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## Sowing the seeds of history

Three pioneering companies share *LM*'s rich history and offer their views about where the industry is headed.

BY DAN JACOBS, RON HALL AND BETH GERACI

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**B** – Business, **D/B** – Design/Build, **I** – Irrigation, **LC** – Lawn Care, **M** – Maintenance

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**ON THE COVER** Photo courtesy of Bartlett Tree Experts ; background photo by iStock International Inc.



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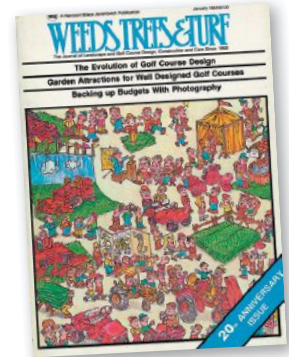
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**OUR MISSION:** *Landscape Management* — the leading information resource for lawn care, landscape maintenance, design/build and irrigation contractors — empowers Green Industry professionals to learn from their peers and our exclusive business intelligence from the *only* experienced editorial team in the market. Serving as the industry conscience for 50 years, we not only report on but also help shape news, views, trends and solutions.



## Showing a little gray hair

**M**y, how the time flies. With this issue, *Landscape Management* magazine begins its 50th year in publishing. That's right, we're just starting to show a touch of gray, which gives us that experienced, distinguished look.

The magazine that evolved into *Landscape Management* began life in July 1962 as *Weeds and Turf*, a supplement to *Pest Control* (now *Pest Management Professional*) magazine.

It's funny how protective editors get about the magazines for which they work. In many ways we think of them like our children. We take care of them — give them everything they need to survive. On occasion we make mistakes, but for the most part we're proud caretakers, boasting of our triumphs and milestones. And 50 years is a heck of a milestone.

*Landscape Management* has been around longer than any publication in the industry, as well as many of its current employees. Yet, that institutional memory is an invaluable asset. We have a deep, rich history, but don't let that touch of gray fool you. We're not resting on our laurels. Here are just a few of the "firsts" we've brought to Green Industry publishing:

› *LM* was the first magazine in the industry to publish "State of the Industry" reports.

› *LM* was the first magazine in the industry to publish lists of the 100 largest landscape & lawn care companies (the *LM100* being the first ever, now expanded to the *LM150*).

› *LM* is the sole producer of the popular and branded "Pocket Guides" — Turfgrass Seeds, Herbicides, Fungicides, Insecticides, etc.

› *LM* was the first magazine in the industry to conduct a "Grassroots Summit" with the participation of nationally recognized industry experts on issues relating to professional lawn care.

› *LM* is the only magazine serving the professional Green Industry chosen as a finalist for a Crain Award, trade publishing's equivalent of a Pulitzer.

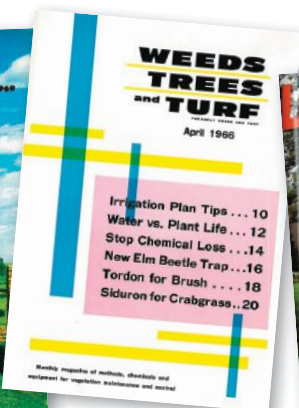
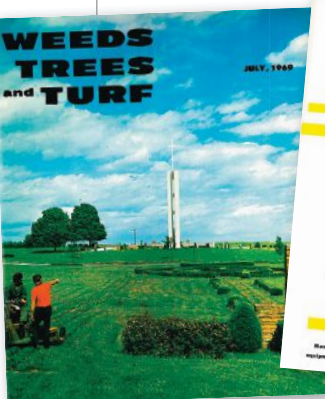
› With its award-winning coverage of immigration and its annual "Water Wise" landscape irrigation series, *LM* editors provide the most in-depth reporting of key issues confronting the Green Industry.

The wonderful thing about publishing is that even with our longevity, we've lost none of the vibrancy, relevancy or the excitement that make this magazine the most award-winning publication in the industry.

With that combination of excitement and experience, we're looking to the next 50 years — not just for *LM*, but for the Green Industry.

To get a sense of where the coming decades will take us, we talk with a few companies who've seen just about everything. Bartlett Tree Experts has survived more than a century in business. While Grasshopper Lawns hasn't been around quite as long, the company sports its fair share of gray hair. Barnes Nursery has been reinventing itself for more than six decades.

See what they have to say about where we're headed as an industry with our cover story "Sowing the seeds of history," beginning on page 10.





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# PROGRESS



## In your hands

**T**ighter rules and regulations in the Green Industry have changed the field's landscape in more ways than one. And businesspeople in every sector of the profession are feeling the crunch.

Regulations "are more stringent than they were 10, 15 years ago, and that's the nature of the beast," said Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). "Regulations are always going to increase. They're always going to be more restrictive. And that's the nature of regulating and regulators."

As dark as it sounds, new rules and regulations aren't necessarily a bad thing, said John Farner, federal affairs director for the Irrigation Association (IA). On the irrigation side, "professional contractors are putting a lot more thought into what is planted into a landscape and how that landscape is irrigated...what the design is like, and how that design is used.

"That's the most noticeable change that I've seen so far," he continued. "A lot of the contractors and manufacturers I've talked to on the irrigation side are using this as a business opportunity."

Not only that, he said, they're embracing the challenge to diversify their businesses and redefine themselves in the face of tighter municipal, state and federal mandates.

Farner said two predominant issues are driving the irrigation industry today: water quantity and water quality. Water quantity is a concern in arid states west of the Mississippi River. The West's water availability — or lack thereof — "is dictating what plant material is being installed and what kind of water is being used to irrigate the landscape," among

## New regulations have made work harder for Green Industry pros, and change won't happen on its own.

other things, Farner said.

Out East, lawmakers are zeroed in on reducing runoff into the Chesapeake Bay watershed. "Look, we don't want any impurities being runoff into the Chesapeake Bay," Farner said. "Our industry is being looked at...but there's no one size fits all solution when it comes to the irrigation profession. It needs to be based on the local environment, the locality. When we're faced with one size fits all, it really doesn't work."

And Bay runoff isn't only affecting irrigators; it's also creating tighter fertilizer regulations for landscapers, who now are restricted on when they can fertilize, what kind of fertilizers they can use, and how much of them.

"We are seeing very prescriptive and restrictive local ordinances covering pesticide and fertilizer use generally, and as part of water quality concerns," said Aaron Hobbs, president of Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE). Hobbs said the Green Industry should be most concerned about "the absence of science and recognition of product benefits in such policies, and the potential for local and state enforcement targeting professionals."

Some states have cut back on fertilizing by up to several weeks, Delaney said.

And that's just the start for the landscape industry. The EPA's WaterSense program, aimed at conserving water, is "killing the turfgrass and landscape industries," Delaney asserted. "It will cut

back on the amount of turfgrass that's out there. And as they cut back on the amount of turfgrass, it has a rippling effect. The fertilizer industry will sell less fertilizer. The turfgrass companies will sell less seed."

But the debate over immigration and H-2B is shaking up the landscape business as much as anything, he said.

If landscape companies think it's expensive to participate in the program now, he said, just wait until Jan. 1, when "they're going to have to pay \$2.60 more an hour per worker," on average.

PLANET members impacted by the H-2B program can't afford to "put their head in the sand," Delaney asserted. "Some of them are afraid that if they put their name on something, they might have an inspector at the door. Otherwise, why would you not spend five minutes to get on our site and send a letter to your congressman? It takes five minutes! It's just trying to wake people up and get them to see they can have an effect and they can make a difference."

Having that dialog with lawmakers is most challenging — and most important — of all, Farner echoed.

"The number one challenge is making sure our folks are at the table when these issues are being looked at by a governing body," he said. "We need to make sure we are engaged and speaking with policy makers, a mayor, a congressman, everyone in-between. If we work with legislators, they'll respond more positively to our needs."



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## THE HALLMARK

RON HALL EDITOR-AT-LARGE

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# Is this recovery different?

**B**eing a world champion of hindsight and after some considerable reflection, I can now write at length about the housing market crash and resulting 2008 Recession. Anybody could have seen it coming, right? How about \$775,000 for a modest 3-bedroom ranch house on a canal in Cape Coral, FL.?

Yes, we looked at one, but it was way more than we could afford. Did we think the price was a tad high? Well, yes.

With that admission, let's look back at other recent economic crisis that slammed our industry. Perhaps we can tease some valuable insights from them about recovering from this latest debacle.

Some of you will recall the 1991 recession. Consumer confidence (and spending) plummeted in the face of high unemployment and worrisome inflation. All U.S. businesses suffered, including our industry. The poor state of the economy was generally blamed for George H. Bush's failed bid for a second term as President.

The go-go 1990s ended with the bursting of the "Tech Bubble." The U.S. economy was still mired in malaise in 2001 when 9/11 added a profound sense of rage and fear to the mix.

### Head-on collision

The landscape industry grew robustly after both recessions. Revenues are estimated to have climbed by more than 30% from 1991 to 2008 when the the housing market tumbled like a house of cards and the financial services industry came to a near worldwide collapse.

The homeowner refinance boom evaporated within a matter of weeks, credit dried up and consumers panicked. Many landscape companies, blithely unaware of what was coming, hit the Recession going full blast.

Again in 2011 we're slowly recovering again. (Why does each decade start so ominously?)

Remarkably, mid-year 2011 the general makeup

of our industry remains remarkably similar to what it was in 1991 and 2001. This includes its basic core of services with pretty much the same laundry list of environmental and regulatory challenges.

But, in light of the severity of the '08 economic disaster, Washington's inability to fashion a believable recovery strategy is unsettling if not criminal.

### Continuing demand

There's no question that, looking ahead, consumers will continue to appreciate their properties, including their lawns. And they'll count on professional services to keep them attractive and healthy. Turf care will remain the largest revenue producer for the industry thanks to:

- ▶ new species and cultivars of turfgrass that resist pests, require fewer chemical inputs (including synthetic fertilizers) and remain healthy and attractive with less water or by using recycled and lower-quality water;
- ▶ fuel-efficient mowers that are quieter, safer to operate and produce minimal or no emissions;
- ▶ more precise and efficient product/service delivery methods, and;
- ▶ a better overall understanding of the role and uses of turfgrass to capture and remediate runoff, and to recharge aquifers.

Beyond turfgrass, the industry will incorporate more native plants onto clients' properties, and can count on the discovery and commercial development of beautiful, new adaptive ornamentals. Terms such as nativescaping, wildscaping and birdscaping are starting to creep into the industry's language. That's great. We're environmentalists.

We will enjoy innovations in every product we use, and in every service that we provide clients, including services we have yet to imagine.

Once our nation digs out of this latest financial mess (Attention Washington: There's really no other option.), whatever we conceive in terms of outdoor services — both the familiar and the yet-to-be realized — we can achieve.



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## Offering insurance helps attract and retain employees

IF YOU HAVEN'T REVIEWED YOUR INSURANCE BENEFITS IN A WHILE, YOU MIGHT BE MISSING OUT ON SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WAYS TO KEEP YOUR BUSINESS SAFE AND SOUND.

**T**HE INSURANCE LANDSCAPE is changing, says John Hodapp, CPCU, Hortica Insurance and Employee Benefits. "Businesses may qualify for tax credits that are part of the 2010 Affordable Care Act," he says. "They help employers afford group health benefits for their employees, depending on the number of employees in the company. Also, term life insurance rates have fallen, so people who haven't been in the life insurance marketplace recently may be overpaying."

**Health insurance** — Offering employees health insurance is more than a cost-effective way to attract and retain good employees, says Diane Bloemker, an employee benefits consultant with Hortica. It's also a great way to help them stay healthy, especially since employees with group insurance receive wellness benefits at no cost, also because of health care reform.

Landscape firms may find it difficult to meet the participation requirements established by health insurance companies, Hodapp says. Group plans require a certain percentage of eligible employees to enroll in the plan. Most landscape contractors hire a significant percentage of workers who don't think they need health insurance and don't want to pay for it.

"We've helped many employers implement dual-option plans," he says. Dual-option plans give employees a choice of either a basic low-cost plan or a more expensive plan that provides more robust benefits. Employees who might otherwise "opt-out" of health insurance may purchase coverage when a lower-cost alternative is available.

**Disability benefits** — Most workplace injuries are covered by workers compensation insurance. However, injuries and illnesses that are not work-related still occur. Short and long-term disability insurance covers the loss of earnings due to accidents and disabling illnesses. These policies can be funded by either employers or employees.

**Key person life insurance** — In the landscaping business, the loss of the service of a key person could hurt the business. When the key people are insured under this policy, the death benefit could provide dollars to help the business weather the storm, says Bloemker.

**Work site benefits** — "These are relatively low cost policies purchased voluntarily by employees to provide specified benefits directly to the employees," Hodapp says.

For example, employees with an accident policy who become injured receive a monetary benefit they can use in any way they choose, he says. This is in addition to workers compensation or any other insurance they have.

Employees also can buy insurance with "first occurrence benefits," Bloemker says. Policyholders are paid a lump sum benefit when they're first diagnosed with a covered major illness such as cancer.

**Life insurance** — Landscape firms also can offer their employees inexpensive group life insurance, and individual policies.

**Long-term care insurance** — Long term care insurance, funded by either employer or employees, can help protect employees' savings and investments.

"If someone has the need for a facility such as a nursing home, long term care insurance contributes toward the cost," she says. It also can cover home health care for individuals who are able to stay in their home.

Janet Aird is a freelance writer in Altadena, CA. Contact her at [janet@janetaird.com](mailto:janet@janetaird.com).



Employees say health insurance is important to them.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

1. Employees say medical insurance is their most important benefit.
2. Employees should take advantage of all available wellness benefits to maintain their good health.
3. Children can now be covered on a parent's group health insurance plan until age 26.
4. Employers typically pay at least 50% of the cost of employees' health care insurance.
5. Prescription drugs account for a major portion of health insurance costs. The use of generic drugs and mail order pharmacies helps control costs.

### BENEFITS SHOPPING TIPS

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Three pioneering companies share *LM's* rich history and offer their views about where the industry is headed.

It's funny how society looks at age. Sometimes it's revered; other times it's reviled. Fortunately, as companies get on in years, they're more likely to be revered.

It's been said that wisdom, experience and strength come with age. With this issue, *Landscape Management (LM)* magazine begins its 50th year of publishing. We've been around longer than any other publication covering the Green Industry.

But this really isn't about us. In the stories that follow, the editors of *LM* spoke with the leaders of three veteran enterprises that, in the case of two, surpass us in experience, and the third that is just shy of our 50 years. We wanted to get their perspectives on where the Green Industry is right now, how it's changed and where it's going.

Senior Editor Beth Geraci examines the roots of Bartlett Tree Experts, the elder statesman in this veteran trio, to find out how the company has survived (and plans to grow) into its second century. Editor-at-Large Ron Hall explores how Barnes Nursery continues to reinvent itself in an ever-changing marketplace. Finally, Editor-in-Chief Dan Jacobs talks with Grasshopper Lawns — at 47, the youngest member of the group — to find out how different the business is with a second generation running the operation.

Thank you, readers and advertisers, for making the past five decades possible. We're proud to have had the honor to serve the Green Industry for half a century, and we look forward to the next 50 years.

BY: DAN JACOBS, BETH GERACI AND RON HALL

### Bartlett Tree Experts

Francis A. Bartlett must have been on to something when he founded family-owned Bartlett Tree Experts in 1907. He built the company on sound science and ethics — the cornerstones of the company to this day.

Any company that's lasted more than 100 years must be doing something right. The company's come a long way in the last century, and as it creeps into its second one, Bartlett President Greg Daniels shared his insights on what makes the company tick and where Bartlett Tree Experts and the Green Industry are heading today. His outlook is both realistic and optimistic.

Despite the Green Industry's current financial woes, he says, it "still has a lot of good opportunities facing it. The future is very bright."

Why so positive? In today's housing market, Americans now realize that stellar landscaping makes their homes more marketable, explains Daniels. Consequently, demand for freshly paved driveways, garden installations or in Bartlett's case, tree care and preservation, is steady if not growing.

Thanks to technological advances, Green Industry professionals work much more efficiently today than in years past. For Bartlett, technology has been instrumental in streamlining its business process, Daniels says, from wireless communication to being able to produce proposals on site in minutes. Bartlett also now has electronic data on every tree it's worked on in recent years.

Despite technological advances, in some ways, the client demands Bartlett confronts today are the same as those it's faced since Francis A. Bartlett founded the company 104 years ago. Take insect and disease control, for example.

"Every year you read about new insects and diseases that are being introduced into the country," Daniels says. "There always seems to be that cyclical up and down of insect and disease prob-



# SOWING THE SEEDS OF HISTORY





Clockwise, from top: Bartlett founder Francis A. Bartlett; a Bartlett crew member today; and a team from Bartlett's early days

lems. That's something we've seen throughout the entire 104 years we've been around." That's why much of Bartlett's business focuses on pest management, Daniels explains.

Despite its progress, the Green Industry in general and the tree care business specifically will continue to be challenged economically and legislatively in the near future, Daniels says. Thanks to low enrollment and cuts in arboriculture and urban forestry programs at universities nationwide, none of those challenges will be greater for Bartlett than nurturing qualified employees, says Daniels.

"There's less of a pool of people at these universities," he explains. "That puts a greater emphasis on investing in and training your own people."

Fortunately for Bartlett, company leaders saw it coming years ago. "We saw a couple things. Our own needs were growing as Bartlett was expanding. We needed more qualified and trained employees," says Daniels, who has been president of the company for 12 of the 36 years he's worked there. "Number two, we saw the college programs, Green Industry programs, diminishing."

So in 2007 Bartlett's Charlotte, N.C. arboretum and training-research facility was upgraded. The 350-acre campus, established in 1965, is now home to 10 training programs covering technical skills, production, leadership and sales, Daniels says.

"You ask 'how can we better care for trees while dealing with tighter regulations?' It all comes down to training," he says. "We have increased regulations because we do use pesticides. We drive vehicles that require special licenses to drive. We employ immigrants. So there are many things that have to be done today that weren't as commonly done 15 or 20 years ago."

It's why Bartlett has staff designated for monitoring regulations and ensuring Bartlett complies with them. It's also why Bartlett makes employee safety and training top priorities.

Bartlett's foresight throughout the last century propelled its success. The company's ability to anticipate what's coming and prepare accordingly enables it to thrive to this day.

"We're very proud of the fact that the company is 104 years old," Daniels says. "Very few family-owned businesses stay in business that long." He attributes Bartlett's longevity to the fact that "we have a clear vision, we've been able to stay ahead of the research curve and we've always had dedicated employees. We know where our company wants to go and we've been able to change over time."

So where does Bartlett want to go?

"We want to be known as the best company to care for and preserve trees," Daniels says. "And we don't necessarily have a goal to be the biggest tree care company. You've got to meet or exceed industry standards.

Nothing can stand in the way of providing a safe work environment for all our employees and the satisfaction of our customers."

## Barnes Nursery

Barnes Nursery Inc., Huron, OH, recently joined the social media scene. The family-owned company realized it needed a presence on Facebook and Twitter. It hired an experienced vendor to guide it because it wanted its digital presence to reflect the quality that's always been associated with its products and services.

Entry into social media is the most superficial and easiest step the company is making into what Sharon Barnes, vice president, sees as a rapidly changing business environment. She says the company has seen a fundamental shift in its market since the 2008 recession. It's now in the process of addressing that change and adjusting the company's direction to meet the regional economic challenge posed by the loss of high-paying union jobs, high employment and rising food, fuel and utility costs.

"Where are we going to be a year or more from now?" asks Barnes rhetorically. "We'll be at a different place, and I don't

Jeanne and Harold Barnes, founders of Barnes Roses, with a younger Robert Barnes, co-owner with his wife Sharon of Barnes Nursery.



## COVER STORY

mean as far as physical location. But we'll be doing things differently."

Making changes to one of the largest and most respected Green Industry companies in northern Ohio is a huge challenge, admits Barnes.

The company owns a 450-acre tree nursery, operates two garden centers, owns and runs a 3-acre compost facility and offers a complete palette of landscape services. Few Green Industry service providers anywhere in the United States offer a broader range of horticultural products and services.

The company is acknowledged as a leader in terms of quality in its regional market. Its design/build services have earned multiple awards over the years. Quality and reliability come at a price, says Barnes. She admits that it's now difficult for many cash-strapped prospects to accept that.

"We're looking at the future as being exciting and having a lot of opportunity, but it's more than a little bit intimidating, too," she says. "The challenge for us is to find the niches that have the



The third generation of the Barnes family, brother and sister, Jarret and Julie Barnes Foster, are taking over operations of Barnes Nursery from parents Robert and Sharon, seated.

most potential."

To that end, the company is re-examining its diversification and scrutinizing each and every service in terms of margins and customer acceptance.

This will not be the first time the Barnes family has reassessed its business model or turned the company to meet market opportu-

nities. In fact, they have shown an enviable ability to adapt to changing economic conditions and markets.

The company dates to 1950, when Harold Barnes and his wife, Jeanne, planted 11,000 rose bushes on their property in the sandy loam soil just south of an expansive marsh on Lake Erie's south shore. The couple made the move a few years after Harold's return from WWII and his studies at The Ohio State University. The 50 acres they purchased on Lake Erie's south shore proved to be a good location for growing roses. The plants

*continued on page 15*

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*continued from page 12*

benefited from the warming effect of the lake in the autumn and its cool, moderating breezes each spring.

The couple grew their company, Barnes Roses, through the 1950s until it peaked in 1962 with 150,000 bushes in their fields. When California and other regions with longer growing seasons got into rose production the family realized it had to steer the company in a different direction. In 1966 it decided to quit growing roses and instead began planting and growing shade and ornamental trees.

In 1969 Robert “Bob” Barnes returned to the family business with wife, Sharon. The company, under the couple’s guidance, soon began adding talent along with landscape services and expanding the company’s nursery acreage.

In 1991 Sharon initiated the company’s 3-acre compost facility, located within a mile of its headquarters. The licensed operation recycles more than 20,000 tons of yard trimmings, food, agricultural and industrial residuals into quality soil products each year.

Sharon looks to the company’s compost facility, something she’s devoted much of her professional life to developing, as an example of the company’s commitment to meeting tomorrow’s landscaping challenges.

**“NOWADAYS, IT SEEMS LIKE CUSTOMERS ARE LOOKING FOR THE BEST DEAL, AND THEY’LL JUMP SHIP OVER A NICKEL.”**

— MICHAEL KRAVITSKY IV,  
GRASSHOPPER LAWN

Nevertheless, it takes financing to move a company like Barnes Nursery into the future, and that’s the goal of the company — shoring up its financial future so that it can continue to innovate.

Fortunately, it can count on the experience of Bob and Sharon, who remain active in the day-to-day operations of the business with the third generation

of the family now learning as part of the management team.

## Grasshopper Lawns

One of the beautiful things about so many landscaping companies is that they are family businesses, passed from one generation to the next, with each new management team working with and learning from the previous one.

Michael Kravitsky IV is president of Grasshopper Lawns, Larksville, PA. His younger brother, Shawn, is vice president. Both represent the second generation to run Grasshopper Lawns.

“We kicked our dad out officially about two years ago,” teases Kravitsky, who nonetheless learned the business from his father from a very young age: “I remember being 5 years old and going with my dad on estimates.”

As a teen, Kravitsky even learned to drive by operating the company tractor that pulled the combine that would aerate, seed, roll and fertilize all in one pass. Sometimes he would drive the tractor to school and at other times, “I would skip school a lot and work in the business.”

At 48, Kravitsky is only a few years older than the company his father, Michael Kravitsky III, started in 1964 with a Lawn-A-Mat franchise. By 1985, with Michael IV and Shawn firmly in the family business, the father and sons were considering leaving the Lawn-A-Mat franchise (which is no longer in business) and heading out on their own. A chance meeting between Kravitsky III and a friend, a former Lawn-A-Mat dealer who’d started his own lawncare company in Connecticut more than a decade earlier, cemented the idea. He even borrowed, with permission, the Connecticut company’s name of Grasshopper Lawns.

“The grasshopper is a sign of good luck,” Kravitsky IV says. “That’s why they picked it.”

And perhaps the image, which adorns the company’s bright orange vehicles, has been a bit of a good luck charm.

Like any company nearing its fifth decade in business, the company has been through its fair share of economic downturns.

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## COVER STORY

"We don't have the crystal ball. We try to gauge what's going on," Kravitsky says. "We think the economy is going to stay steady. We don't think we're going to get the big gains, like we've had in the past. We think it's going to be a slow rise to the top."

Whether it's the economy or social evolution, things have changed over the years.

"Nowadays, it seems like customers are looking for the best deal, and they'll jump ship over a nickel," Kravitsky says. "The customers are a little bit tougher. There's no loyalty there. In the old days, you had a customer until they died or moved."

Quality service is still important, however, and many of those customers eventually realize that a few cents cheaper up front doesn't bring them the same results.

"Usually, after (customers) try somebody else, they're back to us in one to two years," Kravitsky says. "Sometimes a little bit longer, but we get an awful lot of old customers back."

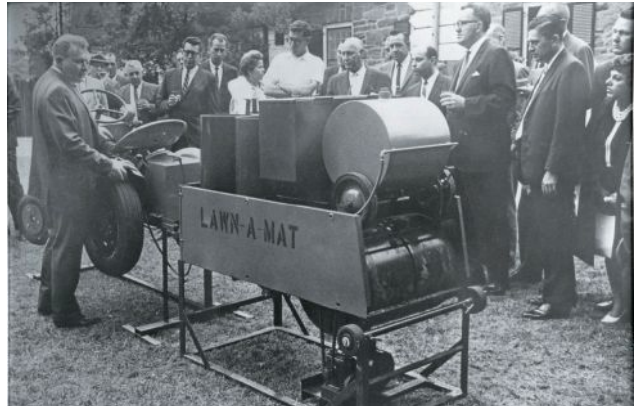
Customers, of course, aren't the only things that have changed. Equipment and the products Grasshopper Lawns' 20 employees spread have improved. Equipment has changed for the better, says Kravitsky, who remembers the days when "we had those cheap little cyclone spreaders with the plastic wheels on them. Now, our guys have these heavy-duty spreaders that you can push with one hand."

The technology is changing inside the trucks, too.

"We're moving forward with computers in the truck," Kravitsky says. "We'll have a history of everything that's gone on with that lawn in the past." Gone are the days of the service cards — long, legal-size forms that were kept year to year.

And despite having been around awhile, the Kravitskys refuse to look the part of the stodgy, curmudgeonly company.

"We have solar power on the top of the building; we're trying to be green by doing our part," Kravitsky says. "It's a good thing



Michael Kravitsky III (far right) watches a demonstration before opening his Lawn-A-Mat franchise (now Grasshopper Lawns). Co-owner Shawn Kravitsky with one of the company's newer vehicles.

to do. I'm very happy with it."

But then again, not everything needs to be modernized.

"We're from the old school," Kravitsky concludes. "We don't need to spout off to everybody how great we are. We've been here since 1964. We know what we're doing." LM



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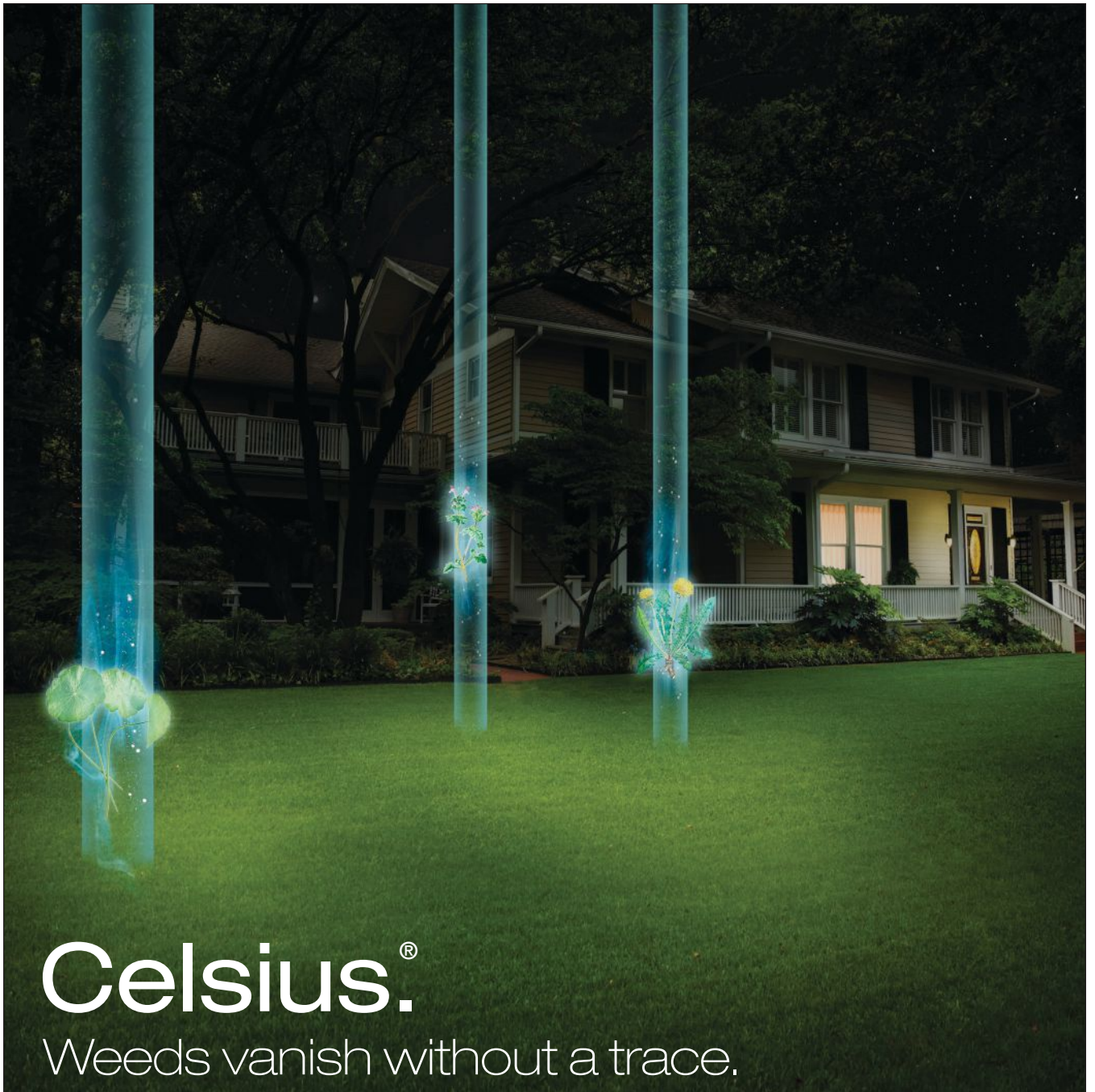
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# THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

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

## Let's talk money and cash flow

**T**here's an old song by the band Simply Red called "Money's too Tight to Mention." Why do I mention this? Because the chickens of three years of lower prices have come home to roost in the form of tight cash flow for many contractors this spring ... and money is too tight to mention.

The combined effect of overhead and capital requirements, in relation to lower gross margins, is biting profits — ergo cash flow.

A little math helps us understand the roots of the problem and solution. Table 1 outlines the calculations. In the "Old Days" column when pricing and gross profit margins were good (Line B), contractors could afford to live at benchmark numbers of 25% Overhead to Revenues (Line D), 45 day accounts receivable (Line E), and equipment returns of \$8 of revenue for every dollar of annual capital equipment costs. As the "These

Days" column shows, those benchmarks at 45% gross margins lead to negative cash flow.

We need new benchmarks to get there.

As Table 1 demonstrates in the "Future Days" column, we need to see improvement in all these numbers. Overhead cost to revenue can only be 20% to 22% of revenues (See the Frank Ross Chart of Accounts for indirect and administrative expenses), accounts receivable (working capital) must average 30 to 35 days maximum, and revenue to equipment must be at least \$9 for every dollar of annual capital equipment costs.

Less overhead with better systems and fewer staff, faster billing and collection, and slightly extended life and equipment care can make it happen. Just being a little better in these three areas improves cash flow and gets you a few more restful nights of sleep.

Now, I have that darn song going through my head and probably won't be able to sleep tonight.

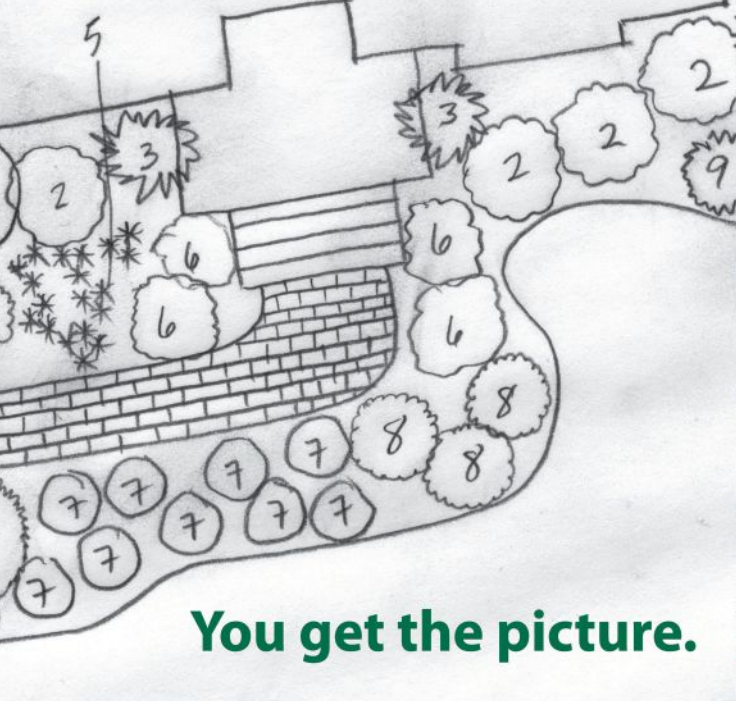
TABLE 1: THE CALCULATIONS

Financial number	Old days		These days		Future days	
A Revenue growth		\$100,000		\$100,000		\$100,000
B Gross margin		55%		45%		45%
C Gross profit dollars		\$55,000		\$45,000		\$45,000
D Overhead cost	25%	\$25,000		\$25,000	20%	\$20,000
E Working capital required	45 <sup>^</sup>	\$12,329		\$12,329	30 <sup>^</sup>	\$8,219
F Equipment capital required	8.00*	\$12,500		\$12,500	9.00*	\$11,111
G True net profit	5%	\$5,171		-5% (\$4,829)	6%	\$5,670

- A Assumed level of revenue growth
- B Estimated profit after DIRECT JOB COSTS are subtracted from INVOICE:
- C Line A times Line B
- D Business expenses to run the office and pay non-production staff: The Overhead percentage (25% assumed here) times Line A.
- E Amount of cash required to play bank for the customer: Line A divided by receivable turnover (365 days divided by the 45-day collection period)
- F Revenue dollars divided by average balance sheet fixed asset value: Line A divided by the benchmark (8.00 here)
- G Line C minus Line D, E, and F

<sup>^</sup> Days accounts receivables  
\* Revenue for every dollar of annual capital equipment costs





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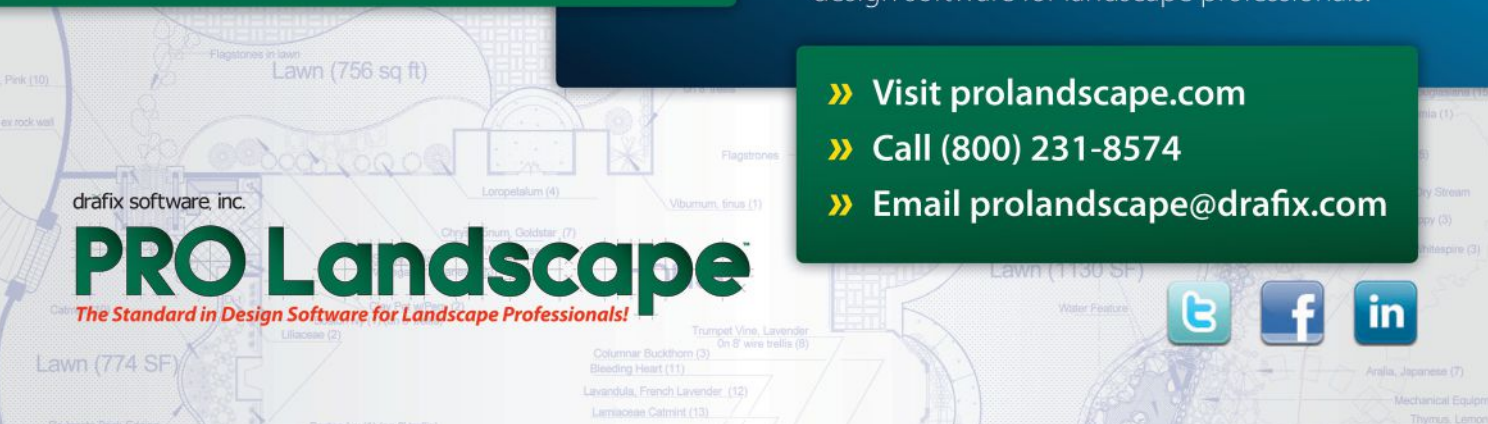
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**Brad Wolfe** loves to ski. While he wanted a career, he also wanted freedom to ski his favorite slopes every winter. He solved that dilemma as a student at the University of Colorado by starting a successful lawn care company offering “organic” lawn care services. His company, Organo-Lawn, has outgrown its Boulder, CO, birthplace and has added a surprising (and growing) winter service.

**How and why did you found Organo-Lawn?** I was attending the University of Colorado, and wanted to keep my winters free so I could ski. I didn't want to be tied down with a part-time job, so I knew that I could make enough money to support a college student's lifestyle by aerating lawns — and about every customer I serviced asked me if I could also fertilize their lawns. I found a good organic fertilizer and started doing fertilization applications. Then customers started asking if I could take care of their weeds, and before I knew it, I was pretty darn busy.

**How has your company evolved since its founding in 1997?** Organo-Lawn has evolved mostly in the products that we're using. When we started, the only organic weed control available was corn gluten meal. Now we can control about any weed situation completely organically. We have 100% organic products that work great in the rock and mulch beds, and last year we finally figured out how to get a high weed control rate in turf post-emergently without damaging the

grass. This was a huge breakthrough for us.

The other biggest change is fuel prices. However, just like our organic products, we've been aggressive about staying ahead of the curve. We started converting our fleet to run on waste vegetable oil in 2004.

**Boulder has a reputation for being “progressive.” What does it mean in terms of lawn care?** Boulder is extremely progressive. It's also affluent and educated. The people of Boulder will quickly adapt to new ways of thinking, but they will also stop buying services that don't work. Even though some of the customers in Boulder can be difficult to please, they make us better as a company. For instance, if we are going to bring a new product to market, we will typically do field testing on the product for one to two years before we release it as a service.

**What other business opportunities do you see for Organo-Lawn?** Presently, the biggest opportunity for Organo-Lawn is building our winter business, Colorado Ski Tunes. We basically provide ski and snowboard tuning with free pickup and delivery services. Last year we did about 1,500 tunes and feel like building this winter business is the key to our ability to grow.

**What's the biggest difference between organic and traditional lawn care?** With our organic focus, our goal is to build a healthy foundation, which means we build the soil. To have a healthy soil, there needs to be a large population of beneficial microbes and bacteria. To achieve a living soil, it must have aeration. It needs warm temperatures and adequate moisture, and it must have food, which is provided by organic matter. If the soil is living, the lawn will use less water and fertilizer; it will naturally fight off fungus and insects, and it will have less weeds.



## AT A GLANCE

**ORGANO-LAWN**

**FOUNDED:** 1997

**HEADQUARTERS:** Boulder, CO

**TITLE:** Brad Wolfe, founder and president

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:** 14

**SERVICE AREA:** Boulder and Ft. Collins, and Front Range communities in between

**NUMBER OF LOCATIONS:** Two (Boulder and Ft. Collins)

**EMPLOYEES:** 15

**SERVICES:** Lawn and tree care (organic fertilization, organic and synthetic combination weed control), humate and RainMaker applications, aeration, power raking, lawn spider mite control, top seeding, tree fertilization, non-spray tree insect control and related services, sprinkler start-ups and blowouts

**HOBBIES:** Skiing, mountain biking, kayaking, travel, photography

**FAMILY:** Single

**WEBSITE:** OrganoLawn.com

Traditional lawn care doesn't build the soil because the fertilizer provides no organic matter to feed the microbial populations.

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## COMMON PURSLANE

*Portulaca oleracea*

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This prostrate summer annual grows rapidly in warm months, and tolerates poorly compacted soils and drought.
- ▶ Its distinct fleshy, succulent foliage sets it apart from other weed species.
- ▶ Seedlings are oblong, succulent and hairless.
- ▶ Leaves are alternate, rounded at the apex and narrowed to the base. Young leaves are maroon on the lower surface.
- ▶ Small, yellow flowers bloom from May through September on hot, sunny days.

### CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Apply herbicide labeled for your use site, for pre- and post-emergence control. Oxyfluorfen is most effective when applied as a post-emergent to seedling purslane, and will deliver residual control of emerging seeds.
- ▶ Once the area is free from purslane, use good management practices to prevent reinfestation. Clean cultivation and seeding equipment that may have been used in infested areas. Remove any purslane escapes before they set seed to minimize reinfestation.



## PROSTRATE KNOTWEED

*Polygonum aviculare* (Pictured: *Polygonum aviculare* ssp *buxiforme*)

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This prostrate summer annual is commonly found in pathways, sports fields and other compacted areas of turfgrass.
- ▶ Cotyledons are narrow, linear and often mistaken for grass. Stems below the cotyledons are often reddish in color.
- ▶ Leaves are arranged alternately along the stem. Short petioles and a distinctive, thin membranous sheath encircle the stem at the leaf base.

- ▶ Small, inconspicuous white to pinkish flowers grow in the area between the stems and leaves.

### CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ As soon as temperatures warm up in the spring, apply a pre-emergence herbicide, such as isoxaben, labeled for knotweed control.
- ▶ Maintain a dense, healthy turf that will compete well with knotweed by the proper use of fertility, maintaining an appropriate mowing height for your turfgrass, uniform watering and compacted soil aeration.

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

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**Underhill**

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continued from page 24

## DESIGN BUILD: LIGHTING

### Aquascape

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LED light fixtures, each of which features a high-output LED light combined with an

optical lens, providing an extremely powerful light output for such a small fixture. Also included is a built-in photocell that automatically controls the

lights, turning the fixtures on at dusk, and off at dawn. [AquascapeInc.com](http://AquascapeInc.com)

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### Acuity Brands Inc.

Tersen Ratio PG, Lithonia Lighting VAP and Lithonia Lighting ALX luminaires are the latest additions to Acuity's LED Outdoor PARK portfolio. Tersen Ratio PG is a contemporary, architectural-styled LED luminaire for parking garages. Lithonia Lighting VAP is an energy-efficient LED luminaire for parking garages, canopies, transportation facilities, schools, hospitals and exterior retail environments where moisture or dust is a concern. Designed for parking lots and surrounding areas, the redesigned Lithonia Lighting ALX minimizes shadows, dark spots and harsh pools of light.

[AcuityBrands.com/outdoor](http://AcuityBrands.com/outdoor)



### BulbRite

New ChandelierLite LEDs are offered with either a candelabra (B10 shape) or a medium base (B13 shape). Both versions are available in clear and feature a 2800K warm white light and a potential life of 35,000 hours. They can be used with ceiling pendants, chandeliers, outdoor/security lights, wall mounts and sconces. TurboLite LEDs are available in several lightweight, diminutive sizes and styles, all UL listed. They can be used for outdoor landscape and security lighting, track fixtures and in open recessed cans.

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

## MAINTENANCE: TRENCHERS

### Vermeer Corp.

The RTX150 pedestrian trencher is designed specifically to assist in the installation of irrigation lines, drainage tiles, and gas and electric lines. Powered by a 20-hp Kohler gas engine, the compact unit offers 68% greater torque than lower horsepower models for increased digging performance, with a maximum digging depth of 36 in. Interchangeable tires or tracks allow users to adapt the RTX150 to specific jobsite conditions. The exclusive Vermeer VZ steering system allows the operator to steer the machine by applying light pressure to the handlebars.

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

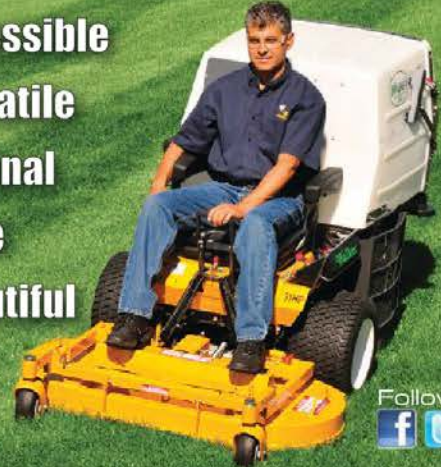


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## BEST PRACTICES

**BRUCE WILSON**

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at [bwilson@questex.com](mailto:bwilson@questex.com).

# Enable crews to be efficient

In recent years, many Green Industry companies have changed the way they manage accounts and supervise crews. Today, the role of account manager often involves managing customer relationships and selling enhancements. Some account managers also are charged with selling new contract work. Given account managers' busy schedules, the role of their production managers is becoming increasingly important.

Production managers can be most beneficial to account managers by doing what their title implies -- managing production. But in some cases, production managers are no more than assistants to account managers — and basically fight fires.

The position needs to be clearly defined. Otherwise, it only adds to the cost of managing crews and customers without any return on investment. To ensure the production manager position pays for itself, consider the following:

1. The production management side of the business should have targeted goals for lowering cost and increasing gross margins on work.
2. Your company must develop best practices or procedures for working efficiently. Your production managers must then buy into those practices and ensure that crews comply with them in the field.
3. Production managers should be taught to observe their crews in the field so they can identify and correct time-wasting methods their workers use.
4. Production managers should work directly alongside their crews — showing them the right way to do things.
5. Production managers should be trained in managing production. In too many cases, companies take a talented foreman and make him or her a production manager, assuming it will go well. And you know what they say about assumptions.

6. The crews themselves need to be measured for performance, and for delivering the quality work you desire within target hour ranges.

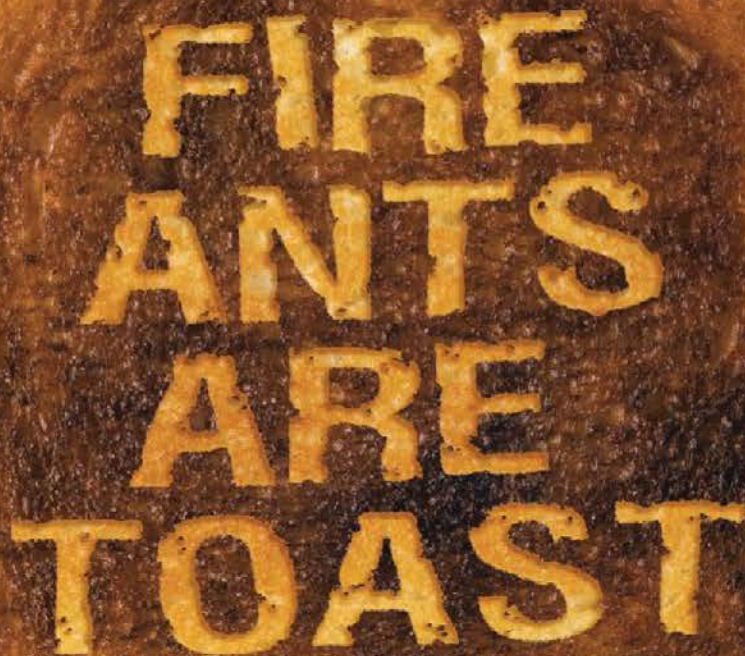
It is an oversimplification to state that unless production managers can save enough in labor to pay for themselves, you might be better off letting the crews go unsupervised. That's why it is essential the production manager have very specific goals for increasing efficiency and controlling quality.

When helping companies with production management, the first thing I do is take the owner with me to observe the crews working. It is, without fail, an eye-opener for the owner to see his or her workers' lack of efficiency. Even companies with low costs compared to the industry in general have a great deal of waste.

If you are to be successful, your production managers must be able to observe their crews with an eye for efficiency or lack thereof. They then need to retrain their crews and help them develop the right habits. For example, when I watched a crew dead head some roses, I noticed the worker doing the pruning was cutting off the dead blooms and throwing them on the ground. Afterward, workers raked the blooms on the ground into a pile on the sidewalk and transferred them into a trash can, leaving some debris on the sidewalk. Yet another employee blew the debris off with a blower. Quite a bit of labor was wasted through that process. The pruner could have cut off the blooms and thrown them directly into the trash can, moving it with him as he went plant to plant.

If you are to be successful, you must require your production managers observe their crews in the field. That way, they can show them first hand how best to perform their work. The more efficiently crews work on the job, the more time and money it saves you. It is not a case of inspiring your crews to work harder. Most crews work hard, they just do not work smart.





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# IRRIGATION ZEROES IN

**RETROFIT SPRAY HEADS  
TO PUT WATER ONLY  
WHERE IT'S NEEDED.**

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

**T**HE DAYS of irrigating sidewalks and patios with misplaced spray heads are becoming a thing of the past. Irrigation professionals know they need to separate a client's property into manageable zones to provide the proper amount of water for different areas. But with water conservation becoming increasingly important, it's time to start thinking even smaller than zones — down to individual plants. That's where micro-irrigation, also known as drip irrigation, comes into play.

Spray heads and rotors allow Green Industry professionals to deliver water over a large area. They work great for monocultures such as lawns, but trees, shrubs and flowers all have different watering requirements than turf. Micro-irrigation uses different emitters to deliver different amounts of water to, say a hydrangea vs. a rose bush. It conserves water by being more precise and losing less water to evaporation.

According to the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension, micro-irrigation is exempt from some Florida communities' irrigation restrictions, and is being encouraged — and in some cases, even mandated — by several municipalities there. In addition to the



environmental benefits, saving water also equates to saving money, even more so if an installed irrigation system can be retrofitted with micro-irrigation.

### **Retrofitting considerations**

The first rule of retrofitting an existing irrigation system with micro-irrigation is not to negatively affect the system's operation. A well-maintained system provides precise amounts of water to various zones due to a measured rate of water flow over time, which can be affected if drip emitters are installed. Micro-irrigation uses a smaller amount of water applied over a longer period of time. Therefore, it's easier to swap out an existing zone for micro-irrigation, rather than mixing spray and micro-irrigation in one zone.

Because the micro-irrigation systems operate at lower pressures than conventional spray systems, a means to regulate that pressure is required to prevent damag-

Drip emitters can be placed exactly where water is needed.

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## A LOW-TECH OPTION

As technology has grown by leaps and bounds, enabling us to summon water at the turn of a tap, it's easy to forget that wasn't always the case. It was once common to harvest rainwater, often using barrels under a downspout to collect and save water for later use. As homeowners become more aware of the importance of water conservation, interest in rainwater harvesting has received renewed interest.

Using gravity flow and a valve attached to the bottom of an elevated rain barrel, collected rainwater can be used to irrigate plants via drip tubing. Without electric-actuated valves, watering will not be uniform along the line. It's a manual process compared to a modern irrigation system — and may require some trial and error to set up. However, rain barrel installation is a service landscapers can market to homeowners who want to reduce their water bills and usage, but who don't want to invest in a full irrigation system.

ing the micro-irrigation system, according to UFIFAS' "Retrofitting a Traditional In-ground Sprinkler Irrigation System for Micro-irrigation of Landscape Plants" research paper. A new fitting on the old system should lead to an in-line pressure regulator to reduce the water pressure before sending the water along drip tubing to the plants in the zone. The length of the tubing and the number of emitters depends on the rate of flow.

The ease of retrofitting depends on the previous system. For example, according to Rain Bird Corp.'s "Landscape Drip Conversion Guide," its 1800 series spray body can accept a retrofit kit in the existing housing. The kit also provides 30-psi pressure regulation for a flow rate of 0.5 to 4 gallons per minute. A filter



Drip tubing allows landscapers to irrigate rows of beds where sprays are not a practical option.

can also be installed to protect downstream components. According to the company, retrofitting a spray zone for drip irrigation can result in water savings up to 60%. **L.M.**

**Gooch is a freelance writer based in Northeast Ohio.**

PHOTO COURTESY: RAIN BIRD CORP.

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### Blast of color

According to **Garden Debut**, Orange Rocket Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*) (PP#18411) was awarded Best Shrub for 2010 at the Oregon Association of Nurserymen's Far West Show. It offers a tight missile-shaped habit, ultimately reaching 6 to 8 ft. in height but only 2 ft. in width in 10 years. Plants have vibrant coral-orange new foliage that matures to mid-green. In early summer, pale yellow flowers are followed by small, crimson red berries that do not set viable seed. By autumn, the foliage is bright orange-red. For best foliage color, grow in full sun. **GardenDebut.com**



### Peonies from heaven

Itoh Peonies are named for Toichi Itoh, who successfully crossed a tree peony with an herbaceous or garden peony. The resulting hybrid features the colorful and exotic flowers of tree peonies, with the perennial growing cycle of herbaceous peonies. They tend to resemble tree varieties, with a domed, vigorous growth habit and large double flowers with disease-resistant lacy, dark-green foliage. Once established, they have an extended blooming period, with as many as 50 blooms in a single season — thanks to their ability to produce primary and secondary buds. They offer an increased color range, greater vigor and excellent resistance to peony blight (*Botrytis paeoniae*). **Monrovia** introduced 'Takara' (treasure) and 'Misaka' (beautiful blossom, pictured) this spring.

**Monrovia.com**

### Hardy honey

New Mahogany Splendor joins the **Pan American Seed** Fantastic Foliage lineup, adding color and, at 3 to 5 ft., height. It's ideal for landscapes, and great in containers with other vigorous sun lovers. The hibiscus features deep burgundy, maple-shaped leaves with serrated edges — a look similar to a Japanese maple. It's resistant to heat, drought and deer, and can be a great addition as a pond plant, as well. Spread is 24 to 30 in., and it thrives in USDA hardiness zones 8 to 9. **PanAmSeed.com**



### Scottish celebration

The repeat-flowering Rosa 'Tam o' Shanter' (Auscrise) from **David Austin Roses** features approximately 25 petals. Its deep cerise, rosette-shaped flowers are loosely formed, held on long, gracefully arching branches that bear blooms along the full length. It has a light, fruity fragrance. It was named to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the birth of the Scottish poet Robert Burns, and the hero of one of his most famous narrative poems. It grows to 6 x 5 ft., and is hardy in USDA zones 5 through 9.

**DavidAustinRoses.com**



### Exotic flair

Lily of the Nile Blue Storm, a patented Agapanthus from **Anthony Tesselaar International**, consistently blooms up to three weeks earlier and longer than most Agapanthus, according to the company. It flowers on average 70 days per season. It produces an abundance of stems topped with light violet-blue flowers. When mature, this vigorous plant blooms in flushes, bearing up to 100 stems on a mature plant per season. It grows to a compact 30 in.

**Tesselaar.com**

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## Safety first

In a down economy, clients cut back on many services, but they often don't cut back on anything related to health or safety. One landscape company learns how to capitalize on that fact.

**W**HEN CLIENTS BEGAN cutting back on their services from Fischer Environmental, owner Robert Kunst knew he had to act fast. He wanted to add a division that would bring value to his clients and would become recession-proof. Recognizing that even in hard times clients were still willing to spend money on services involving health and safety, the company turned to two of its local emergency care locations to find out what brings people to the doctor. The answer they received became the catalyst for a profitable new division: fire ants.

### THE ANTS COME MARCHING

Making their homes in the South and other areas that do not freeze in the winter, fire ants are red-colored insects that not only sting but deliver a type of venom into the skin. A fire ant bite can bring on swelling, itching, puss-filled blisters, and potential scabs. But even more serious, those who are allergic to the venom may have difficulty breathing or throat swelling. In Kunst's region of Mandeville, LA, he found it's a real concern for young children playing in the grass. It was clear his target market was expectant couples or young families with children. Mothers were particularly interested. Kunst immediately began marketing the service through his 11,000 existing customers, informing them the company was now offering an annual fire ant program. He had his salespeople call existing clients and pitch the new service. He also sent out mailers. Those simple efforts paid off.

In addition, word of mouth spread among neighbors and soon he was able to add new clients to the tune of

Fire ants are a health and safety issue for many Southern states.



1,280 fresh faces, primarily because they saw value in a service that would protect their children. Kunst says because he already had the equipment needed to disperse the product, the investment was minimal: product and labor. As a result, it's been an easy source of revenue for the business.

### OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The biggest hurdle Kunst faced in adding a fire ant division was from the same clientele that embraced it. "The moms, who are protective of their children and don't want them crawling around with fire ants, also worried about them crawling around in chemicals," says Kunst. "Fortunately, we had selected a product that was known for being a low toxin so we developed a sheet that showed why it was an excellent chemical. And we started addressing the issue with our sales calls to begin with, before it was even brought up as a concern."

What has also helped overcome any concerns is the company's involvement in the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Pesticide Environmental Stewardship Program (PESP), which helps ensure human health and environmental safety in pest control. "We've been named under Gold tier membership, meaning as far as the EPA is concerned we've reached the highest level of ethics," says Kunst. "So now we can send our customers a direct link to the EPA website. That's been a big benefit. I would highly recommend other companies looking to enter or are already in the pesticide industry join PESP. It may seem contradictory, but sometimes running toward the regulators — instead of away from them — can be a benefit."

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

### » SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**COMPANY NAME:** Fischer Environmental Services

**HEADQUARTERS:** Mandeville, LA

**WHY FIRE ANTS?** It was a service customers could see value in, even during a recession.

**INITIAL INVESTMENT:** If you're already in the lawn care and pest control business, to get into the fire ant business costs almost nothing. You already have a fertilizer or seed spreader and that's all you really need to disperse the granules. The product is the only purchase.

**INVESTMENT RECOUP TIME:** Immediately, considering it's just product, labor and existing equipment.

**WHY CUSTOMERS LIKE IT:** Safety. That's really the bottom line. People want to protect their health. Mothers, in particular, want to protect their children.



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Bill Bemus

Bemus Landscape president **Bill Bemus** founded the company nearly 40 years ago, in 1973. In 1982, his brother-in-law, Jon Parry, came on board. Together, says Bemus, “we made it go and grow.” Today, Bemus runs the family-owned business with his three sons and Parry, the company’s general manager. And he stops to share his views of the maintenance industry with *LM*.

## INSIDE INFO

**Key to being a maintenance leader:** We don’t pretend to have the magic recipe, but we try hard to keep our clients happy, keep the quality up, and retain our people. Success in our business depends on executing the small details correctly day in and day out, so this is what we try to stay focused on.

The best business aphorism I ever learned was from one of my earliest (and current) customers, “If money will fix it, it’s not a problem.”

**Headquarters:** San Clemente, CA (with branches in Santa Ana, San Marcos and Perris, CA)

**Employees:** 370 full-time

## TOP TRENDS

› **“Eco-marketing” is not the panacea we hoped for.** The more things change, the more they stay the same. For all the talk about going green and being sustainable, it still gets down to price. For example, we process and recycle all of our generated green waste. It gives us a slight competitive advantage, but the positive effect on the environment is underappreciated by the client community. Our clients are focused on saving dollars. Be environmentally responsible for your children and grandchildren’s sake. It might not be that important to your customers.

› **The marginalization of the landscape profession.** We as an industry have not done a good job of marketing our profession to the general public. Imagine what life would be like, particularly here in Southern California without landscape contractors. We provide a vital, valuable and necessary service to the community. Having great gardens is part of being civilized. And it’s not just the aesthetics; last I checked oxygen is still produced by photosynthesis in green plants. Beautiful landscaping drives traffic to retailers. It sustains and improves commercial and residential property values. It improves the quality of all of our lives. Why is the landscape budget the first thing that people want to trim?

## TOP OBSTACLES

› **Irresponsible price cutting.** In this economy, the most important thing to remember is to begin every sentence with the phrase “in this economy.” It’s becoming a tired excuse for non-performance. This has always been an extremely competitive business. That being said, the frustrating thing now is to have projects go out for due diligence bids (no issues or complaints) and have our prices — which are competitive — undercut by large, top-notch firms who should know better. Irresponsible price cutting is driving the market down for all of us. Has everyone forgotten how good it feels to get a job when you are not the low bid?

› **Finding qualified entry-level employees at wages the market allows us to pay.** In addition to the current economic realities, our work is perceived as being low in value. In other countries, espe-

cially in Europe, being a gardener is a rewarding career path. This is tied to the previous points regarding public perception of the industry as a whole and the downward pricing spiral caused by the scorched earth policy of some of the larger players. Our industry needs to get it together. The problem is at least partially one of perception. The national and state trade organizations should work together to change these perceptions and continue to bring landscape professionals together for dialogue.

› **Commoditization.** We’re unique, just like everybody else. Everybody does everything and everybody is getting better at it. It’s good for consumers that there are so many qualified contractors, but it is bad for contractors that there are so many qualified contractors. What this means is that while the quality of our services is going up the price is going down.

## TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Basic, simple training that revolves around a vigorous quality assurance system.** We call it our Improve Quality (IQ) Program. Since the implementation of the program we have seen vast improvements in job quality, which many of our clients have commented on. It has helped us gain additional work as well as fight the commoditization referred to above. It is also tied to our bonus structures. Our answer to the aforementioned obstacles is to keep things really simple, work really hard on quality, and to never let a customer down.

› **Our Landscape Construction division.** There has been a recent uptick in this division. This is mostly the result of an internal decision to sell more installation work. We are not looking to be volume oriented, just to maintain a healthy balance between our different offerings. We have been happy with the margins we are seeing in our Tree Division. We don’t know if the overall demand for tree care has increased, but we have increased our focus on this service offering and have been able to increase the workload and keep the margins up.





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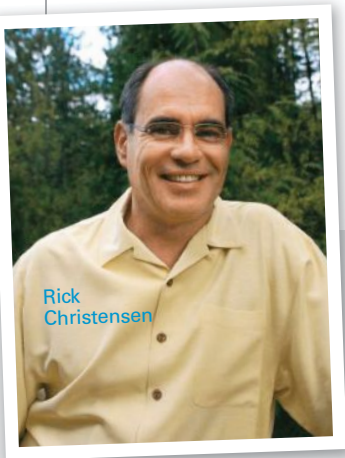
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# MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



## In a tough economy, one company finds a long-distance lender is a critical factor.



Rick Christensen

**COMPANY:** Teufel Nursery Inc.

**HEADQUARTERS:** Portland, OR

**2010 REVENUE:** \$17.5 million

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 235

**SERVICES:** 65% construction;  
35% maintenance

**CLIENTELE:** 90% commercial;  
10% residential

**T**ODAY'S ECONOMY HAS made business more challenging for everyone. For Teufel Nursery Inc., a close relationship with its lender was helping keep the waters smooth — that is, until an unexpected change rocked the boat.

Rick Christensen, landscape division manager of the Portland, OR-based company, says Teufel Nursery had developed a long-term relationship with its lender and, although they were long distance, everyone seemed comfortable and happy.

"We understood their business, and they understood ours," he says.

But in spring 2009, Christensen says, Teufel was alerted that the lender had decided to "get out of the lending business." It was time to look for a new lender.

"Unfortunately, spring 2009 was a bad time to start looking for a new bank," recalls Christensen. "We talked to 24 different banks, and each one was sympathetic but couldn't help us. They all said the same thing: They liked our business, but nobody wanted to start lending to someone new. And because we're also related to construction, because we do large-scale commercial and government work, it was making it even more challenging for us to find a new lender."

With rejections mount-

ing, Christensen says it felt like the situation couldn't get worse... until it did.

"When our lender had first made the decision to get out of the lending business, they had told us we'd have some time," he says. "But when they realized things were not getting any better, they called our note and said it's due. We were told our time was up. Within three days, we had to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy for protection against our own lender."

Christensen says his company got a crash course in bankruptcy, something the profitable business didn't know much about.

"There are different classifications of bankruptcy, and we were classified as a 'solvent bankruptcy,' meaning we were a profitable business and didn't seek protection from our creditors, strictly from our lender," he explains. "Unfortunately, all creditors get pulled in. So anyone we owed money to gets pulled into Chapter 11, and a four-year payback plan to all vendors was established."

While it wasn't easy, the company fought to get back on its feet quickly. Teufel Nursery filed for bankruptcy in June 2009, and by October 2009 submitted a reorganization plan. By February 2010, Teufel exited Chapter 11.

### Lessons learned

Looking back, Christensen says there are a few

things he'd do differently. While the relationship with the long-distance/long-term lender was always strong, Christensen says he now believes it's always good to deal with someone local.

"I also believe it's good common sense not to have all your eggs in one basket," Christensen advises. "That's how most businesses operate — you have a line of credit with a single lender. But today, I'd do things differently."

As the economy has improved, Christensen has continued an open dialogue with most of the banks he first talked to in the rush to find a new lender. He's focused on keeping those doors open for the future. But to this day, the company remains a cash-based business.

"For us, it's the right thing at this point and in this economy," says Christensen. "We're a much smaller business than we once were [the company had a revenue of \$45 million in 2008; it was \$17.5 million in 2010], and we have to watch our cash very closely" on a day-to-day basis."

Christensen says the experience has made the company nervous about returning to the world of banking.

"There's no question we're gun-shy right now," Christensen says. "When we do eventually have a relationship with a new bank, it will be as a partner."

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

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## WORKING TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE.

Together with key industry partners, Project EverGreen has established the following programs to help make a greater impact, sooner:

### GreenCare for Troops SnowCare for Troops



- Project EverGreen connects military families with lawn and landscape companies, as well as snow removal companies to receive free services while their loved one is serving overseas.
- More than 3,500 contractor volunteers and 11,000 military families have signed up for GCFT, while 800 contractor volunteers and 700 military families signed up for SCFT.
- These popular programs have garnered attention on TV and in newspapers across the nation including Mike Rowe's *Dirty Jobs* and NBC's *Nightly News*.

### GreenCare for Communities



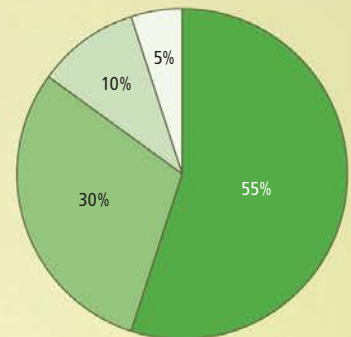
- Creating a focused effort on select communities across the United States, this program brings industry professionals, consumers and anyone who's passionate about healthy green spaces together to improve their city and surrounding areas.
- Over the last four years, our message has made a positive impact in: Akron, Ohio; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and from the corridor spanning from Greensboro to Raleigh, North Carolina.
- In 2011, Project EverGreen will bring our message to Ft. Myers, Florida.

### GreenCare for Youth

- By reaching out to children of all ages, we can create a greener tomorrow.
- The Art of Green Spaces Competition, sponsored by Birds and Blooms, encourages students to use all forms of art to share how they feel about the green spaces in their lives.
- Golf bag tags, featuring messages on the benefits of green spaces, are given to participants of the GCBA Sticks for Kids program.
- Youth sports field renovations make playing surfaces better and safer.

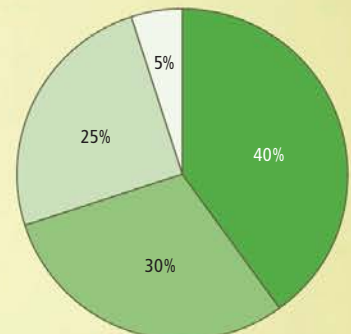
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