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Ditch Witch

Fast, powerful, simple to operate and easy to steer, the Ditch Witch RT24 compact trencher offers a choice of high-flotation tires or heavy duty tracks, plus an optional Roto Witch boring attachment that helps you install utilities beneath driveways, sidewalks and other surface improvements with minimal turf disturbance. The fully hydrostatic, 22.3-hp unit was designed with more weight on the digging chain, so it can put more product in the ground faster. A special trail wheel supports the oscillating tracks to help reduce breakover and increase stability over uneven and rough terrain; tracks "walk" or oscillate 12° for extra stability. Its trenching capacity is 48 in. deep and 8 in. wide, and easy hand controls are grouped conveniently at the operator's station. The optional backfill blade, available only from

the Ditch Witch organization, eliminates the need for shovels and manual labor. DitchWitch.com

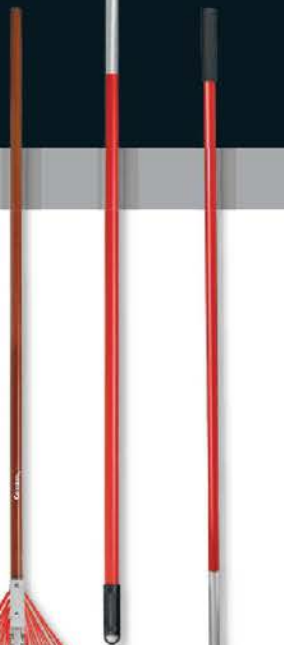


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Steam Jenny introduces four models of direct-drive cold pressure washers. All models are designed for maximum durability and portability. The pressure washers are powered by 9- or 13-hp Honda GX Series engines and feature a triplex ceramic plunger pump, which requires little maintenance. The units are available with pressure ratings between 3,000 and 4,000 psi, and flow rates vary between 3 and 4 gpm. The chassis is backed by a 7-year limited warranty, and other components are covered by a 1-year limited warranty. SteamJenny.com



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BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@questex.com.

Take the leapfrog advantage

As I write this, the country's debt rating has been lowered and the stock market has plunged more than 600 points. Hopefully by the time you read this, things will look a bit better.

Although this has been a long and drawn-out decline, and competition has been severe, someday soon the situation will improve. Through my own experience as a business leader and mentor, and in my observation of successful companies, I know that some companies will outperform during the rebound. As measured against the competition, the companies that survive will do so by having a "leapfrog advantage" over their competitors.

A desire to make that leap is one thing, but doing so is tough. We get defensive. We huddle. We retreat. It's hard to mobilize when the challenges seem insurmountable.

But it is possible. Here's how.

The following eight steps are guaranteed to move your company from defense to offense, and position you for the leapfrog advantage:

1 Evaluate your bench strength. Do you have the capacity to take on growth, given the opportunity? If you were able to grow sales by 25%, what would your organization chart look like? Can you fill the holes?

2 Evaluate your equipment. Have you held off replacing older equipment to conserve cash? Has this left you vulnerable? If so, start investing now and make sure you have the ability to upgrade your equipment to accommodate growth.

3 Evaluate your finances. Do you have funds in reserve? If you get a growth opportunity, can you finance it internally, or do you need to increase your credit lines? The best time to borrow is when you do not need it.

4 Evaluate your market position. Have you compromised your visibility with marketing budget cuts? Do you have sufficient exposure to get the opportunities you want? What is your customer thinking? When was the last time you asked?

5 Evaluate your communications strategy. Has your audience changed? Have you updated your messaging? Have you incorporated a plan for social media?

6 Evaluate your people. Do you have a team that can get you through austerity? Are they ready with the right skills to help you move forward? Do you need to re-tool to enhance performance? Are they willing to do whatever it takes? It might mean change.

7 Evaluate your plan. How thorough is your plan? Is it up to date? Does it cover contingencies and opportunities? Hire a business coach to help you freshen your goals and map out next steps.

8 Evaluate your outreach. Are you networking? Are you talking to other business leaders in your communities? Are you building knowledge, creating relationships and sharing best practices? Listen to what your peers and colleagues are saying. Learn from one another.

Use this period as an opportunity to evaluate and recalibrate. Some segments are doing well; maintenance and residential design-build, for example, show a lot of activity. Where is your strength? Are you playing to it? Are you concentrating on what you do best?

My crystal ball doesn't tell me whether the rollercoaster ride will continue — or whether the turnaround will start today, next quarter or next year. But it doesn't take a crystal ball to know it is better to be the beneficiary of the rebound, rather than the victim of the turmoil.

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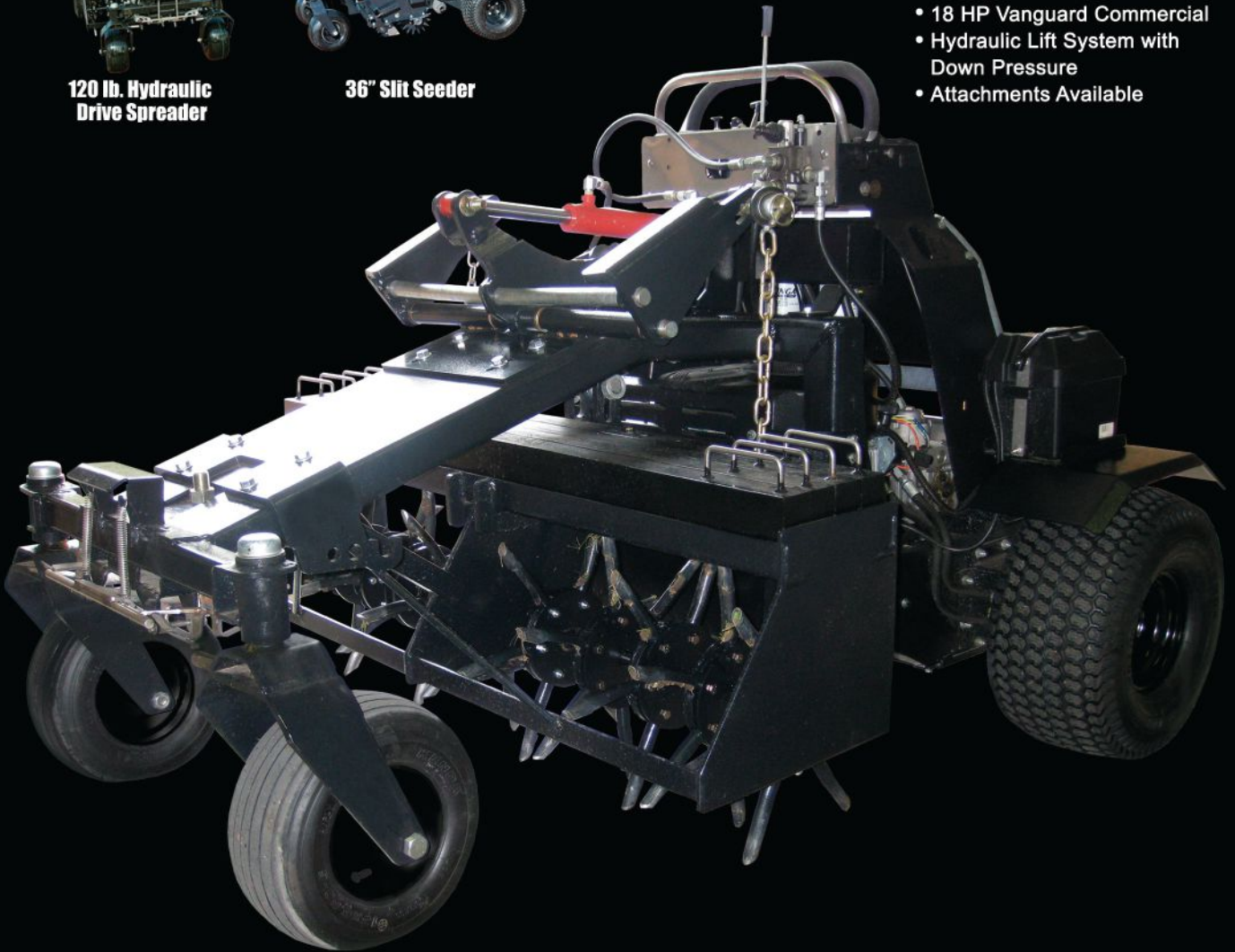


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Fall LANDSCAPE COLOR

Spring isn't the only time for colorful plantings.

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

FALL COLOR doesn't just grow on trees. Perennials and ornamentals can be combined to provide clients with late-season showiness in containers and beds.

Plant breeders continue to improve the color options available to landscapers, as well as the length of bloom time, so there are many options. Even tried-and-true fall performers such as Asters and Chrysanthemums are available in new colors, sizes and shapes. That may be the most difficult aspect of adding late-season color: deciding on the right plants.

Plants of the year

There are thousands of perennials and ornamentals to choose from, but you can narrow them down by beginning with plants tested by associations and botanical gardens. One such association, the Perennial Plant Association (PPA), has chosen *Amsonia hubrichtii* as its



'Glamour Red' kale can provide color all winter in some climates.

2011 perennial of the year.

Amsonia hubrichtii, also known as 'Arkansas Bluestar', provides three seasons of interest in zones 4 through 9. Even after its clusters of light-blue, star-shaped blooms fade in spring, the plant's feathery foliage takes over. The green, fern-like foliage turns bright

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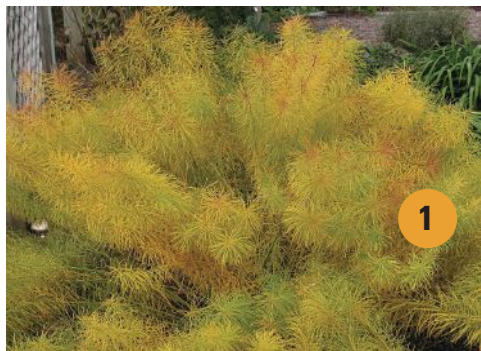
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1 *Amsonia hubrichtii* has wispy green foliage that turns bright yellow in the fall.



2 *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' stands out for its cascading yellow blades.



3 *Gaillardia x grandiflora* will bloom into early autumn.



yellow in the fall. It mounds to 3 ft. high by 3 ft. wide, so it works well in the landscape when massed together and combined with ornamental grasses.

Speaking of ornamental grasses, the variety of foliage colors and heights make them a great addition to a late-season landscape. In 2009, PPA awarded its plant of the year award to *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola,' an ornamental grass also known as Golden Japanese Forest Grass. It has variegated yellow blades with green stripes. Unlike many grasses, it has a cascading growth habit that causes the leaves to arch in the same direction. During the fall the yellow blades of grass take on shades of pink.

AAS award winners

Another organization that tests and recommends perennials is All-America Selections (AAS). Its 2011 winners include two cultivars with late-season appeal: *Gaillardia* 'Arizona Apricot' and 'Glamour Red' ornamental kale.

Gaillardia 'Arizona Apricot' has blooms with yellow edges that deepen to an apricot in the center. AAS judges noted the distinctive color of the 3 to 3.5 in. daisy-like flowers.

"Just 105 days after sowing seed, this *Gaillardia x grandiflora* will bloom from early summer into autumn," according to AAS. "The compact 12-in.-tall plants offer bright green foliage and a tidy uniform habit best viewed when planted to the front of the flower bed."

This long-flowering perennial is hardy

in USDA zones 2 through 10. It is bred by Ernst Benary of America Inc.

AAS' first winning kale is 'Glamour Red,' which has shiny, waxless leaves with vivid color. The fringed leaf type *Brassica oleracea* has a flower head size of 10 to 12 in.

This full sun annual ornamental will bloom 90 days from sowing seed to first color. Leaf coloring begins when night temperatures fall below 55°F for approximately two weeks, according to AAS. You can expect frost-tolerant blooms from November to March in warmer climates. It is bred by Takii & Co., Ltd.

Look local

To make sure plants are viable in your area, check with local growers to collect their recommendations. Look through

plant breeders' catalogs and use them as a means to discuss new cultivars with your local nurseries.

If you have a land-grant university nearby, it might work with the Cooperative Extension Service in your region on plant trials. A number of state horticultural societies also test and rate plants. A good list of these can be found on the U.S. National Arboretum site at usna.usda.gov/Gardens/faqs/pickingplants.html.

Trees and shrubs don't have to be the only bright spots in your clients' landscapes. With the right research and planning, perennials and ornamentals can bring years of seasonal color. **LM**

Gooch is a freelance writer based in Northeast Ohio. Contact him via goochandgooch.com.

KEEP IT CLEAN

To ensure late-season color has its chance to shine in the landscape, sell your clients a fall maintenance package. It's important to remove dead plant matter not only for aesthetics, but to decrease the chance of disease. A fall landscape maintenance program can also include:

- ▶ **Mulching** to protect crowns and roots from winter weather.
- ▶ **Dividing** certain perennials to prevent overcrowding.
- ▶ **Staking** tall perennials so that they aren't damaged by wind or heavy snows.
- ▶ **Weeding and fertilization** as necessary.
- ▶ **Planting** containerized perennials or moving them indoors.
- ▶ **Fall pruning** of certain flowering shrubs. —*JG*



Sound choice

The new Astilbe hybrids 'Hip Hop' and 'New Wave' (pictured) are part of the **Darwin Perennials** Music Collection. Both false spireas feature strong stems and heat tolerance. 'Hip Hop' has an addition of light pink plumes with high-contrast hot pink stamens. 'New Wave' is an upward grower with dark shiny green foliage — with plumes that have a deep, consistent pink on a dark stem. DarwinPerennials.com

Pure performance

Salvia farinacea 'Evolution White' is **Benary's** new silvery white color, with the same performance and compact habit as AAS award winner *Salvia* 'Evolution,' according to the company. Early to flower, 'Evolution White' features bright white blooms for a clean, fresh look in the landscape all season long. Benary.com



Baker's delight

Named for its yellow-gold fruit, *Rubus idaeus* 'Fall Gold' is similar to red raspberries in all respects but color. This upright thorny shrub from **Monrovia** provides an abundance of sweet berries from mid-summer to early fall. It offers green foliage throughout the season and is self-pollinating, so it does not require another plant nearby to set fruit. It reaches 4x3 ft., and prefers full sun in zones 3 to 7. Monrovia.com



Traditional beauty

David Austin Roses' repeat-flowering *Rosa* 'The Wedgwood Rose' (Ausjosiah) — offers approximately 70 soft rose pink petals in medium to large blooms. They feature a fruity fragrance on the outer petals, with a clove-like scent at the center. Their ample foliage is dark green and glossy. They work well as a climber — as tall as 10 ft. — or a flowering shrub (about 5x5 ft.). Hardy in USDA zones 5 to 9, they are named for the English pottery company founded by Josiah Wedgwood in 1759. DavidAustinRoses.com



Taste of the tropics

Tesselaar's 'Tropicanna,' 'Tropicanna Gold' and 'Tropicanna Black' cannas work well in garden borders, backdrops, containers, ponds or water gardens. Featuring variegated, exotic foliage and brilliantly hued blooms (four to eight per stalk), the plants quickly establish into clumps with an upright growth habit. They mature to a height of between 4 and 6 ft., and particularly thrive in USDA zones 7 to 11 — in full sun or partial shade. Tesselaar.com

Earning their stripes

Three business partners recognize huge potential when they stumble into a virtually untapped service segment: marking parking lots.

Tom Darrow demonstrates use of the striping machine.



CHRISTOPHER COURI AND Dan Rella had a successful Connecticut-based landscape business, but they were looking for something else in which to get involved. They wanted an add-on service that could increase their growth potential.

Fellow friend Tom Darrow, owner of another nearby landscaping/irrigation firm, suggested parking lot striping. Couri and Rella were intrigued — and today, the trio has parlayed that service add-on into a national brand.

“When we first started researching this service we didn’t even know what to call it,” admits Couri. “Do you call it parking lot marking? Painting? Striping? It’s just so off the radar that there wasn’t even a name for it. When we realized there weren’t a lot of people out there offering it, we saw a great opportunity. We ended up buying a machine and getting trained on how to use it so that we could inject this service into our business.”

The primary investment for the service was the machine, which cost just under \$6,000. The trio already had use of trucks and trailers from their landscaping businesses, so that kept the start-up costs down. And it didn’t take long for the service to really take off. With almost instantaneous success, the trio started focusing on marketing for their new company, We Do Lines.

“We were getting a lot of work in Connecticut, but also as far north as Maine and as far south as Florida,” says Couri. “That told us there was a larger need. We realized there was potential for a national brand.”

That’s when Couri and his business partners decided to become franchisers.

“We wanted to put this opportunity out there on a national basis,” he says. “It’s a nice complementary business to a landscape company. Most of the time,

they’re already on the lot doing the landscaping, so it’s very easy to integrate the line striping into the process. It can definitely work as a stand-alone or full-time business.”

Starting a We Do Lines franchise is relatively simple for the average landscaper because they likely already have most of the equipment — and even the contacts for potential customers.

“You need a truck, a trailer and a machine,” says Couri. “There’s no warehouse needed to store equipment or a whole bunch of required machinery. It’s a fairly simple business model, and that makes us leaner and more attractive.”

We Do Lines has a national supplier agreement with Sherwin Williams for the paint. Couri says this has worked well for franchisees who can go to any Sherwin Williams store and access paint with one master account. In addition, We Do Lines also offers the stencil packages that franchisees would need to create all the additional parking lot markings like handicapped spaces, crosswalks and curb painting.

While Couri didn’t know much about the line striping business when he first started, he and his partners have since become experts on the service. With no major competitors in the market, it’s become a wide-open opportunity.

“The market was really ripe for a national brand,” says Couri. “Up until now, it was mostly part-time and small businesses offering this. I know maybe 20 landscapers in my town alone, but there’s only one line striping company. And there’s no question that’s also helped boost our landscaping business. We become more of a one-stop shop for the customer.”

The author is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: We Do Lines, Ridgefield, CT

PARTNERS AND CO-FOUNDERS: Christopher Couri, president and CEO; Dan Rella, CFO; Tom Darrow, COO

WHY PARKING LOT STRIPING: The business founders recognized a huge opportunity when they couldn’t find a lot of other companies in the market that offered the service.

INITIAL INVESTMENT: The equipment is the main piece of the start-up package, along with a truck and trailer.

WHY CUSTOMERS LIKE IT: “There simply aren’t a lot of companies offering this service. For a landscape business, it makes for one-stop shopping. The crew can coordinate the landscaping and the line striping all in one day on the lot.”



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“It is very rewarding to serve as CEO of a \$20 million landscape contractor firm,” says **Bill Russell**, chief executive officer of Russell Landscape Group (RLG). The company, based in Dacula, GA, is as committed to Dacula’s people as it is to its landscapes. The company’s demonstrated that through its longtime involvement in the local community, Russell said.

“RLG’s strong community service and commitment to giving back financially to the area where we’ve prospered has afforded us great exposure, yielded new clients and increased referrals,” Russell says.

He pauses to tell *LM* more about opportunities and challenges facing his business and the Green Industry in today’s economy.

TOP TREND

› Irresponsible price cutting and low ball bidding.

I am very concerned with one current industry trend in which far too many firms are drastically reducing their maintenance pricing without regard or consideration for overhead and essential bottom line profit. The prevalence of irresponsible price cutting and low-ball bidding by a large number of companies has created an unfavorable environment, which drives markets downward to the point that we won’t return contract pricing to previous industry standards for several years. Russell Landscape Group will continue to strive to out-service the competition with its quality services at value pricing.

TOP OBSTACLE

› **High fuel prices and labor costs.** The obstacles Russell Landscape Group is currently facing in this challenging economy are numerous. They include intrusive immigration reform by state government, unavailable capital, astronomical fuel prices, increased tax burden and rising operational and healthcare costs. In an effort to reduce high fuel consumption and labor costs created when crews are stuck in traffic congestion, Russell Landscape Group recently established new branch locations throughout our five-state service market. These new satellite locations have reduced travel time and lost job production incurred as crews moved among client job sites.



Bill Russell

INSIDE INFO

Company:
Russell Landscape Group

Headquarters: Dacula, GA (Northeast Atlanta), with 12 branches in the Southeast.

Employees: 475

2010 revenue: \$20 million

Key to being a maintenance leader: The key to being a strong maintenance leader is to understand that one only wins when surrounded by people who are smarter than you are. People aren’t the greatest asset in any company; however, the right people are a company’s greatest asset (both the right employees and the right clients). A great maintenance leader gets the correct people on the bus and then positions them in the appropriate seats to ensure winning.

Russell Landscape Group’s ownership has found that if we help enough people get what they want, then we can achieve what we want. The largest challenge of being a maintenance leader in the present down economy, where quality is going up and prices down, is maintaining a positive attitude. Business is a competitive sport where true leaders go from challenge to challenge with undiminished enthusiasm. Attitude determines altitude and it is essential that company employees consistently witness a leader who is positive about the company’s future.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Effective marketing.** RLG’s leaders network beyond the ordinary, and we have utilized our company website to generate business. The Internet continues to present opportunities for RLG. The presence of a website lends prestige to a firm, is inexpensive, and allows a drastic increase in communication speed. Our company website provides initial contact with numerous potential prospects who are then contacted by phone or in face-to-face sales meetings.

› **Our current client base.** Referrals are RLG’s largest new client generator. Taking care of our existing clients and providing them with more than they expect during tough times has afforded us a strong referral base.

› **Diversified services and landscape enhancement upgrades.** Commercial and residential properties, even in a challenged economy, are still focused on curb appeal by purchasing lifestyle elements such as fountains and outdoor patios. RLG is receiving one-fourth of its new revenue from add-on work orders. Our firm has experienced recent success by expanding services to include Department of Transportation highway contracts, community improvement districts, cell towers and snow removal services.

RLG is also seizing opportunities for growth by partnering with firms who specialize in specific Green Industry services, including hard-scapes, efficient irrigation systems, landscape lighting, mulching, water features and hydro-seeding. Our company often achieves a greater bottom line profit when contracting out specialty work and partnering with firms who specialize in a specific service.