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Add-On Biz

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Concrete engraving

► Landscape pros can beautify and stain existing surfaces for clients who balk at the cost of pavers

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS /
Managing Editor

The customer wanted a hardscape with pavers arranged in circles bordered by flagstone. Had Michael Rodriguez tackled the job the usual way, he would have had to rip out a few thousand feet of cracked and damaged concrete and lay each paver by hand. The amount of manual labor involved would have generated a huge bill for his client.

Instead Rodriguez, president of Santa Fe Springs, CA-based Creative Innovations Landscape and Design, used specially made cutting tools to

etch patterns into the existing concrete. He then stained the concrete to simulate the effect of pavers.

He estimates the cost of the project using pavers at about \$35,000. "With the concrete carving, I was able to do it, for about \$6,000," says Rodriguez, who got his contractor's license in 1979. He delivered the look of pavers and flagstone without removing the old concrete by using patented tools purchased from Engrave-A-Crete, a 15-year-old company based in Bradenton, FL.

Tools small and large

The tools look like souped up hand and yard tools (think an electric circular saw on

wheels with a vacuum attachment to collect dust), but they can etch any design into a variety of surfaces. The tools come in a variety of shapes — everything from a handheld etcher about the size of a large fountain pen to a walk-behind device called the Super Compact.

Darrell Adamson, president and CEO of the Florida-based company, "spent years" perfecting a methodology and designing machines that could create effects in existing concrete surfaces that replicate any building material, claims Paul DelFino, chief operating officer of Engrave-A-Crete. "You combine stain with our machines and you can take existing concrete walkways, patios, pool decks or anything like that and make them look like tile, cobblestone or pavers," he says, adding that not only does the company sell the machines, but it also trains purchasers in their use.

Rodriguez says he researched different options before settling on this particular solution. "I researched it two years prior to going to their school, workshop," he says.

Etched and stained concrete can mimic the look and texture of pavers and flagstone, and it can be enhanced with designs.

Lots of options

The tools and training allow creative landscapers to do more than mimic pavers, flagstone and other patterns. Send the company a design — perhaps a photograph — and an artist can turn that into a 3-D template. That template can be laid out and all the landscaper has to do is cut the mold. Add stain and the only limitation is the client's imagination. The process works equally well for large and small jobs, says the company.

Before he had the tools another client wanted a Chinese character set into concrete. But when he priced the job, the client balked. Rodriguez says he's now able to go back and give the client a less expensive alternative — and still make what he feels is an acceptable profit.

Engrave-A-Crete sells a variety of tools and materials. The minimum entry is about \$2,500, says Brandon Adamson, Engrave-A-Crete's vice president and son of the founder. A complete trailer with everything the company makes is available for just under \$50,000.



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TRAINING TOMORROW'S LEADERS

BY STEVEN M. COHAN, PH.D.

Green Industry-school district collaborations around the country prepare students for rewarding careers.

Finally, some of them are getting it, high schools that is — and our industry is helping deliver the message. The challenge now is to make high school students aware of it.

The 'it' is the effort to make young people aware of the career opportunities within our Green Industry.

Some exciting new education/industry partnerships are being developed for students. The aim is to develop the next generation of industry managers, business leaders and owners. These programs signal an expanding, although admittedly fledgling, effort by industry to raise awareness of the industry's importance to tomorrow's young adults.

One such program, and hopefully a model for high school programs elsewhere, is being developed in Maryland's Montgomery County Public Schools. It replaces the career-based horticulture programs schools formerly offered in the schools. Thanks to the help and advice of Green Industry business owners and managers

the new programs, with redesigned curricula, will offer more "real-world" training in landscape and related businesses.

The push began in 2005 when the county school district took a critical look at its vocational training. That review led Montgomery Community College and county school administrators to develop an infrastructure that connected stakeholders with educators. This led to the formation of Cluster Advisory Boards (CAB) involving business leaders from various industry sectors. To date, 11 CAB's have been established within Montgomery County for specific Career Technology Education (CTE) programs. One of these CAB's involves input and guidance from Green Industry business owners and leaders and government agencies such as the Montgomery National Capitol Parks and Planning Commission.

Nine high schools initially

So what does this collaboration mean to the Green Industry around Montgomery County? In a nutshell, it means that nine county high



schools now have the go-ahead from the Maryland State Board of Education (MSDE) to implement landscape programs for the 2007-2008 academic school year.

"We're building the airplane while it's in flight. That's how Ed Ball described what we're doing," explains Bruce Allentuck, owner of Allentuck Landscaping, Clarksburg, MD, and one of the local industry leaders involved providing educational tools and guidance for the landscape program. Ball is the coordinator of the Career Technology Education program.

The primary role of the Landscape CAB is to research industry and academic standards for community colleges and universities. These standards are the basis for the development of curricula, which the MSDE must approve.

Landscape career pathways

The three curricula, approved under the Environmental, Agricultural and Natural Resource Cluster Pathways (Green Industry), are: Landscape Design, Green Industry Management and Environmental Horticulture.

Each career pathway accommodates up to 34 students per high school course. A second phase will enable more students to participate when college courses are opened for enrollment in the evenings and during summer sessions.

Courses included in each of the career options include: Fundamental Horticulture, Landscape Maintenance, Turf and Irrigation Management, Environmental Studies and Landscape Installation.

Courses specific to the respective career tracks encompass Fundamentals of Design, Floral and Interior Design, Site Design Development, and Greenhouse and Nursery Production.

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PHOTOS COURTESY: PLANET



RECRUITING YOUNG TALENT:

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE

Brette Hardison, human resources administrator for the Wauconda, IL-based Acres Group, says her company finds and develops young talent from industry events, such as the career fair held during the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET) recent Student Career Days at Michigan State University (MSU) and also the Mid-Am Horticulture Show. Acres Group also seeks potential team members at universities with horticulture programs such as MSU, Purdue and Iowa State.

"We're looking for team players, as we're very team-oriented both at and outside of work," Hardison says. "We want ambitious, self-starters, because we're growing fast and there's going to be opportunities to move up."

She adds that the company looks for young people with strong horticulture knowledge, and if they're proficient in a second language such as Spanish, that's another big plus. Acres Group hires five to seven interns every summer, hoping to catch the students' interest early on.

"The interns come in and learn our entire process and all aspects of the business," Hardison says. "They can choose to focus on a certain area like design/build for example, and we'll let them do everything our regular employees do, all the way down to working with clients."

"The internship program gives both the students and us a chance to work together and see if we're a good fit for the future."

The Acres Group offers interns a salary and housing, plus they line up fun activities like visiting the Chicago Botanical Gardens and local baseball games. The company hopes when the interns finish their college careers, or when the internship ends, they'll return as employees.

"It's good to know you can go back to school and further your education and be able to stay with the company," Hardison says. "It's one of the things we do that we think really sets us apart."

Acres Group employees are given benefits such as medical, dental and life insurance; 401(k) retirement saving; flexible spending program; and tuition reimbursement.

"We talk to our employees about a designated career path, so they know when and how they can advance and what they can expect from us," Hardison says. "If they have an idea of where they can go within the company, they're not going to feel like they're stuck in the same position or decide to leave."

— Mike Seuffert



A future professional gets advice at PLANET's Student Career Days.



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Also, all seniors are required to complete an internship for real-life hands-on experience.

"The framework for the program is basically in place," says Allentuck, president of the Green Industry CAB. "It's just a matter of filling in the details." There is a lot of work to do yet in building the complete 4-year high school curricula, he adds.

"The story here is not the people who created this program. The story is the program itself," says Allentuck, pointing out that it's taken a lot of effort by a lot of people to get the program up and running. Assisting in the effort, in addition to his company, are Fine Earth Landscaping; John Sorb Landscaping, Lila Fendric Landscape Architects, Borders and Butterflies, Chapel Valley, University of Maryland Cooperative Extension, Nature Unlimited, The Brickman Group, Potomac Garden Center, Waverly Farm, Green Gardens and Chevy Chase Country Club.

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RECRUITING YOUNG TALENT:

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Bigger isn't always better, students told *Landscape Management* at PLANET'S Student Career Days at Michigan State University in March. Undergraduates told us that as they look at potential employers, they're more concerned about opportunities to grow within the company.

"It helps when a company is looking for a specific position, and not just trying to hire any kid they can get their hands on," says John Young, a graduating senior at SUNY (State University of New York) – Cobleskill. "The companies that impress me are the ones that say 'Where do you want to be in our company?' and then work with me to show how I can get there."

Patrick Smith, a senior at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo is looking at two things: "First is location, a company from some part of the country that appeals to me, like northern California or northwest Colorado. Second, I'm looking for a company that shares the same morals and values that I hold. It's a mutual relationship. I expect to be given responsibility, and the ability to make decisions for customers right on the spot. And together we're going to succeed."

"I think the best companies are the ones that go out of the way to train you, and do what they can to help make you fit in," says Tim Fitzgerald, also from SUNY. "A company that wants to help you grow looks better than one that isn't willing to put in the work."

"It also helps if they pay you a lot of money," Fitzgerald grins.

— Mike Seuffert

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"We've had to do a whole lot of selling to make this program real," says Allentuck. Program promoters worked closely with teachers to give them an accurate picture of the industry and its many opportunities.

"The industry realizes it needs smart young people who speak knowledgeably, do mathematics, are technologically competent and — if they have to the desire and drive — can run a successful business," says Allentuck.

Integral to the landscape career pathways is hands-on experience, which will be provided by internships and summer jobs with participating companies and on-going projects with the Montgomery National Park and Planning Commission.

CTE coordinator Ball says that the program will provide a smooth transition for students to

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SCHOOL RULES

It's a universal complaint. There are not enough ready-made leaders coming out of colleges to fill open positions. The solution is simple. Dip into the minor leagues — the local high school vocational programs. At least that is what several northeast Ohio landscape contractors have done through the landscape and horticulture program at Auburn Career Center in Concord Township, OH.

"They're walking out of most programs with the foundation of the technical side," explains Jim Paluch, of JP Horizons. "If they have a good teacher, they're also walking out with a passion for the industry."

The teacher at Auburn is Green Industry veteran Dave Richards.

"We have about 35 students — juniors and seniors," Richards says. "The junior year we do a lot of hands on equipment safety training, teaching them how to operate different types of landscape maintenance, management and construction equipment safely. This is a more general ornamental horticulture program. The senior year is geared more heavily in landscape construction."

Richards uses Green Industry veterans like Paluch, Steve Pattie of The Pattie Group and Sandy Munley, executive director of the Ohio Landscapers Association (OLA) to help decide curriculum and content. The 12-member advisory committee meets quarterly.

"We spend about 20% of the time in the classroom doing traditional classroom studies — plant material, landscape estimating, math for the landscape industry, botany, pest ID studies," Richards says. "The other 80% of the time is spent with hands-on experience, where they learn by doing."

At the recommendation of the advisory committee, the program has begun to prepare students for OLA certifications.



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articulate in either 2- or 4-year college programs. While working with the colleges and universities the program's advisory board will continue to develop courses to prepare the students for college-level courses. Montgomery College has articulated an agreement with Montgomery County Public Schools to accept six credits toward their Landscape Technology associate degree program.

Ball envisions the potential of 1,000 students graduating from the cluster career pathways program. If this model is followed throughout the country, community colleges and universities will have an excellent recruitment resource. Furthermore with the education and experience these students will be bringing to the college classroom faculties will be challenged with the need

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SCHOOL RULES

"We've had some phenomenal support from industry partners who've engaged in the recruiting process and partnered with us to help improve... it's knowledge of what the industry is all about, and all of the opportunities in the industry," Richards says. "They're continuing to try to communicate that to high-level administrators within our 11 school districts and perspective students who express an interest in exploring our program."

Paluch helped engineer that interest a few years ago by staging a tree planting at a school where the principals gathered for a meeting.

"The principals of the high schools became interested who then started talking to their counselors and saying, 'hey, consider sending some kids to this program,'" Paluch says. Richards next class went from a single-digit student count to the maximum number of 24. It's certainly assured the center won't be closing its doors like other programs have had to do.

"We got together and created a little challenge to Dave in getting out, getting into the living rooms of the students and meeting with the parents, bring the parents in," Paluch says. "I would talk to the parents about the future of the industry and let them know the financial piece. So many times there is a



Auburn's advisory board

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