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Planting for profits

By splitting workers into prep and plant crews, Hillenmeyer increased efficiency

BY RON HALL/
SENIOR EDITOR

So, you think planting annuals is a simple operation? Think again. It can put a crimp in your operation if you don't have a system to do it efficiently.

That's what Hillenmeyer Nurseries, Inc. discovered when it really looked at its annual plantings — its system of installing annuals was taking too much time and labor. The steps it took to return profit back to this particular service offers a lesson for any landscape company.

"We had estimates that were all over the board," remembers Stephen Hillenmeyer, president. "We had some projects that we were doing real well on and some that we were losing on."

The 150-year-old full-service landscape firm headquartered in Lexington, KY, brought in business consultant Jack Mattingly to help improve operational efficiency. Mattingly helped the company to establish production rates for all of its services — including color changeovers.

The process of establishing production rates isn't difficult, explains Mattingly, but it does require taking a measuring wheel to job sites and carefully mapping properties.

Then, using a stop watch, you time the actual

work that's being done whether it's mowing, trimming, blowing off sidewalks or, in this case, planting annuals. Once production rates are in place, management can more effectively track and budget labor for each task. This is a powerful tool in controlling overtime costs, particularly as field foremen are given responsibility to see that their crews meet these budgeted labor hour targets.

The next step for Hillenmeyer Nursery, at Mattingly's suggestion, was to design and post a 4-ft. by 8-ft. production schedule board for all production employees to see. The board displays each crew's tasks for the day and the next two weeks, along with the labor budgeted for each task.

Account managers post this information and make any necessary changes before crews arrive for work. At day's end, when the foremen fill out their time cards, they note how long each task took on their section of the board. (Make your own production schedule board by buying a dry/erase board and 1/4-in. pinstriping, to make lines, at any large office supply store. Total cost is about \$40.)

"It is not the whole answer. You still have to use your judgment," explains Hillenmeyer. "But by establishing consistent production rates, we have something to compare."

While budgeting labor for large property maintenance is mostly a matter of measuring and timing, Stephen Hillenmeyer wasn't as sure about how to get a handle on his company's substantial annual plantings — until he went out and saw for himself.

For years, his company used 16 or 17 people divided among three crews, each crew doing both the site prep and the planting. When he visited a planting site, he discovered all five people working in a group in a section of a large property.

"It was an eye-opening experience," he admits. "They had flowers pulled out of the pots and the flowers were withering and dying on the ground as they prepped the site. The flowers inside the van were wilting, too. It was just a disaster. No won-

der it was taking so much time."

The experience led the company to re-vamp its planting program by splitting the workers into separate crews, one into just preparing sites, while other two-person teams followed behind and planted flowers. It also established production rates.

"When the prep crew people went on a site, they knew that they had, for example, an hour and 15 minutes to get it prepped and get out of there. They knew this because it was on the schedule board," says Stephen Hillenmeyer. "Then, all the planting crew needs to do is start unloading flowers and putting them in the ground. The transition between prepping and planting saves a lot of time."

How much? In 1999, nine people did

the same amount of work that 16 or 17 had the previous season.

With a "old" system, a person was expected to plant 20 flats (32 pots per flat) a day. In the new system, the planters are each regularly planting 30 flats daily per person. One two-person crew installed 97 flats in one day in 1999.

The crews were planting more efficiently thanks to the prep crews and a specially designed trailer that Hillenmeyer's talented shop people constructed. During planting season, the trailer is equipped with racks that hold 100 flats of flowers with room for tools and a water tank, in case the flowers start to dry during the planting process. **LM**

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KANGA CAN DIG!

Light up your profits

BY CURT HARLER/
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Landscape lighting can light up your clients' yards — and your ledger books. Since most people work during the day and relax or party at night, landscape lighting is a logical extension to any landscaping job.

Done correctly — and that doesn't mean making the front of a house look like a landing strip — landscape lighting can add the touch of class needed to set off a well done setting of lawn, shrubs and trees. "Think of it as painting a picture of the landscape at night, using lights to achieve the look a homeowner wants," says Richard Lentz, owner of Lentz Landscape, Dallas, TX.

Customers interested in landscape lighting usually come from one of three camps: those who want heightened security around their property, those who want to illuminate a dangerous area such as steps or those trying to make their home and grounds landscaping look as good at night as it does during the day. In many cases, a landscaper can marry all three of the opportunities, giving the customer an even better reason to go ahead with the project.

Before diving headfirst into

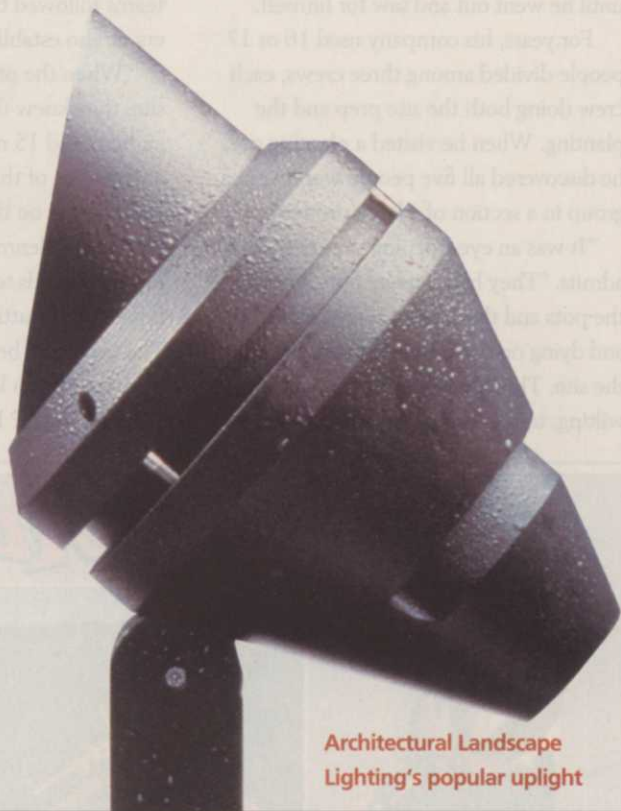
any job, check the local electrical code on installation. Most permanent lighting systems are installed on a stem or pipe support and have to be mounted to a box. Some local regulations allow mounting below ground, others require above-ground installation. If you are not experienced in this area, take a short course or join forces with an electrician or landscape designer who has done some good-looking projects. Finally, do not fall into the trap of thinking that, just because a job is a low-voltage installation, it can be done in any way you choose. You are still dealing with electricity, people's property and people's lives.

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continued on page 66



Architectural Landscape
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buying tips

- ▶ **Know the difference between accent and path lighting**
- ▶ **Not all lighting is intended for wet areas**
- ▶ **Send for American Lighting Association's \$2 brochures on lighting** (PO Box 420288, Dallas, TX 75342).
- ▶ **Check the local electrical code**
- ▶ **Place lights so bulbs can be replaced easily**

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PAR-38 incandescent spot or flood beam and HIT spot or flood optics. Units are UL/CUL listed for wet location use.

The company also has canister-shaped outdoor downlights suitable for building lobbies, corridors, entryways, exterior building walls adjacent to gardens and parks and parking garages. The lights feature a classic cylindrical, canister-style housing with subtle architectural ring details in each of four models. The smooth outer surface has no



Architectural Landscape Lighting offers classic shapes.

visible hardware and a flush-mounted lens. The lens is surrounded by a body-colored trim ring to preserve each unit's crisp design from any viewing angle.

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Ardee low-voltage strip lights

signed specifically for outdoor and damp environments, made by Ardee Lighting, Shelby, NC. Units can be specified in lengths and lamp spacing for complete customization of the lighting design to the site. Strips accommodate four 100 incandescent, argon or xenon gas-filled festoon lamps. Clikstrips come in black or white base finishes.

Circle #266

DABMAR

818/349-1138

www.dabmar.com

Request a complete catalog and price list of low-voltage lighting and landscape lighting products from Dabmar, Chatsworth, CA. The company's line of post-mounted lighting is one of the more complete lines available, with a wide range of single and multiple light choices including pole, wall or post mounting.

Circle #267

HADCO

717/359-7131

www.hadcolighting.com

The Garden Art Collection from Hadco, Littlestown, PA, offers the look of hand-crafted, solid copper



Hadco's hand-crafted look

construction. Styles include mushroom, tiffany, deck, single or double tulip. Designed for path and spread lighting, they are made of annealed copper for strength, and the appearance of the fixture will be enhanced further with age as they weather and take on a rustic patina.

Circle #268

KICHLER LIGHTING

800/659-9000 X6445

www.kichler.com

An entire range of lighting products, from ballard stakes to accent lights is available from Kichler Lighting, Cleveland, OH. The floating pond light is made of composite resin and is great for directing light



Kichler offers a complete line.

downward in ponds. Company offers path and spread lighting as well as deck and accent lighting, including natural cedar wood address lights, louvered step lights, brick lights and a range of well lights. Items are available in a variety of designs from decorative shells to tulip to traditional surface mounts.

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LUMIERE

805/496-2003

Attention to detail is the byword at Lumiere, where all parts are machined, formed or cast out of heavy-wall aluminum at their

Westlake Village, CA, factory. Fixtures are standard powder-painted in black, bronze and verde green; a rainbow of special colors; or solid brass, copper, chromium-plated; or two-step architectural anodized.

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The all-ceramic lighting fixtures from MQ Industries, Orange, CA, are handcrafted one fixture at a time. Ceramics are solid color throughout and will not rust, rot or corrode. Hardware is made of brass or nylon for long life. Fixtures, including bollards, walk lights, spots and well lights, are available in green, tan, rose, gray, black or white.

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www.christmasdecor.net

If you intend to add landscape lighting to your business, check with Nite Time Decor, Lubbock, TX, about establishing a territory in your area. The company offers professional training, premium-quality products, a national marketing program and on-going toll-free phone support, meetings, newsletter and advisory groups.

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standard incandescent bulb at the other end of the patio) for freedom from bugs to narrow beam spotlights and pool lighting for illuminating trees and other foliage. The firm's Earth Lights are available in a variety of decor globe, specialty, outdoor and Bug-A-Way versions.

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A complete range of handcrafted American lanterns in solid brass highlights the LightFare line from Rockscapes, Canoga Park, CA. A range of metal finishes from an-

tique brass to old bronze to dark verde and rusty iron offer a variety of choices. Glass options include iridescent honey, milky white, clear or frosted flat. Just about any shape or size imaginable is available in modern, traditional or international designs. Units can be wall mounted or placed on one of the company's solid brass posts.

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look. Stones are 14 in. in diameter yet support over 400 lbs. Bury them in the ground or surround them with gravel or tanbark. A 10-ft. walk requires four stones.

Circle #275

TAHOE LIGHTING

888/LIT-TAHO

www.tahoelighting.com

For a fine, finished look, check out the products from Tahoe Lighting, Sparks, NV. This company stocks in-ground lighting for interlocking paving stones, concrete and landscaping. Stock shapes include the 5.875 x 5.875-in. Emerald, 3.875 x 7 13/16-in. Zephyr and the 6 x 6 in. octagonal Sierra. All are 2.25 in. deep. They are available in

brick red, tan or gray and are easy to install.

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Control all aspects of outdoor lighting with the Home Control Interface from X-10, Closter, NJ. System allows a PC to control lights and appliances like pool pumps, heating and cooling from one interface. Motion detectors, links from garage door opener to outdoor lights, and connections from pool lighting to security alarm systems are among the many customizable options available.

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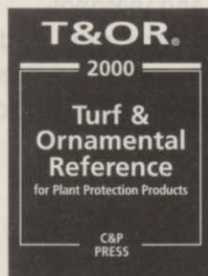
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