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[bit.ly/42BOWIq](http://bit.ly/42BOWIq). Entries are due by April 1. The LM150 list highlights the largest landscaping companies ranked by annual revenue. The list will appear in the June issue of LM and contact LM Special Projects Editor Marisa Palmieri with questions at [mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net](mailto:mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net) or 440-537-4308.



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## If you can't beat 'em ...

Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, often cited a phrase credited to Pablo Picasso when discussing one of the cornerstones of his company's success.

"Picasso had a saying — 'good artists copy, great artists steal,'" Jobs famously said back in a 1996 interview, "and we have always been shameless about stealing great ideas."

Whether Picasso ever actually said that is a point of great internet debate, but regardless of its origins, that phrase or some variation of it is pretty well known, and I'm sure most business owners have thought about it when their competitor down the street tackles some cool new project or comes up with a particularly innovative program.

I know I have. During my career, there have always been times when I thought, "Dang, why didn't I think of that?" followed almost immediately by me thinking, "How can we do that better here?"

A case in point was the first time I learned about the concept behind the *Landscape Management* Growth Summit, which we highlight in this month's issue. At the time, it was actually the version of that event put on by our sister publication in the golf course management space, *Golfdom*, that caught my attention, but the concept was the same, as was my reaction: "Ah, \$%!&. What a great idea."

For the uninitiated, the *LM* Growth Summit is an annual event that brings together lawn care appli-

cation professionals and leading suppliers in the landscaping industry for two days of networking, education and one-on-one meetings designed to improve business operations and build relationships within the industry. This year marked the 12th edition of our event, and each of the other five brands in the North Coast Media family have their own variation of this theme.

**"During my career, there have always been times when I thought, 'Dang, why didn't I think of that?' followed almost immediately by me thinking, 'How can we do that here?'"**

When I started to hear positive feedback about those early golf versions of the Summit, I immediately tried to conjure up ways my old magazine could put on something similar. Unlike Jobs, I've always gravitated toward borrowing good ideas as opposed to blatantly stealing them, but try as I might, I could never come up with a good way to put a different twist on what was a pretty unique concept. Most years, I'd just sigh, tip my cap and move on to the next thing.

Then, North Coast Media and this publication came calling. And while there were plenty of other compelling

reasons that I made the move I did, and it would be disingenuous to say the *LM* Growth Summit was a driving force behind my decision, I did view the chance to be a part of that as one heck of a perk of this new job. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, right?

So, my first go-around at the Summit was the one you can read about in this issue. What will I remember most about the experience? Mainly that my initial impressions about this event way back when were spot on, that this concept still works for both attendees and industry partners and there's no reason it won't still work for another 12 years.

From what I saw and heard, it was a win-win for all involved. The attendees I spoke to said they learned something or made some connection that would immediately benefit their company. The suppliers I spoke to said they had forged stronger relationships with their customers and came away with a better understanding of how they could serve this industry better.

You can read more about this year's event, what attendees took away from the experience and the messages our industry partners delivered starting on page 18. And if you're interested in joining us at next year's *LM* Growth Summit, check out [www.lmgrowthsummit.com](http://www.lmgrowthsummit.com) for all the details, which will be available soon. 





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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](https://www.LandscapeManagement.net).

## What is your opinion on the state of the landscape/green industry in 2025?

“The market has experienced steady growth in recent years and will remain on this trajectory into 2025. This is primarily due to the increase in both residential and non-residential construction. With this growth, industry professionals will face challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified workers to keep up with demand.”



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**Marty Grunder**  
The Grow Group  
Dayton, Ohio

**Phil Harwood**  
Tamarisk Business Advisors  
Grand Rapids, Mich.

**Jeffrey Scott**  
Jeffrey Scott Consulting  
New Orleans, La.

“Companies are broadening their service offerings and expanding into new territories to capture more market share, fueled by increasing demand for water-efficient landscapes, smart irrigation technology and eco-friendly solutions. The future belongs to companies that can adapt, diversify and leverage technology to enhance efficiency and environmental responsibility.”



“The green industry is undergoing rapid change. Technology, legislation and consolidation will push operators to re-examine the core tenets of their businesses. Those who will thrive will filter the *real* game changers from the noise.”

“I think 2025 is shaping up to be a strong year for the industry. In 2024, the election-year uncertainty led many companies to put hiring and investments on hold, but now that’s behind us. Businesses are regaining confidence and investing in growth.”



“I’m very bullish on 2025; I think the new administration in D.C. is much more business-friendly, and business owners have a lot of confidence. Time will tell, but I am very excited, and we have made significant investments in our businesses, which we anticipate growing.”



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





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# LM GALLERY

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

**1 Tee time** In addition to education, networking and one-on-one meetings, attendees at the 2024 **LM** Growth Summit in Orlando took time out for a little golf. This group featured Brandon Rushing from Brandon Rushing Lawn and Garden Care, Michael Sorensen and Rob Golembiewski from Atticus and Brandon Rushing's Tom Nolan.



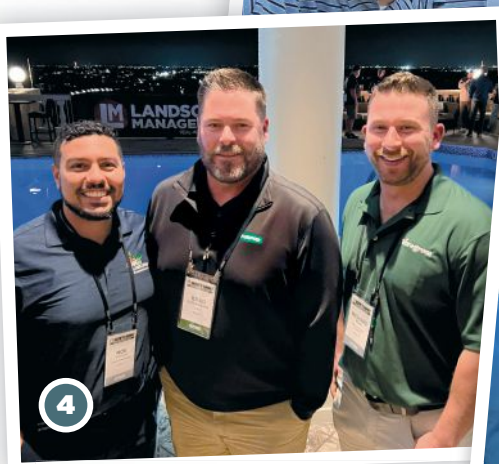
**2 Chief competitors** North Coast Media's president/owner, Kevin Stoltman (right) teed it up with (from left) Jim Turner from Numerator Technologies, Dani McFadden with PBI-Gordon and Colin Scarsdale with Pro Lawn and Pest at the **LM** Growth Summit.



**3 Fantastic foursome** (From left) **LM** Editor-in-Chief Scott Hollister took to the links with Jeff Harkness with 3PG Advisors, Lynn Tootle with Gro-Masters and Andrew Scott with PBI-Gordon during the **LM** Growth Summit.



**4 Pool party** (From left) Noe Loarca with Avanza Landscaping, Brad Hendrickson with Turfco and Richard Pearl with Drew's Lawn and Landscape soaked up some hospitality during a reception at the **LM** Growth Summit.



**5 Three's company** **LM** Growth Summit attendees enjoyed a barbecue dinner on the second night of the event. Shown here (from left) are Scarsdale, Pearl and Clint Baxter from Green Seasons Lawn and Tree Service.



**6 No second fiddle** The members of Jeffrey Scott Consulting's second-in-command peer group commemorated their first stand-alone, in-person meeting — which took place in Destin, Fla., in early January — with a group selfie.







**7 Direct competition** *LM* Editorial Director Seth Jones (second from right) and his golf partners at the *LM* Growth Summit: (from left) Christopher Lemaster with Turf Masters Brand, Cal Hill with Quali-Pro and Matt Smith with Steel Green.

**8 Farm friends** *LM* Publisher Bill Roddy spent a day at the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (MANTS) in Baltimore in early January connecting with friends of the magazine like Jacklyn Krysa from Petitti Family Farms.

**9 Team Atticus** Roddy stopped by the Atticus booth during his time at MANTS 2025 in Baltimore to catch up with the crew representing the company there — (from left) Paul Fox, Cam Copley, Ty Ferraro and Sorensen.

**10 Men in black** Roddy paid a visit to the Arborjet/Ecologel booth and met up with Ryan Mason, the Mid-Atlantic regional technical manager, during MANTS 2025 in Baltimore.

**11 G'day mate** Roddy talked winter weather and the NFL playoffs with Craig Carlson, president of Mulch Mate, at MANTS 2025.

**12 New adventures** Pure Insight's Carmen Magro, Ph.D., (center) with colleagues Dave Waldmann and Valentine Godin during the Opening Celebration at the GCSAA Conference and Trade Show.



## A first for second-in-command peer group

BY SCOTT HOLLISTER | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It might be a little strong to call a relatively new industry peer group reserved for the top lieutenants at landscape and lawn care companies a happy accident or a case of taking lemons and making lemonade.

But even Sean Baxter, the group's facilitator, admits the creation of Jeffrey Scott Consulting's second-in-command peer group — or 2IC, as it's called internally — which held its first stand-alone meeting in Destin, Fla., in early January, was more than just a little fortuitous.

"We had a phenomenon that kept happening with our main peer groups (Leader's Edge) where owners were bringing their second-in-commands to those meetings," says Baxter, president of Lawn and Landscape Solutions in Bucyrus, Kan., and a peer group facilitator for Jeffrey Scott.

"Those peer groups are pretty popular and well attended. Before we knew it, we had 30-35 people in the room, and Jeffrey and I just couldn't function

running a peer group with that many people. It got us thinking that we really needed a whole separate group for second-in-commands."

The gathering in the Florida panhandle marked the start of the 2IC group's third year. The group had met in person each of the first two years (in addition to numerous virtual gatherings), but always as an offshoot of a Leader's Edge peer group meeting. This solo event featured panel discussions, one-on-one strategic planning for 2025 and, in what was a first for this group, a tour of Russell Landscape Group's Miramar Beach branch location.

"(The tour) was really interesting, a great fit for this group," Baxter says. "You have this giant company that Teddy Russell founded in Atlanta (No. 44 on the 2024 LM150 rankings), and we're at a \$7, \$8 million branch. What we were really after as a group of general managers was to learn how a company takes its values, mission and culture from metro Atlanta and translates those to this branch hundreds of miles away. What systems are used to create consistency in that kind of organization? It was really instructive."

José Andrés Genel, chief operating officer at Landscape Renovations in Afton, Minn., is a first-year member of the 2IC group but had previous interactions with Jeffrey Scott's owner's peer groups. He had glowing reviews from his time in



(From left to right) Abby Dobson with Blanchford Landscape Group in Bozeman, Mont.; Maggie Cremeans with Landscapes by Terra in Marysville, Ohio; and Desiree Bouchard with Great Lakes Landscape Design in Oak Park, Mich., tackle an assignment during the second-in-command peer group meeting.

Destin, although he admits he carried more skepticism than positive expectations into the meeting.

"My main goal was to figure out what exactly we were getting out of this," Genel says. "Is this something functional? Is this something practical? Or is it more like just a space to vent about your owners and your teams?"

"I was super glad to learn that the people in the room were just like me and completely capable of changing their companies in ways that they don't even know. It's a great group, and they've built a great culture that is very action-driven. It's like having a gym buddy, someone who is going to hold you accountable."

Desiree Bouchard, general manager at Great Lakes Landscape Design in Oak Park, Mich., is another 2IC peer group member with previous experience with the Leader's Edge groups. She says her takeaways from the 2IC gathering in Destin matched what she had experienced previously.



During its first stand-alone meeting, members of Jeffrey Scott Consulting's second-in-command peer group toured the Miramar Beach, Fla., branch of Russell Landscape Group.

"The whole concept blew my mind a little, just the willingness and ability to have this network of people with different companies who are so willing to share what's working for them, what's not working, programs they find really valuable," Bouchard says. "It opened my eyes to a world I didn't know existed within the industry."

Abby Dobson, general manager of Blanchford Landscape Group in Bozeman, Mont., and another 2IC peer group member, actually had a seat at the table for a Leader's Edge peer group before ever joining the second-in-command group. Company CEO Andrew Blanchford spent several years abroad, meaning Dobson essentially ran the business in his absence


and took advantage of opportunities usually reserved for him, like Leader's Edge.

Because of that, her initial experiences with the 2IC group weren't as rewarding as she had hoped, and she stepped back from the program in year two. But she was coaxed back in by Baxter and the new direction taken by the group for year three, and she says her experience in Florida will pay dividends for her company down the road.

"This time, the focus was on the connections of the members in the group, mirroring the style of the owner's group," Dobson says. "When we were talking about business, it felt much more open and like we were setting the stage for more authenticity and candid feedback.



**Sean Baxter, president of Lawn and Landscape Solutions in Bucyrus, Kan., is the facilitator for the second-in-command peer group.**

"When you have a group like that in the same room, someone has had the exact same problem that you've had and can tell you how they dealt with it, talk about what worked and what didn't work. That's super valuable." 

## JW GROUP LAUNCHES NEW ONLINE COMMUNITY

The JW Group has launched The Disruptors, an online community designed to help landscape professionals grow their businesses.

Founded by LM Editorial Advisory Board member Justin White, CEO of K&D Landscaping in Watsonville, Calif. — who scaled his family business from \$1 million to \$20 million — The Disruptors will deliver a platform for education, collaboration and action, according to the company.

White says The Disruptors is more than just a network, calling it a dynamic educational community created specifically for landscape professionals who want to take their businesses to the next level. Focusing on real-world challenges and solutions, The Disruptors will provide a year-round resource for learning, connecting and staying motivated.

Core features of the new community include:

- **Weekly expert sessions.** Learn from top leaders in the landscape industry and beyond.

- **Peer collaboration.** Share insights and strategies with like-minded professionals who understand your challenges.
- **Actionable resources.** Access tools, templates and curated content to implement change immediately.
- **Community momentum.** Be part of a group that celebrates progress and drives accountability.
- **In-person events.** There will be at least six in-person events in 2025 focused on networking and technology innovation.

"We built this on the foundation of traditional principles, new ideas and massive action — that is the ethos of The Disruptors community," said White, founder of The JW Group. "Running a landscape business can feel isolating, but The Disruptors creates a space where you're surrounded by people who share your goals and are ready to push boundaries."

To join and learn more about the features of the community, visit [disruptors.jwhitegroup.com](https://disruptors.jwhitegroup.com).



**The JW Group recently hosted an event in Atlanta to celebrate the launch of The Disruptors, an online community to help landscape professionals grow their businesses.**



## Equip Expo unveils plans for 2025

**E**quip Exposition unveiled several new features—including new equipment categories, entertainment and more—for its 2025 event, Oct. 21-24 in Louisville, Ky. “We are always aiming to improve what we can offer attendees, and the excitement around the 2025 show is already high. We’re well ahead in exhibitor space reservations this year over 2024,” said Kris Kiser, president and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), an international trade association representing manufacturers and suppliers of power equipment, small engines, battery power systems, portable generators, utility and personal transport vehicles and golf cars, which owns and manages the show.

With more than 1.2 million square feet of indoor and outdoor exhibit space, the trade show includes the 30-acre Outdoor Demo Yard, peer-to-peer networking events, education—including sessions put on by *Landscape Management*—technical training offerings both in English and Spanish, high-level speakers and entertainment.

Several events and offerings will be available, including:

- Jesse Cole, founder of the Savannah Bananas, will speak to inspire attendees to grow their businesses to new heights. Cole will share what it takes to develop a great idea into a brand people embrace and love and how to keep creativity flowing for the long haul.
- Created just for the Equip Exposition, an exclusive small-batch bourbon will be made by a Kentucky master distiller. Equip is asking attendees and exhibitors to help name the bourbon through an online contest.
- Boom trucks, lifts and other large vehicles will be available in an outdoor KEC parking lot as well as indoors on the floor of Freedom Hall.



**Equip Exposition 2025 returns to Louisville, Ky., Oct. 21-24 with many new features, education and entertainment.**

- An expanded UTV Test Track will move this year to a larger area. The relocation frees up additional space in the 30-acre Outdoor Demo Yard, where attendees can test equipment, drive, cut, chop, dig, trench and more in the updated space.
- Entertainers Big & Rich and solo country artist Gretchen Wilson will perform an exclusive concert for show attendees at the Kentucky International Convention Center (KICC) in downtown Louisville on Thursday evening of the show. The concert is included with admission to Equip Exposition.

Since assuming management of the business-to-business trade show in 2022, OPEI has worked to grow Equip Exposition’s offerings. The show broke attendance records in 2022 with 25,000 attendees, in 2023 with 27,000 and again in 2024 with 28,500. The blockbuster trade show brings more than \$25 million annually to Louisville.

Registration is \$25 through May 31. To register, go to [equipexposition.com](https://equipexposition.com). @

## MANTS 2025 hits it out of the park in Baltimore

The 2025 Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (MANTS) welcomed 10,460 attendees, including exhibitors, to a sold-out trade show floor featuring more than 900 exhibitors at the Baltimore Convention Center in early January. The show drew more than 2,970 non-exhibiting buying companies.

“The energy and enthusiasm at MANTS 2025 was truly remarkable,” said Vanessa Finney, executive vice president of MANTS. “Exhibitors repeatedly told us how pleased they were with high-quality

leads, strong sales and valuable networking. MANTS continues to be where the green industry meets to move business forward.”

MANTS aims to foster hands-on learning through informal conversations on the show floor. Veteran professionals and newcomers share insights and explore emerging trends. One big goal of the trade show is to have attendees leave with new ideas and strategies, according to MANTS.

“This year’s show has been fantastic,” said Jessa Collier, vice president of marketing and communications at Colmet. “Traffic has been strong, and we’ve fielded

great questions and ideas from potential customers. We’ve also reached more people, making it a prime chance to introduce our product to new audiences.”

“MANTS has been a great experience,” said Tobias Smith, U.S. key account manager at Westbrook Greenhouses, a first-year exhibitor at the show. “Traffic was steady, and we connected with potential and established customers, including new nurseries. Our conversations were strong; attendees aren’t tire-kickers; they’re serious about purchasing and forming business relationships. We’re looking forward to exhibiting again next year.”



## GROWTH CONTINUES FOR RUPPERT, LAWNPRO

Ruppert Landscape and LawnPRO Partners each unveiled two acquisitions in January, continuing the pattern of growth for both companies.

Ruppert, No. 12 in the 2024 *LM150* rankings of the landscape industry's highest-earning companies, acquired Lawnscares in Panama City, Fla., and Ocean Woods Landscaping in South Carolina.

Meanwhile, LawnPRO Partners acquired both Savannah, Ga.-based Gro-Masters along with Green Image Lawn Care, based in York and Lancaster, Pa., in January. The moves were the 10th and 11th for the company; HCI Equity Partners backed both moves.

Founded more than 30 years ago by Joe Littleton, Lawnscares provides commercial landscaping services in the Florida Panhandle area. Ocean Woods provides services ranging from lawn upkeep to designing major communities, serving customers in Hilton Head, Bluffton, Okatie and Beaufort.

Phil Key, CEO of Ruppert Landscape, said of the two acquisitions: "We are thrilled to welcome Matt

and the entire Ocean Woods team to the Ruppert Landscape family. And we're excited to grow our presence in the Florida market through our partnership with Lawnscares."


Gro-Masters provides lawn care treatment, exterior pest control and tree and shrub care services to residential and commercial customers. The company was founded in 1987 and is led by Lynn Tootle, who will continue to lead the company as president post-acquisition. Green Image offers lawn care services and fertilization, soil testing, tree and shrub care, and flea, tick and mosquito control to residential and commercial customers. The company, founded in 2016, is led by Luke Zimmerman and Ryan Freed, who will continue with the company after the acquisition.

"We are thrilled to welcome the Gro-Masters and Green Image teams and look forward to continuing their tradition of outstanding service while expanding into new markets," said Bill Viveen, CEO of LawnPRO Partners.



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# Healing through landscaping

A South Florida LandCare branch chips in to help brighten the grounds of a local organization assisting children in need

BY SCOTT HOLLISTER | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

*Editor's note: "Time for some good news" is a new feature that will spotlight some of the good deeds, great people and positive stories in the landscape industry. If you have your own good news to share, reach out to either Seth Jones at [sjones@northcoastmedia.net](mailto:sjones@northcoastmedia.net) or Scott Hollister at [shollister@northcoastmedia.net](mailto:shollister@northcoastmedia.net).*

**A**s the president and CEO of the nonprofit Children's Harbor, Tiffani Dhooge is all too familiar with the occasional struggles her organization faces for resources, assistance and even cold, hard cash.

So, when Juan Carlos Gutierrez and his teammates from the Fort Lauderdale, Fla., branch of LandCare came calling with an offer to help renovate the landscaping around Children's Harbor's campus in Pembroke Pines, Fla., she accepted the offer with open arms and a grateful heart.

"We're so used to piecing things together with limited resources that the idea of someone offering such a generous gift — without strings attached — felt almost too good to be true," Dhooge

says. "Once we realized the sincerity of the offer, the excitement and appreciation quickly took over."

Gutierrez, the general manager at the Fort Lauderdale branch, and his team have a long history of giving back to the community through volunteer work.

Previously, they've tackled projects revitalizing local parks and have assisted with lawn care needs in struggling neighborhoods.

Looking for its next philanthropic endeavor, Gutierrez's branch administrator came across Children's Harbor — a child welfare organization with a mission to provide safe harbor and support to at-risk children and youth — and its campus in South Florida. It turned out to be a perfect fit.

"Knowing the challenges Children's Harbor faces in providing a nurturing

“We work hard to create a space that feels as much like home as we can possibly make it. It's amazing how something like landscaping can lift everyone's spirit and give a sense of pride in where they live and work.”

environment for children, we wanted to create a space that felt welcoming and beautiful,” Gutierrez says. “Landscaping can have a profound impact on mental well-being, and I hoped to bring a sense of peace and joy to the children and staff.”

Before the LandCare team stepped in, Dhooge described the landscaping on the campus as “functional but uninspiring.”



Tiffani Dhooge



The LandCare team was looking for its next charitable endeavor.

PHOTOS: LANDCARE; ILLUSTRATION: ALEX\_BOND / ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES PLUS / GETTY IMAGES





**Updating the plantings was a major goal to make Children's Harbor more welcoming and inviting.**

"We work hard to create a space that feels as much like home as we can possibly make it, but the grounds didn't really reflect that," she said. "It was missing the personality and care that our mission embodies."

So, Gutierrez and nine of his LandCare teammates went to work. Their efforts focused on improving plantings around the main entrance to the campus and along the pathways that lead to each home on the

property. They also added several hard-scaping elements, installed new garden beds and refreshed several existing ones.

And in addition to the initial work, Gutierrez has committed LandCare to periodic visits to focus on regular maintenance, monitoring plant health and making any adjustments that might be necessary.


Dhooge says the results have been a game-changer for Children's Harbor.

"Staff and residents alike have commented on how much brighter and more welcoming the campus feels. The teens have even said it makes the campus feel more like a home rather than just a facility, which is exactly what we aim for. It's amazing how something like landscaping can lift everyone's spirits and give a sense of pride in where they live and work," she says.

Gutierrez has received plenty of kudos for the work. "The staff and residents at Children's Harbor have expressed their gratitude and delight at the transformation," he says. "It's heartwarming to see how much the new landscaping has brightened their days and provided a sense of pride in their surroundings."

The personal rewards haven't been bad, either.

"This experience has been incredibly rewarding for me personally," Gutierrez says. "Seeing the joy and appreciation from the children and staff has been the greatest reward. I'm most proud of the positive impact we've made on their daily lives and the sense of community we've fostered through our work."

"The landscaping has been a visible reminder of the care and support our community provides for these kids," Dhooge adds. "When teens come to us after experiencing unimaginable trauma, every detail matters in helping them feel safe, loved and valued. Juan Carlos' work has created an environment where healing feels possible, and that absolutely contributes to our mission." 

**Gutierrez says he's happy with the positive impact he's made with this project.**



**Juan Carlos Gutierrez**





# CONNECTING THE DOTS

The 2024 *LM* Growth Summit brought together lawn care operators and industry partners for an event that inspired, informed and forged stronger relationships

BY SCOTT HOLLISTER | *LM* EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**Y**ou never know where the best learning opportunities will ultimately come from. Just ask Edward Coady, the CEO of Mainely Grass in Bedford, N.H. Coady was one of 36 attendees at the 2024

*Landscape Management* Growth Summit, which took place at Reunion Resort in Orlando this December.

He came into the event with high expectations for his interactions with select partners and a few of his fellow attendees.

And while he said all those expectations were more than met, it was the things he hadn't been expecting

that delivered the most notable takeaways from his time in the Sunshine State.

"I'm going to remember the kind of unpredictability of where great learning or great connection can come from," Coady said. "I thought about this event like, 'Hey, I'm going to go because these certain people or companies are here, and I want to talk to them or learn those specific things.'

"When you get here, you realize, wow, here's this other person I didn't know was going to be here who I learned something from. Or here's this vendor that I never would've responded to their outreach in another





Education sessions, one-on-one meetings, networking with other industry professionals and suppliers and more were all on the agenda for the *LM* Growth Summit this year. Plus, don't forget a round of golf at Reunion Resort's Palmer Course!



format, but I learned they have something interesting. By being here, you're more open to those conversations, those interactions. It's a really unique format."

"Unique" might be the best word to describe the annual *LM* Growth Summit. Now in its 12th year, the event connects leading suppliers in the landscaping industry with pre-qualified lawn care application professionals for networking, education and one-on-one meetings designed to improve business operations and build relationships within the industry. The lawn care operators from around the country invited to attend were joined by representatives of the event's 15 industry partners and staff from *LM* and its parent company, North Coast Media.

"Reflecting on our 12th *LM* Growth Summit, I'm overwhelmed with gratitude," said Bill Roddy, *LM*'s group publisher. "To our partners who make this event possible, thank you for your investment and commitment to making this event a true catalyst for business growth. To our attendees, thank you for connecting with each other and our partners to learn and advance your businesses together. We're honored to call each of you Friends of *LM*."

## Inside information

Amidst three days of near-perfect Florida weather, the *LM* Growth Summit kicked off with a rooftop welcome reception at Reunion Resort. Education sessions that

tackled labor challenges facing the industry and offered tips for motivating and retaining staff opened the second and third days before attendees dove into their one-on-one meetings with the event's partners. A round of golf on Reunion's highly-regarded Palmer Course was also on the agenda.

Among those relishing the connections made at the event and how they would benefit his business in the future was Kevin Salters, owner of Root Development in Suffield, Conn.

"The event was truly outstanding. It was an invaluable opportunity to network with lawn care company owners from across the country. And having direct and focused time with some of the top industry suppliers was incredibly beneficial in helping all of us refine and grow our businesses more effectively," he said.

Terry Weaver, general manager at Think Green Lawn Service in Cumming, Ga., echoed those sentiments.

"It's always nice to be around others who do the same thing that you do, trade tips and tricks, things that have worked and haven't worked," Weaver said. "But the biggest thing we took away from this is probably all of the innovation in the industry. There are a lot of cool tools out there that can make life easier for us and make our business more profitable, so to see those things up close and talk about them with the companies who make them was really valuable."

*Continued on page 20*



*Continued from page 19*

## Straight to the source

Here are some of the insights shared by the 15 industry partners that made the 2024 LM Growth Summit possible.

### 3PG ADVISORS

[3pgadvisors.com](https://3pgadvisors.com)

Why have landscape and lawn care companies become such attractive targets for private equity? That's a question many business owners have been asking as they wade through merger and acquisition offers and try to determine if and when the time is right.

Jeff Harkness, CEO of 3PG Advisors — a firm that helps business owners through those processes and assists in matching entrepreneurs with the right equity partner or buyer — admitted that while the answers to questions like that can be complex, there is a path for owners looking to sell or partner with others to scale their business.



"Some of you might be ready to transition into something new or to retire. Others of you might think, 'If I just had more money and support, we could grow, get more talented people and really blow this thing out,'" Harkness said. "We can help figure out what's your strategy, what's your path to successfully transition or to grow and scale."

**3PG Advisors'**  
Jeff Harkness  
and Benton  
Harkness meet  
with a pair  
of lawn care  
application  
professionals  
at the 2024 LM  
Growth Summit.

PHOTOS: LM STAFF

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# LEADER SPOTLIGHT



## JEFFREY JOHNS

Owner - Coastal Greenery

### THEN

Jeffrey discovered his love for landscaping at 13, pushing a mower in his Georgia neighborhood. He officially opened **Coastal Greenery** in 1994 with a simple mission: transform outdoor spaces while building meaningful relationships. With an entrepreneurial spirit and dedication to the craft, Jeffrey steadily grew his company. He was a good landscaper... but he needed something else to help him become a great business leader.

### NOW

In 1998, Jeffrey joined Marty Grunder's first **ACE Peer Group**, and it changed everything. Jeffrey is now the ultimate landscape professional. Coastal Greenery operates three locations, serving clients with landscape maintenance and design services from Savannah to Amelia Island. His leadership & commitment to constant improvement earned him the 2024 ACE of the Year award, celebrating his success and willingness to share experiences and learn from fellow business owners.

*My advice... let your guard down.  
We all face the same obstacles, and  
collectively, we can find solutions.*

JEFFREY JOHNS

### JEFFREY'S FOUR KEYS:

- 1. Open Collaboration:** We learn most when we freely share problems and experiences with others.
- 2. Growth Mindset:** Always look for ways to expand your skill set and refine operations.
- 3. Financial Discipline:** Understanding expenses and time management is as critical as knowing how to mow a lawn.
- 4. Authentic Culture:** Stay genuine, whether you're talking to a big client or a longtime colleague.



McFARLINSTANFORD.COM

## ALBAUGH SPECIALTY PRODUCTS

albaughspecialty.com

Albaugh is a relatively new player in the lawn care industry — it purchased the assets of Prime Source in 2021 to expand its presence in the turf and ornamental market — but according to Mike Daugherty, Midwest territory manager, it has a long history in the agricultural space. It is the sixth-largest chemical manufacturer in North America and the largest privately owned one.

While the company began its journey in specialty products as a post-patent manufacturer, Albaugh has recently started developing proprietary products and has supported those efforts with a new packaging and storage facility in St. Joseph, Mo.

"People who have been with us for a while with our post-patent products have always asked about when we'd produce our own line of products," Daugherty says. "We're all excited that we've reached that point, and things are really up and running now."

## ATTICUS

atticusllc.com

Michael Sorensen, west region director, and Rob Golembiewski, Ph.D., technical services director, turned a spotlight on Atticus' post-patent products and its focus on becoming a relevant and reliable partner for landscape contractors and lawn care operators.

A video introducing the company put it this way: "While the chemistry isn't unique ... the Atticus culture is something that sets us apart from our competition."

"On one of the many steps along my career path, I was a co-owner of a landscaping company in Phoenix with my brother, so I have a great appreciation for what you all do on a daily basis," Golembiewski said. "We're looking forward to sitting down with you, getting to know you a little better and, more importantly, giving you a chance to learn a little more about Atticus."

*Continued on page 22*



Atticus' Rob Golembiewski and Michael Sorensen (left) discuss the company's product line with Alex and Scott Lawn from Greenway Landscape Design and Build.



(From left) Ewing Outdoor Supply's Michael Maravich, Jeremy King and Ryan Schuette explained the company's recent expansion during their partner presentation.

*Continued from page 21*

## EWING OUTDOOR SUPPLY

[ewingoutdoorsupply.com](http://ewingoutdoorsupply.com)

A well-known fixture in the landscape industry for its irrigation-related products, Ewing has recently expanded into various other outdoor services, including fertilizers and other specialty products. That new focus was a primary reason that the company made its first visit to the LM Growth Summit, according to Michael Maravich, category lead for Ewing's turf and ornamental business.

"We're here to learn more about your businesses and let you know what we're doing as a company," Maravich says. "As we look to the future, we're trying to diversify a little bit beyond just irrigation because areas like fertilizers and herbicides are a big piece of our business, too. We see the turf and ornamental markets as one of our biggest growth opportunities, so learning about your perspectives on the industry and how we can better serve you is what we hope to do."

## GREENE COUNTY FERTILIZER CO.

[greencountyfert.com](http://greencountyfert.com)

Chuck Barber, executive vice president for sales and marketing and a veteran of six previous incarnations of the LM Growth Summit, had some words of advice for the first-time attendees in Orlando.

"It goes by fast, and I'm sure others have told you that," he said. "You're going to get a lot of information and meet a lot of new people. It's easy to feel lost, so make a point to give us your business card and get one of ours. We won't barrage you with information, but like everyone, we want

to follow up and make sure we're answering any questions you might have."

Greene County Fertilizer is based in Greensboro, Ga., and specializes in liquid fertilizers, including stabilized nitrogen and custom blends. The company is one of North America's leading producers of humic acid and has expanded into moisture management with products that target hot spots and dry areas.

## NUFARM

[nufarm.com/usturf](http://nufarm.com/usturf)

Nufarm, which has roots in New Zealand and Australia, has been a fixture in the U.S. green industry since the 1990s. Its current portfolio features more than 45 products, including herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and plant growth regulators.

"The model guiding our business has always been to put the customer at the center of all we do," said Jamie Heydinger, lawn care segment lead. "We strive for excellence in three areas — channel partnerships, supply excellence and portfolio solutions — to support your needs."

Nufarm places just as much emphasis on giving back as it does on providing reliable products for lawn care operators, Heydinger explained. In addition to numerous efforts in the golf maintenance market, the company is also the lead sponsor of Project EverGreen's GreenCare for Troops, which connects military families with complimentary lawn and landscape services.

## NUMERATOR TECHNOLOGIES

[numeratortech.com](http://numeratortech.com)

Using a clip from the movie "Idiocracy" to illustrate her point, Taylor Turner, CEO of Numerator, focused on the importance of properly balanced water for lawn care operators and how her company — a manufacturer of leading soil surfactants and spray tank adjuvants — can improve application success rates.

*Continued on page 24*



LM Growth Summit attendees Nicholas Schmitz and Gary McClung (from left on couch) learn more about Numerator Technologies from Taylor and Jim Turner.



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Representatives from PBI-Gordon — (from left on the right) Sal Strano, Andrew Scott and Dani McFadden — meet with LM Growth Summit attendees Clint Baxter and Richard Pearl.

*Continued from page 22*

“Water is necessary for plant health and growth, and it’s necessary for your spray tank. It’s actually 95 percent of what is in your spray tank,” Turner said. “So, we have tailored solutions to address hard-water bicarbonates and sodium concerns. Hopefully, we can help you solve problems you’re having, improve all the products that you’re using, make them work better and make your water work better for you.”

## PBI-GORDON

[pbigordonturf.com](http://pbigordonturf.com)

Coming off a celebration of its 75th anniversary in 2024, PBI-Gordon brought a focus on the value of partnerships to its participation in the LM Growth Summit.

“We really look forward to events like this one because they give us the opportunity to learn from end-users how we can become better partners and help your businesses flourish,” said Andrew Scott, customer strategist. “That’s our No. 1 goal for the conversations we’ll have this week.”

That doesn’t mean they didn’t also share information about some of their newest products. “We’re excited about some of our newer innovations, including Aethon herbicide, a new southern herbicide for broad-spectrum weed control ... and Arkon herbicide, an innovative solution for sedges and kyllinga control,” Scott said.

## QUALI-PRO

[Quali-Pro.com](http://Quali-Pro.com)

While Quali-Pro is certainly no stranger to those who work in the landscape and lawn care industries, Jeff Rampino, Florida territory manager, told LM Growth Summit attendees that 2025 will be a year where the company reintroduces itself and its products to the industry.

“This year, you will see a kind of rebranding from Quali-Pro,” he said. “You’re going to hear us say that we want you to ‘rediscover Quali-Pro,’ who we are and what we bring to the table.”

A division of Control Solutions Inc., Quali-Pro is generally known for offering post-patent products, but Rampino said the company has developed into more of a hybrid

manufacturer, with new chemistries coming online to support the products already in its pipeline. “Our legacy is in post-patent manufacturing. That’s where we started, and we don’t back off from that,” Rampino said. “But we are building new, proprietary solutions that attack problem pests and weeds, and we’re very proud of how far we’ve come in that area.”

## REALGREEN BY WORKWAVE

[realgreen.com](http://realgreen.com)

Updates are part and parcel of the software world, so it shouldn’t be a surprise that RealGreen by WorkWave — which the company said was the first software by and for green industry businesses — is looking forward to plenty of improvements to its product in 2025, according to Jason King, senior manager of sales for the company’s pest control software.

The changes started last year in the C-suite with a new CEO (Kevin Kemmerer) and CFO (Greg Doran) joining the team. King also pointed out ongoing improvements to the platform, affecting everything from credit card processing to routing.

“Field service is what we do. It’s what we know,” King said. “There are a lot of transformations taking place within the company ... that I think only will help us get better. We are focusing on what your needs are and where we can help better serve those needs.”

## SIPCAM AGRO

[sipcamagrousa.com](http://sipcamagrousa.com)

Sipcam Agro’s history is an international one dating back to the end of World War II. However, despite the family-owned business’ global reach, their focus during the LM Growth Summit was decidedly domestic and directed toward the lawn care applicators in attendance.

“We have plants and facilities in the Pacific Rim, Europe and South America, but Sipcam is really local by nature,” said Michael Prudhomme, herbicide development



consultant. “There is a new facility just established in the last year ... in Waynesboro, Miss., where we’re currently producing pre- and post-emergent herbicides.”

A key product that will come out of that new facility is Linchpin, a sedge and kyllinga/crabgrass herbicide. “That’s a patented formulation that will be coming out in the first quarter of 2025,” Prudhomme said.



## STEEL GREEN MANUFACTURING

[steelgreenmfg.com](http://steelgreenmfg.com)

Versatility is the name of the game at Steel Green and was the primary focus of the message delivered to LM Growth Summit attendees by Caleb Myers, sales representative.

“If you’re dealing with different gate sizes at the properties you manage — and who isn’t dealing with that? — we can offer up different

machines that will accommodate all those different sizes,” Myers said.

Myers said the company’s SG line of spreaders/sprayers offers 36-, 42-, 46-, 52- and 54-inch models, which come with a variety of corresponding capacities for the tanks and hoppers. And in keeping with the theme of versatility, he called the SG46 the most popular model because “you’re able to do those smaller properties but also pick up some bigger properties and use the same machine. It covers a lot of ground for most companies.”

**LM Growth Summit attendee Noe Loarca (left) talks with Caleb Myers and Matt Smith from Steel Green in the outdoor demo area.**

*Continued on page 26*





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**[backslopeinc.com](http://backslopeinc.com)**





The team from Stinger Equipment showed off their product line in the outdoor demo area at the LM Growth Summit.

has a line of liquid options for lawn care applicators. “Wherever you’re at and whatever your preferences are — whether that’s granular first, liquid first or you’re interested in soil amendments — we think we have something that can help you,” Klopp said.

**TURFCO**  
turfco.com

A partner in all 11 previous editions of the LM Growth Summit, Turfco made it an even dozen in 2024. It’s a fourth-generation, family-owned company that celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2019. But those celebrations of where Turfco has been haven’t obstructed its focus on where the company is going.

“We really focus on innovation; we have over 45 patents in the turf renovation space,” said George Kinkead, Turfco president. “I believe that’s the largest library of patents of anyone in the turf renovation space, specifically to what we’re showcasing here in terms of aeration, applications, topdressing and seeding.”

In highlighting several new products, including the T3200 spreader/sprayer, Kinkead didn’t just focus on the mechanical breakthroughs and latest features found on these machines. He also shared how they can help lawn care operators with ongoing labor challenges.

“These new machines are designed to be easy to operate, which can reduce training time and save money,” Kinkead said. “Because of that, we think you’ll be able to hire people without previous mechanical capabilities and have them up and running much sooner.” 📞



Turfco’s John Kinkead (left), George Kinkead (second from left) and Brad Hendrickson (second from right) show off the new T3200 spreader/sprayer with Alex and Scott Lawn.

PHOTOS: LM STAFF

*Continued from page 25*

### STINGER EQUIPMENT stingerequipment.com

Stinger Equipment’s full line of turf renovation products features design specs that set them apart and make them more productive and easier to use and maintain, according to chief marketing officer Dustin McGehee.

“I think we have a line of products that can help you grow your business,” he said. “We want you to really examine these products, ask us questions and let us know how we can help you achieve that goal.”

McGehee said Stinger’s Quad-Aer 3600 riding aerator was one of its most popular models. However, the company also offers a line of walk-behind aerators (the Dual-Aer 2475 and the Ez-Aer), a walk-behind power seeder (the Superseeder 2400) and the Gateway seeder/sprayer, which now features an app for iPhone and Android that allows users to track applications.

### THE ANDERSONS andersonspro.com

While the fertilizer market may have stabilized some in 2024 with price drops for materials in key areas, The Andersons territory manager Alan Hollen told LM Growth Summit attendees that he expected overall product prices to remain flat throughout most of 2025.

“Prices for urea have come down, actually. But it will be hard to see too many results from that because of other issues and pressures like freight costs, challenges with phosphorous sources and things like that,” Hollen said. “The bottom line is that things will likely stay flat for the next year.”

The Andersons is well known in the industry as a supplier of granular fertilizers, said Ken Klopp, Southeast territory manager. But he added that the company also



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### 2024 Partners



# THE COST OF CALLBACKS

Survey says callbacks are a pain point for lawn care applicators, but advanced planning and good customer service can mitigate those troubles

BY SCOTT HOLLISTER | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**F**ew things can throw a wrench in a lawn care applicator's day quite like an annoyed call from a customer complaining about a herbicide not working or a swath of the lawn being missed during an initial application.

But, according to a recent survey about the impact of callbacks and service calls conducted by *Landscape Management* in partnership with Nufarm, the overall effects of those annoyances can be mitigated through good planning, strong customer service and attention to detail by business owners and applicators alike.

Although the majority of survey respondents (68 percent) say they receive fewer than 10 callbacks for every round of applications during the season, results also indicate that callbacks can have real-world impacts on businesses in terms of costs, labor challenges and potential customer losses.

Most business owners report that the annual financial impact of callbacks is less than \$5,000, but some larger companies reported that requests for reapplications or repeat visits by applicators could cost upwards of \$80,000 annually. And over 20 percent of respondents said those callbacks result in at least a moderate decrease in their company's overall productivity and customer retention rates.

The survey did reveal some good news, however: Companies that regularly tracked callbacks and implemented proactive efforts to reduce their numbers saw a decrease in the number of calls they received and were able to mitigate the effect they had on their bottom line.

Here are a few additional highlights from *LM's* survey, presented in partnership with Nufarm.



## 96%

Lawn care applicators who say the presentation of weed-free lawns is at least somewhat important in generating customer referrals, while > 70% say it's very important

## 68%

Lawn care applicators who say they receive **10 or fewer** callbacks per round of applications

## 20%

Lawn care applicators who say they receive **more than 20** callbacks per round of applications







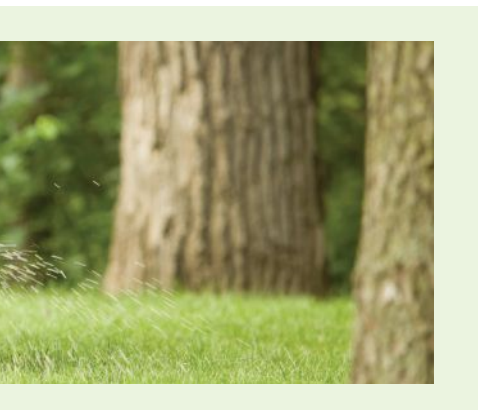
# 72%

Lawn care applicators who say callbacks lead to at least a slight **decrease** in overall productivity

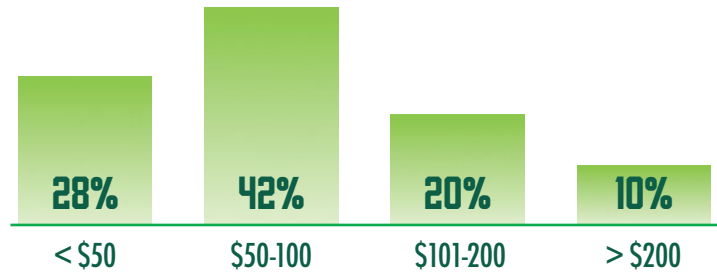


# 55%

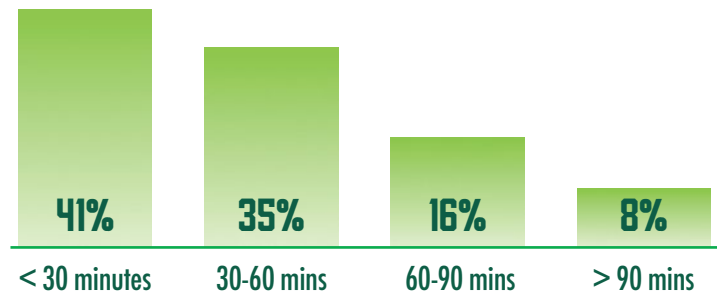
Lawn care applicators who say callbacks create at least a slight **decrease** in customer retention rates



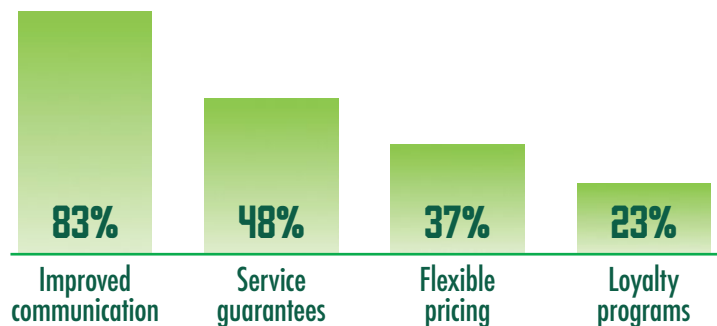
## AVERAGE COST (IN LABOR AND MATERIALS) OF ADDRESSING A CALLBACK



## AVERAGE TIME SPENT RESOLVING CALLBACK ISSUES



## TOP FOUR METHODS USED TO RETAIN CUSTOMERS



## SOLUTIONS THAT WORK

# Plant growth regulators: 2025's MVP

**Learn how strategically utilizing PGRs can boost slim margins for mowing and deliver better-maintained landscapes for clients**

BY MIKE ZAWACKI | LM CONTRIBUTOR

**P**lant growth regulators (PGRs) are versatile tools to lean on in 2025 to overcome labor shortages, maximize on-site productivity, reduce costs and improve overall turf health.

So why aren't more residential and commercial landscape maintenance contractors using them?

"Imagine if you could cut half of the mowings out of your residential lawns when you're really baling hay in the spring, and what

a huge benefit that would be across the board in gas savings, labor savings and emissions (reductions)," says Aaron Hathaway,

a Nufarm technical services manager and a former turf researcher who studied PGRs' cost-saving potential while at Michigan State University.

"The entire industry has missed the boat (on PGRs)," says Jeff Rampino, the Florida territory manager for Quali-Pro. "And it's baffled me why PGRs haven't been adopted more, especially with the costs associated with fuel and transporting people around. Saving an extra mowing on a property each month offsets the cost of the (PGR) for the contractor."

PGR use is prevalent in golf course and sports turf operations, but experts say it's lagging in residential and commercial turf maintenance.

A significant factor contributing to this conundrum is the separation of pesticide/fertilizer applications from landscape and turf maintenance, including mowing, with different companies often responsible for these tasks.

## LABOR SAVIOR

PGRs' core formulations have remained largely unchanged, a testament to their proven reliability and effectiveness. But the industry has been slow to appreciate their value as a crucial tool for mitigating shrinking crew sizes due to persistent labor shortfalls.

"It's become so difficult to find people willing to work in the turfgrass industry," says Matt Giese, Syngenta's Midwest technical services manager. "So, while contractors don't have the labor, they still have the same number of clients who expect to have their lawns mowed."

But turf pros need to see beyond expanses of grass on residential and commercial properties. PGRs play a labor-saving role in managing areas that require routine trimming and edging,

## A TIME-SAVER FOR HOMEOWNERS

While turf professionals often focus on how plant growth regulators (PGRs) can increase their productivity and reduce their reliance on labor, they may overlook a profitable business opportunity with residential homeowners.

Lawn care companies should consider marketing PGR applications as a means of saving homeowners precious free time, says Jeff Rampino, the Quali-Pro Florida territory manager.

"You're already (on the property) spraying their lawn," he says. "Sell PGRs to homeowners as an add-on service that saves them time because they don't have to be out cutting their lawns as often."

such as around landscape beds, curbs, fence lines, sidewalks and driveways.

"Just like the rest of the lawn, there's always growth going on in those other areas that need to be addressed," Giese says. "But if you can get it down to only having to cut those areas once a month rather than every 10 days, that reduces the labor you need on-site and how long your crew is on that site, too."

Applying a PGR to shrubs and hedges significantly reduces labor and maintenance.

*Continued on page 32*



Aaron Hathaway



**GIVE IT A GO**  
Plant growth regulators are an underutilized tool for lawn care operators looking to manage turf growth.



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## SOLUTIONS THAT WORK

*Continued from page 30*

“Here in southern Florida, PGRs are consistently used on hedges because they reduce the frequency of having to trim them from every two weeks to once a month,” Hathaway says. “And when they do have to trim them, it’s pretty light work.”

### MANAGING MOTHER NATURE

PGRs also enhance turfgrass manageability, particularly during periods of rapid growth in spring and fall. This benefit becomes even more critical during extended wet- and warm-weather periods like many U.S. markets experienced in 2024.



**Matt Giese**

“You get a lot of rain-fall in your market, and suddenly, the turf is just going gangbusters,” Syngenta’s Giese says. “A lot of times, that turf is coming out of dormancy, and there’s plenty of fertility left over from winter fertilization. So, the turf is blowing out, and it becomes difficult to keep up.”

While it may require a crystal ball and a leap of faith, PGR experts promote the potential for a return on investment offered by preventive PGR applications before anticipated spring and fall surges. These measures can yield substantial savings in labor, time and overall costs by mitigating the need for more frequent and reactive maintenance. When summer hits or winter settles in, turf’s growth flush subsides as the plants go dormant to survive the environmental stress.

Quali-Pro’s Rampino adds that larger landscape companies, especially those doing both chemical applications and mowing, should take full advantage of PGR applications because they free up crews to focus on more profitable activities.



“While mowing is an important service, landscape crews will generate better margins for the company when they’re focused on other work, such as installs,” Rampino says. “By reducing mowing frequency, those crews can focus their attention on those other more profitable jobs.”

### BETTER LOOKING TURF

Beyond reducing growth, PGRs offer plant health rewards, including reduced clippings and less thatch buildup. They also promote better-looking turf.


“With high-end residential and commercial properties, aesthetics are really, really important,” Rampino says. “These are great properties to use PGRs on because they improve turf quality and encourage lateral growth, which results in thicker, denser, tighter turf. For high-end clients, this is very important.”

Hathaway explains turfgrass treated with PGRs exhibits a higher chlorophyll concentration, resulting in a denser, more vibrant appearance,

improved overall health and enhanced resistance to diseases and drought.

“PGRs are a cool tool for turf because turf is so unique,” Hathaway says. “When you apply PGRs to turf, that plant grows less, but it doesn’t lose the ability to photosynthesize. Instead, (the plant) packs away those carbohydrates that it would otherwise be spending on growth.”

Armed with an abundance of metabolic reserves, this robust energy supply facilitates quicker recovery from natural leaf aging and from the stresses imposed by pests and adverse weather conditions, such as extreme temperatures, Hathaway adds.

“PGRs are such a versatile tool, and they can be tank mixed with virtually anything,” Hathaway says. “I hope they find their way deeper into the turf market this year because there’s a lot of benefits they can bring to contractors.” 



**Jeff Rampino**

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



# THE BATTLE WITH BILLBUGS

Everything to know about controlling these crawling critters

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

BROUGHT TO YOU BY



**A**fter a January Arctic air mass plunged most of the central, eastern and even southern U.S. into a frozen winter wasteland, many lawn care operators (LCOs) are relieved to see the weather warm back up in preparation for spring. However, as winter begins to close, preparations for the inevitable springtime turf pests are open for business.

One such pest that can plague the northern to central U.S., even stretching west into Idaho and Utah, is the bluegrass billbug (*Sphegnophorus parvulus*). Shannon Slevin, Quali-Pro's northeast territory manager, says these pests are small — roughly a quarter of an inch — and rigid insects with a distinctively curved snout at the front. They're usually black or grey with long grooves running down their back.

Slevin says the bugs like to overwinter in some type of coverage or leaf litter on the outskirts of properties, and when the soil starts warming in the spring (roughly late April to early May), the adults emerge and traverse the property to feed and mate.

"The preferred turf is Kentucky bluegrass," Slevin says. "They will chomp on perennial rye and fescues as well, but it's normally Kentucky bluegrass."

## FEEDING FRENZY

During the initial feeding, Slevin says there's usually little damage; it's the upcoming generations that become an issue.

After the billbugs emerge, feed and mate, female billbugs can lay more than 200 eggs. When these eggs become larvae, Slevin says they chomp on the roots and crowns of the plant, causing significant damage to the turf usually around late June.

Sometimes, the new adults can even repeat the process in the same year, meaning another wave of eggs and larvae could wreak more havoc on lawns later into the summer.

"There's typically two generations within 30 day cycles, so that second generation damage you would see mid- to late-July," Slevin says.

Slevin warns that with billbug feedings cause turf to look wilted and yellowed, and one of the biggest mistakes LCOs can make is misidentifying it as drought damage if left untreated.

"If it's completely overlooked, you may confuse some of the untreated damage from the insect with turf drought," Slevin says. "I think that could be one of the key driving things that you need to start scouting well into that late June period if it's left untreated for the first generation."

## BEAT THE BUG

Once billbugs are identified, treating them can be fairly straightforward. Slevin, for example, says the active ingredient chlorantraniliprole historically has been very effective.



## IDENTIFICATION TIPS

Bluegrass billbugs have a distinctly curved snout at the front and grooved lines going down their back.




Shannon Slevin

"(Chlorantraniliprole) has done really well in the past with Acelepryn," Slevin says. "There's a lot of other manufacturers that have access to that molecule currently, and Quali-Pro will be one of those manufacturers here in the very near future with that molecule as a control option as well."

Slevin also says Quali-Pro also offers a new chemistry called Supradox to help fight against billbugs and other turf pests.

"It is an insect growth regulator," he says. "It covers the complete life cycle from eggs to larvae to adults, controlling each phase as it molts."

In addition to choosing the right chemical to eliminate billbugs, Slevin says LCOs that are doing aeration and overseeding can also choose the right grass to resist the issue in the first place.

"I would suggest that those folks look out for turf varieties of Kentucky bluegrass that's actually bred and designed to be billbug resistant," Slevin says. "There's a lot of new varieties out there on the market that are actually bred for that purpose." 

## PICKY EATERS

The larvae munch on the roots of the turf, causing significant damage.





## THE BIG ONE

### The Heart of it all

BY ROB DIFRANCO  
LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

**LOCATION** Fairfield, Conn.

**COMPANY** Eastern Land Management

**DETAILS** A private college founded in the early 1960s, Sacred Heart University sits nestled in suburban Fairfield, Conn., 50 miles north of New York City.

Since 2010, Eastern Land Management's Monroe, Conn., branch has provided full-service maintenance, including lawn services, bed maintenance, daily porter services, watering annuals and adding new plantings.

Greg Gross, Monroe branch manager at Eastern Land Management (ELM), says there are 10 employees on-site to cover the 50-plus-acre property.

"We have one mowing maintenance crew that takes care of all the spring and cleanup and mowing operations," he says. "We have another doing the day-to-day necessities, ensuring the campus is beautiful at all times."

The biggest challenges facing crews are ones you might expect from providing maintenance on an active college campus in the New England area, including the weather, although Gross says that recent winters have been mild, opening up the opportunity to do more in the cold.

"The winter has been milder, and we haven't been snow-covered. So we've been able to do some landscaping tasks over the winter, like tree pruning and dormant shrub pruning."

ELM won a silver award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Awards of Excellence program for this project. 

See more photos from this project at [LandscapeManagement.net/thebigone](https://LandscapeManagement.net/thebigone).



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF EASTERN LAND MANAGEMENT





**Captions |** **1.** Eastern Land Management (ELM) works across the four-campus site with a full-time crew. The university adheres to high standards for sustainability and aesthetics as part of its master plan. **2.** The turf on the property is a mix of fescue and bluegrass. ELM provides a fertility and plant and soil health program, continually adapted to ensure plants' vitality in extreme weather. **3.** ELM recently installed a flower bed with red and white plantings in the shape of the University's SHU wordmark, according to Greg Gross, branch manager. **4.** SHU's red and white colors can be seen throughout the campus in color beds, container displays and hanging baskets. **5.** Martire Family Arena's main entrance features focal points, hanging baskets in school colors and a water-conserving landscape planted with bergamot and northeast native plant material, including low-grow blueberry bushes. **6.** Due to extreme shifts in recent weather patterns, plant material is regularly evaluated for its adaptability and resilience, and there is a plan in place to refresh and update planting strategies to improve plant hardiness and environmental resilience. **7.** Thea's Abbey in Pioneer Village is SHU's dining facility with outdoor eating areas. The university's campus life is largely facilitated by its walkability, healthy outdoor green spaces and water-tolerant landscapes.



## MAINTAIN YOUR EDGE



**FIRST CHOICE**  
String trimmers are a great first battery-powered tool to get familiar with the technology.

# Power through 2025

Expert opinions on battery-powered handhelds for 2025

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

**W**ith all the buzz around battery-powered handheld equipment in the landscaping industry, it's important to remember that most companies still use gas-powered tools.

"Gas is still the overwhelming majority of what we see being used out in the field," says John Powers, director of product management at Echo. "There are a couple of reasons for that. One of them is it provides the right level of performance and weight and cost to get the job done, and it's what users are used to using."

But that doesn't mean battery power hasn't earned a place with landscaping crews nationwide. As the technology continues to develop and grow, many experts are optimistic about its future.

### EASING INTO IT

According to Powers, asking a contractor about battery-powered equipment is like asking someone about their favorite pizza topping: "You're going to get a bunch of different answers."

And while some areas and municipalities — like California — are forcing the switch to battery-powered handhelds, Powers says many companies are now easing into the space by trying out tools like hedge trimmers that work well with batteries and can even surpass their gas counterparts.

"What we've seen is rather than just try to make something that's as close to gas equipment as possible, we're going to make stuff that in some cases is actually better than the gas equipment," he says.

Some tools that require less power and charging infrastructure allow landscapers to try out the technology with less risk, something that Todd Woodhams,

vice president of product management at Senix, thinks will be beneficial in 2025.

Tools like battery chainsaws or hedge and string trimmers have made significant leaps in mimicking their gas counterparts, allowing end users to focus more on the benefits of battery, such as less maintenance, noise and environmental impact.

"With a transition from gas to electric, there are a lot of users who can benefit from, but I think the most important one is just the convenience and lack of having to maintain any product through its life cycle, whereas you can just put a battery on and do the job," Woodhams says.

### WORK TO DO

While battery technology has come a long way, some improvements still need to happen before it becomes the right choice for every contractor, and Woodhams says certain tools still might not cut it right now.

"When it comes down to higher power tools that draw a lot — like blowers — there's not really a good battery solution for that at this point in time," Woodhams says.



**BATTERY BUYING**  
Powers says choosing the right battery platform is critical when switching from gas.


Josh Dumas, Husqvarna's product manager, landscaping and facility, agrees with this, saying the development of a high-powered battery backpack blower is one of the biggest thresholds to be surpassed before full battery adoption becomes viable for many crews.

"(When) the industry puts out a battery backpack blower that can really deliver top-tier performance, there could be a large shift toward battery in lots of other areas," Dumas says.

Charging infrastructure is another area that Dumas says needs some work in 2025, as larger companies would require significant monetary, time and infrastructure investments to make a full switch.

"When you have 30 crews leaving each day and coming back, you now have hundreds of batteries you need to charge for the next day, and that's very high energy consumption. You need to think about electrical circuits, physical space, fire protection, theft protection," Dumas says. "It can be very difficult to figure out."

Dumas, Woodhams and Powers all say their respective companies monitor the industry and work to find solutions to these issues, meaning battery technology will still grow more efficient and viable as the year progresses. Woodhams points to tableless cells, for example, as new battery technology manufacturers are developing to improve charging times, running temperatures and power output.

"I think you're (eventually) going to see a new wave of battery technology coming into the market to leverage the tools that are out there," Woodhams says. 



## RECOMMENDER

### What are the top features you look for when purchasing a **new chainsaw or pole saw?**



Maneuverability and ergonomics are critical factors for landscapers who work long hours with their equipment.



#### **GREG GROSS**

**EASTERN LAND MANAGEMENT  
BRANCH MANAGER**

"For us, (the top features) are durability and price. Those are the top things we're looking at when we're doing our tool orders over the winter in preparation for the spring landscape season. There isn't a particular brand, and we're not doing ... a lot of (high-up) tree work. Most of the work we do on trees is 12 feet or lower, that's typically in our maintenance contracts.



#### **BAILEY MOUNTCASTLE**

**HUSQVARNA  
PRODUCT MANAGER,  
TREE PROFESSIONALS**

"When selecting a chainsaw, landscape contractors should prioritize reliability, performance and maneuverability to ensure efficient, safe and comfortable operation. Since contractors may not use their chainsaws daily or carry a backup, it's crucial to have equipment that consistently starts and runs optimally. Chainsaws with features like air filtration, automatically tuned carburetors, magnesium crankcases and easy-starting systems ensure reliability and ease of use, even after periods of inactivity.

In terms of performance, contractors need chainsaws that provide the power and efficiency necessary to complete jobs on time and safely.



#### **JAKE TEITLER**

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When selecting a new chainsaw, contractors should prioritize several key features to ensure efficiency, safety, productivity and durability. Understanding power and performance needs is critical for a professional, as a chainsaw with a robust engine and high cutting speed can handle various tasks, from pruning to felling trees. Ergonomics and weight are also crucial, as a well-balanced chainsaw reduces operator fatigue and enhances maneuverability during extended use. Safety features are also essential to protect users from potential hazards. Battery-powered chainsaws in particular offer enhanced safety with features like instant start and stop, significantly lower noise levels compared to gas-powered units.



## HARDSCAPE SOLUTIONS

# King of the hill

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

**LOCATION** Old Westbury, N.Y.

**COMPANY** Goldberg and Rodler, Inc.

**DETAILS** It's more than a dream house; it's a dream home, and that's exactly what Goldberg and Rodler set out to do with their award-winning "Hilltop Chateau" project on New York's Long Island.


However, making that dream a reality for the clients and their family wasn't easy, says Ashley Haugsjaa, the company's design office manager and landscape designer. The property hadn't seen much work since the '70s, meaning plant/tree health was poor and the house needed to be completely torn down and redone. Not to mention the whole property is on a hill multiple stories above street level.

Working closely with the architects and clients, Goldberg and Rodler designed a new landscape that better took advantage of the hill the house sat on and added several new family-friendly features.

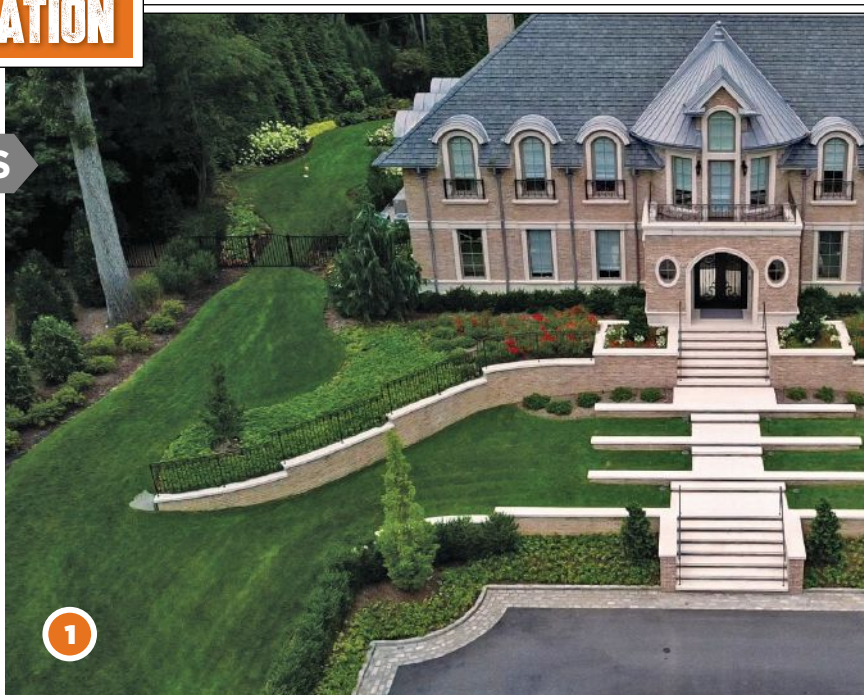
"What is important to the family is being able to go around the property and enjoy it," Haugsjaa says. "You can enjoy nature in your own yard, and that was big for them."

One of the main features was a basement garage on the new house, meaning roughly 1,000 yards of soil had to be cut out to make room for the garage and new parking court.

This also meant that the architecture could extend into the landscape, resulting in a pulled-out staircase leading to the front door, retaining walls that help with the house's foundation, hill gradient and aesthetics, among other features.

Goldberg and Rodler 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](https://www.LandscapeManagement.net/hardscapesolutions).*



PHOTOS: RACHEL BIRES AND GOLDBERG AND RODLER, INC.





**Captions |** 1. The design of the house is a nod to classic estates, and Haugsjaa says the company still does weekly maintenance with mowing, plant health care, seasonal color, pruning and/or other tasks. 2. The narrow driveway was widened, and many trees initially had to be removed due to poor health. Haugsjaa says they were thankfully able to plant more trees than they had initially taken down. 3. An aerial view of the two-plus acre finished project. The project began in 2019, meaning working through the COVID-19 pandemic was incredibly difficult, according to Haugsjaa. 4. The parking area next to the basement garage also can serve as a basketball court for the family. 5. The family wanted to host large gatherings for relatives and friends, leading to an oversized pool and a playset on the lawn for the kids. 6. The family asked for a wood-burning fire pit, so Goldberg and Rodler installed one with a Long Island boulder retaining wall to sit on. Wooden logs from the trees they cut down also serve as extra seating. 7. Haugsjaa says the pandemic forcing people inside for so long was a driving force for her with many of the outdoor spaces, allowing her to better appreciate being able to explore nature in your own backyard. 8. Along with a seamless transition from architecture to landscape, the family wanted to have privacy from neighbors, leading to intentionally thick, lush plantings around the property's border.



## BUSINESS BOOSTERS

# Make a splash

Two experts identify why they've been successful at selling pool installations

BY SETH JONES | LM EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

**T**he American backyard has been the place to be for several years now. As the weather warms up, homeowners are ready to dust off the grills and consider the possibilities of what that backyard offers.

"I definitely feel like there's a great future in the design/build world," says Sam Gembel, CEO and owner of Atlas Outdoor in Flint, Mich. "We're now in an era where people aren't worried about losing their jobs. We've had a lot of

people who have come to us wanting to revisit a project we originally discussed last year or two years ago."

Nick Berger, sales manager at Hidden Creek Landscaping, Columbus, Ohio, anticipates another busy pool installation season for his company. He says the market for pools went "bonkers" during the COVID-19 pandemic, and while he doesn't



Nick Berger

While the COVID-fueled pool boom may have slowed in recent years, pool installers say there's still a strong market ripe for landscape contractors to take.



expect that kind of volume of orders ever again, it'll still be robust.

"During COVID, we had a two-year backlog of orders," he says. "People were on a waiting list. We were able to work through those. Now, we're on a six- to nine-month backlog of clients."

### ENCOURAGE EDUCATION

Berger says before Hidden Creek inks a deal with a customer on a pool installation, he encourages the client to take some time to research who Hidden Creek is and what kind of investment they are prepared to make.

PHOTO: HIDDEN CREEK LANDSCAPING



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"The pool can be anywhere from \$100,000 to \$300,000 depending on the type of pool you're building ... it's a major investment for anybody," Berger says. "I want the client to understand who they're hiring. Understand that the cheapest guy might not be the best guy to use. Make sure you hire someone who has done this day after day, time after time, year after year. It's a cliché, but know that you get what you pay for."

Gembel advises those considering entering the pool business to do all the work as a singular company — and make sure the client is aware of this — rather than contracting elements of the job to other companies. He says he's won contracts 15 to 20 percent higher than the lowest bid.

"We used to work with pool installers, but there could be finger-pointing between the outdoor builder and the installer," Gembel says. "Our clients love it that we sell ourselves as the installer."

Though Gembel doesn't love the process of the actual build itself, he does love the feeling he gets when one of his clients lets him know how the installation has impacted their family.

"There's something about when you finish a job and whether it's a month later, or six months later, a year later or five years later — when the client sends you a video of the kids cannonballing into the pool," Gembel says.

"We've had families where their kids will get married in that backyard. We get to be part of those memories forever. If that doesn't put wind in your sails to be in the business we are in, then I don't know what does." 🍷

## HIDDEN CREEK PREPS FOR GROW! 2025

Landscape professionals from around the country will be making the trek to Columbus, Ohio, for GROW! 2025, billed as "the ultimate learning experience for landscape professionals by landscape professionals." The event, hosted by Marty Grunder and The Grow Group, takes place Feb. 24-26 at Hidden Creek Landscaping.

"We're super excited about it, of course, but there's a lot of mental anxiety that comes along with it too... Just because we're all trying to prepare as much as we can while still trying to do our day-to-day job," Nick Berger, sales manager at Hidden Creek Landscaping, says of hosting the event.

Berger will be delivering a presentation at GROW! 2025, on Hidden Creek's sales initiatives and how the company sells maintenance and design/build.

"We're not hosting GROW! for notoriety. These companies that come and visit us are coming from throughout the United States to see how we've done things," Berger says. "It's really about the industry. These companies might be a fraction of our size, but they want to get to our size, and we can give them some pointers and some tips."


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## EVERY DROP COUNTS

# Preparing landscapes for the use of effluent irrigation

BY DANNY SMITH | CONTRIBUTOR

**A**s water conservation and sustainability practices take hold in response to growing environmental concerns, property owners and landscape maintenance contractors are leading a significant shift in irrigation and landscape practices.

Traditionally, commercial landscapes have relied on clean, potable water for irrigation, which was both practical and abundant given the lower urban populations and sufficient annual rainfall. However, due to heightened sustainability expectations, strict water-use restrictions and rising water costs, many retail water providers and their customers are turning to effluent or recycled water as an alternative source.

While this is a commendable step toward reducing potable water consumption and can help alleviate potable water demand, the transition to using effluent water comes with its own challenges, expectations and costs that all parties must understand before these conversions.

### EFFLUENT EDUCATION

What is effluent water? Effluent water is wastewater that has been treated and purified to a level that makes it safe for specific uses such as landscape irrigation, toilet flushing, dust control and concrete mixing. This water contains higher levels of salts, minerals and other trace elements that are not found in potable water.

One of the first and most critical steps in transitioning to recycled water is selecting the appropriate irrigation materials, either at design or to be installed during the conversion. This includes ensuring that proper filtration will be

implemented based on the expected size and volume of incoming total dissolved solids (TDS), as well as understanding the actual chemical composition of the water to be delivered, including chlorine, calcium and sodium.

When designing a new system, irrigation designers must opt for materials like PVC, which is more resistant to chemical wear or HDPE, which is more durable and resistant to the corrosive effects of recycled water. Stainless steel and certain grades of flexible hose may also be more suitable, though it's important to ensure that the selected materials can handle the mineral load without corroding or degrading over time.

Furthermore, sprinkler heads and emitters must be chosen carefully. Those designed for recycled water tend to have more robust components that can better withstand the abrasive effects of high-mineral water. Most major manufacturers have already identified the need for higher-grade materials that can withstand recycled water and have responded with easily identifiable purple color designations.

### KEEPING IT CLEAN

Another consideration is the increased maintenance costs due to the buildup of minerals, particularly salts, in the irrigation lines, emitters and sprinkler heads, which can shorten material life expectancies. Over time, these minerals can clog or corrode the system, impairing the uniformity and efficiency of water delivery. To prevent this, maintenance contractors must regularly


“Transitioning from potable water to effluent ... is a necessary response to the increasing demand for water conservation.”

— DANNY SMITH



flush the system and keep the water moving to remove mineral buildup and reduce the possibility of algae growth. Furthermore, the impact of effluent on various system components can lead to more frequent replacements of parts.

The impact of effluent irrigation on soil and plant health is one of the most critical considerations for commercial landscapes. Over time, the salts and minerals in recycled water can accumulate in the soil, leading to poor soil health and increased fertilization needs. This is especially detrimental in areas where a lack of adequate rainfall prevents these soils and other contaminants from properly leaching beyond the landscape's root systems.

Transitioning from potable water to effluent for irrigation purposes in commercial landscapes is a necessary response to the increasing demand for water conservation. It requires careful planning and diligent maintenance. Property owners and contractors must adapt to new material needs, develop new maintenance routines and closely monitor the health of plants and soil to ensure a thriving landscape. 

Danny Smith is the director of technical operations for Park West, a full-service landscape construction and maintenance contractor in Santa Ana, Calif.



## BUSINESS BOOSTERS

# Super savers

**Irrigation audits offer a means for clients to save water and money while creating a valuable revenue stream for landscape contractors.**

BY MIKE ZAWACKI | CONTRIBUTOR

**I**rrigation audits offer a powerful solution for commercial and residential properties plagued by escalating water bills.

Although golf courses and athletic fields have utilized irrigation audits for decades, commercial and residential clients may be unaware of their significant water-saving potential. Industry experts confirm that these irrigation system audits can identify problems leading to a 25 to 30 percent reduction in water use, resulting in substantial savings for clients — potentially thousands of dollars and gallons each year.

Landscape contractors who offer irrigation audits as a service for their clients stand to gain significantly, too, with the resulting service and repair work frequently generating profit margins of around 30 percent.

“Essentially, an irrigation audit is the process an irrigation technician must go through to solve a particular problem ...

that is overusing or inefficiently using water,” says Mark A. Ballenger Sr., a Certified Landscape Irrigation Auditor (CLIA) and a St. Petersburg, Fla.-based irrigation consultant. Before focusing solely on landscape irrigation, Ballenger owned a local landscape maintenance and lawn care company.

“You want an efficient irrigation system operating at the best it can be

from an economic and water conservation perspective,” he says. “An audit can lead to savings that the client will begin to see rapidly.”

A thorough audit involves inspecting and analyzing every component of an irrigation system. Visual inspections carefully review controllers, valves, heads, piping, backflow regulators, pumps and filters for damage or malfunction.

In addition, catch-can testing — a standard for golf and sports field irrigation audits, but not always with landscape irrigation systems — measures water distribution uniformity. This ensures the irrigation system is calibrated for even coverage and minimizes wasteful overspray or dry spots.

Lastly, analyzing the client’s historical trends, controller programming and irrigation schedules helps identify areas for adjustment and improvement.

An irrigation auditor produces a comprehensive recommendation report detailing specific measures to improve efficiency in these areas. These may include optimized watering schedules, repairs or replacements of faulty components, head realignment and leak detection.

Experts say audits rarely require a major system overhaul. Instead, most audits identify a leak or broken irrigation head somewhere in the system or zones in the landscape that no longer have plants that need to be watered, says Alex Mayfield, CLIA and principal at JM Irrigation in Volo, Ill.

“With an older irrigation system, it’s not unusual to have a system that was designed to water a tree that is no longer there,” he says. “Another common occurrence is that the homeowner simply doesn’t understand how to properly use their controller.”

Mayfield adds some homeowners have a “set-and-forget” mentality where they’ve been running the same program for years and didn’t realize they could change it.

Many irrigation experts offer annual audits — often timed with spring start-up or fall shut-down — as a complimentary service, recognizing their value in cultivating strong client relationships and addressing their desire to be sustainable water consumers. While some contractors charge for audits, regional water districts frequently subsidize these audit costs for clients as part of broader water conservation programs.

“What’s important is getting to that first step in the auditing process — a high-level inspection of the irrigation system,” says Lindsay Kinsler, CLIA, a water conservation representative with the East Bay Municipal Utility District in Oakland, Calif.

“From there, you can go to the next level and discuss with the client how new technology or specific repairs will get them to save water and, in the long run, save money.”

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



Alex Mayfield



Mark Ballenger



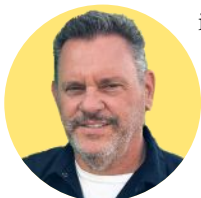
Lindsay Kinsler

# Self-sufficiency pays big dividends for Urban Habitat

BY LAUREN H. DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR

**F**ocusing on employees, costs and the extent of service the company can self-perform helped Urban Habitat experience a 69-percent revenue increase from 2022 to 2023. This put the company at No. 133 on the 2024 *LM150* list and in the ninth spot for year-over-year growth.

Headquartered in Palm Desert, Calif., Urban Habitat offers commercial landscape design/build and maintenance services. It has a second branch office in Rancho Cucamonga, allowing the team to provide landscape-related development projects throughout Southern California, says Brett Brennan, CEO of Urban Habitat.



Brett Brennan

## WELL-ROUNDED

As a full-service landscape general contractor, Brennan says the company offers a blend of services that sets it apart in the industry. Urban Habitat self-performs more than half of its project builds, including mass grading, wet/dry utilities, masonry and landscape, he adds.

“Our work includes self-installations of all landscape-related structures and ancillary work,” Brennan says, noting the company’s projects have included large community parks, event centers, sports parks and arenas. “We offer a turnkey project approach, including maintenance.”

The company’s ability to perform work on time and on budget

has allowed it to build a reputation as the go-to landscape designer and contractor for large, complex and sustainable projects, he says. About 98 percent of its annual projects are from city and government contracts.

**“WE RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF EVERY EMPLOYEE AND TREAT THEM WITH RESPECT AND GIVE THEM A CLEAR PATH FOR ADVANCEMENT BASED SOLELY ON PERFORMANCE”**

— Brett Brennan, Urban Habitat CEO

“Our clients know that we pay attention not just to project costs but also to client ROI by using the most current and effective water-saving technologies and methods, soil blends and appropriate plantings,” Brennan says.

Brennan says those practices help ensure the project’s survivability; plus, using sustainable and renewable materials complies with existing and future environmental regulations.

“Our projects are built to maximize the ease of maintenance while minimizing the expense,” he says.

## TRUSTED TEAM

Urban Habitat’s management team has more than 150 years of combined

Founded in 2008, Urban Habitat has shot up the *LM150* list over the last two years.





**Brett Brennan, CEO of Urban Habitat, credits the experience of his staff for the company's rapid growth.**

experience in landscape design and construction, which allows them to work seamlessly on jobsites to increase on-time job completion and reduce downtime.

"We recognize the value of every employee and treat them with respect and give them a clear path for advancement based solely on performance," Brennan says. "This is true of each division — design, construction and maintenance — which operate together to achieve the common goal of earning the client's complete satisfaction."

Urban Habitat team members have experience in civil and commercial builds, and the firm looks to add employees based on their competency, experience and education, he says, noting that many team members have graduate degrees in their fields.

"Ensure you have the right people that take ownership and care about your success," Brennan says. "But in turn, make sure you are investing in your employees."


Brennan advises other professionals to persevere during both the easy and challenging periods and remember that hard work and consistency eventually pay off. Staying competitive with costs is another crucial part of staying at the top and being awarded contracts, he adds.

"This does not mean compromising quality or lowering standards to be the low bidder but instead capitalizing on our ability to work more efficiently, be more organized, use tools and techniques that improve our labor optimization and lower the time needed to perform the required tasks," he

says. "Innovation beats those who stagnate, and we are proof of that."

### PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, Brennan says Urban Habitat will maintain and improve the quality of its work, adapt to its clients' changing needs and research the best technologies and methods to remain a leader in the industry. The company will also invest in areas where it performs well in the industry.

"You get what you give in any business, and we contribute to the greater good by building and maintaining the best landscape areas and ensuring our employees are rewarded and take pride in themselves and their team," Brennan says. 

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.



# FIVE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW BY SETH JONES | LM EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

## Richard Ogawa

**CEO & OWNER, GARDENLAND POWER EQUIPMENT  
CEO & CO-FOUNDER, TOWA INDUSTRIES, INC.  
CAMPBELL, CALIF.**

### 1 How did you get into the industry?

My father was a landscaper. I grew up in the landscaping industry, and then eventually my dad opened up his own outdoor power equipment (OPE) dealership. Then I grew up in that OPE dealership side of the business all throughout high school. Then I graduated, got my college degree and swore I'd never get back into this industry again. And sure enough, here I am 25 years later back in the industry.

### 2 What motivated you to co-found Towa Industries, a company that primarily creates universal charging solutions for battery-powered equipment?

As we were growing and expanding Gardenland Power Equipment, we found a big need for charging infrastructure. Because in California — especially here in Northern California — a lot of the Silicon Valley tech companies, all of those guys were pushing our commercial landscapers to go 100-percent battery. They didn't want any gas products on their campuses. We had to deal with this very early on ... 10 or 12 years ago. At that time, the battery products just weren't there or commercial quality. That's really what drove us to start Towa. One of the things that we wanted to solve with Towa was the charging capability. It's one thing if you have a handful of batteries that you need to charge. It's another when all of a sudden you have 100 to 200 batteries on a site that you need to charge overnight.

### 3 How are landscape companies there in California handling this change?

It's unique. We were mandated in 2024, they passed legislation that said any (gas-powered landscape equipment) manufactured after Jan. 1, 2024, would no longer be able to be sold in California. There have been some hiccups; apparently there's some EPA language that still needs to be approved. What that's done is it's kind of put our whole California industry in a tailspin because you have a lot of manufacturers, and even a lot of independent dealers, that are

holding off on the transition. A lot of the larger landscape companies have made the transition, or at least a commitment to doing a certain percentage of their fleet. Overall, I think in general the market was kind of waiting for this date to come and seeing where it's going to go.

### 4 You mentioned the larger landscape companies, but what about the smaller ones?

The typical cost of capital to switch from gas to battery is anywhere from two to five times more. It's a significant capital increase. Not to mention that once you purchase the equipment, you've got to charge it, and a lot of these guys don't own their properties. A lot of these one- or two-truck guys rent or lease their properties, and there's no way that they can afford to upgrade the power panel, or sometimes the power is not even available for them to go to a full conversion. I think that has a significant impact on these smaller landscape companies.

### 5 What is your goal for the future of Towa?

Three years ago, no one talked about charging infrastructure. It never even came up. Now, everyone's talking about it. Like how to maximize charging, how to maximize your circuit and not blow it. These are the transitional challenges when you're going from gas to battery. Towa in Japanese means 'universal' and 'long-lasting.' Our whole goal is to give consumers a cost-effective way to transition by giving them solutions that are modular and universal so that you can use it and mix it with other brands of products. 🗨️

#### BEST ADVICE

**"Embrace battery power just as if it is another solution in your toolbox. You'll find that there are applicable solutions that will do better and be more profitable going battery."**



PHOTO: RICHARD OGAWA





BY BEN GANDY

The author is principal of Envisor Consulting. Reach him at [bengandy@envisorco.com](mailto:bengandy@envisorco.com).

# The leadership to-do list

**T**oo often leadership is discussed in vague, expansive terms that fail to translate into actions. There are specific activities that only leaders are positioned to do. These activities are not urgent — they're not calling you up or sending you email reminders — but they're important.

In fact, leaders who fail to engage in these activities are failing to do their part for the business. The activities are simple, but they're not easy.

## CULTURE

In competitive industries, culture is the differentiator, more so than quality and more so than price.

We might like to believe that quality differentiates us; however, where many of us may give certain landscapes an A-plus and others a C-minus, most of our clients do not perceive much of a difference. We can differentiate on price, but who wants to be the cheapest? Being cheap seldom translates to market dominance.

But teams operating in strong cultures tend to treat customers right, get things done, communicate well, have fun, respect one another and achieve results.

Culture is leadership's responsibility. Culture is established through articulation and fidelity to values, as well as the level of standards, accountability, honesty and professionalism.

Noble values, high standards, clear and fair accountability, and the regular practice of truth-telling will drive a stronger culture than the opposite. Canned or ignored values, low standards, unclear accountability and low levels of truth-telling lead to mediocrity at best.

We all know this. It's the executive's job, the leader, to live it.



## VISION

Organizations must have some sense of direction and destination.

"To be the best business in our market" is aspirational, but it is so non-specific that it is not meaningful. "To be a \$12 million business by a certain date, operating with two branches in the commercial landscape maintenance business with a 45 percent enhancement penetration rate and an overall gross margin of 50 percent" is specific. It's time-bound and measurable.

Leadership can draft this vision with input from his or her team, but it's the leader who must set the meeting, approve the destination and create accountability for the waypoints.

## STRATEGY

The business requires resources to achieve its vision. Money, expertise, equipment, facilities and capabilities will all be required. How much? When? In what sequence? These are questions on leadership's plate.

## STRUCTURE

All businesses need a winning team to execute. One of the key activities of leadership is to recruit, place and develop talent. There's a lot to be done, and it must be done well.

The A-plus players are a reflection of leadership, but the same is true for the C-minus players.

## FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Too many businesses in our industry

stumble because leaders don't have clear insight into the financials. Leadership must understand budgeting and financial reporting, particularly the story told by the profit-and-loss report.

A lack of financial literacy by leadership is unacceptable. No one can run a household without understanding the money. Businesses are only different in scale.

## PROCESS MANAGEMENT

Businesses must develop workflows.

The sales workflow starts with an opportunity and ends with closing out or renewing a job. In between are scope development, estimating, proposal writing, closing the sales, and performing and managing the work. The HR workflow starts with recruiting candidates and ends with high-performing professionals. In between are proper on-boarding, training, accountability and professional development.

It's management's job to execute on the workflows. It's leadership's job to ensure the workflows are established, documented, trained and complied with.

## ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Things change, and businesses grow. Are the company's processes being improved upon, or are they stagnant or forgotten? Are people growing and being challenged, or are they being ignored and becoming disengaged?

Developing an organization requires all the steps above. As the leader, it's important to limit the time and attention you give to activities outside of these. You're the one in the organization who can most effectively execute on these things. Get to it, have fun and lead well. ☺



BY GREG HERRING

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

# The haves and the have-nots

One of the best parts of my job is digging into the results of our annual Herring Group Benchmark Report, now in its 11th year. In 2024, 163 companies participated, with an aggregate revenue of \$2.3 billion.

I enjoy analyzing the Benchmark Report because it surfaces powerful ideas that can help landscape company owners improve their businesses and their lives.

One of the highlights of this year's report is an average gross profit margin of 6.9 percent, up half a point from last year (over the 12 months ended September 30). However, this average does not tell the real story — the difference between the haves and the have-nots.

## OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM

In our experience, a 10-percent operating profit margin is a key threshold for success in the landscape industry. The haves are the companies with an operating profit margin greater than 10 percent, and the have-nots are the companies with an operating profit margin of less than 10 percent.

We focus on operating profit margin because it is the one statistic that measures three key priorities for a landscape company — customer satisfaction, management effectiveness and operational efficiency.

The average profit margin for the haves is 13.8 percent, while the average profit margin for the have-nots is 3.5 percent. That is quite a difference, and it is worth considering what these two groups do differently.

This year, 31 percent of the companies had an operating profit margin greater than 10 percent and

earned 66 percent of the total profits captured in our report. Put another way, one-third of the companies made two-thirds of the profit. Let's examine what separates the two groups.

## MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

The first thing high-profit companies do well is create a motivating vision for their firms and communicate it to their teams and customers. This vision must go beyond "We cut grass and install plants." It should motivate employees to create and accomplish their work with great quality and pride. Look around at the visions of landscape companies and you will find some great examples of motivating visions.

“Over time, cumulative pushes on the flywheel build momentum, making improvement easier. If consistency decreases, the flywheel will slow down, making improvement more difficult and results less predictable.”

The second attribute of companies with operating profit margins above 10 percent is courageous pricing. Pricing is difficult, especially in an industry like ours with a low barrier to entry. As a business owner, there are always many voices telling you your prices are too high. Very rarely will anyone tell you your prices are too low. You need good data to help you make pricing decisions.

The final factor separating the haves and the have-nots is diligent

execution. Landscape companies can execute diligently through the following six steps:

1. Create a plan to achieve and maintain a high operating profit margin.
2. Adopt business management software like Aspire.
3. Consider other software and technology that can increase customer satisfaction, management effectiveness or operational efficiency. Examples include Team Engine for recruiting and communicating with field employees, and SmartLink by Weathermatic for irrigation management.
4. Hire and retain great people, whether as employees or contractors.
5. Implement effective processes to ensure customer satisfaction and efficiency.
6. Ensure your company's processes become habits and, ultimately, part of your culture.

Think of the flywheel concept, popularized by Jim Collins in his book, "Good to Great." At first, one needs consistent effort to get a flywheel spinning; it is a lot of work. Over time, cumulative pushes on the flywheel build momentum, making improvement easier. If consistency decreases, the flywheel will slow down, making improvement more difficult and results less predictable.

When companies focus on a vision, pricing and building a flywheel for execution, the results are predictable: They become one of the haves — profit margins, owners' life margin and employee autonomy increase. Are you willing to do what it takes to be in that group? 🍀



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# GROW WITH GRUNDER

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](mailto:marty@growgroupinc.com).



## Use your systems to reach your potential

**W**hen I started my business, we relied heavily on paper. In fact, I was known to write a schedule for the week back then on the back of the paper placemat from my favorite breakfast place.

As Grunder Landscaping Co. grew, we put systems in place to keep all that paper organized, and it worked well for us for a long time. This was one of those situations where good was the enemy of great. Because our paper-based systems were working well for us, we were slower to embrace technology than we should've been.

Implementing Aspire Software in 2020 was a turning point for our business. We made it a rule to embrace the system fully — no paper backups or duplicates, no physical schedule board when the digital one would work for us and no complaining about it either. The only way forward was to embrace this change and make it work for us.

We aren't the only company that has faced this shift. Many of you

**“The more we can work with the system we're using instead of fighting to make it work with the processes we used before we adopted the software, the better off our companies are.”**

reading this have probably navigated it yourselves, or maybe you're young enough that you started out relying on a few digital tools.

At The Grow Group, my team of coaches has one big recommendation regarding technology: use industry-specific software. This theme will be evident to our attendees when we tour Hidden Creek Landscaping later this month as part of GROW! 2025. As my team previewed their sessions, one big takeaway we know attendees will have is Hidden Creek's approach to technology.

There are two things I see them doing well that we can all learn from, whether we run the same software or not.

First, Hidden Creek's team members have embraced technology in their workflows and are constantly looking for ways to improve their use of it. As new functionality is added, they evaluate whether it could help them be more efficient. This is exactly the right mentality to have — the more we can work with the system we're using instead of fighting to make it work with the

processes we used before we adopted the software, the better off our companies are.

Second, they keep looking forward. During the finance and accounting session on the tour, our attendees will hear the Hidden Creek team talk about how they're using accounting as a tool for growing the business and getting away from “reactionary accounting.”

Good managers make good decisions with good information. We need the information to be accurate, and we need the information in our software systems to be readily available so we can make decisions on the future of our business.

We'll hear more about what tools they use, how they use them and what the team is still working on during our in-depth — and indoor — tour of their facility during GROW! 2025, Feb. 24-26, in Columbus, Ohio. If you're already signed up to join us, I'll see you there. If not, sign up or stay tuned; I frequently recap what we learn at our events in our weekly “Great Idea” emails that we share through The Grow Group. You can sign up to receive those at [grow-groupinc.com/weekly-great-idea](https://grow-groupinc.com/weekly-great-idea).

I hope you're ready for a busy spring ahead. Let's make the 2025 season our best yet. 🌱



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