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LM150 deadline nearing!

Don't forget to add your company to our annual list of the top revenue-generating operations in the green industry. We encourage companies with \$10 million or more in 2022 revenue to complete the form online at **LandscapeManagement.net**. Entries close April 3. The 2023 LM150 list is sponsored by Aspire Software and Ewing Landscape supply and will appear in the June issue of LM.



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Finding my 'why' in Hawaii

Don't adjust your screen. Your regularly scheduled columnist, Seth Jones, asked me to pitch-hit for him this month since I just got back from paradise ... literally.

It's not every day your boss asks you to travel 4,000-plus miles to cover the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Leaders Forum in Maui. But when asked, I jumped at the opportunity.

It was such an exhilarating experience being surrounded by folks in the industry who understand that operating a business is so much more than the day-to-day. Sometimes we get so focused, we don't have a chance to understand why we do what we do. This hit home for me during the two talks by Paul Epstein, author of *The Power of Playing Offense* and a former sales executive for the Los Angeles Clippers and San Francisco 49ers.

Epstein, now a consultant, helps operations unlock employees' potential and reduce attrition. He talked about the power of playing offense and led attendees in an exercise to unlock our purpose.

ONE SILVER BULLET TO RULE THEM ALL

Playing offense is a critical part of operating in today's world, Epstein said. Far too many operations play defense instead of offense.

"When playing offense, we play with purpose, we play with passion and we control the terms of our future," he said.

Playing offense with recruitment and retention is a three-part approach. If you take care of your current employees, they're more likely to stay and,

in turn, will make it easier to recruit more employees.

"The same silver bullet takes care of all three," he said. "We need to give them a reason to believe we have the greenest grass."

“The average American works more than 100,000 hours in a lifetime. What we choose to do with it is negotiable.”

He encouraged attendees to pay close attention to their operation's messaging and marketing. He cited a recent study that found 73 percent of consumers will switch to and stick with a brand with a higher purpose. This relates both to selling green industry services and recruiting the next generation into the workforce.

"We as leaders are the tone-setters of culture for our people," he said. "If we want to attract the person of tomorrow, purpose matters more than ever."

100,000 HOURS

Epstein drove home the value of purpose as he led a discussion on discovering our "why," what gets us out of bed, what impacts and drives our decisions at its root. Epstein stressed how important purpose is to today's workers.

"The average American works more than 100,000 hours in a lifetime," he said. "What we choose to do with it is negotiable."

He asked us if we knew why we do what we do. To help us understand our actions, Epstein led us through an exercise to identify which of his nine "whys" —

contribute, trust, make sense, a better way, right way, challenge, mastery, clarify and simplify — we most identify with.


Epstein cited Mark Twain's remark: "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why."

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR WHY

Following a short questionnaire, I learned my why is contribute. A detailed report highlighted the good and bad sides to my why.

For those of you who know me, it'll probably come as no surprise. Sharing what I learn from conversations and my travels with you is a big motivator for me in my role here at *Landscape Management*. I hope the content we provide helps you run your business more efficiently and keeps you more informed. I also love to volunteer for several Cleveland-area programs in my free time.

While most of the report didn't come as a surprise, it gave me a chance to see how my purpose fits into our team at *LM*. It also gives me a great road map to better fine-tune my focus to maximize my contributions.

Our why, Epstein said, is our rocket fuel for our daily lives — it's what gets us going and keeps us going. Where could you take your business if you tapped into this power? 

Aside from rubbing elbows with movers and shakers in the industry, I said "aloha" to Keoki, a resident of the Westin Maui Resort & Spa.

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

What's your best tip for starting spring off right?

“Add white space to your plans for the inevitable rush of calls, jobs and fires. Don't overcommit yourself or your staff, and leave room to provide excellent service. Start planning for the rush now!”



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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
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Luke Henry
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Bryan Stolz
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& Garden Center
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Greg Winchel
Winchel Irrigation
Grandville, Mich.

Industry Consultants

Marty Grunder
The Grow Group
Dayton, Ohio

Phil Harwood
Tamarisk Business Advisors
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Jeffrey Scott
Jeffrey Scott Consulting
New Orleans, La.



“Make sure your pricing leads you to 15 percent net profit (after you pay yourself for your job) and be passionate and proud of what you do and why you do it. Serve your team and serve your clients.”

“Put a few crews to work early. This lets you work out the winter bugs while completing valuable production and will help keep your overtime down in the heat of the season.”



“I think we as leaders have to be great at what we want our teams to be good at. You can talk about what you're going to do but what matters is what you do and what your team sees you doing.”



“Stay ahead of the season. Once you get behind, it's tough to catch up.”



“A great spring requires a smart fall. If you proactively plan every six months, the next season and year will only get better.”



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LM GALLERY

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

1 Hangin' out National Association of Landscape Professionals' CEO Britt Wood, Greenworks' Claudia Martinez, NALP's Scott Savodnik and *LM* Editor Christina Herrick kick back by the pool at the close of NALP's Leaders Forum event.

2 To the victors Winners of NALP's Team-Opoly challenge (for more on that, see page 11), Marvin Gardens, took home bragging rights for outsmarting the rest of the field and netted 20,400 points doing several head-scratching challenges on the grounds of the Westin Maui Resort & Spa.

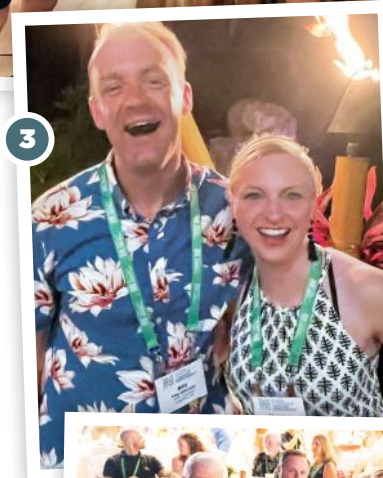
3 Island vibes Billy Otteman, director of marketing for Scythe Robotics, and Herrick were all smiles after a group lesson in Polynesian dancing. Or was it the mai tais? We'll never know.

4 Best dressed Bill and Cheryl Hardy of Level Green Landscaping in Upper Marlboro, Md., won shakas from the crowd for their matching duds at the Leaders Forum luau. (Check out *LM*'s June 2022 *LM150* cover story on Level Green to learn more about Hardy's business.)

5 Luau-ing it up Enjoying a night of Hawaiian hospitality are Julia and Greg McLaughlin of McLaughlin Landscape, Mike Tillia, Herrick, Tim and Kristin Buiten from Tim's Complete Landscape Management and Tami Allen.

6 Quite a scene In what must have been bizarre for onlookers to see, LandCare CEO and NALP President Mike Bogan, Weathermatic's Brodie Bruner and Herrick pretend to climb a tree as part of the Team-Opoly challenge.

7 No I in team "The Coco-nuts" team, including Rebecca Bogan, Michelle Nelson, Mike Bogan and Carol Dilger, show there's no I in team during the Team-Opoly challenge.





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Good weather, good vibes shine through during NALP's Leaders Forum

BY CHRISTINA HERRICK | LM EDITOR

When National Association of Landscape Professionals (NALP) CEO Britt Wood officially kicked off Leaders Forum 2023 in Maui, Hawaii, he said the event centered around connections.

"This industry really helps each other grow," he said.

NALP President Mike Bogan, CEO of LandCare in Frederick, Md., (No. 12 on the 2022 LM150 list), shared how events like Leaders Forum have affected his personal and professional life.

"I am a product of this association," he said, noting he feels like he's still getting more out of NALP than he gives as president.

Bogan said when he started coming to Leaders Forum, attendance was limited, and it felt like it was a secret.

"It's not a secret anymore," he said, with more than 300 people in attendance.

FINDING PURPOSE

Author Paul Epstein said it's time for the attendees in the room to stop playing defense and start playing offense



A group of attendees at Leaders Forum forms a train in a team-building event designed to promote interaction and encourage cooperation.

when it comes to employee recruitment and retention. He said there's no silver bullet to finding and keeping staff members.

"The better we take care of our current people, the more people want to stay and the better we can recruit new people," he said. "We need to give them a reason to believe we have the greenest grass."

Playing offensively, Epstein said, means harnessing the power of purpose within an organization.

"If we want to attract the person of tomorrow, purpose matters more than ever," he said.

Cole Weller, president and CEO of Weller Brothers Landscaping, and Brigitte Orrick, director of

recruiting and employee development at Davey Tree Expert Co., kicked off the second day of the Leaders Forum.

Orrick said in the past, Davey Tree struggled with a high turnover rate of 55 percent. The company replaces about 800 seasonal workers yearly and is constantly backfilling positions. She estimates it costs the company about \$5,000 per person when new hires leave during the 90-day training period.

"The business didn't believe how much it cost to lose talent early," she said.

To counteract the turnover rate, Davey launched a prehire program online that walks new hires through preemployment paperwork, what to expect on the first day and goals for the first three months of employment.

"When we retain people in the green industry, we retain them for all our industry," she said.

Orrick said turnover at Davey Tree is now around 20 percent thanks to the preemployment efforts.



The Westin Maui Resort & Spa said aloha to more than 300 people at this year's Leaders Forum.

KEYS TO LEADERSHIP

During a leadership panel, Steve Bromell, CEO of Pro Cutters Landscapes; Jennifer Jorge, chief operating officer of King GREEN; Roscoe Klausung, president and CEO of Klausung Group; and Tim Portland, chairman and CEO of Yellowstone Landscape, shared their insights into being an effective leader.

Jorge said it's hard to work in a family business and separate family and work. One thing she tries to do is switch to family mode as she physically crosses a bridge on her way home from work.

"I encourage everyone to create boundaries when you're going home for the day," she said.

Klausung shared a lesson he learned from industry veteran Rod Bailey, who taught the financial management portion of the Landscape Certified Manager certification. Klausung said he learned from Bailey to measure more than just his company's key performance indicators. Bailey encouraged attendees to measure the number of marriages, births, homes purchased, etc., by employees during a year.

"We take these leaps of faith when we feel stable at work," Klausung said. "It's not lost on me to measure your success based on the impact you have on others."

MORE THAN JUST SESSIONS

Attendees had a chance to learn a little more about Hawaiian and Polynesian culture during a special buffet dinner and presentation. Dancers led guests on a virtual tour of South Pacific islands, including New Zealand, Tahiti, Tonga, Samoa and Hawaii.

On the last day, groups of seven or eight competed in a Team-Opoly competition based on the popular board game Monopoly. Teams participated in a high-tech scavenger hunt around the Westin Maui Resort & Spa property, photographing and filming their progress along the way.

While everyone took home the hilarious looks from onlookers at the resort, the winning team took home bragging rights. 📷

Jeffrey Scott Executive Retreat motivates business owners, seconds-in-command

BY SETH JONES | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

More than 125 lawn care and landscape professionals met in New Orleans in January at the annual Jeffrey Scott Executive Retreat. The two-day event included lectures from Scott and industry experts, a women-only networking group and a new peer group created for second-in-command employees.

"If you make a better company, your clients will want you to get bigger," Scott told the room in his opening remarks. "The better you get, the more your clients will want you to get better. In other words, you're not pushing your growth... your customers are pulling it."

Keith Freeman, CEO of The Green Group, Raleigh, N.C., delivered the keynote. José Andrés Genel, director of people and culture for Landscape Renovations in Minneapolis, Minn., spoke about culture and the importance of upper management connecting with the crew. Kevin Werbrich, president, Werbrich Landscaping, Cincinnati, Ohio, discussed his philosophy of the red-carpet exit.

Werbrich explained that any employee he parts ways with might someday return to work for him. So he always treats exiting employees — even those who are terminated — with kindness and respect. In other words, he gives them a red-carpet exit. Werbrich even calls his ex-employees every January, just to check in and see if they might be at a point in their life where they want to return to work for his company.

"If you treat people fairly, that word is going to spread," Werbrich told the room.

This was the second Executive Retreat for Justin Wall, president of Coldwater Landscapes in Muscle Shoals, Ala. Wall said in 2021, he didn't know where to go and had no direction for his company, so he decided to attend his first Executive

Retreat. He said attending the Executive Retreat gives him a better perspective of his company.

"I want to build a better business. I want to invest in our people and invest in our culture," Wall said. "I want to create a best-in-class business. When I'm investing in

our people, they can invest in others." Sean Baxter, president at Lawn & Landscape Solutions in Overland Park, Kan., led the Second-in-Command peer group. About 20 people sat in a horseshoe arrangement and were forthcoming with the challenges their companies face.

"Everyone comes in with their problems and we try to solve them as a team," said Raido Kudre, production manager for Werbrich Landscaping. "Everybody has different problems, but some are similar. Some owners need to let go, and the seconds-in-command need to take the lead."

Baxter said the energy and interaction of the second-in-command group was high because they were determined to find solutions they could take back to their employers.

"Owners joined a peer group to gain accountability from other owners," Baxter said. "These people are integrators. They're being paid to be here and make measurable differences in their businesses. I think they're going to move all of their participating companies forward much faster, and with clarity." 📷



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Continued from page 11

SavATree expands in Vermont and Massachusetts, adds first branch in Idaho

SavATree, No. 7 on the 2022 *LM150* list, added its first branch in Idaho following a merger with Boise Tree, a residential tree care company.

The addition of Boise Tree marks SavATree's 81st branch. Boise Tree owner Sean McInerney and his team will join SavATree.

SavATree also added its second office in Vermont with the addition of Vermont Arborists of Waterbury Center, Vt. Vermont Arborists provides residential and commercial arboriculture and plant health services.

Michael Roche, owner of Vermont Arborists, and his employees will remain with SavATree.

SavATree also added Lyndon Tree Care & Landscaping of Hadley, Mass. The merger marks SavATree's sixth office in the state and expands its regional coverage in the state.

Lyndon Tree Care & Landscaping specializes in arboriculture as well as plant care services for homeowners and commercial clients in Western Massachusetts. Lyndon Tree Care's owner Cory Lester and the team will remain on board with SavATree.

Senske Services expands to the mid-Atlantic with its latest move

Senske Services, No. 60 on the 2022 *LM150* list, continues its recent growth with the addition of Blades of Green, a residential lawn, tree, shrub care and pest control company in Edgewater, Md. Senske Services and Blades of Green will operate as separate entities and brands, according to the companies. Mark Leahy, president of Blades of Green, founded the company in 1989 and will remain on the board as a consultant. Leahy's brother, Brad, joined the company in 1999 and will manage the operations moving forward.

Scythe Robotics secures financing to expedite autonomous mower production

Scythe Robotics raised \$42 million in Series B financing. The round was led by Energy Impact Partners and included additional new investors ArcTern Ventures, Alumni Ventures and Amazon's Alexa Fund alongside participation from existing investors True Ventures, Inspired Capital and more. The funding will help Scythe meet demand for the more than 7,500 reservations for its electric, fully autonomous M.52 mower.

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EASY PEASY

Pros say younger hires with experience in technology make a somewhat seamless transition to operating a mower on a crew.

PHOTO: MATTHEW ALLEN



MAKING THE CUT

Experienced mowing pros discuss how they onboard rookie team members

BY SETH JONES | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The sound of the engine, the smell of fresh-cut grass and the instant satisfaction of seeing a completed pass ... mowing grass is the simple task that got many lawn care and landscape professionals started on their lifetime treks in the green industry.

While many got their start on a mower, they eventually left this piece of machinery behind and delegated the task of grass-cutting to others. The new focus became bigger challenges, like growing their business.

To those passionate about the profession, a mower is more of a paintbrush than a cutting unit. Some steps are basic; others are more of an art form. *Landscape Management* took time to talk with experts about mowing to better understand how to train the best operators, and how to get them to be as good as they were back in the day when they were the ones mowing.

Continued on page 18

Continued from page 17

THE FULL 90

Justin White, CEO of family-owned K&D Landscaping in Santa Cruz, Calif., has grown up in the lawn care industry. His mom and dad started the business in 1986. Today, he and his two siblings run the company, offering residential and commercial landscape maintenance, water-efficient landscapes and fire safety and weed abatement to its clientele.

White relies on Greenius to track his crew on their training progress. Before an employee can operate a mower, he or she must earn a mowing badge in the app.

“(New hires) go through nine months of (on-the-job-training); here’s what you do with the string trimmer, here’s the proper technique with the mower,” White says. “Mostly our foremen, but also our supervisors, oversee them and give them tips. Then we do quarterly ‘safety rodeos.’ We focus on safety, but we also try to train everyone up on all our equipment.”

White relies on his supervisors, most of whom have 20-plus years of experience, to keep an eye on the mowing crew and make sure they’re productive yet safe. He asks that mowers aren’t hitting their blades on concrete or running over dangerous objects, like hoses.



White says being patient with employees is important not only for safety reasons, but also because some employees just don’t last.

“They don’t get to run mowers ... they also don’t get to run string trimmers or hedge trimmers, for 90 days,” White says. “They’re mostly just following around the foreman and watching what he does and help clean up behind him. That’s because we lose a lot of people in the first 30 days.”

But once an operator makes it the full 90, it’s game-on.

“There are a lot of people who think they want to be a landscaper, and then they get the job and they’re like, ‘Oh, wait ... this is hard work,’” White says. “After (completing) 90 days, this person proves they’re dedicated. They see how things are done. Now, let’s put them through the nine-month training process.”

White believes young people today are more adept at jumping on a mower than the people K&D trained 10 years ago.

“The younger people getting into the industry who have been using iPhones, actually have a pretty good turnover into operating mowers,” White says. “They’ve already operated technology. Their technique seems to fall into place.”

HOT LAVA!

Another family-run operation is SchoggenScapes, based in Clinton, Miss. Owned by brothers Will and Phil



“The younger people getting into the industry who have been using iPhones, actually have a pretty good turnover into operating mowers. They’ve already operated technology.”

Justin White

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Schoggen, the company offers lawn maintenance, landscaping, hardscaping, outdoor lighting and irrigation work to a primarily residential clientele.

SchoggenScapes mostly operates Exmark mowers, with some Kubota diesel machines in the mix. Phil Schoggen, vice president, says he is an owner who doesn't mind spending money on machinery if it's going to make the crew

more efficient. Any tool that improves efficiency pays for itself, he says. *(Editor's note: to read LM's 5 Questions Q&A with Phil Schoggen, turn to page 57.)*

While he'll pay for premium equipment, Schoggen stresses to the crew that just because the equipment makes them faster doesn't mean it's a race to the finish line.

Continued on page 22

GAME OF SKILL
Experts advise that the best mowers have an eye for it. Those who don't are easily confused and can get lost.

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**Source: TechValidate survey of lawn care operators' use of Acelepryn, February 2021; N=56

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The background of the advertisement is a detailed, high-contrast photograph of a Kawasaki FX820V EVO engine. The engine is shown from a front-three-quarter perspective, highlighting its various components such as the air filter housing, the cooling fan, and the engine cover. The engine cover prominently displays the 'Kawasaki' logo in red and 'FX820V EVO' in white, along with an 'EFI' badge. The overall aesthetic is industrial and professional, emphasizing the engine's power and reliability. In the top left corner, there is a red rectangular box containing the 'Kawasaki ENGINES' logo and the tagline 'THE TRUSTED ONE' in white text.

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MOWING + MAINTENANCE

Continued from page 19

It's important to be fast and efficient, but it's more important to make sure the finished product looks good.

"I tell the guys, 'I don't want to see any turn-and-burn,'" Schoggen says, referring to damage caused by the crew making a turn on a mower too quickly.

"I want to see a three-point turn in those sensitive spots. There's no point in doing the work hastily just to get to the next yard if it ends up costing us more time to go back to the previous property and do repairs."

Justin Vaughn, operations foreman for Brothers Lawn Service & Landscaping in Lafayette, La., echoes those thoughts. He uses a different incendiary visualization to stress the importance of being gentle with the ground: Stay out of the hot lava.

"Some people are smoother than others, and for those who don't have an understanding that turning in the same spot is going to make a bald spot, I tell them, 'Stay out of the hot lava,'" Vaughn says. "You have to be conscious of where your wheels are. It does take skill. You have to be aware of how much traffic you're putting on the turf. I call those hot spots 'hot lava' and it helps them understand."

START SLOW

Pros say it's best to start new team members with smaller maintenance jobs before mowing.



An advertisement for Uline, a shipping supply specialist. The ad features several product boxes: "ULINE ECONOMY TAPE" (1-800-295-5510, uline.com), "ULINE AIR IN A CAN" (5-6771, 12 OZ), and "ULINE PAPER PLATES" (5-17274). A map of North America shows Uline's presence in cities like Seattle, Edmonton, Minneapolis, Chicago, Toronto, Reno, Dallas, NYC/PHILA, Atlanta, Monterrey, and Miami. The ad also includes the text "THE FASTEST SERVICE IN NORTH AMERICA" and "ORDER BY 6 PM FOR SAME DAY SHIPPING 1-800-295-5510 uline.com".

Vaughn adds that it's important to know the operator and how much experience they have. He observes the operator on hand tools, then a stick edger and blower before handing that employee the keys to a mower.

"Being hands-on and observing the person is the most important thing," Vaughn says. "If you throw them to the wolves, they tend to get confused and lost on where they need to be."

Brothers Services made a transition to Hustler stand-on mowers with 36-inch and 60-inch deck models, because they seem to be better for efficiency and the operator, Vaughn says.

"They tend to be easier on the backs, maybe a little heavier on the knees," he says. "Stand-on makes it easier to get on and off, if you need to pick up some trash. Sit-down mowers just take a lot more time and effort to get up from."

TIME AND EXPERIENCE

Casey Child is the Southeast business development manager for Gravelly. Based in the

Continued on page 24



“Being hands-on and observing the person is the most important thing. If you throw them to the wolves, they tend to get confused and lost on where they need to be.”

Justin Vaughn

PHOTO: LM STAFF



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MOWING + MAINTENANCE

Continued from page 22

Atlanta area, he covers from Virginia south to Florida, west to Texas and the Louisiana border. Prior to working for Gravelly, Child worked at Brickman for 20 years. Those



“If you don’t know what you’re doing, you’re not going to be efficient — it doesn’t matter if you’re on a stand-on, walk-behind or a zero-turn.”

Casey Child

years working in the field as a landscaper for Brickman help him do his job as a business development manager for Gravelly, he says.

Child says he recommends Gravelly’s stand-on mowers to companies looking to increase efficiency. Stand-ons are more versatile than zero-turns because they offer the operator more flexibility in how they get the job done. For example, Child says he’s seen crews put on a backpack blower and blow a long straight line from a stand-on.

What is most important for these employees, he says, is that the employer invests time in the person and works

Continued on page 26

ON AND OFF

Pros say crews prefer stand-on mowers for the versatility and efficiency these easy-access machines provide.



PHOTO: LM STAFF

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“Try to have a plan, try to cut in straight lines and try to throw your clippings away from the beds, then do your perimeter lap. Time and experience are the best teachers.”

Tommy Thornton

Continued from page 24

with them from the ground up, before trusting them on a mower.

“The general growth process of a landscaper is starting with hand tools and then working their way up,” he says. “The final piece is mowing. You don’t just throw someone from the streets on a mower.”

Aside from the risk of damaging equipment and property, an inexperienced mower operator will slow down the operation, no matter the equipment.

“If you don’t know what you’re doing, you’re not going to be efficient — it doesn’t matter if you’re on a stand-on, walk-behind or a zero-turn,” he says.

Child says Gravely supports its customers with operational training videos to help landscape companies with the onboarding process. These are offered in both English and Spanish via the company’s website.

Tommy Thornton, owner of Southern Eco-Scapes in Gray, Ga., operates both Gravely and Scag mowers. Thornton started the business in 2008 and employs

25 people. The company offers maintenance, design, drainage and sod installation to its clientele.

Thornton agrees with Child’s take on mower efficiency and has converted much of his mowing fleet to stand-on. Before his employees are trusted to mow a customer’s property, they have to prove they can mow in the Southern Eco-Scapes yard.

“There’s a process to it; it takes an eye for (mowing),” Thornton says. “To start off we’ve got certain properties that are safer than others. They don’t have hills, dips and holes. They have to take care of those places before we’ll let them service properties that require more experience.”

Thornton stresses that he’s patient with his employees because being an expert mower is not something that happens overnight.

“Try to have a plan, try to cut in straight lines and try to throw your clippings away from the beds, then do your perimeter lap,” he says. “But time and experience are the best teachers.” 📍

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FROM THE SOURCE

How I developed a marketing plan and strategy for my lawn care business

Learn the steps I took to help take a two-truck business into one of the best in New Jersey

BY MIKE SISTI | CONTRIBUTOR

One of the most common questions lawn care operators ask me is, “What marketing should I do to grow my business?” I tell them it’s important to understand what marketing really means and know the difference between a marketing strategy and a marketing plan. A marketing strategy is the *why*, and the plan is the *how*.

My very first job in lawn care was in 1991. Imagine no cell phones, no internet and no social media. How in the world can you expect to build a business?

It started with a marketing strategy of defining the vision, developing a unique selling proposition, understanding the competition and identifying the ideal customer. Let’s turn back the clock and look at how we developed a strategy for an aspiring lawn care company in New Jersey in 1991.

STARTING WITH TWO TRUCKS

At the time, we were picking up the pieces of a poorly run two-truck operation. The trucks didn’t even look the same. One was a small red Isuzu pickup; the other we called “Big Blue” — it looked more like a cement mixer than a lawn care spray truck.

Developing the vision meant understanding the aspirations of the business owner. How did he define success? What will this business look like in one year, three years or 10 years?

For that first lawn care company, our vision was to build a consistent brand, maintain healthy lawns, cre-

ate a strong relationship with our customers and provide a great place to work. A consistent brand meant developing a logo and tagline that reflected the company.

BUILDING A BUSINESS

In the first year, we redesigned the company and the brand internally and externally. The company planned to deliver one structured agronomic program rather than many inefficient, a-la-carte services that did not provide any long-term value to the customer. Building in sound agronomic practices, like soil testing and core aeration, and providing training tools for our staff helped solidify ourselves as the lawn care experts of the area.

Next, we defined our unique selling proposition (USP). What was unique about us? What’s the one thing we did better than anyone else? Building upon a sound agronomic plan, the company developed an owner/operator feel from the first truck to its sixth.

It’s one of the reasons why I am still in this industry today — it’s all about




Mike Sisti

the people. While we were small, it was easy to create an owner/operator feel because that’s exactly who did the work.

As we grew, that feeling became our culture. It was part of the training for technicians, the sales team and the administrative people who answered the phone. We quickly replaced those who did not adopt the culture.

Lastly, we researched our competition. We focused on our top three competitors and looked at their messaging and how they delivered lawn care to their clients. We understood how their programs worked, how they billed their services, how they sold their programs and how they performed in the field.

For research, we’d have our competitors out to our homes for a quote to hear their sales pitch (remember, no internet). Once we understood their pitches, we’d place all three side by side, determine their pros and cons and ensure we differentiated our marketing material. We’d never bad mouth a competitor; rather, we’d focus on the one thing we did better than anyone else.

As you create your marketing plan, understand it is a living document. It is your GPS that tells you where you want your business to go. If you make a wrong turn or the unexpected happens, adjust your plan. Finally, be sure to identify why you do something, before identifying how you get it done. 

Mike Sisti is the North American marketing manager for FMC. Sisti formerly worked in the green industry as a franchise owner and grew his business from a startup to 1,000 accounts in four years.



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NICK DILORENZO
LANDSCAPE PRODUCT
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The most important thing is to use your supply partner to help you plan for the season. By using your purchase history, they can help you forecast and preorder your product, so you don't miss the application window. Plus, a lot of distributors have tools that compare product costs, rates and labor costs so that you can select the product that works best for you. Maybe you are facing labor issues and need your fertilizer to last a little longer. By utilizing the tools a distributor offers (like Horizon's fertilizer calculator), you can forecast your total application cost each season and set yourself up for success.



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The professional contractor is looking for more than just a source of product; they should also be looking for a partner. That partner should have value-focused inventory solutions to help them succeed. It should also offer the technical expertise to help them add new services and business solutions that help build their teams and improve their operations. The professional contractor faces daily challenges from labor shortages to equipment and material availability to economic uncertainty. A good distributor partner can help overcome the challenges of today while planning for the changes of tomorrow.



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It starts with value. A good distributor can provide value way beyond saying, 'We've got these products at this price.' The added extra value includes ways to expand the services that the lawn care company offers. A distributor should consult with the contractor about ways they can grow their business model with options like mosquito and perimeter pest control, for example. Secondary to value is not only expanding a business but weaving through the complicated vendor programs. A distributor can help you find out your best buying calendar and how to maximize your budget with the best products that are going to solve your problems.



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- Curby Hughes, Owner, Curby's Landscape 

BUSINESS BOOSTERS

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM ABOVE
Weed Man franchisees Grant and Kyle Faulk say the top benefit of joining a franchise was the business training they received.



Is joining a franchise right for your business?

Lawn care franchisees offer advice on what to look for in a potential franchisor and what you can expect from the partnership

BY ROB DIFRANCO | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Joining a franchise isn't for every landscaping company, but for some, the advice and business training the franchisor provides have been critical to their long-term success.

Brothers Grant and Kyle Faulk, co-owners of Weed Man Lawn Care and Lakewood Landscape Group in Dothan, Ala., and Mark Cox, owner of The Grounds

Guys of San Marco (Fla.), share what they see as advantages of joining a franchise.

TRAINED AND READY

It's not easy to start a business from scratch and run it yourself — or with your brother, in his case — acknowledges Grant Faulk.

“(When we started our business), somebody would say, ‘Can you do this

for us?’ and we’d say, ‘Yeah, we’ll figure it out,’” he says. “That’s not a recipe for making money, but it’s your mindset when you’re a new business owner.”

Shortly after joining Weed Man in 2010, the Faulk brothers traveled to the company’s headquarters in Canada, where they received two weeks of in-person training.

In addition to learning the ins and outs of how to sell lawn care services, the Weed Man team taught them a new perspective on how to run their business.

“Our time up there was truly about learning how to run a successful business,” says Kyle Faulk. “It opened our

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eyes to what we weren't doing. It was like going back to school, where we learned all of these lessons and then on day one, we were able to start off on the right foot."

Similarly, Cox says the most valuable parts of joining a franchise are the resources and training.

"(The Grounds Guys) provided not only a CRM tool for budgeting, but more importantly to me, a business coach," he says. "They are there to guide me and give me sound recommendations on the processes and what I need to do to run a successful business."

SPREAD THE KNOWLEDGE

As an owner of an existing business, Grant Faulk says the Weed Man training helped launch the lawn care franchise successfully, but it also boosted Lakewood Landscape Group through association.

"We've been able to take that training and knowledge and parlay it into (Lakewood Landscape Group)," he says. "We've implemented systems and processes and business planning that we learned through Weed Man that have helped our other business grow as well."

Notably, he says, the company's planning has become more streamlined thanks to help with job costing, financial management and thinking ahead.

"We started planning our labor better," he says. "We started to look at our monthly financials more than we were. We count everything from paper clips to fertilizer, you name it."

THE MORE YOU KNOW

Of course, joining a franchise comes with a cost that potential franchisees should be aware of, says Cox.

According to estimations from The Grounds Guy and Weed Man,

the initial investment, including the franchise fee, personal and capital investment, can range from \$81,000 to \$238,000, depending on the franchisor and how big of a territory the franchise will service.

Cox says solid credit is essential, specifically if the franchisee needs a small business loan to help with startup costs.

Most importantly, it's crucial to research any franchisors you're interested in joining. Cox and the Faulk brothers recommend speaking with owners to get first-hand accounts of what it's like to be a member of that franchise.

"Ask the questions about what resources and processes they have in place that can make you successful," Cox says. "When I opened my doors, I felt that because I spoke with some of the owners in my area, I was ahead of where I would've been if I didn't reach out to them." 🗨️



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AGGRESSIVE AND ADAPTABLE

Experts say *Poa annua* is a difficult weed for LCOs to manage because of its ability to adapt to adverse conditions.



Tips for successfully managing *Poa annua* in lawns

Experts share how a combination of cultural controls and application best practices can give you a leg up on this pesky weed **BY GEORGE KEGODE PH.D. | CONTRIBUTOR**



P*oa annua*, also known as annual bluegrass, is a common weed that infests lawns all year round and is unsightly and hard to control. It can also develop herbicide resistance.

To help lawn care operators (LCOs) get a handle on *Poa annua* management, Justin Ruiz, West area manager with Quali-Pro; Ben Pease, Ph.D., turfgrass agronomist with The Andersons; Aaron Hathaway, technical services manager with Nufarm; and Jared Hoyle, Ph.D., territory manager for turf and ornamental Midwest with Corteva Agriscience, offer some tips and tricks.

CHALLENGES TO MANAGEMENT

Poa annua is an aggressive weed that can grow in adverse conditions and produce numerous seeds even at relatively short plant heights.

“There are always new seedlings emerging throughout the year,” says Pease.

Hathaway says what complicates controlling *Poa annua* is “it is similar to desirable grass species and produces seed that can germinate immediately.”

SUCCESSFUL CONTROL

Experts say the best control combines good cultural practices with the proper use of herbicides.

“Preemergent herbicides provide a barrier on top of the soil surface to prevent *Poa annua* seedlings from emerging,” says Hoyle.

The strategies LCOs use for *Poa annua* control will depend on whether their location is in the north, south or the transition zone.

“Depending on your location, an application of preemergent herbicide during the spring season is the best approach for *Poa* control,” says Pease.

He adds that postemergent applications, when used, are rarely as effective as pre-emergent applications.

Ruiz says plant growth regulators also can give LCOs a leg up on control.

“The use of plant growth regulators can stunt *Poa annua* plants and suppress seed production,” says Ruiz.

Understanding the life cycle of *Poa annua* is a key to successful management, says Hoyle. He adds that the species can behave like an annual or as a perennial, depending on location. This knowledge can serve as a guide for the control of this troublesome weed.

RESISTANCE MANAGEMENT

Over the past decade, herbicide resistance in *Poa annua* has increased substantially, experts say.

“Several herbicide-resistant *Poa annua* biotypes occur in the U.S., and LCOs need to

always be aware of this,” says Pease.

Ruiz says the use of preemergence herbicides likely drives *Poa annua* resistance. Hathaway suggests LCOs rotate herbicides with different modes of action to help slow down resistance.

However, he adds that there are incidences of *Poa annua* biotypes resistant to more than one herbicide mode of action, which complicates the control of this weed.

“Developing a program that combines rotating herbicide modes of action with good cultural management will keep herbicide-resistant *Poa annua* plants in check,” says Hoyle.



Ben Pease

CULTURAL CONTROLS

“Creating an environment that is not conducive for *Poa annua* to grow is the first line of defense,” says Ruiz.

A healthy and robust turfgrass that is properly irrigated can help the turfgrass out-compete *Poa*.

“When turfgrass is healthy and properly mowed, the chemical program works better,” says Hoyle.

LCOs also should alleviate compaction with proper aeration to help the turfgrass better compete, he says.

Finally, although fertilizer may help fertilize turfgrass, it can also bring with it, more *Poa annua*.

“Overfertilizing turfgrass can increase the occurrence of *Poa annua*,” Hoyle adds. 📌



Jared Hoyle



Aaron Hathaway

George Kegode, Ph.D., is a consultant and writer specializing in pest and weed management based in Missouri.



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TIPSHEET

Get ahead of troublesome weeds this spring

Learn how early-season applications can help control white clover, ground ivy, nutsedge and kyllinga

BY MIKE KENNA, PH.D. | CONTRIBUTOR

White clover, ground ivy, sedges and kyllinga can wreak havoc for LCOs. Eric Reasor, Ph.D., Southeast research scientist with PBI-Gordon Corp.; and Jesse Benelli, Ph.D., green solutions specialist for Envu, break down what pros need to know and how to get a leg up on these perennial weeds.

TIMING IS KEY TO WHITE CLOVER CONTROL

White clover is a persistent, perennial weed that grows between 50 and 75 degrees F. Make herbicide applications during active growth to maximize efficacy. Cooler weather and limited soil moisture can hinder herbicide activity. Be certain ambient air temperatures are conducive to herbicide activity by referring to the specific herbicide product label for application temperature ranges. Postemergent herbicides are most effective since it is a perennial weed.

Many products best for white clover control contain three or more active ingredients. Many of these products have active ingredients with multiple herbicide modes of action. It's essential to use multiple modes of action for herbicide resistance management. Herbicide resistance is not widespread in white clover; however, any weed can develop it. Multiple herbicide applications are likely needed depending on the severity of the white clover infestation.

PROPER TREATMENT IS KEY TO LONG-TERM GROUND IVY CONTROL

Ground ivy is a perennial weed in established turfgrasses that can grow throughout the summer and fall. Fewer herbicides effectively control ground ivy and applications in spring or fall are recommended. However, research shows fall applications of fluroxypyr and metsulfuron are superior.

Herbicide application timing is important, but applying the appropriate active ingredients is more important for long-term control. Also, long-term control will likely require multiple applications depending on the infestation severity.

SEDGES AND KYLLINGAS ARE FAST GROWERS

Sedges and kyllingas are perennial weeds that survive the cold months as below-ground tubers and rhizomes. Often, these weeds proliferate more easily in low-lying areas and

TABLE 1. POSTEMERGENT HERBICIDES FOR CONTROL OF WHITE CLOVER, GROUND IVY, NUTSEGE AND KYLLINGA


Active Ingredient*	White clover	Ground Ivy	Nutsedge	Kyllinga
2,4-D	✓	✓		
Dicamba	✓			
MCPP	✓	✓		
MCPA	✓			
Bentazon			✓	✓
Carfentrazone	✓	✓		
Flazasulfuron	✓		✓	✓
Fluroxypyr	✓	✓		
Halauxifen-methyl	✓			
Halosulfuron			✓	✓
Imazosulfuron			✓	✓
Mesotrione	✓	✓		
Metsulfuron	✓	✓		
Penoxsulam	✓	✓		
Pyrimisulfan			✓	✓
Quinclorac	✓			
Sulfosulfuron			✓	✓
Sulfentrazone			✓	✓
Thiencarbazone			✓	✓
Triclopyr	✓	✓		
Trifloxysulfuron	✓		✓	✓

* Read the herbicide label to know which products can be applied to specific turfgrass species. Not all herbicides are safe on all turfgrasses.

areas that receive excessive irrigation, yet we see tremendous surges in drought years with thinned turf.

Yellow and purple nutsedge are most common in turfgrasses and can be the first weeds to appear in the spring. It's essential to make herbicide applications in late spring and early summer rather than late summer.

Not many herbicide actives are labeled for nutsedge control. You can control sedges and kyllingas with postemergence herbicides formulated with one or more ingredients. Timing the initial postemergence herbicide application is critical. Research suggests application for sedges at the two- or three-leaf stage for the effective long-term control, with similar timing for kyllingas. Typically, this occurs in mid-to-late spring throughout the Southeast and transition zone.

You will need multiple herbicide applications for long-term nutsedge control, especially with contact herbicides such as sulfentrazone and bentazon. A second application should be five to seven weeks after the initial application. Include a nonionic surfactant at 0.25 percent volume per volume for optimal control (do not include a surfactant when ambient air temperatures exceed 90 degrees F coupled with high relative humidity). 

Mike Kenna, Ph.D., is the retired director of research for the United States Golf Association Green Section.



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THE BIG ONE

Solid as a rock

BY CHRISTINA HERRICK | LM EDITOR

LOCATION Torrance, Calif.

COMPANY Cadre Landscape

DETAILS Cadre Landscape assisted with the landscaping renovation of a multiuse commercial class-A building with several tenants. The original project converted water features to rock gardens for water conservation. The company continues to manage the property today.

Temo Jimenez, general manager for Cadre Landscape, says low-maintenance landscaping, drip irrigation and incorporating new technology into the property help with water management.

“We’re also promoting smart controllers,” he says. “So any changes in the weather, those irrigation controllers automatically change based on the weather, and it saves water.”

Cadre Landscape uses smart controllers from Hunter, Rain Bird and Hydromat, along with Netafim drip lines.

The company uses drought-tolerant plants, including Eastern redbuds, palms, African tulips, palo verdes, agaves, furcraea, sedums and arbutus. Maintenance challenges include a 24-hour fitness center and a child care facility on the property and a two-hour window daily to use handheld equipment. Cadre uses Greenworks, Mean Green, Stihl and Husqvarna electric equipment.

Cadre Landscape won a Gold Award from the 2022 National Association of Landscape Professionals’ Awards of Excellence program for this project. 🏆

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

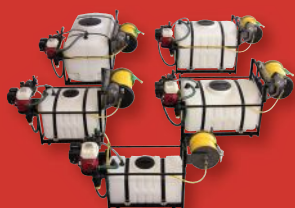


Captions | 1. This rock garden was formerly a water fountain. **2.** Mixed plantings of drought-tolerant agave and tall grasses help provide movement and varying eye levels. **3.** Boulders used as stepping stones, grasses and vibrant plantings lead to an enclave on the property. **4.** A bird’s-eye view of the property.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CADRE LANDSCAPING AND THE MULLER COMPANY



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STEP-BY-STEP

How to have a successful mulch installation

Get the scoop on the steps to take to perfect your technique

BY ROB DIFRANCO
LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Carl Bennett, owner of Happy's Lawn Care & Landscaping in Asheville, N.C., shares the ins and outs of his mulch-laying process.



1 Choose the right mulch. There are plenty of mulches on the market, but Bennett says it's crucial to utilize high-quality mulch that won't harm plants. He recommends finding a local mulch yard that indicates exactly what is in its mulch.

Bennett prefers to use double-ground pine mulch for his projects. He says he's found through trial and error that double-ground pine mulch breaks down the best and has the longest-lasting color.

Customers also prefer it because it's a natural mulch that acts as a soil conditioner as it breaks down over the season, he says.

"It will help to feed the plants, too," Bennett says. "What happens when you use a hardwood is it gets mixed with the soil, and it will fight the plants for nitrogen because it's trying to break down that wood in the soil."



2 Prep the bed. Bennett says the No. 1 mistake contractors make during the mulch-laying process is lackluster bed preparation.

"If you don't get all the weeds out of the bed to begin with, you're going to have a lot of problems with them coming back up through," he says. "Once you get a good 2 to 3 inches of mulch down, most of the seeds that might cause weeds to pop up come from the air blowing them into the beds."

Happy's doesn't use a landscape liner for its mulch installations. Bennett says you don't need liner if you prep the beds well enough.

Another item on Bennett's prep checklist is the removal of debris surrounding plants and trees in the bed. That includes old mulch that hasn't broken down yet.

3 Get your hands dirty. In Bennett's eyes, the secret to Happy's Lawn Care & Landscaping's mulching process is his team spreads material into the bed by hand. This approach ensures an even distribution of the mulch, he says.

"When you shovel or pitchfork it in, some areas might have 4 inches while another only has 2," he says. "It's really important to lay out the proper 2 to 3



inches of mulch. When you're down on the ground, it's much easier to feather it out and ensure everything is even."

Bennett recommends a depth of closer to 3 inches because it does a better job of keeping potential weeds out of the soil.

Bennett says he commonly sees what he calls "volcanoes" or "ant hills" of mulch around plants and trees. Piled-up mulch on trees and plants is unhealthy because it can reduce airflow, he says.

"If there's too much mulch around the tree, take it out and away," Bennett says. "Keep about 1 inch around the base of the tree, and then as you go further away, you can bring it up to that 3-inch depth. That will help give you more airflow and serve as a buffer for potential diseases."

The same rule is important under shrubs. Take the extra step of pruning to ensure the base of the shrub gets proper airflow.



4 Pay attention to detail. Bennett is admittedly picky about the edges of a mulch bed, with a preference for hand-spaded edges.

"We hand spade all of the beds because it ends up being neater than what a machine might do," he says. "It creates a natural edging instead of hitting it with a string trimmer and laying out a plastic or metal edging."

The hand-spading process allows for a more defined line, says Bennett. It also provides another chance to get a closer look at the bed after laying the mulch. 🍷

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MAINTAIN YOUR EDGE



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Pros need to know how much hauling power their truck has before purchasing a trailer.

Time to upgrade your trailer? Here's what you need to know

Learn what to look for when considering different trailer options for your business

BY LAUREN DOWDLE
CONTRIBUTOR

From the size to the type of enclosure, there are several options when it comes to selecting a truck trailer.

PROS AND CONS

Overall, landscape professionals continue to opt for larger trailers, says Mitchell Bender, president of Bravo Trailers. In the past, Mitchell says pros preferred trailers were 6-by-12 feet — and now it's 8 1/2-by-18 feet or larger. The type of trailer must be compatible with the truck's axle rating, as larger trailers will not be compatible with pickups.

Small companies tend to use open trailers, Bender says, while large firms typically select enclosed trailers to haul with either a pickup or dump truck. Open trailers cost less than enclosed ones, but they can also pose security risks to thefts and won't protect the equipment or crews from the elements

like an enclosed one. Enclosed trailers also give crews a place to eat lunch and can serve as a rolling billboard to advertise the company.

Understanding how they will use the trailer will help landscapers choose the right kind for their needs, says Nathan Uphus, sales manager for Felling Trailers. For example, standard ramp and tilt-bed models are good for hauling equipment, but they lack the ability to offload materials efficiently.

"A lawn maintenance professional using a standard landscape model ramp trailer could haul mowers to a site and haul away grass clippings, but they would need to be unloaded by hand as opposed to unloading via dump feature," Uphus says. "Several models are available that offer value in usability and overall productivity, but these models generally come at a higher cost."

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Durability is one of the most important components to consider when choosing a trailer, Bender says. From natural wear and tear to damage caused by crews, trailers get subjected to a lot during the workday. Having one with reinforced corner posts and walls, protected wheel box corners, heavy-duty doors, protected floors and commercial-grade materials will extend the lifetime.

Trailers with translucent roofs, which provide better visibility during loading and unloading, is a trend Bender has noticed among landscapers. Trailers also can

be set up as charging stations for battery-powered equipment.


When deciding what size trailer they need, professionals should think about the space the equipment will take up, the amount of additional room needed to move around it and properly secure it for transport, and the total weight being hauled, Uphus says.

"The first two questions generally asked are, 'What will the trailer be hauling, and what is being used to pull the trailer?'" Uphus says. "It's necessary that the total weight of the equipment is less than the maximum rated carrying capacity of the trailer."

Often, operators will only factor in the dry weight of the equipment as specified by the manufacturer, Uphus says. They forget to consider the weight added by optional attachments, equipment securement devices, handheld equipment, fuel, parts or any additional items added to the trailer. The weight of those can add up quickly.

Professionals also need to choose commercial trailers that can withstand daily use for all equipment and materials, instead of ones intended for recreational use. "You want to be able to grow into it a little more, instead of growing out of it immediately," Bender says.

To avoid costly downtime, professionals should focus on finding a durable and efficient trailer that meets the needs of their crews now and in the future.

"A trailer is part of the team and one of the most important pieces of equipment you have to get the job done well," Bender says. "Trailers don't have to be the weak link of operations anymore." 

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.



AWAY FROM THE ELEMENTS
Enclosed trailers can offer professionals a safe place to store equipment.

PHOTOS: FELLING TRAILERS (TOP); BRAVO TRAILERS



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HARDSCAPE SOLUTIONS

Lakeside livin'

BY ROB DIFRANCO | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

LOCATION South Lyon, Mich.

COMPANY Todd's Services

DETAILS Access to this lakeside property was a consistent challenge for Ryan Dinius, landscape designer for Todd's Services in Hamburg, Mich., and his team.

An open lot on the eastern side of the property allowed crews to stage materials close by during the first phase of construction.

"That was a saving grace as far as being able to perform the project," he says. "We did most of the lakefront work before the second phase, which included some hardscaping on the mid-tier patio down by the lake."

Midway through the project, construction began on a saltwater pool in the middle of the backyard, restricting access to the lakefront. That led to a second phase for Dinius and the company, which included work closer to the home.

Construction during phase two included the installation of a covered pavilion and a water feature with large dolomite stones from a Michigan quarry — which Dinius says was a request from the client.

Later in the project, Dinius says, construction began on the vacant lot crews used to stage materials, completely cutting off access for larger materials and equipment.

"That made things interesting," he says. "We, for the most part, get all the heavy-duty stuff done. Then towards the final stages, it was mostly plantings and touch-up stuff, which we had to do by hand because our access was pretty much cut off."

The project earned Todd's Services 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](https://www.LandscapeManagement.net/hardscapesolutions).



Captions | **1.** The contractor completed this project in several phases as crews had restricted access to the backyard area. **2.** A before picture shows the challenging terrain crews managed as construction played out. **3.** The client requested an extensive outdoor living space in an outdoor pavilion with screens to close off the area from the outdoors. **4.** Todd's Services worked alongside a pool contractor to install a dolomite grotto water feature that serves as a jumping platform and a waterfall.



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BUSINESS BOOSTERS

Compact track loaders offer landscape contractors the power of a wheeled loader without the potential drawbacks according to loader experts.



What to look for in a track loader purchase

See why experts say compact track loaders have become the favorite for landscape contractors

BY ROB DIFRANCO | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

According to Buck Storlie, compact equipment manager for Yanmar, the compact track loader has quickly unseated skid-steer loaders as the top choice among landscape contractors in the loader market.

“If you go back 10 years, it was almost 100 percent skid-steer loaders,” says Storlie. “Today, nearly four compact track loaders are sold for every wheeled

loader. So, there’s a clear trend.”

Storlie and experts from Kioti, Kubota and Home Depot Rental share their opinions on the rise of the compact track loader (CTL) and when a skid-steer loader might still be a solid option.

A GOOD TRACK RECORD

Gerald Corder, product manager of construction equipment at Kubota, tells LM that the No. 1 reason CTLs

have overtaken skid-steer loaders is that they are gentler on easily damaged terrain like turf.

“(CTLs) have better flotation over uneven surfaces and do less damage. It’s really what they’re designed for,” he says. “Everything from mud to turf to sand, even down to snowy conditions, if you’ve got the right tracks, you’ll be able to maneuver the machine and get done what you need.”

Corder says a CTL spreads the weight of the machine’s chassis over a broader surface area, making it ideal for contractors working on a residential project that involves work on a customer’s lawn.

PHOTO: YANMAR

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A TIME AND A PLACE

Skid-steer loaders still have their place, says Corder. They can be advantageous for contractors who need to move material quickly on surfaces that aren't easily disturbed, like asphalt, concrete or gravel.

He also says they are viable machines to use in a warehouse.

Lower upfront and after-purchase costs are potential selling points for a wheeled loader. Storlie estimates they cost around 20 percent less than their tracked counterparts.

Simplified maintenance is also an important consideration. He says maintenance on CTLs can cost two to three times more than maintenance on a skid-steer loader.

CTL MUST HAVES

Jason Boerger, senior product line manager for Kioti, says that when searching

for the right CTL, contractors should key in on rated operating capacity and horsepower. They should also consider what jobs they'll be using the machine for, both at the time of purchase and in the future.

"If you're mostly scooping and dumping loads without a lot of ground engagement, a larger loader with a larger rated operating capacity will be efficient," he says. "If you've got a variety of tasks, landscape contractors tend to gravitate toward a medium-sized compact track loader for its balance in size and power."

Popular features included on new CTLs include vertical lift arms, rearview cameras and joystick controls.

"Lift arms are becoming essential, especially if your business loads into dump trucks," he says. "They allow the operator to load a truck more evenly from one side instead of building dirt ramps and dumping on both sides."

RENTAL POTENTIAL

Renting a machine might make sense for a contractor before committing to a purchase due to the variety of offerings on the market, Boerger says.

Tony English, senior director of merchandising for Home Depot Rental, confirms that CTLs are a popular rental option for contractors. Similarly to the buyer's market, CTLs have overtaken wheeled loaders as the preferred option. However, the popularity of CTLs, among other factors, means there's a premium associated with renting a CTL, he adds.

"Tracked units can cost between \$40 and \$60 more per day than the equivalent wheeled loader," he says. "That comes back to the premium the manufacturer charges because these machines can be more difficult to manufacture with the additional components in a track. They're also more costly for us to maintain." 🇺🇸

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Double-checking attachment points is a crucial step to maintaining a safe work environment.



Why safety is the most important part of working with attachments

Increase job-site safety and reduce serious injury with these practical guidelines for operating compact equipment attachments

BY MIKE ZAWACKI | CONTRIBUTOR

Attachments make tasks involving compact equipment more manageable, less time-consuming and ultimately more profitable for landscape contractors. Crew members should take operator and job site safety seriously when coupling attachments with a compact skid-steer, wheel loader or tractor. Experts share the guidelines every contractor should heed.

UNDERSTAND THE BASICS

Safety is a top priority, beginning with reading and understanding a machine's operator's manual, says Lee Padgett, a Takeuchi-US product manager.

Operators must be aware of their surroundings and ensure the immediate area is free of potential hazards. Job planning allows operators to assess their surroundings and identify potential risks, says Ryan Ruhl, a product consultant for compact construction equipment at John Deere.

"Don't just dive into a pile of bushes (with a brush cutter attachment) and start tearing them up," he says. "You've got to know where to place that material and what risks could be in it."

When changing or hooking up an attachment, manufacturers stress the need for operators to verify the connection. Often, manufacturers include a visual indicator if the connection is unsuccessful or incomplete. As a safeguard, have the loader place down pressure on the attachment to test the connection. Another visual precaution

is to lift and angle the attachment to verify the pins are fully engaged.

Similarly, when uncoupling an attachment, ensure the area is clear of people and potential hazards and confirm that the surface is stable enough to support the attachment's weight. A designated rack or stand is always the safest and preferred place to put the attachment.

While most hydraulic fittings are "quick-couplers" nowadays, Ruhl advises operators to take a moment to check those connections. And when doing so, be sure to wear gloves.

GET UP TO SPEED

Routine safety training focused on correctly using attachments and loaders is essential for every team member. Landscape contractors should establish regularly scheduled training programs throughout the year.

"Just like a maintenance plan protects the machine and ensures uptime, a training program coupled with a clear understanding of the operator's manual greatly reduces the likelihood of job site accidents," Padgett says.

Manufacturers and dealers are great resources for safety training information. Ruhl recommends a foreman or equipment manager receive in-depth training and pass it on to their coworkers.

"I really like one-on-one training, but at times it's just not possible," he says. "Give that in-depth training to one individual and then ask them to 'spread the gospel,' if you will, safety-wise."



RIGHT TOOL, WRONG JOB

Whether it's incorrectly matched to the carrier unit or the wrong tool for the job at hand, there is an inherent danger in using the wrong attachment. Padgett says it's critical to know a machine's lifting and hydraulic capacity before coupling to an attachment.

"The attachment could be too heavy for the machine, causing a tipping hazard," he warns. "Or the machine may not have the hydraulic capacity to run the attachment, causing overheating and poor performance, as well as undue stress on the machine's loader arms and frame."

Then there's the matter of using an attachment for an unintended task. This is often the case when landscape contractors apply rotary/brush cutters and mulchers for more than the manufacturer's design intended.

"There are warnings on the sides of these attachments to stay back 200 feet," Ruhl says. "But if you get into material that attachment isn't meant for, it could start flinging rocks 300 feet. You may end up shooting a rock at a coworker who thinks they're outside the danger zone."

DAILY ROUTINE

Equipment operators should perform a daily walk-around before using any machine or attachment to ensure everything is in working order.

Use a checklist, including items such as monitoring fluid levels, inspecting tires and tracks for damage and signs of leaks and checking for wear and loose or missing parts. Padgett says most manufacturers provide recommended checkpoints in their operator's manuals. 

Mike Zawacki is a Cleveland-based writer covering the landscape and turf industries for nearly two decades.

DID YOU KNOW

ON GRID
Geogrids and geotextiles can provide added strength to the base of a hardscape project.



Learn how to become an ace of base

Experts share some of the most important steps to a hardscape project before it even starts

BY CHRISTINA HERRICK | LM EDITOR

Before embarking on a new hardscape project, experts say there are several things to keep in mind. Here to help you start your projects on the right foot are Joe Raboine, director of residential hardscapes at Belgard; Jason Arseneau, contractor services manager with Unilock; and Mark Arseneau, principal owner of Green Monster Landscapes in Dover, N.H.

DIGGING IN

Unilock's Arseneau says contractors should secure all permits and identify any utilities. He says it's a good idea to communicate with neighbors about any residential projects.

"Letting them know when construction is starting and potential timelines can prove to be helpful," he says.

Raboine encourages contractors to determine where subsurface water will run, noting that a contractor might need to engineer water flow for complex projects.

"Water flow is probably the most important consideration for all projects," he says. "Once a proper plan has been created, the last critical item is ensuring that the installation is done per recommendations."

Raboine says it's important to know what type of soil the property sits on. It's even possible there could be two or more soil types. Arseneau says this could impact the excavation needed for a project.

"Free-draining soil types like sand require less excavation, and soil types like clay require more excavation," he

says. "Clay holds onto water, and if your project is in a climate subject to freezing temperatures and freeze/thaw cycles, you would want to excavate more."

Arseneau says the depth of excavation will depend on the type of project.

"For vehicular traffic versus pedestrian traffic, we're going to have different standards that we use and different ways of strengthening our base with mechanical means like a geotextile or a geogrid," he says.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Arseneau says Green Monster uses a 3/4-inch open aggregate stone as a base for its residential projects. Green Monster offers residential landscape design/build, irrigation and masonry services.

"We'll also use 1 1/2-inch crush stone as well, particularly on driveways, because it has a greater load capacity," he says. "We'll also use 1 1/2-inch frequently when we hit poor subsoils, and we have to amend the soil by mixing the stone into it. The 1 1/2-inch has a little bit more body to it."

Unilock's Arseneau recommends cement-stabilized aggregates to give the base a boost.

"All of these solutions can help to reduce the overall depth of excavation and provide a good stable base for pavers," he says.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Experts say a major component of building a strong base is compaction. Unilock's Arseneau says pros need to compact native soils before adding aggregates.

"When installing your base material either by a slinger or with a skid-steer or even by wheelbarrow, contractors should consider their compaction tools," he says.

Arseneau says contractors need to install aggregate in lifts to get the proper amount of compaction.


"If your base buildup is 12 inches total, a contractor can't simply fill the excavated area and compact down to the 12 inches required," he says. "Installing in 4-inch lifts and compacting is a good rule of thumb. With the use of larger compaction machines, that 4-inch number can be increased."

Arseneau says one mistake contractors can make is to overlook the need for moisture in the compaction process, which could impact the project's lifespan.

"When compacting dense gray gravel, it has to have some moisture in it for it to compact properly," he says. "It's not cohesive if it doesn't have the moisture. If it's too dry, it's not going to compact its maximum potential."

Arseneau says Green Monster goes beyond the Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute and Construction Products Association standards for base depths and the appropriate amount of moisture for proper compaction.

Raboine agrees that doing more than required is always a good idea.

"When in doubt, install a high-quality geotextile fabric and add more base than what is recommended," he says. "Be sure to install the base 1 foot past the edge of the pavement. Oftentimes, you see contractors not doing this, and over time the edge will fail, which will cause the whole installation to fail." 

EVERY DROP COUNTS

How the irrigation industry met and continues to meet challenges

BY DANNY SMITH | CONTRIBUTOR

California has had a unique and increased responsibility to develop sustainable indoor and outdoor water management practices and standards since the early 1950s. As part of the state's shift from an abundant agriculture industry to the post-war era, the region's most attractive counties became saturated with master-planned communities, parks, schools and supporting infrastructure to keep up with a growing population and demand for a suburban lifestyle.

The compounding population boom of the '70s, '80s and '90s brought thou-

sands of acres of city parks, athletic fields, green belts and common areas from drawing board to development with minimal consideration that these demand millions of gallons of water to properly maintain appearance and growth.

Unfortunately, it wasn't until the early 1990s that water conservation principles, such as adopting new irrigation technology, selecting water-conscious plant material, properly installing irrigation systems and properly training



Danny Smith

maintenance personnel began to take root in the minds of city planners, large land development companies and landscape architects.

CHALLENGES TO ADOPTION

While new technologies, such as remote irrigation controllers, high-efficiency nozzles, vari-

able frequency drive pumps and drip lines, were standard and continuously improved California's agricultural industry through the last quarter of the 1990s, it still took several years for

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some irrigation products such as radio/ET-based controllers, high-efficiency spray nozzles and soil moisture sensors to become available to the commercial landscape industry.

It wasn't until the cost of water became substantially more expensive that people considered their property's water footprint and ways to manage it without reducing or eliminating outdoor spaces.

Increasing water costs also resulted in the demand for landscape architects and water providers to develop and implement landscape and irrigation ordinances, codes and regulations, such as the Model Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance, to effectively manage water volume allocations and budgets based on the actual landscapes, their size and the irrigation methods used.

Another challenge to the adoption of technology was the demand for skilled

and certified irrigation technicians, specialists and water managers to install, operate and troubleshoot it.

FUTURE VIEW


Fortunately, eager irrigation manufacturers met many of these challenges. This boom in engineering and development budgets allowed the creation of key technologies we've now adopted.

These technologies include, ET-based, or maximum allowable depletion or deficit-enabled controllers, accurate flow-sensing, two-wire low voltage decoder to solenoid activation and low-radius, high-efficiency rotary nozzles.

Implementing water-conserving technologies allows us to continue to enjoy our lush, yet sustainable spaces. We also can continue to justify the need for furthering irrigation technologies and their adoption and implementation due to the continued rise in water costs.

To ensure these technologies continue to operate as designed, we also must ensure proper training and certification of irrigation technicians and specialists.

As water costs continue to increase alongside the demand for sustainable outdoor spaces, landscape management companies that invest in proper irrigation technician and specialist training and certifications will become leaders.

Companies that pursue both internal and external certifications and choose to invest in quality water management programs via the creation of new roles such as irrigation technician trainers, certified water managers and employee continuing-education program administrators will help to shape our environment by conserving millions of gallons of water. 

Smith is the director of water management for Park West Landscape Management in Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif.

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Irrigation maintenance do's and don'ts

Learn best practices for keeping your irrigation system running smoothly all season long

BY ROB DIFRANCO | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Springtime means the return of the busy season for contractors nationwide. It's also the ideal time for irrigation professionals to get their systems back into tip-top shape.

Shawn Sandink, business development manager for SiteOne Landscape Supply, and Patrick Johnston, irrigation product manager for Horizon Distributors, share their top do's and don'ts for maintaining a well-run irrigation system.

DO

Keep your eyes peeled. An irrigation system involves a lot of moving parts, making it important to ensure that the most vital components are working correctly.

"Sprinklers pop up and shrink down, a rotor pops up, rotates and comes down, a valve is constantly opening and closing," Sandink says. "There's a lot of

movement there. So those are the parts you'll want to watch."

Sandink recommends checking for leaks and potential cracks in emitters as well as their positioning. He also says contractors keep an eye on outside factors that could affect the delivery of water to the landscape, like plant materials that may have grown over time.

Utilize data and technology. The irrigation world doesn't lack new technologies designed to help irrigation professionals, says Johnston. He recommends contractors take advantage of that tech and the data that comes with it.

"The technology that is coming out is becoming less expensive; it's a great tool to have in your toolbox," he says. "I encourage (contractors) to use the newer technology, like smart controllers, to develop that information so you can make the right decisions."

Stay educated. Sandink and Johnston agree that irrigation pros must continue to become educated about the latest irrigation maintenance recommendations. Sandink says resources are abundant for contractors from places like the Irrigation Association, manufacturers and local distributors.

"The more education you have, the better," he says. "I think that staying informed with the latest recommendations and knowledge is the best thing you can do to have a successful maintenance program."

DON'T

Let technology do all of your thinking. For Sandink, as vital as technology

is for maintenance, it's important not to let it entirely run your process. He suggests utilizing checklists with step-by-step instructions for what to check next.

"A contractor may have performed this maintenance a million times, but having to physically check and write it down ensures it's all done correctly," says Sandink. "If they follow a checklist, most contractors find it saves them time."


Let maintenance be too infrequent. Regular maintenance checks are critical to ensure an irrigation system gets water where it needs to be, Johnston says.

What qualifies as regular maintenance? That could depend on where in the country you are located. For example, Johnston says spring is a great time to perform maintenance checks in colder climates.

"When you're refilling lines somewhere that frost and colder weather are an issue, it's a good time to perform a full system diagnostic," he says. "Then you can assemble a quote for materials needed for repairs and get that done."

In warmer areas of the country, maintenance checks should be more regular. Johnston recommends doing system checks monthly.

Assume. There's an old saying about assumptions, and it's one that Sandink says those in the industry should live by. While trusting your gut might work occasionally, he says you should always confirm your suspicions.

"Sometimes experience can be a pitfall for maintenance practices in our industry," he says. "Often, we'll look at something immediately and think, 'Oh, it has to be this.' Especially in today's labor market where time is of the essence because if you're wrong, you might run into a bigger problem." 



A contractor should make checking items for wear a top priority during regular maintenance.

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DID YOU KNOW

What goes into the launch of a new irrigation product?

Get the inside track on the research and development of new products

BY LAUREN DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR

Long before contractors hear about the release of a new controller, nozzle or other irrigation product, manufacturers spend countless hours bringing them from concept to completion.

GATHERING INFORMATION

Coming up with a good irrigation product idea is the easy part, says Joe Porrazzo, marketing group manager of the contractor division at Rain Bird. The difficult part of the process is going from that abstract concept to the finished good because no two people see everything the same way.

An important aspect of the development process is customer feedback. Rain Bird uses a combination of formal interviews, questionnaires, surveys and in-field meetings to drive most of their feedback.

The development process varies by product, but Porrazzo says Rain Bird increased the velocity of its timelines during the past five years through new manufacturing processes, technologies and other innovative means to test products in the field with customers. The company uses a testing facility at its Tucson, Ariz., corporate office and performs testing in-house at its manufacturing facilities.

“Rain Bird works with independent testing facilities outside of the irrigation industry to ensure product longevity and reliability,” Porrazzo says. “Rain Bird also works very closely with the Irrigation Association and other industry peer groups to ensure our product development plans help drive their core initiatives with conservation and sustainability.”

CROWDSOURCING FEEDBACK

Irrigation contractor feedback is central to developing product ideas and efforts, says Jeffery Kremicki, manager of business development for Hunter Industries. Customers can submit their ideas to product development teams on the company’s Great Ideas for Innovation site. The company also actively reaches out to customers through surveys and site visits to confirm the product they plan to develop will meet the contractor’s needs.



“In addition, our employees take an active role in the collaboration around our next new products,” Kremicki says. “Product advisory groups consisting of members from sales, engineering and marketing are tasked with ensuring that the voice of the customer is present in our development activities.”

From inception to launch, a project could take several days to several years. Generally, implementing enhancements and new features to existing products takes less time than the development of a completely new product, Kremicki says.

“Product enhancements to our web-connected irrigation controllers, which have firmware and software, allow Hunter engineers to release new features quickly ‘over the air’ to our customers,” Kremicki says. “The design, development and testing of a new rotor product is a much more involved process.”


Hunter forms product development teams after the product idea is approved. The company creates product design specifications based on customer requirements. Then, the engineers develop designs and prototypes for testing.

TESTING, TESTING, TESTING

Once internal testing is complete, Hunter commonly sends products into the field to confirm the product meets customer requirements, Kremicki says. Product field testing could take years to gather the necessary data. Many products also go through internationally recognized compliance testing to ensure they meet industry standards.

“For many new products, testing can become the most involved part of the product development process,” Kremicki says. “Once a design has been ‘frozen’ and prototypes are developed, they are sent through a battery of Hunter internal tests to confirm performance and reliability.”

Kremicki says Hunter prioritizes the development of low-impact products to help ensure their products and processes remain as efficient and socially responsible as possible.

“Whether we are developing a water-efficient sprinkler or smart irrigation controller, much of our product focus is on addressing concerns regarding water use and the scarcity of this valuable resource,” he says. 

THROUGH THE WRINGER
Newly created irrigation products go through several stages of testing before hitting the market.

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.

FIVE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW BY SETH JONES | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Phil Schoggen

**VICE PRESIDENT
SCHOGGENSCAPES
CLINTON, MISS.**

1 What should we know about SchoggenScapes?

We were founded in 2001 as Premier Lawn and Landscapes, and we rebranded in 2010 to SchoggenScapes. We've grown into a full-service landscape company: maintenance, construction, hardscape, irrigation, drainage and outdoor lighting. My brother and I are running the business together. During peak season, we have about 30 employees who take care of our clients.

2 How did you get into the business?

Well, my degree is in construction and land development from Mississippi State University, but it goes back farther than that ... my brother Will, one day when we were kids said, 'Hey, you want to come help me cut a yard?' I was 9 years old. He was 12. Mom drove us around in the back of her Chevy Malibu with a mower, electric Weed Eater and a push-broom. Here we are today with six crews and 15 trucks. It's been quite a journey.

3 What are your expectations for this upcoming season — do you think 2023 will be similar to 2022?

I don't know if any of us can handle another 2022. There was a point in 2022 where we had six months of backlog work. I think it's going to iron out a little bit. It's always good to have a backlog, but the clients start getting frustrated when it's far out like that. I won't say that I think 2023 will decline — I think there will be plenty of work, but it will be spread out more.

4 Do you have a family, and what do you all do for fun?

I've been married for almost eight years and we've got a little 6-month-old son. His name is Fenley, but we call him Fen. I'm from Mississippi, but I'm a big Boston Red Sox fan ... so we named him after Fenway Park. We live on the reservoir, which is a lake there in Central Mississippi. So, for fun, we like to get out on the boat. I also like to travel, hunt and golf.

5 What are your favorite tools to get the job done?

I'm one of those guys that doesn't mind spending money if it makes our job easier. That applies to office personnel and field personnel. We really enjoy our Ditch Witch mini skid-steers. And, of course, software ... we've been doing digital time tracking since 2006. We went to Boss Landscape Management software in April 2022. We enjoy everything being all together. Those tools are the most valuable. 📱

BEST ADVICE

"My grandad told me, 'If you do what you say you're going to do, when you said you're going to do it, you'll have more work than you can do.' We live by that."



How remote time reporting helped Winterberry slash payroll time

CEO Bryan Stolz shares how integrating payroll software positions Winterberry for growth BY CHRISTINA HERRICK | LM EDITOR

At the end of 2021, Winterberry Landscape & Garden Center, a full-service residential and commercial landscaping company, introduced remote time reporting for its crews.

Bryan Stolz, CEO of the Southington, Conn., operation that clocked in at No. 115 on the 2022 LM150 list, says the integration of an app-based payroll software called Paycom helped set up the operation for a strong future.

“One of the major goals of scaling is to decrease your overall overhead — particularly administrative — to increase that ratio of billable people out in the field versus administrative team members,” he says. “We are this year projected to reach \$32 million with one fewer person in our accounting department than we had when we were doing \$10 million.”

He says the ability to cut down on administrative overhead is a multi-pronged approach. It’s not just thanks to the addition of payroll software.

“Just as important as the actual software and the actual implementation is also the quality of the processes behind it,” he says. “It’s about that data flow from the field to the office and building the processes out right that makes it go efficiently and accurately.”

Imperfection in implementation

Stolz says he was part of a larger software implementation at Winterberry around 2016. Through that process, he learned that companies often don’t

know everything that’s going to happen once it’s implemented.

“You can’t put on rose-colored glasses and tell people, ‘We’ve got this; it’s going to be fine,’” he says. “Instead, be honest with them: ‘Hey, here’s where we’re at. Here’s what we think is going to happen. If that doesn’t happen, let us know as soon as possible so that we can work on it together.’ I think people appreciate that level of honesty.”

Stolz says the Winterberry team told Paycom that it had to integrate into the company’s existing management software seamlessly. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be a good fit.

“If you have all these different softwares that don’t talk to each other, then you end up segmenting the business and the information,” Stolz says. “You lose that sort of open book clarity that we find really important for motivating our team members and for letting them know how they’re performing.”

Change management

Stolz says as the company has grown about 230 percent since 2016, he’s noticed less resistance to the addition of the payroll software but more questions about whether the change was the right one for the company. As Winterberry looked to upgrade, Stolz says a small team vetted the options.

As rollout began, leadership identified team members who were comfortable learning new technology to train their peers in each department.

“That way they were able to speak the same language, both in terms



of the technology, and just in general,” Stolz says. “They also were able to talk frankly about the challenges that they expected.”

Bryan Stolz, CEO of Winterberry, says successfully adding software requires involving the whole team during rollout.

Future moves

Stolz says a few crew members still fill out a paper time sheet as a backup. He says the next step will be to go completely paperless with payroll reporting.

From there, he hopes to integrate the payroll software’s GPS features to reduce the time it takes for crews to use the app to check in.

“Where we really want to get is that when somebody’s on a job, when they pull up their app to punch in, we want that job to already be there,” he says. “So that it saves time going through the phone. And that’s where we haven’t been able to get it to yet, but we’re hoping that we’ll be able to make that work (in 2023).”

Applications are open for the 2023 LM150 list. Fill out the form at <https://northcoast.wufoo.com/forms/lm150-entry-form-2023/> to submit your information, or email Special Projects Editor Marisa Palmieri at MPalmieri@NorthCoastMedia.net for more information.



BY GREG HERRING

The author is the CEO of The Herring Group, financial leaders serving landscape companies. He can be reached at greg.herring@herring-group.com.

4 habits all high-performing landscape companies share

In January, my team and I hosted a High Performers webinar for the 151 participants in The Herring Group's Ninth Annual Landscape Industry Benchmark Report.

We selected three landscape companies from our Benchmark Report participants, analyzed their financials and interviewed them about how they perform at such a high level.

In this case, we defined "high performers" as landscape firms that consistently show an operating profit margin above 10 percent. We verified their results through the data they provided for our report.

We focus on operating profit margin because it is a single indicator that effectively measures customer satisfaction, management effectiveness and operating efficiency. Operating profit is revenue minus direct job expenses, indirect job expenses and overhead expenses — including straight-line depreciation expenses. Operating profit margin is operating profit divided by revenue — a percentage.

For companies with revenue greater than \$3 million, I recommend you target an operating profit margin of 12 percent and settle for anything above 10 percent as an initial goal. Smaller companies can often earn higher margins because the impact of an effective owner is much greater than in larger companies.

COMMON TRAITS

The high-performing companies we analyzed on the webinar are varied in their sizes, markets and specializations, but they consistently

“It is much easier to grow and remain profitable when you do not lose customers. Customer retention starts with knowing the type of customer or project you want.”

achieve a 10 percent-plus operating margin. How do they do it? We identified the following habits they have in common.

Habit No. 1: Rely on data. These companies do not perform at a high level by accident. The companies are methodical and analytical in decision-making. These companies also communicate effectively, so teams always know if they are winning or losing. For example, each salesperson has a sales goal reviewed weekly. For maintenance operations, dashboards in Aspire show whether crews are over or under hours on their jobs in real-time.

Habit No. 2: Focus on retaining customers. All three of our high performers have customer retention rates above 90 percent. It is much easier to grow and remain profitable when you do not lose customers. Customer retention starts with knowing the type of customer or project you want. These companies do not pursue every opportunity.

Habit No. 3: Price to value. Because these companies focus on data, their executive teams know their costs. More importantly, because these companies perform at a high level and focus on cus-

tom satisfaction, they price to the customer's perceived value of their services. In some cases, these companies provide concierge-level service so they can demand a higher price. They are not selling hours.


Habit No. 4: Find a way. A company cannot be a high performer if its management team makes or tolerates excuses. These high performers eliminated the "whataboutism" by holding team members accountable. Each of the owners of these companies has a competitive spirit. They want to win. They hire managers who also want to win. Together, more often than not, they find a way to win.

CHECK OUT THE SERIES

To learn more about how you can turn your landscape company into a high-performing firm, don't miss the first two articles in my series about the results of our Benchmark Report.

In January, I explained that most companies can be a lot more profitable than they are. I also presented a chart to show just how much money you leave on the table if you are not hitting 10 percent.

In February, I explained why this report is the most accurate representation of your company's performance and six ways you can use it to improve your business.

With the right mindset and plan, there is no reason your company cannot quickly turn itself into a high-performing landscape company. 



Scan to see January's article.



BY PHIL HARWOOD

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

Why your business needs a buy-sell agreement

If you're a business owner, step No. 1 for 2023 is to put in place a buy-sell agreement. If you're not a business owner, skip to step No. 2.

STEP NO. 1

A buy-sell agreement provides all the details for the sale of your business when a triggering event occurs.

Unfortunately, the most common trigger event of a buy-sell agreement is the death of a business owner. With this agreement in place, there is a predetermined plan to implement for the survival of the business and the protection of the families involved. Without such an agreement, everyone must figure out what to do next or, worse yet, fight about what to do next.

If two or more people own a business, a buy-sell agreement typically involves the remaining owners acquiring the deceased owner's shares. If one individual owns the business, a buy-sell agreement may involve the sale of the company to a competitor or a key employee. Buy-sell agreements are usually paired with insurance to provide funding for the transaction to occur.

“Trusts and nonprobate assets sound complicated, and they can be. But they don't have to be. ... It just takes some forethought and implementation to get it done.”

STEP NO. 2

Another step for 2023 is to update your will. Most people don't have a will, so this is an easier step because you don't need to locate your existing will and determine what to change and how to legally make those changes. The rules governing will revocation and modification are tricky, and you can make errors easily, resulting in unintended consequences. If you don't already have a will, you begin with a clean slate.

Michigan, like many states, has a statutory will. This is a simple will, created by attorneys and approved by the state. It is entirely free to download and use. But there is a catch. You can't change anything in the statutory will, or it will be invalid. It's a fill-in-the-blank form that works for most people with simple situations. If you need a more complex document, a statutory will won't help you.

A will must comply with the laws of your state to be valid. You must be able to locate the will when needed. The best way to make a will discoverable is to place it on file with your county probate court. In Michigan, there is a \$25 filing fee to do so. But this is a small price to pay to save your family from digging through your office files for days on end trying to find your will.

STEP NO. 3

A final step for 2023 is to avoid probate entirely by creating a trust and employing other strategies to distribute all your assets through non-probate transfers, leaving nothing remaining for intestate proceedings. By doing so, you will leave a wonderful legacy for your family as a person who took careful steps to protect and ensure the assets wouldn't need to endure an unnecessary and public probate process.

Trusts and nonprobate assets sound complicated, and they can be. But they don't have to be. For example, it's not complicated to change a deed so that real estate transfers by operation of law upon death. It just takes some forethought and implementation to get it done.

The bottom line is we all will leave a legacy. What do you want yours to be, and what will you do in 2023 to protect that legacy?

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.

All politics is local

At the National Association of Landscape Professionals (NALP), our Government Relations staff spends weekday mornings combing through thousands of pieces of legislation filed in all 50 states, plus D.C., looking for issues that, if passed, would have affected the green industry.

I am a big fan of federalism, with some notable exceptions. We should make political decisions at the most local level practicable.

For instance, in Maine, legislators are concerned about the human and environmental risks of PFAS compounds. Legislators contemplated dozens of bills in the past session and a raft of new ones in this session. Contrast that to the issues important to the legislature in Oregon, where legislators pay great attention to the remediation of areas affected by wildfires.

Is one issue more important than the other? I can tell you without much fear of contradiction that if the vast forests of Maine were to ignite, the legislature's priorities would similarly change.

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

And this is what makes government relations so fascinating. As the late Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill famously observed, all politics is local. My own counter observation is that politicians don't want a grouchy bald guy from out of town — like me — telling them how to run their state or even their town.

Here in Massachusetts, our state laws say that only the state can regulate the use of plant nutrients. A town on Cape Cod sought to challenge the status quo. Local landscapers

who engaged in retail politics and relied on relationships built with their elected officials over the years convinced the town not to move forward. This is the ultimate key to success. Elected officials who listen to their constituents.

When a legislature introduces a bill, a committee of jurisdiction is assigned the bill. It is within this committee that all the hard work of deciding whether the bill should become law happens. At some point, the committee will host a hearing on the bill in which the elected officials will debate its merits and listen to public testimony.

Public testimony is a bit of a dog and pony show; I've seen people bring in stacks of medical records and perform original music to get their points across. In most states, you'll get about three minutes in front of the committee to make your point. I can hardly introduce myself in three minutes, let alone explain a complicated point of a policy and why it would be a good or a bad idea to pass this bill.


WE'RE HERE TO HELP

It is our goal at the NALP to do the legwork so that when we show up to testify, the politicians on the committee already know who we are. We already met with them to discuss, in detail, our feelings on the legislation. The three minutes affirm our position, a reminder of who we are and

what we represent. We want those votes to be whipped long before we set foot in the committee room. But that is a lot of work.

To streamline that work, we established an Advocacy Contact Team (ACT) at NALP. This team is 100 percent member volunteers willing to engage with their state and local officials on issues important to the green industry. When NALP's Government Relations staff tracks a bill or regulation, we'll contact ACT members to review it and offer their thoughts on whether they'd support or oppose it.

Then, as the measure works its way through the process, we'll engage with ACT members to offer testimony at committee hearings or to submit written comments. We also have the capability to launch email campaigns that target legislators and regulators with carefully crafted messages.

Please consider signing up for the ACT. It's a great way to effectively support the green industry and raise your image as an industry professional. We'll teach and support you every step of the way. 



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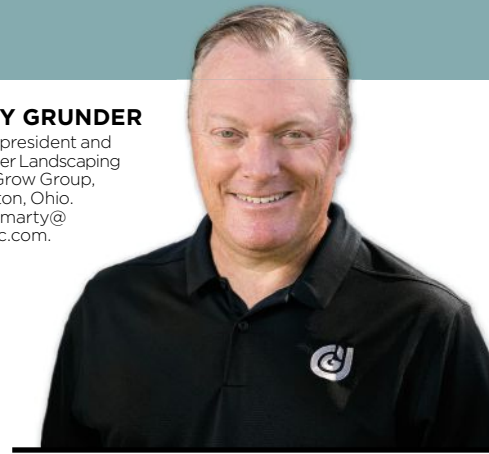
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GROW WITH GRUNDER

BY MARTY GRUNDER

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



The more things change, the more they stay the same

A lot has changed in the nearly 40 years I've been in the landscaping industry. As we kick off another busy spring, I thought it might be fun to reflect together on how far we've come — as an industry and as professionals.

1 SAFETY

We've gotten much smarter since 1984, when seat belts weren't even required in cars. I hate to even admit this, but my crew used to regularly ride in the truck bed — which we all know now is so dangerous. I even knew of one local landscaper who let his team sit on the mowers in the trailer and ride to jobs. Safety goggles weren't popular, and we did absolutely no safety training.

Fortunately, there have been a lot of safety improvements since then, both at Grunder Landscaping Co. (GLC) and in the industry. At GLC, safety is the first step of everything we do, and anyone on the team is allowed (and expected) to correct someone they see not following safety protocols. We don't go anywhere without our seat belts, and we know that a safe company is a good company.

I've seen the industry embrace safety as well. We've seen vendors

“At GLC, safety is the first step of everything we do, and anyone on the team is allowed (and expected) to correct someone they see not following safety protocols.”

now offer safety training on their equipment, and companies show their teams the safest ways to get their jobs done.

2 EQUIPMENT

Oh boy. In 1984, we did not use bed edgers, mini skid-steers, dump trailers, GPS, laser levels, software or cell phones. There was no texting or calling while on job sites. Just imagine the headaches. In 1987, I had a phone installed in my pickup, and when someone called it, the horn would honk. I'd have to sprint back to the truck to answer it, but nine times out of 10, it was my mom calling to ask when I'd be home for dinner.

Young people reading this, imagine what it would be like if the crew had a question while working on a job. We couldn't text pictures back and forth, and even attaching printed pictures to a work ticket was difficult and uncommon before computers and printers became more prevalent.


Today, I'm not sure where we would be without all the equipment that saves our crews so much time or without the technology that makes it easier to do our jobs. All of it makes our jobs less stressful and a lot easier if we can use that equipment and tech to its full potential.

3 PEOPLE

While so much has changed in the nearly 40 years we've been in business, the truth is, it's still people who make our businesses what they are.

I believe I was a good young leader, but there was a lot I needed to learn. I knew then what I still believe to be the secret to success now: You have to treat people well, share your vision with them, and show them what's in it for them to motivate them. And since the early years, I've learned the most important task afterward is to simply get out of their way.

In the days before cell phones, we stayed out of our team's way by default. Today, we have to be a bit more intentional about it. Help your team problem-solve, coach them through an issue instead of telling them the answer, and cheer them on through both success and failure.

As you start another busy spring, take a moment to look back at how far you've come. Even if you've only worked in this industry for a few years, think about what it was like in the beginning and all you've learned. Be proud of those accomplishments. Then look ahead at your future. How can you leverage safety, equipment and the people running alongside you to make your dreams a reality? Our success depends on people, and that's a very good thing. 



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