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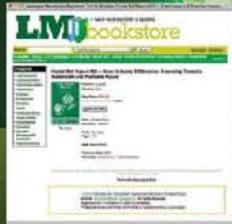
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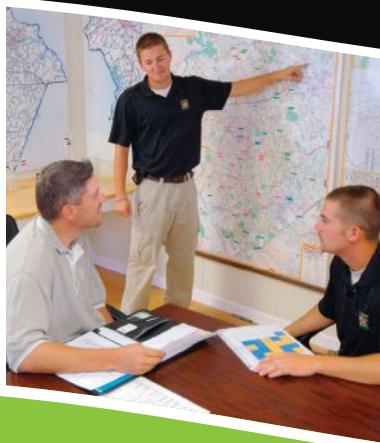
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## A test of character

It was the last day of 5th grade.

A few students and I were helping some of the teachers collect and shelf books in a storage room where they would sit, quickly forgotten, and swelter through summer vacation until they would be distributed to a new class in the fall.

That's when the warning bells went off. Like most kids, my initial reaction was "not another drill, especially on the last day of school." But our teachers' reactions immediately informed us this was no drill — a tornado was on its way.

We were ushered into an inner hallway where we assumed the position. For those of you who live outside Tornado Alley and have never had the pleasure, let me explain. The tornado position involved crouching with your legs tucked under your body with your head resting between your knees and your hands laced over the back of your neck.

It was extremely uncomfortable, and looking back, had the tornado struck our school, I think the only thing that position would have protected us from was actually seeing the cinder blocks fall on top of us.

But spending an hour or more doing our best impressions of a turtle really took a great deal of joy out of the best day of school.

---

Our teachers' reactions immediately informed us this was no drill —  
**a tornado was on its way.**

When the storm passed and the danger subsided, we were allowed to go back to our classrooms, gather our things and finally, head home.

Over the years, a few tornado warnings have forced our family to head to the basement. And just last year at GIE+EXPO, the warning bell went off in our hotel room just after we arrived. We were sent to the basement of our hotel for about 20 minutes until the dangerous storms passed through Louisville.

I've been lucky. I've never suffered any damage from one of Mother Nature's most violent creations.

That can't be said for a few of the people we talked with for this month's cover story, "When disaster strikes" (beginning on page 10). We talk with the top executives at four companies that have lived through some of the worst disasters our country has seen.

These companies survived tornadoes, floods and a hurricane and did so with remarkably positive attitudes. The damage inflicted on them varied, but they all faced disruption of services.

It's easy for company owners to treat their employees well during the good times. It shows an extraordinary character to treat them as well as these companies did in times of crisis. Let's just say, were I to ever find myself in need of a job, theirs would be the first doors I would knock on.

In this month of Thanksgiving, these business owners have a little something extra to give thanks for. And, I suspect, they have a much better appreciation for all the things that go into keeping their livelihoods alive.

I hope I never have to go through a tornado or hurricane or flood to appreciate what it is that makes my life complete. Let me start by thanking you for continuing to read this publication. Without you, I wouldn't have a job. Thank you. Now, if you'll permit me, I think I'll go home and hug my family.

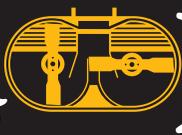
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# PROGRESS

## Reaching new heights



**T**o say that tree care technology has improved since tree care became a profession in the 1800s is an understatement. The methods and equipment the earliest workers employed seem all-out archaic by today's standards, tree care professionals marvel.

And as dangerous as tree care is — it still stands among the world's top five most dangerous professions — advances in techniques, pesticides and equipment have at least made the profession safer than it used to be.

"The [earliest] gear was pretty primitive compared to the equipment we use today," says R.J. Laverne, a master arborist with The Davey Institute. "As far as hand tools, the hand saw was the tool of choice."

In the 1920s, hand saws began to improve, says Sierra Moreno Mercantile owner Don Blair, whose father, Millard, worked as an arborist for 73 years. Like John Davey, who founded Davey Tree in 1880, and Francis A. Bartlett, who founded Bartlett Tree Experts in 1907, Millard was among the profession's trailblazers.

When the Fanno No. 8 chainsaw was developed in the early 1930s, saws made even greater strides, says Blair. It cut on a push stroke, which made it safer than other saws.

But it wasn't until after World War II that the industry modernized. That's when tools such as power saws, brush chippers and aerial lifts hit the market. "The chainsaw and the aerial lift are two things that took tree surgery from an art to an industry," Blair says.

"The chainsaws we have now are safer, more ergonomically designed," asserts certified arborist Steve Tanaka,

### Tree care is still a risky field, but technological advances have made it a little safer.

manager of the tree division at Artis Tree, Venice, FL.

"You have less fatigue on your body when you're operating them, because they're lighter," he says — much more so than the saws of the 1950s, which were so heavy and hard to maneuver they required two men to operate them.

"Equipment in general has enabled the tree care business to become much safer and faster," says Andy Felix, president of Tree Tech, Foxboro, MA.

#### Plant health

Tree cavity work has improved as well. "The early arborists used to approach holes and cavities in trees much like dentists approach cavities in teeth," Laverne says. "They would use chisels and mallets and chisel away the decayed wood, then they filled the holes or cavities with concrete."

Arborists eventually realized that chiseling breaks through a tree's natural defensive barrier, actually facilitating decay and the spread of disease.

When Dr. Alex Shigo of the USDA Forest Service uncovered how trees process decay in the mid-1970s, it "completely changed the way we look at our pruning standards and the way people make cuts," Blair says. "[Shigo] discovered that cuts didn't need to be painted anymore. He was the guru that brought light to the darkness."

#### Safety advances

According to Laverne, tree care safety is the greatest advance of the last 30 or 40 years. Modern safety mechanisms

reduce injuries, Tanaka adds, citing automatic stops on chippers.

More specialized climbing equipment has made tree work safer as well. Slings hold more weight than they used to, Tanaka says. And the creation of lowering blocks and friction reducers, which allow tree workers to manage more weight in the air and exert less energy, has "greatly increased the scope of what we're doing."

#### Pest control

"In my dad's time, they needed to provide insect control, so they took motor oil and mixed it with ammonia to create an emulsion," Blair says.

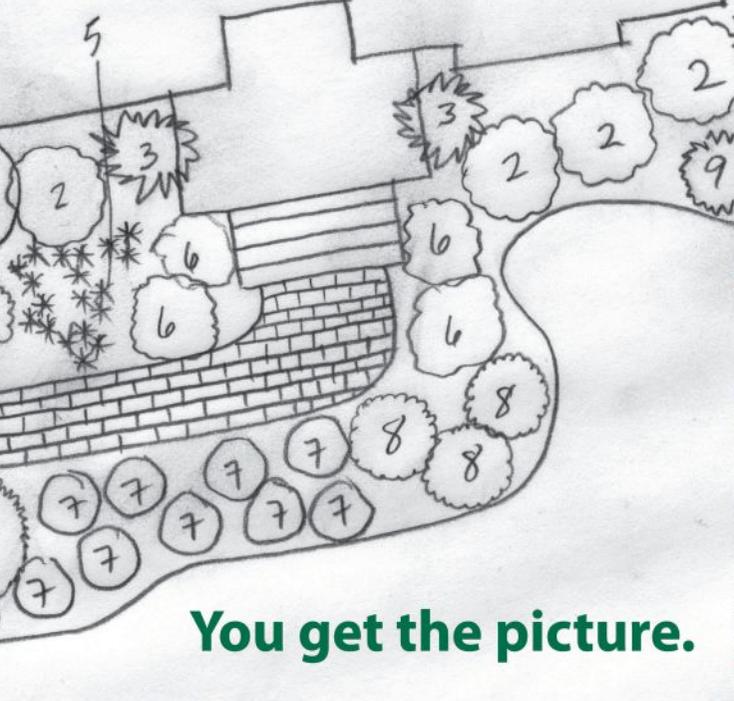
Those primitive techniques are long gone. Modern pesticides have brought much better pest control. But they also created a flurry of environmental hazards.

"I remember Dutch Elm Disease was a problem when I was growing up and the tree care companies spraying DDT on the trees in huge volumes — to the dripping point," Laverne says.

Ironically, says Blair, it was Dutch Elm, another product of the 1950s, that increased demand for tree removal and gave rise to the profession.

Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" had a huge impact on pesticide use, Laverne says. From it, people came to see that a tree is a living organism capable of fending off pests on its own.

"We now approach the problem by keeping the tree healthy," Laverne says. "It's a whole lot different than the way we used to do things."



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## More than just a day

**T**hanksgiving at our house started the same way every year — with our dog, Checkers, sprinting laps throughout the house. We didn't need to look outside to know

Grandma had arrived.

Eventually, Checkers would come to a panting halt beside my grandmother in the living room. And there the dog would stay, still as a statue, for the rest of the night.

Our Thanksgivings evolved over time, but the pairing of Grandma and Checkers never changed.

Some families have Christmas or Hanukkah. We have Thanksgiving. For as long as I can remember, it's been the most meaningful holiday in my family. That's because so many of us have made a huge effort over the years to be together on Thanksgiving.

I was going to write about how the changes in our Thanksgiving celebrations reflect the growth in our lives. About how no matter how crazy a year's been, we always find something to be grateful for — even if it's just for being together.

But then I began reading papers, and this column took a slightly different turn.

They were my students' papers. For those of you who don't know, I teach part time at a local university. At the start of our last class, I asked my students to write about their most memorable Thanksgivings.

As I read their papers, I found myself saying one

word, aloud, over and over: "Wow."

I've never taught a group of students quite like this. They're a special group. They care deeply. They've got soul.

Many of my students' writings resonated with happiness, such as the man who proposed to his girlfriend on Thanksgiving (She said "Yes!"). Or the girl whose family once sang a gospel tune to her great aunt, who passed away at age 94.

But there was also the student who remembered a happy Thanksgiving from when he was 10 years old. It was the last time his family was all together.

Another recalled the Thanksgiving he was 6 or 7 years old. He enjoyed it, but his family hasn't celebrated Thanksgiving since.

I tried to imagine life without Thanksgiving — and Thanksgiving without family.

No Grandma winning at Pictionary (Did I mention she was blind?). No Mom cooking a feast. No Dad-led grace before dinner. No Aunt Dor sipping scotch. No kids running amuck. No cousins watching the sunrise together.

I couldn't imagine it. And when I tried to, it made me sad.

It shouldn't have.

Because every family has its own traditions. Even having no tradition can be a tradition.

I loved reading my students' essays. They told vastly different stories, yet they all had one thing in common — sincere gratitude.

Through their writing, my students showed me that no matter where you're from, how you celebrate it, or even if you celebrate it, Thanksgiving is more than just a day on the calendar; it's a sentiment.

So why should I wait until Thanksgiving to express my gratitude when I'm feeling so grateful now?

I shouldn't. To my family, coworkers, students and anyone who's listening, I have one thing to say: Thank you.

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I tried to imagine **life without Thanksgiving** — and Thanksgiving without family.

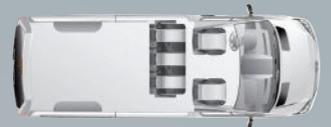


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**O**n her way to the bank, driving along one of the few roads that lead into the middle of the small town of Harvest, AL, Judi Pittman looks at a small white house sitting all alone on the barren landscape. She thinks back to a time just a few weeks earlier when she made the same journey. Only then, the house was barely visible through the large trees that obscured the view. “Now it sits there by itself, and it looks so strange,” says Pittman, pres-

ident of Nitro Green Lawn Care.

Those trees fell victim to the most prolific spate of tornadoes this country has ever seen. Hundreds of tornadoes were reported on April 27, including an F5 tornado that wound its way through Harvest.

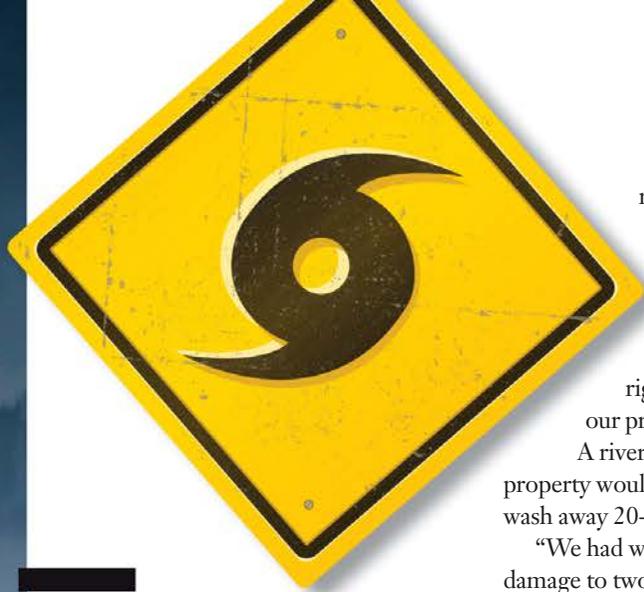
The storms killed hundreds of people across the country. Fortunately none of Nitro Green’s employees were lost or injured, though several did have damage to their homes.

Disasters, whether they’re tornadoes, hurricanes, floods or some other form of Mother Nature’s wrath, have the potential to uproot more than just trees. What follows are the stories of three companies and how they prepared and lived through the worst nature could throw at them.

# WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

**When Mother Nature turns her wrath on a community, it can be a challenge for businesses on many levels.**

BY **DAN JACOBS** EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



## HURRICANE

Vermont isn't generally the first state to come to mind when most people think about hurricane damage.

But as it slid along the East Coast and headed north, Hurricane Irene was both figuratively and literally on the radar of Tami B. Blanchard, president and owner of Homestead Landscaping in the ski resort town of Bondville.

"You find yourself checking the weather every time you walk by the kitchen and the iPad is sitting on the counter," Blanchard says. "You're pulling up the weather report and hoping that little weather bug warning isn't the first thing that pops up on the screen. You're listening to the rain outside. Is it heavy? Is it the rain or is it the wind blowing the trees around? You don't sleep. You wonder what's going on."

What was going on was the rain from Hurricane Irene. It began pounding the community on the night of August 27, a Saturday. Blanchard, along with her husband, Steve, moved the company's 24 trucks and other equipment to their home located not too far away, but on higher ground.

Steve returned to the business Sunday morning around 8 and started moving more equipment. Blanchard recalls trying to call him a few times without success.

"He called back, probably around 10:30 to let me know the place was under water, and I needed to get down there now," Blanchard says. "The

river had jumped its banks up the road and come across the back of the library, which is right across the street from us, and then right through the front of our property."

A river behind the company's property would later jump its banks and wash away 20-30 feet of the property.

"We had water in the office. We had damage to two of our storage sheds. We have three large landscape venues that were completely silted in," Blanchard says. "Our front parking lot was gone. We lost a lot of material — gravel and driveway surfaces throughout. The irrigation in our nursery was totally destroyed. Our irrigation pump was filled with silt."

The company also lost about \$40,000 worth of nursery materials, much of which were to be used for installation jobs later that season. Between cleanup, lost materials and equipment, and damage to structures, the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) estimated Homestead took a \$290,700 hit.

But that's just the damage to the exist-

ing structures. It doesn't take into account the effect it will have on future business.

"I expect to take a 5% hit to our bottom line," Blanchard says. "Our bottom line this time of year is very susceptible to weather. If we can get through November with no snow, we can work installation longer. If it starts snowing November 1st, and installation is shut down, that impacts our bottom line."

It also has an effect on her employees.

"We were pretty clear with our guys about what that means — no new trucks this year. It probably means no profit sharing this year."

The company is eligible for a Vermont Development Economic Authority loan and for loans through FEMA.

"Most of the damage we have, we've resigned ourselves to the fact that it's going to go back together over time and we'll make it work," Blanchard says.

And that's just what they've been doing.

"We were back mowing lawns on Tuesday," Blanchard says. "We had to be. It's amazing the things that are changed or gone and the things that are still here. There seems to be no rhyme or reason as to how that happened. You can't curl up into a ball and cry about it."

Workers from Homestead Landscaping, Bondville, VT, clean up after Hurricane Irene; Waters rise in Vermont after the storm (inset).





## TORNADO

Hurricanes are monstrous storms that generally wreak havoc across areas measured in the hundreds of miles. Tornadoes generally inflict their damage on a comparatively smaller area — generally. From April 25-28 a super outbreak of more than 300 tornadoes impacted areas across the South, Midwest and Northeast. No state was hit more intensely than Alabama.

Harvest, AL, home to Nitro Green Lawn Care and that house now sitting on a treeless patch of land, was one of the hardest hit communities. Harvest was struck by an F5 tornado, the most severe designation for tornadoes.

“Everyone in the community had their televisions on because the weather was so terrible,” recalls Pittman. Sitting in the midst of the tornado belt, it’s not unusual to hear a meteorologist track a tornado as it travels from one community to the next.

“That particular day they were coming through about every 15 minutes,” Pittman says. “You’d hear them say, ‘There’s one that’s just been spotted at Highway 72 and Wall-Triana (Highway) and now it’s heading up to this area.’ My family and I were watching television, and every time they would do that, we would go, ‘Oh my goodness, it’s coming right at us.’”

April tornadoes created extensive damage throughout Alabama, such as these post-twister scenes in Harvest.



Fortunately, the business and Pittman’s home and those of her employees were largely spared. But the city was without power for a week.

Pittman contacted all of her employees on their cell phones on Thursday, the day after the tornadoes, and told them to meet her at her home on Friday. Pittman drove to the office and looked through the company’s files to find her employees’ net pay for a 40-hour week.

“I came down here and handwrote paychecks for all our staff,” Pittman recalls. “Of course, they’d only worked two days that week, but people have to have food and pay their bills. The next week the power did not come on until Wednesday. So again, we paid our employees for the entire week.

“It was about two weeks without doing lawns, which in our busy season really put us behind. There were a lot of lawns where we couldn’t really do anything. We contacted all the customers we could to find out who might have lost their homes to see if we could do anything to help them.”

Pittman sent her employees out to take notes on which customers’ lawns

could be treated. If they got there and there was debris all over, they would put that in their notes and Pittman would put a reminder in the computer system to check back with them a couple weeks later to see if the debris had been cleared off.

“Our policy has always been, if weather or something like that keeps our employees from working, we continue to pay them anyway,” Pittman says. “At the beginning of the year, we had snowstorms and freezes that were unheard of in Alabama. Usually we start to do our lawns the first week of January. This year because of storms that kept us — in one case — in our house where we couldn’t even get down the driveway, for 10 days. Our employees couldn’t work those times either. In January, instead of a normal month, we only had five days where they could go out and work on customer lawns. We paid them for the whole month.”

*continued on page 14*

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*continued from page 12*

## FLOOD

The damage from a hurricane and a tornado, while severe, is short-lived — like ripping off a bandage — painful but over quickly. The potential devastation Justin Hill, president, Hill's Lawn & Landscape, Platte City, MO, faced was a slow, lingering one — like waiting days or weeks to hear back from the doctor about medical tests.

Fortunately for Hill, this disease was a false positive.

The worry began around Memorial Day, when Hill was returning from an

out-of-town trip. The rumor around town was that the Army Corps of Engineers was going to open the Gavins Point Dam, more than 300 miles to the north in South Dakota. Platte City, which had been facing a drought, would soon get more water than it wanted.

The Missouri River soon began to overrun its banks, the water slowly working its way up the side of the town's levy. By August the water was three-quarters up the levy, the highest point it would reach.

But just because the water stopped rising didn't mean the danger was over.

"A levy is made out of dirt," Hill says. "Any time water sits against it, your days are numbered. It's a big sponge. If water

*continued on page 16*

## PLAN OF ATTACK

By **Beth Geraci** Senior Editor

When meteorologists forecasted that Hurricane Irene would hit the East Coast hard, Stamford, CT-based Eastern Land Management (ELM) wasted no time in preparing.

Irene was due to make landfall Sunday morning. Seventy-two hours before that, ELM got busy devising its response plan, relying on detailed information from a weather service for assistance.

Through that service, ELM learned the hurricane's estimated arrival time, its wind speed and the amount of potential rainfall expected. Consequently, ELM was able to create a detailed post-hurricane program for its customers, informing them of the company's response initiative that Friday.

"We didn't want to give them any false pretenses," says ELM president Bruce Moore. "We are not, you know, going to jeopardize our crews. We're not going to be there until the storm is over."

Keeping customers abreast of ELM's plans was important, Moore says, because "we wanted to give them peace of mind. We want our customers to understand we're kind of their third eye. We want them to know we're watching out for their properties, and we're not just there to cut the grass."

ELM not only ramped up its communication with clients, it also ramped up its equipment supply. It reserved two chipper rentals and bought a few new chainsaws, rope and miscellaneous items. "The uncertainty is the hardest part about preparing for one of these storms," Moore says. "We prepared for the worst."



A tree smashed through the roof of a home in Trumbull, CT, near Stamford.

The company focused most on readying its crews. That meant pulling workers off jobs to prepare, moving trucks to locations where they couldn't be damaged by falling branches, and holding a managers meeting three days before the hurricane to create a checklist of potential problems and how to prevent them.

"Everybody rallied to the cause and everybody worked hard to cover all the bases," Moore says. ELM even booked hotel rooms for its crews in case they had trouble getting home.

When Irene finally did hit, ELM sent out 12 crews, mobilizing them by 4 a.m. Monday. But when the workers inspected the sites in ELM's 35-mile service area, they saw that Irene didn't create nearly as much damage as expected. It was good for the Stamford community but bad for ELM's business.

"In some cases there was work to be done, but ultimately the storm didn't do a lot of damage," says Moore. "We bought three chainsaws, which are probably still in the box."

Moore's crews were engulfed in cleanup for only a day and half after Irene, bringing in about \$6,000 in revenue. That was drastically less than the roughly \$30,000 ELM earned in March 2010, when one storm kept Moore's crews busy for more than a week.

But ultimately, Moore says, the lengths ELM went to in preparing for Irene were worthwhile. "We got very positive feedback from clients," he says.



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## COVER STORY

*continued from page 14*

is three-quarters up the levy and sits there for 60-90 days, it gets your attention on a daily basis.”

Hill and his team are part of the levy district responsible for monitoring the levy. They, along with much of the rest of the town, worked to fortify the area's flood defenses by filling more than 50,000 sandbags.

“We have dump trucks. We hauled sandbags with those trucks,” Hill says. “We converted our salt spreaders that are used in snow. We designed a chute to fit on our salt spreaders, which funnels the sand and drops it right into the sandbag.” That allowed crews to fill 50 bags in five minutes.

“It's kind of neat to take your snow equipment in the middle of summer in 100-degree weather and put it to use,” Hill says. Hill donated the use of three or four trucks and three Bobcats to the efforts.

“There'd be times a guy would have

Justin Hill and his team in Platte City, MO, joined the community in filling 50,000 sandbags to contain floodwaters from the Missouri River.



to check the levy at midnight or 1 o'clock in the morning. And you're back at your facility at 7 a.m. to get your guys going.”

Hill didn't lose any business during the extended levy watch. He rotated his work schedule and continued to pay his employees, even when they were doing the volunteer sandbagging work.

All these companies faced serious, potentially business-ending natural

disasters and survived. Perhaps it has as much to do with their attitudes as it does with being prepared. That's best summed up by Blanchard, who says, “I feel very fortunate that all we lost was stuff. We didn't lose our home and we didn't lose people. It can all be replaced. It's just going to take some time and that's perfectly fine.” **LM**

PHOTOS COURTESY: JUSTIN HILL

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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.

## Retention: The silent profit killer

**T**he email or letter comes out of the blue — it's never a phone call. *This is your 30-day notice — we're terminating your services.* Whatever the reason, the impact is traumatic personally and financially. Personally as in "we jumped through hoops the last eight years for those guys and this is the thanks we get." Financially as in it drains away profits faster than anything else in your business, as the following example demonstrates.

Let's assume a scenario where you retain 99% of your monthly contract value each month, where the average Gross Profit Margin on this work is 50% and you started with an original budget of 15% and 25% equipment and overhead costs as a percent of revenues, respectively. See Table 1.

The impact of a 99% monthly retention rate has the following cumulative effect on annual revenues. You lose \$1,000 in January and each month for the rest of the year. The total loss is \$78,000 at the 50% gross margin. See Table 2.

The result — as shown in the Table 3 — is a 3% decrease in net profit or a \$38,520 reduction in cash flow. The primary reason is that overhead expenses don't change that much, even if you consider that

you will save some money for fuel and repairs for now unutilized equipment. Ouch!

### What do you do?

You need to maintain and manage an "At Risk List." At risk customers are those who have a change in ownership, management, or personnel. They are also those you rarely see or with whom you've changed an account manager. They're ones who do not return your calls, or purchase enhancement services, are very new to you or have been with you a very long time. Yeah, it's a big list.

You must talk about more than landscape with your customers. You must talk business as in "How is your business doing? What are your challenges this year? How can we help?" This might come as a shock, but most of your customers have business concerns that greatly outweigh their need for a perfect landscape. These business concerns can be put in two categories — their budgets and their bosses. Their first instinct always is to keep their jobs.

You will be more successful bringing them cost-saving ideas like changes in job specs or enhancements that decrease maintenance costs *before* they ask you. If they are smart enough to appreciate it — and you are bold enough to show them the return on investment that enhancements can make in terms of lower vacancies, happier tenants, and higher rents — they might deem you indispensable and keep you around a long time.

It's worth the effort, given the costly alternatives and the unpleasantness of those depressing termination emails and letters.

**TABLE 1: ASSUMPTIONS**

Monthly contract revenue	\$100,000
Monthly retention	99%
Monthly losses	\$1,000
Gross margin	50%
Equipment	15%
Overhead	25%

**TABLE 2: REVENUE DRAIN**

January	\$12,000
February	\$11,000
March	\$10,000
April	\$9,000
May	\$8,000
June	\$7,000
July	\$6,000
August	\$5,000
September	\$4,000
October	\$3,000
November	\$2,000
December	\$1,000
TOTAL	\$78,000

**TABLE 3: PROFIT & LOSS**

Revenue	\$1,200,000		\$1,122,000	
Gross profit	\$600,000	50%	\$561,000	50%
Equipment	\$180,000	15%	\$168,300	16%
Overhead	\$300,000	25%	\$300,000	27%
Net profit	\$120,000	10%	\$92,700	8%



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## AT A GLANCE

**TITLE:** President

**COMPANY:** Dr. Green

**REVENUE:** \$10 million

**YEAR FOUNDED:** 1985

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:** 17

**EDUCATION:** Masters in philosophy from Queen's University, MBA from Wilfred Laurier University

**HOBBIES:** Sports, running, traveling and most importantly, growing our business

**WEBSITE:**  
[www.doctorgreen.com](http://www.doctorgreen.com)

**Ryan Van Haastrecht** started working in the family business as a 12-year-old boy delivering fliers after school alongside his father, Lou. The elder Van Haastrecht launched Dr. Green in 1985 after discovering lawn care at a franchise show. But instead of buying into an existing concept, he went out on his own. "Dad ran the company and grew it to more than 10,000 customers by 2002," says Ryan, now president. "During high school and college my brother Lee and I worked on the trucks. In 2002 Lee, our current VP of operations, and I joined the company full time."

**Where did the name "Dr. Green" come from?** Dr. Green came from the concept of providing preventive care to people's lawns. (My father) thought it would be clever to have a mascot of a green blade of grass in a doctor's outfit, and this was an immediate hit with women and children.

**What makes your company unique?** We are able to offer compelling programs with very friendly service at a relatively low price. What allows us to do this is our productivity in sales and operations. Having an efficient delivery system and a lower cost per new sale than our competitors allows us to be competitive with our prices and aggressive with our promotions. Many competitors have indicated that our prices are too low, yet we make 20% profits almost every year and have an average annual growth rate of 17.6%.

**Can you describe your market and your customers?** We are 100% focused on the residential lawn care market, and we only provide lawn care

services (no landscaping). We used to do landscaping and we dabbled in commercial, but we discovered we are better off doing one thing very well. We currently serve three markets (Ontario; Calgary, Alberta; and the Chicagoland area).

In the past few years we have seen an increase in the number of female buyers. We are also experiencing a large increase in the number of online purchasers.

**What challenges do you see in the lawn care segment of the industry?** By far the greatest challenge to our industry is the increased attention and pressure to prohibit the use of many pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers.

**How are you addressing those challenges?** We have not let these threats impact our company culture. Fear is

the worst thing because it consumes your energy and it paralyzes the development of new ideas.

**What changes have you seen in the industry?** Social media and the emergence of online marketing. It used to be that if you had one unhappy customer they would tell seven or eight of their friends. Now you can have one unhappy customer connect with hundreds of friends and/or strangers via Facebook, Twitter and other online social media sites. In the coming years growing your company and your profits will be more about service than ever before.

**What is your strategy for growth?** In the past our strategy for growth has always centered around telemarketing, door-to-door and flier delivery. Today we

are moving back to more of a guerrilla marketing approach whereby no one method of selling dominates the others. We need to create a lot of synergy through many smaller campaigns (telemarketing, door to door, flyer delivery, direct mail, email, social media, Google ad words, lawn signs, referrals etc.) Another aspect to our growth model is to improve service. We need to improve retention to improve our marketing ROI.

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# REVITALIZING the *traditional* trade show

**M**any trade shows seem to be trapped in a Catch-22. While they continue to be a concentrated repository for contractors to explore new products and ideas, they haven't changed much in decades, which leaves some attendees indifferent to the same old show. The new team that runs the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation (OTF) show is trying to shake up that "same old" sentiment with fresh ways to present information and products. The OTF, which runs the show — Dec. 5-8 in Columbus, OH — is celebrating its 50th year as an organization. Its show is nearly as old.

"We look at OTF as a place where people who provide solutions can meet up with people who need solutions," says Steve Jurick, executive director of the Ohio Turf and Golf Trust, which oversees the show, and of OTF. "The tried and true turf care professional needs to use products that are available. Our role is to help in that stewardship between the two."

*Landscape Management* talked with Jurick to learn just what his organization is doing to give the show a bit of a facelift.

The new management team for the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation show breathes new life into the staid model.

BY **DAN JACOBS** EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

of factors in our day-to-day lives that we really don't have a lot of support in. Some of that is technology.

Also, we're trying to do more programming on the show floor so people will stay on the show floor longer. We've taken a flat, straight pathway from the entryway to a platform in the back that's a presentation stage. There will be seating for about 400 people.

We will start Tuesday and Wednesday mornings on the show floor with a keynote speaker. The idea is to have everybody start out on the show floor and they can migrate back out when they need to go to their sessions.

## Is it just the education portion of OTF that's changing?

Trade shows typically have lost participation, lost vendors. The world's become more efficient. Consequently, turf conferences have struggled with how to address that efficiency. We have put a show floor plan together to allow our partners, our vendors, to be as efficient as they need to be. We know there's not a lot of order taking on the show floor, but the networking is invaluable.

**Are you updating the layout of the show floor?** Our conference floor has been very linear, and it really hasn't changed for a very long time. The show floor has been redesigned, so there will be pods. It won't be going up and down aisles. The idea behind the pods is to specialize in certain parts of our industry. There might be hardscaping in one particular area. That's not to say we're not going to mix some things up as well.

## How are you planning to draw vendors back to the show?

We're going to give them some easier opportunities to be involved. A significant number of companies migrated away from the show floor because of the expense. We're going to have innovative product areas. They'll be something other than the traditional booth — a table or designated space on the floor. Vendors will be able to be a part of the show at a lower rate. So for the small company that's trying to get known and wants to have a presence on the floor, they can do that in what is the appropriate economic level. **LM**

## Why revamp a show that's been around for nearly half a century?

Organizations often do the same thing over and over and don't look outside the box. We're able to come

into this with fresh eyes. On the conference and show side, we believe the education track is the most important. If OTF cannot provide solid education to make our members' lives better and their professional careers more rewarding, then we're not doing our job. We're not trying to be all things to everybody. It's just that we know there are weaknesses in our association based on what our members are telling us.

**So what's going to change?** We're working to address some of the traditional shortcomings of typical education. In the past things had been pretty heavily turf and golf-related — we talked about agronomy, mechanics. We feel there are a number



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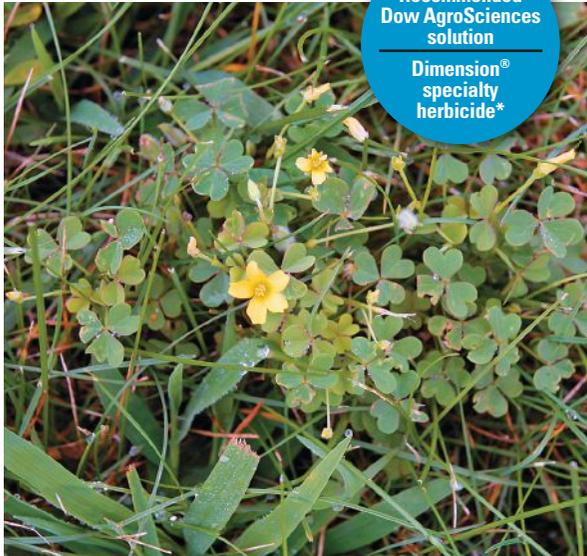
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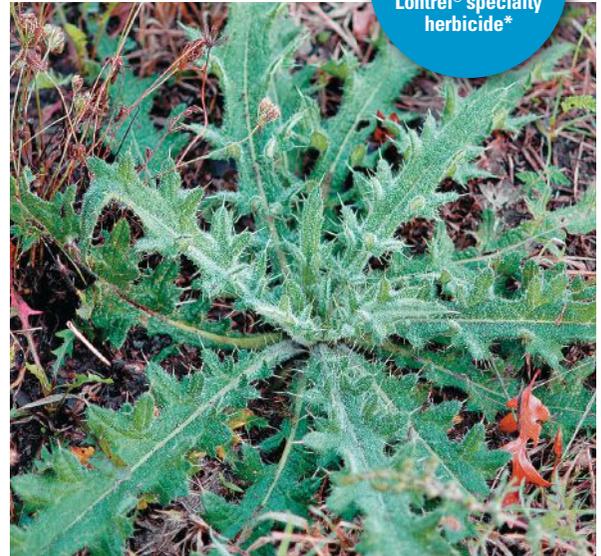
*Oxalis stricta L.*

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This perennial weed is commonly found in greenhouses, ornamentals and turfgrass.
- ▶ Leaves are divided into three heart-shaped leaflets with small yellow flowers.
- ▶ The presence of underground rhizomes helps distinguish yellow woodsorrel from creeping red woodsorrel (*Oxalis corniculata*), where the stolons are above ground.
- ▶ Five-petal flowers occur in clusters that grow from long stalks at the leaf axils.

### CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ This weed is most effectively controlled by appropriately labeled pre-emergent herbicides.
- ▶ In container and landscape settings, products containing dithiopyr or isoxaben provide excellent control.
- ▶ Yellow woodsorrel is not easily controlled by post-emergent herbicides. Two-, three- or four-way herbicide mixes provide minimal post-emergent control.



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## BULL THISTLE

*Cirsium vulgare*

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This invasive, noxious biennial can form large infestations, especially along trails, roads and vacant fields.
- ▶ Plants grow erect, with spines on the leaves and stems.
- ▶ Arranged alternately on the flowering stem, leaves are lanceolate with deeply cut margins. They are coarsely hairy on the upper side, and contain softer, whitish hairs below.
- ▶ Rose to reddish-purple flowers grow at the ends

of the branches, surrounded by spiny-tipped bracts.

### CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ The invasive nature of this weed dictates early detection and control. It reproduces only by seed, so application prior to seed set is most effective.
- ▶ For optimum control, apply a post-emergent herbicide containing clopyralid in fall or early spring, when the thistle is in the seedling to rosette stage.

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## MAINTENANCE: UTILITY VEHICLES



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Durably constructed for years of performance, the newly designed 2011 Gravelly Treker utility vehicle features a top speed of 25 mph. The industry-first column shifter, like that of a truck, and three-spoke contoured steering wheel provide optimal driving control in any circumstance. The electric bed lift is standard, allowing you to easily deposit payload right where you want it. A robust 22-hp Subaru engine provides better cold-weather starting with improved bottom end torque. Industry-leading 9.5-in. ground clearance enhances maneuverability, while the new fender design provides better protection from the elements. The in-dash, watertight locking glove box with 12-volt outlet provides multiple storage use. Choose from two- or four-wheel drive models. [Gravelly.com](http://Gravelly.com)



### John Deere

The new John Deere Gator Mid-Duty XUV 550 and 550 S4 (pictured) cross-over utility vehicles offer off-road performance, improved comfort, cargo versatility, and the ability to transport up to four people across the most challenging landscapes. With best-in-class, fully independent, double wishbone suspension, the Gator XUV 550 and 550 S4

provide 9 in. of wheel travel, and up to 10.5 in. of ground clearance to smooth out the ride. In addition, for the 550, you can choose from either standard high back bucket seats or bench seats. The 550 S4 comes standard with two rows of bench seats. Both vehicles have a top speed of 28 mph, and 4-wheel drive to quickly traverse all types of terrain. The 16-hp, 570 cc, air-cooled, v-twin gas engine provides greater speed and horsepower than most vehicles in its class, and the cargo box can carry up to 400 lbs. of gear. In addition, the 550 is small enough to fit in the bed of a standard pick-up truck. [JohnDeere.com/Gator](http://JohnDeere.com/Gator)

### Mid-Atlantic Services

The new, lightweight ATT 150 All Terrain Tric has tricycle steering, which keeps load off the ATV tow vehicle. It features a 150-gal., low-profile poly tank with high-flotation 31 x 13.5 terra rib tires — for easy maneuvering even in wet soil conditions. The John Blue ground metering pump system provides a dependable, accurate system for application of chemicals and fertilizer. The system is accurate regardless of ground speed and requires no electronics to work. Optional equipment includes a foam marker and electronic boom controls. [MASspray.com](http://MASspray.com)



### Kioti

New for 2011, the Kioti Mechron 4x4 utility vehicle features 4-wheel, fully independent, rear dual A-arm suspension and front MacPherson type suspension. The wide track offers increased stability and a smooth ride, even on rough terrain. The tight turning radius and rear anti-sway bar provides superb cornering and handling. The ergonomically located controls and instruments allow the driver to view critical functions at a glance. The contoured bench seat is widest in its class, offering room for three comfortably. Three seat belts are standard for safety. Plus, the flat, walk-through design of the vehicle offers excellent leg and foot room for easy entry and exit. [Kioti.com](http://Kioti.com)

### Polaris Industries

Hardest working, smoothest riding. With On-Demand True All-Wheel Drive, legendary smooth Independent Rear Suspension, high ground clearance, and monstrous towing capacity, Polaris Rangers outwork every other vehicle in their class, the company says. Because when you make your living as a landscaper, you need a vehicle that works as hard as you do. [PolarisIndustries.com](http://PolarisIndustries.com)



*continued on page 28*



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# LMREPORTS



continued from page 26

## MAINTENANCE: TRACTORS & ACCESSORIES

### John Deere

The John Deere 4720 compact utility tractor features a sloped hood for im-

proved visibility, and comes standard with 4-wheel drive. The LoadMatch feature keeps the tractor from stalling under heavy loads, while the MotionMatch feature enables the operator to customize the tractor's responsiveness. The 4720 comes standard with rear PTO and optional mid

PTO. The new 540/540 economy PTO allows the user to run at substantially lower engine rpms, while maintaining a 540 PTO speed — saving on fuel costs and operating more quietly. All units come loader ready with a standard dual mid-selective control valve and loader joystick. An eThrottle is standard on the 4720 with an eHydro transmission. *Deere.com*



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Designed for:



### Massey Ferguson

The new 25-hp MF1526 compact tractor features a three-range hydrostatic transmission and improved ergonomics for more operator comfort and convenience. It's



powered by a Tier IV interim-emission-compliant Iseki three-cylinder liquid-cooled diesel engine. An electro-hydraulic independent rear PTO engages smoothly and allows the operator to separately manage PTO speed and ground speed for optimum results when mowing or completing other projects. A molded rubber floor mat provides traction and helps further reduce vibration. An easy-to-read instrument panel helps keep the operator informed of the tractor's performance.

*MasseyFerguson.com*

### Kioti Tractor

Kioti introduces a completely new line of implements and attachments for its compact tractors and utility vehicles. The new line comprises more than 60 brand-new models designed to bring added productivity and profitability to more than 30 Kioti prime movers. The line includes a full range of three-point implements, including mowers, cutters, tillage and landscape implements as well as implements designed for ATVs and UTVs. All products feature Kioti's proprietary and new E-Coat (Electro-Deposition Coating), Premium Powder Coat or the Powder-over-E-Coat finish. All products are made from high tensile-strength steel with a base rust inhibitor, then feature a baked-on finish for corrosion resistance. *Kioti.com*





## Build your bench

In spite of management's best intentions, some companies struggle with excessive turnover. This hurts them most when it happens mid-season with the loss of key positions and is compounded by not having enough talent in reserve.

When a company is small, it is hard to envision building a pool of skilled employees. If you plan ahead, you will find the investment required to develop a bench is far less than the high cost turnover will have on your operations and morale.

For example, the lack of sufficient talent limits decision-making when it concerns marginal employees: You have fewer options. It might limit your ability to take on new work because you don't have the crew. Or, it forces you to promote employees to positions they are not ready for, and they fail. It also creates workplace stress and burn-out as managers and others are asked to step in to complete the work of a missing subordinate.

### Attrition to retention

**Hire who you know:** Your best approach to building a strong bench is to start with the people you know. Develop and promote people who know your culture, your systems and your best practices.

› **Coach:** Do you have a culture rich in mentoring? Before you can build a pipeline of promotable employees, you need to ask yourself if you are willing to invest in their growth. Performance reviews are an important tool but do not take the place of consistent mentoring. Coaches "coach" during the game, they do not wait until the end of the season to do a performance review.

› **Communicate:** Discuss career path opportunities openly. Employees can become discouraged waiting for opportunities that do not come. Communication is ultra-critical during a recession, or during periods of restricted growth. Many longer term employees get discouraged when the positions they aspire to are filled with new employees.

› **Peer Development:** Encourage your employees to develop and mentor their own replacements; when they move up, they have a well-trained person to take over. Make it a factor in determining eligibility for promotion.

› **Performance Pipeline:** Ask each person to identify and recommend employees with potential. Develop a coaching plan that will systematically expose them to experiences and skills they need for career growth. Showing employees their personal path to success will benefit morale and engender loyalty because employees feel that the company is taking an interest in them.

There is no silver bullet to stop attrition. But a strong career development program, and a culture that encourages retention with pipeline development, will turn your 'turnover' problem into a return on your investment.

### TIPS & TACTICS

**Grow Your Own!** The industry has a high success rate with in-house career development programs. There are a lot of talented college graduates coming out of our schools. Hire them and develop your own leaders.

If you bring on a talented graduate and place him or her in a crew leader position at a rate higher than a typical crew leader, the real cost is not the hourly rate but the difference between your crew leader rate and the new hire rate. If the recruit is challenged to improve performance by the percentage of the difference, then the cost is offset.

**Poach Not!** Often, in the quest for great talent, and a desire for proven performers to hit the ground running, companies seek to hire from their competitors. Before you hire from another company, remember — there are pitfalls to leapfrogging the investment in training and development to get the competitive advantage. Industry companies have low success rates when they hire from other companies. Hire for skills and abilities. Make your investment in developing long-term relationships and goodwill. Fully committed employees, developed in a high-performance culture, are those most likely to be invested in your success.

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# HOLDING YARDS HELP

**Growing and maintaining your own plant materials makes sense for some landscape businesses.**

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

**T**HERE ARE many benefits to maintaining and growing plants in a holding yard. Most landscape firms already have the expertise needed to maintain the plants as they grow, which can save a considerable amount of time and money compared to buying larger plants to install. Quality and inventory can be tightly controlled in a holding yard, eliminating last-minute searches for high-quality plants.

But there's a downside as well. "I'm a landscaper, not a nurseryman," is probably the most cited reason for not starting a holding yard. It's a sound argument. A holding yard can quickly turn into a private nursery complete with all the work that entails, including greenhouse,



disease and irrigation management. It's no wonder some landscape professionals would rather concentrate on designing and installing great landscapes rather than growing and/or maintaining their own plant materials.

## Residential reasoning

Wayne Whittier, owner of WDS Landscape & Design, New Braunfels, TX, says at a certain point in a landscape business holding yards are a logical addition. Whittier, who has been in the landscape indus-

Keep weeds down with landscape fabric, and arrange plants based on their irrigation requirements.

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try for 25 years, once managed a nursery and now focuses on high-end residential design-build.

"There's a line that you hit where you really need to grow the stuff that you know has a better than 50/50 chance of not being available, and then buying the rest," he says.

Though Whittier admits growing and holding plants would be significantly more difficult if he didn't have nursery experience, having what he needs when he needs it is worth the effort. His holding yard — which includes about 6,000 plants, 350 tons of limestone for water gardens, leftover flagstones, landscape lighting inventory and equipment — allows him to outbid competitors who have to buy all of their plant materials, while keeping quality high.

### Commercial quantities

Holding yards can also help landscapers who focus on commercial landscapes. The huge numbers of plants needed on a large commercial job can make them difficult to obtain economically.

Lavon Webb, owner of the maintenance division of Sterling Landscape Design & Construction in Nampa, ID, often used 5,000 or more shrubs on commercial shopping centers and subdivisions when the economy was booming. Webb, who has been in business for more than 30 years, says his 5-acre holding yard had about 4,000 trees and 20,000 shrubs when his commercial/residential mix was 75%/25%. Now he holds about 1,000 trees and 5,000 container-type shrubs as he focuses more on residential work and waits for the commercial business to return to Nampa.

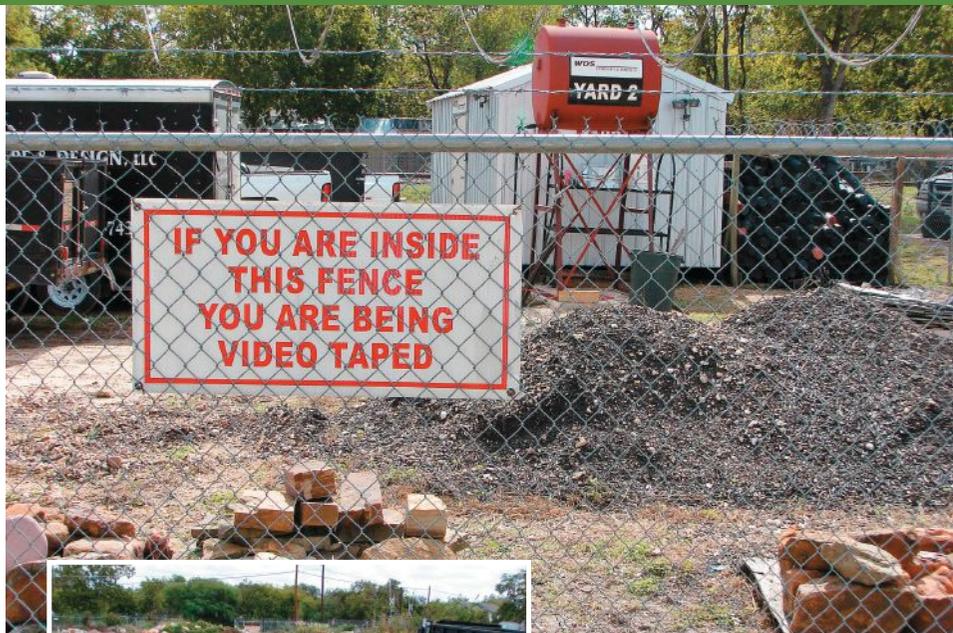
"We left the holding yard in place so that when the economy comes back we'll be ready," he says.

In its heyday, Webb had two full-time employees working to maintain it and manage the inventory.

### Before you build

Landscapers who want to build a holding yard can benefit from advanced planning. Know what to expect when it comes to maintenance.

"Maintenance is all year long," Webb says. "There's a lot of weeding. There are



**Above:** Security is an important expense to consider when building a holding yard.

**Left:** To save time, arrange materials for easy pick-up by landscape crews.

rows of sprinklers between two rows of trees and the misting system sprays out 8 ft., so a lot of weeds grow up. Every week and a half we have to mow weeds down. It's almost like a tree farm operation."

Spraying for insects, pruning and fertilization are also maintenance musts. But Webb says the trees especially help him control costs.

"A 2-in. caliper tree might cost \$60 to grow, but \$90 to \$100 to buy," he says. It helps us get additional work. A holding yard is a good thing to have if you have a lot of commercial business."

As with any property purchase, holding yards come down to location. Appropriately zoned acreage is often only available on the outskirts of town, but the closer you can build to your customer base, the less you'll have to spend in travel time and fuel. Thinking about leasing land? Think again, says Whittier, who had to move his leased holding yard to property he purchased.

However, purchasing land and everything that goes with it is a significant investment. Whittier paid \$20,000 for a secure fence around his holding yard, for example.

Other pitfalls to avoid include haphazard inventory management that makes the landscape foreman's job more difficult, weed-infested plant materials that can't be saved and a lack of zonal irrigation.

Webb learned the importance of multiple zones when he realized his old zones were too large. He was wasting water and spending time turning off and on individual spray heads.

"Now we have it much more zoned so we can control the water better," he says. "Different plants have different requirements, so we can water them accordingly now."

Webb's new holding yard is also graded so that water runs to the center to drain. It is also covered with thick fabric to help minimize weeds.

In the right situation, with the right planning, the benefits of holding yards can outweigh the maintenance headaches.

"You really have to design it and know what you're doing," Whittier says. "If you don't, it'll put you out of business." ■■■

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



### Year of the zinnia

The **National Garden Bureau** declared 2011 as the year of the zinnia. We'll announce the Bureau's picks for flower, perennial and vegetable for 2012 in the January issue, but in the meantime, check out new *Zinnia elegans* 'Art Deco' from **Botanical Interests**. These 5-in., fully double zinnias in shades of pink, lavender and royal purple will power all through summer up to the first fall frost. At 2 to 3 ft. tall, they are suited to border plantings, in large containers, or as a backdrop to shorter plants. They can also be used for cut flower or dried bouquets. [BotanicalInterests.com](http://BotanicalInterests.com) or [NGB.org](http://NGB.org)



### Tall, dark and handsome

*Colocasia esculenta* 'Black Coral' is **Plant Delights Nursery's** latest introduction in the Royal Hawaiian series from Dr. John Cho. This breeding breakthrough takes elephant ears to a new level, with large glossy-black foliage on a 4-ft.-tall clumper. *Colocasia* 'Black Coral' is used as a container specimen or tender perennial for bedding north of Zone 7b. It thrives in partial to full sun. [PlantDelights.com](http://PlantDelights.com)

### The whole *Echinacea*

Selections for the new *Echinacea* 'Sombrero' series from **Darwin Perennials** were made from overwintered plants that are hardy to at least Zone 5. The brightly colored, single-flowered Sombreros feature the same well-branched and compact habit as the floriferous PowWows. The long-blooming coneflowers have coppery maroon centers and attract butterflies to a wide range of landscape settings. Easy to grow, they tolerate dry, poor soils. Colors include Hot Coral, Salsa Red (pictured) and Sandy Yellow. [DarwinPerennials.com](http://DarwinPerennials.com)



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Tejas Originals creates and distributes outdoor kitchens like this.

## Cooking up good ideas

Garett Davis helps contractors profit by building outdoor kitchens.

**G**ARETT DAVIS WAS a design/build landscape contractor in Central Texas when he came up with the idea for a pre-finished kitchen system. His customers loved outdoor kitchens, but Davis didn't love the amount of time that went into building them. He thought if he could come up with a system that could be installed faster while still offering the same high quality product, he could keep customers happy and maintain a steady flow of new jobs as well.

Davis created two different styles of the outdoor kitchen systems through his company Tejas Originals. The first is what he calls a "ready-to-finish" solution. It's a steel-framed cabinet system with cabinets that can be connected together to create any size or shape. The system takes the place of the cinderblock type of construction method most landscapers use.

"A 20-foot linear kitchen can be ready for stone in just a couple of hours, versus an entire week using the other method with cinderblocks," Davis says. "In the end, the system is just as strong. And all the cut-outs like the door cut-outs and the grill cut-outs can be customized."

The same concepts apply to the finished kitchen product — the second style Davis offers. Some might call these kitchen systems "pre-fab," but Davis says he doesn't like that term.

"It gives it a cheap sound and it's definitely not a cheap-looking product," says Davis. "The product is handmade and top quality. We refer to it as pre-finished."

Like the ready-to-finish solutions, the pre-finished kitchen solution has all the

pieces needed to create a custom kitchen and a little bit more. The pre-finished product is already covered with veneer and is shipped with the countertops. Once assembled, it's a finished kitchen.

"All you have to do is drop the appliances in — and we can ship the appliances with it, too," Davis says.

Everything about the concept Davis has developed focuses on simplicity. He wants to keep the process as easy as possible for the contractor.

"We've engineered it so that it ships in a knocked-down fashion," says Davis. "It ships flat in a box. We can get 25 or 30 linear feet of kitchen cabinets on one pallet, which helps keep the shipping costs down for the customer."

Davis says he's also focused on ease-of-use and that all of the systems within his collections are easy to install.

By making his product efficient to ship and easy to install, Davis says he's saving contractors time and money.

While Davis started out using this product in his own landscape business, it didn't take long for friendly competition to ask if they could sell it too.

Davis opted to leave landscaping for the manufacturing industry. Today he's a manufacturer and distributor of entire outdoor kitchen systems as well as pergolas and arbor kits. "We basically want to be a one-stop shop for contractors," Davis says.

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

### >> SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**COMPANY:** Tejas Originals, LLC

**PRESIDENT:** Garett Davis

**HEADQUARTERS:** Austin, Texas

**WHY PREFINISHED KITCHENS:**

"There was nothing else like this on the market for a reasonable cost. I wanted to create a system that was more efficient, and I knew I could design and build it in a way that'd be less expensive as well."

**INITIAL INVESTMENT:**

"Myself and my partners have invested over \$1.5 million into this company."

**WHY CUSTOMERS LIKE IT:**

"It's ultimately more profitable for them to use this system because of the efficiencies it offers. Profitability is the bottom line for most people."

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At Peabody Landscape Group in Columbus, OH, community involvement is as integral to the company's success as self-sufficiency and customer satisfaction are.

"It's important to try to give back to your community," says company President **David Peabody**. "We don't realize how fortunate we are in the United States, for all of the things we have available to us."

Peabody Landscape Group has been involved in community service for more than 20 years, says Peabody, who enjoys supporting Boy Scouts of America service projects and often donates materials and equipment to them.

Peabody has a lot to say about the landscape maintenance business, and he took time to discuss with *LM* the pros and cons of what he's seeing in the industry today.

## INSIDE INFO

**Key to being a strong maintenance leader:** Integrity. With both your clients and your employees you have to be honest, whether things are good, bad or indifferent. And you've got to treat people the way you want to be treated. Be fair in business. If you make a mistake, admit it and take care of it. Everybody makes mistakes, and a lot of people try to shirk their responsibility. But you have to admit it, correct it and move on.

It's also important to keep up with safety measures. And show professionalism, both within the company and outside the company. It's important to give back as much as you possibly can within the community.

**Company:** Peabody Landscape Group

**Headquarters:** Columbus, OH

**Employees:** 45 full-time (plus 130 part-time)

**2010 revenue:** \$6.1 million

## TOP TRENDS

► **Our design/build segment is growing.** Outdoor living is becoming a trendy thing. People are moving away from water features and focusing more on outdoor living and pondless water fixtures. People are steering away from the ponds because of the algae and the maintenance.

Outdoor grilling is becoming more fashionable as well, and there are more sit-up bars. The outdoor fireplace is a more trendy element than fire pits are these days, because it is a focal point of the landscape and it's more elegant. Lighting is something people are doing more of. You see more lighting on the front side of a home. There's an increasing focus on the architecture — enhancing the architecture through lighting. Probably 50% of our construction has become hardscape.

## TOP OBSTACLES

► **Lowball bidders.** The industry is made up of anybody who wants to get away with something, who wants to make a buck. You're essentially competing with Billy the kid next door who's got a lawn mower. That's what this industry is compared to. There's a real misunderstanding from people who see Hispanics working for a landscape company. Their first thought is that the worker is an illegal alien, that he is being paid less than minimum wage, and that's not the case.

Most landscape contractors are trying to provide quality. As far as those who provide unrealistically competitive prices, some property managers are finally starting to see what they've been getting, and they're not satisfied. They're looking to go back to some of the service contractors they've had in the past as a result.

► **Rising costs.** We've had increases in health insurance, and gasoline prices have gone up, both by 50%. Equipment and labor costs have gone up. Rent's gone up. So how can prices go down? It just doesn't make any sense.

## TOP OPPORTUNITIES

► **We're becoming more self-sufficient.** We're on a parcel of ground that's on 22 acres, and we have 12 acres of shade and ornamental trees.

In all, we have about 3,500 trees. By growing the trees ourselves, we eliminate the need to buy them wholesale. Buying trees can be expensive, especially if I'm looking at a big project. It's less expensive to grow them, and then we use them in our bidding.

► **Alternative fuels.** There are huge opportunities for companies if they explore eliminating the normal resource of fuel and look at opportunities in alternative fuels, which we're doing now. Next year, we're looking to decrease fuel costs by around 50%. Decreasing those costs provides me with one more way to be more competitive. We have six trucks dedicated to delivering materials to job sites so we can keep our crews working on the property continuously. Keeping fuel costs down will really have an impact on our bottom line.



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Reliance on solar energy is far from the norm in the landscaping industry. But a growing number of contractors are putting it into practice.

Solar energy panels may be expensive to install, but with financial incentives such as grants, tax credits and reduced costs — not to mention solar energy's promise of a greener future — some contractors say the long-term payoff is well worth the initial investment.



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# MY BIGGEST MISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



This Texas business owner says that by changing her company's focus and branching out into new markets, her business has endured.

**IN THE PAST** Marsha Newberry, owner and managing partner for Signature Contracting Services, says she might not have been as willing to adapt to change, but the state of the economy has almost forced her to, well, change her mind about change. Now, she attributes her Texas-based company's willingness to transform as the key to its survival and success in this difficult marketplace.

"We started as a landscape company and have

basically become a commercial contractor doing work on roads, bridges, and even rail lines," says Newberry. "Being able to diversify and being willing to change has become a necessity."

But, Newberry admits, change isn't easy. "If you have a group of people that knows how to plant flowers and trees and do landscaping work, but you want to diversify beyond that, you need to find people," she says. "This economy might have produced a lot of unemployed people, but it's still not always easy to find good people."

In diversifying, Newberry says one of the biggest challenges has been

finding banking support. With that source of financing closed off, it forced the company to get creative and start looking at jobs that other companies weren't taking on.

"We are up for work that other companies don't show interest in — such as a small job that a larger contractor would say they don't want to waste their time on," Newberry says. "It might be something as small as screwing a bolt

ing," she says. "Those times are gone. We do those things, but if that were all we did, we'd be in trouble. We have even gotten into telecommunications — something that has nothing to do with landscaping or contracting but has become another avenue in these tough times to help support what we now call the 'Mother Company' because we've developed so many different divisions and departments."

While diversifying helps her company thrive, Newberry says it's important to continue to build and maintain relationships. Work continues to flow largely because the company makes an effort to build relationships, even within its diversification.

"If you don't start building relationships, work isn't going to come back to you," she says. "We've gotten some itty-bitty jobs such as drilling one hole because we were the only ones willing to do it in the middle of the night. But then when the customers see we worked in the middle of the night to help them out, they're going to come back to us when they have something else. And maybe next time it will be a bigger job. The bottom line is that you have to be willing to do whatever it takes to survive and that's what we've done. Our philosophy is that failure is not an option."

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



Marsha Newberry

**COMPANY:** Signature Contracting Services, LLC

**HEADQUARTERS:** Grand Prairie, TX

**DIVISIONS AND REVENUES:**

**LANDSCAPE:** \$2,959,921

**GRADING/TRENCHING/BORING:** \$10,885,825

**TELECOMMUNICATIONS:** \$608,525

**MOWING:** \$695,725

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 261

**2010 REVENUE:** \$9,205,051

**PROJECTED 2011 REVENUE:** \$15,150,000

**IF YOU DON'T START BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, WORK ISN'T GOING TO COME BACK TO YOU.**

onto a piece of concrete. By taking on these kinds of jobs, we became the go-to people for the extra work larger contractors don't want to do. That kind of work may be small, but it can add up and has actually supported our company during these tougher times."

Newberry advises other companies to become more willing to adapt.

"You simply can't be so rigid that you only want to plant trees and do mow-

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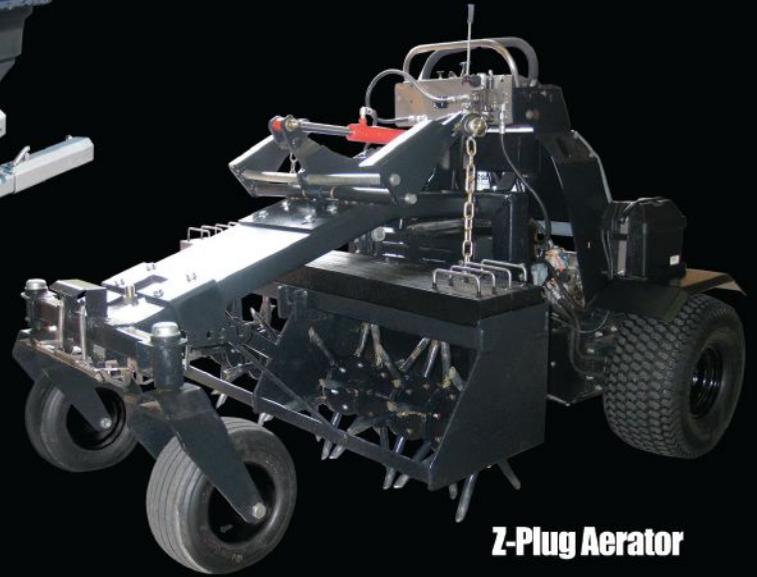


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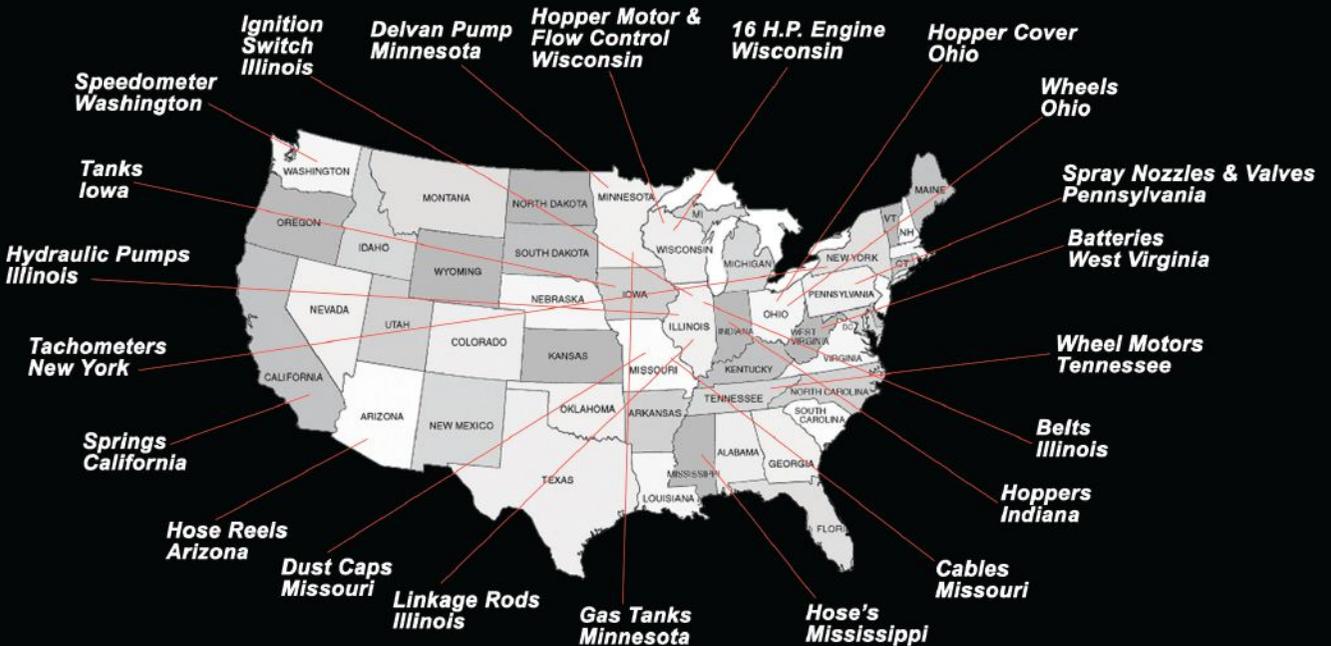
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