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
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December 2023 VOL 62, ISSUE 12

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ON THE COVER: PHOTO BY ROB KAUFMAN

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Tim Buiten shares his most memorable day at work, the most shrimp he's eaten in one sitting and more (page 57).



Be featured in Landscape Management

We're always looking for great stories from our readers. That's why we're inviting you to share your company's goals for 2024, how your company uses equipment to get more efficient, interesting projects your company recently completed and more.

Email Editor-in-Chief Seth Jones at sjones@northcoastmedia.net for more information and to share your thoughts.

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I'm thankful for you all — cheers!

I'm in a post-Thanksgiving lull watching the sun go down on a mild November day, reflecting on publishing this last issue of the year of *Landscape Management*. What a year it was! There is plenty to be thankful for. The people I met, the places I saw and the opportunities offered.

Professionally, this year I made 19 business trips: 17 here in the States, one to Canada and unbelievably, one to Italy (I invite you to check out my complete recap of the Aces Wild peer group's trip to Tuscany, Italy, on page 8.) We fired out 52 LMDirect! newsletters, many with

what I'd like to think was a legendary toast at Thanksgiving.

With the food rapidly cooling off (it took a few minutes for everyone to make their plate and get to the dining room), I kept it brief.

"I'm so happy you're all here, and I'm so thankful for our family. Cheers."

My wife's aunt asked, "That's it?" Her husband replied, "I heard 'thankful' and I heard 'cheers.' That's all I need! Let's eat!"

As someone who is known in the family to be a writer and a speaker, I could see Aunt Lupe's surprise. But sometimes, it's best to be brief.

Like that turkey and stuffing, there is a lot of great content in this issue I want you to hurry up and get to, including our State of the Industry Report and our Battery Powered Guide. I also want to thank the crew at The Greenery in South Carolina for posing for our cover photo. It was an idea we kicked around for eight months and finally pulled off as a nice cover showing the strength of our industry — the people in it.

I hope you get a break during the month of December and can look back at all the incredible work your team accomplished in 2023. That's what I'm going to do ... once I get through these last three business trips (San Antonio for the Irrigation Show, Orlando for the LM Growth Summit and Cleveland for the North Coast Media holiday party.)

It'll be cold here, but I'll watch another beautiful rural northeast Kansas sunset and I'll again raise a glass and say, "I'm thankful for you all ... cheers." 🍷

"I hope you get a break during the month of December and can look back at all the incredible work your team accomplished in 2023."

industry exclusives. I hosted seminars at Equip Exposition; I ran like crazy at Elevate. I saw demonstrations of all sorts of new and exciting products for the industry.

Personally, I took a few family vacations, most to south Texas to visit my ailing father-in-law. I took my daughter on her first college recruiting visit. I coached my son's fifth- and sixth-grade soccer team and watched him lead the team in scoring.

Sadly, I gave two eulogies, one for my father-in-law and the other for my wife's grandma. But happily, I also gave

SORRY TO SAY GOODBYE

An important announcement from your pals here at *Landscape Management* ... this issue will be the last issue with Christina Herrick serving as editor of the publication. Christina decided to return to her roots in the produce industry and has accepted the position of editor of *The Packer*. We're sad to see her go but happy for her at the same time.



I'll share a fun story about Christina's dedication to this magazine. I received an email from a colleague in the industry, a well-known business owner, wanting to know how our magazine knew to share the news of his company's expansion into another market. Apparently, a rival trade publication emailed him, angry that LM "got the exclusive."

I asked around, and it turned out Christina saw the announcement on the company's LinkedIn page. Since it was public information, she turned it into a news story and broke the story to the industry.

I laughed that Christina's sharp eye both impressed me and my colleague while upsetting a rival. That was a good day. (In the meantime, a reminder ... you can always email us a link about your news — that makes my life much easier!)

We thank Christina for her four years of dedication to our magazine and the industry and wish her all the best in her future endeavors.

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD



MORE ONLINE

See more great advice and complete answers from our Editorial Advisory Board in the online version of this feature at LandscapeManagement.net.

What's the state of the green industry as we head into 2024?

"Cautiously optimistic. We have seen shifts in demand, the labor market and operating costs in 2023. Expect more of the same dynamic environment in 2024. We are planning for growth but will have contingencies in place to be nimble to what comes our way in the market."



Landscape Professionals

Richard Bare
Arbor-Nomics Turf
Norcross, Ga.

Troy Clogg
Troy Clogg Landscape Associates
Wixom, Mich.

Pam Dooley
Plants Creative Landscapes
Decatur, Ga.

Paul Fraynd
Sun Valley Landscaping
Omaha, Neb.

Mike Haynes
The Loving Companies
Charlotte, N.C.

Luke Henry
ProScape Lawn &
Landscaping Services
Marion, Ohio

Chris Joyce
Joyce Landscaping
Cape Cod, Mass.

Aaron Katerberg
Grapids Irrigation
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Jerry McKay
McKay Landscape Lighting
Omaha, Neb.

Bryan Stolz
Winterberry Landscape
& Garden Center
Southington, Conn.

Greg Winchel
Winchel Irrigation
Grandville, Mich.

Industry Consultants

Neal Glatt
Grow the Bench
Boston, Mass.

Marty Grunder
The Grow Group
Dayton, Ohio

Phil Harwood
Tamarisk Business Advisors
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Jeffrey Scott
Jeffrey Scott Consulting
New Orleans, La.

"The coming year holds a lot of promise for those willing to make the sacrifice to grab the opportunities."



"I believe we have to work harder to generate and nurture leads, but there are still plenty of people doing projects. I still am very bullish for our industry as an important service to commercial and residential clients alike, and I strongly believe the companies who do the right things will continue to see growth and profitability in 2024."



"I believe emerging technologies and the continued consolidation drive will increase demand for better quality services. More educated consumers allow companies who know their stuff to differentiate and be paid properly for delivering outstanding results."



"'Doing more with less' as a motivation for consolidation, technology adoption and innovation."



"Finding and keeping great team members is the goal and finding and keeping great clients is just as important. There will be issues with finding people for the years to come; those who are staffed will grow."



OUR MISSION: *Landscape Management* shares a comprehensive mix of content designed to stimulate growth and take our readers to their next level.

LM GALLERY

Check out a few of the places where the **LM** team made its rounds recently

1 Too many cooks in the kitchen? Jeff Marguiles (with back to camera) of Good Earth Landscaping & Maintenance, Aspen, Colo., and husband and wife duo Ross and Natalie Day of Oasis Landscapes & Irrigation, Atlanta, get an Italian cooking lesson from professional chefs during the Aces Wild event in Tuscany, Italy.

2 An NBA player in Florence? No, that's just "Tiny Tim" (center), Tim Buiten, president of Tim's Complete Landscape Management, Seattle, with (left to right) David Peterson of Tim's Complete; and Josh, David and Lisa Amigo of G&G Landscape, Charlotte, N.C., on the streets of beautiful Florence in Italy.

3 He's here, he's there, he's everywhere! Editor Christina Herrick bumped into Marty Grunder at Atlantic OASE's Professional Conference in Cleveland, Ohio. Grunder delivered both the keynote and a session on important metrics professionals should know and track. (Check out our report on the event at LandscapeManagement.net.)

4 Heavy hitters Chloe Scoular, LM's account manager met Atlantic OASE's leadership team including President Jeff Weemhoff (left) and CEO Thorsten Muck (right) at the company's conference.

5 "Aspire"ing bowling team LM Publisher, Bill Roddy during the Ignite! The Night event at Las Vegas' Brooklyn Bowl with some of the Aspire team during the software company's annual user conference. From left to right: Curt Conrad, product business owner, PropertyIntel; Robin Mefford, senior manager, product marketing; Kelsea McGraw, senior product marketing manager; Chris Ascolese, specialist, technical solutions and Matt Davis, property measurement/takeoff projects coordinator.

6 Newfound friends Roddy and Yi Wei, senior estimator at Southern Botanical met during breakfast while attending the Aspire Software Ignite! Conference.

7 Exploring life margin Roddy and LM columnist Greg Herring after a chat about how not enough margin in life can lead to burnout.



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Hosted by Mark Bradley

Founder & CEO,
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Set desired outcomes, align company mission & values, develop a SWOT analysis, and implement a financial plan that makes it happen!

PM

Solve the People Problem

Attract the best people, retain staff with training & career ladder, design a performance-based incentive system, and develop a culture of high-performers.



Day 2

AM

Win More Business and Grow Profits

Complete a go to market strategy, uncover how to win at marketing, learn a sales process that delivers, and improve customer retention.

PM

Run Efficient Operations

Eliminate waste in materials, equipment, subs, and more, build your operational strategy, create measurable goals, and finalize your accountability plan to crush 2024.

SPONSORED CONTENT

Revolutionizing Landscaping Business: A Deep Dive into LMN Software's Impact on Growth and Efficiency with Garner Lawn



Q: How has your landscaping business evolved since its inception, and what role has LMN software played?

A: Garner Lawn's journey began in 2018 with a focus on lawn maintenance. As we expanded to include more services like fence building and landscape irrigation, the need for robust landscaping business software became evident. That's where LMN stepped in, transforming our small operation into a multi-crew enterprise. The software's scalability and comprehensive features have been pivotal in our growth.

Q: What specific needs led you to choose LMN software for your landscaping company?

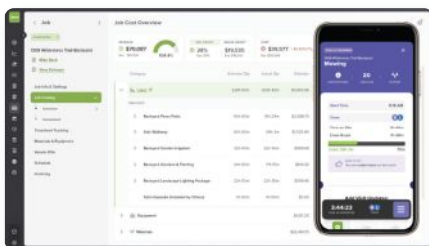
A: We needed landscape management software that could handle the complexities of both lawn maintenance and larger scale construction projects. Our previous system was limited when it came to

managing multiple crews and lacked detailed field data capabilities. LMN offers an all-in-one solution, addressing our diverse business needs and facilitating efficient management.

Q: How have customer demands shaped the expansion of your landscaping services?

A: Customer inquiries for additional services were a significant catalyst for our expansion. We evolved from basic landscaping to a full-fledged outdoor construction company, thanks to the flexibility and support provided by LMN's landscape business software.

Q: Can you share your experience with integrating LMN into your business operations?



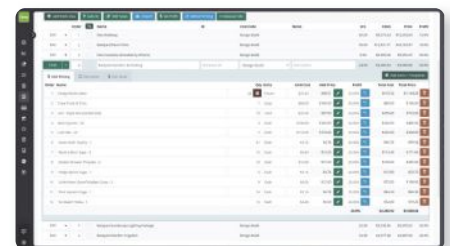
A: We started our LMN journey at the end of one calendar year and were fully operational by the following spring. The onboarding process was a learning experience, given LMN's robust features

compared to our previous landscaping software. But supported by LMN, the transition was smooth and highly beneficial.

Q: What transformative impact has LMN had on your landscaping business?

A: LMN has revolutionized our business operations, especially in design-build projects. It streamlined our estimating process and improved project management. As a comprehensive landscaping business management software, LMN has enabled us to scale efficiently, providing detailed job information and enhancing quality control.

Q: What invoicing challenges have you faced with LMN, and how have you overcome them?



A: Adjusting to a new system was initially a challenge. However, the efficiency of the process and the support from LMN helped us overcome these hurdles, making financial reporting more streamlined than before.

Empowering insight, data focus, better business.

"Each route is tracked separately, allowing us to analyze profitability and efficiency effectively."

Matt Garner
Owner
Garner Lawn & Construction
LMN Client Since 2022



Q: Which LMN features do you find most beneficial for your landscaping business?

A: The analytics feature, currently in beta, is highly anticipated for its potential to offer deep business insights. Additionally, LMN's bulk scheduling and schedule duplication features have been invaluable in managing client integration and route optimization.

Q: How does LMN enhance efficiency and decision-making in your business?



A: LMN captures extensive operational data, facilitating quick and informed decision-making. This landscaping business software provides a holistic view of our operations, from timesheets to project progress, streamlining our workflow.

Q: Could you elaborate on how LMN assists in managing individual maintenance routes?

A: With LMN, each maintenance route is tracked separately, allowing us to analyze profitability and efficiency effectively. This feature of the landscape management software is crucial for optimizing our routes and improving job performance.

Q: Would you recommend LMN to other landscaping contractors, and why?

A: Definitely. For any landscaping contractor looking to scale their business and gain comprehensive operational insights, LMN is the go-to software. The exceptional support and efficiency it offers make it an indispensable tool for modern landscaping businesses.

LMN has supported the craftsmanship of companies like Garner Lawn & Construction since 2009.

If you're not currently with LMN, it's maybe time to take a look at what we can do to enable you, your company, and employees to do their best work everyday.

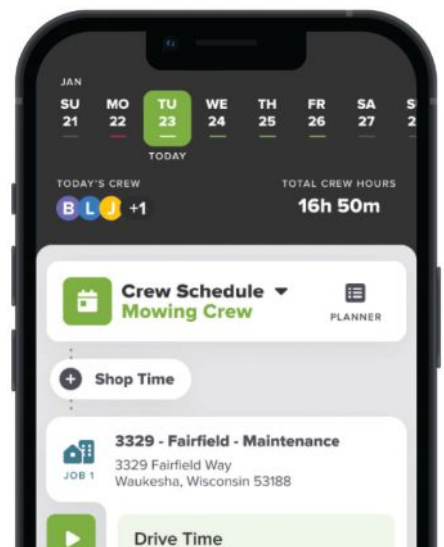
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Aces Wild peer group trip travels to Tuscany for networking, business growth and pasta

Nine landscape companies met in Italy to learn from each other and the coaches at McFarlin Stanford

BY SETH JONES | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Outside a glass door, the wind whips through the mountains of Tuscany, Italy, making the olive trees bend. A chef stokes the wood in the stone pizza oven. It's a half-hour drive down a one-lane gravel road to get back to civilization, a town called Rufina.

Inside, 14 men sit in an 800-year-old stone room. There's scattered exercise equipment; the room is now a workout facility.

What would the priests from the 1200s make of the yoga ball and kettlebell? Or the dozen-plus Americans talking about snow removal, construction costs and human resources?

The discussion is rapid-fire, with advice, insights and the occasional difficult question:

"I'm going to have to hire someone better than me someday; this has always been my goal."

"Someone has to be accountable. If two people are in charge, then really, no one is in charge."

"Across the board, March is the right time to raise prices."

"If we have two guys doing the same job, they always end up going after each other."

"You breathed heavy ... is that an epiphany, or a previous experience coming to mind?"

These landscape and lawn care business owners from around America are part of the Aces Wild peer group. They traveled all the way from Alaska, Colorado, Missouri, Georgia, Idaho, Washington, North Carolina and Wisconsin to the mountains of Italy not for a vacation, but to discuss how they could make their businesses stronger.

LET ME BACK UP A MINUTE

For months, I kept getting invited (perhaps recruited is a better word) to attend the ACE Summit 2023 event in Banff, Alberta, Canada. ACE Summit is an annual event for all the ACE Peer Groups to meet and network outside their existing peer groups. My most recent offer: If I

was there, I could host the happy hour at Banff Brewery, one of my favorite breweries in the world (and a place where I need to pick up a new T-shirt because I've lost mine somewhere along the way).

I was interested, but it always comes down to time. Time is valuable, and I have to be selective when saying yes and saying no to trips. As much as I'd like to make a return trip to the Canadian Rocky Mountains and beautiful Banff, could I afford the time out of the office?





(Above) Edoardo, owner of the Estate de Petroio, points to the Village of Acone, where the groups' hike will take them. (Above right and right) The group toured two wineries; Frescobaldi and Fattoria Lavacchio. The Frescobaldi tour included a majestic castle constructed around the year 1000. Fattoria Lavacchio was unique because it is an entirely organic operation.

I was leaning toward yes because it is a big part of my job — to travel, to be present, observe and report.

And then, on Oct. 3, I got a text message from Vince Torchia, vice president of The Grow Group:

"I have a better one for you — (James) Cali has a spot open on the October Italy trip," he wrote. "You could come Friday and leave Wednesday or stay the whole week."

My response:

"WHOA! How about I call you tomorrow to discuss?"

Call me old-fashioned, but when someone invites this guy to Italy, that follow-up is a phone call, not a text.

From that text on Oct. 3 to less than three weeks later, I found myself sitting next to my wife in the mountains of

Tuscany, Italy. It was Oct. 21 — coincidentally, our 17th anniversary. Much to her chagrin, I toasted the occasion with a group of people I mostly just met.

For the next five days, these business owners didn't just meet but lived together.

Now, this wasn't difficult by any means. The host location, known as the Estate of Petroio, is luxurious and spacious. It's a 900-acre estate and attendees could spread out among four buildings. Take any of those buildings and place it in a suburb of Charlotte and you're talking about a multimillion-dollar home. The previous guests include movie stars and film directors, one who left behind a room packed with unopened cartons of cigarettes and told the owner — smoke 'em if you got 'em.

For these five days, Aces Wild members were in constant communication with



some conversations scheduled, some organic. During a four-hour hike up into the mountains and back to the estate, attendees bonded as they traversed the rocky terrain, touring an olive oil factory and the many vineyards as they made their way to the village of Acone.

Our second of two scheduled winery tours got waylaid when one of the attendees started talking about his accounting software ... and offered to give his comrades a tour of the software. Suddenly, attendance quickly dropped for the winery tour when many stayed to see if their colleague had a secret sauce they should use at their own company.

It's these types of interactions that have helped Todd Christianson, owner of Titan in Anchorage, Alaska, grow his business, he said.

"(Previous to joining) I was uneducated, I didn't know any better," Christianson said. "Marty Grunder, we love watching him speak, he's a dynamic speaker. I learned a lot from him. I've got to say a lot for Jim Cali and Chris Psencik

Continued on page 10

Two dinners, including this pizza feast, were hosted at the Borgo, an outdoor dining area in the mountains of Tuscany. Nearby was the meeting room for the Aces Wild, as well as a tennis court for some stress relief.



Continued from page 9

and Jason New, our current coaches. They're a big part of our growth, having those kind of people around you ... I needed a coach. It really changed everything for us."

James Cali and Jason New founded McFarlin Stanford, a consultancy for professionals in the landscape industry, in 2014. Today the company includes 30 team members and executive coaches spread across the country. Cali said he learns from his 300-plus clients as much as they learn from him, and he uses that shared knowledge to help all his clients learn from others' trials and errors.

"We're former landscapers. We knew there was a need for 'back-of-house, how do you help run a landscape company' (services)," Cali said. "Everything from operations to sales, finance, leadership, HR, the whole nine yards. That niche has helped our clients immensely, and ourselves immensely."

To this outsider, it was a shock to see every conversation so focused on business. Other than a few moments of World Series chatter, most of the conversations at the dinner table, on the bus rides and around the campfire were centered on every aspect of running a landscaping business.

"We've literally completely transformed our business since (joining)

(Top) Edoardo explains the process for harvesting olives. **(Bottom)** Aces Wild members walk the streets of the Village of Acone, with origins that date back to the 6th century. The remote village did its best to resist the Nazis during World War II.

in 2020," said Levi Duckett, owner of Sunshine Landscape in Boise, Idaho. "We got into Aspire, we've used different HR programs, we now use an independent payroll company that we weren't using before ... everything we do has been touched by Aces. It's exciting. I can't go talk to landscapers in Boise about what they're doing or struggling with; they're just not going to talk to me. When (the Aces Wild) get together, everyone is wide open — we talk about everything. Pricing, insurance, HR, everything in the business and everybody is willing to share whatever, because we're not competing in the same markets. Which is invaluable."



ON THE ROAD AGAIN, BUT NOT ALONE

At the end of the trip, Aces Wild held one final dinner at the Borgo, outside the workout room. Edoardo, the owner of the estate, shook hands

The McFarlin Stanford team — James Cali, Paul "Paolo" Myers, Chris Psencik and Michael Bosco — hand out awards at the end of the week in Italy.



and hugged attendees as his ever-present mascot Amelia, a Jack Russell terrier, also said goodbye to the week's visitors.

McFarlin Stanford gave tongue-in-cheek awards to the attendees, like "most American" and "best dressed." I'm proud to report that my award was the "Pour me another glass of wine beer" award, and it was well deserved.

My week at Petroio was quickly coming to an end. It was a memorable week for so many reasons. A trip back down that one-lane mountain road to Florence was also quickly approaching.

The distance was far, but the road traveled to Tuscany was worth it to me and clearly to the Aces Wild attendees.

"We're here to help small business operators exist and operate as a bigger, larger business," Chris Psencik, vice president of McFarlin Stanford, told me. "We allow them to do things, grow things, scale things at a rate that they would not be able to do as a small, boutique operation. ... We're here to help them learn through the power of our peer groups, to be able grow at a faster speed than what you would if you were going down the road doing it yourself." 🍷

Keeping good employees is a big focus of respondents to our annual State of the Industry survey.

LM STATE OF THE INDUSTRY



STANDING STRONG IN 2023 AND BEYOND

Readers say they're optimistic about the future after an outstanding 2023 season

BY SETH JONES | LM EDITOR IN CHIEF AND CHRISTINA HERRICK | LM EDITOR

It's time to close the books on 2023 and look back at the year that was, and what you can take away from it. LM's readers seemed to agree that 2023 was an overwhelmingly positive year for them locally (63 percent of readers surveyed said their local market was up) and for the market in general.

Readers are hopeful about how they see 2024, with 48 percent saying they are somewhat optimistic, and 21 percent saying they are very optimistic.

For our 2023 State of The Industry Report, we spoke to lawn care and landscape professionals around the country for their take on 2023; their outlook for 2024; their predictions for the future of private equity investments in the industry; and how they are recruiting and retaining employees to get the job done.

REFLECTING ON 2023

"The go-go days of COVID-19 are gone, especially on the residential side, but all in all, it was a very,

very good year," says Frank Mariani, executive chairman of Mariani Premier Group. "It's clearly not as easy to make a sale compared to when everybody was at home and there was such a demand. That demand has slowed considerably, but yet there's still so much work out there on the commercial side."



Frank Mariani

Continued on page 12



Some parts of the country faced unusually wet springs or a lack of snow, which caused companies to recalibrate their efforts in other areas of the business.

Continued from page 11

Levi Duckett, president of Sunshine Landscape, a full-service landscape and lawn care company in Boise, Idaho, says 2023 was the best year his company had in a long time.

"We grew quite a bit. We did \$8.5 million in revenue in 2022; We'll probably do around \$11 million this year," Duckett says. "A lot of that was construction growth. We do commercial construction and maintenance. Overall, it was a really good year for us. Some of the labor issues seemed to let up a little for us over the last three years."

Meridian Landscaping President Tim Gardiner says this was a great year for his commercial maintenance and residential design/build business in Sterling, Va., despite a drastic shift in snow and ice removal revenue from last year to this year.

"We went from in 2022 doing seven figures in snow removal to 2023 doing zero," he says, due to the lack of precipitation in Metro Washington, D.C., this past season. "Snow was generally a very

big, big part of our business, it actually forced us to get better and more efficient as a company. And we rallied behind that to where we are outpacing our profit numbers from 2022 to 2023."

Gardiner says many customers rolled their snow and ice management budgets into landscaping and maintenance services this year.

CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

Jack Jostes, CEO of Ramblin Jackson, a consulting company for landscape professionals, says how his clients fared this year depends entirely on their region. While some areas of the country grew in population in places such as Texas, South Carolina, North Carolina and Florida, green industry businesses in the central U.S. and Northeast felt a slowdown, especially toward the end of this year.

"WE GREW QUITE A BIT. WE DID \$8.5 MILLION IN REVENUE IN 2022; WE'LL PROBABLY DO AROUND \$11 MILLION THIS YEAR. A LOT OF THAT WAS CONSTRUCTION GROWTH."

— LEVI DUCKETT



"There was really a boom in landscaping in '20, '21 and '22 because of the pandemic, because of stimulus money, because of stay-at-home (orders) and less travel," he says. "Many people bought landscaping at an accelerated rate during that time. And maybe the market of people who would've bought it in 2023 just wasn't there."

Jeff Domenick, CEO of KeyServ, a Southeastern full-service landscape company with more than 3,000 residential, commercial and government clients across four states, agrees with Jostes, noting he sees 2023 as a tale of the controllable variables and the uncontrollable.

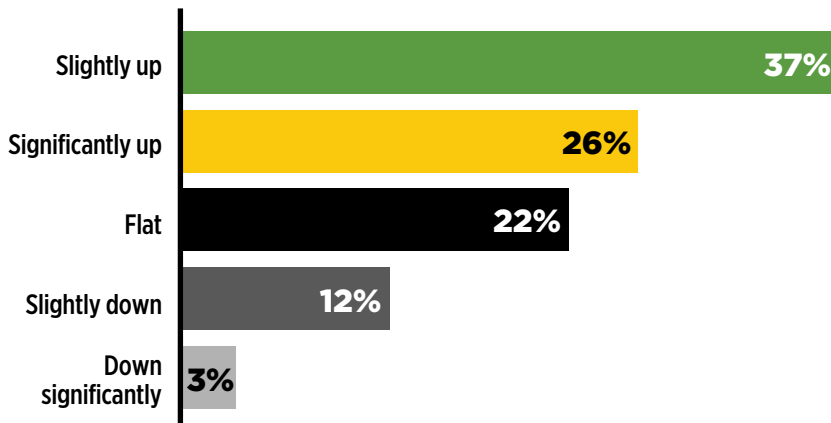
Domenick said it was a wet spring in the Carolinas and Alabama, which

pushed work into the hotter months in July, August and September. It was the opposite in Florida, where a dry spring turned into a wet and hot summer. This fall things look good for KeyServ, he says.

"We think we're going to beat our plan this year," he says. "On the top line, on the bottom line, we, like a lot of contractors, pulled the pricing lever pretty heavy. The last three years we've seen some pretty substantial increases. This really isn't driving up our gross margins or driving up our bottom line. It's really staying in line with the costs increase that we're seeing."

Domenick said his company raised prices to keep up with inflation and a higher cost of goods, but those increases haven't gone unnoticed, he says. It's not just KeyServ's increases but increases at the grocery store, insurance and more.

How would you describe the landscape and lawn service market in your region?



"I think we're going to see some stabilization as we go through the rest of this year and in the next year, but I don't think we're going to have a lot of room in the pricing game," he says. "I think we're going to have

to focus on efficiency. I also think costs will stabilize. We're seeing some of the commodity materials start to come back — seed and pipe and those sorts of things."

Continued on page 14

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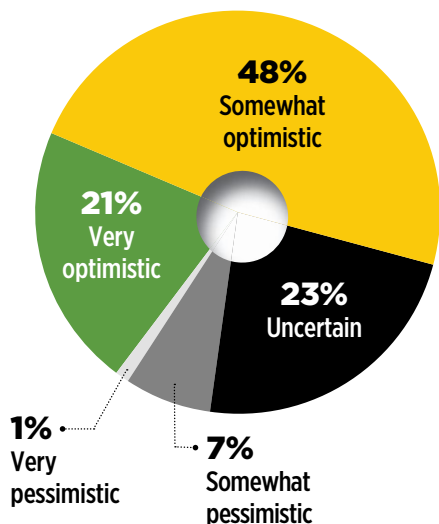
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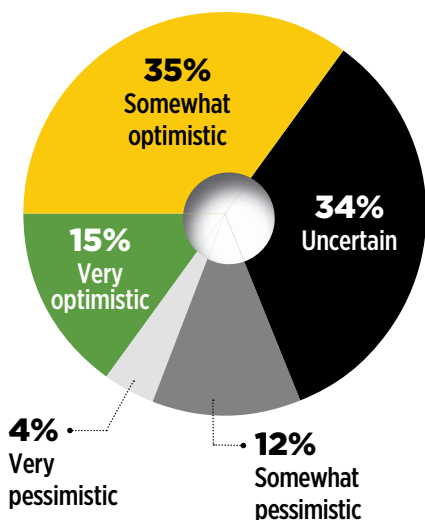


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What's your business outlook for 2024?



What's your view on how the economy will perform in 2024?



While many companies had a good 2023, some say whether 2024 will be a good year will depend on efficiency gains and crew productivity.



Continued from page 13

David Amigo, president of G&G Landscape Solutions, a residential and commercial landscaping company serving the Charlotte, N.C., area says his company is standing strong even though 2023 didn't deliver exactly the profits he was hopeful for.

"From a growth standpoint, about process and people — (2023 was) phenomenal. We've really come a long way in our journey," he says, but adds, "As for the P&L? *Ehhh*, so-so. But we're really building the infrastructure of our

company, so from that aspect, it's been phenomenal, beyond what we expected."



David Amigo

WHAT'S IN STORE FOR 2024

Domenick says a big focus for Key-Serv in 2024 will be improving efficiency to make gains on the increase in cost of goods to keep the business profitable and pricing competitive.

"I think next year, companies are really, really going to have to

Continued on page 16

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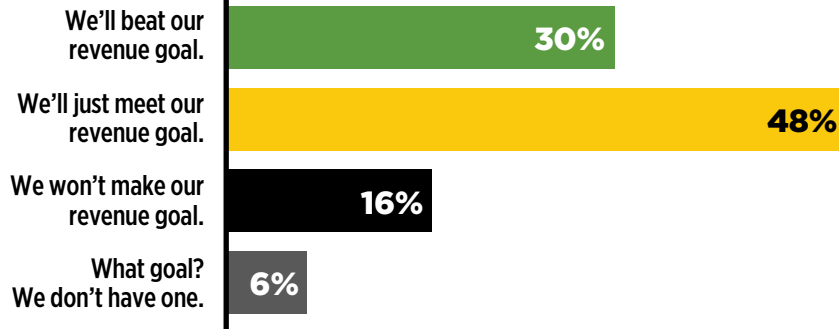
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execute to either maintain their gross margin and profitability lines or if you're working like we are to increase those, it's going to come through efficiency, not through cost increases," he says.

Jostes says he expects 2024 to play out similarly to 2023 for his clients. Like Domenick, he says accurate production rates and job costing will be key in 2024. Jostes also encourages landscape business owners to make sure all marketing efforts (website, social media, etc.) put the best face forward of the business.

"When we're in a softer economy or a down market or whatever we want to call it, people will become more cautious with how they spend their money," he says. "If we're in a period where it's even harder to get

How does your expected revenue goal compare to what you budgeted for the year?



customers, we have to become more efficient and we have to make do with what we have."

Gardiner says he expects Meridian Landscaping will have a good year, thanks to a refocus on the core parts of the business.

"We're hiring for growth for next year, and we're anticipating our core business probably growing at about 25 percent from 2023 to 2024," he says. "We do a little bit of bid/build work. That piece was down, snow was down, but the



Technology will play a key role in the efficiency gains of companies in the coming years.

PHOTO: ROB KAUFMAN

“KNOW YOUR NUMBERS AND JUST KNOW THAT IF YOU’RE TRYING TO GROW, SOMETIMES YOUR BOTTOM LINE TAKES A HIT. BUT KEEP IN MIND THE LONG-PLAY.”

— ADAM CALLISON



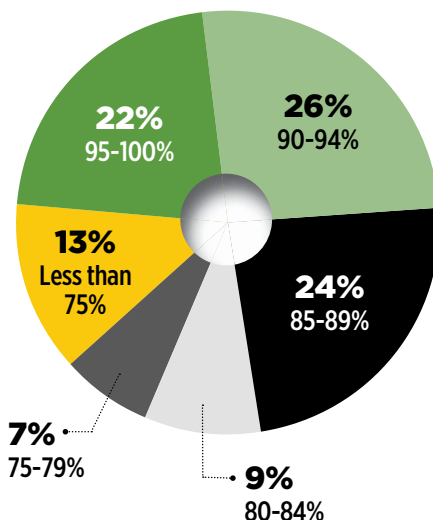
rest of our core business was up, where we will increase revenue a little bit from 2022 to 2023. We’ve been growing our core business at about 20 to 25 percent.”

Adam Callison is president and CEO of Done Right Landscapes in St. Louis, Mo. The company has about 40 employees and does installations, irrigation and snow and ice control. The company did commercial maintenance but sold off that business 10 years ago. Moving forward in

2024, he’s going to get back into the maintenance game.

“If I’m talking to other owners, I just advise them to know their numbers,” Callison says. “We’ve not known our numbers and been growing, and had to significantly downsize, to grow again, because we couldn’t afford the people. Know your numbers and just know that if you’re trying to grow, sometimes your bottom line takes a hit. But keep in mind the long-play.” 📈

What percentage of your clients did you retain over the year?



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WHAT'S THE FUTURE OF PRIVATE EQUITY INVESTMENTS IN THE INDUSTRY?

We asked three industry pros involved with private equity to look into their crystal balls for 2024 and beyond. This is what they said

It was a busy year for the staff of LM for many reasons, one of which was keeping up with all the mergers and acquisitions in the industry. One of the biggest players in that market was Frank Mariani, executive chairman of Mariani Premier Group, No. 11 on the 2023 LM150 list. As of press time, Mariani Premier Group has acquired 15 companies over the last two years.

Mariani did not mince words when asked how he feels: "Private equity is here to stay," he says. And he believes that is a good thing.

"It's wonderful because it gives us owners so many more opportunities to have a liquidity event, whereas most of us just keep investing in our companies and investing and investing ... and that's how we've grown from one truck to hundreds of trucks," Mariani says. "Private equity can allow you to take some money off the table if you want to walk into the sunset, or if you're like me and continue to work as hard as you've ever worked."

Mariani adds that the increase in interest rates will make funding acquisitions tougher, but that won't be enough to slow down Mariani Premier Group.

"We are very, very bullish on next year," Mariani says. "We feel very fortunate to have the partners we already have. I can't thank the green industry and all those individuals enough. There are so many good landscaping companies out there, I don't see this stopping for a long time."



"... THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION, 'WHY IS (THE LAWN CARE) INDUSTRY ATTRACTIVE TO PRIVATE EQUITY?' THE ANSWER IS PREDICTABLE REVENUE."

— LUKE HAWTHORNE



In June 2023, Senske Services, No. 59 on the LM150 list of the largest landscaping businesses in the country ranked by revenue, acquired Emerald Lawns of Austin, Texas. GTCR, a private equity firm invested in Senske Services in December 2022. Emerald Lawns co-founder Luke Hawthorne remains with the company as COO. Hawthorne agrees with Mariani and predicts the number of acquisitions in the lawn care industry will ramp up.

"It started in pest control and it started because the margins in pest control are very good," Hawthorne says. "It's subscription based; it's predictable revenue."

Hawthorne recalled the first time his father walked into his shop and saw how many trucks Emerald Lawns had grown into. Hawthorne says his father's knees literally buckled and he had to steady himself on a truck. His dad, who ran his own excavation company, asked him, "How do you sleep at night? How do you pay off all these trucks?"

"I said, 'Dad, my business is different than yours because you never knew where your next job was going to come from. But I can look ahead six months from now and I can give you a pretty good idea of how much revenue I'm going to have on the books that I'm going to be able to bring in,'" Hawthorne says. "So the answer to the question, 'Why is (the lawn care) industry attractive to private equity?' The answer is predictable revenue."

Jeff Domenick, CEO of KeyServ, a Southeastern full-service landscape services company with more than 3,000 residential, commercial and government clients across four states, says his hypothesis when he pitched his business strategy to private equity investors — Kidd

& Company and LO3 — was there are a lot of great \$5 million to \$10 million landscape services companies that don't have an exit strategy unless their children or an employee is planning to take over the business.

"Our industry has grown so fast over the years that there's a lot of these really great companies and they haven't had to have a transition yet. And so where are they going to transition to?" Domenick asks. "I joked with an associate of mine who's not in the industry and he was like, 'Well, jeez, at some point you're going to run out of companies to buy.' I told him, 'I think we can buy a hundred companies a year for the next 10 years and still have runway.' It's just a really, really fragmented industry. And it's evident when you look at the size of our industry." 🗣️

HELP WANTED... NOW

Recruiting employees remains a steady challenge

Irew Gronholz, president of River City Lawnscapes in La Crosse, Wis., says 2023 wasn't as good of a year as he would have liked, primarily for one reason — labor. The year started off strong with a good snow season for his snow, maintenance and design/build and installation firm, but then ...

"We didn't get our H-2B guys until the third week of June, so it put us back on construction and installation," he says. "We had to change focus with the staff we had on hand. We focused on maintenance. When

the H-2B guys did arrive, it was all hands on deck, getting everything done as much as possible."

Gronholz adds that his H-2B guest workers have otherwise been consistent over the years, and have even become like a family. Because of this lack of labor at the most inopportune time, Gronholz says his company will just barely fall short of its revenue goal for 2023.

Jack Jostes, CEO of Ramblin Jackson, surveyed his clients to gauge how their years went. While the responses varied based on revenue,

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GUYS DID ARRIVE, IT WAS ALL HANDS
ON DECK, GETTING EVERYTHING DONE
AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE.”**

— DREW GRONHOLZ

Continued from page 19

most respondents said recruiting employees was a big challenge, followed by generating quality leads.

“Companies below \$6 million said generating quality leads was the biggest challenge,” he says. “Larger companies over \$6 million said recruiting quality employees was their biggest challenge.”

Jostes says this information is nothing new, as labor woes continue to plague the green industry. That’s why it’s critical for businesses focus on culture, pay, benefits and training, he says.


“If you don’t spend money on it, if you don’t improve yourself, honestly being a good place to work, you’re probably going to continue to have those issues,” he says.

Jeff Domenick, CEO of KeyServ, said it experienced a 22 percent labor cost increase last year. Crew members now make \$19 or \$20 an hour in most markets.

Tim Gardiner, president of Meridian Landscaping, says the company has always had a history of providing strong benefits to its workforce. But a couple of years ago the company initiated a loan program in conjunction with a savings program. Employees pay \$25 into the program and can borrow up to \$2,500.

“When we would do our team meeting, you would ask them what the most important benefit and they would always say the loan program,” he says. “It’s helped us retain employees.”

Gardiner says Meridian will discuss the company’s employee benefits to clients as a way to explain any increases in pricing.

“Sometimes it’s a matter of just going and talking to customers and saying, ‘Hey, here’s an increase. By the way, here’s why,’” he says, ““These are very educated, full-time people. We’re training them, we’re doing English class immersion. We’re providing them a foundation to grow.’ If you have good people, everything follows naturally.” 

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A MANUFACTURER'S PERSPECTIVE

Despite a backlog of inventory, the pipeline won't stop

Rocky Reynolds, vice president of sales and marketing for Senix Tools, says this year was an interesting one for his business.

Senix used this year to market its handheld and battery-powered tools to the green industry. One thing he's heard is how challenging the year has been for dealers and distributors.

"Retailers and manufacturers alike are still dealing with the pandemic hangover, as I call it," he says. "The supply chain was so disruptive during that period of time that everyone — including the manufacturers — just built enormous

amounts of inventory. They could throw anything in the retail store during those two, two and a half years and it was selling. As the consumers were buying, retailers were trying not to be out of stock of different categories."


And then, just like that, Reynolds says the faucet turned off.

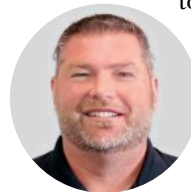
"What we were left with was inventory that's already produced, some has already been paid for by the retailers," he says. "We're all stuck in a situation that's going to take 18, 24, 36 months to level back to where it was pre-pandemic.

Everyone this year really has been working through an enormous amount of inventory that we have to get out of the pipeline so that we can bring new products to market."

Reynolds says this backlog complicates Senix and other manufacturers' ability to continue to introduce new technology

and solutions for the professional landscape contractor.

"Our product pipeline doesn't stop," he says. "We may slow down, we may push some projects back for six months, eight months, something like that, but it's not going to stop." 



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FROM THE SOURCE

Analyzing the benefits of all-in-one fertilizer application

While it might be tempting to add more to your N-P-K fertilizer, will it help or harm your turf?

BY BEN PEASE, PH.D. | CONTRIBUTOR

Efficiency is the name of the game in landscape management. How can we achieve the same or better results with fewer applications, fewer miles on the truck or fewer employees? Many operators are looking at how to streamline their turfgrass management plans. This often leads them to choose a fertilizer “+ etc.” combination product.

It now seems that there isn't anything we can't add to a general N-P-K fertilizer — herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, soil amendments, microbes, surfactants, carbon sources, biosolids and micronutrients. Adding the considerations of slow-release versus quick-release nutrients and the various available nutrient sources can confuse even the most experienced turfgrass practitioner.



Ben Pease, Ph.D.

FEEDING TURFGRASS

Let's start with nutrition. After all, this should be the cornerstone of choosing which products to apply. Correctly fed turfgrass should require fewer of the above-listed add-ins to achieve sustained quality. The time of year and how long you'd like to go between site visits will determine what percentage of slow-release nitrogen to use. For extended feeding, a base level of 50 percent slow-release is optimal.

We can achieve this by mixing two nitrogen sources — for example, a

“Let's start with nutrition. This should be the cornerstone of choosing which products to apply. Correctly fed turfgrass should require fewer of the add-ins to achieve sustained quality.”

poly-coated urea and a noncoated ammonium sulfate — giving the added benefit of quick green-up and extended feeding. This also pairs well with many control products with two-plus month effective timespans.

Slow-release versions of phosphorus and potassium are also available, although they increase the complexity (and cost) of a fertilizer product. But if you are considering a 70-plus day application interval, you should consider slow-release forms of all nutrients. You don't want other nutrients to fall short at day 45 while nitrogen supplies are still adequate weeks later.

The most common value-add to a general N-P-K fertilizer is a control product, usually a herbicide, insecticide or both. Picking the level of active ingredient for each control product can be an issue. Again, you need to pair this with the correct percentages of slow-release nutrients. Fertilizer manufacturers often have these choices dialed in since combination products are common and have proven manufacture/efficacy track records.

TO ADD OR NOT TO ADD?

Incorporating a third or fourth value-

added component to a fertilizer is where things get complicated. Adding a bio-solid filler or fertility source can affect the ability to utilize control products or quick-release fertility. But biosolids can be excellent carriers for surfactants or microbes and are often great carbon sources. The downside is low nutrient content, which may not support our do-more-with-less mentality.

Soil amendments such as humic acid or gypsum can be excellent additions to a fertilizer, often replacing rock limestone as a filler, making every component in the bag beneficial to the turfgrass system. Soil amendments also mix or blend well with standard N-P-K components. Humic acid especially has been shown to reduce the overall nutrient amounts necessary to produce quality turfgrass. When blended with the correct ratio of slow- and quick-release nitrogen, soil amendments have the benefit of extended application intervals.

We can't forget what hides in the shadow of N-P-K: micronutrients. Consider using fertilizers with added manganese, magnesium and sulfur. As turfgrass managers have employed reduced N-P-K rates over the past 20 years, micronutrient levels have dropped. Thankfully, micronutrients come along with soil amendments or you can easily add them to fertilizer formulations on their own. You can add as much nitrogen as you like, but without correct micronutrient levels, the turf may not respond accordingly.

While it may be tempting to add five or six components to a fertilizer blend, that is not often feasible from a manufacturing or cost standpoint. The real all-in-one fertilizer may better exist as a theme across a few complementary, well-planned applications. 🍷

Pease is a turfgrass agronomist with The Andersons.

DID YOU KNOW

Strong communication a key to organic turf care

Achieve more success with an organic lawn care program by tempering client expectations from the outset BY MIKE ZAWACKI | CONTRIBUTOR

Consumer demand for sustainable and environmentally friendly products and services has skyrocketed in recent years. If you're starting to meet this demand, organic lawn care professionals offer some insights for managing client expectations with alternative programs.

BE TRANSPARENT

Today's consumers are accustomed to instant gratification, but converting from conventional to organic lawn care takes time and patience. Contractors must be transparent with clients about the gradual progress and transformations they can expect.

"Organic lawn care is the long rather than the short-term answer (for a client's lawn)," says Dave Walsh, owner and founder of EcoGreen Lawn

Care in Collegeville, Pa., which maintains a 100 percent lawn care service portfolio. "The client must understand at the onset that it's a commitment to go organic."

Often, particularly with new residential clients, their turf has gone feral with weeds, which creates a challenging starting point.

"Initially, we need to get the weeds under control before we can do anything organically," Walsh says. "So, I'll recommend a hybrid program that involves six treatments, the first two a traditional conventional program to get a head start on the weeds in the spring, then transition to the organic program."

Focus initial client meetings on educating them about what organic lawn care service will entail, says Britt Phillips, owner of Complete Land Organics in Wilmet, N.H. The company's service portfolio is 100 percent lawn care.

"I provide a lot of information to clients right off the bat because I want to educate them and manage their expectations. I want them to understand my process, step by step, of what we'll be doing as we transition to organics," she says.

Walsh recommends asking new clients various probing questions, like rating the lawn's condition, how they would best describe their turf, and what state they want to see it in eventually.

"From there, we'll recommend where we should start with our program," he says. "We explain what condition the lawn is in, what's going to happen throughout the process, and how long an organic program might take to begin producing the results they want to see. They need to understand this may be a three-year commitment."

BE FOCUSED

No two properties are alike, a notion essential in successful organic lawn care practices. Before applying a foliar or granular organic nutritional product, Walsh focuses on pH testing, while Phillips prefers soil testing to assess turfgrass needs and what's going on below the surface.

"I won't even write (an organic) program unless I've done a soil test," Phillips says. "My programs are customized to each (client's) soil conditions because so much of what my programs are is amending, balancing and building to create a soil that grass loves to grow in."

Walsh says assessing soil pH is critical because weed varieties tend to prosper in acidic soil. In addition, organic soil amendments are more effective in soil with a neutral pH.


"Especially with organic lawn care, you have to have the right pH for the grass to take up nutrients effectively," he says.

BE COLLABORATIVE

Walsh and Phillips solely manage turf care for clients, while many other green industry professionals handle mowing, irrigation and tree and ornamental care on their clients' properties. They say it's vital to communicate and collaborate with the pros tending other aspects of the client's outdoor space that cross over to turf care.

"In the initial client meeting, I always ask the client who they're working with for mowing and for irrigation. Our market in New Hampshire isn't very big, so we tend to know each other, and I like to maintain good professional relationships (with contractors)," she says.

She says, for example, if she notices stressed turf due to low cutting heights, she'll ask the mowing contractor to raise their mowing deck to alleviate the stress. She'll also work with irrigation contractors when needed.

"When you build up the soil profile, the organic matter holds moisture like a sponge, so the client may not need as much or as frequent irrigation," she adds. "I'll consult with the client's irrigation contractor because some areas of the property are receiving too much water." 



Britt Phillips

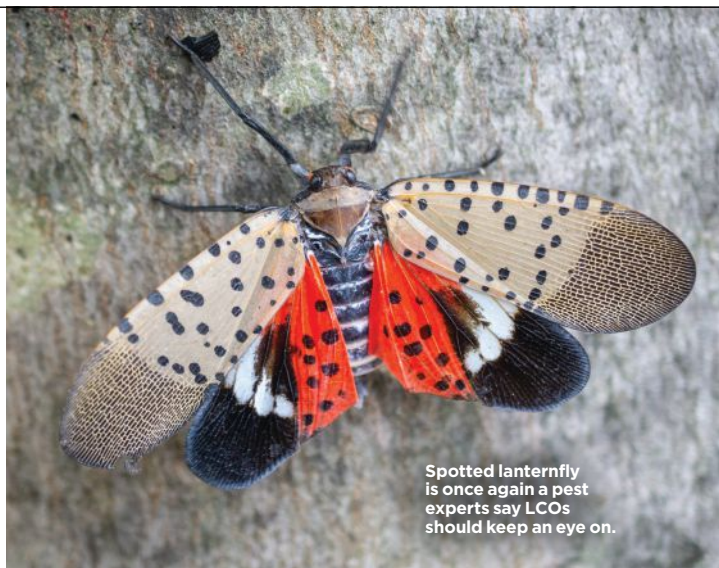


Dave Walsh

Zawacki is a Cleveland-based writer covering the landscape industry for nearly two decades.

» RECOMMENDER

What's the No. 1 emerging pest that lawn care operators should know about in 2024?



Spotted lanternfly is once again a pest experts say LCOs should keep an eye on.



AARON HATHAWAY
TECHNICAL SERVICES
MANAGER IN TURF
AND ORNAMENTALS
NUFARM

The spotted lanternfly (SLF) is a fast-moving insect pest. It isn't as devastating to its hosts as some other pests. It was first found in the U.S. in 2014 in Pennsylvania and made its way to New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Virginia, Ohio and seen in Michigan. SLF is more of a nuisance pest to trees. It has many hosts on which it feeds by piercing and sucking the sugar-rich sap. They leave a wake of secreted honeydew, which attracts bees, wasps, other insects and promotes the growth of sooty mold, which can cover plants, patios, cars and anything else underneath heavily infested hosts.



MATT WILKINSON
PROPRIETARY
PRODUCTS MANAGER
ALBAUGH
SPECIALTY PRODUCTS

Doveweed is a weed primarily found near the Florida coast but has been emerging further north and more inland. This annual is often mistaken for Virginia buttonweed and can be difficult to kill. Split applications in February or March and again in April or May can help alleviate the potential of preemergent misses. Early identification for postemergent applications is essential as young doveweed plants can be difficult to differentiate among desirable warm-season grasses. Young leaves are most susceptible to chemical controls. However, multiple applications may be necessary.



JARED HOYLE, PH.D.
TURF AND
ORNAMENTAL
TERRITORY MANAGER
CORTEVA AGRISCIENCE

One emerging pest that LCOs should know about in 2024 is Japanese stiltgrass. As a summer annual that comes back year after year, populations and the seed bank can increase year-to-year if not controlled. LCOs must apply preemergent herbicides before germination. If LCOs apply preemergent herbicides too late, they will have to move to a post-application product. Dithiopyr, commonly utilized in weed control programs, can control postemergently at early growth stages as well as preemergence control thereafter.



BOBBY KERR, PH.D.
TECHNICAL
SERVICE MANAGER
QUALI-PRO

Bermudagrass mites (*Eriophyes cynodontensis*) have become an increasing issue in the U.S. over the last several years. Mites are difficult to diagnose due to size (adults are 0.006 to 0.008 inches or 0.16 to 0.21 millimeters long). They are cigar or banana-shaped, translucent and have two legs. Development from egg to adult takes about two weeks and each female lays about 50 eggs. The combination of tiny size, quick life cycle and females producing a large number of eggs makes diagnosing and controlling bermudagrass mites challenging.

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Want to add battery-powered equipment to your fleet?

As landscape pros abandon gas-powered mowers and handheld equipment for battery-powered alternatives, perhaps it's time to consider plugging your maintenance operation into this trend

BY MIKE ZAWACKI | CONTRIBUTOR

Battery-powered equipment is a hot industry topic and for good reason. While the technology is not new, rapid technical advancements in recent years have made battery-powered equipment a more viable and attractive option for contractors than in the past.

The push for battery-powered utilization has gained momentum with commercial and residential clients across the U.S., forcing professional landscaping companies to reevaluate long-held business models and consider the investment and transition to electric equipment. Battery power is at the heart of the recent wave of automated mowing equipment.

Growing demand, regulations

The concept of zero-emissions equipment — machines

that operate sans traditional 2- or 4-cycle internal combustion engines — is at the forefront of many industry discussions about changing to battery-powered gear. California recently passed a law requiring new landscaping equipment sold in the state to be emission-free beginning in 2024. Additional states, including New York, are considering their own legislation to ban or limit gas-powered landscape equipment.

The battery-powered products market is expected to grow, studies show. According to 2022 data by market research firm Arizon, the U.S. electric mower market (which includes residential, professional landscape, golf course and government purchases) is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of more than 8.6 percent by 2027. In response, green industry manufacturers have stepped up their research and development efforts, turning out innovative battery-driven tech in recent years to meet the market's anticipated demand from residential and professional users.

However, adoption has been slow among landscape pros. According to 2021 data from FactMR, a market research firm, while battery-powered mowers made up around 37 percent of all sales, professional-grade, ride-on models made up just 11 percent of the total market.

Contractors who made the switch share their insights and experiences on adopting and integrating battery-powered equipment into their operation.

Going electric

Daniel Cienfuegos is a relative newcomer to the professional landscape industry. He and business partner Ronnie Rodriguez started Electrawn in Lakeland, Fla., as a 100 percent electric lawn maintenance company in 2020.

Initially, going electric made entrepreneurial and competitive sense for Electrawn to avoid the costs

Continued on page BP4

Market research firm Arizon expects demand for battery-powered equipment to grow by more than 8.6 percent by 2027.



BATTERY-POWERED EQUIPMENT GUIDE

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associated with the routine maintenance of traditional gas-powered equipment.

"In Lakeland, it's a very aggressive and highly competitive market," Cienfuegos says. "When we were starting out, we were looking at ways we could operate more efficiently and control our start-up costs. With gas-powered equipment, you need a small engine repair shop for the regular maintenance and repairs that equipment requires. But with electric, there's very little regular maintenance required other than periodic greasing and changing blades. For us, that made a lot of (financial) sense."

In addition to lower operating costs, there are other benefits landscape contractors considering switching to battery-powered equipment may find attractive:

1. Reduced emissions. Battery-powered equipment produces zero emissions, which benefits the environment and the health of landscape workers.

2. Reduced noise pollution: Battery-powered equipment is significantly quieter (on average, 75 dB compared to 90 dB), which allows contractors to work earlier or later hours in residential areas without noise being a nuisance.

3. Improved performance: While still not equal to gas-powered equipment performance levels, battery-powered outdoor power equipment manufacturers have made significant technical advancements in the last three to five years to improve the equipment's overall performance and reliability.

Find a customer base

Sean Creel is a proponent of electric,

eco-friendly landscape practices in his home market of Bel Air, Md., and he saw an opportunity to attract a customer base who preferred to do business with a like-minded service provider.

"Traditional lawn maintenance is a dirty business, and there's a variety of reasons why (clients) are choosing alternative services," says the owner of Luminary Lawns, which is 60 percent maintenance and 40 percent organic lawn care. "Operating battery-powered equipment (compared to gas-powered) is certainly a factor in their decisions, but they also like that we're much quieter. This is important to people who work from home or have jobs where they're working second or third shift and have to sleep during the day."

Compared to consumer products offered in big-box stores, experts say utilizing professional-grade equipment is critical to success when switching to battery power. Professionals looking to convert must realize the upfront investment required. Contractors that made the switch say battery-powered equipment costs as much as three times more than traditional gas-powered equipment. In addition, contractors must factor in the costs of batteries necessary to operate throughout the day. For example, professional-grade lithium-ion batteries can run between \$200 and \$600 apiece.

Sebert Landscape in Bartlett, Ill., No. 50 on the LM150 list of largest landscape companies, has been integrating battery-powered equipment into its operations for the last 12 years as part of a concerted shift to become a more sustainable operation. Sebert manages a service

Continued on page BP6

Snow and ice still shut out of battery-powered equipment revolution

While battery-powered equipment has taken a foothold in landscape operations, it has yet to find solid ground in winter snow and ice management. This is a significant factor in this industry-wide conversion, considering that nearly 65 percent of landscape professionals operating in Northern states offer snow and ice management services during winter.

According to contractors, it comes down to cold temperatures' impact on battery reliability and the power — or added oomph — winter equipment requires to jockey heavy-pack snow and frozen slush around a commercial or residential property.

Austin Hall, owner of Greenwise Organic Lawn Care in Evanston, Ill., previously demoed battery-powered snowblowers and was disappointed by their performance. He says they don't meet pro standards and are better suited for home use and managing snow on a single-family residential driveway.

"(The battery-powered blowers) just don't have the power or runtime to manage a contractor's needs on a commercial property," he says, adding the limited runtime is his main issue. "We can't afford to have this equipment going down in the middle of an event."

While the case for winter use isn't quite there yet, Steve Pearce, vice president of operations with Sebert Landscape in Bartlett, Ill., says there are improvements. Viable battery-powered equipment engineered specifically for snow and ice management is on the horizon.

"I anticipate we'll see if first with sidewalk-based equipment — blowers and sidewalk machines," Pearce says. "And that's most likely not that far off."

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Continued from page BP4

portfolio of 10 percent design/build, 50 percent maintenance, 15 percent snow and ice management and 25 percent enhancements. The company aims to transition entirely to battery power (other than trucks and snow and ice management equipment) in 2024.

The initial investment required to convert to battery-powered, professional equipment can be eye-opening for contractors, says Steve Pearce, Sebert's vice president of operations. However, improvements in equipment reliability and the fact that it requires less maintenance offset this cost.

"Yes, the upfront costs can be startling," he says. "But when it comes to the maintenance side of (battery-powered) equipment, the costs go down because you're not spending a lot of time maintaining that equipment. And this saves you money over the long-term."

Partnering with a solid equipment supplier/dealer is vital to the transition, Pearce adds.

"You have to find the right partner who will be able to help you tackle issues related to (equipment) repairs and diagnostics," Pearce says. "And they'll be able to advise you on the infrastructure you'll need, how to build your trailer and train you to charge your batteries properly."

Know Your ABCs

One main criticism of electric equipment is the need for contractors to maintain an inventory of expensive,

fickle batteries to power mowers and handheld gear through a day's workload. Therefore, how a contractor maintains charge becomes critical to success.

To avoid carting around one or two dozen batteries from site to site to power a day's worth of activities, landscape professionals have started equipping their trucks and trailers with onboard charging stations that allow them to replenish power on the go and carry fewer replacement battery packs.

"You have to mind your ABCs — always be charging," Cienfuegos says. "That means you have one battery in the charger and one (powering) a piece of (handheld) equipment, and you make sure (the battery) is back in the charger when the equipment is not in use."

Intense summer heat drains batteries quickly, which impacts their performance and reliability. Cienfuegos notes that depleting a battery to zero charge is a killer. Instead, avoid dipping below a 10 percent charge before returning the battery to its charging rack. Cienfuegos maintains battery pairs for each piece of equipment, so one's always charging while the other is in use.

"We learned some expensive lessons about how to best manage batteries from trial and error over the last three years," Cienfuegos says. "If you're not charging it all the way down (to zero), and you're consistently changing them out during the day to maintain a strong charge, then there is minimal (charge) degradation, and they'll last a lot longer."

Electrawn also taps into Florida's most abundant natural resource, charging batteries via a solar array mounted to the trailer.

"There's no shortage of bright sunshine to charge our batteries, so we charge on the go, and we charge when we're parked," he says.

Client expectations

While regulations and community mandates may push for battery-powered equipment, contractors say the reaction is often neutral. In general, the bottom line with clients is quality of cut and professional service, Pearce says.

"Definitely, there have been no negative reactions to using battery-powered equipment," he says. "And for those (clients) who are paying attention, they seem to appreciate our efforts. They think it's pretty cool."

Landscape contractors interviewed for this story say they're split on whether they've increased their prices to offset the costs associated with the alternative technology.

Continued on page BP8



Those with battery-powered fleets should remember their ABCs — always be charging.



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Austin Hall, owner of Greenwise Organic Lawn Care in Evanston, Ill., raised his prices by 25 to 30 percent to offset the additional time it takes to service properties with battery-powered equipment.

“On a wet day or if the turf is particularly high, a mower powered by batteries is just not going to be as strong cutting through the grass as a gas-powered mower,” Hall says. “So, you may have to go over it more than once to get a quality cut. While we don’t have a ton of data to say definitively that it increases (costs) by a factor of 1 1/2 or 2 times, we’ve had to make some assumptions with our pricing.”

He says he hasn’t noticed a lot of client pushback or a negative impact on client retention.

“I believe that’s because our clients have been very supportive of us moving in this direction,” he adds.

Conversely, Cienfuegos says client demand for battery-powered services in Lakeland, Fla., specifically for sustainability reasons, is not as strong as it might be in other areas of the country. However, Electrawn distinguishes itself by offering clients quiet maintenance services.

“Our market isn’t 100 percent sold on electric yet,” Cienfuegos says. “However, many of our residential customers work from their homes, so offering quiet (landscape maintenance) operations during the day is a major selling point and has been our biggest market advantage.”

And while using battery-powered equipment is an important factor in their clients’ decision-making, Pearce says Sebert has not altered its pricing structure to offer this as a premium service.

“(Battery power) is the direction we’re heading, just like we believe the rest of the (landscape) industry is,” Pearce says. “So, we’re not charging clients

more (to use battery-powered equipment) overall. We have adjusted and increased our pricing, which does factor this in, but it also takes into account other costs and the (state of) the economy, as well.”

Cultural shift

One of the most significant challenges contractors report when converting from gas-powered to battery-powered equipment is employee pushback and the cultural shift required to adopt this new technology. Often, crews believe the tool’s reduction in power and the need to adopt new maintenance approaches and practices hamstringing performance and efficiency.

Hall says it’s akin to removing a worker’s most effective tool, replacing it with something new and unproven, and expecting the same results. It’s a formula for failure.

“There’s going to be pushback, and there’s going to be questions, so you need to prepare for that,” Hall says.

While battery technology has improved significantly, tasks such as mowing may take longer to maintain quality standards. Or tasks previously performed with the assistance of a two-cycle engine — such as raking, edging or sweeping — may now be done by hand.

“Expect to field at least one or two requests to revert back to gas-power because those tools either had more power or allowed them to work much faster on a property,” Cienfuegos says. “That’s why you need to lead from the front so everyone else falls in line.”

Without a doubt, the conversion from gas-powered to battery-powered equipment will change a contractor’s operation, Pearce says. Therefore, employee buy-in begins with solid leadership, which starts with thoroughly vetting the equipment and the new process and procedures crews will follow to ensure their success.

“On the backside, once crews started using the equipment, we saw they adapted easily,” he says. “At the forefront, get everyone — from production supervisors on down — involved and make them part of the process. If you embrace it and have your employees embrace it, then you’ll end up with a positive outcome. This equipment has come a long way, and it’s only getting better.”

And aligning client expectations with employee expectations is fundamental to making this work, Hall says.

“If there’s a disconnect there with your employees or your clients, then you’re just going to be beating your head against the wall,” he says. 🎧

Looking for more

If you’re seeking more info on this topic, check out the Electric Lawn Talk Podcast, a weekly program dedicated to electric lawn care and landscaping topics. Hosts — including Luminary Lawns’ Sean Creel and Electrawn’s Daniel Cienfuegos — interview top industry pros and discuss best practices for marketing and running a successful electric lawn and landscape business. It’s available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Podbean, YouTube, Audacy and other popular podcast carriers.



Zawacki is a Cleveland-based writer covering the landscape industry for nearly two decades.

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Beyond the basics: navigating the transition from gas to battery-powered equipment

Uncover the often-overlooked aspects of charging setups for battery-powered equipment and how planning ahead can prevent common pitfalls BY CHRISTINA HERRICK | LM EDITOR

The saying goes, “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” In battery-powered equipment, the question is often similar. What comes first: the tool or the batteries?

In fact, it’s those two questions that Paul Beblowski, manager with Stihl, says he fields most frequently about battery-powered equipment.

“We hear two major questions and the first is ‘How many batteries do I need?’ and the second is ‘How do I charge ‘em?’” he says.

Beblowski and fellow industry insiders share best practices to help prepare you for the transition to battery.



Paul Beblowski

Know your need

To help contractors understand how many batteries they need, Jason Wilk starts by asking how many tanks of gas they use in a day to power a gas string trimmer. Wilk, a senior product manager for Echo, says string trimmers tend to be consistent in terms of fuel use.

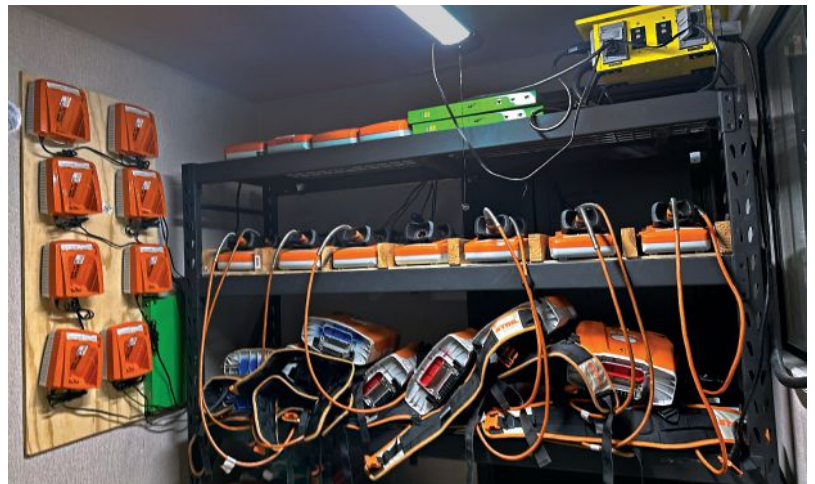
“If it’s two or three tanks of gas, I know one of our 5-amp hour batteries basically provides the same runtime as a single tank of gas,” he says. “If you’re going through

three tanks of gas, you’re going to need three full batteries to start your day, or you’ll need one battery to get you going while you maybe have an adapter or charging solution on your vehicle.”

While this equation is helpful, Wilk says the challenge for contractors is scaling the needs for a larger fleet of battery-powered equipment.

“I have a whole crew where I’m going through on 15 trimmers, two tanks of gas a day, all of a sudden you need 30 batteries,” he says.

Richard Ogawa, the CEO of Gardenland Power Equipment and Towa Tools says in his 12 years as a dealer of battery-powered equipment and the developer of charging solutions for landscapers, there is a distinct learning curve when replacing gas-powered equipment with battery.



“You’ll pay anywhere from two times to five times more for the equivalent gas product to convert to a battery product,” he says. “There’s a huge capital cost of investment to get into the battery set of the business.”

Ogawa suggests contractors utilize online tools and calculators such as the American Green Zone Alliance’s (AGZA) return on investment (ROI) calculator.

“(AGZA) has a lot of ROI calculators and analysis that can help you understand it from an investment standpoint what the cost benefit is going from gas to battery and what those savings may be,” he says.

Ogawa says Gardenland offers a membership program to landscape

Continued on page BP14

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business owners in the Campbell, Calif., area interested in trying battery-powered equipment. He says this monthly subscription plan helps defray the cost of the investment.

"You can actually just subscribe to our pro plan and you can have access to this battery equipment on a monthly subscription basis and that lowers the barrier," he says. "It's very much like a cell phone model and if in two years you decide, 'Hey, I want to go with a different platform,' it's an easy switch."

Harness your power

Charging setup is another critical element of adding battery-powered equipment. And it's one area Ogawa says many landscape contractors fail to understand and plan for until after they purchase battery-powered equipment.

"It's quite a different thing when you've got two or three items that are battery and you have to charge them," he says. "It's totally different when you got a hundred batteries or even 20 batteries. You're going

to blow circuit breakers left and right because you are trying to charge all these things on the same outlets."

Jeremy Berros, business development director for Pellenc North America, says much of a contractor's energy needs comes down to the number of batteries charged and the type of charging setup.

"The more batteries, the more chargers you're going to have at once to charge and the more energy you're going to demand from the grid," he says.

Mike Poluka, segment product manager for Stihl, encourages contractors to understand what type of outlets and power are available at their shops. Is it a 100-volt, 15-amp circuit or 110-volt, 20-amp circuits?

"Those types of considerations should also be brought into their thought process as they switch from gas to battery and making sure that they have ideally dedicated electrical circuits, whether it be 15 amp or 20 amp, so that they could plug in their chargers to avoid overloading that circuit and then tripping the circuit," he says. "There's only so much you can do on 15 amps and 20 amps."



Jeremy Berros

He says Stihl offers some solutions to help stagger the charge of batteries sequentially, so a shop's circuit doesn't get overloaded during an overnight charge.

On-the-go

Some contractors may want to utilize on-the-go charging, which also presents its own set of challenges, Ogawa says.

"We've had that happen many times on our corporate campuses where (contractors) have remote trailers around and they're trying to charge all their electric equipment in one power port coming into that trailer," he says, noting Towa Tools offers multiple solutions that are brand-agnostic to help contractors charge tools on-the-go.

Wilk says there's no silver bullet charging solution. He says the ideal charging solution will depend on the size of the crew and the fleet. While he's heard some crews use a client's outlet to power tools during a workday, that's not a viable long-term solution.

"I've seen everything from on the high end of mobile charging where crews have outfitted the tops of their trailers with solar panels," he says. "Even to the point where they may even have a gas-powered generator in the back of their pickup truck."

Round and round

Todd Zimmerman, vice president of product development for Kress, says another key element to the battery-power equation is battery life cycle. Standard lithium-ion batteries have around 350 to 300 life cycles where they will fully recharge and remain under warranty. After that, they're not operating at full capacity.

"So you can still use it, but what you're going to see is a lower performance, lower run-time," he says, noting that the Kress Cyber-Pack batteries have about 3,000 life cycles.

Berros adds there's a trade-off between the flexibility of charging and the longevity of the batteries.

"There's no free lunch in the battery world," he says. "My advice would be to do your homework about understanding and ask the right questions about how long the battery is going to last during the day, what's the lifetime of the battery, how

Continued on page BP16



Richard Ogawa



Mike Poluka

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— Dominic Gachina, West Branch Manager

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Continued from page BP14

long it takes to recharge, how many batteries do I need to run a full day with this tool?

Ogawa says an unaddressed part of the battery life cycle is what to do with batteries at the end of their usage.

"It's one thing to recycle a 5-amp battery," he says. "It's totally another thing to do a 20 KW battery that's sitting in your ride-on or your ZTR (mower). How are we going to handle that? What's the program? You can't just ship that somewhere. And how do manufacturers deal with it when you have a problem, it's a defect or whatever?"

Other things to know

Daniel Mabe, president of AGZA, says contractors also need to think about the type of trailer they plan to use with battery-powered equipment.

"You need enclosed cargo trailers most of the time, or vans and panel trucks," he says. "Things that are going to not make it easy for stuff to be stolen, things that lend to batteries not being subjected to excessive elements and moisture. And then also not being subjected to direct sunlight and really hot regions of the country as well."

Contractors should expect to take extra precautions to not become a target of theft, Mabe says. And contractors absolutely must read the operator's manual, he says. It's not the same as using gas-powered equipment, Mabe says.

"It's just completely different using gas and electric as a means to meet the same end," he says. "It needs to be respected enough to go through training or at least be responsible enough to read the operating manual and not just assume it's going to work exactly like your gas-powered equipment."

Mabe says AGZA provides education and training — from charging infrastructure to assessing properties to deploying battery-powered equipment — to help contractors make the transition.

Ogawa says it's important to find a manufacturer and a dealer that will provide training and guidance as contractors continue to scale their fleet of battery-powered equipment.

"As you add more and more equipment that's getting charged, you're going to need more and more



Experts can help you determine the best way to set up your trailer and shop for battery charging.


charging infrastructure, but at the same time, you're going to open yourself up to more possibilities of fire, danger, thermal meltdown, (loss of) cell integrity," he says. "It's really important to go with a reputable manufacturer that truly understands that business and has sophisticated battery management systems to help protect your end user from the battery cells."

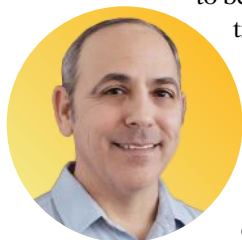
Future of battery

Will we see wireless charging for battery-powered equipment soon? Not necessarily, says Zimmerman.

"Obviously the technology's there, but when you get into bigger battery packs, larger amp hours, that charge time is going to be enormous," he says. "We can't have commercial landscapers, professional guys sitting around for two hours waiting for a battery to charge up, or three hours, or four hours, whatever the time frame may be, but it'll eventually get there."

Zimmerman says many manufacturers will look to electric vehicles for future solutions. As the infrastructure across the country builds to support the charging of electric cars, trucks and vans, is that something the green industry can use to power its fleet of battery-powered equipment?

"It's something that we're keeping an eye on. It's not quite there yet, but as that infrastructure starts to continue to build out, who knows what that advantage may bring to landscapers as they continue to convert from gas to cordless?" he says. 



Daniel Mabe

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Panelists dispel myths, look to the future of battery-powered equipment

Landscape Management's Equip Exposition panel on electric tools and alternative fuels get attendees charged up

BY CHRISTINA HERRICK | LM EDITOR

Landscape Management's "Electric and Alternative Fuels — Are You In?" panel at the 2023 Equip Exposition kicked off with controversy — myths about battery-powered and electric equipment.

Joel Honeyman of Bobcat, Charles Brian Quinn of Greenzie, Michael Bedell of Bedell Property Management and Steven Zbrozek of Oregon Tool discussed myths perpetuated in the industry.

Quinn said autonomous mower technology won't take away jobs; it will help crews boost productivity.

Benefits

With labor at a premium, autonomous mowers could multiply the efficiency of a one-person crew, Honeyman noted.

"That is really the practical solution here — being able to have one or two or fewer people but they're being much more productive," he said.

Bedell said he's noticed maintenance savings associated with handheld battery-powered equipment.

"There's less things to grease, less oil to change," he said. "That wasn't an initial reason why we made the switch but it started showing up on our budget versus actuals and then our P&L."

Where to start

Bedell told those in attendance to

look at their business — what kind of clients do they serve? What's the proximity to fueling options?

"I try and let the apparent advantages of the equipment just play out," Bedell said.

He said if his company has a job in Northern Michigan, it might not be the right fit for battery. But, properties in cities with smaller lots and more idle time are prime for battery-powered equipment.

Honeyman told attendees to start small and pick a property that's set up for success.

"If you're going to have this first piece of electric equipment, go to a customer who you think is going to value this — there might be someone who's complained about noise before," he said. "Be selective when you start out to think about how you can be successful."

Quinn talked about how critical employee buy-in is to success.

"We tell our customers there are three things: It's the right people, the right plan and the right properties," he said. "Those three things are going to make or break it."

Next steps

Zbrozek said beyond taking that first leap into battery-powered equipment the next is to think about how to scale. Attendees adding battery-powered equipment need to think about the type of bat-



tery system, charger types, setup and whether to charge overnight or in a trailer.


Panelists share advice on making the transition to battery-powered equipment at Equip Expo.

"Scale out from when you've convinced everybody (on your team) to try it and they come back raving," he said. "Then how are you going to expand it?"

Honeyman expanded.

"If you don't have 50-amp service today, you're going to want that so you can charge faster," he said. "You're going to want to start planning. Even if you don't buy anything today, it's where would I put this stuff? There's a bit of logistics as you start to think about this."

Zbrozek said attendees who are hesitant to add battery-powered equipment are missing out.

"We're at a point in the market for these types of equipment where there's good enough and there's optimized," he said. "You have nothing to lose from this because what you fall back on is always good enough." 

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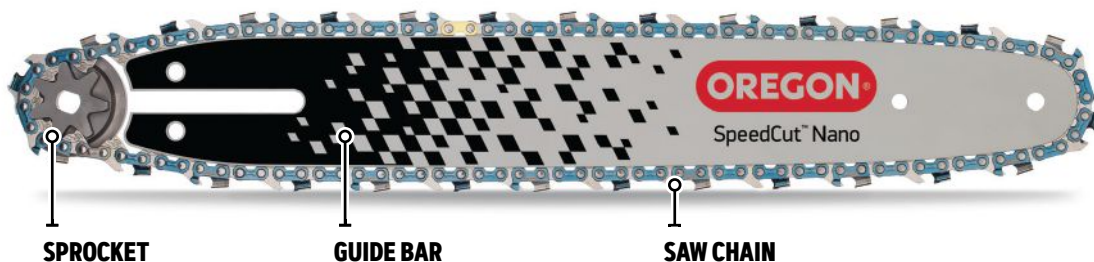
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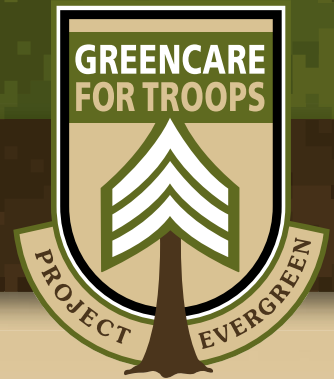
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*Dave and Jamie Petti
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THE BIG ONE

A little bit of everything

BY ROB DIFRANCO
LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

LOCATION Powell, Ohio

COMPANY Environmental Management Inc.

DETAILS Before the client purchased this five-acre residential property in central Ohio, it sat in a state of disrepair for several years.

Shortly after the change in ownership, Environmental Management began working to restore it to its former glory.

The property features more than 200 plant varieties, including portulacas and various tropicals. In addition to a massive planting effort, crews cleared more than 350 trees from the property which had an emerald ash borer infestation.

Environmental Management worked with the client to transition from a more formal garden in the front of the home to a tree grove at the back of the property. The grove includes 5,000 daffodil bulbs and two screening rows of white pines and spruces.

Maintenance crews are onsite regularly to prune the wide variety of plants and trees. The client's vision is consistently evolving, so the maintenance team is in a continuous process of planning and learning.

Environmental Management won a Silver Award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Awards of Excellence program for this project. 🏆

See more photos from this project at LandscapeManagement.net/thebigone.



PHOTOS: ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT





Captions | **1.** This five-acre property in central Ohio was a large undertaking for Environmental Management and its client. **2.** A semi-formal knot garden serves as a focal point at the front of the home. **3.** The woodland garden provides another area with diverse colors. **4.** Environmental Management's goal with this project was to create a formal garden that slowly fades into nature. **5.** A before photo of the property when the client purchased it in 2012. **6.** Before Environmental Management overtook maintenance on the property, the home had no landscaping and unhealthy turf. **7.** Portulaca plants take center stage in containers in the backyard. These flowers only bloom in full sunlight, so the company planted them in the area of the property that gets the most light. **8.** The contractor's design focused on balancing height and proportion throughout the property.

EXPERTS' TIPS

The dependable mountain goat of mowers

Mowing pros discuss why they're loyal to walk-behind mowers

BY BRIAN LOVE | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Even with the wave of ride-on, zero-turns and robotic mowers, walk-behind mowers still serve as an important tool for contractors.

Contractors share their best practices to make the most of their walk-behind mowers.

ADVANTAGES

"The biggest advantage that walk-behind mowers have is versatility," says Julio Tomè, owner of Cloverdale Mowing in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. "Walk-behind mowers can be a lot lighter than a zero-turn mower since it is not putting the operator's

weight on the machine."

Cloverdale Mowing offers primarily residential maintenance, fertilizing and aeration.

Tomè says the adaptability keeps him coming back to his walk-behind mowers.

"I've tried larger mowers as well from zero-turns or stand-on mowers.

TACKLE TOUGH JOBS

Contractors say a benefit to keeping a walk-behind mower in their arsenal is the ability to tackle steep inclines.



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I always seem to go back to that to walk-behind,” Tomè says. “Its versatility is unmatched, along with its weight ratio. They’re just fantastic machines overall.”

Richey Plemons, owner of Plemons Lawn Care in Chatsworth, Ga., says the biggest advantage to walk-behind mowers is the ability to operate on steep inclines. Plemons Lawn Care offers maintenance and landscape design for 50 percent commercial, 25 percent residential and 25 government clients.

“A walk-behind mower can be the mountain goat of the mowing industry,” Plemons says. “It can maintain a hill better than a zero-turn or stand-on. The back end of a zero-turn tends to slide out from behind. Meanwhile, you don’t have to worry about the slide-out with a walk-behind. You can just let the machine go.”

MAKING THE MOST

Tomè recommends contractors keep the blades of their walk-behind mower sharp and the bottom of the deck as clean as possible. These tasks are especially important when mowing in wet grass. It could clog at the bottom of the deck.

“I can easily basically lift the whole front of the mower very effortlessly with the deck up in the air. I can pivot it, sit down, and be able to reach under the deck and clear out any grass accumulation,” he says.

Contractors should also ensure the mower has proper airflow into the bags that gather clippings, Tomè says. The sides of the bag need to be clean so the clippings can go straight into the bag without resistance.

Plemons says proper training for crew members when operating these mowers — following the guidance of the mower’s equipment manual — helps to minimize issues.

“Make sure you train your employees the proper way and safe way to use them,” he says. “They are a machine that will go until you make it stop. We’ve all seen the videos where a safety switch is disengaged on one of these mowers and they let go of the handles when the machine starts doing circles, causing it to not stop and run away from them. We don’t need that to happen.”



“The biggest advantage that walk-behind mowers have is versatility.”

JULIO TOMÈ



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MAINTAIN YOUR EDGE

Make the most of edgers with these best practices

Learn how to take care of your equipment and create a better finished product

BY LAUREN DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR

Proper edger operation not only keeps teams safe, but these best practices also reduce the physical toll on operators and improve the finished product.

STAY SHARP

Having a dedicated edger that's well maintained allows landscape professionals to achieve a consistent, straight line on properties, says Josh Dumas, product manager of North American handholds for Husqvarna.

"It is not uncommon during seasons of high use to see edger blades replaced every one to two weeks — or more often depending on turf or dirt types," Dumas says. "As the blade wears down on the ends, the user will lose overall cutting depth."

Dumas says operators should also adjust the guide wheel on the edger to the correct depth. Once the wheel is in place, it will glide easily and do most of the work.

"Another tip to remember is that it is OK if the edger blade makes occasional contact with the surface you are edging against," Dumas says.

Choosing the right type of edger for the job is also important, Dumas adds. An offset, or curved, shaft edger will

have a higher RPM and allow operators to cut more efficiently through softer, finer soil and turf types. The straight shaft edger typically has a lower blade speed but higher torque, which helps cut through harder, denser soil and turf.

"If you are in an area with high clay content or dry, packed soils, consider a straight shaft edger," Dumas says.

LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD

Edgers are ground-supported tools, though some professionals opt to float them, says Mark Taylor, product manager, Echo. That practice wears on the operator if they edge a lot during the day.

"Let the tool do the work," Taylor says.

Another misconception is some operators think if they tilt the edger higher, it will cut deeper into the ground, but Taylor says that's not the case.

"Where the blade is mounted to the gear case is a fixed location from the ground," Taylor says. "They'll put it above their arms, but then they just have a loud gas engine right next to their ear."

When working around corners of hardscape material, landscape pros should edge from both sides instead of trying to edge in a single pass.

"You don't want to chip away at the sidewalk or driveway," Taylor says. "It's bad for the unit and the concrete."

Maintaining the edger is also important, including changing the air filters, spark plugs, greasing cables,

checking the engine and replacing the blade as needed, Taylor says. If operators use edgers frequently or against sidewalks and driveways, the blade will wear out faster.

"As the blades wear out, the edges get rounded out and don't cut as well into the grass or dirt as the original rectangular shape would," Taylor says.

SAFETY FIRST

Achieving a clean edge during the first part of the season helps create a definitive line for the rest of the year, says Gerry Barnaby, director of excitement, Ego.

"Edging defines lines and gives it a crisp look," Barnaby says. "You lay the groundwork with a stick edger and then the string trimmer after to clean it up. It makes a world of a difference."

Operators should keep an eye on the job and their surroundings to ensure a straight edge. That's especially important since they will be walking backward with the edger to prevent it from throwing material back at them. They should also wear the proper personal protective equipment, including eye and ear protection.

"There's an art to it," Barnaby says. "This is the finishing touch, but it really has quite an impact on the finished product." 🎨

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.



ART TO EDGING

Experts say operators need to pay attention to details to create those clean lines along sidewalks and landscape beds.

INSTALLATION SOLUTIONS

Design trends you need to know for 2024

Clients show a renewed focus on incorporating natural, luxurious features

BY LAUREN DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR



From growing environmental concerns to changes in the materials requested, trends for design/build projects continue to evolve across the country.

CONNECTING SPACES

After the pandemic, homeowners began asking for more luxurious outdoor spaces in their backyards, says David Mull, landscape architect for DiSabatino Landscaping in Wilmington, Del. The company offers design/build, landscaping, landscape maintenance, landscape lighting, exterior additions and interior construction services to residential properties.

Staycation projects include features like patios with grill stations, pavilions, resort-quality pools and other design/build trends from areas like Arizona, California and Florida, Mull says. Customers seek ways to extend their living areas and want outdoor designs to mirror the rest of their homes.

“People want a stronger connectivity between their indoor and outdoor spaces,” Mull says. “The details and finishes you put in the outdoor space are very important, so you want them to relate architecturally to the rest of the house.”

Homeowners are moving away from concrete pavers and brick retaining walls and requesting natural materials like flagstone, porcelain, exposed aggregate concrete and boulders, he says.

“Travertine marble pavers are also popular because the appearance is cleaner and more contemporary, and they’re cooler under your feet when you walk on them,” Mull says.

SHIFT IN MATERIALS

Customers are looking to incorporate products that are sustainable and cutting-edge, says Joel Tomlin III, landscape designer at Milosi Landscape in Hendersonville, Tenn. About 75 percent of the company’s work is residential design/build, with the rest being landscape and snow maintenance for residential and commercial properties.

“Now, they want to be more environmentally conscious and are more interested in the details of their project,” Tomlin says.

In the past, Tomlin’s team installed real quarried stone and brick patios and walls, but that trend has decreased and shifted to materials like porcelain pavers and concrete. Low-maintenance plant material has also become more popular in designs, along with artificial turf.

For pools, they’re installing more glass tiles and LED lighting. “The whole LED factor gives us more underwater options,” Tomlin says. “The lighting has really been fantastic.”

NATURAL APPROACH

Customers are realizing the benefits of being outside and connecting with nature, so they are willing to spend more on outdoor living spaces, says Andy Blanchford, CEO of Blanchford Landscape Group in Bozeman, Mont. His company offers landscape design/build, garden and holiday décor services to residential customers.

To extend the use of the outdoor spaces, homeowners look to add structures for shade and lights, fire

features and comfortable seating areas. “They want to make it a space that can be used for three seasons of the year,” Blanchford says.

They’re also focusing more on native plants, site-appropriate landscaping and other environmentally friendly components — like small, subtle lighting that doesn’t pollute the sky with light. Adding water features is another way to tie the projects back into nature.

“It’s nice to incorporate some kind of water into landscapes for the soothing sound and the ability to muffle out some of the surrounding noises,” Blanchford says. “It doesn’t have to be huge or fancy — just a boulder bubbling fountain in an intimate space.”

As for trends that have faded away, Blanchford says his crews aren’t installing many large, woody shrubs anymore. Instead, they focus on trees and perennials, which can freshen up the landscape. They’ve also cut back on the amount of sod they install — going from 100,000 square feet of sod a year in the past to less than 20,000 square feet now.

“Most of our projects don’t have lawns,” Blanchford says.

Looking ahead, Blanchford and his team are open to trends and anything that helps their customers better connect with nature. “We’re just continuing to find things that invite people outdoors,” Blanchford says. 🌿

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.

MODERN FEEL
Clients favor pavers with a more contemporary style that provides a clean look for outdoor spaces.

HARDSCAPE SOLUTIONS

Livin' great by the lake

BY CHRISTINA HERRICK | LM EDITOR

LOCATION Moneta, Va.

COMPANY Seven Oaks Landscape

DETAILS An existing maintenance client approached Seven Oaks Landscaping to renovate a beachside home's landscaping and rebuild a failing retaining wall. The landscape faced some extreme slopes from the top of the property to the lake access.

"Because we were taking down the retaining wall, it gave us an opportunity to just rethink that whole space and create a bigger patio," says David Bower, president of Seven Oaks Landscaping. "He was really wanting to use every square inch of that space."

Crews needed to excavate the old retaining wall with footers on top of rotting tree stumps. Bower says the company's Ditch Witch ride-on mini skid-steers and Muck Trucks proved invaluable for that part of the project.


The client wanted the outdoor space to have zones, including beach and lake access, a butterfly garden, a designated hot tub area, a fire pit on the point and boat storage.

The home was also undergoing an interior renovation, so the team at Seven Oaks worked with the interior construction company to coordinate indoor and outdoor design details. Bower says these included some of the pillars used on the exterior of the house and the garage doors.

"They got us involved because they know that we have this passion for the outdoors to match design theme," he says of the home construction contractor. "You just don't realize how far it can go when you get to be a team — how much more you can do as a team when you really pull together and you respect each other. Sometimes that is not something that just comes naturally for landscapers and contractors."

Bower says other unique features of the project include how the design team worked to creatively hide the septic system, utility access and drainage on the patio area.

"They put it under a plate on the patio, so you could still access it, but you would never know it was there," he says.

Seven Oaks Landscaping won a Silver Award from the 2022 National Association of Landscape Professionals' Awards of Excellence program. 

See more photos from this project at LandscapeManagement.net/hardscapesolutions.



PHOTOS: JIM AND REGINA DEVINNEY/ROANOKE REAL ESTATE PHOTOS



Captions | 1. The client wanted this vacation home transformed into a primary residence with multiple outdoor areas to accommodate large year-round gatherings of family and friends. 2. Crews removed the existing retaining wall and rebuilt it, which created an opportunity to design additional outdoor spaces. 3. This after photo shows the lake-level access now with different elevations to give the homeowners the feeling of entering a spa. Natural stepping stones lead to a terraced butterfly garden and natural stairs lead to beach and lake access. 4. Seven Oaks Landscaping created a new front entrance that mixes the feeling of a vacation home with that of a primary residence. 5. Seven Oaks Landscaping used a failing retaining wall as an opportunity to reimagine the outdoor space for the client, including the addition of a hot tub, boat storage, two outdoor showers, lake access and a butterfly garden. 6. Crews also faced extreme slopes typical of mountain lake properties. 7. Crews needed to work around existing trees, utilities and the home's septic system.

PRODUCTS THAT WORK

Landscape Lighting



LUXOR WIRELESS LINKING MODULE

COMPANY: FX Luminaire
URL: FXL.com

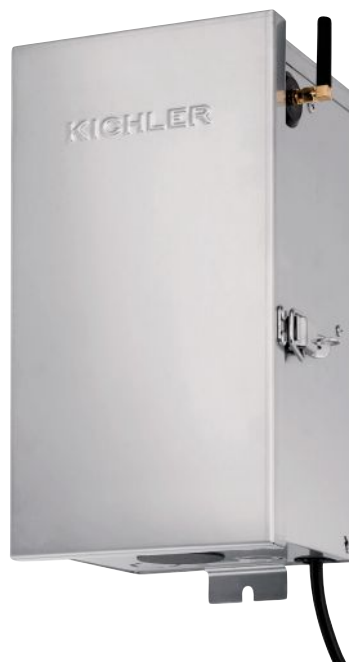
The Luxor Wireless Linking Module allows users to connect Luxor and Luxor Satellite Controllers without trenching or running wire. The module uses LoRa radio, a frequency-driven technology. It also offers installation flexibility with controller and remote mounting options and two setup modes: quick start — which gets controllers up and running within minutes and advanced — which lets contractors configure the wireless modules to specific Luxor or Luxor Satellite Controllers using unique identifiers.



SMART CONTROL TRANSFORMER 300W

COMPANY: Kichler Lighting
URL: Kichler.com

The 300W low-voltage Smart Control Transformer can design and schedule up to three separate lighting zones. Kichler says this allows customers to customize and control the areas they want to illuminate, all with the Kichler Connects app. The transformer allows for three independently controlled zones, which users can expand with multiple Smart Control Transformers.



TCS WIFI LIGHTING TRANSFORMER

COMPANY: Vista Professional Outdoor Lighting
URL: VistaPro.com

The TCS WiFi Lighting Transformer is available in 150W or 300W configurations and offers four total zones, featuring three individually programmable zones with dimming capability and astronomical timing. It also includes a Smart Zone terminal, which supplies uninterrupted power for WiFi-enabled smart fixtures and smart lamps with its own control feature. The transformer is controllable through a smartphone app.



RECOMMENDER

Innovative technologies will play a major role in irrigation management in 2024, experts say.

What's the **No. 1 thing** irrigation pros should focus on in 2024?

MAX MORENO

VICE PRESIDENT OF
WATER CONSERVATION
HARVEST LANDSCAPE
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ORANGE, CALIF.



In 2024, irrigation professionals should continue to focus on sustainable practices and innovative technologies. Precision irrigation systems that utilize data analytics, IoT (Internet of Things) sensors and AI-driven solutions are likely to be at the forefront. Water conservation remains a critical concern globally, so methods that optimize water usage while maintaining healthy landscapes will likely dominate the industry trends. Additionally, there might be a push toward integrating renewable energy sources into irrigation systems to reduce their environmental impact.

PAUL SCHULTZ

IRRIGATION
RESOURCE MANAGER
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For irrigation professionals, it's going to continue to be important to ensure your people are educated. Find ways to retain them. How do you keep people, provide a good career path and help ramp up education, especially when new technology just keeps coming? I think the next step is understanding how to utilize training processes that people can tap into on-demand.

Things like two-wire systems have been around for a while, but there's new tech that can measure inside the wire to tell you the distance down the path itself and where the issue might be. The more that people use two-wire systems or maintain them, it's going to become a thing where you either know how to work (the tech) or you're going to scramble. That tech can help troubleshoot a lot of the issues that pop up with those systems. But I think it's something that people are still behind on.

BUSINESS BOOSTERS

RIGHT PLACE
Irrigation professionals say organization is key, but say it's best to let crews set up their vehicles.



Boost productivity with an organized truck

Make your irrigation crews more effective with these tips for keeping irrigation vehicles in proper order **BY MIKE ZAWACKI | CONTRIBUTOR**

Most irrigation professionals will attest that getting crews to maintain vehicle organization is an ongoing journey and not necessarily a destination. Orderliness ensures efficiency, reduces material waste and contributes to greater profitability.

Mark Twiss is bullish when it comes to adequately organizing his irrigation trucks.

"Maintaining an organized (irrigation) truck increases our productivity out in the field," says the certified irrigation contractor and irrigation services manager at DW Burr Landscape and Design in Simsbury, Conn.

"If we fail to maintain that level of order and organization, then we lose time, which results in us losing money."

DW Burr maintains a service portfolio of 40 percent landscape maintenance, 30 percent snow and ice management, 20 percent hardscaping, and 10 percent irrigation installation and maintenance.

A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

Twiss is a big fan of storage, so he uses vehicles specially equipped with onboard systems that feature a variety of compartments to hold tools and parts. DW Burr uses racks to stow hand tools and pipes, and the company also uses multi-pocketed tool bags and custom 5-gallon bucket inserts for tool and part storage. Twiss' mantra: Everything has its place.

"It's important that everyone follows protocol and that all of the tools we use

out in the field are always returned to the same place on the truck," he says. "And the same goes for parts and where they're stored. We don't have the luxury of wasting time during the day hunting down specific parts or a specific tool, or worse — we have to leave a job site to make a trip to the (irrigation) supply house. That's why everything is put away in its proper place (on the truck)."



Mark Twiss

INVEST TO ORGANIZE

J.C. Wheaton, president of Centerville Landscape and Irrigation, says a well-devised storage system is a wise investment, whether a contractor is utilizing a basic pick-up truck, a truck modified with side and rail boxes or a commercial van outfitted with elaborate shelf and bin systems.

"You're going to need to spend a little money at the onset, but it's well worth the investment," Wheaton says. "You need a good identifiable (storage) system that will allow you to organize, store and find all of the small parts, screws, nozzles, wiring — all of those things you need handy at the job site. If you're throwing everything into a big box in the back of the truck, then you're going to eat up a lot of time looking for what you need."

Wheaton's Dayton, Ohio-based company runs seven trucks, two for irrigation installation and five for service work. Overall, the company service portfolio is a 50/50 split between irrigation and landscape management, and its client makeup is 60 percent commercial and 40 percent residential.

A CREW TO A VEHICLE


From day one, Twiss and Wheaton train crewmembers on the tenets and virtues of intelligent storage. Wheaton believes keeping crews with the same vehicles contributes to maintaining order. However, he warns against dictating how crews should set up their vehicles.

"Everyone has their own way of organizing things, how they prefer to orient and access their tools versus their parts, and how and where they like to store things like glues, cleaners and Teflon tape," he says. "Just be sure you provide adequate storage (capacity) and let them manage the rest."

Solid storage and organization practices affect parts inventory, as well. Both Twiss and Wheaton believe over-purchasing is a significant financial waste and breeds vehicle disorganization.

"One of the biggest mistakes is double buying," Wheaton says. "Make sure everything is organized (on the vehicle) properly so crews know what they have, and you're not buying three boxes of the same expensive parts or materials."

Twiss and his team utilize FieldCentral, an irrigation software platform that helps them manage job assignments, tracks parts inventory and alerts them when items run low.

"(The software) is a vital component to keeping everything organized and current," he adds. "And we waste less time looking for or having to buy something during the day that we didn't realize we needed." 

Zawacki is a Cleveland-based writer covering the landscape industry for nearly two decades.

FIVE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW BY SETH JONES | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Tim Buiten

PRESIDENT

TIM'S COMPLETE LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT
SEATTLE, WASH.

1 What would you like *Landscape Management's* readers to know about your company?

I started my landscape company in 2011. I've got a landscape company that will do maintenance and one-time projects. I also have a separate irrigation company that supports the landscape company, Mist'er Rain, that has its own customers and supports the landscape company's irrigation needs. We do high-end residential and commercial work. We work primarily in South King County, Seattle and the Tacoma area.

2 How did you get started in the industry?

I've been doing landscaping since middle school and high school. I went to college to get a business degree so I could eventually start a business. I knew landscaping, so I started a landscaping business. I've never worked for anyone in my life before. I didn't know where it could go. But after a couple of years, I hired my first employee and then my second. And then I got hooked up to your magazine and discovered GIE+Expo (now two separate events known as Elevate and Equip Exposition) and learned that this is an industry where it can be a couple of employees, but it can (earn) up to tens of millions of dollars a year. It was pretty amazing to learn that from trade magazines, the National Association of Landscape Professionals and the state organizations.

3 Do you have a most memorable day at work?

I posted for a general manager position. David (Peterson) came in for the interview, and we ended up talking for about three hours. We found out we're

born three days apart. We were both born in Michigan, but we never knew each other. That stands out as a day that started to change things because after I hired him, we became a really great duo, to what we are today and continuing on together. Finding that right-hand guy is a huge thing. I was lucky and blessed to find him early on when we were smaller. That's a day I'll always remember.

4 What do you and your family do for fun?

My wife Kristin and I have three young kids. We've got a 7-year-old, a 5-year-old and a 2-1/2-year-old. We're in that stage of doing fun activities, but nothing extreme. We're probably a couple of years away from being able to take the family to do bigger things, so it's just sports activities and small half-day trips.

5 You're well known for having a big appetite. Buiten (pronounced *bite-en*) is the perfect name for you. What's your record for most food eaten in a single setting?

I once ate 175 shrimp at Red Lobster. That meal cost about \$17. So, I got each shrimp for about 10 cents apiece. I definitely got my money's worth that day. 🍤

BEST ADVICE

"I always tell people that I'm not very smart, but I know how to ask questions. That's why I'm in a peer group. That's why I read trade magazines. That's why I go to Elevate. I go to people who are smarter than me, I ask them questions and I listen."



A different perspective on the labor crisis in the green industry



BY PHIL HARWOOD

The author is a senior advisor with Tamarisk Business Advisors. Reach him at phil.harwood@tamariskadvisors.com

Over the past several years, many articles have covered the labor shortage and what steps employers may take to become more attractive, create more engagement and retain workers. I've been on this bandwagon myself. This column offers a different perspective.

Wouldn't we all love to discover a solution to the labor issue? Well, there is a solution, but it's not an easy one. It involves changing our education system and immigration policies. But first, it's important to understand why we have a labor shortage in the first place. Then, we can focus on solutions.

LESS WORKERS

The labor shortage is, in part, a result of declining birth rates. The U.S. birth rate is half of what it was in 1950. Fewer births mean fewer workers and an aging population. Not long ago, experts warned population growth could cause a global food shortage. Today, U.S. population growth is at a historic low and could actually begin to decline.

There are many reasons for this dramatic shift in birth rates — a discussion I'll save for another time.

The labor shortage is also a result of our education system. The U.S. continues to fall behind other leading nations in educational outcomes, despite spending enormous amounts of taxpayer money on federal and state bureaucracies and administration. I've hired college graduates who can't spell or construct a sentence. Less than half of all third graders in Michigan can read at an acceptable level. We have a serious

“Change will never occur unless someone makes it happen. Maybe that is each of us speaking up.”

problem, and throwing more money at it is not the solution.

In addition, we're living in an information age, where careers in the digital space are abundant. Global connectivity allows us to work from anywhere in the world, something unheard of in previous generations.

However, there is an overemphasis on postsecondary education and a lack of emphasis on learning essential trades. Apprenticeships, which predominated before government-run schools became the norm, are few and far between. While there are new and exciting career options, we still need construction workers, electricians, plumbers and landscapers for society to function.

WE CAN DO SOMETHING

There is no easy solution. On the other hand, change will never occur unless someone makes it happen. Maybe that is you. Or maybe that is each one of us speaking up and taking action where we can in our communities. Our educational system needs a radical overhaul, in my opinion. We can learn from other nations that have had success with other models. We can elect people at the local, state and federal levels who are able to push through necessary changes.

In the same way, our immigration system is failing us and needs radical reform. For decades, immigration reform has been a politically charged

issue, and our elected representatives have been unable to change our broken system. The only thing we all agree on is that our system doesn't work and that it needs to be changed. This stalemate has gone on for decades and needs to come to an end.

The reality is people from all over the world want to live and work in the U.S., and every industry needs workers. There is enormous supply and demand. What we're missing is a group of elected representatives who can connect the dots.

Nobody knows how many undocumented people are in the U.S. and how many are working without proper documentation. Employers should not have to bear the burden of the government's failures. Nor should employers have to carry the risk of hiring undocumented workers when our government has neglected its responsibilities.

Immigration reform has been attempted and failed during every administration in my lifetime, if I'm not mistaken. There's no benefit to pointing fingers at any one political party or administration. Until there is radical reform, everyone is to blame. When will we send people to Washington who can work with others — including people they disagree with — to solve our nation's biggest problems? Why do we reelect career politicians who have been in Washington for decades and have failed to solve these problems? We all have a hand in this.

What's your perspective on the labor issue? I'd love to hear from you. My email is phil.harwood@tamariskadvisors.com.

Now go forth. 🇺🇸



BY BOB MANN

The author is the director of state and local government relations for the National Association of Landscape Professionals. Reach him at Bob@landscapeprofessionals.org.

Despite challenges, the green industry will survive and prevail

When I first started in the lawn care industry, it was the Wild West. You could rent a reverse phone directory (organized by address instead of names), get some rolls of dimes from the bank and set up shop inside a phone booth. Telemarketing was at its zenith and with some basic sales skills and determination, you could build a million-dollar company out of virtually nothing.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

I am old enough to have met and worked with some of the industry's pioneers. One such gentleman was named John Kenney. John, the founder of Turf Doctor, was a bear of a man both in stature and personality. I came to know him when his firm went belly-up, and the company I worked for purchased the assets and gave him the title of regional manager. Much of what I know about the industry comes from what he taught me.

John and I spoke every day, sometimes multiple times. When I'd get back to the office, there would be a message from John to give him a call, and I would. One day, I noticed John seemed surprised and annoyed that I was calling him. This continued for a couple of weeks until one afternoon, the office manager popped her head into my office to let me know that John Kenney was here to see me.

"Great," I thought to myself. "I always enjoy seeing John." To my surprise, the man appearing at my door wasn't the John Kenney I knew. He was as mad as a wet hornet and displayed a badge.

"Why haven't you returned my calls?" he bellowed. Flummoxed, all I could think to say was "Who are you?" He impatiently replied, "I'm John Kenney, the pesticide inspector for the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources!"

Oops.

After a quick explanation, we both enjoyed a hearty laugh and got down to business. After a quick check of some pesticide records, he went on his way. Until he retired, John and I enjoyed telling that story anytime we met up.

SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE


As you can see, I love going down rabbit holes. I start reading and come across something that catches my interest, and once I finish reading the first thing to catch my eye, I notice something else. Before long, I completely forgot my original inquiry. I'm not kidding, and I think it may be time for an intervention — someone needs to take away my keyboard and mouse.

Such was the case when I prepared to write this column. For the life of me, I couldn't remember someone's name, so I began stringing together words and phrases in Google, hoping to find something that would jog my memory. That's when I encountered this:

"Environmental groups are organizing on the local as well as federal level. Environmental groups are attacking potential registrations while EPA is processing them rather than waiting for them to reach the marketplace. There is also a shift in attacking pesticides for urban use rather than agricultural use."

I could understand if you assumed I plucked a quote out of a news story from this year. Yet, that quotation comes from a news story in the January 1984 issue of *Weeds, Trees and Turf* (now known as *Landscape Management*). Ray Russell, the then government relations director for Dow Chemical, said that quote at the Professional Lawn Care Association of America's Fourth Annual Conference in Indianapolis, Ind. What he said way back then is every bit as accurate today as it was 40 years ago.

I got a phone call this week from someone concerned about the future of the lawn care industry. Looking at the challenges our industry faces today, including labor, regulation and efforts to ban anything and everything to do with the landscape industry, I don't blame him for his concern.

But I realized I'm not worried. Somewhere deep inside of that rabbit hole, I ran across that 1984 account of the state of our industry. It's exactly the same today as it was back then. We're a tenacious bunch. We'll survive just fine. 



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BY MARTY GRUNDER

The author is the CEO of Grunder Landscaping Co. and The Grow Group, based in Dayton, Ohio. Reach him at marty@growgroupinc.com.



How to make a good impression and win new business

It's not what you say; it's how you say it.

My mother wasn't a business owner and didn't even work for a for-profit company. She taught me what would become arguably the skill that has gotten me the farthest in business: at the end of the day, your ability to deal with other people will determine your success in any part of your life. My mom taught me early on that how I say things matters more than what I actually have to say.

It's a key lesson I've tried to pass on to my own team and to the other landscape professionals I meet.

A TALE OF TWO TEAM MEMBERS

I wrote this column on a flight from Charleston, S.C., to Charlotte, N.C., on my way home from a golf trip that has become an annual tradition with seven of my friends and me. We went to Kiawah Island, played golf, laughed a ton, ate some great food and encountered one very large alligator.

On our first tee time of the weekend, a polite and professional starter greeted us on the course. He told us the pin placements, where the snack bar was, when to expect the drink cart and thanked us for being on the course. It really kicked off the round nicely and left us with a great impression of that course and associated club.

The next day while we were playing, we made the turn after 9 holes and were greeted by another team member

“Treat your team with compassion, respect and understanding, and they will, in turn, treat those they come into contact with the same way.”

on the course named Dick. He was confrontational and told us, “You guys are playing too slow and need to pick up the pace on the back 9.”

We didn't have a group behind us that we were holding up, so while it wasn't the fastest game we'd played, it also didn't seem to cause problems.

Here's where we get back to my point. He could've started a conversation with us and said, “If you see any opportunity to play fast, it would be appreciated! There are a lot of golfers out here today and my job is to make sure everyone is having fun but also playing at a good pace.”

Instead of our group feeling like we were in trouble or unwelcome, we would've probably gone along with what he asked of us — happily. It also would've left us with a better impression of the course and club.

GOOD IMPRESSIONS

Every person on our team has the chance to make an impression when they interact with clients or the community, and having a positive attitude and being cheerful can go a long way in winning you more business or improving your client satisfaction. I'll dive into how exactly

teams can do this during a breakout session I'll lead at GROW! 2024 titled Soft Skills: The Interpersonal Skills Everyone Should Have to Be Successful in Life and Business.

I'd like to end with this: in my experience, you know what rolls downhill. Maybe Dick is just a grumpy guy, or maybe, just maybe, his manager wasn't kind to him that morning, and he took it out on us. Look up the episode of *How I Met Your Mother* with the “chain of screaming” if you want a great example of what I mean.

Treat your team with compassion, respect and understanding, and they will, in turn, treat those they come into contact with the same way. I think, especially this holiday season, that's a great way to impact both your work and personal life.

P.S., if you haven't signed up yet to join us at GROW! 2024 Feb. 6-8 in Des Moines, Iowa, what are you waiting for? We have a great event planned with breakout sessions to help your team improve sales, operations, customer service, team retention and more.

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