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CONTENTS

MAY 2024 • VOL 63, ISSUE 5



TOTAL CONTROL

Irrigation pros discuss the tools that maximize their efficiency

12

TURF + ORNAMENTAL

23 Fertile Ground

Get to know enhanced-efficiency and controlled-release fertilizers

24 Insect ID + Control

Tools to stop chinch bugs from damaging your turf

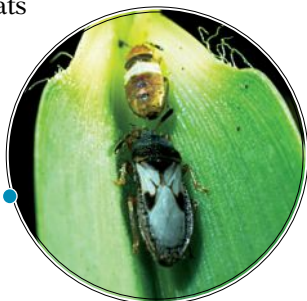
26 LM Growth Summit Success Stories

How the Growth Summit can give you a leg up on the competition

28 Turf School

Tips to tackle a pair of cool-season turf threats

Experts say that chinch bugs can spell doom for cool-season turf (page 24).



The inside story of Timberline Landscaping's award-winning park restoration (page 30).

MOWING + MAINTENANCE

30 The Big One

Timberline Landscaping, Colorado Springs, Colo.

32 Products That Work

Backpack blowers

34 Business Boosters

How to successfully add holiday lighting to your business

DESIGN BUILD + INSTALLATION

36 Hardscape Solutions

John Mini Distinctive Landscapes, New York City

IRRIGATION + WATER MANAGEMENT

38 Recommender

What to look for in a good distributor partner

ON THE COVER: PHOTO BY RACHEL HOULDRIDGE

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Meet Sunseeker's Orion X7 robotic mower (page 9).

COLUMNS

6 Scott's Thoughts

BY SCOTT HOLLISTER

42 LM150 Profile

How The Grounds Guys focus on existing customer prices

44 Business Insider

How I learned, struggled and saw personal growth on the racetrack
BY JEFFREY SCOTT

45 Industry Advocate

How the green industry continues to stay ahead of the curve
BY BOB MANN

46 Leadership Advantage

Finding and staying in your sweet spot
BY KEN THOMAS

48 Grow with Grunder

3 big changes that altered Landscape Workshop's trajectory

BY MARTY GRUNDER

IN EVERY ISSUE

8 LM Gallery

Check out the faces and places the LM team recently encountered

9 Need to Know

Sunseeker debuts new wireless robotic mower

40 Five Questions

Bill Bramble, president and owner, WinLAWN, Atlanta

47 Classifieds/Ad Index

Bill Bramble of WinLAWN shares what trends he's seeing in the Atlanta area (page 40).



[COMING SOON]

2024 LM150 list

It's that time of the year! Are you curious who made our list of the top revenue-generating landscape companies this year? Stay tuned for our June issue to see which operations topped our 2024 LM150 list!



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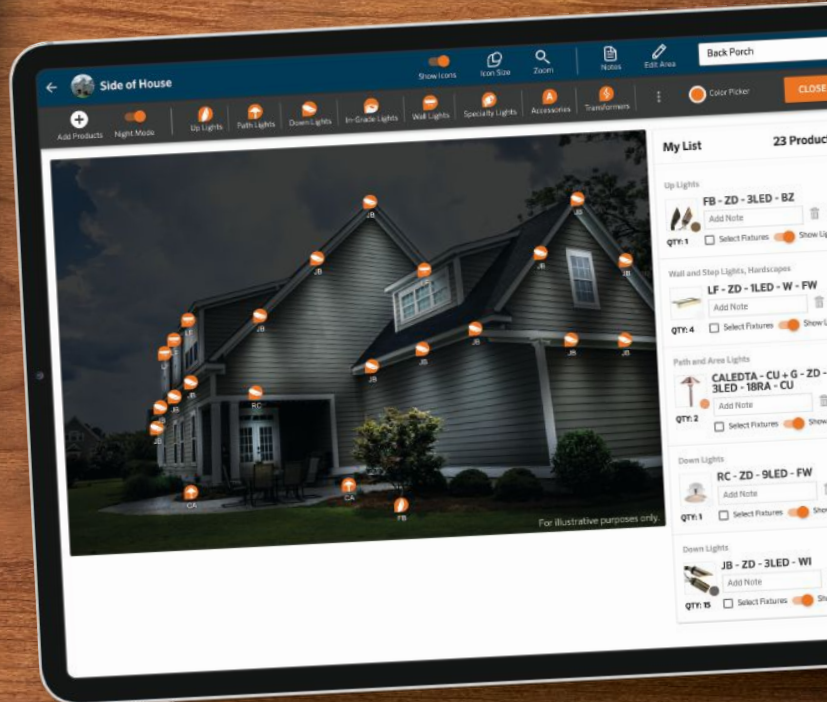
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Please allow me to introduce myself

Whenever I hear someone proudly proclaim how much they “embrace change” or “welcome the uncomfortable,” I can’t help but roll my eyes and think, “Sure, man. Whatever.”

Part of that’s because I’m old and I roll my eyes at lots of things (*dang kids!*). But what really sparks that reaction is a knowledge that no one really, truly relishes change. Change is hard. It disrupts routines. It forces us out of our comfort zone. It makes us face the unknown in a way that can be, at best, unsettling. Some people obviously deal with change better than others, but those telling you how much they love change and how they actively seek it out ... well, they’re either lying or really good actors.

Now, having staked that position doesn’t mean I don’t fully acknowledge the value of change. Change inspires innovation and improvement. It can give us new perspectives. It can challenge us and kick-start new directions and new adventures.

At least that’s what I’m counting on. You see, yours truly has had plenty of first-hand experience with change lately. And it’s the reason why I’m here introducing myself to you as the new Editor-in-Chief of *Landscape Management*.

For the previous 26 years, I worked for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and its monthly publication, *Golf Course Management*. For the past decade, I was *GCM*’s editor-in-chief and the director of the association’s publications department.

“Yours truly has had plenty of first-hand experience with change lately ... it’s the reason why I’m here introducing myself to you as the new Editor-in-Chief of *Landscape Management*.”


It was an awesome run working in an amazing industry, and I couldn’t be prouder of what we accomplished during that time.

But while I hadn’t been actively pursuing a change, I was definitely dealing with that itch to try something new and challenge myself in new ways. My old friend Seth Jones — he and I worked together at GCSAA from 1999-2012 — had no idea about any of that when he called to see if I’d have lunch with him to discuss an opportunity with *LM*’s parent company, North Coast Media. But sometimes, it’s better to be lucky than good, and I figured the worst-case scenario was that Seth had to buy me lunch.

Turns out, it was a best-case scenario for me, and hopefully, it will be the same for *LM* and the magazine’s loyal audience. The opportunity to work for an industry leader such as *LM* and with the magazine’s talented team was the perfect way to scratch that itch I was feeling. I’m fired up to get started and can’t wait to learn more about what makes this magazine and amazing industry tick.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t share a caveat, a few thank yous and one request before I go. First, for those wondering, my joining the *LM* team doesn’t mean your old friend Seth is going anywhere. While he’s ceding the Editor-in-Chief title to me, he’ll retain his role as the magazine’s Editorial Director. He and I will work side-by-side to maintain and, hopefully, expand the momentum *LM* has demonstrated.

Second, my thanks to everyone at North Coast Media — notably Seth, CEO Kevin Stoltman, Publisher Bill Roddy and Associate Publisher Craig MacGregor — for the warm welcome I’ve received since my announcement. I also have to thank my family — my wife, Britt; my daughters, Alyssa and Adilae; and my son, Alex — for all their support and understanding as I went through the process before taking this exciting leap.

And finally, an invitation to you, the magazine’s loyal readers. While I’m not entering your world completely blind — golf course management is, after all, an adjacent industry to lawn care and landscaping — I have a ton to learn about what you do, how you do it and how this magazine can help you do all that better, faster and smarter. If you see me out and about at an industry event, stop me and say hi. If you have an idea or just want to introduce yourself, operators are standing by. I’m eager to meet everyone and learn about what’s important to you and how we can make this publication even better. 



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LM GALLERY

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

1 Score one for helmet hair

While at Stihl's Ride and Drive event, **LM**'s Joseph Ciccolini was able to learn about the company's latest string trimmer innovations from Ahmed Hamdy, product segment manager, and Erin Bailey, product manager for Stihl.

2 A fine-looking group

Stihl recently invited a group of media, influencers and end-users to its headquarters in Virginia Beach for a tour of its facilities, as well as product demos of some of the company's latest equipment.

3 Stihl Team Six Various members of the Stihl team assisted attendees on the tour including, Lindsay Hooper, manager of public relations and business events; Maegan Reynolds, content marketing specialist; Eric Harshman, product manager; Mike Poluka, product segment manager; Josh Allen, product manager and Madison Ashley, public relations specialist.

4 Get to know these guys! Justin Novosel, executive vice president and general manager of North American operations, (left) and Matt Moore, director of robotics sales, for Sunseeker share the frame with the company's new Orion X7 robotic mower. For more about the company's launch event, read our recap on page 9.

5 Sunseeking in North Carolina Complete with a comedian serving as emcee, the Sunseeker Orion X7 launch event brought dealers, users and media to Monroe, N.C., for a sunny and hot mid-April day.



PHOTOS: LM STAFF (1, 3 AND 4), JESSICA SHEA (2), SUNSEEKER (5)

Sunseeker gives users hands-on experience with new robotic mower

BY ROB DIFRANCO | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Sunseeker hosted dealers, mowing professionals and media in Monroe, N.C., to celebrate the official launch of its first wireless robotic mower, the Orion X7, on April 16.

"We're launching the product today, it's in stock and we're ready to get the product in the hands of as many dealers and distributors as possible," Justin Novosel, executive vice president and general manager of North American operations told *LM*.

As part of the launch, Sunseeker introduced three models with max mowing areas ranging from 0.75 to 3 acres.

According to Matt Moore, director of robotics sales, the Orion X7 sets itself apart from other robotic mowers on the market because of its unique vision system. During a morning presentation, Moore explained how the company married RTK satellite positioning with VSLAM (Visual Simultaneous Localization and Mapping), artificial vision and a deep-learning system.

"The ability of the system, not just to rely on one way of navigation, is a huge difference. A lot of systems on the market have that singularity, whereas ours has (it all)," he said. "The fusion of technology we've built into the system allows you to completely automate the system and not need much interaction at all."

On top of its enhanced vision systems, the X7 has a cutting width of 14 inches, with auto height adjustment between 0.8 and 4.0 inches.

For Moore and Novosel, the event allowed them to get feedback from



attendees who have tested the X7 in the field.

"If you think we could do something better, we want you to tell us," he said. "We're going to invent something one way and someone could have another idea to enhance the product. Having that constant feedback from customers and communication with our engineers will help us develop the product more completely."


COMING SOON ...

In addition to the Orion X7, Sunseeker showcased new mowers set to launch later in 2024, including the X22 — a successor to its L22 model.

"(The X22) has a similar system (to the X7), just with a smaller footprint made for smaller yards — more

like townhomes and small areas like the postage-stamp yards," said Moore.

Moore and Novosel added that the most common question they received during the event was "What's next from Sunseeker?" For them, that's a reassuring question. It signals, to them, that they're on the right path with the company's new products.

"It's a great feeling to have. (Our customers) are going to be invested in us and we're invested in them," Moore said. "You know how it is. As soon as you come out with technology, it's like you gave a kid a new toy, they play with it for a day and all of a sudden, it's like, 'Hey, I want the next one.'" 

Sunseeker's Orion X7 is the company's first wireless robotic mower built for landscape pros.

Equip Expo names TV star as keynote speaker

This *Old House* host and home improvement expert Kevin O'Connor will deliver the keynote address, sponsored by Kress, at Equip Exposition this fall. The speech will focus on energizing the landscapers, contractors, dealers and manufacturers who attend the trade show and helping them identify ways to build their business.

"We're excited to have Kevin join us this October for Equip—he's a seasoned contractor and really knows the business. He's one of us, and he'll have a great

story to share with attendees," said Kris Kiser, president of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, which owns and manages Equip Exposition.

In his work, O'Connor says he sees the importance of landscape industry professionals and the tremendous opportunities available to them, with growth and demand for landscaping services.

"Many homeowners have some sense of what goes into a bathroom renovation or a new paint job but very few understand the amount of work necessary to prep the ground, properly grade,

manage water, remove trees or bury conduit," O'Connor said. "Educating homeowners early about the infrastructure necessary and the cost associated with that infrastructure will help avoid misunderstandings and better-set expectations."

A special spring promotional price of \$25 offers those interested in attending the event an opportunity to register for the 2024 Equip Exposition at a discount. This pricing ends on May 31. 



Kevin O'Connor

The Greenery expands in S.C.

The Greenery, No. 28 on the 2023 *LM150* list, revealed commercial landscape expansion plans for the Greater Charleston market. Advances to landscape operations and services, an experienced executive leadership team and a new branch office are part of the company's plan for growth.

"We have been serving the Charleston market since 1999," said Lee Edwards, CEO of The Greenery. "It's the second largest market that we are in, and we think it's going to be a huge part of our future through our strategic plan and our employee-owned leadership."

The company currently has commercial landscape operations in Greenville and Spartanburg in South Carolina as well as Jacksonville, Amelia Island and Daytona in Florida. The Greenery will continue to serve communities in the Lowcountry including Hilton Head Island, Bluffton, Palmetto Bluff, Beaufort, Savannah and Charleston.

For more about The Greenery, read *LM's* 2023 State of the Industry report in our December 2023 issue.

Bartlett adds office in San Diego

Bartlett Tree Experts, No. 5 on the 2023 *LM150* list, expanded in Southern California with a new office in San Diego. The new office location, south of existing Bartlett offices in Santa Monica and Pasadena, is strategically located to provide scientific tree and shrub care services for customers along the coastline.

Bartlett's newest location in Southern California provides scientific tree and shrub care services for residential and commercial properties from Southern Orange County to the U.S.-Mexico border. Key service areas for the new office include the Interstate 15 corridor west to the coastline.

"The opening of Bartlett's new San Diego office highlights how essential scientific tree care is for this part of Southern California," said Jim Ingram, Bartlett's president and COO. "Wet winters and dry summers contribute to the lush vegetation and diverse tree species that spread throughout the region's geography. These coastal areas, canyons and residential neighborhoods will benefit from the support of Bartlett Tree Experts."

PBI-Gordon welcomes three new hires

PBI-Gordon Corp. recently added Matthew Crowther, Sean Lehr and Chris Quinlan as sales representatives.

"Matthew, Sean, and Chris bring a wealth of technical knowledge to PBI-Gordon," said Tim Demerath, vice president of sales. "We are thrilled to have them on our team and are confident our customers will not only benefit from their expertise but also from their ability to foster deep relationships with our partners."

Crowther will manage all sales initiatives for golf course, sports turf, lawn care and landscape maintenance customers in the northeastern U.S. Before joining PBI-Gordon, he was the certified golf course superintendent at Cape Cod Country Club in Falmouth, Mass.

Lehr will lead golf, landscape, professional lawn care and agriculture sales for PBI-Gordon customers and distributors in Kansas, Missouri and Arkansas. He was most recently district sales manager at Wilbur-Ellis Co. and has held sales positions with Koch Turf & Ornamental, J.R. Simplot Co. and Mears Fertilizer.

Quinlan will lead sales initiatives for golf course, sports turf, lawn care and landscape maintenance customers in Minnesota, Wisconsin, South Dakota and North Dakota. He comes to PBI-Gordon from Profile Products, where he was a sales representative for the Illinois-based company.

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CREATURE COMFORTS IN THE FIELD

The latest generation of irrigation tools has helped make the jobs of irrigators as streamlined as ever.

PHOTO RACHEL HOULDRIDGE



TOTAL CONTROL

With a goal of maximizing efficiency and saving labor, irrigation pros look for the latest the industry has to offer

BY SETH JONES | LM EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Riley Marvin, president of Alpha Landscapes in Johnston, Iowa, says that it's his job to make sure his crews are as efficient as possible. To do this, he is always on the lookout for a better way to get the job done.

"We look for anything that can help them out, we give it to the crew and then ask them for their feedback," Marvin says. "They'll tell us if they like it or not and if it makes their lives easier or not."

Mark Pyrah, president of Peak Landscape in Hillsboro, Ore., says being cutting edge and showing employees that he is dedicated to having the most efficient tools to get the job done, helps him retain employees.

"I don't think it's the No. 1 selling point for a company — that will always be wages — but it is a selling point," Pyrah says of his company's dedication to technology. "We're presenting ourselves not just as an irrigation company, but a water management company. We're promoting that we want our techs to be well trained and grow."

Landscape Management spoke with irrigation professionals around the nation and asked for feedback on what tools they're using to get the job done as efficiently as possible.

Continued on page 14



Continued from page 13

Reaching peak efficiency

Peak Landscape is a landscape management contractor with locations in Seattle, Vancouver, Wash., and Portland, Ore. Pyrah started the company in 2005. Currently, the company primarily services commercial clients but also offers residential landscape management and tree care. In all, the company has 150 employees.

Pyrah says that just a few years ago his company “wasn’t technologically advanced at all.” That changed when he decided it was time to invest in a new tool: SmartLink from Weathermatic. The most immediate change was that the company was no longer using paper to submit estimates, work orders and purchase orders — the stacks of paper needed to do the work suddenly disappeared.

“We decided to shift and go this direction where SmartLink allows us to increase our efficiency, not just at the level of the tech, but all the way through (the process) from inspection to invoice,” Pyrah says. “Everything is digital now.

There’s no paper. Everything goes to the customer, it’s seamless. And I think more than anything that creates accountability between us and the customer.

This season so far, we’ve done 300 inspections and we’ve had zero questions on any repairs so far.”

Pyrah says 80 to 85 percent of the company’s controllers are now SmartLink controllers. He and his employees can program, turn off and turn on any irrigation head from a desktop or a cell phone, anywhere, anytime.

The idea of having this much control in the palm of his hand, on his phone, was something Pyrah didn’t believe was possible. That changed for him a year ago when he was sitting in the parking lot of an IHOP, looking at an area of his client’s landscape that was dried out.

“I physically sat in my truck, pulled the app open, found the controller, found the valve, turned it on from my phone, and it

Continued on page 16

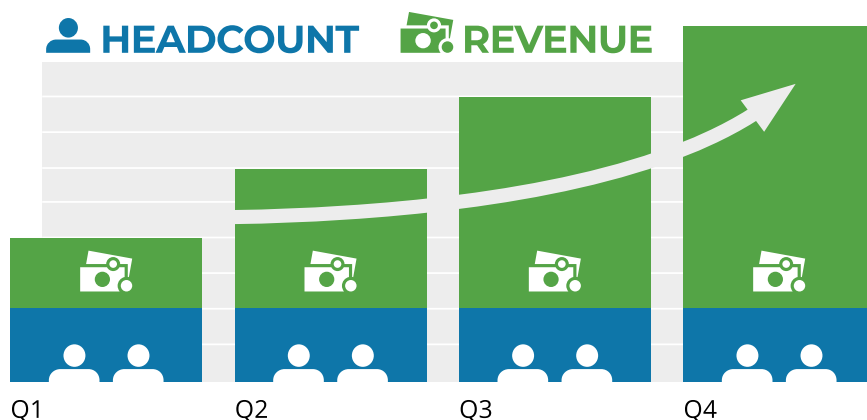
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"In a 10-hour workday, a typical technician was giving about 6.5 hours of production time in the field. The rest of the time was driving, doing paperwork, proposals, reports, etc. When we implemented Weathermatic, the production time went to about a 9-hour day." – Jeffrey Johns, CEO, Coastal Greenery



"We've gone from using two irrigators during the inspection process down to one. That's enabled us to take other skilled irrigators and reallocate them to more value-added services on repairs for our clients' landscape improvements." – Jason Mathers, Owner and President, Monarch Landscape Management



TODAY'S IRRIGATION TOOLS

Continued from page 14
popped up right in front of me and I said, 'Oh, here's the problem,'"

Pyrah recalls. "I looked at the program, it only had two minutes on it. I changed the program from my phone and sent it to the controller. I never had to go inside the IHOP, never had to do anything like we would've had to do before to go find the valve or anything like that."

That's just one example. At the most recent SmartCon in Austin, Texas, hosted by Weathermatic, Pyrah gave a presentation that included an example of a property 45 minutes away that has 17 controllers. Previously he would send a tech to the location who would spend half a day adjusting all the controllers. Now, they do it in a matter of 10 to 30 minutes — all remotely.

"This is a matter of business efficiency and labor savings," Pyrah says. "We did 30 percent more revenue last year, with the same amount of people."

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS
Peak Landscape increased its revenue by 30 percent, without adding staff.



Cutting down on clutter

Matt Coombs knows what pressure looks like when it comes to water regulations. In his previous career, he was a golf course superintendent at a top-100 golf course in what he calls "God's country" — the Monterey Bay area of California.

Coombs made a career switch eight years ago, and now he is the irrigation manager for Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping & Garden Center in Portland, Ore. He maintains between 180 to 220 commercial maintenance accounts — his primary job duty — as well as helping with irrigation systems of about 250 residential customers.

One big difference maker in Coombs' day-to-day productivity came when Dennis' 7 Dees bought into Aspire software.

"When I first started, we were still doing paper invoices and paper job sheets and that was a big time-suck," Coombs says. "We went away from the paper system and we're currently using Aspire. From my viewpoint, I really like it. I know from the estimating standpoint there can be some challenges in the invoicing, but from a customer relations standpoint and a scheduling standpoint

Continued on page 18



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TODAY'S IRRIGATION TOOLS



Continued from page 16

and parts procurement, generating POs, all the production type of things that we do ... we got a huge boost. I'm able to generate work tickets in seconds rather than minutes or tens of minutes."

Coombs says it was a task to get all his paperwork submitted previously. He says he had "stacks" of paperwork on his desk. That is now a memory.

"(Aspire) really boosted my productivity in the office," Coombs says. "Whereas before it was a task trying to get all the paperwork submitted and the stacks of papers on my desk ... now everything's kind of virtual."

Another big change for Coombs and his team came about five years ago when Coombs' manager met with Weathermatic at a trade show. They converted their entire book of business to the Weathermatic

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“

I've got irrigators here who are in their 20s and 30s, and they know how to use a mobile device ... there's so much material on there that when they have an issue they don't have to call me anymore."

JORGE VILLEGAS



SL series smart controllers, which include a wireless rain sensor and allows them to communicate with their controllers from anywhere.

"If you're within 1,000 feet and you've got a couple of fresh batteries installed in the rain sensor, you're probably going to get some pretty good weather data," Coombs says. "(The SmartLink) kicks in automatically and there isn't a lot of programming aspect to it. You can set it and forget it.

"That's been really great for our efficiencies for the bottom line,"

REMOTE CONTROL
Collecting data and monitoring stations remotely has become easier than ever.

Coombs continues. "Our customers on the water-saving side are saving gallons by not programming once every couple

weeks and just letting it ride regardless of what the weather looks like. These smart controllers are making these daily adjustments based on the weather data. They'll go up or down if it freezes, they'll turn off if it rains. You can set all the parameters."

Coombs adds that there is a learning curve on how to fully understand how the Weathermatic controllers work, but that the company has excellent customer service.

Bridging the generation gap

Jorge Villegas has been working for Keesen Landscape Management as the company's director of irrigation for five years. Keesen has been in business for 50 years and provides landscape maintenance, primarily

Continued on page 20



PHOTO COURTESY OF WEATHERMATIC

ACE PEER GROUPS

LEADER SPOTLIGHT



ROSS MOORE

CEO - Red River Outdoor Living

THEN

Ross started pushing a mower at 13 and later officially founded Red River Outdoor Living with his wife Kala in 1997. Early on, they began attending industry events to learn the latest trends in technology & equipment. This was integral to their success, but over time Ross realized that the growth of the business was directly tied to his growth as a leader. He needed something more.

NOW

Today Ross is an active **ACE Peer Group** member where he gets the leadership skills he needs to grow. The investment he's made in himself has kept the growth & success going, even in a challenging rural market. After more than 25 years, Ross and Kala have realized the best way to grow is to focus on their people. And that starts with creating the right environment for them to succeed.

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ROSS MOORE

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TODAY'S IRRIGATION TOOLS



Continued from page 19

to homeowner associations and retail properties. Villegas has 30 employees he manages across four branches.

The smart controller from HydroPoint is the tool that has made the biggest impact on his ability to get the job done efficiently, he says.

"As we collect all the data from zones or properties, we input that data into a computer control and then it's easier for me or for my irrigation managers because we have a mobile device that we can turn stations on," Villegas says. "We can pretty much keep an eye on the property and manage the property correctly, through that smart controller."

Villegas says Keesen Landscape is investing in him to stay up-to-date on certifications so he can pass that

knowledge on to his crews. Villegas says his staff is split down the middle when it comes to using the latest in technology — half embrace change and want the latest and the greatest, while the other half are "old school" and not as eager to try new tools.

Training his employees is a big part of his role at Keesen. It's the "old school" employees he worries the most about because for the younger members of the crew, using HydroPoint is almost second nature.

"I've got new irrigators here who are in their 20s and 30s, and they know how to use a mobile device," Villegas says. "I don't have to train them because they know how to look into things and if they can't figure that out right away, they go to YouTube and they just jump right in there. There's so much material on there that when they have an issue, they're able to figure it out. They don't have to call me anymore because they know how to do it."

SMOOTH OPERATOR
Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping utilizes Aspire and Weathermatic tools to get the job done.

All eyes on the future

Russ Jundt, president of Conserva Irrigation, says his company is always striving to find the newest technology to help them get the job done easier. He points to two initiatives at the company: Conserva University and ShopConserva.com, as examples.

Conserva University is an online tech training program. The comprehensive coursework includes

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22 modules and 44 courses. Jundt says the program gets a tech fully operational and trained in 30 to 60 days (read more in the June 2022 issue of *LM*.)

ShopConserva.com is a one-stop shop that enables Conserva franchise owners to shop for all their irrigation products online and have them packed up and shipped to their office in two days or less. This eliminates the need for techs to drive to the distributor. It also allows for better inventory control, as well as helps to identify purchasing trends attached to the truck or driver.

But what Jundt is really excited about is a pilot program underway using augmented reality lenses/glasses in the field. Techs can wear these glasses and the franchise business coaches can see what the techs are seeing.

"They're super cool and super-efficient," Jundt says. "They allow for greater learning across our network of 350-plus technicians. The glasses give (coaches) the ability to interface with the tech and give them instructions. We can also record teaching moments — and disseminate those moments across our network."



(Augmented-reality glasses) are super cool and super efficient. They allow for greater learning across our network of 350-plus technicians. The glasses give (coaches) the ability to interface with the tech and give instructions."

RUSS JUNDT



More than software

Alpha Landscapes and owner Riley Marvin are always looking for tools to save labor. Alpha Landscapes specializes in commercial landscape and commercial construction work, servicing central Iowa. The company generated \$11 million in revenue last year and has around 50 employees.

Irrigation installation is a relatively new service for the company. Previously Alpha was subcontracting the work, but when Marvin saw he

Continued on page 22



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TODAY'S IRRIGATION TOOLS



We look for anything that can help them out, we give it to the crew and ask them for their feedback. They'll tell us if they like it or not and if it makes their lives easier or not."

RILEY MARVIN



Continued from page 21

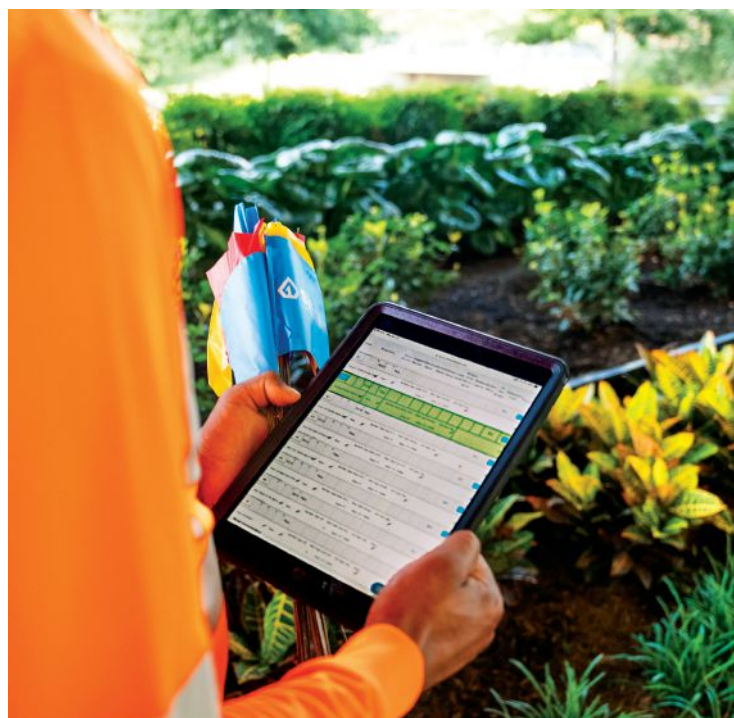
subcontracted over a million dollars in irrigation installation, he decided to bring it in-house.

At a recent trade show in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Marvin saw a tool he knew he wanted for his team: the Poly Trolley. The Poly Trolley holds the roll of poly pipe and feeds it to the irrigation crew as they install it, eliminating the need for one employee to "manhandle" the pipe.

"If we didn't have one of these, we'd have someone standing there unrolling, manually unrolling the roll of poly pipe as a plow bolts it into the ground," he says. "It eliminates a person's worth of labor while we're pulling in pipes. It's something that makes life easier." 📱

SAVE THE TREES
Irrigation professionals save valuable desk space with the help of digital records.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WEATHERMATIC



FERTILE GROUND

How enhanced-efficiency and controlled-release fertilizers can save time and money

Experts share how LCOs can make themselves more efficient with these tools

BY ROB DIFRANCO | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Controlled-release and enhanced-efficiency fertilizers aren't new to the turfgrass industry. Even with 40-plus years of exposure, according to Rick Blasi, strategic account manager for Helena Products Group, lawn care operators (LCOs) still have plenty of questions about these products.

"How much does it cost? 'How long will it last?' 'Will it give me a flush of growth?'" are just a few questions that Blasi hears from LCOs often.

Most LCOs will be at least somewhat familiar with controlled-, or slow-, release fertilizers, which

commonly have a polymer coating, which aids in slowing the release of available nitrogen to the turfgrass plant.

Blasi and Product Manager Jason Gregory from Helena

share what LCOs need to know to make controlled-release and enhanced-efficiency fertilizers a valuable tool in their toolbox.

WHAT THEY DO

The most obvious advantage that these types of fertilizers offer, Blasi says, is controlled turfgrass growth, as the name "controlled release" might suggest.

"We're not trying to make hay," he says. "We're trying to avoid big flushes of growth. We want to even that out. A healthy turf is going to be fed more consistently. You don't want to see large jumps in growth, because then you'll

be cutting off a lot of the turf when it's mowed."

In addition to slowed growth, leading to fewer mows, these fertilizers will promote healthy green turf or, in other words, enhanced efficiency.

"If (an LCO) gets a controlled-release fertilizer that is going to last through a six-to-eight-week period, you won't see a drop off in color between applications," Blasi says. "In the lawn care industry, obviously color is a big deal, so there are definite advantages in using a long-term slow-release fertilizer."

OTHER ADVANTAGES

Blasi says that another major reason for LCOs to utilize longer-term slow-release fertilizers is to save time. He explains that an LCO can apply the granular product in their first application of the year, and then not need to fertilize on their next stop at the property.

"They'll go out in their second round and do a tickle of liquid nitrogen, it won't be a big application, and then they can

add in their broadleaf weed control and whatever else they need," he says. "It gives you a lot of flexibility, whereas if it was all quick release, you'd probably be fertilizing again because it's not going to last longer than two or three weeks."

This, Gregory adds, can be a major time and money saver for an LCO versus a traditional quick-release fertilizer.

"When you look at how much it costs you, what you're really getting out of it is a cost-per-unit (of nutrients) that is cheaper. And, to Rick's point, you're going to make one application instead of two, which will reduce costs associated with labor," he says.

Other advantages that might not be apparent on the surface, according to Blasi and Gregory, include enhanced herbicide and pesticide uptake, plant safety.

"We've known for some time that traditional fertilizers have weaknesses within our application environments, whether that is nutrient loss, the potential to burn or, more recently, sustainability concerns," Blasi says. "We've found that these enhanced efficiency/controlled release nitrogen technologies can be very valuable tools in an LCO's toolbox when used correctly." 🌱



Rick Blasi



INSECT ID + CONTROL

Keeping chinch bugs out of your turf

Get to know the warning signs of this turf-killing pest

BY ROB DIFRANCO | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Chinch bugs are an elusive turf pest that can be a major problem for a lawn care operator (LCO) and their customers.

To ensure this turf killer doesn't harm your lawn, Steve McDonald, chief plot sprayer and owner of Turfgrass Disease Solutions — a Pennsylvania-based consulting company — says LCOs must stay vigilant and know the signs that mean chinch bugs are present.

"I've seen it damage fescues and bentgrass. I've seen it on some zoysiagrass as well as ryegrass," he says. "Once it gets into a stand, it can do a lot of damage pretty quickly."

MADE IN THE SHADE

McDonald tells *LM* that chinch bugs prefer open, dry areas. If LCOs work on a lawn with areas shaded by trees, they may see populations stop at the shade line. Chinch bug damage can frequently be mistaken for drought damage, making identification crucial.

"The turf will turn to a straw or light brown color. It looks droughty," he says. "People will mistake it for drought stress, and they'll add water to it and it doesn't get better. Within seven to 10 days, the soil moisture is adequate and then that's when you typically start some investigation."

To identify a chinch bug infestation, McDonald recommends getting down in the weeds and pulling back turf.

"Pull the grass back with your hands and look at the soil surface where it meets the turf," he says. "If you have hairy chinch bugs, you'll see small insects with what looks like a white 'X' on their backs, scurrying around. You won't see one, you'll see hundreds of them."

There are several methods — in addition to pulling turf — that LCOs can use to ID a chinch bug problem. McDonald says if you're in a rush a quick way to find out if you have chinch bugs is by using soapy water on turf to float bugs to the surface while looking for the familiar white X on the insect's back.

Several types of chinch bugs affect turf in the U.S., but the most common, McDonald says, are hairy chinch bugs.

TIME TO APPLY


When applying for chinch bug control, McDonald recommends a mid-to-late June application. Chinch bug damage will typically appear in early July, so the

June application — which can coincide with white grub applications — will take hold before chinch bug populations build up.

In terms of active ingredients, LCOs can look for chlorantraniliprole, clothianidin or acephate. McDonald says products like Acelepryn Xtra from Syngenta fit the bill for the base of a good chinch bug control program.

"We had low rates of Acelepryn Xtra, but we saw phenomenal control of hairy chinch bugs for 45 to 60 days following the application in the summer, even at those low rates," he says. "In our research, it's been successful as a broad-spectrum insecticide on a range of turfgrass pests, from chinch bugs to cutworms to grubs, it's performed very consistently."

McDonald adds that LCOs shouldn't assume that their chinch bug problem will be a one-season issue. To fully ensure that chinch bugs will be kept at bay, it can take several seasons of applications and implementation of cultural practices.

"(You might) make an application and it decreases the pressure the next year substantially," he says. "But it's still important to remember that these insects have a pretty high population. So even if you get control of 90 or 95 percent, you could potentially have some issues the following year, especially if the situation with watering and the temperatures are the same." 



Steve McDonald



X MARKS THE SPOT
LCOs can spot hairy chinch bugs by looking for the trademark white X on their backs.

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Get 'em where they ain't

A 2023 Growth Summit attendee shares how the event has helped him get a leg up on his competition

BY LM STAFF

For Brad Herrle, sales and operations manager at Lawn Rx in Latrobe, Pa., the 2023 LM Growth Summit was an invaluable experience.

Herrle was a first-time attendee in 2023 and left the Summit feeling good about helping Lawn Rx reach its goals — including eclipsing the 3,000-customer mark and handling rising labor costs — in 2024.

"I met peers who ranged from being just 3-4 hours away from our business, to being several states away or even across the country,"

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he says. "Though we're separated by geography, we are all facing similar challenges, whether that's dealing with the labor shortage, new state regulations in the lawn care industry and several other challenges."

MEETING WITH PARTNERS

For Lawn Rx, the rising cost of chemicals — pesticides, herbicides and fungicides — has been a major point of concern as the company continues to grow.

"The chemical market in our industry is becoming more competitive than ever," Herrle says. "There's an influx of newer companies entering the market, certain products are soon to be off-patent and there's a lot of development of new products addressing specific needs in the industry."

With that rapid expansion, Herrle says that events like the Growth Summit are crucial for businesses, as they offer the chance for one-on-one sit-downs with companies.

Herrle says that his meetings with partners at the 2023 Summit helped put Lawn Rx in a better situation to succeed in 2024, specifically because their competitors weren't there.

"Those of us who make sourcing and purchasing decisions need to stay educated as to

who our potential suppliers are," he continues. "(We have to know) what products they offer and not be afraid to try a new supplier or product. If we get complacent, our competitors have the chance to pass us by."

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Equally as important for Herrle was being able to share experiences and best practices with other Growth Summit attendees. He adds that being able to learn about what others are doing to tackle those shared challenges was invaluable.

"I've been attending conferences in various industries for approximately 25 years, and the LM Growth Summit format is by far my favorite," Herrle says. "The intimacy is what sets the event apart. I had a chance to talk to almost everyone in attendance and have meaningful conversations with numerous attendees. I've stayed in touch with several contacts I made in December and will continue to do so." LM

Brad Herrle (center) sales and operations manager at Lawn Rx in Latrobe, Pa., points to networking with industry colleagues as a highlight of his 2023 LM Growth Summit experience.

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RIDING THROUGH THE ROUGH PATCH

Learn more about brown and summer patch, a pair of cool-season turf killers

BY ROB DIFRANCO | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Brown and summer patch are a pair of pesky turf diseases that can cause headaches for both lawn care operators (LCOs) and their customers.

Often found on cool-season turfgrass, these diseases can lead to an LCO's worst nightmare, dead turf, says Brian Aynardi, Ph.D., Northeast research scientist for PBI-Gordon.

"Summer patch may result in significant patches of dead turf that present in the middle of the summer following periods of significant rainfall followed by hot weather," he says. "Brown patch may not kill the turf, but it will result in diffuse brown patches that are visually unattractive."

Aynardi shares what LCOs need to know about these two potentially harmful turf diseases.

THE DISEASE TRIANGLE

As with most turfgrass diseases, brown patch requires a specific set of environmental conditions to develop, including temperatures greater than 85 degrees F during the day and 65 degrees F at night and 10 hours or more of free-leaf moisture — or high humidity.

"Brown patch will cause lesions, specifically, angular tan lesions surrounded by a dark brown border," says Aynardi. "(LCOs can ID brown patch through) 'smoke rings' (which) are dark areas of active infection present at the edges of the patches and are typically seen during cloudy weather or early in the day. On occasion, there may be small amounts of aerial mycelia observed with patches."

Brown patch is most problematic on tall fescue and ryegrass but also occurs on bluegrass and fine fescue. Turf with

excessive nitrogen or inadequate levels of phosphorus and potassium can also be conducive to large outbreaks.

Conversely, summer patch doesn't require specific environmental conditions. Rather, according to Aynardi, symptoms will be present during hot weather following significant rainfall — or the overwatering of a lawn.

LCOs can identify summer patch by looking for small patches or crescent-shaped patches of tan/bleached turf. Those that can expand and coalesce as the disease progresses. Summer patch often occurs on Kentucky bluegrass, annual bluegrass and fine fescues.

Aynardi adds that there will be no fungal structures visible in the canopy or specific lesions on plants. LCOs can also ID summer patch by pulling up affected plants from the turf to reveal black roots, crowns and rhizomes.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

In terms of ingredients, treatment options for brown and summer patch have remained largely the same for LCOs in recent years. However, according to Aynardi, there are newer combination products — usually a strobilurin and a DMI fungicide — that have proven to be effective in controlling both diseases.

For brown patch specifically, LCOs should reserve applications for when the environmental conditions are conducive for the disease. These products, commonly including the active ingredients azoxystrobin and propiconazole, should be left on the turf after application.

If summer patch is a worry, LCOs should use preventive applications when the 2-inch soil temperatures



Summer patch-infected turf declines for one to two weeks, turning yellow or straw brown and eventually collapsing to the soil surface.

reach 65 degrees F in late spring, according to Aynardi.

"Since the pathogen that causes the disease affects the roots and rhizomes, immediate post-treatment irrigation to get the product to the soil is essential, with 1/8-inch of irrigation being optimal," he continues.

CULTURAL PRACTICES

LCOs can assist turf in fighting off brown and summer patch with several cultural practices as well.

For brown patch, Aynardi recommends regular mowing to reduce relative humidity and promote drying of the canopy. He adds that, if possible, LCOs should ensure irrigation does not occur at night as it promotes extended leaf wetness.

Similarly, cultural practices to reduce summer patch start with water management.

"Ensure there isn't excessive irrigation prior to extended periods of hot weather in the summer," Aynardi says. "(LCOs) can also look to plant species that are non-hosts to the summer patch pathogen such as turf-type tall fescue or perennial ryegrass." 🍷

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THE BIG ONE

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LOCATION Colorado Springs, Colo.

COMPANY Timberline Landscaping

DETAILS When Timberline Landscaping took over this project in 2021, it had a simple goal — to make the park something the surrounding community could be proud of.

As part of this extensive project, Timberline installed new sod, trees and native plantings and installed irrigation. Prior to its renovation, the park was left in a state of neglect with weeds infesting much of the flat and sandy ground.

Grading was also a major pain point for Timberline on this project. The contractor needed to create several drastic grade changes, which required special GPS-enabled machinery.

In addition to serving as the maintenance contractor for this park, Timberline also aided in several other aspects, serving as the general contractor. As the general contractor, Timberline was responsible for the demolition of the existing structures, grading, installing benches, picnic tables and more.

Timberline Landscaping won a gold award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals Awards of Excellence program for its work on this project.

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



Captions | **1.** As the general contractor, Timberline Landscaping was responsible not only for the landscape installation but the installation of new playground equipment. Timberline subcontracted several tasks to get the job done, including the building of a skate park, playground areas and an artificial turf field. **2.** A before shot shows the existing landscape at Panorama Park, which was flat and sandy, according to the contractor. **3.** To replace the preexisting landscape, Timberline added several native Colorado plantings, including trees, native grasses and more. All in all, Timberline removed 20 trees during the project and added upwards of 200 native trees.

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COMPANY: Milwaukee Tool

URL: MilwaukeeTool.com

The M18 Fuel dual-battery backpack blower from Milwaukee Tool delivers a higher blowing force than up to 60cc gas. The backpack blower reaches a full throttle of 650 cfm and 155 mph in under one second. The blower requires at least two M18 RedLithium batteries for operation and includes two additional battery terminals to extend runtime. The battery setup allows the operator to adjust the number of batteries for either lighter weight in quicker clean-ups or more runtime in extended clearing applications. This blower also features an adjustable battery configuration combined with a fully adjustable harness, mode select, telescoping nozzle, variable speed trigger and low noise level of just 62dB(A).

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DPB-5800T



COMPANY: Echo

URL: Echo-USA.com

The DPB-5800T from Echo is the first three-battery port backpack blower. This blower is compatible with Echo's 56v battery platform and features outdoor grade power, comfortable ergonomics and quiet operation. Additional features of the DPB-5800T include a brushless motor, LED Grip Control Display that provides quick and accurate indication of all three batteries and a turbo button to boost performance to 195 mph and 795 cfm.



BGA 300

COMPANY: Stihl

URL: StihlUSA.com

STIHL's BGA 300 is the company's first battery-powered backpack blower. With a high-performance brushless motor, the BGA 300 delivers 25 newtons of blowing force and a max air speed of 194 mph (571 CFM) for heavy-duty clearing of both dry and wet debris. American Green Zone Alliance-certified, the BGA 300 is a zero-exhaust emission blower. When paired with the Stihl AR 3000 L battery and used on level 1, the BGA 300 delivers up to 140 minutes of performance.



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The lights before Christmas

Consider these helpful tips before adding holiday lighting to your service portfolio

BY MIKE ZAWACKI | CONTRIBUTOR

Landscape contractors offer Christmas light installation as an add-on service to existing and new customers primarily to fill in the gaps during their off-season.

Here are some things to consider when adding holiday lighting to your operational portfolio.

A SLOW START

The margins are relatively thin the first season contractors provide lighting services to clients. Returning clients begin to generate a respectable profit for the contractor in the second, third, and subsequent years.

“You custom fit a house or a commercial business in year one, then you’re going back year after year putting the same stuff back up, and it’s already fit (to that building),” says Jim Schill, market president at Schill Grounds Management. “Then your only expense is labor and any replacements, like gutter clips or special fasteners, that are either broken or lost.”

Headquartered in North Ridgeville, Ohio, Schill Grounds Management — No. 27 on the 2023 *LM150* list, with a revenue of \$92,500,000 — is a full-service landscape maintenance company, holiday lighting makes up about 10 percent of its annual revenue.

KEEP A TIGHT SCHEDULE

To increase return rates, consider an incentive — like a 5- or 10-percent

discount — that encourages clients to renew the service in the summer, as early as July. This provides an advanced outlook on which clients are returning and which are new this season.

“We do our best to get (returning) clients lined up in advance,” says Hobie Barrett, owner of Barrett Landscaping in Savannah, Ga. “And many of our new clients typically come through our website.”

Barrett is primarily focused on residential landscape maintenance (70 percent), lawn fertilization (15 percent), and enhancements (15 percent).

Ideally, contractors should begin putting up lights starting the first of November and hopefully have them installed by Thanksgiving or the first week in December at the latest. Once the holiday season is over, lights are uninstalled and stored away for next year by the end of January.

If scheduling and labor availability are issues, an option to consider is subcontracting the set-up work to allied contractors (for example, construction or tree services) who are experienced working on ladders and roof lines and are eager for employment opportunities before calling it quits for the winter.

AVOID CHEAP LIGHTS

Landscapeers engaged in holiday light installation will want to invest in the best quality Christmas lights and installation equipment for the most profit. Don’t be tempted by price-friendly lights available through local big-box stores,

contractors caution. Pro-grade lights offer greater reliability season after season, which reduces costly service calls.

“Pro-grade lights are very resilient and have greater reliability,” Barrett says. “Over the last few years, we may have gone out on three service calls to address faulty lighting.”

Because holiday lights have upfront costs, it’s important to own the lights and store them in the off-season. This allows them to be reused season after season or applied to new clients’ properties.


“Per our agreement, we own the lights, and we take them down and store them so that they can be set up again the next year without any issues,” Barrett says. “This is helpful because we typically do roof-line lighting, and the lights, after the first year, are correctly sized for the client’s home, saving a considerable amount of set-up time.”

CONSIDER A FRANCHISE

Schill Grounds Management has two locations that contract with the Christmas Decor franchise based in Irving, Texas, and has more than 200 locations throughout the U.S. and Canada.

One advantage is that the franchise generates leads and establishes protected territories — based on zip codes — for landscape contractors, improving the frequency of new business.

Another benefit is the ability to buy in bulk. Plus, buying through the franchise gives them access to a variety of lights.

“We keep it to a very small sample size, though ... we’re not trying to be the Griswolds,” Schill says. 

Mike Zawacki is a freelance writer with nearly two decades of experience covering various aspects of the green industry.



Hobie Barrett



Jim Schill

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Mitchell O'Banion, owner of GrassRoots Turf in Central Mississippi, described FMC's Scion in two simple words — easy and effective. Before he switched to Scion Insecticide, O'Banion's team was tasked with using multiple chemicals for their lawn care service. Once he switched to Scion, he only had to use one product.

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O'Banion explains, "As primarily a lawn treatment company, scheduling mosquito callbacks can be tricky because we don't offer daily mosquito service. I started out rotating it with our previous products and quickly moved to Scion alone because of the results and ease of use."



MITCHELL O'BANION
Owner, GrassRoots Turf

The most notable difference is the customer satisfaction leading to a reduction of service calls. "It has been a great change in my opinion. We have less service calls now, which tells me our customer experience has improved due to the longer residual."

O'Banion is extremely satisfied with his decision to switch to Scion. "I have

more confidence in our program and that makes it easier to sell to customers," he concludes.

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HARDSCAPE SOLUTIONS

Big city views

LOCATION New York City

COMPANY John Mini Distinctive Landscapes

DETAILS The contractor, John Mini Distinctive Landscapes, was approached by the owners of this Manhattan building to design its Sky Lounge terrace.

Located in Manhattan's Union Square district, the building owners sought LEED Gold certification. To achieve the LEED certification, John Mini Distinctive Landscapes aimed to create a sustainable design, alongside plants that could handle a New York winter.

The project presented several challenges for the contractor, mostly stemming from its rooftop location. Because of the height of the building, the terrace received direct sunlight and high wind. To create shade areas, the contractor installed an overhang structure. The overhang also absorbs sunlight to power lighting fixtures underneath it.

One of the most unique additions to the terrace was planters flush to the ground. To ensure the surface remained uniform, the contractor used landscape EPS foam.

John Mini Distinctive Landscapes won a gold award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals Awards of Excellence program for its work on this project.

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



PHOTOS: JOHN MINI DISTINCTIVE LANDSCAPES



Captions | **1.** Because of extreme differences in natural lights on the terrace following the installation of the overhang structure, the contractor developed specific plant palettes for the two zones. The area that receives full sun features several different perennial grasses and flowers. **2.** In shaded areas, John Mini Landscapes installed ferns and oakleaf hydrangea. In areas that sat in both the full-sun and shaded zones, crews installed smoke bush and several evergreens. **3.** The contractor was careful to not block the rooftop views of the New York skyline that the terrace provides. **4.** At the start of the process, John Mini Distinctive Landscapes collaborated with the client on a mood board that featured desired color schemes and light fixtures. **5.** After collaborating on the plant selections, John Mini Distinctive Landscapes utilized 3D design software to get a full view of what the project would entail. This was important because of the project's location. **6.** Despite the challenge presented by its location in a busy New York City borough, the installation process ran smoothly thanks to clear communication between the contractor and the client.

RECOMMENDER

What do you look for when choosing the **right distributor?**

Educational offerings, payment options and support are some of the top traits that contractors should look for in a distributor partner.



PHOTO: EWING IRRIGATION & LANDSCAPE SUPPLY

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"Our Stihl dealer is Virginia Outdoor Power Equipment in Merrifield, Va. One of the biggest things we were looking for was someone who was willing to come to our shop and train our guys.

They have a demo day at a local park. They'll let us use some of the equipment for a day or two after the event, to let our guys get an even better feel for the machines. Plus, when we need parts or materials, they'll bring them to our shop.

They're not just looking at our ability to grow, but they're asking us about our needs, about what fits in our trailers. We want a strategic partner, versus a sales rep."

RILEY MARVIN

ALPHA LANDSCAPES

PRESIDENT



"For irrigation, we went with SiteOne because of their payment terms. We get 60-day terms with them, which is nice. Also, we can essentially have set inventory at our shop and then they'll come to stock it. As far as irrigation parts are concerned, we're still getting that set up, but that's something we're going to utilize. They just opened a new location and it is less than 10 minutes away from our shop, so that's also convenient."

MARK PYRAH

PEAK LANDSCAPE

PRESIDENT



"We use a number of different distributors, but I would say that the people that we work with best are ones that provide education for us. If we have a question, they're able to help work to solve that problem. They're not trying to necessarily sell something all the time. They're just there for us. And then when we need support from an educational perspective, they're going to provide it.

For instance, we use Wilbur-Ellis, which is a chemical/fertilizer supply company here in the Northwest. We contact them and they work with us to figure out what fertilizer we should have this spring. He doesn't reach out once every two weeks to ask, 'Hey, do you need this? Do you need that?' What's more, he knows our program. He gets to know us, knows when we need certain things, and then works with us almost like as a consultant rather than just somebody who's trying to sell something."

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FIVE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW BY SETH JONES | LM EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Bill Bramble

PRESIDENT AND OWNER
WINLAWN
ATLANTA

1 What is WinLAWN, and how did you get it started?

We are a locally owned and operated lawn care service. We are one of the top lawn care services in Georgia. We cover all of North Atlanta. We specialize in fertilization. I started the company, I did landscaping all through high school and all through college. I really enjoyed the work, I enjoyed going into a yard full of weeds, doing something about it and then seeing the finished product. I love seeing the smiles on people's faces when they have a yard they can enjoy.

2 Are you seeing any trends with your customers there in the Atlanta area?

The majority of our customers are residential — probably 65 to 70 percent. I would say the main thing, is the knowledge of the customer. People are internet-savvy. When we get leads that come in, I'll call Mister and Miss Customer and ask, 'What can we do to help you? What are you looking for?' And they already know what they're looking for and what is needed to do the job. I tell them, you're right in saying that, but maybe we could try this instead — we have very good results doing it this way.

3 What is your favorite tool to get the job done?

I wouldn't necessarily call it a tool ... my technicians and the people who work for me are the most important thing at WinLAWN. Our technicians and employees, they're all experienced, they're all tenured. Ethan's been with us for eight years. My least-tenured employee has been with me for two years. That's a rarity in this industry. Having people who know what they're

doing and can engage with the customers — that's how we get referrals. That's how we grow the business and get the reputation that we have in the industry and the community. I would say without question, my employees are the most important thing that we have.

4 Do you have a most memorable day at work?

I look back to the beginning of the company. It takes a lot of preparation to start a business, and I knew what I was doing when it comes to landscaping. But, when it all comes together, and you're at the point where I'm driving this brand-new, beautiful spray truck when I pull up to that first yard and spray it, finish it off, and look at it. Just the feeling of that moment. And then every day after, we're just growing the business, getting new customers. But I always go back to that very first day — that was a great day.

5 What do you and your family do for fun?


I've got a 13-year-old daughter. When I'm not here, I'm with her, it's a great thing. She is a motivating factor in my life. I kid with people, my goal in life is to be Noah Bramble's dad. She's a great kid. She does well in school. Right now, we're going through a cards phase ... we play a lot of Uno. 

PHOTO: MICHAEL BROWN



BEST ADVICE

"My dad was my hero. He owned his own business. He always said, 'Work hard every day. Treat people with respect. Do the job to the best of your ability, and it's all going to come back to you.'"

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FINDING ROOM FOR GROWTH FROM WITHIN

How The Grounds Guys focus on existing customer prices and marketing

BY LAUREN DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR

For The Grounds Guys, focusing on its existing customer base was the main priority during and shortly after COVID, says Lori Johnson, president of the company.

The initiatives the company put in place helped grow its 2022 revenue by 29 percent from 2021. That landed The Grounds Guys at No. 22 on the 2023 *LM150* list of the top landscaping companies in the country, with a revenue of \$114,000,000.

A Neighborly company, The Grounds Guys is based in Waco, Texas, providing lawn and landscape maintenance, snow and ice control, design/build, lawn care, shrub maintenance, holiday lighting and pressure washing services. The company has 238 locations in the U.S. and 28 in Canada, where it services a customer base of 60 percent residential and 40 percent commercial.

As a franchisor, The Grounds Guys experiences growth in two main ways, according to Johnson: organically through increased sales of their existing locations and by adding new locations to their open territories.

“Both continue to have lots of runways to ensure year-over-year growth and expansion of our footprint,” she says.

When it came to organic growth from existing locations, The Grounds Guys reevaluated its strategies and how the pandemic impacted business. Concerned about runaway inflation and the potential pullback in consumer spending from 2021 to 2022, the company focused heavily on increasing its revenue-per-customer metrics.

This approach included price increases, replacing unprofitable customers, expanding services within its existing customer base and ramping up existing customer marketing.

“Because we are a full-service lawn and landscape company, it made sense to continue to add value by expanding the services customers received from us and maximizing our existing customer relationships,” Johnson says.

The economic conditions caused by COVID led the company to focus on keeping and expanding existing cus-



tomers to ensure stability and lessen year-over-year churn, she adds.

The company also actively focused on reputation management using net promotor scores (NPS) and other forms of feedback to ensure positive reviews and referral increases. It sent the NPS to its customers as a follow-up via email after providing services, and in 2023, The Grounds Guys had an average NPS of 82 percent.

Looking ahead, Johnson believes it will be important to add value and increase revenue per customer like the company has done previously.

The Grounds Guys plans to emphasize customer research and sales this year. Johnson says it's critical to understand the consumer mindset in their space post-COVID and how the company's marketing and selling techniques should evolve to best fit the new normal.

Keeping its “culture of care” a priority is another important aspect of the company and its growth, Johnson says. To reinforce that culture, franchise locations have a team huddle each morning to recite the “code of care,” which includes keeping customers first, having a positive and helpful attitude, treating everyone with respect and enjoying life in the process.

“We continue to believe that our culture of care and a focus on values and customer service is what sets us apart from our competition, and is a key reason we are successful and allows us to continuously grow year-over-year,” Johnson says. 🍷

“We continued to grow despite an uncertain economic climate and an increase in consumer sentiment to try and/or switch to a new brand,” says Lori Johnson, president of The Grounds Guys.

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.



Lori Johnson

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BY JEFFREY SCOTT

The author is owner of Jeffrey Scott Consulting, which helps landscape companies grow and maximize profits. Reach him at jeff@jeffreyscott.biz.

How I learned, struggled and saw personal growth on the racetrack

Every couple of months, someone reaches out to ask me how they can become a consultant. That question allows me to reflect on the journey. On the one hand, I'm sure they have great experiences. On the other hand, becoming a consultant isn't a simple choice. We make it look easy, but it's taken a ton of hard work.

Over the years, I've coached more than 350 firms in the landscape business, and it's shocking to look back at what I thought I knew, even just a couple of years ago. The key to success in this business is never thinking you have arrived, and constantly challenging and educating yourself.

COACHES NEED COACHING

When I decided to put up my shingle, I hired the very best "coaches coach" I could find. It's critical for anyone who wants to be a great coach to receive great coaching themselves.

I've continued this commitment in my personal life, hiring coaches to help me progress in my hobbies, including car racing.

Learning isn't pretty, attempting to master a new skill can be stressful. I was reminded of that challenge recently when I visited a new (to me) motorsports track: Eagles Canyon Raceway, north of Dallas.

It's a difficult track for the newcomer: very hilly, curvy and long. It was especially difficult because I rented a car which I had not driven before.

THE EMOTIONS OF STRUGGLE

I experienced all the emotions of struggle and failure over that two-day weekend. The driving coach I hired is the best in the South, and so my learning curve was steep.

On day one, it took all my effort to try to grasp and visualize the track. There were times when I ended up in a total fog, literally forgetting where I was, unsure if the next turn was to the left or right. I made many mistakes, which isn't pretty when you're driving 80 mph.

Was my coach rolling his eyes, or was that my inner voice feeling the shame? Shame and doubt can rear its head when you fumble terribly. We ended up skidding off the track

once, no crashes and no need to spend the insurance deductible.

In my downtime (between runs) I studied the video footage. I pushed myself to memorize each curve, trying to internalize the rhythm of this track.

Over dinner, my coach pulled out the day's video and showed me the recurring errors and the big opportunities for the next day. He seemed to enjoy poking fun at me, but it was all in good spirits. There is no room for being thin-skinned when you want to run with the best.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

On day two, with each mess up my coach would say "Ok, back at it! Get your head in the game. GO, GO, GO!"

By the middle of day two, I was passing cars and one guy stopped by to say thanks for the cat-and-mouse chase. When I passed him towards the end, I lost him. He couldn't keep up.

The lesson I learned here is that the struggle is real and can even be dangerous. The shame, however, is made up. It's in your head. There is no time to stop and feel sorry for yourself. Shake off the missteps and just keep going!

TAKE TIME TO REFLECT

Yes, take time to reflect with a professional coach, someone who can guide you to learn and adjust your strategy. It's very hard work. But I promise if you keep at it, soon others will be following you.

The winners in business and life are those who surround themselves with top people and persevere. Eventually, you will reach a top level and enjoy being that leader. But don't breathe your own exhaust, and never stop learning. 🏁



BACK IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT
It's important to reflect on your mistakes, but Jeffrey Scott says it's not worth dwelling on for too long.



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.

The green industry continues to stay ahead of the curve

On behalf of my family, I wish to offer my sincerest apologies. What have I done; you may ask? Let me explain.

You may not know this but that scourge of lawns everywhere, the dandelion, is an introduced species in North America. As the story goes, the pilgrims brought dandelions with them on the Mayflower, ostensibly for the medicinal qualities of the plant. Keep in mind before you head down to the local natural health store to stock up that roughly half of the pilgrims died during their first winter in Plymouth.

Now, I enjoy diving down rabbit holes on the internet. If I see something that strikes my curiosity, I'll do a Google search to see where it leads me. Many times, I'll bump into something else of interest and down the rabbit hole I go.

This time, I was thinking about my grandfather, who passed away in 1984. That was long before the internet but I wondered if I could find any reference to him if I searched. Lo and behold, I did! It turns out that he's included in the genealogy of descendants of Mayflower passengers. That means I'm related, too; therefore, my ancestors were responsible for the dandelions you see everywhere.

Gosh, folks. I had no idea! All these years customers were blaming me for causing all the dandelions on their lawn and by golly they were right!

I've had a curious relationship with weeds over the years. As a lawn care professional, I was paid to make them disappear. It required quite a bit of study and experience to become a competent weed assassin but somewhere along the way, my attitude towards weeds began to change.

It was when I was traveling across New England, going from one branch office to the next, training lawn specialists. I thought I had a decent grasp of what kinds of weeds you'll find on the average New England lawn but I quickly realized that there were many species that I did not recognize.

I got into the habit of carrying a copy of *Weeds of the Northeast*. I destroyed two copies from overuse, carrying them around in the truck looking up one weed after another. I thought that I was fairly good at nailing down tough ones. Admittedly, since I am seven years removed from being on the lawns, my skills have gotten a bit rusty.

I stopped hating weeds and began admiring how tenacious and adaptive they are. You've seen the meme showing a delicate houseplant complaining — "*Oh, a draft! Surely, I shall die!*" while in the adjacent frame is a crabgrass plant growing through asphalt — "*Asphalt? (bleep) yeah!*" It's funny because you know it's true.

This transformation in my perspective was complete when I began bringing weeds home from my journeys. I would occasionally take a 4-inch diameter section of a customer's lawn home and plant it on my lawn to observe what it would do. I tell

you this now because I'm pretty sure the statute of limitations on stealing sections of a lawn has run out.

All of this is said in the context of what we're working on in the policy space as we decide the future of pesticides. Federal courts have made it clear that the EPA has to be compliant with the Endangered Species Act when it registers pesticides for use. We've already seen one widely-used herbicide removed from the market; over-the-top uses of dicamba on soybeans were vacated by a federal court late last year.

You'll properly note that dicamba is the same herbicide contained in many products labeled for lawn care. Compliance with the Endangered Species Act is sucking all of the oxygen out of the room you might say.

Our mission in this effort is to educate and inform policymakers about what we in the green industry do and how we do it. What we have discovered is that even though we account for less than 10 percent of the total volume of pesticides used in the U.S., we are a wellspring of ideas for mitigating the negative effects of pesticides. Long before the passage of the Endangered Species Act or the formation of the EPA, we had to develop our own mitigation practices to keep from damaging or killing sensitive plants close to pests we were trying to control.

If there was a dandelion right next to Mrs. Smith's rose bush, you had best not harm a single flower or you'd hear about it! To combat that, we developed low-pressure, large droplet spray systems that minimize drift and techniques that reduce the total amount of pesticides applied.

I wonder what our forefathers would have thought about all of this. 🍷





BY KEN THOMAS

The author is principal of Envior Consulting. Reach him at kenthomas@enviorco.com.

Finding your sweet spot

A lot of things have changed in the landscape industry over the past 15 years, but one thing that hasn't is the value of good people and the importance of building a great team. This industry attracts a great breed of people that I am proud to be associated with.

As I work with companies around the country, I have gotten to know many outstanding individuals and I have witnessed a special group who seem to have found their "Sweet Spot".

What do I mean by that? When we meet people in any walk of life who are operating in their sweet spot it is vividly apparent. They clearly love what they do, and not only are they extremely productive and effective they also seem to have a sparkle in their eye and a spring to their step.

These are the people that enjoy going to work. You know them. You can recognize them a mile off. They operate with purpose and their energy is contagious.

FINDING THE SPOT

So, how do we find our sweet spot? I've heard it explained as the intersection of our strengths and our passions. It's no mystery that each of us has been designed with a core set of strengths, whether it is leadership, problem-solving, detail orientation or people skills.

Additionally — and just as importantly — I believe we all have a passion (or passions) that drive our behaviors. How do we identify our passions? They're typically the things we enjoy doing even when we are not getting paid like making art, serving others or combing over analytics.

To align your strengths and passions consider taking a personality profile online such as DISC or Myers Briggs. We use the Culture Index these days with our teams at Envior. These short assessments will help you to understand your strengths.

“So, how do we find our sweet spot? I've heard it explained as the intersection of our strengths and our passions.”

For your passions, just look at where you spend most of your time and money. If you can find an intersection between these points in your career, I guarantee you will be happier, and more prosperous in the long run.

If you're not operating in your sweet spot today, don't fret. Begin looking for opportunities within your company and work your way to your optimum job.

IT TAKES EFFORT

Unfortunately, in our careers, we don't always start in our sweet spot. We have to spend some time and prepare for the opportunity. Let me give you a couple of examples.

I met a young lady a few years ago in Boston, Jessica Goutzos, who was the contract administrator for a \$3-million-design-build division, and she was always trying to organize a disorganized operations manager. That's a tough job at best.

Jessica is a process-driven leader, and it was tough for her to sit under


poor leadership and still do a great job. But that's exactly what she did until the door shut behind the last failed operations manager. Jessica was called up to the majors and took on the role of operations manager. Finally, she was able to combine her exceptional leadership strength with her passion for organization and it has been magic.

Today, Jessica has come into her own and is truly one of the best operations managers I've had the pleasure of working with. The division has grown to \$8 million, with client satisfaction and profits at an all-time high. Jessica is operating in her sweet spot, and she is killing it.

Let me introduce you to Matt Wenz with Mulhall's in Omaha, Neb. Matt was hired to head up the accounting department and was well qualified. But his ability to manage complicated data and ride herd on the company's new strategic plan positioned him to take over the "Implementer" role.

After one year, Matt has helped to refocus the organization, maximize software utilization and drive top-line and bottom-line growth to new levels. Matt is finding his sweet spot, growing personally and professionally and having a lot of fun doing it!

Jessica and Matt are just a couple of the lucky ones who have discovered — and are operating in — their sweet spot.

The success that these two, and many like them, have achieved is impressive. But maybe even more impressive are the organizations that have figured out how to create a company full of people who are operating in their sweet spot. 

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AD INDEX

Albaugh Specialty Products.....	22
Bartlett Tree Experts.....	33
Curtis Industries.....	32
FMC.....	35
FX Luminaire.....	5
Grasshopper.....	31
Helena Agri-Enerprises.....	25
Horizon Distributors.....	17
Isuzu.....	3
Leaf Burrito.....	33
McFarlin Stanford.....	19
Mulch Mate.....	16
Mulch Mule.....	21
Nufarm.....	11
OPEI/Equip Exposition.....	7
PBI Gordon.....	CV4
Pike Creek.....	20
PRO Landscape by Drafix Software.....	18
Quali-Pro.....	29
Senix.....	CV2-1
Snowfighters Institute.....	39
STIHL.....	CV3
Switch-N-Go.....	38
Uline.....	39
Weathermatic.....	15

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RESOURCES



GROW WITH GRUNDER

BY MARTY GRUNDER

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3 big changes that altered Landscape Workshop's trajectory

Over the years, I've gotten to know JT Price and the team at Landscape Workshop in Birmingham, Ala., well, and I've been so impressed by their operation. The company has grown tremendously since JT took over the company in all senses of the word. Their internal culture has improved, their top-line revenue has grown astronomically and their profitability is up.

When JT took over, there were some critical changes he made that set the team up for the success it has seen over the last decade. Those three major changes were:

HAVING THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT SEATS

Finding what people excel at and allowing them to focus on it has been a powerful driver of Landscape Workshop's growth. As the company has made acquisitions, it has also acquired new talent, and getting the right people doing the right tasks has been the key to realizing economies of scale.

JT told me when I interviewed him on our podcast, *The Grow Show* powered by Stihl, that he's learned a ton from the people who have joined Landscape Workshop through its acquisitions. He makes sure to get to know them and listen to their ideas, which is important for figuring out the best role for everyone moving forward.

I've seen this be true at my own company, too. Rearranging the team into roles so that people can work on what they're passionate about and best use their skills is a powerful driver of growth.

“Rearranging the team into roles so that people can work on what they're passionate about and best use their skills is a powerful driver of growth.”

CREATING A PERFORMANCE CULTURE

JT and his team have key metrics they use to measure their team's performance to make reviews and promotion decisions as objective as possible. All team members are incentivized in some way on customer retention and profitability metrics.

These metrics are easy for the team to understand, and everyone in the company has an impact on these, too.

The Landscape Workshop team always measures these two metrics in tandem for a great reason too, it would be easy to perform well at one to the detriment of the other. Like many things, there's a balance required of team members here in order to be successful.

SHARING THE INFO NEEDED TO MAKE GOOD DECISIONS


Also on *The Grow Show*, JT shared a story of how six months into taking over the company, he asked account managers what they thought the company's profit margins were. The answers were all over the place, but everyone agreed they thought the company was making a lot of money.

The truth was they weren't profitable at all. It wasn't the account managers' fault that they didn't know this, but how are they supposed to be successful in their roles if they don't

have the information they need to make decisions?

Today, Landscape Workshop relies on Aspire as its software system, and the team has opted to be very transparent with employees on metrics and performance so that it's easier for team members to understand how they impact the company's success.

Landscape Workshop has made headlines for the acquisitions they've made to grow to a projected \$140M in revenue this year, but that's only part of the story. By every indicator I've seen, this is a well-run company we can all learn something from. Whether we're looking to buy other companies, be acquired or just continue running in our own lanes.

What I love about this industry is everyone's willingness to share — the Landscape Workshop team doesn't hold much close to the chest. We'll spend 24 hours in Birmingham learning from their team during the upcoming Field Trip we're hosting in partnership with NALP on June 11-12. Will I see you there? www.growgroupinc.com/nalp-field-trip 

P.S. You can find my interview with JT Price on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or YouTube. Search for The Grow Show. New episodes are released each Wednesday.

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