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like it," said West, explaining that many first-time H-2B laborers arrive at their U.S. employer's office with few job skills. They speak little or no English, are unfamiliar with turf/landscape equipment and have little experience with U.S. laws and customs.



Jeff West seeks more training help in Mexico.

Training needed

With a few reservations, West terms the program a success. Taught by professional bilingual educators, it required worker candidates to attend two weeks of classroom and hands-on instruction. They received lessons in conversational English and U.S. laws and customs, and learned how to operate and maintain commercial mowers

thanks to commercial mowers donated by John Deere.

About 300 potential landscape employees "graduated" from the program. Classes began in early February and concluded in mid-March. West said these workers stand a better chance of becoming productive landscape workers. Also, he insisted, they're less likely to go AWOL from their U.S. employers (become "illegal") to seek better pay in construction or other U.S. industries.

"If these men spend two weeks of their time here, eight hours a day, without getting paid, that tells me they're serious about wanting to work in the United States," he said.

West admitted his motives for promoting the program weren't entirely altruistic. Through his labor contracting firm, GTO International, Whitmore Lake, MI, he said he expected to place at least 100 of the "trained" laborers with U.S. landscapers.

West said that he's also met with officials in other Mexican states, and they're interested in developing similar training programs for workers seeking seasonal employment in the United States.

— Ron Hall

6 steps to successfully recruit H-2B workers

Get temporary work visas. Get an agent or other expert familiar with the H-2B program so you can recruit labor via legal means.

Get involved. Don't depend solely on outside sources to recruit for you. Use them to help make an initial contact and preliminary screening only.

Recruit from within. Use a trusted employee who has permanent or legal status in the United States, or contact a local Hispanic-based group to help acquire new workers.

Meet and greet. Make an effort to send a company representative to the border to meet and greet your new recruits. This will help break down some of the new employees' anxieties, and also provides them with correct transportation to your place of business.

Spanglish? Make some effort to increase your communication with your recruits. Have a translator available as much as possible. You've got to be able to communicate.

Plan for the future. With a successful season of recruitment, you can plan on the next year being just as successful as you will have a local group of employees.

— Terry Foley, Foley Enterprises labor solution company, Austin, TX.

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Weed of the Week

Okay, so you think you're the King Weedhead. Why don't you find out if you really are by logging on to PBI/Gordon Corporation's WeedAlert.com Web site to play the



"Weed of the Week" contest?

Each week, the company puts up a new turf weed for site users to identify. The first five participants with correct guesses receive a WeedAlert.com coffee mug and online recognition as winners.

According to Monte VanBibber, Programmer/Webmaster for the company, the "Weed of the Week" page gets around 200 hits and 30 to 40 guesses per week. After each week's contest, the weed is added to the site's identification listing with a full description of the weed, its growing habits and germination timing, cultural control methods and herbicide use timing.

When you're done bruising your brain over weed identification, check out some of the other features on the site: useful tips, links to universities offering turf and horticulture programs, a "Weed Spotter" posting section and an on-line technical advisor.

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Circle No. 113 on Reader Inquiry Card

Washington landscape pros face water ban

BY JASON STAHL

EVERETT, WA — A plan to inform the public on how to maintain their landscapes despite a potential water shortage might not be enough to save Washington-area landscape professionals from a big economic hit this year.

In February, the Washington Association of Landscape Professionals (WALP) was told by Seattle Public Utilities that there was a 1-in-10 chance of a drought and subsequent water ban occurring this summer. A

week later, the phase one Advisory Stage of the City of Seattle's 2000 Water Shortage Contingency Plan was implemented.

On March 29, the WALP met with Seattle Public Utilities again and learned there was now a 1-in-7 chance that water restrictions would be put in place. Also, the Advisory Stage was upgraded to Voluntary Stage, requesting the public to take serious steps toward conserving water.

"If this pattern continues, we'll be in the

Emergency Stage before May 19, which is right before our busy season," says Peter Dervin, WALP Executive Director.

An uphill battle

Dervin says the WALP's press releases advising the public to consult with landscape pros who can devise a landscape that conserves water haven't been able to counter negative television coverage. According to Dervin, customers have been hesitating to buy new installations based on what they have heard so far.

"I saw the first brown lawn on television in December," he says. "In a thirty second sound bite, they say to turn off your sprinkler. The public hears this and says, 'If I can't water, then I'm not going to have new landscaping installed.' We try to tell them that installing irrigation systems with rain sensors will actually save them money."

"We've had steady rain for about a month now, so we're telling people that right now is the best time to install new landscaping since the rain will help it get established," Dervin continues.

High demands on water

Washington landscape pros' position is even worse because of the state's agricultural needs and impending energy crisis. Water is needed to allow Washington to make good on agreements to trade power with other states, and to grow produce. Also, the EPA and National Marine Fisheries have asked the state to restore endangered salmon habitats, another water concern. Dervin says out of all these concerns, landscapers end up last.

"The landscape and nursery industries tend to be the sole target because the knee-jerk way to address a water shortage is to stop sprinkling lawns," Dervin says. "Yet the Seattle Times uses water to print its newspaper, and car dealers wash their cars every morning."

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People & companies



Ferris Industries promoted **Phil Wenzel** to vice president

and general manager.

Environmental Industries re-hired **David L.**

Hanson as vice president of operations. He held various positions with

Environmental Industries' Environmental Care (ECI) division for over a dozen years.

BASF appointed **Charles Austin** senior sales specialist for BASF Turf, Ornamental and Pest Control Groups.

Patten Seed Company appointed **Joe O'Donnell**

vice president of Georgia Super Sod Outlets.

Simplot Partners promoted **Craig Shafer** to national accounts manager.



Seed Research of Oregon named **Bill Dunn** vice president.



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Make annual plantings profitable

BY RON HALL / SENIOR EDITOR

Seasonal color can make your firm's reputation soar. Try these installation tricks to make it more profitable too

Who says you can't teach an established company, even a 125-year-old one, new tricks in installing seasonal color? Green Industry pioneer Akehurst Landscape Service, Inc., Joppa, MD, is among the landscape firms bringing new ideas to the service.

Installing annual beds is no longer something that firms offer merely to retain maintenance contracts; it has to be a profit center, too. In fact, some companies now focus on flowers even if it isn't to the extent of Atlanta-based Color Burst, which specializes in designing, delivering and maintaining seasonal color.

President Joe Burns remembers, as an employee of another landscape company, dreaming of running such a company.

"I thought, 'We're doing a lot of color and it's getting more and more important,'" he says. "It

seemed like it would be a lot of fun for a horticulturist (degree from Auburn University) like myself to get into this business." That was 14 years ago, and Burns says seasonal color has since evolved from being considered an attractive novelty to being a necessity for many property owners or property managers. This accounts, as least in part, for Color Burst's success in establishing branches in Birmingham, AL, Charlotte, NC and Nashville, TN.



Your goal should be to handle each plant just once when you're installing annual beds for your accounts.



Property managers have learned that “curb appeal” boosts occupancy rates at residential complexes, increases sales at retail sites and enhances corporate clients’ image. That’s not to say they won’t squeeze every splash of color they can out of their budgets. That’s why raising prices isn’t an option for most contractors. They find themselves caught between shrewd managers and aggressive competitors. They must continually massage their service delivery systems to find ways to wring more production from each labor hour.

Crews stay in contact

For instance, William K. Akehurst, manager of his company’s landscape department, has equipped some of his field supervisors with Palm Pilots — chip-driven, handheld organizers that offer instant data storage and retrieval, and e-mail messaging. On-site supervisors can instantly report on each job’s progress.

“We have the ability to put each crew’s schedule on the portable unit,” says Akehurst. “We can track when each job is started and stopped, and the Palm Pilot becomes an in-the-field time clock. At the end of the day, we can upload this information into our network. It lets us know exactly where we are with each job.”

Akehurst offers two caveats to using this technology — you must train employees to use it and you should have office software to use the collected data intelligently. “There is a learning curve,” he cautions.

Tracking installations doesn’t have to fall into the “rocket science” category, though. It can be as simple as affixing erasable boards on the walls in your company’s break room. The boards could show a schedule of each crew’s tasks and daily records of each crew’s production. (See “Planting for profits,” May 2000 *LM*).

Whatever system you use, the goal is the same — 1) establish production goals, 2) track them and 3) find ways to meet or exceed them. Basically, every job comes down to labor hours and production.

“All of our jobs are bid by hours,” explains Dee Sanders, South Bay Operations Manager for Gachina Landscape, Menlo Park, CA.

Sanders prefers to use smaller crews for color installs or changeouts, typically three people although some large jobs may call for as many as five. The rea-

sons are that crew members can travel to job sites in the same truck, usually a crewcab, and there’s less likelihood they’ll be standing around waiting for colleagues to finish their tasks.

Smaller is more efficient

“You don’t need large crews to plant flowers,” insists business consultant Jack Mattingly, Mattingly Associates, Woodstock, GA. “I think you can keep it to two- or three-person crews. One crew can strip out the old flowers and prepare the bed by tilling and adding compost. Then, a second two- or three-person crew can come to the bed at a later date to do the planting. Small crews allow workers to become more specialized and adept at their tasks.”

Mattingly also advises installation crews not to spend too much time planting flowers “in perfectly straight lines.” After carefully establishing the bed’s first row, an experienced worker with good hand/eye coordination can plant annuals without a lot of measuring and handling of plants more than once.

“With this system, if a worker’s down there on his hands and knees, you can just hand him the flower

continued on page 28

What client wouldn’t appreciate this striking design? Masses of flowers in two basic colors and meticulous maintenance turn this display into a showcase project.

Tips to streamline installations

- Establish realistic installation goals and monitor them
- Prepare beds thoroughly prior to the arrival of install crews
- Have growers ship annuals to the job site
- Two- and three-person crews work best for most jobs
- Don’t mulch where it’s not necessary
- Don’t overlook training women for your install crews

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that's out of the pot, and he can put it in the ground," says Mattingly. "If the plant is off a little bit, in a few weeks it won't matter anyway. The plants will have filled the entire bed with color."

Mattingly's suggestion for mulching flower beds is to put mulch only where needed. "You might want to mulch the primary flower beds in areas where people walk by or where there is lots of traffic and the area has to look good immediately," he says. "In three weeks, after the flowers start spreading, you don't see the mulch anyway."

Partner with growers

Apart from the installation process, contractors streamline seasonal color service by working closely with vendors such as growers. When a contractor and a grower develop a long-term partnership, both benefit.

"We have a grower to whom we contract all of our color, and he tries to grow what we're asking for," says Gachina's Sanders. "We try to get that information to him months ahead of time."

"We want to inspect their greenhouses and their operations," adds Joe Burns of Color Burst. "It takes a while, but once we get comfortable with a grower, we like to operate as a partnership."

With this type of relationship, a grower can save a contractor time and labor by delivering bedding plants directly to a job site.

"A lot of our jobs utilize a full

truckload of flowers, and we'd rather not have them come to our yard," adds Akehurst. "If we can get our growers to ship to the job site, the flowers just come off the truck and practically go right into the hole."

Don't forget employees

No matter what efficiencies you build into your seasonal color programs, none will work without trained and dedicated employees, including women who often make excellent installers,

says Joe Burns in Atlanta.

"The backbone of any company is good individuals who like what they're doing. That makes for happy customers, and happy customers make for repeat business," he adds. **LJM**

Don't cheat yourself by pricing too low

BY BILL PHAGAN

Do we really charge enough for seasonal color? A recent survey indicates that contractors pay an average cost of .55 to .80 a pot for a four-inch annual. The price that most contractors charge their customers for seasonal color is typically too little. Many contractors take the price of each annual and double it. Therefore, the .75 potted plant becomes \$1.50, which may still not be enough.

Here's another reason to reconsider your pricing. The American Nursery & Landscape Association reports that high energy costs hit greenhouse growers hard this past winter. Also, commercial freight carriers tacked on fuel surcharges of 5% to 10%, and growers paid more for the plastic they use to wrap and move plants. Costs will be passed on to you.

Consider what you must do to put flowers "in the ground" for clients, and you'll appreciate why you have to price this service carefully:

- ✓ Go over color, location and timing with the customer. Are you charging for your expertise?
- ✓ Find and order flowers (and hopefully not have to make 10 calls in the process)
- ✓ Pick them up or have them delivered
- ✓ Travel to and from the job site
- ✓ Improve soil in beds (don't forget the cost of labor and soil products)
- ✓ Till beds if they need cultivation
- ✓ Move plants at job site, pulling them from containers, placing them in holes and backfilling them smoothly and carefully
- ✓ Clean up the job site by collecting and stacking pots, etc.
- ✓ Apply a light coat of mulch (if required)

Don't forget state sales and other applicable taxes. Warranties and plant replacements — 30 days, 90 days? Who's responsible for watering the flowers and taking care of pests and nutrition? Is all that included in your price per four-inch annual?

— *Bill Phagan is a financial and business operations consultant to the Green Industry. He can be reached at 813-961-2149 or e-mail: bphagan@tampabay.rr.com*

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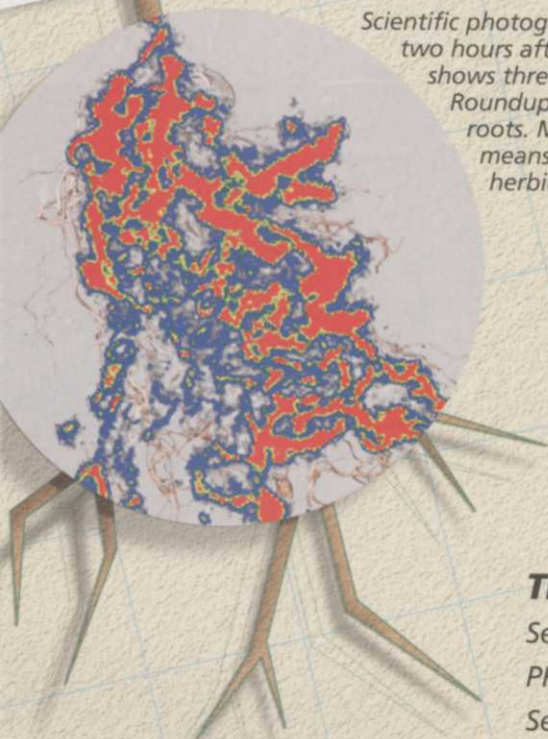
This is a cross-section of a weed leaf magnified 1000x. The yellow droplets mean Roundup Pro is already at work inside.



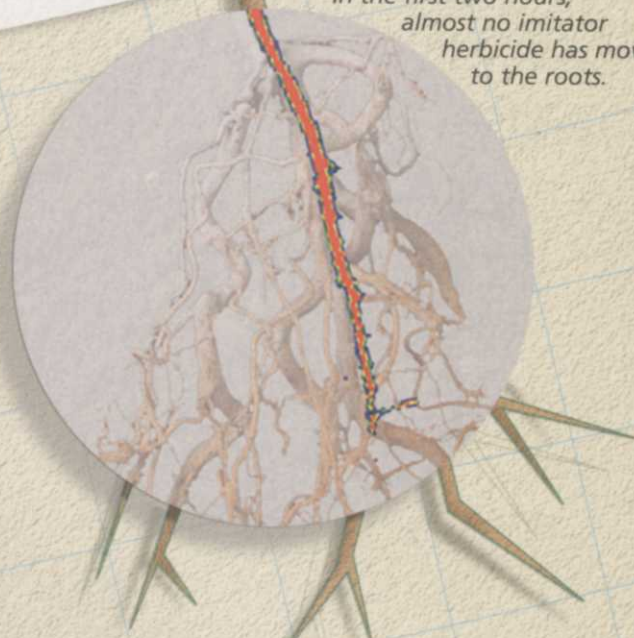
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Efficient mowing

Decrease your mowing time while you increase the quality of your customers' properties with more efficient methods

BY JOHN C. FECH

Almost all lawn and landscape contractors offer mowing. It's boring, time consuming, requires equipment that needs regular maintenance and, toughest of all, is performed by employees that are often hard to come by. Do you need any other reasons to perform this service as quickly and efficiently as possible?

Keep ornamentals in their place

Start with good landscape design which separates turf and ornamentals in the landscape. This will reduce mower damage to ornamentals (tree damage can be costly). Operators can also mow more efficiently, since they don't have to turn and maneuver so much.

Mowing around clean and flowing bed lines is easier than odd-shaped beds. Eliminate narrow strips of turf wherever possible. They're hard to irrigate, fertilize and

mow. One of your goals should be to reduce or eliminate hand mowing and string trimming.

Work with clients to modify their landscapes to make mowing more efficient. Explain how their mowing costs might go down with a few simple changes.

The one-third rule

Follow the one-third rule — mow just one-third of the leaf blade at a time. The operator will get minimal drag on the mower blade. It takes a lot of horsepower to mow 7-in. grass plants down to a couple of inches.

Also, mowing at the proper height allows grass leaves to decompose and be absorbed into the turf canopy. Mowing through overgrown turfgrass results in unsightly clippings piling up. The most important benefit from following

this rule is healthier turf. Photosynthesis occurs in the leaf. Removing small to moderate amounts of leaf isn't harmful, and increases turf density.

The "old school" thinking on how high to mow the lawn is "mow low in spring and fall, and high in the heat of summer."

This strategy is based on documented evidence that shows that as the mowing height is raised, turfgrass root depth increases. Deeper roots are better suited to supplying the grass plant with water in summer heat.

Recently, turf researchers have begun to measure other factors relating to summer lawn care. They've noticed that raising the height of cut causes more leaf canopy to be produced, thus facilitating more

water loss from the turfgrass blades.

Other well documented occurrences have been reconsidered as well, including



Tree damage can be costly, so work with your clients to separate turf and ornamentals.

seasonal decline of the rooting depth in summer and that as the height of cut rises, the thickness or density of the turf decreases.

Raise the height

Considering all of these factors has caused turf experts to recommend raising the height a moderate amount to create more canopy, but not so much that a lot of water is lost from the grass blades.

Turf receiving little or no irrigation doesn't need to be mowed as often. In fact, mowing can

Fertilizer increases mowing

Fertilizer has a direct affect on mowing. Fertilized turfgrass produces more leaves and grows faster, meaning that your crews will have to be on these properties more often.

You can control this growth somewhat by using a slow-release nitrogen source. Sulfur coated urea, urea formaldehyde, water insoluble nitrogen, methylene urea and many organic sources encourage a moderate increase in growth for eight to 10 weeks rather than a

with a plant growth regulator (PGR). The most beneficial time to apply a PGR is when the turf is growing like crazy.

In spring, for instance, cool-season grasses can grow so fast that it's hard to manage them effectively. The one-third rule ends up being violated in many cases because the grass is growing faster than your crews can mow it. The application of a PGR will slow down the grass plants' growth rate so you won't break the rules.

The results of a PGR last for five to six weeks. Using one will increase the amount of time between cuttings three to four days, which can be desirable in certain situations.

Using a PGR adds to your overall turf maintenance budget, but it may be a worthwhile investment.

Be sharp, mow sharp

Mow with sharp blades. Dull blades leave the turf with more points of entry for foliar diseases, not to mention giving it a beat-up appearance. If the blades look "fuzzy" or "ratty" after a mowing, it's time to sharpen. Here's how:

- Remove the spark plug wire from the plug.
- Remove the blade from the shaft.
- Use a flat file to return the blade to its original condition.
- The desired angle for the cutting surface on an impact mower blade is 30°.
- Even if sharp, a blade with a



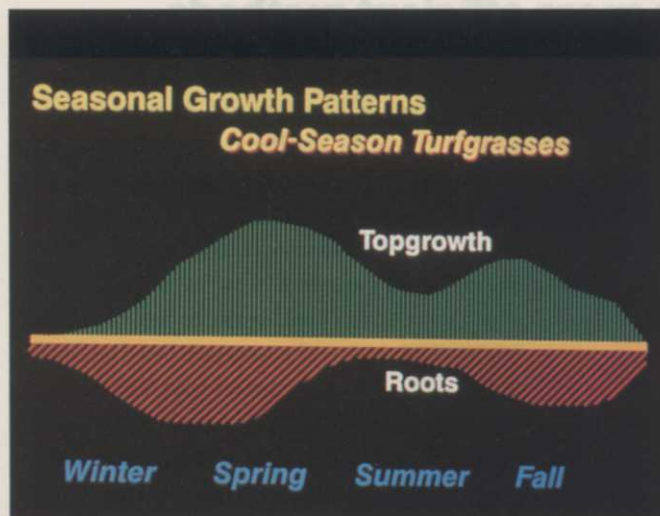
Mowing through overgrown turfgrass results in unsightly clippings piling up in trails or globs on the property.

45° angle will tear and fray grass blades. A blade with a 20° angle cuts well, but becomes dull quickly.

- After you sharpen a few blades, you'll be able to eyeball the degree of slope. Or, you can use a protractor.
- Keep replacement blades on hand. **LM**

— John Fech is with the University of Nebraska

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Turf experts have documented the seasonal decline of rooting depth in summer. This, and other recent research, has led them to reconsider the conventional wisdom about summer mowing.

cause further damage by crushing crowns and tillers. Advise clients to irrigate before you mow.

Too much water can be a problem too. If the soil is too wet, don't mow. It can cause wheel rutting, and may be unsafe for the operator too.

large increase in growth rate that lasts for only two to three weeks. They're more costly than fast-release products, but they're usually worth the extra expense.

Another approach to reducing growth rate is to treat turf