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If you keep your mower blades sharp and mow often enough you may not have to pick up the clippings on clients' lawns.



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# Five myths of mulched turf

**I**n theory, mulching turf sounds great because it reduces waste, increases productivity and recycles nutrients. Still, there are some questions: Is not having to dispose of clippings worth dealing with customer complaints about clumps on their lawn? Are the added nutrients worth having to de-thatch later in the season?

If you've asked yourself these questions, it's time to learn more about mulching.

**MYTH:** The appearance of mulched lawns is inferior.

**REALITY:** Mulched lawns can look just as clean as bagged lawns as long as you have the

right machine and run it at the proper speed when the grass is in normal condition.

**MYTH:** Mulching causes thatch build-up.

**REALITY:** Thatch build-up is caused by over-fertilizing, over-watering and cutting too much of the grass blade. Mulching helps prevent thatch from developing due to the rapid decomposition of tiny clippings. These tiny clippings also feed earthworms, insects and microorganisms that improve the soil. Landscapers who mulch tend to use less fertilizer and other chemicals.

**MYTH:** Mowing with the discharge chute covered is

**REALITY:** There is more to a mulching system than plugging the discharge chute. Efficient mulching machines have specially angled, sharp mulching blades and mulching baffles that work with the existing deck baffles to maximize air flow and circulation. Since mulching has higher horsepower requirements than side-discharging applications, make sure your machines have plenty of power.

**MYTH:** Clients are not willing to give up bagging clippings.

**REALITY:** Once your clients discover the benefits of

mulching and the savings, they will be more likely to allow you to try it on their property.

**MYTH:** I can make more money bagging clippings.

**REALITY:** You can charge more for bagging because it takes more time than mulching. Due to the time saved from not collecting and disposing of clippings, however, your crew can move on to the next property faster and complete more properties in the day. **LW**

— Clover V. Shelton, Swanson Russell Associates

## PROS / CONS OF MULCHING

### Mulching recycles valuable nutrients.

Nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium are recycled into the turf, providing up to 25% of the lawn's total annual nitrogen requirement.

**Mulching reduces waste.** When bagging clippings, one challenge is finding a place to dispose of them. Disposal of bagged clippings is time consuming and, in many places, expensive.

**Mulching increases productivity.** With the proper equipment, mulching can reduce mowing time by 30 to 50%.

**Mulching conserves water.** Grass blades are 70 to 80% water when freshly cut. When grass is chopped finely and blown deep into the turf, much of this moisture returns to the soil. The dryer mulch acts as a barrier which reduces evaporation from the soil.

**Mulching is safer than side-discharging.** With the use of a discharge chute cover, mulching is safer than side-discharging, which throws debris toward people, pets, automobiles and homes.

**Poor equipment gives mulching a bad name.** Many mowers claim to be "mulching mowers" simply because the discharge chute is covered. This equipment

(which could also possess inadequate blades and low power to the cutting deck) can leave clumps of grass on the lawn.

**Mulching isn't appropriate for all seasons.** It is usually better to bag during spring clean-up. In the fall, when there are lots of leaves on the ground, bagging is better. When there is only a small amount of leaves on the ground, mulching is okay. Mulching also might not be the best option if grass is wet or long.

**Conservative clients.** It's difficult to convince clients that mulching is good for their lawn and can improve its looks. Once their neighbors choose mulching, however, they might do the same.

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# Build your team for the big job

**Learn how planning and team building provided efficient irrigation to the 8,000-home Ladera Ranch, CA, project**

BY DON DALE

**L**andscape irrigation supervisor Phillip Heald learned one important thing from the Ladera Ranch project, a

huge California housing development that will span 12 years and put 30,000 people in 8,000 new homes: If you want to do the job right, work from a team concept from day one.

On any job, there is as much a chance the project will produce chaos as there is it will produce cohesion, but on large developments like Ladera Ranch that feature many disparate elements, the chance for chaos is much stronger.

"We tried to find where all the hidden snags were," says Heald of Rancho Mission Viejo, the company building Ladera Ranch in southern Orange County. Thus, a project that didn't begin construction until 1998 began building a consulting team in 1994.

## **A gigantic project**

To give an idea of the Ladera Ranch project's scope, the first phase includes a school, community center, 22-acre sports park, water quality management basin and walking trails. That's in addition to the homes.

Because the project was huge, the team began by producing a master plan guideline, an operation manual and management specs.



**Irrigation consultant Steve Hohl programs one of over 300 Rainmaster Evolution controllers being installed for the Ladera Ranch project.**

Having those guidelines made early preparations easier. For example, because the heavy clay soil on the 8,100-acre property was going to be difficult on landscape plants, Heald began his consultations on soil materials. "We spent a lot of time early on grading logistics," Heald says. Before soil was ever moved, he had team members working on soil tests, developing plant palettes and customizing soil amendments and backfill mixes.

Heald and his team, which included an overall land and environmental planner, landscape design company, nursery, some of the four installation contractors and the landscape maintenance contractor, then determined the actual irrigation design and selection of components.

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This part of the Ladera Ranch site in Orange County shows some of the 591 miles of irrigation pipe that will eventually be used.



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### Go team!

Steve Hohl, irrigation consultant and director of Water Concern Ltd., is also glad that Rancho Mission Viejo had a team-building concept for the new project. During the project, he was the irrigation director for a company called Land Concern that was designing the landscape. The first phase of Ladera Ranch was Oak Knoll, which had over 80 acres of landscaping.

"We started to break (the job) up into smaller pieces," Hohl says, noting that team members contributed ideas from their own areas of expertise.

One of the early decisions that had to be made was what type of irrigation controls to use. Hohl says the entire irrigation project hinged on how it was to be controlled.

"We determined that the whole community would be central-controlled, and that it would be operated by telephone, hard-wired," Hohl says. Radio controls were state-of-the-art, but the team decided that more reliable and cheaper land lines would be used to connect all valves.

The team also helped Hohl decide which control manufacturer to use. This was such an important decision that even employees of the eventual maintenance contractor, O'Connell Landscape Maintenance, were asked for input.

"The maintenance group usually comes in at the end, and it's a low-bid contract," Hohl says. But

he says their viewpoint is important at a project's beginning because they will be stuck with it after construction crews leave.

Tom Page, O'Connell's area manager and liaison with Rancho Mission Viejo, says that as a result of the decision to involve his company in the selection of central irrigation, the Ladera Ranch Homeowners' Association will be spared lots of money and headaches in the future.

"Our aim is to keep maintenance costs down," Page says.

Because of his company's early involvement, Page and his associates were also able to offer advice on the plant palette selection for Ladera Ranch. When shown soil test results, they determined which plants would and wouldn't be appropriate.

It was just as important to make Pacific Coast Nursery, the nursery growing for Ladera Ranch, an early team member. Advance scheduling was required to grow thousands of trees and shrubs.

"We try to stay about two years ahead of the nursery," Heald says of planning the plant material orders. His company considered soil important enough to demand control over the backfilled materials. They also wanted to research the matter thoroughly before deciding if the work should be done on a labor-only basis.

### Decisions, decisions

Hohl ended up choosing the

Rainmaster Evolution system because it could program irrigation based on fixed amounts of recycled water, and divide that irrigation throughout the development for maximum efficiency.

"It turns on multiple valves on the same controller to optimize the flow of the whole site while maintaining safe hydraulic conditions on each water meter," Hohl says.

The system was also selected for its ability to conserve water. "Public perception of water management is growing," Hohl says. With that in mind, he knew sprinklers operating during a rain storm would not go over well. The system has alleviated some of his worries because it has its own weather station and makes it easy to customize irrigation settings.

### Eye on the future

The first phase of Ladera Ranch, which will one day be an incorporated city, is nearly complete.

All involved with the project laud the team concept because it not only gave them more control over the development but allowed them to take charge of even minor obstacles.

One joint decision that proved valuable involved stringing 168 miles of electrical wire for the irrigation controllers. Since everyone involved had

seen projects that had break-in problems with controllers because of faulty wiring, they brought in one small irrigation contractor who made sure controller wire was properly strung and pulled through conduit.

Construction blueprints with future irrigation timing guidelines right on them eased future maintenance, too. O'Connell Landscape, which also maintains nearby Rancho Santa Margarita, likes this type of cooperative vision. It makes everyone's job easier for the lifetime of the development. And it will make life more pleasant for the people who live there, too. **LM**

— The author, based in Hollywood, CA, frequently writes for *Landscape Management*

## THE LADERA PROJECT

### TEAM MEMBERS

- ▶ Rancho Mission Viejo
- ▶ Land Concern
- ▶ O'Connell Landscape Maintenance
- ▶ Pacific Coast Nursery

### PROJECT MATERIALS

- ▶ 591 miles of PVC pipe
- ▶ 1,600 miles of irrigation wire
- ▶ 175,000 irrigation heads

Got 'em.

Check.

Sure.

You bet.

Uh, huh.

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## Property at a glance

**Location:** Abbott Park, Abbott Park, IL**Staff:** Abbott Park Grounds

Department

**Category:** Industrial or Office Park**Year site built:** 1966**Acres of turf:** 155**Acres of woody ornamentals:** 16**Acres of display beds:** 21**Total paved area:** 135 acres**Total man-hours/week:** 650

## Maintenance challenges

- ▶ Snow removal
- ▶ Prairie maintenance
- ▶ Patio/outdoor eating area maintenance

## Project checklist

- ▶ Abbott Park Zone 30 patio installation project
- ▶ Sports field construction
- ▶ Abbott Park Zone 52 patio installation project

## On the job

- ▶ 15 full-time staff, 7 seasonal employees, 15 licensed pesticide applicators

## Abbott Park

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

The Abbott Park Grounds Department has its work cut out for it. The staff is not only responsible for Abbott Park, the 481-acre Abbot Laboratories corporate headquarters located in northeastern Illinois, but it also cares for the 45-acre "K-Complex" and 89-acre Abbott Park East nearby.

With so much territory to cover, organization is key. That's why Abbott Park, Abbott Park East and the K-Complex are divided into eight zones. Once crew members are assigned to a zone, they "own" it. This instills a great sense of pride in the work each crew performs.

Winter can be miserable in northeastern Illinois, especially when you have to clear snow and ice from 98 acres of parking lot, 11 miles of sidewalks and eight miles of roadways that must remain open to traffic 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Crew members work three shifts to provide 24-hour coverage Sunday evening through Friday evening, then remain on call over the weekend.

The best time to see the Abbott Parks Grounds Department in action is shortly before Abbott Labs' annual shareholder

meeting in late April. Gotta impress those shareholders! The crews remove all the sod that's been damaged by road salt and replace it along all roads, sidewalks and parking lot perimeters. They also apply about 1,850 cu. yds. of shredded hardwood mulch to shrub beds and tree rings, and to highlight the pansies, forced tulips, hyacinths and daffodils that beautify the executive patio.

Nontraditional plants like pennisetum grasses, blue salvia, purple wave petunia and verbena bonariensis provide this flower bed with a unique design.



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MANAGEMENT

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 2000 Awards, contact PGMS at:

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An employee sets up a sprinkler at a display bed near Abbott Park's Gate 1 entrance. These beds are designed differently each year.



Each crew member works in one of eight zones on the property, and takes ownership in its care and appearance.



# Got it, Use it

BY VICKY POULSEN

## Three landscape contractors discuss getting the most out of construction and installation equipment

**E**very landscape contractor knows that if his equipment "ain't workin', it ain't makin' money." That's why they look for equipment that's versatile enough to handle many tasks and productive enough to pay for itself in a short time.

Equipment with those qualities does exist in this industry, as you can learn by reading what the manufacturers have to say and reviewing the latest products in the pages that follow. First, read about what types of construction and installation equipment work best for three contractors we interviewed.

▲ PHOTO COURTESY TORO

### LARGE CONTRACTOR

Name: Frank Mariani

Title: President

Company: Mariani Landscape

Location: Lake Bluff, IL

2000 revenues: \$23 million

Business mix: 97% commercial

Employees: 320

**Company profile:** Founded by Vito Mariani, Sr. in 1958, the company also has a satellite office in Bollingbrook, IL, to service the western suburbs. Located in Lake Bluff is its design/build and landscape management maintenance divisions hailed as its top two "profit centers." Both departments are operated with their own staffs. Maintenance crew sizes range from two and five people and construction crews may need between four or five, depending on the job. Crews may even be combined since construction projects can range from \$2,000 to \$2 million per job.

**Construction/installation equipment:** "We have close to 100 trucks. For safety rea-