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Ford Series 10 tractors are engineered for excellent performance, ease of operation and all-around versatility.

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## Ford tractor-loaders

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Quik-Tach models for many tractors make for great flexibility. Quick and easy mounting lets you work with the loader in the morning, and "park" it to mow and haul in the afternoon.

Ford also offers many other attachments for grounds maintenance work: rotary cutters, flail mowers, front and rear blades, landscape rakes, scoops, posthole diggers and more. See your Ford Tractor dealer for complete information.

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FORD TRACTORS



## Rocky Mountain moves

Denver's Tom and Becky Garber *touch* condo clients with landscape management techniques built around hard work and high tech.

by Ron Hall, associate editor

He's being eaten alive the hard way—from the inside out by the acid in his stomach. His nerves feel like somebody is dry shaving them with a rusty razor.

Meet the landscape contractor who makes his living dealing with condominium boards in the foothills of the Rockies.

"I left that meeting feeling miserable," says Tom Garber, recalling a memorable encounter with one board. "I was just shaking."

Meet Garber of the finely-trimmed Edwardian beard and the small-college linebacker build. Meet his partner, his wife of 15 years, Becky, a slender, stylish woman with a winning smile.

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**'Becky, I just got  
ran over by a  
sod truck.'**

**—Garber**

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He studied to be a college professor. She was a journalist.

Today they're owners of Denver-based Colorado Landscape Enterprises Inc. (C.L.E.). The five-year-old company employs 30, is approaching the million dollar club, and recently moved into a new 2,700-square-foot office. C.L.E. is tailored exclusively for town house and condo turf and landscape management.

Success for the Garbers doesn't come easy. It comes as a result of their



**Tom and Becky Garber in front of Chimney Creek town house development in the foothills, one of the properties maintained by their Colorado Landscape Enterprises.**

stubborn drive to learn from other industry leaders, the courage to test new ideas, and an almost fanatical desire to please.

It was this obstinacy (attention Guinness Book of World Records) that pushed Garber to sit through 15 homeowner association meetings in one month, sometimes two the same evening, sometimes on opposite sides of Denver.

C.L.E. has some other unique wrinkles.

"Becky, I just got run over by a sod truck," Garber remembers saying after dialing his wife from the wreckage of his car this summer after it had been flattened by a supplier's truck.

### Car telephones

"Our entire operation is based on our communication system," Garber says. Clients and work crews are scattered over a 30-square-mile area.

"Silver Bullet" is Garber's car radio name, "Becky Base," his wife's. Then there's "The White Shadow" or "Red Rider" or "The Little Rascals," all C.L.E. employees. All are linked by a sophisticated cellular telephone network.

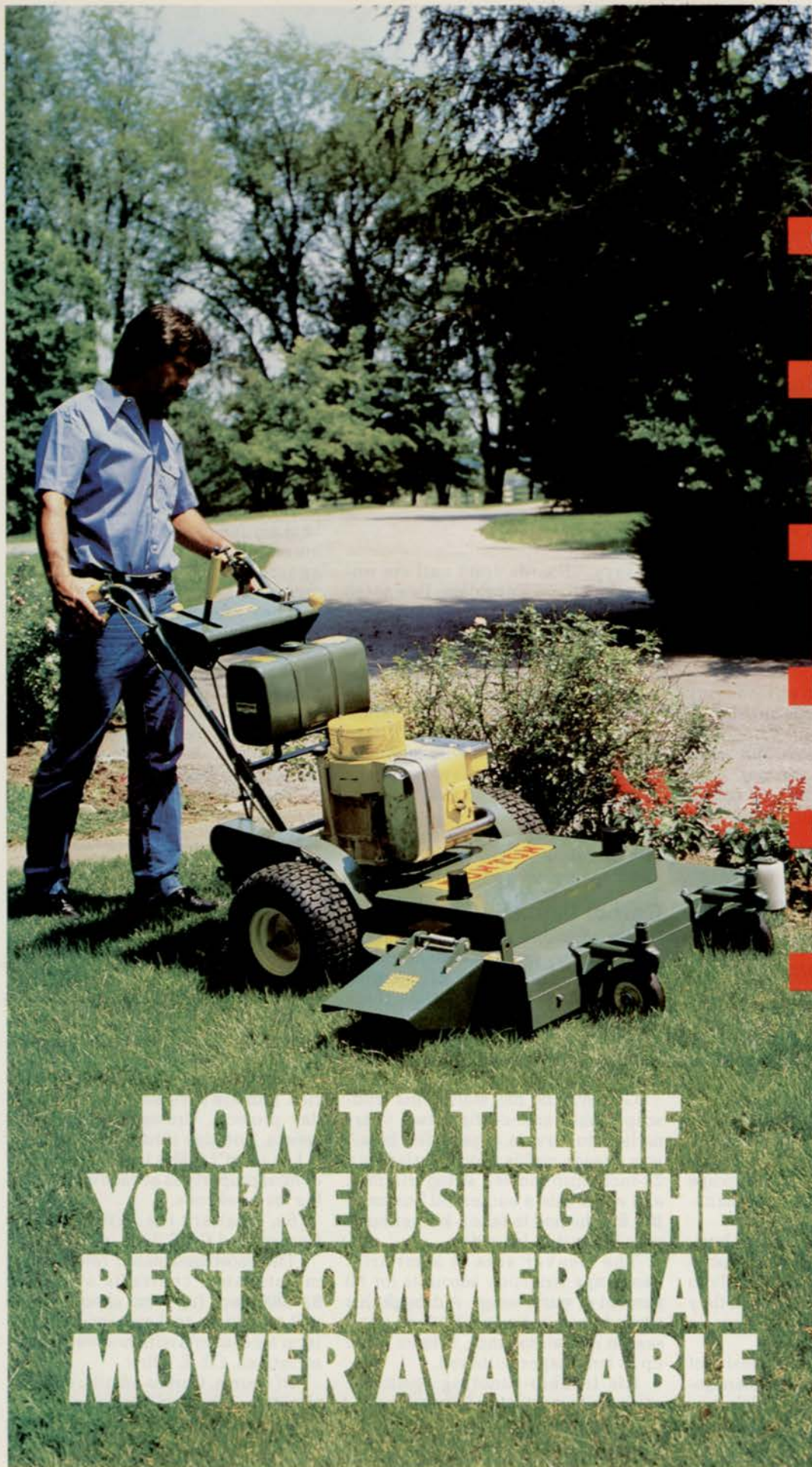
"High tech, high touch," Garber describes it. "Maybe our clients don't see us, but we'll be touching them every day."

And the Garbers want to touch their clients the right way. No long hair or earrings for the male members of C.L.E. landscape crews. "We hire the all-American

types," Garber says.

C.L.E. also touches its employees with a full-time client services manager. "We get 30 calls a day from our clients. If we didn't have the client services coordinator, these little jobs would end up on little scraps of paper."

Even so, Garber buzzes the perimeter of Denver daily, his car telephone



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**Tom Garber (left) reviews maintenance plans with property manager John Hammersmith.**

at his hip. He's talking to clients, touching bases with property managers.

So why is Garber busting his buns?

### Condo boards

"We basically start from scratch every year," he says. "Contracts are usually for 12 months."

Homeowner associations meet monthly to discuss common concerns, to determine who will collect their garbage, who will reroof their

**'I can convince an association to get rid of any contractor'**

**—Hammersmith**

units, who will maintain their grounds. Nine times out of ten they employ a property manager to hire the contractors, like C.L.E., they need.

It's a symbiotic (and sometimes mutually suspicious) triumvirate of interests. Change a few key members of the condo board, axe the landscape contractor. Switch property managers, boot the contractor.

Says Garber, "People in this business tell me that homeowner associations just don't make any sense. Even though you work your fanny off, they will drop you in a couple of years for whatever the reason."

John Hammersmith, vice president of a Denver-based property management company, fixes his icy blue eyes on the *bottom line*.

"I know I can convince an association to get rid of any contractor,"

he says. "Boards don't call me unless they have a problem. I've got to have the peace of mind that if I have a problem the contractor will take care of it. And the landscape contractor is the most important service we provide."

Hammersmith, fielding an average of 30 complaints daily, doesn't have time to mix sentiment with business.

It's no wonder that few landscape maintenance firms in Denver specialize in condos.

Says Garber, "while everybody else is running from condominium maintenance, we're running to it."

### Garber listens

Garber took this stand after listening to an industry speaker at an Associate Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) convention in Dallas three years ago. "I learned you have to carve your own niche. You can't expect to go head-to-head with the established firms in their specialties," he recalls.

Garber, who had started his landscape maintenance firm two years earlier "to survive, to pay a few bills," was already on his way to parlaying a 22-inch push mower, string trimmer, and edger into a successful business. But first he had to take a keener business interest in irrigation.

The Denver area is semi-arid. Landscape irrigation accounts for 50 percent of water usage. A drought his second year in business wiped out a season of maintenance. Clients dried up as landscapes withered.

His trouble-shooting sprinkler crew visits most sites daily now.

Denver's climate also pushed C.L.E. into snow removal. In addition to providing a winter cash flow, snow

removal allows C.L.E. to keep good workers year round. Emphasis is on walks. The main tool is a plastic shovel. When worn out, it's thrown away. Steel is too heavy. At Denver's altitude it would wear out workers in the brittle air of long nights.

Shovelers work six-hour evening shifts so that walks are clear by the morning rush.

Landscape management, sprinkler repair, snow removal—says Garber: "Suddenly we found ourselves with a corporation."

But, he points out, "I wasn't a businessman."

With a B.A. in English literature from Cal State at Fresno and an M.A. in theology from Chicago's Trinity Divinity University, his only business experience came from a short stint in Denver real estate.

Becky, with a similar educational background (degrees in English literature, history, and information management), put her journalistic aspirations on a back burner.

They immerse themselves in industry affairs and seek the advice of successful businessmen. Tom is on the board of directors of the Maintenance Division of ALCA. Becky is active in state and local industry associations. And they read. Trade publications. Books like *Megatrends* and *In Search of Excellence*.

This husband-wife team approach is being extended with C.L.E. now di-

**'I learned you have to carve your own niche.'**

**—Garber**

vided into three divisions: Turf Care, Sprinkler Management, and Special Services. Teams are assigned territories. Jobs are divided into 1/4- and 1/2-day projects. Crews work four-day weeks, Tuesday through Friday. The C.L.E. team's goal is to have each residential property as attractive as possible for weekends.

So, what are the payoffs for the Garbers and C.L.E.?

The most noticeable rewards are maintenance contracts averaging \$25,000 each (up from about \$10,000 just two years ago) and several long-term agreements with homeowner associations, C.L.E.'s first.

Of course, Garber admits, satisfied clients members and smiling property managers make those long evening condo board meetings a darn sight more enjoyable.

**WT&T**

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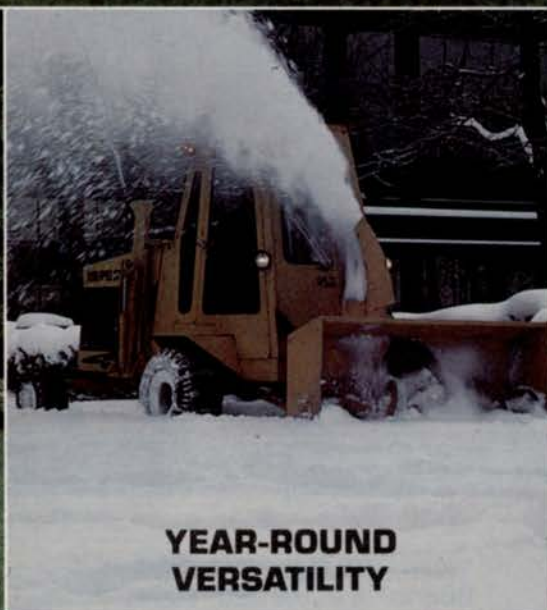
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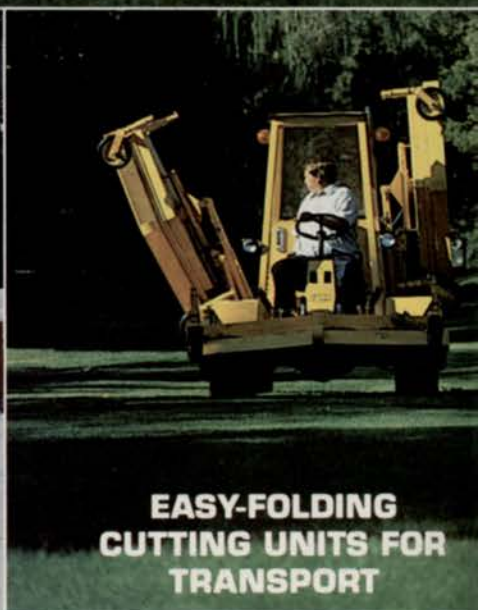
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## Living on the Riverside

Like most Southern California cities, Riverside is experiencing unparalleled growth. So is its housing industry. That means good times for those in the condo and apartment landscape maintenance business.

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor

**B**ob Pelikan of Pelikan Landscape Maintenance Inc. in Riverside has to be the only businessman in Southern California with an unlisted phone number. It's not that he's anti-social—he simply has all the business he and his five-man crew can handle. And then some.

Development is evident in every corner of Riverside, a traffic-jamless city that provides a refreshing contrast to the faster-than-the-speed-of-sound pace of Los Angeles and the beach cities.

Riverside is a babe, not mature, not yet a beauty, but ripe for the population boom it is experiencing.

It seems Bob Pelikan made the right choice several years ago when he gave up his desk job with the City of Riverside to maintain the turf and landscapes of condos and apartments.

It's a business he understands because he knows when to say "no" and when to submit a bid. Lately, he's said "no" more than its opposite. "I have just about all the business I need," says the bearded 48-year-old. "I don't want to get so large that I can't keep control over my work. I'm picky. I want to make sure it's done my way."

Most days, you'll see the youthful Pelikan out in the field with his young crew, directing the work yet pitching in at the same time.

He's responsible for the landscape



**Bob Pelikan** says he doesn't have the time to maintain his Riverside home/office like he once did. Nonetheless, it remains impressive, featuring an outdoor whirlpool and swimming pool.

maintenance of several apartment and condominium complexes with a combined total of 550 units in the Riverside area. It keeps him running but he's not slowing.

### Rescue missions

One reason he can't let up is because he and his crew are often called in after another outfit has butchered a complex's landscape. "Grass cutters" have a bad name among the profes-

sional maintenance people in Riverside.

"There's an awful lot of grass cutters who call themselves gardeners," says Pelikan. "They buy a lawnmower, an edger, and a truck and they're in business. In this area, unemployment is high and someone who's unemployed knows he can cut grass. He goes into business." The results can be disastrous.

"They give others who are edu-



Riverside's Canyon Creek, featuring 128 units, is one of Pelikan's oldest clients.

cated and experienced a bad name. They come in not knowing the bidding process. They bid low, get the job, then we're called in to clean up the mess," he says.

But even after a condo association has seen the damage done by the "grass cutter," it may still be reluctant to shell out more bucks. It feels the bargain basement price of the grass cutter is normal. Enter Pelikan with his professional operation. And his professional overhead.

"I have to pay my taxes and maintain good insurance. Those costs are passed on to my customers," he says.

In order to maintain a good working relationship with condo boards, Pelikan relies on education. "Everybody's concerned about the dollar: they want to get the most for it," he says. "I think the important thing is educating people so they know what they're getting for their dollar.

"I know that often a management company will ask me to come to an association meeting and make it clear to them what they're getting for their dollar. They want to know why it costs so much to take care of an area," says Pelikan.

That's one part of the job Pelikan doesn't enjoy. "I get a little nervous and uptight because I'm afraid I'll get put on the hotseat," he says, half in jest. "At the same time, I try to form a good working relationship with the property manager or the committee person in charge of grounds. I find that very useful because they tell me when things aren't going right."

### Green vs. brown

Part of Pelikan's educational process involves explaining why things don't stay green year round in sunny Southern California. Located 50 miles from the Pacific Ocean, Riverside doesn't feel the relative warmth the ocean breezes bring to the seaside in the winter. Winter nights can be downright cold.

**'Taxes and insurance... costs are passed on to my customer.'**

—Pelikan

"We try to grow a lot of cool-season grasses here. A lot of these condos want green grass year round. That's one of the problems I run into. People don't understand plants and seasons. In the winter time they think 'it's California, the grass should be green year round,' but you get the bermuda lawns and the St. Augustines and they all go dormant," he says.

The solution, not surprisingly, is to go with a bluegrass or a bermudagrass overseeded with a winter rye.

More often than not, the client goes back to a bermudagrass lawn anyway. "The experts tell us that in Southern California, sooner or later, you'll end up with a bermuda lawn. It does so well here," he says.

The predictability of Southern Cal-

ifornia weather makes Pelikan's job a little easier. Says Pelikan, "we know when it's going to rain. It allows us to schedule our maintenance better. Here we try to work around the heat, not the rain."

Irrigation scheduling is usually a simple process, but a vital one.

"We have not been treating water with the respect we should," says Pelikan. "There are not that many natives in landscape and the ones who are, who know the value of water, don't get heard—they're drowned out." He predicted a boom in the number of Southern California irrigation firms in the future.

### 30 years of changes

Bob Pelikan came to Riverside in 1956. Then a dot to Rand-McNally, Riverside had less smog then. Pelikan felt it was the perfect climate for a Missouri boy like himself. He stayed, married, and took a job with the city of Riverside Parks and Recreation Department.

His wife, Ann, earned her law degree in 1979 and passed her bar exam, allowing her husband the chance to start his own business. She assists her husband in contractual matters.

"I worked myself up too high (with the city of Riverside)," he says. "I'm basically an outdoor person and I found myself behind a desk doing time-management studies."

The years weren't foolishly spent. In fact, Pelikan says his experience with the city and time-management helps him now manage his business. "I have my crew really organized. They have it down to a routine so they know exactly what to do." Even so, employee turnover has been a problem. "Once they get really good, they go into business for themselves."

He has other problems. Dealing with the overplanted landscapes in Southern California is a headache. Last winter Pelikan removed over 100 trees from one of the developments he maintains. Not one resident noticed. He says he'll probably remove another 100 this winter.

And then there's the renters (and sometimes owners) who have little interest in the look of their landscape.

He stays away from commercial and private properties (he leaves that for the guy with the mower, edger, and one truck) and trees ("I consider tree trimming to be a field of its own").

He says his volume today is just where he wants it. Not bad for a guy with an unlisted phone number.

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