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# LETTERS

To the editor:

With due respect to the reports of my contemporaries on the subject of "The Black Death" (August issue), permit me to offer my opinion on the element that seems to be lacking.

Layers occur by intent or by the migration of finer particles. In soil growing media, migration is hindered by the presence of aggregates, produced by the process known as "flocculation," enhanced by the presence of aerobic micro-organisms. In their absence, plants growing in a medium of high rates of infiltration, percolation and drainage, it follows that, with reduced water-holding capacity in the medium, irrigation is needed in quantity. The rapid movement of water tends to assist the finer particles to migrate. In a system that embraces flocculation, it appears that the grape-like clusters of fine particles, acting as large particles with ample pore space, may prevent migration to a considerable degree.

To sustain a thriving biological complex, it is necessary to provide the essential nutrients, which, for the most part, are organic in nature. This implies a totally different system of management, one that is in harmony with the age-old processes of nature.

High sand content of soils in putting greens that were "easy to keep" was a feature of field research conducted at Beltsville in the '50s with co-workers Radko and Wilson. Cup-cutter cores from greens were collected and analyzed for sand content. Low sand content characterized the greens "hard to keep." The "easy to keep" greens showed many large pore spaces in photographs of thin slices of the profile.

This study, lacking final conclusions, was dropped in 1953. It may have contributed to the notion that, if high sand content in a soil is good, why not use all sand? It must be remembered that this was in an area where topdressings contained organic matter and organic fertilizers were in vogue. The biological nature of soil in the "easy to keep" greens was not determined, but it was thought to be high.

**Fred V. Grau**  
Consulting Agronomist  
College Park, Md.

To the editor:

Since 1986, I have been increasingly active on a broad range of environmental issues. My experience thus

far indicates that generally speaking, most people who manufacture, distribute, sell and/or apply pesticides are not very interested in alternatives like integrated pest management (IPM).

Officials with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture see no problems at all with the safety of pesticides. If it were not for many concerned individuals, I doubt very seriously that the state would be developing guidelines for monitoring wells for pesticide contamination.

Community feel that many major corporations really don't care about environmental quality, and conversely, organizations like 3PF feel that we environmentalists are a misguided group with sinister motives. Is it any wonder that people on both sides of the fence get frustrated?

I would like to point out that pesticides are not the only reason for problems in the environment. They are, however, part of the problem. We are all responsible for what happens to this planet, individuals as well as industry.

I employ IPM in my business, and have found it to work very well. I use the best cultural practices I am familiar with, and I only use pesticides as a last resort. The only materials I use are insecticidal soap, a sulphur-based fungicide/miticide, dormant oil and strategic use of Roundup. I am doing a lot more hand-weeding, and I intend to use a product called "Sharpshooter" (Safer Co.) for weed control as soon as it is available in concentrate form.

**Robert Mulder**  
Amsterdam Landscaping  
Raleigh, N.C.

To the editor:

I sometimes wonder why the controversy exists concerning "VNS" (Variety Not Stated) seed.

For years, the terms "common" or "commercial" existed and described seed which was being sold as seed of that kind. Any reference to variety was reserved for seed being described with a certain variety name, either of pedigreed and sometimes non-pedigreed status.

More recently, sophisticated and astute seed buyers have come to recognize the merits of seed certification, and the guarantees inherent when specifying "certified seed." It would seem that this is all that is really needed; "common" or "commercial" seed to describe any seed which is not

seed of an identifiable variety and one of the pedigreed grades. Pedigree seed merits the variety being part of its name.

"VNS" seems to be some kind of implication that this non-descript seed may possibly possess some varietal traits and characteristics. I do not believe it can be both ways, and disagree with messrs. Olinger and Roberts in attempting to justify anything other than "common" status for "common seed."

Finally, I would point out that it does not really matter whether you are dealing with a "reputable" or "non-reputable" wholesale distributor. If a buyer is not taking advantage of the assurances inherent with pedigree seed, then caveat emptor—buyer beware.

**Martin C. Pick**  
Otto Pick & Sons Seeds  
Ontario, Canada

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## GCSAA from page 17

sional staff to provide specific recommendations and analysis.

The GCSAA reports that the system is expected to cost less than \$1,000, a substantial savings when compared to the cost of an environmental audit, which can exceed \$10,000.

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## INDUSTRY

### Safer adds a pair of new east and west centers

Safer Inc., a leading researcher and manufacturer of naturally-based pesticide and plant care products, is expanding.

Safer has a new west coast distribution center in Ontario, Calif. that serves Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Alaska and Hawaii. This plant will cut deliveries to those states up to seven days.

Safer's new Camp Hill, Pa. facility allows the company to deliver product within three days to New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia and West Virginia.

Safer, with headquarters in Well-esley, Mass., manufactures and distributes insecticidal soaps, moss and algae killers, a sulfur-based fungicide, a herbicide, insect traps, leaf cleaners and plant protectants to the green industry. **LM**

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## JACOBSEN TEXTRON

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J-10-8

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HF-15

HR-15

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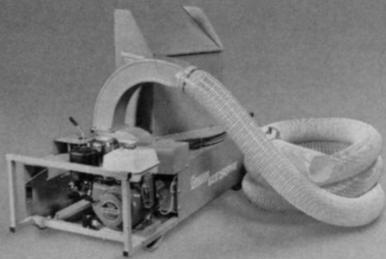
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# PEOPLE

**Nick C. Toscano**, University of California Riverside's extension entomologist, has been appointed associate dean for Cooperative Extension in the Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Toscano has published more than 70 articles in scientific and semi-scientific journals.

**Harold Pellett**, professor of horticultural science and landscape architecture at the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum has received the Norman Jay Colman Award from the American Association of Nurserymen. The award recognizes outstanding achievement in horticultural research.

**Dwayne Ingram**, professor and extension specialist in ornamental horticulture at the University of Florida, received the Nursery Extension Award. **Clifton Comstock** of Monrovia Monrovia Nursery Co. in Azusa, Calif., won the AAN's Wholesale Plant Salesman of the Year Award. **Paul Smeal**, professor of horticulture and extension specialist at VPI-SU, won the L.C. Chadwick Educator's Award. **Henry Spalding** won the Garden Communicator's Award.

**E. Thomas Smiley** joined the Bartlett Tree Research Laboratories as plant pathologist and soil specialist. Smiley received his Ph.D. from Michigan State University in those areas. He was previously with ACRT Environmental Specialists.

**Alston Legare Van Ness** has been appointed director of marketing for the National Club Association. Van Ness holds a bachelor's degree in history from the College of Charleston, and has specialized training in the master's program at the University of Dallas.

**Ron Zwiebel** has joined Lesco as a



Ron Zwiebel



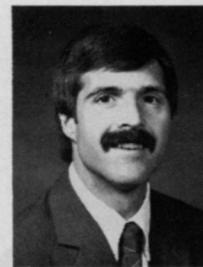
Jerry Kraft

fertilizer and seed specialist serving Alabama, Tennessee and central Georgia. Zwiebel was previously president and founder of Green Care Lawn Service. The company is now being run by his wife, Marlene.

Internationally recognized horticulture research scientist and professor at Clemson University, D.C.

**Coston** has been named associate dean/director of the S.C. Agricultural Experiment Station. Coston replaces **Absalom Snell**, who retired from the post this year after serving the station for 39 years.

Long-time association executive **George Rose** retired after more than 50 years in the horticulture industry, including 24 years with All-America



Larry Kuhl



George Rose

Rose Selections. He was named executive secretary in the 1960s, a position he held until his retirement.

The Chemical Producers and Distributors Association has a new board of directors: chairman of the board is **Richard Mille** of Prentiss Drug and Chemical; first vice chairman is **Rusty Griffin** of Griffin Corp.; second vice chairman is **Bobby Pace** of Helena Chemicals. **Warren E. Stickle, Ph.D.**, moves from executive director to president. **Rick Davis** of SureCo will serve as secretary.

**Suzanne Klaus** of Klaus Greenhouse, Greenwood, Mo., is new president of the National Association of Women in Horticulture. Other officers are **Betty Hensinger**, **Patricia Kish**, **Kathy Freeland**, **Linda Barnett**, **Lisa Macky** and **Mary Lu Parks**.

Ransomes has announced the promotion of **Larry Kuhl** to vice president of manufacturing. Kuhl is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison who joined Ransomes in 1977 as plant manager.

**Timothy Zink** has been named vice president of Safer's newly-formed Commercial and Agricultural Division. Zink comes from the Sandoz Crop Protection Division where he was vice president of marketing.

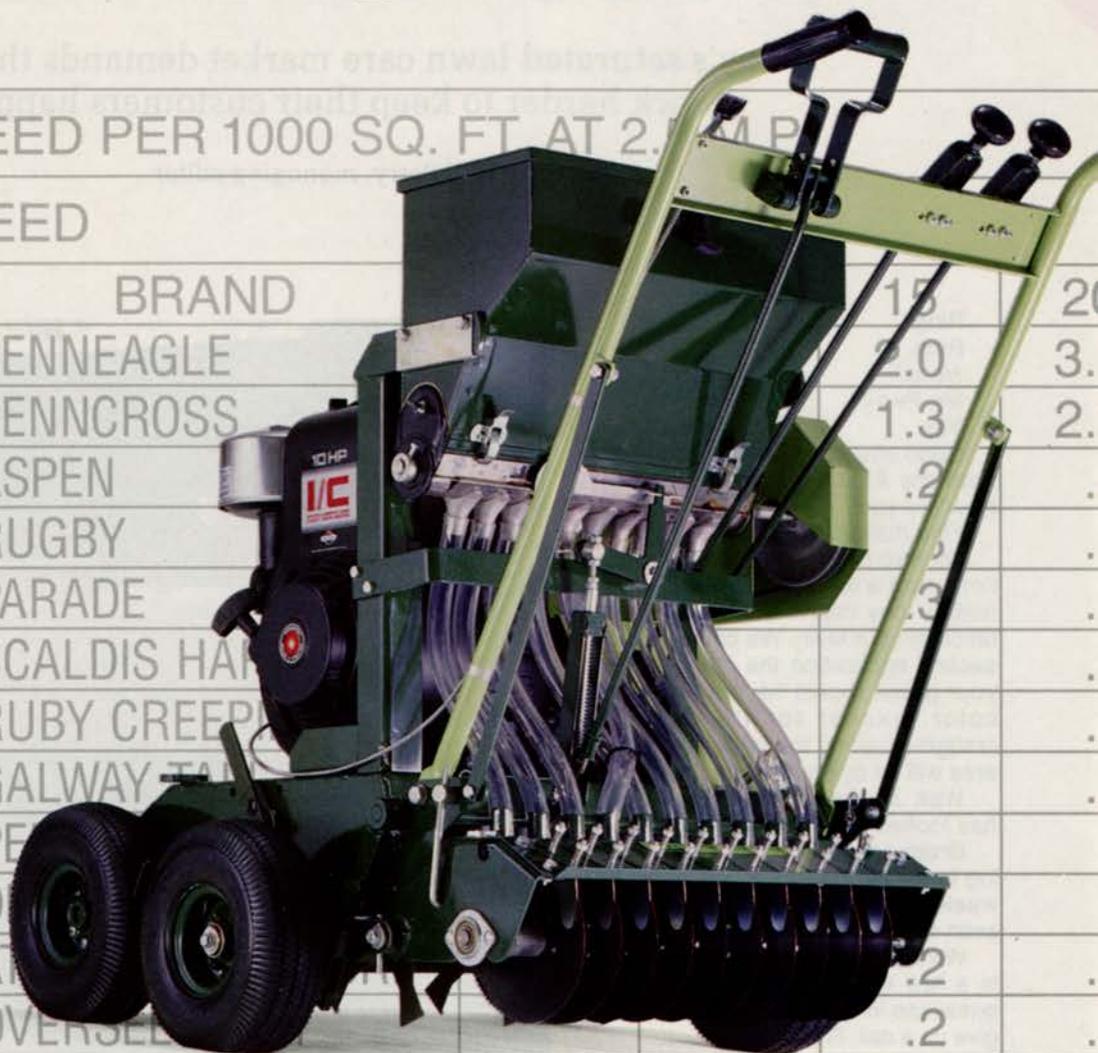
**Jerry Kraft** has been named vice president of sales for KLM Bio-Systems, a company that produces organic lawn care products. Kraft has been with KLM since 1984; prior to that, he was with O.M. Scott & Sons.

**Robert P. McLain** is new service coordinator for Tecumseh Products' Engine and Transmission Group Service Division. McLain is a Kent State University graduate with a bachelor's degree in marketing.

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|-----------------------|---------------|-----|-----|
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|                       | PENNCROSS     | 2.0 | 3.0 |
| KENTUCKY<br>BLUEGRASS | ASPEN         | 1.3 | 2.0 |
|                       | RUGBY         | .2  | .   |
|                       | PARADE        | .3  | .   |
| FESCUE                | SCALDIS HAWK  | .   | .   |
|                       | RUBY CREEPER  | .   | .   |
|                       | GALWAY TALKER | .   | .   |
| RYEGRASS<br>PERENNIAL | PEPPER        | .   | .   |
|                       | DUNDEE        | .   | .   |
| MIXTURE               | ATLANTA       | .2  | .   |
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# THE CUSTOMER AS KING

Today's saturated lawn care market demands that LCOs work harder to keep their customers happy.

by Will Perry, managing editor

Ring.  
Ring.  
Hello?  
Mr. Perry?  
Yes.

Good afternoon. This is John Smith from the ABC Lawn Care Company. How are you?

*Fine thanks. Yourself?*

I'm also fine thank you. The reason I'm calling is to check and see if you've noticed any improvement in the condition of your lawn. We completed our second application the other day and your grass should have a nice green color, except for the areas of crabgrass along the back fence. That area will be dying off about now.

*Well, as a matter of fact, the lawn has looked very nice this year.*

Great. I might suggest a light watering in the early evening sometime this week. It's been a while since we've seen some rain.

We'll be back to check on your lawn in a few weeks, but if you have any questions in the meantime, feel free to give us a call. Goodbye.

If you're in the lawn care business and this conversation sounds at all absurd to you, chances are good that you're getting out-hustled for customers in your market area.

Industry analysts agree that the business of lawn care in America has reached a turning point in its history. Gone are the days of the endless customer base that LCOs have enjoyed for the past 20 years. In the 1990s, profitable companies will be those that are able to retain clients through improved communication while selling them additional services.

"The issue now for lawn care companies that are going to be successful is better service," said Rudd McGary,

**In the 1990s, the successful lawn care service companies will be those that remember the customer is king.**



senior consultant with All-Green Management Associates in Columbus, Ohio. "The progressive companies out there have started saying to their customers 'You're the most important part of our business.'"

McGary notes that since the late 1960s, the lawn care industry has followed traditional business cycles of rapid expansion, followed by market saturation, and eventual industry consolidation, which exists currently.

Today, more than twenty years after the industry's inception, there is little variation to be found in the technical offerings of competitors, notes McGary. As a result, company that makes the special effort to attract and

retain customers is likely to be more attractive—and profitable.

### Tapping potential revenue

McGary's estimate of the total revenue available in the lawn care industry in this country is between \$1.5 and \$2 billion. Since just 1983, chemical lawn care market revenue has grown from \$1.05 billion to \$1.5 billion, according to industry surveys. Likewise, membership in the industry's professional organization, the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA), has grown from 31 companies in 1979 to more than 1,200 today (which includes the loss of about 30 firms due to consolidation in

1988.) Translated, that means LCOs have reached most of the potential customers available.

To remain profitable, LCOs have recognized the need to hold on to their present customers and sell them additional services, such as mowing and management, tree care and aeration.

Russell Frith, PLCAA president, notes that the "Back to Service" theme of this month's PLCAA convention this month reflects the importance of the issue.

"In the last couple years you can see a real change in the look of the lawn care market. A huge amount of capital has been poured in and the competitive nature of the industry has increased dramatically.

"The thinking used to be that you could always go out and get a new customer if you lost one that wasn't happy. That's no longer always the case," Frith notes.

Frith's company, Lawn Doctor, has grown steadily for several years and ranks among the top revenue-earning lawn care companies in the country with annual sales of more than \$31 million. The company has a policy of making sales calls to customers within 48 hours of a visit.

"Each company has to deal with the issue of customer retention in its own way," says Frith. "This is one of our ways."

### Better employee training

The Davey Tree Expert Company of Kent, Ohio, with annual revenue of more than \$5 million, has placed increased emphasis on customer communication in its employee training program.

"We want our people to treat each lawn as if it's the lawn of the president of the company," says Roger Funk, Ph.D., Davey's director of technical and human resources. "Then we want them to realize that it's not the president of the company that pays their salary. The average customer does."

Davey's "Customer Care" training program is a two-day affair for field employees that was conceived in 1986 and initiated this year. Its focus is to get employees to evaluate their performance through the eyes of the customer.

Davey's field employees are encouraged to attempt to talk directly with customers at the time of service. If no one is home, personalized literature is left at the door, including a stamped survey card. Also, employees are to check the environment for possible areas of complaint.

Funk adds that a toll-free number



for customers is also under consideration.

"As we looked back on 75 years as a company, we found that customer care was indeed the direction we should be headed in," says Funk. The company is currently designing an "Employee Care" program for its management personnel. It will be designed to attract, train and develop the type of caring employees it desires.

"After all," says Funk, "you can't have one without the other."

Mike Turner, operator of Cleveland-based Custom Lawns, uses a quarterly newsletter featuring articles on varied topics such as gardening and mower maintenance in addition to post-application telephone service calls. In addition, since a vast majority of his customers are within 20 to 30 miles of the home office, his employees will stop to evaluate the lawn condition of nearby customers while on the road. They always leave at least a personalized note behind that lets the customer know they were there.

These free visits cost Turner about 10 man-hours a week and have become an effective public relations tool.

"What we're doing now is going out between applications and taking a look around. We're making decisions about the success of the mate-



**Consultant Larry Kokkelenberg says that treating a customer well is the most important element in a service-oriented business.**

rials we're working with, trying to spot potential problems and offering additional services or suggestions. The company that doesn't go out and do these things is the one that's going to be in trouble."

#### **Ignorance is expensive**

In addition to a rising or falling revenue and customer base, there are other factors to consider when evaluating your relationship with your customers. Specifically, it's impor-

tant to read into those numbers for a more complete picture of where your company may be headed, says industry consultant Larry Kokkelenberg.

Kokkelenberg is president of the Center for Business Development, a consulting firm that has worked with LCOs for more than seven years. He believes that a company's attitude toward its customers is the single most important factor in the success of a service-oriented business.

Kokkelenberg notes that for every customer complaint you receive there are 26 other customers with the same complaint you won't hear from. Sixty-five to 95 percent of those will not do business with you again. Also, the person with a complaint is likely to tell nine or 10 others of their misfortune, while 13 percent of those will tell more than 20 people. However, 95 percent of customer complaints can be rectified if you act quickly and courteously.

A competitive lawncare company today can no longer tolerate an average annual customer turnover rate between 16 and 22 percent, he says.

"There is greater awareness today that it's a lot more expensive to gain new customers than to retain the ones you have," concludes Kokkelenberg. **LM**

## **'IT WORKS FOR ME'**

When Senske Lawn and Tree Care reached a slow growth period three years ago, owner Chris Senske gave it a booster shot by increasing emphasis on communicating with the customer. Today he operates three branches in Washington, enjoys an annual growth rate of 30 percent and revenue of more than \$2.5 million.

"We had reached a plateau," notes Senske. "I wasn't happy with how the company was going and felt there was something we needed to do to make a change."

Senske hired a consulting firm to coordinate a two-day training seminar that is taken by all his field service representatives prior to the spring season. "The major thrust of it is to train them to be confident in their abilities to communicate with the customer," says Senske. His employees learn the reasons why people want a lawn care service, what customers want to hear, how to use the proper tone of voice in conversation

and how to give a firm handshake, among other things.

"For the new employee, this seminar is awesome," says Senske. "They think, 'Oh my god, this really is a professional organization.' For the returning employee it's a good refresher course that reminds them who pays their salary."

In addition, Senske has 16 employees manning the telephones to drum up new business and contact present customers four to six weeks after their second or third application. "We're calling to see if we can get them to complain before they complain," explains Senske. He says that about 10 percent of his customers have concerns that require attention.

These steps are part of a whole package of things designed to improve the company's image in the eyes of its customers, Senske says. How an employee answers or speaks on the phone, how easy it is for the customer to understand and



**Chris Senske**

pay their bill, and providing sufficient notification of when you have or will visit a customer's home are all examples of everyday business aspects that can be used to your advantage. —Will Perry