

By Marisa Palmieri / Editor

Labor pains



Hiring and retaining workers remains a challenge, but successful operators show creativity and investment pay off.

Finding and keeping high-quality employees is a perennial challenge for landscape contractors and lawn care operators.

The overall economic situation and new regulations are playing a role in the availability of the labor force, as are local market conditions.

“Despite the fact that unemployment seems to be high, it’s gotten more difficult to hire people in the last couple of years,” says Lee Edwards, president and CEO of The Greenery in Hilton Head, S.C. “In South Carolina we have the E-Verify law, so immigrant labor has really changed a lot.”

As of Jan. 1 all employers in the state were required to enroll in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s system to verify the legal status of all new employees within three business days.

“I’m in favor of those laws, but it makes our job harder,” he says, explaining more employers are going after the same pool of legal workers. “It’s been more expensive to hire people.”

Keeping a legal workforce is a challenge nationwide. It’s a top concern for Ricardo Baldi, president and owner of Baldi Gardens in Arlington, Texas.

“We’re having a hard time finding qualified workers,” he says. You have a lot of companies after the Latino legal workers because they work really hard.”

The labor situation in Jeff Bowen’s market has been “funny” this year. “This year it’s been tough,” says the owner of Images of Green, Stuart, Fla. “We’ve talked to other companies and they’ve experienced it, too. I think we’re finding people in general know landscaping is a hard, hot job in

Florida. You can make the same money at Walmart or McDonald’s, especially if you speak English. And folks that used to want to work in landscaping are finding there’s an easier way to make \$8, \$9 or \$10 an hour.”

His solution has been to tap temporary workers. He hired two temps for the month of August and one for September. “By the fourth quarter all of our temp labor will be gone,” he says. “It’s only in the summer we need it. We do the same amount of work in the winter and summer, but it takes 30 percent longer to do it in the summer.”

Being aggressive

John Newman, president of Hampton, Ga.-based Classic Landscapes, rates his labor situation as “medium” in terms of difficulty lately.

“It’s still not easy, but because of the fact that we’re pretty aggressive, it’s not our biggest challenge,” he says. By aggressive, he means he’s forged relationships with instructors at a local technical college’s horticulture program, he’s been active with the chamber of commerce and he’s been involved in the community as part of his recruiting effort.

For Newman, sales positions are the toughest to fill. “There are people who are either very astute salespeople without as much technical background or there are great designers who are very talented but aren’t skilled in sales or don’t want to be,” he says. “I’ve been interviewing for that position.”

Rob Reindl, owner of Oasis Turf & Tree in Loveland, Ohio, names recruiting and retaining employees a top challenge. His solution is being

Wage report

Hourly

	0-5 years experience	% change from 2010	> 5 years experience	% change from 2010
Mower operator	\$10.60	2% ▲	\$12.73	7% ▲
Spray technician	\$12.87	4% ▲	\$15.54	1% ▲
Construction worker	\$11.72	1% ▲	\$14.84	1% ▲
Irrigation technician	\$13.05	3% ▲	\$16.23	2% ▲

Salary

	Current wage	% change from 2010
Crew foreman/team leader	\$34,175	12% ▲
Saleperson	\$46,214	1% ▲
Equipment mechanic	\$34,762	6% ▲
Landscape designer	\$41,496	1% ▲
Landscape architect	\$56,837	7% ▲
Account manager	\$42,034	3% ▲
Supervisor	\$41,066	8% ▼
Operations manager	\$53,151	3% ▼
Owner/president	\$75,238	8% ▲
Branch manager	\$67,321	n/r in 2010

proactive: always interviewing for sales reps and technicians and sometimes hiring more people than he needs to—so there's always someone trained and ready to go if something happens to an existing employee.

For sales positions, Reindl interviews in early fall for the following year, compared to many lawn care firms that don't scale up until December or January. "If we have the opportunity to pick up someone impressive, we'll hire him," he says. Plus, Reindl doesn't lay off his sales team after the spring rush.

When it comes to technicians, he lays off a few of them in December, January and February, but a few of them work in the shop all winter, servicing equipment. *Additional reporting by Beth Geraci. LMI*

H-2B update

Late last year, the Department of Labor (DOL) issued two rules that could hurt the H-2B guest worker program, potentially making it unusable for members of the Green Industry. The two proposed regulations are known as the wage rule and the program rule.

The wage rule would artificially increase labor costs associated with the H-2B program to a level users call unmanageable.

In September, Congress voted to extend the law that prevents the DOL from implementing the wage rule through March 27. It's part of a stop-gap spending measure to keep the government funded beyond the start of the fiscal year, which began Oct. 1.

"PLANET [the Professional Landcare Network] will continue to fight for a longer term prohibition, but we are happy in the meantime our members will not be subject to unprecedented wage increases," the association said in an alert to members.

The program rule seeks to impose new costs, burdens and complexities. It can't be implemented due to a preliminary injunction issued against it in April in Florida's Northern District. The injunction applies nationwide.

"After the legal maneuvering in the case concludes, PLANET hopes the judge will make the injunction permanent," the alert said.

At a glance: **LABOR**

GOOD

Companies with creative, aggressive recruiting and retention programs report mild labor difficulties.

BAD

Uncertainty remains about proposed rules that could render the H-2B guest worker program unusable.

UGLY

Contractors fear an overall change in workers' attitudes makes landscaping an undesirable profession.