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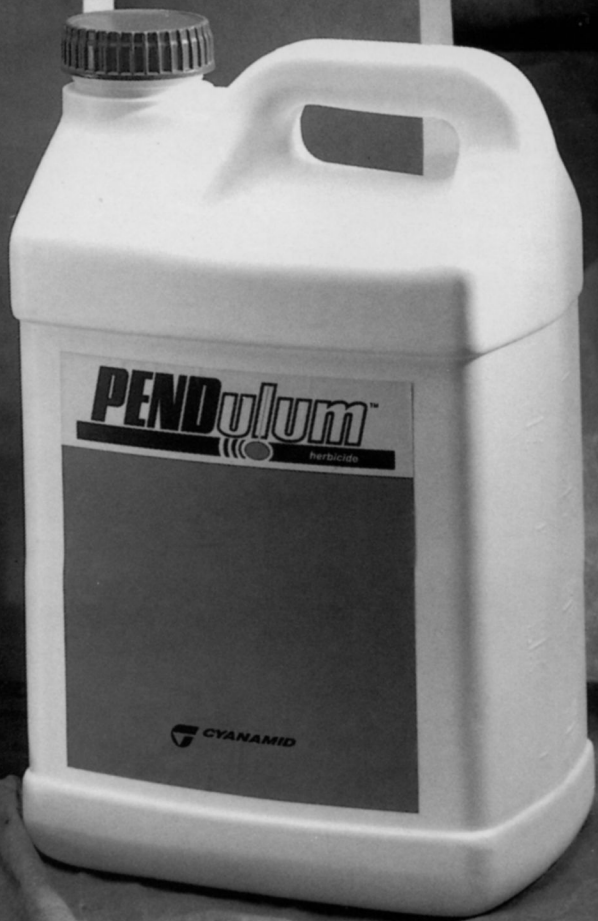
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ON THE COVER: SUMMER GREENERY AT ITS
PEAK AROUND THIS CLEVELAND, OHIO RESIDENCE.
PHOTO BY J. QUINN PHOTOGRAPHY

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So: where is the \$14,400 going to come from?



Jerry Roche

JERRY ROCHE
Editor-in-Chief

As you've probably heard, the minimum wage increases from \$4.25 to \$4.75 per hour, 30 days after President Clinton signs a bill now sitting on his desk. It will then increase to \$5.15 per hour next July 1st.

What you haven't heard—but can only speculate on—is the impact of this legislation on the nation, your operation in particular.

Economists disagree vociferously with each other. One academic study shows that increasing the minimum wage does not increase unemployment.

A similar study with supposedly more accurate data reaches the opposite conclusion.

Another study suggests that raising the minimum wage also triggers recessions and a rise in poverty rates.

Republicans contend that increasing the minimum wage could force small businesses to lay off 100,000 to 500,000 workers over the next several years.

Granted, very few minimum wage jobs exist

in this industry. Most line-level jobs pay \$6 to \$9 per hour, depending on the section of the country in which you're doing business. But Ben Bolusky of the American Association of Nurserymen believes the green industry will see a "trickle-up" effect, forcing companies (golf courses, too!) to pay crew members higher wages—maybe not the full 90 cents an hour of the official increase, but a percentage of it.

Consider this: The average small business with 10 minimum-wage employees working 40 hours a week for 40 weeks a year will pay \$14,400 more per year in wages if those employees receive a 90-cent an hour raise. We can all agree that's not a small amount.

And just where will that money come from? Some could come from an additional provi-

sion of the bill that has been pretty much underpublicized: the government is offering \$14 billion in tax relief to small businesses over the next 10 years, some of which will be for buying equipment.

The ceiling for equipment credits (not "deductions") is going up from \$17,500 this year to \$25,000 by the year 2003. Every dollar you spend to purchase equipment—under the ceiling that year—is a dollar you don't have to pay in income tax. Not a bad deal.

But some of the extra money you'll be paying employees will have to come from other lines in your budget. As we see it, here are four of your obvious options:

- 1) Pay good workers more, and figure out a way to get more production out of them.
- 2) Pay good workers more, but cut out some of their benefits.
- 3) Pay good workers more, and reduce your profit margins.
- 4) Fire one of every 15 workers now employed.

None of these is especially attractive to the business owner or golf/athletic field supervisor.

My guess is that the most judicious answer to the problem of higher payrolls might need to come from the manufacturing segment. Simply put, over the next few years they will have to supply new products that are faster, more efficient and easier to use—mowers, hedge-trimmers, fertilizer spreaders, herbicides, blade-sharpeners—whatever. This will mean that your employees, with the proper training, will be more productive.

In the meantime, because you work in a labor-intensive business, productivity remains the key to running a profitable operation. If you're not using the most efficient products on the market, and training your employees in their proper use, your competitors are getting a head start on you.

LM

Comments? Suggestions? Contact Jerry by phoning (216) 826-2830 or faxing (216) 891-2675. If you are computer-connected, you can e-mail 75553.502@compuserve.com.

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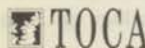
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A rocky bed for landscape shrubs

Will replacing bark mulch with 1/4-inch stone in shrub beds cause any long-term problems with the growth and development of the shrubs? Plantings are made up of mostly pines, yews, junipers, azaleas and rhododendrons.

—NEW YORK

A review of information relevant to your question indicates that there isn't a simple "yes" or "no" answer. I've seen stones, pebbles, gravel and other inorganic materials used as mulch, but I'm more familiar with the organic mulches like wood and bark chips.

Here are some problems with rock mulches:

1) When rock mulch is used, there is usually a sheet of plastic film beneath it. The plastic, usually black, is for weed control and it may cause problems for woody plants. Often, this will result in poor aeration and too little or too much moisture in the underlying soil. Poorly-aerated, wet soil plus the root and collar organisms commonly found under such conditions can cause root loss, reduced growth, and/or death of the entire plant.

2) When the rock mulch has been in place for several years, it is—in my opinion—not very attractive because weeds grow in or on the litter that accumulates among the stones.

3) It is more difficult to remove leaves and decomposing plant material from large beds of rock mulch. With most of

the organic mulches, such debris simply blends in.

4) The appearance of bark-mulched beds can be easily improved by a topdressing of fresh material. Renovation of rock-mulched beds, however, means removing the existing layer of rocks, putting down new plastic, and spreading around new or clean stones.

5) Where black plastic isn't used, weeds are a problem. Herbicides often become the only means by which to keep the beds free of these unwanted plants. And repeated contact with herbicides through drift and/or root uptake can injure or kill the desirable plants.

6) When the bed gets a lot of sunlight, the rocks store heat, and high temperatures can kill or injure roots and emerging or thin-barked plants. If the rock, stone or pebbles are of calcareous origin (for example, limestone), the mulch may increase soil pH to the point that pines, junipers, azaleas, rhododendrons and even the yews suffer from micro-nutrient deficiencies.

The main reason people use stones is because they think that once rock mulch is installed, no further maintenance is required. This isn't necessarily so, as we've shown.

It is true that bark mulches have to be topdressed periodically, and that occasional weed control is necessary. However, in the long run, you will probably have fewer plant and appearance problems with bark mulch.

Whitefly control: flip a coin, any coin

We are having a severe problem with whiteflies on ash trees. We are thinking of using products such as Merit, Talstar and Astro. What is your opinion about these, as far as whitefly control?

—CALIFORNIA

Insecticides such as Merit, Talstar and Astro are labeled for whitefly control on ornamentals. However, I am not quite sure how well they will perform.

Based on my discussions with entomologists, I believe that either Talstar or Astro should perform well. However, I do not personally have much experience with these products.

Merit can be used either as a foliar treatment, soil injection and/or drench. I believe most information on whiteflies is obtained on greenhouse crops. I am not familiar with any outdoor use of Merit for whiteflies. However, I do believe that it should work well. Try on a small scale and become familiar with its performance.

Read and follow label specifications for better results.

(Ed. Note: Bayer Corp. literature indicates that Merit can be used for whitefly control on ornamentals.) **LM**



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PLANT DIAGNOSIS

by JERRY ROCHE /
Editor-in-Chief

It's August, the lawn is brown in unusual, irregular patches. Your client is howling with disapproval because he's paying you good money to keep it green.

So what's the problem, Ace? Has the customer failed to turn on the sprinkler system, or has irrigation missed a spot or two? Is it one of those funky diseases you're always reading about—brown patch or maybe leaf spot? Or have the insects taken control of the lawn?

You don't have a lot of time; if the problem isn't resolved soon, you stand to lose another customer.

Worse yet, if you're a golf course superintendent, your most influential members are howling. You begin to perspire, and it's not from the 90-degree temperatures, either.

"Diagnosing plant problems is difficult and requires discipline and diverse knowledge," says Jim Chatfield of the Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service. "Yet everyone wants an instant and simple answer, not to mention an inexpensive and certain solution."

"The best diagnosticians, the best horticulturists, learn every time they go onto a landscape. Diagnosis is both an art and a science. There are occasional 'gimmies,' but more often than not, your diagnosis will not be proven or certain."

So you get down on your hands and knees with your



Can you diagnose this problem?

trusty hand lens, looking for telltale signs. You grab your handy Swiss Army knife and cut out a small plug. Aha! Too much thatch, you think, which is having a detrimental effect on water availability to the

plant. We must aerate and adjust the irrigation schedule, you reason.

A week later, the grass is still brown, and if you were perspiring before, you're really sweating now.

How many times has this happened in your career? Don't feel lonely; it happens to every turf manager on a pretty regular basis. Even though your success depends on knowing what the problems are, you've doubtless mis-diagnosed problems before.

Write us, using the form below, to relay your experiences to 52,000 other turf managers—so they won't make the same mistake. Tell us what you thought the problem was, what it really was, how you found out and what you did about it. If we publish your observations and hints, we'll mail you a free LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT painter's cap. □

Your turn

Every other month, we report what readers think about current topics. Tell us how you correctly **DIAGNOSED** a tough agronomic problem. Tear out or photocopy this page, and fax or mail your response to: Talk Back, Landscape Management, 7500 Old Oak Blvd., Cleveland, Ohio 44130 • Fax: 216/891-2675 • E-mail: 75553.502@compuserve.com

What plant malady have you had the hardest time diagnosing? Why?

COMMENTS _____

How did you finally correctly diagnose the problem?

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