the compact unit offers up to 80 minutes of mowing time — enough to mow more than 1 acre. Features include a high blade-tip speed for cut quality, a welded steel deck and tubular frame, and dual electric transmissions for true ZTR maneuverability. *HustlerTurf.com*

## DESIGN BUILD: SOFTWARE

### DynaScope

The DynaScope Manage software program, a modular, Web-based program that helps landscape professionals manage their businesses more efficiently and professionally, has been revamped. The software helps contractors follow best practices for estimating, bidding, sales and management. The end-to-end system automates proposal writing, scheduling, project management, job costing, billing forecasting and financial analysis. *DynaScope.com*



### NuPoints LLC

SiteCapture Pro, version 2.0, has features to make it easier to document and draw a job-site property while on site. The software allows users to add notes from a dictionary of commonly used terms or custom notes that can be saved for use in later drawings. The optional "hide notes" feature gives a clean view of progress in documenting the site without any notes. *NuPoints.com*

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## BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author is a partner with the Wilson-Oyler Group consultancy. Visit [www.wilson-oyler.com](http://www.wilson-oyler.com).

# Sharpen your estimating pencil

One of today's biggest issues is the low-price environment that's challenging landscape companies in most markets. This has been the case during past recessions, too, but perhaps not to the degree we see it presently. Usually, it's caused by construction-heavy contractors trying to enter the maintenance market or grow that portion of their businesses to make up for declining construction revenue.

This time, there's also aggressive pricing by national companies that seem to be leading the low-pricing charge. During the recession of the early '90s, some upstart companies were pricing work aggressively. Most of these companies were launched by employees of larger companies. They were successful because they built companies from scratch with lower operating and overhead costs.

Contractors need to learn from the past. For example, several large companies have made difficult choices to reduce costs recently, and in the process, they realized they had let themselves become top-heavy and inefficient. After the cost reductions, they've been able to carry on with much lower cost loads to cover and adjust to the lower price environment.

Now that the recession has lasted more than a year, most companies realize the market is different and that they need to figure out how to survive, grow and prosper again. Ask yourself, "If I were to start over, what would I do differently when building my company?"

Each of us can better hone our ability to estimate more accurately.

Many companies still use rather subjective methods of estimating. They are content to lean on an experienced eye for quick guesstimates of material and labor costs. While this method has worked OK for some companies, it's far from a

"best practice." Also, this method is not accurate enough to scale up or down as companies change in size and their costs and competitive pricing pressures fluctuate.

Remember: The practice of guesstimating is prone to overestimating.

Usually, the people subjectively estimating hours for jobs are the same ones who will have to manage the projects to be profitable. This leads to padding estimated labor hours — so if they get the jobs, they can manage the work more comfortably. Estimating hours during the high workload season influences them to bid more hours. The opposite is true during slower seasons.

Companies that have developed production rates, and measure jobs and count plants, eliminate much of the guesswork. If you estimate by factoring in production rates, frequencies and degree of difficulty, and compare that estimate to a subjective look by an operations staffer, you can zero in on the right price.

Another helpful estimating strategy: Compare each job, on a square-footage basis, to similar work you're doing (or have done) for which you have accurate cost information.

Additionally, consider the average hourly wage of the crew that would be assigned each job. Larger crews usually have lower average hourly wages because of the ratio of low-paid workers to the higher-paid crew leader. Most companies ignore this fact when estimating and use one hourly rate for all jobs, regardless of crew size.

If you tether several of these estimating strategies, you will develop more confidence you have the right price. There's no need to leave dollars on the table and/or come in over budget.

There are many little things that, when put together, can make a big difference when looking at pricing. In a market like this, your estimating pencil needs to be laser sharp — so you can compete successfully and continue to profit and grow with tighter pricing.





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# Miles of TRIALS

**THE NEWEST CULTIVARS WILL BE ON DISPLAY AT THE CALIFORNIA SPRING TRIALS.** BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

**E**ACH SPRING SINCE 1965, plant breeders and marketers have put their latest cultivars on display for a week in California. The event has grown steadily, and this year more than 40 companies will give visitors a preview of what will be available in 2010 and beyond. Though originally geared toward growers, the trials now are attended by representatives from many corners of the Green Industry, including landscapers, garden centers and big box retailers.

The dates that were originally set for the 2010 trials were pushed back from March 20-26 to April 10-17 at this year's OFA Short Course. The later dates will give breeders more time to deliver their best plant materials. Plants will be on display at dozens of open houses along the central and southern coasts of California.

The opportunities for landscapers who attend the California Spring Trials are many. Formerly known as the Pack Trials because

the displays focused on greenhouse "packs" of flowers, the trials now include plant performance information for each step of the distribution chain, including landscape installation. The event is the largest flower exhibition in the horticultural industry, so landscapers can get a first-hand look at the new color that will be available to them.

Design ideas will be easy to come by because the open houses have large displays and landscape demonstrations that feature various color and height combinations. Attendees can also learn what goes into breeding cultivars for color, hardiness and disease resistance — and have the opportunity to speak directly with plant breeders.

The state of the art in flower production is a constantly moving target. Each year, new cultivars are released that perform better than the old standbys. Knowing what those new cultivars are and how they perform in your area is a competitive advantage landscapers can use to gain and retain customers.

For the most up-to-date information, and to make appointments with the participating companies, visit the National Garden Bureau's Spring Pack Trial page at [www.ngb.org/spring\\_trials](http://www.ngb.org/spring_trials). 🌱

The California Spring Trials will be bursting with color and ideas for landscape bed designs.

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### Award-winning marigold

As a 2010 All-America Selections winner, Marigold F1 African Moonsong Deep Orange from **Syngenta Flowers** offers fade-resistant, double-bloom flowers that range from 2.5 to 3.5 in. in diameter. The stress-resistant plants flower in about 70 to 84 days, and grow to 15 in. tall. Over the summer, the old blooms will be covered with green foliage — which keeps the plants looking fresh throughout the growing season. [GoldsmithSeeds.com](http://GoldsmithSeeds.com)




### Hot shades of Winter Jewels

New for 2010 from **Terra Nova**, Helleborus Winter Jewels Peppermint Ice has large, double picotees that are light pink with a rim of dark pink edging. This clumping perennial is most active in late winter to early spring, and requires dappled shade (full sun in the Northwest). It's equally at home in mixed beds, cottage garden layouts or as understory. Other new shades this year in the Winter Jewels series include Amber Gem, Berry Swirl, Cotton Candy, Harlequin Gem, Jade Tiger, Onyx Odyssey, Sparkling Diamond and Painted Doubles. [TerraNovaNurseries.com](http://TerraNovaNurseries.com)


### Summer shot of color

**Proven Winner's** Lil Miss Sunshine bluebeard is a cross between Petit Bleu and Sunshine Blue. It delivers shiny yellow foliage all summer long, and features a compact habit. Abundant blue flowers appear in late summer on this deer-resistant, butterfly-attracting shrub. With a height of 30 to 36 in., it can be used as an addition to a mixed border or perennial bed. [ProvenWinners.com](http://ProvenWinners.com)




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# ACUTABOVE

GREEN INDUSTRY MAINTENANCE LEADERS » BY DAN JACOBS

Taking the high road is easier because it's always less traveled. That's a lesson **Donna Vignocchi**, president and CEO of Wauconda, IL-based **ILT Vignocchi**, learned from father Harry, who started the company 40 years ago. It's one of the lessons she uses to run her maintenance company.

## TOP TRENDS

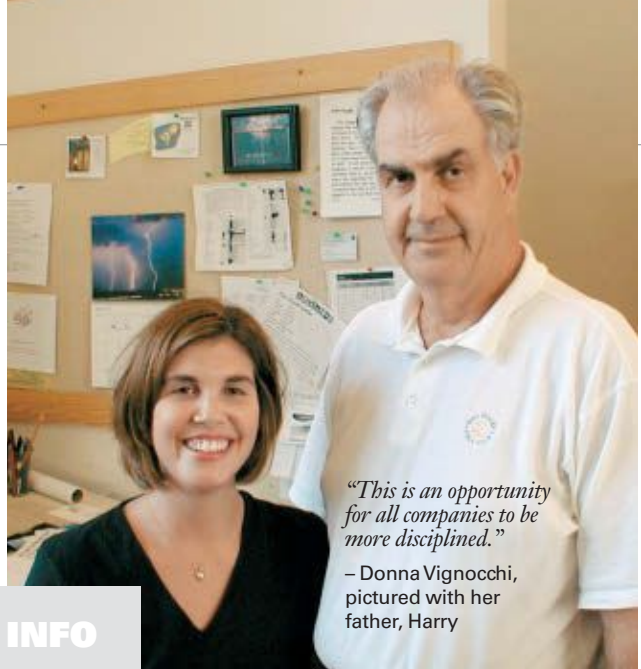
» **Price pressure.** The biggest trend right now has been the downward motion of price. I believe, that in our market, landscape maintenance is becoming much more of a commodity than a service. People are less concerned with quality than they have been, and that's simply because of the reality of the economy.

» **Going green.** There are very few ways to differentiate yourself when you do landscape maintenance. One way to do it is to be really cheap. The other approach is to provide a quality service. In our market, in Chicago, customers won't tolerate poor customer service, unless you're on the inexpensive side. Companies such as ours are driving this green sentiment at the forefront of their consumer messaging to differentiate themselves. It's a movement pervasive among all industries. Everybody is advertising "green." It's a trend, but it's also the biggest opportunity moving into 2010.

## TOP OBSTACLES

» **Recession woes.** We must figure out how to compete; how to retain customers when everything is seemingly about price. How do we continue to exist and be profitable when we have to compete in this type of market? We have to continue to cut our costs and reevaluate things such as benefits. ILT always has been a benefits-rich company. Those are things we have to look at. This recession isn't something we're going to see end in the near future. We're looking at three to five years.

» **Tight lending.** Lending institutions are unwilling to lend. They're all out saying they weren't one of those banks that had to take the money and "we're still lending." Your ability to fund growth or



*"This is an opportunity for all companies to be more disciplined."*

— Donna Vignocchi, pictured with her father, Harry

## INSIDE INFO

**Company:** ILT Vignocchi

**Headquarters:** Wauconda, IL

**Year established:** 1969

**Employees:** 20 full-time and 130 seasonal employees

**LM Top 150 rank:** 130

**Key to being a maintenance leader:** Never buy the second truck. I'm not kidding. That's my biggest piece of advice. Having more than 50 vehicles with umpteen number of safety incidents a year ... I don't necessarily believe volume has anything to do with being a leader. Being a leader means not being afraid to stand up for what you believe in. The people we employ are passionate about horticulture. We're supposed to be stewards of everything that grows. That's what a leader is.

buy new equipment for replacement programs, and now pay cash out of pocket, is almost impossible. It's a crisis. I think of companies such as ours that have been in business for 40 years that are sound, and I'm so frightened for those companies that aren't. It's scary. That's one of the biggest obstacles for small businesses right now.

## TOP OPPORTUNITIES

» **Work the hurt.** Our vendors have less business, just like we do. It could be less volume; it could be lower prices. Because of that, they're offering us substantial discounts we've been able to take advantage of. It's a significant opportunity for companies that can take advantage of it.

» **Topgrading.** There's an enormous opportunity to pick up talented people. I don't think that's something our industry could say three years ago. There were very few good people out there looking for work. Now, there are a lot of

talented, qualified people looking for work. It's a good time to consider topgrading personnel. If you're looking to expand into other markets, now is a great time to staff up.

» **Spend wisely.** This is an opportunity for all companies to be more disciplined. That's a very good thing. We've learned many lessons throughout the past two years that have been invaluable to me as a leader and valuable to our staff as a team. You tend to view things a bit more conservatively.

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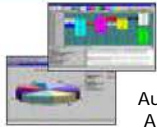
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## Same resolutions, renewed resolve

In March 2009, I wrote a column, “What are you going to do with all of the time you’ve been given?” I concluded it by sharing my professional, personal and spiritual To-Dos.

Looking in the rearview mirror, it’s clear that outside of a few sporadic successes, I fell a bit short working toward those goals. The resolutions were (and still are) solid, but my resolve wavered.

Because the goals are desirable and attainable, and I wholeheartedly believe in second chances, I’m giving my resolutions another go-around. Here are my 10 resolutions for 2010:

**1. Eat Less. Move More.** Four words ... Simple, but not easy. Like a lot of things in life, I have to stay committed to improving both sides of the ledger to gain ground (instead of pounds).

**2. Spend Less. Save More.** As The Great Recession lingers, many of us will make the same or less this year. Meanwhile, the cost of fuel, food, utilities and medical coverage will continue to climb. The good news is if I’m successful at Resolution 1, it automatically fortifies my efforts toward Resolution 2. By the way, did you know fast food isn’t considered a necessity in other parts of the world?

**3. Talk Less. Listen, Think and Take Action More.** God gave each of us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Growing up with nine siblings, interruptions sometimes seemed my only way into conversations. But now that I’m allegedly “all grown up,” that same behavior gets me nowhere. This goal includes not playing psychic by trying to finish people’s sentences.

**4. Worry Less. Pray More.** The worrying comes and goes, as does the praying. But the praying is gaining steam while the worrying is stalling. Hmm ... Perhaps they’re inversely related.

**5. Grump Less. Laugh, Love and Live More.** I need to adopt an attitude of gratitude and carry it with me throughout each day. I’m blessed beyond belief. I need to cherish every moment I have with the special people, gifts and grace God showers upon me at home and work. I might never be a millionaire, but that’s OK. I’m relationship rich.

**6. Take Less. Give More.** I’m not where I could or should be with this one, but I do experience magical moments of getting out of self and getting into others. I hope to make this a daily deal. My oldest brother, Jim, tried to help three people a day and not let anyone else know about it. If others discovered his good deeds, they “didn’t count.” (I won’t share my progress on this goal because I want all of my random acts of kindness to count.)

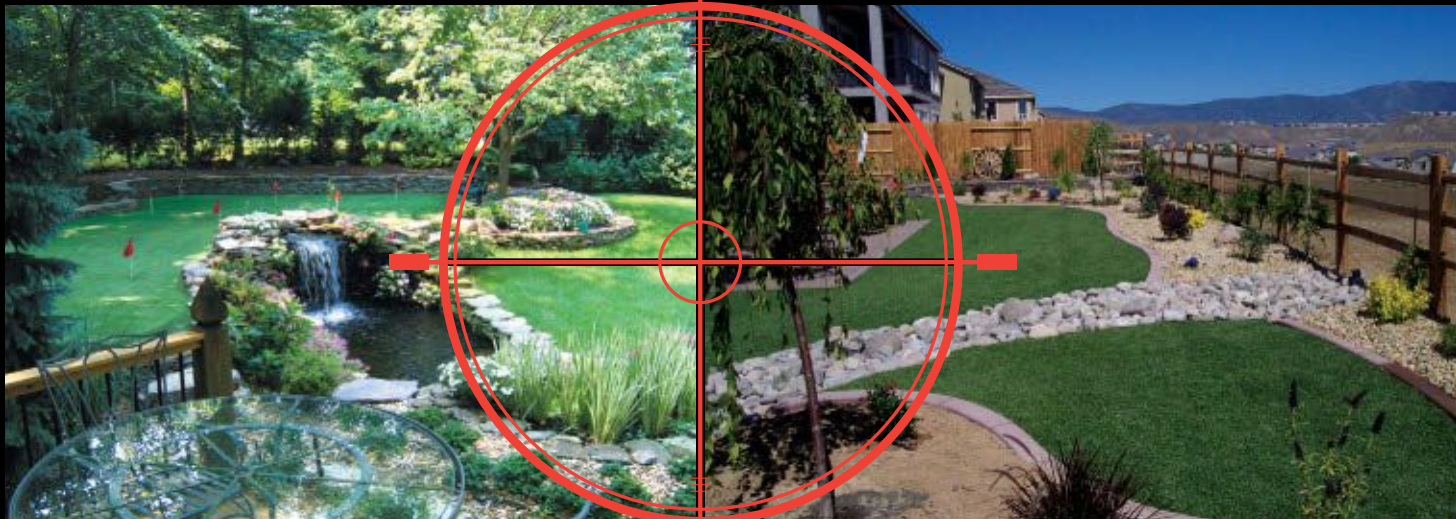
**7. Reach Out More.** My goal is to connect with at least 20 readers every month. Thousands of lawn care, landscape maintenance, design/build and irrigation professionals and an expansive family of marketing partners subscribe to our magazine. Consistently connecting with the customer will help us take our relationships and integrated media solutions to the next level.

**8. Plan Your Work. Work Your Plan.** A host of professional To-Dos fall under this goal, including improving communications, strategic planning and tactical execution. The action list is lengthy and complex, but the desired by-product is singular and simple, albeit a bit militaristic: *We* need to do all we can do to become all we can be.

**9. Complete HUGE Heart Home Makeover.** This one was the brainchild of Group Publisher Kevin Stoltman. After we barely missed winning an “Extreme Makeover Home Edition” renovation for friends, Kevin convinced me to not give up. With Kevin’s gentle urging, last year I organized and promoted a local project to raise funds and expand and remodel the home of the Gaspar family of Fairview Park, OH. Adam Gaspar, my buddy since the first grade, lost his 10-month battle with cancer Sept. 30, 2008. In no way can this endeavor offset the loss of Adam, but it is bringing together an entire community in a beautiful act of service that will make home a little sweeter for Adam’s widow, Ann, and their six children.

**10. Write and publish a book.** In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve been writing this classic — “Whit’s World ... Living proof that evolution is overrated” — one month, one column at a time.

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