

**Tony Bass's Isuzu cab-forward trucks only seat three, so that's how many crew members arrive together at a job site.**



**LM:** *Is crew size something you've paid attention to over the years?*

**Bass:** It certainly is. There's lots of low-skilled labor out there, but it's hard to attract that labor, so it makes sense to have the right crew size. It's your way of using productivity to fight against labor and cost increases. With wages starting to go up in our industry and customers remaining intolerant of price increases, we have to make sure we're operating at maximum efficiency.

**LM:** *What are your ideal crew sizes?*

**Bass:** We have two-person crews for residential lawn maintenance and three-person crews for commercial lawn maintenance. We generally use three-person crews on our landscape construction jobs as well. For really big jobs, we'll put two crews together...

**LM:** *Rather than increase the size of one crew?*

**Bass:** Exactly. Seldom do we work with four- or five-man crews.

**LM:** *How do you arrive at your crew sizes?*

**Bass:** [laughs] A lot of it has to do with the size of the cab of the truck! We mostly use Isuzu cab-forward trucks, the so-called "Super Lawn Truck System," and they seat three. We insist that our people seat themselves properly in the cab and put their seat belts on. That means you can only get three people into the cab.

Some companies have config-

ured their trucks differently.

There are dual cab trucks that can seat six or seven — something we will consider in the future for large commercial project because of the shortage of available drivers!

And we've begun to run some numbers because of the prospect of landing some super large projects — properties of more than 25 acres to take care of in one day. We find that the most a three-man crew can cover in one day is 18 to 20 acres, so if we have properties of more than 20 acres in size, and if it's important to get the job done quickly, we'll consider a larger truck/larger crew.

**LM:** *You said "run some numbers." What you mean by that?*

**Bass:** We look at the average wage of our crew. In most cases, our three-man crew has a crew supervisor, who's also the driver of the truck earning, say, \$9 an hour. Then, we have what we call our "number two" man, someone who could probably run the crew but is being held back by something (usually the lack of a driver's license, English language skills or leadership skills). This person is usually going to earn about \$7 an hour. The third person is usually a rookie earning about \$6 an hour.

The average wage of that crew is \$7.33 an hour. Let's say we're going out to a big property, perhaps 40 acres in size. Our numbers tell us that at our production rates, we can take care of

that 40 acres reasonably quickly and profitably if we had six people on that job.

**LM:** *You said, "Our numbers tell us..." Do you keep management information?*

**Bass:** Yes. When we attempt to take care of a new property, we'll physically measure all of the critical components of that landscaped area — the square footage of the lawn, the square footage of the beds, the number of shrubs (categorized as small, medium or large), the linear feet of edging, the number of zones of irrigation to be inspected on a regular basis, the square footage of weed eating and the estimated amount of time needed to blow off debris.

**LM:** *And do you store all of this information somewhere?*

**Bass:** You got it. We use these items on our estimate worksheet in Microsoft Excel. We create the estimate in an Excel spreadsheet, and, after we interpret the information, we plug the combined numbers into CLIP software to monitor the budget for the job per visit or per year. CLIP is a software program we use to help route and schedule and calculate job costing on our lawn maintenance jobs.

**LM:** *You do that so that when you're facing a really big job, you're in a position to base your decisions about crew size on historical information from your own company.*

*You're not just flying by the seat of your pants.*

**Bass:** That's right. We're not just driving through the property saying, "I think it's going to take 'x' number of days." You have to have concrete information with the physical data that's out there.

We spend a great deal of time on estimating to make sure we don't make mistakes on our bids.

**LM:** *And that careful estimation probably tells you a lot about the crew sizes you're going to need. Has the effort you've put into determining your proper crew sizes paid off?*

**Bass:** We are a successful company, and we're constantly looking to acquire new business. Right now, we're doing just that. I compare our profitability to ALCA standards, so I know that we are above average.

The effort we've put toward figuring out our ideal crew size has definitely paid off. I would say that the tendency toward incorrect crew sizing constantly threatens us, though. If somebody in our business today thinks they can add an unnecessary person to a crew and still survive, they're seriously mistaken. The margins we operate on in the Green Industry don't permit us the luxury of putting even a little more labor on a job than is necessary to get the job done efficiently or to an acceptable level of quality. **LM**

*Don't listen to a thing the boss tells you. The boss doesn't know anything. You gotta do this*

# Eliminating 'Team Busters'

BY BILL HOOPES

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT COLLINS  
MCOLLINS@WEBQUILL.COM

*before they  
affect your crew*

**I**t's a mid-summer Monday morning in Grassville. You've just completed your regular, small company team meeting, made assignments and recognized top performers.

At this week's meeting, you tried to emphasize your belief that if your company doesn't deliver better customer service than the competition, your business will

suffer. You talked about checking with homeowners every chance you get to identify any problems that may need attention. You talked about "doing the job right the first time" to avoid unnecessary service calls.

A quick survey of the crew's faces signaled that they got the message.

After the session, you watch over the day's start,



making sure the crew is organized and on the road, then turn your attention toward repairing an important spray rig. In the middle of the job and missing some parts, it's clear you'll have to pick up some supplies to finish.

As you head for the store, you notice two of your vehicles at

a McDonald's restaurant. That's strange, you think to yourself. I provided plenty of coffee and doughnuts to the guys only 20 minutes earlier. Why are some of my guys at McDonald's?

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continued from page 33

Since you can't find a logical reason for their presence, you pull in and enter the restaurant through a side door.

Two of your people are sitting behind a row of plants. One is a new employee, and the other is a veteran.

You slide into a hidden seat opposite the row of plants.

As you listen to their conversation, you witness the attitude of an all-too-common employee you know as the "Team Buster," or "TB." These insidious, negative employees create divisiveness and negative attitudes that can destroy a team's morale, productivity and loyalty, leading to increased turnover.

As the conversation progresses, you find it hard to stay cool. Tom, your six-year veteran, is lecturing Anthony, your new employee. Tom details his extensive experience working with customers. He tells Anthony that "what you heard in the meeting is the typical manager's 'take' on customer service."

With a superior sneer, Tom outlines what he calls "the real world" and lets Anthony know in plain terms that "what he told us to do is what all bosses try to get employees to do."

You steam up more as you hear, "These owners don't do what we do, kid. In fact, most of them haven't touched a spreader for so long, they wouldn't know what to do with one."

The lecture continues, "If you want to know how to get the job done, here's what you do."

Then, Tom proceeds to undo all the instructions and training you just gave to Anthony.

In no time, your new employee has been indoctrinated by the TB. He now thinks that "knocking on the door wastes your time" because "nobody's home anyhow." He learned how to write comments on invoices in advance because "doing it on the lawn takes too much time."

Anthony has also been carefully instructed on how to answer the typical questions "those stupid customers ask" and why "all you really need to do is blow a little smoke at them and get outta there." Tom even told Anthony when, where and how to relieve himself in the bushes.

Tom then begins to describe how to observe female sunbathers in his territory who "really make the job fun in the summer."

That's when the game ends.

## Damage control

You've had it. You get up, approach the startled workers and say: \_\_\_\_\_. What do you say? What action would you take? Can the damage be repaired? How long had this been going on?

"Team Busters" are negative people who will poison your team if left in existence. These people will tear down your team's morale and your operation will suffer.

## Positive steps

Start by setting positive standards. You have the right to run your business any way you choose and that privilege in-

cludes establishing customer service attitudes, as well as procedures. Your staff has a responsibility to meet your standards.

React immediately! Don't just hope a negative person will 'see the light' and change once things get less hectic.

Be certain you have clearly communicated your standards and expectations. Under difficult circumstances, even the most committed of us fail to live up to our own standards. Before you blame and take action, check out the effectiveness of your communications.

If you're convinced the employee knew how the job was to be done, conduct an immediate and private performance intervention interview.

In the interview, review the training you have provided and the instructions you have given. Get the employee to acknowledge that he or she understood your job performance standards.

Now, communicate the specific performance problem in detail. Be specific, detailed and unemotional. Confine comments to specific performance. Do not attempt to analyze why the performance was unacceptable, just describe what actually happened.

Ask the employee to explain his or her performance. Listen with an open mind. Do not jump to conclusions or "bait" the employee to prove your point.

Most managers believe the employee deserves at least one verbal and one written warning. Depending on the severity of the unacceptable performance, you

may decide to terminate the employee on the spot. If you decide to warn the employee, give the *specific and detailed instructions* on the level of performance you expect in the future, beginning immediately.

Establish follow-up performance benchmarks and a timetable for improvement. Always follow-up quickly.

The worst thing any manager can do is *nothing*.

## Keeping TBs off the team

Once stung, most managers either develop the opinion that "people just don't want to follow directions," or they learn to keep a closer ear to the ground.

Here are two things you can do to minimize the chance that a "TB" will invade your staff:

**Require staff input as a part of the planning and problem-solving process.** People are positively motivated and work harder to succeed when they feel ownership in the process.

**Hold regular "one-on-one" meetings with your staff.** Make them frequent, private and personal. Ask questions that probe the employee's mind. Learn as much as possible about their overall level of satisfaction or frustrations. Be bold enough to ask your employees straight out, "How can I make your job a little bit easier?" Once they know you genuinely care, they'll care too.

— The author is director of training and development at Scotts' Lawn Service, Marysville, OH. He can be reached at 937/644-7207.

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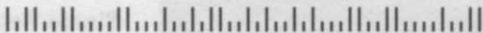
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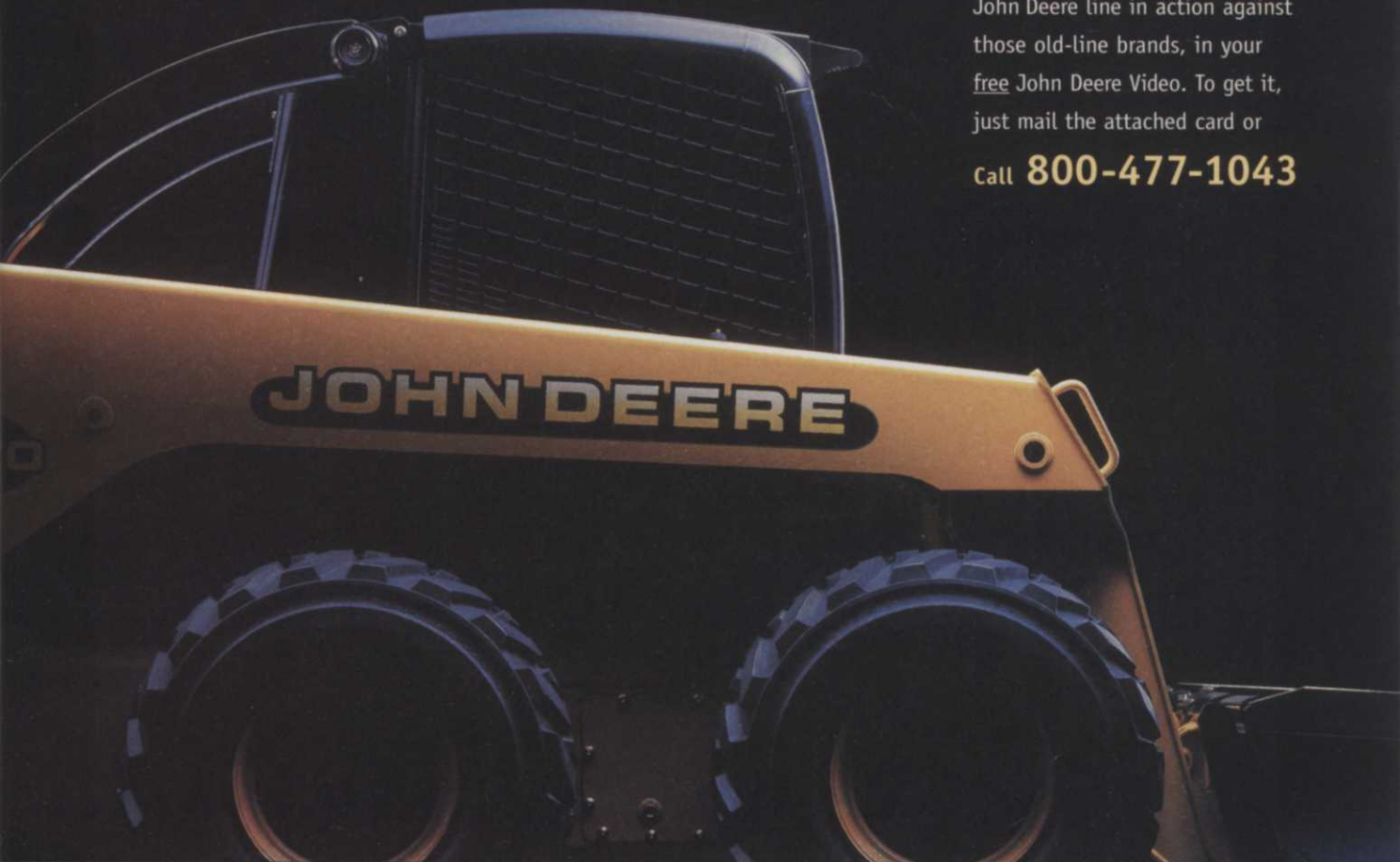


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### Property at a glance

**Location:** Shelter Gardens, Shelter Insurance Co., Columbia, MO

**Staff:** Shelter Insurance Co.

**Category:** Industrial or Office Park

**Year site built:** 1974

**Acres of turf:** 22

**Acres of woody ornamentals:** 14

**Acres of display beds:** 6

**Total paved area:** 13

**Total man-hours/week:** 340

### Maintenance challenges

- ▶ Preventing disease and insects
- ▶ Providing for public (safety)
- ▶ Irrigation maintenance

### Project checklist

- ▶ Vietnam Memorial
- ▶ Built new stone bridge
- ▶ Installed new irrigation system in garden

### On the job

- ▶ 6 full-time staff, 2 seasonal employees, 5 licensed pesticide applicators

# Shelter Gardens

## A 2000 Grand Award Winner of the Professional Grounds Management Society for Industrial or Office Park

Just because it's an insurance company doesn't mean Shelter Insurance of Columbia, MO, doesn't deserve nice landscaping. It's surprising that any of the employees come back from lunch, with all there is to look at and enjoy: a Vietnam Veterans Memorial complete with bamboo and Japanese maples; a newcomer school that's a 19th century replica of a one-room schoolhouse; and a breathtaking rose garden complete with hybrid teas, floribundas, climbers and shrub roses.

The rose garden takes 20 man-hours per week, a fraction of the time it takes to care for the 8,000 to 10,000 annuals planted the first week of May. Over 22 acres of turf must be mowed two to three times per week, and a chipper sits ready to help after storms. Since the gardens rarely close, grounds crew members have to consider visitors' safety when fixing broken irrigation lines and applying insecticides and fungicides.

Two grounds crew members design and plant one of 23 annual flower beds located on the Shelter grounds and gardens.



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Editors' note: *Landscape Management* is the exclusive sponsor of the Green Star Professional Grounds Management Awards for outstanding management of residential, commercial and institutional landscapes. The 2001 winners will be named at the annual meeting of the Professional Grounds Management Society in November. For more information on the 2001 Awards, contact PGMS at:

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The Japanese maple garden consists of many varieties of maples. Each variety is labeled and identified. A pagoda gives this garden a taste of the Orient.



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# KC's "Trial Hill" is the ultimate mower test

BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR

Mowing is pretty much all the Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department does in the spring and summer. In landscape technician Dave Stark's district alone, there are 1,500 acres of fields and lawns to cut.



Dave Stark and his new Ferris mower.

"We're out there mowing 12 hours a day, six days a week," Stark says.

Stark has tested just about every type of mower in his 14 years with the department, and knows exactly what he likes in each machine.

"I like a mower to have a low center of gravity so that I feel safer on hillsides," Stark says. "I also like good ground speed that matches cutting speed, and a comfortable ride."

Stark also says he looks for a mower that can climb any hill, and he doesn't just

take the manufacturer's word for it. The first thing he and the other 15 employees of his district do to demo a mower is take it to a steep hill in their area known as the "Trial Hill." They drive it from the bottom to the top — if it can make it.

"The Ferris mower was the only one that made it to the top. The others cut off about halfway up," Stark says.

Based on the demo, Stark's department is purchasing 11 Ferris mowers, a mix of 72-in. IS 4000 Zs and 61-in. IS 3000 Zs. They will join a fleet of Grasshoppers and Dixie Choppers. Because the new Ferris mowers can handle the hills, the department has done away with walk-behinds.

Stark says he will pull out the Ferris not only when there's a steep hillside to tackle but when aesthetics are important. Crews in the department tackle one-foot tall areas with stand-

ing water, but they're also in charge of mowing the grounds around the outdoor Starlight Theatre. They'll have to take particular care in mowing Satchel Paige Stadium once renovation work is completed.

"The Ferris won't tear the turf because the tread is less aggressive," Stark says.

With the coming of spring and the prospect of all-day mowing, Stark expects some squabbling over the new mowers. "Because of its four-wheel independent suspension, everyone's going to want to hop on the Ferris."

## BUYING THE BEST COMMERCIAL MOWER.

Investing in a new commercial mower for your business is an important step; and it's a decision that takes some thought. If you're thinking about a zero-turn rider, there are a number of features you should look for:

- **The latest technology.** Today's most advanced zero-turns feature independent suspension (either 2 or 4-wheel) for increased comfort, speed, traction, stability and a more consistent cut.

- **Rugged deck construction.** Choose a hand-welded deck with overlap-welded corners, a double top deck and reinforced side skirts to make sure it stands up to years of tough, commercial mowing abuse.

- **Serviceability.** A simpler design means fewer parts and easier access to the engine compartment and hydraulics for routine maintenance and service. You should also look for 2-year warranties on parts and labor.

- **Important features.** A low center of gravity; foot-operated deck lift; 360-degree pivoting, anti-scalp rollers; twin A-section hydro drive belts; and radius-cut, 1/4" thick hardened steel blades... they're all important to your comfort and productivity.

To make your choice of a new mower even easier, be sure to see the new 2001 line of Ferris mid-mount, zero-turn riders at [www.ferrisindustries.com](http://www.ferrisindustries.com). Ferris is the innovation leader in commercial mower design. Don't make a decision to buy a new mower for your business without visiting your nearest Ferris dealer.

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# Green Space

**Greg Mitchell**  
**Owner, Turf Surgeons**  
**Irrigation Services, Fort**  
**Worth, TX, and**  
**President of ALIRT**

BY JASON STAHL

*(Editor's note: Green Space is a new feature that provides a candid profile of an irrigation contractor. By reading it, you will learn about the contractor's personality and view on industry issues. Hopefully, you will also relate to the challenges he/she faces in everyday work situations. Look for it to appear in future issues of LM.)*

**Why did you start ALIRT (Association of Landscape Irrigation Repair Technicians)?**

I felt like the associations that were currently in existence didn't focus enough on issues that concern irrigation repair technicians — they were built around the manufacturer-distributor-installer group. As a group, I felt like we could gain a little bit of clout and voice some of our concerns to manufacturers or distributors.

**Why didn't you think irrigation repair technicians had the clout they deserved?**

We didn't have any clout with distributors because all they ever see is a bunch of little ticket items. What they fail to see is the big ticket item. A repair technician will go in and buy a half dozen valves and 15 to 20 heads and one controller, and that doesn't seem like a lot of stuff. But we buy those quantities every day. In the summer, we might buy those sort of quantities two to three times a day.

**How has response to ALIRT been so far?**

I feel very encouraged at this point. Once we became affiliated with the Irrigation Association (IA), we gained some credibility. Since our second meeting at last year's IA show, we've had over 40 new members join. I get very good response in Texas, in part because I teach a course there called Diagnosing, Troubleshooting and

