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AT A GLANCE

COMPANY: Brad Johnson's LawnAmerica

FOUNDED: 1999

HEADQUARTERS: Tulsa, OK

TITLE: Founder and president

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 25

SERVICE AREA: Tulsa and surrounding area, Bartlesville, Grand Lake

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT: Longtime member of PLCAA and PLANET

NUMBER OF LOCATIONS: Three

EMPLOYEES: 40

SERVICES: Fertilization, weed and insect control, aeration, seeding, Primo Maxx applications, soil testing, mole control, snow removal during the winter

PERSONAL HIGHLIGHTS/HOBBIES: Backpacking, being with family

FAMILY: Wife, Becky, children, Jake, Katie and Luke, and three grandchildren

After building and selling one successful lawn care company to TruGreen, then starting and building a second lawn care company, **Brad Johnson** took most of the 2010 season away from his business, Brad Johnson's LawnAmerica, to hike the Appalachian Trail. The experience taught him two things: 1) People are generous; and 2) His company did pretty darn well, even without him. Now he's writing a book about the experience.

Brad, we understand you hiked the Appalachian Trail in 2010, all 2,181 miles of it. Tell us how you did it. I hiked it in three segments. I started at Springer Mountain in Georgia on May 28. That's kind of late. I got a late start and hiked more than 800 miles to central Virginia. Then I came home for a while and later in the summer hiked from Maine south for about 1,000 miles. This past December I finished the remaining 175 miles to Harpers Ferry (WV). Because I did the entire trail it's considered a thru-hike.

Why did you hike it? After I got a letter from TruGreen offering to buy my company, it started me thinking about what I would like to do if I could walk away from this business and do exactly what I wanted to do — hike the Appalachian Trail. Over a 3-month period I read books about the trail, talked to people who had done it, either all of it or some of it. And I decided I was going to do it and do it for charity.

Which charities? There are five: The Little Light House, Folds of Honor,

Young Life-Rogers, Habitat for Humanity and the Salvation Army. We put the hike out there. We publicized it. We called it AT2010 A Compassionate Journey. We developed a logo for it. We put it on our website and our guys even wore shirts last year that had the logo and sponsors on it. All American matched donations dollar for dollar. In the end we raised more than \$105,000.

Everybody on the trail has a trail nickname, what was yours? The Compassionator.

What was the toughest thing about hiking the trail? It was very hard physically but the mental and emotional challenges are even greater. Mostly being away from my family, from my wife and from my business.

Did you have any physical problems or injuries in the mountains? I had to get a

cortisone injection for a bum hip to begin with. I had shin splints, got infected toes and got a spider bite on my face. It bit me on the cheek. With some medications the swelling on my face finally went down. I had to go to the doctor about four times while I was on the trail but nothing major, thankfully.

Did you ever consider quitting? If I had dropped off the Trail after two weeks I would have looked pretty stupid. I kind of painted myself into a corner and that was partly by design. I had to finish this because so many people knew about it. You almost have to have a reason to hike the Trail and I had a reason. There were a couple of times when I hit the wall and got a little discouraged. It wasn't that I didn't think I could make it because I knew I could, but things happen.

Has the hike changed you?

The experience has made me appreciate relationships even more. My family. My friends. My employees. My customers. That's what you miss most, the relationships.

THE EXPERIENCE HAS MADE ME APPRECIATE
RELATIONSHIPS EVEN MORE. **MY FAMILY. MY FRIENDS.
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GOOSEGRASS

Eleusine indica

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This annual emerges a few weeks after crabgrass, and continues well into the summer.
- ▶ The coarse, bunch-type grass features dark green leaves that form a basal rosette of prostrate to upright flattened stems.
- ▶ Compressed stems near the base are silver or white in color.
- ▶ Flowers contain two to 10 flattened, finger-like spikes that resemble a zipper.
- ▶ The strong, extensive root system invades high-

traffic areas like athletic fields or golf courses.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Improving turfgrass health and vigor through proper fertilization and maintenance is most advantageous.
- ▶ If possible, alleviate compaction and minimize traffic. For complete control, apply a pre-emergent herbicide such as dithiopyr just prior to crabgrass germination. This timing will provide season-long control of both crabgrass and goosegrass.



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SPURGE

Euphorbia spp. (pictured: *E. maculata*)

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ Red- or purple-tinged stems and opposite leaves are common. All species emit milky sap when broken.
- ▶ Oblong leaves are smooth or sparsely hairy, reddish green to dark green in color — often with a maroon or purple spot in the center.
- ▶ The prostrate structure forms mats by branching from the base.
- ▶ This warm-season annual is found in disturbed soil, such as gardens and flower beds, along

sidewalks, and in open turf areas.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Spurge plants are prolific seed producers. Apply a spring treatment of a pre-emergent herbicide that offers residual broadleaf weed control, such as dithiopyr.
- ▶ Spurge germination is prominent in compacted soils, so alleviating compaction, or the reasons behind compaction (such as poor drainage or nematode infestations) will help keep spurge infestations from occurring.

* State restrictions on the sale and use of Dimension specialty herbicide products apply. Consult the label before purchase or use for full details.

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

CLEAN CUT

Green Industry professionals are turning to propane equipment — and not looking back.

BY BRIAN RICHESSON



Jon Dozier was a tough sell the first time through the propane lawn equipment displays at the GIE+Expo in Louisville, KY.

“I don’t know if I wasn’t looking at it right, if I couldn’t make heads or tails of it, or if I didn’t think the savings were there,” the Georgia landscaper recalls of the propane lawn mowers he glanced over several years back at the trade show before going on his way.

To that point, Dozier’s only knowledge of propane was its role in cooking steaks on the grill. So how could he take the fuel seriously and rely on it to power his Merry Acres Landscape & Lawn Maintenance mowing equipment?

His attitude changed last year

during an opportunistic visit from a local propane marketer that turned Dozier’s business upside down. Russell Lemon, a representative from Modern Gas in Albany, GA, had been pitching Dozier on the benefits of propane lawn equipment. And on this particular visit to Dozier’s Albany office, the timing couldn’t have been better.

“It happened to be the right time that we were ready to buy equipment,” says Dozier, who last June replaced his gasoline fleet with eight Gravely 60-in. zero-turn riding mowers. On top of that, the company purchased a Ford F-150 propane pickup truck.

“You have to put yourself out there and make yourself available to these guys, and when they say ‘no,’ it’s not final,” Lemon says of the propane marketers’



Clockwise from top: Propane mowers are increasingly popular with maintenance contractors. Engines on propane mowers tend to require less frequent maintenance. Merry Acres Landscape & Lawn Maintenance co-owners Jarrett Martin, left, and Jon Dozier will burn 10,000 to 12,000 gallons of propane this year running eight Gravely mowers and a Ford F-150 pickup truck.

influence on landscapers. “You have to provide them with whatever they need.”

Landscape companies around the country have been making the same discoveries as Dozier and Merry Acres co-owner Jarrett Martin: Propane can power their equipment just as well as — or better than — gasoline.

Merry's time

Merry Acres runs its equipment year-round, with Dozier estimating the firm

will burn 10,000 to 12,000 gallons of propane annually. Modern Gas installed a 1,000-gal. fueling station at Merry Acres' facility, and the companies negotiated a 12-month price on propane. At less than \$2 a gallon, that supply contract enables Merry Acres to see significant fuel savings compared to the price of gasoline.

“We've always tried to be good stewards of the environment, but what got us looking into this area was a way to save money and increase our bottom line,” Dozier says. “It is an initial upfront expense to go propane. The trucks cost more, and the mowers cost more. But we're thinking we will recoup our cost in the first year-and-a-half.”

Initially, Dozier was hesitant about the propane lawn products, wondering whether they would hold the same power and performance as those running on gasoline. But the company

has been pleased with the results, even noticing an increase in power on the propane mowers.

“We put them in some nasty situations, cleaning up a restaurant that's been shut down for a while, and they blew right through that stuff,” Dozier says. “We never heard a strain on the mower, versus gasoline where the engine would bog down or slow up.”

Maintenance is also made easier on the propane mowers, as Merry Acres can double the amount of hours (now 100) between oil changes, “so our costs of maintaining it are down on our engine side,” Dozier says.

The company's Ford F-150 is used daily by its maintenance manager to check on accounts, but Dozier remains curious how fuel mileage would fare when a propane truck is worked harder, with a trailer and a heavy load of equipment.

In March, Merry Acres purchased four conversion kits from AltFuel LLC and has been testing other lawn equipment on propane. As the company needs more equipment, Dozier says it will continue to consider propane.

Staying competitive

No company has more experience using propane lawn equipment than Competitive Lawn Service in Downers Grove, Ill. It is said to be the first company in the country to operate its commercial crew — encompassing mowers, blowers, trimmers and trucks — entirely on propane.

Competitive Lawn Service runs a converted propane fleet of 18 mowers (12 Wright Standers and six Bob-Cat and Wright walk-behinds), 12 Dolmar blowers and six Lehr trimmers. The company also runs four propane-fueled Ford F-Series trucks with Roush retrofits, and a Ford dual-fuel truck from AJ Automotive Group.

“Every machine I have out there not running on propane is killing me,” says company founder Eric Hansen, who has put Competitive Lawn Service on



PHOTOS COURTESY: MERRY ACRES LANDSCAPE & LAWN MAINTENANCE; (OPPOSITE PAGE) BRIGGS & STRATTON; (LEFT, TOP), MCCOY'S LAWN EQUIPMENT

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the alternative fuel map with his push to propane, a process that began in 2008 when gasoline prices spiked. “I’d like to stop going to the gas station at all.”

With its converted equipment fleet, the company estimates it will burn about 25,000 gallons of propane this year, running mainly April through December. United Propane, a Heritage company, helped install a 1,000-gal. fueling station at Competitive Lawn Service for convenient, cost-efficient and secure fill-ups. About 40% of that propane goes into the company’s trucks.

“They’re like rocket ships; they’re extremely fast,” Hansen says of the trucks, which travel a small radius to customer sites, less than 10 miles from the office.

With a significant differential in per-gallon fuel costs between propane and gasoline, Competitive Lawn Service is saving about \$2,500 per month. And Hansen is seeing other benefits with propane. With slight adjustments, his first converted propane mower has reached 3,500 hours in runtime, when they normally “blow up at 2,500 hours,” he says.

“What we’re finding is these engines last longer. Do they last twice as long? We haven’t proven that yet, but they are lasting longer and we’re changing the oil every 100 hours as opposed to 25 hours,” Hansen says. “If we get an engine that

Baker Commercial Landscaping, Orlando, FL, converted 38 John Deere mowers to propane last year.

lasts longer, has less emissions, that runs the same, with the same cutting, that’s how we’re picking up all that savings.”

Hansen is a self-described “small-engine guy,” always looking for ways to gain longer runtimes and advantages from his equipment. Propane, he says, is helping him to achieve his goals — and allows Competitive Lawn Service to differentiate itself in the market.

Propane perspectives

When Baker Commercial Landscaping pulled one of its converted propane mowers, in operation for the previous five months, into the garage for an oil change, it made a notable discovery.

“When we drained the oil, it came out as clear as new. It was almost crystal clear,” says Bob Jensen, sales manager for the Orlando, FL-based company. “When we pulled the spark plugs, we found next to nothing on them. Maintenance-wise, this has been a huge benefit. It’s a clean-burning way to do business, and it saves us money and time.”

With help from Heritage Propane, Baker converted 38 of its John Deere mowers — 60- and 72-in. ride-ons and 48-in. walk-behinds — to propane last year.

continued on page 31



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