

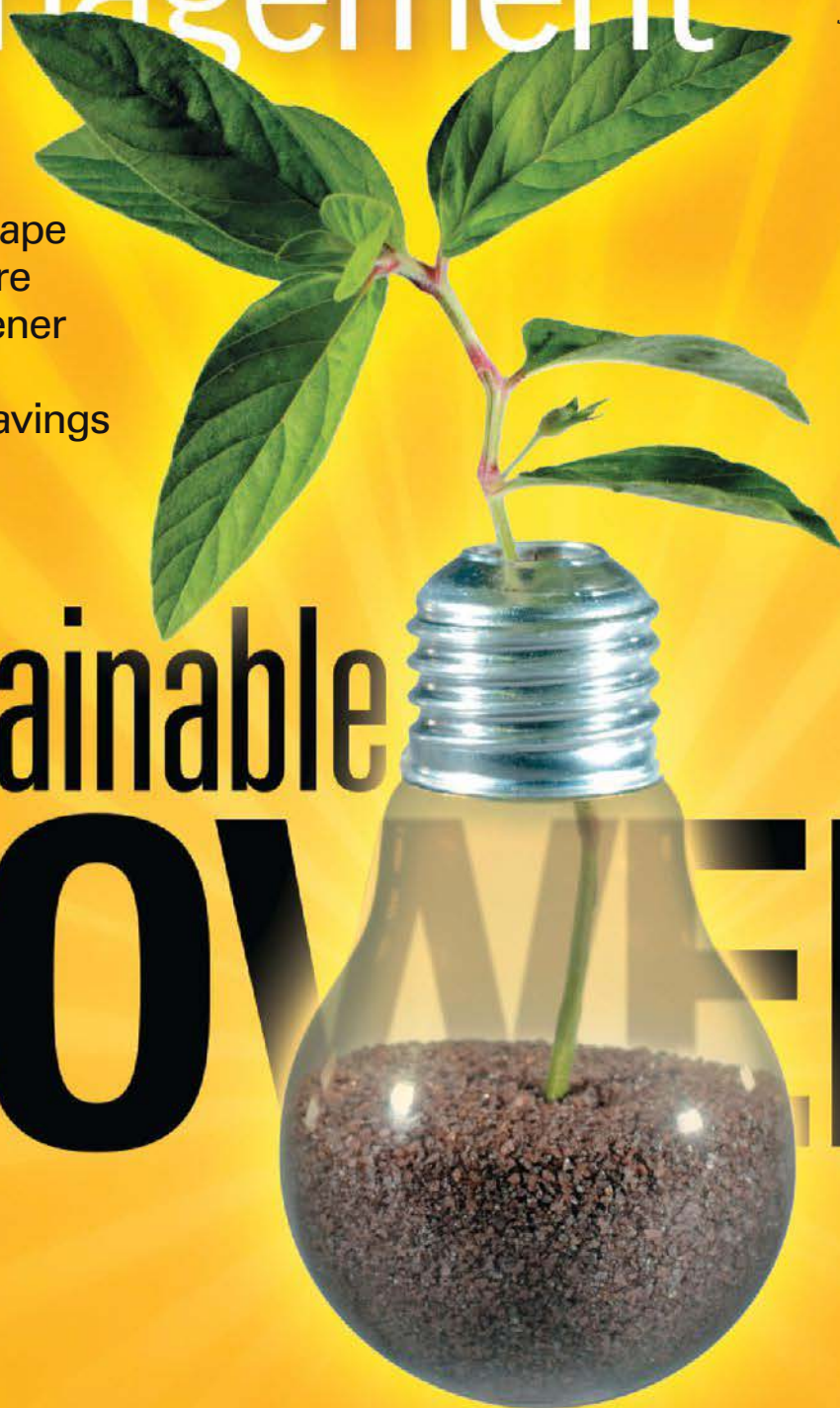
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CLEVELAND HEADQUARTERS

600 SUPERIOR AVE. EAST SUITE 1100
CLEVELAND OH 44114 800/669-1668

EDITORIAL STAFF

Editorial Director Marty Whitford 216/706-3766 | mwhitford@questex.com

Editor-in-Chief Daniel G. Jacobs 216/706-3754 | djacobs@questex.com

Senior Editor Beth Geraci 216/706-3756 | bgeraci@questex.com

Contributing Editors Heather & Jamie Gooch 330/723-3539 | heather@goochandgooch.com, jamie@goochandgooch.com

Art Director Carrie Parkhill 216/706-3780 | cparkhill@questex.com

ADVERTISING STAFF

Publisher Jason DeSarle
216/706-3758 Fax: 216/706-3712 | jdesarle@questex.com

National Accounts Manager Ric Abernethy
216/706-3723 Fax: 216/706-3712 | rabernethy@questex.com

Account Executive Classifieds Kelli Velasquez
216/706-3767 Fax: 216/706-3712 | kvelasquez@questex.com

BUSINESS STAFF

Vice President Kevin Stoltman 216/706-3740 | kstoltman@questex.com

Vice President of Sales Patrick Roberts
216/706-3736 Fax: 216/706-3712 | proberts@questex.com

Administrative Coordinator Petra Turko 216/706-3768 | pturko@questex.com

Marketing Manager Ryan Bockmuller 216/706-3772
Fax: 216/706-3712 | rbockmuller@questex.com

Production Specialist Amber Terch 218/206-2129 | Amber.terch@superiormediasolutions.net

Production Director Jamie Kleist 218/206-2107 | Jamie.kleist@superiormediasolutions.net

Audience Development Manager Carol Hatcher
216/706-3785 | chatcher@questex.com

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Customer Services Subscriber/Customer Service
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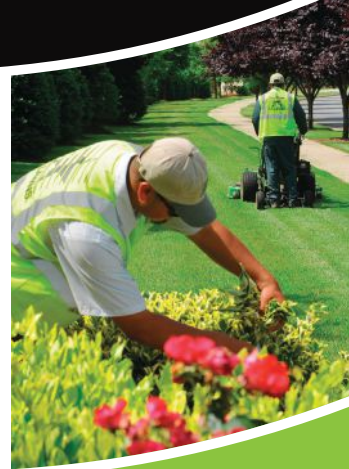
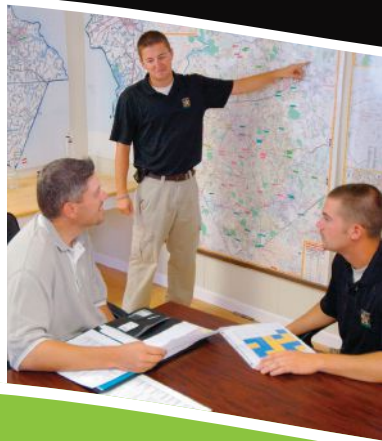
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A little end of the year introspection

Every year, as the last days of December begin to fade, I usually take a few moments to reflect on the year. It's been quite a year. I was promoted to Editor-in-Chief of this fine magazine. We're celebrating our 50th year of publishing the magazine and things are really looking up for 2012.

But it's not all been good news.

If you're a longtime reader of my column (thank you), you know I've written about my ongoing struggle to lose weight. A couple years back, I thought if I publically espoused my intentions with promises of updates on my progress it would shame me into success. It didn't work.

But if you've seen me recently, you might notice I'm a few pounds lighter.

I'm happy to report, since the end of February I've lost nearly 40 pounds. The question I get most often is, "How did you do it?" It's simple, really; I decided to eat less, eat more healthily and exercise regularly. No fad diets. Just a commitment to make the effort and stick with it.

Over the years, I've started exercise programs and diets; I've made promises to myself. But my countless attempts at losing weight were much like my father's at quitting smoking. As the old joke goes, quitting is easy; he did it dozens of times. It

wasn't until he was truly finally ready to quit smoking forever that he actually did so.

My catalyst came earlier this year (that February timeframe). I had been to the doctor and was waiting for some test results. They came while I was on the road at a show out West. My cell phone rang at about 6 a.m. "Mr. Jacobs," the doctor began, "you're a diabetic."

Talk about a wake-up call.

With the loving support of my wife (and my employer), I embarked on a new path. We started eating whole grains and more fruits and vegetables and stopped eating refined sugars. And we're now regulars at the gym.

I'm blessed. I don't currently need to treat this disease with medicine. My blood sugar levels have steadily declined thanks to my lifestyle changes. During my most recent appointment, the doctor told me I was still in the "risk" stage, but that's a lot better than where I was earlier in the year. I hope by my next appointment, in about three months, my numbers are even better.

I'm lucky. I got the diagnosis early and easier to do something about it.

Over the years, we've written many times about the importance of putting yourself and your family before the business. I'm lucky enough to work for a company that allows me to do that. Over the past several months I've had numerous doctors' appointments with nary a word from my superiors about my needing to leave early or come in a little late.

Of course, the job of putting out the magazine still had to get done each month. But I certainly didn't mind working at home on occasion (after finishing my workout at the gym) to make sure things ran smoothly.

I pledge that I will do my best in 2012 to get myself and this magazine in the best shape of our lives — and to stay that way. And whatever resolutions you make for the coming year, I wish you success. Have a happy and healthy new year.

My attempts at losing weight were much like my father's at quitting smoking. **As the old joke goes, quitting is easy; he did it dozens of times.**


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NEWS+VIEWS

GREEN INDUSTRY EVENTS, TRENDS AND TIPS

Turfco unveils its T3000i series of spreader-sprayer riding units

BY MARTY WHITFORD EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Four years ago, Minneapolis-based Turfco Manufacturing introduced its popular T3000 spreader-sprayer riding applicators at GIE+EXPO. Refusing to rest on its laurels, the company spent the past two years listening closely to users of the patent-pending technology and incorporating key enhancements requested by leading lawn care operators (LCOs).

The latest series of enhancements to the Turfco spreader-sprayer applicators include, among others:

- › All new, hands-free speed control for unprecedented productivity and control;
- › A new pump system featuring extended life, minimal maintenance and easier servicing; and
- › A trim speed lock to trim properties at a consistent 3.5 miles per hour.

“LCOs across the country were co-engineers of our next-generation spreader-sprayer system, the T3000i series, launched at GIE+Expo this past

October,” says Scott Kinhead, Turfco’s executive vice president. “The T3000i is engineered to double productivity. Take a ride on a T3000i and you’ll quickly realize a level of profitability, comfort and safety never before seen in a spreader-sprayer.”

Key features

- › An ergonomically friendly steering wheel to circumvent operator fatigue while improving application accuracy;
- › A pivoting front axle and floating operator platform to minimize strain and shock on the operator;
- › Cruise control so the user can easily operate the machine’s multitude of spraying and spreading options while driving;
- › Unparalleled control and stability, even on slopes and uneven ground, thanks to two smartly positioned 8-gallon saddle tanks and a hydrostatic transaxle braking system;
- › A 120-pound spreader hopper and 120-pound carrier tray;



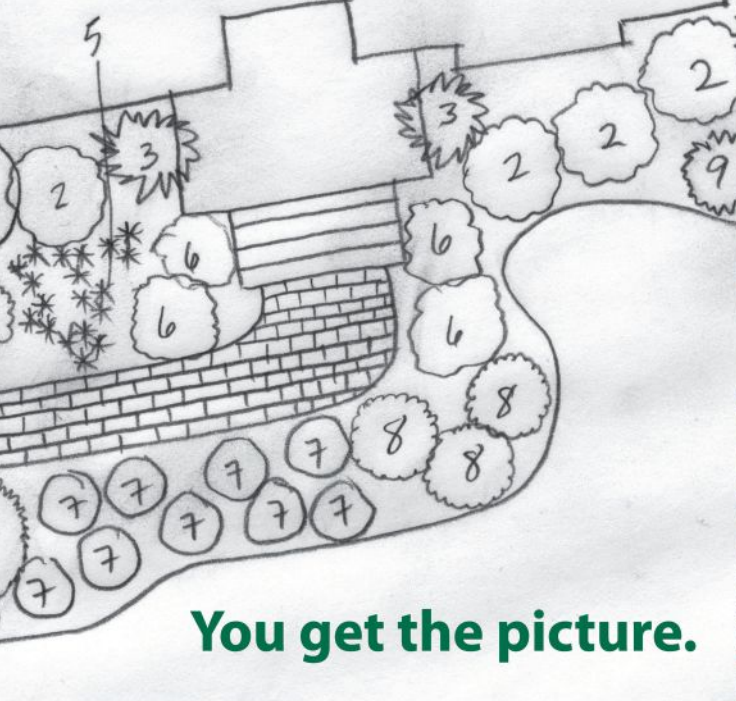
- › The ability to fit through a 36-in. gate for residences and then go next door to complete a 64,000-square-foot commercial application — up to 120,000 sq. ft. with an auxiliary tank;
- › A high-pressure/high-velocity spray system — adjustable to 4-foot, 6-foot and 9-foot widths — for larger droplets, better coverage, less drift and fewer callbacks;
- › Separate spreader and sprayer systems but matching effective widths at 6 feet and 9 feet;
- › An easily adjustable pressure dial that allows LCOs to quickly change spray widths from 6 feet to 9 feet;
- › A 4-foot trim spray and 15-foot wand for easy trimming and spot treatments on the fly;
- › Mechanical control of the applicator’s two-speed spinner: Just flick a switch to toggle to/from 12-foot and 8-foot applications;
- › The ability to quickly adjust rates for trimming widths to eliminate over-application and fertilizer waste;
- › A wrap-around deflector that helps avoid prills and reduces cleanup and material waste; and
- › Last but not least, Turfco’s T3000i is easy to use, making it ideal for operations with multiple crew members.

For more information on the T3000i sprayer-spreader, please call 800/679-8201 or visit www.turfcodirect.com.

TURFCO’S TURNAER XT5

Minneapolis-based Turfco Manufacturing has developed a new steerable, reversible aerator, the TurnAer XT5. Designed to help lawn care operators (LCOs) keep their tines down and profits up, the TurnAer XT5 leverages Turfco’s patented steerable aerator technology along with a new hydrostatic drive system. The TurnAer XT5 features EasyChange tines and improved durability thanks to its low profile and unibody steel frame. The TurnAer XT5 uses drive chains that are covered and located outside the frame. The TurnAer XT5 is field tested to be up to 50% more productive than traditional aerators.

With Turfco’s new TurnAer XT5, LCOs now can turn and reverse while they aerate, increasing productivity while reducing operator fatigue. Visit www.turfcodirect.com/makingiteasy and register to win a TurnAer XT5 in March 2012 or one of five Apple iPod touches being given away through February 2012.



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PROGRESS



Hardly slowing down

When *Landscape Management* featured an article about landscape design 15 years ago at this time, customers valued green space, texture and natural colors. And decks and swimming pools were the amenities of choice.

Some of those preferences have changed today, and some haven't. But there's no doubt hardscaping materials, equipment, trends and techniques have taken giant leaps over the years.

A lot has improved in hardscaping since his early days in the industry, says Dickson DeMarche, FASLA, director of design for Connecticut-based LaurelRock.

DeMarche, who has worked in the field since 1964, says concrete pavers, for one, have made major strides.

"Back in the old days, when I first started practicing, concrete pavers were just beginning to come into play," he says. "When they first came out, they were not very great."

But over the years, concrete pavers became available in many more patterns, styles and colors. The material is much denser and more resistant now as well, DeMarche says. "One of the most important things is, they've improved their durability. Early on, the color would lighten up and you'd see a lot more sand and gravel exposed."

As more manufacturers gradually entered the market, pressure mounted to make each paver better than the last.

In fact, manufacturers changed the industry, says Ed Castro, president of Ed Castro Landscape. Because of manufacturers, today's flooring systems are more modular and concrete pavers make nicer patterns, Castro says.

According to DeMarche, among the most recent improvements in pav-

The design/build sector has advanced, along with the materials and technology that have shaped it.

ers is that sealants now come built in. "In the past," he says, "if you wanted the resistance you had to spray [the material] with a sealant after it had been laid down, and it was an additional cost."

Hardscaping materials resemble natural brick more these days as well. Faux brick looks a little more distressed, a little older, and it's more difficult for an untrained eye to distinguish it from real brick, DeMarche says.

Customers are different today

Just as materials have changed over the years, so have customers' preferences. Water features are nothing new, DeMarche says, but within the last 10 years they have become more popular.

Whereas swimming pools were the "end all, be all" in the 1960s and 1970s, he says, today's residential clients prefer fountains and waterfalls.

Residential customers have always enjoyed pools and gardens, says Castro, whose company will celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2012. What's new today is customers' desire for exterior kitchens and other add-ons that connect them to the outdoors, he says.

When it comes to connecting to the outdoors, sunrooms and screened porches once ruled. Now they've been replaced by outdoor "rooms" featuring cooking areas, fireplaces, water features, stainless steel products, bars and automated lighting that allow residents to lounge as comfortably as though they were inside.

"The interior and exterior should flow and connect," Castro says. That seamlessness is indicative of how hardscaping design has advanced, Castro says.

Technology helping shape the industry

Technology has played a major role in making outdoor rooms possible and in advancing the hardscaping industry as a whole. Computer-controlled devices have led to awnings that stretch themselves; screens that open with the push of a button; and lighting options where "you can highlight this and downplay that," DeMarche says.

Not only has technology created more options for customers, it also has changed the way design/build professionals work. They no longer have to go to the library to research information nor draft designs by hand. It makes for a much faster process, but there's a lot to be said for the old-fashioned way.

"There used to be down time between design phases," DeMarche says, "...and I think design was better because of that. I would have kind of an 'aha!' moment and all of a sudden I'd say, 'Gee, this is what we could do!' Design being a creative process, you can't just call it up on demand."

Landscape architects are still creative, he says, but they were even more so when their ideas had time to gel.

"Things move at a much faster pace today," DeMarche adds. "You need it when? OK, we can do that."



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12 resolutions for 2012

It's human nature to want to wipe the slate clean and start anew every so often — and what better time to do so as one year comes to a close and another begins anew?

Here are my goals for the new year:

- 1. Eat less. Move more.** Four simple words — but ones that are much easier to write than do. A wise man once quipped, “Fitness is the past tense of fatness.” I’m just hoping it can serve as the past *and* future tenses.
- 2. Spend less. Save more.** The cost of food, fuel, utilities, medical care and education will continue to climb — Great Recession or not. The good news is if I’m successful at Resolution 1, it automatically will fortify my efforts regarding Resolution 2 (*sans pizza delivery costs*).
- 3. Talk less. Listen more.** God gave each of us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Growing up with nine siblings, interruptions often seemed my only way to pry into conversations. Now that I’m allegedly “all grown up,” I have to constantly remind myself to take the cotton out of my ears and put it in my mouth.
- 4. 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. My oldest brother, Jim, tried to help three people each day and not let anyone know about it. If others discovered his good deeds, they didn’t “count.”
- 5. Worry less. Pray more.** The worrying comes and goes, as does the praying. But the praying is gaining steam while the worrying is stalling. Perhaps they’re inversely related.
- 6. Work less. Play more.** If we work smarter, we can spend less time at work, more time at home, and be more successful on both fronts. No one on his deathbed ever said, “I really wish I had worked more.”
- 7. Grump less. Smile 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 at work.



- 8. Weep less. Embody more.** Grieving over the loss of loved ones is natural, but we better honor their memories by trying our best to embody the very traits we miss most about them.
- 9. Improvise less. Plan more.** A host of professional to-dos fall under this goal, including improving communication, strategic planning and tactical execution. “Winging it” is not a plan.
- 10. Order less. Coach more.** When it comes to effectively communicating our business vision, experience and expectations, *how* we share these is as important as *what* we share.
- 11. Bark less. Howl more.** Life is all about perspective. As Charlie Chaplin once said: “A day without laughter is a day wasted.”
- 12. Nap less. Live more.** Now’s not the time for napping. See Resolutions 1-11.

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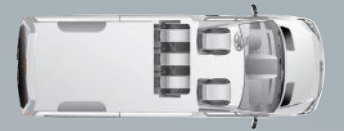


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Sustainable

Some landscape companies are growing greener now to earn mega-watt savings in the future.

BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR

POWER

M

ORE AND MORE, landscape businesses are putting even more green into the Green Industry. Some recycle natural waste from job sites back into the

property. Some encourage their clients to use smart controllers to conserve water. And some propel their equipment with cleaner-burning fuels.

But contractors like these are ramping up their ecological efforts even more. They're putting their sustainable efforts into practice not only in their customers' yards — but in their own.

Solar energy

In August, Ruppert Landscape completed construction of a solar field at its Laytonsville, MD headquarters. The roughly million-dollar project consists of 988 solar panels on three-quarters of an acre, making it the largest non-institutional ground-mounted solar farm in the region.

Ruppert Landscape President Chris Davitt says the company implemented the solar field for two reasons. "One, we wanted to be greener. We think it's our obligation, and we want to make less of a footprint on this earth.

"Two, a lot of it is what our customers are looking for. Not all of them are waving the green banner and asking for it up front, but when we bring up our green practices, almost all of our customers are interested."

Ruppert Landscapes' solar farm led to the elimination of the company's \$40,000 annual electric bill.



Without financial incentives, however, constructing the solar field would not have been feasible. Government grants and renewable energy credits made it possible. Ruppert obtained a federal grant worth 30% of the project's value. That grant offsets solar field construction costs, Davitt says.

In addition, Ruppert receives a payment for the sale of its solar renewable energy credits (SRECs) through a local power provider. The payments for the energy credits should continue for the next 20 years, the solar panels' total life expectancy.

"The revenue from the sale of our SRECs started at \$83,000 a year, and

it will diminish gradually," Davitt says. "In the latter years we'd be getting \$10,000 a year."

Given those financial incentives, "from a return on an investment standpoint, it's a no-brainer," Davitt says.

Before creating the solar field, Ruppert's annual electric bill totaled \$40,000. Now, those costs have been eliminated; the solar field is big enough to provide all of the electricity for Ruppert's Laytonsville, MD corporate campus.

Between electricity savings, the sale of solar renewable energy credits, the grant and the bonus depreciation of the asset, Davitt expects the solar field to pay for itself within seven years.



The amount of carbon emissions solar energy generation produces

Whether a long-term or short-term financial investment, “sustainability does go hand in hand with reducing costs,” Davitt says.

So why aren’t more companies rushing to use solar energy? “One, you need land,” Davitt says. “The other reason is, a lot of people aren’t aware of the government grants and credits. But a lot of these things tend to catch on, and they catch on quickly. Ultimately, as more people invest in solar technology the costs are going to drop. It just depends on how quickly people invest in it.”

DeSantis Landscapes installed 20 solar panels on its roof in May 2008. According to Dean DeSantis, president of the Salem, OR-based company, the 3.9-kilowatt system provides 15% of the total power needs at DeSantis Landscapes’ headquarters.

“I think it’s been a good thing for the business,” says DeSantis, relenting that the solar energy constitutes a relatively small percentage of his company’s overall power.

“There isn’t a huge impact there,” he says, “but the statement that it makes about the direction that our company is going, it just kind of fits with our overall branding message that we’re a greener company and we support alternative energies.”

DeSantis Landscapes invested \$31,000 in its solar panel project. Those costs were offset by a federal tax credit of \$4,674, a state tax credit of \$15,580 and a \$5,700 incentive from the Energy Trust of Oregon. With a three-year return on investment, the project is now entirely paid off.

DeSantis Landscapes initiated its sustainability discussion in 2005, when it was in the midst of strategizing for its future.

“It kind of came out that each one of us was interested in the environment and it was kind of like, ‘Why aren’t we doing something about this?’” DeSantis says.

Like Ruppert and DeSantis, Pacific Landscape Management in Hillsboro, OR installed a solar system — in 2009. It produces 95% of the company’s power. Like other companies that

employ solar power, Pacific president Bob Grover says that without tax incentives solar energy wouldn't have been feasible for the company.

"Quite frankly, there was a great financial incentive for us to do that, so it was an easy decision," says Grover.

Pacific received a 30% federal tax credit the first year and a state tax credit worth 10% annually over five years. In all, 90% of the solar project's cost was covered through federal and state tax credits and grants.

Pacific's 35-kilowatt solar panel array cost about \$250,000, "but after all tax credits and grants paid out, my costs were about \$25,000," Grover says. "It's a good deal. I still had a seven-year return on investment, but after the seventh year our power will be free. In the long term, we're going to save money."

And because many people in the Northwest are environmentally conscious, "it's good for our marketing," he adds.

Solar power works well for Pacific, and Grover has no regrets about following through with the project. But he does say that though solar energy is the future, it's not cost effective.

Parry Webb, director of sales and business development for Littleton,



CO-based Terracare Associates, agrees.

"We have to be able to be cost effective with any changes that we make," he says. "There's been quite a lot of talk about solar, but it depends on the scope of your business. For us, it becomes economically impractical."

Edible garden

Terracare Associates may not be joining the solar revolution, but it does focus on other types of sustainability at its offices. It uses smart controllers to conserve water at its headquarters, and it's an advocate of "edible" vegetable gardens for commercial properties.

Thanks to Terracare Associates Vice President Bill Horn, who drove the project, the company removed turf at its Bay Area Martinez, CA branch last spring to plant an edible garden.

By removing the turf, the company reduced the water and chemical use turf maintenance requires yet still made use of the land. "It's a way of replacing turf with a more sustainable landscape," Webb says.

"It's like farming in an urban environment."

Some of Terracare Associates' irrigation professionals also planted an edible garden at Terracare's Littleton office, building the frame out of used pallets and filling the boxes with recycled soil from clients' landscaping sites. The garden sprouted greens and vegetables for company staff all summer.

Sustainability is "really at the heart of what we do," says Webb. "The

DeSantis Landscapes' solar array provides about 15% of its office energy needs.

sustainability movement in landscape is evolving, and I think for most people, because you're in landscape, they assume you're sustainable because you're around plants. But there's always a right way and a wrong way to maintain sustainable landscapes."

Rain garden

Other than its solar project, Pacific has taken many other steps toward sustainability. It's reduced its chemical use, converted its equipment to lower emission models, built a 10-foot vertical garden at its facility — and installed a rain garden there.

To create the rain garden, Pacific disconnected its downspout so water would no longer flow into a storm sewer. Thus, water from the roof now pours directly onto the garden and into its soil.

"The advantage of a rain garden is, it reduces runoff," Grover says. "The storm sewer flows into the local creeks. By planting our rain garden, we're trying to get the water to go back into the soil, thereby easing the stress on our sewer system."

Although rain gardens are best installed as part of a building's original design, Pacific removed part of the existing landscape at its headquarters to make room for its rain garden, which Grover emphasizes features both native and non-native plants.

"There's a really big push in landscape design today to utilize native

continued on page 16

“ ”
From a return
on an investment
standpoint,
it's a no-brainer.

— RUPPERT LANDSCAPE PRESIDENT
CHRIS DAVITT, ON THE COMPANY'S
USE OF SOLAR POWER

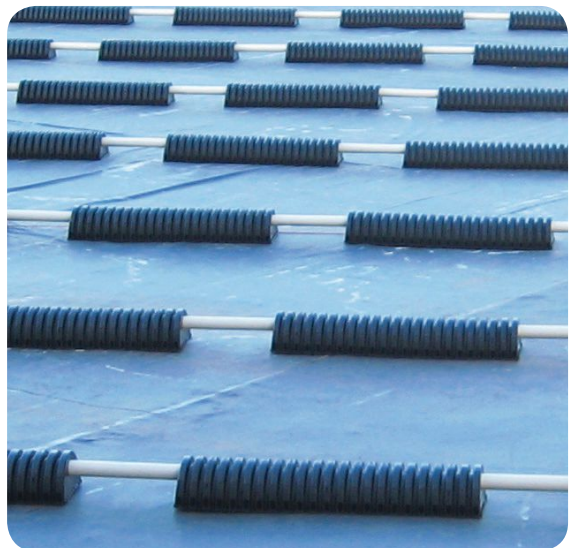
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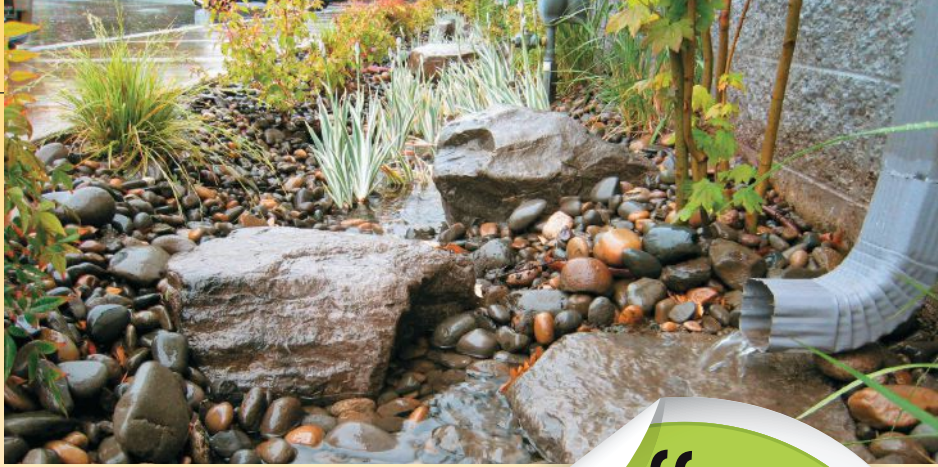
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continued from page 14

plant material, and the theory behind it is that indigenous plant material is acclimated to our weather or our climate,” Grover says. “The problem is, many urban landscapes are not similar to the native environment.”

Non-native plants that can adapt to soil and exposure perform better and



“ ”
 We’re trying to show people that by selecting the right plant materials and maintaining them in a certain way the garden will have long-term viability.

— PACIFIC LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT
 PRESIDENT BOB GROVER, ON THE COMPANY’S OFFICE RAIN GARDEN



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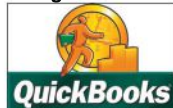
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require less maintenance than some native plants, Grover asserts.

“We’re trying to show people that by selecting the right plant materials and maintaining them in a certain way the garden will have long-term viability,” he says.

Rainwater harvesting

In October, Dallas, TX-based Lambert Landscape Co. was one of three companies awarded The Professional Landcare Network’s (PLANET’s) 2011 Sustainable Company Award. The award is given to companies that show environmental consciousness at their workplace through things like water conservation, waste management and pollution reduction.

Lambert has been an entirely organic company since the 1980s and employs many ecological practices — including recycling and forbidding the use of plastic bags.

Though some of those practices are common throughout the industry, rainwater harvesting is less common. And Lambert has been practicing it for

PHOTOS COURTESY: PACIFIC LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT (THIS PAGE); LAMBERT LANDSCAPE CO.



Lambert Landscape Co. collects its rainwater in this 30,000-gallon holding tank then uses it to make compost tea.

two-and-a-half years now.

“We collect all of our own rainwater in a 30,000-gallon holding tank,” explains Lambert Director of Garden Services Jodi Joseph. The reclaimed water is added to Lambert Landscape’s compost tea to make a concentrate. Then, seven times a year, the concentrate is applied to all of the 224 properties Lambert maintains.

Lambert’s ecological advocacy “comes from the top down,” says Lambert Director of Garden Development Jud Griggs. “We try to mini-

mize our carbon footprint on the world.”

Ruppert, too, practices rainwater harvesting, at both its corporate headquarters and its facility in Lilburn, GA.

At its Lilburn facility, Ruppert installed a well and a 10,000-gallon cistern

to collect and store captured rainwater and runoff from its roofs and existing irrigation systems. The reclaimed water is used to irrigate the Lilburn facility’s nursery holding yard and landscape, and to wash company vehicles.

The project, completed in June of 2009, took one week to install and cost about \$26,000. Ruppert expects the project to “completely pay for itself in just over three years’ time,” Davitt says.

With the rainwater harvesting project, the Lilburn facility went from using 2 million gallons of water annu-

ally (and spending an average of \$9,000 annually on water bills) to using just 96,000 gallons of water annually (and spending \$500 annually on water bills).

Over the next seven years, Ruppert expects to save nearly \$47,000 and approximately 13 million gallons of water.

“Our average monthly water bills before the project were around \$1,400 and have dropped to just \$60 a month since the project’s completion,” Davitt says.

Whether landscape companies show their environmental consciousness through large-scale company projects like solar fields and rainwater harvesting or smaller ones such as recycling and gardening doesn’t matter. What does matter, DeSantis says, is “everyone’s looking to get on board, which is good. We want to see the industry shift a bit. And we’re starting to see it happen.” **LMI**

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THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

The author, owner-manager of 3PG Consulting, is a 25-year industry veteran. Reach him at kkehoe@questex.com.

Winning in 2012

It is becoming increasingly clear that 2012 is shaping up to be an even tougher year than 2011 — which itself as it turned out was much tougher than 2010. This means that cash conservation and organization focus are more important and interrelated than ever.

We must get our costs in line with our revenue and production realities. This starts with a conservative revenue projection. We need a revenue projection not based on hope. It should be a projection that is married to an objective alignment of overhead staffing in sales, account management and operations with the new industry benchmarks (Table 1).

The table outlines what is possible from a personal performance perspective for several key positions. These benchmarks are real and represent the target range for the high-end profit makers in the industry. More than anything else, they demonstrate a clear principle that people in these positions are expected to and are in fact doing and producing more than ever.

Innovation is driving this trend. Specifically, innovations in information systems wedded to

management practices that enable people in these key positions to successfully take on more work and responsibility. The simple fact is that most people in these positions waste too much time chasing the urgent versus the critical. I am not suggesting that they are not working and trying hard, but I am stating that they are often only 60% effective. That is expensive for you.

The only way to remedy this expensive problem is to directly manage people and functions at a detailed level that focuses on forecasting (not just reviewing) key performance numbers.

Take the account management job. The key performance numbers for this job are typically account retention, enhancement sales, and customer satisfaction. Performing well requires account-related activities that cost the account managers time. If that time is not planned and allocated for, then when account managers get busy time slips away. And it can never be recovered. The loss of time too often results in loss of renewals, quality problems and lower than budget enhancement sales.

Today's leading software provides information for managing numbers on a real-time basis — at a reasonable cost. What software systems can't do is turn that information into decisions that manage the most limited and expensive of all resources — time.

This is management — information combined with prioritization that provides leadership and direction. If we want to make money next year, we have to conserve cash. To conserve cash we have to minimize overhead staffing costs while maximizing effectiveness. To minimize overhead staffing costs, we have to get people to do more. To get people to do more we have to manage time looking through the windshield instead of the rearview mirror. More than ever, time is money.

TABLE 1: BENCHMARKS

	Minimum	Target
New sales production		
Grounds maintenance	\$750,000	\$1,000,000
Design/build	\$150,000	\$2,000,000
Bid build	\$400,000	\$5,000,000
Account management		
Contract and upsell value	\$1,500,000	\$2,000,000
Retention	90%	95%
Operations management		
Contract crews managed	5	8
Retention	90%	95%





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**Nominal power rated by the manufacturer.*



AT A GLANCE

TITLE: Founder & President

COMPANY: Majestic Lawn Care and Landscape

YEAR FOUNDED: 1993

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 25

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT

(ASSOCIATIONS): PLANET, ISA, SIMA, NYS Turfgrass Assoc., NYS Nursery & Landscape Assoc., Professional Landscape Assoc. of Rockland County.

FAMILY: Wife Jenn, stepson Nick, daughter Emma, & Joseph IV is arriving any day now!

WEBSITE:

<http://www.majesticlawn-andlandscape.com/>

It's a wonder **Joe Holland** has time to run a business. "I am currently in two tribute bands; Robot Slaves (Black Sabbath) & Stiff Upper Lip (AC/DC), which play the Tri-State area," says Holland, a drummer and owner of Majestic Lawn Care and Landscape, New York City. Holland got his first gig playing in clubs at 18 and his first job on the road at 22. "I toured around the United States and Canada for three years, which was a blast," he says. "In the winter of 2003 I helped develop the score and played drums in the off-Broadway play 'Heat Lightening.' I have done a lot of recording studio work, concerts, club gigs and touring." He talks with *LM* about his place in the industry.

What made you want to start Majestic Lawn Care and Landscape? I got married and thought I needed a "real job", so I went to work for a friend's lawn maintenance company, and by the end of the summer I bought a small company of my own. In September of 1993 Majestic Lawn Care & Landscape was born.

What makes your company unique? Great customer service, our honesty and we don't mislead our customers. We are constantly tweaking and improving our systems to better serve our customers. Our customers really like that their phone calls/messages are promptly returned. They'll have the same crew each year and know them by name. Our team leaders know our customers' likes and dislikes because they have worked with them in previous years. One of our maintenance team leaders helped start the company with me, and

two other maintenance team leaders came on board soon after. Most of our team leaders worked their way up the ladder and have been here for many years, which helps things run more smoothly.

Can you describe your market and your customers? Our market is predominately middle to upper middle class. We are in a suburb of NYC, and our customers run the gamut, as you might expect being only 30 minutes from Manhattan. We rarely hear from the majority of our customers, however, a handful of them never stop calling. We do our best to keep them all happy.

What challenges do you see in the lawn care segment of the industry and how do you deal with it? Over regulation!

There seems to be a small segment of our community that makes so much noise with false or misleading information that they are scaring the public at large, and sometimes they get away with it. We regularly mail out leaflets describing the chemical applications we do and the objectives we are trying to achieve on their property.

How has the economy affected your business? Our best year was 2008. In 2009, we came in \$500,000 below 2008 but we regrouped, tightened up our maintenance routes and saved wherever we could. This motivated us to really look at how inefficient we were running.

What's the best part of your job? The satisfaction of a job well done: 1. Spending time

with customers and selling work and 2. teaching and mentoring my employees.

What are your thoughts about the industry as we head into 2012? The lawn industry locally is getting tougher as years go by. Everyone wants a deal, which is understandable, so our angle has been about quality of service, dependability, our good standing in the community, and care after the sale. We may not be the cheapest guys out there, but you will get quality service that we stand behind.

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HENBIT

Lamium amplexicaule

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This winter annual has square, flowering stems that grow up to 10 in. tall.
- ▶ Henbit features mint-like pink to purple flowers, and prefers thin, nutrient-rich soil.
- ▶ It is commonly confused with purple deadnettle (*L. purpureum*), but deadnettle's upper leaves have petioles (henbit does not) and are distinctly red- or purple-tinted.

CONTROL TIPS

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



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DALLISGRASS

Paspalum dilatatum

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This abundantly seed-producing perennial grows in clumps with a tall, membranous ligule.
- ▶ Leaves are rolled in the bud and lack auricles. They also are without hairs except for several long, silky hairs that grow in the collar region.
- ▶ The seedhead is produced on a terminal stalk with three to five finger-like spikes branching from the center. Each spikelet is covered in black silky hairs.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ If present, the best way to eradicate dallisgrass is by digging out the clumps prior to formation of rhizomes or seed set.
- ▶ Dallisgrass seed begins to emerge when soil temperatures reach 60° F. For optimal control, apply dithiopyr in the spring just prior to these soil temperatures being reached.
- ▶ If dallisgrass is a problem in ornamental beds, apply a layer of mulch over the top of your pre-emergent herbicide.

* State restrictions on the sale and use of Dimension apply.

For more information regarding these and other turf weeds — and related control technologies and tips — please visit www.DowProvesIt.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

MAINTENANCE: MOWER ACCESSORIES



Husqvarna

A new “dump from seat” collection system is available for the Husqvarna PZ and Dixon DX200 commercial zero-turn

mowers. The collection system fits 54- and 60-in. cutting decks. The commercial collection system includes a 12-gauge steel hopper and high-density polyethylene hood. The 11-bushel hopper has a convenient spring-assisted release handle, which is accessed from the seated position. Efficiency is increased by allowing the operator to remain on the machine during the removal of collected material. With a deck-driven blower assist, the collection system accelerates debris through the tube and into the hopper. Husqvarna.com

Gravelly

Gravelly introduces a new Rear Discharge Deck option for the Pro-Master 260 mower. The deck enhances safety, efficiency and productivity and meets a growing need for commercial and government contractors. It's designed for mowing near obstacles, as clippings are diverted behind the machine instead of out the side. This way, clippings remain on the turf instead of on roadways and sidewalks — making for easier cleanup, the company says. The deck includes trim edge on both sides, improving productivity. Ariends.com



Magna-Matic Corp.

Since 1958, Magna-Matic has been primarily known for lawn mower blade balancers and sharpeners. Its new MAG-12008 Lawn Mower Blade Cleaner, the company says, is the first of its kind in the industry — able to clean a blade with two large gangs of wire brushes. It will clean up to a 30-in.-long, 3.75-in.-wide mower blade in 60 seconds. All dirt and debris is channeled to a vacuum port of the MAG-12008, so your shop environment is not filled with dust. Magna-Matic.com

MAINTENANCE: NEW MOWERS



Kubota

The new Kubota ZP330 is the latest addition to Kubota's top-of-the-line Z300 Series of commercial mowers. It boasts a 31 gross horsepower, 3-cylinder, liquid-cooled liquid propane gas (LPG) engine

for greener performance with reduced carbon dioxide emissions. Available in two Pro Commercial mower deck sizes — the 72-in. ZP330LP-72 or 60-in. ZP330P-60 — the mower includes a full-flat operator platform, high-back deluxe suspension seat, adjustable-speed control levers and hands-free hydraulic deck lift and parking brake. Kubota.com

Grasshopper

The new Model 321D-48 is a compact size for precision maneuvering in close quarters. It features a 48-in. cutting deck, yet uses less than 1 gal. of fuel every hour, saving up to \$3,000 every year in fuel costs compared to gasoline and propane. The Tier 4i-compliant, fuel-efficient diesel engine also reduces emissions of greenhouse gases, according to test data from the California Air Resources Board. GrasshopperMower.com/mid_321d



Excel Industries

The new BigDog T-Series of walk-behind mowers features the user-friendly PowerBar Steering System and easy hand-operated deck lift. All T-Series mowers come equipped with Kawasaki FS engines, available in 16 to 24 hp. Choose from a 36-, 48- or 54-in. deck. An optional electric start is available on the 54-in., 24-hp model. A two-year warranty is standard. BigDogMowers.com



continued on page 26



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RTV1140CPX



M59TLB

continued from page 24



Massey Ferguson

Available with 60-in., 72-in. standard or 72-in. high-volume mower decks, the new ZT29 and ZT33 (pictured) zero-turn mowers (ZTM) feature 3-cylinder, liquid-cooled diesel engines. Two hydrostatic pumps and two hydrostatic motors with gear reductions at the drive axle provide long life and excellent performance. An electro-hydraulically engaged multi-disc wet clutch

engages and disengages the mower deck through the use of the yellow knob on the right hand control console. The Standard Folding Rollover Protection System (ROPS) folds to 90° without tools to easily fit into an enclosed trailer or garage. MasseyFerguson.us

Toro

Toro Z Master Professional 5000/6000 Series and GrandStand EFI (pictured) mowers use the latest in fuel management technology, reducing fuel consumption costs by up to 25%. They feature a Kohler engine with a closed-loop electronic fuel injection system (EFI), allowing the engine to automatically adapt to load, weather, fuel and altitude changes. Easy starting in a wide range of altitudes and conditions, along with no-choke starting, helps operators get down to work quickly. A system of engine sensors monitors the engine while running, and indicator lights provide early warning of any potential issues before they actually occur. Toro.com



Cub Cadet Commercial

During a four-week road tour this fall, Cub Cadet unveiled to its 1,500 dealers its new, next generation of advanced commercial zero-turn riders: the Tank LZ and SZ (pictured). The Tank SZ, which denotes steering wheel Zero turn, delivers maneuverability, turf protection and remarkable traction, even on steep inclines, thanks to Cub Cadet's exclusive 4-wheel steering technology, patented as Synchro Steer Technology. The Tank LZ, which denotes lap-bar Zero turn, features the industry's only lap bar system that allows for a full range of adjustability and rider egress, regardless of position. CubCadet.com



John Deere

The new John Deere ZTrak PRO Z925 with Electronic Fuel Injection (EFI) can provide up to 25% fuel savings for landscape contractors. It offers a closed loop fuel injection system that constantly monitors engine performance. Fuel injectors respond to the load on the engine with the right amount of fuel, delivering maximum fuel efficiency for the conditions. The engine includes an exclusive Tuff Torq integrated transmission. The transmission, which is standard across the ZTrak PRO 900 Series, features 13cc piston style pumps and 13cc wheel motors for increased efficiency. Another series exclusive is the cross-porting system that routes the coolest hydraulic fluid to the hydraulic pump doing the most work. JohnDeere.com/EFI



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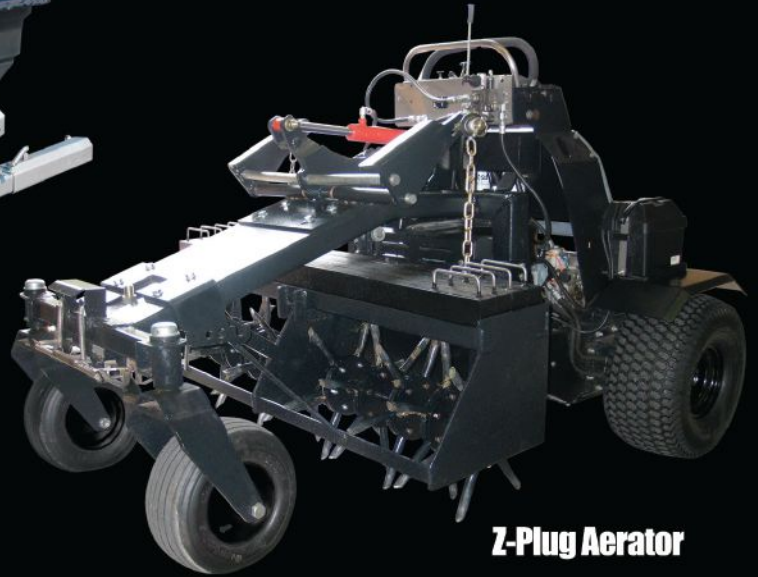
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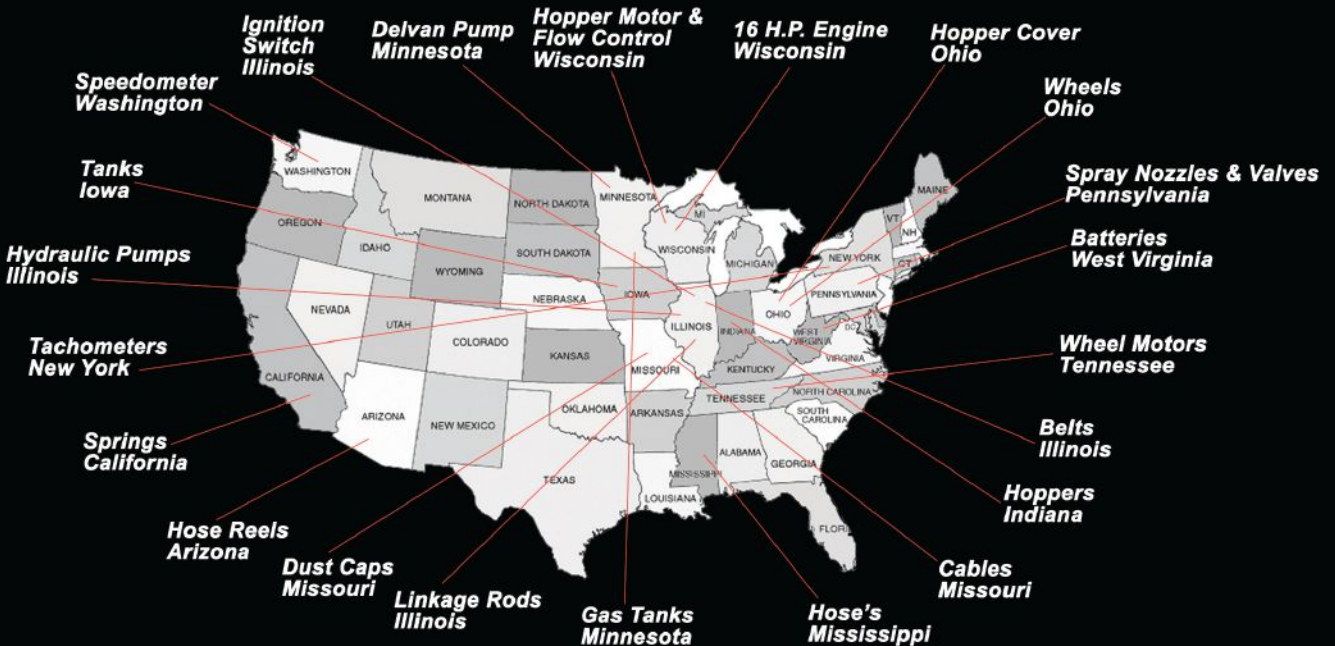
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BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@questex.com.

Are bad habits keeping profits down?

*“Chains of habit are too light to be felt
until they are too heavy to be broken.”*

— Warren Buffet

It's budget season. Time to take a look at how your performance stacked up against last year's goals and set improvement milestones for next year that will grow sales and increase profitability.

It sounds simple enough, but it's not. Problem is, developing an executable strategy for sustained profitability is tough. Let's take a look at what gets in the way and how to fix it.

The biggest obstacles to improved profits are bad habits that consistently inhibit your potential.

One common “old way of doing business” is also the second most common obstacle to improved profitability — the lack of a clear path. Both habits need to change if you want to increase profits.

Start by making small adjustments — consistently and over time. Unless you have some fundamental flaws in your organization, such as poorly bid work, there is always room to improve habits, clear the path and improve profits. I have clients who want to jump from 5% profit to 10% profit. This can be done, but usually not in one year.

I am an advocate of the defined path. The defined path to higher profitability starts with knowing where your opportunities are most likely found. This is where benchmarking can help. If other companies spend less as a percent of sales on a cost line such as labor, it means you might be able to do the same.

You can also learn from your own performance. Place the last few years' financials on a spreadsheet in columns so you can easily compare results side-by-side. Look for indications where you might have had lower costs for a line item. Track trends. Plot hits and misses. By studying your financial performance you can start to dissect your costs and reflect on the reasons that your costs are rising, or on practices that you may have gotten away

from, that led to lower costs in the past.

With improving profits there are no silver bullets, but once you know what you're doing wrong and fix it, the change will have a positive effect on your business. You will be much more successful at what you do. And it will be more profitable.

Identifying areas of potential savings

In looking at costs, consider that the greatest impacts on savings can be made in labor, equipment and enhancements. Enhancements, in particular, are often small and not very cost effective. If not well planned or managed, it is easy to see bid margins evaporate.

When you identify an opportunity to save, it takes more than wishing to make it improve. You must dig into the cost category and try to identify why it's too high. Often, it is not obvious. If you do not spend time analyzing the probable cause, you will probably not be as effective in gaining improvement.

Common mistakes affect labor cost

Two primary but different factors can affect labor costs. The average hourly wage composite of crews affects the margin. So if you manage hours, you might be hitting your budgeted hours but missing the gross margin because the composite average hourly rate of the crew is higher than you think. Since companies have lost work due to the economy, many have laid off the newer lower paid employees. This in turn has increased your average hourly wage cost. This must be managed.

The other reason labor may be higher than desired is exceeding the bid hours. This could be due to a number of things, including: inefficient crews, wrong crew size for the job, not assigning enough work for the day, not having the right equipment and poor routing. You must take time to look at exactly what the problem is and fix it. Some companies approach this by cutting crew hours. But it's a bandage that does not fix the underlying problem and leads to a loss of quality.

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PROJECT PORTFOLIO

A SCRAPBOOK OF DESIGN/BUILD OVERHAULS

Urban oasis

THE MISSION

Create a private yet inviting garden for a brownstone residence

The client wanted total privacy from all sides and above to screen the surrounding four-story building. The challenge, notes Greener by Design President Richard Heller, was “how to accomplish this while preserving light in the urban valleys of New York City.” A secondary challenge was bringing in 10 yds. of sand and planting medium, 10 tons of stone, two trees and hundreds of plants, among other materials and tools, all through a labyrinth of residential hallways.

The space was conceived as “a textural modern garden with clean lines and uncomplicated elements, while still feeling warm and inviting,” he says.

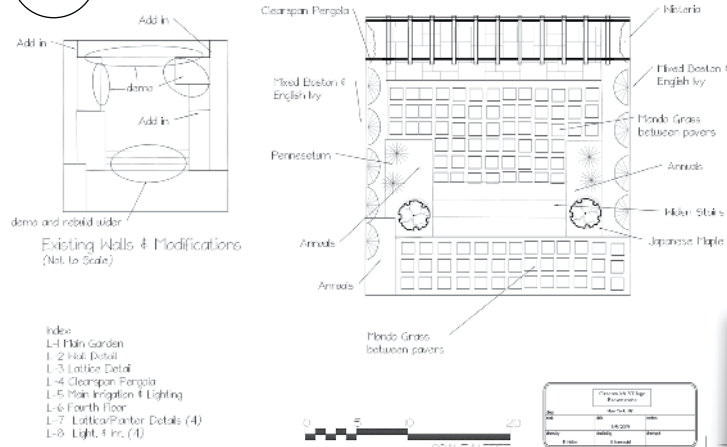
Heller created a raised patio planting area, used varying gray and silver tones, and incorporated a variety of geometric and textural elements. For example, the wisteria connected lattice to the pergola, while Mondo grass brought plantings into the paved areas.

An upstairs patio was designed as a more private, separate space; by using similar textures and materials, Heller says, it “became an extension of the lower garden.” Budget restrictions prevented replacing the existing concrete pavers, so the team stained the tiles instead.

“The final effect is a marriage of serenity and drama,” Heller concludes. “The owner was pleased with the private, modern look of his garden.”



2



PHOTOS COURTESY: 1, 4, 5 - JEFF HUTTON; 2, 3 - GREENER BY DESIGN; 6 - BRUCE BUCK

THE WORK

1 | An engineering feat. The Greener by Design team constructed a free-standing, 25-ft. clear span pergola for privacy from above. The long crosspiece had to be carried through the home in pieces, assembled to look seamless, and reinforced with steel so it wouldn't bow or break.

2 | The plan. This installation successfully met the client's principal concern, which was to add privacy from surrounding properties and provide a serene, yet dramatic sanctuary in a noisy, densely populated urban neighborhood.

3 | Good bones. This "before" image, taken from the fifth-floor roof, shows that the garden had multi-level interest and pleasing proportions in a 25x25-ft. — but neither exactly square nor symmetrical — space.

4 | Look Ma, no clutter. A discreet hinged panel in the bottom right corner of the wood trellis provides an elegant solution for hiding irrigation and lighting controls.

5 | Geometric effect. Mondo grass planted between permeable paver squares transitions from the steps to the seating area. Long, clean lines of the pergola cast shadows that echo the blue stone below.

6 | Garden, variety. The small upstairs patio became an extension of the lower garden. A tall planter with Pennisetum (fountain grass) and a stand of bamboo complement the owner's South African statues, while a small pond with a statue centerpiece quietly burbles in the rear left corner.

Offering residential and commercial services, including Greenroofs, New Rochelle, NY-based Greener by Design has more than 30 years of experience in serving the New York City market. Its all-organic, sustainable approach to the residential market in particular is noise-free, family-friendly and upholds the values of its clients and its team. This particular project garnered a 41st Annual Environmental Improvement Grand Award from the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). For more information, visit GreenerDesigns.com.





PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN

Shilan is editor of FromDesign2Build.com. Contact him at 201/783-2844 or jshilan@gmail.com.

Never give a client a ballpark number

Q We provide our clients with landscape master plans and charge a design fee for our drawings. Our problem is that a lot of times we scare them off and lose the work and the relationship when we give them a price for the entire project. Is there something we should be doing differently?

—Bob Pedatella, Kodiak Landscape, Haskell, NJ

A Absolutely! This is a very common problem and one that can easily be rectified by just slightly modifying your design/sales process to make this happen.

Let's walk through the traditional scenario.

You meet with prospects and do a walk through of their property. You've made a list of the things they would like to include in their design and developed what we refer to as a "program." After showing them a sample plan from another project and photos from your portfolio they agree that creating a master plan of their property makes the most sense, and they give you a deposit for the design fee.

With property survey in hand, you create a base map, complete a site analysis of the property and develop a solid concept plan. You have a second meeting with your clients to review the design. So far, so good. As you present the ideas and concepts, based on their program and your site analysis, the prospects begin to envision what the project will look like.

After your 30-60 minute presentation to the clients, the inevitable question comes up. "So what's this going to cost us?" As you squirm and hedge, your clients sense you are becoming uncomfortable and suggests, "Just give us a ballpark. Don't worry, we won't hold you to it."

I have three words to say about that: "Yes, they will." If you don't know it yet, any number discussed with clients is immediately locked into both short-term and long-term memory. What's worse is, they will "hold" you to that number. I guarantee it.

So here's what you must do to avoid this trap.

I call it the 5 D's to a successful sale (design the dream counts as two)

- › **Develop** the program
- › **Determine** the priority
- › **Discuss** the budget
- › **Design** the Dream

Now many of you are thinking that what I have just described is exactly what you do now. I can tell you, openly and honestly, that you don't. Your process might be similar, but there are some nuances that make this process work much better than yours.

Let's walk through our scenario again, but this time using the 5 D's.

Walk the property and *develop the program* as previously outlined and make sure you get a design fee deposit. But before you leave the table and begin your site analysis, make sure you *determine the priority* and *discuss the budget* of the project. In other words, you need to ask, "What are we doing first and how much do you want to spend?"

This allows you to still "*design the dream*" and get them excited about the possibilities. However, instead of getting tripped up and being forced to throw out a ballpark number for the entire master plan, you should only create a proposal for the work that is their first priority and within their predetermined budget. It's a subtle difference, but a brilliant one.

So the next time your clients say, "Wow, we love everything, what's it going to cost?" You can calmly and comfortably reply, "I'm really not sure, but here is a proposal for phase 1 that fits your budget perfectly. Why don't we start with this?" Not only will you sell and upsell more, the time that you spend on estimating will be cut in half, if not more.

Profiting from Design is a quarterly column from award winning landscape designer, consultant and former design/build contractor Jody Shilan. Shilan is also the President of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association. If you have a question you would like answered in Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.



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EXTEND YOUR BUSINESS » BY CASEY PAYTON

Cleaning up in business

One landscaper finds that being resourceful and never turning down an opportunity has been the key to continued success.

GREG SMITH, PRESIDENT of B.L.B. Contractors, is a jack of all trades. The Philadelphia area-based contractor has always been resourceful about finding new ways to generate income. As a result, he says, he has never been short of work. Smith refers to himself as a “one-stop-shop” for his clients. He says they appreciate that he can meet almost any of their maintenance needs.

Smith actually started out in the janitorial business, working as the operations manager for one of the largest companies in the Philadelphia area. But when that company was bought out and Smith lost his job, he had to be creative. Eventually he began building his own janitorial business. It wasn't long before he overheard one of his commercial clients talking about hiring a landscape company to handle outside maintenance, including snow removal.

“I stepped up and told them I could do it,” he says. “Of course I hadn't done that kind of work before but I got the equipment I needed and started building up jobs. My niche was telling people that I could handle maintenance indoors or out. I was already on the property so it made sense to do it all. Clients appreciated only having to make one call for all of their maintenance needs. From there, the business grew.”

While Smith's business started out as 85% janitorial and 15% landscaping, today it's completely the opposite. Smith mostly does landscape work, incorporating the janitorial work as an add-on service to supplement his income in bad weather or when landscaping work is slow.

“Doing that extra janitorial work allows for a steady paycheck every month and makes up for down time because of bad weather or lack of snow,” says Smith. “The idea is to always keep the income flowing. Sometimes that does mean being creative.”

Greg Smith



But that's how Smith's brain works. For example, if he takes on a tree removal project, he's already thinking about how he can sell the acquired wood as firewood.

“The fact is that there are always ways to make money or to be busy with work — even in tough times,” says Smith. “My father used to say that you shouldn't complain about not having enough money — you should spend that time finding ways to make it, even if you have to flip burgers. There's always something you can do.”

This past summer, when the weather was brutally hot in the Northeast and Smith's landscape business was sluggish, he picked up some extra work by doing blacktop for a client.

That patchwork job was a success. As a result, Smith was encouraged enough to later bid on a parking lot project. He says he enjoys being in the field and learning new skills. And if he gets asked about work he can't do, he still finds a solution for the client.

“If it's not something I know how to do, I sub it out if I can,” he admits. “The idea is to never say ‘No.’ If a client comes to me with a need and I can't do it myself, I'll find the right person for the job and serve as the project manager. It keeps the client happy and keeps some extra money in your pocket.”

Smith admits that in his 30 years of doing business independently he's always had to work hard. He's not a sit-behind-a-desk kind of boss. But he loves what he does. And in today's world, he's grateful for staying busy and having steady work.

“A lot of businesses are diversifying now with the state of the economy,” he says, “but I've always tried to sell myself as a one-stop-shop. I work hard, but it pays off.”

The author is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: B.L.B. Contractors

HEADQUARTERS:
North Wales, PA

YEAR FOUNDED: 1981

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 4 full-time and 3 part-time janitorial

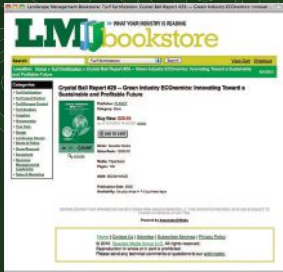
SERVICE: 70% landscape; 15% snow; 15% janitorial

CLIENTELE: 60% commercial; 40% residential

What does your future hold?

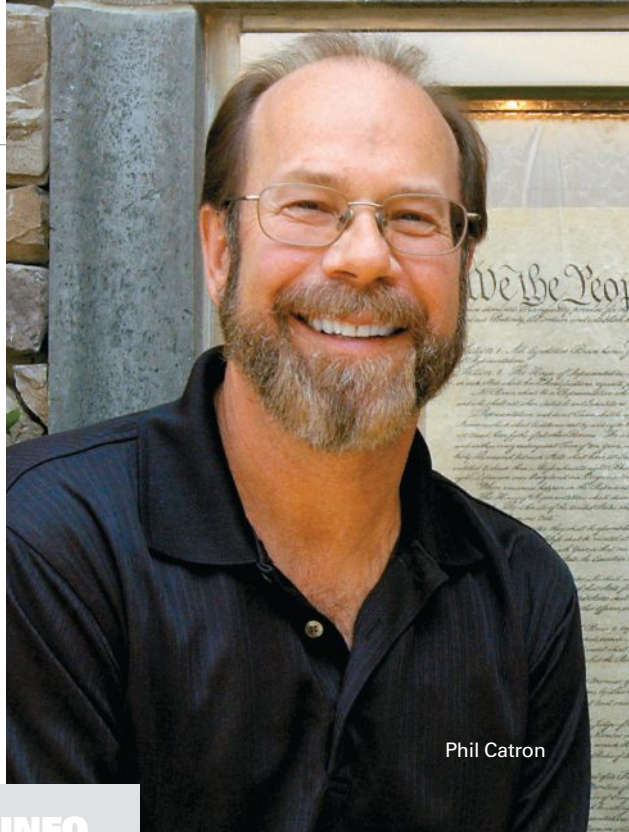
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From our bookshelf to yours.



**Landscape
Management**

In 2012, NaturaLawn of America will celebrate its 25th anniversary. The company opened its first office in Damascus, MD in 1987, moving its corporate headquarters to Frederick, MD two years later. NaturaLawn has grown exponentially since then, and now it operates more than 60 offices in 24 states. Company President **Philip Catron** discusses with *LM* the opportunities and challenges NaturaLawn is facing today.



Phil Catron

TOP TRENDS

› **Environmental awareness.** The industry will continue to look for ways to not only reduce any potential negative environmental impact from our work, but also create and discover new methods for doing “old” techniques. While continued state regulations will potentially impact our industry, those businesses that make operational decisions as to how to work with the regulations as opposed to trying to combat them will end up being better off.

› **More targeted marketing efforts.** As a matter of economic survival, smaller and mid-sized businesses desiring to not only survive but also grow, will become more focused in their strategic marketing efforts. They will cease trying to be a one-stop shop for consumers.

This will give them a stronger financial position and foundation from which to move into the future. There will also be many opportunities for smaller businesses that want to conduct joint ventures with or completely merge with mid-sized companies, offering smaller businesses a chance to grow.

TOP OBSTACLE

› **Attracting the right employees.** The industry in general continues to face issues in finding or attracting personnel who really want to learn about what we all do and grow with a company. There is a need for community colleges and vocational schools to recruit and train students, implement Green Industry-related programs and arrange internships with businesses. All of those things will help educate and train future generations for opportunities our industry can offer them.

INSIDE INFO

Company: NaturaLawn

Headquarters: Frederick, MD

Employees: 275

2010 revenue: \$37,750,000

Key to being a maintenance leader: For any business to lead, it must first take care of its people. When a company truly cares for and ensures that its employees' needs are being met or exceeded, then the employees will in turn treat the customers in an equitable fashion. The customers will then take care of the company by buying their products and services. When this happens, the company will automatically become a leader.

While many books have been written about leadership and what it takes to be a leader, perhaps the most succinct instructions I have ever heard on this subject were from listening to a presentation by General Norman Schwarzkopf, one of the most brilliant army officers our military has been blessed with. His response to a very similar question on leadership was simply, “Make a decision and do the right thing.” That’s pretty hard to beat, and if the advice is followed, I don’t think one can go wrong.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Growing demand for our work.** Even though the economy is not growing in many sectors, there is currently more demand and interest for what we do than ever before. Expansion opportunities are only limited by two things: not having enough qualified personnel and being limited in financial resources. We are fortunate in that our ongoing operations are able to provide internal funding for growth. We also have several outside financial sources available to us should we need to draw on reserves.

› **Our employee ownership program.** To help us address the need for qualified personnel, several years ago we instituted an employee ownership program where every person in our organization is given an opportunity to own their own NaturaLawn of America business. The program gives employees financial credit toward ownership over a four-year vesting period. After three years, employees can exercise their option in ownership and receive a 75% credit. Or if they choose to wait an additional year, they get 100% of the option.

During the vesting time period, we conduct an ongoing management training program with those employees who have expressed an interest in ownership or who management has identified as having the characteristics we are looking for. The training program covers all aspects of the NaturaLawn of America business. It is an intense program utilizing not only classroom instruction but also in-field experience and mentoring with upper management.

Meet the LM Team



Dan Jacobs

Editor-in-Chief

Jacobs is a veteran of the Green Industry and an award-winning journalist. During his 20-year career, he has written for a variety of newspapers and magazines. He is a past president of the Press Club of Cleveland and a graduate of the University of Cincinnati and John Carroll University. He joined *Landscape Management* in 2006 as Managing Editor and was promoted to Editor-in-Chief in April 2011.



Beth Geraci

Senior Editor

Geraci has worked as a professional journalist for more than 15 years, including six years as a writer for the *Chicago Tribune*. A graduate of Allegheny College and Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Geraci is an award-winning reporter who has expertise in both print and online media.



Marty Whitford

Editorial Director

Whitford is an award-winning journalist and editorial leader at Questex Media. He has served Questex's Green Group for four years, including two years at the helm of *LM*. He steered *LM*'s reader-driven print and Web site redesigns that helped the brand win a record number of awards from the Turf & Ornamental Communicators Association (TOCA). Whitford brings with him 18 years of experience in business-to-business integrated media.



Matt Lobe

Technical Editor

Lobe joins *LM*'s team as Web Editor/Marketing Coordinator. Lobe holds a bachelor of arts degree in journalism from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Prior to joining *LM*, Lobe served as a digital media editor with another Questex Media brand, *Nightclub & Bar (NCB)* magazine, producers of The NCB Show.

Ask anyone... *Landscape Management* is the **No. 1 resource** for business management content from one of the most experienced editorial teams in the industry! In fact, in 2011 *Landscape Management* celebrates its 50th year of publishing. With more than 50 years of editorial experience, there's no doubt the magazine that has supported Green Industry business professionals for 50 years will be around for 50 more!

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MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Losing a key employee led the managers of this company to focus more on appreciating their people.



"It's all about opportunities to communicate, connect and to say 'thank you,'" Chris Davitt says.

COMPANY: Ruppert Landscape

HEADQUARTERS:
Laytonsville, MD

YEAR FOUNDED: 1976

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 650

2010 REVENUE: \$65,339,000

PROJECTED 2011 REVENUE:
\$67,000,000

SERVICE BREAKDOWN:
49% landscape maintenance;
51% landscape construction

CLIENT BREAKDOWN:
100% commercial

I TOOK LOSING a key employee for Chris Davitt, president of Maryland-based

Ruppert Landscape, to realize his company needed to redefine itself as one that really cares about its employees. It was tough losing a valuable employee, and the situation was made worse because he took business with him. Davitt says that experience led to his company developing a much better appreciation for its people, and that's been a positive change.

This particular employee was managing the landscape management segment, which was a key growing division at the time. When the employee sat down for his annual pay review, he asked for more money and was turned down.

"Back then it wasn't really a formal process," recalls Davitt. "It wasn't an evaluation — it was more of a conversation. This employee argued for more pay and we argued for less, and we knew he wasn't happy but the meeting came to an end. We chalked it up as 'we're supposed to have these kinds of uncomfortable moments where we save cost and employees aren't always happy.' It was part of doing business."

But within a couple of weeks the employee left — and took about one-third of Ruppert's total projects

with him. Davitt says that got his attention, and he realized he needed to make some changes. He needed to make his employees' wants and needs heard and make his staff a higher priority. Today, Davitt says his people are his number one asset.

"Happy employees work harder and by making a real investment in your employees on a variety of levels...it strengthens their commitment to the organization and its values," Davitt says.

Davitt says he created a structure around the goal of trying to become a more employee-oriented company. With 15 branches on the East Coast, this structure helps ensure employees at all locations are feeling appreciated.

That has included the requirement that each branch host an employee barbecue or gathering for a meal at least three times a year. "These get-togethers are reminders to say 'thank you,'" Davitt says.

And instead of the informal pay review sessions the company used to hold, management now conducts regular evaluations.

"The employee gets evaluated as well as the manager," says Davitt. "And on top of that we have summer picnics and holiday parties. We have informal celebrations for winning jobs. And we

recognize everyone with birthday cards, and on the anniversary of their hire date (we) give them a commemorative coin/case with signatures and personal messages from all of the company's managers."

When people have landmark anniversaries at Ruppert, the company takes it one step further.

"Maybe it's management in a limo showing up on the job and picking up the employee," Davitt says. "Then we'll drive them around and do a walk-through history of the jobs they've performed throughout their time with the company, culminating with dinner at a restaurant with their spouse and children to celebrate."

Davitt says that as a large company it's easy to get busy, but he's now truly committed to being good to his people and focusing on being employee-oriented.

"We know from past experience that we might forget, so we have the structure in place to make sure we remember to do these things," he says. "It's all about opportunities to communicate, connect and to say 'thank you.' We think all this takes time, energy and money but it more than pays us back. I go back to the first mistake early in the going that frankly almost sunk the company. That experience really knocked some sense into us and helped us head in the right direction."

Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

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