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"This has to be one of the most sophisticated markets in the country because of the existence of large companies and a great mix of medium to small companies who have created niches for themselves."

Jeff Topley, regional manager, The Brickman Group, Laurel, MD

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doesn't have as many regulations but the ones that they have and ones they enforce are inconsistent."

Topley also considers the rising costs of labor a major challenge. "Our labor costs have increased 25 to 30%, and we haven't seen individual job renewal pricing increase nearly as much, if at all," he says. "There hasn't been a correction in the market in terms of pricing."

Building on success

Almost every landscape firm experienced growth during the boom of the last few years, but McHale & McHale Landscape Design felt an explosion.

The firm, founded in 1981 by brothers **Kevin and Stephen McHale**, handles upscale residential properties to the tune of \$5 million a year. Recently, the company has experienced 18% annual growth. "As long as the economy is sound, we expect a minimum of 10% growth for the next two to three years," Kevin McHale says.

Canvassing the areas in and around Middleburg, VA; Potomac, MD; and Annapolis, MD; McHale & McHale has built

"The residential design/build market is constantly growing." Kevin McHale, co-owner,

McHale & McHale Landscape Design, Upper Marlboro, MD

a client list that includes properties ranging from \$800,000 to \$5 million.

"Our goal is to create imaginative, large-scale residential gardens," Kevin says. Economic conditions, as well as the quality of work his company does, has almost nullified the effect of low-ballers on the market. "People listen to our single-source responsi-

DC Corridor facts

- ▶ Current population — 2,149,949 for the area (Baltimore through northern VA)¹
- ▶ Projected 2005 population — 2,174,569¹
- ▶ Number of single family households: 449,052²

- ▶ Number of commercial properties or acres maintained: 117,008²
- ▶ Number of government (Federal, state, county and District) properties to be maintained: 1,908²
- ▶ Average household income or salary/wages: \$61,623 in Washington DC MSA (Metro Statistical Area)³

SOURCES: 1 WWW.CENSUS.GOV; 2 AMERICLIST; 3 US DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS

bility process, realize the value and are willing to pay for it," he adds.

The hard part is behind us

When Memphis, TN-based TruGreen-ChemLawn acquired Ruppert Landscape, Ashton, MD, it added \$47 million in revenues and also signaled that it intended to be the landscape industry leader in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic market.

That was less than two years ago, and a lot has happened since then. Ruppert founder Craig Ruppert is no longer with the company. By the summer of 1999, the landscape division had become TruGreen-LandCare, a separate business unit within parent company ServiceMaster. Even so, the TG-LC operations serving the market still retain a distinctive Ruppert flavor.

"We're still in transition," explains **Ken Hochkeppel**, TG-LC regional manager for Mid-Atlantic operations and, himself, the former CFO of Ruppert. "I think we've been very successful in making the transition transparent to our customers. I don't think that we've been as successful making the transition as transparent to our employees. Integrating 12,000 employees into one organization within 16 months is challenging."

Labor, of course, remains a big problem

for TG-LC in the strong metro DC marketplace. "We have a lot of employees who have been with us 12 years or more," he adds, "but, it's still a huge effort to get staffed up in the spring."

Hochkeppel says the market around DC is unique in the predominance of contracts tied to the calendar year, the great

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"The competition for labor results in higher wages for crew members up through management." Ken Hochkeppel, Regional Manager for Mid-Atlantic, TruGreen-LandCare

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majority of which are one-year contracts.

"There's always an intense effort to bid projects at the same time of the year," he explains. Also, the past few years have seen more projects going to bid as property managers keep the pressure on to cut costs.

Even so, Hochkeppel insists: "We have no intention of winning a job on price. We'll win it on service and reputation. Our goal is not to be the low-cost provider, but we certainly want to be efficient."

As for the changeover from Ruppert to TG-LC: "Change is always difficult, but the hardest part is behind us."

Needed: a few good men

Everybody's hustling in the offices of Natural Lawns Inc. in Fairfax, VA. Northern Virginia is bursting at its seams. Traffic streams by on the highways connecting to DC, the clang and bang of construction is everywhere and lawn care or landscape trucks sit at just about every intersection. That's the biggest problem right now — too much traffic, too much work, too few workers.

"I'm more concerned about the competition for labor right now than I am for customers," says **Bern Bonifant**, co-owner, Natural Lawn Inc. "There's not much of a blue collar mentality in this area anymore."

The situation isn't being helped by regulators either, he feels. A lawn care technician in Virginia must be registered to apply fertilizer and chemicals on properties.

Once he works for a year as a registered applicator, he's eligible to take the test to become a certified applicator. But tests are given in English only.

"Why they don't allow the test in Spanish is beyond me. It's not giving a big part of the labor force a chance to work for us," adds partner **Dan Henneberg**.

Some planners estimate another 16,000 new homes in western Fairfax County and the areas surrounding Dulles Airport within the next several years.



"We're probably the second worst traffic area in the nation." Dan Henneberg, co-owner, Natural Lawn Inc., Fairfax, VA.

"And 16,000 families are going to find it's hard to grow grass on Virginia clay," comments Bonifant wryly, no doubt thinking about how much more business he could do with a few more good employees.

A question of water

Two seasons of severe drought in the DC area have put a charge into turf/landscape irrigation businesses.

According to **Steve Schrader**, president of Bio Green, Manassas, VA, a lawn application company also specializing in irrigation installation and maintenance, "The rush this year began in early February."

The proof is in sales, he says. In 1999, his 13-year-old company grew its irrigation billings 30% to \$675,000, while it provided \$900,000 in lawn care. This year it's aiming for total sales of \$1.9 million.

The communities and counties of northern Virginia reacted to the droughts in a patchwork of regulations. For instance, water restrictions were the order in Loudon County, while other locations sought voluntary conservation from homeowners and businesses.

"As far as giving estimates, we've had more than we can handle." Steve Schrader, president of BioGreen, Manassas, VA.

"People are definitely learning how to irrigate," says Schrader. "Some customers watered correctly and others let their lawns go dormant. We didn't lose many."

Changing with the market

You might call **Tom Spiers** an "oldtimer" in the lawn care business. In 1974, he purchased a Lawn-A-Mat franchise — one truck, one van, one trailer and 96 customers. Last year his company, Agro Lawn, Vienna, VA, sold \$2.7 million.

It now provides lawn care and a variety of landscape services as it tries to keep up with the growth in northern Virginia.

Spiers points to the huge concentration of high-tech firms establishing headquarters in neighboring communities. "We're

"When you see the construction cranes go up, you know the economy is going to be good and it's going to be difficult getting any help." Tom Spiers, president, Agro Lawn, Vienna, VA.



doing work for 25-

year-old guys who are making over \$100,000 a year."

As his market changes, Spiers changes too. Last year he purchased a small nursery. "There's been a severe shortage of ornamental plants," he explains. He also operates Virginia Pastures, a firm specializing in pasture renovation and management for the horse crowd.

His biggest concern going into the 2000 season? "The saying here is that if you see the construction cranes go up, you know the economy is going to be good and it's going to be difficult getting any help." **LM**

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Make your training work

Can't find the time to train? Make it easy and quick and it will become a regular habit BY PHIL FOGARTY

Is it possible for you to have an effective, ongoing training program? I think it is. But your staff must realize they need it, and the way to engage people is to discuss *their* issues.

When I ask contractors why their training is never accomplished, they say:

"We've tried to train before, but who's got the time?"



"We want to develop our people, but we're so understaffed we *have* to produce."

"Where do we start? Our new hires can't even fill out an invoice and our veterans have done it for years."

Get started, even in May

Start by asking your staff what they need. Ask what they'd like to learn and when they want to learn it. Then, find your teachers. You could teach, but resist the impulse. Enlist the real teachers in your or-

48 weeks of ideas

American Cyanamid and *Landscape Management* co-sponsor the Skills Development Series, a program of quick training you can easily apply to your own op-

erations. This series, which is endorsed by PLCAA, is led by Phil Fogarty of JP Horizons. Phil's real-life experience as a successful lawn care operator is obvious in the slate of topics to be covered this year, such as:

- Fertilizing basics
- Efficient routing
- Safety in summer
- Fall sales plan
- Equipment maintenance
- Handling difficult people
- Working with people
- Developing leaders

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- Arborlawn, Inc.
- Crowley's, Inc.
- Grasshopper Property Maintenance, Inc.
- Lawn Classics
- Mountaineer Lawn Care, Inc.
- WLM Workaholics Landscape Management, Inc.

For more information about applying the Skills Development Series training system to your organization, call JP Horizons at 440/254-8211 or email:

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Hands-on demonstrations help employees learn the key points quickly.

ganization — your field supervisors and managers who have up-to-date information. In fact, involve everyone. All they want from you is a format and a small assignment so they can feel confident.

Keep it simple and quick

People want to learn while doing in small, digestible amounts. Don't hold any all-day marathons. After four hours, most people are on cruise control. It must be quick, informative and regular. Here is the format we use in the Skills Development Series (see sidebar):

- ▶ Short sessions to involve people, like talking about positive development.
- ▶ Discuss and engage them in the topic. Ask for examples they've seen.
- ▶ Deliver the lesson (8 to 10 minutes).
- ▶ Give them an activity to make your point, like a hands-on demonstration.
- ▶ Have them repeat what they've learned. Pass along an inspiring thought.
- ▶ Remind them of next week's session (make this regular, remember?).

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The Natural

Once scoffed at for his 'hippie' ways, landscaper Hendrikus Schraven's personal, nature-inspired ideas now attract discerning clients — and garner awards

BY MIKE PERRAULT

A decade ago, when an extended drought and an accompanying irrigation ban turned Seattle lawns every shade of brown, landscaper Hendrikus Schraven's properties remained noticeably green and healthy. So noticeable, in fact, that the Holland-born president of Hendrikus Schraven Landscape Construction & Design, Inc. was accused of secretly watering his clients' turf at night. Baffled radio station reporters stuck microphones in his face demanding to know how he got away with it.

"Nobody could believe that I wasn't putting water down," Schraven recalls with a laugh. But when he launched into a technical explanation of an organic approach emphasizing carefully nurtured soils, microorganisms, plant uptake and proper drainage, many people tuned him out. It's a response he has faced since even before founding his Issaquah, WA-based landscape construction and design company in 1974. His approach has been perceived as everything from a

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Schraven constructed these walls with stone wedging without using mortar.

"We don't design the commonplace. We don't believe in kits. Like fingerprints, snowflakes and the stripes of a zebra, every project is unique." — Hendrikus Schraven

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counter-culture hippie trend to an environmental extremist's marketing ploy.

Today, however, more landscape professionals and backyard gardeners are listening. Schraven's 26-year-old company has garnered dozens of awards and a growing client base. In this booming economy, he has to turn away nearly three out of four prospective clients.

Schraven could easily grow his design, construction, installation and maintenance business to accommodate more customers, but he's more interested in focusing on quality, not quantity. He also wants time to research and implement new techniques that allow him to design and install unique landscapes that blend into the natural surroundings.

Working intuitively

The 47-year-old Schraven learned about the importance of soil quality and began developing an acute sense of ecological balance while working with his father on the family farm in Holland.

"We would walk through a field that we were going to plow, and we would just smell the dirt," Schraven remembers. "You instantly knew — by just touching with the hand, smelling it, feeling it — whether the soil was good or bad. There was no real scientific process involved; it was an inherited thing."

Julian Durant, Schraven's right-hand man and friend for nearly 15 years, says his boss's upbringing also instilled in him a passion and reverence for nature and a steadfast commitment to preserving the environment. He demands the same commitment from employees.

"We believe in the wonder and vitality of natural elements: wood, water, stone, wind, fire, earth, plants," Schraven says. He balances technology and art by using organic fertilizers and sprays, including kelp meal, rock phosphate, green sand, humate and compost, while factoring in conservation and recycling.

Schraven is adamant about good soil, amended sub-surface soil, proper drainage and a good medium for root expansion and moisture retention. "If you do the process right and stabilize the soil, you have a living organism that is feeding your plants so that your plants can uptake



Hendrikus Schraven

minerals and strengthen their immune systems," says Schraven, who traveled to China last year to share his expertise on soil revitalization.

"If the roots go down and the soil is composed in such a way that it retains moisture, yet also has the ability to percolate, what you have is what nature does; nature has been doing it for billions of years. All I'm doing is using modern technology to actually establish a nice, thick soil layer for plant life to thrive in," he says.

Waterfalls, tree houses

Schraven's company rarely hires subcontractors other than for high voltage tasks and other highly specialized roles. His company tackles everything from designing water features that look as if they've been part of the landscape for a century to ancient-looking rock walls, lively gardens and forest-like settings, says Tina Peterson, company business manager. That doesn't mean the firm won't take on such tasks as tree houses, hot tubs, trellises, decks, bridges or landslide restorations.

Because the landscape design and construction firm can pick and choose clients, it can take on more residential jobs where homeowners look for — and can afford to pay for — artistry, rather than focus on the bottom line. Typical landscape projects for the company range from \$20,000 to \$1 million.

When homeowner Julie Denney and her husband wanted two waterfalls installed outside their rustic north-west pacific home, the couple turned to Schraven based on a word-of-mouth recommendation. Julie Denney was taken aback by Schraven's enthusiasm and creativity. "You have to kind of listen to him and picture the visual ideas he has in his mind," Denney says, adding that she had to give him creative license and trust that he "knew what he was going for." He also disguised a structural wall at the home to look like granite — a work of art, she says.

The key to creating such landscapes is having a clear vision of the finished space, Schraven insists. He learns with each new challenge, and he never stops researching and implementing new techniques. He currently has a patent pending for an innovative method to blow topsoil.

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