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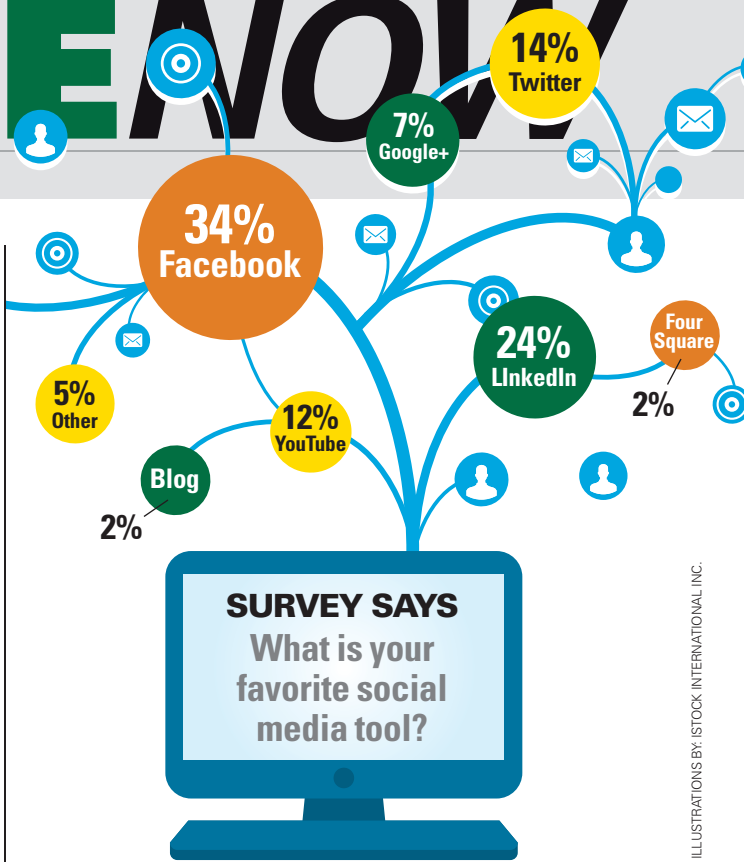
## THE LM DAILY

### DID YOU CATCH THE LATEST FROM THE BLOG?

» "A few days ago we said goodbye to our H-2B team ... (M)ost of them have been an integral part of our team / our family for the past 8 years, and we always miss them when they are gone. This year especially, when we have no idea – Thanks to our interference from our Government – if we will ever see them again."

» "(T)rees generate \$270,153 in community services, including aesthetic benefits, energy conservation, stormwater control and carbon and air pollution reduction (to the city of Wooster, OH)."

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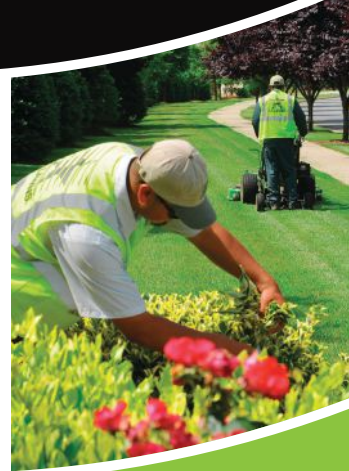
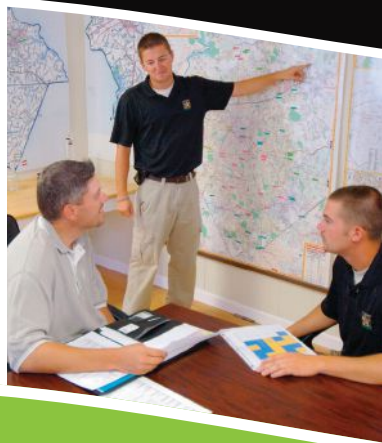
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## Into each life a little *tsuris* must fall

**A**n old man nearing the end of his days reflects on his very difficult life. He thinks of all the *tsuris* (Yiddish for misery) he's experienced — business failures, illness, family and financial problems — and the list goes on.

The man, visited by his rabbi, asks, "I've been devoted to God, followed his laws and yet I've experienced nothing but misery and woe. Why is this happening to me?"

Without saying a word, the learned rabbi takes a handkerchief from his pocket and passes it over the ailing man's eyes. The man drifts away, and when he wakes, the man finds himself walking along a path toward a large hill in the distance.

The man walks along the path, unsure of where he is, when he hears a noise growing in the distance. He turns to see three huge, black semi-trailers rumbling toward him. The man flags one of the trucks down and asks what's going on.

"These trucks are filled with your sins. We're taking them to the top of the hill where your life will be judged."

Aghast, but ever practical, the man asks for a ride.

"Sorry, there's not a spare inch of extra room."

And the trucks move on.

A few moments later a tiny, white Mini Cooper sidles past. Again the man flags down the driver.

"Where are you headed?" he asks.

"I'm carrying all your good deeds to the top of the hill, where they'll be weighed against your sins."

"I don't want to walk the whole way. Do you

have any spare room?"

"Sure, plenty. Hop in."

They finally arrive at the top of the hill. The man looks about and sees all the grandeur of the heavenly court. And right in the center is a large scale. The man's sins are loaded on one side of the scale, which comes crashing down with a heavy thud. His good deeds are placed on the other side of the scale, and it doesn't move an inch.

The man hangs his head, clearly worried about his fate, when three gray trucks arrive.

"What do these carry?" he wonders.

"These trucks," the angels explain, "contain all the trouble and strife you've experienced in your life."

The trucks' contents are unloaded. All those many years of misery are added to the scale along with the man's few good deeds. Amazingly, the scale reaches perfect equilibrium.

Immediately, the man turns around to face God. "What? You couldn't give me just a little more *tsuris*?"

*Tsuris*, trouble, comes in all sizes and shapes, from the pain, suffering and loss of loved ones to getting stuck behind some slow-driving shmuck who pulls out in front of you, forcing you to slam on your brakes, and then drives five miles per hour below the speed limit, which gets you stuck at the next red light (while he rolls cluelessly through the intersection).

The challenges we face in life and business, big and small, are tests. They test our faith, patience, dedication and will.

Who knows, maybe if I'd made that light I would have been sideswiped by a semi-trailer (carrying my sins, no doubt) at the next intersection. Maybe instead of cursing the car in front of me, I should have been offering thanks.

For many, 2011 was a challenging year. But we got through it and hopefully the *tsuris* we dealt with will make us all stronger. And maybe, just maybe, it will tip the scales in our favor.

Have a blessed, balanced 2012 — at work and at home.



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## A lesson in volunteerism

Project EverGreen partners with Nature's Select Turf Services and Syngenta to donate landscaping to historic Penn-Griffin Arts School.

**G**REENSBORO, NC — Project EverGreen, a national, non-profit Green Industry educational foundation, recently coordinated with Nature's Select Premium Turf Services staff in Winston-Salem and Greensboro-based Syngenta employees, joining faculty and student volunteers donating their time and services to enhance and improve the grounds at the Penn-Griffin Arts Magnet School in High Point, NC.

William Penn-Alfred J. Griffin

School for the Arts is a 120-year-old, public arts magnet school situated in a historic locality, now a designated part of a new National Historic District.

"The grounds around the school have been sadly neglected over the years, which has had an effect on our campus," says Linda Willard, administrative assistant at Penn-Griffin. Willard reached out to Steve Dorer, local territory manager at Syngenta, for help to upgrade landscaping on the campus and replace old, outdated plants with newer, native plants that would be more drought-resistant, to reduce water usage.

"The generosity of Nature's Select and Project EverGreen to fund the project, along with our faculty and student volunteers and Syngenta employees involved in this landscape installation, helps us to beautify our outdoor environment and make it a more pleasant and inviting place to learn and to visit," Willard says.

"Coordinating with Nature's Select and Syngenta Lawn & Garden exemplifies how we organize local company donors to help meet

community needs," states Michael Joyce, Project EverGreen NC project manager. Other Project EverGreen initiatives in North Carolina include GreenCare for Troops, The Art of GreenSpaces in Schools arts contest and GreenCare for Communities green space rehabs such as the Penn-Griffin landscaping donation.

Gene Queen, owner of Nature's Select Premium Turf Services in Winston-Salem, volunteered his professional staff's time and labor to plan and supervise the installation, and donated extensive nursery stock and mulch needed for the landscape restoration.

"Our company's mission is to preserve and enhance our community green spaces, and facilitating the Penn-Griffin School landscape renovation is one way we're glad to help sustain a healthy, green environment for current and future students at Penn-Griffin," Queen says.

"We are a corporate partner and sponsor of Project EverGreen and actively support this community green space effort," says Margaret Bell, Syngenta senior marketing communications manager, and executive committee member of Project EverGreen. "Our corporate responsibility commitments include making a positive contribution to the communities where we work and live, so we're especially pleased to assist Nature's Select in this effort to improve the grounds of Penn-Griffin school, a historic, educational treasure right here in the Triad."

Members of Project EverGreen, Nature's Select and Syngenta donate time and services to improve the grounds of Penn-Griffin Arts Magnet School, High Point, NC. Volunteers planted trees, mulch and native plants.







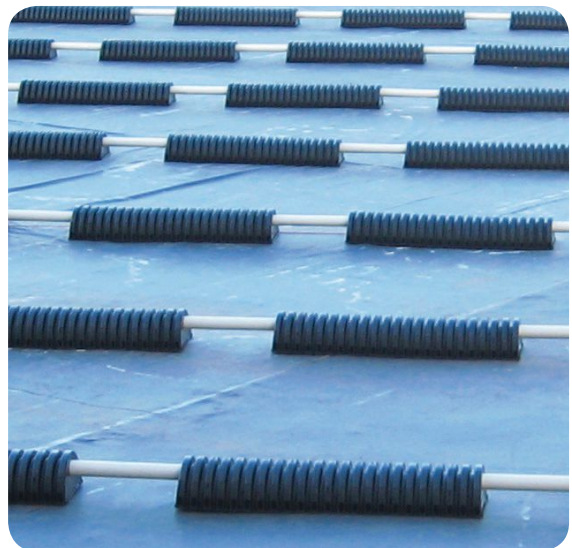
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Jim Campanella, president of Lawn Dawg

## Lawn Dawg acquires Capital Green Lawn Care

**N**ASHUA, NH — Lawn Dawg Inc. announced the acquisition of Capital Green Lawn Care, based in Rochester, NY.

Capital Green Lawn Care is owned and operated by Mark Zingaro of Rochester, NY. The existing operations came under the name of Lawn Dawg last month.

“I’m so excited to be part of the Lawn Dawg team,” states Zingaro. “This acquisition gives me the most support that I ever had working for another company in the past or for myself. With all the support and knowledge I’m getting from the Lawn Dawg team, combined with my experience, the sky is the limit. I met with Jim Campanella and Tom Bucci for the first time, and I told myself this is the team I want to be working for.”

Capital Green offers a classic five-step lawn care fertilization program and supplemental lawn care services as well as a tree and shrub program.

Lawn Dawg President Jim Campanella shares his enthusiasm, “We are very excited about entering the Rochester market as we continue our growth plan to expand throughout the Northeast. What makes this even more exciting is that we are bringing on an industry veteran in Mark Zingaro. Mark is a great addition to Lawn Dawg’s management team due to his commitment to outstanding customer service, which is evident in his superior retention rates. Mark has the talent and skills to build a great team and grow our business while maintaining the high level of service that we demand.”

## ANLA and OFA

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) OFA — The Association of Horticulture Professionals and the American Nursery and Landscape Association announce the formation of a joint venture, initially focusing on business education and government relations activities.

ANLA President Bob Lyons, Sunleaf Nursery (OH), states, “The industry is facing significant oppor-

## PLANET names

HERNDON, VA — The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) has announced that Virginia-based Stihl Inc., and Tennessee-based TruGreen have each committed an additional \$25,000 to the PLANET Academic Excellence Foundation (PLANET

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## form a joint venture

tunities and challenges that require its national trade associations to respond as never before. OFA and ANLA have decided to join forces to expand the capacity of the organizations to better support our members and the industry.”

OFA President Mike McCabe, McCabe’s Greenhouse and Floral (IN) adds, “ANLA and OFA members will have access to the best of both organiza-

tions. OFA brings technical and business development education, industry marketing and a major, international trade show. ANLA represents our industry in Washington D.C., interprets major industry trends and offers owner/senior management education.”

Asked if this was a merger, McCabe replies, “We’re going to work together on lobbying and education first. In sev-

eral years, if both organizations see the joint venture as a value to our members, our intention is to form a new organization serving the horticulture industry.”

Lyons adds, “But for now, there will still be two associations, OFA and ANLA. We will have two staffs, two offices and two leadership structures. Each of the partners grows stronger, but remains an independent business, while their customers benefit from the collaboration.”

## new AEF ambassadors

AEF) scholarship fund, moving both companies to the Platinum Ambassador level. At PLANET’s annual Green Industry Conference in Kentucky this past October, the Ohio Nursery and Landscape Association, which has already donated \$25,000 at the Ambassa-

dor level, pledged an additional \$50,000, bringing its total donation to \$75,000 and also moving it to the Platinum Ambassador level.

In addition, Bruce Moore Sr., Landscape Industry Certified Manager, owner of Eastern Land Management Inc. in

Connecticut, has committed \$25,000, making him the newest PLANET AEF Ambassador.

PLANET AEF was formed in 1998, to promote and advance the lawn care and landscape services industry by supporting academic excellence. To fulfill its mission, the Foundation relies on tax-

*Continued on page 13*

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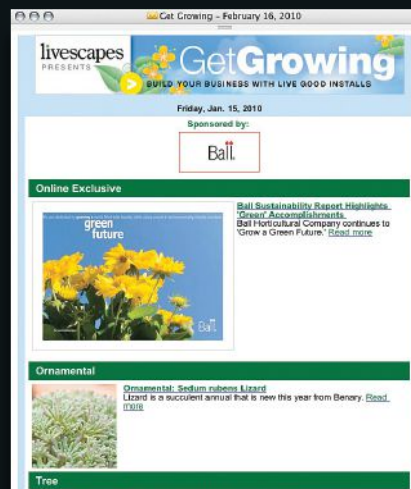


# Landscape Management e-news



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## ▲ Get Growing-Livescapes

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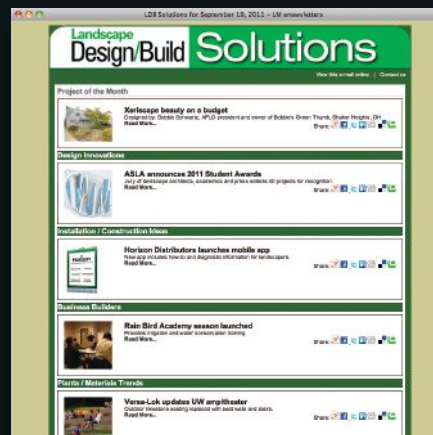
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# MAILBOX

*Continued from page 11*

deductible donations and long-term pledges from individuals, corporations, organizations, and estates. Since its inception in 1998, the PLANET AEF, formerly the ALCA Educational Foundation, has given almost \$600,000 in scholarships and awards to 585 students. The Foundation's assets total more than \$2 million.

Last March, the PLANET AEF board set an aggressive goal of raising the fund balance from \$2 million to \$5 million over the course of the next five years. This ambitious goal is being called the 5-by-5 (\$5 million in 5 years) Plan.

Roger Phelps, Landscape Industry Certified Manager, of Stihl Inc., states, "As a founding sponsor of the PLANET AEF fund, Stihl believes that to ensure the future growth and success of the Green Industry, it is necessary to invest in our students."

## A shade on solar energy?

After reading the latest addition of *Landscape Management* I feel compelled to offer another insight with regard to Renewable Energy. I think all of the green initiatives highlighted are praiseworthy. I applaud the foresight of those who made them a reality. I cannot see one thing wrong with an organization improving its image in the community in which it does business by taking a proactive step in resource conservation.



Where the train comes off the tracks for me is that by "bellying up to the government trough" for financial assistance to justify the ROI of private green initiatives, those responsible are unwittingly enabling the government bureaucracy at all levels to continue the status quo. The industry cannot honestly complain about invasive and counterproductive H-2B and EPA mandates, while simultaneously asking these same agencies for handouts. I contend

that if the industry wants to garner more control over our collective destiny, we need to wean ourselves of government largess. The government only has the power we give it.

— Don Crawford, Operations Manager, Hoy Landscaping Inc., Melrose Park, IL



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# PROGRESS

## Blossoming breakthroughs



**M**any improvements have been made in plant breeding throughout the years, and ornamentals are no exception.

Today's plant developers can select desired traits for ornamentals right in the lab. They couldn't before, says Jeff Gibson, Landscape Business Manager for Ball Horticultural Company. "We're using a lot of advanced scientific methods today to accelerate the identification of plants we want to create," he says.

According to Ryan Contreras, an assistant professor at Oregon State University who deals in ornamental plant breeding and cultivar development, molecular biology is beginning to be used in ornamentals. "We're still in the infancy of that," he says. "The biggest opportunity is using it to identify plants that have genes for resistance, resistance to Dutch Elm Disease, anthracnose, things like that."

Molecular genetics "is the new line of plant breeding," says Rick Schoellhorn, Director of New Products for Proven Winners L.L.C. "Today's plant developers are using the lab to develop hybrids. In horticulture they're finding they can

**Genetics and breeding are at the core of advances in ornamentals.**

make hybrids between things they didn't know they could before.

"That to me is the future of ornamental floriculture breeding," he continues. "You're still creating a new hybrid, but you're doing it in a laboratory now, so everything can be perfect for those two parts to join. That results in plants that are sterile, so they don't produce any seed. Therefore, they will flower for as long as the season lasts."

The advancement in the genetics and breeding of ornamentals, Schoellhorn asserts, is the upshot of intensifying competition among seed and vegetative companies. "That's how the industry progresses," he says. "The progression comes from that competition. It's fascinating to watch and it's nowhere near done."

Traditionally, there was very little advancement in the perennial market, Schoellhorn says, but something happened in the past five years. "Echniacea, for example, is suddenly yellow, orange, white, pink, and now there are hundreds of cultivars on the market. It's in pursuit of a higher plant and also a higher profit for the market," he says.

Trees and shrubs have begun to show breakthroughs, too, displaying better flowering and disease resistance. Genetic attributes of trees and shrubs are being driven in part by the prefer-

To save money, today's customers are turning toward trees and shrubs such as hydrangeas, whose blossoms last multiple seasons.

ences of urban landscape customers, Gibson says, including their desire for compact shrubs that don't grow as high.

And as today's landscaping clients move toward smaller trees and shrubs, they are turning away from pricey flowers, says Gibson, explaining that commercial clients and homeowner associations looking to cut their budgets often cut extras like flowers first.

But many customers are willing to go along when landscapers suggest multiseason trees and shrubs. Customers generally perceive them to be cost effective, he explains, because their blooms last.

Take, for example, hydrangeas, Gibson adds. "If you're planting in a subdivision and your homeowners association doesn't want to plant petunias, they might be willing to plant a hydrangea that changes color over multiple seasons and gives them some color. It's a compromise plant. The idea of multi-season shrubs is very important."

The use of containers in the landscape also is becoming a trend in many markets, Gibson says. A client who is reluctant to plant big beds of colorful plants yet still desires color might opt for placing plants in containers.

"Putting plants into containers up close and personal" is not only a cost-effective compromise, Gibson says. It's also "consistent with a trend toward more compact environments."

Future trends in ornamentals will be determined by more genetic breakthroughs, Schoellhorn asserts. Heirloom varieties aren't going anywhere, he says, "but when you start to look at where the real genetics of breeding is moving, it's just fascinating."





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EFFICIENCY**



A difficult economy complicates the already challenging job of running a landscaping business. Some of the industry's top executives offer their insights into growing their companies.

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WORD

# LOOKING TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE

**A**s we move into the new lawn and garden season it seems every media outlet is serving us a steady diet of doom and gloom. Certainly the nature of the current U.S. economy makes our job as business owners more challenging. But despite the negative news about the economy, many landscape contracting businesses are not only surviving, but also thriving, in this volatile market. The first thing they will tell you about replicating their success is that you need to “Get Your Priorities Straight.”



One advantage of a tighter economy is that it forces focus — whether we like it or not. It is times like this when every business owner needs to have a few metrics that give them an instant read on the health of their business. In manufacturing we call them Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The *Landscape Management* editorial staff has done the legwork in gathering which KPIs the biggest and the best contractors look at on a daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly basis to help them maintain a vibrant operation.

As a result, they are able to offer valuable insight into how the top landscape companies are making this economy work for them. They explore how they monitor the health of their businesses, become more efficient and manage their money.

I've always believed you can find opportunity in any kind of economy. My great-grandfather started our family business in 1933 in the midst of the Great Depression. He had to set his priorities, stay focused, and challenge the doom and gloom mindset that surrounded him at the time. But with a small loan borrowed against his life insurance policy he slowly and steadily grew a business that would go on to sustain three more generations of employees.

With a similar tenacity and a sharp focus on priorities, let's use these shared strategies to power through the challenges that hold others back.

Best regards,

DAN ARIENS

President  
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INNOVATIVE  
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# POWERING THROUGH A RECESSION

**R**ecessions are great at teaching company leaders how to trim the fat from their enterprises. But it's true that you can't cut your way to prosperity. *LM* interviewed executives at three companies to learn their strategies for growth.

## THE BRICKMAN GROUP

If any company knows about surviving economic fluctuations, it would be the Brickman Group. The company has survived through feast and famine since its inception in 1939. Today, the Brickman Group maintains a presence in 29 states through 165 branch offices, and wrapped up 2011 with a projected \$850 million to \$900 million in revenue.

The company focuses on commercial work, with landscape maintenance as its core business. Two other core competencies include enhancement services and snow removal, with the latter recently expanding. Value-added services include design, water management, irrigation and technical and horticultural expertise.

Brickman President Mark Hjelle says one of the company's successful strategies is focusing on "constant improvement" of quality, service and efficiency, despite the economy's status. While some companies may make snap deci-

Company executives offer their solutions for surviving challenging economic times.

BY CAROL BRZOZOWSKI

sions in challenging economies, Hjelle points out the service business calls for setting reasonable goals with work teams, inspiring employees to do their best.

"We stay focused on great service and strong client relationships, regardless of economic conditions," he says.

Hjelle says the focus on customer and employee needs are the two biggest metrics in determining the health of the company's business.

"With solid leadership and constantly improving business processes, the financial results follow," he adds. "A lot of times in this type of environment, people try to chase revenue, and if you're not disciplined, there can be a lot of challenges being successful with that strategy."

The company focuses on "delighting" its customers, Hjelle says: "Foremost is taking care of those long-term relationships. We listen to the things that are changing for them, and ask how we can adjust to accommodate their needs. We offer them the additional technical expertise they may desire to look at issues on their sites."

The company focuses on core

values such as doing a task right the first time, and using data to plan its corporate direction. Other values include keeping one's word, making decisions that benefit the team as a whole rather than just one person, and being fair and honest in all dealings, Hjelle says.

The Brickman Group endeavors to train and retain good





employees to maintain its success.

“We talk a lot about great crews, great branches, a great company,” says Hjelle. “A lot of it is treating them the way you would want to be treated.”

## THE GREENERY

The establishment of an Employee Share Ownership Program (ESOP) has made a difference for The Greenery in Hilton Head, SC. Led by Lee Edwards, The Greenery covers coastal South Carolina and Georgia, doing mostly residential work in Hilton Head and commercial in its other markets; services are 70% maintenance, 30% installation.

It took time for employees to embrace the concept of having ownership in the company, but once they started seeing the value of their shares rising on their annual stock certificates, they started to realize the role they created in the company success, Edwards notes.

“A lot of people think businesses are created to make jobs,” says Edwards. “That’s not the

case. Companies are created to make money for the owner. We’re no different. We’re trying to be a profitable company. But in this case, everyone who works here who is vested starts to see the profits going back to them — and they develop an ‘ownership’ mentality.”

The company’s mission statement is to be the highest quality landscaper in the markets it serves — not to be the cheapest, most expensive or the biggest, Edwards says.

The Greenery team has maintained its philosophy throughout the recession, and has worked with clients who have taken a hit by the economy through decreasing hotel bookings, empty office space or foreclosures. That creates a tendency for property owners to seek the lowest bid for landscape services.

Edwards tells those clients his company has been with them in good times, and will continue to partner with them in bad times.

“We’ve told them, ‘We know the income is not what it used to be, so let’s tailor a program for this

property that will make it look the best it can for what you can afford,’” he says, adding that as times improve for those clients, the previous service level is reinstated.

Still, there are some who will go elsewhere.

“We lost a little business like that,” Edwards says. “We had an awful 2008 and 2009, but we grew in 2010 and 2011.”

The Greenery also has acquired smaller competitors to expand its market share, and has pursued municipal work in an effort to diversify.

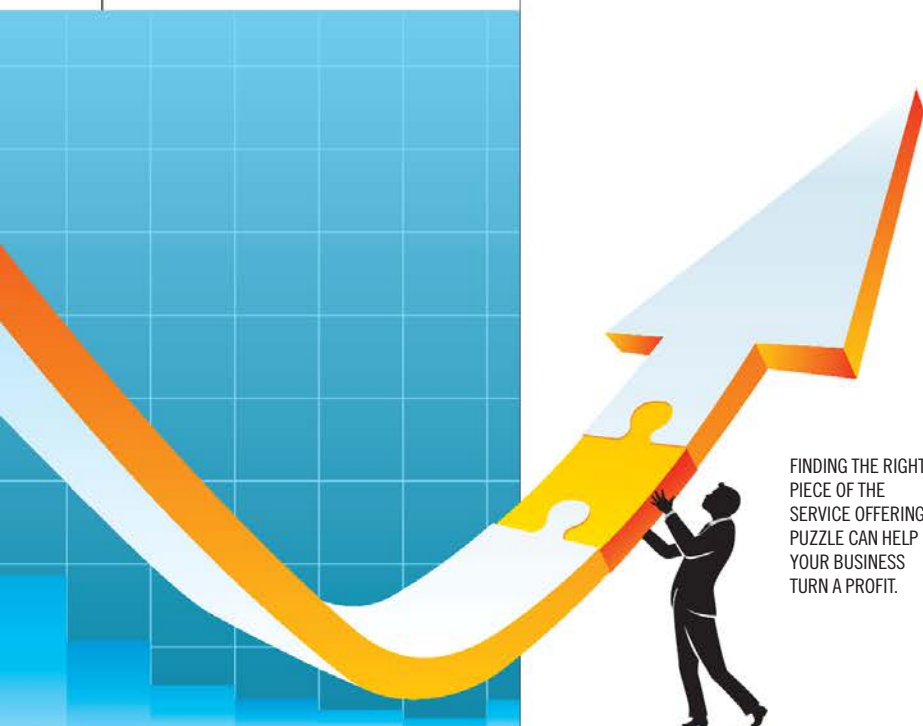
“It used to be there was always lots of new construction happening, and as soon as we built an entrance or an amenities center in a new community, we’d roll into the maintenance,” Edwards says. “Those days are over. We’ve had to find new ways to bring in new clients, and that’s going out and knocking on a lot more doors than we used to.”

Keeping an eye on the health of the business has meant tracking labor costs and other expenses on a daily basis, Edwards says. He’s asked vendors for early pay discounts, reducing the MOD rate on the Worker’s Compensation, and canceling services that are “nice,” but not necessary, such as coffee services.

“What’s enabled us to grow in this economy is the employee ownership,” Edwards says. “I can’t stress that enough. When clients see our employees on their job working with pride, showing up looking sharp and doing a conscientious job, people notice it.”

## AMERICAN LANDSCAPE SYSTEMS

American Landscape Systems began in 1985 doing residential work. Today, the company’s sole focus is on the commercial market, with services in landscape and irrigation installation, maintenance and hardscape in the Dallas/Fort



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Worth region. The company also does irrigation repair, and serves as a general contractor for several park and streetscape projects.

“We didn’t want to be reliant upon any one type of commercial work,” Joseph Angelone, vice president of American Landscape Systems, says of the company management’s decision 10 years ago to switch its focus. “You don’t want to be doing all residential work, and then the residential bust happens and you’re basically starting over. We wanted to be able to perform in different markets, so when one goes down and the other goes up, we’d still have an even spread of work.”

Today, the company is finding work in the municipal sector.

“Municipalities are still building schools, streets and new parks because they build their bond packages over four and five years, so you really don’t get that up and down you get on the private development side,” Angelone says.

A company’s bonding capability is critical for government work, Angelone notes.

“If you don’t have the

financial stability or the capability to provide the bond, you can’t do work for them,” he says. “That will separate you from your competitors quite a bit, because there are a lot of new or smaller companies that don’t have the financial capability to do so. A bonding company won’t stand behind them.”

Bonded work currently comprises 75% of the company’s business, Angelone says.

American Landscape Systems also has a network of subcontractors, which enables the company to act as a general contractor for larger landscape and irrigation projects. Plus, Angelone says his team is always seeking new revenue streams. For example, the company provides construction of playgrounds and screen walls, which block noise and provide privacy for developments.

“There’s a lot of money that goes into those,” says Angelone, noting that the first one the company did was a \$100,000 playground.

Looking ahead, the company’s goal is to become more service-oriented,

Angelone says.

“Service contracts — ongoing maintenance for clients — are 25% of what we do. We’d like it to be at 50% or 60%,” he says. “You can rely on it, because it’s an annual agreement that gets renewed each year. That allows you to count on parts of your business that are going to be there, no matter what happens in the market.”

American Landscape Systems has from 90 to 115 employees. “That’s a small fluctuation for a company of our type,” Angelone says.

American Landscape Systems offers its employees health insurance and the opportunity to make overtime pay.

Managing the company’s cash flow means making sure accounts receivable are paid within 30 to 45 days, Angelone says.

“If you’re putting out enough work that you’ll have money coming in a timely fashion, the basic investment we have as a company is 30 to 45 days of payroll, and we’re able to keep going,” he says. “If we grow the company, we’re going to grow the revenue, so in turn that takes care of the payroll situation.”

It’s also important to have positive credit alliances with vendors, Angelone says.

“You’ve got to keep your vendors and give them a complete understanding of what’s going on with your company,” he says. “If vendors know what’s going on with their invoices, it means a lot to them. Alliances with vendors are just as important as your employees, and being able to have six to eight weeks of payroll invested in the company before you receive a dollar back is how we do it.” ■

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THE BRICKMAN  
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An illustration on a teal background. On the left, a black stethoscope is shown. On the right, a white dart is hitting the bullseye of a target. A yellow sticky note is attached to the top left.

## KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Monitoring key performance indicators helps prevent small problems from turning into big nightmares.

BY HEATHER TAYLOR

# MEASURING YOUR COMPANY'S HEALTH

**I**n business dealings, surprises generally aren't desirable. As the managers at Russell Landscape can attest, even companies that plan well can discover an overlooked item that has the potential to throw goals off-track. According to Teddy Russell,

CFO and partner of the Atlanta-based firm, one of Russell's largest divisions had a problem last year. It was an issue the team faced head-on.

"After looking at every property maintained by this division, it was determined two of the largest properties were utilizing more resources than budgeted," he

explains. "We made some adjustments, and met with the customer to discuss future pricing."

Russell, along with other Green Industry business leaders, says that companies with any business sense already are monitoring metrics such as revenue and sales figures. But there are other benchmarks to

keep an eye on if there's any hope of avoiding bad surprises. Here's a guide to other important metrics that landscape contractors say should be followed regularly, along with the frequency at which they should be examined.

**—1**

**Accounts receivable/payable**

Frequency: weekly/monthly

At Russell Landscape's weekly meeting, department heads review cash flow and sales reports along with receivables and payables.

"One item we never skip is the collection of delinquent payments for services performed," Russell says. "We devote a tremendous amount of time to this crucial task."

Each of Russell Landscape's 15 divisions is set up with an identical chart of accounts so

revenue and expenses can be monitored and compared across all areas of the company.

Owners review the figures on a monthly basis. Billings and work orders are also reviewed monthly.

"Assuming a company has systems and procedures in place to ensure profitable estimating and efficient operations, then a company needs to make sure the invoice is sent out in a timely manner," Russell says.



TEDDY RUSSELL

**—2**

**Production hours**

Frequency: weekly

Every week, the department heads at Westco Grounds Maintenance Co. gather to scrutinize what production hours should be versus what was charged. Before the field

crew members' paychecks are processed, supervisors can determine whether there's a variance from the scheduled production hours — and if so, what the problem was. Reasons for discrepancies can include equipment problems, traffic or new foremen, says Mike Palermo, vice president of the Houston-based company's maintenance division.

A report is processed on Monday afternoon for the previous week's labor and production figures. Supervisors and managers have about 12 hours to review the reports before their weekly Tuesday morning meeting. Once the reports are reviewed and reconciled, they're given to the payroll department for processing.

A primary goal is to review whether labor hours went over the production hours planned for each product, but it's just as important to examine why sometimes there are fewer labor hours than production hours, Palermo adds.

MONITORING AND TRACKING KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS HELPS BUSINESS OWNERS HIT THEIR MARKS.



**MONITOR THESE TWO, TOO**

**Fuel costs.** Sure, nothing can be done to stop fuel prices from skyrocketing, but if costs are rising above what was anticipated, adjustments need to be made elsewhere to compensate.

"It's a huge amount," Randy Newhard says of his fuel bill, adding it causes him to re-evaluate operations. "You have to figure out ways to reduce job costs, such as combine routes and trucks."

Newhard also responded to the soaring fuel prices by buying a fleet of fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles for the sales staff and managers.

**Lost items.** As the economy changed, managers at Russell Landscape Group decided that the company had to be as lean as possible.

"Our company now holds employees responsible for neglect or loss of company tools," Teddy Russell says. "Every crew is assigned tools and equipment, and must turn in old equipment to get it replaced. As the employees were held accountable, the expenses for items such as shovels, rakes, hand saws, etc., were lowered."

The company also started ordering this type of item in bulk versus at retail stores, which reduced the amount spent — as well as labor time spent off the jobsite. — HT



“Naturally, if hours logged are very off what our bid was, maybe there was work that hadn’t been done by the crew or foreman,” he says. “Whether it’s a residence or a community association or a strip center, we still want the job looking as pristine as it possibly can for the best possible price.”

### 3

#### **Labor hours/rates**

**Frequency:** daily/quarterly

-----  
 Keeping an eye on labor hours goes hand-in-hand with monitoring production hours.

Labor hours can sometimes be recorded inaccurately because of how the employees in the field fill them out, Palermo says.

“It’s not that employees will try to cheat, but sometimes they’re filing out the timecards at the end of the day, and not as they go along,” he says.

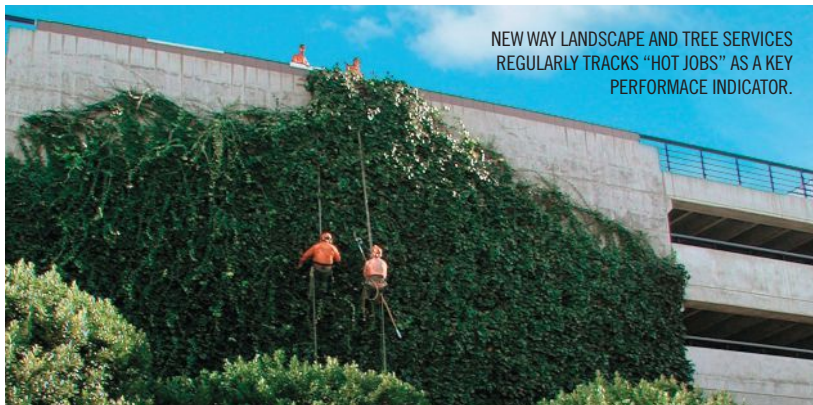
Russell agrees, noting that keeping an eye on the effect of a rising labor rate is just as important as keeping an eye on the labor hours.

“Successful landscape contractors know labor is the major expense and factor on whether the company will make the target profits,” he says. “There are critical times in our seasonal business where labor must be reduced or increased. Decisions hinge on variables including the weather, time of year and amount of work.”

Adjustments are warranted on a regular basis because the expense of labor can make a sizable difference on the bottom line, Palermo adds.

“If the labor rate has increased, we’re potentially losing money on the job,” he explains. “We look at where we stand with the average labor rate for company and factor it into overhead.”

This number is



NEW WAY LANDSCAPE AND TREE SERVICES REGULARLY TRACKS “HOT JOBS” AS A KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR.

reviewed — and adjusted as needed — on a quarterly basis at Westco Grounds Maintenance.

### 4

#### **Additional customer requests**

**Frequency:** weekly/monthly

-----  
 Officials at New Way Landscape and Tree Services closely watch a category of business they call “hot jobs.” Whether it’s a customer with many complaints, somebody who gives a 30-day notice to correct problems, a submitted punch list, or a number of other matters, they are items that get top billing at meetings.

The company uses a service request system to track the items.

“If a property manager, building owner, homeowner or association owner has an issue that gets called in — they can email, fax, phone — it gets uploaded into the website,” says Randy Newhard, CEO of the San Diego-based company. “The client gets a password, and can log in three days later and verify if the irrigation head was fixed, leaves were swept, the pile was picked up, whatever it may be. It saves six to seven phone calls per work order.”

The requests must be completed within seven days. To maintain accountability, manag-

ers review a detailed report each month that shows when each issue was settled.

#### **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Different companies might find that different methods or benchmarks work for them. But a general rule of thumb is that if one of a company’s key indicators appears to be off, it might not be monitored often enough.

“If there is one division not hitting their target margins or revenues, we will go into more detail and analyze more frequently,” Russell says.

It also could be a wise investment to hire a controller to closely follow important indicators, especially as they relate to the ever-changing areas of finance and government regulations. It is becoming more crucial to keep business performance on track, Russell says.

“This tough economy has changed the expected target goals; however, the process remains the same,” he concludes. “There is no longer any room for mistakes. All operations and company expenses need to be as efficient and cost-effective as possible to remain competitive.” ■

*Heather Taylor is a freelance journalist with 6 years’ experience writing for the Green Industry. Contact her at [bwoodtaylor@gmail.com](mailto:bwoodtaylor@gmail.com).*



RANDY NEWHARD

FINDING  
EFFICIENCY

# TAKING INVENTORY

SOME BUSINESS OWNERS  
ARE METICULOUS ABOUT  
TRACKING THEIR  
INVENTORIES.

Leading landscape professionals reflect on efficiencies on fleet and equipment needs without sacrificing quality.

BY TOM CRAIN

for evaluating their equipment needs and maintaining their vehicle fleets to keep costs in line, or even reduce costs.

## MORE WITH LESS

Dallas-based EarthWorks hasn't had to make any major changes in how it handles equipment because it has always been conservative on spending. The landscaper provides premier, full-service landscape management services for multi-family and commercial properties.

"Fleet and equipment management is a constant evolution for us," says General Manager Chris Lee. "Even in these tough times, you need to do what makes sense. You don't want to be chasing your tail, or it can be a downward spiral. No matter what, we never let short-term issues derail our long-term plans."

Dean Snodgrass, vice president of and one of three brothers operating Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping in Portland, OR, agrees that

"even when times are tough, we don't advocate cutting service or routine inspections on our fleet and equipment."

Many landscapers are saving money by downsizing the size of their trucks for their crews, doing more with less equipment — and in some instances, relying on alternative transportation.

"There was a time when a large fleet made me happy," says Snodgrass. "But we realize now that we don't necessarily need large, heavy trucks on-site all the time and for every job. We are always re-thinking the size of vehicles necessary. In some instances, we even encourage our crew to use light rail for their prime source of transportation to get to jobsites downtown or at the airport."

In the past, EarthWorks leased its fleet, but now it owns all its vehicles. "When we were leasing, it cost us more money," says Lee. He found that most leasing companies charge a "management fee" built into the lease rate. "Unless you plan to lean heavily on the leasing company for disposition or other value-added services they provide, you can borrow money a lot cheaper from your bank."

## BUDGET AHEAD

When it comes to budgeting for vehicles and equipment, landscape leaders look closely at projected

In today's challenging economic environment, landscape professionals are finding it crucial to keep service and repair costs down. Many financially strapped equipment and fleet managers are caught up in the daily grind of keeping old, faulty equipment in service for short-term gain — without any well thought-out, condition-based maintenance or equipment management strategy in place for the long run.

Should you repair your existing equipment, or spend the money to purchase new? We found some leading landscape professionals willing to offer their tips and tricks



equipment maintenance costs and evaluating prior repairs. Proper budgeting, maintaining good records and being proactive on repairs are sure-fire ingredients.

Each year, Cagwin & Dorward Landscaping Services, in the San Francisco Bay area, projects fleet and equipment sales revenues and maintenance expenditures for the upcoming year based upon actual costs from the previous year.

“We drill down on actual equipment purchases,” says Steve Glennon, vice president, treasurer and COO.

Cagwin & Dorward uses tracking software to evaluate its remaining vehicle and equipment life versus the cost of repair and replacement to make the decision about repairing existing equipment or spending the money to purchase new.

“We try to keep the evaluation process simple by breaking down the condition of each unit into four main categories: age of unit, running condition and interior and exterior conditions,” says Glennon. “After that, it’s just making quality decisions based on data and budgets.”

Dennis’ Seven Dees has a similar system. “We know what expenses go into service work, and what portion goes toward repair,”

says Snodgrass. “To make a decision about when to retire a vehicle, we review all of the data. We do a physical check-up and talk to the operator. We will review what money has been spent.”

When repair costs outweigh the actual value of the piece of equipment, EarthWorks replaces it. “If repair and replacement parts costs are 60% or more of the actual value of the piece of equipment, it’s taken out of commission,” says Lee.

Dennis’ Seven Dees eliminates extra expenses, like towing bills or major damage repairs, which Snodgrass says can add up significantly to the bottom line.

“We keep close tabs on the performance of our vehicles by having our operators give us constant feedback,” he says, noting his firm also tracks all repairs on hand equipment such as blowers, edgers and trimmers to determine turnover by projected repair costs and performance.

EarthWorks used to have a policy to sell and replace all its smaller equipment at the end of every season. “What we sold it for did not cover the capital of the initial outlay,”

THE CAGWIN & DORWARD TEAM USES TRACKING SOFTWARE TO DETERMINE THE REMAINING LIFE OF ITS VEHICLES.

says Lee. “After subtracting the maintenance and repair savings, it was still 30% more expensive.”

Larger landscapers find it feasible to do their own repairs with in-house maintenance staff.

“We perform 95% of our own repairs in-house,” says Glennon. Cagwin & Dorward still finds it challenging to manage repairs, however, because its operations are so spread out. “Our entire geographic footprint covers 14,000 square miles,” Glennon says.

### EMPLOYEE BUY-IN

The landscapers Landscape Management interviewed all agree that it’s a good practice to encourage support from their crews on equipment maintenance. Dennis’ Seven Dees conducts a tag-out system.

“When a vehicle is tagged, it goes into the work order list for our mechanics to schedule,” says Snodgrass. “We write it up quickly, and can do a 24-hour-or-better turnaround on most basic repair jobs.”

EarthWorks includes discussions on equipment conditions in conjunction with its weekly safety meetings. “We go over basic maintenance tasks on how to protect the equipment they use, based on whatever problems the mechanics are seeing frequently,” says Lee. “Cleaning filters, checking oil and properly greasing fittings are commonly stressed to all our crews.”

Maintaining longstanding, positive relationships with dealers and contractors is also stressed, to encourage them to provide great deals and terms — especially during these difficult economic times. ■

*The author has been a freelance journalist and contributor to B2B publications, including many in the Green Industry for more than 20 years. Contact him at Tom Crain [tecrain@goingreenguy.com](mailto:tecrain@goingreenguy.com).*





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## A little give and take

**E**very day, Alonzo sat on a crate outside Walgreens, cheerfully greeting passersby. His jovial “hi!” rang out like a song as yuppie parents and their children strolled by.

Alonzo lived in the men’s shelter up the street from me in Chicago. He donned a worn black cap, jeans and a grungy shirt every day. He was thin as a rail, yet he never asked for anything. He reached out his hand, not for money, but to shake the hands of others.

Whenever Alonzo saw me, he hugged me, and his voice inevitably rose into a sing-songy, “How ya doin’?” When he asked that question, he listened to the answer.

I lived in that neighborhood for four years. In all that time, Alonzo never asked me for money, and I never gave him any. I rarely gave him anything but attention.

Occasionally I’d buy him lunch, or on hot summer days, a Dr. Pepper — his favorite. I considered him my friend. Maybe I was naïve, but conversation seemed to mean more to him than money.

If I gave the same attention to every homeless person that I did to Alonzo, I would never get anything done. And if I gave them all money or bought them all lunch, I would be as broke as they are. So I understand why people walk by homeless people on the street.

And I can’t blame the couple who blew right by a homeless man in the days leading up to Christmas, even as he implored them repeatedly, “Please help a hungry man out.”

I was on my way to do last-minute Christmas shopping. Heck, I felt grateful the man wasn’t talking to me. I kept walking. Then I turned around.

“You hungry?” I asked the man. There was a Jimmy John’s sub shop right there. “Wait here. I’ll buy you a sandwich.”

“I don’t want a sandwich,” he said. “I want wings.”

Wings. Huh. If I had been smart I would have told him right then and there, “It’s Jimmy John’s or bust.”

But I didn’t. Instead, I found myself being carried along wildly, as if by some strong current. So off we went to get wings.

By the time it was over, the man was dining on a burrito grande and a Corona inside an upscale Mexican restaurant and I was out \$20. I left thoroughly angry at myself, wondering what just happened, trying not to think about what was about to transpire inside the restaurant.

People always say, “Beggars can’t be choosers.” Apparently they can be, at least when I’m around. I may have lost 20 bucks from this experience, but I gained priceless wisdom.

There are various levels of giving, and now I see there are various levels of taking, too. You can give begrudgingly. You can give selflessly. You can accept graciously. Or you can take greedily.

In buying the homeless man dinner, I discovered far more than the going rate of a burrito. I learned you can give willingly and still be taken for a ride; that generosity is not always noble; that with the right audience, even a beggar can be demanding.

Later that evening, I continued my shopping. I bought gifts, but my mind was on my friend Alonzo. I look for him whenever I visit Chicago. The last time I went, his crate was there, but he wasn’t. If he had been there, I might have bought him lunch. Or I might just have given him a smile. It’s the only thing he ever asked me for.

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In buying the man dinner, I discovered far more than the going rate of a burrito.

# H-2B OR NOT H-2B

Contractors across the country are battling  
Department of Labor changes to the H-2B visa program  
that if implemented could cripple their businesses.

**T**hat sigh of relief you might have heard late last month was the collective exhalation from contractors across the country expressing their relief that two rule changes that would drastically alter the H-2B visiting worker program were put on hold until later this year.

On December 16, Congress included language as part of its spending bill that delayed the change in the Department of Labor's (DOL) wage methodology that would have dramatically increased the hourly rate contractors are required to pay their H-2B visa workers. The delay pushes the rule changes to Sept. 30 of this year. Contractors are still waiting to hear the rulings on two separate lawsuits tied to the DOL changes.

"It's great we've got that long extension, but we would have preferred to get the ruling on our lawsuit," says Tom Delaney, government affairs director for the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). "At least everybody knows for the next eight months where they're at. The judge really has until September to rule, but we think she'll rule well before September."

The current uncertainty leaves some contractors with an unpleasant nagging feeling in the back of their brains.

"When are they going to say, 'It's not going to happen. You don't have to worry about this anymore,'" asks Bill Gordon, owner of Signature Landscape, Olathe, KS. "I don't think it's going to happen. I don't think legislators are willing to push hard enough to eliminate the stupidity they've come up with."

The delay allows contractors to move ahead with their plans for 2012.

"It buys us the spring and the summer, but the same problem rears its head (in the fall)," says Fred Haskett, managing partner/operations for U.S. Lawns, Defiance, MO. "We're going to spend a huge amount of our time going back to Congress again and spending a lot of time that we could be devoting to building our businesses, taking care of our clients, taking care of

our employees and creating jobs into fighting the federal government on a continuous level."

According to Delaney, senators and members of the House of Representatives are finally beginning to realize this is a small business issue and not an immigration issue.

"People in Congress understand what we're dealing with now and are becoming more empathetic to us," Delaney says. "It's a result of our lobbyists and our members. They finally understand what impact the DOL would have."

The lawsuits and rule changes are just as important to contractors who don't use the H-2B program.

"If we lose our H-2B workforce and are looking for replacement workers at the local level, we're going to aggressively advertise and look for people, and guess who we're going to be recruiting," Haskett says. "We're going to look for the guys that have some experience."

*continued on page 32*





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

We're practically tripping them on the street and dragging them in the building. And we can't get them to work. We've never had more than one or two people (in 7 years) show up for an interview properly. We've had one person show up for work. They lasted for two days.

— **FRED R. HASKETT**  
*Managing Partner/  
Operations, U.S. Lawns*



Haskett's temporary workers usually arrive in mid-March and leave near the end of November.



*continued from page 30*

### The problem

The H-2B program is necessary, contractors argue, because they cannot fill positions any other way. Contractors recite story after story about hiring applicant after applicant who never shows up. And the few who do rarely stay beyond the first day.

“Yes, I’ve relied on the program because the program has brought me a group of professional work ethic-oriented guys who have made us what we are,” says Josh Denison, president of Denison Landscaping, Fort Washington, MD. “There are no call outs; there are no no-shows. They come here to earn a living for their families, make money to send home, live a good life and come back the next year.”

It’s not for a lack of trying to find domestic workers.

“I’ve had 170 guys walk out the door with the season here,” Denison says.

As of late December — with his

H-2B workers back across the border for several weeks — the weather was still good enough for landscaping work to continue.

“All of our contractors are still making that big end-of-the-year push,” Denison says. “They want to get work in the ground; they want to get work done. We are a seasonal need company, but with the weather the way it’s been, we’ve stayed busy. My (H-2B) guys have left, and I would normally hire 25-35 (domestic workers). That would have gotten me through the winter, but I can’t even get those guys in the door.”

“In the last 25 days, I have hired 29 people of whom (only) four are left — that’s hired and came to work.”

“I feel I could have given those guys \$35 an hour and those guys wouldn’t have shown up for work,” Denison continues. “I talked to a gentleman last week who said, ‘Why should I come bust my ass and break my back when I can sit at home and collect unemployment? Why should I go to work?’”

It seems, in less than a generation, landscaping has gone from a good way to make some money to a job no Americans want.

“The culture of America is different than it was 25 years ago,” Gordon says. “Hard labor, seasonal work is something Americans just don’t want — especially young Americans. They’d rather work fast food.”

It hasn’t always been that way.

“My dad grew up — if he didn’t work, they didn’t eat,” Haskett says. “That’s gone in this country and we are the worse for it, unfortunately. By trying to be good, we’re hurting our work ethic.”

“The safety net in this country has gotten so elaborate with government assistance,” Haskett continues. “You don’t go hungry; you don’t go without clothing; you don’t go without shelter. You can live a basic existence without having to work.”

### H-2B means American jobs

The irony for many contractors is that



## HOW BAD IS IT

Josh Denison, president of Denison Landscaping, Fort Washington, MD, spoke with one applicant who hadn't worked in two years. At his last job he was making \$18 an hour as a foreman.

"I offered him \$12 for (the first) two weeks and after that, if he was good, we could sit down and renegotiate and talk about his salary," Denison recalls. "The guy hasn't had a job in two years."

He told the applicant, "'Here's a job that's going to pay you \$12/hour for two weeks at time-and-a-half over 40 hours, and we're working a 55-hour workweek. In two weeks we're going to sit down and talk about money. If you can do what you said you can do you'll make somewhere in that \$15-\$17 range."

"You have to have the realization that you were making \$18 (an hour) at a place that you'd worked at for 19 years. You didn't walk in making \$18 an hour there." He hadn't considered that.

"He called me at noon and told me he couldn't accept it. Here's a guy that's been collecting unemployment, his benefits are running out now, I offered him a job and he didn't take the job."

losing the H-2B program (or making it too expensive) would result in the loss of American jobs.

The program can be quite valuable for contractors. Haskett has a workforce of 41, of which 28 are seasonal and 25 are H-2B visa workers.

"Since we started using the program, this company has grown 400%," says Haskett. "Prior to 2005 our annualized turnover rate was north of 250% at the seasonal workers. Today that is between 5% and 7%."

"Every time we bring in three or four of these guys, we add another full-time, year around job with benefits," he continues. "It creates jobs. This action on the government will kill jobs and kill companies."

For most business owners, there seems to be a love-hate relationship with the H-2B visa program. They need the program to grow and maintain their businesses, but they would much prefer to wean themselves off it. "I'd like to think that I have the ability to become

less dependent on the program in the future," Denison says. "That would be a goal — to become less dependent on the program. But how do I become less dependent on a program whose people have become so ingrained in what we've done? They're not guys who just get here on a bus. They're my guys. They all have faces, they all have names; they all have families; they all have needs. If I become less dependent on the program, who doesn't come back next year?"

Gordon finds value in the program as well, but he's also been burned by the experience.

"I've been beat up by the program so many times," he says. "We're continuing to use it but we're trying not to be too dependent on it because it's so undependable."

### The lawsuits

While the judges in a pair of lawsuits — one in Florida and another in Louisiana — have yet to rule, contractors who use the temporary visa worker



◆ Signature Landscape's Operations Support Manager, Fernando Cassas hands out visas to the company's temporary workers in Monterrey, Mexico.

◆ After spending the day filling out forms and answering questions at the U.S. consulate in Monterrey, Mexico, Signature Landscape's H-2B workers wait for the bus to arrive that will take them to Kansas.



## THE H-2B BATTLE

program are once again able to plan for the 2012 season.

"We've been involved in the Florida litigation suit since its inception," Denison says. "We felt that this suit was our only chance to get someone to listen. We did not step into litigation against a branch of the federal government lightly. It was our last effort, our only hope."

Before Congress pushed back implementation of the wage rules, it was thought the judges were set to announce their rulings. This delay allows them to spend more time on their decisions. Even if the judges ultimately favor the Green Industry's position, the rulings are unlikely to end the debate. The pro-union (and seemingly pro-Administration) forces that pushed the DOL to make changes to the wage methodology in the first place will likely urge an appeal if the legal decisions go against them.

But that it's even gone this far is wrong, according to Delaney.

"Congress changes what the minimum wage is and here's the DOL coming in and saying how much you have to pay your workers," Delaney says. "It's sort of Communistic. We'll have to keep fighting until some better system comes along that helps those who use and need the program."

### The future

The H-2B situation looks almost exactly as it did at this time last year. Contractors will have the opportunity to petition for their H-2B workers and plan their seasons accordingly. As it stands now, if nothing changes, the wage and hiring provisions will automatically go into effect Sept. 30.

If the provisions do go into effect, most contractors will likely highly curtail their use of or altogether abandon the H-2B program. If decisions are delayed again, contractors might again get stuck in planning limbo.

"How in the hell do I develop a proper business plan to protect my year-round full-time people with all this uncertainty — with our current administration try-

## H-2B AFFECTS EVERYBODY

### Hispanic leaders and landscape execs say the wage rule impacts Hispanics and Americans alike.

BY BETH GERACI

According to Ralph Egues Jr., executive director of the National Hispanic Landscape Alliance (NHLA), the H-2B visa program has long been an important source of labor for landscape companies. What's more, he says, it has created for Hispanics an opportunity for upward mobility.

"It has created conditions where U.S. Hispanics have been able to advance more rapidly than they otherwise would have in the landscape industry," he says.

One big complaint the NHLA has is that H-2B workers are difficult if not impossible to replace by domestic workers.

"We try to hire locals, but it's very, very hard to train those guys and keep them on," says Jerry Maldonado, vice president of San Antonio, TX-based Maldonado Nursery Inc. "It's manual labor, and it's just not something people here are looking for. We can't find these

folks in San Antonio. They're just not available. If they were, maybe we wouldn't be here talking."

Jesus "Chuy" Medrano, owner of CoCal Landscape, Denver, CO, and president of the National Hispanic Landscape Alliance, knows that all too well.

In 2008, Medrano wasn't able to bring in H-2B laborers because all of the 66,000 H-2B jobs allowed by the government had been filled by the time he made his request. Without H-2B workers, Medrano went through 1,300 domestic workers that season.

"It was just a nightmare," says Medrano. "If you're going on a long trip and you're running out of money, it's kind of like that."

Being a Hispanic business owner makes for an interesting dynamic when it comes to H-2B issues. The idea of raising H-2B workers' hourly rate is "kind of like a double-edged sword," says Medrano. "It not only would make it harder for

us to operate, but it also feels like they're singling us out as Hispanics."

If the Department of Labor does rule that landscape companies must raise the hourly wages for their workers, says Maldonado, "it puts us in a position where we can't use the program and will have to decrease the size of our companies or close them down."

The DOL should consider the immense ripple effect raising workers' wages would create, Egues says.

"The H-2B program is very important to the growth of the industry and to maintaining the kinds of jobs that Americans want," he explains. "Let's say your job is to supervise workers but you have no workers to supervise. You lose your job, right? And then if your organization is cut by 40% or 50%, do you need the same numbers of human resources representatives? No you don't. So you see now your whole company is shrinking and you're laying off jobs that frankly, Americans aspire to."

But Egues is hopeful about the judge's decision.

"When I say I'm optimistic for the outcome of our lawsuit, I base it in part on the filing itself, but also on the action that the judge has already taken on related matters," he says. "So far, so good."



CoCal Landscape owner and National Hispanic Landscape Alliance President Jesus "Chuy" Medrano (right) talks with Congresswoman Linda Sanchez (center) and another attendee at an NHLA reception.





◆ H-2B workers provide many companies like Signature Landscape a stable and reliable workforce they can't find any other way.

▼ Fred Haskett hosts a cookout at his house at the end of each season before his H-2B visa workers return home to their families.



ing to stick their nose in all these details with small business?" Haskett asks. "I've got enough trouble trying to keep the doors open in a recession. The uncertainty is almost as bad. At least if I knew what was going on, I could pick Plan A or Plan B."

What becomes more interesting is how the situation plays out if the wage and hiring rules go into effect, making the H-2B program very expensive to use.

"There are two groups of contractors in our market," Gordon says. "The ones that are going to completely turn their heads the other way with regards to immigration, which is most contractors. The other ones are going to fight like hell to make sure they have a legal workforce. H-2B is the best way to get that done."

Given this is in an election year, it seems unlikely Congress will act to

make any sweeping changes.

"My greatest hope is that we have a new administration and a new DOL secretary that favors us over some of the labor unions," Delaney says. "We can fix the system, but don't break it. The immigration system is broken and when we try to work on it they look to the H-2B program, which everybody admits that we still have to have. When we fix the immigration system we want a program like the H-2B to work."

### The human element

While it's easy to look at the H-2B as a numbers game, it's easy to forget the people involved.

"My guys aren't just my guys," Denison says. "My guys that have been here seven, eight, nine years have become part of this company. They've become part of what makes Denison Landscaping what it is today."

And saying goodbye at the end of the season is difficult.

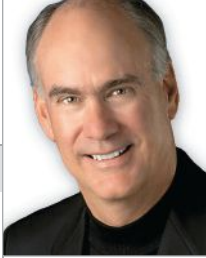
"It's a bittersweet experience for them and for us," says Haskett, who hosts a cookout at his home at the end of every season.

"We're happy that they're going home, and they're happy that they're going home to see their wives and children," he says. "Ninety-five percent of them are married and have families. That's what motivates them to come here. It's family-oriented. They're going to their wives and children. They have not seen them physically for eight or nine months. It's a tremendous sacrifice they make — to be able to earn a living."

No matter what happens, the goal is to keep the doors open. The H-2B program makes that easier. But for Denison, the mission is clear.

"We're going to survive next year," Denison says. "Our plan for the next couple years is to survive. Our plan is to be here. We're going to do everything necessary to be here. I'm going to continue forward and use the program." LM

*Additional reporting done by Senior Editor Beth Geraci*



## THE BENCHMARK

FRANK ROSS

The author, owner-manager of 3PG Consulting, is a 45-year industry veteran. Reach him at [fross@questex.com](mailto:fross@questex.com).

FYI

Beginning with this issue, the Benchmarking column written by Kevin Kehoe, will rotate among the 3PG Consulting group's three owner-managers: Kehoe, Frank Ross and Jeff Harkness.

# Why are you in business?

**S**o, what's your budget like this year? *Budget!?! Frank, you know you can't budget in this industry! There are way too many variables — there's the weather, there are labor issues, things die... Frank! It simply can't be done. No way, no how, just forget it!*

Sound familiar? I hear it all the time. But the truth is, budgeting *can* be done — and very easily, too, when the process is taken one step at a time.

I suspect budgeting gets its bad rap because of the more popular methods being used today. One such method is what I refer to as the Ego Method. This is where ownership reviews the income statement for the year just completed. They see the revenue figure was at \$750,000, for example, and for no other reason other than to placate their egos, they set a goal of \$1 million for the next year. Why \$1 million? Other than the fact that it has a nice ring to it, I have no earthly idea.

Another method is the Inflation Method. Here, ownership looks at local statistics measuring inflation, and the record says that inflation was 4% for the most recent reporting year. Because they can think of no reason why not, they increase all of their figures by the inflationary 4%.

And then there is the Percentage Method. In their infinite wisdom, ownership picks a sales figure — it could be the \$1 million we mentioned earlier — and then figures all of next year's expenses will be the same percentage of sales as they were last year.

All of these methods focus on the top line of the income statement: *sales*.

## Time to realign

Why are you in business? Is it because of the bragging rights you achieve because of a higher sales figure? Hardly. You are in business to make a profit. Sales are simply a means to an end. Profits give you life. They give you purpose. And, they create the lifeblood of your business — cash flow.

So, if I were going to budget for next year's activities, where would I start? Certainly, not by asking how much sales I want to produce. I'd start with my motive for risking everything I own to do it all over again. I'd start my budget by looking at my bottom line, and calculating how much profit I need to make.

Notice my choice of words here. It's not how much profit I *want* to make. It's how much profit do I *need* to make?

I am often asked how much profit someone needs to make in his or her business. Honestly, I do not know the answer to that question, but I can suggest a process by which you can calculate the minimum amount of profit you need to make:

1. Add all of the principal payments you intend to pay on your outstanding notes.
2. To that figure, add the down payments and principal payments on any new fixed asset additions you intend to buy.
3. Add about 8% of your sales growth for next year over this.
4. Throw in some bonus expense for the job well done by the team.
5. Don't forget Uncle Sam: Figure 25% of the sum of the above for good measure.
6. Add it all up, and you've got a pretty good idea of what your minimum profit needs to be for your company to survive and prosper.

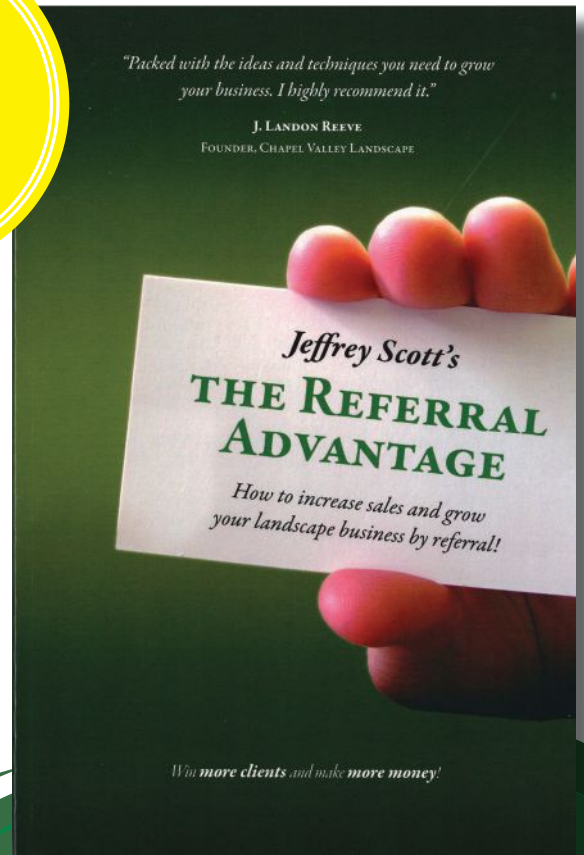
Budgeting is not a difficult process, so long as you know where to start. Don't wrestle with how much sales you might do next year. Start at the bottom line and work your way up the income statement. Start with how much profit you *need* to make, and build a winning budget.



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## THE REFERRAL ADVANTAGE

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Author: Jeffrey Scott

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**Landscape**  
Management



**COMPANY:** Lawn Pride

**TITLE:** General Manager

**YEAR FOUNDED:** 1983

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:** 17

**INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT:**  
PLANET

**HOBBIES:** Shopping and spending time with my family

**FAMILY:** Husband – Bryan; children – Jacob, 9; Lexi, 11; Katie, 17; and Justin, 20

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

As the economy remains in flux, **Susan McIntosh** is looking for ways “to continue to prove our value to our customers.” As General Manager of Lawn Pride, Indianapolis, IN, McIntosh understands that while the company has yet to face any significant challenges from the economic downturn, “I don’t want to assume it will remain so in the future. So we will continue to find ways to make our business more valuable to our customers.”

**What makes your company unique?** We are a mix of landscaping (commercial) and lawn care applications (residential). They are two very different businesses that complement each other very well. Additionally, we believe in maintaining a very professional image. We have a strong brand, which is represented on our vehicles, our uniforms and our marketing.

**How do you convey that message to your employees/customers?** Extensive and continuous training is something we really believe in. As a part of that training our crewmembers are encouraged to be efficient on both sides of the business. This is good for us as well as our customers. For us, it results in higher margins. For our customers, it results in faster, seamless service. Ultimately our customers don’t want to be burdened with our processes. They just want results.

**Can you describe your market and your customers?** We serve a nine-county area with a population of about 1.7 million people. We have a fairly traditional growing season, with the

bulk of our business occurring from March to November. Our foundation is and will be residential lawn care. It’s 85% of our business. Commercial services makes up the remaining 15% and that is comprised of lawn services, landscaping and snow removal.

**What challenges do you see in the lawn care segment of the industry?** Maintaining a competitive advantage will always remain a challenge. As players come and go and prices fluctuate, we work hard to communicate our value to new and existing customers. Secondly, we are working to hone in our core target market. Understanding who our customers are and what makes them tick will allow us to market our brand more effectively and efficiently.

**How are you addressing those challenges?** First, we’re rare in that we work with an ad agency to determine the best way to reach our type of consumer. We don’t just

trust our instincts; we solicit outside expertise in all of our marketing efforts. Secondly, we have invested in profiling our customer base to know exactly who buys our service and where they are located.

**What changes have you seen in the industry?** Marketing has changed substantially over the years. It used to be driven by Yellow Pages and now Internet and social media have taken over. Technology is now a big driver of our business as well. We have invested in IT to help make our internal processes more effective and appear more seamless to the customer.

**What is your strategy for growth?** Our target audience isn’t growing, so we have to seek growth within a defined market. So our strategy is pretty simple. We want to reach new customers in the most efficient and effective means possible. By reducing waste in our marketing and making use of new tech-

nologies, we hope to maintain existing customers and attract new ones.

**How has the economy affected your business, and how are you dealing with it?** While the housing decline has eliminated market growth, the downturn overall has been good for us. Homeowners are investing in their homes and lawns, which ultimately is good for business.

**What’s the best part of your job?** I never do the same thing two days in a row. So I love the variety. Also, I have learned the business from the ground up, which comes in handy when issues arise.

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# CHANGING THE WAY WE IRRIGATE, WITH *WaterSense*

**When water supplies** are tight and municipalities are scrambling to find solutions, it's often easy to target local landscapes with watering restrictions. Nationwide, residential outdoor water use exceeds 7 billion gallons of water each day, most of which is used for landscape irrigation. Experts estimate that as much as half of this water goes to waste due to evaporation, wind, and improperly scheduled irrigation systems. But with smart irrigation technologies on the rise, there may be a better way to water using Mother Nature as a guide.

## Look for the label

EPA created the WaterSense label in 2006 to help consumers find products that save water and perform well. To date, more than 4,000 models of plumbing products have earned the label. Working with more than 2,000 utility, manufacturer, retailer, distributor, and irrigation professional partners, WaterSense has helped consumers save 125 billion gallons

The Green Industry has a smart way to save a little green and blue.

BY **STEPHANIE TANNER**,  
U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL  
PROTECTION AGENCY (EPA)

of water and \$2 billion in utility bills over the past five years.

With the release of its final WaterSense Specification for Weather-Based Irrigation Controllers, EPA opens the program to the first outdoor watering product eligible to earn the label. Weather-based controllers use real-time, local climatological data to schedule irrigation. Once properly installed,

these controllers can do the thinking for homeowners and facility managers in terms of when and how much to water outdoors.

The WaterSense specification covers stand-alone controllers, add-on devices, or plug-in devices in residential and commercial applications. WaterSense-labeled irrigation controllers must be tested and certified to meet performance requirements based on the Smart Water Application Technologies (SWAT) protocol. SWAT includes performance measures of irrigation adequacy and irrigation excess, which measure how well the system meets plant water needs without overwatering. The specification also requires supplemental capabilities such as the ability to change irrigation schedules to accommodate local watering restrictions and the ability to connect to a rainfall device.

EPA has held various working groups, conducted independent research, and worked with numerous experts to determine the appropriate performance characteristics and testing protocols to ensure WaterSense-labeled controllers provide sufficient irrigation to promote plant health and meet the needs of landscape managers and utilities trying to reduce water waste.

EPA has held various working groups, conducted independent research, and worked with numerous experts to determine the appropriate performance characteristics and testing protocols to ensure WaterSense-labeled controllers provide sufficient irrigation to promote plant health and meet the needs of landscape managers and utilities trying to reduce water waste.





## Mother Nature beats the clock

An estimated 13.5 million irrigation systems are currently installed in residential lawns across the United States, and an additional 308,000 new systems are installed each year as a part of new home construction. The industry estimates indicate that less than 10% of the units already installed use weather-based controllers to schedule irrigation. Currently, the most common method used to schedule irrigation is a manually programmed clock timer that irrigates a specified amount on a preset schedule programmed by the user.

Clock timer controllers can be a significant source of wasted water, because irrigation schedules are often set to water during the height of the growing season, and might not be adjusted to reflect seasonal changes or changes in plant watering needs. Although plant water requirements decrease in the fall, many homeowners forget to reset their irrigation schedules, and landscapes will be watered in October as if it were July. Overwatering plants also results in shallow roots, weed growth, disease and fungus.

As an alternative to clock timer controllers, weather-based irrigation controllers can make irrigation schedule adjustments automatically by tailoring the amount, frequency, and timing of irrigation events based on current weather data and landscape conditions, applying water only when the landscape needs it, and promoting a healthier, more attractive landscape.



## Partnering with professionals

As the demand for “smart” irrigation technology increases, so does the demand for cutting-edge irrigation professionals. Proper installation, programming, and maintenance are key to ensuring that weather-based irrigation controllers save water on landscape irrigation and reduce runoff.

Professionals who have successfully completed a WaterSense-labeled certification program that focuses on water-efficient irrigation automatically qualify to become a WaterSense partner. EPA recommends homeowners and facility managers look for a WaterSense irrigation partner to design, install, audit, or maintain irrigation systems to ensure controller performance. WaterSense-labeled new homes that include an irrigation system require design or installation and audits to be conducted by an irrigation partner. Each year, WaterSense singles out one such partner and recognizes his or her efforts to promote water efficiency.

“My designs are only as good as the equipment in my legend,” explained Christopher Curry, the 2011 WaterSense Irrigation Partner of the Year. “The work done by the manufacturers in smart controllers really helps the overall goal to save water.”

To learn more about the WaterSense Specification for Weather-Based Irrigation Controllers, find WaterSense-labeled products, or learn more about WaterSense irrigation partners, visit [www.epa.gov/watersense/outdoor/index.html](http://www.epa.gov/watersense/outdoor/index.html). **LW**

## EDUCATION AND INNOVATION AT CLCA'S LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY SHOW!

We've got lots of NEW at this year's show to keep you on your A game!

Brought to you by the California Native Plant Society, Norman's Nursery and the Theodore Payne Foundation for Wildflowers and Native Plants, Native Plant Bingo is a new addition to CLCA's Landscape Industry Show for 2012! Horticulturists and show attendees could win \$100 cash and a book on native plants!

CLCA's new Technology Café features industry apps for the iPhone and Droid. Learn about networking on LinkedIn and Facebook. Also learn about Jibbiggo, Sprinkler Times, Soil Web, the Landscaper's Companion, ProntoForms, Fleetmatics, Heartland's new Mobuyle payment system and more! Bamboo Pipeline will also be available to show attendees the iPad.

Are you a good designer? Try this year's "Designer's Challenge" brought to you by the Association of Professional Landscape Designers (APLD). This contest shows how quickly you can think on your feet and communicate your finished design to your client. Speed is good, but quality of design is just as important. This fun, interactive, pen and paper challenge will have you thinking on your feet and will be over before the ink is dry!

CLCA's Landscape Industry Show features excellent seminars including Introduction to Green Wall Systems, Design and Installation and Dirt — Can You Dig It?, sponsored by the American Society of Landscape Architects, and Professional Selling Skills sponsored by Ewing Irrigation. Other seminars and CEU classes include: edibles, social media, pesticide technology, how to get paid in full and more! CLCA's Water Management Certification Workshop and test will also be available in English and Spanish.

Besides excellent educational opportunities, attendees have the opportunity to network and meet vendors. CLCA's Landscape Industry Show takes place Feb. 1-2, 2012 at the Los Angeles Convention Center in Los Angeles and is FREE to those who register in advance and \$5 at the door. Seminars are a bargain and begin at \$40 with unlimited classes for \$120. Attendees achieve an excellent return for their time as well as opportunities to grow! Register to attend for FREE today! Go to [www.clca.us/lis](http://www.clca.us/lis).

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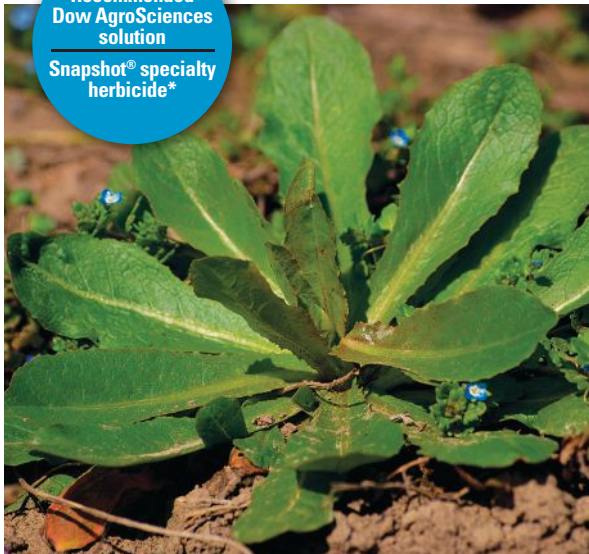
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California Landscape Contractors Association

# WEEDWATCH

STANDING SENTINEL TO PROTECT PLANT HEALTH

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## PRICKLY LETTUCE

*Lactuca serriola*

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

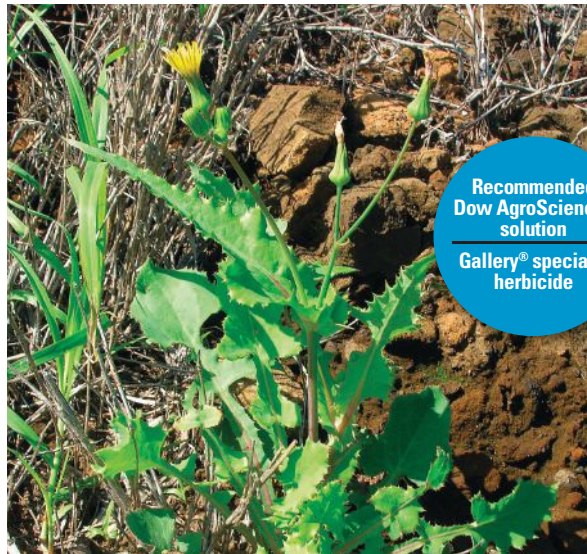
- ▶ This winter annual's leaves form in a basal rosette.
- ▶ It produces an upright stem with alternating, deeply lobed leaves, which feature a row of spines along the mid-vein of the lower surface.
- ▶ Its deep tap root will secrete a milky sap.
- ▶ Small, yellow flowers appear in late spring to early summer.

### CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Prickly lettuce is a weed commonly found in container plantings and nurseries. For optimum weed control and plant safety on a broad range of ornamentals, apply a pre-emergent herbicide that contains isoxaben.
- ▶ Till the area prior to planting, or pull any existing seedlings prior to pre-emergent herbicide application.

\* State restrictions on the sale and use of Snapshot apply.

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## ANNUAL SOWTHISTLE

*Sonchus oleraceus*

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This annual's bluish/green leaves form a rosette, deeply lobed with prickly spines on the margin.
- ▶ Yellow flowers, similar to dandelion, appear in mid- to late summer — but they form on a branched stalk vs. a hollow, solitary stem.
- ▶ Has a tap root, and all plant parts exude a milky sap when broken.
- ▶ It's often confused with prickly lettuce, but does not have spines along the mid-vein.

### CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ For optimum control, apply a pre-emergent herbicide, such as isoxaben, that is labeled for control of annual sowthistle.
- ▶ Pre-emergence herbicides must be applied before weeds germinate. Any existing annual sowthistle must be physically or chemically removed prior to pre-emergent herbicide application.
- ▶ Tilling of a landscape bed prior to planting and herbicide application will improve control of annual sowthistle.

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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P R O V E N   S O L U T I O N S

# LM REPORTS

YOUR GUIDE TO PRODUCT RESEARCH

## MAINTENANCE: MOWERS & ATTACHMENTS

### Gravely

The new Pro-Turn 400 zero-radius turn mower is designed for maximum operator comfort and efficiency. The mower features the industry's first air-suspension seat and a new effortless deck lift. The seven-gauge fabricated and welded X-Factor Deck features an all-new deck-lift system. Minimal force is required to raise and lower the deck, reducing operator fatigue, especially for operators who manually float the deck over the terrain. Combined with the dial adjust height-of-cut system, the Pro-Turn 400 makes changing cutting height simple and easy to learn. The dial system is faster than pin height-of-cut selectors on other decks, the company says. [Gravely.com](http://Gravely.com)



### Wright Commercial Products

The Stander X mower combines the feature-filled Stander with an easy-to-use deck-lift system and new AERO CORE deck design. The height of its 48-, 52- or 61-in. decks can now be adjusted on the fly with Wright's new-generation, height-adjustable deck. Its 9.5 mph cut speed increases productivity without sacrificing comfort. A suspension platform provides a smoother ride, and a full-length thigh-to-knee pad increases operator comfort. Plus, the open, unconfined design allows the operator to quickly step off in case of an emergency or to pick up debris. [WrightMfg.com](http://WrightMfg.com)

### John Deere



The Z700 ZTrak Series includes the Z710A (48- and 54-in. decks) and the Z720A (60-in. deck). The ZTrak 700 Series provides contractors a productive machine in a less expensive, and lower-featured model than the ZTrak PRO Series. Using a similar steel channel frame and castings as those on the PRO Series, the Z700s feature the 7-Iron II mower deck with mowing speeds up to 10 mph, and a 400-lb. towing capacity. They are equipped with pneumatic front tires for a soft ride; comfortable high-back bucket seat with armrests; a fully folding rollover protective structure (ROPS); an easy-grip turning height-of-cut adjustment; and John Deere's exclusive Brake & Go system. [JohnDeere.com](http://JohnDeere.com)

### Bobcat

The soil conditioner attachment prepares lawns for seed or sod. It separates rocks and debris; grades, levels, fills and pulverizes soil; and tears out sod. The attachment can be angled as wide as 25° left or right and has forward or reverse raking action. The soil conditioner fits all company loaders. A three-point hitch model fits compact tractors. [Bobcat.com](http://Bobcat.com)



### Wright Commercial Products

Wright Commercial Products introduces the Sport X mower, which combines the benefits of the Stander with the choice of stand-on or sit-down operation. The mower is equipped with an easy to use deck-lift system and Wright's AERO CORE deck design. The height of the 48-, 52- or 61-in. decks can be adjusted on the fly, and the 9.5 mph cut speed maintains productivity. A fold-away seat allows the operator to step off for quick exits, and the mower stops immediately. An operator presence switch on the foot platform stops the blade and engine, and the control levers return to the neutral position when the operator lets go. [Wrightmfg.com](http://Wrightmfg.com)







## TurfEx

This versatile attachment can be converted from a sweeper to a dethatcher without having to purchase additional equipment. Available in 48- and 60-in. widths (models MT480 and MT600, respectively), the attachment uses a universal mount that easily fits the form of most major manufacturers' zero-radius-turn mowers. It includes two rows of brush sections that can be replaced with spring-mounted tines to turn the sweeper into a dethatcher in a matter of minutes. To switch between the two, the operator simply removes a containment plate, then slides the brush or tine sections in and out of the housing. As a sweeper, the attachment is popular for grooming and debris cleanup applications. The durable, resilient polypropylene brushes work equally well in forward and reverse, helping to clean out tight spots a zero-radius-turn mower is capable of reaching. The dethatcher version contains special tines for keeping turf damage to a minimum, whether the mower is driving forward, backing up or conducting a tight turn. It also includes support wheels with adjustable height to optimize control while dethatching. *TrynexFactory.com*

## Kubota

The new Kubota F-Series 100-in. RCL100F-F36 Flex Mower Deck — for application on Kubota F3680 Front Mount Mowers — has a 100-in.-wide cut width yet mows with the precision of a 21-in. walk-behind mower. The patented design integrates five 21-in. mower decks, pinned together and belt driven, for a total 100-in. width cut. The belt drive system allows for maximum power efficiency to drive the deck, while the 100-in. width provides large acreage mowing in a short amount of time. *Kubota.com*

## LAWN CARE:

# AERATING EQUIPMENT

## Classen

With all of the performance and features of Classen's current turf rake line, the new spring tine reel models TR-20RH (with Honda GX160 engine) and the TR-20RB (with B&S Intek 850 engine) are more forgiving on lawns that have in-ground sprinkler systems or other permanently installed objects in the turf. The models are also ideal for those areas where flail reel or slicer blade reels are too aggressive. They feature 104 individual spring tines that are surface treated to provide more than 50% added strength and tine life. Partial spring tine or complete spring tine reel assemblies are also available. Both assemblies will fit any Classen brand turf rake or seeder model, and make an ideal retrofit for adding dethatcher functionality to existing Classen machines. *ClassenTurfCare.com*



## Exmark

These aerators feature intuitive operation, removable suitcase weights and low-effort maneuverability. Users can turn the aerators more easily with the self-cleaning, easy-to-replace tines engaged. Operators also can turn and reverse the aerators with the tines engaged. The aerators feature Kawasaki and Honda commercial-grade engines; offer a one-year limited warranty; and qualify for Exmark's fleet discount program. *Exmark.com*



## Toro

The 21-in. Single Hydro walk-behind and 30-in. Dual Hydro Ride-on aerators are designed for high productivity, and are compact enough to go anywhere. With zero-radius-turn maneuverability, variable speed and reversible traction drive, the aerators can get into and out of tight areas easily. The company's 20-in. slit seeders are capable of power-seeding, dethatching and verticutting. These 3-in-1 machines hold as much as 40 lbs. of seed, allowing operators to seed as much as 8,000 sq. ft. without refilling. With zero-radius-turn maneuverability and a variable-speed drive system that allows forward and reverse operation, the slit seeders offer maximum productivity on every jobsite. *Toro.com*

## OPERATIONS: ENGINES & TRANSMISSIONS

### Briggs & Stratton

Attributes of the E Series engines (550e and 550ex) include easier starting with the ReadyStart starting system (no need to choke or prime); best-in-class, torque-to-weight ratio, which means the engine has the power to get the job done while

being light enough for easy maneuvering; a more comfortable mowing experience, with reduced vibration and an improved sound level with the addition of the Super Lo-Tone muffler; enhanced engine life with the overhead valve design that lets the engine run



cooler and cleaner; improved air cleaner (no tools are needed); and an optional paper air cleaner element that provides even greater, auto-style debris filtering for dusty conditions. [BriggsAndStratton.com](http://BriggsAndStratton.com)

### General Transmissions

The Element V automatic transmission uses less power than hydrostatic, leaving more for the cutting deck. The transmission, which has been tested in extreme temperatures ranging from 100 F to -30 F, operates at lower temperatures for less wear and greater fuel efficiency. It's been bench tested to withstand axle-torque loads 30% greater than competitors'. An almost indestructible glass fiber composite housing resists torque and won't rust or corrode. The transmission is maintenance-free and lubricated for life. [ElementVautomatic.com](http://ElementVautomatic.com)

### Kohler

The Command PRO EFI FlexFuel E85 engine provides the flexibility to use all ethanol fuel blends, from E0 to E85, which translates to significant savings at the pump. The closed-loop EFI technology, which allows for a low operating cost, closes the loop between the air/fuel intake and the exhaust output to provide a constant stream of critical feedback, which helps deliver optimal fuel efficiency, easier starting, improved power and an increased life span. The closed-loop technology automatically senses the ethanol mix in the engine — even if that includes many different grades — and optimizes performance accordingly. The end user, then, has fewer worries about fuel type, fuel quality or ethanol content. The engine is designed to make performance enhancements intuitively, regardless of operating conditions. [KohlerEngines.com](http://KohlerEngines.com)



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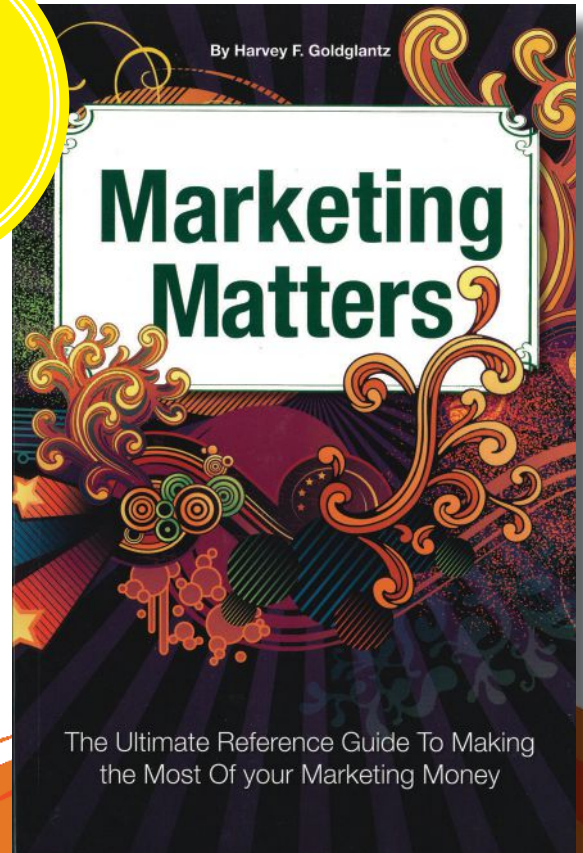
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**Landscape**  
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## BEST PRACTICES

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).

# Pythagoras, where art thou?

**F**rom the dawn of ages, many have tackled the complex operation of keeping score. Whether using primitive techniques to quantify time or applying complex economics to manage large capital assets, a wide range of monetary problems requires solutions grounded in understanding how the numbers work.

I've often been called a numbers guy. By looking at key ratios, I can instinctively identify trouble spots — as can many people who know their numbers. But knowing what to do about them, or what is causing them, is much more complex.

Sharpen your financial IQ with these 10 steps:

- 1. Use a chart of accounts** — Make sure your company is using a chart of accounts to manage important costs. As a general rule, it is necessary to have separate cost of sales accounts for each type of sales or revenue account. Labor is your single largest manageable cost. A chart of accounts will help you manage it.
- 2. Keep in mind the velocity of cash** — More has to come in than go out.
- 3. Net not** — The bottom line isn't the bottom line. Many managers look at the bottom line, and if the net gain/loss numbers look OK, they do not dig any deeper. This is a mistake.
- 4. Welcome pushback** — Don't be afraid of the Devil's Advocate. Pick someone on your accounting team to challenge your results. You want your accounting team to help you see things you might miss or take for granted.
- 5. "Like" your P&L** — The balance sheet is your friend. This is the true measure of your business's health. Learn your ratios, what they mean and how to influence them.
- 6. Get a budget** — It will help you build, re-build and provide the tools to guide spending and measure your short- and long-term success.
- 7. Get a fiscal posse, too** — Enlist key members of your accounting and management teams to help

build a sustainable budget. This gives them shared ownership in doing their part to achieve the targets.

**8. Be an open book** — This does not mean you have to share your whole financial statement with your team, although some companies do. Be open with your employees about numbers they can influence. This benefits their sense of ownership, helps engage them in a positive outcome and is good for morale. For instance, operations managers should see sales and job costs; crew leaders should understand how the hours work.

**9. Manage what you can measure** — Measurement is the cornerstone of evaluation. You can determine whether your practices are improving or deteriorating, and assess processes and outcomes. You can become more successful over time if you measure where you are now.

**10. Offer incentives wisely** — Aligning business goals and targets with organizational structure can generate positive outcomes. When these are misaligned, there is a danger that performance can become self-serving. If you create incentives for employees to achieve targeted goals, beware of unintended consequences: It can bleed red ink and create a cutthroat culture. More damage can be done by an ill-conceived plan than no plan at all. This is one area where you should get help from consultants or other contractors you know.

Numbers are important and require rigorous attention to detail. But stressing financial numbers can also contribute to sending mixed messages to your team. Remember that other numbers have an equally important value system in your business: the number of people who trust and respect your company; the roster of satisfied (and retained) customers; having a high percentage of engaged, motivated employees; and the amount of credibility your company has in the community.

Whether you use an abacus or an Apple, measurement is the best practices way to ensure your company has an agenda for action.



# 3 tips for **future** **success**

**PREPARE FOR THE 2012 SEASON BY RESPONDING TO ECONOMIC CHALLENGES.**

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

**A**STHE old saying goes, “if it were easy to do, everyone would do it.” By that measure, it must be easy to tell the future. This time of year, there is no shortage of prognosticators predicting everything from landscape plant color choices to popular accessories to overall design trends for 2012.

While it’s impossible to know exactly what’s coming, and specific tastes vary by region (and even client), the big picture is largely the same. The economy dominates the presidential debates, dinner table discussion and the 24-hour news cycle. It will dominate 2012 landscape designs as well.

Lucky Red Flame Lantana stay upright all season, making them well-suited to small-space landscapes.

PHOTO COURTESY: BALL HORTICULTURE



## It’s the economy

If you’re a cup half full kind of person, you might predict the poor economy could actually lead homeowners to invest in their landscapes. After all, they’re not taking vacations and they’re not planning on selling anytime soon, so they want their properties to be as comfortable as possible. Maybe so, but as high unemployment rates continue, it’s easy to see the cup as half empty. Abandoned properties don’t need much in the way of landscaping, and as budgets shrink, the landscaping service may be one of the first to be cut.

One way to prepare for the worst and hope for the best is by offering services that appeal to recession-weary clients. What services can you provide that could save money for your clients?

**1 Renovate landscapes.** Rather than starting from scratch, develop services and pricing plans that allow you to spruce up budget-conscious property owners’ landscapes without breaking the bank. Use high-impact specimen plantings and pops of color to add needed design elements to existing landscapes when possible. Get your foot in the door with small changes that make big impacts and build your customer base. Smaller changes over time can still

lead to a dramatically different landscape, though it may take multiple seasons to accomplish. Keep all those changes moving in the right direction by offering to create a long-term master plan for clients. In addition to being critical to a cohesive landscape design, a master plan engages clients in the future of their landscape and helps make them repeat customers.

**2 Save water.** After an initial installation investment, a well-designed irrigation system starts paying the property owner back by saving water costs. Whether replacing an inefficient system or installing a new irrigation system, less maintenance is also a selling point. Putting the right amount of water in the right place can also reduce the need for disease control inputs because it helps prevent fungal and mold growth.

Landscapers can even offer lower-tech services to help property owners conserve water, such as rain barrel sales and installation, or installation of rain gardens to collect runoff. Rain gardens can be planted with deep-rooted plants that make use of extra water as it’s collected.

The money-saving benefits of water-wise plants, too, should be communicated to your clients. Breeders have successfully reduced many popular plants’ water requirements.

“Plants bred to withstand attacks from pests and diseases that are also tolerant

of climate and soil extremes provide a better value,” states Anthony Tesselaar, cofounder and president of Tesselaar Plants, in a recent news release. “Gardeners are more aware than ever that choosing the right plant for the right situation is imperative if you want to help save the planet — let alone your bank balance.”

**3 Sell sustainability.** The renewed interest in the environment in recent years is not slowing with the pace of the economy. In fact, the recession may have brought even more attention to the importance of sustainable landscapes.

Green roofs are one example of a growth area that owes its popularity to environmental awareness. From reducing heating and cooling costs, to improving air quality and lowering city temperatures, the benefits of green roofs are becoming too obvious for many city planners to

A container garden featuring Tangerine Tango, the Pantone Color of the Year: Tropicanna Black cannas (top), ornamental peppers (lower left) and croton (lower right).

ignore. Landscapers can learn the specialized skills needed to install green roofs themselves, or find partnering opportunities with progressive roofing companies who are installing the structures needed to top cities with green.

The focus on reducing our environmental impact by buying locally sourced products is a boon to local growers, nurseries and landscapers. It’s also an opportunity to market the benefits of native plants. Mixing native species in with more traditional cultivars can help lower the need for inputs and maintenance.

Edible landscapes have been making headlines for years. From modern victory



## HOT COLOR FOR 2012

The world is an increasingly smaller place. From national television marketing campaigns by plant producers, fashion labels and even paint manufacturers to social networking among friends and families, design trends travel more quickly now than ever before.

Some of those “trends” are little more than hopeful soothsaying, but one in particular is backed up by some serious research.

Pantone LLC is well known to many who work with color.

Graphic artists, interior designers and fashion designers use the company’s color swatch library regularly. Color is, literally, Pantone’s business. So when the company announced “Tangerine Tango” (PANTONE 17-1463) as its color of the year for 2012, plant breeders and consumers paid attention.

“The color of the year selection is a very thoughtful process,” according to a Pantone press release. “To arrive at the selection, Pantone quite literally combs the world looking for color influences. This can include the entertainment industry and films that are in production, traveling art collections, hot new artists, popular travel destinations and other socio-economic conditions. Influences may also stem from technology, availability of new textures and effects that impact color, and even upcoming sports events that capture worldwide attention.”

Over the past several years, orange has grown in popularity and acceptance among designers and consumers alike, according to the company’s research.

As clients hear about and see more orange shades, they may request a complementary color palette for their landscapes.

Anthony Tesselaar, cofounder and president of Tesselaar Plants, suggests using red-orange with other plants featuring subtle echoes of the same color: “Not too much of this fiery hue,” he says. “A little goes a long way.”

Or, since the orange-red tangerine color is opposite of blue-green on the color wheel, it could be grouped with frosty, cool-hued plants.

For more information on Tangerine Tango, visit [www.pantone.com/coy2012](http://www.pantone.com/coy2012).

gardens to the First Lady planting edibles at the White House, consumers have taken notice.

“Economic, nutritional, environmental and social interests are converging to elevate the practice of home vegetable gardening to mainstream relevance,” said Jessie Atchison, brand manager for Burpee Home Gardens, at an Edible Garden exhibition presented by the New York Botanical Garden during the 2010 growing season.

And edibles continue to make inroads into suburban back yards. In addition to being seen as providing “free” food, some clients also equate personal fruit and vegetable gardens with lessening the environmental footprint of shipping produce globally.

The economic benefits of a well-designed landscape are one thing, but the intangibles should not be forgotten. A beautiful landscape can provide your clients with a welcome respite from their economic anxieties.

Some property owners will certainly still be in a spending mood in 2012, but having service and pricing plans to appeal to all income levels looks like a safer bet this year than focusing only on the high end. ■■

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



Can-Can Orange Calibrachoa (top) can be used to pinpoint spots of color. Bonfire begonias add a punch of tangerine color to the landscape (bottom).



**Hot, hot, hot**

The *Pelargonium interspecific* 'Caliente' series from **Syngenta Flowers/Goldsmith Seeds** features dark foliage and free flowering qualities. This new class of geraniums is an ivy and zonal geranium cross, bred to have better heat tolerance. Colors include orange (pictured), pink and Hot Coral. [SyngentaFlowersInc.com](http://SyngentaFlowersInc.com)



**The bold and the beautiful**

New for 2012, *Gardenia jasminoides* 'Coconut Magic' is a **Ball Ornamentals** exclusive. At 5 to 6 in. in diameter, its creamy white flowers are the largest of any gardenia, and have fragrant blooms all summer long, the company says. The low-maintenance plant slowly changes to golden yellow blooms over the season, and doesn't need pruning. Both its height and spread range from 36 to 48 in., and it's hardy in USDA Zones 8b to 11. [BallHort.com](http://BallHort.com)



**Earned its stripes**

Reaching 20 in. tall and 24 in. wide, **Monrovia's** new Sun Stripe *Agapanthus africanus* 'Mon-Kageyama' is hardy in USDA Zones 8 through 11. Discovered by F.K. Nursery in Los Angeles, the center is green marbled with yellow stripes, bordered with a wide, soft yellow. Blue flower stalks appear in summer, thriving in perennial gardens or containers. It works well in morning sun, but appreciates dappled shade in hot afternoon. [Monrovia.com](http://Monrovia.com)

**Compact stature**

As the dwarf form of the popular 'Lime-light' Hydrangea, **Proven Winners'** 'Little Lime' is one-third the size of traditional hardy hydrangeas. Each year, the summer flowers on this deciduous shrub open soft green and turn pink and burgundy in fall. It does best in partial to full sun, and is hardy in USDA Zones 3 to 9. [ProvenWinners.com](http://ProvenWinners.com)



**Just desserts**

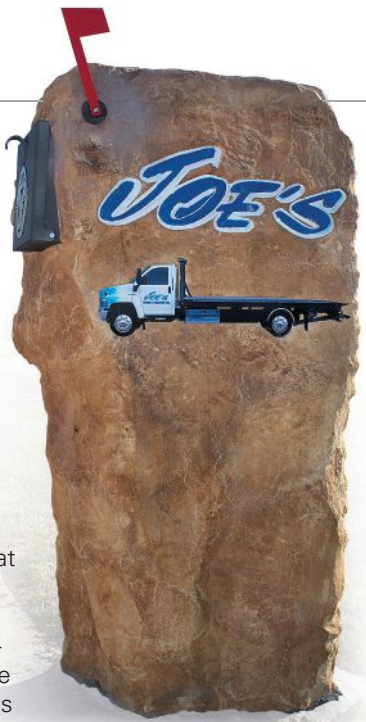
New in **Terra Nova's** Crisp Series (which also includes 'Blackberry Crisp,' 'Peach Crisp' and new 'Pear Crisp,'). 'Apple Crisp' alum root features ruffled green leaves and a white veil. Its tight, compact mounding habit is suited for moderately well-drained, organic soil types in Zones 4 through 9. The heat-, drought- and humidity-tolerant plant attracts hummingbirds and offers nice winter color. [TerraNovaNurseries.com](http://TerraNovaNurseries.com)



**Worthy namesake**

Hardy in USDA Zones 5 through 9, **David Austin Roses'** repeat-flowering English Rose *Rosa* 'Kew Gardens' offers 2.5-in. flowers with five petals. Abundant single flowers are clustered in large heads, similar to a hydrangea. The young buds are soft apricot, opening to white with a hint of soft lemon behind the stamens. The flowers are followed by small red hips, which should be removed to encourage repeat flowering from early summer through the end of the season. Reaching approximately 5 ft. tall by 3 ft. wide, the healthy, thornless bush features upright growth. It was named in celebration of the 250th anniversary of Kew Gardens, the famous Royal Botanical Garden in London. [DavidAustinRoses.com](http://DavidAustinRoses.com)

Concrete boulders bring Engels Lawncare added revenue.



## The boulder business

A small landscape company finds that custom-made boulders are a great way to boost business.

**K**EVIN ENGELMANN, OWNER and operator of Engels Lawncare in Frankfurt, IL, says that finding an additional business or service to complement his landscape company has always been in the back of his mind. When he came across information on Boulder Designs, he knew he had the perfect fit. As a company that develops made-to-order concrete boulder products, Boulder Designs had many tie-in opportunities with Engelmann's landscape business.

While many of the Boulder Designs franchisees are developing commercial business signage with the product, Engelmann saw an opportunity for using the boulders in residential properties. The product not only offers an unusual alternative to traditional business signage, but it can be a beautiful addition to both commercial and residential landscape design.

"I'm a small landscape company, and wanted to find something that was an add-on that I could still do myself," says Engelmann, who is now also the owner of the Boulder Designs of Will County franchise.

"I thought this was something neat —

and a little different — so I gave them a call. It's something I really enjoy. You get to make something from nothing, and end up with a beautiful product that customers love."

Traditional man-made boulder products typically use chicken wire, Styrofoam and a concrete mixture — and as a result, are not always very durable, Engelmann says. Part of the appeal of the Boulder Design custom-made solution is that it uses specially enhanced concrete and is solid. This gives the boulders the same characteristics as the "real thing," he says, and ensures the product is strong and durable.

The secret to building these boulders is proprietary. Franchisees are walked through the process and are then able to

build their own boulders at their own sites.

Engelmann says that in addition to the step-by-step secret of building the boulders, Boulder Designs has been helpful in its marketing support. But, he says, the best marketing has been word-of-mouth.

"It's really a see/touch/feel thing," says Engelmann. "Customers need to see the product to appreciate how neat it is. I find the more I get out and sell, the more new customers I pick up. When people see the product, they love it and want one for themselves."

Besides selling to new customers, Engelmann says that this new add-on business has been an opportunity to go back to former clients and pitch something new. And he says it's been a great upsell for his current projects.

"The possibilities are endless when it comes to using the product for landscaping purposes," he says. "A new product we're working on now is benches, which are really sharp."

Now that he has the boulder business, Engelmann says it's another way to keep revenue flowing. "You might get a call for a landscaping job, and then give them a brochure for the boulder business and wind up with that sale, too," he says. "Or it's happened that maybe I didn't get the landscape job, but I still sold them a boulder."

Engelmann says the learning curve for building boulders was manageable and something that any hands-on landscaper would be able to easily pick up. "It helps to have an artistic side — which many landscapers do," he adds. "But it's something that isn't too hard to learn. I felt that the cost investment was relatively low for the opportunities you have to make that money back. For me, it's really been a great decision."

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



Commercial signage is a perfect fit for this add-on biz.

### » SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**ADD-ON BUSINESS:** Boulder Designs of Will County

**WHY BOULDERS:** "I was looking for something unique that not everyone else was already doing," says owner Kevin Engelmann. "There's not a lot of competition for this, and there are protected territories through the franchise."

**PRIMARY BUSINESS:** Engels Lawncare

**NO. OF EMPLOYEES:** 2

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

**SERVICES:** 80% maintenance; 20% design/build



BY DAVID WEINSTOCK &amp; CURT HARLER

# TEXAS DROUGHT TEACHES (BUSINESS) SURVIVAL SKILLS

Three Lone Star State LCOs learned an important marketing lesson: **Focus on irrigation.**

**T**he summer of 2011 was a record breaker in Texas. Texans experienced the longest stretch of the highest daily temperatures, accompanied by the least amount of rain, in recorded weather history.

In East Texas, for example, there was not a single day in July in which the maximum temperature failed to rise above 100° F, nor was there any instance of rainfall. All segments of the growing industry — landscape, agriculture, cattle and turf farms — were scorched. Water became more precious than oil. By summer's end, the state's bellwether Green Industry — cattle — was looking at one of its lowest inventory levels ever. With no grass for animals to graze on and precious little surface water to drink, even the wizened cattle producers were hanging it up.

For the most part, the Texas land-

scape industry fared better. As fears over dwindling water supplies increased, numerous communities passed water-use restrictions, limiting lawn watering from once or twice a week to once or twice a month. But a number simply made adjustments, moving into other enterprises that cushioned the losses the water scarcity created.

True, some Texas landscapers pulled their horns in — laying off crews, parking trucks, waiting for rain. And yet one Dallas firm, Southern Botanical, actually did well because of the drought.

## Drought-intensive profits

"It made us real busy," reports Alan Richmond, the company's vice president of irrigation, drainage and lawn treatments.



Drip irrigation installation has become increasingly popular.

Founded in 1995, the company has 150 employees and a fleet of approximately 50

vehicles. Its business is derived from Dallas Metroplex residential and commercial properties.

Southern Botanical gained a lot of its drought-season revenue servic-



## ARID SUMMER

Randy Mase of Tyler, TX, had fewer landscaping contracts than normal this summer. Lawn fertilization, seeding and some construction work helped keep one of his three crews busy during the drought season.



ing customer irrigation systems. “The drought exposed a lot of irrigation system flaws,” Richmond says. “We do a lot of maintenance work on existing irrigation systems.”

They also made time to add water-retention materials to their clients’ landscapes. Expanded shells and commercial soil additives were among some of the materials they use, though Richmond declines to identify which brands they employed.

The company’s new strategy is to “water deep and less frequently,” Richmond notes that when watered less, turf tended to probe more deeply into the

soil with its roots for moisture.

In addition, they installed a lot more evapo-transpiration (ET) controllers on irrigation systems. Costing \$1,500 and up, the controllers self-adjust soil moisture to make up for the portion removed by the plants, while accounting for evaporation and transpiration on the sites. They began the ET-controller installations last year on both residential and commercial properties.

Southern Botanical employees saw a lot of sunburned plant material while in the field this summer. It caused them to focus more on plant materials and to make more visits to do so. It was as

a result of the increased visits that they spotted the coverage issue.

### Shift in emphasis

Yet another Dallas firm simply redirected its operational emphasis from planting to construction.

“The early part of the summer was not easy,” admits Lambert Landscape Co. Director of Garden Development Jud Griggs. “By the beginning of August, we stopped all our planting operations and focused on construction.”

A succession of replacements and negative client complaints forced the switch, he says.

“Most of the smaller groundcover plants fried in the heat,” Griggs adds. “Lawns everywhere were scorched. There was just no point in taking plants out of the greenhouse and placing them into an environment of incessant heat.”

The most telling damage he recalls seeing was a large, mature red oak that was healthy and vibrant in the spring — and covered with flashing yellow and brown leaves, a sign it was dying, by summer’s end.

Founded in 1919, the privately held Lambert Landscape Co. normally employs 180 people and has a fleet of 82 vehicles, plus equipment. It derives nearly all its income from residential accounts in the Dallas Metroplex, although reduced income brought the company some projects from the Austin and Wichita Falls areas.

The summer slowdown in residential business caused Lambert Landscape Co. to reduce work hours to 32 hours a week, and then resort to layoffs. The good news is that, by mid-October, nearly everyone had been rehired.

Designing and building patios, fountains and walls normally make up about 55% of the company’s summer revenues. This past summer, it comprised two-thirds of capital intake.

“We did a lot of irrigation repair and maintenance as well,” says Griggs. “Any turf without irrigation took a beating this summer.”

The hotter weather forced them to use a number of dry-weather con-



struction techniques, such as pre-wetting stone and using additives to make sure concrete didn't set up too quickly.

A number of Lambert clients, faced with municipal water-use restrictions, resorted to hand-watering to keep their sensitive plants alive. The heavy clay soils in the area caused a lot of overwatering problems that company crews had to educate their clients about, and then troubleshoot.

Surprisingly, says Griggs, the landscape input industry didn't reduce prices against lagging demand.

Because of area water restrictions, Lambert has begun talking to its clients about drip irrigation. "We're also using more permeable surfaces to capture the rainwater when it does come," Griggs notes.

The region's climatologists are saying the drought could continue for as long as a year (see "More to come?"



## MORE TO COME?

In late September, Texas State climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon revealed his belief that this drought resembles a mega-drought that began in 1950 and ended in 1957.

Current thinking in meteorology links southern Great Plains droughts to La Niña. A strong one emerged last fall, which fizzled in early summer. At press time, a new La Niña was emerging, according to scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) — bringing with it the promise of another dry Texas winter.

The argument for this being the start of an extended drought is compelling. Nielsen-Gammon said the same warm ocean temperatures that fueled the droughts of the 1950s are present in the tropical region of the Atlantic Ocean today.

There is no guarantee this drought will last as long, but if it does, Texas landscapers have already demonstrated droughts don't faze them any more than other weather systems do. Knowing what services to sell and which varieties to plant will see them through.

box above). Griggs agrees with their assessment.

"We've not seen the full effects of the summer drought yet," he predicts.

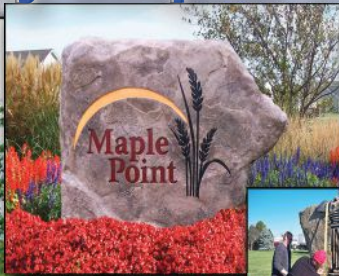
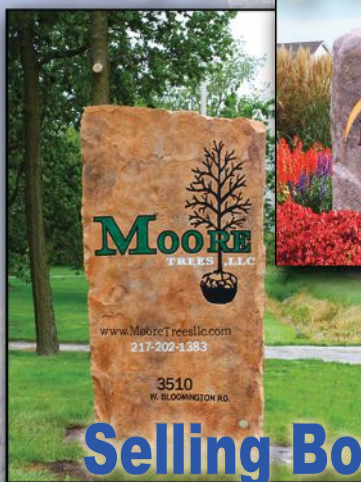
"If we face another tough winter with

cold temperatures and freezing, things could get really bad."

That will likely bring about a lesser dependence on non-native species.

Lambert crews are using native spe-

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## ARID SUMMER

cies wherever they can, especially drought-resistant ones.

### Back to basics

“Encore azaleas,” says Randy Mase of Tyler, TX-based Mase Landscape Co., “were the worst this year.”

Instead of blooming once each year, the azaleas should bloom all year.

“But when the temperature hit 112° F and the relative humidity fell to 14%, they died, everywhere,” Mase says.

A self-described “landscape artist,” Mase’s firm serves the well-to-do of Tyler’s oil-rich population. He normally runs three crews. But this year he’s down to one.

Born and raised in Tyler, Mase got started in what he calls the Great Freeze of 1983. “I started out with one truck and one part-time employee, and projected my income at \$30,000 that year,” he recalls.

The Freeze of which he speaks was



**TOP:** The drought made the hard red clay of East Texas even harder to excavate this summer, making small drainage projects like this one a little longer to complete.

**BOTTOM:** Construction projects like this pool and hot tub kept companies like Mase Landscape Company of Tyler, Texas, and Lambert Landscape Company of Dallas busy this summer.

an unseasonal cold streak that brought March temperatures down to freezing and near-freezing levels. “The people of Tyler had dead plants all over their yards. It killed every plant in town,” he explains.

By year’s end, Mase grossed \$1 million and employed 25 people.

This year — between the delayed effect of the recession and the hot, dry summer — his company was forced out of its artistic pursuits and into more mundane tasks, such as lawn seeding and fertilization.

He’s been selling some of his clients on the virtues of zoysia grass. Heat-resistant, thick sodded, and wear-tolerant, he said it’s an easy sell once customers see an established turf. **LM**

---

*Harler is a freelance writer from Strongsville, OH. Contact him at [curt@curtharler.com](mailto:curt@curtharler.com).*

PHOTOS COURTESY: MASE LANDSCAPE COMPANY (TOP); MASE LANDSCAPE COMPANY

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Ted Hofer

At Plainfield, IL-based Spring-Green, Chief Executive Officer **Ted Hofer** has a lot on his mind. To start the new year, he took a minute to opine about financing, marketing, the strength of the industry's customer base and other issues affecting his business and the industry overall.

## TOP TRENDS

► **Educating the customer.** A customer's cultural practices are a deciding factor in the quality of their lawns. One of our challenges in lawn care has always been to make sure customers understand that mowing at the right height and watering properly are important to the aesthetics of their lawns. In addition to the aesthetic appeal, there are extensive environmental benefits gained from having properly maintained turf, so now we take it one step further and let the customer understand that by mowing and watering properly, and by using our service, they are having a positive impact on the environment.

► **Lawns are still being maintained.** While the lawn care customer base may not have grown over the past few years, it's not declining severely, as you may have seen in other industries. Many people are spending more time at home than ever before. They're eating in more frequently and taking fewer vacations, so they want their homes and their properties to look good. Despite the economic downturn, and the unpredictable future ahead, most lawn care users have kept their service.

## TOP OBSTACLES

► **Access to credit.** Many Spring-Green franchises are looking to expand and accelerate their growth, but the lack of access to credit has slowed a business's ability to achieve its long-term goals. This is true for most small businesses today. They would like to grow but are often unable to get financed through traditional means. In today's lending environment there are still plenty

of million-dollar deals getting done, but the lower loan amounts (\$25,000 to \$200,000) have been more difficult to secure.

► **Increasing costs.** This past year has seen significantly increasing costs in fertilizer and fuel, two key components of our business. To offset some of these cost increases, Spring-Green franchises went back to the basics and utilized a daily driver's report to track product usage and vehicle mileage. They made sure their equipment was properly calibrated and tracked their fertilizer usage daily. They used routing software to schedule tight routes for each day's work. Then they monitored the mileage being driven each day. Lawn care businesses certainly experienced a tightening of margins in 2011 and I'd expect 2012 pricing to reflect the increasing costs of doing business.

## TOP OPPORTUNITIES

► **Increasing our marketing complexity.** Although I think of lawn care as a service that you don't want to over-complicate, there are some areas of our business, such as marketing, in which we can delve deeper. We want our franchisees to keep a "database mentality" when it comes to marketing, and they do so by maintaining detailed customer and prospect databases.

► **Annual plans.** One of the great things about lawn care that many companies don't take advantage of is that it's fairly easy to put together an annual business plan. During winter, the Spring-Green support team works with franchise owners to create a plan for the upcoming year that focuses on areas of the business such as staffing, equipment and marketing. After the spring sales season, our team revisits the plan, evaluates where the business will be at year's end, then makes educated managerial decisions during the second half of the year to improve bottom lines. By maximizing potential cash flow they are able to fund next year's marketing investment and keep the cycle turning.

## INSIDE INFO

**Company:** Spring-Green

**Headquarters:** Plainfield, IL, with 122 franchises in 26 states

**Employees:** 350

**2010 revenue:** \$34 million

**Key to being a maintenance leader:** In lawn care, a leader needs to run an operation that can generate business and get the work done on time. So at Spring-Green we make sure our franchise owners have a strong operational focus while also maintaining a marketing mentality.

In lawn care, there are operational realities that can't be ignored. A certain amount

of work needs to be completed each year and a schedule has to be maintained throughout the year to finish on time. Our franchise owners track their progress against their production schedule while accounting for real-life factors such as weather and employee turnover.

As they deal with daily operations, our franchise owners need to be able to maintain a marketing mentality in order to take advantage of each sales opportunity. They execute and follow through on their marketing activities with the same passion as the production side of the business and train their staff so that everyone feels comfortable making sales.

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**Landscape Management**



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[ Coming in February ]

## MAKING THE MOVE: M&A

Mergers and acquisitions have always been part of the industry and a way for companies to grow quickly. But these deals come with a unique set of business challenges. We'll talk with some companies that have taken the plunge to find out what they've learned.

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### Get Growing

An economic study confirms the vital role the Green Industry plays in providing entrepreneurial opportunity, jobs and income to U.S. Latinos.

### i-News

We pressed on (through 2011), hoping that the economy would turn around, and that it would be heading in a positive direction by now. While there have been some positive signs of growth this past year, we still have a long road ahead of us.

## Landscape Management

# Meet the LM Team



**DAN JACOBS**  
Editor-in-Chief

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



**BETH GERACI**  
Senior Editor

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



**MARTY WHITFORD**  
Editorial Director

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

# MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Andrew Weilbacher found that growing his number of crews gave him more headaches — and less profit.



Andrew Weilbacher improved his company's performance after downsizing.

**COMPANY:**

Weilbacher Landscaping

**HEADQUARTERS:** Millstadt, IL

**OWNER:** Andrew Weilbacher

**2010 REVENUE:** \$500,000

**PROJECTED 2011 REVENUE:**

About the same

**CLIENTELE:** 80% residential;

20% commercial

**SERVICES:** 70% retaining walls; 20% paver patios; 10% design/build

**WHILE MANY PEOPLE** tend to think of growing their companies in terms of adding employees, Andrew Weilbacher says that having too many crews was a mistake for his business. It became tough to manage multiple crews, and he was

getting callbacks on jobs he didn't personally supervise because mistakes were being made.

For a time, Weilbacher, who owns Weilbacher Landscaping in Millstadt, IL, says he had about 10 employees and three separate crews going out on jobs. Though he grew the business from doing side work on his own into a full-time career, he figured that adding more crews was the best way to move forward and grow his business. But what he found was that having his hand in the work and overseeing it as much as possible was actually more effective for him.

"As the economy got shaky and I cut back my employees to just three or four crew members over the last couple years, I've found that I'm actually making more money and dealing with a lot less problems," he says. "My quality control is much better because I'm able to be at the job myself most of the time."

Weilbacher says he started the business as a hands-on owner and has found that it works better that way for his business.

"With a few crews going out that I wasn't personally working on, I was getting callbacks that the work wasn't done well enough or there were mistakes," he recalls. "That's a big problem for my business. Most of my jobs are weeklong jobs, where we start on a Monday and finish up by Friday. If we get a call over the weekend that something needs to be fixed before we get paid, it means spending half a day back on that property on Monday instead of starting the next job."

Since downsizing to one key crew with himself as the leader, Weilbacher says he's no longer getting those callbacks. "It's my company, and I'm looking for perfection," he says. "I understand that a laborer getting paid \$12 an hour isn't going to care if it's perfect — but I do."

Today, customers are happier, and Weilbacher says he's enjoying a simplified payroll. He says that paying 10 employees each week was really eating away at his profits, and he started to feel like he wasn't making as much as he should be. The extra work he was accomplishing by having multiple crews just wasn't paying off with all the

callbacks he had to handle. While things have much improved, Weilbacher says one problem he continues to have is finding good employees. Though he's currently happy with his crew, laborers tend to come and go — and Weilbacher says that finding good help is difficult.

"Just recently, I went through four laborers to find the one that was great," he says. "One of the biggest lessons I've learned from that is the fact that you have to be your employees' boss, not their friend. You need to find the best person for the job and not worry about hurting anyone's feelings. What I do now is give employees a two-week trial period. I explain up front that if it doesn't work out, they'll still get their paycheck, but we'll have to part ways."

Weilbacher says that knowing whether to cut down on the number of crews is really a fine line for small businesses like his.

"Everyone always wants to know how many employees you have, and they think that it's somehow a measure of how good you are," he says. "But a bigger business isn't necessarily a better business. After all, it's not about what you bring in, it's what you take home. I've definitely found that I have less headaches and more money — and I'm much happier with the way things are today."

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

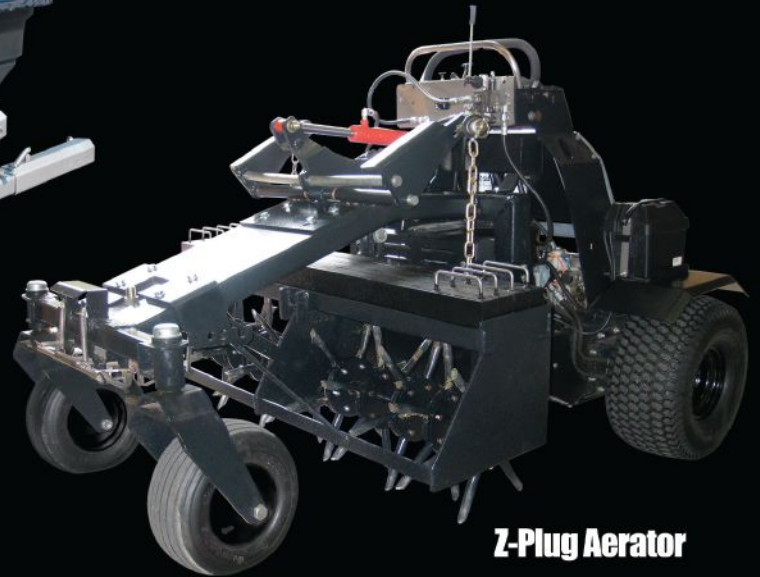


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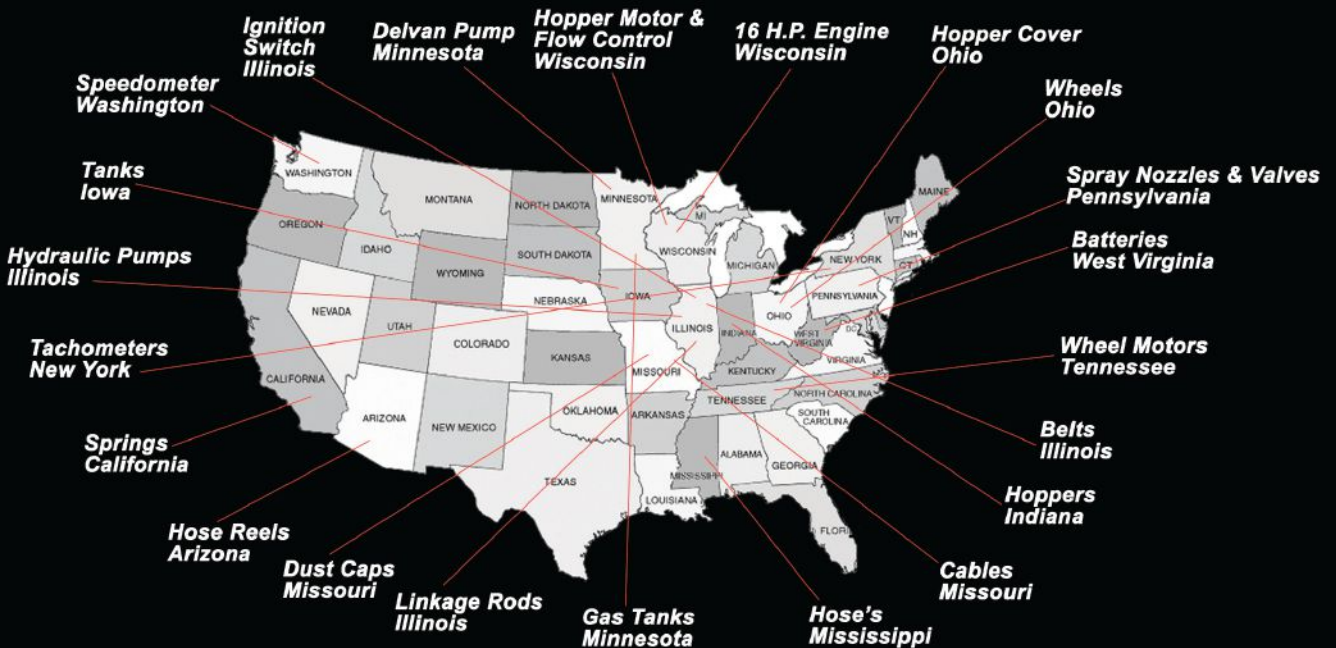
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