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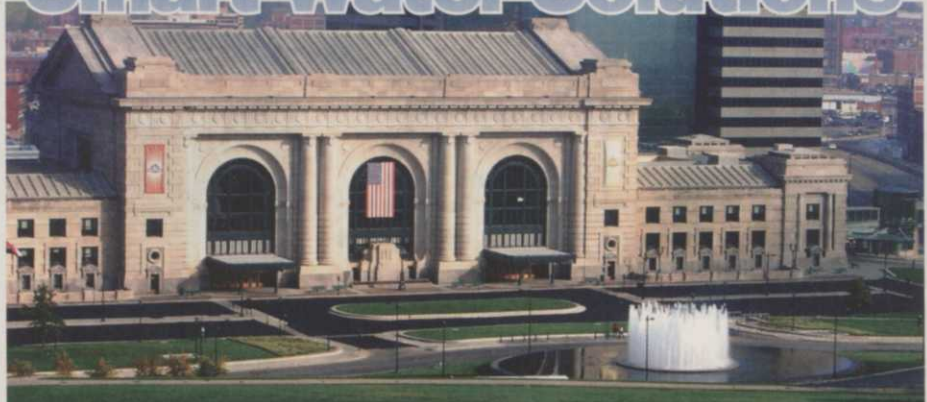



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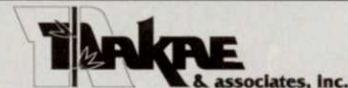
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Company	Page #	
ASLA	18, 27	Ferrellgas46
Aquascape Inc.	52	Ferris46
Ariens Co.	24	First Ladies national Historic Site .70
Austin Ind. School District	42	Ford Motor Co.27
Belden Brick	72	Gap Inc.27
Belrobics	46	Grass Roots Training16
Bobcat Co.	66	Green Roofs for Healthy Cities . .27
Bose Corp.	40	GreenGrid Roofs27
Brickman	25	Guelph Turfgrass Institute23
Canon USA Inc.	40	Hinds Community College62
Caterpillar	64	John Deere64
ChemLawn Corp.	24	JP Horizons24
Dixie Chopper	46	Lake City Community College . .38
Emory Farms	30	Lastec44
Envirogard	46	Logitech40
EPA	20	Mariott25
Fecon Inc.	64	Midwest Groundcovers34
		Midwest Trdg Hort. Supplies Inc. .34

Nat. A/V Conservation Center	. . .30
National Gardening Association	.52
Ohio State University	. . . . .24
Ontario Turfgrass Research Found.	20
Outside Unlimited Inc.	. . . . .30
Penn State University	. . . . .30
PLANET	. . . . .20, 22, 25, 68, 72
Russo Lawn & Landscape Inc.	. . .88
Scapes LLC	. . . . .68
Silvercup Studios	. . . . .35
SofTee Automation	. . . . .46
Swiss Army Brands Inc.	. . . . .40
Target Specialty Products	. . . . .22
Todd's Envirosapes Inc.	. . . . .70
Tree Care Industry Association	. . .22
Trees Unlimited	. . . . .64
University of Guelph	. . . . .23
University of Maryland	. . . . .30
ValleyCrest Cos.	. . . . .24
Vermeer Manufacturing Co.	. . .66
Weston Solutions Inc.	. . . . .27
Wilson-Oyler Group	. . . . .12

This index is provided as an additional service. The publisher does not assume any liability for errors or omissions.

Events

RESOURCES

WHAT, WHEN & WHERE

Kubota Tractor / p77

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Treat your people well, and they'll treat your business well

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS /
Managing Editor

Mike Russo is a realist. He realizes that the guy down the street uses the same equipment and cuts the grass the same way.

"No one in the landscape industry is coming up with the next best way to cut grass," says Russo, owner of Russo Lawn & Landscape Inc. "We're not inventing anything different. Sooner or later you realize that whether you're cutting grass, putting down pavers, planting trees, plowing snow, (anything) service related, it's all got to do with people."

Russo's epiphany led his operation to more than triple in size in just five years after more than 10 years of slow growth. When Russo talks about people he refers not only to customers, but also to his employees.

"I defy you to name a business that has grown over the last 10 years that has screwed up dealing with people," he says. "You can grow without



Growin' and smilin'.

The Russo team (l. to r.) says training is the key: Mark Stupcenski, Molly Russo, Mike Russo, Christina Gordon

focusing on sales with sheer luck, but you can't grow by sheer luck if you screw your people, if you don't know how to manage them, if you don't know how to develop them or if you don't treat them right."

Training builds people, says Russo, who has used several consultants to motivate and train his 40-man workforce.

Training covers everything from planting shrubs to policies and procedures, many of which have changed as the company has grown. It's a continuous process. Russo confesses it wasn't always that way. For the first decade of his com-

pany's existence Russo was too focused in the business to work on the business. Then he attended an ALCA (now PLANET) meeting.

Networking is huge

"If I'd become involved in ALCA five years earlier, I'd be 10 years ahead of where I am now," he says. "You're in your own little world in day-to-day fires. Then you go to these things and you see stuff."

"If you can capitalize on it, make connections with e-mail or visit other companies or bring in consultants and keep your eyes open (and learn) how can you go wrong? It certainly makes it easier than

staying in your little square doing the same old thing day-in and day out."

Like most successful landscape operations, Russo struggles at finding good help.

It gets frantic

"That's a big challenge, but it's a challenge in the bucket of challenges," he says. "The biggest challenge for me, is to continue to struggle – and some days win and some days get my ass kicked – with the role of owning, managing and running a \$3.5 million business.

"That's the struggle that I face, trying to stay focused on what I do well and hiring for what I don't do well and then working the plan. There aren't too many owners at this stage, it seems, calm, level-headed, well thought out, soft spoken, relaxed business owners at the growing stages of a business – certainly under \$1 million to a couple million.

"Successful owners have identified their own weaknesses and strengths and plan around their strengths. Then they hire stronger people for their weaknesses."

Russo says that's something he's always working on — knowing what he does well and what he doesn't. **LM**

►► **Online:** www.russolawn.com **Location:** Windsor Locks, CT
Principals: Mike Russo, Molly Russo, Mark Stupcenski and Christina Gordon **2006 Revenues:** \$3.5 million **Founded:** 1990

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