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The future of landscape construction and maintenance is in the hands of a new breed of manager who knows how to deal with people and money, as well as plants.

WANTED: Managers!

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

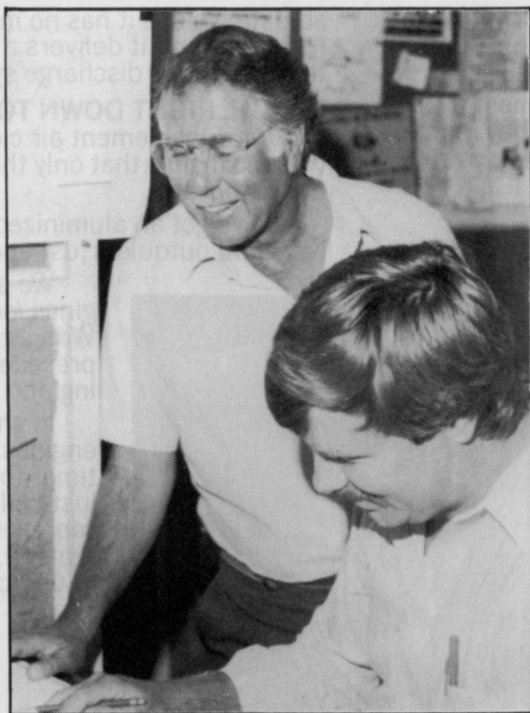
There are no trees on a Monopoly board but there is a wheelbarrow. It's a symbol of the past to veteran Florida landscaper Marvin E. Gross who says the days of the wheelbarrow operator are over; but the profession of landscape contracting/management has yet to see its best days.

The era of the trained manager is at hand, he insists, and the profession is ready to blossom. The key is the influx of young, professionally-trained managers.

Management skills essential

"Laborers, they're easy to find. Managers, good managers, that's what this profession needs. It's difficult to get a good manager," Gross says. "The people in this industry have to be extra knowledgeable about a lot more than just the technical names of the plants. To do a good job they've got to know their soils, they've got to know habitats. They've got to know business and how to manage."

Gross is the owner of Marvin's Garden & Landscape (the name was inspired by the popular Parker Brothers board game) just outside Sarasota, FL. Sun-tanned and laid-back, the mustachioed Gross has carved himself a Garden of Eden, complete with airy bungalow, among the palms and flowering foliage behind his 25-acre tree farm. He laughs when he says you won't find a "Yankee bush" in his bewildering assortment of semi-tropical plantlife, but that doesn't mean you



Gross and Mississippi State University graduate Mike McMurry. Gross has hired several MSU graduates who received the practical training of Bob Calloway.

won't see him north of Tallahassee from time to time. His company tackles landscape construction jobs in the (heaven forbid!) so-called temperate zone as well as major design/build projects in south Florida.

Along the sometimes bumpy path of experience (he'll be marking his 25th year in business soon) he's had to learn—and live with—the capricious whims of nature in a variety of climates. He's had to learn that some varieties of palms "will die if you walk by them with an ice cream" while others can survive even the 1983 Christmas freeze that devastated much of the semi-trop-

ical plantlife north of the Caloosahatchee River. To Gross, who takes pride in the hardy stock he keeps in his wholesale tree farm, "there is a risk involved in about everything you do." Particularly planting.

His enthusiasm for the landscape industry, however, continues to grow. One reason is his son Aaron, a student in the excellent landscape architecture program at Mississippi State University.

"Managers, good managers, that's what this profession needs."

— Gross

Aaron is one of a handful of co-op students at the university. In addition to classroom studies they gain practical experience between terms by working with quality contractors around the nation. Aaron is learning about the real world at Environmental Care in Los Angeles.

Strong ties

The ties between Gross and Mississippi State go deep and have had a major influence on him and his business. It was in 1973 at a seminar in Louisville that Gross met Bob Callaway head of the Landscape Architecture Department at Mississippi State University. In fact, Gross hired Callaway's first graduate as a result of the meeting. Since then he's hired several others right out of the program.

Michael McMurry, vice president and sales director of Marvin's Gar-



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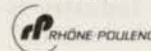
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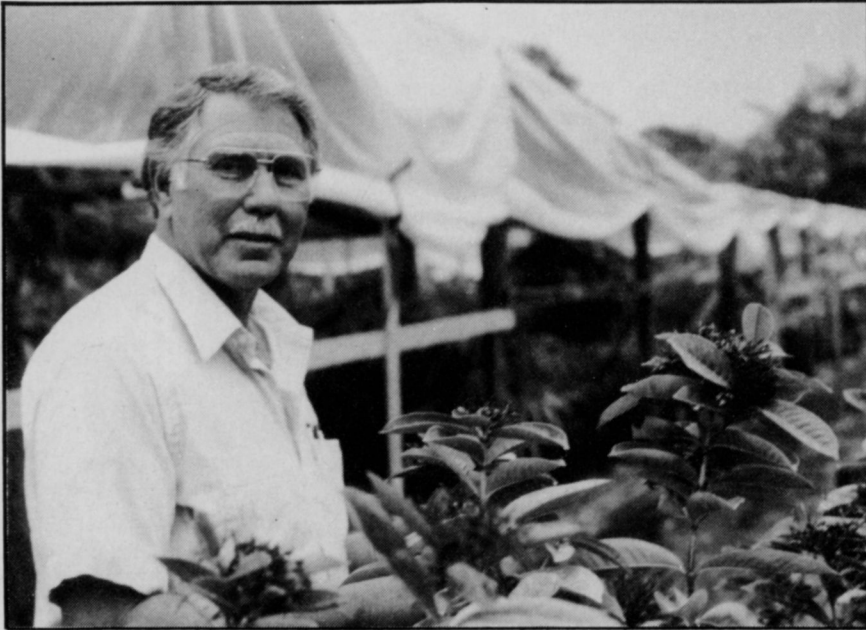
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dens, is a graduate of MSU as is the company's architectural designer Tidwell and its landscape designer William Vaughan. Gross says if his son, Aaron, returns to the Sarasota business following his formal studies he'll do so as a foreman. He'll have to demonstrate his business abilities just like the others. Rounding out Gross's management team is Michael F. Getzman, manager of the company's Irrigation Division and Mark Anderson, project supervisor.

managers that can manage people and dollars."

The value of education didn't come to Gross in a blinding flash. Gross left West Virginia for Florida in 1947 chasing a career in animal husbandry and eager to learn more about Brahman cattle. He never left Florida. He did change his plans. In 1956 he acquired a degree in landscape architecture from the University of Florida and within a few years he was in business.



Gross pampers 25 acres of semitropical material at his nursery.

Opportunity knocks

MSU's Callaway echoes Gross's enthusiasm about exciting new opportunities in the landscape field where in recent years the demand by respected landscape contracting firms for top-flight graduates has been outdistancing supply.

"Our students compete financially with any of the other disciplines at the university with the possible exceptions of engineering and computer sciences," Callaway says. "If the student has intelligence, energy, and is mobile the opportunities are there." Callaway, who spent 15 years in the industry before joining academia, says salaries in the \$22,000-\$25,000 range are not unusual for bright professionally-trained managers with a couple of years experience.

"Basically what the industry is looking for today is not a technician," he adds. "It's looking for managers that have an understanding of the practical as well as theoretical aspects of the industry. Industry is looking for

Marvin's Garden and Landscape found a place in the balmy breezes off the Gulf of Mexico where its growth has been hard pressed to keep up with the growth of Florida's Gulf Coast communities. The population of Sarasota County has jumped from 120,000 to 220,000 since 1970. "When I came down here all these towns were small villages," he recalls

The good life

Gross says Sarasota is a place where the quality of life is important. He claims area residents are proud of the beauty of their area and its growing reputation as a major cultural center. Few other American cities of 50,000 can boast an opera house, several professional theaters, and a futuristic performing arts center, the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall.

Add the presence of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (the official state art museum of Florida) and the quarters of the East Coast Symphony and you've got a powerful

lot of the arts hugging Sarasota Bay where the average annual temperature is a pleasant 73 degrees.

Although fully 75 percent of the dollar value of the work done by Gross's company is commercial, the landscaping of single family resi-

"I'm in competition for the luxury dollar. I'm in competition with the other luxury item salesmen,"

—Gross

dences remains important to the success of Marvin's Gardens. Some of that work is showcased at beautiful residences on the offshore keys with names like Longboat, Siesta, Bird, St Armand's, Lido, and Casey.

Marvin's Garden & Landscape, Inc. approached \$2 million in business last year.

Competition? Gross doesn't consider others in his trade as competitors.

"In our community there are about four companies that do what we do. We're always bumping heads with each other. All of us have been in a business a number of years. But, I never felt that I've ever been in competition with the other companies," he says.

"I'm in competition for the luxury dollar. I'm in competition with the other luxury item salesmen because if you think about it you really don't need a tree or plant. The more luxury dollars there are to spend, the more we're going to get if we're informed about what we're doing and doing the job right."

Gross puts emphasis on the word "informed". That's the keystone of the landscape construction and management industry now.

"If you're not informed about what you're doing, you're not going to make it. The man with the pickup truck and the wheelbarrow and little professional training just doesn't have the knowledge to gain the customer's trust," he adds.

But to those entering the industry with professional training and enthusiasm the sky is the limit, he insists. "This industry is going to grow forever and forever—just like the bushes," Gross laughs.

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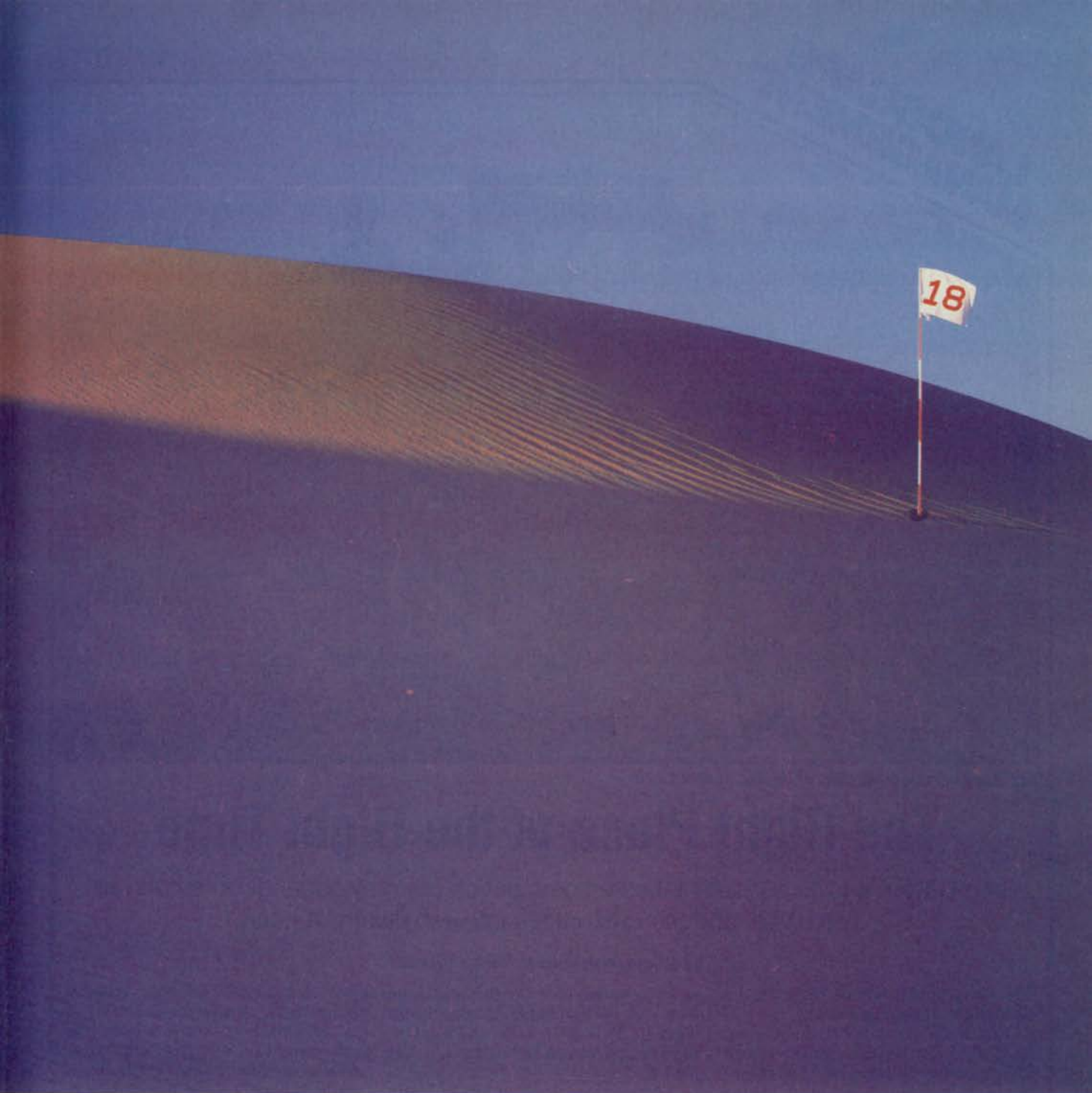
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Bill Boykin, vice-president of Boyco, at IBM Corp.

The Right Place at the Right Time

Greg Boykin knows success takes a combination of knowledge, good employees, hard work and the customer's interest always at heart.

by Maureen Hrehocik, managing editor

Ask Greg Boykin about being in the right place at the right time.

Not that luck has taken the place of hard work for Boyco Landscape and Maintenance, Wilson, NC; but rather the businessman with the Midas touch is also a savvy entrepreneur.

Eleven years ago, the man with the build of a middle linebacker and the disposition of a friendly pup, was doing landscaping work around his father's construction jobs. Today Boykin is president of an over \$1 million company that is one of the most successful landscape maintenance companies in North Carolina.

IBM, Proctor and Gamble, and many of the businesses in Research Triangle Park, NC, right outside of Raleigh, number themselves among his clients.

"I was in the right place at the right time 11 years ago as far as the land-

scape maintenance market goes," he says. "A lot of people think all you need to do is get a rake and a lawnmower and you're in business. It just isn't so."

His business has also just recently become interstate with a contract from the Virginia Electric Company, VEPCO, which he got on a referral from Carolina Telephone and Telegraph, also a well-satisfied Boyco customer.

A strong commitment to quality work, knowledge in his field and a keen interest in the welfare of the people who work for him have melded into a business that's as profitable as it is satisfying for its owner.

The business

The bulk of Boyco's work is landscape management—mowing, pruning, fertilizing and weed control. The com-

pany also installs drainage systems, plants trees, shrubs, does brick and concrete walk work and is even into snow removal. Sixty-two employees are managed by 12 supervisors. Their territories are divided geographically instead of by specialty. There is only one specialty crew—for drainage and brick work.

Boykin's employees are a big part of why his company is special. Some might sniff at Boykin's hiring philosophy.

"We try to hire anybody and everybody," he says proudly. Disadvantaged youth, people in vocational rehabilitation programs and Vietnam vets score high on the list.

"We're willing to train people to do the job right," Boykin says. "We're usually rewarded with employees who are loyal to the company and their jobs."

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With the vocational rehabilitation employees, the government helps pay their salary while they're being trained.

Due in large part to his hiring philosophy and for his continued free maintenance of the City of Wilson's athletic fields, Boykin received the highest honor of his life last year, the North Carolina Distinguished Service Award from Lt. Governor James C. Green. "It was certainly one of the



Attention to detail —a Boyco trademark.

highlights of my life," the 34-year-old says in a thick North Carolina accent.

Back to business

Most of the predominant grass in the area is bermudagrass. In the fall and winter it goes dormant producing unsightly brownish-yellow turf. "We usually overseed with rye, but in a lot of cases it just took too long to green-up."

That green-up problem launched Boyco into another area—that of lawn dyeing.

"We offer lawn-dyeing to clients as an option to overseeding. So far they've been very receptive. It's an expensive process, but some of our smaller clients prefer it."

Most of Boyco's clients are 100 acres and above. The company has a few residential accounts, but because of slow payment, Boykin is concentrating his efforts where the



Greg Boykin, president of Boyco.

money is—larger accounts that pay on time.

One of those, Research Triangle Park near Raleigh, is an excellent client, but maintenance-wise, Boykin describes it as "the armpit of the world. It's the absolute worst area to try to get anything to grow in. Being in the transition zone, keeping things green and growing is a never-ending battle."

He overseeds twice a year, in April and October with Kentucky 31, but poor drainage presents another problem.

"The area just doesn't perk," he reports. "It's a beautiful area but it gives us a run for our money."

Being a member of the North Carolina Industrial Council provides Boykin with another marketing tool. He is privy to all new industry moving into North Carolina. Before they even arrive, Boyco literature is sent out explaining the company's services to the prospective new client.

Hot dogs and turf

Boykin graduated from North Carolina State with a degree in landscape design and turf management. He worked with the City of Wilson's landscape planning department after he graduated.

"At \$500 a month I was about to starve to death," he chuckles now.

It was at that point that Boykin started landscaping his father's contracting jobs. Word got around and friends started asking him to do the same. He finally decided to start a business of his own with his brother, Bill, who is now a vice president with the company.

Boykin is a confident, gregarious man who feels just as much at home eating a few hot dogs at the local college hangout as he does driving a sparkling white Mercedes. He stays involved in the community. The city's three athletic fields are maintained free of charge by Boyco.

"I've always been interested in sports and the town I grew up in," he says. "I do it to support good will in the community."

The Rotary, a Monday morning call-in gardening question radio show and a "hacker's game" of golf get what little is left of his free time.

Spending time with his wife and two children, ages two and four, (and another one due next month) is what he enjoys the most.

The future

Boykin says he wants to move into the Richmond, VA, market because he "wants to work with bluegrass." There are also plans down the road to possibly start a branch in the New England area.

"Right now we just want to do what we do well," he says.

"I've seen a lot of good companies go under because of poor management or non-payment. We decided to hang around the companies who will pay their bills.

"Those who do good work will survive," Boykin continues, "those who cut corners will go under."

There have been some, even in Wilson, who see Boykin's success and think they can do the same thing. Wilson is the world's largest tobacco market. Because of that fact, per capita, it has the most millionaires in the U.S.

"Prospective landscape maintenance people come in and see all the big homes and think it'll be easy to become one of them (millionaires), but it takes a lot more than just mowing lawns to be successful."

Boykin is very conscious of professionalism in the business. He's also willing to share whatever knowledge he has to keep the industry "clean."

He is a member of the Professional Grounds Management Society, Professional Lawn Care Association of America and is very "pro" the state licensing test for professional landscapers.

"In this world, you reap what you sow," Boykin concludes. "There's enough business out there that people don't have to cut each other's throats."

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