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ACUTABOVE

GREEN INDUSTRY MAINTENANCE LEADERS » BY DAN JACOBS

It's a matter of accountability. "Our people have a clear understanding of what they are supposed to deliver and are measured on that," says **Martin Cleary**, owner along with his brother Mike, of Cleary Brothers Landscape, Danville, CA. The Clearys have built a successful enterprise by rewarding decision makers and letting them make decisions that affect their rewards. "They are given power to make decisions and also make mistakes," Martin Cleary says. "As an owner, I am always available for council but I expect my people to take action. I have high expectations, but I don't expect absolute perfection."



Martin Cleary runs one of the largest landscaping companies in California.

INSIDE INFO

Company: Cleary Brothers Landscape

Headquarters: Danville, CA

Year founded: 1987

Employees: 165 full-time

Annual revenue: \$10 million

Services offered: Landscape construction, landscape maintenance, arborist services

Key to being a maintenance leader: Our key has been the same since day one. Do great work and love our customer. We make every effort to provide a top-level experience for our customers. We don't accept shoddy work. Every person in our company is trained to respect our customers in every action that we take. This is a primary part of our culture. All of our employees consider themselves as professionals and take pride in the work that they do. We have great people on staff. Great people attract great people. Great people also attract great customers.

tion systems, pest control choices, sustainable landscaping processes, management information systems, and compliance. Without a strong staff, this is a huge challenge to the landscape contractor.

» **Downward Push.** Pricing pressure is going to continue to get worse for the next two years.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

» **Water Management.** In many parts of the country water is in short supply. Being expert in managing that resource is a huge opportunity for the landscape contractor. Getting educated through trade groups and vendors on technology and techniques is a key to success.

» **Renovation Work.** In order to keep property values up in a tough market, the property has to look better than the competition. Renovation will always be an opportunity, particularly in the smaller commercial arena.

» **The Proper Attitude.** Being positive in a negative world. People, it's a buyers market right now for top talent. While others are putting the brakes on, this is the time to recruit.

TOP TRENDS

» **Sustainability.** There is a real movement toward sustainable and responsible landscaping. Our industry has matured and so have our customers. Commercial customers expect to deal with professional firms.

» **Mutual Growth.** Property owners expect more from their landscaper than just horticultural care. They expect a partner, a company that will give them support and input that helps to meet their goals.

» **Accountability.** We don't micromanage our managers. They are given power to make decisions and also make mistakes. When mistakes are made I only expect action to fix the mistake.

TOP OBSTACLES

» **A Down Economy.** Most landscape companies are small and are going to have a hard time competing with the larger firms. If a company has sales under \$5 million overhead is going to be very difficult to dilute. To thrive in this economy, the landscaper has to have people focused on sales, marketing, production, customer service, and accounting.

» **Expertise.** To be on top, the landscaper has to be expert in a variety of topics: advanced irriga-

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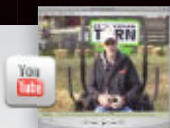
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Mac vs. PC: I choose Door No. 3

Even though my first computer was an Apple IIc, I've been a Windows guy for years. I'm comfortable on a PC. My Dell Latitude 630 has been a great little laptop for me. But recently, I was given a 15-in. MacBook Pro, and I have to admit, I'm impressed. The real question, yet to be answered, is: Will I switch?

Judging from all of the commercials, you could easily guess that Windows users and Mac users don't see eye to eye. You might even have the impression that Windows users are either nerds or the All-America Average Joes who love their computers. Conversely, Mac users are either hip twenty-somethings or out-of-touch elitists.

It's easy to see the marketing machines at both companies running at full tilt. It's somewhat more difficult to cut through the noise and get a sense of which system works better.

For me, a computer has to fit my needs. It's just a tool, a means to an end. It's not a fashion or political statement. Getting things done is the key. My daily workload consists of software development, email, social media, finance and, of course, article writing. My computer is also my launching point to the most important tool available to me: the

Internet. It's interesting that, with the exception of social media, those tasks haven't changed for me for more than 15 years. I think it's safe to say that, independent of my computer's operating system, I'll be doing these same tasks for many years to come.

I like my Windows PC because I'm comfortable with it. I understand how things work. The standard keystrokes have become second nature to me. I have all of the software tools I need to get things done, both quickly and efficiently. Unlike the message I hear from Apple commercials, I run Windows Vista and like it. It just works.

Now that I've had a chance to play with my new MacBook Pro, however, there are several things that are really nice. First, the multi-touch track pad works like a dream. Using two fingers to scroll, three fingers to move top or bottom, and four fingers to view all of my running applications is really nice. The solid, glossy, smooth laptop hardware definitely lives up to the Apple hype. And surprisingly enough, I'm finding Mac versions of my favorite software. From a developer's perspective, it's also nice to have access to the underlying Unix operating system. It's been a bit of a learning curve understanding where things are and how to be efficient, but certainly manageable.

So, do I now consider myself a Mac guy? It's interesting. Through learning more about the Mac, I've come to realize that my ability to transition from Windows to Mac has less to do with the features or functionality of either system. It has everything to do with the fact that my computing life is now solidly out in the Internet. Most of my software tools reside on Web sites I can get to from either a Windows PC or a Mac. And while I like both computers, it has become clear to me that they both equally provide access to the one tool I can't do without: the Internet. I suspect that in the years to come, computers will be seen as just a gateway to the Internet.

As for Windows vs. Mac: I choose the Internet.



It's easy to see the **marketing machines** at both companies **running at full tilt**. It's somewhat more difficult to cut through the noise and get a sense of **which system works better**.

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TOURING • THE *trials*

THE CALIFORNIA SPRING TRIALS SHOWED OFF NEW VARIETIES AND PLANT TRENDS.

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

FROM GILROY TO ENCINITAS, and all the stops in between, the new and yet-to-be-released cultivars were on display for a week in April during the 2010 California Spring Trials. Growers, retailers and landscapers who want to know what's new and what's next attend the annual event. This year's displays didn't disappoint.

In what is perhaps a sign of an improving economy, visitor traffic reports were up this year, compared to last year's trials, despite the timing of the 2010 event.

"We were all very surprised by the turnout, especially since the event was extra late this year (due to how Easter fell on the calendar) and most growers were deeply involved in spring crops already," says Dean Bemis, broker account manager for Syngenta Flowers.

Expanding color ranges

"There was, as always, a plethora of color on display," says Steve Carver of the trials. Carver is manager, Technical Education at OFA — An Association of Floriculture Professionals. He and his OFA companions made 13 stops along the trial trail this year. "Everyone is trying to push the border on the color range of their product lines. This year, the stand-out for me was the black petunia."

"The Ball FloraPlant Black Velvet Petunia — the world's only black petunia — certainly wowed at this year's trials," says Jennifer Neujahr, product marketing manager for PanAmerican Seed, a Ball Horticultural brand. "Black is the perfect complement to other colors and can create drama in the landscape and in mixed containers."

That drama stems from the contrast between light and dark, which was a popular theme in this year's displays.

"Contrasting colors seemed to make a bigger impression this year: blue set off by orange, red set off by green or yellow," says Bemis. "Using contrasting colors of any kind was of great interest. It's an economical way to

A rainbow of colors greeted visitors to Goldsmith Seeds/Syngenta Flowers' trials in Gilroy, CA.

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make a big impact as fewer plants can be used but they 'pop' and are very striking."

What landscapers learned

In addition to seeing new varieties, landscapers who attended this year's trials were able to see what the industry is doing to promote sustainability, pick up marketing ideas, and learn how to better maintain the plants they install for clients.

"What's exciting about Spring Trials is the inspiration it provides to all attendees," says Faith Savage, retail account manager for Syngenta Flowers. "That certainly holds true for landscapers and the growers who serve them. At Spring Trials, it's our mission to create landscape displays that inspire and motivate."

In addition to inspiration, landscapers at the trials were able to determine what new plants they should order this year for maximum impact.

"The landscape market segment wanted to see cultivars that were not necessarily the least expensive on a

per plant basis, but that could fill in a big space so the number of plants per bed was reduced," says Bemis. "TigerEye rudbeckia, Volumnia begonia, and Xtreme impatiens would be good examples from our seed assortment. Believe it or not, the Picobella milliflora petunia is very spreading and thus falls into this category."

Carver says landscapers should attend the trials to get the big picture of the plant options that are available.

"Landscape design and maintenance is based on sound science, but it is art that composes its heart and soul," he says. "If an artist would not attempt to paint a portrait or a landscape mural without a full pallet of color at his disposal,

For more information on the 2010 trials, including complete interviews and dozens of pictures, visit www.landscapemanagement.net/livescapes/.



Black was the new black at Ball Horticultural Company's trials in Santa Paula, CA.

why would a landscape professional attempt to 'paint' or maintain a living landscape without at least knowing the pallet options at their disposal? The California Spring Trials provides landscaping professionals with the ideas and materials to keep properties they design and manage fresh, fashionable ... and profitable." 🌿

Gooch is a freelance writer based in Northeast Ohio. Contact him at jamie@goochandgooch.com.

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Well red

Benary's new *Gaillardia x grandiflora* 'Arizona Red Shades' is the first red gaillardia from seed, according to the company. This FastraX perennial flowers the first year without vernalization, and offers an excellent branching habit. Its masses of flowers bloom throughout the summer, and offer impact in beds, pots or mixed containers. Benary.com

Variiegated beauty

Twist of Lime Variiegated Abelia from Garden Debut has bright yellow leaves with green centers when young, maturing later in the season to ivory and green. It produces blooms of fragrant, white-tinged-pink clusters of trumpet-shaped flowers (up to 5/8 in. long), which appear from late spring to fall. Dusty pink "ruffs" of sepals last after the petals are gone. This Abelia hybrid is a rounded, spreading, multi-stemmed shrub in the honeysuckle family. It typically grows to a mature height of about 4½ ft., especially in Zones 6-10. GardenDebut.com



Plum delicious

The purple leaves on Terra Nova Nurseries' Heuchera 'Sugar Plum' make a full mound of evergreen foliage. Silvery pink flowers rise 26 in. above the soil and frequently rebloom. Hardy in Zones 4-9, this perennial coral bell plant likes moist, well-drained soil. It thrives in mixed beds, borders, understory, containers and entryways. TerraNovaNurseries.com

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G.P.S. Speedometer	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 m.p.h. Transport Speed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Locking Caster System	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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CEO Burt Sperber explains the ValleyCrest way as part of a site visit to the company's Las Vegas offices.

EXECUTIVE

It's a sustainable world; we're just living in it.

BY **DANIEL G. JACOBS** MANAGING EDITOR

Sustainability.

Get used to the word. You'll be hearing it a lot more. In fact, if you haven't already, it's probably because you haven't been paying attention.

Whether it's developing a sustainable business model or adopting "more green" business practices, "sustainability" was a theme thread throughout the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET's) Executive Forum held in Las Vegas in February.

It might seem ironic to hold a conference dealing with sustainability in a city known for excess, but presenters repeated the theme throughout the event. And the event's 270 attendees, including 70 first-timers, were presented with a wealth of information from Green Industry veterans, consultants and a well-regarded economist.

A tour of the top

The folks of ValleyCrest Landscape Cos. do a lot of things well. Perhaps most important is founder, chairman and CEO Burt Sperber's ability to adapt to fit the changing needs of clients. And that hasn't changed in the company's 60-year history.

"Burt doesn't do anything small," says Tom Donnelly, president of ValleyCrest Landscape Development, a division of ValleyCrest Cos., perfectly describing the site visit hosted by the company's Las Vegas office.

With nearly \$1 billion in revenue in 2009 and almost 10,000 employees in 112 offices, ValleyCrest gave Executive Forum attendees an insider's glimpse of one of the Green Industry's largest operations. Those who participated in the facility tour got to hear about how the company continues to evolve. ValleyCrest has embraced the sustainable movement, examining its supply chain and business practices, as well as the expected outcomes.

"We're a little behind the curve," explains Kelly Duke, ValleyCrest's vice president of pre-construction. Duke says sustainability is achieved when the company meets its environmental, social and economic goals.

One concern many people have about sustainability is the perceived expense associated with it, but Duke argues that "sustainable practices need not be a cost."



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