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P R O V E N S O L U T I O N S



BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author is a partner with the Wilson-Oyler Group. He can be reached at bwilson@questex.com.

Identify your at-risk clients

Maintenance contractors have faced — and will continue to face — competitive invasion of their base contracts in what remains a “take away” environment. Until new construction rebounds, the competition remains fierce as contractors try to protect their existing contract base and grow by taking others’ work. Prices are down significantly over the last two seasons as price-conscious buyers take advantage of the highly competitive environment.

Many contractors have taken significant hits to their contract base, while others have managed to hold on. Some contractors have stubbornly resisted lowering prices and have paid a price in lost contracts. Lowering prices can save contracts, but no one really wants to go there if they do not have to.

We believe there is a partial solution in identifying your most at-risk clients, and coming up with a creative strategy to lock them in. It involves becoming hyper-observant, trying to understand your clients’ businesses, and anticipating their pain.

We have created a checklist of things that can put a client at risk (see Table 1). If you and your account managers look at all of your jobs and assess them against this list, it will help you determine relative risk. There is no specific scoring system, but the more risk factors present, the more in jeopardy the property becomes to being stolen.

If you use this tool to rate each of your jobs, you can decide where to focus attention. Often, the account manager can take this information early on and meet with the client to see how serious these factors come into play with the client. This allows you to take a proactive approach to finding a win-win solution.

For example, if the client is experiencing a high vacancy rate, curb appeal will still be important, but short-term cash flow could be an issue. Offering a lower price for a new contract could be appealing, while you provide for an escalation to a higher price as the vacancy rate goes down. Or it might be attractive to include mulching in the contract price for a year, if you can get an extension at the current price. This gives the client a discount, now, when they need it, and returns you to a more acceptable price when things improve.

Do not underestimate your competition. Most good contractors are very in tune to with options to entice the client to change, and they will most likely offer things similar to what you can come up with. Your single advantage can be “trust.” If you have built a trusting relationship with your clients and are proactive in approaching them before they have to come to you or go out to bid, you hold the advantage in working something out favorable to you. Train your staff to look for the risk factors, and take action while you hold that advantage.

TABLE 1: RISK FACTORS POTENTIALLY RESULTING IN CLIENT LOSS

Client or job	Vacancy rate	Business health	Business sector health	Change in ownership	Change in client contact	Change in our contact	Other contractors work w/ client	Price-sensitive client	Won job on low bid	Recent service glitch	Risk rating: low (L) medium (M) high (H)
Job one	L	M	M	M	L	L	H	H	M	L	
Job two	H	L	M	M	M	H	L	L	L	M	
Job three	L	L	M	L	L	M	M	M	H	H	

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"2009 was our first-time at GIE+EXPO and we enjoyed the complete experience. From the new products and innovations to the demo area and the education sessions, we got a lot out of the show. We're planning to come back in 2010 just to keep up with the industry's newest trends."

Doug McDuff, President
Landscape America
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Ornamental OPPORTUNITIES

CONSUMERS ARE LOOKING AT ORNAMENTALS IN A NEW LIGHT. BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

YOUR CLIENTS MAY not know the difference between herbaceous perennials and woody ornamentals, but they know what they want. Creating educated landscape customers is a worthy goal, but don't forget to listen and learn from them as well.

"Landscapers shouldn't be lumping everything into plant categories, like trees, shrubs and perennials," says Debbie Lonnee, planning and administration manager at Bailey Nurseries Inc., Newport, MN. Bailey is one of the largest wholesale nurseries in the country. "They are all plants and can work in harmony. So many times we try to lump everything into a neat category, but the lines are becoming blurred. Shrubs are being used as annuals. Hey, whatever makes the customer happy!"

Craving color

This year, color is making the customer happy. And it doesn't matter if that color comes from blooms or foliage. Landscapers have the opportunity to weave ornamental trees and



Landscapers looking for something different in large-scale groundcover shrubs could move away from *Diervilla lonicera* to the new *Diervilla Cool Splash*, introduced by the Landscape Plant Development Center.

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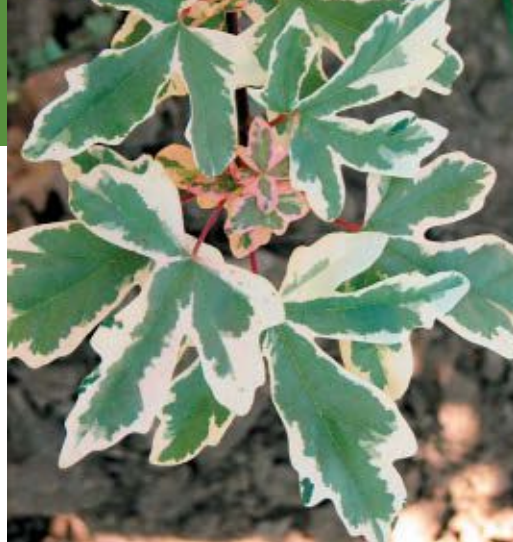
shrubs with distinctive shapes and foliage colors into the landscape.

Year-round color and interest from spring blooms, fall color and winter bark should all be taken into account when satisfying your customers' requests for color. Many consumers have also become enamored with variegated leaves. Clumps of green are becoming out of vogue, says Lonnee.

Edibles remain popular

Some of that color may even be good enough to eat.

According to The Garden Writers Association Foundation's (GWAFF) Late Spring Gardening Trends Research Report for the 2010 gardening season, more consumers are planning on adding a vegetable garden or herb garden. This



Top Variegated foliage, like this on *Acer campestre* Carnival, adds interest without blooms.

Bottom Landscapers can find improvements in new *Hydrangea*, from the reblooming *Endless Summer*, to the new types of *Hydrangea paniculata*, including more dwarf forms and improved flowers.

continues the edible landscape trend identified in last year's report that showed more than 41 million U.S. households (38%) grew a vegetable garden in 2009, more than 19.5 million households (18%) grew an herb garden and 16.5 million households (15%) grew fruits.

"Fruits in general have been a very strong category for us, whether it is a fruit tree such as apple, pear or plum, or any type of small fruit, from blueberry to currants, gooseberries and raspberries," Lonnee says. "We can't keep enough rhubarb in stock."

When planting edible plants, make sure the client is aware of the mainte-

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Small berries, whether on strictly ornamental plants or on edibles, add splashes of color to the landscape.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

No one can accurately predict what the economy will be like in the years to come, but a little soothsaying shows this might be a good time to profit from trees and shrubs.

Woody plants are readily available this season. There may even be an oversupply of them. However, it's likely that growers may cut back on production during the recent economic downturn. Because of the relatively long turn around time between planting and installation of trees and shrubs, supplies could be more limited even if the market picks up in the near future. If so, low supply and high demand could lead to price increases.

Volatility is not something growers enjoy. Many are willing to work with landscapers to custom grow plants for them, which can be a lifesaver on long-term projects.

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nance that comes with many fruiting trees and shrubs. Many drop their fruit. However, there are ornamentals that don't leave a big mess, such as flowering crab apples, or produce small berries that are taken up by birds — often before ever hitting the ground.


Big ideas for small spaces

Designing a small landscape space? Don't rule out ornamentals. There are plenty of dwarf trees and shrubs from which to choose.

"We love the new Rocket series of barberries from PlantHaven," says Lonnee. "In the upper Midwest, people are looking for a substitute from the banned columnar buckthorn, and anything columnar and small fits the bill."

New shrubs and trees bred to fit small spaces can help landscape professionals

do a lot with a little space. Plant breeders have also made great strides in drought tolerance and disease resistance.

"Get to know your supplier's salespeople, and keep up on new plant trends," says Lonnee. "So many suppliers have open houses and tours and can show you what is in production." 

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

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THE STATE OF *color*

Contractors learn about new varieties during Ball Horticulture's Landscape Day.

CONTRACTORS BELIEVE the market for annuals might wither like, well, a drought-stricken annual in the heat of the noonday sun.

According to a survey conducted by Ball Horticulture, 75% of landscape contractors say the number of color change-outs will stay the same or decrease over the next three years. At the same time, 96% expect their expenditures for perennials will stay the same or increase during the same period.

"This year has been flat-line stable for us," said Ed Mrozinski, a buyer for Acres Landscape, Wauconda, IL. Mrozinski was part of a panel of growers and contractors at Ball Landscape Day, held last month at Ball's headquarters in West Chicago, IL. Ball released its 2010 Landscape Contractor Survey at the event.

CONTRACTORS EXPECT THE PERENNIAL PLANT MARKET TO GROW WHILE ANNUALS MARKET TAKES A DIP. BUT NO MATTER WHAT THEY'RE LOOKING FOR, GROWERS CAN BE A CONTRACTOR'S BEST FRIEND.

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS

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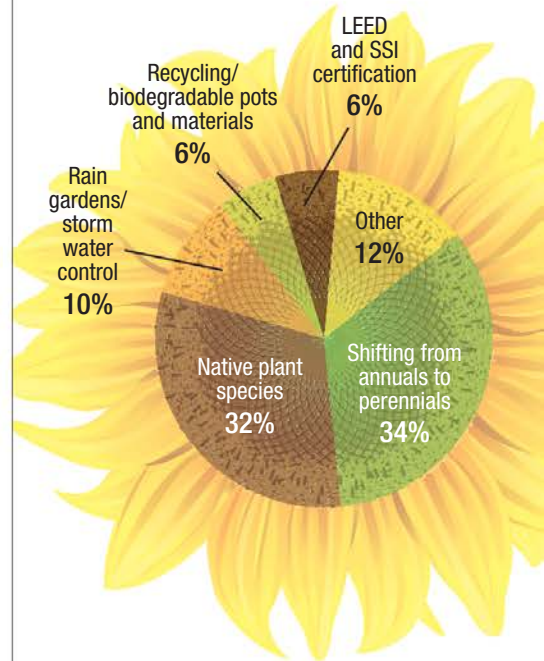
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> SURVEY

Which ONE of the following areas pertaining to landscape sustainability are your clients asking you about the MOST?



Notable trends

When asked which area pertaining to landscape sustainability clients are asking about most, nearly 34% responded “shifting from annuals to perennials.” The second most common response was “native plant species” at 32%.

Fewer annuals mean fewer color change-outs, which could have an impact on the bottom line.

“I like annuals,” said Bruce Hellerick, senior horticulturist for Brickman. “I’m very nervous for the industry right now.”

Whether it’s annuals or perennials, when contractors are looking for new varieties, the most popular source of information is to speak with the local grower. And nearly nine in 10 contractors (88%) are willing to trial those new varieties on customer jobsites. Just over half of contractors (51%) want growers to trial samples at the grower’s production facility. 🌱

Results based on Ball Horticulture survey with responses from 376 U.S. landscape contractors, 29% commercial and 46% residential, primarily maintenance (49%) and design/build (29%).

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