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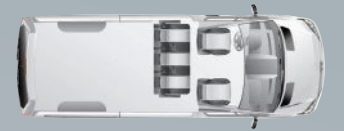


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Sustainable

Some landscape companies are growing greener now to earn mega-watt savings in the future.

BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR

POWER

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ORE AND MORE, landscape businesses are putting even more green into the Green Industry. Some recycle natural waste from job sites back into the

property. Some encourage their clients to use smart controllers to conserve water. And some propel their equipment with cleaner-burning fuels.

But contractors like these are ramping up their ecological efforts even more. They're putting their sustainable efforts into practice not only in their customers' yards — but in their own.

Solar energy

In August, Ruppert Landscape completed construction of a solar field at its Laytonsville, MD headquarters. The roughly million-dollar project consists of 988 solar panels on three-quarters of an acre, making it the largest non-institutional ground-mounted solar farm in the region.

Ruppert Landscape President Chris Davitt says the company implemented the solar field for two reasons. "One, we wanted to be greener. We think it's our obligation, and we want to make less of a footprint on this earth.

"Two, a lot of it is what our customers are looking for. Not all of them are waving the green banner and asking for it up front, but when we bring up our green practices, almost all of our customers are interested."

Ruppert Landscapes' solar farm led to the elimination of the company's \$40,000 annual electric bill.



Without financial incentives, however, constructing the solar field would not have been feasible. Government grants and renewable energy credits made it possible. Ruppert obtained a federal grant worth 30% of the project's value. That grant offsets solar field construction costs, Davitt says.

In addition, Ruppert receives a payment for the sale of its solar renewable energy credits (SRECs) through a local power provider. The payments for the energy credits should continue for the next 20 years, the solar panels' total life expectancy.

"The revenue from the sale of our SRECs started at \$83,000 a year, and

it will diminish gradually," Davitt says. "In the latter years we'd be getting \$10,000 a year."

Given those financial incentives, "from a return on an investment standpoint, it's a no-brainer," Davitt says.

Before creating the solar field, Ruppert's annual electric bill totaled \$40,000. Now, those costs have been eliminated; the solar field is big enough to provide all of the electricity for Ruppert's Laytonsville, MD corporate campus.

Between electricity savings, the sale of solar renewable energy credits, the grant and the bonus depreciation of the asset, Davitt expects the solar field to pay for itself within seven years.



The amount of carbon emissions solar energy generation produces

Whether a long-term or short-term financial investment, “sustainability does go hand in hand with reducing costs,” Davitt says.

So why aren’t more companies rushing to use solar energy? “One, you need land,” Davitt says. “The other reason is, a lot of people aren’t aware of the government grants and credits. But a lot of these things tend to catch on, and they catch on quickly. Ultimately, as more people invest in solar technology the costs are going to drop. It just depends on how quickly people invest in it.”

DeSantis Landscapes installed 20 solar panels on its roof in May 2008. According to Dean DeSantis, president of the Salem, OR-based company, the 3.9-kilowatt system provides 15% of the total power needs at DeSantis Landscapes’ headquarters.

“I think it’s been a good thing for the business,” says DeSantis, relenting that the solar energy constitutes a relatively small percentage of his company’s overall power.

“There isn’t a huge impact there,” he says, “but the statement that it makes about the direction that our company is going, it just kind of fits with our overall branding message that we’re a greener company and we support alternative energies.”

DeSantis Landscapes invested \$31,000 in its solar panel project. Those costs were offset by a federal tax credit of \$4,674, a state tax credit of \$15,580 and a \$5,700 incentive from the Energy Trust of Oregon. With a three-year return on investment, the project is now entirely paid off.

DeSantis Landscapes initiated its sustainability discussion in 2005, when it was in the midst of strategizing for its future.

“It kind of came out that each one of us was interested in the environment and it was kind of like, ‘Why aren’t we doing something about this?’” DeSantis says.

Like Ruppert and DeSantis, Pacific Landscape Management in Hillsboro, OR installed a solar system — in 2009. It produces 95% of the company’s power. Like other companies that

employ solar power, Pacific president Bob Grover says that without tax incentives solar energy wouldn't have been feasible for the company.

"Quite frankly, there was a great financial incentive for us to do that, so it was an easy decision," says Grover.

Pacific received a 30% federal tax credit the first year and a state tax credit worth 10% annually over five years. In all, 90% of the solar project's cost was covered through federal and state tax credits and grants.

Pacific's 35-kilowatt solar panel array cost about \$250,000, "but after all tax credits and grants paid out, my costs were about \$25,000," Grover says. "It's a good deal. I still had a seven-year return on investment, but after the seventh year our power will be free. In the long term, we're going to save money."

And because many people in the Northwest are environmentally conscious, "it's good for our marketing," he adds.

Solar power works well for Pacific, and Grover has no regrets about following through with the project. But he does say that though solar energy is the future, it's not cost effective.

Parry Webb, director of sales and business development for Littleton,



CO-based Terracare Associates, agrees.

"We have to be able to be cost effective with any changes that we make," he says. "There's been quite a lot of talk about solar, but it depends on the scope of your business. For us, it becomes economically impractical."

Edible garden

Terracare Associates may not be joining the solar revolution, but it does focus on other types of sustainability at its offices. It uses smart controllers to conserve water at its headquarters, and it's an advocate of "edible" vegetable gardens for commercial properties.

Thanks to Terracare Associates Vice President Bill Horn, who drove the project, the company removed turf at its Bay Area Martinez, CA branch last spring to plant an edible garden.

By removing the turf, the company reduced the water and chemical use turf maintenance requires yet still made use of the land. "It's a way of replacing turf with a more sustainable landscape," Webb says.

"It's like farming in an urban environment."

Some of Terracare Associates' irrigation professionals also planted an edible garden at Terracare's Littleton office, building the frame out of used pallets and filling the boxes with recycled soil from clients' landscaping sites. The garden sprouted greens and vegetables for company staff all summer.

Sustainability is "really at the heart of what we do," says Webb. "The

DeSantis Landscapes' solar array provides about 15% of its office energy needs.

sustainability movement in landscape is evolving, and I think for most people, because you're in landscape, they assume you're sustainable because you're around plants. But there's always a right way and a wrong way to maintain sustainable landscapes."

Rain garden

Other than its solar project, Pacific has taken many other steps toward sustainability. It's reduced its chemical use, converted its equipment to lower emission models, built a 10-foot vertical garden at its facility — and installed a rain garden there.

To create the rain garden, Pacific disconnected its downspout so water would no longer flow into a storm sewer. Thus, water from the roof now pours directly onto the garden and into its soil.

"The advantage of a rain garden is, it reduces runoff," Grover says. "The storm sewer flows into the local creeks. By planting our rain garden, we're trying to get the water to go back into the soil, thereby easing the stress on our sewer system."

Although rain gardens are best installed as part of a building's original design, Pacific removed part of the existing landscape at its headquarters to make room for its rain garden, which Grover emphasizes features both native and non-native plants.

"There's a really big push in landscape design today to utilize native

continued on page 16

“ ”
From a return
on an investment
standpoint,
it's a no-brainer.

— RUPPERT LANDSCAPE PRESIDENT
CHRIS DAVITT, ON THE COMPANY'S
USE OF SOLAR POWER

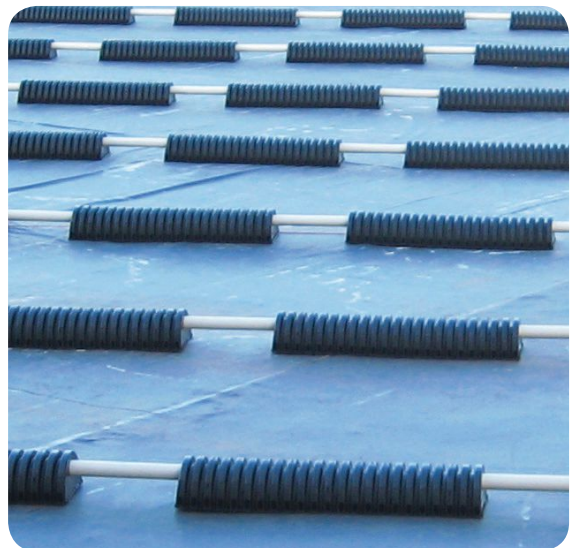
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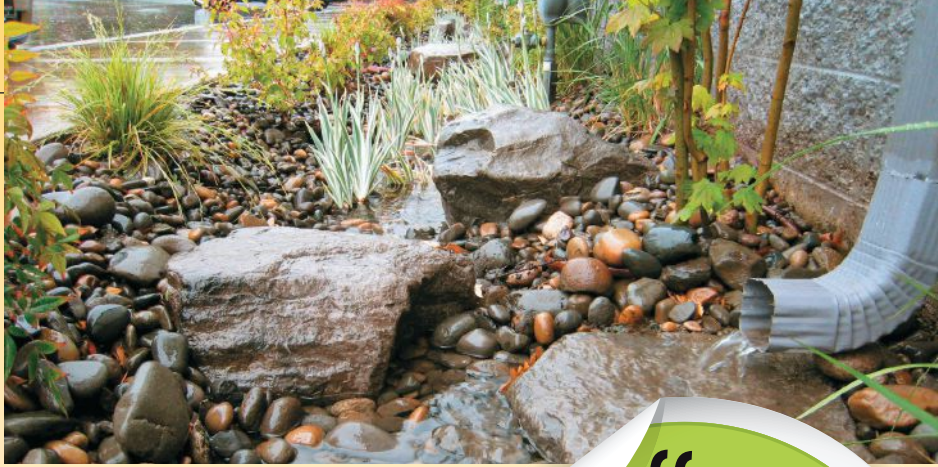
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continued from page 14

plant material, and the theory behind it is that indigenous plant material is acclimated to our weather or our climate,” Grover says. “The problem is, many urban landscapes are not similar to the native environment.”

Non-native plants that can adapt to soil and exposure perform better and



“ ”
 We’re trying to show people that by selecting the right plant materials and maintaining them in a certain way the garden will have long-term viability.

— PACIFIC LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT
 PRESIDENT BOB GROVER, ON THE
 COMPANY’S OFFICE
 RAIN GARDEN



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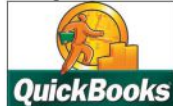
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require less maintenance than some native plants, Grover asserts.

“We’re trying to show people that by selecting the right plant materials and maintaining them in a certain way the garden will have long-term viability,” he says.

Rainwater harvesting

In October, Dallas, TX-based Lambert Landscape Co. was one of three companies awarded The Professional Landcare Network’s (PLANET’s) 2011 Sustainable Company Award. The award is given to companies that show environmental consciousness at their workplace through things like water conservation, waste management and pollution reduction.

Lambert has been an entirely organic company since the 1980s and employs many ecological practices — including recycling and forbidding the use of plastic bags.

Though some of those practices are common throughout the industry, rainwater harvesting is less common. And Lambert has been practicing it for

PHOTOS COURTESY: PACIFIC LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT (THIS PAGE); LAMBERT LANDSCAPE CO.



Lambert Landscape Co. collects its rainwater in this 30,000-gallon holding tank then uses it to make compost tea.

two-and-a-half years now.

“We collect all of our own rainwater in a 30,000-gallon holding tank,” explains Lambert Director of Garden Services Jodi Joseph. The reclaimed water is added to Lambert Landscape’s compost tea to make a concentrate. Then, seven times a year, the concentrate is applied to all of the 224 properties Lambert maintains.

Lambert’s ecological advocacy “comes from the top down,” says Lambert Director of Garden Development Jud Griggs. “We try to mini-

mize our carbon footprint on the world.”

Ruppert, too, practices rainwater harvesting, at both its corporate headquarters and its facility in Lilburn, GA.

At its Lilburn facility, Ruppert installed a well and a 10,000-gallon cistern

to collect and store captured rainwater and runoff from its roofs and existing irrigation systems. The reclaimed water is used to irrigate the Lilburn facility’s nursery holding yard and landscape, and to wash company vehicles.

The project, completed in June of 2009, took one week to install and cost about \$26,000. Ruppert expects the project to “completely pay for itself in just over three years’ time,” Davitt says.

With the rainwater harvesting project, the Lilburn facility went from using 2 million gallons of water annu-

ally (and spending an average of \$9,000 annually on water bills) to using just 96,000 gallons of water annually (and spending \$500 annually on water bills).

Over the next seven years, Ruppert expects to save nearly \$47,000 and approximately 13 million gallons of water.

“Our average monthly water bills before the project were around \$1,400 and have dropped to just \$60 a month since the project’s completion,” Davitt says.

Whether landscape companies show their environmental consciousness through large-scale company projects like solar fields and rainwater harvesting or smaller ones such as recycling and gardening doesn’t matter. What does matter, DeSantis says, is “everyone’s looking to get on board, which is good. We want to see the industry shift a bit. And we’re starting to see it happen.” **LMI**

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THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

The author, owner-manager of 3PG Consulting, is a 25-year industry veteran. Reach him at kkehoe@questex.com.

Winning in 2012

It is becoming increasingly clear that 2012 is shaping up to be an even tougher year than 2011 — which itself as it turned out was much tougher than 2010. This means that cash conservation and organization focus are more important and interrelated than ever.

We must get our costs in line with our revenue and production realities. This starts with a conservative revenue projection. We need a revenue projection not based on hope. It should be a projection that is married to an objective alignment of overhead staffing in sales, account management and operations with the new industry benchmarks (Table 1).

The table outlines what is possible from a personal performance perspective for several key positions. These benchmarks are real and represent the target range for the high-end profit makers in the industry. More than anything else, they demonstrate a clear principle that people in these positions are expected to and are in fact doing and producing more than ever.

Innovation is driving this trend. Specifically, innovations in information systems wedded to

management practices that enable people in these key positions to successfully take on more work and responsibility. The simple fact is that most people in these positions waste too much time chasing the urgent versus the critical. I am not suggesting that they are not working and trying hard, but I am stating that they are often only 60% effective. That is expensive for you.

The only way to remedy this expensive problem is to directly manage people and functions at a detailed level that focuses on forecasting (not just reviewing) key performance numbers.

Take the account management job. The key performance numbers for this job are typically account retention, enhancement sales, and customer satisfaction. Performing well requires account-related activities that cost the account managers time. If that time is not planned and allocated for, then when account managers get busy time slips away. And it can never be recovered. The loss of time too often results in loss of renewals, quality problems and lower than budget enhancement sales.

Today's leading software provides information for managing numbers on a real-time basis — at a reasonable cost. What software systems can't do is turn that information into decisions that manage the most limited and expensive of all resources — time.

This is management — information combined with prioritization that provides leadership and direction. If we want to make money next year, we have to conserve cash. To conserve cash we have to minimize overhead staffing costs while maximizing effectiveness. To minimize overhead staffing costs, we have to get people to do more. To get people to do more we have to manage time looking through the windshield instead of the rearview mirror. More than ever, time is money.

TABLE 1: BENCHMARKS

	Minimum	Target
New sales production		
Grounds maintenance	\$750,000	\$1,000,000
Design/build	\$150,000	\$2,000,000
Bid build	\$400,000	\$5,000,000
Account management		
Contract and upsell value	\$1,500,000	\$2,000,000
Retention	90%	95%
Operations management		
Contract crews managed	5	8
Retention	90%	95%





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AT A GLANCE

TITLE: Founder & President

COMPANY: Majestic Lawn Care and Landscape

YEAR FOUNDED: 1993

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 25

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT

(ASSOCIATIONS): PLANET, ISA, SIMA, NYS Turfgrass Assoc., NYS Nursery & Landscape Assoc., Professional Landscape Assoc. of Rockland County.

FAMILY: Wife Jenn, stepson Nick, daughter Emma, & Joseph IV is arriving any day now!

WEBSITE: <http://www.majesticlawn-andlandscape.com/>

It's a wonder **Joe Holland** has time to run a business. "I am currently in two tribute bands; Robot Slaves (Black Sabbath) & Stiff Upper Lip (AC/DC), which play the Tri-State area," says Holland, a drummer and owner of Majestic Lawn Care and Landscape, New York City. Holland got his first gig playing in clubs at 18 and his first job on the road at 22. "I toured around the United States and Canada for three years, which was a blast," he says. "In the winter of 2003 I helped develop the score and played drums in the off-Broadway play 'Heat Lightening.' I have done a lot of recording studio work, concerts, club gigs and touring." He talks with *LM* about his place in the industry.

What made you want to start Majestic Lawn Care and Landscape? I got married and thought I needed a "real job", so I went to work for a friend's lawn maintenance company, and by the end of the summer I bought a small company of my own. In September of 1993 Majestic Lawn Care & Landscape was born.

What makes your company unique? Great customer service, our honesty and we don't mislead our customers. We are constantly tweaking and improving our systems to better serve our customers. Our customers really like that their phone calls/messages are promptly returned. They'll have the same crew each year and know them by name. Our team leaders know our customers' likes and dislikes because they have worked with them in previous years. One of our maintenance team leaders helped start the company with me, and

two other maintenance team leaders came on board soon after. Most of our team leaders worked their way up the ladder and have been here for many years, which helps things run more smoothly.

Can you describe your market and your customers? Our market is predominately middle to upper middle class. We are in a suburb of NYC, and our customers run the gamut, as you might expect being only 30 minutes from Manhattan. We rarely hear from the majority of our customers, however, a handful of them never stop calling. We do our best to keep them all happy.

What challenges do you see in the lawn care segment of the industry and how do you deal with it? Over regulation!

There seems to be a small segment of our community that makes so much noise with false or misleading information that they are scaring the public at large, and sometimes they get away with it. We regularly mail out leaflets describing the chemical applications we do and the objectives we are trying to achieve on their property.

How has the economy affected your business? Our best year was 2008. In 2009, we came in \$500,000 below 2008 but we regrouped, tightened up our maintenance routes and saved wherever we could. This motivated us to really look at how inefficient we were running.

What's the best part of your job? The satisfaction of a job well done: 1. Spending time

with customers and selling work and 2. teaching and mentoring my employees.

What are your thoughts about the industry as we head into 2012? The lawn industry locally is getting tougher as years go by. Everyone wants a deal, which is understandable, so our angle has been about quality of service, dependability, our good standing in the community, and care after the sale. We may not be the cheapest guys out there, but you will get quality service that we stand behind.

WE MAY NOT BE THE CHEAPEST GUYS OUT THERE, BUT YOU WILL GET QUALITY SERVICE THAT WE STAND BEHIND.