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Lessons on turning challenging installation projects into big wins for both customers and contractors

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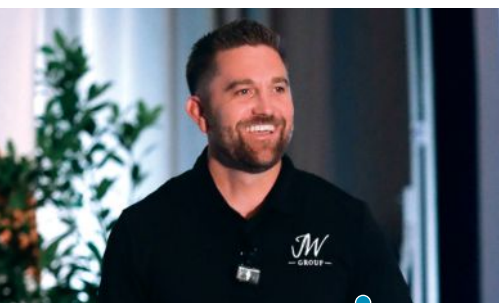


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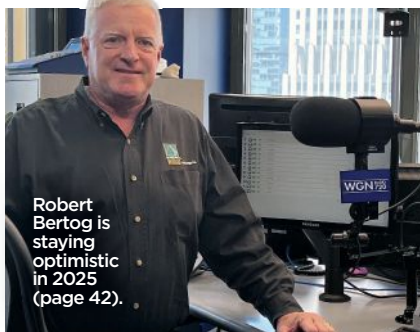
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[IT'S IRRIGATION]

Send us your projects

Have a unique irrigation project you just completed? Have something in the works that the industry should hear about? Let us know!

Next month's issue of *Landscape Management* is everything irrigation, and we want to hear from you about what's been flowing through the industry. Send your best stories to Editor-in-Chief Scott Hollister (shollister@northcoastmedia.net) and Editorial Director Seth Jones (sjones@northcoastmedia.net) for a chance to be featured in the upcoming edition of LM!

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A year to remember

This month marks my one-year anniversary with *Landscape Management*. And if you had asked me before my first day on the job to predict where I'd be 12 months into my new journey, I'm pretty sure my answer would have been about as accurate as my picks were for March Madness (translation: not accurate at all).

Now, don't read any negativity or pessimism into that statement. My move from one part of the green industry — golf course management — into another — landscaping and lawn care — has been one of the highlights of my professional career. It's energized me at a point in my career when I needed energizing. It's introduced me to a host of great people at a wonderful new company. And it's given me a whole new NBA team to root for (let's go, Cavs!)

It's been a year of learning, of meeting tons of new people and immersing myself in an exciting new industry. But — and you knew there was a "but" coming — if you thought 12 months was enough time to learn everything, meet everyone and become fully immersed in every facet of this great, complex business ... well, you'd be sadly mistaken.

There are days when I feel like I have a pretty good handle on what's important to landscape pros, what makes them tick and how that all translates to the content we provide in the pages of *LM*, on the magazine's website and through our social media channels. On those days, I feel like I can talk the talk *and* walk the walk.

“I know I still have a lot to learn about the landscaping and lawn care industry ... but I couldn't be more grateful to those who have welcomed me into that industry over the last year.”

Then, of course, there's the rest of the time where, if I'm being honest, I'm pretty much just faking it. I'm reminded of football coaches who tell players to act like they've been there before when they score a touchdown. I'm definitely trying to act like I've been here before, even though I've never actually been here before.


Thankfully, I've got some awesome teammates at *LM* who have rarely acted annoyed when I ask a stupid question. I've developed a small but trustworthy network of landscapers who have been happy to lend a helping hand to this rookie. And I feel like the magazine's stable of regular contributors — industry veterans, each one of them — have had my back throughout, always willing to teach, counsel and encourage.

So, what has stood out about this industry and the people in it during my first full year on the job? First and foremost, it's clear this is a healthy, vibrant and growing industry. That doesn't mean there aren't challenges to overcome, but as our recent state of the industry report and the annual

*LM*150 rankings (the 2025 version will debut in June *LM*) demonstrate, this is an industry on the rise, and there are few signs those positive trends won't continue.

Second, it's easy to see that the people in this industry give as freely as they take. Whether it's in the peer groups that have become such a part of the landscaping business or through one-on-one interactions, you care as much about helping your colleagues succeed as you do about growing your own business. Even in the most competitive of situations, where practices like that seem counterintuitive, you still help each other.

Finally, your passion and commitment to improving yourself through continuing education set this industry apart. I was used to that from my days in golf, where superintendents are notorious for being lifelong learners, so I was gratified to see so many turn out for *LM*'s education sessions at Equip Exposition, pack classrooms during Elevate and log on for webinars hosted by industry suppliers and vendors.

I know I still have a lot to learn about the landscaping and lawn care industry and those who have dedicated their lives to it. But I couldn't be more grateful to those who have welcomed me into that industry over the last year, and if those first 12 months are any indication, I can't wait to see what the future will bring. 

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EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD



MORE ONLINE

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

What is the top thing a landscape contractor should look for in a dealer/distributor partner?

"We should all look for and expect proactive behavior from our dealer/distributor partners. In a world where most providers of products and services wait to be contacted, our goal and expectations should be to have people who reach out to us and anticipate our needs as best they can."



Landscape Professionals

Bryan Christiansen
Mariani Premier Group
Lake Bluff, Ill.

Troy Clogg
Troy Clogg Landscape Associates
Wixom, Mich.

Pam Dooley
Plants Creative Landscapes
Decatur, Ga.

Paul Fraynd
Sun Valley Landscaping
Omaha, Neb.

Mike Giese
Perfecturf Lawn care
Mt. Pleasant, Wisc.

Chris Joyce
Joyce Landscaping
Cape Cod, Mass.

Jerry McKay
McKay Landscape Lighting
Omaha, Neb.

Max Moreno
Everthrive Landscape
Riverside, Calif.

Bryan Stolz
Winterberry Landscape
& Garden Center
Southington, Conn.

Justin White
K&D Landscaping
Watsonville, Calif.

Industry Consultants

Tito Caceres
Bloom Talent Solutions
Coral Gables, Fla.

Marty Grunder
The Grow Group
Dayton, Ohio

Phil Harwood
Tamarisk Business Advisors
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Jeffrey Scott
Jeffrey Scott Consulting
New Orleans, La.

"Know each dealer's point of leverage and what it means for your business. Do you sell on quality? Price? Speed? For each company, vendor and product, maximize what they can offer that is most important by trading off on what isn't."



"The thing that matters most about a dealer or distributor is communication. It's key for our distributors to be partners in our scale and growth plans, and that requires excellent communication. A key indicator is a dealer who listens to understand rather than a dealer who listens to speak. Partners who understand our growth plan can help us stay ahead of it and always have the right tools and resources to accomplish our goals."



"They have to have great service. To be blunt, some of great service is good communication, and very few are good at it. We travel outside our main area to a dealer that offers great service. Without the service, the equipment can't be fully utilized."



"A true strategic partner understands your business goals and is able to develop creative solutions to help you achieve your goals."



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

LM GALLERY

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

1 Laissez les bon temps rouler! Let the good times roll! **LM** was pleased to attend the Mardi Gras Experience in New Orleans, co-hosted by McFarlin Stanford and The Grow Group. Here, Annette McCarthy, owner of RJ Lawn and Landscape in Des Moines, Iowa, and Megan Parker, executive coach, McFarlin Stanford, prepare for an amazing meal at Antoine's Restaurant, the oldest restaurant in the French Quarter.

2 Balcony view (Left to right) Jim Pope, founder, Pope Landscape & Irrigation, Garner, N.C.; "Tiny" Tim Buiten, president, Tim's Complete Landscape Management, Seattle; Levi Duckett, owner, Sunshine Landscape, Boise, Idaho, and Drew Gronholz, president, River City Lawnscape, La Crosse, Wis., take a moment on the balcony of Antoine's, now in its fifth generation as a family-owned business.

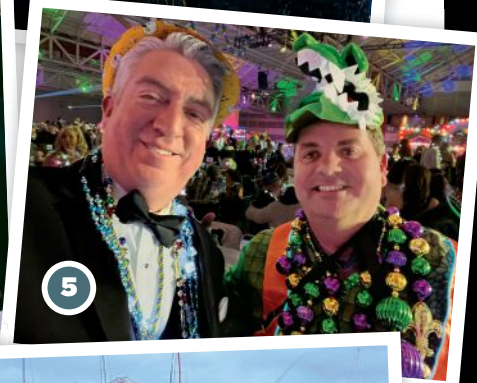
3 Bacchus Ballers It was a black-tie affair at the annual Bacchus Ball inside the New Orleans Convention Center. From left to right are Hank Parker, owner, Bay Landscaping, Mobile, Ala.; Adam Dukes, owner, GrandScapes, Sullivan's Island, S.C., and Brad Shaffer, owner, Thrive Landscape Management, Harvey, La., and his wife Melody.

4 The man in the yellow hat Seth Jones, **LM** editorial director; Nick Jensen, vice president, Jensen Gardens, Omaha, Neb., and Kayden Glynn share a laugh during the Bacchus Ball in New Orleans. According to Jones, the yellow hat — it flashes lights when turned on — made it safely all the way back to Kansas.

5 Go Gators! Jones and James Cali, principal, McFarlin Stanford. Cali has been riding on the "Bacchagator" float for years. His job? To spread cheer and toss beads to the crowd while dressed as an alligator.

6 Malone. Ryan Malone. Ryan and Elani Malone, Malone's Landscape, Kent, Wash., were dressed to impress for the Bacchus Ball (Ryan's brother Jake is also featured in this month's cover story).

7 Friends of LM Julio Lopez, president, Cadre Landscape, Los Angeles, and Mary Verjan enjoy the view from the deck of the boat house.



ACE Peer Groups go to Mardi Gras (and Mullin)

BY SETH JONES | LM EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

It's hard to declare what the highlight of the week was — the black-tie Bacchus Rendezvous Ball, where Shaquille O'Neal was the king of the parade, and ZZ Top played a concert? The VIP balcony seating at the Sheraton Hotel while watching the parade go by on the street below? Seeing the fireworks launch from a barge on the Mississippi from the President's Suite of the Westin?

Or for those attendees who were there more for the business side of things ... was it the behind-the-scenes tour of Mullin, No. 144 on the LM150 list?

Maybe all of the above (and the food, too).

"The Bacchus Ball was even more fun than I expected; I'm definitely going again," said Nick Jensen, vice president of Jensen Gardens in Omaha, Neb. "I thought it would be wild and crazy — and it was — but you could watch the parade with your kids, or you could go to Bourbon Street."

The first part of the week, dubbed "ACE Experience Mardi Gras" and co-hosted by McFarlin Stanford and The Grow Group, was mostly reserved for parade-watching and networking events. As the week went along, the event changed to the "ACE Scramble," which brought three existing peer groups together for a

tour of Mullin, followed by case studies, company updates, roundtable discussions, a book review and a finance and metrics lesson.

Kyle Narsavage, president and founder of GreenSweep and Garden Gate Landscaping in Silver Spring, Md., says the atmosphere of New Orleans during Mardi Gras is "an awesome vibe," and even though the whole city

was having a party, the ACE Peer Groups were still able to lock down and get a lot of work done.

"With the crossover of the three different peer groups, these are people I typically only see once a year at ACE Discovery," Narsavage says. "There's a bigger pool of people to pull from."

A MOMENT WITH MULLIN

The visit to Mullin included a tour of the company's yard, shop and office building. Presentations were made by the company's construction division leader, maintenance division manager, head mechanic, controller and director of human resources. Chase Mullin, who calls himself the "founder, CEO and weed puller" of Mullin, batted last.

Mullin opened up to the group and talked about some of the challenges he finds himself dealing with, but doing it without losing a part of the culture he's



Tony Distefano, president, Angelo's Landscape Group; Timothy Trimmer, president, Professional Grounds; Chef Wynn and Chris Psencik, partner and vice president, McFarlin Stanford, following a dinner at the Cali boat house during ACE Experience Mardi Gras.

worked hard to foster. "I feel like a lot of things are in progress, but I just want to hit fast forward," he told the room, garnering knowing nods.

Before closing the tour, Mullin took a moment to tell the group what a unique experience McFarlin Stanford and The Grow Group had arranged for them by bringing them to New Orleans during Mardi Gras week.

"There are people who live here who wouldn't ever be able to get that same experience as you all just did," Mullin said. "You really have to know someone (to get that experience). I know New Orleans, but Jim (Cali) *really* knows New Orleans, and what he put together is really special."

MORE JUICE IN THE TANK

Jim Cali, principal of McFarlin Stanford, said that the ACE Peer Group membership is not only about driving your own professional advancement but about having a bigger perspective on life.

"We know that driving experiences with our members is as important as financial acumen," Cali says. "I am so thrilled I could share the experience



Chase Mullin, founder and president, Mullin, talks to the ACE Peer Groups about his process for renovating his shop.

of my hometown of New Orleans and show what and how Mardi Gras affects a culture and ultimately drives relationships. Remember, we are in a relationship business, and whether you network on a board at your child's school, golf with friends, volunteer for the needy or celebrate Mardi Gras, it is all networking."

Narsavage told *LM* that a conflict on his calendar led him to miss the last in-person event with his ACE Peer Group, and he could tell missing that opportunity to connect with fellow landscape and lawn care entrepreneurs hurt a little.

"There's only so much you can share with your coworkers or even your own wife," he says. "You can accomplish so much in a short period of time here because of the knowledge sitting at the table."

Narsavage said he didn't have one highlight of the trip but three—the tour of Mullin, the camaraderie of doing "issue processing" with his colleagues and the atmosphere in New Orleans that week.

"Getting behind-the-scenes access of Mullin, that has to be my No. 1. Any time you get to open the hood on a successful company and meet their people, that's a great opportunity to learn," Narsavage says. "You always come back energized with more juice in the tank than what you left with." 🍌

Equip Expo tabs Cole as keynote speaker

Jesse Cole, the founder of the Savannah Bananas baseball team, will be the keynote speaker at Equip Exposition, Oct. 21-24 in Louisville, Ky.

One of the country's best-known marketers and entrepreneurs, Cole will share what it takes to develop a great idea into a brand that people embrace and love during his keynote address, which is sponsored by Kress. His bootstraps-to-success story will delve into marketing brands and how to keep creativity flowing.

Other networking opportunities planned for Equip Expo include a welcome reception at Churchill Downs, sponsored by Caterpillar, where a new signature bourbon will debut this year, two concerts, a women's leadership reception and a host of other peer-to-peer activities.

Country stars Big & Rich and solo country artist Gretchen Wilson will perform an exclusive concert for show attendees at the Kentucky International Convention Center on the Thursday night of the show. The concert is included with the registration to Equip Exposition.



Jesse Cole, the founder of the Savannah Bananas baseball team, has been selected as the keynote speaker for Equip Expo 2025.

"We offer a number of social opportunities at Equip, but they're created with purpose," said Kris Kiser, president and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), an international trade association that owns and manages the show. "Unlike any other time of year, peers can talk with one another — get to know each other — at the show. It's especially a great opportunity for team building."

Registration for Equip Expo is \$25 through May 31, 2025. For more information or to register, visit www.equipexposition.com.

UNLIMITED, BEARY MAKE ACQUISITIONS

Unlimited Lawn Care and Beary Landscaping both made recent acquisitions to help expand their service footprints in the Southeast and Midwest, respectively.

Unlimited, a provider of recurring residential lawn, tree and shrub care services headquartered in Suwanee, Ga., acquired Sand-Sational Lawns, a lawn care company based in Sugar Hill, Ga.

"We are excited to welcome Sand-Sational Lawns to the Unlimited Lawn Care family," said Scott Whitehead, CEO of Unlimited Lawn Care. "Each of our brands is committed to outstanding customer service and people-first values. We look forward to providing new growth opportunities for their employees and continuing our legacy of excellence."

Beary, a Silver Oak Services Partners portfolio company, acquired MJS Landscaping Services. MJS, founded in 1997 and headquartered near Milwaukee, Wis., is a provider of landscape management, snow removal and landscape design and build services throughout southern Wisconsin.

"Joining forces with MJS aligns perfectly with our strategy to partner with like-minded operators," said Brian Beary, CEO and founder of Beary.

EARLY DISCOUNT AVAILABLE FOR SUMMER GROWTH SUMMIT

Jeffrey Scott's annual Summer Growth Summit is Aug. 19-21 in Cleveland, hosted by Jeffrey Scott Consulting and *Landscape Management*, and an early bird discount is available for registrations made before April 24.

This event is designed for landscape business owners and their leadership teams to gain cutting-edge insights, refine their strategies and connect with top industry leaders.

For three days, attendees can expect to dive into the strategies behind Schill Grounds Management, one of the industry's fastest-growing firms, while learning from Scott and his community of successful business leaders. Attendees can save \$400 with the early bird discount. To register and for more information about the event, visit jeffreyscott.biz/2025-summer-growth-summit.

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MORE POWER helps you push through even the toughest jobs. Both models come off the line carrying new engines — the Cat C2.8T and C2.8TA respectively — providing a significant torque increase in both models that will deliver more power to the ground as you drive into a pile of dirt, for example, giving you improved working performance and that “seat-of-your-pants” feel.

MORE PERFORMANCE means you get more confidence in a variety of tasks as you take these machines to work. The 255 and 265 will both take lift height to new levels for their respective size classes, and a fully redesigned undercarriage provides more stability for when you need to lift heavier loads, operate on slopes, or make a final grade.

MORE COMFORT in the new Cat compact track loaders isn't just about bigger cabs, although their new design provides additional overall volume, foot space and hip room. It's also about optional heated and ventilated seats, easier entry and exit and a two-step removable door. Plus, optional advanced joysticks that allow full machine function control at your fingertips. All that adds up to operator comfort that will make the hard work seem just a little bit easier.

All models across the new Cat compact track loader lineup will come ready for Smart Attachment Technology, ushering in the highest level of integration between machine and attachment, giving the 255 and 265 that much more versatility on the jobsite.

If you'd like more information about the 255 and 265, availability, pricing, and financing information are available from your local Cat dealer, or go online to

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CONNECTIONS FOR CONTRACTORS

Dealers and distributors' five key insights to help utilize this business relationship

BY NATHAN MADER
LM ASSOCIATE
EDITOR

Dealers and distributors are a necessary part of the landscaping industry. Beyond the sale of equipment, materials and chemicals, these middlemen and women function as a necessary bridge between the contractor and manufacturer.

In addition, dealers and distributors also try to go beyond the initial transactional relationship of making a quick sale, and their position allows them to serve as a much-needed resource for landscapers needing extra assistance with business planning, equipment help and more.

Because of the extra hand they can lend, it's important for landscape contractors to build a strong relationship with trusted dealers and distributors. Many industry experts understand that when trust and communication are established in these partnerships, it allows both businesses to thrive.

Landscape Management spoke with dealers, distributors and other industry pros for their best business-boosting tips and tricks on establishing and growing these key relationships.

1 Clear communication

Like any relationship, good communication is an absolute must for success.

"We live in an awesome time where we all have phones and can call or text pretty much instantly anybody we need to get ahold of. But yet, we sometimes don't do that for whatever reason, and it goes both ways," says Josh Coffman, commercial and retail sales manager at Everglades Equipment, a John Deere dealer in Florida. "Just being honest, being upfront and forthright with what you're doing; it's a simple thing."

Coffman says that quick, transparent and upfront communication with dealers is important because it allows them to offer the best, most efficient help. It often saves time and headaches down the road as well.

"One thing that we do is a spring parts sale, and we know that's going to happen every February to the middle of March," he says. "If the customer is looking to buy a bunch of stuff in April or has talked about buying a bunch of stuff in April and is



Josh Coffman



missing that sale, we would have the awareness to say, 'Hey, I know in the past you tried to buy later in the season a little closer to end of April. If we can pull that forward, this program is coming out that is going to save you a good bit of money.' Again, being transparent, having that good communication to give them a better deal on the things that they need."

Similarly, Samantha Bamaca, director of marketing at Harrell's — an employee-owned distributor of customized agronomic solutions — says good communication often results in the customer receiving the help they need in the moment and throughout the entire season.

"When there's open communication between the customer and the Harrell's rep, the rep can put together the right plan to help the customer be successful. I'm not sure if all contractors know we can help them in this capacity," she says. "It's not always simply about sending over product information. We really enjoy creating a relationship based on open communication about what our customers are working to achieve in their businesses, what their challenges are agronomically and how we can work alongside them to help them realize their goals."

Ultimately, it comes down to both parties setting clear expectations and goals to work toward, especially when each contractor has different needs. Jason Coleman, co-owner of Coleman Equipment — a Kubota dealer in Kansas City — says knowing the type of customer he's working with goes a long way.



Samantha Bamaca

"We've got customers that are a one-man operation to customers with several hundred or thousands of employees running crews all over the city. We cater to such a vast array of customers that there are different expectations with each type," Coleman says. "I think it's really important that any dealership really tries to figure out that customer type so that they're dealing with them in the best way possible."

And, of course, when things aren't working out the way they're supposed to, don't be afraid to express that. Coleman says being honest with good feedback can help fix any issues that come up along the way, and it's something that all parties should be open to.

Continued on page 16

QUICK THINKING Josh Coffman says dealers often need to change their plans on the fly since customers' equipment needs can differ greatly from call to call.



HISTORY OF SERVICE The original Coleman Coal and Feed facility from the 1940s ran by Jason Coleman's grandfather. Since then, it has evolved to service several other industries, eventually focusing on Kubota and other landscaping equipment.

Continued from page 15

2 Bridging the gap

One reason vendors are such a crucial resource for landscapers is their ability to work with manufacturers.

When product or supply issues appear, dealers and distributors often serve as the missing link to better assist the local end-user.

“Not only do we have great relationships with our customers to help them as trusted advisors, but we also have great relationships with our manufacturer partners,” says

Jason Frank, vice president of business development, marketing and R&D at Harrell's.



Jason Frank

“Say there's a product performance issue. We can bring that manufacturer to the table and say, 'Help us understand what happened here,' and potentially fix the situation.”



Frank says it's important for contractors to understand this aspect of dealerships and distributors because product issues aren't the only time this relationship comes into play. Vendors can also pass along manufacturer information on deals and promotions to trusted partners.

It's also important to note that vendors can vary by culture, size and business practices, even when working with the same manufacturer. Contractors should consider picking the right dealer or distributor based on its values and connections.

“I think there are a lot of customers that expect that any and every Kubota dealer is going to be the same. It's really not,” Coleman

BEYOND SALES

Clay Breazeale, vice president of turf sales south at Harrell's, says dealers and distributors are often much more than just the products they offer, and they want to provide added value beyond the sale for contractors.

PHOTO: HARRELL'S





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THEN

College Fund Landscaping started with a simple goal: help Matt pay for college. With a truck, a mower, and a lot of determination, Matt spent his days in class and his evenings mowing lawns to cover tuition. What began as a side hustle quickly turned into something bigger. Over time he realized that scaling a business wasn't about working harder—it was about building the right team, putting systems in place, and knowing when to ask for help.

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MATT DAVIS

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- 4. Action is Everything** – Knowing but not doing is the same as not knowing.



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says. "It's about ownership and how the businesses are run because they can be drastically different from each other and between product lines."

Outside of manufacturer connections, vendors also have contacts with other experts inside their network. Greg Nicoll, vice president, turf sales north at Harrell's, says when one contractor has an issue, the vendor can connect them with another pro who's experienced the same problem for help.

"All of a sudden, this beautiful relationship forms," Nicoll says. "The next thing you know, they've known each other for years and they're going on vacation together. Those are the things that we love to do; just network amongst each other and get people together and have them chat and strategize."

3 Embrace success

Business ownership isn't easy, and sometimes it can feel like a dogfight against everyone else to reach the top, or even just to stay afloat. One thing vendors want contractors to know is that they exist to help grow your business.

To fully optimize the partnership, contractors should be open to the idea of working with vendors in times of need and when they have business or product questions. For dealers and distributors, the relationship is symbiotic, meaning both parties hope to grow together. After all, they're in the service industry just as much as they are the landscape industry.

"We're not just trying to trade that for a sale. We truly want to be a part of the community and to help (contractors) make their businesses successful so that they can feed their families and they can achieve their dreams," says Clay Breazeale, vice president of turf sales south at Harrell's. "That's really what it's about. And then, of course, Harrell's will grow out of that, too."

Businesses that embrace their vendors will likely find much more than just the products they're looking for. However, when landscapers aren't as open, both parties can suffer.

"It hurts (the dealer's) bottom line because you're not making as many sales," Everglades' Coffman says. "Even more so, and I don't mean this in an arrogant way, but it almost allows the customer segment to settle for less."

Continued on page 18



Clay Breazeale

Clay Breazeale says many dealers and distributors have web pages dedicated to finding the best local stores and representatives, making it easier to connect with the right vendors. He recommends trying out the Harrell's representative locator at www.harrells.com/sales.

Continued from page 17

For him, if communication is poor and certain opportunities aren't being taken advantage of, contractors don't always get the best products and tools to do their jobs. Plus, if landscapers don't view the partnership as one with mutual growth, they may be hesitant to the advice being offered, even if it comes with their best intentions in mind.

4 More than just a sale

For many distributors and dealers, the initial sale is just one small part of their overall strategy to work with contractors. Sometimes, it's not even a part of it at all.

But other resources and behind-the-scenes work isn't always apparent to business owners, especially when compared to the shiny machines and mounds of materials out front ready to be bought.

"We continue to invest in research, innovation and business-building resources for lawn care operators, and we hope our customers know that these resources are available to them," Bamaca says.

Nicoll agreed with this idea, saying it's important for landscapers to go out of their way to talk about their



THE LONG GAME

Greg Nicoll says getting help from vendors will save money in the long run since contractors can be confident they're using the best products for the job.

business needs and goals. If they just take advantage of the bare minimum, they'll miss out on everything else that's offered.

"There are a lot of talented (employees) with knowledge here to assist," he says. "Leverage that relationship because there are a lot of folks here that care."

Even for landscapers that prioritize just the initial sale, there's always a bit more to it than the price tag attached to the purchase. When working with the bare minimum, it's still important for contractors to find the value in what their distributors and dealers can offer.

"We believe as a dealership that we're here to offer you value beyond just the lowest dollar upfront," Coleman says. "You're going to add value to your business in other ways through our parts supply and our level of services and the availability of technicians and things that we have at our service departments and our products that we offer beyond just a piece of machinery, whether it be extended warranties or some of the other products that we've built into our offerings that aren't even added at the manufacturer level."



Greg Nicoll

5 Be prepared

Even with good communication and an open mind, making the most out of a partnership with vendors is difficult if the contractor isn't prepared. When making operations as smooth and efficient as possible, the more information available, the better.

Boris Alvarado, South Florida district manager at Heritage Landscape Supply Group, says sometimes getting the contractor what they need without an exact product name or number can be difficult. When there's missing information, it could lead to consumers getting products that aren't the best fit.

"I'll use the iPhone example. I'll walk in and say, 'I need an iPhone 15 with a new retina camera ... and it's

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DEALER AND DISTRIBUTOR GUIDE

Continued from page 18
one terabyte,' versus the guy that just says, 'Give me the brand-new iPhone.' There's a huge difference between how specific somebody can be in our world."

Coleman agrees and says providing all the needed information upfront — such as finance contracts, drivers or business licenses and maintenance records — builds the relationship and makes getting help more efficient.

"Customers who can provide us with good, accurate information — just like we would try to provide them with good, accurate information — I think is really important, and it really saves time," he says. "It really makes for a good relationship."

Alvarado argues that coming prepared also builds synergy that can speed up future issues, and it helps vendors



IMPROVEMENT (Left) Boris Alvarado says constant education and learning new things is crucial for vendors. The landscape industry is always changing, meaning they need to stay up to date. (Right) With all the products they offer, being as specific as possible with your needs can help vendors get you the right products as quickly as possible.



service their customers better by getting to know them. For example, if a contractor likes certain brands or repeatedly uses a particular kind of product, dealers and distributors will recognize that and be ready to help.

Coffman says proper equipment maintenance can also be a good way to stay prepared. Sometimes, machine issues just happen, but whether a contractor

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BORIS ALVARADO



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checks their equipment regularly or well past the maintenance light coming on, knowing what issues need to be addressed and what has already been worked on goes a long way in building trust.



Boris Alvarado says neither party wants to take responsibility, he says.

“It can be a bone of contention because neither party wants to take responsibility,” he says.

Despite any challenges that might arise, Alvarado says one thing contractors should be prepared for is vendors wanting to work together. And if all goes well, landscapers should have an extra partner to lean on in their careers.

“I wish customers knew how much we actually cared about their business; that we want to form a relationship and not just be transactional,” Alvarado says. “I think that’s a huge thing for me. I wish they knew I want to form a relationship with you. I want to learn everything about you so I can best service you.”

For Breazeale, it all comes down to being ready for those open and honest conversations between vendor and contractor.

“A distributor can’t help a customer be successful unless there’s open communication, and success to a lawn care operator is happy customers and profitability to grow their business. In order for us to help them do that, we need open communication with them so we can help build the best agronomic program that fits into their business,” he says. “When we deal with lawn care operators, that’s the conversation that we want to openly have so that we’re all on the same page and working cohesively with them to move forward.”

PHOTO: JOHN DEERE



COMMUNITY CARE Coffman says getting involved in the local community is crucial for vendors to build trust in their area and get to know their customers better.

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DESIGNING SUCCESS

These eye-catching design-build projects offer a host of tips on overcoming challenging circumstances to produce big wins for both customers and contractors

BY SETH JONES | LM EDITORIAL DIRECTOR AND SCOTT HOLLISTER | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

There is no shortage of famous sayings and inspirational quotes about how the most challenging of situations often produce the most rewarding of results. Few of those, however, come from landscape designers and builders, which is a real shame.

Because if there is any group that knows about turning lemons into lemonade, it's the professionals in this industry who regularly manage the intricacies of complicated design-build projects to produce results that wow the customer and build stellar reputations for the contractors involved.

These success stories can offer plenty of lessons about what works and what doesn't when navigating the challenges these projects can present, whether those are restrictive physical spaces, environmental concerns, regulatory hurdles or demanding customers.

So, Landscape Management reached out to a host of top firms to learn about their biggest design-build success stories, what made the projects so challenging and how they overcame those challenges to create eye-catching finished products and satisfied customers.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR Lawn and Landscape Solutions Bucyrus, Kan.

When Lawn and Landscape Solutions landed the job of reinventing the backyard of a high-end residence in the Kansas City suburb of Mission Hills, Kan., the job came with several challenging elements.

As Sean Baxter, the founder and president of Lawn and Landscape Solutions, describes it, the project to renovate a 40-year-old pool and surrounding hard-scape area had to factor in strict setback restrictions, screening concerns and grading issues. The hurdles weren't insurmountable by any means, but they would require a deft hand from all involved.

That's why it's a little surprising that Lawn and Landscape Solutions turned to a first-time project manager, 23-year-old Diego Ibarra, to oversee the work and make sure it crossed the finish line on time and on budget.

Well, surprising to everyone except those who worked most closely with Ibarra.

"As expected, Diego embraced the new challenge head-on," says Quintin King, the director of design and build operations at Lawn and Landscape Solutions. "He successfully planned and executed the scope of work, managed project timelines and coordinated multiple subcontractors, including plumbers and electricians.

"His ability and willingness to address concerns from the customer and make real-time decisions ensured that the project stayed on track and exceeded the client's expectations."

For his part, Ibarra said the company's support on what was internally called the Roseburg Residence project was invaluable.

"Just because I'm young, I'm sure there are people who think I don't know what's going on," Ibarra says. "But I know our team respects me, and I respect them. I'm a person who doesn't just tell them what



Lawn and Landscape Solutions turned to Diego Ibarra to guide a project in Mission Hills, Kan.

PHOTO: LAWN AND LANDSCAPE SOLUTIONS



Reimagining a space that had degraded over time was the goal of this High Prairie Outdoors project in Kansas City.

to do; I show them. I don't ask them to do something I won't do myself, which they respect."

Work began on the project in October 2023, and thanks to a mild winter, it was completed four months later. The pool restoration took center stage but was only a part of the overall project that reimagined the patio, hardscapes and landscaping surrounding the pool. The new work included a two-tiered patio that ran from the back of the home to the pool, a new outdoor kitchen area, updated landscaping that surrounded the entire footprint and a new waterfall feature.

"I thought the waterfall turned out nice," he says. "It's kind of like a wall in one corner of the pool, but it fits in with everything else and has some really cool lighting where you can change the colors."

In addition to navigating the setback and space restrictions, Ibarra says the project's only other significant challenge was a regulatory one.

"The city was pretty strict in what they would allow and what they wouldn't, so we had to be careful about that," he says. "We couldn't pave more than we needed to, and there were some walls that we needed to be removed that they were concerned about. But we replaced those with new walls, and other than that, it was all pretty smooth."

Despite the minor roadblocks and the first-project jitters that Ibarra had to manage, the finished product and a satisfied customer gave him confidence that he had found a home in his new role at Lawn and Landscape Solutions.

"It was a big challenge for me, dealing with the customer, with contractors, with the city," he says. "There can be a lot of stress, but to see the work we did and know that the customer was happy made me feel good. I like what I'm doing and who I'm doing it with." — S.H.

HIGH STANDARDS FOR HIGH PRAIRIE

High Prairie Outdoors

Edwardsville, Kan.

Serving the greater Kansas City area is High Prairie Outdoors. Founded by owner/CEO Robyn Schmitz, the company came into existence almost by accident; Schmitz worked on a crew and then as a designer when she realized she loved the industry but couldn't find a company that matched her expectations for excellence.

"There was room to elevate the high-end residential game in Kansas. We never really set out to be business owners, but I do believe that things happen for a reason," Schmitz says. "In 2010, I basically said, 'If I can't find the company that I aspire to work for, maybe I'll create it and be that company for other people.'"

The company offers comprehensive, year-round service to its clients. High Prairie Outdoors has both designers and architects on staff. They offer landscape design, landscape installation, maintenance, pools, decks, spas, irrigation and drainage. Schmitz's husband, Bret, is a certified public accountant who serves the company as the operations manager.

One of the company's most complex and rewarding projects took place in North Kansas City, Mo. The site was a steep, heavily compacted slope with limited access and no existing infrastructure, which made conventional construction equipment unusable. The area, once a natural space, had become degraded over time — deep shade, poor soil conditions, water issues and no clear way to access or enjoy it. The homeowners wanted a

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transformation: a functional, visually appealing outdoor environment that could be used day or night while still respecting the natural habitat and local wildlife.

The primary challenges were threefold:

- Getting power and utilities through rocky terrain for lighting and irrigation.
- Addressing environmental damage, including soil compaction and poor drainage.
- Making the space accessible and safe with attractive, non-intrusive infrastructure.

"We approached the project with a combination of creativity and precision," Schmitz says. "To address the steep terrain and limited access, we used micro-equipment, cranes, conveyor belts and other specialized tools to move materials in and out. We conducted soil testing, followed up with a nutrient-dense soil regeneration program, installed a dry stream bed to manage and redirect water and designed an optimized irrigation system. We also integrated stone steps for safe access and strategically placed seating and lighting areas to make the space inviting at all times of the day."

"It starts at the design phase — where we set honest expectations with the client about what's possible given their goals, site conditions and budget."

— ROBYN SCHMITZ
OWNER/CEO,
HIGH PRAIRIE OUTDOORS

The result was a lush, multi-functional landscape that enhanced biodiversity, improved drainage and offered the homeowners a peaceful, immersive space to enjoy from both indoors and out.

The key to success in complex projects such as this one, Schmitz says, is proactive planning and clear communication from the very beginning.

"It starts at the design phase — where we set honest expectations with the client about what's possible given their goals, site conditions and budget," she says. "Next comes a detailed estimating and contract process where we spell out exactly how we'll solve the challenges, what materials and equipment will be used and define the scope with transparency."

The goal is to eliminate surprises before any work begins, she adds.

At High Prairie Outdoors, the company created a robust three-stage sales-to-production handoff process:

1. On-site planning and pre-mortem: Key stakeholders walk the site, review the project scope and conduct a "pre-mortem" to identify potential obstacles and opportunities.

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2. Formal project planning: Back at the office, they create a detailed project roadmap with assigned tasks, resources, delivery schedules and contingency plans.

3. Client introduction and expectations meeting: The production team is introduced to the client, they're walked through the phases of the project and clear communication standards are established.

Approximately two weeks before the start, the project manager leads a final kickoff meeting with the field crew and reviews video documentation, estimates and the full project plan. This level of preparation ensures the project is set up for success before boots hit the ground.

Especially challenging projects create a gamut of emotions, Schmitz says. But when the job is completed, the anxiety goes away, and it's replaced with pride.

"At the end, when you've surpassed your clients' expectations, kept all your promises and kept your budgets, it's a feeling of relief and pride." — S.J.

MALONE'S LANDSCAPE DELIVERS

Malone's Landscape
Kent and Snohomish, Wash.

One of Malone's Landscape's slogans is, "The perfect outdoor living space is closer than you think." But just because it's close doesn't mean it's easy.

Malone's Landscape was founded in 1991 by Jim and Debbie Malone. Over the decades, the company has grown from a few trucks into one of Seattle's premier landscape design and construction firms. In 2002, the company added Malone's Landscape Management to provide commercial maintenance and enhancements.

Jake Malone is the son of Jim and Debbie and used to work on the crew over the summers when his baseball schedule would allow. He didn't think he'd come back to the company until his brother Ryan did. Jake Malone attended Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida, earning a Bachelor of Business

Administration while playing on the baseball team as an infielder during his junior and senior years.

After discussing the idea of working with the family company with Ryan, he decided to give it a try.

"They needed another salesperson on the management side," Malone says.

Continued on page 26



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Permitting and logistical issues made this project near Seattle one to remember for Malone's Landscape.



Continued from page 25

"So, I came back home and joined the business, and I've done just about every job in the company since then."

Now the production manager, Malone knows exactly the success story he wants to reflect upon. The crew still talks about this project even though it was a few years ago. Essentially, a homeowner in Lake Forest Park, north of Seattle, wanted a covered deck with an outdoor kitchen.

But because of the location — and one valuable tree — the project was a logistical nightmare.

"The project had quite a bit of adversity. As you know, permitting here is brutal. The tricky part is, right behind these people's house is a creek/wetland," Malone says. "The Seattle area is very permit extensive. Most of the time, they don't even let you build. It's a miracle we even got through the permit phase."

The design called for the deck to be built around the tree. With so much existing tree cover, the Malone's Landscape crew couldn't crane anything in. They had to build kits and then haul them in using a material lift, or at times, three or four crew members carrying a big piece of lumber.

The property was large, but the tree cover and the deck being built literally on a creek meant there wasn't much room to move around. A temporary bridge was built so the crews could transport materials over the creek.

When it comes to a challenging project like this, Malone says his secret to success is to communicate to the entire team on the challenges and make it an "all-hands-on-deck" project.

"Our senior designer, Jeremiah Lord, had to be hands-on out there. Jeff Colston, the project manager, worked

really hard on this project as well," Malone says. "Anyone who could spare extra time would come in and help."

The results — as the photos show — was a picturesque oasis for the homeowners to sit outside and enjoy nature. Malone says the feeling upon completion was "euphoric."

"There was just so much blood, sweat and tears that went into this one," Malone says. "And the homeowners were so grateful. They threw a party with all their neighbors and invited us and the crew as well. We're out there having burgers, and the crew gets to experience the finished project and the joy." — S.J.

MASTERING THE MOUNTAIN

Sunline Landscapes

Bluffdale, Utah

Sunline Landscapes is based just south of Salt Lake City, meaning it's no stranger to applying its expertise in high-end residential work to homes in the resort area of Park City. Company founder and CEO Curtis Atkinson estimates his firm has done close to 40 projects in Park City over the years.

While each of those had its own particular set of challenges to overcome, he says there are common challenges to all work in and around Park City.

"It's pretty common with Park City projects to have a lot of acreage but a very small building space because they're right up against a mountain, and they're trying to preserve these natural areas," he says. "Most of them are on the side of a mountain — it is a ski area, after all —

PHOTO: MALONE'S LANDSCAPE

so you're dealing with tricky drainage, tricky elevations. And these are very high-end private estates or homes, so they need to be secluded, and they need to go through complicated approval processes. It's a lot."

A recent project tackled by the team at Sunline in partnership with a local homebuilder, however, stood out to Atkinson when asked if there was one that presented unique challenges in design and construction.

"The way the house is positioned on the property, tucked up against the mountains, created some challenges for us," he admits. "It needed to have a nice, natural look to it, multiple layers, terracing, so it didn't look like a giant wall. That also meant we wanted a bunch of plantings to soften that look."

Atkinson says a ski-in, ski-out access point on this property was also unique, requiring a stairway and walkway that was safe and walkable but stayed within the strict building envelope that had been approved for this property. There was also the ongoing problem of sourcing materials in a mountain environment that had to be solved.

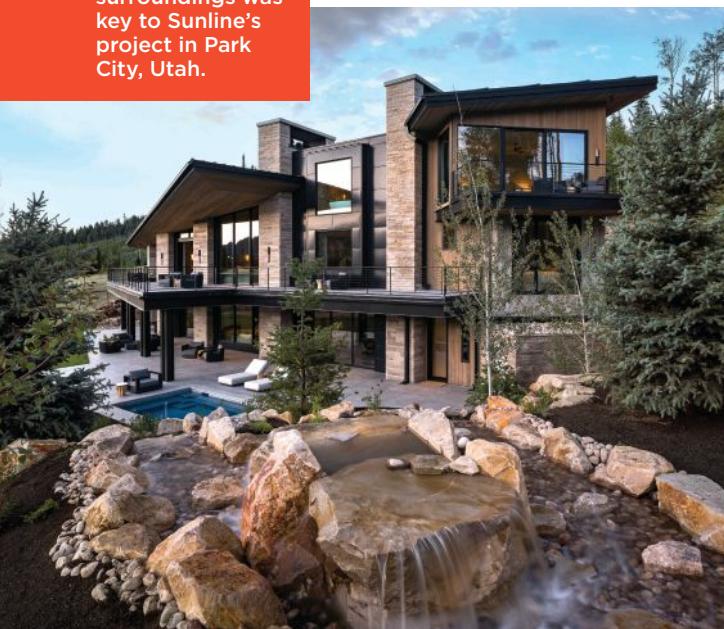
"You're building on the side of a mountain, right? So, it's a big-time challenge to source materials. Not to mention there is a limited plant palette to work with at that elevation. Not a lot grows up there," he says.

In the end, Sunline's experience with similar projects in Park City paid off. The homeowner was blown away by the entire property, which added yet another notch to the belts of the home builder and Sunline.

"We've done a lot of work with this builder for 15 or 16 years. They're great friends, great partners," Atkinson says. "Because a lot of the homes in Park City are second homes, vacation homes, the owners put a lot of trust in the builder who bring in their preferred teams. We're blessed that we've become one of those partners for the outdoor spaces of these homes." — S.H. 

Blending landscaping into the natural surroundings was key to Sunline's project in Park City, Utah.

PHOTO: SUNLINE LANDSCAPES



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The practice is only a temporary fix, but employing a certified arborist to assess the situation might be the right call for client and company alike

BY JOHN C. FECH | CONTRIBUTOR

Here's a scenario: You look closely at a tree on one of the properties you manage, and intuitively, you think something is wrong or could easily go wrong. Maybe you even back away slowly, as the tree just looks weak and troublesome. At this point, the thought of cabling or bracing enters your mind to improve the look and safety of the tree. These are good thoughts and are in the best interest of the client.

Cabling reduces the likelihood of tree branches with bark/branch inclusions separating from each other and helps stabilize weak branch attachments through the installation of hardware. It can be a valuable procedure for creating increased structural support in the short term.

It can also be used for slightly extended branches and situations where the central leader has suffered storm damage and no longer exists, but several scaffold limbs are weakly attached. However, cabling is generally recommended only on a temporary basis.

CABLING, BRACING DEFINED

So, what is cabling, and how does it differ from bracing? Cabling involves placing thick, wound wire/cables two-thirds of the way up the tree's height in the canopy. Bracing involves the placement of thick metal rods about 2-4 feet above the weak branch unions.

This work must be done by an ISA-certified arborist with extensive experience and proper equipment. It's not a job for a homeowner or a non-professional; if you see an attempt



to stabilize poor branch angles and included wood, it's best to inform the property owner of their responsibility to hire a certified arborist to investigate and remediate.

WHY IS IT A SHORT-TERM FIX?

Cables and braces are needed when branches are arranged such that the conductive vessels of one branch are being compressed by an adjacent branch (whose vessels are also being compressed). This type of water/nutrient movement reduction is best limited to a year or two in order to keep a tree in good health.

Once sufficiently weakened, the potential for branch separation — aka failure — increases dramatically. As time passes and weight and leverage are incrementally added, the hardware's capacity to stabilize the branches is increasingly reduced.

If a canopy has weakly attached or poorly angled branches without branch inclusions, cabling hardware can remain in a tree longer. However, a certified arborist must inspect the tree yearly to determine whether sufficient support exists for it to remain in the landscape without posing an unacceptable risk to the client or passersby.

WHERE TO DO IT

Cabling and bracing can be done in any part of the landscape but is especially appropriate for high-visibility and target-rich environments where people and valuable property items are frequently present. Examples of these sites include shopping malls, post offices, HOA clubhouses, churches, schools, golf course practice greens, rest area picnic grounds, sports field spectator bleachers, children's playgrounds and residential

landscapes with patios and gazebos. Rural cemeteries and acreage wind-breaks are locations where cabling and bracing are not likely to be worth the investment.

In addition to target-rich spaces, high-value trees that are underplanted in a particular region, memorial trees planted to honor a philanthropic or generous donor to a public place and sentimental trees that have special meaning to a particular family are often considered worth the time and effort. When assessing the site for possible cabling/bracing installation, interviews or listening sessions with the client are essential.

PROS AND CONS

These procedures have pros and cons. On the plus side, the most notable of those is making weak trees stronger and preventing a fatal accident or destruction of an important building.

Unfortunately, installing cables and braces draws unwanted attention to a hazardous situation. This hardware often provides a false sense of security, a feeling that the tree is safer or more stabilized than it really is. The bottom line is that it's important to thoroughly assess the site, the


degree of instability of the tree and the potential for harm to occur if no action is taken.

ALTERNATIVES TO CABLING

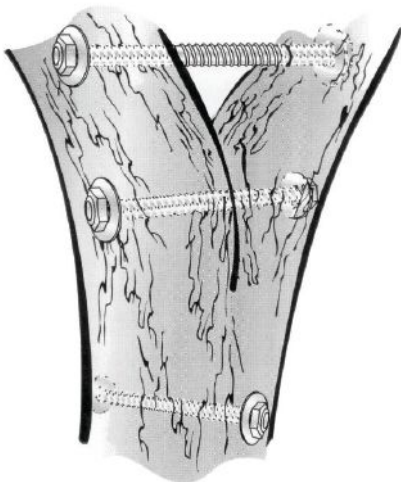
If the time, expense and effort of cabling or bracing aren't an option, there are at least two alternatives to hardware installation.

First, cut off one of the co-dominant branches in a V-shaped arrangement, if possible. This often creates a large wound that may not close and leads to heartwood decay but could extend the tree's life by five or six years instead of the one or two associated with hardware installation. It could also leave a void in the canopy, which the client may not like. In each following year, the tree should be inspected

by a certified arborist to determine if additional pruning is necessary to keep the tree stable and eliminate weak stems that grew in response to the branch removal.

Second, you can simply cut the tree down and remove it from the landscape if spending the money to cable/brace or prune off a branch is not feasible. This eliminates the problem and related liability completely. While this option is usually not popular in the short term, it allows for the establishment of a sturdy replacement that will provide long-term benefits instead of hanging on to the vestige of a formerly beneficial specimen. 

John C. Fech is a horticulturist with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a certified arborist with the International Society of Arboriculture.



Bracing involves using strong metal rods at the tree's weak branch unions.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN C. FECH

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WILD GOOSE CHASE

Hunt down crabgrass and goosegrass in
your landscapes BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

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When it comes to weeds, sometimes you just need to cook its goose.

Crabgrass (*Digitaria* spp.) and goosegrass (*Eleusine indica*) are two similar and common turf pests found poking out of lawns throughout the United States. Germinating in the spring and growing quickly through the warm months, these annual weeds can produce thousands of seeds that can stick in the soil for years, causing a perennial problem.

LIKE A WAGON WHEEL

Jason James, owner of Turf 212 in Greenville, S.C., says a common issue with both weeds is being mistaken for each other. To some, both weeds can just look like “out-of-place grass.”

“If you look at it very closely, you can see a bunch of hairs all over the crabgrass,” he says.

James also says crabgrass is clumpier, taller and can sometimes have a purplish color, especially at the base. Goosegrass, however, is flatter and more matted to the ground with a

thicker, whiter root system and stems that look similar to a wagon wheel.

He also notes that it’s important to not confuse these pests with dallisgrass, which is another similar grassy weed. Dallisgrass has a unique black seed head, meaning that’s a defining detail to look for.

HUNTING SEASON

Depending on location, James says that chemical treatment for crabgrass and goosegrass can change for different types of turf. However, there’s a decent catch-all strategy that he’s found to work well.

“So Barricade (prodiamine) and my Dimension (dithiopyr), I treat it the same for bermuda and zoysia and fescue,” James says. “Right now, we’re spraying that across the board. So on all my grasses, we’re spraying bermuda, zoysia, with Barricade going out the door Feb. 15.”

James says depending on how quickly he can get to his customers, he’ll then make a second application across the board with Dimension near the second week of April. He recommends prodiamine products due to its versatility, availability and cost efficiency.

“That’s your best preemergent to use across the board. That’s why everybody makes prodiamine,” James says. “Because prodiamine is so cheap.”



IN A PINCH

Crabgrass is clumpier with dense hairs coating the leaves, according to James.


For dithiopyr, James recommends Corteva Agriscience and Quali-Pro’s products.

He also warns that those in colder and warmer climates will have different schedules for applications. As a general rule of thumb for preemergent application, soil temperatures at a 2-inch depth should be roughly 55 degrees for crabgrass and about 60 degrees for goosegrass.

HEALTHY HABITS

Crabgrass and especially goosegrass like to thrive in thin soil where conditions are unfavorable, such as near driveways and sidewalks. This means that the best preventative measure for these pests is proper turf maintenance.

“I’m a firm believer on this; the best weed control you can apply on your yard is a thick, healthy turf,” James says. “The thicker you can keep that yard, the better off you are. That’s what’s going to help to fight your weeds.”

James also says mowing height and frequency come into play, especially when working with different grasses. Leaving fescues taller while cutting zoysia and bermuda shorter has shown him success with managing his landscapes. 



PROPER PRACTICES
Good turf maintenance can help resist a lawn’s susceptibility to these weeds.



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Reaching new heights

Brandon and Melissa Holley found motivation and connections at the 2024 LM Growth Summit

BY LAUREN H. DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR

After hitting revenue milestones and winning industry awards, Brandon Holley, president of Lawn Solutions in Arlington, Tenn., wanted to continue growing his company without losing the personal touch his customers had come to expect.

"I might be president of the company, but I still go out to their yards and do surprise pop-ups," Brandon Holley says. "We want to give our customers that next-door neighbor kind of attention."

One way he and his wife, Melissa, vice president of Lawn Solutions, sharpen their business skills is by connecting with other professionals at green industry events.

"I'm still learning even after 30 years and will always be learning," Brandon says. "If I'm still learning at my age after doing it for so long, I'm sure someone else in their younger years and just getting into it could probably learn something I have to offer. So, it's kind of a win-win for me."



Melissa Holley

FORMING CONNECTIONS

In December, the couple attended the 2024 LM Growth Summit, where they networked with other owners, demoed new equipment, met with leading supplier partners one-on-one and formed lasting relationships.

The Summit provides professionals with innovative ways to improve their businesses and build relationships with peers from across the

country. Brandon says he and Melissa left feeling ready to hit the ground running when they returned from the three-day event in Orlando, Fla.

"The small business owner needs that kind of motivation, especially getting into our peak-season work," he says. "To get that motivation in our off-season and get us geared up for the new spring was perfect timing."

While Brandon knew the event would be close-knit, he says he was still surprised by how much he and Melissa connected with the other attendees and the supplier partners.

Networking with other women was one of the highlights for Melissa.

With a limited number of women in the industry, she appreciated meeting others she can bounce ideas off of

and plans to stay connected, Brandon says.

"That's just priceless," Brandon says. "We're all out to help one another in our industry, which is so important to me."

KEY TAKEAWAYS


Having various lawn care and equipment suppliers on-site was another benefit to attending, Brandon says. He especially liked seeing machines from Stinger Equipment and Steel Green Manufacturing. The experience led him to buy a new ride-on aerator.

"The vendors were all top-notch and easy to talk to," he says. "They answered all of the questions I came in with. I enjoyed talking to all of

them and even got to try some of the new equipment."

He encourages other owners who want to take their businesses to the next level to consider attending the event in the future.

"It could be meeting that one person at the right time and place that could change their career and motivate them to be more successful as a leader," he says. "They can also bring that motivation home to their teams and have them become better leaders."

"It was nothing but good times, good fellowship and good people," Brandon says. "It was just a win-win-win across the board." 



Brandon Holley

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.

GET TO THE SUMMIT!

If you're reading this, it means you're interested in learning more about the tools available to help lawn care operators get the job done. Instead of reading about the tools at the LM Growth Summit, why not attend and see them for yourself?

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— SCOTT LAMON, TYNIC LANDSCAPING
(2024 *LM* GROWTH SUMMIT ATTENDEE)



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THE BIG ONE

A taste of Europe

BY ROB DIFRANCO
LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

LOCATION Orem, Utah

COMPANY Sunline Landscapes

DETAILS Before Sunline Landscapes took over maintenance of this property in 2022, the annuals and perennials were overgrown. As a result, Sunline crews have spent plenty of time working to fulfill the client's wishes for a European aesthetic.

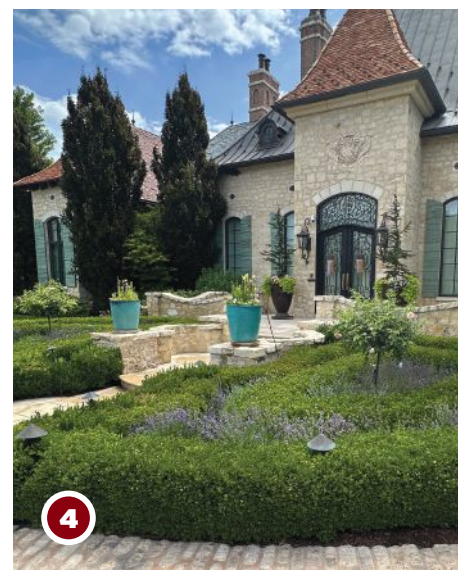
The property lead trains the climbing roses weekly to prevent them from becoming overgrown. Crews also manicure the boxwoods once at the beginning of the season and hand prune everything else for the remainder of the year.

The centerpiece of the property is an imported water feature, which the client brought over from Italy. Maintenance crews must hand prune around this water feature and the rest of the ponds on the property.

The property also features three koi ponds which require crews to take special care when pruning and caring for the plant life around them.

Sunline Landscapes won a gold award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Awards of Excellence program for this project. 🏆

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



Captions | 1. Sunline Landscapes performs every maintenance element except for healthcare for trees more than 12 feet tall. 2. All perennials on the property are hand-pruned to ensure their longevity and a consistent bloom. 3. The weeping cherry tree touches the ground, the manicured wisteria covering the roofline is trained to grow and the boxwood is maintained as a continuous hedge with a rounded top. 4. The client selected an annual color palette that Sunline describes as light and airy.

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ENVIRONMENTAL TECHNOLOGIES

BUSINESS BOOSTERS

Staying ahead of noise ordinances

Pro landscape insiders offer five strategies to best manage and navigate local regulations on gas-powered equipment **BY MIKE ZAWACKI | CONTRIBUTOR**

A growing wave of grassroots legislative action is reshaping the landscape industry as municipalities nationwide implement increasingly stringent regulations on gas-powered equipment.

While often framed as noise ordinances, these restrictions are sometimes driven by a desire to eliminate gas-powered tools, with noise complaints serving as the Trojan horse. Now, landscape professionals face the complex challenge of navigating local restrictions while providing clients with quality service.

Landscape industry pros and insiders offer five strategies and best practices to better serve clients while adhering to these restrictions.

STAY INVOLVED AND INFORMED

Direct and consistent engagement with local government is crucial for landscape professionals navigating these evolving regulations, says Kris Kiser,



Kris Kiser

president and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI). To stay on top of the issues municipal councils are dealing with, Kiser advises contractors to stay on top of meeting notices, proposed ordinances and meeting agendas, all accessible online or through the local media.

“You need to be aware of what’s going on in the communities you’re working in and recognize, as a business, that if these (restrictive ordinances) are going on the books, it’s likely a result of a complaint or group of complaints,” Kiser says.

Operating in a distinct geographic area, and often being residents themselves, gives contractors and their crews a specific advantage about the political climate of the communities they serve, says Bob Mann, NALP’s senior director of technical and regulatory affairs. However, this familiarity should not supplant proactive due diligence.

“If you don’t understand or haven’t made an effort to go and find out if there is some kind of an ordinance in

place, it’s probably a good idea to do so,” he says. “If you don’t, you’re going to run into police or an enforcement person who is going to issue a fine or a ticket. So, it’s better to know upfront that you’re in compliance.”

GO ELECTRIC

Switching from gas-powered to quieter-running, pro-grade battery mowing and maintenance equipment is a prudent option landscape pros can consider when troubleshooting local ordinances.

Roswell, Ga.,-based Ed Castro Landscape serves the greater Atlanta region, and has begun the conversion to battery-powered landscape equipment to meet client preferences for reduced noise and emissions. Ed Castro Landscape is a full-service landscape company whose service offering is 55 percent landscape maintenance (mowing and turf care, enhancements, irrigation, tree work, etc.) and 45 percent design-build landscape construction, serving a client portfolio that is 30 percent residential and 70 percent commercial.

“Currently, we’re undergoing that transition, and we have a number of clients who are with us because we offer battery-powered services,” says Aaron Vilchez, director of maintenance. “And as this technology grows, we’ll be able to offer more of this service to clients concerned about noise and emission pollution.”

However, the cost of large-scale conversion — particularly the price of lithium-ion batteries — isn’t financially feasible for all landscape companies, especially small to mid-sized outfits operating on tight margins.

Landscape contractors must budget properly for this transition, and Vilchez advises treating battery-powered equipment as a capital expenditure to spread costs



Aaron Vilchez

over time. In addition, he suggests increasing maintenance rates to recoup the investment because clients are often willing to pay more for the benefits of battery-powered equipment.

SEND THE CORRECT MESSAGE

Whether proactive or reactive, landscape pros must build goodwill correctly and transparently with their clients about noise and equipment issues.

Landscape pros must correctly train their crew to react and manage a situation where someone complains directly about equipment issues. Mann suggests teaching crews the art of being good, sympathetic listeners who acknowledge the complainant's frustration and suggest they contact their boss or owner to discuss the issue further.

"Often, people just want their concerns to be heard by someone," Mann says. "After they vent, it's often enough to diffuse the situation."

Likewise, a proactive and transparent communication strategy can effectively address a landscape contractor's regulatory challenges. Mann suggests educating customers about the indispensable role of their current equipment lineup and the lack of viable alternatives. In addition, try to reach a sympathetic ear with those who oppose landscape work. Remind people that you're a local business owner, that your company employs people from the community and that you're a vital part of the local economy.

ALTER PRACTICES

Twenty-plus-year landscape industry veteran Tom Smith says doing business in the Phoenix market creates significant logistical challenges. In his market, a contractor more often runs afoul of local daylight-hour ordinances



rather than direct noise violations, even though noise is what generates most complaints.

During a Phoenix summer, it's not uncommon for daytime temperatures to top out at 110 degrees F, says the owner of Desert Designer Landscape and Development, which focuses 100 percent on landscape design-build work. The searing midday temperature forces Smith's crews to start their workday at an early hour to be more productive. However, this can generate complaints from nearby residents who are angered at the noise too early or too late in the day.

"If I don't get started early, then there's a good chance I'm sending someone to the hospital by noon," Smith says.

To troubleshoot this problem, Smith has begun rotating elements of a project.

Aspects that call for equipment to run are held off until later in the day when the noise is less impactful to nearby residents. Manual or hand labor is focused on during the day's cooler hours. Most importantly, to keep the workflow going, Smith strategizes and plans the evening before on the types of less intrusive work to complete the next morning.


"Yes, this adds time to a project's schedule, but it allows us to work while keeping my people safe and the neighbors nearby from logging a complaint," Smith says. "The extra margins gained

from a shorter project turnaround aren't worth sending someone to the hospital in an ambulance for heat stroke."

EXERCISE COMMON SENSE

Many landscape pros operate in densely populated areas with residential homes close together. The persistent din of leaf blowers, edgers, trimmers and mowers creates a pervasive noise environment, especially during prolonged fall and spring clean-up activities.

The landscape industry bears a degree of responsibility for exacerbating this issue, Mann says. To illustrate this point, Mann offers a striking example he observed firsthand — a landscaping crew deployed nine backpack blowers simultaneously on a single landscape during an April cleanup at a hospital. The combined noise output exceeded the decibel level of ambulance sirens within the hospital zone.

"Landscape pros need to use a modicum of tact about using this equipment," Mann says. "You don't need to have nine people standing next to each other blowing in a line. This just drives complaints and makes people mad." 

Mike Zawacki is a Cleveland-based journalist and frequent LM contributor who has covered various aspects of the landscape and horticultural industries for the last 20 years.



Tom Smith



Bob Mann

HARDSCAPE SOLUTIONS

Take a peek

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

LOCATION Denver, Colo.

COMPANY Designs by Sundown

DETAILS When someone's dream home and landscape pops up in the neighborhood, it's hard not to look.

After years of designing, planning and building, Designs by Sundown's (DBS) "Americana Estate" stands proudly in this historical Denver suburb, taking on a French chateau style (really, they imported limestone from France) that seamlessly blends the property's interior and exterior features into one composition.

Keven Winkelmann, PLA, senior landscape architect for DBS and the project's designer, says lots of thought and effort went into providing natural privacy to the house while still letting passerby view the finished product.

"We did want to still allow peek-a-boo views to the house but not full-blown 'here's-my-big-house' views," Winkelmann says. "(The client) obviously did want people to see the beautiful house that they built."

Winkelmann says being smart with the location and type of vegetation was one of the biggest factors for privacy. Mature Colorado spruce trees were spaded and relocated from the original house, and blue and green fastigate spruce, Hicks yew, dwarf Korean lilac hedges, Alleghany viburnum, flowering pear trees and more were all selected to provide the needed screening and aesthetics.

The rebuild of the house and landscape also added several outdoor features such as a 20-by-40-foot pool and fountain, a large fire pit, expansive patio areas and even an outdoor kitchen to host large gatherings.

In the end, DBS won a gold award from the 2024 National Association of Landscape Professionals' Awards of Excellence program for this project. 🏆

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



Captions | **1.** Winkelmann says the vegetation was designed to highlight and focus attention on certain features of the property, such as the mature fastigate spruce trees surrounding the fountain space. **2.** One of the biggest challenges when rebuilding the house and landscape was reversing the property layout, causing several mature trees to need relocation and a new driveway to be installed. **3.** A balustrade fence borders on top of a 30-inch retaining wall that raises the backyard. Winkelmann says the wall was being built before the fence pieces arrived on site, leaving no room for error. **4.** Winkelmann says Designs by Sundown still does full maintenance of the property, including lawn care, pruning, irrigation checks and more.



PHOTOS: RON RUSCIO

» RECOMMENDER

What emerging trends in **landscape lighting** are customers gravitating toward in 2025?



Customizable lighting that blends into the natural surroundings are catching consumers' eyes in 2025.



RYAN WILLIAMS
FX LUMINAIRE
SAN DIEGO, CALIF.

"In 2025, customers are increasingly implementing dynamic RGBW lighting systems for customizable outdoor environments, allowing homeowners to adjust colors for different moods and occasions. There is also a strong demand for dark-sky-compliant fixtures that reduce light pollution while still providing effective illumination. Sleek fixtures that blend into modern landscapes are popular, as well as smart home integration, enabling users to control their outdoor lighting remotely or through automation systems."



KEVIN MINTON
COASTAL SOURCE
MOORESTOWN, N.J.

"In 2025, we see the landscape lighting industry trending more toward the dramatic effects light has on the beautification of the subject without seeing the source. Designers are opting to incorporate fewer and smaller fixtures — blending in with the space around them and producing much better results than larger fixture options. The Coastal Source family of EVO lighting fixtures ... allows landscape professionals to use the same module in multiple form factors, allowing opportunities to illuminate spaces with new techniques."



JASON CROMLEY
HIDDEN CREEK
LANDSCAPING
HILLARD, OHIO

"Our team is fully embracing the vast assortment of lights and how each one brings a different element. Much like each plant has a specific role in our designs, our lighting can do the same. For many years ... our designers said I had a limited mindset that only allowed for about five different lights. I was missing out on so much when I realized all the options and enhancements that we could offer by proper design. Focusing on the design at the beginning sets us up for much better success."



ROGER RAMSEY
EWING OUTDOOR
SUPPLY
PHOENIX, ARIZ.

"Current economic conditions are placing pressure on discretionary spending ... and consumers are being more value-conscious when making decisions regarding landscape lighting. We still have the larger, project-based sales of premium offerings, but everyday, over-the-counter demand for economy products has risen over the past several years. Also, black finishes have grown rapidly. Some manufacturers are selling black-enamelled imported brass products, blending the two intersecting national trends."

IRRIGATION TECH

Unlocking hidden valves

New controller technologies, such as Weathermatic's built-in valve locator, can save contractors time and resources

BY MAX MORENO | CONTRIBUTOR

In recent years, smart technology has made significant advances in irrigation controllers, offering features that improve efficiency, water conservation and ease of use.

Among these innovations, a built-in valve locator such as the one found in the Weathermatic SmartLine controller can be an invaluable tool for landscape professionals. While smart controllers are typically recognized for their weather-based adjustments and remote management capabilities, the valve locator feature is a game-changer that often goes unnoticed.

THE HIDDEN CHALLENGE

One of the most frustrating and time-consuming issues for irrigation contractors is locating buried or hidden valves. Over time, landscape conditions change; grass grows over valve boxes, mulch and debris accumulate and renovations

alter the landscape, making previously accessible valves nearly impossible to find. When contractors take over a new maintenance account, one of the first challenges is identifying the existing irrigation infrastructure, especially when documentation is outdated or missing.

This scenario unfolded when we took over a landscape maintenance account in Irvine, Calif. The property's irrigation system had been neglected for years, and traditional methods of finding valves — such as probing the soil or using outdated as-built plans — were proving inefficient.

HOW IT WORKS

Built-in valve locators simplify this process. Unlike standard controllers, which only provide basic zone operation, this feature sends a specialized electrical pulse to the valve, creating an audible “chattering” noise that allows contractors to locate the valve even if it is buried beneath layers of grass, dirt or mulch.

The process with SmartLine is straightforward:

1. Activate the valve locator mode in the controller.
2. Select the station associated with the missing valve.
3. Listen for the chattering sound the solenoid produces as it rapidly turns on and off.
4. Pinpoint the exact location of the valve and clear away any debris for access and maintenance.

THE BENEFITS

Built-in valve locator features provide several advantages for landscape

maintenance companies, irrigation auditors and property managers:

1. They save time and labor costs.

Without a valve locator, searching for buried valves can take hours or even days. The ability to quickly locate hidden valves allows contractors to focus on actual repairs and system improvements.

2. They reduce property disruptions.

Traditional valve-finding methods often involve unnecessary digging, damaging turf, disturbing plant material and creating unsightly patches. The chattering feature in the SmartLine controllers allows contractors to pinpoint the valve with minimal disruptions.

3. They enhance system troubleshooting and repairs.

Irrigation systems frequently experience valve malfunctions, pressure inconsistencies and wiring issues. Locating and accessing valves easily allows contractors to diagnose and repair problems quickly.


4. They improve documentation for future maintenance.

Once valves are located, they can be mapped and documented for future reference. This ensures that future contractors or maintenance teams won't face the same challenges in locating them again.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While the valve locator feature is not necessarily a new technology, it is often overlooked when selecting an irrigation controller.

When considering an irrigation controller for new installations or system upgrades, landscape professionals should prioritize features that save time and labor costs.

Built-in valve locators do exactly that, proving that sometimes, the most valuable tools are the ones that solve the simplest but most persistent problems in landscape irrigation management. 



Max Moreno is the vice president of water conservation with Harvest Landscape in Orange, Calif.

PHOTO: MAX MORENO

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FIVE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW BY SETH JONES | LM EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Robert Bertog, CLP, CSP

PRESIDENT
BERTOGLANDSCAPE
WHEELING, ILL.

1 Tell me about Bertog Landscape and how you got into the business.

We're a design/build maintenance firm, full service across the board, and we've been doing it for over 50 years. We're on the outskirts of Chicago proper in Wheeling, Ill. My background is in finance. My brother started the company back in 1974 when I was in sixth grade, so I've been pushing a lawn mower over the summers since then. I went to college, got a couple of degrees in finance, and then I was down at the Options Exchange from '84 to '92. Then I hooked up with my brother in '92 and came on full board with him. We've been in a growth phase since then.

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

I know people think of tools like shovels and tractors and things, but I think of it at a different level. I think the most important tool for us is communication, and that's at all levels. That's starting at the top, from your first meeting with the customer, and keeping everybody involved. You want to stay in front of everybody with great communication. And I think details, details, details — they are so important. Technology is just changing so quickly. Every week, they come out with new equipment, and they make a better mouse trap. But I like to go back to the basics, and listening and communicating, to me, are tools that are going to give you a great job at the end of the day.

3 You do a radio call-in show with WGN in Chicago. Why do you find that valuable, and what kind of exposure do you get?

You just hit the keyword: exposure. This is our fourth or fifth season. They had me on for just a couple of questions, and then I guess they said that the phone board just lit up. People call with questions. I don't know what's coming at me. It's anything from turf health care to issues with trees and shrubs. It's a 20-minute segment, and it's just a lot of fun.

4 Any trends you're noticing with your clients?

I think if you go back a few years when COVID was around, it was a great opportunity for most people in this industry. People wanted outdoor spaces. They wanted patios. And so we built a lot of outdoor spaces in the back of the house. But a trend we've noticed is a lot more people doing front yard gathering areas; they interact with their neighbors. If you want to be intimate, you can go still into the backyard, but what if you want to have fun and just interact with neighbors? The dogs are out, the kids are out playing. We found a lot of people congregate to the front yard, and they want a seating space or seat wall. I think that's a trend. And then as far as other trends, the buzzword is sustainability. A lot of clients are saying, "We want an organic product. What are you doing about the carbon footprint? Are you using battery-powered equipment?" We're following all those trends as best we can.

5 How do you feel about the health of your business and the industry as a whole?

I have to be optimistic. Hopefully, every year, you want to have a better season than the last. But I think some people are sitting on their hands right now. I think people are going to finally realize that it is March and they're moving their clocks forward. It's time to start moving. I do think interest rates might come into play this year. There's just a lot of uncertainty in the economy, but I have to be positive. We have a backlog of work from last year. If I had to say, is it going to be a good or bad year, it's going to be good, but I think there's some hesitation coming out of the gate. 📌

BEST ADVICE

"The No. 1 advice I give to people is to listen. We always have people say, 'Oh, I hear you.' Well, you hear me, but you're not listening. Especially in a business where it's so interactive with people, it's imperative to listen."



PHOTO: SUE MARKGRAF, GREENMARK MEDIA

Betting on success

How Genesis Landscape Solutions is preparing for its next stage of growth

BY LAUREN DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR

Planning ahead and taking calculated risks have helped Mesa, Ariz.-based Genesis Landscape Solutions, which checked in at No. 124 on the 2024 LM150 list, grow year after year.

Ranked No. 41 for fastest-growing firms, the company experienced a 20-percent increase in revenue between 2022 and 2023 and again between 2023 and 2024. That's typically how much it grows based purely on referrals from existing customers, says Joe Calland, CEO of Genesis.

"Over the years, we have seen that if we maintain our high standard of quality and hire passionate people to join our team, our satisfied clients are typically enthusiastic about referring us to new business," Calland says. "This has been crucial to our sustained growth."

Genesis, which was founded in 2012, also merged with two smaller local companies during that time and has been operating fully as one company since 2023.

With four locations, the company serves homeowner associations, commercial properties and municipalities across the Phoenix metro area. It provides maintenance, tree care, enhancements/construction, irrigation, pest and plant health services.

MAKING SMART BETS

Genesis' philosophy is that it can't be afraid to take risks and should always be prepared for the next stage of growth, Calland says. That's something the company has done from the start when the founder of Genesis, Warren Wheat, bought a tree truck and underwent the arborist licensing process — all before the company had its first tree customer. Now, it runs an entire fleet of tree crews year-round and employs multiple arborists.

These days, those bets and risks mainly involve new hires and adopting new technology, Calland says. Genesis

implemented Aspire Software, had multiple key new hires start in recent years, invested in building a leadership team, created common strategic goals as a company and added new incentive plans to reward the behaviors it wanted to encourage.

But like many others in the industry, Genesis faced challenges in 2023, such as inflation and record-breaking heat. The company also learned that rapid growth presented unique challenges, such as an overwhelming number of one-time projects and new processes to manage.

"We had to get extremely organized and set ambitious timelines to get those issues solved while at the same time not letting day-to-day issues fall through the cracks," Calland says. "Our solution was to over-communicate, relentlessly prioritize tasks and work in groups to make sure we got to the right answers as fast as possible."



Joe Calland

EYEING GROWTH

For others looking to grow, Calland encourages companies to set financial goals, create metrics the team can regularly track and invest in their business. He says many owners in the industry seem to overvalue cash and undervalue their time.

"Instead of dwelling on how much it will cost to hire that new person or get that new software, focus on how much time it will save," Calland says. "Every business has an impossibly long list of challenges to solve, but if you can find yourself the freedom to attack the top issues on that list, you can make huge progress and differentiate yourself."

If companies fail to do that, they risk getting stuck in the trap where there is too much to deal with every day that they can't focus on their higher-level priorities, he says.

With Genesis' team, culture and overall structure already in place, Calland says the company's next focus will be on organizational excellence and the customer experience, which go hand in hand.

"Despite our growth, we want our customers to think of us as the same small company we were a few years ago, one that is eager to help and willing to go the extra mile," Calland says. "We are going to put the work in to make that happen." 📌

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.



To read more about Genesis Landscape Solutions, check out the June 2023 issue of *Landscape Management*.



BY JUSTIN WHITE

The author is the CEO of K&D Landscaping in Watsonville, Calif. He can be reached at justin@kndlandscaping.com.

A call to action for 2025

Greetings! I'm Justin White, the CEO of K&D Landscaping in Watsonville, Calif., and I am excited to make my debut as the newest columnist for *Landscape Management*.

I took over K&D from my parents in 2015 and have scaled it into an eight-figure business. In 2022, I founded the JW Group, a platform for landscape leaders to take their businesses to the next level. This year, the JW Group launched The Disruptors, an online community for those looking to innovate and challenge the status quo in the green industry. Through my podcast, public speaking, coaching and now this column, I am on a mission to raise the bar in the landscape industry.

The industry is poised for transformation. The way we hire, sell, operate and scale our businesses is evolving faster than ever. Technology is advancing, labor dynamics are shifting and customer expectations continue to rise.

The opportunities have never been greater for those willing to embrace change.

That's why Raise the Bar isn't just a column — it's a movement. It started in 2015 with a simple but powerful idea: to push the limits of what's possible in this industry. It's a mindset shift, a challenge to reject mediocrity and lead with innovation. It's about building stronger teams, creating scalable businesses and setting a new standard for success.

As the Raise the Bar movement enters a new chapter with *LM*, the mission remains the same: to elevate the industry by providing real-world strategies that drive growth, profitability and long-term success.

Are you ready to take massive action in 2025?

This isn't about sitting on the sidelines; it's about action and execution. If you're serious about leveling up, here's what it means to raise the bar in today's landscape industry:

- **Building a scalable business.**

Developing systems, processes and automation that create predictable profit and allow you to grow without chaos.

- **Developing a winning team.**

Leadership strategies that create a culture of ownership, accountability and long-term retention.

- **Leveraging technology for profitability.**

Artificial intelligence, automation and data-driven decision-making that make businesses more efficient and competitive.

- **Mastering sales and marketing.**

Positioning your company as the premium choice in your market — not just the lowest bidder.

- **Creating generational wealth.**

Profit-first strategies, merger and acquisition opportunities and financial models that build a lasting legacy.

This isn't just about revenue growth. It's also about leadership, mindset and impact. It's about taking control of your future and raising the standard for what's possible in this industry.

The industry is changing — will you lead or be left behind?

The landscape industry isn't the same as it was five years ago, and it won't be the same five years from now. Change is happening, with or without you. The only question is: Will you take control and lead the change, or let it leave you behind? If you're reading this, you're already thinking bigger and participating in this movement. Now, it's time to take massive action.

I want to thank Bill Roddy, Seth Jones and Scott Hollister for giving Raise the Bar a new platform in *LM*. Their commitment to pushing the industry forward aligns perfectly with this mission, and I'm honored to be a part of it.

In future columns, I'll share fundamental strategies, actionable insights and lessons from my journey scaling K&D Landscaping into an eight-figure company. But this isn't just about me; it's about your growth, impact and legacy.

So, here's my challenge to you: What's one bold move you're making in 2025 to raise the bar in your business? I want to hear from you, so drop me a message, comment or connect with me on social media. I want to help you take that next step.

Let's make 2025 the year we take massive action and redefine what's possible in this industry. 📌



RAISING THE BAR
Justin White with K&D Landscaping, the JW Group and The Disruptors, is *LM*'s newest columnist.



BY JASON NEW

The author is a founding principal and executive coach for McFarlin Stanford.

Can trust supercharge your business?

Q What are the best ways to build trust so team members believe in our direction and want to stay long-term?

A If you want to build a thriving landscape business, trust isn't a nice-to-have — it's a necessity. Your team needs to believe in your leadership, the company's stability and their future within your organization. Without trust, you'll struggle to retain top talent and attract new team members who can help take your business to the next level.

How do you build trust and communicate a compelling vision that keeps the team engaged and committed? Here are three strategies that we've seen drive results across the most successful companies in our ACE Peer Groups.

CAST THE VISION, BUT MAKE IT PERSONAL

It's not enough to have a five-year plan laminated on a wall. Your vision has to live and breathe within your company's culture. You can't just talk about growth or culture from 30,000 feet — you must bring it down to the ground level where your team operates every day.

Team members want to know: "Where are we going, and why should I care?" But even more importantly, they're asking, "Do I have a place in that future?" If you're not answering that, you're missing a major opportunity to build internal trust.

Action step: Make vision casting a rhythm, not a one-time event.

Use quarterly state-of-the-company addresses to communicate progress toward big goals, and in team meetings, translate those goals into what they mean for each department. Sit down one-on-one with key team members and show them the link between their role and the broader mission. When the team can see the straight line from their work to the company's future, it builds trust and ownership.

PRIORITIZE TRANSPARENCY AND OPEN COMMUNICATION

One of the fastest ways to erode trust is to keep your team in the dark. Lack of communication breeds fear and disconnect. Transparency isn't about oversharing every financial detail; it's about being honest and clear.

Teams want to know what's going well, what's not and how the company plans to address challenges. Even when the news isn't great, being upfront builds credibility. When leaders are quiet, people start filling in the blanks — usually not in your favor.

Action step: Create a communication cadence and stick to it. Monthly town halls, weekly team check-ins and even a short Friday message from leadership can make a big difference. And don't make it one-way; ask for questions and start conversations. The companies we work with that build the deepest trust are those where team members feel heard, not just spoken to.

LEAD WITH ACTIONS, NOT JUST WORDS

Trust dies when leaders say one thing and do another. Your team watches everything — what you reward, what you tolerate and how you show up

when things get tough. If you preach accountability but make excuses for leaders at any level or talk about work-life balance while texting at 10 p.m., your credibility erodes fast.

Your values have to show up in the small moments, not just the big speeches. When leadership at every level walks the talk, it sends a powerful message: You can trust us to do what we say.

Action step: Audit your actions against your stated values. If "teamwork" is a core principle, are your leaders actively cross-collaborating and breaking down silos? If "professionalism" matters, are job sites tidy and uniforms consistent? These aren't minor details; they're signals. And in every interaction, you're either reinforcing trust or chipping away at it.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Your company's future isn't built in a strategic planning session. It's built every day in how you communicate, lead and show up. If you want to attract and retain top talent, you have to create an environment where people believe in the direction you're going and trust the people leading them there.

At McFarlin Stanford, we've helped hundreds of landscape businesses build cultures of trust that drive loyalty, performance and growth. If you're ready to level up how your team connects to your business's vision, let's talk.

Do you have a question for a future *Ask McFarlin Stanford* column? Submit it to info@mcfarlinstanford.com. We're here to help you lead with purpose and grow with passion.



BY JEFF KORHAN

The author is the owner of True Nature Marketing, a Naples, Fla.-based company helping entrepreneurs grow. Reach him at jeff@truenature.com.

Based on a true story

Once had a client tell me he hired my landscaping company not because of my experience but because of my honesty about my lack of experience. It turns out honesty and a little humility go a long way when you are short on ways to grow your business.

Marketers struggle with transparency because they fear appearing too vulnerable — or worse, lacking expertise. Think about when you meet someone. What makes the biggest first impression? Is it their intellectual smarts or expertise in their field? Or is it the fact that they are interesting and interested in you?

Marketing used to lead with credentials, experience and proof of capabilities. While those qualities are still relevant, they matter less than most people realize. The traditional marketing equation has been flipped. To get noticed, it's now necessary to lead with deeper and more relatable content.

Buyers today want access to the top contractors who are in short supply. To find them, they aren't Googling, "Who's the absolute best landscaper?" They're thinking, "Who can handle my project and will not

“When you put stories in front of your business, you create a compelling narrative that invites buyers to inquire further.”

ghost me during the process of getting it done?”

Most buyers will resist engaging with a business until they have a personal connection with somebody within it. How often have you visited a website looking for a way to connect without finding it? It's as if business owners went to great lengths to conceal their identity. In addition to missing SEO opportunities, they are turning away leads and potential business partnerships.

When you put stories in front of your business, you create a compelling narrative that invites buyers to inquire further. This is much easier than using marketing to explain every little thing about how your products and services will make their lives better.

People are complicated. We all have our hot buttons and personal priorities. It is impossible to

address all of them, but the right story can suggest the capabilities that will resonate with your prospects. Buyers may not be savvy about landscaping and lawn care, but most are smart about people, so they can infer what they need to know from a true story.

Please don't give up on using marketing to be helpful. Instead, change your perspective. Market to your audience like they are already friends or customers. What you say matters less than how you say it because your personal touch may soon be your only distinction in contrast to AI-generated content.

Ask yourself why Netflix and other streaming services lean on credibility hooks like “based on a true story.” These companies are tasked with satisfying an insatiable demand for streaming content that resonates with audiences.

Consider thinking about your marketing channels in this way. Instead of promoting products and services, share interesting client or employee stories. This type of nuanced content will likely inspire deeper and more meaningful business narratives.


If you need a storytelling formula, here's one I learned from a Hollywood screenwriter: “Somebody does something, and it works out.” That may seem simplistic, but Hollywood films are hopelessly formulaic. So, don't overcomplicate this. Just develop a process for curating the true stories your team members bring back from the field and use them to make more compelling marketing that rings true. 



PHOTO: STURTI/E+/GETTY IMAGES



BY TITO CACERES

The author is the managing director at Bloom Talent Solutions in Miami. He can be reached at tito@bloompartnerstalent.com.

From first touch to first day

Three out of four landscape workers who quit in their first month cite poor onboarding — not pay — as their primary reason for leaving. Yet most companies still treat hiring as the finish line rather than the starting point. What happens after a candidate applies and eventually accepts an offer is what really determines whether they stay, perform and thrive.

At Bloom Talent Solutions, we've worked with landscape companies across the country, and one pattern keeps showing up: Companies aren't losing people because of pay alone; the real culprits are unstructured interviews, abbreviated onboarding and unclear cultural expectations.

Here's how to fix that, with simple, real-world improvements you can make right now.

INTERVIEW LIKE IT MATTERS

The interview process is your first chance to make a real impression. Too often, it's treated like a box to check. Candidates show up not knowing who they're meeting or what to expect. Managers wing it. No one follows up.

Let's be clear: Candidates today have options. They want clarity, respect and speed. The ones who don't get those things walk.

To earn some quick wins in this area, try:

- Sending a quick email or text before the interview with what to expect.
- Using a short list of behavior-based questions for consistency.
- Giving feedback — yes, even to the ones you don't hire. It builds your reputation.

We've seen clients reduce ghosting by simply following up within 48 hours. That alone makes a huge difference.

“Companies still treat hiring as the finish line rather than the starting point.”

ONBOARDING IS WHERE TRUST BEGINS

We hear this from field employees all the time: “They just threw me out there.”

Onboarding isn't just paperwork or safety training. It's your chance to show new hires they made the right decision and help set them up for long-term success. A strong onboarding program should:

- Have a clear first-week agenda.
- Include a short welcome message from leadership about your company's mission and purpose.
- Deliver hands-on training for critical digital tools (scheduling apps, time tracking, routing systems) used in daily operations.
- Introduce them to their team and pair them with a crew buddy to guide them through the first week.
- Define what success looks like at 90 days, six months and a year.
- Schedule a 30-day check-in to listen and support their progress.

THE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE = YOUR BRAND

Even candidates you don't hire are part of your brand. If they feel ignored or disrespected, they'll tell others, and that reputation spreads.

If you want to be seen as a destination employer, act like one. That means quick replies, clear communication and a process that feels intentional. Consider using mobile-friendly applications, which we've seen consistently attract more

applicants, and text updates to keep people engaged and reduce no-shows.

INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

The landscape industry presents unique challenges with hiring and onboarding employees, so some equally unique tactics can help.

For your seasonal workforce, consider developing a “returnship” program that encourages top performers to return next season. Also, keep communication open during off-seasons with periodic check-ins. For a multi-lingual workforce, provide bilingual documentation for critical onboarding materials, and ensure training resources are available in multiple languages.


SUCCESS STORIES

We've seen remarkable transformations when landscape companies prioritize the candidate experience, including seasonal workers returning at higher rates the next year and higher-quality candidates joining despite pay staying the same.

The bottom line is that hiring is just the start. What happens between a candidate's first interaction and the end of their first 30 days decides whether they become a long-term asset or just another turnover stat.

Audit your current process and ask yourself:

- Do we follow up?
- Do new hires feel supported?
- Would I want to go through our hiring process?

Make just one or two changes, and you'll see the difference. Because in landscaping, success doesn't come from just filling roles. It comes from building trust from day one. 

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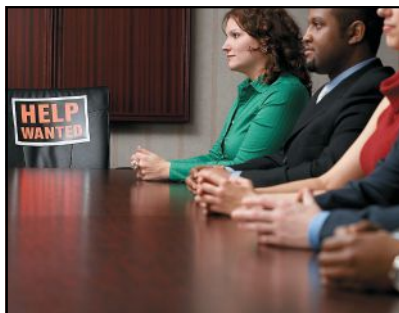
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[KEEP SMILING]

Got good news?

Do you have an employee that deserves to be recognized? Is your company making a positive impact in the world? What about a heartwarming story to share that will put a smile on your colleagues' faces?

If so, email Editor-in-Chief Scott Hollister (shollister@northcoastmedia.net) and Editorial Director Seth Jones (sjones@northcoastmedia.net) for a chance to be featured an upcoming edition of *LM's* good news feature column.



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BY MARTY GRUNDER

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



A busy-season survival guide

April is my birthday month and a great time for me to be reminded each year that I'm not as young as I once was.

I think this fact hits me the hardest each spring. As we get back to our peak head count and onboard new team members, we're knocking the rust off and getting back to full steam. Our sales team is working on securing new maintenance contracts and booking design-build work for later in the summer, our production team is training new additions for the season and fine-tuning routes, and our administrative team is doing lots of setup to keep the business rolling.

As the work piles up, we're hopefully going to plan ahead and manage our workload to avoid any all-nighters. What works for us? Here are my best tips to help.

SPEND TIME PLANNING AHEAD

Look at the next 30, 60 and 90 days to see what's coming down the pipeline. What projects are sold and will be scheduled? What type of training can you do now to prepare your team for what the new season



“You can only tolerate chaos for so long. Work to get into fire-prevention mode instead of fire-fighting mode.”

brings? What systems can you spend time setting up to make your days easier this summer?

When we plan ahead, we can reduce the “noise” that comes from all the little emergencies and distractions. You'll never eliminate all of them, but focus on getting and staying organized, and it'll serve you well.

All planning is good; the more you plan, the more control you have of the outcome. The more control you have, the less stress you'll have.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Sticking to a routine can help immensely in a busy spring. For me, that means making time for a daily walk and sticking to my bedtime, even if I'm in another time zone. Some other ideas include:

- Getting away from your desk to eat lunch.
- Waking up earlier so you can sit and enjoy a cup of coffee.
- Committing to going home at 5, even if it means you work from home after the kids are in bed.
- Flexing your schedule so you can make it to your child's game or recital.
- Treating yourself to a piece of candy after you finish a big task.

We can only be our best selves at work if we're also taking care of ourselves, and burnout will catch

up to you eventually. If you have to schedule time on your calendar to decompress, do it.

Remember that as a leader — and a leader in my book is anyone who makes things better — you should always be asking, “Would I want to work with me?” and then taking steps to make sure the answer to that is “yes.”

SPEND TIME ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT

We can't fix issues if we aren't spending time on them. What's your biggest challenge this season? Put time on your calendar weekly to work on addressing that, whether it's through brainstorming solutions, doing outreach (for sales or recruiting, for example) or implementing something you know will help. If your biggest challenge is labor, but you're spending zero hours each week working on that, you can't expect to see improvements.

I know these spring months can be taxing, and today I know something that I didn't know when I was younger — you can only tolerate chaos for so long. Work to get into fire-prevention mode instead of fire-fighting mode. It'll help you and your team's days to be smoother, and it'll improve morale, too.

Best of luck this month, I'll talk to you again soon! 🍀



The world didn't need a new mower. It needed a new Lazer Z.

The Lazer Z X-Series has arrived—built to deliver unmatched durability, legendary cut quality, and performance that exceeds expectations at every turn. The future of mowing has never looked so good. Visit your dealer to experience the Lazer Z.



Explore the
legacy behind
the legend.



LAZER Z
— SINCE 1995 —

Let no weed past the first punch.

Callbacks can be the greatest challenge for any lawn care business, requiring you to use extra product, time and fuel. Unless of course, you're fighting with Nufarm premium herbicides. Get quality results with every round – as tough weeds tap out, and customers enjoy the victory.



Learn more about our premium herbicide solutions at [NUFARM.COM/USTURF/DEFEATWEEDS](https://www.nufarm.com/usturf/defeatweeds)