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TURNING RESOLUTIONS INTO RESULTS

The business goals that
landscaping and lawn care pros
are focusing on for 2026



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LM CONTENTS

JANUARY 2026 • VOL 65, ISSUE 1

**LM STATE
OF THE
INDUSTRY**

EXPAND
SOFTWARE
CAPABILITIES

INCREASE
STAFFING

EXPLORE
AUTONOMOUS
MOWERS

UPGRADE
TRUCK
FLEET

TURNING RESOLUTIONS INTO RESULTS

The business goals that
landscaping and lawn care pros
are focusing on for 2026

12

43 LM150 Profile

A focus on people, digital tools
drive growth at SavATree

TURF + ORNAMENTAL

26 Business Boosters

How updated equipment boosted
fall sales for RD's Total Lawn

28 Turf School

The warm-season weeds to watch
this winter

29 From the Source

Let revenue potential
guide spray rig purchasing
decisions

MOWING + MAINTENANCE

30 The Big One

Ruppert Landscape, Elkton, Md.

32 Products That Work

Traditional and autonomous
mowers that are turning heads

DESIGN BUILD + INSTALLATION

34 Hardscape Solutions

Mariani Landscape, Winnetka, Ill.

36 Business Boosters

Sustainable spaces, high tech
among 2026 trends to watch



Water works
in The Big Easy
(page 38).

IRRIGATION + WATER MANAGEMENT

38 Business Boosters

The trends and topics that dominated
conversation at the Irrigation Show

SNOW + ICE

40 Step By Step

How to make sure your equipment
is ready when the snow starts to fall

Boosting
fall sales
(page 26).



ON THE COVER: SUNSEEKER; GETTY IMAGES; ILLUSTRATION: MONSTER, PAWICH SATTALERD, KHANCHIT KHIRISUTCHALUAL, D3DAMON / ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES PLUS; HISPANOLISTIC / E+



COLUMNS

6 Scott's Thoughts

BY SCOTT HOLLISTER

44 Green Industry MBA

Reading recommendations from the CEO's bookshelf

BY BRYAN CHRISTIANSEN

45 Ask McFarlin Stanford

The innovative strategies, tactics that will drive growth in 2026

BY JASON NEW

46 Marketing Mojo

Using AI optimization to put your business on the path to success

BY JEFF KORHAN

47 Blooming Talent

Why 2026 will be the year of leadership clarity

BY TITO CACERES

• A party in Park City (page 9).

48 Business Insider

Consultant or coach? Determining the right fit for your business

BY JEFFREY SCOTT

50 Grow with Grunder

Lessons learned from the journey to the next level

BY MARTY GRUNDER

IN EVERY ISSUE

8 Editorial Advisory Board Q+A

What is your professional New Year's resolution for 2026?

9 LM Gallery

Check out the faces and places the LM team recently encountered

10 Need to Know

The latest industry news

11 Good News

Leaf and Limb are bringing new life to the urban core

42 Five Questions

Nate Jensen, Jensen Gardens, Omaha, Neb.

49 Ad Index

[LM GROWTH SUMMIT]

What were your takeaways?

Were you at the most recent LM Growth Summit in December? If so, we hope you had a great time!

We want to hear about your experience — what did you learn, who did you meet, and what takeaways are you now applying to your business? Let us know how your trip to Orlando went by emailing Editor-in-Chief Scott Hollister (shollister@northcoastmedia.net) or Editorial Director Seth Jones (sjones@northcoastmedia.net), and you could be featured in an upcoming edition of *Landscape Management*!



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Images shown are of a prototype and the production SGLITE may differ slightly from the pictures.

SCOTT HOLLISTER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Contact Hollister at 785-424-0932
or shollister@northcoastmedia.net.



April 22, 2024 ... where were you?

I remember my first day with *Landscape Management* like it just happened. And considering I can't tell you what I had for lunch yesterday, that's saying something.

There was an early morning flight from Kansas City to Cleveland. A couple of photo shoots, one of which produced the image that adorns the column you're reading right now (note to self: update that photo!). There were meetings with human resources, with the company's information technology group, with the editors and publishers of North Coast Media's other brands.

There was a lunch, a staff happy hour, a trip to an NBA playoff game (go Cavs!). Heck, I can even tell you the exact date — Monday, April 22, 2024.

But even more surprising than the many specifics that my otherwise fading memory can still pull from that day is just how long ago that day actually was. My brain might think it was just yesterday, but in truth, I'll be celebrating my two-year anniversary with *LM* in just a few months, a fact that had me shaking my head when I was thinking back on all this recently.

Of course, I was shaking my head in the good way, the kind that comes with a satisfied smile. Because of all the cool things that I've been privileged to do during my long career in green industry publishing, the opportunity to join the talented team at *LM* and to dive headfirst into a new industry at this stage of my career has been as exciting and energizing as it sounds.

All this came back for me largely because of the time of year it is. New Year's reflections come naturally

when the calendar turns from one year to another, and I certainly wasn't immune to that at the end of 2025. In my case, though, those reflections went back just a bit further ... to April 2024, to be exact.

“I'm super grateful that I took this leap, am proud of the work our entire team has done and couldn't be more excited for what the future holds.”

And it didn't hurt that at the exact same time, we were working on *LM*'s annual State of the Industry report, which kicks off on page 12 of this issue. Between the interviews we did with landscape and lawn care pros from around the country and the industry-wide survey about the overall health of the business that we conducted, our mindset was already focused on reminiscing about the year that was in 2025. It wasn't much of a stretch for me to take things back a few more months into the previous year.

At the same time, though, I realize there is only so much good that comes from lingering in the past. You have to spend as much effort looking at what the future might bring, and I can confirm we've been doing plenty of that at *LM*. For example, much of what we talked about with the sources for our State of the Industry stories this month was forward-thinking, and

the responses we got reflected a general sense of optimism about where the landscape industry is and where it's headed.

My travel schedule for the first part of 2026 also sets the stage for some cool stuff to come as we make our way into the new year. I teased this a little bit in last month's column, but I already have trips booked to visit a host of innovative companies and loyal *LM* partners, all of which should generate a bunch of fun new content for both print and digital. Business travel can be taxing, but when the payoff looks like this, it makes the time on the road worth it.

And finally, I can confidently say that the content you've come to count on from *LM* will continue to evolve and improve in 2026. We've got new features that will go in-depth on innovations in the turf equipment and design/build spaces, the return of the magazine's franchise guide and rankings and a new special section focused on the growing robotics and autonomous equipment segment.

Much of what I've been lucky enough to do in my role with *LM* and the steps we're taking toward the future would have never seemed possible on my first day with the company. But I'm super grateful that I took this leap, am proud of the work our entire team has done and couldn't be more excited for what the future holds. I'm glad you're all along for the ride. 🍀

Small business owners' to-do lists can add up. So see if you can save money on a commercial auto quote at **ProgressiveCommercial.com**.



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EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD



MORE ON P. 12

See more 2026 business resolutions from landscape and lawn care pros from around the country in "High-resolution thinking" on page 12 of this issue of *Landscape Management*.

What is your professional New Year's resolution as we head into 2026?

"For 2026, our lawn care business goals will focus on profitability through efficiency, client retention by high-end service referrals and expanding our year-round services."



Landscape Professionals

Bryan Christiansen
Mariani Premier Group
Lake Bluff, Ill.

Troy Clogg
Troy Clogg Landscape Associates
Wixom, Mich.

Pam Dooley
Plants Creative Landscapes
Decatur, Ga.

Paul Fraynd
Sun Valley Landscaping
Omaha, Neb.

Mike Giese
Perfecturf Lawn care
Mt. Pleasant, Wisc.

Chris Joyce
Joyce Landscaping
Cape Cod, Mass.

Jerry McKay
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Industry Consultants

Tito Caceres
Bloom Talent Solutions
Coral Gables, Fla.

Marty Grunder
The Grow Group
Dayton, Ohio

Phil Harwood
Tamarisk Business Advisors
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Jeffrey Scott
Jeffrey Scott Consulting
New Orleans, La.



"In 2026, we're centering our strategy on core clients and investing in the capabilities required to deliver a superior experience and scale what we do best."



"Our 2026 resolution is to invest whatever it takes on marketing to level out the peaks and valleys of sales."

"In 2026, my goal is to grow people, not just profits. The biggest ROI in landscaping comes from developing leaders, delegating more and giving talented people room to thrive."



"In 2026, my professional resolution is to become a leader of leaders. I have often balanced leading with doing, and in 2026, my focus is on helping my team become exceptional leaders and spending more time in the leadership seat. This will require more preparation, coaching and patience as we grow our team."



"I don't usually do resolutions; I do business planning. However, I do set personal goals with my spouse, answering the following four questions: Who do I want to be, what do I want to do, where do I want to visit and what do I want to have? These are both simple and profound when completed with a partner."



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

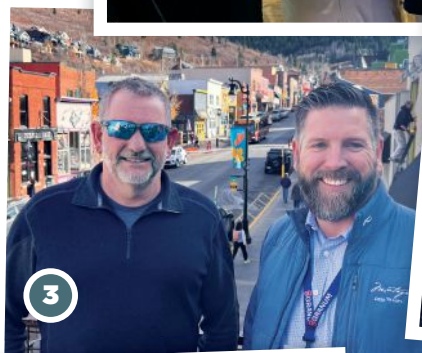
LM GALLERY

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

1 A dinner to remember We brought together four different companies at Equip Expo 2025 for a fun evening we'll long remember. From left to right, counterclockwise are Nader Hassen, *Landscape Management*; Taylor Turner, Numerator; Kyle Parks, Mulch Mate; Kevin Stoltman, *LM*; John Perry, Greene County Fertilizer Co.; Nick Carlson, Mulch Mate; Jim Turner, Numerator; and Seth Jones, *LM*.



2 Two CEOs and an editor walk into a bar... OK, in this case, they walked into a conference room at Equip Expo ... Marty Grunder (center), CEO, Grunder Landscaping Co. and The Grow Group, joins Jones and Stoltman, CEO of North Coast Media, for a quick pic following the *LM*150 panel discussion hosted by Jones.



3 Rooftop access for the VIPs Tony Sellers, president, Sellers Services, Rochester, Ind., and Mark Layton, enterprise account executive, Weathermatic, enjoy the nice view and the great weather during ACE Connect.



4 Not their first rodeo The premier event at the National Association of Landscape Professionals' (NALP) Elevate 2025 was a raucous rodeo held at Corona Ranch in Phoenix. Joining *LM* Editor-in-Chief Scott Hollister (left) and *LM* Editorial Director Jones (right) is Mark Bradley, chairman, LeanScaper.



5 It's a Park City party! We can always count on Complete Landsculpture co-owner and vice president Gene Freeman (left) for a few big laughs and a great discussion on music. Freeman and Chris Strempek, president and CEO of Complete Landsculpture, will host GROW! 2026 in Dallas next month.



6 A good place to hang with the numbers guys? The No Name Saloon Outside Park City, Utah's No Name Saloon are (from left to right) Sellers; Freeman; Jason Creech, owner, Creech Landscape, Alpharetta, Ga.; Ian Hanemann, financial analyst, McFarlin Stanford; and Logan Quebedeaux, senior accountant, McFarlin Stanford.

7 Connecting at ACE Connect Jones spotted two friends of *LM* at the ACE Connect event in Park City, Utah, hosted by McFarlin Stanford: Marty Grunder and Barrett Chow, executive coach, McFarlin Stanford.

Albaugh, Kubota make leadership changes

Two green industry companies — Albaugh and Kubota — recently made promotions and changes to their leadership teams.

Albaugh named Willie Negroni as its new president for the North America region. In this role, Negroni will lead the North America organization in all capacities, including commercial, marketing, operations, technology/manufacturing, finance, legal and human resources.

Negroni brings more than 26 years of experience in the agriculture industry in a variety of roles, including sales, branch management, area management and most recently serving in an executive leadership position.

“We’re thrilled to welcome Willie Negroni as president of North America,”



Willie Negroni

said Kurt Pedersen Kaalund, chief executive officer. “For more than 45 years, Albaugh has delivered high-quality, cost-effective solutions to customers across North America. Willie’s leadership will advance that mission and usher in a new chapter for Albaugh.”

Kubota North America (KNA) recently appointed Todd Stucke as president, where he will lead the company’s North America technology function while advancing global and regional business growth. Stucke succeeds Nobuyuki Ishii, who will retire from the company.

Stucke will also take on new responsibilities as general manager of Agri Solutions Headquarters, Kubota Japan (KBT), a global role that maintains focus on agricultural innovation and customer solutions. 📍



Todd Stucke

M&A Scorecard

- Comvest Private Equity, a middle-market private equity investment group, announced that its portfolio investment, **Bland Landscaping**, has acquired **CSS Landscaping** of Jacksonville, Fla.
- **Mariani Premier Group** has acquired **Roots Landscape**, a landscape firm headquartered in Wayne, Pa.
- **ExperiGreen Lawn Care**, a portfolio company of Wind Point Partners, has acquired **Turf Masters Brands** from CenterOak Partners, a Dallas-based private equity firm.
- **Visterra Landscape Group** has added two new companies to its family — Manchester, N.H.-based **Outdoor Pride** and Houston-based **Texas Landscape Group**.
- **The Senske Family of Companies** has acquired Florida-based **Deans Services** and **Huerter Lawn Care**, a provider of lawn care in Kansas City.

WALLINGFORD JOINS MCFARLIN STANFORD AS NEW CEO

McFarlin Stanford has appointed Scott Wallingford as the firm’s new CEO.

In that role, Wallingford will oversee operations and the delivery of McFarlin Stanford’s expanding suite of services, which includes executive coaching, ACE Peer Groups, outsourced accounting, recruiting, human resources, valuations and leadership development.

Wallingford brings 25 years of leadership experience building and scaling businesses. Most recently, he served as president of software company Onit, but his background includes leading teams at Lexis-Nexis, AT&T, Sabre and Booz & Co.

“We started McFarlin Stanford because we lived the challenges owners in the green industry face

every day,” said founding principals James Cali and Jason New. “As demand for our services has grown, we reached a point where we needed additional leadership focused on operations and strategy. Scott brings the expertise to help us scale while we stay focused on what we do best — coaching and serving clients.”

“What drew me to McFarlin Stanford is the combination of a growing market, a company with deep client relationships and proven client results and founders who are deeply committed to growth,” said Wallingford. “I’m here to help scale what Jim, Jason and the team have built so we can make an even bigger impact.”



Scott Wallingford



Bringing new life to the urban core

Leaf and Limb bring native plantings, a restored meadow and wildlife habitats to a Salvation Army youth center in Raleigh, N.C.

BY REBEKAH MIEL | CONTRIBUTOR

Editor's Note: "Time for Some Good News" is a feature that spotlights the good deeds, great people and positive stories in the landscaping industry. If you have your own good news to share, reach out to Seth Jones at sjones@northcoastmedia.net or Scott Hollister at shollister@northcoastmedia.net.

The Salvation Army Red Shield Youth Center sits at the corner of a busy downtown intersection in Durham, N.C. For the youth who attend after-school and summer camp there, there is little buffer between them and the cars belching exhaust and noise; just a few trees and a parking lot.

Decades of construction and hard-scaping have left this corner of the city stripped of life. What is left is compacted, exhausted dirt, with almost no habitat for wildlife and little for children to explore.

Leaf and Limb, a regenerative tree and land care company located in North Carolina, is helping change that. Around the perimeter of the building, they are planting a privacy thicket, a selection of native trees and a meadow, also known as a Piedmont Prairie. It will transform a bare space with limited places to play or learn into a lush landscape that is full of life.

The installation includes the 5,500-square-foot Piedmont Prairie that wraps around the corner of the property facing the road, a 700-square-foot privacy thicket screening nearby apartments and a diverse mix of native trees and shrubs, such as Southern wax myrtle, white fringetree and Virginia sweetspire.

"This planting project will do more than beautify our space—it will give our children a living classroom," says Joshua Dorsette, the director of the center. "As they watch these trees and flowers grow, they'll learn about stewardship, resilience and the power of nurturing something beyond themselves. It's a gift

that will shape their environment and their outlook for years to come."

And the children truly will have the chance to watch this transformation unfold over time. Piedmont Prairies take three years to establish, and while the trees and shrubs that make up the native thickets grow quickly, they will naturally evolve. What these plantings require in patience, they repay in resilience. Privacy thickets need only occasional pruning, and Piedmont Prairies are cut back just once a year.

Despite minimal maintenance, these areas feed pollinators, rebuild soil, store carbon, reduce stormwater runoff and restore habitat, all without fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides or irrigation.

Bringing this project to life would not have been possible without the partnership of the North Carolina Wildlife Federation (NCWF), a nonprofit dedicated to protecting, conserving and restoring wildlife habitat across the state. Through its Butterfly Highway initiative, NCWF supports the creation of native pollinator habitats in places affected by urbanization, recognizing that sites like the Red Shield Youth Center serve as critical stepping-stones that reconnect fragmented ecosystems. NCWF secured grant funding for the installation, with Leaf and Limb leading the planning and installation process.

"We believe true conservation happens through collaboration," said Kate Griner, vice president of philanthropy and communications at NCWF. "Partnering with Leaf and Limb to restore Piedmont Prairies allows us to do far more for wildlife than we could alone.



Through the philanthropic support we're able to mobilize, these restoration projects bring native habitats back to life — benefiting wildlife, people and the communities that share these landscapes."

This project also reflects a broader shift in how we care for land, a movement that Basil Camu, co-founder of Leaf and Limb, outlines in his book "From Wasteland to Wonder."

"When we plant native species, rebuild soil and work with nature instead of against it, we help transform damaged spaces into places that are teeming with beauty and life," he says. "These small acts, repeated across our communities right where we live, support a movement aimed at helping heal Earth."

Together, these partners are transforming a once-overlooked corner of Durham into a thriving, resilient landscape for the kids to learn from. 

Miel is the director of marketing and outreach for Leaf and Limb, based in Raleigh, N.C.

Piedmont Prairies take three years to establish.

HIGH-RESOLUTION THINKING

Landscape and lawn care companies share their goals for 2026 and how they plan on achieving them

It's a new year, and with that typically comes New Year's resolutions. Many people want to lose weight, read more books or cut out a bad habit.

For business owners in the landscape and lawn care industries, it's an opportunity to look ahead and consider goals for their businesses. While *LM* was in attendance at two recent events — the 2025 *LM* Growth Summit (hosted by *Landscape Management* magazine) and the 2025 ACE Italy Experience (co-hosted by McFarlin Stanford and The Grow Group) — we asked business owners what their goals were for 2026.

Many business owners were supercharged for what 2026 had in store for themselves and their companies. One owner is anticipating a tumultuous 2026 and gave us her words of advice that she will use to motivate her team. And many owners are talking about implementing autonomous robotic mowers and using artificial intelligence to maximize efficiency throughout their operations.

The nine business owners interviewed by *LM* represent companies from all around the country and offer a wide variety of products and services.



BY SETH JONES | *LM* EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

2025 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY SURVEY

As a part of *Landscape Management's* State of the Industry reporting, the magazine surveyed its readers to learn about the year that was in 2025 and gauge their opinions about what 2026 had in store for them and their businesses. Highlights from that survey are featured throughout this story.



BENSON LANDSCAPE AND DESIGN | NEW YORK

Scott Benson is the president of Benson Landscape and Design, a company he started in 1987 when he was a junior in high school. The company is in Victor, N.Y., and services a large area around Rochester. Benson Landscape and Design offers services including landscape design, landscape maintenance, turf care, plant health care, mosquito and tick control and snow removal.



Scott Benson

"We take the approach that we know what it is to receive good service and what I expect as a consumer," Benson says. "We deliver an exceptional product quality with an exceptional client experience, and that has led us to a huge foundation of happy clients that lead to great referrals."

Benson says his No. 1 goal for next year is growth. The reason? He needs to take care of his employees.

"Being in business for 38 years, I've made the progression of really building a great team around me," Benson says. "In order to continue to provide for them, I need to grow my company. I need to give them a place where they can have success, where they can build their families."

Back when the company first started, Benson was limited to clients within walking distance, then tractor distance, and finally, driving distance. Now, Benson wants to take his company to the highest levels of high-tech and be seen as a company on the leading edge.

"I'm letting the technology mature, but we want to be on the leading edge of technology," Benson says.

One way he's doing that is working with Rochester-based Golisano Institute for Business and Entrepreneurship, specifically with their AI and robotics programs.

"They have some certificate programs that business owners or anyone in the community can join in," Benson says. "Our goal is to become a sponsored employer, to get interns to come into our space with these skills and backgrounds and expose us to the cutting-edge things they're looking to."

SELLERS SERVICES | INDIANA

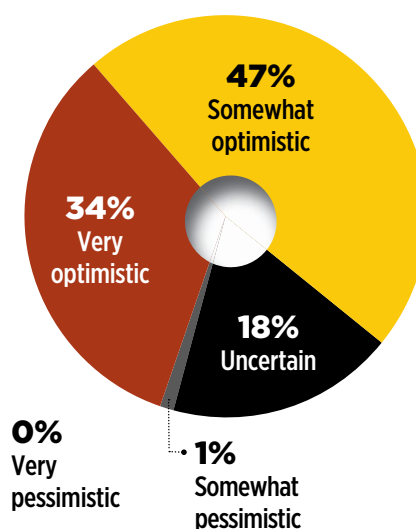
Tony Sellers is president of Sellers Services in Rochester, Ind., a business he started 26 years ago. A member of ACE Calibrate, Sellers Services has more than doubled its revenue over the last few years. His goal is to grow from \$4.7 million to \$10 million in 10 years.



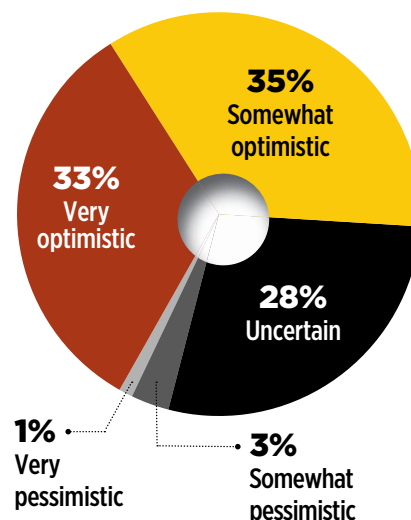
Tony Sellers

Continued on page 14

What's your business outlook for 2026?



What's your view on how the economy will perform in 2026?



Continued from page 13

“We’re trying to create growth so we can create real opportunity for most of our guys,” Sellers says. “My two oldest kids are involved in the company, which has helped me a lot with, ‘What’s my way out? How much longer do I want to do this?’”

While Sellers isn’t on the way out any time soon — he says he still enjoys his job — it’s important for him to plan his exit and make sure his employees are all well taken care of when he does retire.

“I really want to take care of my employees, that’s my top thing,” Sellers says. But what is he doing today to make that future a reality?

“Artificial intelligence is really getting interesting,” Sellers says. “I’m a pen-and-paper guy. But AI is making it simpler than when I was sitting down to take the time to write a job position. You still have to type it up and put your logo on it, but with AI, it’s made it so much faster to be able to say, ‘Hey, we’re looking for this position. Here’s what we want.’ And it puts it together, you tweak it, and it’s done.”

“WE HAVE TO BE VERY INTENTIONAL WITH AI, WHETHER THAT BE APPS OR SOFTWARE THAT WE IMPLEMENT, SO THAT WE DO IT PROPERLY.”

— Andy Vande Hey,
President, Vande Hey Co.



VANDE HEY CO. | WISCONSIN

A third-generation company based in Appleton, Wis., Vande Hey Co. was started in 1950 by Len Vande Hey as a way to support his family of 11 children. The 11 kids became the crew, and as it grew, Gerald Vande Hey thrust the company onward in 1968 from basic lawn care to complex landscaping projects and opened a garden center in 1982.

Gerald’s son, Andy, is now the president of the company, stepping into the role in 2002. Today, the company employs 130 people and

has an annual revenue of \$13 to \$15 million.

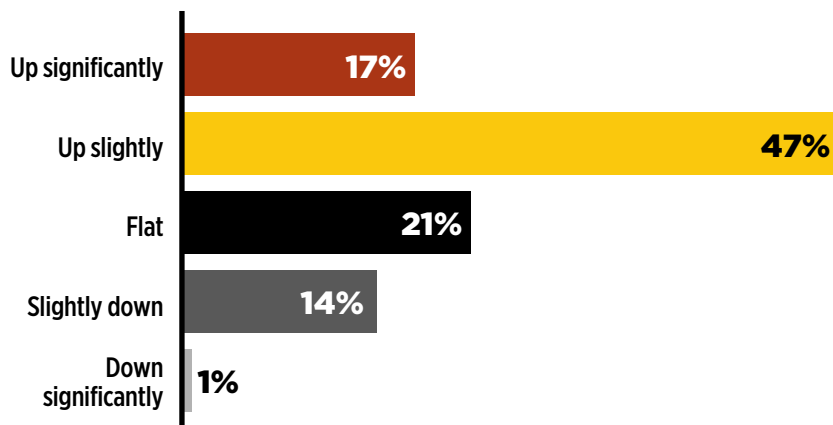
“We’ve made a very conscious effort to be diverse,” Andy Vande Hey says. “We’ve got tree care, a pool division, a design center, a showroom, we’ve got maintenance, we do snow removal. It’s always new and challenging things, and it has allowed us to have fewer ups and downs as the economy ebbs and flows. There’s always a champion division that has a blockbuster year while the other ones may remain status quo.”

Vande Hey says he has a growth mindset, and for him, he wants 2026 to be “pedal to the metal.” But he adds that it’s also important to be cautious and deliberate, because technology is changing so rapidly.

“We had an acquisition in 2025, a small one, but we had to install a lot of systems,” Vande Hey says. “I think that is going to extend into 2026 because technology and AI are moving so fast. We’ve embraced a lot of new practices this year. I think in 2026 it’s going to be important that we don’t move so fast that we get out of control. We have to be very intentional with AI, whether that be apps or software that we implement, so that we do it properly.”

Continued on page 18

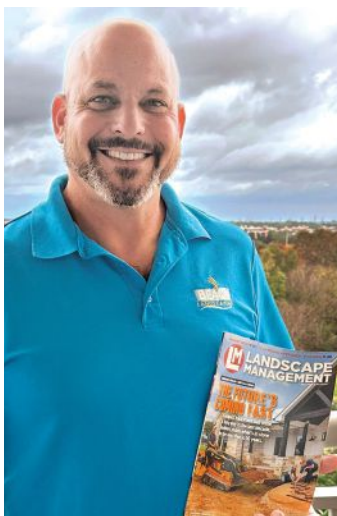
Describe the current state of the landscape and lawn service market in your region.



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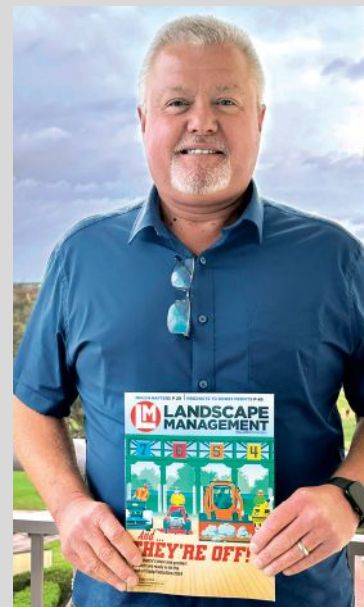
"I look forward to reading *Landscape Management* each month as it is a great resource to learn about industry trends, best practices, and new technologies and equipment. It has helped me gain new perspectives and, at times, given me the confidence that I'm on the right track."

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— MIKE MANSOUR,
OPERATIONS MANAGER
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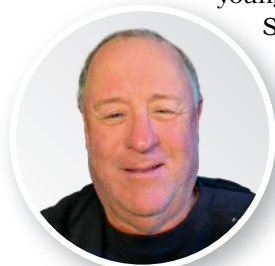
* Results are illustrative of certain customers' success; your individual results may vary.

Continued from page 14

MORIN TURF | IOWA

Mike Morin, president of Morin Turf, and his son, Sean, vice president, recently attended the 2025 *LM* Growth Summit to learn from the magazine's advertising partners about what's out there to help lawn care applicators be more successful.

Mike was a repeat attendee, while Sean was a first timer. As Mike said, "I'm not getting any younger, so I wanted Sean to see what's out there, too."



Mike Morin

Morin Turf is based in Sioux City, Iowa, and was started by Mike's father in 1946. Mike Morin has no control over this, but his biggest hope for 2026 is for his area to get better weather. But when it comes to what he can control, he hopes to implement what he learned at the *LM* Growth Summit and try some new products that are available.

"One thing I like about this particular event is that it gives you insights," Mike Morin says. "While they're selling you things, they're not the salesmen that I deal with from my distributor, so I pick up a lot of information. Now I have to implement it."

Morin says the products that really stood out to him were Steel Green's spreader/sprayer and a Stinger aerator/seed. He likes the Stinger so much, he bought a second one. About half their yards are tall fescue, and the other half are bluegrass yards. Instead of vacuuming out the hopper to change seeds, now Morin has one machine for tall fescue and one machine for bluegrass.

"It's a phenomenal product," Morin says. "We would not be able to cover the ground we cover without it."

CHESTERFIELD LAWN AND LANDSCAPES | MISSOURI

Justin Hatfield is the fertilizer division manager of Chesterfield Lawns & Landscapes in St. Peters, Mo. He's been in the industry for 15 years and says his biggest challenge is talent acquisition and workforce development.

One of his goals for 2026 is to achieve 95 percent on-time applications during peak season to meet crop growth stages. But he also plans on adding a truck and an applicator next year, and finding the right person to take on that role is top of mind.

Hatfield tried recruiting on Indeed.com and said that it did not go well. He set up seven interviews, and none of them showed up. He also created QR codes and printed them on pull tabs that he hung up at community colleges. That got

him a person, but not the right person.

"To be fair, he started in August. It was hot, and he just couldn't take it," Hatfield says. "He was 20 years old, and he lasted two weeks."

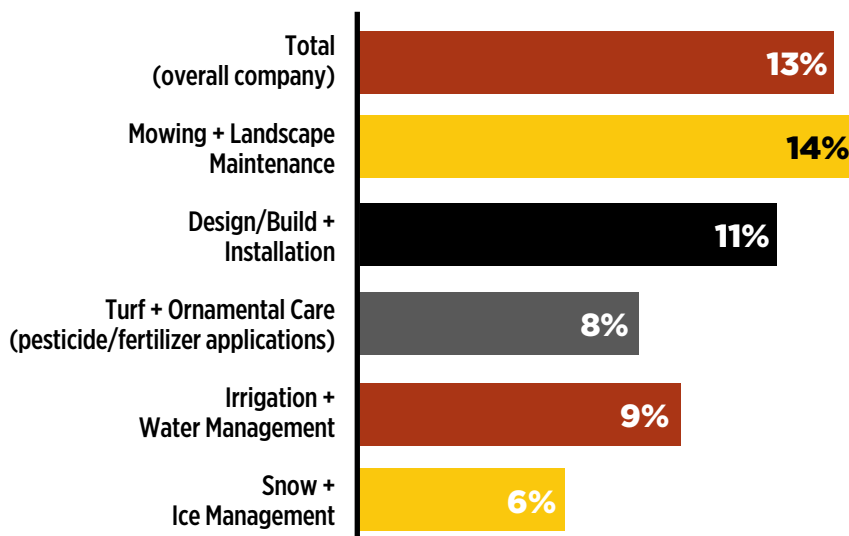
Hatfield attended the *LM* Growth Summit and was eager to talk to others in his position about how they're attracting labor. Chesterfield Lawns and Landscapes does use H-2B labor, and he isn't opposed to going that route again if he can't find someone locally.

"Most of my mind power is on recruiting and making sure I've got the workload to sustain that truck," Hatfield says. "I don't know how many people I've got to hire to get one to stick. It's a matter of finding the right person for that truck."



Justin Hatfield

What percent do you expect your total gross revenue to change from 2025 to 2026 in the following service areas? (Tell us the percent change in either a positive or negative number. Use a 0 for no change.)



BRET ACHTENHAGEN'S SEASONAL SERVICES | WISCONSIN

Bret Achtenhagen is the president and CEO of Bret Achtenhagen's Seasonal Services in Mukwonago, Wis. Founded in 1994, the company is a full-service landscaping company primarily focused on high-end residential design/build.

Achtenhagen grew up on a farm in Wisconsin, and after graduating from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in psychology, he felt the family farm calling him back.

Achtenhagen and his brother started mowing lawns in high school and never stopped, so he decided to start his own company.



Bret Achtenhagen

"I wound up not knowing what I wanted to do, and I always came back. I loved the farm," he says. "I just gravitated toward landscaping and started the company in 1994."

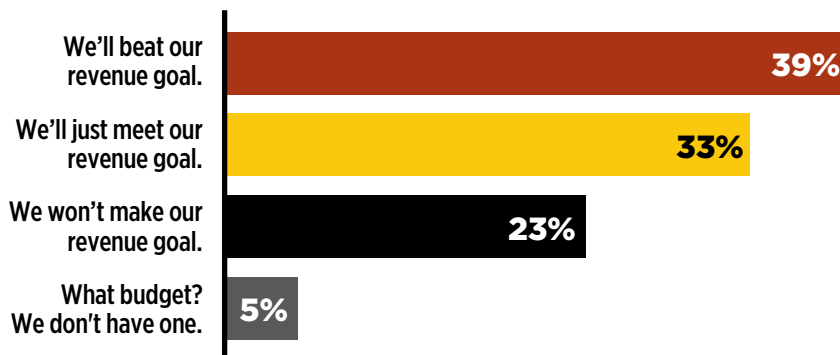
He says that 80 percent of his experience in the industry has been positive and successful. There are always ups and downs, he says. The trick is to stick with it.

"This industry is full of challenges, but the big one is finding enough help, finding great people that can help you grow and expand," Achtenhagen says. "Over the last four or five years, and with the help of McFarlin Stanford and The Grow Group peer group I belong to, we've been focusing on my team."

Achtenhagen says his goal for 2026 is to continue to stay focused on finding more leaders within his company, as opposed to trying to recruit them.

"We're spending a lot of time with people we think are ready (to be leaders), even though they might not themselves," he says.

How do your expected 2025 revenues compare to your budget for the year?



"We see something in them, and we're spending a lot of time trying to develop and get them educational resources and different venues to learn and become leaders and promote them from within."

ILT VIGNOCCHI | ILLINOIS

ILT Vignocchi is a design/build and maintenance company, both commercial and residential, servicing the Chicagoland area, primarily the North Shore. The company was started by Harry Vignocchi in 1969 and today is led by the second generation: Donna Vignocchi Zych, president, and her husband, Aaron Zych, vice president.

The Zychs say they have "shied away" from robotic mowers previously, with the belief that these machines are geared more for large commercial properties or municipalities. But in 2026, they're going to take a small step — a handful of

hand-picked clients — to see what autonomous robotic mowing might do for their company.

"We're going to select certain customers ... we think it's the future," says Donna Vignocchi Zych. "We tend to tell ourselves that we don't have that kind of customer. It's hard to flip the switch. So, a test run is how we're going to look at it."

Aaron Zych adds that one of the hardest parts about embracing robotics is how quickly the technology is evolving.

"Every time we say, 'Hey, let's go in this direction,' three weeks later, there's something new and better. It's hard to decide which direction to go in when things are changing so quickly. I think in 2026, we'll really hone down and let us take it in the direction it's going."

Beyond the robotic mowers, Donna Vignocchi Zych has another

Continued on page 20

"WE HAVE TO BECOME MORE EFFICIENT IN EVERYTHING WE DO. UNFORTUNATELY, A LOT OF COMPANIES ARE BEING GOBBLED UP BY CONGLOMERATES. AND WE ARE PROUDLY STILL AN INDEPENDENT, FAMILY-OWNED COMPANY. BUT TO KEEP UP WITH WHAT IS COMING AT US, WE NEED TO FIND MORE EFFICIENCIES SO THAT WE CAN GIVE BACK MORE TO OUR PEOPLE."

— Aaron Zych, Vice President, ILT Vignocchi



BEYOND THE ROBOTIC MOWERS, DONNA VIGNOCCHI ZYCH HAS ANOTHER GOAL FOR 2026 — TO MAKE SURE HER TEAM REMEMBERS HER MANTRA, “WE GOT THIS.”

Continued from page 19

goal for 2026 — to make sure her team remembers her mantra, “We got this.”

“It might sound rudimentary, but one of the key things we forget about when we’re running companies is a lack of cultivating that teamwork and making sure that everyone is not just on the same page but feels part of the process,” she says. “I think 2026 is going to get rough quick. We have a saying whenever someone leaves our office, our facility, our accounting department, whatever — ‘we got this.’ No matter what storms in the door in the next five minutes, we got this. If it gets rough, just remember, we’ve all got each other’s backs.”

ETCH OUTDOOR LIVING | IOWA

Etch Outdoor Living is a full-service design/build company located in Huxley, Iowa. The company is led by president Sam Rankin, who started the business as a way to support

his dream of becoming a professional hockey referee.

“This business became a little bit more fun each day, and we were lucky enough that the growth kind of perpetuated itself;

we didn’t struggle to grow the business,” he says. “Over time, it made it more fun, and it became my focus as we built it into a career.”

Rankin is a member of the ACE Peer Group program and made two trips to Italy as he’s moving from one peer group to another. Before he wrapped up with his old peer group, he wanted to complete his

member-driven case study, which put him in the middle of a circle, with his fellow peer members surrounding him and listening to how he’s handling his company and asking follow-up questions.

A shy person might see that experience as something of an interrogation, but Rankin found it invaluable.

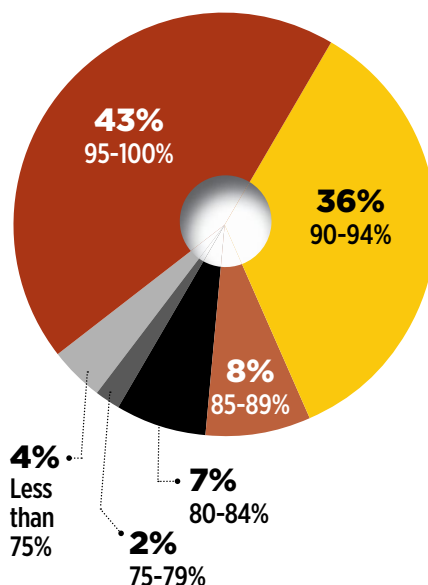
“It was fun. Inevitably, sitting in the middle of the circle becomes hard,” Rankin says. “One of the biggest things I took away from this — and it’s going to change the trajectory of my 2026 — is I really need to figure out what I want for my life. What does it look like, and how do we model a business that will drive success and drive a high-quality workplace for those on our team?”

Rankin’s interview with *LM* happened immediately after his case study had concluded and right before he departed for the airport to get home and see his young family. Rankin was clearly supercharged with excitement from the experience during his interview. To watch a video of his interview, visit [LandscapeManagement.net](https://www.LandscapeManagement.net).

“I think 2026 and beyond is going to be more focused on the team generating success instead of just me kind of leading the charge,” Rankin says. “I think the macroeconomic environment is continually moving in a favorable direction. Unemployment is up marginally, but at the same time, we’ve got plenty of labor, and in maintenance/fertilization, we control a recurring service.

“We’ve continually seen that growth, year over year,” he continues. “We’ve got to focus on our team, but the second part is, inevitably, there’s going to be growth because we continue to push in the right market segments.” 📌

What percentage of your clients did you retain over the past 12 months?



How does your expected 2025 budget compare to what you budgeted for the year?



Sam Rankin



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Marty Grunder, Founder & CEO, Grunder Landscaping



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GAZING INTO THE CRYSTAL BALL

Whether it was during *Landscape Management's* travels in 2025, responses to our annual State of the Industry survey or as part of our conversations at the *LM Growth Summit*, the Friends of *LM* have had plenty to tell us about the health of the landscape and lawn care industries in 2025 and their thoughts on what 2026 has in store.

Here's what a number of them had to say, plus the resolutions and business goals they're focused on heading into the new year.



BY SCOTT HOLLISTER
LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

“My top three goals for 2026 are to strengthen our leadership, scale the culture and sharpen the processes so Atlas can continue to grow without chaos. Our more specific resolutions are to:

1. Grow topline revenues by \$1 million through acquisitions and \$1 million organically.

2. Leverage artificial intelligence, our company SOPs and leadership training for efficiency and scale.

3. Get A.T.L.A.S. — ambitious, teamwork, learners, accountable, safety — ingrained into every decision, every hire and every promotion.

4. Strengthen intentional training, coaching and growth ladders.

5. Strengthen second-in-command leadership.

6. Continue to implement the 5S lean principles across all departments/branches.”

— **Sam Gembel, founder/
CEO, Atlas Outdoor,
Flint, Mich.**



“We’re resolving to focus on building for the future while maintaining the high standards of daily operations and customer service that define Goldenstate Landscapes. We honor our past with gratitude for what we have accomplished, while recognizing that the systems that brought us here must continue to evolve to ensure long-term success.”

— **Robert Olsen, CEO,
Goldenstate Landscapes,
Camarillo, Calif.**



“Our main resolutions are to make sure we continue to take care of our employees and continue to provide the best customer service possible. Taking care of employees has always been one of our core values, and as a result, our retention is very high. We don’t lose many employees. Without great people, you can’t get great results ... so we put a lot of emphasis on training and on making sure our employees feel like we’re investing in them and taking care of them. That’s got to be number one.

“Then on the customer side ... we want to build relationships with our customers. We’ve always been that way. We use technology as best as we can to help with that, but we still want to be able to knock on the door and make sure we meet and greet our customers; develop that intimacy with them. It’s much harder for them to get rid of a company where they really know the people, their family

stories and things like that than it is to get rid of a company they don’t know, right? For us, 2026 will be about people — those inside our company and the customers we serve.”

— **Bob Brower, general
manager, Lawn Plus,
West Alexandria, Ohio**



“The North Point Outdoors team resolutions and business approaches for 2026 are to protect the system that has been supporting our growth. We want to maintain a frontline-first culture, operational clarity and predictable chaos-free mornings. We’re going to focus on and maintain elite staff retention, keeping frontline and manager retention above 95 percent. And we want to continue to refine and enhance a predictable operating system where daily performances don’t depend on last-minute heroics or problem-solving.

“Ultimately, we believe that growth that degrades the system is failure, while growth that strengthens the system should be the goal. We are determined to continue to build something unmistakably strong, a company that people want to work for, for leaders they want to show up for and be owners that support the frontline to make it happen.”

— **Dave Fairburn, CEO,
North Point Outdoors,
Derry, N.H.**



“My resolution will be to focus on commercial growth for my company. I am a one-person operation, which is by choice because I wanted to be on the ground and understand the business versus hiring somebody who’s trying to tell me to use this product or not use this other product. That said, I am thinking about bringing on an outside person to help me look at the business side of things, to provide some thoughts on business development and growth. I’m not ready to dive too much into tech or business software, but on the business development and commercial side, another perspective could definitely help.”

— **Rodney Sykes,
owner, Lawn Squad,
Collingswood, N.J.**



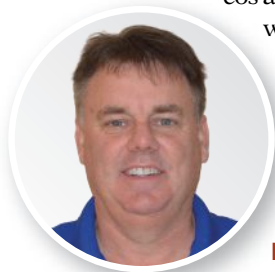
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“We’re stepping into a new chapter — one that raises the bar for who we are and how we work. We’re building real-world training materials using our own people, our own equipment and our own standards. This isn’t just documentation. This is us defining the way we operate, the way we deliver and the way we set ourselves apart in the industry.

“We’re starting with the sales team, creating clean, accurate maps and designs that flow seamlessly to our installation and maintenance crews. When we say we’re going to deliver something, this process ensures we deliver it with precision — every time, at every site, with every customer. It’s a big challenge, but it’s the kind of challenge that pushes us forward.

“To make this happen, we’re equipping our teams with tablets and weather-proof GoPro cameras to capture high-quality videos and photos. Every piece of training content will be built in both English and Spanish, so every crew member has the tools to succeed. This is about clarity, consistency and pride in our craft. We’re not just preparing for the future — we’re building it.”



— **Mike McCarron, owner, Image Works Landscaping, Fairfax Station, Va.**

“(My resolution) is to try and be more accepting of new technologies like artificial intelligence, business software, things like that. We’re a little more old school. We do use RealGreen, but we still do the paper invoices, enter stuff manually, just because of that fear of taking the leap. I feel like this event (the 2025 LM Growth Summit) helped us understand more about what tools are out there that can help us and how others are using them. So, I would just say (my resolution is) taking advantage of new opportunities, or at least investigating them a little more versus just being so dismissive and sticking with the ‘if-it’s-not-broke-then-I-don’t-need-to-fix-it’ mentality.”



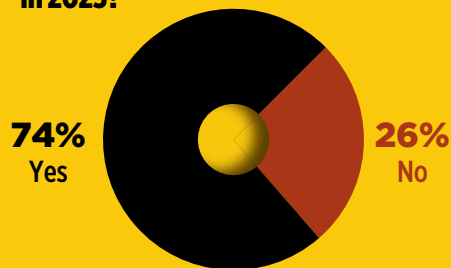
— **Joshua Rupani, owner, Advanced Turf Pros, Yarmouth Port, Mass.**

“My professional New Year’s resolution is to better drive a culture of ‘Total Sales.’ Everyone, regardless of position, is a spokesperson and salesperson for the Winterberry brand.”

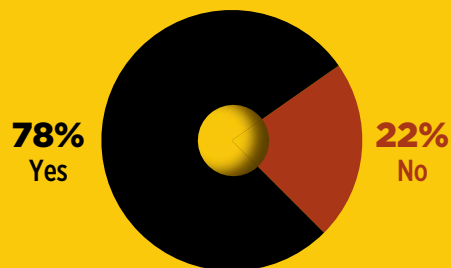


— **Bryan Stolz, CEO, Winterberry Landscape and Garden Center, Southington, Conn.**

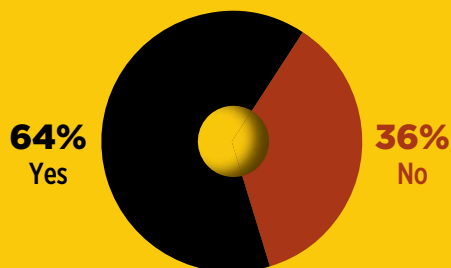
Did rising prices or the rate of inflation affect your business in 2025?



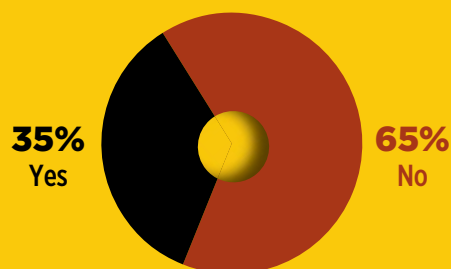
Do you plan to add any equipment to your fleet in 2026?



Has your company experienced labor challenges or had difficulty finding reliable workers?



Do you plan to expand your business in 2026 through a new service or a new branch?



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BUSINESS BOOSTERS

Fall guys

With the help of new tools from Stinger Equipment, RD's Total Lawn took its seasonal aerations and overseedings to a new level in 2025

BY SCOTT HOLLISTER | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Fall cultural practices such as aeration and overseeding are not new to the service menu at RD's Total Lawn in the Philadelphia suburb of Langhorne, Pa.

The company and its owner, Ryan Dittes, have been offering both services since the company started nine years ago. In 2024, for example, RD's did about 200 aerations and overseedings for its growing roster of customers, all with walk-behind units.

But Dittes knew he was only scratching the surface when it came to that kind of work and that an upgrade

in equipment could also upgrade top-line revenue for his company. That's why he jumped when Stinger Equipment came calling with an offer to gift RD's Total Lawn a new GT30 riding aerator for use this past fall, part of an effort by Stinger and *Landscape Management* to raise awareness of the real-world benefits these machines can bring to a lawn care company.

"We set some pretty lofty goals (once they received the GT30)," Dittes says. "They were definitely stretch goals considering what we'd done in the past, but we were hoping to break six figures in top-line revenue with aerations and overseeding. And then we also wanted to try and get at least 80 percent of our treatment clients on board for those services."

Consider those missions accomplished. The introduction of the GT30 to RD's fleet helped the company exceed both goals while at the same time proving the use case for riding aerators and overseeders that Stinger and its vice president, Dustin McGehee, had long argued for.

"We ended the year doing a total of 334 fall aerations and overseedings. And our total revenue, \$107,000, blew past

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"We've got several yards that are next to our competitors', and there's just a drastic difference. They look greener, they look healthier. Just amazing products."

— Jeryl Beachy, Okaw Prairie Landscapes, LLC



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Stinger's Dustin McGehee (left) talks about the GT30 with Ryan Dittes of RD's Total Lawn.

our goal. Far exceeded it," Dittes says. "And then we had over 86 percent of our treatment clients sign on for those programs, so definitely exceeded all of our expectations and goals there with that."

"That's an impressive feat, adding that kind of revenue from a secondary service for your business," says McGehee. "But that was why we did this, to pull the curtain back and show people the money they're leaving on the table, show them how aerators like the GT30 can take a really labor-intensive task and make it easier for the contractor and more cost-effective for the customer."

About the only challenge that Dittes and RD's faced last fall was having too much new work and not enough time to do it in, a scenario that Dittes says was "a good problem to have, but a problem nonetheless."

"In this part of the world, our seeding window is really short. Ideally, we have a six-week time frame that is our peak time for seeding. You want it to be cool enough that you can get some seed down, but you don't want to get it in the ground when it's cold enough that it's not going to germinate. There's a sweet spot there you have to hit," Dittes explained.

The solution was doubling down on Stinger's GT30. RD's ended up renting another unit for the season to pair with the one they received from Stinger, allowing them to run two aerations/seeding crews every day to keep up with demand.

"Logistically, that was the only way we could pull it off," Dittes explains. "Typically, we'd run two-man crews for this kind of work ... but what was really cool about these machines was that we didn't see a need for that. The GT30 with the seed box on it allowed us to pull plugs and seed at the same time. There really wasn't a need for a second person on those crews. It was more efficient to run a second single-person crew with another Stinger."

Based on the successes of 2025, Dittes and his team at RD's Total Lawn are already strategizing for next fall, including the possibility of adding a third crew.

"With seasonal work, it's always good to reflect on what worked, what didn't and really try to perfect it. We're definitely doing that with aerations and overseeding," Dittes says. "Getting a third crew out on the road would really ramp things up for us." 🌳

PHOTO: LM STAFF

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A WARM-SEASON WARNING

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Warm-season weeds to watch this winter

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

While *Landscape Management's* Cleveland headquarters gets covered in inches of snow, lawn care operators (LCOs) in southern climates are worried about the next breakout of weeds that can plague their clients' properties.

Warm-season grasses in the lower half of the U.S. have their own management problems, especially when it comes to the winter months. Jay Wyrick, agronomist for FineTurf in Charlotte, N.C., has a few recommendations to make post-holiday turf care easier than ever.

POA'S PRIME

Around this time of year, *Poa annua's* lighter color tends to stand out from surrounding grass as cool conditions favor its growth in otherwise more dormant warm-season turf. And while colder states get slammed with snow, Wyrick says winter rains in warm climates can break down the previous autumn's weed prep.

"That type of thing can cause the efficacy to break down a little quicker, so you can see some problems there just depending on what product you use," Wyrick says. "We use Specticle for our controls, and then we mix a couple other things with it to broaden the spectrum."

Wyrick says other postemergent controls he recommends include Envu's Revolver herbicide and PBI-Gordon's Katana herbicide for bermuda and zoysia. On St. Augustine and centipede, he says atrazine is a good go-to since options are more limited thanks to higher risks of herbicide damage.

THE BROADLEAF BATTLE

While *Poa* can be a fight all on its own, the regular appearance of broadleaf weeds can also require some LCO intervention.

Weeds like henbit, chickweed, bittercress and more can all strike during the winter, and Wyrick says being vigilant with postemergent control is important to prevent them from growing into bigger problems.

"In January, February, you're starting your first round of the year, which obviously you're doing some type of pre-emergent," Wyrick says. "But you're doing postemergent control as well in conjunction to clean up winter weeds and catch them, hopefully, before they get much larger. (Now), they're much easier to control."



And when it comes to postemergent control on different types of grasses, he recommends Nufarm's Cool Power herbicide since it can be used on the four main turf types.

↑ PESKY POA
Poa annua is particularly tricky to control, so it's important to not let it ruin your preparations for the upcoming spring season.

SPRING IS COMING

Even if there's not inches of snow covering the turf, the winter season still serves as a slower period for warm-season LCOs. Wyrick says now is the perfect time to be planning for the busy spring and summer months ahead.

"You're gearing up for the spring this time of year. You're already thinking about March, April and May. Once you get through these first two rounds of preemergent and postemergent weed control, you're on to the growing season and pushing the turf to perform the best it can for the next six to eight months," he says.

In the January to February time frame, Wyrick says crabgrass is a prominent future issue he makes applications for, and when it comes to the product of his choice, he says his ol' reliable is prodiamine preemergents.

"That's for crabgrass control and a few other types of weeds," Wyrick says. "You get longer efficacy and a little better control from breakthroughs in the spring and early summer by doing a split application. Here, we have to get that first round down usually by Feb. 15." 📌

FROM THE SOURCE

Revenue potential should guide spray rig purchases

Picking the right piece of equipment that fits both your budget and your future business plans can be the key to future growth

BY DAVE ARNETT | CONTRIBUTOR

A spray rig is more than a tool of the trade: It is probably the single biggest driver of a lawn care provider's success. A rig's capacity, capabilities and quality affect your top and bottom lines, and these factors should be front and center when deciding on a rig.

Maybe you noticed that I didn't include cost. It goes without saying that cost is a very important consideration. However, being overly cost-conscious can lead folks to opt for a rig that doesn't support longer-term growth and profitability. In short, it can undermine your ability to make a good living. When you focus on affordability and revenue potential rather than cost, you're in a much better position to make a purchase that serves your business well.

Here are some suggestions that can help guide lawn care pros when the time comes to purchase a new spray rig.

GO BIG OR GO HOME

For lawn care operators who are just starting out, a pickup truck and spray unit could be the right choice. It's a great entry-level rig for doing weed control and lawn fertilization on smaller properties. But to grow the business and increase revenue, you'll need to buy another larger rig in the not-too-distant future or risk losing new accounts to competitors.

That's why it makes good business sense to buy the largest rig you can afford, ideally one that meets your current needs while allowing your

business to grow. In most cases, this means getting a rig that can accommodate more customers and services.

AIM FOR 'ONE AND DONE'

The more services you can deliver in a single trip, the happier you and your customers will be. Unlike a pickup rig, the right large lawn rig can enable lawn care providers to handle warm- and cool-season grasses, tree and shrub care, perimeter pest control — even mowing — in just one route trip.

This kind of efficiency is a powerful driver of revenue ... and profits. In fact, a full-size rig with multiple tanks and dual pumping stations can generate \$500,000 to \$700,000 in revenue per year.

FIT YOUR RIG TO YOUR BUSINESS PLAN

Even a good quality, larger lawn rig can fall short if it's not designed and equipped to perform the way your particular business needs it to. So, it's important to work with an equipment provider who takes the time to understand what services you want to offer and how you

want to deliver them before providing a price quote. What's more, they should be able to suggest custom features and designs that not only align with your goals but make your work more efficient.

SERVICES MATTER

A spray rig of any size is a significant investment, and there's no overstating the importance of getting high-quality equipment. But it's just as important to work with a spray equipment provider whose services are geared toward their customers getting the most from that investment.

Along with quality equipment and customization, buyers should look for a provider who offers:

- Technical support for maintenance, troubleshooting and repairs.
- Ready availability of repair kits and replacement parts.
- Reasonable financing and delivery options.
- Refurbishing options.

These types of services can help keep a top-quality rig out in the field and generating revenue for 20 or even 30 years, and that adds up to a healthy bottom line. 

Arnett is a sales manager at Graham Spray Equipment in Douglasville, Ga., with more than four decades of experience with the company.



It's important to invest in a spray rig that can support both current and future jobs.

THE BIG ONE

A five-star project

BY NATHAN MADER
LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

LOCATION Elkton, Md.

COMPANY Ruppert Landscape

DETAILS Fair Hill is home to one of only seven five-star equestrian venues in the world, and the second one in the U.S. It's where horses and riders race and compete at the elite Maryland 5 Star event, meaning only the best conditions are acceptable.

"Managing Fair Hill is both an honor and a responsibility," says Martin Sanchez, branch manager for Ruppert's Toughkenamon, Pa., branch. "Every decision we make impacts not just how the property looks but how safe and consistent the footing is for horses and riders competing at an Olympic level."

Day-to-day maintenance at Fair Hill is extremely detailed and data driven, Sanchez says, with more than 100 acres of turf managed with a full-time crew. The main turf track is sand based, meaning moisture is monitored daily, and real-time irrigation adjustments are made on the more than 120 zones.

When the 5 Star is on the horizon, pre-event prep takes priority, including competition arenas, cross-country obstacles, farmland, vendor spaces and tailgating fields all receiving makeovers or upkeep.

"There's a lot of pressure, but it's very rewarding to see everything come together and know that our work plays a direct role in a successful, safe event," Sanchez says.

And in true competition fashion, Ruppert Landscape took home a trophy of its own. The company won a gold award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Awards of Excellence program thanks to its maintenance of the site, which started in April of 2020. 🏆



PHOTOS: SPORT AND ENTERTAINMENT CORPORATION OF MARYLAND (1-3, 7); RUPPERT LANDSCAPE (4-6)



Captions | **1.** Ruppert began maintaining Fair Hill right after the racetrack and special event zone was constructed, and since then, the company and its partners have been responsible for the full grow-in, stabilization and now active management of the site. **2.** Rolling with a pull-behind sod roller is used to smooth the surface, close divots and maintain consistent footing after horse workouts. **3.** The cross-country course gets special attention from Ruppert, with the company constructing its own obstacles. They require watering and upkeep before the event. **4.** Sanchez says the team runs two Scythe autonomous mowers to help maintain more than 100 acres of turf, allowing the crew to focus on high-visibility competition zones, hand detailing, irrigation management and repairs. **5.** Horse racing returned to Fair Hill in 2025 with the new sand-based Kentucky bluegrass track. Sanchez says the team spent several years carefully growing in and stabilizing the surface, plus building a precise fertility and irrigation program. **6.** Fertility programs are aggressive thanks to more than 18 annual applications. Weed management, aeration, verticutting and topdressing are also major maintenance tasks. **7.** Around the turf track, moisture readings are taken at 300-foot intervals to help guide both automated and manual irrigation strategies using water sourced from on-site ponds.

PRODUCTS THAT WORK



← KR800 VOYAGER

COMPANY: Kress
URL: kress.com/en-us

The Kress KR800 — or “Voyager” — is designed specifically for route-based landscaping operations and represents a significant leap forward

in commercial-grade automation. Kress’ Voyager is an autonomous, 40-inch robotic mower engineered to work seamlessly within landscaping companies’ existing service models. Equipped with a fusion of real-time kinematic (RTK) technology, lidar, VisionAI and high-tech sensors, Voyager operates boundary-wire-free with centimeter-level accuracy and the sophistication typical of autonomous cars. After a one-time mapping process, Voyager travels with the crew from property to property with infinite map memory capability. Voyager mows up to 7 acres or eight hours per charge and operates at a rate comparable to or faster than traditional on-site crew tasks. It can also travel trailer free between properties in dense HOA-style neighborhoods.

↓ PROLINE AMI

COMPANY: The Toro Co.

URL: toro.com

Toro introduced the autonomous ProLine AMI at Equip Expo 2025, a solution the company says delivers serious results and gives pros the power to maximize productivity, streamline workloads and increase ROI. Toro’s latest autonomous mower, the ProLine AMI is guided by GNSS+RTK, a high-precision positioning technology that combines satellite navigation with real-time corrections for consistent results with less overlap. Contractors can operate confidently with continuous system monitoring, including audio and visual

alerts, remote stop and ISO-compliant radar to aid in collision avoidance. Machine status and access to controls can be monitored

on the bright, full-color LED screen or through the mobile app. The

new technology is built on the trusted ProLine platform, which runs on the 26.5-hp Kohler Command Pro EFI engine for extra muscle.



PRO-TURN 200

COMPANY: Gravely

URL: gravely.com

Strong dealer and landscaper demand has led to the return of the Gravely Pro-Turn 200 commercial zero-turn mower. Available in 52- and 60-inch deck widths, the company says this fleet favorite reenters the lineup to fill a critical price point in the commercial segment while offering high durability, comfort and performance. Originally launched in the mid-2010s, the Pro-Turn 200 features Gravely’s X-Factor 2 deck designed with baffling that produces smooth clipping dispersion and a clean, consistent cut in a variety of conditions. A 13.4-gallon fuel tank minimizes refueling stops, while the premium cut-and-sew suspension seat cushions the operator from rough terrain through long hours. Within the chassis, landscapers will find Kawasaki FX850 and FX921 engines paired with Hydro-Gear ZT-5400 transaxles, which drive the unit to a top speed of 13 mph and offer smooth, responsive control.



Z998R

COMPANY: John Deere

URL: deere.com

John Deere has expanded its lineup of diesel ZTrak zero-turn mowers, including the debut of the Z998R. In addition, the existing Z997R model has received a full design upgrade and is now available in two trim levels:

the Z997R and the Z997M. The Z998R offers unmatched versatility and control, operating as a traditional 100-inch zero-turn mower or adapting on the fly with the touch of a button. Thanks to its independently controlled E-Cut wing decks

and electric drive motors, operators can raise or lower each wing deck to navigate around trees, fences, gates and other obstacles without interrupting mowing. The Z998R can mow with just one wing deck down, providing flexible cutting widths of 60, 80 or 100 inches. JDLink modems installed from the factory are included for all three models and enable customers to wirelessly stream machine data in real time to the John Deere Operations Center.



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HARDSCAPE SOLUTIONS

Connecting multi-dimensional space

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

LOCATION Winnetka, Ill.

COMPANY Mariani Landscape

DETAILS This newly constructed house and the landscape that defines the property is the result of a collaboration between multiple design professionals. Their work all traces back to the client's vision for thoughtfully connected and purpose-driven areas in a multi-dimensional landscape.

Upon arrival, one is greeted with a formal, center entry drive moved from a previous location at the corner of the lot. A reclaimed antique brick paver driveway lined with flanking perennial beds opens to a courtyard punctuated by a walled garden.

White accoya fencing, hand-crafted gates and custom-forged hardware connect with stone retaining walls throughout. They link the many pathways, gardens and lounge areas, including the lily pond with seating positioned to catch the afternoon sun.

A New York bluestone pathway along the side of the home highlights a bosque of lindens that provide shade to cafe seating adjacent to kitchen and dining areas. Stone wall garden terraces lead down to a perennial bordered backyard.

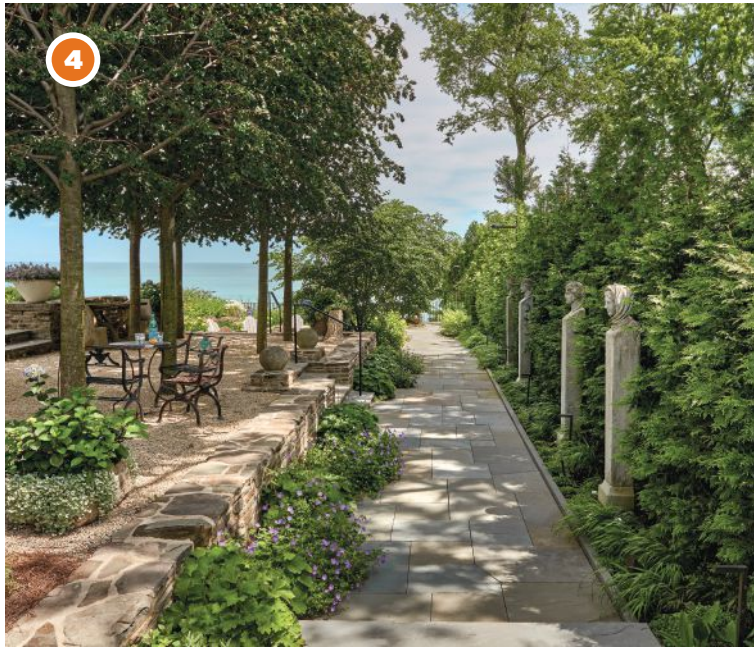
Beyond the lawn panel and surrounding gardens, steps lead down to a loggia structure and the reimagined pool below. The south pool house received a completely new look, and the old north pool house was converted into an open-air pergola.

"The client's vision was to create rooms in the landscape for how they live, entertain and connect with nature," says design principal Sara Furlan. "We collaborated from the very beginning and well before construction began with the client, architect, interior designer and builder. They're thrilled with the result."

Mariani Landscape won both a gold award and the Judges' Award in the NALP's 2025 Awards of Excellence program. 



PHOTOS: MARIANI LANDSCAPE



Captions | 1. Design work began in 2018, and the project was completed in 2022. Mariani continues to care for the property at least twice a week through fine gardening, pruning, lawn care, seasonal rotations and more. 2. The clients' new home is surrounded by a New York bluestone carriage walk and a curbed, mixed perennial garden. 3. Water plays a massive part in the property's charm and aesthetics, with the lily pond, pool area and lakefront all fit for a relaxing afternoon. 4. Classic pea gravel was used to ground the bosque, and a set of Four Seasons sculptures line the bluestone walkway connecting the front and back of the home. 5. The seating area on top of the pool's loggia structure leads to staircases surrounded by fragrant, textured perennials. The revamped pool provides views of the lake at a comfortable mid-level just below the lawn. 6. Elevation changes were better emphasized with the terraces, and a fire circle now anchors the south end of the middle lawn section. 7. The home now overlooks vertical transitions supported by the stone wall garden terraces, lawn panel and bluff garden. Past the perennial border is the pool area and beach.

BUSINESS BOOSTERS

SUSTAINABLE SHADE

Trees not only add aesthetic beauty but also provide practical benefits.



Redefined refinement

Explore the 2026 shift in design-build trends, from decorative backyards to tech-integrated, sustainable modern outdoor spaces **BY MIKE ZAWACKI | CONTRIBUTOR**

In 2026, the landscape design-build sector anticipates a profound shift from purely decorative design aesthetics to a more performative approach. Clients demand more than just beautiful outdoor spaces. Instead, they desire living areas engineered as seamless, tech-integrated and sustainably minded extensions of their home environment.

Design-build professionals first noted this shift during the pandemic with the

advent of the “COVID backyard.” However, in 2026, experts suggest this trend has matured, reflecting a broader consumer demand for environments that encompass the entire outdoor experience rather than isolated design features.

“It’s no longer enough to offer people a static environment,” says J. Wickham Zimmerman, CEO of Anaheim, Calif.-based Outside the Lines, a design-build landscape construction firm specializing in rockwork, water

features and themed environments. “Visitors now expect a reason to linger, whether they’re seeking passive rejuvenation of running water or a high-energy spectacle like a choreographed light and water show.”

SUSTAINABLE WATER USE

In the 2026 design-build market, sustainability is no longer a passing trend but a permanent industry fixture, particularly for water features in arid regions such as California and Texas, Zimmerman says. While water conservation remains a priority, Zimmerman notes that a high-efficiency water feature consumes very little water.

PHOTO: VECTORWORKS



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"If they're designed, built and maintained properly, there should be no leakage," he says.

Additionally, Zimmerman expects future projects to move toward closed-loop designs that prioritize innovative water harvesting. Beyond standard rainwater harvesting, he advocates using air-conditioning condensate to offset evaporative losses in a water feature. Perhaps the most advanced application of this trend is the integration of water features directly into HVAC systems.

ADVANCED AUTOMATION

Central to 2026 trends is the integration of advanced automation, allowing homeowners to manage their outdoor environments with unparalleled ease, design-build experts say. Automation enables remote control of lighting and water features, serving both aesthetic and security purposes by projecting a

lived-in feel while residents are away.

A major development in this sector, according to Kevin Minton, national sales manager at Moorestown, N.J.-based Coastal Source, is the rise of human-centric lighting. This innovation enables outdoor lighting to sync with clients' natural circadian rhythms, allowing users to transition through a host of natural lighting tones.

"So, if you want a bright daylight application in your home, you can have that, and you can just dial it in," Minton explains.

LESSENING THE CARBON FOOTPRINT

According to Eric Gilbey of Columbia, Md.-based design-technology firm Vectorworks, the 2026 landscape design-build market is being shaped by a shift toward environmental accountability, where sustainability has evolved from a buzzword into a more rigorous design metric for consumers.

Gilbey notes that clients expect designers to evaluate the carbon costs of the transportation, installation and long-term operation and maintenance of their outdoor spaces.

"The goal isn't just beautiful," he says. "It's one that actively participates in carbon sequestration."

Gilbey foresees the continued rise of specialized construction material brokers selling sustainably sourced and harvested, reclaimed hardscape materials rather than freshly quarried stone or virgin concrete.

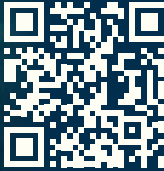
"Reused materials are no longer seen as a compromise," he adds. "Cleverly carved reclaimed concrete and salvaged stone are becoming high-end aesthetic choices." 

Zawacki is a Cleveland-based journalist and frequent contributor who has covered various aspects of the green, horticultural, sports turf, and irrigation industries for the last 20 years.



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BUSINESS BOOSTERS

New year, new solutions

Finding the top trends at the 2025 Irrigation Show

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

One of the best parts about the Irrigation Show and Education Week is that it takes place in November or December, allowing business owners, manufacturers and everyone in the industry to collectively look back on the year they've had.

But through the educational classes, networking events and trade show floor

that hit New Orleans from Dec. 8-11, another key opportunity is to look forward into 2026 and think about what can help grow the industry.

"We hope attendees left feeling educated, inspired and better equipped to move their businesses and careers forward," says Brittany Tyrrell, senior meeting and events manager for the Irrigation Association.

READY FOR 2026?
Start planning your trip to the 2026 Irrigation Show, Dec. 7-10 in Las Vegas.



And whether the almost 2,400 attendees were engaged in classes or meeting with their favorite manufacturers, these practical takeaways often included understanding what the next big trends are for irrigation pros.

A WIRELESS WORLD

Irrigation contractors are busy, often having to run to hundreds of different sites to troubleshoot, adjust or update the controller. When labor is hard to come by and time is even scarcer, the ability to work remotely is starting to become massive for pros.

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“The two key areas I see the most interest in and the most advancement in is wireless valve management, as well as weather-based and, more specifically, cloud-based system management,” says Don Davis, irrigation training manager for SiteOne Landscape Supply. “A typical contractor simply can’t be on the jobsite every day, monitoring and adjusting run times. A cloud-based irrigation system can make that contractor better at what they do.”

Wireless communication and remote monitoring can notify contractors of problems within the system and influence maintenance decisions, which also helps take advantage of another big 2026 trend: increasing revenue streams.

Anthony Long, senior product manager for Hunter Industries, says the company’s Hydrawise controller, system and app allow contractors to change how business is done amidst time and labor shortages. For example, instead of changing a controller on-site for a larger fee, pros can do it remotely and bill a reduced off-site service charge. However, they’re also able to charge for monthly monitoring and maintenance fees or other Wi-Fi-based controller services, adding ways to generate consistent revenue.

“Contractors are getting much tighter about how they manage people, and particularly, time and labor is just so short,” Long says. “The more we can do in the office, and the more we can get our less tech-savvy people to do work, we can keep our tech heavy guys out in the field working.”

SMART SOLUTIONS

Along the lines of wireless communication, smart controllers in general are growing in popularity among contractors — and clients, too.

Martin Wirtz, a regular Irrigation Show attendee and COO of Burge Sprinkler Company in Maryland, says as a Hunter Industries fan, almost 80 percent of his clients are now on a Hydrawise system.

“I think there’s just certain things that were more foreign that are now becoming the industry standard,” Wirtz says.

And the almost inescapable inclusion of AI in many aspects of business management was another hot topic at the Irrigation Show, with many educational opportunities focusing on how to really take advantage of it in 2026.

For more insight on what the industry predicts as the next big thing, the IA will release its 2026 Landscape Irrigation Contractor Outlook Report — based on 173 responses from IA members — in the upcoming months. 

PHOTO: LM STAFF

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STEP BY STEP

Planning for the first plow

Whether it's the first of your season or the first of your career, here are some tips to get machines ready for when the snow starts flying

BY SCOTT HOLLISTER | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

In some parts of the country, the snow will have been flying for months by the time you read this. For others, you still might be waiting for the first appearance of Old Man Winter.

Regardless, there are some time-tested tips and techniques for making sure your snow removal equipment is ready to get to work when called upon this winter, from engine inspections and attachment evaluations to standard safety checks and snow removal.

This month, we revive an old *Landscape Management* favorite — Step by Step — to showcase an in-depth checklist of steps landscape pros should go through before their crews take to the streets this winter. This list was prepared with information provided by the Snow and Ice Management Association (sima.org) and BOSS Snowplow (blossplow.com).

Step by Step was a regular monthly feature in *LM* from October 2014 through December 2018, and beginning this month, will appear again on a quarterly basis.



STEP 1: SAFETY AND SETUP

- ✓ Park the equipment on a level surface and lower attachment to the ground.
- ✓ Motion-control levers should be in neutral, the parking brake should be engaged and the key removed before inspection.
- ✓ The operator platform should be clear of snow and ice, and the operator should verify all guards, covers and safety decals are in place and readable.

STEP 2: FLUIDS

- ✓ Engine oil and hydraulic fluids should be at the correct levels.
- ✓ Inspect hydraulic hoses and fittings for leaks, cracks or wear.
- ✓ The fuel level should be sufficient for the duration of the job.
- ✓ The fuel cap should be tightly secured and the area around it clean.

STEP 3: BATTERY AND ELECTRICAL SYSTEMS

- ✓ The battery should be fully charged and the battery terminals clean and tightly secured to the terminals.
- ✓ The battery terminals should show no corrosion.
- ✓ The main fuse and fuse box should be visually inspected.
- ✓ Lights should be operational, front and rear.
- ✓ The display screen should power on and show no fault warnings.

STEP 4: TIRES, WHEELS AND DRIVE

- ✓ Make sure tire pressure matches manufacturer recommendations.
- ✓ Tires should be inspected for cuts, damage or excessive wear.
- ✓ Wheel lug nuts should be tightly secured.
- ✓ Hub cotter pins should be present and secure.

STEP 5: BELTS AND AIR INTAKE

- ✓ Inspect belts for cracking, fraying, glazing or burn marks.
- ✓ The air cleaner cover should be secure.
- ✓ The intake area should be clear of snow, ice or other debris.

STEP 6: ATTACHMENTS AND HYDRAULICS

- ✓ Attachment should be properly installed with quick pins fully locked.
- ✓ Hydraulic couplers should be fully seated.
- ✓ Attachment hoses should be free of leaks or damage.
- ✓ The attachment should move freely through full range.

STEP 7: FINAL WALK-AROUND

- ✓ Snow should be removed from the machine, controls and attachment.
- ✓ Ensure visibility from the operator position is clear.
- ✓ Verify beacon/light visibility.
- ✓ Confirm no leaks after warm-up. 

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FIVE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW BY SETH JONES | LM EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Nate Jensen

OWNER, JENSEN GARDENS

OMAHA, NEB.

1 How did Jensen Gardens get started, and what services do you offer?

When I was 9, I saved some pumpkin seeds and planted them in the backyard. It took over. From then on, I was hooked. I loved growing things. Started mowing and snow removal at 9 years old, dad carting me around at 4 a.m. so we would have the driveways done before 7 a.m. Then worked landscaping in high school and college and loved it. Jensen Gardens was started as a design/build, landscape and snow-removal company in 2002. Nick Jensen and Eric Gustafson joined in 2004 and helped us grow to our current offering of design/build, bid/build, maintenance, snow removal, pools, playgrounds, structures and tree care.

2 What are your expectations for the industry for the next five or 10 years?

If you think back to 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 ... if you can go through that, everything else is a walk in the park. I think people are getting leery, saying, "It's not as busy as it was two or three years ago." COVID turned out to be a windfall for all landscapers in general. Now, we're getting away from that, to more like it was before COVID, when we had to fight for customers. We've got to be on our A-game as far as customer service and response times.

3 Why did you choose to join a peer group?

My brother talked me into it. Once you learn what some of these other guys are doing, you get a little bit of competitiveness within the peer group. Like, "Oh, their numbers are better than ours, their turnover is less than ours?" When you think you have one thing figured out, you then realize somebody else has it more figured out. Or maybe we're prioritizing the wrong thing. It teaches you to focus your energy where it needs to go.

4 Do you have a most memorable day at work, maybe a day where you felt like you really made it?

I don't think you ever make it. I've never felt like I made it. The goal posts are always moving. That might be a character flaw. Now, the moment when you build a waterfall and plug the waterfall in and see the pumps running for the first time — that never gets old. Those are the good days. Or showing up when the crew is at lunch, and they share their lunch with you, and it's some of the best Mexican food you can have. Those are the good days.

5 How did you and your wife meet, and what do you do for fun?

Jaime and I are high school sweethearts. For fun, we're hobby farmers. She's the chicken whisperer. I've got five cows. We pretend to be farmers when we're not landscaping. It's mostly for fun; it's not a revenue generator, that's for sure. 🐮

PHOTO: LM STAFF



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POWERED BY PEOPLE

#9

SavATree creates digital tools to empower employees and improve efficiency

BY LAUREN H. DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR

With “create raving fans” as a core value, SavATree believes growth will follow when they achieve that goal — and that’s proven true for the company for nearly 50 years.

Landing at No. 9 on *Landscape Management’s* 2025 LM150 ranking of the industry’s top revenue-generating firms, SavATree’s customers are about 70 percent residential and 30 percent commercial. It provides services like tree/shrub care, lawn care, tick control, landscape design, landscape maintenance, deer control, holiday lighting/decor and natural resource consulting.

Experiencing a 22-percent increase in revenue from the previous year, the company attributes its growth to team members and their commitment to the customer, says Phil DeGisi, chief growth officer of SavATree, headquartered in Bedford Hills, N.Y.

BUILDING SOLUTIONS

To support their local teams, SavATree invests in various initiatives for things like improved training, technology and communication. For example, the company prioritized rigorous training and ongoing certi-

fication for its International Society of Arboriculture-certified arborists and plant health care specialists. It built a comprehensive onboarding and continuous education program that equips its teams with the skills they need for the field.

“This investment has helped drive quality, build trust in our brand and improve retention of clients through better outcomes,” DeGisi says.

To stay ahead with technology, SavATree created a business intelligence reporting suite so its local and district operators can review data across safety, sales, production, fleet and efficiency.

“It’s allowed our teams to make data-driven decisions confidently and efficiently, which in turn is driving growth,” DeGisi says.

The company was also an early adopter of artificial intelligence (AI) with an emphasis on enabling its teams to create schedules more efficiently, find sales opportunities and get answers to questions faster.

“We continue to invest here and see a great deal of opportunity to support our team members with AI, all in the spirit of giving them more time to serve the client,” DeGisi says.

SavATree also has a history of partnering with arboriculture and agronomy companies, and they are now a nationwide company with more than 100 locations.

GROWING PAINS

Along with growth have come some challenges, primarily with communication and training. To ensure

all of its team members are set up for success from the start, SavATree recently rolled out a company-wide communications platform, SAT Central, which allows every employee to access information, resources and updates in one place.

“It’s also our hub for peer-to-peer recognition and allows us to deliver consistent, timely messaging

across all branches, ensuring that everyone feels valued and aligned as we grow,” DeGisi says.

To improve the company’s training processes, it developed a self-directed advancement program, help-

ing to empower employees to develop their careers and build skills at their own pace. The program is available on demand and is fully mobile accessible, which has been an essential feature for their geographically dispersed, field-based crews.

“By giving team members flexible, easy-to-access learning pathways, we’ve been able to increase consistency, retain more of our valuable team members and support long-term growth,” DeGisi says.

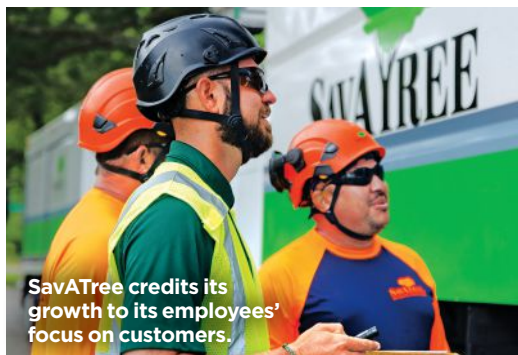
During the past two years, most SavATree branches have grown their teams — including increased sales arborist and field-team capacity — as a result of increased demand for their services. As it looks toward the future, DeGisi says it will continue focusing on its people, products, services and technology to deliver a customer experience that its clients rave about.

“Invest in your people and focus on your customer,” he says. 📌

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.



Phil DeGisi



SavATree credits its growth to its employees' focus on customers.



The CEO's bookshelf: Touchstones to building success



BY BRYAN CHRISTIANSEN

The author is the CEO of Mariani Premier Group, the largest premium residential landscape firm in the U.S. Reach him at BryanC@marianipremiergroup.com.

Every January brings a fresh set of resolutions. Eat better. Exercise more. And for many business leaders, one that quietly carries a lot of weight: read more books. Not just for enjoyment, but to sharpen thinking, challenge assumptions and become better stewards of the businesses and people we lead.

Throughout my career, I have applied the best concepts in business from thinkers I respect. Certain books have become indispensable to me; operating manuals for how I approach leadership and strategy. To that end, I'm sharing three books that have fundamentally influenced my perspective on building a successful company and the key lessons I apply daily.

"THE SPEED OF TRUST" **BY STEPHEN M.R. COVEY**

"The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything" is a blueprint for success in business and in life. Covey argues that trust is not just a nice-to-have; it's the single greatest factor in speeding up operations and reducing costs. When trust is high, everything happens faster. Decisions are quicker, communication is clearer and the need for red tape and micromanagement disappears.

In the context of our company, where we are integrating diverse, established companies, high trust is non-negotiable. It's our job to trust the unique expertise of each acquired company and leverage their capabilities, as well as establish transparency and consistency across our family of companies. We identify their individual strengths and then seek to share and scale them across the entire group.

Over time, this allows us to deliver consistent results. As Covey reminds us, trust is built on reliability. We must set clear expectations and follow through on every commitment, demonstrating that our combined organization is more stable and reliable than the sum of its parts.

"MINDSET" BY CAROL S. DWECK

At a certain point in a career — and in life — it's easy to become comfortable with what you've already achieved. But in a fast-growing organization like ours — especially when acquiring new companies — this sense of satisfaction can lead to stagnation. "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success" offers a powerful framework for recognizing when comfort starts to limit progress and for choosing adaptability and growth instead of standing still.

Specifically, Dweck shows us how a fixed mindset believes that abilities, intelligence and talents are static. People with a fixed mindset often avoid challenges, give up easily and feel threatened by the success of others. In contrast, those with a growth mindset embrace the belief that talents and abilities can be cultivated through dedication, effort and learning.

At our company, adopting a growth mindset means we foster feedback, learning and resilience. We encourage experimentation and learn from setbacks to create a more dynamic and agile company.

A growth mindset breaks down barriers, reinforcing collaboration and the sharing of best practices between previously separate companies. Instead of seeing integration as a threat to

existing practices, our growth mindset promotes the exchange of ideas, where each firm contributes its strengths to elevate the collective performance of the entire organization.

"EXTREME OWNERSHIP" **BY JOCKO WILLINK AND LEIF BABIN**

As we integrate multiple landscaping companies, the principles of "Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win" can help unify diverse teams, improve efficiency and ensure strategic objectives are met. Here's how we apply this at the Mariani Premier Group.

Taking extreme ownership means that leaders must take full responsibility for their decisions, actions and shift their mindset to, "Our successes and failures start and stop with me." Ego can severely inhibit effective leadership and team cohesion. Leaders must put aside their personal pride for the greater good of the group.

Additionally, leaders must believe in the mission. For our company, all leaders and employees must understand and be aligned with the group's vision and goals. Leaders should communicate the strategic objectives clearly and frequently to ensure a shared sense of purpose.

Finally, complexity is the enemy of execution. As we scale, our plans and communication must be clear, concise and easy to understand so that teams can execute autonomously while remaining aligned with our strategic goals.

Ultimately, each of these books has helped inform my approach to business, and I hope they will help you. 

How to innovate, motivate and make more money in 2026



BY JASON NEW

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

Q What is the most innovative product, service or process your clients plan to implement in the next 12 months?

A As we kick off 2026, one thing is clear: Operational excellence is about working smarter. Innovations in operations don't always require brand-new technology or massive capital investment. Often, it comes from creating awareness of the change that is needed, developing new ways to perform daily tasks with your existing resources and team and everyone staying disciplined to do their best work every day.

In our experience, operational innovation happens where planning, people and tools intersect. In 2026, we see the biggest opportunities in three areas:

- 1.** Landscape and irrigation installation
- 2.** Maintenance and lawn care
- 3.** Fleet and equipment

Let's break down what innovation looks like in each of those areas.

LANDSCAPE AND IRRIGATION INSTALLATION: BUILD IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME

Installation work is where margins are won or lost. The companies leading in 2026 are focusing on building processes that work, before the shovel ever hits the ground.

One of the simplest yet most powerful concepts in operations is O.H.I.O. — Only Handle It Once. Every time a task, decision or piece of information is revisited, it costs time and money. Innovation means designing workflows so tasks are

completed correctly the first time, eliminating duplicative steps.

For example, you can direct ship products and supplies instead of staging material for jobs at the shop. Try this exercise with your managers: Choose a recent job that went over budgeted hours and track how many times your team touched each piece of material before it was installed.

MAINTENANCE AND LAWN CARE: PRECISION, NOT JUST PRODUCTIVITY

Maintenance operations thrive on consistency, but innovation is what keeps them profitable. And innovation doesn't always mean new equipment. Sometimes it means better agronomic products, sharper blades or improved application methods that deliver stronger results with less waste.

The most innovative organizations empower their crews to identify problems and propose solutions. "Continuous improvement teams" create ownership, boost morale and spot operational insights leadership might otherwise miss.

How can your team get started? Choose three maintenance properties where you have issues with hitting hours — ones with more hours are ripe for savings. Print a map for each property with street visibility and ask them to indicate the following:

- Where is the vehicle parked?
- Assign crew members to line trimmer, edger, mower and blower tasks.
- Create an order for tasks to be done to service the specific property.
- Draw the best routes using a different color for each task. Draw arrows to show the direction from the start to finish at the truck.

The goal is the least number of steps possible to complete the work. For example, ending a task away from the truck and having idle steps back to the vehicle is time wasted. The operators who are empowered to work on this together have better quality and do it in less time.

FLEET AND EQUIPMENT: WHERE EFFICIENCY BECOMES VISIBLE

Your fleet tells a story to your team and your clients. In 2026, that story should be one that represents a brand of excellence.

When it comes to your trucks and trailers, abide by this simple rule: Everything has a place, and everything in its place. Organization starts with standard equipment lists by crew type and clearly defined storage locations. That visual order helps reduce thinking time and mistakes.

Using the wrong tool — or lacking the right one — costs more than time. It leads to poor quality, frustrated employees and safety risks. Innovative operators invest in purpose-built tools, mobile storage solutions and clean, branded setups that allow crews to perform at a high level every day.

FORMING THE FOUNDATION

In 2026, operational leaders should be asking:

- Where are we handling things more than once?
- How are we empowering our people to innovate?
- When can standardization create freedom instead of restriction?

The companies that win aren't chasing every new trend. They are improving their workflow processes, embracing the changes to drive progress and training the team to seek excellence. 



BY JEFF KORHAN

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

AI optimization: What your business needs to know

If you expect artificial intelligence (AI) to recommend your business to potential customers, you need to get involved, because AI is different from traditional search engine optimization (SEO). Most website traffic still comes from traditional, keyword-driven SEO, yet the more nuanced, conversational AIO — artificial intelligence optimization — is quickly emerging.

Even our smallest clients are already seeing leads generated by ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs). That's exciting and somewhat frightening too, because changes in the AI world happen almost overnight, and nobody likes surprises.

LLMs are increasingly used for research and comparison, and that inevitably leads to business recommendations. The challenge for businesses is that all of this is happening through AI chatbots that use conversational language. It's time for your marketing to adapt to this shift.

REFRAME HOW YOUR WEBSITE WORKS

AI's ability to consume and synthesize accessible information allows it to be hyper-focused on what customers

want to know. That matters for landscape contractors who rely on trust, expertise and local relevance to win business.

Optimizing for AI is surprisingly simple, with your favorite LLM doing much of the heavy lifting for you. Even better, this process forces clarity about your ideal customers, the problems they are trying to solve and how your website's content addresses them.

For example, unless you are well-known in the industry or your community, it's likely nobody is reading your blog. That's OK, because AI is reading it. Any content that's accessible can be evaluated, summarized and used by AI to inform recommendations.

START WITH THE LOW-HANGING FRUIT

The first step is understanding where you stand today. If you aren't sure if your business is getting leads from ChatGPT or other AI tools, the simplest way to find out is to ask directly. Use this prompt — "Tell me everything you know about [your business name]" — and take a close look at what comes back.

- What are the sources? Is one of them your website?
 - Where are the gaps? That is, the services that are not being recommended?
 - What information is missing that only customers would know?
- The real work is refining and strengthening that alignment by identifying the information sources and assessing their

accuracy to complete your buyer's journey. Forget about keywords as you do this and focus on clear, conversational communication.

Think of this as completing a business profile — almost like an executive summary. How does AI perceive your business as strong or weak, so you can double down on your strengths and address any blind spots?

These are the core elements we focus on with our clients.

- 1. Services.** What you do and what you don't do.
- 2. Ideal buyer.** Roles, characteristics, location and decision criteria.
- 3. Problems solved.** The real pain points your customers face.
- 4. Outcomes and results.** What success looks like for your clients.
- 5. Location and pricing context.** Service areas and positioning.
- 6. Credentials and trust signals.** Certifications, experience and social proof.

CHOOSE WHERE THIS INFORMATION LIVES

This content can live on a current website page, such as your "About" page. However, it doesn't need to appear in your website navigation because that's for humans. AI will find it if it exists and is well-organized. That's why we often create a new page labeled something like "AI Training" and link to it in the footer with other secondary pages.

Don't overthink this. Many True Nature Marketing clients already have basic AI training pages in place, and we continue refining them as we learn more. Like most other website decisions, getting this done and working for your business is far better than waiting for it to be perfect. 



Why 2026 will be the year of leadership clarity



BY TITO CACERES

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

The past year forced a reset across the green industry. Hiring slowed, teams tightened, and candidates became more cautious than at any point in recent memory. At the same time, transparency accelerated. AI made information easier to access, Glassdoor reviews carried more weight, and informal peer networks became standard due diligence.

Many landscape companies invested heavily in internal recruiting. Yet, hiring momentum didn't return as expected. This wasn't a labor shortage; it was a clarity moment.

As we move into 2026, the separation between companies hiring successfully and those remaining stalled is no longer access to talent — it is the signal their leadership sends to the market.

A SIGNAL, NOT A SETBACK

In 2025, many firms reduced headcount. From the outside, this looked like a contraction. Internally, it was a recalibration. Leadership teams finally began to reassess:

- Which roles truly drive margin and service quality versus mere “revenue chasing.”
- Whether past leadership hires solved operational bottlenecks or simply added overhead.
- Where decision-making authority had become blurred during the post-COVID growth surge.

The strongest companies didn't stop hiring; they stopped guessing. That discipline is now creating 2026's competitive advantage.

Meanwhile, candidate behavior has shifted from chasing the highest bidder to seeking the most stable platform. First, transparency is

unavoidable. Experienced branch and account managers now research a leadership team's reputation before the first interview.

Second, risk tolerance has dropped. After watching peers navigate messy post-acquisition integrations or sudden restructures, top-tier operators are more selective about who they work for than how much the role pays.

Today's candidates aren't chasing “upside narratives.” They are underwriting the leadership team's ability to execute. They look for a disconnect between the vision pitched by a recruiter and the reality of the yard, the fleet and the culture they sense during a site visit.

WHY INTERNAL RECRUITING WASN'T A SILVER BULLET

Expanding internal talent acquisition was a logical move, but sourcing was rarely the constraint. Candidates disengage when they sense:

- Unclear ownership of the role's profit and loss.
- Shifting expectations or “moving goalposts” mid-interview.
- Slow decision making that signals a lack of internal alignment.

In 2026, the speed and clarity of your hiring process are your primary brand signals.

THE WINNER'S ADVANTAGE

The companies winning the talent war right now recognize that middle leadership is the real bottleneck. Strong branch managers and division heads absorb complexity and protect owners from daily challenges. When this layer is weak, growth is painful; when it's strong, growth is inevitable.



To ensure that winning advantage continues, leaders should focus on these five moves in 2026:

- 1. Clarify decision authority.** Long hiring cycles usually reflect internal ambiguity. Define who has the “final say” before posting the role.
- 2. Pressure test the role.** Be ready to explain why the position exists now and exactly what success looks like at the 12-month mark.
- 3. Hire for judgment.** Experience matters, but the ability to make sound decisions under the pressure of a compressed spring schedule matters more.
- 4. Protect top performers.** Retention of your “A-Players” is now a strategic growth priority, not an HR metric.
- 5. Treat reputation as operational reality.** In the tight-knit world of the green industry, leadership reputation travels faster than any job board ad.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Hiring in 2026 is rational again. The market is no longer the constraint; the “signal” is. Companies that used the 2025 reset to sharpen their structure and align their leadership are now positioned to attract the talent that compounds value over time.



BY JEFFREY SCOTT

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

Consultant or coach: How to choose the right fit for you

Every business owner eventually hits a ceiling. You're working long hours, solving problems all day, yet progress slows.

You feel busy, but you know you could achieve more: more effective scaling, higher profits, greater discretionary time or a clear succession plan.

That's usually when leaders start searching for outside help, typing into Google "business coach" or "landscape business consultant."

But what is the right answer for you? Do you need a consultant or a coach? It depends on where you feel stuck. Do you feel stuck in yourself or in the business?

CONSULTING: THE NEED FOR CLARITY AND ALIGNMENT

Consulting is focused on the business and the leadership team as a whole. It's the process of getting key leaders in the same room and asking, "Where are we going, what must change, and how will we align to make it happen?"

Consulting creates a road map that the entire team can execute. The process often includes:

- Defining the long-term vision and near-term strategy.
- Uncovering the opportunities buried in your financials.
- Redesigning the organizational chart and clarifying responsibilities.
- Fixing bottlenecks and structural friction that slow down the business.
- Creating an actionable plan toward your goals.

Consider a company run by two partners. They shared responsibility for sales and operations, which sounded collaborative, but in reality created confusion. The team wasn't sure who owned decisions,

“Do you need a consultant or a coach? It depends on where you feel stuck. Do you feel stuck in yourself or in the business?”

which led to missed accountability and slowed progress.

Once we clarified the vision, defined responsibilities and aligned the structure, everything changed. Growth accelerated. Team confidence rose. The partnership became stronger because each person now had a defined lane and operational objectives.

They didn't need more motivation — they needed architecture and a road map.

COACHING: THE NEED FOR FOCUS, CONFIDENCE AND FOLLOW-THROUGH

Coaching is different. It is centered on the owner, the person responsible for making the road map real. This is where the rubber meets the road: difficult conversations, delayed decisions, emotional weight and leadership habits that must change.

Coaching helps the owner:

- Prioritize instead of juggling.
- Make decisions when the stakes feel high.
- See blind spots before they cost time and opportunity.
- Stay accountable when distractions pile up.
- Upgrade their leadership approach.

Business is never static. People quit, stars emerge, opportunities arise and crises appear unexpectedly. Coaching provides ongoing support and alignment in real time.

A client sent me a message recently after he reviewed our early

coaching notes and reflected on how he crushed his BHAG — big, hairy, audacious goal.

"We achieved our BHAG of tripling the business, expanding our facility, building the infrastructure to pull me out of the day-to-day sales and operations and creating a far more enjoyable and fruitful life for myself as owner," he said. "What I learned through coaching still impacts my business, my team and my family every day. Thank you!"

His road map didn't guarantee the end result — his consistent action did. Coaching helped turn strategy into momentum.

CONSULTING OR COACHING?

Do you need consulting or coaching? Here's the simplest filter to help you decide:

- Lack of strategy, structure or alignment? Consulting.
- Lack of accountability or decision support? Coaching.
- Unclear plan and inconsistent execution? Consulting first, then coaching.

Your challenge, then, is to create immediate action. Write down one important decision you've delayed for the last 90 days. Now ask yourself whether you're stuck because the company lacks the structure to support change or because you personally lack the clarity to act?

That answer tells you exactly what you need. Either way, clarity followed by decisive action changes everything. Consulting builds the plan. Coaching builds the leader.

At Jeffrey Scott Consulting, we can help you with both. Visit JeffreyScott.biz to learn more.

AD INDEX

Advanced Turf Solutions.....	26
Ariens/Gravely.....	41
Aspire.....	16-17
Aspire.....	21
Bailey Nurseries.....	36
Bartlett Tree Experts.....	27
Curtis Industries.....	37
Graham Spray Equipment.....	25
Greene County Fertilizer.....	39
Gregson-Clark Spraying Equipment.....	CV3
Kaufman Iron Works, Inc.....	39
Kawasaki Engines.....	CV2
Progressive Insurance.....	7
Quali-Pro.....	33
Steel Green Manufacturing.....	5
Turfco.....	CV4
Uline.....	38

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If you have any properties that won an award from the NALP's 2025 Awards of Excellence program for design/build or landscape management, let us know! Shoot us a few photos, and we might feature it in an upcoming edition of The Big One or Hardscape Solutions. Email associate editor Nathan Mader (nmader@northcoastmedia.net) for more information.

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BY MARTY GRUNDER

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



Lessons from the journey to the next level

In 2018, I found myself in a situation at Grunder Landscaping Co. that I think a lot of owners will relate to.

We had been stagnant at just under \$5 million in revenue for years, and our team was getting frustrated by the lack of growth and opportunities. We were stuck. I had team members who wanted to grow, and from my work at The Grow Group, I knew the steps that we needed to take, but we were falling apart on the execution.

In 2025, we did nearly \$18M in revenue, and while there was a lot of hard work that got us to that point, I think the biggest lessons learned came from the changes made in our organizational chart. We had to focus on getting the right people into the right seats at the company, whether that meant finding new talent or rearranging the team that we already had. Here's what it took.

FIND YOUR TEAM'S STRENGTHS

It starts with looking at your team's strengths and figuring out if the role they're in is really maximizing those strengths to their fullest potential. In the years since 2018, we promoted heavily from our crews when we saw potential. Today, those folks are:

- Salespeople (four members on our 11-person sales team started on a crew)
- Director of lawn care
- Director of production operations
- Procurement manager
- Group leaders managing our production crews

The various paths within our company came from understanding

“I knew the steps that we needed to take, but we were falling apart on the execution.”

the team member's unique passions and skills and finding a way to let them do more of that. Brent Grolnic was so good at finding enhancements, for example, that he was a natural fit in sales. Amanda Collins really loves plants and does a fantastic job as procurement manager. Lorenzo Lopez Valenzuela was so good at teaching teams to mow well that he now has more direct reports as a group leader than anyone else on the org chart.

TAKE OWNERSHIP AS A LEADER

A hard lesson to learn as the leader of this company was that it was nobody's fault but mine that we weren't growing. I was the bottleneck on too many decisions, causing problems by managing too many sales accounts on my own and missing the potential in our team. I foolishly thought that team members would speak up if they wanted a promotion or had an idea, and I learned the hard way that this wasn't true.

Looking back, bad attitudes were also preventing us from growth, and I can't blame anyone else but myself for that. We needed to look at new ideas or challenges as opportunities, get out of our comfort zone a bit, and just go get work done instead of talking about all the reasons we'd fail. We took a hard look at our company culture and made changes to reward team members with the

right attitudes, redirect conversations to keep them positive and train our managers to be strong leaders.

EQUIP YOUR TEAM WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THEY NEED

As we've grown, we've done a lot of things for the first time. We did our due diligence and asked our network for guidance, sent team members to industry events to learn from others who were already doing that work and invested in training for everyone from the top all the way to the field.

I'm not going to lie and tell you it's all been roses: We've had some hiccups and run into challenges, but we would've made more mistakes had we gone into this growth without that education, training and network to go back to. You can't scale up without the right structure, and that comes from setting a smart strategy, getting the right people into the right seats and going into the year with the right education, too.

My team and I will be at GROW! 2026 in Dallas on Feb. 10-12 to continue our education, share the knowledge we've accumulated and network with other industry pros. We always come away from this event with so many new ideas and takeaways that will make Grunder Landscaping Co. better, and I'm especially excited for my team to see what the team at Complete Landsculpture, this year's tour host, shares. I think it will set us up for success in 2026 and beyond.

Will I see you there? Visit growgroupinc.com/grow-2026 for more information. 

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