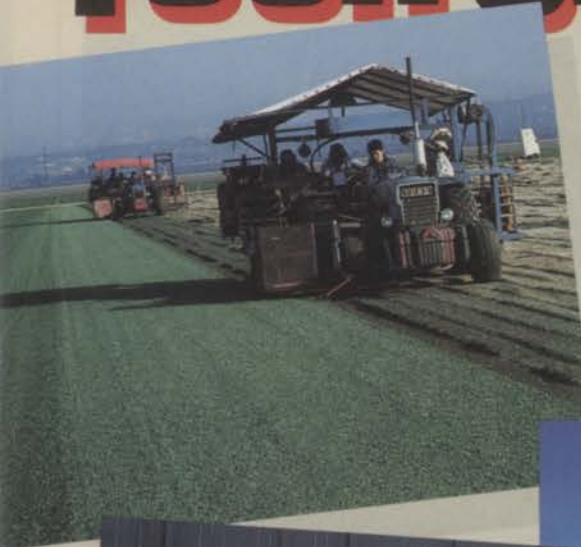


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Landscapers are building more walls

New stone and concrete products and a growing body of how-to info broaden client interest in retaining walls.

■ A growing number of landscape companies are building retaining walls.

These include everything from simple treated-wood or railroad-tie planting beds to decorative concrete block walls.

A well-designed, well-constructed retaining wall serves a functional purpose but can, depending upon the skill of the builder and his choice of materials, enhance a landscape too. For instance, a residential client may choose a decorative, stone or block retaining wall instead of having a section of their property regraded to solve a particular site problem. Or to shore up an embankment.

"The design and installation of retaining walls has blossomed dramatically in the last three years," says Greg Ernst. He and his brother, Clint, operate Custom Retaining Walls & Landscaping, Rochester, Minn.

Often, what separates the work of landscape professionals like the Ernsts from general contractors in this kind of



Stone-faced block wall helps set off a stunning residential landscape.

work is the installation of appropriate plant material in and around the wall. This combination of attractive wood, block or stone wall *and* greenery can be particularly eye-catching.

Professionals like Ernst feel that one of the best times to suggest a retaining wall is at the initial landscape installation. "The design of a house will almost dictate that you need retaining walls," he says.

It's at these new-construction sites that a landscaper with good stone-laying experience can really show his stuff, says Freely Downing, Jr., Downing Landscape, Springfield, Ohio.

Not only does Downing Landscape design and build customized walls, but it also lays paving stone, installs walks, constructs tree wells, etc. The company uses a variety of building materials, including hand-picked flagstone and busted up sidewalks (rough side showing) to build some of its most distinctive retaining walls.

"Every once in a while we wonder how far away from the actual landscaping we want to get," says Downing. "But stone work is definitely becoming a bigger part of landscaping."

Retaining walls can be simple or elaborate, but increasingly they're also attractive.

That's because a growing number of stone and concrete block companies are coming out with newer, more attractive and easier-to-work-with products.

Typically, these suppliers will also provide suggestions and how-to's (some of it surprisingly detailed) on how to use their building materials.

"The learning curve's already been done by other people," says Ernst.

—Ron Hall



Block suppliers like Versa-Lok provide solid how-to information.

More about retaining walls:

● Building Stone Institute, P.O. Box 5047, White Plains, NY 10602-5047. 914-232-5725.

● Keystone Retaining Wall Systems, 7600 France Ave. S. Ste 110, Edina, Minn. 55435. 612-897-1040. 800-747-8971.

● Rockwood (and EZ Wall) Retaining Walls, Inc., 7200 N. Highway 63, Rochester, Minn. 55906. 800-535-2375.

● StoneWall Landscape Systems, Inc., 3934 N. Ridgely Cr., Milwaukee, Wis. 53211. 414-962-4065.

● Tech-Stone, The Ideal Builders Supply & Fuel Co., 4720 Brookpark Road, Cleveland, Ohio 44134. 216-741-1600.

● Versa-Lok Retaining Wall Systems, P.O. Box 9116, North St. Paul, Minn. 55109. 612-770-3166.

With All The Abuse Your Turf Takes, Who Needs Root Pruning?

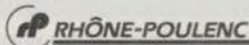


You know the story. The guys who swing an iron the way a lumberjack wields an ax are the same guys who yell the loudest when weeds give them a bad lie. So, with all the abuse your turf takes, the last thing you need is root-pruning from your herbicide. That's why you need CHIPCO® RONSTAR® brand G herbicide. University root pull studies show that CHIPCO® RONSTAR® G works without pruning turf roots. That means healthier roots and stronger, more durable turf. Best of all, just one pre-emergence application provides season-long control of 25 tough broadleaf and grassy

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Growing your business UP, not OUT

Mastery of the fundamentals (your primary service) produces some of the greatest accomplishments.

by Ed Wandtke

■ Many green industry companies were founded on the principle of delivering one prime service to customers. But when the company's rapid growth slowed down, the owner often looked at additional services his or her company could effectively provide to customers.

In 1992, I saw many companies re-evaluate their service diversification because their profitability was diminishing.

Why should your company look at "growing up, not out?" Are there real opportunities in diversification, or are there catastrophes waiting to befall the unsuspecting? Let's look at some of the issues you need to consider to determine what direction is right for your company in 1993.

So often, people expand their service base and have not considered some of the critical issues of expansion like credibility and marketing. Does your company really have any expertise or special skills that would allow it to enter this market if this service were your primary business? Who will you target this new service to, and what do you hope to accomplish? How does this affect your overall marketing plan for future growth?

Pool problems—Recently, I met an owner of a lawn care company who primarily services the very high end of the market. His lawn care program is six applications with aeration in the fall. He is priced extremely high, but his customers are thoroughly satisfied with his service.

As growth slowed down last year, he noticed many—approximately 40 percent—of his customers had swimming pools. As a result, he decided to offer pool maintenance services. His customers quickly responded and the business was rolling.

However, in mid-summer he realized that most of his customers' pools were

greener than their lawns. He needlessly lost valuable customers and the new growth quickly turned around. Today, he is back to strictly lawn care, even though his customer base hasn't completely recovered.

Iffy below 50!—I have a rule of thumb for businesses looking to expand. If the new service cannot bring in at least \$50,000 worth of new business, it is not a good area for expansion. I have found that until a company hits the \$50,000 mark, there are no efficiencies that make the new service an attractive add-on.

As lines of business expand, problems expand geometrically. For example, if you have a paperwork problem with one service offering, then with four service offerings you will have 16 times the problems.

After 15 years in the green industry, I've found that the true reason businesses expand into new services are typically the following:

1) Market problems: Companies that cannot attract new customers very effectively decide to service the same customer more often. Putting too many eggs in one basket can become very risky to a small business.

2) Service deficiency: Unfortunately, few owners realize that they are not quality service providers. Customer cancellation patterns and employee turnover should tell an owner how bad his service really is.

3) Competition: The company has underestimated the level of competition in

the market for the services they provide. As a result, they find it easier to offer what others don't. (How long do you think it will take before your competition realizes this too?)

4) Soft market: The area in which the business operates is economically soft. Perhaps opening a second location in a more viable economic area could be an alternative.

Offering a new service is not the wrong thing to do, as long as you have considered its marketing implications.

I believe that too many firms try to provide everything to everybody instead of targeting a particular market niche and working at it. Throughout history, mastery of the fundamentals (your primary service offering) has produced some of the greatest accomplishments.

In sports, teams with the winning traditions are always teams that master the fundamentals. In the green industry, ChemLawn of the late '70s and early '80s was the fundamental master of the lawn care industry. Today, Barefoot Grass seems to understand the importance of mastery of the fundamentals, as evidenced by its service offerings and successful growth.

If you are a full service company or considering offering a new service, make sure you have mastered the fundamentals of your service offerings. Constantly re-evaluating how you operate, what can be improved and what competition has arisen will be the keys to success.

As you begin the new year, you should make a commitment to "mastering the fundamentals."

—The author is a principle at Wandtke & Associates Management Consultants, 2586 Oakstone Dr., Columbus, OH 43231. For more information, phone (614) 891-3111.



Before adding services, make sure you've mastered the fundamentals.



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Big, old trees can be of promotional value

Using those trees you love and care for, to gain some public attention for your business.

■ Standout trees that are either big, old or odd can provide promotional value to local tree care operators. A company that encourages residents to track down these trees can harvest positive publicity.

"It's definitely something that appeals to the public," reports Lauren Lanphear, vice president of the Forest City Tree Protection Co. in South Euclid, Ohio.

As co-host of a gardening show aired over a local radio station, Lanphear invites listeners to write or call in with the location of a favorite old or big tree.

The tree promotion is not a contest in the true sense of the word, because prizes are not awarded, but it does serve as a clearinghouse for information on the area's unique specimens.

Each week during the 13-week summer radio season, Lanphear airs a brief piece on the location, size, approximate age and historic value of a selected tree. A 300-year-old white oak, for example, "was here when the U.S. Constitution was signed."

A handout is then prepared for distribution to tree-loving listeners who wish to visit these sights. "Each year I compile a list of the trees I have highlighted."

In addition to tips from listeners, Lanphear relies on information provided by Cleveland's Early Settlers' Association. He suggests that tree care operators in other communities can obtain similar help from historical societies, garden clubs and interested citizens.

"There can be some way of giving people encouragement," he advises, "like if you identify some kind of tree you get a booklet or service" related to tree care.

Touch trees, touch history—A successful promotion was launched by Larry Holkenborg Nursery, a tree care and landscaping firm in Sandusky, Ohio, to celebrate the nation's bicentennial. "We tried to find a 200-year-old tree in each township," he says.

Close to 20 plaques were affixed to these old-timers. "There were stories in the newspapers and all that," Holkenborg recalls. "I haven't had anyone say, 'I remember that

plaque; here's the job,' but it did bring positive publicity, and how do you measure that?"

Other tree care operators can benefit from similar promotions, Holkenborg says. "Anything to make people aware of trees" can bring positive results.

"I've seen this done in other communities and it's a good educational tool," reports Mark Ervin, special projects administrator for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Forestry.

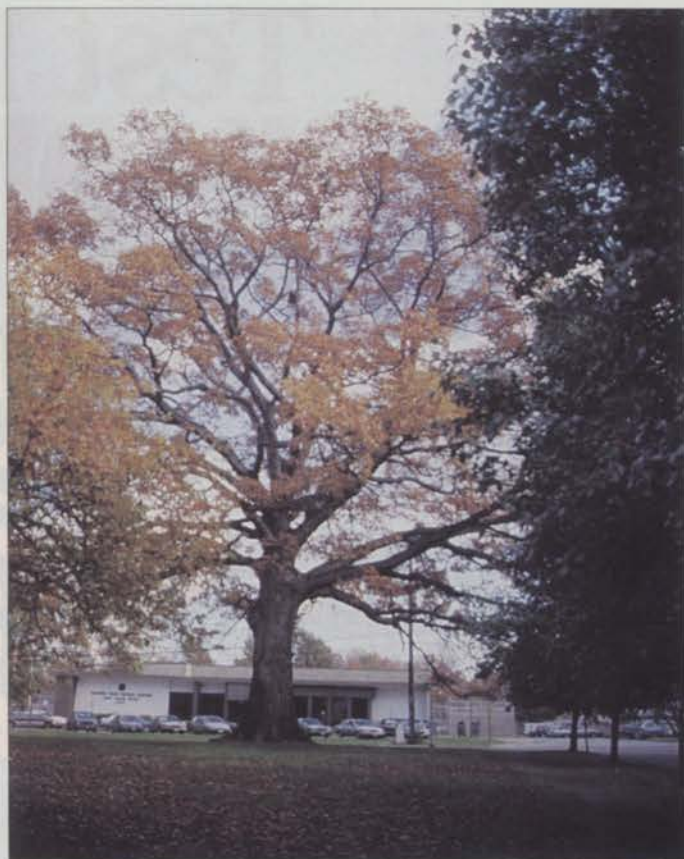
Promotions such as these "tend to increase the image and awareness of trees overall" among homeowners, says consultant Steve J. Day of Landscapes Plus in Littleton, Colo. Consumers then realize that trees "are just like people and cars—they need maintenance all their lives."

What else to look for—In Day's neck of the woods, near Denver, there are limited varieties of trees in the mountains, so he suggests promoting a search for "the most unusual specimen of a non-native tree."

And for those tree care operators reluctant to actually run a promotion, it can certainly do no harm to be on the lookout for a unique tree while out on the job.

"They can take a picture of it and include it in a newsletter as a special interest item," Day points out. "What arborists can do is tie in the history of the tree" with current buildings and events within the community.

"You can teach history through trees," explains Phillip Rodbell, urban forester at the American Forestry Association. The Washington, D.C.-based non-profit organization actively seeks information on trees that are large, old, famous or historic. "We get a



Promotions tend to increase the image and awareness of trees.

lot of participation from tree care companies at the local level," says Deborah Gangloff, vice president of program services. Help is needed to search out qualified trees, as is donated care for important trees in need of aid to survive.

The big picture—"Davey Tree is one of our biggest supporters in informing people about the value of big trees," Rodbell says. Davey sponsors the AFA's National Register of Big Trees, which names a "champion" biggest tree of each species. About 800 "living landmarks" have been selected, with Florida being No. 1 in big trees with 113. (Some 200 tree species lack a champion specimen.)

In addition to soliciting help from tree care operators in locating and caring for champions, the AFA also seeks out aid for other ongoing projects that can provide considerable visibility on a local level. "We are working with many tree care companies to encourage them to contribute time and equipment for tree planting," says Rodbell.

—James E. Guyette is a freelance writer based in South Euclid, Ohio.

What do you get when more than 4,400 turf managers switch to SCOTTS® Poly-S Technology?

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