



Bourne: 'It's a whole new awakening for us in the public sector to be customer-driven.'

12) researching tasks: a video tape study cut mowing of one area from 1-3/4 days to 3-1/4 hours by using different equipment and crew configuration;

13) using the Boy Scouts to install paths as a community service (he suggests using condominium associations and neighborhood associations, too);

14) educating the customer or consumer as to what maintenance is appropriate; and

15) leasing land to local gardening enthusiasts so they can maintain it.

It may be a sad fact, but it's a fact of life indeed, that landscape management in the '90's will mean being more efficient and "doing more with less."

Using your imagination may help you not only survive, but thrive, in the decade of the '90's.

—Jerry Roche

'Flex-force' idea works for Delaware company

■ Larry Iorri was motivated to downsize his company eight years ago, when he realized it wasn't fun anymore.

President of Down to Earth, Inc. in Wilmington, Del., Iorri says he returned to the shop at the end of a day and noticed a number of things "out of place." He sensed a lack of appreciation from the crew, and realized he was spending a lot of time and effort and getting little in return. The business was doing well, but he was working as hard as he had been 20 years ago.

It was then that Iorri decided to downsize his company in a way that would keep it profitable and productive. The plan took five years to implement, during which time he:

- converted the eight full-time and 10 part-time work force into a part-time "flex-force," with one full-time supervisor;

- lowered the volume of work done by the in-house force;
- earned higher profit margins on each job, and was still able to maintain high quality work; and
- switched from two- to three-year contracts.

The flex-force is split into two wage divisions: a \$9- to \$14-per-hour force and one that is paid between \$4.50 and \$6 per hour. Clothing allotments are across the board.

Iorri is generous with salary increases in both wage brackets. "If I get somebody who's a great worker," he says, "I'm going to pay him well to show I appreciate him. Why should I try to save a couple thousand dollars a year by not giving (good raises)? That person ends up making me money, and I don't have to retrain him!"

Iorri's crew members are between 30 and 72 years old. They have one thing in common: strong motivation to work, primarily families.

"I realized that my best guys were always older, and had a lot of responsibilities," says Iorri.

Those of his crew who are not retired all hold full-time jobs, which takes care of their insurance and health care. There are no paid holidays for Iorri to worry about, and vacation pay is related to the number of hours each man works each week. For instance, an eight-hour-a-week employee gets eight hours of vacation pay. He pays less Social Security tax, less federal unemployment tax, and less liability insurance.

All employees benefit from the company profit-sharing plan.

Is it working? Iorri says he hasn't lost a man in eight years, and estimates that the entire crew has missed about five days

in eight years.

Iorri feels as if he has incorporated a genuine team approach, thanks to the crews' positive work ethic and flexible schedules.

'Satellite substitutes'—

These Iorri innovations are people who handle accounts with multiple locations—such as a bank or realty company—located at greater distances from the office. Iorri sets them up with the equipment, and they take it from there.

Iorri says he now has enough flexibility to sub-contract mowing, big mulching jobs, weeding and larger chemical applications. Size of job and geographic location are taken into consideration when choosing a sub-contractor.

His company handles lawn renovations, aeration, pre-emergence weed treatments, and athletic field jobs

A man who's bursting at the seams with ideas, Iorri has a few other tricks up his sleeve, designed to keep busy and promote the company:

- selling his services as a design consultant to homeowners, competitors and institutions such as hospitals;

- advertising "winter pricing" and off-season pricing to get customers locked in for the spring and summer;

- acting as a service broker. If a client wants a service done that Iorri can't handle, he'll do the legwork, secure a supplier for the service, and pocket a fair finder's fee (10 to 20 percent of the price of the job);

- acting as a third-party arbitrator in legal disputes; and

- concentrating on finding service niches that require one man and one piece of equipment.

Iorri suggests that the decision of whether or not to downsize depends on the stage your business is in. It might not work for a company just starting to grow, but could be just the ticket for an intermediate size company, or one whose owner is planning to retire soon.

—Terry McIver



Iorri: No health insurance costs with part-timers.

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From soap to hot sauce, deer damage prevention gets creative

Landscape managers have to use their imaginations, a regularly changing combination of both taste and scent repellents, and fences.

■ Bambi, loved by millions of Americans, is becoming a landscape destroyer.

Bambi is the northern white-tailed deer. She nips off the soft tips of twigs, and munches branches and shoots no thicker than a match stick. Unfortunately, some of the plants she finds appetizing are valuable trees and plants in our landscapes.

The problem: too many deer.

Populations are at historically high levels in many areas of the country, particularly east of the Mississippi.

"The deer pressure is getting so high that the food source is getting very, very low," says Les Hulcoop, cooperative extension agent for Dutchess County, N.Y.

Unfortunately, as deer populations rise, deer habitat shrinks as people subdi-

vide prime deer browsing locations into suburban home sites and office parks.

It's no wonder that deer are increasingly invading landscapes. They're hungry.

Todd Mizen discovered this last April when, after a late-spring snow, deer chomped off all emerging tulips at the woodlot-encircled, three-acre office site he helps maintain just southwest of Cleveland.

Mizen, like other landscape managers, can't do much to keep it from happening again and again. These deer live in small woodlots surrounding the office, not in an area where they can be harvested during Ohio's brief deer season. Indeed, some of the office employees or neighbors probably wouldn't stand for it even if they could be taken.

"When you talk about deer, you're talking about a controversial subject," admits



Feeding by white-tailed deer distorted the shapes of these evergreens at the Holden Arboretum.

Hulcoop, who has been investigating the deer-repellent properties of the fertilizer Milorganite. "On one hand, people don't

continued on page 16



Todd Mizen sprays a homemade mixture, hoping that the deer in a nearby woodlot find it too 'hot' for their taste.

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Products to keep deer, landscapes apart

■ Just about any type of fence, provided it's at least eight feet high and there are no gaps in it, will keep deer from landscape plants. But fences look like fences..

A newer product on the market, **Benner's Deer Fence**, is a dark mesh polypropylene material that can be strung from tree to tree around a property or planting, and it's not as obtrusive, say users. Contact: Benner's Gardens Inc., P.O. Box 875, Bala-Cynwyd, PA 19004; phone (800) 753-4660.

Some popular taste or scent products used to repel deer from landscapes include:

- **Deer-Away**, Deer Away, 712 15th Ave., NE, Minneapolis, MN 55413.
- **Gustafson 42-S Thiram Fungicide and Repellent**, Gustafson Inc., P.O. Box 660065, Dallas, TX 75266.
- **Hinder**, Necessary Trading Company, 422 Salem Ave., New Castle, VA 24127.
- **Hot Sauce Animal Repellent**, Miller Chemical and Fertilizer Corporation, PO Box 333, Radio Road, Hanover, Pa 17331.
- **Milorganite**, 1101 N. Market St., Milwaukee, WI 53201-3049.
- **Ro-Pel**, Burlington Bio-Medical & Scientific Corp., 222 Sherwood Ave., Farmingdale, NY 11735.
- **Spotrete 75 WDG Turf Fungicide**, W.A. Cleary Chemical Corp., Southview Industrial Park, 178 Route 522, Suite A, Dayton, NJ 08810.

For an excellent overview of deer damage control, the pamphlet *Controlling Deer Damage in Wisconsin* by Scott Craven and Scott Hygnstrom is a good place to start. Write to Agricultural Bulletin, Room 245, 30 N. Murray St., Madison, WI 53717, or phone (608) 262-3346. There is a small charge for the pamphlet.

want to hurt them. On the other hand, they don't want deer damage."

Mizen tries to discourage deer from eating the *Taxus* near the entrance of his office site with a spray mixture of hot sauce, Wilt Pruf and water.

The spray may or may not work through the winter. He may have to re-apply it. He may have to try another type of repellent.

Most studies show that chemical repellents, even some homemade ones, are about 50 percent effective. That's probably a little bit better than the success rate for collecting human hair at a barber shop and spreading it around specific plants. Or hanging it in bags from branches. Or drilling holes in small bars of deodorant soap and hanging them on the branches of valuable plants. (Leave the wrapper on the soap, it lasts longer, says one landscape manager with deer control experience.)

Jim Mack, superintendent of grounds at Holden Arboretum in wooded northeast Ohio, fights an even bigger battle to protect trees and plants, some of them quite valuable, from deer. The 3,000-acre arboretum, besides being basically an outdoor tree museum, is also a game preserve.

The arboretum's staff protects its valuable trees and gardens with an assortment of fences and aviary netting. Some of the materials Holden Arboretum uses include electric fences around plant nurseries, welded wire fences around some free-standing trees, plastic fencing material in some wooded areas.

Mack acknowledges that fences protect trees and beds, but he questions whether homeowners would find them aesthetically pleasing. Fencing really doesn't solve the bigger deer problem anyway. They just deflect deer to another area, says Mack.

The solution, he believes, is for deer populations to be maintained at numbers that would be in balance with their avail-

able food source.

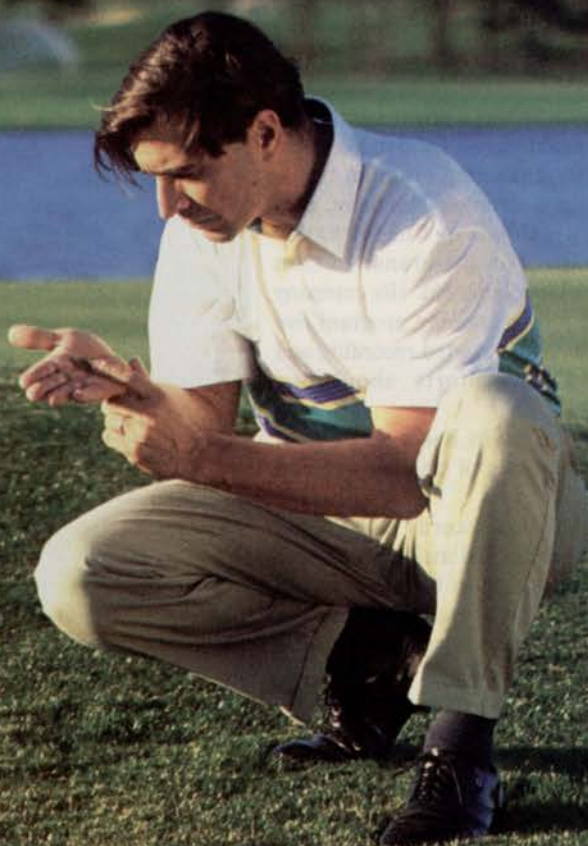
Beyond that, landscape managers will have to use their imaginations and, perhaps even, a regularly changing combination of both taste and scent repellents along with fences to keep deer from destroying and disfiguring trees and landscape plants, he says.

—Ron Hall



Jim Mack, at the Holden Arboretum, tends a wire mesh fence that keeps deer from this tree.

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Circle No. 103 on Reader Inquiry Card

Better training builds profits and sets standards for quality and safety

Maryland landscape firm discovers that company performance is tied directly to its employee training.

■ If you don't think you can reap real financial returns with your employee training program, think again, says J. Landon Reeve IV.



Reeve says a company-wide training program helps keep branch operations moving in the right direction.

A strong training program translates into a stronger company, says Reeve, president of Chapel Valley Landscape, a multi-branched firm based in Woodbine, Md. His company began a formal training program five years ago, and it started recording and tracking these efforts about four years ago.

Therein, claims Reeve, lies one of the cornerstones of training—record keeping.

The training records that Chapel Valley generates and maintains allow it to statistically gauge the effectiveness of its efforts. It actually matches the level of training its departments receive to their performance.

"The branches that are most productive and most profitable, did the most training," he says unhesitatingly.

Reeve maintains that a varied and well-thought-out program builds more self-reliant employees, employees that:

- ✓ produce more,
- ✓ have fewer accidents,
- ✓ maintain better morale, and
- ✓ are less apt to leave.

"You could see it just as clear as day," he says.

Initially, Chapel Valley's goal was to provide each employee 52 hours of formal training each year. However, the company's definition of training has since expanded to also include just about any extra or specialized knowledge an employee receives. That includes any employee, even managers.

Not too restrictive—"We don't try to write rules and regulations about what's training and what's not," says Reeve.

The company is, however, a stickler on recording and tracking its efforts. To get credit for the training, the employee must make sure it's recorded on the forms that the company makes available.

Actually, says Reeve, once employees see that training can help



Frank strengthened training because he didn't think new hires were getting the info or support they needed.



them with their own professional and personal goals, they become more responsive. That's one reason why his company refers to its training program as a Skills, Knowledge and Leadership Program.

David Frank, 34 years in the green industry, concurs that once employees understand that training can help them achieve their professional goals they're more likely to participate.

Let them do it—Participation is really what training is all about, says the president of David J. Frank Landscape Contractors, Germantown, Wis.

"We have to make training a participatory experience," says Frank. "We learn through our senses."

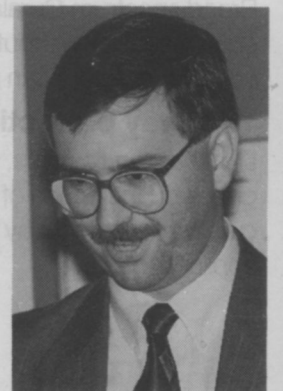
That's why he favors a mixed bag of training experiences, including question-and-answer sessions, hands-on demonstrations, and lots and lots of visuals. His company's video library contains about 350 titles.

"Probably the worst thing we can do is just stand up and lecture," he says.

Steve Leker, ISS Landscape, Tampa, Fla., suggests the following ingredients for a successful training experience:

- ✓ a comfortable location,
- ✓ willing employees,
- ✓ ample and appropriate training materials,
- ✓ a knowledgeable and enthusiastic trainer,
- ✓ a step-by-step approach to the material, and
- ✓ lots of repetition.

Says Leker: "If you can't find the time to train, you're not going to be able to find the time to correct the



Leker: show employees how to do something, then let them show you.

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mistakes later on."

Setting standards—Bud Stephenson, owner of Caretaker Landscape Management, Inc. of Mesa, Ariz., and current president of the Arizona Landscape Contractors Association, recently began a training program in his maintenance-heavy company.

Initial training will be for crew leaders, and will show "how we want things done," says Stephenson. He says he realized the need to have some operational standards in place after six years in business, "before we get any bigger."

Continuity of work from one account to another is important in an industry where it's not uncommon to lose a contract to a lowballing competitor. The more professional and disciplined the crew, the better are your chances of retaining accounts from year to year.

Stephenson believes a good training program shows that the company cares about employee advancement. It also helps reduce or eliminate turnover.

Worker safety is part of the Caretaker program, which Stephenson has culled together from industry literature and videos, and some material offered by various suppliers.

Stephenson plans to videotape his own training program, custom-made for Caretaker personnel.

Leker, Frank and Reeve all spoke at the ALCA annual convention in Indianapolis this past November; Stephenson spoke from his office in Mesa, Ariz.

—Ron Hall, Terry McIver

Exchange programs provide peer group interaction

■ An interesting twist on employee training is the tried-and-true method of learning from others in your peer group. It's accomplished at the Chicago Botanic Garden through an exchange program.

Cindy Baker, director of education, says the program was started in 1989, "based on the premise that whenever two professionals meet, they have knowledge and experience to share with each other."

Participants in the program usually hail from area arboreta, zoological parks or universities, but just about any green industry professional is welcome.

"We invite (organizations and companies) to send their staff members here for two weeks, and so far 18 have participated."

According to Baker, having an opportunity to interact with someone from a different work environment is akin to re-learning or reinforcing some concepts and ideas that may have staled with time.

"And," adds Baker, "we find that people integrate new ideas into what they're already doing."

"The people who come to us wear many hats, so we try to specify what they do here. They spend two weeks in two different areas of horticulture."

The Chicago Botanic Garden staff is itself a group that's ready, willing and able to participate in continuing education. A recent poll by management revealed a need for training in basic "horticultural Spanish," and the classes were given soon thereafter.

—Terry McIver

Before you pick up your next pick-up

■ Dealers say emphatically that price is not as important as some other considerations when small businessmen purchase a pick-up truck.

"Service is probably number one to the buyer today," says John Kessen of Southwest Ford in Parma Heights, Ohio. "But service and trust run right together. It's important to the dealership that people come back again and again."

The overriding features that small businessmen look for in their trucks nowadays are, according to Kessen:

- 1) ruggedness, durability, "quality;" and
- 2) investment: how long it will retain a value.

Before you head to the showroom, try to picture how your new truck will fit into your overall operations over the next several years. Scratching out a list of jobs your new vehicle will perform will save time and confusion at the dealer.

"The first thing I want to know is how the truck is going to be used," notes

Landscape managers who run their trucks 'long and hard' need to be prepared before buying replacements.

